



Passing the Baton: Learning from the Experience of Brazil on the Security Council Meeting Note | May 2024

Introduction

On April 30, 2024, the International Peace Institute (IPI) held a closed-door roundtable to discuss Brazil's council term from 2022 to 2023 and the experiences of other elected members of the UN Security Council (E10). The roundtable brought together representatives from current, previous, and prospective E10 members to foster an exchange on lessons learned.

In recent years, the E10 have come to play a more prominent role, exerting increased influence in the Security Council's working methods, thematic issues, and some country files. The contributions of the E10 are particularly felt during times of constrained political space among the council's permanent members (P5). In such cases, the ability and willingness of the E10 to work together across areas in which they have common interests has helped to spur the council's work.

Because gains made by the E10 are often based on the efforts and innovations of individual member states, it is critical that lessons learned are shared with incoming and future elected members to maintain momentum. While some member states undertake internal reviews of their council terms, they are not usually shared externally, which prevents their experiences from benefiting future Security Council members.

To that end, during the roundtable, participants reflected on the experience of Brazil and of the E10 more broadly across three phases: (1) getting elected to the council, (2) serving on the council, and (3) transitioning off the council. This meeting note summarizes the main points raised in the discussion under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution and does not necessarily represent the views of all participants.

(1) Getting Elected to the Council

When campaigning for a seat on the Security Council, participants noted that even when running on a clean slate, it is still important to work towards getting a high number of votes to signal broad member state support and legitimacy for their council terms. As one participant stated, achieving support from two-thirds of the General Assembly is "not a small feat." The fact that E10 members are elected gives them legitimacy among their peers and thus members campaign to win votes regardless of whether they are running uncontested. One participant also noted that competition among member states within regional groups can be a positive thing, as it provides more options of which countries to elect, and because it promotes a more robust presentation of member state priorities.

Participants discussed the extent to which their countries' previous council terms affected their approach to campaigning and selecting priority topics. While some member states noted that they had carefully studied their country's previous council terms for lessons learned, there are limitations to what this analysis can provide. For example, in Brazil's case, more than a decade had passed since the last time they were on the Security Council, which meant that political dynamics both within and external to the council had evolved

significantly. In that respect, one expert noted that while preparing for their term on the council, they looked at the priorities of current E10 members to understand the most relevant issues.

(2) Serving on the Council

One major point of discussion was the development and pursuit of national priorities while serving on the Security Council. Brazil had seven priority areas for their council term, but many member states choose to have fewer. Because the workload while serving on the council has increased in recent years, it can be difficult to achieve priorities during a brief two years on the council. This is exacerbated for the E10, given that they do not come in with the same institutional memory as the P5 and because E10 are often tasked with chairing subsidiary bodies, which can be very time consuming.

Participants also reflected on the balance E10 members must strike between planning ahead to achieve priorities while responding to crises as they emerge. As one participant recommended, E10 members must “be flexible and adjust priorities” to respond to emerging situations. One piece of advice was to view priorities as a broader approach that can be implemented across a range of issues, including new crises that emerge. For example, Malta had previously identified children and armed conflict as a priority, which they implemented throughout much of their work on Gaza, rather than only dealing with children as a standalone issue.

While acknowledging that the work of the Security Council has become more constrained – in particular due to divisions among the P5 – participants identified the relative convergence of the E10 as a silver lining. While E10 unity is not always possible, and by design the composition of the E10 changes every year, participants acknowledged that when members can coalesce around a given issue, it can lead to results. For example, experts discussed how the E10 played a critical role in pushing for resolutions on the situation in Gaza.

Another area where the E10’s convergence has led to changes has been in seeking to make the working methods of the council more equitable and representative of the broader membership. For example, at the suggestion of Brazil in 2022, the informal working group on procedural methods now has a standing item on penholdership. As one expert noted, prior to this time penholdership was “whispered about but no one talked about it openly, so this was good for transparency.”

Participants also reflected on future opportunities for the E10, namely around advocating for a strengthened relationship between the council and the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC). Participants discussed that most member states seem to be in favor of strengthening coordination between the two bodies and that the E10 members have already taken up this issue. For example, coordination between the council and PBC was one of Brazil’s priorities during their term on the council. Similarly, Japan who is currently on the council, organized a signature event on this topic in 2023.

(3) Transitioning off the Council

A critical issue raised among participants was how outgoing council members can pass the baton on priority issues to incoming members. Experts highlighted the co-penholdership on the Syria humanitarian file as an example of what passing the baton looks like in practice. In 2021 and 2022, Ireland and Norway shared the pen, authoring the text for a resolution that would be adopted by the council following the end of their terms in January 2023. Brazil and Switzerland then took up the file and although their draft resolution was vetoed in July 2023, Switzerland has continued to hold the pen following Brazil’s departure from the council. In this regard, participants acknowledged that since it can be difficult to advance every priority in the brief two-year period, outgoing E10 members can benefit from working with likeminded incoming E10 members to continue pushing for progress.

Conclusion

There was consensus among participants that E10 members do not want to be “tourists or bystanders” during their term on the Security Council. Although the workload on E10 members is increasing, the spaces for elected members to operate is widening. It can be challenging to achieve E10 unity with ever-changing council dynamics and emerging crises. Nevertheless, when members unite around common interests, it can lead to action and a more effective council.