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Leveraging diplomatic power and influence on the UN Security Council: the case of Australia

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ABSTRACT

There is scepticism about whether a state like Australia can secure its interests and exercise influence on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). A case study of Australia's experience as a UNSC member in 2013–2014 shows that it directly influenced UNSC decision-making in a number of ways: first, in the response to the MH17 incident; second, pushing forward UNSC practice through the first-ever resolutions on both 'small arms and light weapons' and police in peacekeeping; and third, as chair of three sanctions committees, influencing the decision-making environment towards greater transparency. While Australia did not achieve all its objectives, it made its views well-known. A second case study demonstrates that Australia's opportunities to influence UNSC decision-making are not limited to stints of membership. Australia was able to achieve many of its foreign policy objectives in East Timor in 1999 through strategically engaging with key UNSC players through an informal diplomatic grouping: the Core Group on East Timor. Both case studies show that Australia's diplomatic engagement with the UNSC is desirable, necessary and strategic, whether or not it is a current or prospective member.

KEYWORDS

UN Security Council; Australia; elected membership; informal institutions; influence

Introduction

On 29 September 2015 Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop announced to the UN General Assembly that Australia was nominating to serve on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2029–2030 following its elected term in 2013–2014 (Bishop 2015). Greg Sheridan (2015), Foreign Editor of *The Australian*, promptly ridiculed the announcement, claiming that UNSC elected membership 'makes no difference'.

A striking aspect of the literature on the UNSC, underpinning both criticism of the Council and proposals to remedy its flaws, is the assumption that the five permanent members (the 'P5', comprising China, France, Russia, the UK and the USA) are the only members who can exercise power and exert influence over the Council's decision-making process and outcomes (Bosco 2009). This is despite the fact that the 10 elected

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UNSC members (the ‘E10’) comprise two-thirds of the Council and often include states with a greater claim to objective power than some P5 members, whether in terms of economic strength, population or territorial size.

Drawing on Australia’s experience, this paper argues that non-permanent members can influence UNSC deliberations in a variety of ways, whether or not they are economically or militarily powerful, and whether or not they are elected members on the Council. This is not to say that non-permanent members can pursue and protect their national interests in the same way and to the same extent that the P5 can. Nor is it to claim that P5 power and control over the UNSC’s decision-making process do not constrain the capacity of E10 members to influence outcomes. Rather, our argument is that despite the reality of P5 power and control, strategic and innovative non-members can nevertheless contribute to and influence UNSC outcomes in a variety of ways.

The paper is presented in two parts. Part I draws on the insights of critical players in Australia’s UNSC delegation during its 2013–2014 elected term to explore instances of E10 impotence and influence. Part II describes how Australia was able to influence UNSC decision-making on the crisis in East Timor as a non-member in 1999. The aim is to explain how, why and when E10 members are best able to secure their interests and exercise influence on the UNSC.

Influencing the UNSC as an elected member: Australia’s experience

Australia’s most recent stint as a Council member, in 2013–2014, illustrates how Council membership provides a direct opportunity to exert influence (Langmore and Farrall 2016). Yet Australia’s 2013–2014 experience also serves as a sober reminder of how the capacity of elected members to introduce policy innovations can be severely constrained in the face of permanent member resistance. In this section we survey the structural limitations facing elected members, as well as the opportunities available to them. As part of this survey we discuss some of the ways that Australia navigated these limitations and sought to grasp its opportunities as an elected member. We then examine one case in which Australia was able to exert demonstrable influence over a UNSC outcome, namely a resolution on the MH17 incident, as well as one example of unfinished business, namely its valiant but unsuccessful push for a resolution on sanctions implementation.

