

About the UN

The Security Council

This fall, elections were held in the UN General Assembly to fill five of the ten temporary seats on the UN Security Council. New members are chosen by regional groups and confirmed by a two-thirds vote of the UN General Assembly for two-year terms, which may not be served consecutively.

On October 16, 2006, Belgium, Indonesia, Italy, and South Africa were elected. The fifth seat was filled on November 7, 2006, by Panama, a consensus candidate that emerged after 47 deadlocked ballots between Guatemala and Venezuela. The other temporary members completing the second year of their terms in 2007 are the Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Peru, Qatar, and Slovakia.

History and Relevance

On October 24, 1945, the victors of World War II – China, the U.S.S.R., France, the United Kingdom, and the United States – ratified the UN Charter, creating the Security Council and establishing themselves as its five permanent members with the unique ability to veto resolutions. Originally there were six temporary members, rotating every two years and distributed on an equitable geographic basis. That rule was more explicitly defined in 1965, when the number of temporary members was increased to ten (five from Africa and Asia, one from Eastern Europe, two from Latin America and the Caribbean, and two from Western Europe). The first temporary members were Australia, Brazil, Egypt, Mexico, the Netherlands, and Poland.

The Charter also established the purpose of the Council, to “investigate any dispute, or any situation which might lead to international friction or give rise to a dispute, in order to determine whether the continuance of the dispute or situation is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security” and to act accordingly, by:

- Investigating any situation threatening international peace;
- Recommending procedures for peaceful resolution of a dispute;
- Calling upon other member nations to completely or partially interrupt economic relations as well as sea, air, postal, and radio communications, or to sever diplomatic relations; and
- Enforcing its decisions militarily, if necessary.

On January 17, 1946, the Security Council met for the first time in London. The first UN peacekeeping mission was deployed in 1948 to the Middle East; there have been 60 more. Over the last 60 years, the Security Council has taken action to defuse innumerable international crises, the most recent of which include those in North Korea, Iran, and Lebanon.

Membership Reform

There have been frequent calls to reform the membership of the UN Security Council, most of which include accepting Japan, Germany, India, and Brazil (known as the G4) as permanent members. Japan and Germany are the second and third largest contributors to the UN budget respectively. India is a nuclear power, the world’s largest democracy, and the second most populous nation. Brazil is the largest, most populous, and most prosperous nation in Latin America. The United Kingdom, France, and Russia are said to support permanent G4 membership on the Security Council. The Bush Administration has said that it supports Japan’s bid.

In addition to the proposal to make the G4 permanent members of the Security Council, there have been several other proposals floated by various groups and individual countries, none of which have met with positive response from the Security Council.