

# IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD, A SEAT AT THE GLOBAL HIGH TABLE

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

India will be [back in the United Nations Security Council](#) (UNSC) for a two-year term beginning January 1, 2021 at a critical time in the history of the UN. It is hoped that by then COVID-19 will have subsided, a U.S. President will have been elected, and the contours of a new world order may have emerged. India is serving for the eighth time and has a record of contributing to some of the seminal resolutions of the UNSC. As a consequence of the long debate on the expansion of the UNSC, many countries which have never served on the Council have begun to claim their turn. Earlier, India, Japan, Pakistan and some others used to get elected more frequently. Compared to the retiring members, the newly elected members are more politically significant. India's reputation for taking balanced positions and consensus building will be welcomed by the other members.

The basic contest for the non-permanent seats takes place in the respective regional groups and their sub-groups. Voting in the General Assembly is to fulfil the requirement of countries having to secure a two-thirds majority of the member states. If there is regional endorsement, all countries, except those with any grievance against the candidates, vote for them and they sail through easily. But regional endorsement is becoming difficult as countries inscribe their names years in advance and those squatting countries have to be persuaded to vacate the place through various means. Last time, it was Kazakhstan which vacated the place for India; this time, it was Afghanistan. India could not have got the endorsement without such gestures from friendly countries. It must have taken some deft activity by our mission to accomplish these feats.

Editorial | [At the high table: On India's U.N. Security Council win](#)

Voting in the General Assembly is not without its own excitement. The two-thirds majority is assured, but the competition is to secure all the votes cast. But no one gets that as the ballot is secret and adversaries may vote against the candidates. For instance, out of the 192 votes cast, India got 184 and no one will ever know the eight countries that did not vote for India. But it is a matter of concern that there are so many countries with grievances against India. In the order of the number of votes received by each one, the countries elected were Mexico, India, Norway, Ireland and Kenya. Since there was no endorsement in the African Group, Kenya had to go for a second round against Djibouti. Kenya was the favourite of the West and Djibouti was supported by China and the Islamic states. In the Western European and Others Group, Canada lost to Ireland in a contentious contest.

One special feature this year was the COVID-19 effect. Ambassadors were allowed to enter the General Assembly Hall one by one to cast their ballots instead of the simultaneous voting that usually takes place. The campaign was also unconventional — it took place through Zoom conversations and the sharing of brochures and pamphlets rather than through meetings at bars and restaurants serving haute cuisine around the UN. The candidates may also have saved money as this is normally an occasion for splurging.

Though India's success was assured, the new Permanent Representative of India, T.S. Tirumurti, who has a formidable reputation for multilateral skills, produced an impressive multimedia presentation with memories of India's sterling role in the annals of the UN. Asked for his reaction to the victory, he said, "In the COVID and the post-COVID world, India will continue

to provide leadership and a new orientation for a reformed multilateral system.” How far the UN will be able to reform itself in the new situation remains uncertain. The expected changes after 9/11 never materialised because of vested interests and traditional positions. The UN did not succeed in either defining terrorism or in adopting the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. Counter-terrorism will be one of the highest priorities for India at the UNSC.

Also read | [India will be Security Council President for August 2021: U.N.](#)

India’s election as a non-permanent member has understandably ignited the hope that its quest for permanent membership of the Council may succeed. Nothing is farther from the truth. Operating within the provisions of the Charter is one thing and seeking to amend the Charter to add new permanent members is quite another. The debate has thrown up many ideas, but till today, none of the proposals has the possibility of securing two-thirds majority of the General Assembly and the votes of the five permanent members. It is fairly certain that no expansion of the permanent members will take place under the existing provisions of the Charter. We may blame the permanent members for being adamant about protecting their privileged positions, but the fact is that a majority of the UN members are against the privileges of the permanent members, particularly the veto. India’s performance in the Council may earn it respect, but it will not lead to its elevation to permanent membership as the opposition to any expansion is not India-specific.

India will have a higher profile at the UN for the next two years as the non-permanent members have a collective veto over every resolution in the Council. Permanent members can prevent adoption of resolutions by themselves, but they need at least nine votes to get a resolution passed. India will also have a rare peep into the consultations chamber of the UNSC, which is closed to non-members of the Council. It is there that hard negotiations take place without any public record, characterised by arm-twisting and threats of veto. The pressure of work of the mission will also increase because India will get involved in many issues in which it may not have any direct interest. Since India does not have a veto, it shall have to proceed cautiously not to offend anyone, lest they should go against it when a matter of vital interest for the country comes up in the Council.

Also read | [India’s UNSC non-permanent seat: Modi thanks global community](#)

India’s mission in New York has earned a reputation that it is next only to the permanent members in influence. But whether it will be able to deal with traditional challenges in novel ways will depend on the turns and twists in an uncertain world.

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