

A GROUND PLAN FOR INDIA'S REFORMED MULTILATERALISM

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At the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly | Photo Credit: AP

Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit to the United States (September 18-28) has set the stage for [an expansive range of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy by India](#). It is a unique visit as it seeks to achieve a vast list of objectives led by the [Indian delegation's participation in the High-Level Week](#) at the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, which opened on September 13.

Perhaps the only precedent to the Minister's current 11-day whirlwind diplomacy is his 2019 visit to the General Assembly, followed by a policy outreach comprising seven think-tanks in seven days in Washington DC. Even so, this year's diplomatic agendas and international setting separate it from earlier years in quite a few ways. Coming just after the recently concluded Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meet in Samarkand, which was attended by the Prime Minister, India's varied multilateral engagements showcase a road map for India's renewed multilateral diplomacy.

At the heart of India's participation in the 77th General Assembly is the call for a 'reformed multilateralism' through which the United Nations Security Council should reform itself into a more inclusive organisation representing the contemporary realities of today. India's call for this structural overhaul of global multilateral institutions incorporates institutional accountability and a wider representation of the developing countries.

For a global organisation such as the UN, growing stakes of developing countries in the Security Council could foster trust and leadership across the world. The theme of the 77th General Assembly, which seeks "A watershed moment: Transformative Solutions to Interlocking Challenges", places India right in the midst as a strong partner of the UN.

At least three recent global developments reflective of the UN's functional evaluation have stood out in India's quest for a reform of the UN. The COVID-19 pandemic was a weak moment for UN's multilateralism. It highlighted the UN's institutional limitations when countries closed their borders, supply chains were interrupted and almost every country was in need of vaccines. Countries of the global South, including India, which stepped up through relief efforts, drug distribution and vaccine manufacturing, have created space for a more inclusive UN, particularly through its Security Council (UNSC) reform.

Second, UN-led multilateralism has been unable to provide strong mechanisms to prevent wars. The shadow of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has loomed large over several deadlocks in UNSC resolutions since the war broke out in February this year. With the West boycotting Russia, the veto provision of the UNSC is expected to reach an even more redundant level than in the past. As such, a reformed multilateralism with greater representation could generate deeper regional stakes to prevent wars.

Finally, China's rise, belligerence and aggression which has been on display through its actions in the South China Sea, the Indo-Pacific region, and now increasingly globally, have also underscored the limitations of the UN-style multilateralism. China's growing dominance could lead it to carve its own multilateral matrix circumventing the West, economically and

strategically. The international isolation of Russia and Iran as well as increasing the United States' Taiwan-related steps could usher in these changes more rapidly than expected.

China's control of multilateral organisations, including the UN, is only increasing — most recently seen in the unofficial pressure China exerted on the former UN's human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet, to stop the release of a report by the UN Human Rights Council on the condition of Uyghurs in China. Moreover, China's unabashed use of veto power against India continues at the UN.

In the most recent case, it blocked a joint India-U.S. proposal at the UN to enlist Sajid Mir, a top Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) operative involved in directing the 2008 Mumbai attacks, as a 'global terrorist'.

Consistent with the changing times, India's call for reform of the UNSC has grown in the past few years. In this regard, Mr. Jaishankar's hosting of a ministerial meeting of the G4 (Brazil, India, Germany and Japan) holds special significance. Another high-level meeting of the Indian delegation with the L.69 Group, on "Reinvigorating Multilateralism and Achieving Comprehensive Reform of the UN Security Council", will be critical in the planning of the next steps. The L.69 group's vast membership spread over Asia, Africa, Latin America, Caribbean and Small Island Developing States could bring about a wider global consensus on the issue of the UNSC reforms.

India's emphasis on reinvigorated multilateralism coincides with a critical juncture in the UN-led multilateralism. Just as burden-sharing has become integral to evolving multilateralism between regional countries, the UN could integrate such practices within its institutional ambit. In the past few years, the UN's responses to both global and regional events have evinced a clear space for leadership and representation, as much as they have depicted its institutional inability to lead globally on its own. With starker divisions between countries as result of the Russia-Ukraine war and lingering pandemic-induced restrictions, the need for the UN's reform is likely to be felt more palpably than ever before.

Beyond the UN, the Minister's participation in plurilateral meetings of the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, the U.S.), IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), Presidency Pro Tempore CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States), India-CARICOM (Caribbean Community) and other trilateral formats, such as India-France-Australia, India-France-the United Arab Emirates and India-Indonesia-Australia underlines India's search for new frameworks of global governance, amidst growing frustration with the extant multilateral order. As Mr. Jaishankar has rightly highlighted in his remarks at the UN, at a challenging time for the world order, New Delhi continues to affirm its commitment to "diplomacy and the need for international cooperation".

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