

# The United Nations System: How Australia can Punch Above its Weight

Written by Scott Limbrick

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SCOTT LIMBRICK, AUG 7 2012

Debate has long raged over whether and how Australia should engage with the United Nations (UN). To be sure, there is little point attempting to increase Australia's influence in the UN system if this is not in the national interest. As such this essay will describe current bipartisanship on key national interests of security and prosperity before outlining current challenges and opportunities, including the international economy, terrorism, and climate change. In an effort to encourage bipartisan engagement with the UN it will argue that an understanding of Australia as middle power should not fully determine the direction of foreign policy. Further to this it will advise that the concept of good international citizenship should be treated as a tactic in pursuing economic and security interests rather than as a national interest itself. In this way engagement with the UN can be seen as in Australia's interests as conceived by both major parties. The essay will turn to the question of methods and tactics available to Australia to increase its own influence in the UN system and thereby generate outcomes in its strategic interests, encouraging a platform for engagement based on good international citizenship, prioritisation of the UN, and renewal of Australia's diplomatic service. It will close with an overview of specific initiatives and tactics for increasing influence, including attaining a non-permanent seat on the Security Council, improving the quality of engagement, utilising the G20, and contributing to various UN bodies and reforms.

### Australia's National Interests

Despite the attention given to arguments over the right to define Australia's interests, government reports and ministerial statements reveal remarkable consensus on the issue. Two foreign and trade policy white papers commissioned by John Howard's Coalition government offer a basis for understanding Coalition views of Australia's role and aims in international affairs. Both emphasise the expression of Australian 'values' through foreign policy while presenting the maintenance of state sovereignty and prosperity as key national interests.[1] This understanding of Australian concerns has been echoed by the opposing party with Labor Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd proposing a largely similar set of interests including 'the maintenance of Australian national security' and 'the enhancement of Australia's national prosperity'. [2] Indeed, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Annual Reports from 2006-07 and 2010-11 show remarkable consistency in their primary outcome statements.[3] Such continuity is indicative of general agreement that Australian foreign policy should principally aim to improve its security and economy. As Stewart Firth has argued, 'Australia has bipartisanship on the key issues of foreign policy'. [4] With these national interests established as the focus of Australia's policy in international affairs it is important to assess current challenges and opportunities in promoting them.

### Contemporary Issues in Australian Foreign Policy

While it is out of the scope of this essay to fully address the large array of foreign policy issues Australia will need to respond to in the future, key global issues have been canvassed with a particular emphasis on those suited to cooperative solutions. Each of these will be explained below and it will be argued that engagement with multinational institutions, in particular the UN, will be vital in addressing their impact on Australia. The essay will turn to the question of how this should shape Australian foreign policy.

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## *The International Economy*

An increasingly globalised economy creates unique opportunities and challenges. The Global Financial Crisis exemplifies the impact of economic decisions made in other states,[5] with the debt crisis in Europe a potential future influence on Australia's economy.[6] As economies become increasingly interconnected strategies to regulate global activity must follow. As DFAT's 2011 Trade Policy Statement claims, 'multilateral agreements offer the largest benefits'.[7]

## *China's Rise and the "Asian Century"*

As Prime Minister Julia Gillard has said, 'the shift of economic and strategic weight to Asia has never been more rapid or more profound for Australia's interests than it is now'.[8] Australia's exports to China increased 34 per cent in 2010, making China Australia's largest export market.[9] Multilateral engagement will be particularly important if Australia wishes to maintain good relations with both the US and China regardless of whether economic disagreements or militarised disputes eventuate.[10]

## *Resources, Energy, and Climate Change*

Australia's self-sufficiency in oil and petroleum will decrease significantly as domestic reserves are depleted,[11] requiring a prioritisation of the search for alternative sources. This resource-intensive economy, as well as the need for domestic reform with any international agreement,[12] also constrains climate change action. The distribution of global emissions and the risk of states exploiting the efforts of others necessitate cooperative action.[13] To resolve these dilemmas and enjoy the benefits of sustainable energy and a stabilised global climate Australia will need to engage and lead multilaterally.

