

United Nations Security Council Reform: Is India Really Interested?

Pratip Chattopadhyay & Amulya K Tripathy

Abstract

India's diplomacy is soaked in the philosophy of Kautilya, Gandhi and Nehru, who spoke about concentric circle of friendship, nonviolent satyagraha and nonalignment respectively. The present genre of Indian diplomat seems to be following something else rather than these theoretically and practically tested paths and give it the name of 'New Delhi consensus' which is nothing but a balancing act between important powers of the world. In that context, the present article tries to take up United Nations Security Council (UNSC) reform and India's bid for a permanent membership in it in order to argue that present Indian diplomacy seems to be contended with 'would be' rather than 'be' a permanent member which requires altruism in diplomacy that can cost economically but politically and morally be very fruitful.

Keywords: India, Diplomacy, UNSC, Reform, Economics

Introduction

With India getting elected overwhelmingly as a non-permanent member of United Nations Security Council for a two year term in June 2020, jubilation seems to have been spread across the Indian diplomatic circle cleverly subduing the fact that there was no other candidate from the Asia-Pacific region as both China and Pakistan endorsed India's candidature in 2019. In the context of this jubilation on a feat that India achieved seven times in the past and this time it shares the non-permanent membership with Estonia, Niger, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Tunisia and Vietnam, none comparable to the stature of India. This article therefore raises a pertinent question – is India really interested to reform UNSC and breakthrough with a permanent membership or is it happy with non-permanent memberships status as and when it comes. In order to analyse the issue the article is divided into three sections - a history of India's engagement with UN, an analysis

of India's approach to UNSC permanent membership, an assessment of India's present leadership about real intent to get UNSC permanent member status. The article concludes by arguing that India must create a conclave of those from developing countries who are awaiting permanent membership status for long and bargain with P-5 countries geopolitically and geo-economically to make a final call for UNSC reform.

Section I

Through the 1990s, as the UNSC continued to authorize the use of force in domestic conflicts across the globe, India turned into something of a conscientious objector within the UN with regard to military and humanitarian interventions. This stance was especially familiar to international negotiators involved with nuclear proliferation and testing. India had long remained an obstinate holdout when it came to the NPT and remained so when the treaty was extended indefinitely in 1995. In addition, India frustrated its great-power interlocutors and also some other states the following year by opposing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in the UN General Assembly. Increasingly, India began voicing a demand for greater representation in international organizations based on its national capabilities and contributions to the multilateral system over the decades. At the UNSC, this meant an expansion of the permanent membership to include India. After losing the election to Japan in 1996, India eschewed non-permanent membership for a decade and a half, preferring to campaign for a permanent seat instead. During this period, and in particular in the run-up to the 2005 UN summit, India, with Brazil, Germany, and Japan, each a candidate for a permanent seat on the council, lobbied strongly for council reform. Compared to its last tenure, India returned to the UNSC a far more self-assured interlocutor in 2011, which rapidly turned into an exceptionally challenging and active year for the UNSC. In addition to managing long running conflicts, the council was faced with new crises in Côte d'Ivoire, Libya, and Syria. Libya and Syria, however, posed challenges for council cohesion, creating deep divisions within the P-5 as well as between the Brazil-Russia-India-China (BRIC) grouping and the Western powers. India— along with Brazil, China, Germany, and Russia— abstained on a resolution authorizing multilateral military intervention in Libya. India's argument came down to the need for a “calibrated and gradual approach” that respected the sovereignty of the states in question, but it did little to elucidate the details of such an approach. With India perhaps the strongest candidate

United Nations Security Council Reform: Is India Really Interested?

among the four countries seeking a permanent seat through council reform, New Delhi was reminded that, ultimately, the composition of the council is controlled by the P-5, any of whose members can veto a proposal. Indeed, more than a subliminal message along these lines was reflected in strong comments made by the U.S. permanent representative Susan Rice over Washington's disappointment with India's stance on Libya and early position on Syria in light of the aspirations of several emerging powers to a permanent seat. In effect, India was reminded that the deck remains heavily stacked in favor of the P-5 in the UN Charter's system of checks and balances, which today appears woefully outdated in some of its specifics but cannot be amended without unanimous consent of the P-5. (Malone and Mukherjee, 2013)

