

# Security Council Reform Debate Highlights Challenges Facing UN

By Ian Williams | August 10, 2005

Within a day of arriving at the United Nations John Bolton, the former lobbyist for Taiwan and advocate for one permanent seat on the Security Council, the United States, had cut a deal with the Chinese representative. China wants to stop an additional permanent Security Council seat for Japan. The United States had promised Japan its support in return for its loyalty over Iraq, but hated Germany more than it loves Japan. So the two agreed to thwart the attempt by the G-4 (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan), to secure permanent seats during the current reform proposals.

Initially, they wanted to ensure that the G-4 Proposal for six new permanent seats, (including two for Africa) and four new temporary seats, is thwarted in the General Assembly, but neither are very likely to let a majority against them in the Assembly dissuade them from exercising their veto against Charter changes.

Sadly, despite the cynicism of their motives, the end result will probably be better for the UN and World. Although the United States may be vindictive in its motivation toward Germany and other nay-sayers to the Iraqi invasion, it has been consistent and correct in saying that all the proposals currently under discussion result in far too large a Security Council to be effective.

One hopes it will be a lesson to would-be permanent members that kow-towing to Washington does them no good at all. It is also true that the issue of who is on the Council has diverted attention from the much more important question of what it actually does.

## Twisted Priorities of Reform

For every diplomat, the only thing better than being a permanent representative to the UN Security Council is being a permanent representative for a permanent member. This obsessive ambition threatens the much more

important UN reforms that Annan has proposed, such as a hard-hitting Human Rights Council, a clear definition of terrorism, clear guidelines for humanitarian intervention, and of course, addressing the whole range of development issues from AIDS to poverty. In the nature of nationalism, it is just possible that there are hungry peasants in Africa, Brazil, or India who are more concerned about whether their countries have a permanent seat in the UN Security Council than they are about a reasonably secure meal. But one still has to question the priorities.

As befits an organization whose Charter was mostly drafted by Americans, the UN reflects a compromise between the promise of principles and the reality of power. In the General Assembly, Nauru, with fewer people than a Manhattan block, has the same vote as China or India. But having made that concession to notional national equality, the Security Council held the power, and its permanent membership was determined by those holding military and political power at the end of World War II.

So since 1945, five countries—Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States—have had a veto and a guaranteed place on the Security Council. The other members are elected on non-renewable two year terms. Back



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in 1945, even France and China were only added as a courtesy, and a war-bankrupted Britain was already looking a little pretentious as a permanent member. For fairly obvious reasons, Japan and Germany were not in the running for seats back in 1945—indeed, clause 109 of the Charter still basically says that it's okay for anyone else to restart the Second World War on them.

To add to the anomalies, for a quarter of a century China was represented by the defeated nationalist government on Taiwan.

For some time after Beijing took the seat there was a pragmatic justification for the P-5 (shorthand for the five permanent members of the Security Council). They were all substantial military powers, and all had nuclear weapons. It is difficult to enforce a UN decision against an uncooperative nuclear power.

But since then, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea have blasted their way into the nuclear club, and no one wanted to give an incentive to Iran to be on the Council!

### Imbalances in Representation

According to the UN Charter, the Council is the only body that can authorize military activities by member states, although like most commandments, this one is honored more in the breach than in the observance. The Charter also says that any one of those five can veto any changes to the Charter, such as any attempt to remove their veto, or add more members to the Council.

Now, however, Japan pays almost as much in dues to the UN as the United States—and what's more, pays it on time and without some Japanese version of Henry Hyde in the Diet threatening to cut funding if the UN does not do what it is told. Germany also pays more

than Britain, France, Russia, or China, which is, incidentally, getting a free ride based on its economy over a decade ago, not its current boom times.

The problem is that the Council is already top heavy toward the industrialized world and adding these two would make it even more so, unleashing a flood of me-tooism from India, Brazil, and other developing nations.

To complicate matters even further, if you add more permanent members, then you have to add more elected members, and it begins to look less like an executive committee and more like a mass meeting. Current proposals take its membership up to 25. For those who step back and consider how long it took the Council to act on Sudan, let alone Rwanda or Bosnia, this is not a happy prospect.