Why and how Australia became an elected member

The decision to seek an elected seat on the UNSC was made by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008 (Langmore 2013). Rudd saw this as a way to signal his government’s intention to engage actively in multilateral diplomacy, through the United Nations. In the four decades between 1946 and 1986, Australia had held a UNSC seat on four occasions: 1946–1947, 1956–1957, 1973–1974 and 1985–1986. But Australia’s failure to win election to the Council in 1996 (Thakur 1996) and its decision not to contest its next scheduled UNSC election in 2006 had the consequence that Australia had not held a Council seat for the entirety of the post-Cold War era. This meant that the Australian public was unfamiliar with the benefits that UNSC membership would bring, that Australian diplomats were out of touch with the inner workings of the UNSC, and that, for the first time in Australia’s history, an opposition party sought to gain political advantage by openly criticising the

Government's decision to seek election, doing so on the grounds of cost and necessity (Alexander 2010).

Ultimately Australia won election to the Council with a decisive result in the first-round of voting on 18 October 2012, securing 140 votes. This success was attributed to an extremely professional and global campaign. One of the key contributors to the campaign was Australia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Gary Quinlan, who worked tirelessly in the lead up to the election to increase the likelihood that the other 192 Permanent Representatives would vote for Australia. Nevertheless, despite the professionalism of Australia's campaign, success was as unexpected as it was resounding. While Australia had devoted considerable diplomatic resources to its campaign election, it had undertaken little strategic planning for what it would do if it actually won the election. Australia's diplomats thus had to work extremely hard to develop the necessary diplomatic policy-making and support structures to sustain an effective UNSC membership. With this less-than-ideal preparation to undertake a UNSC term, one might have expected Australia largely to react to events on the Council, rather than to take the initiative. Yet as we discuss below, Australia's engagement across the broad range of issue areas on the Council's agenda indicated a growing capacity to be effective both in reactive and proactive modes. Moreover, Australia's experience in 2013–2014 showcased how Council membership can facilitate both the pursuit of multilateral action to advance priority national interests, as well as the strengthening of relations with key bilateral partners to advance long-term foreign policy objectives.

Structural limitations on elected members

Non-permanent members must navigate a series of obstacles in order to drive, shape or refine UNSC decision-making. The biggest obstacle is the veto power of the five permanent members, which empowers them to exert considerable control over the development of UNSC decisions. Another obstacle is the fact that few non-permanent members possess meaningful institutional knowledge of the UNSC's diplomatic and decision-making processes prior to assuming their seats. When Australia took its place on the UNSC on 1 January 2013, the fact that it had been a Council member on four previous occasions did not count for much in terms of institutional knowledge given that, as noted above, its most recent Council stint had been during the Cold War (1985–1986). Luxembourg, whose elected term coincided with Australia's, was serving on the Council for the very first time, so it had absolutely no first-hand knowledge of how to negotiate effectively in the UNSC decision-making processes. By contrast the permanent members have maintained a steady presence on the UNSC since 1946. They have accumulated decades of practical experience in and in-house reporting on Council decision-making. The P5 can therefore use their substantive and procedural know-how to maximum negotiating advantage in deliberations with their far less-experienced elected counterparts. Australia's lack of institutional memory was offset somewhat by its close relationships with permanent members: with decades of close diplomatic relations within the UK and the USA and a substantially stronger bilateral relationship with France during the course of 2013–2014. This was particularly helpful during Australia's early months on the Council, as it worked hard to find its feet.

Another related obstacle is obtaining and committing the necessary diplomatic resources to participate effectively on the UNSC. This requires the investment of substantial human and financial resources. The Council can be called to meet at any time of any day of the year. The first few months can be disorientating and exhausting for new members. Diplomats must get up to speed on the substance and complexities of the dozens of country-specific and thematic items on the Council's agenda. A member of the Australian delegation during the 2013–2014 term described this experience as like entering a room and having to participate immediately in an intelligent way in more than 40 extremely important yet simultaneous conversations. E10 members must prepare for and attend constant meetings of the Council, whether taking place in formal or informal session. They also participate in, and in some instances chair, regular meetings of the Council's subsidiary organs, including the more than a dozen committees that administer the UNSC's sanctions regimes. During 2014 alone Australia was required to attend 430 formal meetings or informal consultations of the whole, as well as 167 meetings of the UNSC's committees and working groups of the whole, amounting to 597 meetings in just one year (UN Department of Political Affairs 2015). Just attending these meetings is burdensome enough, but in order to participate effectively elected members need to be well-prepared and well-resourced. Being an effective UNSC participant also requires the allocation of substantial diplomatic resources not just in New York, but also in capitals, including one's own and those of other key players on the Council, such as the P5.

