



ANALYSIS

# Australia in the UN Security Council

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia has endured a turbulent term on the Security Council since January 2013, navigating crises ranging from Syria and Ukraine to South Sudan and Mali. Its UN team has gained a good reputation for pragmatism and openness among fellow diplomats, UN officials and NGOs. Australia's main achievement has been to carve out a diplomatic niche on humanitarian aid to Syria. It has also shown a talent for tactical brinkmanship in facing down an increasingly assertive Russia while also distinguishing itself from the United States, UK and France in UN debates.

While admired for its competence, Australia has only been able to have relatively limited influence on situations – ranging from Afghanistan to Mali – on which bigger powers have greater say at the United Nations. But Australia's advocacy for human rights, humanitarian causes and more effective sanctions has had a positive impact on both the Council and attitudes to Australia across the United Nations.

In March 2008 then prime minister Kevin Rudd announced that Australia would seek a non-permanent seat on the Security Council. Critics immediately rounded upon the decision as a waste of taxpayers' money. Australia would fail in its bid. Even if it succeeded, they predicted, Australia would fail to have any major impact on the Council's deliberations.

But Australia did win its seat on the Council and had a chance to measure itself against the United Nations' main powers. On Friday 21 February 2014, Vladimir Putin handed Canberra a foreign policy victory. With violence peaking in Kiev, the Russian president convened his top security advisers to discuss the events in Ukraine. But his team also needed to respond to events at the United Nations, where diplomats had spent weeks negotiating a Security Council resolution sponsored by Australia, Luxembourg and Jordan calling for "safe, rapid and unhindered" access for humanitarian assistance to the victims of the Syrian war.

The draft resolution represented the culmination of almost a year of dogged diplomacy by Australian officials and their Luxembourg counterparts. It included surprisingly detailed descriptions of the Syrian regime's atrocities, including the use of crude barrel-bombs. Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, had indicated that the text was acceptable. But Churkin had sent similar signals in earlier talks on Syria before changing tack on orders from Moscow, vetoing three resolutions in conjunction with China in 2011 and 2012. Western diplomats were optimistic but not absolutely certain that Putin and his advisers would not sink the latest text.

Moscow let it go through. On 22 February, the Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2139, "expressing grave alarm" at the humanitarian disaster in Syria. Few observers believed that it would transform the war, but at least the Council now looked a little more humane. Australia and its co-sponsors earned praise for navigating the rifts between the permanent five (P5) members of Council. Britain, France and the United States gave the resolution strong support in its final stages, but Russia and China might have rejected the text if it had been tabled by London, Paris or Washington. Nor was this the first time Australia had played a pivotal role in diplomacy over Syria: Canberra's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Gary Quinlan, had chaired the Council in September 2013 during the crisis unleashed by the Syrian military's use of chemical weapons in Ghouta.

Yet the February resolution also highlighted the limits of what Australia – or any non-permanent member – can achieve in the Security Council. Despite its firm wording, it boiled down to a call for the Syrian combatants to respect basic international humanitarian law. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the resolution but

complained “it should not have been necessary.”<sup>1</sup> In May, Ban told the Council that the Syrian government was still “failing in its responsibility to look after its own people” and called for a new strategy to get aid to rebel-held areas.<sup>2</sup>

The brief moment of cooperation over Resolution 2139 was also the prologue to clashes at the United Nations over Ukraine, which soon cast a pall over Syrian diplomacy. In mid-May, Russia and China vetoed a new resolution, tabled by France and co-sponsored by fifty-seven countries including Australia, calling for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate Syria. As this paper reached completion in late May, Australian diplomats were talking to their Luxembourg and Jordanian counterparts and other allies about tabling a potentially explosive new resolution penalising Damascus for its failure to let aid reach the suffering.

Having joined the Security Council in 2013 for the first time since the 1980s, when the body was mired in Cold War battles, Australia has found itself in the middle of a fresh bout of big-power confrontation. How have its representatives in New York navigated through these treacherous waters? This Analysis explores the principles and priorities that have guided their efforts in the Council to date. It draws on a broad range of informal interviews with UN officials, diplomats and activists who have worked with Australia’s UN mission since January 2013.<sup>3</sup> It gives a sense of the – mainly positive – way these efforts are seen in the UN system. It examines the Syrian case and parallel crises in Africa as key tests of UN diplomacy, before offering an overall assessment of Australia’s tenure.

