

INDIA'S OPPORTUNITY AT THE UN

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

A United Nations logo and flag at the UN headquarters in New York. | Photo Credit: [ERIC THAYER](#)

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the UN General Assembly on September 27, his country will find itself in an unfamiliar position.

For the first time in some years, India is in the cross hairs of some segments of the international community, thanks to its recent actions in Jammu and Kashmir. While governments around the world have largely remained quiet, some influential voices have lambasted New Delhi's decision to dilute Article 370 and criticised the country over the effects of its ongoing lockdown in Kashmir.

In the U.S., members of Congress, the State Department, and even Bernie Sanders, a front-line 2020 presidential candidate, have registered their concern. It has been a long time since there was so much negative noise about India in Washington, where for quite a few years there has been — and rightly remains — a strong bipartisan consensus in favour of a close partnership.

Here, the annual UNGA meetings offer the government an opportunity to regain its footing in the court of international public opinion.

To achieve that outcome, the most reasonable, and realistic, expectation is for a speech that features two core components: a clear acknowledgement of the international community's concerns about human rights in Kashmir, and a focus on India's robust efforts to tackle the global development challenges that attract considerable concern in the UN and beyond, issues such as health, sanitation, and climate change.

Yes, it will be asking for too much from Mr. Modi if one expects him to mention, much less acknowledge concerns about, a sensitive issue that New Delhi regards as internal and does not want to get further internationalised. Still, Mr. Modi, by stating that he recognises the world's worries about the lockdown and its effects, can push back against global perceptions that his government is wholly dismissive of a real and serious problem. And by striking a note of humility, he could undercut the narrative of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan who, at the same forum, will in all likelihood come out with guns blazing on Kashmir.

What would also resonate well is a speech that underscores India's bona fides as a rising and responsible global power, in contrast to what are perceived by some overseas observers as irresponsible actions in Kashmir. Here, Mr. Modi can pick up where the late Sushma Swaraj, former Indian External Affairs Minister who delivered India's UNGA speech last year, left off. She highlighted India's progress in meeting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, particularly through increasing people's access to safe sanitation, and she spoke of India's efforts to mitigate the climate change threat. By homing in on India's track record in tackling challenges that affect nearly every nation, Mr. Modi can project his country as a willing and able global partner. This isn't to oversell the influence of the UNGA speeches. Outside of India, Mr. Modi's address won't exactly be must-see TV. Further, anti-Modi protests are planned during his time in New York, and media coverage of these protests could undercut the messages articulated in his speech.

Indeed, one UNGA speech won't eliminate the critical global narratives about India that have

emerged since August 5. So long as the Kashmir lockdown remains in place, and likely after it's lifted as well, and so long as New Delhi carries out a divisive social agenda, those narratives will be present. Still, for a government and a Prime Minister who place a premium on branding, the UNGA offers a useful opportunity to push back against growing threats to India's image. It's an opportunity that would be a pity to squander.

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