

# INFLUENCE IN THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL: RETHINKING THE ROLE OF ELECTED MEMBERS

SECURITY COUNCIL ANALYSIS NETWORK (SCAN)

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As a popular political saying goes, 'If you're not at the table, you're on the menu'.

In global governance, this is a powerful assumption. It motivates international actors of all kinds to seek a seat in the global forums that shape world politics, including the UN Security Council. With the balance of global power shifting and the post-World War II institutional architecture challenged, the question of voice and representation in global governance has acquired critical importance.

## WHAT WE KNOW

In the UN Security Council, it is widely understood that not even a seat around the famous horseshoe table ensures that states can have their say. The pre-eminent authority for maintaining international peace and security, the Council remains an exclusive club dominated by its five permanent members (P5), representatives of an old order from which much of the world has moved on. The UN's 188 other member states are represented by just ten elected members (E10) serving two-year terms. These elected members must struggle to have their voice heard—and to make it count—in an institution controlled by powerful members who not only dominate the game but wrote its rules.

The constraints facing elected members are written into the UN Charter, which institutionalises an unequal Council hierarchy by granting the P5 not just permanence, but also veto power. Moreover, elected members are disadvantaged by the Council's informal practices in at least three ways. First, permanent members wield greater diplomatic capacity by virtue of bigger, better resourced missions staffed by diplomats with more Council experience than their elected counterparts, who often take their seat without recent experience of membership. Second, by the time a draft resolution is formally debated, the P5 have usually already consulted behind closed doors to script in advance the Council's decisions. The informal convention of 'penholding' further entrenches their control. Third, an expansive agenda and the frantic pace of work makes it difficult for states on and off the Council to make representations and advocate for their interests, whether as elected members, through Council consultations or via other means of diplomatic lobbying.

Former E10 ambassadors have remarked on the power imbalance between elected and permanent members. New Zealand's Permanent Representative Colin Keating (1993-94) criticises the P5's stranglehold on the Council and notes that the E10 have become more marginalised since the mid-2000s. Similarly, Singapore's Permanent Representative Kishore Mahbubani (2001-02) argues that 'the structural weakness in the Council has resulted from a dichotomy—the P5 have been given power without responsibility; the E10 have been given responsibility without power'.

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The relevant academic literature, emerging mostly from the field of international relations, tends to concede P5 domination. Most analyses of influence on the Security Council are conducted through the lens of the P5. In the rare cases where scholars explore the question of E10 influence, it is mostly to highlight their limits.

## WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

The orthodox view of P5 predominance offers bleak prospects for the 188 UN member states not permanently represented on the Security Council. Yet as we demonstrate in our project, 'the other 188' can leverage more opportunities for voice and influence than commonly thought, particularly because of three fundamental shifts in global politics.

The first arises from the challenge of old multilateralism and waning U.S. hegemony. The post-1945 global governance architecture was essentially built around the U.S. and industrialized Global North, but largely excluded the developing Global South. With the global balance of power shifting East and South, governance that lacks voice and representation from 'the rest' inevitably faces a serious legitimacy deficit.

The second opportunity emerges from the interrelationship between new multilateralism and regime complexity. Twenty-first century multilateralism is marked by the diffusion rather than concentration of power. This in turn has led to a surge of principles and preferences about how to address problems collectively. At the same time, many different channels of cooperation have emerged alongside the Council, sometimes acting in parallel and sometimes in competition. In sum, the institutional pathways for exercising influence have become more diverse.

Third, as a result, questions of institutional choice—about where and how to exercise influence—have acquired new importance. In these strategic decisions, voice and representation are the sine-qua-non for legitimising the pursuit of power.

What we don't know (yet) is how elected members can manage these shifts and best leverage these opportunities to maximise their influence in the Security Council. Our project critically engages with the conventional wisdom that P5 centrality crowds out any space for elected members to have meaningful influence in Council decision-making. It argues that scholarly analysis of Security Council decision-making, with its focus on the P5, has overlooked many of the dynamics critical to the Council's outcomes, resulting in shallow understandings of the various ways in which the E10 wield influence. We aim here to begin addressing that oversight by mapping the diplomatic practice of the UN Security Council with specific reference to the role and influence of the 188 'outs' (as opposed to the P5 'ins').

