



U.N. member flags fly at the U.N. headquarters in New York City. (Getty Images)

# India on the Long Road of Security Council Reform

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In 2023, India's population is estimated to be the largest on the planet, surpassing China's for the first time in more than 200 years.<sup>1</sup> It is a turning point the world is unlikely to see again for centuries.<sup>2</sup> Such demographic transitions have geopolitical consequences.<sup>3</sup> Yet the United Nations Security Council, which acts on behalf of "we the peoples"<sup>4</sup> and serves as a center for harmonizing the actions of nations<sup>5</sup> while addressing international peace and security, is bereft of representatives from India, a sui generis state with the largest democratic agglomeration of humankind in history.

This omission is a metaphor for the inability of international organizations to keep pace with changing realities. The situation has come about not for lack of awareness of major nations about the desirability of Security Council reform. Pathways to reform have long been on the table. In the early 1990s, India and its Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) partners initiated this phase of the post-Cold War reform process by enshrining the "question of equitable representation and increase in the membership of the Security Council" on the agenda of the U.N. General Assembly.<sup>6</sup> Since then, the role of international organizations



in global affairs has changed considerably. The role of the United Nations Security Council has also evolved in form and content. Yet Security Council reform has remained a collection of plans, processes, consensuses, and negotiations to nowhere.<sup>7</sup>

India's active engagement on matters related to Security Council reform pre-dates the current efforts. India has consistently promoted structural change of the U.N. Security Council for decades.

India, in the initial years of the U.N., never accepted the gentlemen's agreement arrived at informally among the permanent members of the Security Council in 1946 as guidance for distribution of the nonpermanent membership because it was never discussed or adopted by the general membership.<sup>8</sup>

When the effort initiated by the Latin American states in the 1950s to expand the nonpermanent members from six to eight<sup>9</sup> sputtered on account of Soviet objections linked to Cold War differences with the West, it was India, as the champion of the NAM, that led a chorus of voices calling for the enlargement of the council.<sup>10</sup> Collectively, the Afro-Asian NAM states and the Latin states proposed an increase of nonpermanent members from six to 10 and the total membership from 11 to 15, citing the significant increase in the total membership of the U.N. from 51 in 1945 to 113 in 1963. The reform also formalized the geographical distribution of nonpermanent seats to four regional groups, ending the informal gentlemen's agreement.<sup>11</sup> It led to adoption of the U.N. General Assembly resolution 1991/A (XVIII) on Dec. 17, 1963, and resulted in the coming into effect of the only amendment of the U.N. charter on Sept. 1, 1965.<sup>12</sup>

In 1979, India was among the 10 NAM members that proposed the inclusion of a new item on the agenda of the General Assembly on the "equitable representation on and an increase in the membership of the Security Council." The aim was to increase the nonpermanent membership of the council in light of increases in the membership of Afro-Asian states of the U.N. to 152, from 113 in 1965.<sup>13</sup> The opposition of the permanent members and their camp followers blocked the effort.

While India has actively engaged on Security Council reform since the inception of the United

Nations, the present thrust differs from the past in the quest for permanent membership. India is in the vanguard of those desiring an expansion of the existing membership categories – permanent and nonpermanent. This is the preferred option of most members of the U.N. All permanent members, barring China, have, at some stage during the past three decades, expressed support for such a rubric of reform. India typically possesses the strongest case for a permanent seat among the G4 (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan), who all aspire to permanent membership. The Indian bid also has the most extensive support base in the General Assembly.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, differences remain among those who support the need for an increase in both categories. The divergence is in the numbers of a reformed council, processes to be followed in expansion, and the rights and responsibilities of new permanent members concerning the veto issue. The commonality of approach on the need for greater equity, enhanced legitimacy, more representativeness, and desire for reflecting new realities has not translated into cohesiveness of action.

The five permanent members that enjoy disproportionate influence over the reform proceedings, as their ratification is essential for any U.N. charter amendment to come into force, display differing degrees of a lack of interest in change. The 54 African states, under Chinese pressure, are reluctant to press forward. No reform is possible without their buy-in, as they are 42% of the 129 votes needed for any outcome in the General Assembly.<sup>15</sup> Other significant groups promoting reform in both categories, such as the L.69, cannot move the dial much due to Africa's incoherence. The secretaries-general who followed Kofi Annan have shown little interest in promoting Security Council reform.

On the other hand, a set of middle powers that perceive that they will lose the most if new permanent members are inducted have banded together along with their close allies. They constitute the Uniting for Consensus group – Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Indonesia, Italy, Republic of Korea, Malta, Mexico, Pakistan, San Marino, Spain, and Turkey.<sup>16</sup> Although they have the support of not more than 30 members, they have put forth proposals for a new



category of elected members with longer tenures than the two years provided in the U.N. charter, and suggest that the ban on immediate reelection will not apply to this new category of long-term members. China has gravitated toward them and coordinates tactically with Russia to emphasize that there is no general agreement for reform of the permanent membership. Diplomats keep kicking the can of Security Council reform down the road and bank on the resilience of the established council to tide over calls for change. The result is that the reform process stands derailed in all but form.

