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Australia on the United Nations Security Council 2013-14: An Evaluation

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Australia's position on the Elected Council of the United Nations Security Council in 2013-14 enabled the usual middle power[1] an opportunity to step into the forefront of international relations. While Australia, led by ambassador Gary Quinlan, did have a chance to exert some influence and produce resolutions, specifically in light of the MH17 plane crash[2] and the work towards a convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), the state's time at the forefront of the Council was not entirely successful, both due to its own failures relating to humanitarian intervention in Syria and refugees, and due to the usual limitations imposed by the much more powerful permanent members of the Security Council (P5). While there was positives and negatives to Australia's time on the Council, what this essay regards to be of particular interest is the failure of Australia to address the Asia-Pacific region and position themselves in any advantageous light relating to the region, despite being presented with the infrequent opportunity of the Elected Council.

The United Nations Security Council operates as an international crisis management forum (Conley Tyler & Pahlow 2014, p. 96), with specific powers including sanction implementation, the establishment of peace keeping operations and the ability to authorise military action in response to "threats to international peace and security" (Charter of the United Nations, chapter VII). The Security Council has five permanent members, known as the P5, which are traditionally powerful states including China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom and the United States. In addition to these permanent members, there are ten additional states which are elected for two year cycles (Conley Tyler & Pahlow 2014, p. 96). These states are placed into groups based on geographical location in order to be voted onto the council (Conley Tyler & Pahlow 2014, p. 96). A major criticism of the Security Council is that the permanent members retain extensive powers, especially the power of 'veto' through which permanent members can easily defeat any initiative proposed by an elected member. This power imbalance, and the resulting criticism, results in the implication that the P5 has substantially more influence than the elected members, to the point where it is questioned if only permanent members can perform any real exercise of power (Farrall & Prantl 2016, p. 601).

However, it would be unsubstantiated to say that the criticisms are completely accurate, as pointed out by Conley, Tyler & Pahlow (2014, p. 97), the UN Security Council resolutions require the elected members to vote in approval of their proposed resolution in order for them to proceed. This is illustrated through the example of a United Kingdom and United States resolution that occurred prior to the Iraq war, where the resolution was avoided by the lack of the requisite nine elected member votes (Conley Tyler & Pahlow 2014, p. 96).

Australia is a UN founding member and has previously served on the Security Council on four different occasions, the most recent being 1985-86. Although Australia has a significant history with the UN, Australia's bid for a 2013-14 seat was originally announced under the then Labour Government and became a debated domestic issue in the subsequent federal election (Markovic 2010 p. 1). Labour then suffered defeat in this election, and Tony Abbott of the Liberal party became Australia's 28th Prime Minister. Australia's transition to a Liberal Government was accompanied by a significantly altered Foreign Policy, as Abbott directed policy away from his predecessor's middle power stance. Abbott was less persuaded by traditional middle power institutions, evidenced in his policy on asylum seekers which occupied a sovereignty focused realism[3] approach (Burchill & Griffiths 2014, p. 17)

The fact that Australia had served other terms as an elected council member was deemed by Farrall & Prantl (2016, p. 603) to ameliorate that gap between the permanent and elected states, as in addition to their veto power, the permanent states also wield the advantage of institutional and structural experience, which could be manipulated to

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promote the interests of the permanent members. As Australia had some comparable experience, it was able to negotiate to a higher standard than countries operating without intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the council.

While this essay from this point will consider Australia's independent actions, in order to evaluate its overall performance on the council, it is necessary to do so with an awareness of the limitations placed on elected members of the security council, including their comparatively reduced power and experience on the council.