## FROM THE “INTERNATIONAL INTEREST” TO REAL DIPLOMACY

Australian diplomats were under no illusions about the state of the Security Council as they finished their campaign for a temporary seat in late 2012. Prime Minister Rudd launched the campaign in more benign circumstances in 2008 before the Georgian war and the global financial crisis signalled the fragile state of international affairs. His pitch, like his interest in climate change, contained an obvious streak of cosmopolitan idealism. Later in 2008 he told the UN General Assembly that “our national interests are invariably best served by the simultaneous prosecution of the international interest.”<sup>4</sup> In the years that followed – as Rudd’s domestic fortunes waned, waxed and waned again – it has been hard to keep faith in the “international interest” as climate change diplomacy has faltered, Russia and China have grown more assertive, and the United States has equivocated over its global role.

This sense of drift has been prevalent in the Security Council. As the Australian campaign approached its conclusion, the Council split over the Libyan and Syrian wars, while simultaneously struggling to control African crises including the fragmentation of Mali and militia warfare in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). By late 2012, with China and Russia still unwilling to compromise over Syria, the Council faced a gathering tide of discontent among the wider UN membership.

When Julia Gillard addressed the United Nations in September 2012, shortly before the Security Council elections for 2013-2014 seats, she insisted that Australia still stood for “high ideals”.<sup>5</sup> Australia’s advocacy for the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which came close to completion in 2012 and would finally be agreed in April 2013, buttressed this claim. Its high-powered Security Council campaign climaxed in a decisive first-round win ahead of Luxembourg and Finland. Observers across the United Nations cite the personal popularity of Ambassador Quinlan as an asset both during the campaign and since, although the investment of at least A\$25 million in outreach efforts certainly helped too.<sup>6</sup>

But doubts lurked about Australia’s ability to act on its ideals in the Security Council. While only faintly aware of Australian politics, other countries’ representatives at the United Nations were conscious that Labor was liable to lose to the Coalition in 2013, and that the new administration was likely to have less internationalist inclinations. Some Western diplomats muttered that the Australian team, so confident during the campaign, seemed cautious (or according to one especially unkind observer, “floundering”) as Labor infighting and electioneering intensified.

Australian diplomats had more immediate reasons for caution. Having seen the Council split over Syria and stumble over Africa, they knew that they would find few easy openings for diplomatic initiatives. Even the most ambitious non-permanent members of the Council have to tread carefully, as the P5 are quick to punish any challenges to their predominance. In recent years major powers including Brazil and India have passed through the Council without leaving any substantial legacy. The Brazilians stumbled in an effort to engage Iran on its nuclear program in 2010, while India wasted political capital in a push for a permanent Council seat in 2011.

For Australia, the obvious point of reference was Germany, a non-permanent Council member in 2011 and 2012. The Germans had stumbled too, clumsily abstaining on the March 2011 resolution authorising the use of force in Libya. But under the guidance of a popular ambassador, Peter Wittig, they had regained their credibility relatively quickly, taking a strong line over Syria and sticking close to the British, French and Americans. Australia seemed poised to take up the Germans’ mantle as the most senior pro-Western non-permanent member of the Council.

More specifically, Australian officials aimed to take over a number of positions that the Germans had held within the Council, including the role of 'pen-holder' (diplomatic coordinator) on Afghanistan and the chairmanship of sanctions committees dealing with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. These were not givens: the P5 were interested in the Afghan file given the need to plan for the country after the exit of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) at the end of 2014. Russia pushed to take over as pen-holder, but Australia managed to deflect its bid. It also secured the chairmanship of the Iran sanctions committee, a further sensitive post that Germany had not held.

UN officials generally judge Australia to have done a good job on these initial priorities. It has had limited leverage over Afghan affairs, as tensions between Washington and Kabul have obstructed debates about the future international presence in the country. These have also complicated discussions of the United Nations' own assistance mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) which, although a target for terrorist attacks, may have greater responsibilities once ISAF is gone. When UNAMA's mandate came up for renewal in March 2014, the United States signalled it was not yet willing to discuss substantive changes, quashing serious debate.