India has served in the UN Security Council as non-permanent members seven times (1950-51, 1967-68, 1972-73, 1977-78, 1984-85, 1991-92 and 2011-12). During its last term (2011- 12) on the UN Security Council, India chaired the UNSC 1373 Committee concerning Counter-Terrorism, the 1566 Working Group concerning threat to international peace and security by terrorist acts and the Security Council 751/1907 Committee concerning Somalia and Eritrea. India played an active role in discussions on all issues related to international peace and security, including several new challenges which the Security Council was called upon to deal with in Afghanistan, Cote d'Ivoire, Iraq, Libya, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen. In view of the serious threat posed to international maritime trade and security by piracy off the coast of Somalia, India promoted concerted international cooperation against the pirates. At India's initiative, the Security Council mandated international cooperation for release of hostages taken by pirates as well as for prosecution of those taking hostages and those aiding and abetting the acts of hostage-taking. In its participation in the decision making process at the Security Council, India underscored its commitment to promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts by diplomatic means, including by supporting regional efforts. India also worked for enhancing international cooperation in the areas of counter-terrorism, prevention of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to non-state actors, and the strengthening of UN peacekeeping and peace-building efforts. India is eminently suited for permanent membership of the UN Security Council by any objective criteria, such as population, territorial size, GDP, economic potential, civilizational legacy, cultural diversity, political system and past and ongoing contributions to the activities of the UN—especially to UN peacekeeping operations.

Section II

In the Indian eyes, “no reform of the United Nations (UN) is complete without the composition of the Security Council changing to reflect contemporary realities of the twenty-first century. This requires expansion in the membership of the Security Council in both the permanent and non - permanent categories.” This Indian quest for permanent membership to the Security Council, what India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh once rightly described as “an essay in persuasion” lies at the heart of repeated Indian pleas for reforming the UN, the only existing universal organisation of global governance. (Nafey 2005) The United Nations Security Council has emerged as the key arena and barometer for evaluating the promise and progress of accommodating new, rising powers in the international system. The case of India provides one of the best examples of a rising power coming to terms with its increased power, role and expectations of itself and of other powers, great and small, in negotiating its place in the reformed Council as a permanent member. The typical Indian preference in the UNSC has always been to be a part of the democratic majority contributing to the adoption of broadly acceptable resolutions and decisions. Significantly, on not more than a dozen times did India stand aside without joining the concurrent majority, and has not voted against any resolution, and resorted to abstentions only to express its reservations. Remarkably, India was never a loner in abstaining as it always had the company of other Council members on many occasions. The Indian behaviour herein clearly points to a systematic effort to display a constructive, rule of law abiding and a democratic majority building state in a global, multilateral setting like the Security Council. India’s rising economic stature globally has added to Indian claims as well. India is now the fastest-growing major economy in the world, and Asia’s third largest. India’s real GDP growth, as its 2017 Economic Survey predicts, will remain between 6.75 percent and 7.5 despite international upheavals like growing oil prices, Brexit, growing protectionism and trade-related tensions between major economies. India’s leading position in software and its IT-enabled services making it a global technology giant add to its increasing economic and trade footprint across the world. India is now counted amongst the most influential players in economic organisations like the WTO, BRICS and the G20. India’s newly acquired status as a Nuclear Weapons State (NWS) in May 1998 also makes it a natural claimant as a permanent member similar to the existing permanent members. Though India has not been accorded a *de jure* recognition of this by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968, India now stands recognised as a

United Nations Security Council Reform: Is India Really Interested?

de facto NWS due to the nuclear deal signed by India and the United States in 2005 and the Nuclear Suppliers Group waiver in 2008 to nuclear transfers for India despite not being a NPT signatory.

On the negative side, it is argued by critics that India has still not signed the NPT, had rejected the CTBT in 1996 and in fact, was the target of unanimous Security Council Resolution 1172 after it conducted nuclear tests in 1998. But India's nuclear diplomacy after the May 1998 tests successfully turned India from a pariah state to being increasingly a part of the non-proliferation regime. India has adopted a multi-layered strategy to assume the highly coveted permanent seat in the Security Council. Explicit public declarations supporting India's candidature as a permanent member in the Council are now also embodied in bilateral Joint Statements/Declarations since last few years by most of the P5, including China. Parallel to courting big and small powers in a bilateral framework, India has also formed the G4 comprising Brazil, Germany, Japan and itself, its "coalition of the willing", and a "collaborative strategy" to negotiate reforms of the Council. After initial euphoria on its creation in 2004 when its first summit-level meeting was held, Indian interest ebbed as its campaign to secure a seat did not fructify in 2004-05. After 2004, G4 has been revived by the current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. PM Modi, reiterated that the UNSC "must include the world's largest democracies, major locomotives of the global economy, and voices from all major continents" to carry "greater credibility and legitimacy." Making a much stronger case for the G4 in its entirety, he said that "more Member States have the capacity and willingness to take on major responsibilities with regard to maintenance of international peace and security." In a move to garner substantive support, the G4 Joint Statement pledged to support "Africa's representation in both the permanent and non-permanent membership in the Security Council," and highlighted the significance of "adequate and continuing representation of small and medium sized Member States, including the Small Island Developing States, in an expanded and reformed Council."

