



POLICY BRIEF

The shape of Australia's future engagement with the United Nations

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The views expressed in this paper are entirely the author's own and not those of the Lowy Institute for International.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Australia is currently bidding for another term on the United Nations Security Council in 2029–30 as well as seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2018–20. But Australia's broader engagement with the United Nations is patchy and underwhelming. It needs to be upgraded to ensure that Australia has a greater say on global issues that are important to its national interests.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Australia should reinforce its engagement with the United Nations by:

- championing UN reform in particular areas, such as improving the UN's intelligence and analytical capabilities
- making a stronger contribution to peacekeeping operations, including by increasing the number of Australian Defence Force personnel on UN missions
- increasing the number of Australians in leadership positions in the organisation.

In 2015, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop announced Australia's bid for a seat on the United Nations Security Council in 2029–30 as well as a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2018–20. The announcement was a rare exercise in long-term thinking — the end point of the Security Council campaign is 14 years (or four parliaments) into the future. Reactions to the announcement were mixed, however, echoing some of the criticisms that accompanied the Rudd government's announcement in 2008 that Australia would campaign for a seat on the Council.

Such criticisms would seem, however, to exemplify a rather narrow view of Australian interests and our place in the world. Australia is a member of the G20, the world's 12th largest economy, and the 12th largest contributor to the UN budget. Australia also boasts a highly advanced and capable military and a world-class diplomatic service. Why shouldn't Australia have a greater voice on issues of global concern? And why shouldn't that voice be heard at the most important multilateral crisis management forum in international politics, the United Nations Security Council?

In this Policy Brief, it will be argued that Australia's engagement with the United Nations should not just be sustained but upgraded by way of a modest and consistent investment in thinking and resources over the next decade.

Australia has a long and proud history of engagement with the United Nations. The country's current commitment is both broad and effective, albeit underappreciated by the political class and the public alike. Many at the United Nations value Australian contributions and speak of Australian interventions — on protection of civilians, development, gender, and humanitarian and crisis response — in highly favourable terms.

Yet, many also speak of Australia's lack of a consistent approach to the United Nations. Some in the UN Secretariat even consider Australia to be a "fair-weather friend" of the organisation, a "bit player" that "punches below its weight", and overly reliant on a few brilliant diplomats.¹ In short, Australia has been cast as a supporting player, possessing unfulfilled potential and lacking the confidence to lead. It is time to take a leading role.

THE UNITED NATIONS SERVES AUSTRALIAN INTERESTS

The Australian Government must seek to embrace a more forthright and considered approach to UN engagement because Australia has global interests. The rules-based global order is under considerable pressure. Since 1945, a body of rules, regulating the proper conduct of states, has built up around the United Nations.

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The Security Council has again recently become increasingly polarised between Russia and China on the one hand, and the Western P3 (the United States, United Kingdom, and France) on the other. The election of Donald Trump as US President is changing the prevailing power dynamics at the United Nations with as yet unknown consequences. Both Mr Trump's rhetoric and his early actions point to US retrenchment.² In the absence of strong US leadership at the United Nations, other powerful players will likely seek to fill the void. In these circumstances, Australia, working together with other like-minded member states (Germany and Canada, among others), should be prepared to enter the fray to defend the international rule of law, a central element of the liberal order.

Over the past 70 years, Australia has derived considerable benefit from the United Nations, including: action on climate change; the eradication of infectious diseases; efforts to manage and mediate international conflicts; the regulation and elimination of some weapons of mass destruction; the establishment of an agenda for sustainable development; and the management of dire humanitarian crises. The role of the United Nations in each of these issues, as well as the relative stability of the post-Second World War order more broadly, has made Australia a safer and more prosperous country.

Australia has also benefited specifically from UN actions. In the years immediately following the UN's founding, the Security Council was involved in bringing about an end to the protracted conflict between Dutch and Indonesian nationalists. Australia called upon the Council to address the ongoing crisis. The Council recommended a series of measures and in 1949 adopted Resolution 67, which called for the creation of a federal United States of Indonesia. Although largely forgotten, the UN's value in this instance was remarkable, and of considerable benefit to Australia. It is also worth remembering that Australia led the establishment of the instrument of peacekeeping by sending a small group of peacekeepers to monitor a ceasefire between Dutch and Indonesian forces.

A more recent example is the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) over Ukraine in July 2014. Thirty-eight Australian residents were killed. Seven days later, the Security Council, under Australian leadership, adopted Resolution 2166, which called on all member states "to provide any requested assistance to civil and criminal investigations".³ The resolution assisted in various ways including enabling access to the site and establishing a framework for the investigation into the cause of destruction of the plane. It also backed Russia into a corner, and allowed the Council to condemn an attack carried out by Russian-backed rebels.⁴ Australian diplomats were able to speak on behalf of Australia's dead, rather than asking another Security Council member to do so.

