



What's in a Name?

A Proposal for a Change in Membership Terminology for the Security Council

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The UN Charter establishes two categories of Security Council members: "Permanent Members" and "Non-Permanent Members". The Permanent Members are five in number and serve continuously. They gave themselves this special status when they wrote the Charter in 1945. They also gave themselves the privilege of the veto. The Non-Permanent Members are the ten others, who serve two-year non-renewable terms, upon election by the General Assembly.

It's time for people to stop using this awkward and outdated Charter terminology. "Permanent Member" wrongly implies a status and power that will last forever. It is a deeply conservative, mesmerizing use of language. People say knowingly: "You see, there can never be any change at the UN, the Permanent Members will not allow it." They forget that there is nothing permanent under the sun, including permanent members.

When Britain and France first gained their "permanent" status in 1945, the governments in London and Paris ruled over world wide empires with hundreds of millions of people. It used to be said that "The sun never sets over the British Empire" and that France had a "civilizing mission" in the world. Now those empires are long gone and their "great power" status is no more. Britain is even ceding most of its powers over Scotland to a separate Scottish parliament. Clearly there is nothing permanent here.

China is also a case study of impermanence. In 1949, in the frenzy of Cold War and revolution, the Beijing government lost its Security Council seat (and its seat in the UN). For twenty-two years, the government of Taiwan (a small island off the China coast) held the seat. Then, in 1971, Beijing got the seat back again. This bizarre episode did serious damage to the credibility of "permanence".

The most recent drama of impermanence played at the UN in 1991. In December of that year, the once mighty Soviet Union dissolved and its Security Council seat passed to a new (considerably smaller) nation: Russia. This change, without even a formal vote, came as a slight-of-hand of international diplomacy. Today's Russia is not a superpower, militarily or economically. Its economy is in dire straits and its huge military apparatus is in a state of collapse. Breakaway movements like Chechnya gnaw at its territory. Mafyosi terrorize its capital. This, too, is impermanence in the extreme.

Even the United States is caught in the flux of power. Though its military might is even more preeminent than at the UN's founding in 1945, it is now a debtor rather than a creditor nation -- its once-peerless economy now challenged by many fierce competitors. If the twentieth century was the "American Century," who doubts that other nations (or supra-national federations) will cast a longer shadow before the twenty-first century has run its course?

The world is not a place of permanence. Nor is the UN. So the ludicrous term "permanent member" has to go.

"Non-Permanent Member" is equally bad. It is purely negative, defining the rotating members solely in terms of power and status they do not have. And again, reinforcing the false concept of permanence.

What terms, then, should we use as a substitute? The best approach would spotlight the most important distinction between the two types of members -- that one group is elected (a positive characteristic) and the other un-elected (negative).

So why not call the rotating members "Elected Members?" Some delegates, in fact, are beginning to do just this. In recent meetings at the UN, the ambassadors of Italy and New Zealand (among others) have been heard using this term. The NGO community, correspondents and other delegations should get on board and use the term, too. In a few months, everyone may be using it!

What, then, to call the continuously-serving/veto-wielding members? "Self-appointed members" might do. The term would be appropriate and perfectly accurate, but it's a bit too harsh for a diplomatic institution like the UN. Another approach would be to call them "non-elected members." The term has a nice neutral ring. It uses and mocks a UN tradition of negative terms (like "non-governmental organization"). So if "elected members" catches on, why not "non-elected too?"

From now on, let's use: **Elected Members** and **Non-Elected Members**. The P-5 can stick to their comforting old terminology. But it's time we use terms that

are better suited for promoting change. Maybe then one day we'll wake up and say: "Why do we put up with non-elected members?" And: "When are those non-elected members going to stand for election like everyone else!"

[A famous poem about the impermanence of power](#)