Indian desires repeatedly articulated at the highest levels of government remain unfulfilled and seemingly intractable, its ideas and diplomacy, bilateral and multilateral, over the last few decades on the UN Security Council and its reforms including its quest for a permanent seat, highlight a growing, powerful consciousness in India. The Indian decision makers realise that it is now historically placed to become an international rule maker and shaper, as opposed to a meek rule follower in the policy relevant future. It truly marks a rising India's dramatic

desire to move to the centre from the periphery of global politics (Dabhade,2017).

Due to the expanding remit of the post-cold war UNSC and the persistent weakness of the Indian state in the face of serious internal and regional security threats as well as fragmenting domestic politics, an increasingly powerful India has become a stronger defender of sovereignty now than it was in the past. And due to India's aspiration for greater representation in international institutions and the UNSC's inability to accommodate this demand, an increasingly powerful India with rule-making ambitions has grown somewhat detached from the multilateral security system over time. India envisages a more just and equitable multilateral order that takes into account the aspirations of a rising, democratic, and peaceful nation such as itself. In the UNSC, this means a permanent seat with veto power, which would allow India to temper the organization's impulse toward intervention and refocus attention on questions of economic development. It has not yet seriously faced the greater likelihood of second-class permanent-member status deprived of a veto, which it might prefer to eschew altogether.

Secondly, in a classic chicken-and-egg sense, India's willingness to shape the multilateral security order depends on the ability of the order's gatekeepers— the P-5—to accommodate India's interests and ambitions; this is nigh impossible unless India signals a willingness to shape the order in ways that are not detrimental to the P-5's interests (which are less congruent with each other's interests than they were during the immediate post-cold war period). India still lacks the tools and the strategy to convince each of the P-5 (notably China and the United States) that it will act "responsibly" from their perspective. With regard to strategy, New Delhi has yet to embrace a fully political calculus in negotiating its rise within the global order. With regard to ideas, although India can effectively argue within the UNSC against prevailing norms with which it disagrees, it is less capable of articulating credible alternatives.

Thirdly, India's multilateral policy in the realm of international security will be driven largely by internal and regional security concerns rather than global systemic considerations. When tensions arise between the demands of multilateralism and the exigencies of regionalism or bilateralism, India will tend to prioritize the latter, as it has done systematically in recent decades. In particular, given India's abiding interest in excluding great-power and third-party involvement in the Kashmir region, India's domestic and regional concerns will tend to eschew multilateral solutions rather than demand them. Fourth,

although India may have been a rule breaker at times in the past, it is essentially a rule shaper— that is, a state that will attempt to create exceptions for itself (nuclear testing) or modify rules that do not accord with its interests (the International Criminal Court). In this sense, India will remain largely compliant with the bulk of international law and international regimes, although it will occasionally seek to use its influence to shape the formation of new rules and the practice of existing rules. India does seek to comply with those treaties it ratifies and does not see why it should be bound by treaty regimes to which it has never agreed.

Finally, contemporary normative contestation exposes the growing gap between multipolarity (very much supported by India) and genuine multilateralism in the international system. A shifting balance of power is likely to create space for the emergence and growth of norms that are globally and regionally more appropriate to the circumstances of Asian powers such as China and India. In the future, a more powerful and strategically adept India might well press its normative claims in the UNSC with greater success. (Malone and Mukhrjee, 2013)

Section III

Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi led the Indian delegation to the High level segment of 74th Session of the UN General Assembly (22-27 September 2019). He was accompanied by External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar, Minister of State for External Affairs Shri V Muraleedharan and other senior officials. PM attended high level meetings viz. Climate Action Summit, High- Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage, and the Leaders' Dialogue on Strategic Responses to Terrorist and Violent Extremist Narratives. PM also announced the launch of the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) and the initiative of the "Leadership Group", an outcome of the Industry-Transition Track that India co-led with Sweden as part of the Climate Action Summit. During his visit to the UNGA, PM hosted two major plurilateral engagements, namely, meeting with the leaders of the Pacific Small Islands Developing States (PSIDS) (24 September 2019) and meeting with the leaders of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) (25 September 2019). This was the first time, Summit level meetings were held with these Groups and PM announced several measures for enhanced partnerships with countries belonging to these Groups. Commemorating Mahatma Gandhi's 150th Birth Anniversary at the UN On the side lines of the 74th UNGA in New York, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi hosted a high-level event (24 September 2019) titled,

