

Will New Non-Permanent Members Bring Change to the UN Security Council?

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(UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe)

On October 18, 2012, the United Nations (UN) Security Council will elect five new non-permanent members — one from Africa, one from the Asia-Pacific, one from Latin America and the Caribbean, and two from the Western Europe and Others category. To learn more about this occasion, we speak to Paul Heinbecker, CIGI distinguished fellow, Canada's former ambassador, permanent representative of Canada to the UN and author of Getting Back in the Game: A Foreign Policy Playbook for Canada.

CIGI: What will new non-permanent members add to the Security Council?

Paul Heinbecker: That depends on the issues on the Security Council agenda. Regarding the crisis in Syria, for example, a change in non-permanent members is not decisively important because the Council's permanent members with vetoes are divided and are blocking progress. Overall, nevertheless, it looks as though there will be an upgrade in terms of the capabilities of countries that get seats. South Korea, which we can hope but not presume to win a non-permanent Security Council seat is the Asian country whose values are most akin to our own — probably more so than Japan, China and some of the other Asians as well. With South Korea you can expect a strong defence of human rights and a strong interest in human security. Both Australia and Finland are pretty capable countries with diplomatic strengths and

values similar to our own that have contributed quite a bit to peacekeeping and, in Australia's case to coalitions of the willing. You can't say that they add up to more capacity on the Security Council than (outgoing) Germany but they are each probably more capable than Portugal. Rwanda, based on its own history with regard to outside intervention, is probably the African country that would most be willing to entertain outside intervention in Syria. Argentina is not all that constructive and capable a player — it's run by a government that is bit *sui generis*. Of interest in this election are the departures of India, especially, and Germany, both of whom have been reluctant to support humanitarian intervention, first, in Libya, and now in Syria. Australia and Finland are likely to be more amenable to talk about intervention in Syria than for example Germany is. And South Korea is much more willing to countenance support for an intervention than India would be, I would think.

The new non-permanent members will come to the Council with regional priorities. For example, the issue for South Korea is always North Korea, and perhaps Japan and China as secondary interests. But South Korea might come to the conclusion that the situation in North Korea is not ripe for Security Council interest, in which case they won't push very hard to do anything about it.

CIGI: The election of non-permanent members, based on regional configurations, has been criticized as outdated and unbalanced. What are your thoughts on this? And is it time, as some member states have argued, to enlarge the Security Council?

Heinbecker: Regional configuration is not the principal problem — it's the permanent member states that hold vetoes. There is a disposition around the UN to hope that countries with vetoes won't exercise them on issues of major humanitarian crises, like Syria. But there's no evidence on the part of the veto holders that they would actually fulfill this wish. France is the most circumspect about using vetoes; all the other members have been prepared to use them when they see it as being in their interest to do so — and not necessarily just their direct interest. The United States is the biggest veto user and about half of those vetoes have been used to protect Israel from censure.

The criticism on the reform issue comes principally from those countries that have become major international players (India, Brazil, Japan and Germany), but that for historical reasons are not permanent members of the Security Council. This problem does not originate with regional voting systems; it's a problem of the permanent seat configuration and the impossibility of changing it without the approval of the existing veto holders. Crosscutting groups such as the Group of 77 (G77) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and, to some extent, the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization — affect the functioning of the Security Council. The reason the NAM and G77, cold war relics, are still functioning is because small countries, otherwise largely powerless, believe they can enhance their influence by uniting. They can dictate the outcome of voting on the basis of sheer numbers. This unity and solidarity among smaller states can produce bizarre voting; small states in the Pacific who regard climate change as crucial end up voting with Saudi Arabia, which holds diametrically opposing

views. I would like to see more emphasis in the United Nations on regional approaches to issues. It would be better if we were getting, for example, action on issues of regional importance rather than one that is crosscutting.

As for enlargement of the Security Council, adding permanent seats with vetoes is a sure way to make the enterprise seize up and not function. If you want accountability in the Security Council, then you need non-permanent members. I talk about this in my book, *Getting Back in the Game: A Foreign Policy Playbook for Canada*, which reflects a Canadian view on international affairs. To account for the fact that some countries are vastly different in geopolitical and economic terms, you could create perhaps five non-permanent seats, each with five-year terms. This would yield a Council makeup that is more reflective of power in the modern age. Countries could then be re-elected if the membership wanted them to remain on the Security Council.

CIGI: Given that in some cases attaining a seat on the Security Council requires a financially significant and lengthy campaign, is membership on the Council still worthwhile?

Heinbecker: While power resides with its member states, especially the United States, which remains in a class by itself militarily (but ever less so economically), the United Nations Charter provides the rule book for international relations. Every country, pretty much, sees it as in its interest to abide by the rules laid out in the UN Charter, which with the approximately 500 treaties negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations constitutes the central operating system of global governance. Virtually every country thinks it is in its interest to be on the Security Council — except for perhaps Canada. The fundamental issue is, however, their ability to contribute to international peace and security. That is why it doesn't make much sense for countries like Luxembourg or the Seychelles to campaign for a seat on the Council — they lack the capacity to fulfill the obligations they undertake.

CIGI: Is there a tendency for countries that don't acquire a Security Council seat to back away from future opportunities?

Heinbecker: No. Australia, which lost to Portugal in 1996, is running this year. Italy lost an election but ran again two years later and won. This is a fundamental point: it is in the interest of countries to be on the Security Council, even for a two-year term. Germany, India, Japan, Brazil, South Africa and maybe Nigeria all want permanent seats. They all see Council membership as a manifestation of their own significance, and they all know they can look after their own interests better on the Security Council than off. They run for non-permanent seats at every opportunity. Picking up your marbles and leaving when you lose an election, especially because your policies find little international support, is not very productive.

CIGI: In Canada's case, it was suggested that we did not gain a seat on the Security Council because of the government's vocal position on human security issues in Africa, Sri Lanka and Iran. Is there validity to this argument? What about the contention that the UN is dominated by thugs and tyrants?

Heinbecker: Canada didn't get elected last time for a number of reasons. First, it was because of a Canadian policy on Israel and Palestine that most of the rest of the world thinks is one-sided, unfair and unhelpful. Probably all 57 Arab countries voted against Canada; if you take into account the Islamic countries, our vehemently pro-Israel policy probably cost over 70 votes (out of 193). Further, Canada was perceived as having walked away from its climate change responsibilities, downgraded its aid program for Africa and mishandled its relationships with countries like Mexico, China and the United Arab Emirates, as well as a number of others. Canada effectively alienated more countries than it attracted.

Regarding thugs and tyrants, the American, non-partisan, non-governmental organization Freedom House, which has been measuring the progress of democracy and freedoms around the world since 1945, has shown that over time there has been significant growth in the representation of both democracy and freedom at the UN. A majority of UN member governments are parliamentary democracies now, and only a small minority of the UN's near 200 country membership, about 40 countries, are considered not free. It is inaccurate to characterize the organization as one of thugs and tyrants. It is worth noting that even many of the democracies did not vote for Canada in the last Security Council election.