Notwithstanding the current trends towards protectionism and isolationism around the world, political leaders and policymakers cannot ignore transnational problems that are not amenable to unilateral or even regional solutions. Although often unwieldy and imperfect, the UN can also provide countries with additional options to pursue their national interests. Member states invest in the United Nations because it is an institution that holds a larger range of tools and commands greater legitimacy than any other international organisation.⁵

WHY AUSTRALIA SHOULD LEAD AT THE UNITED NATIONS

Australia's engagement with the United Nations also goes to what kind of country Australia should be internationally. Australia should be a global leader that is prepared to shoulder its share of the burden of global governance and international crisis management. This means not just going through the motions at the United Nations but playing a leading role within it. Australia is well positioned to do so. Canada's longest-serving UN permanent representative Robert Fowler has argued that "middle powers are afforded latitude at the UN, because [countries like Canada and Australia are] not trying to run the world".⁶ During Canada's last term on the Council (1999–2000), Fowler himself oversaw a revolution in UN sanctions. Australia can use the latitude Fowler speaks of to advance issues on the UN agenda.

UN leadership is in Australia's foreign policy DNA. Four examples stand out. In 1945, Foreign Minister HV Evatt exhibited exceptional leadership and advocacy on behalf of Australia and other small and middle powers represented at the UN's founding conference at San Francisco. In the early 1990s, Foreign Minister Gareth Evans led mediation efforts to end the Cambodian–Vietnamese War. The result was the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement, with Australia supporting its implementation through the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). In 1999, Prime Minister John Howard lobbied world leaders to deploy an Australian-led international peacekeeping force to East Timor in response to the militia violence that broke out following the independence ballot. In 2013, Australian diplomats worked with their counterparts in Luxembourg and Jordan on a plan to secure humanitarian access corridors in Syria.⁷

Leading at the United Nations grants increased weight and influence on the international stage. Norway, for example, has projected itself as the foremost third-party mediator. This position affords the world's 27th largest economy with a population of just over five million people considerable prestige and influence.

Australia should also lead for reasons of defensive multilateralism. If we choose not to lead, then others (most notably the G77) are likely to shape the agenda as they see fit. It is ironic that in Australia, critics of the

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United Nations constantly refer to the way the organisation is inhabited or manipulated by countries they consider unsavoury. But that alone is a reason why a sensible democratic country should play a bigger role in the organisation, something that Australia's Western allies often acknowledge.

This begs the question of what, then, in practical terms, does leading at the United Nations mean? Three initiatives in particular could help Australia play a leading role: making the UN smarter; contributing more meaningfully to peace operations; and strengthening Australia's contribution to the UN's human resources.

A SMARTER UN

All large organisations require continuous upgrading and renewal. Many areas of the UN system are ripe for innovation. Reform is a necessity in an organisation constrained by integration difficulties, inter-agency tribalism, and bureaucratic rigidity. Occasionally there is resistance to new ideas and innovative practices, although sometimes the best ideas win out through the power of the better argument.⁸ As highlighted above, Australia has an interest in rendering the United Nations more capable of handling contemporary challenges to the rules-based global order.⁹ Australian diplomats should be given resources and the creative freedom to lead on the reform front, especially in the honeymoon period of new Secretary-General António Guterres.

Australia should be prepared to articulate a narrative for upgraded engagement — to become the “patron saint”¹⁰ of particular reforms and issues within the UN system. One area it could champion is strengthening the UN's ability to undertake political analysis, to help it improve its understanding of the world in which it now operates and deliver on its central mission of maintaining international peace and security. Australian-led action on this front would reinforce Guterres' broad vision to make the United Nations “nimble, efficient and effective”.¹¹ Although progress has been made, more must be done.

First, the Australian Government could help the United Nations to strengthen intelligence and analytical capacities within individual field missions. Second, it could substantially increase its contribution to the Department of Political Affairs to enable strengthening of peacemaking functions such as the Mediation Support Unit and activities aimed at sustaining peace. Third, it could boost funding for statistical capacity (which currently stands at \$223 million worldwide) and support several pilot Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) measurement programs in the Indo-Pacific region. As the ‘patron saint’ of political analysis and statistical capacity within the UN system, Australia would be afforded not just access to but also genuine influence in field missions and peace processes, and across all 17 areas of the SDGs.