While on the Security Council, Australia was able to navigate its way through certain situations with authority, diplomacy and accuracy. One of these situations occurred in July in 2014, when the Malaysian Airlines Flight (MH17) was downed over Ukraine (Langmore & Farrall 2016, p.64). Australia quickly drafted the resolution, lead negotiations and was able to push it through after making "pragmatic compromises" (Langmore & Farrall 2016, p. 64). This was a simplistic case of where a position on the elected council constituted a beneficial exercise in diplomacy, as Australia successfully asserted a comprehensive position on the crash, which was of particular importance to the state, as it was responsible for the death of thirty eight of its residents. Langmore & Farrall (2016, p. 64) stress that it was not due to chance that Australia was able to successfully negotiate a resolution, as the state made use of the "constructive working relationships" it had been focused on creating throughout its term on the Security Council. Australia's efforts not only led to a resolution successful enough to win plaudits, but as the success came under Prime Minister Tony Abbott of the Liberal Party, it served to ensure that the change of governments would not influence Australia's position on the Council and they would remain just as invested as it had been under Rudd. (Oliver 2015)

Although the response to MH17 does present a UN Security Council success story, it must be noted that this resolution, like all resolutions put before the council could have been subject to the P5's veto power had it been averse to any of their interests. This is evidenced by previous similar situations, including the downing of Korean Airlines Flight 007, where the plane was downed by a Soviet fighter plane in 1983, and the proposed resolution was vetoed by the then Soviet Union (Langmore & Farrall 2016, p. 65). Additionally, McLean (2014) writes that "many observers" expected that the draft resolution would be rejected by Russia. Therefore, at least some element of Australia's success in response to MH17 was dependant on securing the support of all the powerful permanent Security Council members.

One area that Australia retains credit for is the first ever UN Security Council resolution relating to Small Arms and Light Weapons (Resolution 2117), which was achieved while Australia was Security Council acting president (Levin, 2017). This was also presented as a significant diplomatic success as Australia timed its promotion of the issue well, capitalising on action against illicit arms from the United Nations General Assembly's adoption of the Arms Trade Treaty (Brangwin 2013). This resolution focused on protecting civilians in cases of armed conflict and preventing illicit activities in order to procure more arms (DFAT, 2014). Both the MH17 and SALW resolutions were examples of diplomatic success, where Australia, led by Gary Quinlan was able to show to the international community their efficiency when promoting the right issue. However, there is some potential that Australia would not have been as diplomatically persistent and assured if the issue was more controversial, both to its own interests or those of the P5, both for fear of being 'vetoed' or obstructed by an ingrained system. This issue was presented by some scholars including Gowan, (2018, p. 12) as proof that Australia, had only excelled at "niche" diplomacy. In practical terms, this is the concept that Australia was able to flex influence and diplomacy in issues that had not already faced high level of contention or had not been previously rejected by major powers. While to a point this is unrealistic, as all issues in the United Nations Security Council are met with some level of contention, as Gowan acknowledges (2018, p. 12), it holds considerable weight when Australia's high level of success in some areas is compared to its other contributions, including in response to the Syrian crises and acknowledging the Asia-Pacific region.

The United Nations Association of Australia lists its contribution to the humanitarian issues in Syria as a success in its briefing of its term on the Security Council (UNAA, 2014). It states that Australia was a key discussion leader, alongside Luxembourg and Jordan, leading to the implementation of various UN Security Council resolutions. However, it is the belief of scholars such as Nadin (2017), that the council has not done enough to prevent the devastation of the Syrian people. Nadin (2017) points specifically to the repeated practise of 'vetoing' draft resolutions by both China and Russia, which resulted in the shutting down of six out of the eight proposed resolutions, including ones that were proposed during Australia's term on the Security Council. Australia had the

