

CURRENT POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO RESTRUCTURE INDIA'S TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO THE UN

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

This week ought to have been a moment of celebration for the United Nations — [the 75th anniversary of its founding](#). But the [pandemic](#) has robbed the UN of all cheer. In a normal September, world leaders would be zipping through New York city creating innumerable traffic jams and running into each other in the UN lobby.

Thanks to the corona crisis, hardly any president or prime minister is showing up this year in New York, which is also one of the worst-affected cities in the United States. Even President Donald Trump, a native of New York, is not travelling in from nearby Washington. He will address the UN, like many other world leaders including Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#), through pre-recorded video statements.

The missing buzz at the UN is arguably less important than the fact that the [coronavirus](#) has exposed the structural weakness of the system that was set up amidst the ruins of the Second World War. Put simply, the UN has been unable to respond effectively to the once-in-a-century global crisis triggered by the coronavirus.

At the UN Security Council, China blocked a serious discussion on the origin and sources of the crisis. While the World Health Organisation did move a bit in that direction, the US was not satisfied with the outcome and walked out of the forum.

Those who view the UN through the realist prism are not surprised. If you cut through the collectivist rhetoric of the UN, it was meant, by design, to be a concert of great powers who had a permanent seat in the Security Council. In other words, cooperation among the great powers was the precondition for its success in the security arena.

Barring a brief decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, collective security has been hard to come by. During the Cold War, Washington and Moscow were at each other's throats and the UNSC was deadlocked. During the brief unipolar moment of the 1990s, post-Soviet Russia was willing to acquiesce to the sweeping US agenda for global security. China, which was getting its internal act together after the Tiananmen uprising of 1989, was feeling its way around multilateral institutions and avoided any challenge to the US and West.

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All that began to change in the first decade of the millennium, when Russia and China began to offer resistance to US dominance. By the dawn of the third decade, the conflict between the US on the one hand and China and Russia on the other has become full-blown. To make matters more complicated, the West itself is divided. Despite the enduring post-War alliances, there is a growing divergence between Washington and its European partners on many global issues.

Some of the differences between the US and the other powers will be very visible this week on the Iran question. Although he has walked out of the nuclear deal with Iran, Trump wants to continue the UN sanctions on Iran. Other powers, including the US's allies in Europe, are not willing to follow the American lead on this.

The discord between the US and its European partners underlines the problem with viewing the world through the traditional East-West prism. Nor is it useful to think of the debates in the UN as a contest between the US and the rest. The US has never been more divided within itself on global issues as it is today. Rejection of post-War multilateralism and post-Cold War globalism is at the heart of Trump's "America First" foreign policy. Trump's Democratic rival in this year's presidential election, Joe Biden, wants to put multilateralism at the very heart of his administration's foreign policy. If Trump argues that multilateral institutions have not served America's interests, Biden insists that multilateralism is the most sensible means to pursue US interests. Biden has promised to re-join the nuclear agreement with Iran, albeit with new conditions, put the US back in the global coalition to limit climate change, and return to the WHO.

If you are a pessimist, the current political fragmentation augurs poorly for India's two-year tenure at the UNSC starting next January. If you are an optimist, this is an opportunity to restructure India's traditional approach to the UN. And if you are an activist, there are huge possibilities for enhancing India's multilateral standing.

To succeed, though, Delhi must come to terms with a number of propositions. First, it should shed the illusion, cultivated since the 50th anniversary of the UN in 1995, that the expansion of the permanent membership of UNSC, with or without veto, is within reach. UNSC reform is unlikely to happen soon.

Second, India's own experience during the Cold War points to the fact that the UN is a lot more than the Security Council. While the UNSC was dysfunctional, India developed a multilateral agenda of its own — from decolonisation and disarmament to a new international economic order — and mobilised considerable political support for it. Not all of India's efforts were successful during the Cold war, but the past underlines the possibilities for shaping the global discourse in the present.

Opinion | [Pandemic accentuates challenges to global order. New framework is needed, India must be rule-shaper](#)

Third, while promoting big ideas is exciting, Delhi can't lose sight of the basic relationship between national interest and multilateralism. The primary objective of India's present multilateralism must be to ensure its territorial integrity, especially at a time when China and Pakistan have mounted a massive effort to internationalise the Kashmir question.

The question is not merely about playing defence, but also leveraging multilateralism to serve India's interests. In the last few years, Delhi has worked mechanisms like FATF to mount pressure on Pakistan to stop supporting cross-border terrorism in India.

On both the issues of terrorism and Kashmir, China, once viewed as India's natural partner in the multilateral arena, has turned out to be the problem. The US and the West, traditionally viewed as part of the problem, are now helping India fend off the security challenges in the multilateral arena.

Fourth, beyond the issues of peace, there is the big challenge of protecting India's prosperity amidst the unfolding economic, technological and environmental disruptions. The rules governing all these areas are now up for a significant overhaul. As India learnt from its 1970s experience with the nuclear non-proliferation regime, once the rules are set, it is rather hard to change them.

Fifth, in writing the new rules and reshaping the global order, India needs to strengthen its recent

turn to a more dynamic coalition building. While reclaiming its role in the Non-Aligned Movement, Delhi has also joined the European alliance for multilateralism. India also knows that much of the new rule-making is likely to take place outside the UN. That is where India's new engagement with the US on building like-minded coalitions acquires much significance.

Finally, Delhi can't hope to expand its international influence on the cheap. India's share in the UN [budget](#) stands at 0.7 per cent. The shares of China, Japan and the US are at 8, 10 and 22 per cent respectively. Raising Delhi's contribution to at least one per cent might convince its partners that India is serious about pursuing a more vigorous multilateralism.

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