Australia responded to these resource challenges by scaling up its New York presence and by creating a dedicated Task Force in Canberra to provide support to its Security Council team. In New York, the staffing profile at the Australian Mission doubled in size between mid-2012 and mid-2013 (United Nations 2012, 2014). The quality of the diplomats deployed on Australia's team was extremely high. Australia's permanent representative, Ambassador Gary Quinlan, had been deployed in New York for a number of years, during which time he had developed close working relations with other permanent representatives. These close relations had borne fruit in October 2012, when 140 permanent representatives delivered Australia its elected seat by casting their votes for Australia. The delegation also contained senior members who had previously been posted to New York and/or had led Australia's diplomatic efforts in relation to matters on the UNSC agenda. Meanwhile, in Canberra, the UNSC Task Force contained approximately 10 staff throughout 2013–2014.

Opportunities to exert influence

Despite these considerable obstacles, E10 members can influence the UNSC's decision-making process in a range of ways. For example, the responsibility for chairing the Council's subsidiary organs, including the dozen or more sanctions committees, is distributed among elected members. Australia thus had a substantial opportunity to influence Council decision-making in its capacity as chairs of three sanctions committees, namely the 1737 (Iran) Committee, the 1988 (Taliban) Committee and the 1267/1989 (Al-Qaida) Committee. Australia also had the unusual privilege for an E10 country of being the 'pen-holder' on a country-specific agenda item (Security Council Report 2013, 2). Australia took over

the role as pen-holder on Afghanistan from outgoing member Germany, thus enabling it to shape and drive the drafting process for resolutions on Afghanistan.

The most visible way in which elected members can contribute to UNSC business is as President. The Council presidency rotates in English alphabetical order on a monthly basis, providing each elected member at least one chance to be President for the month. While the procedural responsibilities of the presidency can be demanding, the office also provides an opportunity to shape the Council's schedule during that month. Many E10 members use this opportunity to schedule one or more open debates on an issue of pressing importance. During its term Australia assumed the presidency twice, in September 2013 and November 2014. In its first presidency it scheduled a debate on small arms and light weapons, at which the Council adopted its first-ever resolution on the topic. Resolution 2117 (2013) determined that the 'illicit transfer, destabilizing accumulation and misuse of small arms and light weapons' posed a threat to international peace and security and encouraged member states to establish or strengthen subregional and regional cooperation and coordination to prevent illicit transfer of small arms and light weapons (United Nations Security Council Resolution 2117 2013, [1]; [4]). It also emphasised that better implementation of the Council's arms embargoes would help prevent the illicit transfer of small arms (United Nations Security Council Resolution 2117 [2]–[4]; [6]–[8]). In November 2014 Australia held a debate on 'police in peacekeeping', at which the Council again adopted its first resolution on Australia's chosen topic. In resolution 2185 (2014) the Council resolved to include policing as an integral part of UN peacekeeping operations and special political missions, and undertook to draft 'clear, credible and achievable' mandates for policing-related activities (United Nations Security Council Resolution 2185 2014).

Australia also played a proactive, leadership role on other issues at moments when it did not hold the presidency. With Luxembourg and Jordan, it actively sought to improve humanitarian access in Syria. Towards the end of its membership, Australia also led behind-the-scenes efforts to place on the UNSC agenda the issue of the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Australia was able to obtain the co-sponsorship of nine other members to put the proposed new agenda item to a procedural vote on 22 December 2014 and following the successful vote, the issue was subsequently added to the Council's agenda.

