

ABOUT TIME INDIA GOT A SEAT AT THE HIGH TABLE

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

Modi's call for reforms of the United Nations should be heeded, given how the body is losing authority, and the urgency to regain it. For a start, India needs a voice to match its stature

In an official visit to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called upon all like-minded nations to push for an overhaul of the United Nations (UN) structure. The UN, he said, was being used by some members as a tool rather than an institution to resolve global conflicts. His criticism holds merit. Formed in 1945 after World War II, the global body has been losing relevance. It began with that war's victors, the US, Russia, UK, France and China, as permanent members of its Security Council, and for decades afterwards, the Big Five did exercise disproportionate clout in world affairs by virtue of their nuclear arsenals. Today, this is no longer so. If contemporary geopolitical realities are to be taken into account, then the Council needs to induct other countries as veto holders as well. But the basic matrix of power within the UN's apex decision-making unit has remained stuck in time. Over the past two decades, it has become painfully clear that such structural deficiencies have rendered the UN largely ineffective on matters of war and peace. If reforms are not undertaken soon enough, it risks turning into a relic of the 20th century.

The most glaring sign of the UN's lost authority was the US's 2003 offensive against Iraq, as part of its War on Terror in response to the 9/11 attacks. This campaign did not have any UN sanction, nor was it sought, unlike America's previous strikes against Baghdad, the 1990-91 effort to evict Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Since then, unilateral military actions by major world powers seem to have gained a measure of legitimacy, and the very idea of the Council working out solutions to international problems has turned anachronistic. This may suit some countries that are used to having their way, such as the US, but open disregard for multilateral deliberations has reduced the UN to a talk shop. This is disconcerting. As the so-called American century gives way to an Asian one, it's all the more crucial that the UN regains the stature needed to act as a force for peace.

India has a strong case for permanent membership of the Council, although China has been thwarting its entry. India is a rapidly emerging economy, provides large numbers of soldiers to the UN for peace-keeping missions, and is armed with nuclear weapons, for which it has a clear no-first-use policy stated upfront. Most crucially, the country accounts for almost one-fifth of all humanity. These are credentials enough. Nuclear hyphenation with Pakistan, an arch-rival in global perception, however, has been a stumbling block, one that Islamabad's ties with Beijing make hard to remove. Over time, the logic of economic heft could work in India's favour. The country's market potential underlies New Delhi's relations with Riyadh, for example, and how strongly other nations rally to India's cause may depend on how their interests are served by the rise of our economy. Of course, UN reforms would mean seats at the high table for other worthy candidates, too. Realpolitik may determine the eventual outcome of a structural rehaul, and India could arguably do with a better record on conflict resolution, but a country of our strength and diversity simply cannot be left out of the power matrix for much longer. As the UN turns 75 next year, it's high time it makes space for India at the high table.

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