Sanctions diplomacy has provided more room for creativity. Many non-permanent Council members dread the minutiae of sanctions regimes, leaving serious business to the P5 or UN officials. The Australian mission set up a special unit to handle these issues and signalled that overhauling the implementation of sanctions would be one of its signature issues. Australian negotiators have a reputation among other Council members for expertise and dedication, sometimes bordering on an obsession with process. They have promoted transparency over the activities of the sanctions committees they manage – for example by reaching out to West African diplomats to discuss measures against al-Qaeda in the Sahel – and tried to share lessons with other committee chairs.

In May, Australia launched a "high-level review of United Nations sanctions" with Finland, Greece and Sweden with the ambitious if tortuous mission statement "to enhance their effectiveness and thereby better address threats to international peace and security through improved integration with today's evolved network of internal and external institutions and related legal instruments."<sup>7</sup> The focus is sharper than this language implies. Most new UN sanctions are now targeted at individual wrongdoers (such as Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders) rather than states, and implementing them requires complex financial and legal arrangements. Australia grasped an unglamorous task in trying to improve sanctions implementation, but it is crucial to the United Nations' use of economic tools in future crises.

Such technical innovations have not resolved deeper political frictions over the application of sanctions. In June 2013, Ambassador Quinlan had to delay a regular 90-day report from the Iran committee due to divisions between China, Russia and the West. He eventually released a report outlining the differences between the two sides (largely relating to Iranian missile tests in 2012) rather than searching for an impossible consensus. Nonetheless, Australia's efforts to promote openness over sanctions have been a part of a broader strategy to raise the Security Council's transparency.

'Transparency' is not the diplomatic pabulum that it might sound like. Always an exclusive club, the P5 have notably increased their grip on the Council in recent years, conducting most essential negotiations in private.<sup>8</sup> This sidelines the non-permanent members and alienates states outside the Council. In mid-2012 an alliance of small states led by Switzerland launched a General Assembly resolution demanding greater openness, but the P5 put aside their Syrian differences to crush the initiative. As Australia joined the Council, the transparency advocates were still recovering from that fight.

Despite the risks of offending the P5, Australia soon emerged as an advocate of transparency within the Council. It worked well with the "Accountability, Coherence and Transparency" (ACT) Group, a coalition of states formed in May 2013 to restart the fight for a more open Council after the 2012 debacle. A diplomat from one of the leading ACT members describes Australia as an "excellent" partner.

Such warm words about Australia are not uncommon. Asked to assess the Australian team at the United Nations, the various UN-watchers interviewed for this paper use terms such as hardworking, well-informed, collegial and (most frequently of all) pragmatic. The "international interest" has not been entirely forgotten, either. Human rights advocates concur that Australian diplomats are consistently open to their opinions. "They don't always agree with our ideas," one concludes, "but they do at least consider them properly."

Contrasting the Australians with their German predecessors, members of the press corps grumble that the Germans gave better background briefings. (Australia, says one, has not learned to "negotiate through the media".) But those who have worked with the two countries' officials on similar topics behind the scenes say the Australians are usually as skilled as, or even better than, their German counterparts.

This level of competence was tested when Kevin Rudd called a federal election for September 2013 – clashing with Australia's tenure as president of the Council that month. The September Council presidency is usually a diplomatic dream, as it coincides with the annual gathering of world leaders for the opening of the UN General Assembly. For Quinlan's team it had the makings of a nightmare, overlapping with the (predictable) transfer of power in Canberra and the (unforeseen)

chemical weapons crisis in Syria. With the Council teetering on the edge of a destabilising breakdown over Syria – to which we will return in the next section – Australian diplomats had to manage their domestic political headaches.

They did so surprisingly well. The Australian mission had spent some time looking for a suitable topic for a top-level debate in the Council, at first considering women, peace, and security. It eventually settled on the control of small arms and light weapons, a security threat that the Council had only addressed sporadically in the past and could be linked to Australia's role in sealing the ATT. The UN diplomatic community expected that whoever was prime minister in Canberra after the elections would come to chair the meeting.<sup>9</sup> Yet after defeating Labor, Tony Abbott decided to send his newly minted foreign minister Julie Bishop to New York instead.