Australia's major success: resolution 2166 on Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17

The clearest example of Australian influence over UNSC decision-making came when Australia pushed for the Council to respond to the destruction of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 over eastern Ukrainian airspace on 17 July 2014. The explosion, which appeared to be the result of a ground-based missile attack, killed 298 people, including 38 Australian citizens and residents. Australia immediately began negotiating a draft resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire surrounding the crash-site and a comprehensive international investigation leading to a process that would hold accountable those responsible for the destruction of MH17. The USA and UK were reluctant to play a lead role on the issue, so Australia led the charge. Russia, which was actively supporting the very rebels in Eastern Ukraine who were the likely perpetrators of the attack on MH17, did not openly oppose Council action but it threw its negotiating weight around to soften the strength and

language of Australia's preferred draft text. After various pragmatic compromises, including deploring the disaster as a 'downing' rather than the result of an attack, resolution 2166 (2014) was adopted by consensus on Monday, 21 July, just four days after the crash. The resolution demanded immediate access to the site by international, independent investigators, dignified and professional recovery of bodies, restraint from destroying or moving wreckage and halting of military activities in the area.

Given the reticence of some key UNSC members to pursue urgent action on MH17, resolution 2166 probably would not have been adopted without Australia's strong motivation and determination. Despite not possessing the permanent member veto, Australia was able to pursue and secure a negotiated outcome in the Council that directly served its own national interests. The main explanation for this success was Australia's ability to gain diplomatic support for its proposed action from UN members beyond as well as inside the Council. Indeed, over the previous 18 months Australia had worked hard to build constructive working relationships with P5 and other E10 members. It is noteworthy that the Council had not been able to respond so quickly to two previous incidents involving the destruction of civilian planes. In 1983 the Soviet Union vetoed a draft resolution on Korean Airlines Flight 007, which had been shot down by a Soviet fighter-plane, killing 269 people. In 1988 the Council took seventeen days to adopt a resolution on Iranian Air Flight 655, which had been shot down by a US Navy missile cruiser, killing 290 people (Security Council Report 2014, 2). Another important factor was the presence of Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs in New York, which added political weight and momentum to Australia's push for a prompt Council response. Minister Julie Bishop had flown to New York shortly after the MH17 crash in order to lead Australia's engagement with other Council members.

Unfinished business: Sanctions implementation

During its 2013–2014 term Australia also sought to push forward UNSC policy and practice on sanctions implementation. If successful, this initiative would have served as a considerable concrete legacy of Australia's active and effective participation as an elected Council member. Australia's interest in sanctions implementation stemmed from the 'wheat-for-weapons' scandal that unfolded during the UN's Oil-for-food program (OFFP) that aimed to ameliorate the humanitarian impact of UN comprehensive sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s. The 2005 Independent Inquiry Committee into the OFFP exposed the fact that the Australian Wheat Board had paid a total of US\$221.7 million in 'side payments' to Saddam Hussein's regime in order to secure the transport of Australian wheat under the OFFP (UN 2005, 315; Boreham 2009, 171–190; Mulgan 2009, 334–352). This amounted to more than 14% of the funds illegally collected by Iraq through its OFFP kick-back schemes. A Royal Commission was created to investigate this scandal. Its hearings and findings prompted considerable reflection in Australian policy circles on how to prevent Australian companies from violating UN sanctions in future. The Australian Parliament subsequently adopted legislation that sought to improve UN sanctions observance including the International Trade Integrity Act 2007. Australia has since prided itself on possessing a 'best practice' approach to domestic implementation of UN sanctions.

During its term Australia thus co-sponsored (with Finland, Germany, Greece and Sweden) a High Level Review of UN sanctions in partnership with the Watson Institute of Brown University and Compliance and Capacity International. Australia then pursued and promoted a draft resolution on sanctions implementation, drawing heavily on the findings of the High Level Review, which it hoped the Council would adopt during a dedicated debate on sanctions that it proposed to hold as part of its November 2014 presidency. The draft resolution would have established a policy and coordination unit to identify sanctions best practices. It would also have mobilised experts to provide technical assistance on sanctions implementation to UN member states. Ultimately, however, while the debate went ahead and prompted vigorous debate about the need to strengthen sanctions implementation, the draft resolution was not put to the vote during or after Australia's presidency (UN Doc S/PV/7323; 25 November 2015).

