

Centre for Strategic Studies Discussion Paper

Getting Around the Security Council Table

NZ success in securing a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) for 2015-16 is a significant foreign policy accomplishment. It is a tribute to all those campaigned. For only the third time in the seventy years of the UN's existence, NZ will assume a seat at the Council.¹ We take our place at a precarious moment internationally. A combination of deep seated political tensions in the Middle East coincides with brutal divisions inside Islam. Our campaign for membership emphasised a NZ record for conscientious international involvement and capacity for independent judgement. Those qualities will now be tested.

ISIS: A well-resourced, media savvy organisation employing harsh inhumane methods, the Islamic State (ISIS), has emerged committed to redrawing the map of the Middle East through cold blooded creation of a new country - a caliphate - which involves cruel persecution of fellow Muslims and of non-Muslim faiths. Christian leaders, including in NZ, voice dismay and Muslim communities, including in NZ, denounce ISIS methods which defy basic Islamic teaching about justifiable war. It is crystal clear that this issue and the character of the response by the international community, will cast a shadow over the NZ tenure on the UNSC. That is not to say of course that other crises will not intrude like that surrounding Ukraine where complex judgements are involved in the sense that none of the principal parties has a monopoly on virtue.

The immediate origins for this present Middle Eastern turmoil lie in the tragic 2003 US led invasion of Iraq (which NZ wisely opted not to join) involving doctored intelligence and disastrous post conflict decisions on the part of the victors that helped divide Shia from Sunni Moslems; and dismantled much of Iraq's administrative system and its armed forces. Subsequent disintegration has been fuelled too from Syria where political, regional, tribal and religious antagonisms which splinter that country in ways that almost defy outside understanding, spilled across the border in the form of ISIS.

¹NZ served in 1953/54, 1993/94. It also occupied half a term of one year in 1966. In 1982 NZ was defeated in a bid by Malta, when African nations opposed the candidature because of NZ sporting ties with apartheid South Africa.

Responses: The international community once more agonises over how or whether to intervene in this latest chapter in Middle Eastern perdition. Confronted by the prospect of an open ended conflict and hard on the heels of an unprecedented prolonged commitment in Afghanistan, NZ rightly has taken time to formulate a response in keeping with our means. A final decision one way or another should not be taken before NZ assumes our UNSC seat and absorbs the full magnitude of the Council workload. We must remain clear in our own minds that a decision to commit SAS troops, no matter how much embroidered by claims to a training or protection role, is a decision to enter combat. Special forces are now contingents of choice favoured by major powers deployed by coalition governments in both Afghanistan and Iraq. There was ultimately no win in either place. Special forces on their own, or even in combination with aerial strikes, are not proving sufficient for victory. A final NZ decision should not be founded in expediency but conditioned by just how wise it is to participate militarily.

Diplomatically NZ must of course continue to condemn vigorously ISIL methods, show readiness to assist with diplomatic intercession and generosity with inevitable post conflict humanitarian rehabilitation. Notwithstanding the shockingly inhumane ISIS cruelty on display our basic approach must be conditioned by a realisation that in the last analysis regional governments and religious communities in the Middle East must themselves bear the lions' share of responsibility to thwart or accommodate ISIL. There are undeniably serious moral principles involved. Modern secular governments from outside the region need nonetheless to think very carefully about committing to fight in someone else's open ended religious conflict which is bound up with deep seated ethnic, tribal, separatist and warlord anarchy that confound for outsiders, the very difference between friend and foe.

Basic Causes; The NZ capacity for independent foreign policy thinking on the UNSC will therefore be severely tested. It is important to us that international legitimacy and moral principle of any joint international action is preserved to the extent achievable, including in Syria. The political and the religious dimensions of Arab or Muslim grievance are inextricably connected. Resolution of the present crisis cannot for example ignore Iran's legitimate interest in any international blueprint for reconciliation. Pressures must be applied strenuously upon Israel and Palestine to heal deep divisions. Nuclear disarmament must be reinforced to include Israel as well as Iran. Saudi Arabia and Gulf States must be discouraged from funding variously favoured insurgencies and causes in the region. Egypt must be persuaded to moderate forcible oppression of the Muslim Brotherhood. Sale and provision of sophisticated foreign weaponry to favoured regional clients must be curbed.

