

India and the UN Security Council

Ambassador Asoke Kumar Mukerji

On 1 January 2021, India began eighth two-year elected term in the UN Security Council (UNSC). During campaign for this election, India had identified four priorities. These were to implement a New Orientation for a Reformed Multilateral System (NORMS) to promote inclusive solutions to peace and security; to pursue result-oriented UNSC measures to counter terrorism; to make UN Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs) more effective; and to focus on securing a human-centric technology-driven world.

The UN Charter stipulates that “non-permanent” member-states must obtain the votes of at least two-thirds of the membership of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) to be elected to the UNSC for a two-year term. It is ironic that while countries like India have successfully met this high threshold of international support for their membership of the UNSC regularly since 1950, none of the five permanent members (P5) of the UNSC have ever received such a democratic endorsement of support from member-states in the UNGA for their presence in the UNSC.

Elected from the Asia-Pacific constituency, India is expected to be active on Asia-Pacific issues already on the agenda of the Council. These include “country issues” like Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Myanmar, Yemen, and Syria, and “regional issues” like the Palestinian Question. In addition, “thematic issues” like health crises, human rights, protection of civilians including women and children impacted by conflicts, terrorism, climate issues, and information and communication technologies are already on the UNSC agenda.

The pursuit of NORMS requires India to confront a specific challenge in the UNSC’s method of taking decisions. This is the veto privilege which was made a pre-condition by the P5 for their adopting the UN Charter at the 1945 San Francisco Conference. The veto has effectively blocked decisions supported by the majority of UNSC members. Till December 2020, the P5 had used their veto as many as 293 times since the first meeting of the UNSC in 1946. The latest example of the UNSC being held hostage by the veto privilege of the P5 was in its tardy response to the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. This delay contributed significantly to a

fragmented global response to the crisis, impacting all member-states of the UN.

The question of the veto is mandated to be addressed as one of the five agreed areas for inter-governmental negotiations on UNSC reform underway in the UNGA since 2008. Until the UNGA adopts its resolution to amend the UN Charter, India's objective within the UNSC should be to make the use of the veto accountable and transparent as part of the reforms of the UNSC's working procedures, which have remained provisional since 1946.

India's adroit use of bilateral diplomacy to create a supportive network for pursuing declared priorities within the UNSC is evident. India has enhanced the momentum of strategic partnerships with four of the P5 (France, Russia, the UK, and USA). India and Vietnam (an E-10 member during 2021) held a Virtual Summit on 21 December 2020, during which they adopted a Joint Vision document to guide the future development of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In December 2020 India announced the opening of resident Embassy in Estonia (an E-10 member during 2021). Earlier, in September 2019, India had hosted the visit of the Prime Minister of St Vincent and The Grenadines (an E-10 member during 2020-21) to India as a special guest to participate in the UN Conference to Combat Desertification. India has assiduously maintained good bilateral relations with the other E-10 members like Ireland, Kenya, Mexico, Niger, Norway, and Tunisia.

On 7 January 2021, under Tunisia's Presidency, the UNSC agreed by consensus to elect India as the Chair of the Taliban Sanctions Committee, the Chair of the Libya Sanctions Committee, and the Vice-Chair of the Counter Terrorism Committee (CTC). India will become Chair of the CTC in 2022 after Tunisia completes its UNSC term in December 2021. India was elected one of the Vice-Chairs of the Non-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction Committee which will be chaired by Mexico, as well as a Vice-Chair (along with France and Russia) of the Working Group to monitor implementation of UNSC sanctions on Al Qaida and the Taliban. This Working Group, chaired by Niger, is also expected to consider setting up an international fund to compensate victims of terrorism and their families. These outcomes of India's inclusive approach provide a platform to attempt to reform the UNSC's ineffectiveness in countering terrorism so far.

India's Chairmanship of the Taliban Sanctions Committee, where the two Vice-Chairs are Russia and St Vincent and The Grenadines, will be significant. Afghanistan had stepped aside from its candidacy in 2013 and endorsed India instead for election to the UNSC for the 2021-22 vacancy from the Asia-Pacific region. This fact, along with the evolving geo-political situation in and around Afghanistan, will require India to keep Afghanistan's interests in mind while taking initiatives to enforce UNSC sanctions. Another initiative proposed by India in the UNSC on 8 January 2021 is closer cooperation with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), and to use the FATF network of financial institutions to enforce UNSC sanctions. India's success in implementing this approach will be determined by the position of the P5, who have displayed varying levels of ambivalence on prosecuting terrorism emanating from the Af-Pak region due to their regional and geopolitical interests.

In 2020, the UN reported that more than 80 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide due to conflicts on the UNSC's agenda, the highest such number since the end of the Second World War. The UNSC has used PKOs to respond to the most volatile of these conflicts. The two main objectives of UN PKOs today are to protect civilians caught in conflicts, and to create space for sustainable political solutions to be negotiated to end conflicts where they are deployed. The inability of the P5 to use UN PKOs effectively, especially in Africa and West Asia, calls for new initiatives to make UN PKOs more effective and accountable. While waiting for UNSC reform to get more permanent African and Asian voices into PKO decision-making, India can take the initiative with other E-10 members to provide the first draft of UNSC mandates for UN PKOs, especially in Africa and Asia. These PKOs account for the bulk of peacekeeping resources in terms of troops and budgets, and India can lead the process to turn UN peacekeepers into peace builders, who can assist in strengthening national institutions of governance where they are deployed.

India's rich PKOs experience is unique in the UN system, with over 240,000 Indian UN troops having served in 50 of the 72 PKOs since 1948. The track record of India's pioneering women UN peacekeepers in Liberia and South Sudan can become a template for UNSC mandates to integrate issues like women, peace and security, the protection of civilians, and peace building. India's advocacy of adopting a ground-up integrated approach will help the UN pursue its declared priority of using UN peace operations to create conditions for the negotiation of sustainable political

solutions, including by using local dispute resolution mechanisms that exist in many of these conflict-wracked societies but are often ignored by P5 dominated PKO mandates.

The UN's unanimous and universal Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development prioritizes the transfer and application of technology for socio-economic development and climate change. The Preamble of Agenda 2030 recognizes the inter-linkage between peace, security, and sustainable development. This enables India with other E-10 members in the UNSC to call for integrating sustainable development issues into UNSC decisions. None of the P5 have so far addressed the development dimension of peace and security.

A multi-dimensional approach to the concept of peace and security combined with sustainable development is becoming the norm in the UN's activities, including those of UN Specialized Agencies who help member-states implement Agenda 2030 on the ground. India's advocacy of using technology with a human touch through multiple stakeholder participation fits into this matrix. Three priority areas for the UNSC where technology transfers should be recommended to maintain peace and security are in the global response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the support for environmentally friendly technologies to respond to climate change issues, and the integrity of cyberspace.

India's leadership on the way the UNSC deals with these issues will highlight the need for bringing an Asia-Pacific and developing country perspective into the UNSC. The absence of such a perspective in UNSC decisions is palpable despite the presence of one P5 member from the Asia-Pacific in the UNSC. India's success in achieving her declared priorities during her term in the UNSC will play a significant role in highlighting the inter-linked challenges to peace, security, and development. That would lay the foundations for pursuing the bigger objective of "reformed multilateralism", which would require amendments to the 1945 UN Charter by the UNGA.
