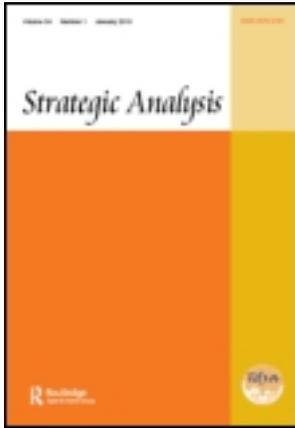


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India and the United Nations

Ramesh Thakur

To paraphrase the mantra of realism—international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for normative ascendancy: the establishment and maintenance of the dominant normative architecture of international order created and maintained by the interplay of power and ideas. As China, India and Brazil emerge as important growth centres in the world economy, the age of the West and its disrespect for the role, relevance and voice of the rest of the world is passing. As power and influence seep out of the trans-Atlantic order and migrate towards Asia and elsewhere, how, and by whom, will the transition from the Westphalian to a replacement system of world affairs be managed? Conversely, how will the newly empowered big players of the global South manage the transformation from being perennial spoilers to becoming responsible globalisers?

In his speech to both houses of India's parliament on 8 November 2010, President Barack Obama paid tribute to India's treasured past that had helped to open the mind and expand the moral imagination of the world. He endorsed India's long-held aspiration for permanent membership of the UN Security Council, but reminded listeners that with global power status comes responsibility, including for such thorny issues as nuclear non-proliferation, democratic governance and human rights. India could not duck its responsibility to speak out on violations of these global norms by countries like Iran and Myanmar (Burma), he said.

But if India and other rising stars of the global South are to assume a leadership role in world affairs, the status quo powers will have to adjust their world views and expectations and concede some leadership space to the newly empowered actors. Last year, when Brazil and Turkey teamed up to engage in innovative diplomacy to break the nuclear impasse with Iran, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—China, France, Russia, the UK and the US, known colloquially as the P5—ganged up against them and quickly put them in their place. In 2011 they were joined by India and South Africa and Germany on the Security Council. For the first time in its history, the Security Council has the powerful countries from the global South as a political counterweight to the P5. (In earlier decades, even when on the council, the Southern countries were nowhere near as powerful). How would the symbolic shift of the global order from the North to the South play out in the context of UN politics? More pertinently for this special issue, what role should India play?

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That the powerful Southern countries are not averse to responsible leadership was visible in the Copenhagen Accord on climate change, in the form of a deal struck by Brazil, China, India and South Africa with the US. The problem of global warming was created by the developed countries who have deeper carbon footprints and greater financial and technological capabilities for mitigation and adaptation. But the deadly impacts of climate change will not be distributed in proportion to those responsible for it. The poorest will suffer the most. The problem will continue to worsen not because developing countries aspire to Western affluence but to affordable food, housing, clean water, sanitation and electricity. Westerners must change lifestyles and support international redistribution. Developing countries must reorient their growth in cleaner and greener directions.

A country's role, respect and influence in the United Nations cannot be divorced from its international political, military, economic and ideational status. If India wishes to leave a lasting footprint and not become a mere footnote in world history, it will have to demonstrate normative and political leadership during its two-year term on the UN Security Council and not be just a time server. Moreover, it will need to exercise creative diplomacy in order to combine the protection of national interests with the representation of developing-country and Asian interests. This essay will first establish the historical context of India–UN relations and then take up three themes that India should pursue during its tenure in the Security Council: reform in the process of choosing the secretary-general; the expansion of the Security Council; and promoting a global development agenda.

The history of India–UN relations

India kept its tryst with destiny two years after the United Nations was created to shape the world's destiny, yet was one of 51 founding UN members. The ideals of world peace and global solidarity based on sovereign equality, mutual respect and universal tolerance were immensely attractive to independent India.

India took the UN seriously and was taken very seriously in the United Nations. Vijayalakshmi Pandit was elected president of the General Assembly in 1953—the first woman to hold the post that formally outranks the secretary-general. It is hard to think of another country that, over the entirety of the issue, had more influence in driving the campaign against the criminal apartheid regime in South Africa.

There have been periodic misunderstandings and disenchantments, from the early referral of Kashmir to censorious remarks in the Security Council during the Bangladesh War and after the nuclear tests in 1998. India was soundly defeated the last time it contested an elected Security Council seat in 1997; the failure to be a permanent member is a permanent sore; the quixotic decision to field an Indian candidate late in the day for the post of secretary-general in 2006 while also lobbying for reforms in the selection procedure of the Secretary-General effectively undercut both goals.

India tends to be among the top three contributors to UN peace operations in numbers of missions, force commanders and personnel. On 31 January, 8,680 Indian soldiers and police were deployed on UN duty overseas: almost nine per cent of the total UN peacekeeping contingent (Bangladesh and Pakistan had more than 10,000 each). There are three broad reasons why India is asked to contribute troops to UN operations: the size and professionalism of its armed forces; the lack of such forces in most developing countries until recently; and India's influence in world affairs.

