

The challenge of reforming the UN

Every year it is in the month of September when the world remembers the UN as a galaxy of leaders descend on New York. This year is a bit more interesting with US President Donald Trump making his debut at the UN General Assembly's annual deliberations. The rest of the world leaders are struggling to formulate their own strategies on how to handle President Trump's "America First" agenda as the White House beats the war drums in North Korea and Iran, and continues to threaten to pull out of trade and climate deals.

The Trump administration is leading a high-profile effort this year for UN reforms. In his remarks at a UN "Management, Security and Development" meeting convened by UN secretary general António Guterres, the US President said that "in recent years, the UN has not reached its full potential due to bureaucracy and mismanagement". However, contrary to expectations, Trump pledged that the US would "be partners in your work" to make the organization a more effective force for peace across the globe. Trump had also earlier accused the UN of causing problems than solving them. "When do you see the UN solving problems? They don't. They cause problems," he said. "So, if it lives up to the potential, it's a great thing. And if it doesn't, it's a waste of time and money."

Reforming the UN is big on the Trump administration's agenda and this reforms agenda is largely based on two principles: sovereignty and accountability.

In his main speech to the UN General Assembly, Trump underscored the centrality of sovereign states which worked for the betterment of their citizens. Where the US leadership over the last few decades has been making globalization the centrepiece of its global outreach, Trump's vision is anchored in his "America First" approach with national sovereignty as the main pillar of the internal system.

The US is also keen that the management of the UN becomes more accountable and transparent as it remains the largest contributor to the UN budget, in-line with its position as the world's largest economy. It pays 25% of the UN's regular operating budget and over 28% of the separate peacekeeping budget. The Trump administration has been critical of the UN's overreliance on the US and wants a more equitable sharing of burden. It has been instrumental in the \$600-million cut to the UN peacekeeping budget this year.

The challenge, of course, remains of how to operationalize these reforms. The UN is structured in such a way that the decision-making process is distributed among a wide range of countries and constituencies with often competing and contradictory views and interests. Russia and China, for example, did not attend the UN meeting on reforms.

For its part, India has suggested that the UN reforms need to be "broad-based and all-encompassing" and the changes should not be restricted to its secretariat only. India's permanent representative to the UN, Syed Akbaruddin, has made it clear that reforms cannot sidestep issues related to the governance of UN bodies. But India has extended its support to Trump's efforts at UN reforms, saying it should include the expansion of the world body's permanent and non-permanent members to keep pace with the changed times.

Since the end of the Cold War, India has been spearheading a move for reforms at the UN to make the world body more representative of the changing global realities while enhancing its credibility and effectiveness. India remains one of the largest contributors to the UN peacekeeping operations, providing almost 200,000 troops in nearly 50 of the 71 peacekeeping missions mandated over the past six decades.

It is not surprising, therefore, that New Delhi has been concerned about the post-Cold War international acceptance of the UN's questionable "right to intervene" where it believed it to be necessary, allowing the UN to act with little debate. The nature of the military operations increased both in number and complexity over an extremely short timescale.

Additionally, the UN peacekeepers were deployed to environments in which the belligerent parties were not entirely on board with the deployment, thus seriously threatening the safety of the troops under the UN flag. India has repeatedly underlined the dangers inherent in such a rapid transformation from traditional UN missions to these new operations.

Since the cessation of the Cold War there have been attempts to reform the international legal system to reflect the rights of the individual over and above those of the state. But India, along with other largely non-Western nations, has remained sceptical of these attempts at reforms, believing that any such reforms would afford the privileged few with the means to intervene, the moral justification to do so. Therefore, the Trump administration's focus on "sovereignty" as the defining feature of UN reforms will be welcomed by New Delhi.

But as India continues to expend its diplomatic capital on finding a seat at the UN Security Council, it will also have to articulate new ways of how the UN can be made more effective and efficient. There is a need to create a new balance between India's pursuit of its narrow national interest and its responsibility as a rising power to maintain global peace and stability.

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