### Reconfiguring the Security Council

Kofi Annan originally proposed two alternatives: "Plan A" was for six new permanent members, including two from Africa, but with no vetoes. Everybody, except those who thought they would be one of the six, agreed that adding six new vetoes into a frequently gridlocked body was hardly the way to make it efficient, even if it allowed the six lucky ones to parade their enhanced membership. This plan would also add three new temporary seats for the South.

"Plan B" called for eight new "semi-permanent" seats which would be re-electable and sit for four years, and one new temporary seat.

In the end, the G-4—Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan—put forward a version of Plan A which would call for reconsideration of the veto powers in fifteen years' time. The Africans have muddied their waters by putting up a counter resolution which called for the new

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members to have veto powers, and added yet another temporary member to bring the Council up to 25.

What complicates things even more is that there is no consensus on who would occupy the African seats. In the earlier versions, there would only have been one, and it was the Arab League representative on the committee, who happens to be the former Egyptian foreign minister, who fought for two.

If there is only one African permanent seat, then Egypt had the chances of a snowflake in the Sahara of getting it. If there are two, then a promise of Arab and Muslim support for the African proposal could get it, leaving Nigeria and South Africa to fight it out for the second seat.

There is a problem here of course. The Europeans and others can accept a grandfathered China, but would not be happy to see a dubiously elected Hosni Mubarak in a permanent seat, let alone with a veto.

### Uniting for Consensus Proposal

Then there are the regional rivals. Understandably, Argentina and Mexico are not sure how a permanent Brazil would represent Latin America; Spain and Italy look askance at Germany, and Pakistan and Indonesia fail to see how a permanent India represents them. These joined with Canada and others put forward a “Uniting for Consensus” proposal. While proposing no new additional permanent members, in order to get sufficient support from the General Assembly delegates it would also add ten temporary members, who would genuinely represent their regions, and be renewable.

The Canadians, who have always supported the United Nations and want to see it work are

more concerned about the Council’s functions, and agree with the Americans that current proposals make the Council too large and unwieldy. They also make the entirely reasonable point that permanent membership is itself an unfair anomaly, and even if we can’t do anything about it, then extending it to six more states is still unfair to the other 180 or so lesser members. Canada is supporting the uniting for consensus proposal in a tactical way, although even they think it would still make the Council far too big.

One of the problems with the existing Council is that there are very rarely elections for the temporary seats anyway. Many of the regions, such as Africa, have a long term agreed rota system which puts up members who can be weak, pliable, law-breakers and recidivist human rights violators, for example Morocco, still occupying Western Sahara despite decades of resolutions, or Rwanda which held a seat during the genocide there. The current African proposal almost certainly promises more of the same.

It would really be better for the G-4 aspirants to use their prestige to revive the General Assembly and make it a much more relevant body. For example at the height of the Korean War, the United States secured a “Uniting for Peace” procedure that allowed the General Assembly to bypass the Security Council when a veto led to deadlock. Then it was the Russians, but now it is the United States, and occasionally the Chinese, who use or threaten a veto. Most members are, frankly, too chicken to reaffirm the procedure.

The idea of re-electable terms is good, because then Germany, Japan, India, Brazil, and whoever would have to report back on their behavior in the Council to justify their reelection. In fact, even paying careful

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attention to the quality of candidates for the existing Council would do far more to reform it than any of the discordant musical chairs moves now proposed. It was not France, Russia, or China which blocked approval of the invasion of Iraq. If the Bush administration had had the diplomatic sense to pledge that they could keep their oil contracts, it would have had far fewer problems with them. In fact, it was the smaller and more principled states, such as Ireland, Mexico, and Chile, which stood up for principle under heavy pressure.

None of them is under proposal for a new permanent seat, but more members like them would make formal reforms much less necessary. As they say, it is not the size, it is what you do with it that makes the difference. Bolton may have inadvertently done everyone a favor after all.

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*(Ian Williams contributes frequently to Foreign Policy In Focus (online at [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)) on UN and international affairs.)*

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, formerly Interhemispheric Resource Center, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2005. All rights reserved.

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### Recommended citation:

Ian Williams, “Security Council Reform Debate Highlights Challenges Facing UN,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, August 10, 2005).

### Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/230>

### Production Information:

Writer: Ian Williams  
Editor: John Gershman, IRC  
Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

