


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Dissenting at the United Nations: Interaction orders and Venezuelan contestation practices (2015–16)

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(Received 7 April 2021; revised 1 November 2021; accepted 20 December 2021; first published online 15 February 2022)

## Abstract

The Venezuelan participation in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2015 and 2016 was expected to be a challenge for the institution, as the Maduro government adopted controversial positions at the General Assembly (UNGA). However, Venezuela contestation line did not appear clearly at the UNSC. Drawing upon an in-depth qualitative study, Erving Goffman's work, and literature on contestation in international organisations (IOs), we interpret this apparent inconsistency from the concept of interaction order. We argue that the UNGA and the UNSC each constitutes a specific interaction order that influences the way contestation practices are channelled. The contestation practices Venezuelan representatives set up at the UNGA hardly work during the UNSC official sessions, where they adapt their practices to its interaction order. Venezuelan representatives also use informal and backstage actions to express their dissent, without avoiding being called into order. Venezuela's moderation at the UNSC results from an invisibilisation of contestation by interaction practices.

**Keywords:** United Nations; International Practices; Contestation; Erving Goffman; Venezuela

## Introduction

In September 2014, at the tribune offered by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro declared that 'we must democratize and overhaul the Security Council.'<sup>1</sup> Venezuela under the Bolivarian Revolution (Hugo Chávez, 1999–2013; Nicolás Maduro, 2013–to date) was particularly critical of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Venezuela questioned its composition, working methods, practices (veto, sanctions) and the overly broad interpretation of its mandate.<sup>2</sup> However, a few weeks later, Venezuela was elected to be part of the same institution for two years.

While Venezuela has participated in the UNSC as a non-permanent member on five occasions since 1945 (1962–3; 1977–8; 1986–7; 1992–3; 2015–16), only the 2015–16 mandate took place

<sup>1</sup>A/69/PV.8.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Medina Mejías, 'The Security Council had contributed to the violation of the rule of law on many occasions, without any accountability whatsoever.' (A/C.6/70/SR.7), or Ramírez Carreño: 'It is clear that the purpose of the arrangement [the perpetual provisional status of the Security Council's rules of procedure] has been to favour a small group of permanent members that, under the guise of a supposedly rules-based practice, does or does not do, as wishes.' (A/70/PV.44).

On the criticisms addressed to the UNSC within UNGA, see Martin Binder and Monika Heupel, 'The legitimacy of the UN Security Council: Evidence from recent General Assembly debates', *International Studies Quarterly*, 59:2 (2015), pp. 238–50.

during Bolivarian governments. Analyses of the Venezuelan presence in multilateral forums are rare. They tend not to link Venezuela's multilateral participation to its foreign policy,<sup>3</sup> or to adopt an official stance.<sup>4</sup> These references are useful to clarify crucial aspects of the Bolivarian diplomacy, but they do not allow us to catch the subtleties of Venezuelan multilateral actions in 2015–16. Indeed, this participation may seem puzzling, as it coincided with the growing multidimensional crisis in Venezuela. As the Venezuelan candidacy was presented in 2008, at the zenith of the Chávez era, it was impossible to step back for an administration that based its legitimacy on its predecessor's legacy. It was thus expected that this mandate would illustrate the contestation dimension of the Bolivarian diplomacy. The tension between the United States (US) and Venezuela was actually staged at the time of its election by the UNGA. Samantha Power, the then US Permanent Representative to the UN, responded to the Venezuelan election by declaring: 'Unfortunately, Venezuela's conduct at the UN has run counter to the spirit of the UN Charter and its violations of human rights at home are at odds with the Charter's letter.'<sup>5</sup> Many observers questioned the implications of the election of a 'radical' state to the UNSC.<sup>6</sup>

However, an empirical observation of Venezuelan participation at the UNSC contradicts this hypothesis. The 2014 bid seemed to respect all the procedures, including the 2008 declaration to the Latin American and Caribbean Group (GRULAC) of Venezuela's intention to run for an UNSC seat, and then waiting for its turn. The 2014 candidacy obtained the unanimous support of the regional group, before being supported by 181 votes from the 193 member states of the UN. In 2015–16, although the Bolivarian government regularly expressed dissent and staged diplomatic contestation at the UNGA, it adopted a lower profile than expected in the UNSC, even on issues included on both agendas, such as Syria. According to a Chilean diplomat working from Santiago at the time, Venezuela 'did it very well, it respected the UNSC forms and showed its goodwill' in the institution.<sup>7</sup> In our 2017 field survey, one of the national diplomats interviewed even admitted that he was 'not inspired by the subject' because Venezuela 'did not have a very strong policy in the Security Council'. In short, the respondent 'has no striking memory' of the Venezuelan presence at the UNSC on the issues he/she was working on.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Venezuela's contestation to the UNSC during its mandate is not clear. Over the two years of its mandate, Venezuela went alone and therefore broke consensus on only four of the 141 resolutions adopted<sup>9</sup> (out of 146 votes).<sup>10</sup> However, a more detailed analysis of the votes shows that Venezuela was the member with the most abstentions in 2015 and the member with the greatest number of negative votes in 2016. Table 1 shows Venezuela is not the only elected member that opposes consensus. While most of the ten elected members barely vote against or abstain, a few actually did it each year (Venezuela in 2015; Venezuela, Angola, and Egypt in 2016). Can these abstentions and negative votes be interpreted as a contestation practice along the

<sup>3</sup>Wolf Grabendorff, '¿Una voz radical del "Sur global"? Venezuela en el Consejo de Seguridad', *Nueva sociedad* (January 2015), available at: {<https://nuso.org/articulo/una-voz-radical-del-sur-global-venezuela-en-el-consejo-de-seguridad-de-la-onu/>}; Víctor Mijares, 'Soft balancing the titans: Venezuelan foreign-policy strategy toward the United States, China, and Russia', *Latin American Policy*, 8:2 (2017), pp. 201–31.

<sup>4</sup>Rubén Darío Molina, 'Venezuela ingresa al Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU: Venció la diplomacia soberana y el multilateralismo inclusivo', *Correo del Alba*, 41 (2014), pp. 28–9.

<sup>5</sup>Samantha Power, 'Statement by the U.S. Ambassador to the UN on the Newly Elected Members of the Security Council', US Mission to International Organizations in Geneva (16 October 2014); Somini Sengupta, 'Venezuela Gest UN seat; Turkey is denied', *The New York Times* (16 October 2014).

<sup>6</sup>Grabendorff, '¿Una voz radical del "Sur global"?'.

<sup>7</sup>Interview with a Chilean diplomat, Santiago, 7 May 2015.

<sup>8</sup>Interview with a national diplomat, New York, June 2017.

<sup>9</sup>Resolutions 2209, 2240, 2244 in 2015, and 2312 in 2016.

<sup>10</sup>Five drafts were vetoed by one or more Permanent members.

**Table 1.** Summary of votes at the UNSC (2015–16).

Members	Abstention	Incl. alone	Against	Incl. Alone*	Total
<i>Angola</i>					
2015	3	0	0	0	3
2016	8	0	0	0	8
<i>Chad</i>					
2015	1	0	0	0	1
<i>Chile</i>					
2015	0	0	0	0	0
<i>China (P)</i>					
2015	3	0	0	0	3
2016	5	0	1	0	6
<i>Egypt</i>					
2016	7	2	0	0	7
<i>France (P)</i>					
2015	0	0	0	0	0
2016	1	0	1	0	2
<i>Japan</i>					
2016	1	0	1	0	2
<i>Jordan</i>					
2015	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Lithuania</i>					
2015	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Malaysia</i>					
2015	0	0	0	0	0
2016	1	0	1	0	2
<i>New Zealand</i>					
2015	0	0	0	0	0
2016	1	0	1	0	2
<i>Nigeria</i>					
2015	2	0	0	0	2
<i>Russian Federation (P)</i>					
2015	5	2	2	0	7
2016	6	0	2	0	8
<i>Senegal</i>					
2016	2	0	1	0	3
<i>Spain</i>					
2015	0	0	0	0	0
2016	0	0	1	0	1
<i>Ukraine</i>					
2016	0	0	1	0	1
<i>United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (P)</i>					
2015	0	0	0	0	0
2016	1	0	1	0	2
<i>United States of America (P)</i>					
2015	0	0	0	0	0
2016	1	0	1	0	2
<i>Uruguay</i>					
2016	1	0	1	0	2
<i>Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)</i>					
2015	8	3	0	0	8
2016	5	1	3	0	9

Notes: \*No other member voted against or abstained. (P) refers to permanent members whose votes against correspond with the use of the veto. UNSC members voted 65 times in 2015 and 81 times in 2016, of which 86.4 per cent (55) and 82.7 per cent (81) were approved unanimously respectively. Logically, consensus was not reached regarding 10 votes in 2015 and 14 votes in 2016.

Source: United Nations Security Council website.

lines of those displayed at the UNGA where almost all of Venezuela's votes indicate opposition to the US?

