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In the national interest

There has never been a time when Australia had so much diplomatic clout. Not only do we sit on the 15-member Security Council of the United Nations, we also chair the G20, the most significant international forum of the global economy.

Years of patient work have led to these outcomes and, while we would have hoped it had not been this way, Australia has been able to use the influence of its position to make a concerted and effective response to the Malaysia Airline Flight MH17 disaster.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his foreign minister Julie Bishop deserve credit for the outstanding way they have responded on the humanitarian level and led international opinion in response to this monstrosity.

It is a tragedy for all those on board and their families, especially for the 37 Australians, their families, neighbours and all our fellow citizens.

Bishop used Australia's position on the UN Security Council to sponsor and secure unanimous support for an independent investigation into the crash, and co-operation to make it happen.

From the outset Abbott has been clear, determined and forceful in his public statements. He has been in touch with Russian President Vladimir Putin several times to secure promises of co-operation.

Because Abbott is chair of the G20, Putin has to take his calls and has to be seen to be co-operating.

Abbott and Bishop have been effective because they have focused on the legitimate interests of Australia — the fate of the victims and justice



Foreign minister Julie Bishop, speaking at the United Nations Security Council, has not tried to overreach. Picture: Getty

for the perpetrators. They have not tried to overreach. They have not sought to broaden their role to give commentary on, or engage in the claims of, the separatists or the conduct of war in the Ukraine.

That is the kind of thing that would have tempted a Kevin Rudd or a Bob Carr.

Australia's best interest at the moment is to separate the humanitarian issue from the political and work for co-operation from all parties.

Which is why Abbott was right to ignore those state premiers and media commentators who called for Putin to be excluded from the G20

summit to be held in Brisbane in November.

The priority is to get on with the search of the crash site and get assistance to do that. Time is running against an effective search. When the window of opportunity closes and there is no more that can be done in that regard, there will still be plenty of time to respond to any party that has sought to frustrate the search or failed to properly co-operate.

Let us hope this has all been resolved by November, with full Russian co-operation. If not we can deal with it then.

The G20 doesn't have a constitution or charter like the

UN. It is a group that began as an economic forum for finance ministers and central bankers in the wake of the Asian financial crisis.

Its first official meeting, once the membership was settled, was in Berlin in 1999.

Since then it has grown to include a leader's meeting, business meeting, trade meeting, and a host of other events.

The nations that are members of the G20 were chosen because they are economically significant — not because they are models of democracy, or law and order, or human rights.

Many countries have tried to get into the G20. None has

ever left. No country has ever been thrown out.

Outside groups, and some members, have sought to take the G20 in different directions.

Environmental activists wanted it involved in climate change. But the UN already sponsors climate summits.

Aid activists sought to focus the G20 on poverty and development. But the World Bank is the body uniquely focused on development issues.

There is no point having each international association deal with each international issue — that would result in endless repetition.

The membership of each of

these bodies varies according to the task it is designed for.

The G20 is a body formed to promote financial stability and global economic growth.

If there is an international effort to solve the war in the Ukraine these would not be the countries invited to the table.

And others not in the G20 would have to be invited — not the least of which is Ukraine.

We should be realistic about why leaders are coming to Brisbane in November and what can be achieved there.

Peace in the Ukraine is not something that will be brokered through the G20.

But there are no hard and fast rules about what can and cannot be discussed when leaders meet together.

The last time Putin was in Australia it was for the APEC leaders meeting of 2007. I was in those discussions. They roamed wider than the narrow focus of the Asia-Pacific.

To have key players in our country and to be able to raise issues of importance does give our government more than the usual influence.

As chair of the G20 this year, our voice will carry more than usual weight. And it can be used to further international objectives that are, and are seen to be, matters of our genuine national interest.

In the present case that includes comforting those Australians who have lost loved ones by securing the return of their remains. In due course it will mean bringing the perpetrators to justice.

If we want to do that, the government must use its influence carefully. It must focus on our national interest and not be distracted by the agenda of others. Which is just as it has been doing, wisely and well.

Peter Costello is a former federal treasurer.