“Leadership Matters: Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi in the Contemporary World” to mark the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. The event was attended by the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, President of Republic of Korea Mr. Moon Jae-in, Prime Minister of Singapore Mr. Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Bangladesh Ms. Sheikh Hasina, PM of Jamaica Mr. Andrew Holness and PM of New Zealand Ms. Jacinda Ardern. Participating dignitaries paid rich tributes to Gandhian thought and ideals and the influence it had on their lives. On the occasion, the leaders jointly inaugurated the Gandhi Solar Park that was commissioned on the roof of the UN Headquarters. The project consisting of 193 solar panels, symbolic of the 193-member states of the United Nations, was executed by the UN at a cost of US\$1 million. A special postage stamp on Mahatma Gandhi was also released on the occasion. Significant Achievements of India in UN during Modi government are recorded as follows:

(a) The UNGA Resolution declaring 21 June every year as the International Day of Yoga was adopted in Dec 2014 with a record number of 177 cosponsors. (b) Usage of Hindi in UN public communications (UN news, weekly audio bulletins on UN radio and UN social media) began in March 2018 following the first MoU signed by the UN with any country. (c) The first ever single-country South-South cooperation initiative at the UN was launched in June 2017 through the “India-UN Development Partnership Fund”, a \$100 million fund facility to undertake projects across the developing world. In April 2018, a US\$50 Million Commonwealth window was created under the Fund to support SDG related projects in developing countries of the Commonwealth. (d) India worked closely with its partners in the UN Security Council to successfully accomplish the listing of Pakistan based terrorist Masood Azhar under the United Nations Security Council’s 1267 Sanctions Committee (May 2019) concerning Al-Qaida and ISIS (Da’esh) and associated individuals and entities, which was pending since 2009. (e) India was elected to the Human Rights Council in Oct 2018 for the period 2019-2022 with highest number of votes (188/193). (f) India was unanimously elected by ECOSOC for another three year term from 2020-22. (g) At the virtual Session of the 73rd World Health Assembly in May 2020, India, along with over 60 countries, co-sponsored the resolution on Covid-19 pandemic. India was also elected the Chair of the Executive Board (EB) of the World Health Organization at the virtual meeting held on 22 May, 2020 for the next one year (MEA Report, 2020)

As its power and influence grew in international affairs, however, India sharply reduced its support for sovereignty violations. India consistently

United Nations Security Council Reform: Is India Really Interested?

counselled restraint to the UNSC during the 1990s and opposed the violation of sovereignty except as a last resort, notably during debates over East Timor, Kosovo, northern Iraq, Sierra Leone, and Somalia. India was an even more vociferous critic of unilateral intervention, especially in the case of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Kosovo. Overall, the Indian position was that the state ought to be the sole arbiter of domestic conflict; intervention, if at all necessary, must only be undertaken multilaterally, with the consent of the target state and only after all other avenues of conflict resolution have been exhausted. A similar stance pertained during India's tenure on the council in 2011–12. By maintaining international peace and security, the UNSC has helped to preserve the post–Second World War liberal institutional order established and underwritten by the United States and its allies. Over time, the UNSC has become a key pillar of that order, however inconsistent its decisions have sometimes been, conferring legitimacy (or not) on states and their policies.³⁹ India does not seek dramatically to alter the international order but instead to realize its great-power ambitions largely within it (that is, to be a rule shaper); hence it has sought frequent election to the UNSC as a non-permanent member. It follows that, as India's position improves within the order, New Delhi should increase its commitment to maintaining the global multilateral system so that India can continue benefiting from it and eventually become a rule maker within it. Delhi's willingness to shoulder the security burdens of the international multilateral system was noticeably higher when its position in the international system was weaker, that is, in the period between independence and the end of the cold war. Early on, India was an enthusiastic supporter of the United Nations, incorporating key elements of the UN Charter into the Indian constitution. Despite the initial setback over Kashmir, India remained committed to the UN. Throughout this period, India championed the interests of developing countries in various UN bodies and advocated in favor of the UNSC as the preeminent forum for resolving international conflicts. The latter was especially important to India's policy of nonalignment. Since the end of the cold war, however, while the UNSC significantly expanded its mandate and operations, India's enthusiasm for multilateral solutions to international security problems has not kept pace (Malone and Mukherjee, 2013).

