

Nov 04, 2016 by [Caitlin Byrne](#)

Australia's campaign for the UNSC: an optimistic view ^[1]

I am optimistic about Australia's campaign for a temporary seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). To be clear, I am optimistic about the campaign, rather than the contest. It is almost impossible to predict the outcome of the three-way competition between Australia, Finland and Luxembourg for the two available seats; a contest that will be determined by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in New York on 18 October.

Australia's competitors, Finland and Luxembourg present compelling cases as to why they should be elected. Both European nations have been in the race far longer than Australia and both have had more time to secure diplomatic pledges of support; pledges they hope (but can never be sure) will be realised in the secret ballot processes of the UNGA vote.

So, why my optimism? Quite apart from the outcome of the contest, the campaign has provided the backdrop against which Australia has demonstrated the potential that creative public diplomacy partnerships hold for addressing issues of global significance. The Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), now in its second phase of operation (with \$4.26 million in AusAID funding) is one such example.

Established in 2008, the Centre puts significant intellectual grunt behind the R2P research and outreach agendas. It operates independently of the Australian government and promotes the principles of R2P through research, advocacy, outreach, and training programs—working at local, regional and global levels.

The work of the Centre reaches well beyond official audiences to engage public audiences at a grassroots level throughout the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. This outreach has prompted new and expanding conversations about the fundamental pillars of R2P—in particular, the responsibility of states to protect their own people, and the collective obligation of the international community to assist states in this endeavour.

These are the conversations that have immediate relevance within the region and are engaging the publics of Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Cambodia, to name a few. If nurtured, these conversations over time might effect better practice, and contribute to better, more reliable international decision-making and preventative action.

The international community has been consumed by the pointy-intervention-end of R2P, especially in relation to the civil violence within Syria. This year the UNSC has tied itself in knots trying to come to terms with the application of R2P in the case of Syria. This is unlikely to change over the short-term, even if Australia wins a seat in this month's vote.

Yet, it is worth remembering that the principles of R2P have immediate relevance to all states, including within the Asia Pacific region—where the traditional notions of state sovereignty and

non-interference hold strong. R2P is complex and complicated. There is still some way to go to build understanding and consensus on how it should work, including through research agendas that reinforce early warning and preventative mechanisms.

While some UNSC campaign initiatives are criticised as distortions of the normal policy agenda, such criticisms are easily refuted when it comes to Australia's involvement in R2P. Just as Australia contributed to the founding and development of the United Nations, so too has Australia contributed to the development and acceptance of R2P. Former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans is recognised as a key architect of and authority on R2P, while Australian academics and practitioners have contributed much to the evolving scholarship and expertise in the field.

Australia's campaign for a seat on the UNSC presents an opportunity to bring public dialogue and involvement on R2P to the fore. This is a process that has a clear purpose: to build understanding and consensus on R2P from the bottom-up in ways that will impact local uptake and practice, and might over time influence and improve global uptake, decision-making and preventative action.

Though a 'slow-burn' initiative, it speaks to the type of facilitative leadership that Australia could bring to the UNSC table, whether that occurs after the 18 October vote or in years to come. This is an initiative with significant public diplomacy dimensions that gives me cause to be optimistic about the Australian campaign, and about the prospects for Australia's international policy agenda beyond the campaign.
