

'BY ANY CALCULUS, INDIA QUALIFIES FOR UNSC PERMANENT SEAT'

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: UNO and its various Agencies

Syed Akbaruddin , India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, retires on Thursday. The diplomat discussed a range of topics related to India at the UN, including the country's bid for permanent membership at the Security Council. Edited excerpts:

India is due for election to the temporary membership of the UN Security Council later this year, for the 2021-22 period. What do you think will be the priorities for India to work on?

India in many ways is a *sui generis* country. It's a country of a billion-plus, it's a country which is a democracy, perhaps the only example in history of a billion-plus people working together in a democratic framework. We will bring to it those values and strengths of being able to work cohesively among disparate entities. That's our USP, we try and work out solutions.

One of the biggest issues that will confront all multilateral organisations and certainly the Security Council will be issues which are beyond borders. Issues of ... the global commons, whether it is in cases of public health as we are now seeing in the current pandemic, but other issues, for example, cyber [issues]. There are no regulatory mechanisms or no rules on that, and that's another.

A third one is issues of high seas. Again, beyond your EEZ [exclusive economic zone], there is very limited understanding of what states can do and what states can't do. Now, why should we focus on these broader thematic issues? It's because you'll see our experience has been: ungoverned spaces lead to opportunities for those who are inimical to global governance to breed, whether it is in states or it is beyond state boundaries, this has been the experience, and therefore, we as a country would like to focus on these things.

Has India got closer to permanent member status at the Security Council in the past four or five years?

One of those aspirational goals was, is and will remain permanent membership to the Security Council, because we feel by any present day calculus, we would qualify. Now, the issue of the expansion and reform of the Security Council is not an India-centric issue. It is an issue which entails a whole host of teams, because, as I told you, everybody acknowledges that India is *sui generis*. A billion-plus people not being permanently in an organisation which starts with, 'We the peoples of the United Nations'. You can't have that dichotomy between an organisation, which says, "I'm ready, I work on behalf of the peoples of the world," and keeps such a big country representing more than a billion people out.

On India's membership, there are very few discordant notes, but there are other issues. There are people who feel that matters relating to, for example, the veto are important factors. There are others who feel, 'Should it be that every region expands or are there some regions that are already represented adequately (or not)?' There are a multiplicity of other issues which are fairly complex in nature.

What is India's position on accepting permanent membership in case it doesn't carry veto power? And what, if anything, will actually change China's position on India becoming a

permanent member?

If you look at the voting pattern at that stage when the reform or the expansion from 11 to 15 happened by increasing four non-permanent members, none of those present there as permanent members right now voted in favour. There were some who opposed, there were others who abstained. The only representative at that stage who voted in favour of change was the Republic of China. Now, even with that sort of vote, in two years, everybody accepted the vote and ratified it...in diplomacy, there is no finality in these things of what people say, people evolve, situations change, global pressures will mount.

The choice will have to be, do you want an organ which is moribund, which is not effective, which is not legitimate, which is not credible, or do you want, in the evolving situation, a body which is able to work — with its difficulties, but it's able to work. Therefore, we bet on optimism and we bet that change will happen and people who may have reluctance today will join.

On the veto...

Of course, there are many of us who feel that veto was the outcome of a situation in 1945 when the world was different. Our view is that we do not oppose any approach that is non-discriminatory in nature. You are aware that on the issue of discrimination, we have a very strong historical record, whether it was going back to the NPT [Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty]. At that stage, it was discriminating among those who had nuclear weapons before a certain date or later, similarly on the issue of veto. If there are restrictions, these need to be applicable to everyone. These are difficult calls and those discussions have not yet happened.

Would you agree that the issue of Jammu and Kashmir has been internationalised after the August 5 decision by the government, given how many times it's been raised including by the Secretary-General and the Security Council after so many decades [last taken up in 1971]?

[Mr. Akbaruddin said that the Secretary-General issues a list of all items that are/were discussed formally in the Security Council, including those that have not been discussed in decades but are listed at the behest of delegations. These include 'The Hyderabad Question' and 'The India-Pakistan Question' of 1948].

I'm not contesting that is on the agenda because the agenda, the way it works is that one country can put in anything on the agenda to continue, even if not discussed for... in the case of Hyderabad now, 70 years. Being on the agenda is not an issue of concern to anybody.

But it [Jammu and Kashmir] was discussed informally...

Informal consultations by definition are not considered to be formal if in any nature. Yes, any country can raise anything on the agenda or outside the agenda in an informal setting. Like you and I when we sit and have a cup of tea, discuss anything under the agenda. Sure. We have not contested that this was informally raised, but you also are aware of those outcomes. No country, not even the informal outcome was shared with anybody, so you can see what the inclination of most members is. I can repeat it, I've done it many a time before, that there is no interest in addressing that issue in the Council in any format. That's why those who had raised it raised it three times, but look at the way each time they raised it, the returns have diminished.

So is it fair to say that you disagree that it's been "internationalised"?

In a globalised world, you can say anything is internationalised, but I don't think there is any fear that if something is... States are sovereign, they can do what they want, but if you don't have resonance, it's a loss.

How does plurilateralism — a concept India has backed — work during a pandemic? Wouldn't multilateralism — which is, in many senses, under attack right now — work better given the pandemic affects everyone?

I don't see a conflict between the two frameworks. There are multiple levels at which you can address the same issue and perhaps that's the way to go about it. There is a national effort under way. That does not detract from a regional effort like we've tried in SAARC with our Health Ministers. The EU is trying in some way in the European Union countries, there are others trying elsewhere. However, at some stage, you will also have to address it multilaterally, beyond plurilaterally. A virus knows no borders, so there will always be a threat to us unless we address it across the board, and that's the role of multilateralism.

India has achieved quite a bit in having its position on a global response to terrorism acknowledged. However, we haven't been able to make headway on the proposal for a comprehensive convention on international terrorism, the CCIT. Which regions and countries have been the biggest hurdles?

We need to look at the global context in which we made that submission and what is the situation today? We made the submission when I was a young First Secretary here in 1996. At that stage, terrorism was not even looked on as anything beyond a law and order issue.

Today, we've come a long way on that. There are multiple elements... of what we put in there, which are now norms in the global discourse. They are now part of many Security Council resolutions, itself. The discourse has absorbed many elements from that.

There still remain areas where we need to address them. Terrorism financing — there are Security Council resolutions; terrorism nuclear issues — there is a separate convention. The norm that nothing justifies terrorism is now accepted globally. We've come a long way on that, of course.

(*With inputs from*

Suhasini Haidar)

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(*For the full interview, log on to bit.ly/Akbaruddin*)

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