## *Terrorism*

As non-state actors terrorists pose a unique challenge. Operating through networks and across borders, close international cooperation is required to fight successfully.[14] The UN system can be useful in dealing with root causes and enablers of terrorist activity.[15] In particular, international law and the development of failed states can be addressed.

## *Population Flows and Asylum Seekers*

Policies aimed at reducing the arrival of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants have recently taken centre stage in Australian politics.[16] While to date focus has been directed towards preventing boat arrivals, such tactics have brought the ire of the international community.[17] To prevent inflows while maintaining Australia's reputation other tactics will need to be sought.

## *Nuclear Proliferation*

Any increase in the number of states with nuclear capabilities, particularly in Asia, would significantly complicate Australia's strategic environment.[18] As a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, Australia currently sits within the global non-proliferation regime. As such, while relying on the US alliance as a nuclear deterrent, it is in Australia's interests to encourage others to join the regime and those already within it to continue disarmament.[19]

## *Global Pandemics*

The outbreak of the H1N1 influenza virus in 2009 highlighted the risk pandemics pose to security and economy. Despite being relatively mild more than 191 Australians were killed and 21 million doses of vaccine were purchased by the federal government.[20] The World Health Organisation's (WHO) role in monitoring H1N1 globally was vital to knowledge-sharing and tracking, as exemplified by its weekly updates.[21] As a more lethal outbreak could result in

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far greater misfortune Australia should engage with bodies such as WHO to ensure its national health and security.

However, debate over the value of multilateralism has emerged in discussions on policy in these areas. As such this essay will address these misgivings before turning to tactics for increasing influence at the UN. Central to such debate has been Labor's traditional emphasis on the idea of Australia as a "middle power" and "good international citizen".

## Australia as Middle Power

Alongside economic and security concerns Rudd has highlighted 'the development of a regional and global rules-based order' as a third national interest, citing the utility of 'creative middle power diplomacy' in advancing this goal.[22] While there is no agreed definition of what makes a middle power the term has become a descriptor of states with a tendency toward certain behaviours in foreign policy, described by Carl Ungerer and others as a preference for multilateralism; a commitment to developing international legal norms; and a pro-active, narrowly focused, and outcome-driven style of diplomacy sometimes referred to as 'niche' diplomacy.[23] However, this use causes middle power terminology to lose any usefulness as a predictor of or rationale for this behaviour. As David Cooper argues, such use is essentially 'circular reasoning' resulting in a 'tautology'.[24] To avoid the pitfalls of these inherent conceptual and definitional inconsistencies this essay will avoid use of the term, though it will independently discuss situation-based use of associated tactics such as niche diplomacy. Before doing so, however, the oft-cited notion of Australia as a good international citizen will be addressed and a case will be made for restricting understanding of national interests to those security and prosperity concerns outlined above.

## Good International Citizenship: A Third National Interest?

The pursuit of good international citizenship has often been used as a rationale for policy. In particular former foreign minister Gareth Evans argued consistently for grouping Australia's interests under three broad categories—'geopolitical or strategic interests; economic and trade interests; and the national interest in being, and being seen to be, a good international citizen'.[25] Academic Andrew Linklater has provided possibly the clearest articulation of what makes a good international citizen, claiming that such states must 'put the welfare of international society ahead of the relentless pursuit of [their] own national interests'.[26] Despite this ostensibly altruistic vision, for Evans good international citizenship is an act of 'enlightened self interest' as contributing to the solution of global problems such as pandemics and the proliferation of chemical weapons is demonstrably in Australia's interests.[27] Similarly, for proponents like Rudd acting as a good international citizen is fundamental to 'enhancing the spread' of the 'rules-based order' which protects Australia.[28]

