
Call for reformed

MULTILATERALISM AT THE UN

Over the years, India's position at the United Nations has become more prominent. In the backdrop of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address at UNGA last year, Ambassador Asoke Kumar Mukerji explores the country's demands for a much-awaited reform of the global body, which will lead to sustainable world peace, security and development



A photograph from September 2019, in which India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi can be seen speaking at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), in New York, USA. This year, due to the ongoing global pandemic, the 75th UN General Assembly session was organised virtually and like other heads of delegations, PM Modi made his address during the General Debate of the UNGA session through a pre-recorded video message



A screenshot of PM Modi's recorded video speech for the virtual UNGA session, held between September 15 and 30, 2020

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi reasserted the country's commitment to the United Nations (UN) during the 75th anniversary commemorative events of the world body held last year. Three major themes resonated in his repeated calls for "reformed multilateralism". These were the urgent need to complete the process of democratisation of decision-making in the UN Security Council (UNSC); the positioning of development issues at

the forefront of the work of the UN; and transforming the functioning of the UN into a multi-stakeholder body to enable it to respond effectively to the challenges it faces.

The call for "reformed multilateralism" has become an integral part of India's foreign policy, seeking to maximise the country's participation in the multilateral system to accelerate its transformation into one of the major powers of the 21st century. India has contributed significantly to creating

The first UNGA virtual session

Every September, member states have met in the legendary General Assembly Hall at the UN headquarters in New York for the annual session and its highly visible general debate. The modalities of the 75th session were very different. This year, because of the pandemic, world leaders stayed away and shared pre-recorded videos of their speeches to be broadcast.

The hall, however, was not empty, as the videos were introduced by a representative of each country, who was physically present

INDIA'S JOURNEY TOWARDS PROGRESS, INDIA WANTS TO LEARN FROM THE WORLD AS WELL AS SHARE ITS OWN EXPERIENCES WITH THE WORLD

Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India

During his speech, the Prime Minister recalled that India has contributed over 240,000 troops in more than 50 UN missions, with Indian soldiers suffering the maximum number of casualties among UN peacekeepers. **(Right)** A contingent of the Indian Army that is a part of the UN peacekeeping forces



Indian Army's contribution to the UN Peacekeeping Force

The Indian Army is the largest troop contributor to United Nations Peacekeeping Missions, which maintain stability and negotiate peace settlement in turbulent regions of the world.

- 240,000 Indians have served in 50 of the 71 UN peacekeeping missions established around the world since 1948
- India has a long tradition of sending women on UN peacekeeping missions
- In 2007, India became the first country to deploy an all-women contingent to a UN peacekeeping mission
- Indian peacekeepers have served in some of the most physically demanding and harshest environments, including South Sudan
- More than 160 Indian peacekeepers have paid the ultimate price in service to global peace, losing their lives serving under the UN flag

Source: <https://news.un.org/en/gallery/541602>

the contemporary multilateral system. A century ago, over 1.3 million Indian soldiers volunteered to serve in the victorious Allied armies that secured victory in the First World War, enabling India to sign the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and become a founder-member of the League of Nations. Over 2.5 million Indian soldiers volunteered to fight with the Allied armies during the Second World War, enabling India to sign the 1942 Washington "Declaration by United Nations" and subsequently the UN Charter in June 1945 in San Francisco. As a country with one-sixth of the world's population and a thriving democracy, India is a major stakeholder in a functional multilateral system.

Following his call for a multilateral approach to achieve sustainable peace and prosperity at the High-Level meeting of the UN's Economic and Social Council

(ECOSOC) on July 17, 2020, Prime Minister Modi made a strong pitch for reformed multilateralism "that reflects today's realities, gives voice to all the stakeholders, addresses contemporary challenges, and focuses on human welfare" at the UN's 75th anniversary summit on September 21, 2020. The Prime Minister's speech at the general debate of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on September 26, 2020, provided the contours of India's vision of "reformed multilateralism".

