

## ***India and the UN @ 75: Some Thoughts***

Nalin Surie\*

As the UN approaches the autumn of its existence and the Covid-19 pandemic raises fresh issues regarding the effectiveness and relevance of the UN, it is perhaps time to review India's approach to the UN, and consider whether alternative multilateral or plurilateral arrangements might not be the way to go.

The UN and WHO response to the ongoing Covid-19 global pandemic has further seriously dented the already frayed credibility of the Organisation. It has again highlighted the cynical manner in which the permanent members of the UNSC act when their country or interests are involved - in this case China. Are we then at a tipping point in the life of the UN?

But first, it may be useful to recall India's constitutional provisions on international relations. Article 51 of the Directive Principles of State Policy clearly requires the State to endeavour to, inter-alia, promote international peace and security, foster respect for international laws, etc. In effect, the UN is only one such means. Yet, since India's independence, enormous importance has been placed on the UN System in Indian foreign policy. This was done in spite of the betrayal over Pakistan's invasion of Jammu and Kashmir very soon after India's independence - perhaps to achieve broader objectives to promote international peace and security such as decolonisation, global development, disarmament, etc. Recent instances of overreach by senior UN officials of interference in India's internal affairs while turning a Nelson's eye towards others rankles in public opinion.

Further, the great expectations over the ability of the UN to fulfil the purposes and principles of the UN Charter after the end of the Cold War have largely been belied. This has happened for a variety of reasons, but largely on

---

\***The Author**, Ambassador Nalin Surie, presently a Distinguished Fellow at the Delhi Policy Group, is a former Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs and a former Deputy Permanent Representative of India to the UN at New York. He has been India's Ambassador to Poland, China, and High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. He was also the Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA).

*(This opinion piece was received from the author on April 8, 2020)*

account of the cynical use of their power by the permanent members of the UN Security Council not only in regard to matters pertaining to international peace and security but also across the UN family. This latter conclusion can be assessed by examining the implementation of the forward-looking Declaration adopted on 24 October 1995 on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the UN. The latter called for the creation of new opportunities for peace, development, democracy and cooperation; and to redirect the UN towards greater service to humankind, especially to those who are suffering and deeply deprived. It committed member States to give to the 21st century a UN, equipped, financed, and structured to serve effectively the peoples of the world. The Declaration identified concrete activities pertaining to peace, development, equality, justice, and reform and the modernisation of the UNO.

While some progress has undoubtedly been made on SDGs and, grudgingly, even on climate change, the record of the United Nations over the past 25 Years has been spotty at best, including with respect to the maintenance of international peace and security (need one be reminded, for instance, of the long running crises over DPRK and in Afghanistan, the South China Sea, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, Libya, DRC, Sudan, and the cancer of terrorism), and the global financial and economic crisis of 2008. Yet, the system has survived for want of any real alternative wherein virtually all nation states are present, have the ability to discuss issues of vital importance, and assist smaller and disadvantaged nation states with their immediate problems. Also, most of the Specialised Agencies have soldiered on, and remain relevant.

However, work on critical transnational issues such as the maintenance of peace and security, climate change, development, technological change, information technology, disarmament, counter terrorism, reduction in disparities, migration, gender issues, cyber issues, to name a few, continue to elude a genuine and workable consensus. This is essentially because those who have the heft first focus on self and not the greater good of humanity. Will the fight against Covid-19 help show some light at the end of the tunnel? The portents so far are not particularly hopeful, though plurilateral discussions on how to fight the pandemic are happening. India has taken the initiative with SAARC and the G-20, but these are work in progress at best at the time of writing.

Why is the UN limping along and unable to fulfill its purposes and potential? This has been so essentially because those who set it up are unwilling to acknowledge that the power structure has - and continues to - evolve since the end of World War II and the pace, for instance, of globalisation, technological change, the rise of non-state actors, terrorism, and climate

change require the international community to take decisions for the benefit of all humankind, and not simply in the individual or minimal collective interest of the P-5. As India's Prime Minister Modi recalled at the UNGA, on 27 September 2019, that the face of the world is changing today, and proposed that, "In this new era, we will have to give new direction and energy to multilateralism and to the United Nations."

But will the P-5 permit taking a new direction that will necessarily dilute their power and influence in the UN system? Will they allow the UN to restore or regain some moral authority? The record so far would suggest not. The question then arises whether countries like India should continue to expend resources and political capital on seeking a permanent seat on the UNSC, knowing full well that the P-5 have no intention of allowing this and that, if once expanded, the permanent membership of the Council can continue to evolve to reflect the changing contemporary reality going forward.

Alongside the focus on the UN family, multilateralism, and multi polarity were, and remain, among the basic principles governing India's foreign policy. India's focus on those has grown particularly in the post-Cold War era. Prime Minister Modi's remark above also refers to this. The fact is that the UN and multilateralism are two sides of the same coin. The former is the more inclusive form of the latter. Plus, the latter can be used to strengthen the former (UN). More manageable multilateral groups/organisations can be used to address difficult issues among principal players, and be offered to the wider international community as doable options to address problems. India's linking of the UN with multilateralism is of long standing. Its vigorous support for, and defence of, the Non-Aligned Movement is a classic example. The driving force behind this effort was to take principled positions on the burning issues of the day, and on the future of the world community based on merit and the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. That the Movement got buffeted by the then great powers was, ironically, a sign of its success. Similarly, the thrust to develop South-South cooperation - which has today acquired a major dimension - offers alternatives to traditional donors. The Movement's initiatives fed directly into the UN agenda, and were often successful. The size of the Movement also meant that outcomes based on its initiatives were likely to carry greater legitimacy.