However, there is much to be gained conceptually and practically by restricting Australia's national interests to security and prosperity. As noted in an Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) report, good international citizenship was afforded less weight by the Howard government.[29] To be sure, the *In the National Interest* white paper claims that 'Australia must be realistic about what ... the United Nations system can deliver. International organisations can only accomplish what their member states enable them to accomplish'.[30] These misgivings form the basis of resistance to good international citizenship as a driver of policy, yet the paper's emphasis on Australia's 'international reputation ... [as] an important foreign policy asset' is in some ways promotion of the concept in all but name. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer also gave service to the concept in claiming that Australia 'does not presume to hold other nations to standards that we do not apply to ourselves'.[31] As such, despite the white paper's truism regarding the role of member states in multilateral institutions, there remains scope for pursuit of good international citizenship through both major parties' views of the national interest. However, Evans' elevation of good international citizenship and Rudd's promotion of a rules-based order to national interest status negatively influence clarity. To be sure, these tactics are important ways of promoting Australia's interests. However, they should not be confused with interests themselves; that is, means should not be confused with ends. As Evans himself admits, good international citizenship is better promoted through pragmatic arguments than through pitching it as 'disinterested altruism'.[32] By subsuming the concept in economic and security interests a better argument can be made for its utility. This essay therefore treats good international citizenship as a core tactic in advancing Australia's national interests rather than as an interest in itself.

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## Building a Platform for Engagement

The benefit of acting as a good international citizen should be understood as establishing and maintaining a platform from which Australia can engage more constructively with international partners both directly and through the UN system. Further, despite Linklater's emphasis on altruism, national interests and global welfare are not mutually exclusive. As Chris Brown has argued, good international citizenship does not require abandoning the national interest but does require that they be pursued 'within a framework of legality and in the context of the wider norms and values of international society'.<sup>[33]</sup> Actions taken in advancing good international citizenship usually also directly benefit those national interests of security and prosperity, as will be shown. In particular such a platform greatly assists reputational power, and hence influence, at the UN. Other general reforms, described below, further increase Australia's capacity to navigate the UN system with more specific goals and tactics.

### *Moral Leadership, Human Rights, and Honouring Treaties*

At its best multilateralism provides an opportunity to transform international governance using international institutions and international law.<sup>[34]</sup> As Kevin Rudd has claimed, such a rules-based order 'protects us all'.<sup>[35]</sup> However, sustaining and developing this system requires that UN member states, including Australia, support its existing structures. Being perceived as an international hypocrite weakens a state's persuasive power. John Langmore and Jan Egeland highlight Norway's success in this area, pointing to its support for conflict resolution, disarmament, and aid, as well as its relatively large financial contributions to the UN.<sup>[36]</sup> To be sure, Australia has had some notable instances of moral leadership, such as its promotion of the Responsibility to Protect norm and its application in Libya, exemplifying what Tim Dunne and Jess Gifkins refer to as Australia's 'significant normative power'.<sup>[37]</sup> Australia's adoption of a carbon tax has also been promoted on the world stage as leadership on the issue of climate change.<sup>[38]</sup> However, other policies have attracted sharp criticism from other states and the UN itself, with human rights commissioner Navi Pillay claiming that Australia's asylum seeker policy and its treatment of indigenous Australians cast a shadow over its human rights record.<sup>[39]</sup> Such views are particularly damaging considering Australia's status as a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention and purported human rights emphasis.<sup>[40]</sup> Further, for a global governance framework to be successful its constraints must be observed. As Kenneth Abbot and Duncan Snidal argue, norm elaboration is an important function of international organisations, particularly the UN.<sup>[41]</sup> Taking leadership on these issues therefore makes strategic sense for Australia's security and economy. More immediately, it increases the nation's influence on the world stage that is the UN. At the very least it provides greater incentive for other countries to accept quid pro quo arrangements in future deliberations which can directly benefit Australia.