### India's Path to Permanent Membership of UNSC

Does this mean the end of the road for India's pursuit of permanent membership? Has India's thinking evolved on the issue following the stalemate? Has India's quest for reforming the Security Council run its course? Has India, then, missed the bus? These are all legitimate concerns that need to be addressed.

Those raising such issues misinterpret India's approach to changing the international peace and security architecture. India desires change, but is not wedded to "change now" as the only path forward.

India has long perceived itself to be a great power and aspired to better representation on the horseshoe table. At the San Francisco conference where the U.N. charter was agreed to in 1945, India voted in favor of the Yalta formula,

prescribing permanent membership with a veto for the five powers. However, this was not before the Indian delegation unsuccessfully sought to insert into the charter a provision providing for associated members with permanent seats at the Security Council but without the right to veto, in the hope that India would be one of them.<sup>17</sup>

Subsequently, the architect of independent India's foreign policy in the formative years, Prime Minister Jawarhalal Nehru, consistently pointed to "many factors," including historical, geographical, demographic, and moral, based on which India was entitled to a permanent seat on the Security Council.<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding the rhetoric, it was India's normative role in multilateral fora that made it a significant actor, rather than aspects of hard power, which had made the permanent members what they were. Hence, India promoted the expansion of nonpermanent membership without giving up the aspiration to permanent membership.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh termed India's quest for reform as "an essay in persuasion."<sup>19</sup> While India pursued permanent membership, like his predecessors, Singh followed a more realist thinking, considering India's many challenges. While the ultimate goal was to ensure a permanent place for India at the horseshoe table, there was also an understanding that no quick-fix solution was on the anvil. India acknowledged that sovereign states' views must be respected and addressed through purposive diplomacy. More time

and effort were needed. This also fit well with the space India required to enhance its abilities as a provider of global public goods, which would be a key ingredient in any endgame related to Security Council permanent membership. While India was active at the U.N. and coordinated with other key players with similar goals, it was willing to allow time for the process to bear fruit. It was, therefore, more understanding and sensitive to African concerns than it otherwise might have been. Unlike those who felt that any delay would undermine their cause, India calculated that the passage of time would strengthen its credentials, not diminish them.

There is a consistent pattern to India's quest for permanent membership. Across different governments, the calculus has involved:

- Contributions by India to the U.N. system.
  - The value-addition that India, as a large developing country with a balanced approach, would bring as a permanent member to the decision-making process of a body where issues of peace and security impacting the Global South were addressed.
  - The incongruity of the permanent membership not reflecting current demographic realities, i.e., India now being the world's most populous country.
- Implicit in all this is the consistent Indian desire and willingness to shoulder more global responsibilities. Since 2014, under



Ruchira Kamboj, U.N. Security Council president for December 2022 and India's permanent representative to the U.N., chairs a Security Council meeting. Despite India becoming the most populous nation in the world, it does not have a permanent seat on the Security Council. (Eskinder Debebe / U.N. Photo)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has added several strands to this existing matrix.

For one, there is a conscious delineation of normative thinking on global affairs. Modi speaks of "*Vasudaiva Kutumbakam*," meaning "the world is one family," reflecting the U.N.'s multilateral approach.<sup>20</sup> External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar speaks of "the India way."<sup>21</sup> Others in government mention India as a "*Vishwaguru*," or "world teacher."<sup>22</sup> The intent is to project India as a "civilizational state" with a distinctive take on global affairs. Intrinsic to such thinking is that India deserves a role at the global high table on matters of peace and security. The approach, however, remains nascent and awaits full-fledged articulation. Nevertheless, the use of traditional terminology has generated broader domestic interest in foreign policy issues, well beyond elite sections that have dominated Indian discourse in the past.

Increasingly, India is pursuing alternate options for shaping global discourse, providing global public goods, and addressing peace and security

concerns since the reform of the Security Council is not progressing. India has become more forthright in criticizing the inability of global multilateral arrangements to meet the challenges of the 21st century, as they remain cemented in a framework of a bygone era.<sup>23</sup> Indian diplomacy is more actively engaging in plurilateral and minilateral initiatives with peace and security implications, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with Australia, Japan, and the U.S. The aim is not only to address security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, but also to meet new-age threats from new and emerging technologies, the disruptive role of nonstate actors, and intensifying geopolitical competition.

Also, India's approach to Security Council reform issues has been repositioned as part of a larger package, termed New Orientation for Reformed Multilateralism (NORM). It envisages reforms in all three pillars of the current multilateral architecture: peace and security, development, and human rights.<sup>24</sup> This is the first time India has promoted



multilateral reform holistically. It takes into account that for many states, especially those from the Global South, the reform agenda at the U.N. is far larger than Security Council reform. NORM endeavors to address a multiplicity of global ills.

