



What Is It Like To Be a Non-Permanent Member of The UN Security Council?

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The UN Security Council undoubtedly is the most prominent body of the world organization's institutional machinery. Through its key executive decision-making powers it addresses conflicts and crises which constitute threats to international peace and security. Its decisions are binding on the entire membership. While the five permanent members of the Security Council have a pretty clear view on their role in the Council (permanence indeed helps), that is less so for the non-permanent members (potentially the bulk of the remaining 188 UN members) who only intermittently experience the Council, if at all. This paper addresses the question of 'what is it like' to be a non-permanent member of the Security Council in a straightforward way. No grand theories or speculative flights are involved. Just sound common sense. But common sense, as some of us know, can be a scarce resource.

On 8 June 2018, the United Nations General Assembly (GA) will elect 5 new Non-Permanent Members (NPMs) of the Security Council (SC) for a term of 2 years. As it does

so every year, the total of NPMs adds up to 10. Together with the 5 Permanent Members (PMs – China, France, Russia, UK and US) they constitute the 15-member Security Council (SC).

Belgium and Germany are sure of a seat as a NPM in the SC, after the withdrawal from the race of Israel, which belongs to the same regional sub-group of candidates (the so-called WEOG) for which 2 seats are available. In order to get elected a candidate must gather a two-thirds majority of the members of the GA present and voting. As there are 193 members in the GA, and supposing that all of them are present and voting, a candidate must muster 129 votes to get elected.

So far for some background facts. Let's move on to the 'what is it like to be a non-permanent member of the Security Council?'-question. I will address this not from an outsider's (objective) view, but based on an insider's (subjective) experience about what it means to be part of the SC (which the author of this paper was in 2007-08). Such an insider's view may tell a more interesting story than a more distant outsider's (say legal or political) approach. We all know the difference between reading a travelogue and doing the travel itself.

To start with, some sobering considerations on what it means (and what it does not mean) to be a NPM of the SC:

- **Power versus Authority.** A non-permanent membership is not power that one grabs, but authority that is conveyed and which one is expected to exercise responsibly. Your country's power base hasn't changed as a result of your being elected to the SC. But yes, you are being offered the most select security platform, which allows and indeed expects you to contribute effectively to the SC's 'primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security', and thus to help steer the course of events in the world (Art. 24 of the Charter).
- **Privilege versus Responsibility.** A non-permanent membership is not a privilege to be enjoyed, but a responsibility one must assume. A mandate as NPM of the SC first and foremost means hard work. It will be up to you to demonstrate that you can live up to the challenge. You will be judged by your substantive input to the debate, by the knowledge and expertise you bring to the issues at stake and by the skills you demonstrate in framing and shaping solutions to problems.
- **You versus the Others.** A non-permanent membership is not primarily about you, but first and foremost about the others. And the others, that is the UN-membership at large that you are supposed to represent, on whose behalf the SC acts (Art. 24) and who are bound by its decisions (Art. 25). So, forget 'your' (national) SC agenda. The agenda is set by the others and by events in the outside world.

The thrust of these remarks is essentially the following: don't take yourself too seriously as a newcomer on the SC. It's not about glory and prestige, but about hard work and quality. As a NPM you are primarily being watched and

judged by the PMs and it is they, together with the UN-membership at large, who will decide about your fate in the SC. It is the PMs that will make or break your reputation as a NPM.

In light of the preceding, here are some very basic rules of behaviour that constitute what one could call the 'survival kit' of the effective NPM on the SC. These rules may seem so obvious that one may be surprised that they have to be stated explicitly. And still, experience shows that they are systematically broken, including by so-called 'prominent' NPMs.

- **Know your file.** Know what you are talking about. If you don't, you will be sidelined at once and outflanked by those who do. The SC is not the GA, which is essentially a debating forum. The SC is a no-nonsense decision-making body. Its members are interested only in what effectively contributes to solving the problem at hand. SC questions are tough and complex and require quite some study work. In the SC it is not enough to state your position, you have to argue for it.
- **Know your place** in the setting of the SC. There are of course the five PMs who occupy a dominant position, whether you like it or not. And then there are the other NPMs, each with their own weight, power and authority. It is up to you to find your proper place, the kind of 'natural place' others expect you to occupy. If you do not, you risk to appear pathetic. But 'proper place' does not mean self-effacing, it just means the right balance between not enough and too much. And that place need not to remain static, of course; it will evolve as you evolve, as you become more self-confident, as you gain authority.
- **Gain authority.** As already suggested, it is the PMs in particular that will determine the relative authority with which you will be able

to act in the SC. And they will do so on the basis of what you bring to the SC in terms of substance, quality, skills and influence on others. It is the PMs who will decide which NPM will be entrusted with a special mission and which NPM will be called upon to chair the different Sanctions Committees. As the SC is essentially a deliberative body it is the distribution of authority, rather than that of power that counts, which paradoxically can result in small countries having a larger say in the SC than bigger countries.

- **Be predictable.** Not only must your positions be coherent with each other, they also need to be consistent over time. Only by being predictable will you be considered to be a reliable partner, and only by being reliable will others be willing to interact with you and will you be able to find allies for your cause. Conversely, if your positions are not internally coherent and consistent over time, you may well end up becoming a non-player in the SC.
- **Be no-nonsense.** The SC is not, as we already said, the GA. The SC is a results-oriented decision-making body that, contrary to received wisdom, works rather well. What the SC aims at is solving problems, not complicating them as sometimes happens in the ‘debating’ culture of the GA. There is not much room for ideology in the SC. To be an effective NPM one therefore has to avoid

dogmatism (of which legalism is one prominent form). On the contrary, an effective NPM will be hands on, pragmatic and equipped with a good sense of what is politically acceptable and practically feasible.

This concludes our short walk through the world of the NPMs. It is not a complicated walk; indeed, it can almost be reduced to keeping one’s two feet firmly on the ground. Watch out for (1) the PMs: they are there to stay, you come and go, and they know the tricks of the trade, you don’t; (2) for the other NPMs: they are your potential allies, they need you as much as you need them; and (3) watch yourself: the trappings of the job are numerous; go for the Stoic virtues of soberness, steadfastness and self-confidence while having a good laugh from time to time.

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