To make matters worse, Russia (which had refused to support the ATT and has a thriving small-arms export sector) threatened to upset the debate by raising questions about Western and Arab governments' shipments of weapons to the Syrian rebels. Despite the continued uncertainty over Syria, Australia decided to put Russia on the spot by tabling a lengthy if mainly declaratory resolution boosting arms embargoes, disarmament programs and other measures to limit small arms. Russia chose to abstain rather than veto, allowing Bishop to chair a successful Council meeting and showing that Australia was willing to tangle with a P5 member.

## SYRIA: NICHE DIPLOMACY IN A TOTAL WAR

If states' tenures on the Security Council were defined by serious and sustained diplomacy, Australia could be a superpower. But this is not how the United Nations works. *Realpolitik* and brinkmanship continue to determine power and status in the Security Council. As Germany's self-defeating decision to abstain on the military action in Libya showed, a competent non-permanent member can be undone by bad crisis management. The hardest tests for Australia at the United Nations since January 2013 have thus lain in Syria and a series of complex but vicious crises facing the Council in the Sahel and Central Africa.

As of January 2013, there was no guarantee that Australia would play a noteworthy role in Security Council diplomacy over Syria – or indeed that the Council as a whole would continue to play any real role on the worsening conflict. China and Russia's three vetoes of previous Security Council resolutions hung heavily over UN discussions of the crisis. In early January, President Bashar Assad firmly rebuffed ceasefire proposals from UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi. In the same month Australia joined fifty-seven other countries, including Britain and

France, in signing a letter coordinated by Switzerland calling for the Security Council to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court. But China and Russia had no interest, and the United States believed the gambit was counterproductive.

By April 2013, Brahimi was close to resigning, but the new US Secretary of State John Kerry persuaded him to stay by promising to convene a peace conference in Geneva with Russia. The humanitarian crisis in Syria and its neighbourhood was, however, worsening. In April 2013, the United Nations' main humanitarian officials made a fresh push to publicise the cataclysm, complaining in *The New York Times* of "an insufficient sense of urgency among the governments and parties that could put a stop to the cruelty and carnage in Syria."<sup>10</sup>

After the UN officials briefed the Council, Ambassador Quinlan pushed for his divided counterparts to at least agree on "press elements" on the crisis, offering to draft the necessary language.<sup>11</sup> If this was the weakest possible option available short of silence – not even amounting to a full press release – it was possible to hash out talking points on reducing the "unacceptable" violence.

Luxembourg had independently started exploring the problem, and agreed to join forces to pursue a resolution on humanitarian access. Overcoming a series of obstacles the non-permanent duo aimed for a Security Council "presidential statement" on humanitarian access – a less potent outcome than a resolution but still significant in UN terms. Had the Syrian war continued uninterrupted, Australia and Luxembourg would probably have got agreement on this statement eventually. But the Syrian security forces' use of chemical weapons at Ghouta near Damascus on 21 August totally transformed the terms of debate.

Ghouta threatened to wreck Council diplomacy. Russia torpedoed a draft British resolution authorising a military response. President Obama declared that he would not let "diplomatic hocus-pocus" at the United Nations stop strikes against Damascus. By 1 September, when Quinlan took up the rotating presidency of the Council, it looked probable that Australia would oversee the worst smash-up in its history since Iraq.

In the weeks that followed, the United States and Russia groped their way out of the crisis, effectively cutting all other Council members (including Britain, France and China) out of negotiations. Australia had little leverage over substance, but Quinlan did have power over process as Council president. His strategy appears to have been to avoid any actions or debate at the United Nations that could upset Washington and Moscow while reassuring fellow Council members that a solution remained possible. He avoided convening formal talks on the crisis in early September but used a scheduled discussion on the Middle East as a chance for all sides to state their concerns. This restraint annoyed ambassadors who wanted a more prominent role, but a high-profile

debate on the crisis could have caused all sides to harden their positions, lowering the chances of a compromise.

Quinlan's gamble paid off in the last days of September, when the United States and Russia presented their agreement on a UN-mandated process to dismantle Syria's chemical arsenal in tandem with the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Quinlan smoothed the deal's path, liaising with individual Council members to ensure that they would not propose disruptive amendments while handling the formalities of collaboration with the process-heavy OPCW. Viewers around the world watched TV footage of Quinlan gaveling through Security Council Resolution 2118 on 27 September.