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A STRONGER CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE OPERATIONS

Since 1956, middle powers such as Australia, Canada, and Norway have been called upon to deploy their troops as peacekeepers. These countries are without “colonial legacies” and have “less at stake in any given conflict”.¹² However, by the late 1990s most countries with advanced militaries, including Australia, opted to provide only token contributions, while much of the peacekeeping burden fell to the developing countries. Despite a proud history as a peacekeeper, Australia is now considered a reliably poor contributor. As at 28 February 2017, Australia’s commitment to UN peacekeeping is an embarrassing 38 personnel.¹³ Australia should upgrade its engagement on the reinforcement and reform of peace operations.

Australia has a strong interest in the effectiveness of UN peace operations. These operations have generally been an effective instrument for the maintenance of international peace and security: not perfect, certainly, but better than nothing and better than the alternative. The United Nations fields a large number of peacekeeping operations,¹⁴ all of which are overstretched. If it is to overcome its deficiencies on peace operations, it will need the wholehearted support of wealthy, capable countries such as Australia.

Participating in peacekeeping is an exercise in regional defence cooperation — Indonesia (2872 personnel), China (2594), and Malaysia (871) are all strong regional contributors.¹⁵ However, Australia has considerably diminished its credibility on peacekeeping: if the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is not actively participating in peacekeeping missions, how can it train peacekeepers from across the Indo-Pacific? If Australia wants to train peacekeepers, then it should actively and effectively participate in peacekeeping operations.

Third, Australia’s token contributions do not afford it much influence in New York where most debate on matters of international peace and security centres on the UN’s many peacekeeping operations. A renewed commitment would give Australia influence during a time of reform and bolster its position in the peacekeeping fraternity, in support of its 2029–30 Security Council bid.

The government should strengthen its contribution to peacekeeping in several ways. First, Australia should seek to deploy a larger number of personnel to UN missions alongside other like-minded countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom. A recommitment of 350 personnel (half that of Canada’s) would be comparatively modest yet significant. The government should commit to a deployment target and request that the ADF develop plans, in conjunction with the United Nations and key allies, to achieve this target within five years.

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Second, Australian staff officers should be deployed to UN missions in larger numbers and for at least a year (in line with UN policy), rather than the current six months. If more ADF officers were to undertake the UN staff officer course, offered by the ADF Peace Operations Training Centre, the ADF would be able to support UN mission start-up — making Australia a reliable first-in contributor. The ADF could also introduce a personnel policy that encourages, rewards, and recognises UN service. Indeed, the ADF should promote UN peacekeeping as a career-enhancing opportunity and increase motivational incentives such as pay and opportunities for promotion.¹⁶ UN peacekeeping offers immense challenges and rewards and should be recognised as such.

Third, aside from deployments, Australia's greatest potential contribution could be on issues of peace operations and stabilisation policy. The primacy of politics embedded in the UN's new peacekeeping charter requires a tailoring of operations, and therefore a strong analytical basis. The Secretary-General has sought to ensure that "system-wide strategic analysis and planning is initiated earlier and planning processes are more strictly followed and supported by more rigorous situation assessments and conflict analysis".¹⁷ In line with the smarter UN initiative, Australia should practically support efforts to develop a stronger peace operations intelligence and political analysis capability.

A GREATER CONTRIBUTION TO THE UN'S HUMAN RESOURCES

Australians are talented, well-educated, hard-working, resilient, and creative people. While the Australian Government has backed Australian candidates for leadership positions in the United Nations, the record of support has become uneven. More should be done to support the candidacies of Australian nationals in the UN system.

Australians are under-represented in senior leadership positions within the UN system. No Australian has ever served as a UN mission leader — we have no Jan Egeland, Ian Martin, Ellen Margrethe Løj, or Sergio Vieira de Mello.¹⁸ Australia's last Force Commander was Major General Ian Gordon, who finished as Chief of Staff of United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) almost a decade ago in 2008.

A plan should be established for the management and promotion of Australia's international civil service cadre. The plan would have three components. First, a mechanism to keep track of all Australians (on an opt-in basis) working inside the UN system and across allied fields (that is, humanitarian organisations, non-government organisations). Understanding and analysing the talent pool is the first step in the development of Australian talent. At present, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has an underdeveloped understanding of the Australians who work in the UN system.

Second, a program of courses and seminars as well as informal mentoring to help Australians working in the international civil service develop their careers. Australian diplomatic missions should also facilitate regular informal contact with other Australians in the UN system.¹⁹

Third, a system to identify and nominate Australian candidates for top UN posts in all areas including economic and social affairs, human rights, and human resource management, and particularly for roles in mediation and field mission leadership.²⁰ Those Australians with the requisite leadership competencies — found within the UN system, the Canberra bureaucracy, and further afield — should be granted opportunities to expand their skill set and experience.