### *Aid and Development*

In light of this need for moral leadership and international engagement Australia's commitment to aid and development is conspicuously poor. As Langmore has argued, even with Labor and Coalition commitments to increase aid to 0.5 per cent of national income by 2015-16 Australia is 'notable for [its] meanness'.<sup>[42]</sup> The recent bipartisan breach of this promise is therefore particularly damaging.<sup>[43]</sup> Australia's current contribution remains just half of the level recommended by the UN,<sup>[44]</sup> despite attempts by the government to highlight its emphasis on the UN Millennium Development Goals.<sup>[45]</sup> With aid acting as strong indicator of a state's commitment to UN initiatives it is difficult to justify this resistance to increased contributions. However, this reluctance is also particularly striking due to the clear strategic benefits a larger aid program would offer Australia in advancing its national interests. A 2006 White Paper on Australia's aid program clearly states that 'the aid program is an integral part of Australia's foreign policy and security agenda'.<sup>[46]</sup> With an increase in aid benefiting Australia on two levels, reputational at the UN and strategic in decreasing regional terrorist activity and refugee claims, the aid program should be made a priority in Australian foreign policy.

### *Dues and Voluntary Contributions*

To Australia's credit its reputation on payment of dues has provided some basis for influence, particularly when in 2011 it was recognised as one of only eighteen member states to have paid its contributions in full.<sup>[47]</sup> However, as

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Keith Suter notes, the UN 'could be used far more extensively to assist the planet'.<sup>[48]</sup> This would require some degree of idealism and, indeed, leadership in contributing to UN operations above the base level required. While Australia does currently provide some additional funding to the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), there remains scope to make this a cornerstone of Australia's foreign policy.<sup>[49]</sup> More cynically, reliance on Australian funding would increase the government's leverage on UN operations. While this undoubtedly goes against the spirit of providing further funding, this becomes a useful argument when faced by those who would prefer limited spending on the UN, such as Greg Sheridan.<sup>[50]</sup>

## *Increasing Diplomatic Capacity*

However, even Sheridan agrees that Australia's diplomatic service is in dire need of renewal.<sup>[51]</sup> Like the above reforms, this can be accomplished through government policy. Unlike these issues, a failure to improve diplomatic capacity will decisively limit Australia's ability to execute the tactics recommended below. Without budgetary support and prioritisation of diplomatic initiatives Australia will simply not have the number of staff or the level of expertise it requires to successfully work within the UN system, or indeed outside of it. Revealingly, a 2009 report entitled *Diplomatic Deficit* revealed that of the then thirty Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations, Australia operated more diplomatic posts than just four;<sup>[52]</sup> soon up to 150 positions at DFAT will be eliminated.<sup>[53]</sup> This restricted diplomatic service does not align with Australia's position as the world's thirteenth largest economy.<sup>[54]</sup> While effective diplomacy is necessary in bilateral negotiations—indeed, as Alex Oliver and Andrew Shearer argue, diplomacy can be seen as a kind of pre-emptive (and cheaper) defence<sup>[55]</sup>—it is also important to acknowledge that member states are the constituency of the UN. Bilateral and regional engagement therefore complements cooperation within this organisation. An improved diplomatic service will not only strengthen Australia's ability to deal with international governments directly, it will also aid in gaining support for initiatives being pursued at the UN. Australia's current bid for a temporary Security Council seat, alongside other recommended tactics, exemplifies this need.