While critics accused the United States and United Nations of selling out the Syrian people, Australia had a further card up its sleeve, tabling the presidential statement on humanitarian access it had developed with Luxembourg immediately afterwards. This detailed, if non-binding, catalogue of steps needed to facilitate aid was finally agreed on 2 October.

Australia thus played an instrumental role in guiding the Security Council through an existential crisis. Whatever disgruntlement he may have caused through his cautious approach, Quinlan's performance won high marks among his peers. He was lucky: had the Obama administration decided to bomb Syria, Australia could have done little and the Security Council would have looked irrelevant. But a less adept diplomat would not have been able to navigate through this brinksmanship.

One sour note was the failure of the 2 October statement to make any real impact on humanitarian aid to Syria. Attacks on the Council soon started to mount anew. Having won a Council seat in November, Saudi Arabia refused to take it, citing the forum's maladroit performance in the Middle East. At the beginning of 2014, Australia and Luxembourg began new efforts to secure a resolution on humanitarian aid to Syria, bringing Jordan (which had filled the Saudi slot) in as an Arab ally in the initiative.

Working closely with the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) the trio of powers worked on a text with the Americans, British and French through January 2014. The United States initially appeared disinclined to back anything that could disrupt the UN-OPCW mission, but the evidence of a further decline in the humanitarian situation was overwhelming. Australia and Luxembourg reportedly floated a text with China and Russia on 6 February. The two non-Western powers refused to engage in formal consultations, and Russia was dismissive of the entire process, but China signalled a desire to make a deal possible.

This glimmer of an opportunity encouraged the British and French to invest more in the process. The United Kingdom appeared keen to take it over completely, arguing that Russia was vulnerable to pressure during the Sochi Winter Olympics. The United States concurred, and while the world divided its attention between skiing in Sochi and the killings in Kiev, the Council edged towards its agreement on Syria. Australia and its partners did not let go of the process despite the pressure to do so, and Russia finally yielded to Resolution 2139.

There are several explanations for this success. The importance of the Olympics may have been overstated, but China's openness to a deal put Russia in a vulnerable spot. Perhaps most importantly, the escalating crisis in Ukraine gave Moscow a new focus. Analysts still differ over whether Russia's takeover of Crimea was planned or improvised, but either way Vladimir Putin did not need a peripheral fight over Syria. Even so, Australia and Luxembourg pulled off a difficult victory for two temporary Council members, and their resolution called for Ban Ki-moon to report monthly on humanitarian access in Syria, potentially paving the way for a future showdown with Damascus. Since then, as we noted at the outset, relations with Russia and China over Syria have deteriorated again.

The February 2014 opening for better collaboration may have been fleeting – and given the fallout from Ukraine, the hopes it raised were deceptive – but Australia and Luxembourg deserve credit for persevering with the humanitarian file and making the best of the few tactical opportunities that came their way.

## CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN AFRICA – BUT NOT ASIA

While tending to Syria, Australia also had to confront African crises that clustered on the Security Council's agenda in 2013 and early 2014. These included the war in Mali, persistent instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the collapse of order in Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan's descent into civil war. Australian officials had known that African crises would occupy sixty to eighty per cent of the Council's agenda, and bulked up their limited diplomatic presence on the continent. They had also used their Security Council campaign to emphasise their experience of peacekeeping in cases such as Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands, and its potential relevance to long-running blue-helmet operations like that in the DRC. Yet the explosions in Mali and the frankly obscure CAR stretched Australia's ability to analyse and respond to events.

UN officials appreciated Australia's support for proposals for a new peace enforcement brigade in the DRC in early 2013. This ran into opposition from other non-permanent Council members such as

Pakistan, the biggest troop contributor to blue-helmet operations, but has proved to be a success to date. Quinlan and his team were ahead of the curve on CAR, expressing alarm months before France (the former colonial power) decided to intervene. Australia also insisted that the United Nations should launch a Commission of Inquiry into events in CAR and provide public human-rights reporting on the situation there, in line with its broader commitment to transparency. With a small number of personnel in South Sudan, it also provided airlift after the Security Council authorised 6,000 reinforcements for the UN mission there on Christmas Eve 2013. Australian diplomats pride themselves on collaborating closely with their African counterparts over each crisis and ensuring that issues such as humanitarian access and the protection of civilians – similar themes to those they have raised over Syria – were factored into Council discussions of these conflicts.