Australia could also make a greater contribution to the UN's human resources by resuming its participation in the UN Junior Professional Officer Programme and Associate Expert Programme — schemes designed to expose young professionals to the UN system.²¹ Australia discontinued its involvement in 2004, and as a result there are virtually no young Australians working at the United Nations. A modest yet respectable recommitment might involve the funding of ten positions in key areas of priority for Australia.

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CONCLUSION

Australia's national interests require it to be fully engaged in the key processes of multilateral decision-making and action. In an increasingly uncertain world, Australia cannot afford to pursue a business-as-usual approach to the United Nations. Put simply, there is too much at stake.

Australia should champion reforms that make the United Nations smarter and more effective. Australia should renew its commitment to peace operations and make a greater contribution to the UN's human resources. Every serious country wants to have a voice and a presence at the United Nations. Australia should not be any different.

NOTES

¹ Confidential interviews with the author, June–July 2016.

² For example, a draft Executive Order, “Auditing and Reducing US Funding of International Organizations”, calls for a review of funding for international bodies, including the United Nations and its related agencies, and a “40 percent overall decrease” in voluntary US support for international organisations: see Max Fisher, “Trump Prepares Orders Aiming at Global Funding and Treaties”, *The New York Times*, 25 January 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/us/politics/united-nations-trump-administration.html>.

³ United Nations Security Council Resolution 2166, adopted 21 July 2014, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2166>.

⁴ John Langmore and Jeremy Farrall, “Can Elected Members Make a Difference in the UN Security Council? Australia’s Experience in 2013–2014”, *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 22, Issue 1 (January–March 2016), 59–77.

⁵ For example, sanctions, peacekeeping, mediation missions, and the legally authorised use of force.

⁶ Robert Fowler, former Canadian Permanent Representative to the United Nations, interview with the author, July 2011.

⁷ Richard Gowan, *Australia in the UN Security Council*, Lowy Institute Analysis (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 10 June 2014), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/australia-un-security-council>.

⁸ Ian Johnstone, “Security Council Deliberations: The Power of the Better Argument”, *European Journal of International Law* 14, No 3 (2003), 437–480.

⁹ Leanne Smith, “Australian Foreign Policy Needs a Broader Conception of our National Interest”, *The Conversation*, 20 July 2016, <https://theconversation.com/australian-foreign-policy-needs-a-broader-conception-of-our-national-interest-62092>.

¹⁰ Confidential interview with the author, June 2016.

¹¹ “Secretary-General-Designate António Guterres’ Remarks to the General Assembly on Taking the Oath of Office”, 12 December 2016, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2016-12-12/secretary-general-designate-ant%C3%B3nio-guterres-oath-office-speech>.

¹² Emily Paddon Rhoads, *Taking Sides in Peacekeeping: Impartiality and the Future of the United Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 60.

¹³ Australia contributes 2.3 per cent of the UN’s \$7.87 billion 2016/17 budget for peacekeeping, but only 0.039 per cent of the UN’s total personnel: see United Nations, “Peacekeeping Statistics”, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/>.

¹⁴ A total of 16 peacekeeping operations aimed at sustaining peace.

¹⁵ As at 28 February 2017: see United Nations, “Peacekeeping Statistics: Troop and Police Contributors”, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/>.

¹⁶ Confidential interview with the author, June 2016.

¹⁷ *Report of the High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations* (United Nations General Assembly document A/70/95, Security Council document S/2015/446), 17 June 2015, 59, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/446&referer=http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/reports.shtml&Lang=E.

¹⁸ Alexander Downer was UN Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Cyprus (July 2008–February 2014). Australian military and police have served with distinction: Major General Tim Ford (Commander, UNTSO in the Middle East and Chief Military Adviser in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations at UN Headquarters); Major General Michael Smith (Deputy Force Commander, UN Transitional Administration in East Timor); Major General Ian Gordon (Commander, UNTSO); Lieutenant General John Sanderson (Force Commander, UNTAC); and Andrew Hughes (UN Police Commissioner and member of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations). Currently, Australia's highest-ranked UN official is Peter Drennan (Under-Secretary-General for Safety and Security).

¹⁹ One interviewee noted that the German Foreign Ministry was adept at maintaining regular contact with German UN staffers.

²⁰ Director 1, Director 2, Assistant Secretary-General, Under Secretary-General, Force Commander, Deputy Force Commander, Police Commissioner and Secretary-General's Special Representative are all top UN positions.

²¹ *Junior Professional Officer/Associate Expert/Associate Professional Officer Programmes in United Nations System Organizations, Joint Inspection Unit* (Geneva: United Nations, 2008), https://www.unjiu.org/en/reports-notes/archive/JIU_REP_2008_2_English.pdf.

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