

India's Contribution to the United Nations

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The United Nations is the second international organisation set up in the world for maintaining peace and security in the world. The first was the League of Nations which was formed after the First World War. It failed to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War within 20 years and was wound up soon after the war ended.

The United Nations will celebrate its 75th anniversary next year. Its survival is its biggest success. Actually, it has done much better. It has prospered, as has the world. The world is more globalised today than ever in human history and the United Nations and its affiliated organisations have transformed themselves into global institutions involved with nearly every aspect of our daily life. How has this come about? Can the United Nations claim credit for it? What is its relevance in today's world? How much has India contributed to its growth? How does India view the organisation and what expectations does it have of it?

The United Nations was set up with a great deal of hope and enthusiasm but there was also a steely determination to ensure that the new organisation had the ability to take quick decisions and action against any threat to international peace and security. For this, the Security Council was formed as a compact and all-powerful body of 11 members and placed firmly in the control of the five principal allies who had won the war. The General Assembly was kept as a deliberative and recommendatory body. In fact, the General Assembly is forbidden by the UN Charter to make recommendations on an issue under discussion in the Security Council.

The founders of the United Nations did have the realisation that economic and social factors were at the root of the rise of Nazism and fascism which had led to the Second World War. They included in the preamble to the UN Charter a reaffirmation of faith in human rights and a commitment to social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom but the primary goal given to the United Nations was maintaining international peace and security.

It is interesting to note in the light of this that the main achievements of the United Nations have been in the economic and social sectors and it is for these that it is admired in the world. Although it has been successful in averting a nuclear war it is debatable if the UN can take credit for it. In any event, the list of wars the United Nations has not been able to avert is long and depressing.

India has the distinction of being a founder member of the United Nations. It was not independent at that time but was allowed by the United Kingdom to participate in the proceedings at San Francisco in 1945. The Indian delegation participated enthusiastically in the deliberations and became an active member of the new organisation even when it was still a British colony.

I will begin with the seminal role played by India in the early history of the organisation. India has a special place in the evolution of the United Nations. India was instrumental in reorienting the UN from a security organisation to a developmental and promotional body.

India's achievement is particularly credit-worthy because it was not a permanent member of the Security Council. It became a member of the Security Council only once in the 1950s, in 1950-1951. India used this to its advantage by focussing its attention on the General Assembly and identifying itself completely with the newly-independent countries of Asia and Africa. The Security Council was sharply divided from the very beginning because of the cold war that had started between the Western countries led by the United States and the Communist countries led by the Soviet Union. This compelled other members to take sides and several countries joined the military alliances formed by the two sides. India stayed away from this polarising politics of power and activated the General Assembly by the sheer force of its ideas.

In the early years, India was almost alone in this since few countries of Asia and Africa were members of the United Nations. India was joined slowly by them as they became independent. The developing countries, as they called themselves, acquired their full strength in the early 1960s. Even the countries of Latin America, most of whom were members of the Western group till then, joined them in 1964 to form the G77.

The most powerful organ of the UN, the Security Council, suffered from the deadlock among five permanent members. It had some initial successes, like ceasefire between Israel and the Arab countries and between India and

Pakistan and securing the independence of Indonesia. However, it was not able to adopt its rules of procedure and could not agree on admitting several new members till 1955. It could not also agree on a military force to be placed at its disposal. Unable to provide security to the world, the newly-formed United Nations had to look elsewhere for its fame and relevance.

The United Nations is known today as a champion of democracy and human rights. It has over one lakh peacekeepers in war-ravaged countries. But this was not envisaged in when the UN was formed. The word democracy does not figure in the UN Charter. Few of the founding members of the UN were democracies. Human rights were referred to in passing and decolonisation was not one of the goals set for the world body. Peacekeeping was a later innovation, opposed by some permanent members and left to the neutral and non-aligned countries to provide troops for.

Resetting the course of the organisation so soon after it was formed was a difficult and contentious task that took several years. It was done in the face of stiff opposition from the established powers, the permanent five of the Security Council. India, fresh from its historic and inspiring peaceful freedom struggle led by people with a world-view far ahead of the times, was the moving spirit behind this transformation.