The interconnections between peace and security, development and human rights, and India's importance as a key actor on the global economic and social agenda also provide it leverage in peace and security matters. India's approach to reform of the peace and security component is well known and has not changed much in the NORM framework. What has changed is India's willingness to move reform discussions beyond the General Assembly. During India's presidency of the Security Council in December 2022, it held an open debate on NORM. India's global development reform agenda is also being vigorously put forth during its current presidency of the G20. The goal is to expand the reform canvas beyond the United Nations and encompass multilateral development institutions. The social aspects of the reform objectives have not been explained in detail as yet. Given India's global ambitions, reforms related to human rights machinery will be of interest when articulated.

To summarize, India's quest for Security Council reform continues as part of a broader orientation toward multilateral reform. This approach enables India to leverage its role in other aspects of the global multilateral reform process to enhance its claim as a potential permanent member. While there

is stasis at the U.N. in the Security Council reform process, India has strengthened its prospects by using opportunities beyond the format of the General Assembly. Buoyed by its growing economy and utilizing rotational openings on various platforms – the two-year nonpermanent membership of the Security Council in 2021-22 and G20 presidency in 2023 – India has assiduously worked to burnish its stature. It is moving toward Modi's stated goal of India becoming a "leading" power.<sup>25</sup>

### India's Global Aspirations

The challenge that India faces is channeling its growing global role on a multiplicity of transboundary issues, such as environment and climate change, sustainable development and economic growth, emerging technologies and global health, and outer space and cyberspace, onto a pathway that will lead it to a permanent perch on issues of international peace and security.

The moribund reform process at the U.N. remains on the back burner. The conventional wisdom is that, historically, situations of acute disorder provide opportunities for change of established institutions or the rise of new mechanisms. This has been true for the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, and conferences at Bretton Woods and San Francisco in the 1940s, all of which followed crises. Crises catalyze states to rise above inertia, myopia, and narrow self-interest. Anything less than a cataclysmic crisis won't do. Hence council reform, which

requires meeting a very high bar of support, is infeasible in an era of great-power competition. In fact, the issue had slumped so far down the U.N.'s agenda that two years ago, Secretary-General António Guterres did not even refer to Security Council reform among the long list of proposals in his report titled "Our Common Agenda."<sup>26</sup>

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the global reverberations due to the inability of the Security Council to address its consequences, have changed the equations at the U.N. The economic headwinds developing countries face due to COVID-19 have accentuated concerns about the viability of the multilateral system. The episodic effort to reform the United Nations Security Council has returned to mainstream discussion. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urged the council to act or "dissolve yourself altogether."<sup>27</sup> President Joe Biden lent further weight to the reform brigade when he remarked at the General Assembly in September 2022 that the "United States supports increasing the number of both permanent and non-permanent representatives of the council."<sup>28</sup> The High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, which Guterres set up in a new report titled "A Breakthrough for People and Planet," acknowledges that the principles of equity and legitimacy can only fully be met by expanding the Security Council membership and reforming its decision-making procedures.<sup>29</sup> The secretary-general's "New Agenda for Peace," expected in June or July 2023, will likely highlight measures needed for bettering the U.N. peace



and security framework. All of these factors indicate a new interest in the reform agenda in the run-up to the Summit of the Future planned for September 2024.<sup>30</sup>

Modi often refers to the next 25 years as “*Amrit Kaal*,” or “The Era of Elixir.”<sup>31</sup> His objective is to bring to fruition national aspirations by the time of the centenary of Indian independence in 2047. Few issues on independent India’s foreign policy agenda

have the resonance and pedigree that the aspiration for permanent membership on the Security Council does. We can, therefore, expect concerted efforts by an aspirational India toward meeting this goal by making the most of the opportunities likely to open up as change beckons. Only time will tell whether this phase will lead to the end of India’s long road to permanent membership. If not, the persistent quest is certain to continue.



**Syed Akbaruddin** joined the Kautilya School of Public Policy on June 1, 2021, as its dean, following a distinguished diplomatic career spanning more than three decades.

Entering the Indian Foreign Service in 1985, he retired in April 2020 upon completion of his tenure as the permanent representative

of India to the United Nations. He was the official spokesperson of India’s Ministry of External Affairs from 2012 to 2015.

He is among the few Indian diplomats who have the distinction of also serving as an international civil servant in a United Nations entity. From 2006 to 2011, he worked at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna. He was the head of the External Relations and Policy Coordination Unit, and later also served as the special assistant to the director-general

of the IAEA. He also served as the consul general of India, Jeddah, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 2000 to 2004.

Having served as counselor at the Indian High Commission in Islamabad (1998-2000), he is well versed in key issues between India and Pakistan. Also, he has worked at the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations as first secretary (1995-98). He was a member of the U.N.’s apex body, the Advisory Committee on Administrative & Budgetary Questions, during 1997-98.

Since his retirement, he has written and spoken extensively on global public policy issues. He has a master’s degree in international relations from the Australian National University.

He writes regularly in the Indian and West Asian media and lectures on the politics and economics of West Asia, Eurasia, and the Indian Ocean; political Islam; and energy security.

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