

CHINA'S RISE AND FALL AT THE UN

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

The [United Nations turned 75](#) this year. In normal times, September would have seen a grand Summit in New York but because of the [novel coronavirus pandemic](#), world leaders were forced to do with video messages to the UN General Assembly. The UN season, though, started on an auspicious note for India, with India besting China in the elections for a seat on the UN's [Commission on the Status of Women \(CSW\)](#). This was the first such victory in a decade.

To add to China's woes, soon after the CSW vote, it lost another election, this time to tiny Samoa for a seat on the [UN Statistical Commission](#). And a couple of days ago, it [just about managed to get elected to the UN High Rights Council](#), coming fourth out of five contestants for four vacancies. Earlier, China's candidate had lost to a Singaporean in the race for DG World Intellectual Property Organization.

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In 2011, India defeated China in a one-on-one election at the UN for a place on the Joint Inspection Unit. Thereafter, taking advantage of its position as a member of the P-5 and as a huge aid giver, China made itself invincible in UN elections, capturing, among others, the top positions at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). Indeed, India, too, felt this was a UN election behemoth not to be trifled with, and even as late as last year, pulled out its candidate against the Chinese from the race for the Director-General, FAO.

But how did China rise to this pre-eminent position at the UN. It all began, as is the case with [India and multilateralism](#), a century ago with World War I. India was one of the largest contributors of soldiers in the war against Germany and Turkey and became a founding member of the League of Nations even though it was a colony. At the end of WWII, India participated in all the three UN conferences becoming a charter member of the UN even before Independence. Pakistan, on the other hand, joined the UN in September 1947 on application.

China saw an opportunity in World War I to rid itself of German occupation from some of its territory and allied with the United Kingdom and France. But they could not send soldiers as the Japanese, who were in competition with the Germans for the same Chinese territories, also allied against the Germans and refused to countenance Chinese troops in action. So, the Chinese sent large numbers of labour to support the western war efforts against Germany and won an invite at the Versailles Peace Conference. Things, however, did not turn out well as the West sided with the Japanese and China refused to sign the Versailles Peace Treaty.

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The United States, though, was sympathetic to the Chinese cause, and a few years later helped reach a peace deal between China and Germany.

World War II saw strong U.S.-China collaboration against the Japanese, including U.S. operations conducted from India. An incidental but pleasant fallout of the stationing of U.S. forces in India was the establishment of ice-cream makers in India who, at the end of the war, bought the plants brought by the U.S. for its forces.

These old trans-Pacific linkages of the U.S. and China, including the presence of a very large Chinese community on the west coast of the U.S., are not well known, especially in India, but China is really “the forgotten ally” of the U.S. to use an expression coined by Oxford Professor Rana Mitter. This is important to bear in mind as the world, and India, pontificates the outcome of a U.S.-China contestation and its implications for multilateralism.

Their bilateral ties saw the U.S. include the Chinese in the ‘Four Policemen’, a group of the most important countries for ensuring world peace post- World War II, along with the real victors of World War II — the U.S., the USSR and the U.K. This number morphed into the P-5, with France being added by the UK at the San Francisco conference held in 1945 where the UN charter was finalised. The pure multilateralism of the League of Nations was thus infused with a multipolarity, with the U.S. as the sheet anchor.

The U.S. also thought that China would act as a bulwark against the USSR. But that was the Republic of China (RoC) led by the Kuomintang who were soon routed on the mainland by the communists and found themselves on the island of Formosa (now Taiwan). This is important as the People’s Republic of China (PRC) would have us believe that it was a founder of the UN.

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RoC retained the UN seat of China till 1971 when it was expelled from the UN and the PRC admitted as a member giving it a *de jure* pole position at the UN. U.S. President Richard Nixon visited Beijing in 1972 and the U.S.’s opening to the PRC certainly paved the way for the unprecedented economic growth of China. However, in its march to global hegemony, the COVID-19 pandemic may have caught China on the wrong foot.

Multilateralism is under unprecedented stress fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic and a certain disenchantment with globalisation. At the root, of course, is the rise of China and its challenge to U.S. global hegemony. But for global action there are no substitutes for multilateralism backed by strong multipolarity relevant to contemporary realities. This demands institutional reform and not just engagement with extant issues which form the song and dance of diplomacy.

Perhaps most important are institutional reforms in the UN Security Council (UNSC) and at the Bretton Woods Institutions so that their governance leverages the capabilities of the major players among both the developed and developing countries. In this context, it is good that recently India, Germany, Japan and Brazil (G-4) have sought to refocus the UN on UNSC reform. As proponents of reform, they must remain focused and determined even if these changes do not happen easily or come soon. This is also the way forward for India which is not yet in the front row.

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Earlier in the year, [India was elected as a non-permanent member of the UNSC](#) for a two-year term. India will also host the BRICS Summit next year and G-20 Summit in 2022. These are openings for India in coalescing the world in critical areas that require global cooperation especially climate change, pandemics and counter-terrorism. India also needs to invest in the UN with increased financial contributions in line with its share of the world economy and by placing its people in key multilateral positions.

Three defeats and a near defeat for China in elections to UN bodies post-COVID-19 and the negative reaction to its threat of veto to forestall a discussion on the pandemic in the UNSC clearly point to a disenchantment with China in the globe and is a thumbs down for them. It is also an opportune moment for [India and a Reformed Multilateralism](#).

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END

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