**The Group of 77 performed a similar role albeit in economic matters.**

Regrettably though, the efficacy of the Non-Aligned Movement and G-77 were seriously circumscribed by the divisive efforts of the great powers,

their control over the world economy, and determination to preserve their balance of power configurations. On matters of reforming the methodology for maintaining international peace and security as well (for example, UNPKOs), the P-5 were, and remain, determined to prevent any dilution of their powers. India has also been supportive since long of other efforts at strengthening multilateralism and multipolarity. For example, India is a strong proponent of European integration as it has evolved through stages into the European Union. India's support for ASEAN, and its role in the East Asian region and the evolving Indo-Pacific architecture, is also fulsome.

Other examples that come to mind include, for instance, the development of IORA, SCO, BRICS, IBSA, BIMSTEC, etc.

These are all arrangements consistent with the provisions of the UN Charter, and enable the development of cooperation to meet its principles and purposes. The development of multipolarity helps, among others, in reducing the excessive concentration of power and influence.

A particularly important form of multilateralism, bordering on the universal in global economic terms, is the evolution of the G-20 process which has proved to be successful in addressing the immediate challenge posed by the global financial and economic crisis of 2008. Regrettably, after the initial success and once a semblance of normalcy began to appear, the agreements on long term reform, sustainability, and the need for the development of infrastructure (especially in developing countries) were left by the wayside. This again was the result of the most powerful economies wanting to retain their privileged positions, and ignoring the need for structural reform of the international economy. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and other current protectionist and inward looking approaches of some major economies, may conceivably force a knocking together of heads, and elicit a better response since this time the impact is of an order that may negatively impact the existing global value addition and technology development chains. And, the margin for manoeuvre this time is more limited.

Like the UN, the G-20 also needs to urgently and seriously introspect, and begin to address the challenges of global sustainable development, eliminate poverty worldwide, and thereby ensure the maintenance of international peace, stability and security.

The G-20 could indeed supplant the distorted decision making structure that underline the UN system through the system of the permanent membership of its Security Council. The balance of influence in the G-20 will keep varying, depending on the changing economic status of each member and the ability to

build issue-based alliances. Questions regarding universality will, and can be, addressed, and the UN system used to provide legitimacy if needed.

The question remains though whether the P-5 will allow this. Logic would suggest they should; but logic is not what necessarily governs the conduct of international relations. Statesmanship of a high order is needed if the collective damage imposed by unsustainable life styles is to be undone. A few days lock down in many parts of the world due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic suggests that the damage is reversible. Will lessons be learnt? Can the UN, or will the UN system or the G-20 be allowed to rise to the occasion? Or will the response be to simply pump in more money, and exacerbate the debt mountains in the major economies?

The challenges facing the United Nations on the eve of the 75th Anniversary of the signing of the Charter in June 2020 are indeed unprecedented!

The question then arises: has the United Nations failed? Can multilateralism replace or rescue it?

It would be incorrect and unfair to say that the UN has failed. It has had many successes, including in terms of maintaining peace and security. Ironically, its track record during the Cold War period appears to be better than thereafter. The Specialised Agencies too have several successes to their credit, though their performance in the post-Cold War era again raises questions, particularly on account of the USA's approach towards them.

The reality is that the UN system has greatly underperformed, though the perspective of the smaller countries on the development benefits received maybe different in this regard. This is the result of the interplay among the great powers and their allies. More critically though, the UN has not been allowed to evolve and adapt to the changing geo-political and geo-economic realities and the imperatives of technological innovation. The world today is driven by technology in a manner that was underestimated at the turn of this century. The institutions and instrumentalities of the UN and multilateralism have to change if the world is to succeed in facing the critical and complex challenges it faces ranging from terrorism to climate change, to environmental degradation, to growing inequality and migration, to sectarian conflict, to drugs, etc., to representative governance, to cyber security, to security of outer space, and to the speed and content of technological change.

Multilateralism must have a future if humanity has to survive. And, the United Nations provides the universality which is ideally needed.

It is not surprising that those who wield power today, no matter how diminished, do not wish to give it up. They are grudging even to share it. This, unfortunately, is human nature reflected in international relations. However, the forces of change are inexorable, and no one country or small group can claim to be eternally entitled. A globalised, developed, secure, and stable world that is sustainable requires multilateral cooperation, and a drastically reformed set of international institutions for this purpose. The status quo cannot be indefinitely sustained. That would be a historical anomaly. Hopefully, the change will happen peacefully.

In the contemporary world, interdependencies have grown intense, but are now being questioned for more than one reason. Can they, or should they, be diluted? Change is inevitable, and adjustment to evolving requirements and dependencies will, no doubt, be adjusted, taking into account the need for reliability and strategic independence. But the need for multilateral mechanisms and a near universal, reformed, United Nations will remain a necessary precondition for a safe, secure, and peaceful world that is governed by universally adopted norms and laws. This is particularly important for a very large, fast growing developing country such as India which is a team player who is more than willing to meet the demands placed on it by the international community (The latter is based on India's proven track record ever since its independence). It is equally important for India to be a committed and active participant in international law making.

India's commitment to multilateralism and to a reformed United Nations has support across the political spectrum in the country. It should continue to work to reform and modernise the UN, and simultaneously participate in existing and new multilateral and plurilateral groupings/institutions/arrangements. Where necessary, it should continue to take the initiative to establish new multilateral mechanisms. It has done so with the International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. India's sustained development over the last four decades, and its future prospects for growth enable it to initiate multilateral initiatives on critical issues on the international agenda. This provides an additional thrust to its foreign policy, and to the development of India as a strong pole in a multipolar world that would underpin both reformed multilateral and UN systems which would axiomatically include India in their principal decision making structures.

\*\*\*