## THE PURCHASING POWER OF INFLUENCE

Drawing on examples that emerged from interviews and workshops with current and former UN diplomats, UN staff, civil society representatives, and academics, we have identified five important, mutually reinforcing explanatory factors, which we call the purchasing power of influence (PPI).

### Diplomatic capacities and competences

Diplomatic practices and the personal qualities of elected member representatives—their diplomatic competences—are particularly important in accounting for elected members' influence. These include the longevity of their association with the UN, their expert knowledge and proficiency, and

their personal charisma. Indeed, our interviews with UN practitioners have revealed that many accord substantial explanatory weight to the reputation, tactical skill and tenaciousness of an elected member's Permanent Representative and its other senior diplomats.

### Representative legitimacy and voice

Legitimacy dynamics are critical to Council practice. Although the permanent members enjoy an outsized role in Council decision-making, it is not an exclusive role. Permanent members need the elected members, and not only to obtain the nine affirmative votes necessary for a resolution. An institution that is seen only as a vessel for manipulation by the most powerful states quickly loses its influence. Without legitimacy, the Council—like any institution—loses authority: states more often ignore its decisions and turn to alternative institutions. That is, for its decisions to have impact in the world, the Council needs to command the respect, consent and compliance of the world's states and, increasingly, its non-state actors. This means that elected members must be effective, or at least seen to be effective, in representing the views of the broader UN membership.

### Embedded influence

The Council is embedded in a global order that is fundamentally challenged and contested. As a result, influence is the product of dynamic and complex multi-level processes. UN member states engage with the Council as one of several institutional means to get what they want. What states want is embedded in the broader context of international affairs. This means that the actions of influence-seeking elected Council members, and their likelihood of success, are inherently connected to their actions, and those of non-members, outside the Council. This embeddedness and interconnectedness also increases the likelihood that influence-seeking actions lead to unintended results.

### Formal and informal mechanisms of influence

Our broader observations of Council dynamics highlight specific mechanisms, formal or informal, commonly seen in cases of elected member influence. For instance, elected members have at times used the rotating Presidency astutely to provide a platform to set and advance an agenda. The provisional rules of procedure (ProP) have given non-permanent members the opportunity to participate in Council debates in specific circumstances. Mechanisms like Arria-formula meetings have allowed council members to address an issue in the absence of a consensus to hold a formal meeting. Coalition-building practices have enabled elected members to leverage representative legitimacy as a means of influence. Finally, elected member influence may rely on the input and active cooperation of epistemic communities and outside experts on a particular issue.

### Favourable conditions

Exercising influence is not simply a matter of assembling resources and employing a set of tactics. While the agency of an elected member will be crucial in determining influence, the ability to influence Council decision-making is constrained by factors beyond the control of any one state. Our research highlights the significance of favourable conditions to these instances of elected member influence. Timing, the political context and the specific composition of the Council appear particularly important.

Furthermore, the longer an issue is considered, the greater the opportunities for influence. Whereas the fast pace of P-5 diplomacy often limits the entry points for elected members in a debate, issues

on which permanent members are either stalemated or not seeking a rapid decision allow elected members the time to build a coalition, develop proposals and solutions, and to lobby Council members through creative diplomacy.

## OUR QUESTIONS

The research team will be in New York in June 2018 to build on, and test, the above findings with the input of practitioners and experts on the work of the Security Council. We are focused on four key questions:

1. On which issues, or category of issues, do elected members have the most influence and why? Is elected member influence more likely on issues of lesser or peripheral importance, or can elected members sometimes cut through on the most important issues of the day?
2. What are the institutional and procedural conditions that facilitate or hamper elected members' influence? If an elected member wants to influence Council decision-making, what should it prioritise? What resources does it need? What barriers and pitfalls should it seek to avoid?
3. How do the dynamics outside the Security Council (e.g. UN General Assembly, groups of friends, core groups, contact groups, etc.) affect the influence of elected members on the Council?
4. How can an elected member maintain influence on Council decision-making beyond its two-year term?

For more, see <https://scan-un.org/> or contact [marie-eve.loiselle@anu.edu.au](mailto:marie-eve.loiselle@anu.edu.au)

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