This case draws attention to the contestation of and within international organisations (IOs), whose studies have recently multiplied. Contestation here means the manifestation of discontent

and the expression of dissent that challenges an institution, a norm, a practice, an order, or a hierarchy. Surprisingly, studies on contestation at the UNSC and at the UNGA are not common, in contrast to other institutions, such as the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) often contested due to the politicisation of the institution and the issues (human rights) on which the stakeholders negotiate.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, despite recent publications about UNSC elected members,<sup>12</sup> we still lack in-depth studies to comprehend whether and how multilateral contestation practices work. While these references tend to focus on actors who want to integrate and do not adopt contestation as their main strategy, we turn our attention to dissenting actors that often try to disrupt the multilateral game. These actors can be expected to adopt a coherent stance to promote it in the various multilateral institutions in which he/she takes part. However, this is not always the case. A detailed study of the Venezuelan diplomacy at the UN offers a significant case to investigate and compare the simultaneous practices of contestation in different forums of an actor claiming to lead a diplomacy based on contestation.

During the last decade, Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution embodied the phenomenon of these dissenting states. With Hugo Chávez's accession to power, and more significantly following the *coup d'état* of April 2002, Venezuela's foreign policy has often been described as confrontational by both the press and academics. The idea that the Bolivarian strategy differs from more conventional ones – which may be critical but express it more diplomatically – is widely shared, despite the variety of normative positions among scholars regarding this political project.<sup>13</sup> The Venezuelan position of denunciation and contestation also spread to multilateral institutions, as demonstrated in 2007 by the announced withdrawal from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, two symbols of the neoliberal economic system, and the effective withdrawal from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2013 and the Organization of American States (OAS) in 2019, two institutions known for their US strong influence. Analysts consider that Nicolás Maduro, Hugo Chávez's successor since 2013, is pursuing the

<sup>11</sup>Mélanie Albaret, 'Négocier et contester au Conseil des droits de l'homme des Nations unies', *Négociations*, 2 (2020), pp. 79–93; Joel Voss, 'The use (or misuse) of amendments to contest human rights norms at the UN Human Rights Council', *Human Rights Review*, 20:4 (2019), pp. 397–422.10.1162/10.1162/002081800551154

<sup>12</sup>Ann-Marie Ekrengrén, Fredrik D. Hjorthen, and Ulrika Möller, 'A nonpermanent seat in the United Nations Security Council: Why bother?', *Global Governance*, 26:1 (2020), pp. 21–45; Jeremy Farrall et al., 'Elected member influence in the United Nations Security Council', *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 33:1 (2020), pp. 101–15; Jess Gifkins, 'Beyond the veto: Roles in UN Security Council decision-making', *Global Governance*, 27 (2021), pp. 1–24; Colin Keating, 'Power dynamics between permanent and elected members', in Sebastian von Einsiedel, David M. Malone, and Bruno Stagno Ugarte (eds), *The UN Security Council in the 21st Century* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner, 2016), pp. 139–56; Isobel Roele, 'Around Arendt's table: Bureaucracy and the non-permanent members of the UN Security Council', *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 33:1 (2020), pp. 117–37.

<sup>13</sup>Ralph S. Clem and Anthony P. Maingot (eds), *Venezuela's Petro-Diplomacy: Hugo Chávez's Foreign Policy* (Gainesville, FA: University Press of Florida, 2011); Javier Corrales and Carlos A. Romero, 'Venezuela's foreign policy, 1920s–2010s', in Jorge I. Domínguez and Ana Covarrubias (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Latin America in the World* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), pp. 153–68; Steve Ellner, 'The Chávez government in the international arena', in *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics* (London, UK: Lynne Rienner, 2008), pp. 195–225; Rita Giacalone, 'Venezuelan foreign policy: Petro-politics and paradigm change', in Ryan K. Beasley et al. (eds), *Foreign Policy in Comparative Perspective* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013), pp. 290–312; Anthea McCarthy-Jones and Marc Turner, 'Explaining radical policy change: The case of Venezuelan foreign policy', *Policy Studies*, 32:5 (2011), pp. 549–67; Diana Raby, 'Venezuelan foreign policy under Chávez, 1999–2010: The pragmatic success of revolutionary ideology?', in Gian Luca Gardini and Peter Lambert (eds), *Latin American Foreign Policies: Between Ideology and Pragmatism* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 159–77; Carlos A. Romero, *Jugando con el globo: Política exterior de Hugo Chávez* (Caracas, Venezuela: Ediciones B./ Grupo Zeta, 2006); Andrés Serbin and Andrei Serbin Pont, 'Quince años de política exterior bolivariana: ¿entre el Soft-Balancing y la militarización?', *Pensamiento propio*, 39 (2014), pp. 287–326; Mark Eric Williams, 'The new balancing act: International Relations theory and Venezuela's foreign policy', in Thomas Ponniah and Jonathan Eastwood (eds), *The Revolution in Venezuela* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2011), pp. 259, 273.

Bolivarian Revolution, including in the field of foreign policy.<sup>14</sup> Contestation therefore still characterises Venezuelan international diplomatic action.

To study its contestation practices<sup>15</sup> at the UN, we draw upon the sociology of Erving Goffman and apply his work on interaction orders so as not to limit contestation to simply mean the non-compliance or questioning of formal rules and norms. We argue that contestation practices are specific to each institution's interaction order, even in the case of an actor regarded as a dissenting one, however counterintuitive. In the context of Venezuelan diplomacy difficulties, the country's delegates adopted, a contestation line widely accepted by their counterparts at the UNGA. At the UNSC, the Venezuelan role is ambivalent: even if the country publicly appeared, more often than not, as a member of the team in official performances, its representatives actually tried to adopt a more dissenting approach particularly in the backstage of the institution, not without limitations. Finally, these actors, who claimed to be dissenting ones, actually played roles that do not significantly challenge the interaction orders.

Starting from existing analytical proposals to understand Venezuela's contestation practices at the UNGA and the UNSC, we underline the innovative perspectives that Goffman's reflection on interaction order brings for our case study in a second section. Considering these two institutions as distinct orders of interaction in a third one sheds light on the different contestation practices, used by Venezuelan actors with varying degrees of success, as shown in section four. While their strategies work at the UNGA, they miss their target at the UNSC. In a final section we study how Venezuelan contestation attempts were invisibilised and relegated to backstage practices.

## 1. Beyond institutional contestation at the UN: Taking into account the contestation practices within interactions

Scholars from different social sciences study the contestation of IOs by states from a variety of perspectives: the exit strategy of states from IOs,<sup>16</sup> the contestation on a specific issue such as the sexual orientation and gender identity one<sup>17</sup> or on specific cases such as Haiti,<sup>18</sup> the contestation of international norms,<sup>19</sup> the legitimacy of IOs,<sup>20</sup> the contestation led by major powers and its effects on international cooperation<sup>21</sup> or the Trump administration's effect on

<sup>14</sup>Luis Maximiliano Barreto, 'La domesticación de la Política Exterior de Venezuela (2013–2017)', *Relaciones internacionales* (Costa Rica), 91:2 (2018), pp. 1–24; Élodie Brun, 'Une continuité à toute épreuve: la politique étrangère de Nicolás Maduro', CERI-Sciences Po Note (20 June 2014); Corrales and Romero, 'Venezuela's foreign policy', p. 163; Carlos A. Romero and Víctor M. Mijares, 'From Chávez to Maduro: Continuity and change in Venezuelan foreign policy', *Contexto Internacional*, 38:1 (2016), pp. 165–201.

<sup>15</sup>Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (eds), *International Practices* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, 'The play of international practice', *International Studies Quarterly*, 59:3 (2015), pp. 449–60.

<sup>16</sup>Inken Von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, 'The Costs of Membership Withdrawal from Intergovernmental Organizations', Political Economy of International Organizations Conference, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2018.

<sup>17</sup>Joel Voss, 'Contesting sexual orientation and gender identity at the UN Human Rights Council', *Human Rights Review*, 19 (2018), pp. 1–22.

<sup>18</sup>Rosa Freedman and Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, "'Jistis ak reparasyon pou tout viktim kolera MINUSTAH": The United Nations and the right to health in Haiti', *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 28:3 (2015), pp. 507–27.

<sup>19</sup>For recent references, see, for example, Nicole Deitelhoff, 'What's in a name? Contestation and backlash against international norms and institutions', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 22:4 (2020), pp. 715–27; Annette Stimmer and Lea Wisken, 'The dynamics of dissent: When actions are louder than words', *International Affairs*, 95:3 (2019), pp. 515–33; Antje Wiener, *Contestation and Constitution of Norms in Global International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>20</sup>Ian Hurd, 'Legitimacy and contestation in global governance: Revisiting the folk theory of international institutions', *The Review of International Organizations*, 14 (2019), pp. 717–29.

<sup>21</sup>Benjamin Fraude and Michal Parizek, 'Contested multilateralism as credible signaling: How strategic inconsistency can induce cooperation among states', *The Review of International Organizations*, 16 (2021), pp. 843–70.

multilateralism.<sup>22</sup> The literature offers several interesting but insufficient avenues of reflection for understanding why Venezuelan contestation practices differ from one institution to another.