Section IV

Retrospectively it can be said that India remained a power which is contended with what global powers think India is capable of. India has not made much progress in BIMSTEC, Ganga-Mekong cooperative

forum in its backyard and of IBSA forum at the global level. These forums were very much important given the contemporary balance of power in global politics. Reminding of the teachings of diplomatic manoeuvre of Kautliya about *Ari-Mitra-Mitra* (in other words enemy's enemy is my friend) it can be said that in contemporary world no one country can be a declared enemy of another but latently through behaviour, positioning an impression can be created about likes and dislikes. India has not been able to do so but as the catchy phrase of a just published book by Mohammad Zeeshan in 2021 July, India is 'Flying Blindly' in all directions without any specific aim. As a result today India is available as an important member of almost all the multilateral bodies but the main aim of India to be counted as a global power through permanent membership in UNSC requires abstention and not participation. In other words India must selectively participate and strengthen those forums that try to resist the onslaught of globally reputed powers in designing the economics, politics and culture of the globe. As a result India must join Brazil and South Africa through IBSA forum at global level to cooperatively pressurise the P-5 countries to induct them as permanent members of UNSC and make meaningful reform or democratisation of UNSC. The present genre of India leadership, instead is sailing in BRICS and QUAD at the regional level and Indo-US and Indo-Israel partnerships at the global level to accrue benefits in terms of geopolitical and geo-economic recognition. India is also giving importance to African continent with a revived India-AU summit from 2015 onwards. India has also given due recognition diplomatically to all the countries of the world from the perspective of South-South and North-South cooperation but the leitmotif of such agenda remains stagnant at the global diplomatic recognition and presence of India. But the main issue at hand for the new leadership who has economy, military, and political strength and stability to pursue in single mind the issue of democratisation of reform and pressurise the global P-5 powers with restrained connection with them in consortium with Brazil South Africa and other important markets of the world. Indian leadership of the present genre also remain oblivious of Gandhian philosophy of satyagraha in dealings with others through which an altruistic model can make the opponent give to the demands of the satyagrahi. In this philosophy in practice, India may incur a bit loss by avoiding global economic interactions with P-5 countries but that would give P-5 countries more economic shock in losing the market potential of India and also of Brazil and South Africa.

The Covid pandemic has shown that economy can survive even with a dip in economic interconnectivities and if that becomes for a greater

cause of democratisation of UNSC by pushing through its permanent membership India citizen will always remain behind the government as a support. At the same time the present genre of Indian leadership tries to do away with Nehruvian nonalignment framework as a thing of past. The essence of nonalignment was not closing the doors but selectively opening the doors of partnership and engagement with important powers but at the same time keeping the doors open always from developing countries to forge and strengthen partnerships. In that perspective Nehru accrued two benefits at the same time – one is of getting elevated to leadership stature among developing countries and second to get attention from powerful countries(US and Soviet Union at that time of Cold War) for increasing their support base. The present genre of Indian leadership has discarded nonalignment and with that discarded its essence- the strategic aspect of diplomacy and therefore tried to engage with all but with no positive intent or from a position of stature of military and economic potential that India is at present. So the genuine interest of UNSC reform remains at bay for Indian diplomats and leadership at present who are more interested in satisfying P-5 and get benefits from each through more and more engagement without creating their displeasure by pressurising for UNSC permanent membership now and not to keep it at bay.

Conclusion

This article argues forthwith that Indian induction in UNSC permanent membership lies not with the right intent of P-5 countries but with more mature and autonomous foreign policy moves of India by creating a new centre of bargaining power in IBSA forum and continuously pressurise the P-5 for their permanent membership to democratise UNSC right away and not remain contended with pat in the back by the P-5 and keeping the induction for the future. In this context this paper calls upon Indian leadership to go back to the basics of Indian diplomatic moves from the teachings of Kautilya and practices of Gandhi and Nehru to establish a more democratic world order by becoming the voice for UNSC reform at the earliest.

References

- [1] Dabhade Manish(2017): 'India's Pursuit of United Nations Security Council Reforms', ORF Occasional Papers, ORF, New Delhi
- [2] Nafey, Abdul(2015): 'Permanent Membership in the UNSC: India's Diplomatic initiatives and Strategies', *India Quarterly*, Vol.61, Issue 4

- [3] Malone David and Mukherjee Rahul(2013): 'Dilemmas of Sovereignty and Order: India and the UN Security Council' pp.157-176 in W.P.S Sidhu et al eds. *Shaping the Emerging World: India and the Multilateral Order*, Brookings Institute, USA.
- [4] https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India_UN_2020.pdf, accessed on 10.7.21