

# CONCLUDING ON A HIGH NOTE, IN MANHATTAN

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'It was during the Ukraine conflict that India's independent stand calling for dialogue and peace struck a chord with many developing countries' | Photo Credit: AFP

India concluded its eighth stint in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) at the end of December 2022. And, by any yardstick, its two-year stint has been unprecedented. It has been my privilege to serve as India's Ambassador/Permanent Representative in the Council for 18 out of the 24 months.

I arrived in New York in May 2020, on a relief flight, when COVID-19 was at its peak, only to find the empty roads of Manhattan. The UN had begun conducting its sessions virtually. Fortunately, by May 2021, the UNSC resumed physical meetings in the Council Chamber.

When we entered the Council on January 1, 2021, we had clear priorities. We focused inter alia on maritime security, terrorism, UN peacekeeping, reformed multilateralism and the Global South. India was elected Chair of three important UNSC Committees: the Taliban Sanctions Committee, Libyan Sanctions Committee and Counter-terrorism Committee.

The Prime Minister of India chaired for the first time a UNSC meeting on maritime security. The Presidential Statement issued was the first holistic document on this issue which, for the first time, had a direct reference to UN Convention on the Law of the Sea as international law setting out the legal framework in the context of maritime activities. It also called for, inter alia, freedom of navigation, anti-piracy and combating terror and transnational crime at sea.

Old conflicts on the UNSC agenda festered and new conflicts were added — Myanmar, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Mali or Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Haiti, Libya, the Sahel, and of course Ukraine. The Council stood polarised, unable to act decisively. India strove to bring them on the same page.

There was a military takeover in Myanmar on February 1, 2021 soon after we came into the Council. The Permanent-5 (P-5) were pulling in opposing directions while the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) counselled caution. India shares a nearly 1,700 kilometre-long border with Myanmar and it was vital to stop violence, bring in stability and ensure democratic processes went forward. India ensured balanced and comprehensive Council pronouncements, which finally culminated in a resolution on Myanmar (adopted under our presidency) in December 2022.

In August 2021, the Taliban forcefully seized power in Afghanistan. India was able to steer the negotiations which resulted in UNSC Resolution 2593 laying down benchmarks: on stopping cross-border terrorism from Afghan soil, including from proscribed UN terrorist entities in Pakistan; protecting the rights of women, minorities and children; ensuring an inclusive government, and providing humanitarian assistance. With the UN Secretariat and the West trying to engage the Taliban without success, a firm position on the Taliban upholding these benchmarks continues to be the best course of action.

It was during the Ukraine conflict that India's independent stand calling for dialogue and peace struck a chord with many developing countries, since they themselves were affected by unilateral sanctions. All levers were being weaponised. India spoke out against such sanctions inter alia on oil, food and fertilizers. With this conflict spilling over into India's G-20 Presidency, it is time for India, as a credible voice, to launch an initiative to convert its proactive position into action.

India has enhanced the focus on terrorism. As Chair of the UNSC Counter-terrorism Committee (CTC), we brought the CTC meeting to India in October 2022. While India's attempt to list terrorists under UNSC Resolution 1267 sanctions (along with the U.S.) was thwarted, in a significant development, the proposal to list Abdul Rehman Makki, Deputy Amir/Chief of the Lashkar-e-Taiba was approved by the UNSC. This listing was the first, with India as a proposer.

India has been the largest contributor of UN peacekeepers, including as a pioneer in women peacekeeping. Its launching of the UNITE Aware technology platform to strengthen real-time protection of peacekeepers is to be noted. In August 2021, we piloted the first UNSC resolution by India in more than five decades, calling for accountability for crimes against peacekeepers. We gifted two lakh vaccines to all UN peacekeepers.

Our focus on the developing world, especially Africa and West Asia, was enhanced, given our close historical relations.

In December 2021, we thwarted a move by the West to wrest climate change from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change-led process and bring it under the ambit of the UNSC, where the P-5 are also major historical polluters. The draft resolution was defeated in the Council when India and Russia voted against. A change in the climate change architecture would have shut out the voice of the Global South, especially Small Island Developing States.

In a first, India also raised the issue of a contemporary form of religiophobia in the Council when, while condemning phobia against Abrahamic religions, it forcefully put forth the need to combat rising hate crimes and phobias against non-Abrahamic religions as well. With hate crimes being fuelled abroad by vested interests, India's stand needs to be robustly taken forward.

The culmination was a discussion under India's Presidency on the need for immediate reform of the Council. The Indian team's performance over two years is testimony to why India needs to be at the horseshoe table permanently.

T.S. Tirumurti was Ambassador/Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations in New York between 2020-22, and President of the UN Security Council for August 2021. The views expressed are personal

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