India's foreign policy in the early years of the United Nations took up challenges like decolonisation, apartheid, human rights, nuclear disarmament, equity in the international economic order and in North-South relations, non-alignment, South-South cooperation and democracy. It gave these ideas to the United Nations at a time when the Security Council was stuck in sterile debates and inaction. These became the guiding principles of the General Assembly and opened new vistas for the United Nations.

India's most notable success was in decolonisation. When the Second World War got over, there was a rush among the victors, the big European powers, to recover the colonies that had been conquered by the Axis powers. France wanted to recover Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, and Britain was determined to take back Malaysia and Singapore and other colonies in Asia. Netherlands wanted to recover Indonesia. The US seized islands in the Pacific. Russia seized all of East Europe. The UN did not have a policy to check this.

India was one of the first countries to raise its voice against European colonialism and made the UN the platform for its campaign. In 1960, by which

time there were sufficient numbers of countries from Asia and Africa, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on decolonisation, the 'Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples'. The resolution declared that subjecting people to alien subjugation constitutes denial of human rights and is an impediment to attaining world peace. The resolution was made possible by 19 newly-independent states joining the UN that year. It was adopted by 89 votes to none, but there were 9 abstentions, three of them permanent members of the Security Council – the US, Britain and France.

The situation, however, has been quite dismal in disarmament, which is one of the goals set for the United Nations in the UN Charter. The Cold War started an arms race among the big powers. The invention of nuclear weapons made this race even more dangerous for the world. India campaigned energetically for banning nuclear testing and the elimination of nuclear weapons. India refused to join the nuclear club even when China went nuclear in 1964. The nuclear powers made some token concessions to the growing clamour for nuclear disarmament. They negotiated the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963 but they sealed their hegemony of nuclear power with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968, which legitimised their nuclear weapons while making it illegal for others to possess them. The United Nations was subsequently able to negotiate treaties like the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention. However, the main treaties regulating nuclear weapons were negotiated bilaterally by the United States and the Soviet Union/Russian Federation.

India's other big campaign in the United Nations was against apartheid. It launched this even before becoming independent. In 1946, it got the General Assembly to adopt a resolution against racial discrimination in South Africa. This was in the teeth of opposition from the South African prime minister, Jan Smuts, who had helped draft the Preamble to the UN Charter just a year before. India continued the opposition to apartheid, leading to the imposition of sanctions against South Africa and Southern Rhodesia (now, Zimbabwe).

India was in the forefront of the UN taking the lead in reforming the global economic order and making development one of its goals. It was instrumental in the setting up of UNCTAD in 1964 for promoting trade and development. A declaration on setting up a new international economic order was adopted by the UNGA in 1974. This included monitoring the target of 0.7% of GDP set for official development assistance to developing countries, transfer of technology, debt relief, preferential market access, South-South cooperation, regulating transnational corporations, protecting commodity exports and a greater voice for developing countries in international monetary and trade institutions.

Peacekeeping is the biggest activity of the United Nations today. It is also its main contribution to its primary goal of maintaining international peace and security. The annual budget for peacekeeping is almost three times the regular budget of the UN. Peacekeeping was a later innovation for the United Nations and India played a key role in its evolution, especially in the Congo mission from 1960 to 1964. India has consistently been a major contributor to UN peacekeeping. It has provided about 240,000 personnel in 49 of the 71 UN peacekeeping operations so far. Currently, Indian personnel are participating in 9 out of 14 peacekeeping missions. The largest being to MONUSCO in DR Congo.

The other major activity of the UN is imposing sanctions on countries, organisations and individuals. Here again, India was the main force behind the imposition of sanctions for the first time by the United Nations. This was against Southern Rhodesia in 1965, against strong opposition from the Western countries. Sanctions have since been used on several occasions against countries developing nuclear weapons, the supply of weapons to countries facing armed conflict and the flow of funds to terrorist organisations and individuals. India has been supportive of sanctions, especially against terrorism.

However, there are certain aspects of UN activism after the Cold War that India has been reticent to endorse. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the Security Council, not having an army of its own, authorised member states to take military action to liberate it. After the success of this operation, the

Council authorised a dozen more such military actions with varying objectives – in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, DR of Congo, Albania, Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic. This phase of Security Council activism, however, came to an end soon after the invasion of Libya in 2011 because of differences between the three western permanent members, the United States, France and the United Kingdom, on the one side and Russia and China on the other.