In doing so, they were only able to finesse strategies constructed by more influential players such as France. This is still more than most non-African Council members (and indeed some smaller recent African Council members such as Togo) have been able to achieve. The fact that Australia chose to invest in activities in a part of the world that is far removed from where its core national interests lay may have a positive effect on perceptions of its Council tenure.

Yet it also points to a major dilemma for Australia in the Security Council: the forum has so far been largely irrelevant to its own interests in the Asia–Pacific. The last UN peacekeepers left Timor-Leste in December 2012. China and the United States negotiated a surprisingly strong resolution in response to North Korea's January 2013 nuclear test, but Australia and other temporary Council members (including South Korea) had little influence over the talks.

Australia did play a more active role in April 2014, when it joined France and the United States in sponsoring a Council meeting on North Korean human rights abuses, following on from a Commission of Inquiry chaired by former Australia High Court justice Michael Kirby, and raising the possibility of a referral to the ICC. China and Russia boycotted this meeting, and it is unlikely that Australia would have backed it without US diplomatic cover. The meeting still fit well with the broader Australian narrative of promoting human rights and humanitarian issues through the Council.

While tensions over the South China Sea and the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands seized international attention through 2013, the Security Council did not engage on these disputes. Beijing's veto power has precluded serious UN diplomacy over these issues and the United States has not wanted to put them before the Security Council. So while Australia has used its time on the Security Council to expand its role in the Middle East and Africa, it has not exploited the forum to advance its own regional interests. This was foreseeable: Australian officials studiously avoided

suggesting that they wanted a greater United Nations role in Asia during their Council campaign, for fear of alienating its neighbours. Yet the Security Council's silence on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and South China Sea, like its paralysis over Ukraine, has raised questions about the institution's role in an era of major-power tensions. Australia's advocacy of the international interest at the United Nations looks cut off from national interests nearer to home.

## LEAVING A LEGACY

Can Australia leave a lasting legacy from its tenure on the Security Council when it steps down at midnight on 31 December 2014? It should have delivered at least one more significant resolution by then, as the Council has to agree a mandate for US-led international forces in Afghanistan after ISAF closes. This is another potential source of friction with China and Russia, concerned about security in Central Asia, and Australia will have to work hard as the Afghan pen-holder to keep all sides happy. Meanwhile, the odds of a further breakthrough on Syria are slim at best. While it is clear that President Assad is ignoring the February resolution, it is highly improbable that an increasingly strident Russia will support any serious penalties against Damascus. At the time of writing in June 2014, Australia was working on a new resolution with Luxembourg and Jordan, making sharper demands for humanitarian access to Syria. It was already clear that China and Russia would block assertive language, and there are risks of further weakening the aid effort with a diplomatic fight.

Australia will hold the Council presidency again in November, and can use this to solidify its legacy. It plans to convene a thematic debate on the role of police in UN peace operations, an increasingly significant but poorly understood operational field which Canberra emphasised during its campaign. Another area where Australia will continue to push a substantive policy agenda is sanctions. As we have noted, it has launched a review of systems for helping states implement sanctions regimes, and advise current and future non-permanent Council members on how to handle these issues. Focusing on this niche could provide a lasting entrée into Council discussions, rather as Switzerland's advocacy for transparency gives it a privileged role in debates about the Council's business.

In a recent paper, Oxfam noted that Australia must follow up on small-arms issues.<sup>12</sup> Yet, as Oxfam also notes, Australia must consider how to cap off its work on humanitarian access in Syria as best it can. This has, for good or ill, been the most compelling dimension of its tenure on the Council, at least for the wider public. Even if progress on Syria itself is impossible, Ambassador Quinlan and his team could table a broad resolution outlining the Security Council's overall commitments to

facilitating humanitarian aid – whether in Syria, South Sudan or North Korea – and proposing steps to streamline diplomacy on these urgent matters. In the current climate, Russia might well veto it. China would probably waver, as it did over Syria in February. And even a strong, unanimous text would probably offer little immediate succour to those suffering in CAR or Homs. But having stood up for a more humane Security Council, Australia should not relent.

