Research Summary

The UN Charter gives the Security Council the extraordinary function of being responsible for international peace and security. Although the Permanent Five members are disproportionately powerful, there is scope for elected members to influence the decision-making processes during their two-year terms.

The capacity of the P5 to control the Security Council’s deliberations and outcomes should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, despite considerable constraints, imaginative and industrious E10 members can make influential contributions to the Security Council’s decision-making processes.

- They can broaden and deepen Council discussions by bringing to the table regional and local knowledge about many of the crises requiring Council attention.
- They can shape the Council schedule when they assume the role of Council president. For example, Australia scheduled several important thematic debates on small arms and light weapons and police in peacekeeping, both of which culminated in the successful adoption of the Council’s first-ever resolutions on those topics.
- They chair the Council’s subsidiary organs. Australia chaired three important sanctions committees throughout its Council term: the 1737 Committee on sanctions related to Iran’s proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities, the 1988 Committee on sanctions against the Taliban, and the 1267/1989 Committee on sanctions against al-Qaeda.
Elected members have some natural advantages over the P5:

- They have more flexibility and less baggage than the P5. They are not as locked into political contests between the big powers or previous negotiating positions that could curtail their options.
- They bring fresh knowledge and different interests. Some of the E10 have been responsive to the professional nongovernmental organizations that, in turn, have been allies in influencing the political climate within which issues are debated.
- As the underdogs, the E10 can more easily mobilize political support of many countries and popular movements.

Relations with the P5 are issues of vital concern for all other countries. Yet that does not mean that compliance with their wishes is the most effective form of cooperation. Within each of the P5 countries, there also are intense debates about interests, strategies, and policies: they are not monolithic. When elected members take positions that they judge to be in the best interests of the Security Council and the global common good, they stand a greater chance of winning the respect and support of many within P5 countries, whether or not this persuades the key power-holders of the moment.

The E10 can also have more leverage than they presume. The issue is not only about the extent of courage; it is also about how best to strengthen the long-term interests of every member state through fulfilling the purpose of the Council to maintain international peace and security.

For Consideration:

- What are the tactics available to the E10 for influencing Council outcomes?
- What are the main challenges faced by elected members?
- Are E10 members too passive in debate? Why are they reluctant to be more assertive?
- How and when have elected members made a difference on the UN Security Council?
- How and when have the ambitions of elected members been frustrated?
- Do E10 members have more leverage on reform debates while on the Security Council?


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