Classic logic of the cost/benefit ratio does not allow us to decrypt Venezuela's different behaviours in the UNSC and the UNGA. As Nicolás Maduro's legitimacy is the core objective of his foreign policy,<sup>23</sup> appearing as a dissenting actor at the UNGA also served internal purposes. Due to the significant media coverage of the general debate, states' performance at the UNGA is also addressed to national public opinion and other international audiences. From 2014 on, tensions with the opposition were increasing and the economic crisis deepened in Venezuela. This situation was linked to Nicolás Maduro's failure to achieve the legitimacy of his mentor. Therefore, speeches at the UNGA were used to summon the figure of Hugo Chávez for the purpose of legitimisation. Faced with a tense national situation, the government of Nicolás Maduro sought to compensate internationally by affirming its dissenting profile and its affiliation with Hugo Chávez, thus leading to the 'domestication of foreign policy'.<sup>24</sup> With the first sanctions against the Maduro administration taken in 2014, contestation was not costly. On the contrary, what is costly for a dissenting actor that uses his/her behaviour to gain international and national support is to appear as a moderate player. Then Venezuela's moderate profile at the UNSC requires further reflection. Indeed, tensions with the US, and to a lesser extent with other Northern countries, symbolise Chávez's legacy, so the Bolivarian government does not need good relations with them in the UNSC.

Some references also link contestation in IOs to specific international contexts. In his classical book, Gary Goertz considers three modes of context: context as cause, context as barrier, and context as changing meaning.<sup>25</sup> Regarding the international insertion of Latin American and Caribbean countries, international conditions are traditionally emphasised as a core restrictive factor to understand their capacity of actions.<sup>26</sup> In 2015 and 2016, the international context did not particularly favoured contestation. Consensual international circumstances, marked by Barack Obama's diplomatic gestures on Cuba and Iran – two of Nicolás Maduro government's close allies –, participated in silencing contestation. At the UNSC, terrorist offensives of the ISIS group dominated debates on Syria, relegating the negotiation on the future of Bashar al-Assad's regime to a secondary level in comparison with the debates in 2013.<sup>27</sup> Despite this context, Venezuela has developed a high-profile dissenting diplomacy in the UNGA. Therefore, although important, the context is not sufficient to understand the different contestation practices adopted by Venezuela at the UNGA and the UNSC.

<sup>22</sup>Jutta Brunnée, 'Multilateralism in crisis', *Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting*, 12 (2018), pp. 335–9; Frederick W. Mayer and Nicola Phillips, 'Global inequality and the Trump administration', *Review of International Studies*, 45:3 (2019), pp. 502–10; James Sperling and Mark Webber, 'Trump's foreign policy and NATO: Exit and voice', *Review of International Studies*, 45:3 (2019), pp. 511–26.

<sup>23</sup>Barreto, 'La domesticación de la Política Exterior de Venezuela (2013–2017)'; Brun, 'Une continuité à toute épreuve'; Romero and Mijares, 'From Chávez to Maduro'.

<sup>24</sup>Barreto, 'La domesticación de la Política Exterior de Venezuela (2013–2017)'.

<sup>25</sup>Gary Goertz, *Contexts of International Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>26</sup>Alberto van Klaveren, 'El análisis de la política exterior: una visión desde América Latina', in Thomas Legler, Arturo Santa-Cruz, and Laura Zamudio González (eds), *Introducción a las Relaciones Internacionales: América Latina y la Política Global* (México, DF: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 96–109.

<sup>27</sup>See the discussions identified in the following documents: S/PV.7775, S/PV.7587, S/PV.7831, or the support given to France following the Paris attacks: S/PV.7565.

Despite persistent differences among the UNSC members, Venezuela did not have to position itself as was the case for elected members of the UNSC in 2013 when chemical attacks occurred in Syria and threats of military intervention increased by the US and its European allies at the UNSC.

In addition, scholars have often pointed out inconsistencies in the positions of a state between different IOs which can result in contested multilateralism,<sup>28</sup> between UN institutions,<sup>29</sup> or within the same institution at different moments.<sup>30</sup> While references about decision-making and bureaucratic processes help figure out the evolution and difficulties of states' diplomacy towards multilateralism, they are insufficient to interpret the discrepancy of one actor's positions, at the same time, in the same place (New York), and therefore by members of the same permanent mission. In the case of the permanent mission of Venezuela to the UN, some diplomats dedicated themselves to the UNSC mandate, whereas others worked on other UN institutions. However, due to the size of the mission (22 diplomats in 2015 and 29 in 2019),<sup>31</sup> some coordination occurred.<sup>32</sup> The sole assumption of inconsistent foreign policy results irrelevant for understanding why Venezuela is systematically more moderate at the UNSC than at the UNGA.

Another way of thinking would be to mobilise the design of international institution literature.<sup>33</sup> The distinct institutional design of the UNSC and of the UNGA would be a variable that influences the strategies of actors. Literature on the UNSC often focuses on the intrinsic inequality between permanent and elected members. Most of the elected members suffer from a lack of knowledge of the issues and of the practices, due to their scarce and irregular participation in the UNSC, and the lack of institutional memory.<sup>34</sup> The result is often a reading of the UNSC as an institution designed by the most powerful for their own benefit. In such an explanation, contestation by an elected member appears to be so constrained that it seems, if not impossible, at least irrelevant. The mobilisation of permanent members to prevent the integration of potential problematic members whose dissent is too bombastic when they apply to join the UNSC seem to support this thesis. For instance, in 2006, Hugo Chávez's government launched Venezuelan candidacy for a non-permanent seat at the last minute, in order to challenge the candidacy of Guatemala, regarded as too close to the US. After 47 unsuccessful ballots, Panama was finally elected as the compromise candidate.<sup>35</sup>

However, this idea that the UNSC does not leave much room for contestation by elected members is not consistent with others conclusions<sup>36</sup> nor with the Venezuelan case study. While Venezuela always has a lower profile in the UNSC than in the UNGA, practices of contestation in the UNSC can be identified even if they are invisibilised or are not as obvious as the disregard of formal rules and legal texts. We analyse below how Venezuelan diplomats overuse of the 'any other business' meetings (AOBs) during their presidency in 2016, as well as how they negotiated a text with other elected members, before presenting it to the whole UNSC. To understand

<sup>28</sup>Julia C. Morse and Robert O. Keohane, 'Contested multilateralism', *The Review of International Organizations*, 9 (2014), pp. 385–412.

<sup>29</sup>Eduard Jordaan, 'Foreign policy without the policy? South Africa and activism on sexual orientation at the United Nations', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 24:1 (2017), pp. 79–97.

<sup>30</sup>Samuel Brazys and Diana Panke, 'Analyzing voting inconsistency in the UNGA', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 28:3 (2017), pp. 538–60.

<sup>31</sup>United Nations Digital Library, Permanent Missions to the United Nations 305 and 306, 2015 and 2016, available at: {<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/795099?ln=en>} and {<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/840484?ln=en>}.

<sup>32</sup>For various examples, see the footnotes in sections 3 to 5, which include extracts from speeches by various Venezuelan diplomats.

<sup>33</sup>Erik Voeten, 'Making sense of the design of international institutions', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22 (2019), pp. 147–63.

<sup>34</sup>Gifkins, 'Beyond the veto'; Keating, 'Power dynamics between permanent and elected members'; Niels Nagelhus Schia, 'Being part of the parade: "Going native" in the UNSC', *PoLAR*, 36:1 (2013), pp. 138–56.

<sup>35</sup>For a testimony from a Guatemalan actor, see Gert Rosenthal, *Inside the United Nations: Multilateral Diplomacy Up Close* (London, UK: Routledge, 2017), pp. 74–88.

<sup>36</sup>For instance, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot show that contestation is not impossible at the UNSC. Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot, 'Power in practice: Negotiating the international intervention in Libya', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:4 (2014), pp. 889–911.

Venezuelan contestation, the institutional design hypothesis is not sufficiently convincing because it does not take into account the way diplomats embody their role, both as state representatives and as individuals. To this end, the prospects opened up by the practice turn and analyses based on Goffman's sociology provide heuristic avenues for reflection.

## 2. Goffman's interaction order to capture contestation practices at the UN

To interpret Venezuela's distinct contestation practices in the UN, we draw upon the sociology of Erving Goffman whose work is increasingly used in International Relations<sup>37</sup> and sometimes to study international organisations.<sup>38</sup> We build our argument on his dramaturgic metaphor about actors' practices within interactions, apprehended through behaviours in terms of 'face-work', performances, and roles.<sup>39</sup>

The IR literature that uses Goffman privileges the analysis of practices in interactions beyond institutions. Goffman's sociology allows us to question the idea that institutions define the social order and to open up analytical perspectives that make it possible to interpret Venezuelan contestation 'line'<sup>40</sup> at the UN in detail. It then becomes possible to understand the ambivalences pointed out in the introduction.

