

Security Council set for boost

By Harvey Morris in New York
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A group of powerful and increasingly influential states is poised to join the UN Security Council in elections this week, promising to alter the dynamics of the body's decision-making.

In the contest for five of the 10 regionally based rotating seats, India and South Africa are standing unopposed, while the General Assembly will determine on Tuesday which two of Germany, Canada and Portugal will join the 15-member council on January 1. Colombia is assured the remaining seat as representative of Latin American and Caribbean nations.

The newcomers will join Brazil and Nigeria, emerging regional powers that have already served the first 12 months of their non-renewable two-year terms.

"It's a bit unusual to have so many heavy hitters who in the past have positioned themselves for permanent seats," said Carne Ross, a former British diplomat who heads the New York-based Independent Diplomat consultancy. "It will be interesting to see if you have serious countries ready to stand up to the big boys by forming alliances."

The "big boys" are the five permanent members of the council – the US, Russia, China, UK and France – whose individual veto can overturn any resolution.

It is virtually impossible for the 10 non-permanent members of the council to stall measures on which all of the big five agree. They require seven votes in order to block a resolution.

However, as Brazil and Turkey illustrated by their opposition to a fourth round of UN sanctions against Iran this year, the emerging powers are now less disposed to accept the reality of "big power" rule without a struggle.

The new council will include up to half the Group of 20, an institution that has come to overshadow the UN as a forum for international decision-making on economic issues.

It will include all the Brics – the alliance of emerging powers Brazil, Russia, India and China – and as many as three of the Group of Four that have pledged to support each other's bids for a permanent seat on the Security Council. The G4 groups Brazil, Germany, India and Japan, which completes its own two-year UN term on December 31.

"It will be a very particular Security Council with lots of big countries," said a diplomat from one of the permanent powers. "It may prove less amenable than the previous one."

Some analysts are sceptical about whether even such a membership will revive a council that has been marginalised in its role of supreme arbiter on international peace and security. It is now often perceived as little more than a rubber stamp for decisions taken by the big powers.

Two-thirds of the council's time is spent on Africa, a continent whose crises are seen as important in their own right but viewed as marginal to global issues dealt with in forums such as the G20.

"The Security Council still matters, which is why states want to be on it," said Thomas Weiss, professor of international studies at New York's City University. "But the UN's entire existence is about procedure rather than results."