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chance to be acting chair during September of 2013, and therefore be involved in the negotiations, primarily between Russia and the United States. Australia and Gary Quinlan in particular were praised by a US representative, and the negotiations were ultimately successful leading to the adoption of resolution 2118 (Langmore & Farrall, 2016, p. 67). Australia and Luxembourg also achieved the presidential statement they had been campaigning for, and with the help of Jordan the three elected members were able to influence the council towards implementing more resolutions. However, UN Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs reported multiple times that the violence and brutality remained a constant problem despite the UN Security Council effort (Langmore & Farrall 2016, p. 67). While acting chair, it is still unlikely that Australia would have been able to negotiate through the persistent veto practice, as discussed earlier this remains a major problem with the UN Security Council. Despite this, the lack of a suitable resolution still ultimately means that Australia did not achieve success in this area. While this discussion is centred on Australia's term on the Security Council, it is essential to note that internationally, Australia's conduct in relation to this issue cannot be held to a high moral standard, and was undermined by the government's policy of significantly reducing international aid contributions in the 2014 Federal budget, which constituted the "largest ever multi-year aid cuts" and "largest ever single year cut" (Rimmer & Day 2016). After so heavily promoting the humanitarian cause in Syria, such extensive budget cuts "seriously undermined" Australia's credibility (Langmore & Farrall 2016, p. 67) and brought further into the foreground the fact that the issues in Syria still remain, despite Australia's negotiation success. Australia's credibility in relation to this issue is further impacted by its long-standing humanitarian breaches relating to the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. Australia is subject to near constant international criticism over its handling of asylum seekers, with "the latest in a long series of international critiques" (Maguire 2017) occurring via the UN High Commission for Refugees Chief, who accused Australia of misleading conduct, while the rest of the commission provided a "stinging rebuke" of the state's actions (Maguire 2017). While this is too far removed from the state's term on the UN Security Council, it is worth mentioning, as any international praise for Australia's humanitarian work must overlook this issue (Charlesworth, 2017) Therefore, whether Australia's conduct in relation to the Syrian issue is a success is questionable, although they did achieve some significant resolutions.

Perhaps the most interesting outcome of Australia's time on the Security Council was the state's complete failure to address its own interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Gowan (2018, p. 10) writes extensively on this issue, and goes as far as to say that this forum has been "largely irrelevant" to Australia's interests in the region, in stark contrast to one of the motivating factors driving the initial bid for the two-year position. At the time Rudd's proposed motivations for the council seat was its high level of relevancy to Australia's interests, specifically in relation to Bougainville and East Timor. It must be noted here that the region was at this time relevant to the council, which can be seen through the implementation of a resolution against nuclear testing performed by North Korea in 2013 (Gowan 2018, p. 10). While the council was resistant to any interference in the Asia-Pacific region, it was heavily invested in Africa throughout 2013-14. Australia specifically was prepared to deal with the African based crises, including the war in Mali and instability in the Central African Republic, as Gowan (2018, p. 9) reports the state had aimed to increase its diplomatic presence across Africa. Although it is unlikely that Australia alone could have forced Security Council attention on to the region by itself, especially with regional hegemon China sitting on the board of the P5, it remains unfavourable to Australia's strategic interests that the state was not able to frame any political action in the immediate area. This is reflected in current political discourse, as both the 2016 and 2017 Australian Defence White Paper's place significance on the stability of the region (Colton 2018), indicating further the connection between the region and Australia's interests.

In conclusion, Australia's achievements while on the UN Security Council can be deemed successful, especially the implementation of resolutions in response to SALW and MH17. However, these resolutions only appear to have this success when viewed in isolation, as overall Australia experienced some major failures, including the lack of an appropriate solution to the Syrian humanitarian crises, and the failure of the state to address its own interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Overall, while Australia's individual achievements cannot be dismissed, and their efficiency in handling these situations certainly went far to portray the state as efficient in diplomacy, the state is still subject to claims of niche diplomacy, and its eventful period was not successful enough to overcome the many intricacies of the UN Security Council. The actions of Australia during this period had the potential to break the boundary of a classic middle power, as Quinlan's efficiency and resolution success showcased a well organised state with the requisite clout to push beyond its current status. However, the many failings surrounding humanitarian issues and Australia's failure to use the forum to promote their regional interests confirmed them as most akin to a middle power, as they

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were not entirely able to assert their own interests in the face of the more powerful P5.

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Notes

[1] Ungerer 2007 (p. 538) defines a middle power as an in-between sized state, specifically for the purpose of international influence. Australia's position on the elected council is an example of its position as a middle power, because it is not a great power (represented by the P5).

[2] MH17 was the Malaysian Airline flight that was downed over Ukraine in July 2014, leading to an international investigation.

[3] Realism is the attitude that each state must struggle for power (Wivel 2017) and is underpinned by assumptions of an anarchist world system. Morality should not play a role in state decision-making in international affairs.

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