India has been cautious in endorsing this aggressive concept, referred to variously as the Responsibility to Protect and humanitarian intervention. They went well beyond the security mechanism envisaged for the Security Council. India had strong reservations on these military interventions because of their intrusive nature and the resort to force. But it supported some on humanitarian considerations. Resolutions seeking authorisation for such military actions came up five times in the Security Council during India's membership and India abstained on most of them:

1. Korea: India voted for Resolution 82(1950) but abstained on Resolution 84(1950).
2. Bosnia & Herzegovina: India abstained on Resolution 770(1992).
3. Somalia: India voted for Resolution 794 (1992) on a US-led force.
4. Libya: India abstained on Resolution 1973(2011).
5. Mali: India supported Resolution 2085(2012) for an African-led force.

The United Nations lays great emphasis on protecting human rights and promoting democracy. India supports these activities but believes that the UN should play a promotional role that seeks to strengthen national commitment and capacity and offers national best practices as inspiration. It opposes any intrusive action to enforce them.

Terrorism has become an important concern of the United Nations and India is in the forefront of this activity. India has been pressing for the adoption of a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism that can increase international cooperation and the effectiveness of the UN in combating cross-border terrorism. Currently, only specific acts of terrorism, such as hijacking and taking of hostages, are prohibited by separate international agreements.

India is also keen on the UN exercising responsibility in meeting the global challenges of development, especially poverty eradication and climate change. India is supportive of the UN efforts to promote the Sustainable Development Goals, as it was of the Millennium Development Goals earlier.

India is an ardent advocate of UN reform, particularly of the Security Council. It initially eschewed any ambition of becoming a permanent member of the Council. However, when UN reform was taken up by the General Assembly in 1992, Germany and Japan sought permanent membership. India also soon staked a claim.

India eventually joined hands with Germany, Japan and Brazil to form the G-4, which seeks expansion in both permanent and non-permanent categories. India maintains that the aim of the reform should be to increase the effectiveness of the UN in dealing with: international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction including nuclear disarmament, and transnational organised crime including the trafficking in narcotic drugs, humans and arms.

India's claim to permanent membership is based as much on the size of the country, its population and economy as it is on its firm commitment to the principles of the UN: peace, democracy, human rights, international cooperation, development assistance.

India was also one of the first countries to take an international dispute to the Security Council. This was the invasion of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir by Pakistan in 1947. India complained to the Security Council which adopted Resolution 47 on 21 April 1948 asking Pakistan to withdraw, following which a plebiscite would be held to decide which country the state would accede to. Pakistan, however, refused to withdraw its forces and progressively increased its demands after forming an alliance with the United States. The Security Council adopted 18 resolutions in all on the issue. The last one in 1971. Since the Simla Agreement of 1972, India does not regard the UN resolutions as applicable any longer. However, India continues to allow the presence of UN military observers, the UNMOGIP, in J&K since 1949.

What does the future look like for the United Nations? The UN survived the Cold War mainly because neither the United States nor the Soviet Union wanted to walk out of it. They instead blocked each other's initiatives to the detriment of international peace and security. The permanent members

continue to treat the UN with disdain. Their main endeavour is to prevent it from taking any action against their own strategic interests. The UN's security-related activities are thus confined to gentle actions like peacekeeping and sanctions.

How long can this continue? Can the UN survive the new East-West confrontation? This question is not difficult to answer. The permanent five have no reason to disturb the current global power structure and as long as it has their support there is no possibility of any change in it. But the fear for the UN is not its extinction but irrelevance. The UN must be the organisation for smaller powers to turn to for their security and the protection of their rights. Its inability to address their security concerns makes them indifferent to it and turn to the big powers instead. A UN that is deadlocked by the veto of the permanent members in the Security Council is of little use to the rest of the world.

A more representative and democratic Security Council will be a more boisterous and cumbersome body but it would be a more meaningful forum for diffusing global security tensions. Reform of the Security Council and of the UN is essential for stemming the continued irrelevance of the organisation in its primary role of maintaining international peace and security. For India, sustained efforts for its reform, no matter how frustrating futile, will be more rewarding than the two-year non-permanent membership it gets periodically in the Security Council.