Conversely, the contribution to the proposed peacekeeping operation by India, and to regional and international stability by the proposed mission, have been the constant refrain for justifying India's involvement in international peacekeeping. Part of the explanation for this has been a creeping apartheid in UN peacekeeping, where poor countries contribute troops while rich Western countries provide logistical support and dominate the senior policymaking ranks in the UN system.

Of course India gains traction because of this—like being elected to the new Peacebuilding Commission. But have Indian policymakers done a hard-nosed evaluation of whether the credit ledger is overshadowed by the debit? Of the 2,861 UN peacekeepers killed until 31 January 2011, 139 were Indians—more than any other nationality. Moreover, in public, governmental and UN perception around the world, India becomes bracketed with poor countries with bloated and antiquated defence forces desperate to earn foreign money. India must look at the balance of composition of UN missions, and contribute only if there are at least some industrialised countries also willing to shoulder the burden. Only then will it begin to put a distance between the professional Indian military and the image of UN operations as something fit only for impoverished and amateurish contributors who are in it for the money.

Indian foreign policy has a habit of not letting national interests come in the way of abstract principles. Its leaders are easily seduced by praise and thrilled by a pat on the back. Such gratifying gestures are no substitute for rigorous calculation of self-interest. In the rarefied UN atmosphere in particular, it is easy to be mesmerised by the phantom attraction of numbers, when what matters is the composition of voting blocs. Sometimes being in the minority can be a badge of honour and better serve the nation's balance of interests.

The Secretary-General

The position of the Secretary-General (SG) matters: the choice has consequences for many critical issues in several parts of the world. Trygve Lie, the first SG, famously said that his was 'the most impossible job in the world'. It combines the role of politician, diplomat and international civil servant. His role is to assist and facilitate the UN Security Council and, to a lesser extent, the General Assembly to make informed and sound decisions, and then to implement the decisions faithfully and report back accordingly.

He must display management ability and negotiating skill while establishing rapport with a global audience. He must know when to force an issue and when to exercise reticence; when courage is required and when discretion is advisable; and when commitment to the UN vision must be balanced by a sense of proportion and humour. He must possess charisma, the ability to articulate bold visions and complex arguments in crisp sound bites, powerful oratory, an instinct for grasping the big picture without neglecting the necessary details, and a strong sense of the demands and expectations of the organisation against the limits of the possible.

To enumerate what is needed is to explain why Ban Ki-moon's selection was a triumph of hope over experience. It was made possible by the most peculiar process for selecting the SG. The procedure is so quaint that we really have no idea of the relative support for Ban and the runner-up, Shashi Tharoor, in a head-to-head contest if electors had been forced to choose between the two, the normal method for competitive elections where qualities of decisive leadership are attractive to the electors.

Instead the ‘voting’ process puts a premium on the most amiable and least offensive, not the most forceful and effective. It privileges breadth of support over depth. It gives no indication of who would be the preferred candidate if the electors were forced to choose one from among several. Process shapes performance: choosing a weak leader allows the five permanent members of the Security Council to scapegoat him for the UN’s ineffectual performance.

The process also highlights the impotence of the General Assembly (GA) *vis-à-vis* the Security Council. Article 97 of the UN Charter says that the SG ‘shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council’—but the selection process is not specified. It was adopted by the GA in 1946, which could easily change the terms and conditions of the appointment so as to make the SG less subservient to the Security Council, for example through a non-renewable single term of seven years. It could also use its power of appointment to provide substantial input into the selection beyond rubber-stamping the choice of the Security Council, whose overriding motto is: offend no permanent member.

There are many more such options, but the really important point is that the issue needs to be addressed. India had taken the first tentative steps towards reform of the procedure in 2006 but had to abandon the effort once Tharoor was nominated by the Government of India for the post.

The Security Council

India’s primary and very public interest in UN reforms is to enlarge the Security Council with India becoming one of the new permanent members. The Security Council’s legitimacy—and thus its capacity to regulate international behaviour—is increasingly clouded as it becomes less and less representative of the international community, stuck rigidly in a 1945 time warp. Unfortunately, although almost everyone acknowledges the need for Security Council reform in theory, they cannot agree on any one concrete reform package wherein losers and opponents outnumber winners and supporters.

The case for Security Council reform rests on making it more efficient and effective by realigning its composition with contemporary realities and not historical nostalgia. Another way of framing the issue is this. If we were to start afresh, what would the Security Council look like? How can we make the transition from what we have to what we should have?

