

75 Years of India and the United Nations

Amb. Asoke Mukerji

India is one of the 51 original founders of the United Nations (UN). India, following the independence from Britain on 15 August 1947, “continued” as an original member of the UN.

Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, delivered independent India’s first major statement in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on 19 September 1947. She noted that “the great Powers, instead of coming closer together, are drifting farther apart. There is tension, suspense and anxiety, and an uneasy awareness that things are perhaps moving towards some new and annihilating disaster for mankind...”. Rejecting attempts to make India part of the ideological confrontation of the Cold War, Mrs. Pandit said that “ideology is less important than practice. We cannot eat an ideology; we cannot brandish an ideology, and feel that we are clothed and housed. Food, clothing, shelter, education, medical services-these are the things we need.” Independent India had clearly articulated its vision of the UN as providing a supportive global framework for the socio-economic transformation of India.

This vision has been sustained during the past 75 years. Two major achievements stand as a legacy to India’s contribution to the UN so far. First, the successful campaign to democratize international relations enabling former colonial countries to become independent members of the UNGA with the historic unanimous Decolonization Resolution adopted by the UNGA in December 1960. Second, the incremental positioning of sustainable development issues firmly on the central agenda of the UN and its specialized agencies, encapsulated in the UNGA’s unanimous adoption of Agenda 2030 with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015. The SDGs represent a holistic matrix of human endeavour, covering health, education, gender, energy, employment, infrastructure, inequalities, urban growth, consumption, and the environment on land, sea, and air.

These two achievements were made possible by India’s proactive diplomatic engagement with other member-states of the UNGA on the basis of shared values and interests. In 1961, India became a co-founder of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that rejected getting mired in the confrontational bloc politics of the Cold War. The NAM today has 120 of the

193 member-states of the UNGA as its members. In 1964, India joined 77 newly independent developing countries to establish the Group of 77 (G-77), which currently has 134 member-states in the UNGA. The driving force of the G-77 is the creation of an equitable new international order, based on the Charter of Algiers adopted by it in 1967, and Agenda 2030 is the G-77's core interest in the UN.

The inclusion of democracy and sustainable development added substance to the activities of the UN and its specialized agencies over the past 75 years. The Preamble of the UN's Agenda 2030 underscores that, "There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development." Yet, international peace and security is increasingly under threat, primarily due to an increasingly ineffective UN Security Council (UNSC). Currently, over 50 conflicts are on the agenda of the UNSC, including in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Mali, the Central African Republic, Libya, Syria, Yemen, the Middle East, Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Ukraine. These conflicts have displaced almost 90 million people across the continents.

In South Asia, the rapidly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan brought about by the UNSC's refusal to uphold the Doha Agreement endorsed by UNSC resolution 2513 in March 2020 has left half of Afghanistan's population (about 20 million women) without their basic human rights of education and employment, which are integral to implement Agenda 2030.

Responding to these challenges to international peace, security, and development, Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi proposed an ambitious project to "reform multilateralism" to make it human-centric during the 75th anniversary Summit of the UN in September 2020. The two main objectives of this are reforms within the UN, particularly of the UNSC; and reforms of interlinked multilateral organizations (the UN, its specialized agencies, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and the World Trade Organization) to create a coherent global framework to respond to common challenges facing mankind. Developing countries, which form the vast majority of the UN membership, have a direct stake in reforming the UN and other multilateral institutions to make them more efficient and responsive. Agenda 2030's SDG 16.8 contains the unanimous commitment of the UNGA to reform multilateral institutions to "broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance".

On 12-13 January 2023, India hosted a virtual “Voice of the Global South for Human-centric Development” Summit. A measure of the importance of India’s initiative can be gauged from the fact that 125 countries responded to this initiative, including 47 from Africa, 31 from Asia, 29 from Latin America and the Caribbean, 11 from Oceania, and 7 from Europe. Participating countries were linked by common concerns regarding issues of sustainable development of priority to them, on which existing multilateral institutions have failed to provide significant outcomes.

The outcome of the New Delhi Global South Summit will be integrated into the G-20 process by India, which is the current chair of the G-20. It is significant that the next two chairs of the G-20 are also prominent participants in the New Delhi Global South Summit, with Brazil taking the chair in 2024, and South Africa in 2025. In parallel, India’s initiative provides a major input into the preparations for the UN’s “Summit of the Future”, planned to be held in New York in September 2024.

Achieving “reformed multilateralism” through these processes would require world leaders to review the international situation after the disruptions caused by natural and manmade causes over the past three years, which have set back the momentum of constructive international cooperation. In this context, a decision by the UN’s “Summit of the Future” to convene a General Conference of the UN in 2025, when the organization marks its 80th anniversary, would be appropriate. As a leading voice for diplomacy, dialogue, and development, India must play a major role in ensuring this objective.

[Ambassador (Retd.) Asoke Mukerji retired as India’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York in December 2015 after over 37 years in the Indian Foreign Service.]