## **A Seat on the Security Council**

A UN Security Council seat would raise Australia's profile, provide it a powerful forum, allow for involvement in international security decisions increasingly likely to impact the nation, and act as an example of Australia's good international citizenship, a key tactic in building Australia's influence in the wider UN system. With the UN Charter assigning the Council 'primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security,<sup>[56]</sup> being elected to a seat has been described as 'a measure of international standing'.<sup>[57]</sup> It regularly makes decisions on pressing international issues, including terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and outbreaks of regional conflict. As such Australia's current bid for a seat on the Council from 2013-14, as announced in 2008,<sup>[58]</sup> takes advantage of an opportunity to increase Australia's standing and influence in the UN while promoting a primary national interest. Indeed, a panel discussion on this very issue, made up of commentators from all sides of Australia's politics (including Langmore, Former Secretary of Defence Robert Hill, and AIIA Director Melissa Conley-Tyler), reached the general consensus that removal of contingent (and contestable) factors such as cost this bid is very much in Australia's interests.<sup>[59]</sup> Contrasting this view is Raoul Heinrichs, who has argued that despite official costs remaining 'relatively low', decisions on the location of embassies and the direction of aid have been adversely influenced by the campaign.<sup>[60]</sup> Heinrichs further fears 'having to choose' between the US and China.<sup>[61]</sup> Remy Davison is also opposed, claiming that this 'vainglorious project' is expensive and pointless due to Australia's irrelevance in international affairs.<sup>[62]</sup> However, as Michael Fullilove argues, membership of the Council cannot be both dangerous and irrelevant.<sup>[63]</sup>

More problematic for Australia is whether it can actually win a seat. Ben Wilkie has argued that Australia, due to limited diplomatic resources and a reputation tarnished by asylum-seeker and indigenous policy, doesn't deserve a place.<sup>[64]</sup> This is particularly pertinent when the current campaign is based on the idea that at the UN 'we do what we say'.<sup>[65]</sup> The platform for engagement outlined above, encompassing tactics of good international citizenship, enlarged diplomatic capacity, and greater emphasis on the UN's utility, is therefore a fundamental requirement for Australia if it is to gain influence in the higher echelons of international relations. It should attempt to establish such a platform as this bid is well advised, and Australia should continue to regularly seek positions on the Council whether

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or not it is successful in this instance. The reputational benefits of campaigns will be a significant and constant consolation prize.[66]

## **The General Assembly, Summits, and Conferences**

Australia will also need to engage more effectively with member states. As UNAA's report card noted in 2007, 'for the last decade Australia has been the only developed country not to send ministers to several major UN conferences on economic and social development'.[67] However, the UN offers a unique opportunity for Australia to play to its strengths, gain influence, and lead movement on issues important to its national interests. In the General Assembly this will need to take place on three levels: at opening sessions, which set out each nation's views on contemporary global issues; in informal negotiations between delegates; and through engagement with Assembly committees to negotiate resolutions.[68] At UN events, such as the upcoming Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development, the importance of effective negotiation holds. Australia's success in navigating the complexities of UN will be enhanced by an improved reputation. However, like the Council bid, it will also benefit from this essay's recommended diplomatic expansion. More diplomatic staff will enable participation and leadership in more negotiations and committees due to the ability to attend more meetings. Such increased diplomatic capacity will also allow for greater interpersonal relations at the UN; build institutional support in Canberra; and provide a capability for wider effort in determining desired outcomes and devising negotiating strategies to achieve them.

In particular Australia can draw on its talent for niche diplomacy, as previously described, and coalition-building. While these can be applied across foreign policy they are especially relevant to these UN activities. The focus of conferences on specific issues makes them ideal for effective use of niche diplomacy while Assembly committees allow for a continual coalition-building approach. Australia's role in drawing together the Cairns Group of Fair Trading Nations in the 1980s to increase its influence in agricultural trade negotiations serves as an example of what can be achieved through these tactics.[69] To replicate this in the UN system Australia must maintain awareness of international trends and the interests of other member states. Failure can be seen in the 1996 Security Council bid, which many attributed in some part to the personality of Australia's UN representative Richard Butler.[70] Attention must be paid to the interpersonal skills of diplomatic staff, particularly when considering the second, informal level of UN negotiations. A strong and influential diplomatic corps with a deep understanding of niche and coalition tactics will therefore serve Australia well in advancing its interests through these parts of the UN system.

