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THE CANBERRA COLUMN

The UNSC seat: Australia, Israel and Palestine

By Graeme Dobell - 17 October 2012 9:00AM

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In its [quest](#) for a UN Security Council Seat, to be decided by the General Assembly on Thursday, Australia has kept running into Israel and Palestine.



The [race for the seat](#) has been with Luxembourg and Finland, but Israel and Palestine have become a fascinating element of the contest for the two seats allocated to the [Western European and Others Group](#) in which Australia finds itself anachronistically located. Israel and Palestine have posed hard questions for Canberra at both ends of the diplomatic scale, ranging from issues of high principle down to the hard-edged politics of winning an election fight.

To give an example from the count-the-numbers political end: in 2008, Kevin Rudd received [advice](#) from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade that the 2018 UNSC bid offered Australia its best chance of winning a seat. The primary opponent in that race: Israel, one of the 28 members of the Western European and Others grouping, along with Australia.

Rudd [forsook](#) the chance to run against Israel, opting instead for the earlier 2012 bid. Had he accepted the timetable offered him in 2008, Australia would have given itself a full ten years to mount its case. And to repeat: its key opponent in the Western European and Others Group would have been Israel. There's no such thing as a sure winner in horse racing or multilateral diplomacy, but Australia would have been the un-backable favourite.

Israel [announced](#) its bid for the 2018 contest [back in 2005](#) after joining the Western European and Others Group in 2000; before that, it had been blocked from playing any role in the UN's Asia Group. For Israel, just being able to enter the race is a significant achievement. And in that contest, Israel starts with only two sure votes – its own, and that of the US.

Rudd's decision to run for a 2013-14 slot was probably a function of impatience and enthusiasm rather than any aversion to facing off against Israel. But if Luxembourg pips Oz in the Security Council Stakes, the Foreign Affairs hardheads will bite their tongues while silently shaking their heads. It would have been so

much easier to run against Israel, rather than having to run around the Israel-Palestine issue.

The sense of that sentiment was underlined by the emotion in the General Assembly last year over Palestine's dramatic [demand for recognition](#) as a state with full UN membership. The excitement level is down this year as Palestine reaches, instead, for recognition as a non-member observer state. Even that lesser-status issue could have derailed Australia if Palestine's request had gone to the General Assembly ahead of Thursday's decision on UNSC seats. Fortunately for Australia's candidacy, Palestine is content to wait until after the US election next month before it gets an observer state verdict.

When the previous big Palestine vote decision went the rounds of the Canberra kitchen a while ago, Kevin Rudd (as Foreign Minister) said Australia should abstain but Julia Gillard [ruled](#) that Australia would vote against Palestine. Australia opposed Palestine's campaign under Howard, abstained under Rudd, and under Gillard is now back in the 'no' camp, causing Alison Broinowski [to wonder](#) : 'If Australian foreign policy is so out of step with the global majority, and so responsive to the wishes of the United States (and indeed Israel), why would UN member states want to waste a seat on Australia?' Gareth Evans [argues](#) that 'being on the wrong side of history is never a comfortable position', and that is where Australia stands, with the US and Israel, in resisting 'the tide of international sentiment in favour of moving now to recognize Palestinian statehood.'

If Australia loses on Thursday, then that tide of history will have washed over Canberra's hopes. And if Australia wins, then it is going to have two years on the Security Council to confront these dilemmas from the front line. Add into this mix two other factors that will loom ever larger for Australia – its position in Asia and its relationship with the world's largest Muslim nation.

Some day, when the UN lurches into the 21st Century, Australia is going to shift group membership so that its UN perch matches its geography and interests: farewell Western Europe, hello Asia. The Indonesia dimension is just as problematic in terms of timelines, but the trends are clear. In thinking about these dimensions, consider an excellent [paper](#) by that sharpest of Singapore thinkers, Kishore Mahbubani, entitled 'Australia's destiny in the Asian Century: Pain or No Pain?'

The short answer to that question, he judges, is that the 'country that will have to make the most painful adjustment to the Asian century is undoubtedly Australia.' As a former ambassador to the UN and President of the Security Council, Mahbubani is well placed to offer some thoughts on the interplay between Australia's region and the nation's actions at the UN. His starting point (quoting a private jest the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, once made to his Australian counterpart, Gareth Evans) is on the need for Australia to do a Green Paper on Indonesia, charting the changes an ever more Islamic Indonesia will demand of its neighbour:

The geopolitical challenges from Indonesia will not come in military terms. Instead, the amount of political "space" Australia occupies in the region could shrink sharply in the event of a political quarrel between Australia and Indonesia. To get a sense of the kind of difficulties that Australia might encounter, Australia should do a scenario exercise of the impact of having a "Dr. Mahathir" type of figure emerging as the newly elected leader of Indonesia. So far, Australia has been blessed with relatively moderate and friendly Indonesian presidents. Is Australia ready for a less friendly Indonesian President?

There is one simple bellwether issue that will indicate the impact on Australia's political space in the region: the Israel-Palestine issue. So far, Australia's voting patterns on UNGA resolutions on this subject have been in line with its fellow members in the Western European and Others Group. Quite often, Australia has voted just as Canada has. However, Canada is geopolitically blessed in being protected by two mighty oceans and by the greatest power in the world, America, from any anger in the Islamic world. Canada is also a free rider on American security. Australia's geopolitical position is almost the exact opposite of Canada vis-à-vis the Islamic world. Yet it votes just like Canada in the UN. Surely this is geopolitical folly of the highest order.

The Canada analogy is ominous, because Canada's last bid for a Security Council seat, in 2010, crashed.

'The race for second and third': photo by Flickr user [InspiredInDesMoines](#) .



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