A campaign for permanent membership of the Security Council cannot be based solely on a claim of entitlement. Instead it must combine a mix of arguments aimed at persuading the UN community of the merits of the case; a strategy for lobbying jointly with other leading candidates in order to forge a powerful winning coalition; and a strategy for identifying and neutralising potential opponents.

Countries should be permanent members based on their representational credentials and contributions of human, financial, military and other resources to attaining UN goals. On these criteria, there is surprisingly broad agreement already on the leading candidates. If the Security Council were to have another five permanent members, four are clear-cut: Germany, Japan, India and Brazil. The fifth and sixth would likely be two out of Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa.

Opposition comes from three groups: those with a vested interest in the status quo, especially the P5; the regional rivals of each of the leading candidate countries; and a large group who would see their status diminished still further with the increase in

permanent members from five to 11. All three groups have found it expedient to adopt the tactic of divide and rule, convincing the leading contenders to compete with one another.

Only in this century did Brazil, Germany, India and Japan wake up to the realisation that either they will all become permanent members in one major round of reforms, or none of them will. Japan by itself or together with Germany would worsen what is already a very badly skewed industrial–developing country imbalance; which would be addressed by the inclusion of Brazil and India.

Each of them has strong claims but also at least one major though not fatal weakness.

Germany is Europe's biggest and the world's fourth largest economy, which demonstrated the capacity to be independent of Washington on the issue of the Iraq war. It has begun to play an increasingly active role in world affairs and is contributing more militarily as well. But Europe already has two of the existing P5 slots; does it really deserve three?

Brazil joins Germany and Japan in pressing to break the link between permanent membership and nuclear status and carries the most weight in Latin America. But in a Spanish-language continent, Brazil is Portuguese speaking.

India, with over one billion people, is the world's second most populous country and ranks among the biggest contributors to UN peacekeeping missions. It is also nuclear armed, but outside the NPT regime.

Japan is the world's third biggest economy, contributes more to the UN budget than four permanent members combined (Britain, China, France and Russia) and resents being treated like the UN's ATM. But Japan also is the only one of the four leading candidates who is yet to prove that it can take a genuinely independent stance. It is seen too often simply to echo the US position on issues of international security, when Washington is already far too dominant in the UN system.

India will have to tread the careful path of neither antagonising Washington nor submerging its independent identity to appease Washington: the first will earn its candidacy a veto, the second could cost it majority support among the total membership. As of March 2011, senior India officials and ministers were quietly confident that the impasse on Security Council reform would be broken in late 2011 or early 2012. Only time will tell whether this was based on realism or wishful thinking. A likely circuit-breaker in resolving the deadlock is the voluntary acceptance by the new permanent members not to use their veto power for the first 15 years.

From the Millennium to Global Development Goals

The third and most important reform is reclaiming the organisation overall as the forum, voice and servant of the poorer and weaker majority instead of a tool of domination by the rich and powerful minority. India could help to achieve this by taking the lead on a new set of global development goals (GDGs) to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that will expire in 2015.

We live in an age of unprecedented global connectivity and the accompanying global responsibility for all humans living on our planet. Persisting pockets of debilitating poverty and deep deprivation degrade the lives of hundreds of millions, diminish not just them but all of us, threaten social cohesion, political stability and international order, and are an indictment of governments and international institutions.

Developing countries have been severely buffeted by the crosswinds of globalisation and the resulting 'end of geography' in a flat world. To many, globalisation

is both desirable and irreversible, having lifted standards of living throughout the world. To some others, globalisation is the soft underbelly of corporate imperialism that plunders and profiteers on the back of rampant consumerism.

The benefits and costs of linking and delinking are unequally distributed. Industrialised countries are mutually interdependent; developing countries are largely independent in their economic relations with one another; but are highly dependent on industrialised countries. Brazil, China and India are starting to change this equation.

The flow of capital is highly asymmetrical. Over the last two decades, overseas development assistance from the rich to the poor countries has totalled \$50–80 billion per year. In the same period, every year, \$500–800 billion of illegal funds are sent from poor to rich countries. Thus for every dollar of aid money over the table, the West gets back ten dollars under the table and, for good measure, lectures the rest on corruption.

There has been a growing divergence in income levels between countries and peoples, with widening inequality among and within nations—in effect a redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich. Assets and incomes are more concentrated. Wage shares have fallen, profit shares have risen and capital mobility alongside labour immobility has reduced the bargaining power of organised labour.

The deepening of poverty and inequality—prosperity for a few countries and people, marginalisation and exclusion for the many—has implications for social and political stability among and within states. The rapid growth of global markets has not seen the parallel development of social and economic institutions to ensure balanced, inclusive and sustainable growth. Labour rights have been less sedulously protected than capital and property rights, and global rules on trade and finance are inequitable to the extent that they produce asymmetric effects in rich and poor countries.