Goffman analyses social interactions 'as that which uniquely transpires in social situations, that is, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another's response presence'.<sup>41</sup> Analysing this face-to-face domain 'which might be titled, for want of any happy name, the interaction order'<sup>42</sup> allows us to understand how a form of social order is constituted. Indeed, from actors' interactions, 'a system of practices, conventions, and procedural rules comes into play which functions as a means of guiding and organizing the flow of messages'<sup>43</sup> thus defining a social order. To the question of 'how will these features of the interaction order be geared or linked into, connected up with, tied into social structures, including social relationship', Goffman answers that

<sup>37</sup>Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management in International Relations: Transgressive identities, norms, and order in international society', *International Organization*, 68:1 (2014), pp. 143–76; Michael Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press 1998); Jeffrey Chwieroth, 'Managing and transforming policy stigmas in international finance: Emerging markets and controlling capital inflows after the crisis', *Review of International Political Economy*, 22:1 (2015), pp. 44–76; Guillaume Devin, 'Goffman, la scène', in Guillaume Devin (ed.), *10 concepts sociologiques en relations internationales* (Paris: CNRS Biblis, 2015), pp. 9–28; Ben Mor, 'Accounts and impression management in public diplomacy: Israeli justification of force during the 2006 Lebanon War', *Global Change, Peace and Security*, 21:2 (2009), pp. 219–39; Frank Schimmelfennig, 'Goffman meets IR: Dramaturgical action in international community', *International Review of Sociology*, 12:3 (2002), pp. 417–37; Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Seanon S. Wong, 'One-upmanship and putdowns: The aggressive use of interaction rituals in face-to-face diplomacy', *International Theory*, 13 (2021), pp. 341–71.

<sup>38</sup>David Ambrosetti, *Normes et rivalités diplomatiques à l'ONU: Le Conseil de sécurité en audience* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2009); Deepak Nair, 'Saving face in diplomacy: A political sociology of face-to-face interactions in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:3 (2019), pp. 672–97; Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>39</sup>A "performance" may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion that serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.' Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), p. 15. 'Defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audience or to an audience of the same persons.' *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>40</sup>A line is 'a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and though this his line of evaluation of the participants, especially himself.' Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 5.

<sup>41</sup>Erving Goffman, 'The interaction order', *American Sociological Review*, 48:1 (1983), p. 2.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup>Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, pp. 33–4.



Minor social ritual is not an expression of structural arrangements in any simple sense; at best it is an expression advanced in regard to these arrangements. Social structures don't 'determine' culturally standard displays, merely help select from the available repertoire of them. The expressions themselves ... are interactional in substance and character; at best they are likely to have only loosely coupled relations to anything by way of social structures that might be associated with them.<sup>44</sup>

By paying attention to the interactions, it is thus possible to study a social order that does not strictly correspond to that of the institutions, including contestation practices that cannot be reduced to institutional contestation as they also take place within interaction. Consequently, as Vincent Pouliot indicates, 'from a Goffmanian perspective, each multilateral forum is structured by a particular order of interaction.'<sup>45</sup>

Among the contributions of the IR literature inspired by Goffman's interaction order, three are of particular interest for our study, because they stress the importance of focusing on diplomats and their face-to-face interactions to understand how their practices contribute to changing or reproducing institutions, rules of the game and hierarchical orders.<sup>46</sup>

The first one emphasises the ambivalence of the role of diplomats who are both individuals with personal trajectories and representations, and who embody their state at the same time. Rebecca Adler-Nissen underlines the possibility for diplomats to play the same role – that of representing their state – in different ways.<sup>47</sup> Only the analysis of interaction situations can account for these games and their effects on the social order.

Secondly, the literature addresses disruptions of the interaction order.<sup>48</sup> 'Maintain[ing] both his own face and the face of the other participants'<sup>49</sup> is 'a basic structural feature of interaction'.<sup>50</sup> To do so, individuals develop 'face-work' practices that are 'the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face'.<sup>51</sup> But they can also make a strategic use of embarrassment or an 'aggressive use of interaction rituals'.<sup>52</sup> Through them and the reactions they generate, reproductions, contestations, and changes of the social order are also at play.

Finally, a third contribution delves into the practices behind the scenes, or in the 'back region or back-stage'.<sup>53</sup> A large part of multilateral negotiations is based on informal discussions, off-the-record activities, oral exchanges, and behind-the-scenes operations. Goffman distinguishes the 'front-region' to refer to the place 'where the performance is given'<sup>54</sup> from the back region 'where the suppressed facts make an appearance'.<sup>55</sup> Based on Goffman and an ethnographic fieldwork at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Deepak Nair differentiates between two repertoires of face-saving in this organisation: a repertoire of practices in formal interactions, that is, in official meetings and one during informal interactions whether they take place during working hours (coffee break for instance) or outside working hours (bars, cinema).<sup>56</sup>

<sup>44</sup>Goffman, 'The interaction order', p. 11.

<sup>45</sup>Vincent Pouliot, *L'ordre hiérarchique international* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2017), p. 39, authors' translation.

<sup>46</sup>Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders*.

<sup>47</sup>Adler-Nissen highlights the 'partly merging between the diplomatic self and the state self or identity'. Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Diplomacy as Impression Management: Strategic Face-Work and Post-Colonial Embarrassment', Center for International Peace and Security Studies, Working Paper No. 38 (2012), p. 16.

<sup>48</sup>Adler-Nissen, 'Diplomacy as Impression Management'.

<sup>49</sup>Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, p. 11.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>52</sup>Wong, 'One-upmanship and putdowns'.

<sup>53</sup>Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p. 112.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>56</sup>Nair, 'Saving face in diplomacy', p. 687.

Building on this literature, we refine Adler-Nissen's analysis that considers diplomacy as an interaction order 'centred around impression management, face-work and a strong focus on avoidance of embarrassment'.<sup>57</sup> Despite a number of commonalities in diplomatic practices, we argue that interaction situations are not played out in strictly identical ways in different diplomatic stages. In other words, the UNGA and the UNSC each constitute a specific 'interaction order' in Goffmanian terms. The 'interactional modus vivendi'<sup>58</sup> differs from one institution to another, leading to specific performances.

Deriving from Goffman's sociology, we set up an empirical survey mobilising qualitative methods: digital observation of the official sessions of UNSC and UNGA via UN Web TV, semi-directive interviews and an exhaustive study of the speeches of Venezuelan representatives in the UNSC and the UNGA in 2015 and 2016. Digital observation can contribute to IOs analysis in highly constrained situations or in the case of hard-to-reach institutions, such as the UNSC. It is supplemented by semi-directive interviews, 'a second-best alternative'.<sup>59</sup> Given the importance of informal negotiations and discussions at the UN, interviews are sometimes the only method for obtaining information or triangulating others.<sup>60</sup> This analysis rests on a dozen semi-directive interviews conducted under cover of anonymity and confidentiality with national diplomats (permanent representatives, ministers counsellors, counsellors) and national or UN officials of different ranks.<sup>61</sup> All respondents had worked at or about the UNGA and UNSC between 2014 and 2017, in New York or from their capital. Their experiences helped us to interpret the different interaction orders at play in these two institutions.

### 3. UNGA and UNSC as two different interaction orders

Rather than homogenising the UN and considering it as a unitary actor, Goffman's sociology encourages us to observe the UNGA and the UNSC as two distinct stages with different sets and ways of operating formally and informally. An orderly representation of the UNSC stages it as a team responsible for maintaining international peace and security. The interactions that take place at the UNGA do not generate the representation of such a team but of an interstate community characterised by both a sense of commonality and conflicts.

First, the decorum suggests the difference between each interaction order. The UNGA is organised as a forum: during the general debate, the speaker expresses his/herself from the marble lectern in front of an immediate audience. This public, that is, representatives of other members and the media, can discuss their speeches, acknowledge these claims, strengthen, or qualify the role that each state pretends to play.<sup>62</sup> Even dissenting states take advantage of this forum to stage their contestation as illustrated by the way Hugo Chávez stigmatised the US in 2006.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Adler-Nissen, 'Diplomacy as Impression Management', p. 7.

<sup>58</sup> The 'interaction modus vivendi' refers to the fact that 'together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exist but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured.' Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>59</sup> Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>60</sup> Mélanie Albaret and Joan Deas, 'Semi-structured interviews', in Fanny Badache, Leah Kimber, and Lucile Maertens (eds), *Introduction to International Organizations Research Methods* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>61</sup> Part of our field study was carried out at the time of the intensification of the multidimensional crisis in Venezuela that generated international tensions. That is why some respondents expressly requested that their total anonymity be respected.

<sup>62</sup> Mélanie Albaret and Simon Tordjman, 'Usages et effets politiques', in Guillaume Devin, Franck Petiteville, and Simon Tordjman (eds), *L'Assemblée Générale: sociologie d'une institution politique mondiale* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2020), pp. 13–23.

<sup>63</sup> A/61/PV.12.