Australia's pursuit of a resolution on sanctions implementation was bold, but it was also risky. It required the acquiescence of Russia, which was in a far less accommodating mood by November 2014 on the topic of sanctions than it had been four months earlier on the MH17 resolution. At the time Russia was the target of a range of non-UN sanctions regimes that had been imposed by the USA, the EU and even Australia itself in response to the Crimean and eastern Ukrainian crises. Yet despite Russia's predictable defensiveness on sanctions, Australia prioritised the push for a sanctions resolution as a signature part of its final months on the Council. Perhaps Australia calculated that it might be able to call Russia's huff and puff bluff again, as it had on resolution 2166 (2014), but on this occasion Russia firmly dug in its veto-threatening heels, demanding so many concessions to the original text that it would have been virtually unrecognisable. Australia prudently opted to withdraw the draft, rather than allowing it to be watered down any further.

What are we to make of this? A glass half-full reading of Australia's single-minded pursuit of a sanctions implementation resolution could be that it showcased an imaginative, innovative E10 member at the height of its powers, doggedly pursuing a principled outcome despite the predictable opposition of a permanent member. Moreover, while a resolution was not achieved, the High Level Review process had already identified weaknesses in sanctions implementation and advanced strategies to address those weaknesses. Australia had also encouraged procedural improvements in sanctions administration, such as improved transparency of reporting by chairs of sanctions committees. A glass half-empty reading, however, would question whether Australia might not have made greater use of its hard-won diplomatic capital during its final weeks on the Council, particularly as it was practically inevitable that Russia would torpedo a reform initiative on sanctions.

Comparing Australia's record with other elected members

What will the primary legacy of Australia's 2013–2014 term be? In the past, other elected members have: introduced trail-blazing agenda items such as protection of civilians (Canada, February 1999) and women, peace and security (Namibia, October 2000); instituted important procedural innovations (Germany, driving the resolution 1989 ombudsperson process on Al Qaida sanctions adopted in June 2011); or raised provocative new ideas (Brazil, proposing 'responsibility while protecting', November 2011). As

discussed above, Australia's main contributions included catalysing the Council's response to the downing of MH17; shepherding through the Council's first-ever resolutions on 'small arms and light weapons' and 'police in peacekeeping'; and leading the push for a procedural vote to add the human rights situation in the DPRK to the Council's agenda.

Overall, however, Australia will be remembered mostly as a competent, hard-working Council member. P5 diplomats have described Australia as the most effective elected member of its term, due to a combination of its diplomatic capacity and preparedness to take the initiative rather than sitting back. One of these diplomats observed that many elected members failed to make the most of their opportunities on the Council, perhaps due to a belief that they had little scope to be proactive, whereas Australia employed a 'just do it' approach, enabling it to make a strong contribution.

Influencing the UNSC as a non-member

We now turn to a case that demonstrates that countries like Australia can exert some influence over UNSC decision-making even when they are not Council members: the Core Group on East Timor in 1999.

Post-Cold War UN conflict resolution has seen a proliferation of informal institutions working in and around the UNSC (Prantl 2006). Between 1990 and 2006, the number of those mechanisms increased from four to over thirty (Whitfield 2007, 4).

Informal institutions may provide platforms to escape what one may call 'the multilateral predicament'. Such institutions have come to play a range of critical roles and occupy a vital space between multilateral governance on the one hand and traditional major power diplomacy on the other. One can distinguish between two types of informal institutions—*exit* and *voice* (Hirschman 1970; Prantl 2005, 559–592; Prantl 2014, 449–482). *Exit* institutions are created in response to a perceived decrease in the performance or benefit of the UNSC to a member state or a group of member states. *Voice* institutions provide UN member states with a forum to improve or repair the loss of quality of UNSC decision-making through enhanced negotiation and communication. Stakeholders not being represented on the UNSC may articulate their interests (or dissatisfaction) in a particular issue area or conflict and may informally influence agenda-setting and/or decision-making.

