

PURSUING NATIONAL INTERESTS, AT THE UN HIGH TABLE

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

India deserves a permanent seat at the high table of the United Nations, the UN Security Council (UNSC), but is almost sure not to have it anytime soon. Therefore, its [two-year non-permanent stint at the UNSC](#) should be viewed as a once-in-a-decade opportunity to clearly identify and pursue its national interests regionally and globally, rather than chase chimerical goals such as a permanent membership or to issue please-all platitudes.

The UNSC, unfortunately, is where the leading powers of the international system dictate terms, show less powerful countries their 'rightful' place, fight among themselves even as they negotiate deals outside the horseshoe-tabled room. This is not where the lofty ideals of the human race come to fruition; nor are the members of the elite body persuaded by moral and ethical considerations. Seated at the table for the eighth time, New Delhi knows the game. And yet, sometimes it becomes a victim of its own past rhetoric and forgets to play the game to its advantage.

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New Delhi's entry into the UNSC coincides with the emergence of a new world order, one marked by systemic uncertainty, little care for global commons, absence of global leadership, the steady division of the world into rival blocs, and an age marked by unabashed pursuit of narrow national interests, putting even the rhetoric about a value-based global order on the backburner. Efforts by the newly-inaugurated Biden administration in the United States, especially to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement and, possibly, the Iran nuclear deal, may go on to ameliorate some of the harsh impact of this dog-eat-dog global (dis)order. However, the deep systemic malaise that has already set in will outlive the good 'intentions' of a democratic administration in Washington DC, delayed as they come.

The UNSC has also reached a point wherein its very relevance is in serious doubt, let alone serious expectations of it to live up to its primary objective: "the maintenance of international peace and security".

India is different too. It is no longer an ardent believer in the fantastical claims about a perfect world at harmony with itself, nor is it a timid bystander in global geopolitics. Contemporary India is more self-confident, resolute and wants to be a shaper of geopolitics even though it lacks the material wherewithal, economic heft, and domestic consensus, to action its ambitions. But at least its mindset has changed, from being satisfied on the margins to desiring to be at the centre stage. On the downside, however, its hard realism is not just a foreign policy attribute but reflective of and stems from its domestic political dynamics, worrying as it were.

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New Delhi's pursuit of its interests at the UNSC should, therefore, reflect its material and geopolitical limitations, and its energies should be focused on a clearly identified agenda.

New Delhi's tenure at the UNSC comes in the wake of its growing military rivalry with Beijing, the impact of which has already started to be felt at the UNSC meetings in New York. China's opposition to having India chair the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) in 2022 was a

precursor to the things to come on the high table. If the Biden administration were to continue with Donald Trump's policy of pushing back Chinese aggression including at the UNSC, New Delhi might find itself some useful allies in checking Chinese aggression in the region.

Greater Indian alignment with the West at the UNSC, an unavoidable outcome, could, however, widen the growing gulf between Moscow and New Delhi given Russia's increasing dependence on Beijing in more ways than one. However unfortunate that may be, it might not be possible for New Delhi to sit on the fence anymore; doing so would bring more harm than goodwill in an international system where battlelines are sharpening by the day.

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India's seat at the UNSC is also significant *vis-à-vis* China because the next two years will be key to ensure checking further Chinese incursions along the Line of Actual Control and building up enough infrastructure and mobilising sufficient forces in the forward areas. Our experience from Doklam to Ladakh to now Arunachal Pradesh points in one direction — that Chinese land grab attempts will continue unabated and in pushing Beijing back, we would need all the assistance we can get.

Terror is likely to be a major focus for India at the UNSC. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's statement at the UNSC Ministerial Meeting on the 20th Anniversary of Security Council Resolution 1373 and the establishment of the Counter Terrorism Committee has set the stage for New Delhi's approach on the issue: "Terrorists are terrorists; there are no good and bad ones. Those who propagate this distinction have an agenda. And those who cover up for them are just as culpable".

New Delhi recently assumed the chair of the [Taliban sanctions committee](#) which assumes significance given the fast-moving developments in Afghanistan and India's new-found desire to engage with the Taliban. The issue of terrorism has been a major theme in the country's national security and foreign policy discourse for decades now, more so of this government. India must, however, formulate its policy towards terrorism with far more diplomatic finesse and political nuance especially given that it is chairing the Taliban sanctions committee while courting the very same Taliban. More so, a nuanced policy towards the Taliban would be difficult to sustain without a similar treatment of domestic insurgencies. Put differently, if New Delhi wishes to make its mark on the global discourse and policy formulation on terrorism, it would need to approach them with far more clarity and intellectual coherence.

Yet another area New Delhi would want to focus on while seated at the high table would be to use the forum and its engagement there to build coalitions among like-minded states and set out its priorities for the next decade — from climate change to non-proliferation. While these topics might only concern the UNSC in varying degrees, New Delhi should use its bargaining power at the UNSC to pursue its national interests in other forums and domains as well.

In first speech at UNSC, Jaishankar slams China and Pakistan on terrorism

Perhaps more significantly, New Delhi's UNSC strategy should involve shaping the narrative and global policy engagement *vis-à-vis* perhaps one of the biggest grand strategic concepts of our time — the Indo-Pacific. Given India's centrality in the Indo-Pacific region and the growing global interest in the concept, New Delhi would do well to take it upon itself to shape the narrative around it. In doing so, it should, through the UNSC and other means, court Moscow once again and assuage its concerns about the Indo-Pacific.

New Delhi's pursuit of its national interest at and through the UNSC must also be tempered by

the sobering fact that the UNSC is unlikely to admit new members any time soon, if ever at all. India's past global engagements and efforts have often been contingent on the hope that it would one day be admitted to the UNSC given its irrefutable claim. But a cursory glance at the recent debates on UNSC reforms and the state of the international system today should tell us that bending over backwards to please the big five to gain entry into the UNSC will not make a difference. So New Delhi must focus its energies on what it can achieve during the short period that it would be in the UNSC rather than what it wishes happened.

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