As for the UNSC stage, the centrepiece of the set is the horseshoe table that implies an intimate *entre-soi* where all members can see each other.<sup>64</sup> Backstage, diplomats from UNSC member states often work in the UNSC consultation room. Its organisation implies proximity, including physical proximity.<sup>65</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, the then permanent representative of Singapore in the UN, insisted on the fact that ‘relationships at a personal level were marked by a warm sense of camaraderie, which is often generated by working together in close quarters over an extended period of time.’<sup>66</sup> Other diplomats also note this sense of camaraderie,<sup>67</sup> when, for example, one of them says that the Venezuelan representatives are ‘very nice people’, ‘appreciated by all’.<sup>68</sup> This feeling is also expressed by the respondents when they underline the use of first names and of *tutoiement* outside the official UNSC room<sup>69</sup> and when they talk about some informal activities (for instance, having a drink) outside working hours. Another diplomat, while confirming this camaraderie, adds a nuance: ‘The camaraderie among the political coordinators is much greater than among the permanent representatives. It is possible for friendships to develop between some representatives, for example, when there are trips of the entire Security Council to a region or a country’, before concluding that ‘continuous interaction between permanent representatives tends to moderate their discourse’.<sup>70</sup>

On these two differently decorated stages, diplomats do not interact with the same actors. At the UNGA, collective work is often the norm and most resolutions are supported by one or more groups, indicating collective affiliation.<sup>71</sup> Most interactions therefore take place with partners. For instance, Venezuela claimed to belong to groups that, in distinct ways, defined themselves as contesting the international order. From 2016 to 2019, Venezuela held the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement, participated in the unity of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) on the Syrian issue,<sup>72</sup> and was a leading member of the G77. In formal sessions, the UNGA protocol helps to ease tensions between states that consider themselves adversaries.

At the UNSC, the 15 members are required to collaborate, even when bilateral relations are strained. Venezuelan representatives work for consensus including with the US colleagues.<sup>73</sup> It was sometimes reported in the press<sup>74</sup> and often mentioned in interviews that the relationship

<sup>64</sup>Even the architectural features of the UN buildings make the UNGA an outwardly open forum while the UNSC is located in the basements. George A. Dudley, *A Workshop for Peace: Designing the United Nations Headquarters* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>65</sup>Several authors point out the room’s size: David Ambrosetti, *Normes et rivalités diplomatiques à l’ONU; Jean-Marc de la Sablière, Le Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Brussels: Larcier, 2018), pp. 66–7: ‘It is in a small room, equipped with interpretation services, where the heads of delegation are side by side, accompanied by a few staff members, only two of whom can find a seat, that everything is decided.’ Lorraine Sievers and Sam Daws, *The Procedure of the UN Security Council* (4<sup>th</sup> edn, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 62: ‘The Consultations Room contains a smaller horseshoe table.’ Moreover, the observation was mentioned several times during our interviews with national diplomats, New York, June 2017.

<sup>66</sup>Kishore Mahbubani, ‘The permanent and elected council members’, in David Malone (ed.), *The UN Security Council* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004), p. 258.

<sup>67</sup>Interview with a Chilean diplomat, Santiago, 7 May 2015.

<sup>68</sup>Interview with a national diplomat, New York, June 2017.

<sup>69</sup>In official sessions, the use of the formula ‘Representative of x country’ and the use of *vouvoiement* are required.

<sup>70</sup>Comments by a Venezuelan ex-diplomat, April 2020.

<sup>71</sup>As Peterson noted it, a large part of the scholarship work on the UNGA questions the collective dimensions of states’ votes. M. J. Peterson, ‘General Assembly’, in Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws (eds), *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 132.

For a recent reference, see, for example, Michael A. Bailey, Anton Strezhnev, and Erik Voeten, ‘Estimating dynamic state preferences from United Nations voting data’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 61:2 (2017), pp. 430–56.

<sup>72</sup>Élodie Brun, ‘Semejanzas ideológicas y diversidad diplomática de la Alianza Bolivariana frente a la crisis siria’, in Gilberto Conde (ed.), *Siria en el torbellino* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2017), pp. 599–628.

<sup>73</sup>Interviews with national diplomats, New York, June 2017.

<sup>74</sup>According to Ana Cara, ‘Relations between the two countries in the chamber [the UNSC] have been described as polite so far.’ Ana Cara, ‘The “favorite daughter” of Venezuela’s late leader Hugo Chavez just made her debut at the UN’, Associated Press (1 April 2015), available at: {<https://www.businessinsider.com/the-favorite-daughter-of-venezuelas-late->

between the representatives of the two countries was described as ‘respectful’;<sup>75</sup> ‘Amb. Ramírez and Amb. Power made the effort to work for the benefit of the UNSC agenda’;<sup>76</sup> ‘the relationship was very good at PR level’, there was ‘mutual respect’, ‘a willingness to understand’ and ‘work together’.<sup>77</sup> The negotiations of Resolution 2334 of 23 December 2016 on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict illustrate their ability to do so. At first, Egypt took the lead but, due to very strong pressure, its diplomats decided to abandon it. Venezuela then declared itself ready to assume the draft resolution, even alone. This protagonism could have harmed the project: the US would have had more difficulty not voting against it if Venezuela was the only leader on the subject.<sup>78</sup> In the end, the representatives of the Latin American country opted for a pragmatic alternative: four non-permanent states (Malaysia, New Zealand, Senegal and Venezuela) representing four different regional groups (Asia, Western European and Other States, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean) co-sponsored the draft resolution, that was adopted as Resolution 2334 (2016). For the first time in eight years, the UNSC succeeded in adopting a text on Israeli settlements, avoiding the US veto.<sup>79</sup> It is quite striking that Venezuela begun its mandate by abstaining alone on Resolution 2209 and finished it by successfully negotiating a text about an UNSC sensitive issue in collaboration with the US.

Each of these two interaction orders ‘both promotes and constraints particular behaviour’.<sup>80</sup> In addition to other uses of collective legitimisation,<sup>81</sup> equalisation,<sup>82</sup> and political influence,<sup>83</sup> the UNGA usually serves as a tribunician platform.<sup>84</sup> States present themselves to the world, claim the hierarchical status they aspire to as well as the teams they belong to. At the UNGA, the interactional *modus vivendi* allows for the representation of disagreements.<sup>85</sup> ‘All sensitivities, ideologies, differences in culture and interests can be expressed there in speech and by votes.’<sup>86</sup> Hugo Chávez’s intervention at the 2006 UNGA general debate embodies the interactions allowed at this institution. In a famous speech, he took advantage of the UNGA’s general debate to stage his criticism of his US counterpart: ‘The Devil came yesterday, right here. It still smells of Sulphur today. Yesterday on this rostrum the President of the United States, whom I refer to as the Devil, talked as if he owned the world. ... The address of the

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leader-hugo-chavez-just-made-her-debut-at-the-un-2015-4?IR=T}. See also El Universal, ‘Consenso guía a Venezuela en el Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU’ (19 April 2015), available at: {<http://www.eluniversal.com/internacional/150419/consenso-guia-a-venezuela-en-el-consejo-de-seguridad-de-la-onu>}.

<sup>75</sup>Interview with a national diplomat, New York, June 2017.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>United Nations, ‘Israel’s Settlements Have no Legal Validity, Constitute Flagrant Violation of International Law, Security Council Reaffirms’, Meetings coverage SC/12657 (23 December 2016), available at: {<https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12657.doc.htm>}.

<sup>80</sup>Adler-Nissen, ‘Diplomacy as Impression Management’, p. 15.

<sup>81</sup>Inis L. Claude, ‘Collective legitimization as a political function of the United Nations’, *International Organization*, 20:3 (1966), pp. 367–79.

<sup>82</sup>Diana Panke, *Unequal Actors in Equalising Institutions: Negotiations in the United Nations General Assembly* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>83</sup>Robert O. Keohane, ‘The study of political influence in the General Assembly’, *International Organization*, 21:2 (1967), pp. 221–37.

<sup>84</sup>M. J. Peterson, *The UN General Assembly* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), p. 84.

<sup>85</sup>The argument could be refined by taking into account the interaction orders of the different configurations of the UNGA. For an example of the interactions in the Fifth Committee (administrative and budgetary issues), see Chadwick F. Alger, ‘Interaction in a committee of the United Nations General Assembly’, *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 10:4 (1966), pp. 411–47. Venezuela proved to be a very dissenting player in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Committee (economics issues) and 3<sup>rd</sup> committee (human rights) and tempered its role in the others (on disarmament and international security, administrative, budgetary, and legal issues. Comments by a Venezuelan ex-diplomat, April 2020.

<sup>86</sup>Marie-Claude Smouts, ‘The General Assembly: Grandeur and decadence’, in Paul Taylor and A. J. R. Groom (eds), *The United Nations at the Millennium* (London, UK: Continuum, 2000), p. 21.

world tyrant, cynical and full of hypocrisy, shows the imperialists' intention to control everything.<sup>87</sup>

At the UNSC, official sessions stage a team responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security.<sup>88</sup> The intimacy mentioned earlier is at the service of solidarity. The team's solidarity is measured by the audience (UN member states, UN Secretariat, other UN institutions, public opinion, media, etc.) through decisions (resolutions or presidential statements). Team members are not expected to denounce their team during UNSC meetings.<sup>89</sup> The UNSC is not the place where one actor 'points the finger'<sup>90</sup> at another one. 'It is crucial for the maintenance of the team's performance that each member of the team possess the dramaturgical discipline and exercise it in presenting his own part.'<sup>91</sup> The 'working consensus'<sup>92</sup> that characterises the UNSC, whose solidarity among its members must be staged in official sessions, makes the contestation line that Venezuela adopted at the UNGA, delicate to implement at the UNSC as well.