Many developing countries were worried even before the financial crisis of 2008–2010 that globalisation would impinge adversely on economic sovereignty, cultural integrity and social stability. ‘Interdependence’ among unequals translates into the dependence of some on international markets that function under the dominance of others. The crisis confirmed that absent effective regulatory institutions, markets, states and civil society can be overwhelmed by rampant transnational forces.

Globalisation has also let loose the forces of ‘uncivil society’ and accelerated the transnational flows of terrorism, human and drug trafficking, organised crime, piracy and pandemic diseases. The growth in transnational networks of global uncivil society threaten both state institutions and civil society in many countries.

What can developing nations do to accentuate the positives and discount the negatives of globalisation? The outright rejection of globalisation and a retreat into autarky is neither practical nor desirable: who wants to be the next Myanmar or North Korea? Equally, though, who wants to be the next Iceland, Greece or Ireland? The notion that endless liberalisation, deregulation and relaxation of capital and all border controls will assure perpetual self-sustaining growth and prosperity has proven to be delusional.

The United Nations exists to bring about a safer world and a better life for all. At the global summit convened by the UN in 2000, world leaders signed the historic Millennium Declaration from which the eight MDGs were derived, capturing the normative consensus on the nature and meaning of development and articulating measurable and timetabled indicators. The world’s leaders accepted individual and collective responsibility to reduce poverty in their own countries and globally. The MDGs corrected the skewed focus on markets and stabilisation, redirecting attention and efforts towards the reduction of poverty and the promotion of human development.

They served as a powerful tool for mobilising governments, the UN system and civil society.

Substantial progress has been recorded in many places, including primary education and greater gender equality in education, investment in social sectors, a renewed commitment to aid, gains in life expectancy, and reduced income poverty in two-thirds of the countries of the world. The UN's 2010 MDG report estimates that despite the setbacks caused by the global financial crisis of the last three years, the number of people living in poverty will be halved by 2015, while child deaths went down from 12.5 million in 1990 to 8.8 million in 2008. Conflicts, which aggravate the harmful effects of poverty while making it difficult to tackle it, have also declined.

However, the gains from the eight goals have been neither uniform nor even across developing countries, and performance to date has fallen short of the ambitious targets. HIV prevalence remains critically high in southern Africa, threatening the achievement of many MDGs. Chronic hunger, child malnutrition and maternal and infant mortality rates are distressingly high. Unemployment, especially among the young, remains stubbornly persistent. Aid did not reach pledged commitments nor always conform with national priorities: 'local ownership' has been little more than a slogan. The goal of an international partnership for development lacks measurable indicators of progress.

In addition, new issues and concerns have emerged or intensified since 2000. These include climate change and the accompanying desertification and rising incidence of natural disasters, from which the poor suffer the most. Water scarcity, lack of adequate sanitation facilities, food availability and affordability are looming problems. The dramatic rise of new powers like Brazil, China, India and South Africa as Southern engines of growth has provided alternative models of growth, development and South–South cooperation, and changed the discourse on the best terms of engagement with the international economy.

The experience since 2000 has proven the value of the goals, particularly global commitment to worldwide poverty reduction in the medium term and the aim of eradicating poverty in the long term. The policy space for many developing countries is conditioned by the global economic and political environment and can be influenced by global frameworks, agendas and institutions. To consolidate and build on the undoubted successes of the MDGs and address pressing new global concerns, India could initiate a conversation on a new policy framework for national development and global poverty reduction beyond 2015. After a broadly inclusive consultative process, a new set of goals should be articulated, comprising measurable targets and indicators, while confronting the shortfalls and gaps in MDG achievements.

The new GDGs should promote national ownership by adapting the global goals to national circumstances and priorities; devising mechanisms to ensure that external aid conforms to priority needs identified in national development plans prepared by the recipient countries themselves, instead of privileging donor country priorities and agendas; and complementing financial aid with technical assistance to strengthen the analytical, policy development and programme delivery capacity of target countries. Just like teaching and equipping someone to fish is better than giving him a fish, so capacitating a country to diagnose the causes of and solutions to its own under-development is better than creating long-term aid dependency.

India is a natural candidate to take the lead on this. The GDGs should aim to ensure equitable economic growth and reset the balance between the productive sectors of the economy and social sectors. They should incorporate climate change and the need for

mitigation and adaptation, paying special attention to food availability and affordability. They must directly address the need to reduce inequalities between individuals and groups within and among countries. There is also the need to pursue pro-poor and pro-development policies in the still incomplete Doha Development Round of trade negotiations.

Conclusion

India should use its growing wealth, power and influence to return the UN to its foundational values and ideals in the service of humanity. Poverty strips human beings of dignity and is profoundly demeaning. It is an affront to the human conscience. India must lead the UN community to make it history. That would justify India's claim to permanent membership of the Security Council and also leave a legacy worthy of Indian history.