The very idea that western policies of prolonged intrusion in the Middle East might actually also provide strong circumstantial explanation for basic political causes of all, or most, of the present

turmoil is substantively unacknowledged². The original simplistic post 9/11 interpretations proclaiming an irrational radicalised Islam driven by weakness, disillusionment and envious resentment over its eclipse by western success, resonates still in some western capitals. The brutal methods of ISIL not surprisingly reinforce these preconceptions. But precarious self deception persists as a problem even while major powers strive once again to summon a coalition of like-minded to pull chestnuts from Middle East conflagration re-ignited and fuelled by 2003 blunders in Iraq.

Reform & Workload: Amidst all of this NZ's stated objectives for its UNSC tenure are ambitious. We are committed to pursuing reform of the use of the veto by permanent UNSC members (P5) and to change in the composition of Council and secure fairer rotation for non permanent members. Veto reform is not a new proposal, and ideas about membership were scripted last time NZ served, to no avail. In the current climate pursuit of veto reform must be carefully evenhanded. It is perfectly reasonable for NZ to deplore the prospect of vetoes by Russia and China both for their own reasons, of UNSC collective action on Syria. It is equally regrettable that the UNSC conspicuously failed to adjudicate the latest savage outbreak of Israel-Palestine enmity in Gaza. A continual American veto exists over Council decisions on this long standing tragedy with its obvious connections to radical jihadism of ISIS and its individual foreign sympathisers. Any suggested NZ formula for veto reform that might appear to condone use by certain permanent UNSC members but not others, would be fraught by an unconscionable double standard.

The work load for NZ on the UNSC will be inordinate and will test professional agility as well as MFAT capacities in Wellington to brief and support the UNSC delegation. There are in fact some 53 country and regional issues preoccupying the Council with varying degrees of urgency and complexity. Unforeseeable crises can of course add to that list. NZ has to have a policy position on each and every issue. A glance at the UNSC agenda for October 2014 is sufficient to reinforce the point. The council was due to consider:- Syria, Ukraine, Somalia, South Sudan, Yemen, Mali, Haiti, Israel/Palestine, Western Sahara, Congo, Lebanon as well as devote attention to UN peacekeeping, to the security implications of communicable disease (ebola), to the issue of women, peace and security, to debate the Council's working methods and to hear a report from the International Court of Justice.³

The extent to which the ten non-permanent members on the 2015/16 Council will be able to make common cause in ways that influence the five permanent members, individually or collectively, should not be overrated. Different interests and ambitions will obviously influence the ten although pursuit of greater transparency and democracy in the Council's informal deliberations provides

² Lewis. B. What Went Wrong? Phoenix. 2002 pp.168-178

³ UN Security Council Report; securitycouncilreport.org-country-regional-issues.php

some measure of shared interest amongst them all, which NZ could promote as part of its small country Security Council credentials.

Briefing & Wider Responsibilities: The basic Briefing Book which MFAT must supply to the NZ Council delegation will be pretty voluminous and must allow of course for unexpected change in respect to any of the crisis issues involved, as well as include issues that NZ itself will want to propose including UNSC reform. (during its last tenure NZ pursued the safety of UN peacekeepers as one of its Council objectives) All of this requires perception, understanding and forward thinking throughout the various MFAT directorates and effective coordination at the senior level. That challenge is amplified by the as yet untested full impact of reforms inside MFAT to install a 'business model' for operations and policy advice that served to deplete levels of experience.