To maintain face, Venezuelan delegates were expected to demonstrate 'loyalty, discipline, and circumspection'<sup>93</sup> at each performance so as to perpetuate the representation of UNSC as a team. The Venezuelan cooperation with other permanent representations, in particular those of Chile, another elected member in 2015, and Cuba helped to advise and mentor Venezuela through informal contacts in order to preserve the UNSC team. These informal contacts went beyond ideological criteria: while Cuba was a close ally of Venezuela, this was not the case for Chile, which adopted a moderate diplomatic strategy. In the words of a Chilean diplomat, 'Venezuela showed maturity to understand that the work in the UNSC must be different than in the Latin American context.'<sup>94</sup> Other diplomat noted that the Venezuelan staff assigned to the UNSC were among the most moderate.<sup>95</sup> These exchanges between Latin American diplomats aimed at softening the Venezuelan contestation practices.<sup>96</sup>

The Venezuelan justification of its abstention on Resolution 2244 (2015) on the situation in Somalia, whose committee it co-chaired, is an illustration of the framing of its contestation in an acceptable way. Interestingly, Rafael Ramírez justified his criticism in the name of 'the transparency and inclusiveness that should prevail at all stages of negotiation in order to guarantee the participation of all its members and, ultimately, the unity of the Security Council.'<sup>97</sup> While stating that 'My country demands respect in the Security Council – respect from the penholders for the opinions and points of views of every country, whether permanent or elected Council members', he lifted his gaze and addressed it to the rest of the room. His look was not loaded with hostility and the tone of his speech was rather monotonous, except when he spoke about respect, but without getting carried

<sup>87</sup>A/61/PV.12.

<sup>88</sup>On the UNSC practices, working methods, and evolutions, see David L. Bosco, *Five to Rule them All: The Security Council and the Making of the Modern World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009); Sebastian von Einsiedel, David Malone, and Bruno Stagno Ugarte (eds), *The UN Security Council in the 21st Century* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner, 2016); Thomas Gehring and Thomas Dörfler, 'Constitutive mechanisms of UN Security Council practices: Precedent pressure, ratchet effect, and council action regarding intrastate conflicts', *Review of International Studies*, 45:1 (2019), pp. 120–40; Edward C. Luck, *UN Security Council: Practice and Promise* (London, UK: Routledge, 2006); Sievers and Daws, *The Procedure of the UN Security Council*.

<sup>89</sup>This reflects Goffman's analysis when he writes that 'members of the team must not exploit their presence in the front region in order to stage their own show .... Nor must they use their performance time as an occasion to denounce their team.' Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p. 214.

<sup>90</sup>Interview with a national diplomat, New York, June 2017.

<sup>91</sup>Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p. 216.

<sup>92</sup>Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

<sup>93</sup>Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p. 229.

<sup>94</sup>Interview with a Chilean diplomat, Santiago, 7 May 2015.

<sup>95</sup>Interview with a national diplomat, New York, June 2017.

<sup>96</sup>Interview with a Chilean diplomat, Santiago, 12 May 2015.

<sup>97</sup>S/PV.7541, p. 2.

away.<sup>98</sup> In a reversal of argument, his abstention was therefore justified by the need to preserve the unity of the team even in behind-the-scene processes, but the UNSC interactional codes in official performance were respected. In view of the UNSC's and UNGA's own interaction order, contestation and disagreements are to be channelled differently, as the Venezuelan case demonstrates.

#### 4. Venezuela's contestation practices: Working at the UNGA, missing their target at the UNSC

Venezuela's contestation line at the UNGA did not find its way to the UNSC or missed its objectives, because each interaction order implies different ways of expressing contestation. At the UNGA, Venezuela expressed its contestation through the use of particularly aggressive vocabulary, the staging of its solidarity with deviant regimes, and votes, all practices that have no place in official interactions at the UNSC.

At the UNGA, Venezuelan anti-capitalist,<sup>99</sup> anti-imperialist,<sup>100</sup> and anti-US<sup>101</sup> rhetoric was strong, particularly in the general debate and plenary sessions. The vocabulary chosen disrupted euphemised diplomatic phrases;<sup>102</sup> the US and Israel were explicitly denounced and singled out.<sup>103</sup> At the UNSC, Venezuela's delegates avoided denouncing partners. Their statement discarded the 'anti' rhetoric. Except for a few explicit denunciations as for instance, in December 2016, at the very end of Venezuela's mandate, when Israel was explicitly mentioned as 'the occupying Power', a disparaging phrase generally used at the UNGA,<sup>104</sup> the style reflected the majority

<sup>98</sup>Somalia – Security Council, 7541<sup>st</sup> Meeting', UN Web TV (23 October 2015), available at: {<https://media.un.org/en/asset/k10/k10t660e14>}.

<sup>99</sup>See, for example, Ramírez Carreño (A/C.2/70/SR.3): 'Capitalism, which was based on selfishness, greed and dispossession, was an unsustainable system since it promoted a culture of death.' Also see the speeches of Engelbrecht Schadtler (A/C.2/70/SR.9) or Rodríguez de Febres-Cordero (A/C.3/70/SR.4).

<sup>100</sup>For example, by denouncing 'the colonial domination of the United States of America for over 100 years' on Porto Rico, 'Morocco's occupation' of Western Sahara or 'the colonial process undertaken there [in Palestine] by the occupying Power in violation of international law'. See Ramírez Carreño (A/C.4/70/SR.2).

<sup>101</sup>This was particularly the case when the Cuban question was on the agenda. See, for example, the speeches of Moncada (A/69/PV.30) and Ramírez Carreño (A/70/PV.40).

<sup>102</sup>Nicolas Maduro stated: 'After so much death and bombing of the brotherly Arab people of Iraq, we have to invite the sovereign Governments of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt and indeed the entire region to come up with a comprehensive political, military, cultural and communication strategy that can be supported by the UNSC. Anything else is crazy.' (A/69/PV.8).

<sup>103</sup>Criticisms of the US, often referred to as 'the empire', were based on its domination of the international system. For instance, in 2014 at the plenary of the UNGA, Nicolas Maduro declared: 'Venezuela has had to suffer ongoing harassment and persecution at the hands of the imperial forces and the allies of the United States empire, who have sought again and again to undermine our democracy.' (A/69/PV.8) On relations with the US, see Javier Corrales and Carlos Romero, *U.S.-Venezuela Relations since the 1990s* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013). As for Israel, criticisms were more related to its role in the conflicts in the Middle East. At the time of Operation 'Cast Lead', led by Tsahal in the Gaza Strip in late 2008, Hugo Chávez decided to break off diplomatic relations with Israel in protest and his government recognized Palestine as a state a few months later. Israel is described 'as an occupying Power in the Palestinian territories' (A/70/PV.62). For an analysis of bilateral relations, see Angel Blanco Sorio, 'Venezuela and the Middle East under Hugo Chávez (1999–2013)', in Marta Tawil (ed.), *Latin American Foreign Policies towards the Middle East* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), pp. 99–134.

<sup>104</sup>See Ramírez Carreño: 'It is therefore necessary for Israel, the occupying Power, to put an end to the policies derived from the prolonged occupation of the territories of the State of Palestine, as well as the inhumane blockade of the Gaza Strip, which has lasted for almost a decade and is a flagrant violation of international law.' (S/PV.7853). Regarding the US see, for example, Ramírez Carreño in September 2016: 'Unfortunately, it must be said that the United States-led coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant took military action last weekend against the Syrian army, jeopardizing the cessation of hostilities agreed to a few days earlier. Venezuela condemns and laments the inexplicable attack on positions of the Syrian Arab Army carried out by American, British and Australian aircraft, manned by the aforementioned coalition, on 17 September.' (S/PV.7777).

of interventions at the UNSC. Even the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Delcy Rodríguez, whose speeches were often more virulent in tone,<sup>105</sup> resorted to periphrases to avoid denouncing the US explicitly.

Furthermore, at the UNGA, Venezuela representatives ostensibly marked their solidarity with disapproved or even deviant regimes, including their support for the Bashar al-Assad government for example.<sup>106</sup> Of all the resolutions on the human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, Iran and North Korea, for which a vote was requested, Venezuela voted against, thereby tacitly or expressly showing support for these regimes. It thus stood out from most other states, as less than twenty of them voted against these resolutions. When UNGA Resolutions 71/202 and 72/188 on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea were adopted without a vote, Venezuela requested the floor to 'dissociate itself from the consensus on that resolution'.<sup>107</sup>

Concurrently, at the UNSC, Venezuela works for consensus, even on Syria, as symbolised by the presidential statement of 17 August 2015.<sup>108</sup> As these declarations are made on behalf of the UNSC, they involve a consensus of all 15 members, which makes agreement on a statement sometimes more complicated than the adoption of a resolution.<sup>109</sup> During the informal discussions, it appears that Venezuela was the only state opposed to this text. Some diplomats suggested a compromise solution to their Venezuelan counterparts; they did not oppose the declaration but dissociated Venezuela from the paragraphs they considered problematic after the reading of the text in the meeting. Thus, 'while it did not block the adoption of presidential statement S/PRST/2015/15 and joined in the consensus, the delegation of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela does not subscribe to paragraphs 8 and 10 of the statement.'<sup>110</sup> In the end, Venezuela often helped preserving the unity of the team during official performances and, consequently, the UNSC interaction order.

