

# Calculating Whether a Two-Year Term on the UN Security Council is Worth Seeking

Written by M.J. Peterson

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M.J. PETERSON, OCT 12 2012

Some Australians have been debating whether the government's long campaign to secure election to a two-year term as a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council is worth the effort. Critics note that the campaigning absorbs resources and energy that could be better devoted to other foreign policy efforts and maintaining better relations in the region while supporters believe a term on the Security Council is worth the effort because of the wider opportunities for voice and influence that even a nonpermanent seat provides.

For any country, determining whether seeking a nonpermanent seat on the SC is worthwhile requires assessing the costs and the benefits, and determining whether the latter exceed the former. This calculation is different for a leading developed country (Australia belongs to the G20) than for most developing countries. Most developing countries face a set of benefits and costs not relevant to Australia – the impact of Security Council membership on foreign aid and economic activity. Some studies, including work published in 2006 and 2009, indicate that developing countries receive more aid from bilateral and multilateral sources while they are nonpermanent members. The experience of Yemen in 1990 also suggests there are financial as well as political hazards in going up against a unified SC. After voting against SC Resolution 678 authorizing the Gulf War, it lost some of its Western aid and the Saudi government expelled all the Yemenis then working in Saudi Arabia.

For a developed country like Australia, costs have three main components. The first are the additional diplomatic staffing in New York and additional backup at home needed to participate effectively on the Council, but absorbing these are well within Australia's capacities, so need not concern it. The second is the possibility of political hazard arising from getting out of synch with a united P5, but this appears unlikely given Australia's overall positions on global issues and the current level of P5 disagreement. The third are the costs of successfully campaigning for a seat, which involve campaign-related "horsetrading." These are increased not only by the fact that Australia is a developed country from which some financial generosity is expected but also because it is in the Western and Other group. Membership in WEO adds to campaign costs because, as the historical record of SC elections shows, the WEO seldom offers a "clean slate" – the same number of candidate countries as the regional group is allocated open seats that year. That means Australia must campaign for support not only within its group but also among the other UN member states. While it may not go to the lengths of Turkey, which was said to have made some \$85 million in aid or loan commitments during its successful campaign to win election over Iceland and Austria in 2008, there are financial costs. They would be increments to existing Australian aid, not new programs, but need to be included in the calculations. The other element of "horsetrading" consists of promises to back other countries' candidacies for other UN positions, whether selection of one of their nationals for a major secretariat post or election of the country to a term on a UN body. While some countries are suspected of making vote promises they do not keep, Australia keeps the value of its promises high by avoiding such expedients.

The benefit side is conceptually more straightforward; it means securing direct voice and vote in the SC. This means a say on a broad array of ongoing security issues – such as countering terrorist activity, monitoring sanctions, or supporting conflict-resolution efforts in countries around the world – as well as headline-grabbing crises like the current Syrian civil war. As a Swiss observer pointed out, election would also afford greater influence in the ongoing effort to reform the membership and voting rules of the SC itself. Though that process seems unlikely to be brought to

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a conclusion during the 2014-2016 biennium during which Australia would serve if elected, the Australian government has traditionally shown strong interest in making the UN more effective and in the terms of reforms.

As prospect theory reminds us, the anticipated value of something is not a simple cost-benefit calculation; calculation must also pay attention to the probability of occurrence. Were the probability of election zero, a country would not embark on a campaign because there would be costs but no benefit. Were the probability 100%, a country would still have to campaign because campaigning is the norm, but running a campaign costing less than the benefit would be easy. In the middle probabilities things get more complicated because once a country has campaigned for a certain amount of time it is committed to campaigning. Though some Australians think it “started too late,” Australia actually started its campaign in 2008, but kicked it into higher gear more recently. An unsuccessful campaign has costs because it absorbs time and energy that might be devoted to other activity, but those costs are not as high as a successful one, since the incremental shift of diplomatic resources required to participate in the SC would occur only if elected, much of the promised aid would only flow after election, and promises regarding other elections offered as a trade would expire. However, keeping campaign costs within bounds is harder because it can be hard to tell whether a bit more campaigning would improve the prospects of success. Clearly there is confidence in Canberra; Australia has not withdrawn its candidacy. Whether that confidence is warranted will be revealed next week when the General Assembly meets to elect nonpermanent members of the Security Council.

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