At the same time NZ will require to keep up with the pace of activity inside the wider multilateral system beyond the UNSC. International economic issues including trade and investment liberalisation are obvious priorities although with trade, the focus is more likely at the regional than global level for as long as WTO is paralysed. But refugees, child protection, climate change, disaster response as well as health pandemics like ebola, are areas where NZ must remain more widely and constructively engaged, alongside UNSC responsibilities. On climate change the NZ decision to distance itself from the second Kyoto Protocol has resulted in diminution of its mediator role in international negotiation. On disarmament NZ will be the only member on the UNSC of the six nation so-called New Agenda Coalition (NAC)⁴ dedicated to the elimination of nuclear weapons. As a co-founder NZ must consult with other NAC members whenever the UNSC addresses in 2015-16 nuclear non proliferation, either comprehensively or in respect to individual delinquents. The concern of the Permanent Five (P5) Council members is invariably (but understandably) to halt further spread of the weapons into new hands but with rather less weight attached to actual disarmament of their own arsenals, despite the universal Non Proliferation Treaty that directly link both dimensions. That is a link which NZ on behalf of NAC should strive wherever to preserve around the Council table, as well as urging full P5 compliance with the nuclear test ban treaty.

Asian Connexions: The need more generally for NZ to retain good lines of diplomatic communication during 2015-2016, beyond the Council itself, has larger relevance. Give UNSC preoccupation with the immensely complex issues arising from ISIS in the Middle East and the wider implications, it will be important to retain close interaction with those Asian countries with significant Muslim populations - Indonesia (the largest Muslim country in the world), Malaysia, India etc. - both in New York and through our diplomatic missions in capitals, in order to share

⁴ Established in 1988 comprising Brazil, Mexico, Ireland, Sweden, South Africa and NZ

perceptions and understanding. Malaysia has also been elected to the Council for 2015-16 and will assume Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2015. These happy coincidences provide opportunity for appropriate NZ collusion with ASEAN on UNSC business. It is important above all that NZ multiplies its points of reference for the intricate challenges presented by radical Islam, and does not depend solely on the judgements and interests of Atlantic powers alone, important as those are.

The need as a member of UNSC to keep good lines into Asia is obviously a reflection too of the way the balance of NZ's external interests has shifted, particularly since our last UNSC tenure in 1993-94. Institutionally, diplomatically and economically our relationships in the region have now magnified appreciably in the past 20 years, no more so than with China. There is a mild irony, shared with Australia, in the fact that we remain categorised inside the UN electoral system in New York, as a member of the 'west european and other group' (WEOG), while the balance of our external interest is shifting elsewhere. It will be an exceptional experience for NZ to deliberate issues of global security on the UNSC in the presence of both China and the US given our status as friend but not formal ally of either. That amplifies the challenge for our diplomatic dexterity. We do not want to be forced to choose sides. This may at certain times however, become unavoidable, and NZ will then perforce rely upon the intrinsic quality of both NZ bilateral relationship and the skill of professional diplomacy to navigate ahead. China's relationships with other Asian countries whom NZ also values as partner (including Malaysia who also is on the Council), will likewise condition the NZ approach. We need too to leverage Council membership in as far as we can, to embellish NZ /South Pacific relationships at a time when along with Australia, we confront signs of a disposition to modify the institutional arrangements in the region.

UNPKO: Finally some of our reformist zeal for the NZ UNSC tenure should also be directed to improving the whole UN peacekeeping (UNPKO) effort. NZ has conspicuously fallen off the pace in its support (from previously being well ranked as a contributor we are now 97th on the list). Our preferred involvements are now with NATO which will have five members on the 2015 UNSC, and strives to be an alternative, or even rival, to the UN in international peace support although its priorities remain strictly those of the Atlantic world. The practical result is that international peace support has become a two speed system with governments of Asia, Africa, the Middle East etc. bearing the burden of UNPKO while NATO governments and friends, concentrate in areas and on issues, of direct security interest to themselves, with or without UNSC authorisation, employing latest weapon technologies, special forces etc. NZ has in effect fallen in with this preference. There remains a real need to strengthen UN capacities; and for western governments to commit contingents and resources to UNPKO. As a UNSC member NZ should now champion that cause, more especially since improved UNPKO would help extend our own scope for interoperability with

Asian militaries (among the P5 China is the leading UNPKO contributor), something which dovetails with NZ's broader political and economic interests.

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