Finally, at the UNGA, Venezuela used its vote as a contestation practice. At the 70<sup>th</sup> session of the UNGA, 73 resolutions were put to a vote. Venezuela and the US differed 61 times out of 69 votes (Venezuela was absent four times).<sup>111</sup> Similarly, at the 71<sup>st</sup> session of the UNGA, Venezuela and the US opposed 71 times, out of 83 resolutions voted (Venezuela was absent during a vote).<sup>112</sup>

At the UNSC, deadlocks, vetoes, the non-adoption of the agenda or a resolution, or the adoption of a resolution without unanimity look like failures, more or less significant, of the UNSC team. The four times Venezuela voted against a draft resolution, the consensus breakdown was also the result of other states' position, most of the time vetoes from permanent

<sup>105</sup>S/PV.7191, S/PV.7527, S/PV.7774.

<sup>106</sup>Syria is thus described as 'a brotherly Arab country which has been a victim of terrorist barbarism and is fighting to defend its sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity and to guarantee respect for the human rights of its people.' (A/71/PV.58). Venezuelan leaders read the Syrian conflict through an anti-imperialist prism and focused their criticism on US foreign policy. See Fadi Ahmar, 'The Syrian-Venezuelan rapprochement: Two anti-American strategies into practice', in Elodie Brun and Roberto Khatlab (eds), *Latin America and the Middle East: Crossed Perspectives* (Beirut: USEK), pp. 63–79.

<sup>107</sup>See A/71/PV.65 and also A/72/PV.73.

<sup>108</sup>S/PRST/2015/15.

<sup>109</sup>Interview with a national diplomat, New York, June 2017.

<sup>110</sup>See S/PV.7504. This practice to preserve consensus by making a reservation was repeated for the vote of Resolution 2216 on Yemen (S/PV.7426).

<sup>111</sup>Dag Hammarskjöld Library, Index to Proceedings of the General Assembly, Seventieth Session, 2015–2016, Part I, Subject Index (New York, NY: United Nations, 2017), pp. 239–53, available at: <https://library.un.org/sites/library.un.org/files/itp/a70-parti.pdf>.

<sup>112</sup>Dag Hammarskjöld Library, Index to Proceedings of the General Assembly, Seventy-first Session, 2016–2017, Part I, Subject Index (New York, NY: United Nations, 2018), pp. 233–44, available at: <https://library.un.org/sites/library.un.org/files/itp/a71-parti.pdf>.

members (notably Russia and, to a lesser extent, China)<sup>113</sup> and, on one occasion, from an elected member.<sup>114</sup>

More interestingly regarding Venezuela's contestation, the Latin American state abstained alone on four occasions (three in 2015 and one in 2016).<sup>115</sup> In most cases, this practice of contestation was blatantly undermined by the interactions that follow the vote. On no account this gesture, nor the following statement, provoked a debate among the UNSC members.<sup>116</sup> On one occasion, at the beginning of Venezuela's mandate, interactions during the UNSC 7401<sup>st</sup> meeting even shifted the focus from Venezuela's abstention to an oral confrontation between Russia and the US. During the vote on the draft that will become Resolution 2209 (6 March 2015), only Venezuela abstained, being also the first time it broke the consensus alone. This abstention could be interpreted as a strong act of contestation in an institution where a large part of the interactions is geared towards consensus building. However, a closer look at the interactions during this formal session opens the way to another interpretation. Following the vote, the UNSC chair gave the floor to the Venezuelan representative. In his speech, there is little evidence he was playing a contentious role. The clothes he wore (a suit), the behaviour of the diplomats in the background (very serious), the respect of the turn to speak, the language in which he expressed himself (Spanish), the way he thanked the Chair and then read the statement sometimes looking up at the chair, everything indicates a respect of the order of interaction.<sup>117</sup>

His speech was actually in keeping with standard practice. It was followed by statements from the other member countries that have asked to speak: Russia, China, the US, the United Kingdom (UK), Jordan, and France. However, the subsequent interactions changed the scene. The Russian representative, Vitaly Churkin, asked for the floor again to react to the speech by the US representative, Samantha Power, who in turn reacted to Churkin's speech, who replied again before the closing of the meeting. Churkin challenged Power's position by explicitly naming her. In his third intervention, he addressed her directly by looking at her when speaking. The exchanges between Churkin and Power made them the focus of attention, thus taking over the leading roles. These interactions highlighted the opposition between the US and Russia, despite both voted positively the draft resolution. Venezuela's act of contestation was clearly overshadowed by the confrontation between the two powers.

Venezuela's abstention can be considered as a misstep, that others members chose to ignore. This misstep reveals the difficulties specific to Venezuelan diplomacy, the ideological incoherence and the lack of internal capacity that were more acute during the period under review. Nicolás Maduro's foreign policy inherited the inconsistencies of the alliances sealed by Hugo Chávez, converting it into a biased and therefore less convincing diplomacy,<sup>118</sup> as illustrated by the alignment on Russia even when it was contrary to the principle of self-determination at the heart of the Bolivarian discourse.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>113</sup>International Crisis Group, 'Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN diplomacy', Special Briefing 1 (30 April 2019), available at: {<https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/b001-council-despair-fragmentation-un-diplomacy>}. For a comparison of Venezuelan alignment on China and Russia, see Mijares, 'Soft balancing the titans'.

<sup>114</sup>On Resolution 2285 (2016), Venezuela and Uruguay coincided on Western Sahara, whose aspiration for independence most Latin American countries have traditionally supported. The representatives of both states deplore their exclusion from the preparation of the draft and question the effectiveness of the resolution in a direct criticism to Morocco (S.PV7684). This is an example of how regional agendas can interfere in the UNSC, but without concrete consequences, as the text was approved.

<sup>115</sup>Resolutions 2240 (2015) and 2312 (2016) dealt with the same issue: the migration securitisation process and the expansion of the UNSC agenda. The other two (Resolutions 2209 and 2244, both voted in 2015) address the situation in the Middle East and in Somalia, respectively.

<sup>116</sup>S/PV.7366, S/PV.7531, S/PV.7541, S/PV.7783.

<sup>117</sup>'Middle East (Syria), Security Council, 7401<sup>st</sup> Meeting', UN Web TV (6 March 2015), available at: {<https://media.un.org/en/asset/k18/k1808s2pub>}.

<sup>118</sup>Brun, 'Une continuité à toute épreuve'; Romero and Mijares, 'From Chávez to Maduro'.

<sup>119</sup>Abstention from the vote of draft resolution S/2015/562 on Ukraine. Russia vetoed. See the meeting record S/PV.7498.



The Bolivarian project also suffered from the purges carried out in the public administration following Hugo Chávez's radicalisation, what undermined its capacities to catch the game of contestation practices at the UNSC – along with its long absence from the institution. After the attempted *coup d'état* in 2002, appointments were guided more by trust and ideology than by professionalism. Beyond the learning capacity of the people recruited, technical skills required for participation in the UNSC (prior knowledge of the files, familiarity with working methods) are difficult to replace in the short term. Indeed, the appointment of Rafael Ramírez as the permanent representative of the Venezuelan delegation in 2014 is striking. Minister of Energy and Minerals since 2002 and president of the national oil company, PDVSA, since 2004, he was then a key figure close to Chávez with a diplomatic trajectory in multilateral oil issues, but he had no previous UN experience and benefited from a certain degree of independence regarding Caracas. Not surprisingly, Rafael Ramírez was subsequently ordered to resign by the Venezuelan President on 5 December 2017.<sup>120</sup>

The specific difficulties of Venezuela's diplomacy also led to missed opportunities, as illustrated by the African agenda. Venezuela often privileged alignment with the positions of the three African elected members, over contestation.<sup>121</sup> African issues mainly dealt with peacekeeping operations that the Maduro government overtly opposed for sovereignist purposes. However, Venezuelan statements were limited to broad foreign policy principles such as the protection of sovereignty.<sup>122</sup> Venezuela supported the continuation of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO),<sup>123</sup> and did not even intervene at the time of the vote on Resolution 2295 (2016) on Mali, which was one of its main cooperation partners in Africa.<sup>124</sup>

Venezuelan contestation practices at the UNGA were not well adapted to the official UNSC interactional situation. But the analysis of contestation practices does not stop at these formal sessions. There are also several indications that Venezuelan representatives attempted backstage contestation practices.

## 5. Backstage contesting attempts at the UNSC

A closer look at Venezuela's mandate shows behind the scenes attempts to pursue a diplomacy based on contestation, although not without difficulty. According to a Chilean diplomat, 'the visible face of the UNSC's work is the sessions, but it is also necessary to take into account the preparation, when it is necessary to reach a consensus, which is done in parallel, in an informal manner.'<sup>125</sup> Despite their structural disadvantages as elected members, most of them go through a learning process and 'are able to play a more assertive role' during the second year of their mandate.<sup>126</sup> Not surprisingly, the best examples of backstage contestation practices carried out by Venezuela all occurred in 2016, particularly during its presidency of the UNSC, an important agency moment for elected members.

