

“We contributed to the respect for international law and the peaceful resolution of international conflicts”

Ina Heusgen, Julian A. Hettihewa

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Last month, Germany’s two-year non-permanent membership in the Security Council of the United Nations ended (see [here](#) for Hannah Birkenkötter’s blog post). We seize this opportunity to reflect with Ina Heusgen, a member of Germany’s Security Council team in New York, on Germany’s tenure in these challenging times. Ms. Heusgen is Deputy Political Coordinator, Deputy Head of the Political Section, and Legal Adviser of the Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations.

See for the original German version of the interview [here](#).

Two years of Germany’s non-permanent membership in the Security Council are now over. Do you remember a particular special moment from the last two years that you can share here?

There are quite a few. “Crunch time” in international negotiations at this level is exciting, and being part of it and achieving results that we deem important is an experience you don’t forget. I remember moments when we stood firm and persistent to come to certain “language” and results. This was the case, for example, in a resolution in which we achieved a decision on the extent of access for humanitarian aid to Syria, on which hundreds of thousands of people depend. Or, for example, in a resolution with which the Council endorsed the results of the Berlin Conference on Libya, an important step towards the political process now ongoing, which will hopefully bring peace. We also struggled for months to find words to reach a common language of the Security Council to address the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The moment when the Ambassadors raise their arms for approval are full of relief and satisfaction.

I am also proud of the moments when Germany stood up emphatically in defence of international law and spoke plainly, even if this meant taking issue with partners, including friends. For instance, we have condemned the fundamental violations of human rights and international humanitarian law that Russia backs in Syria in every single meeting on the subject and have not once accepted it in silence. But we also, for example, criticized the former US administration when it advocated the violation of international law in the Middle East (I am referring to the recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights and the opening of embassies in Jerusalem).

I will always hold in good memory that Germany actively and concretely advocated compliance with the rules and values of the UN Charter in this world body. That may

sound self-evident, but it is not. One can put the breach of the foundations of our international order, which unfortunately has increasingly taken place in recent years, into general terms, or one can put the finger on the weak spot in a specific case. I will never forget that we did this, and I believe others will not either.

Such a short time in the Security Council certainly requires focused and structured planning. Not all issues can be dealt with. How did Germany prepare for Security Council membership in 2019/2020? Which core issues did Germany want to bring to the Security Council? Which goals were you able to achieve?

Preparations for Security Council membership begin well in advance. Germany applies for two-year membership every eight years. There are important issues which we always strived to advance in the Security Council during our tenure, such as the role and protection of women in conflicts (“Women, Peace and Security”), climate and security, etc. We took these priority issues to the Council. However, we also put the most pressing current topic of the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for peace and security on the Council’s agenda and achieved the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2532 during our presidency. The goal is not necessarily to achieve a concrete Council “product”, a resolution or presidential statement for example. Not in every case only achieving the adoption of a resolution is a success. On some issues, the mere fact that the body considers certain questions (this also has an impact!) is a successful step forward. For example, nine years ago during our Presidency in the Council, we already dealt with the impact of climate change on international peace and security and achieved a so-called Presidential Statement, which is a consensus document of the Security Council. Last year, when we dealt with the issue again, it was fairly clear in advance that there was no way to find consensus on a resolution text (which one finds out in informal discussions ahead of a negotiation). However, we were able to set up a Security Council expert group to discuss these questions. Soon, the UK will now put the issue back on the agenda. This is how this international organ works. It might take some time until consensus forms on how to take certain issues forward. Contributing to forming a position of the body, even over a longer time period, is the decisive task that countries can pursue successfully.

With 15 members in the Security Council, one can easily imagine that there are 15 different views on various issues as well. It becomes difficult, however, when Council members cannot even agree on the basic facts. The German Ambassador Christoph Heusgen, for example, once accused his Russian colleague of telling “[fairy tales](#)” on Ukraine and felt that he was in the “[wrong movie theatre](#)” after listening to Russia’s description of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). On what basis can one still speak and negotiate in the Security Council if there are such fundamental differences?