The following section will introduce the Core Group on East Timor as an informal *voice* group in UNSC decision-making that particularly helped Australia to exercise a high degree of influence in UNSC decision-making without being directly represented on the UNSC.

Australia and the Core Group on East Timor in 1999

The resignation of President Suharto of Indonesia in 1998 opened a window of opportunity for the resolution of the long-standing struggle over greater autonomy for East Timor, which had been annexed by Indonesia in 1976 when Portugal withdrew from its former colony (Traub 2000, 75). In January 1999, the new President Habibie offered an UN-sponsored ballot on the status of East Timor by the end of 1999, which became subject of the Tripartite talks between Indonesia, Portugal and the United Nations. Negotiations resulted

in the 5 May Agreements signed under the aegis of the United Nations in New York, with Indonesia having full responsibility for maintaining security in East Timor.

The Core Group on East Timor was facilitated by the UN Secretariat shortly after Habibie's announcement and coincided with Australia's intention to form a Contact or Friends group. While the United Nations had the lead in the negotiations, the Core Group provided a well co-ordinated multi-track diplomacy to mobilise international support. The Core Group had been kept deliberately small and comprised the key external stakeholders in the conflict: Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the UK, and the USA. For Australia, as Whitfield has observed, 'East Timor had been the most contentious aspect of Australia's foreign policy since Vietnam, and the UN process offered the possibility of resolving the situation with the legitimacy of the United Nations behind it' (Whitfield 2007, 201). Japan had been the largest provider of foreign aid to Indonesia. New Zealand brought deep regional expertise and balance to Australia's diplomacy. The USA was an obvious choice, given its interest in regional stability and its strong support for the UN's good offices in East Timor. Besides, as Robert Orr observed, 'What U.S. policy makers really like about the East Timor "model" is that the United States did not have to take the lead' (Orr 2001, 133). The UK, while perhaps a less obvious choice, proved to be extremely useful to facilitate consultations with and agreement of UNSC members not directly involved in the process.

The establishment of the group reflected the sustained commitment of its members to provide the necessary means to secure the successful implementation of the 5 May Agreements. Neither Australia nor Japan or New Zealand were elected members on the Council at this stage. Setting up the Core Group on East Timor had therefore very much to do with the positioning of stakeholders that wanted to be perceived as credible players committed to the resolution of conflict.

In a kind of self-selection process, the grouping constituted itself along the early 1990s model of Groups of Friends of the Secretary-General (Wensley 2000). Australian diplomacy at the beginning of 1999 had 'swung into high gear, determined not to find itself behind Indonesia on East Timor' (Whitfield 2007, 200). At the same time, the UN secretariat was anxious not 'to find itself behind Australia' (Whitfield 2007, 200). Looked at from a UN perspective the group was an 'ideal mixture of very vested and very benevolent forces' (Whitfield 2007, 200). It allowed the UN Secretariat to closely engage with a small circle of key stakeholders rather than engaging with the UNSC as a whole. Looked at from an Australian perspective, the group achieved two key policy objectives: first, to leverage Australian influence on the UN-led process without being represented in the central UN decision-making organ, that is, the Council; second, to resolve a very delicate crisis situation in the neighbourhood with full UN legitimacy.

Throughout the crisis period, the Core Group met on a daily basis. The UN Secretariat was in regular contact with the then Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations in New York, Ambassador Penny Wensley. The Group was closely connected with respective capitals and the embassies in Jakarta/Indonesia in order to facilitate communication to the greatest possible extent. For that purpose, embassies in New York and Jakarta as well as Foreign Ministries in capitals had set up special East Timor task forces or policy co-ordination groups. Primary functions of the Core Group initially included dealing with practical problems arising from the envisaged assistance mission of the United Nations in East Timor, the mobilisation of international support, and the focus on the security situation on the ground.

With the situation deteriorating after the ballot results of 3 September 1999, the establishment of a multinational force in East Timor became the overwhelming concern. The issues at stake were now to pressure Indonesia to accept an international presence, to receive a clear and unambiguous mandate by the UNSC to legitimise such presence, and to mobilise the international community to contribute to or support the operation (Whitfield 2007, 200). Australia would only contemplate major troop deployment and peace enforcement measures with the explicit consent of the Indonesia and only if the United Nations would take on the responsibility for a transitional administration of East Timor.

