The United Nations is indispensable

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Germany has been a non-permanent member of the

UN

Security Council since

1 January 2011. What impact does that have on the Permanent

Mission, but also on your personal schedule?

Peter Wittig: Our day-to-day routine here in New York is clearly dominated by Germany’s membership of the Security Council, no doubt about it. Just take the frequency of meetings, for instance: almost every day there are Council meetings at ambassador level which last for several hours – some of them public, some behind closed doors. In addition, the experts in our Security Council team play an active role in countless coordination meetings of the Security Council’s many different bodies and organs – it’s their job to prepare the Council’s central decisions. And all this on top of the regular work the Mission has to do for the General Assembly, its major committees and the Economic and Social Council. All in all, the amount

of work we have to do here has increased hugely. So far we've been able to meet the challenge well, and to resolutely put forward our interests – not least thanks to our team's high level of motivation and willingness to work hard.

What subjects have been particularly to the fore in the last ten months or so?

We were all surprised by the developments in the Arab world. Who would have thought that for the first six months of our membership the Security Council would be looking mostly to North Africa and the Middle East? Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria – none of them "traditional" focuses for the Security Council. The Council faced a completely new challenge. It had to live up to its responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. It didn't always meet our expectations: in the case of Syria, for instance, a double veto meant that the Security Council wasn't able to send the necessary strong signal to the leadership in Damascus

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With regard to the emerging crises, Germany pursued a proactive, forward-looking foreign policy in New York. To give one example: in close coordination with our French and British partners, we pushed at a very early stage for the Security Council to concern itself with the crisis in Yemen. I certainly can't say we didn't meet with any resistance. But in the end we succeeded: a resolution was adopted unanimously and the subject was firmly fixed on the Council's agenda. True, this hasn't yet resolved the crisis. But at least with the first Security Council resolution on Yemen we made sure that the international community was speaking with one voice. Bearing in mind the divisions visible in the Council on Syria recently, this should not be underestimated. We played a substantial part in this success.

There was particular public interest in and discussion of

Germany

's abstention in the vote on Resolution 1973 on

Libya

. What other decisions, which perhaps didn't provoke such a great response from the public, have you found especially important?

The debate at home about our voting behaviour has overshadowed much of what

Germany

has achieved in the Security Council so far, including the whole complex issue of the Arab Spring.

Germany

played an active part in making it possible in the first place for the Council to deal with

Syria,

Yemen, but also

Libya.

Alongside this political and diplomatic crisis management, however, we have also been actively promoting our own main foreign-policy interests. Let me just give you two examples from the month in which we held the presidency of the Security Council.

Firstly, we successfully negotiated a resolution to improve protection for children in situations of armed conflict and got it adopted. As a result, targeted attacks on schools and hospitals are banned under international law and anyone carrying out such attacks has to reckon with punishment. We expect this to have a real deterrent effect on the ground, and in some conflict areas we are seeing that this is indeed the case.

Secondly, we have been able to bring the debate on the security implications of climate change a good way further and to anchor it in the United Nations. The presidential statement on this, which was eventually adopted unanimously after very tough negotiations, says for the first time that climate change is a potential threat to international peace and stability. This recognition by the Security Council has far-reaching significance. It means that the Secretary-General will have to take the climate change aspect into account in all his reports, which are especially important for crisis regions in particular. This is a remarkable milestone and also a success for German diplomacy and crisis prevention policy.

We have also helped bring progress with regard to policy on

Afghanistan. We managed to get the Al-Qaida and Taliban Sanctions Committee (which we chair) divided into two: one for the Taliban and one for Al-Qaida. This was an important and diplomatically a very sensitive project, with regard to both the fight against international terrorism and Afghan domestic policy. This division will enable us to effectively support the political process within

Afghanistan

and contribute to the hoped-for success of the Bonn Conference on 5 December.

Germany

’s election to the Security Council was a big foreign-policy success for the German Government, but also for the officials at the Federal Foreign Office. How do you explain to

people who don’t deal with the United Nations every day what’s so special about a seat on the Security Council?

Let me first say this: the Security Council is the central organ of all international efforts to counter war and crises. We want to shoulder responsibility in this body. The Security Council’s task is nothing less than the preservation of world peace. It deals with all the conflicts in the world – from

Afghanistan

to the

Congo

and

Somalia, from the

Middle East

to

Cyprus. In this context the Council can establish international law binding on all member states – this is what makes it unique. Plus, it is the only organ authorized to impose international coercive measures – be they civil or military – against certain players.

In Germany there is broad consensus that Germany’s foreign policy is basically a proactive policy for peace. This is in part down to our history, but it also serves our political, social and economic interests. That’s why we are committed to strengthening multilateral structures, in particular the United Nations. As the third-largest contributor we make a substantial financial contribution to this; we deploy major resources in all crisis regions; and we work substantively and reliably in all bodies. It is therefore natural that we should try to live up to our global responsibility. An active role in the Security Council not only forms part of this responsibility but also serves our own interests.

According to the Charter of the United Nations, the task of the Security Council is to maintain peace and security in the world.

But the Council is often criticized as being a “debating club” which avoids clearly-worded resolutions because it has to take account of the sensibilities of individual members, especially the five permanent members with their powers of veto. How do you counter this criticism?

The United Nations is neither a world government nor a world parliament. The United Nations is an institution set up by sovereign nation-states with the aim, among other things, of

maintaining peace in the world. That’s what it says in the Charter. But that must not blind us to the fact that the individual nation-states here do of course try to represent and push their own interests. That’s quite normal and legitimate – we do it too, by the way.

What’s special about the United Nations, however, is that there is a jointly agreed framework with agreed rules for negotiating and balancing individual interests – the overriding aim being the preservation of peace in the world.

And if sometimes we find the result unacceptable – for instance when

Russia

and

China

vetoed a resolution on

Syria

– then we have to recognize that there is no other legitimate international framework in which opposing interests like that can be negotiated. That’s what makes the United Nations so indispensable.

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