Differences in the Council on questions of peace and security cannot be prevented, they exist. From my point of view it would have been wrong not to clearly name the most blatant violations of international law and human rights to show unity or harmony in the Council. We cannot allow statements such as “parts of the Ukrainian population were violently repressed and wanted to join Russia” or “the people who rose up against the regime of Bashar al-Assad are terrorists; chemical weapons were used by them, not by the regime” to go unchallenged. One can discuss about everything. The greater the disagreement, the more intensive the discussion or negotiation.

Speaking of disagreement, two years ago the protest for climate justice led by young people reached its peak for the time being. Yet the third Youth, Peace and Security [Resolution 2535](#) of 2020 does not even mention the term ‘climate change’ once. Why does the Security Council avoid this? Should or could Germany have done more in this respect?

Last year, Russia, China and the USA in various forms strongly opposed the inclusion of language on climate change in Security Council products. We had prepared a draft resolution on climate and security which enjoyed strong support of ten Security Council members. However, Germany and the other Security Council members were not able to break their opposition; all three are veto powers. However, this “project”, which we shared with other Security Council members, is not lost, but can be picked up by others with the same goal when time is ripe.

Let us approach an issue that dominated last year: the COVID-19 pandemic. It has also changed the way the Security Council works. How did virtual meetings of the Council proceed compared to those in-person? In what way did consultations change? And to what extent has the pandemic had an influence on Germany’s programme in the Security Council?

It is true that because of the pandemic, the Security Council had to switch to virtual meetings, which after a while could even take place with translation into all UN languages. And yes, of course this has changed our work. There are no conversations in the margins of a meeting and informal exchanges as usual. The possibility for exchange has become more difficult overall. The format has also had an impact on the procedural rules because virtual meetings are not considered formal meetings. Nevertheless, practically all sessions could be held and there is no major impediment to programming. We have included addressing the impact of the pandemic on peace and security in our monthly programme and adopted Security Council resolution 2532 (2020) as I have mentioned.

When leaving the Security Council, German Ambassador Christoph Heusgen was criticised, quite harshly, by certain colleagues. Can one draw conclusions

about cooperation and the working atmosphere in the Security Council from this? How would you describe and explain this?

As I have said, differences of substance on important issues cannot be smoothed over. Because of considerable differences on some issues, the atmosphere in the Security Council was sometimes tense. But this is appropriate at times, because we are talking about the very serious impact of state action on human beings, as for example the provision of humanitarian aid to hundreds of thousands of people in Syria. At the same time, however, it should be said that in general we have an excellent, very professional and often cordial relationship among diplomats of all countries. Diplomacy is the art of working together and achieving agreements despite differences.

Taking a look into the future, [Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said](#): “We [...] seek to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council”. Have the last two years in the Security Council brought this goal within realistic reach?

The reform of the UN Security Council has been a project for a long time. Even though I believe that Germany as non-permanent member of the Council and given the role it plays on the international level shows qualification to be a possible permanent member, it seems to me that achieving this goal still depends on a number of other issues, such as the openness of the current permanent members to discuss a reform of the Council.

Last but not least, what advice would you give to a future German team preparing for Security Council membership?

Despite all its shortcomings, the Security Council is a unique body in which one struggles for peace and security with all important actors and regions on a daily basis. The results are sometimes not concrete or clear. One struggles to position a high-level body in which very different worldviews come together and sometimes clash. Sometimes you can only conclude that you are too far apart and that you need to continue to engage with each other in order to come closer on certain points if necessary. I would advise not to be discouraged if successes cannot always be achieved immediately or through a clear resolution, or if one sometimes is stuck at this level. Despite centrifugal forces that occurred as a result of globalization and that have been reflected in the Security Council over the last two years, we have made progress in multilateral cooperation in various areas or have maintained it.