The involvement of regional players turned out to be another fundamental element in the drafting process of what should become later resolution 1264, authorising the establishment of a multinational force in East Timor on 15 September 1999. The APEC meetings beginning on 9 September provided a convenient platform for key actors to produce an agreement and a draft resolution (Kühne and Prantl 2000, 98). Meeting in the margins, leaders entered into an intense negotiating and drafting process with the Core Group members as facilitators. From this perspective, the process showed a striking analogy to the genesis of resolution 1244 that had established a civilian and military presence in Kosovo. Both resolutions had been negotiated and agreed upon outside the UNSC that finally only formally adopted the pre-negotiated draft.

In conclusion, the close cooperation between the Core Group and the Secretariat produced a win-win situation: Stakeholders to a conflict committed themselves to provide the necessary means to conduct an envisaged operation, while being part and parcel of the process that set the parameters of crisis response. The Core Group has been ‘a case study of how a country which is not a UNSC member, and not a formal party to a dispute, but which has a strong interest in a conflict situation, can exert influence on UNSC decision-making processes’ (Wensley 2000). Looked at from the UN Secretariat’s perspective, the Core Group turned out to be key to gain the necessary political support for a rapid response and a quick deployment of forces (personal interview with a senior official of the UN Secretariat in New York). The cooperation helped to answer the initial question of how the United Nations should react, whether to set up a UN operation or to authorise a coalition of forces. In fact, the engagement of the group prevented a situation that could have been characterised by a huge gap between UNSC declaratory and operational policy, i.e. by adopting a resolution without providing the means to implement it. In sum, the Core Group format helped ensure that key stakeholders in the conflict were intimately involved in the management of the crisis, while the UNSC’s response was directly informed by the views and positions of Core Group members.

Conclusion

We started this paper with Greg Sheridan’s (2015) claim that UNSC elected membership ‘makes no difference’. We have demonstrated in this article that Australia has the diplomatic capacity, creativity and connections to influence UNSC decision-making both as a member and as a non-member.

In Part I we explored how Australia influenced UNSC decision-making directly as a Council member in 2013–2014. Australia did this in a number of ways. First, Australia

was able to pursue its national strategic objectives on the response to the MH17 incident, delivering a unanimous UNSC resolution on the matter within four days and in the face of reluctance by Russia. Second, Australia was able to push forward UNSC practice on thematic issues that it considered important, shepherding through the Security Council's first-ever resolutions on both 'small arms and light weapons' and police in peacekeeping. Third, as Chair of three sanctions committees, the Council was able to influence the decision-making environment in subsidiary bodies, emphasising the need for greater transparency. Fourth, Australia played an instrumental role in the push to place the human rights situation in the DPRK on the Council's agenda. Finally, while Australia did not achieve all of its objectives on humanitarian response to Syria or on strengthening sanctions implementation, it made its views well-known on the consequences of the UNSC's failure to move forward on both of these issues.

However in this article we have demonstrated that Australia's opportunities to influence UNSC decision-making are not limited to stints of membership. In Part II we described how Australia was able to achieve many of its foreign policy objectives in East Timor through indirect diplomatic action, strategically engaging with key UNSC players and influential informal diplomatic groupings. Although Australia was not *on* the Council, the Core Group allowed it to achieve its key objectives *through* the Council, in close collaboration with the USA and the UK.

We therefore agree with Sheridan that the question of whether Australia is or is not a UNSC member need not determine Australia's capacity to engage in the UNSC's sphere of influence. Where we differ with Sheridan, however, is that we argue that Australia's engagement with the UNSC *can* and *does* make a difference. We view Australia's diplomatic engagement with the UNSC as desirable, necessary and strategic and we believe it is good diplomatic policy for twenty-first century UN member states to remain as engaged as possible in the issues addressed by the UNSC, whether or not they are current or prospective members.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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