## **Economic Development through the Bretton Woods Institutions**

The effects of the GFC and China's rise highlight the need for Australia to participate in international economic policy development. Effective engagement with the Bretton Woods Institutions, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, is therefore central to Australia's economic interests. The election of an Australian, Christopher Legg, to the position of Executive Director on the Board of the IMF is a positive indicator.[71] However, for Australia the path to influence in the UN system lies outside of the system itself.

Gaining membership of the G20 has provided Australia an opportunity to contribute to reform in international finance.[72] The IMF and the World Bank have been heavily criticised for implementing allegedly ideological policies to the detriment of developing nations.[73] As Eric Helleiner has argued, the GFC has therefore created a legitimacy crisis for the neo-liberal financial regime many associate with these organisations.[74] Australia will need to strike a balance between pursuing its own interests and voicing the concerns of developing nations to maintain its wider engagement platform. With commentators currently considering whether the G20 could replace the IMF Australia will need to leverage its current position wisely.[75] If Australia can represent its own interests and those of its neighbours in G20 outcomes they will carry far greater weight at the UN, the IMF, and the World Bank. Further, in the event of the G20 gaining greater prominence, a reputation as an effective and contributing member will assist in maintaining membership.

## **Other Opportunities for Advancement**

Australia must pay attention to wider UN operations. Crucially it should continue engagement in peacekeeping and

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continue active participation in bodies such as the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and specialised institutions such as the WHO. Finally it should contribute constructively to UN reform.

## *Peacekeeping*

In UN peacekeeping activities Australia has shown some potential (for example, its leadership in East Timor), yet as Peter Londey has argued, 'in comparative international terms, Australia has only been a moderately energetic peacekeeper'.<sup>[76]</sup> Despite the complexities of UN peacekeeping Australia has much to offer. Alex Bellamy and Paul Williams have highlighted Australia's recent decrease in troops offered to peacekeeping operations.<sup>[77]</sup> By rebuilding this capacity and increasing policing and governance assistance Australia can gain great reputational benefit. By way of involvement it will also contribute to international security and stability—very much in its own interests.

## *UN Bodies, Specialised Agencies, and High-level Panels*

Australia's current membership of ECOSOC,<sup>[78]</sup> the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency,<sup>[79]</sup> and other parts of the UN system should be maintained where possible and expanded where necessary. In particular membership of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues should continue to address issues where Australia's international reputation is weak. As Stephen Leeder has argued, Australia can also play an important role in making WHO more effective.<sup>[80]</sup> Gareth Evans' presence on the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change gave Australia an important voice on an issue of continued international importance,<sup>[81]</sup> and this should be replicated at every opportunity. As Suter has noted, 'Australia's delegation at the UN is highly regarded for its professionalism'.<sup>[82]</sup> Promotion and skill-building of talented diplomats will assist in encouraging desire for Australian involvement across the UN system. Care must be taken to ensure representation on bodies and committees most related to national interests, particularly on issues of climate change, the global economy, health, and security issues such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and failed states.

## *UN Reform*

While there is rarely agreement on how the UN should be reformed it is generally accepted that structural reforms are necessary.<sup>[83]</sup> Australia's support for the 'one UN' model recommended by the High-Level Panel on UN System-Wide Coherence, which aims to increase efficiency through performance-based funding and other initiatives,<sup>[84]</sup> should therefore take higher priority as a foreign policy goal. Rudd has highlighted reform as the focus of a 'long term campaign'.<sup>[85]</sup> As Security Council and other reform could provide future opportunities for engagement, such a campaign is important if Australia wishes to construct an international framework which empowers it to pursue its national interests.

## **Conclusion**

As has been shown, engagement with the UN is directly in Australia's national interests as envisaged by both major parties. As such it should be prioritised in foreign policy, requiring a rethink of diplomatic capacity and the development of a broad platform for engagement. Once established this will aid Australia as it pursues specific tactics to increase its influence in the UN through the Security Council and the wide array of agencies, bodies and committees that make up the UN system. In this way Australia might truly punch above its weight on the international stage.

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