## CONCLUSION

If Australia's advocacy for human rights, humanitarian causes and basic decency has been a recurrent theme of its term on the Security Council, does it matter? As Terry Eagleton, a British literary critic, has argued in another context, the case for "trust, loyalty, teamwork, dialogue, pluralism, an acceptance of difference and a sensitivity to others . . . is not the most world-shaking of moral standpoints."<sup>13</sup>

Something similar could be said about the account of Australia's performance on the Security Council. All too often, it has come down to doing the decent thing, whether that means making sanctions regimes fairer, getting basic aid to starving Syrians or arguing that crimes in CAR should not be forgotten. Nobody could argue that these have been objectionable aspirations. But given the increasingly contentious nature of big-power relations in the Security Council, such appeals to the better angels of the international community's nature have risked appearing (at best) a little too earnest and (at worst) sadly too innocent.

Yet Australia's UN team cannot be accused of naivety. In some of the most dire crises of the last eighteen months, Quinlan and his staffers have demonstrated a distinct skill for diplomatic brinkmanship. They have repeatedly stood up to an assertive Russia on issues from Afghanistan to the small-arms trade and Syrian aid. Yet Australia has also distinguished itself from the Western members of the P5 through carving out niche diplomatic goals on its chosen humanitarian causes.

These tactical successes are, perhaps, just as important as the "high ideals" that have guided Australia's policy on the Security Council. Many members of the United Nations have good intentions. Rather fewer have the capacity and gall to act on those intentions. Australia has shown that, at a minimum, it has the tactical dexterity to play with the P5 at the United Nations. If some of its efforts, most obviously over Syria, have had depressingly little impact on the ground it is not Australia's fault: it is a symptom of the parlous state of the United Nations and international cooperation in general.

Australia has not changed the world from its non-permanent seat on the Security Council. This was never likely. However, it has acquitted itself well, bringing extra rigour and professionalism to the debates in New

York and always nudging the big players in the direction of a better approach. In the process Australia has solidified its reputation as a good international citizen and a serious country. For that reason alone, Australia's return to the Council can be counted a success.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sangwon Yoon, "UN Security Council Adopts Resolution on Aid Access Syria", *Bloomberg News*, 23 February 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Somini Sengupta, "UN Chief Urges Aid Delivery without Syria's Consent", *The New York Times*, 23 May 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The author has also benefited considerably from the work of Security Council Report, a think tank that tracks the day-to-day business of UN diplomacy in impressive detail. Security Council Report's analyses are at [www.securitycouncilreport.org](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org), and its blog "What's in Blue" ([www.whatsinblue.org/](http://www.whatsinblue.org/)) is required reading at the UN.

<sup>4</sup> "Kevin Rudd's Full Speech to the UN", *The Australian*, 26 September 2008. See also Mark Beeson, "Can Australia Save the World? The Limits and Possibilities of Middle Power Diplomacy," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 65, no. 5 (2011): 563-577.

<sup>5</sup> AAP, "Julia Gillard Schmoozes Leaders in Pursuit of UN Seat", *The Australian*, 26 September 2012.

<sup>6</sup> John Langmore, "Australia's Campaign for Security Council Membership," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 48 no. 1 (2013): 101-111.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.hlr-unsanctions.org/main/concept>.

<sup>8</sup> See Bruno Stagno Ugarte et al., *Security Council Working Methods: A Tale of Two Councils?* (Security Council Report, March 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Denis Fitzgerald, "As Australia Takes Security Council Reins, Not Only Syria on the Agenda", *The Lowy Interpreter*, 29 August 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Valerie Amos et al., "A UN Appeal to Save Syria", *The New York Times*, 15 April 2013.

<sup>11</sup> The text of Quinlan's intervention is available at <http://australia-uns.org.au/2013/04/comments-in-consultations-syria/>.

<sup>12</sup> Steph Cousins et al., *On the Home Stretch* (Oxfam Australia, April 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in John A. Hall, *The Importance of Being Civil* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 1.

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