Debates around Resolution 2144 and the sanctions against Somalia constitute a first example of backstage contestation practices. Elected members usually chair the UNSC's subsidiary bodies. Venezuela, while opposed to sanctions, chaired the Somalia and the Sudan/South Sudan

<sup>120</sup>A few days later, an investigation was opened against him in Venezuela for embezzlement. The representative had publicly expressed his reservations about the government's economic decisions. 'Venezuela to investigate ex-oil tsar over corruption', *BBC* (12 December 2017), available at: {<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-42332858>}.

<sup>121</sup>Comments by a Venezuelan ex-diplomat, April 2020.

<sup>122</sup>Abstention on Resolution 2303 (2016) on the sending of police officers to Burundi without the consent of the government of that country. The same situation applied to South Sudan (Resolution 2304 (2016)).

<sup>123</sup>Vote in favour of Resolution 2218 (2015) and vote against the end of the mission endorsed by Resolution 2285 (2016).

<sup>124</sup>Camille Forite, *Chávez et l'Afrique: dix ans de politique extérieure vénézuélienne* (Paris: IHEAL, 2011).

<sup>125</sup>Interview with a Chilean diplomat, Santiago, 7 May 2015.

<sup>126</sup>Comments by a Venezuelan ex-diplomat, April 2020.

committees. On these two topics, the penholders were at least two Western permanent states, the UK and the US. While it chaired the Somalia sanction committee, Venezuela was not consulted by the penholders (Lithuania, the UK, and the US) during the negotiations leading to Resolution 2244. Venezuelan frustration, while framed in acceptable way during the official session, as already mentioned, led to an ‘institutional rebellion act’<sup>127</sup> during the negotiation of the presidential note (S/2016/170) that took place under the Venezuela presidency of the UNSC.

A former Venezuelan diplomat gave us this insightful testimony about this significant episode that marked on Venezuelans’ minds,<sup>128</sup> and influenced the following Venezuelan presidency of the UNSC.

One of the things that motivated us to organise this discussion and prepare the Note was our experience in the Somalia and Eritrea Sanctions Committee. ... In our capacity as Chairman of the Committee we tried – in 2015 – to persuade its members to consider lifting the sanctions against this country. The United Kingdom, the penholder, and the United States, were vehemently opposed, others were more neutral. In 2015, Venezuela was the only country to abstain. In 2016, the resolution received only 10 votes in favour. In 2018, the sanctions were lifted. In the background, it was the intransigence of some Council members and the inherent injustices of the UN sanctions system that motivated us to convene this debate and produce that note.<sup>129</sup>

Most of the resolutions are drafted by the US, France, and the UK, and negotiations informally take place among permanent members before being presented at the plenary.<sup>130</sup> But it was not the case on this occasion. On the contrary, Venezuela’s delegates first interacted with elected members to negotiate the presidential statement draft. They adopted a backstage dissenting practice that is increasingly used by elected members.<sup>131</sup> Then, they presented it to the permanent members, thus inverting the common practice. However, this rebellion act never appeared publicly in the PV or in an official performance of the UNSC, which invisibilised contestation.

A second clue to learn about practices that take place behind the scenes is given by the way UNSC members react in formal meetings. While Venezuela respected the practices when public records were taken, it controversially used the ‘any other business’ meetings (AOBs) with no public records. During the Venezuelan 2016 UNSC presidency, the delegation organised an unusual number of AOBs meetings. Fourteen were held according to Rafael Ramírez.<sup>132</sup> Several of this AOBs meetings, particularly on Palestinian issues, only aimed at ‘scor[ing] political points’.<sup>133</sup> This strategy allowed the Bolivarian government to appear officially as a member of the team and to pursue dissenting objectives backstage. Hence, thanks to media coverage, the Maduro administration sent a message to its support without incurring a high diplomatic cost.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>127</sup>Ibid.

<sup>128</sup>Although not explicitly stated, it seems that Venezuela was particularly frustrated that it was not consulted in its capacity as chair of the Sanctions Committee by the penholder drafting the resolution, in this case the UK.’

What’s in Blue, ‘Working Methods Debate’ (9 February 2016), available at: {<https://www.whatsinblue.org/2016/02/working-methods-debate-2.php>}.

<sup>129</sup>Comments by a Venezuelan ex-diplomat, April 2020.

<sup>130</sup>Marie-Eve Loïselle, ‘The penholder system and the rule of law in the Security Council decision-making: Setback or improvement?’, *Leiden Journal of International Law*, 33:1 (2020), pp. 139–56.

<sup>131</sup>Gifkins, ‘Beyond the veto’.

<sup>132</sup>S/PV.7633.

<sup>133</sup>Security Council Report, ‘In Hindsight: The Security Council in 2015: High Activity, Less Consensus’ (29 January 2016), available at: {[https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2016-02/in\\_hindsight\\_the\\_security\\_council\\_in\\_2015\\_high\\_activity\\_less\\_consensus.php](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2016-02/in_hindsight_the_security_council_in_2015_high_activity_less_consensus.php)}.

<sup>134</sup>Venezuela promoverá debate sobre conflictos en Medio Oriente ante la ONU’, *Telesur* (1 February 2016), available at: {<https://www.telesurtv.net/news/Venezuela-promovera-debate-sobre-conflictos-en-Medio-Oriente-ante-la-ONU-20160201-0044.html>}.

During an official meeting that occurred at the end of Venezuelan presidency, representatives from other countries reprimanded – diplomatically – their counterpart for this unusual and intense use of AOBs. They intentionally expressed their rebukes during an official session, so that their remarks would be included in the record. According to the representative of the UK, February was ‘a very busy month’. The Spanish representative concluded: ‘My team has been working intensively and, according to our calculations, you, Sir, convened 12 such meetings – although, you, Sir, say the number is 14. This practice seems to me to be necessary and advisable because, in fact, that is the work of the Security Council. ... However, despite all the fondness and trust that I have for you ... 14 meetings seem perhaps a bit too many.’<sup>135</sup>

The aim is to signal the misstep but to do so in a friendly manner. Gestures and facial expressions provide a better understanding of the interaction. After French representative thanked the Chair, he let out a small laugh. When he stated that ‘With a smile, you, Mr. President, have imposed on us an intensive program of work with a record number of items under “Other matters”, including four that were discussed yesterday’, the two individuals sitting behind him smiled. Similarly, when the New Zealand representative talked about ‘yesterday’s marathon’, the person sitting behind him on his right, also smiled.<sup>136</sup> As for the Spanish representative, he was on first-name terms with his Venezuelan counterpart. As these examples illustrate, while contestation practices are possible at the UNSC, they are also strongly constrained by interactions.

## Conclusion

Interaction orders strongly influence contestation practices at the UN, as illustrated by Venezuelan different lines adopted at the UNGA and the UNSC during 2015 and 2016. The interactional sociology of Erving Goffman allows to shed light on a seemingly contradictory situation: while Venezuelan representatives expressed radical positions at the UNGA, they display moderation in the UNSC. In both cases, Venezuelan authorities respected to a large extent the interaction order of each institution and adopted expected roles: a dissenting participant at the UNGA and a team member at the UNSC, at least during official performances.

An analysis based on the notion of interaction order provides a better understanding of Venezuela’s moderation at the UNSC. It is not the result of a lack of contestation but of an invisibilisation of contestation by interactive practices. Contestation initiatives often became invisible through different processes. Venezuelan contestation was downgraded either by the interactions between permanent members as was the case after the vote on Resolution 2209 or because it was part of a configuration linked to divisions between permanent states, namely the US versus Russia and China. In other cases, Venezuela contestation was often relegated backstage or behind the scene and/or was framed in acceptable forms when it occurs during official meeting.

Venezuelan contestation occurred at the UNSC, but its containment led to the reproduction of the interaction order or for changes to take place only at the margin. Thus, it opens the analysis of the UNSC change processes beyond institutional reforms. Our study provides a better understanding of the complexity of dissenting practices at the UN, at a time when a growing number of actors contest multilateral formal and informal rules. The votes of Angola and Egypt at the UNSC (see Table 1) confirm the need for further research on contestation in IOs.

**Acknowledgements.** In addition to the three reviewers whose comments allowed us to improve our article substantially, we would also like to acknowledge the feedback of the following colleagues who provided comments on our article: Ana Covarrubias, Guillaume Devin, Milena Dieckhoff, David Martini, Vincent Pouliot, Emily Riley, Carlos Romero, Arturo Santa Cruz, Thomas Risse, and a Venezuelan ex-diplomat that agreed to revise the draft. We are also thankful to the

<sup>135</sup>S/PV.7633.

<sup>136</sup>‘Efficiency and Transparency of the Council’s Work, Security Council, 7633<sup>rd</sup> Meeting’, UN Web TV (20 February 2016), available at: {<https://media.un.org/en/asset/k17/k17urlabpj>}.

discussants (Nicole Jenne, Stefano Palestini, Carsten-Andreas Schulz, and other participants) of our article during the Workshop on International Relations organised by PUC-Chile in December 2020.

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