At the core of this vision is India's belief that UN member-states "cannot fight today's challenges with outdated structures. Without comprehensive reforms, the UN faces a crisis of confidence." The only UN structure that obstructs the democratic principle of taking decisions by consensus or majority voting is the UNSC, where the veto powers of its five self-selected

India was set to become an elected member of the United Nations Security Council for a two-year term, starting from January 2021. PM Modi said that the country “will not hesitate to raise voice against the enemies of humanity, human race and human values”

permanent members overrides democratic decision-making.

The Prime Minister castigated the UNSC for failing to prevent conflicts, including civil wars, and terrorist attacks resulting in the deaths of many ordinary human beings, including hundreds of thousands of children. Millions of people uprooted by conflicts have become refugees. He said that this has happened despite the significant contributions made by many UN member-states to the UNSC to help maintain peace and security. The Prime Minister recalled that India has contributed over 240,000 troops in more than 50 UN missions, with India's brave soldiers suffering the maximum number of casualties among UN peacekeepers.

In June 2020, India obtained 184 out of 193 votes in the UNGA to be elected to a two-year term in the UNSC for 2021-22. This marked the eighth time since 1949 that over two-thirds of the UNGA has endorsed India's credentials to be elected to the UNSC. The Prime Minister pointed out that “the people of India have been waiting for a long time for the completion of the reforms of the United Nations”. He asked: “Today, the people of India are concerned whether this reform-process will ever reach its logical conclusion. For how long will India be kept out of the decision-making structures of the United Nations?”

In his remarks at the 75th anniversary summit, the Prime Minister referred to the

PM Modi's virtual address at UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2020



PM Modi made a 22-MINUTE long speech in Hindi.

“For how long will India be kept out of the decision-making structures of the United Nations? A country, which is the largest democracy of the world...How long would a country have to wait particularly when the changes happening in that country affect a large part of the world?”

“Even during these very difficult times of a raging pandemic, the pharma industry of India has sent essential medicines to more than 150 countries. India's vaccine production and delivery capacity will be used to help all humanity in fighting this crisis.”

“If century changes and we don't, then strength to bring changes becomes weak. If we assess the last 75 years of the United Nations, we see several achievements. But...there are also several instances that point to a serious need for introspection for the United Nations.”

“far-reaching” declaration adopted by world leaders and cautioned that unless the UN was comprehensively reformed, the vision of the declaration “in preventing conflict, in ensuring development, in addressing climate change, in reducing inequalities, and in leveraging digital technologies” would remain unfulfilled.

India’s call for reformed multilateralism focuses on the inter-linkage between peace, security, and development. An ineffective UNSC jeopardises India’s national efforts to achieve Agenda 2030’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The relevance of this observation for the work of the UN in the decade ahead was illustrated by the Prime Minister’s reference to some of India’s major development initiatives implemented since 2015. Showing how the UN member-states can “reform-perform-transform”, the Prime Minister listed

“**REFORM IN THE RESPONSES, IN THE PROCESSES, IN THE CHARACTER OF THE UNITED NATIONS IS THE NEED OF THE HOUR**”

Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India

the “transformational changes” in India over the past five years that had enabled hundreds of millions of people to enter the formal financial sector, become free from open defecation, and get access to free healthcare services. The empowerment of women through promotion of entrepreneurship and leadership, access to micro-financing and paid maternity leave were integral to India’s non-discriminatory development policies. India was “one of the leaders in digital transactions”, PM Modi said, and the policy of “Self-Reliant India” would become a force multiplier of the global economy after the current Covid-19 pandemic is over.



A file photograph of Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing UNGA for the first time on September 27, 2014, where he made his historic and successful proposal for the UN to declare June 21 every year as the International Day of Yoga. This illustrates a multiple stakeholder approach to reform multilateralism



The United Nations headquarters in New York City with flags of member nations

The Prime Minister committed India to “sharing experiences of our development” as a practical way to implement the principle of international cooperation on which multilateralism depends. This included a commitment to build on the supply of essential medicines by India to more than 150 countries to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic by leveraging India’s vaccine production and delivery capacity to “help all humanity”.

Based on its experience of implementing the SDGs, India advocated “a multi-stakeholder ground-based” approach to achieve the global goals. This required engaging “state and local governments, civil society, communities and people.” India’s international experience in implementing various global initiatives for a holistic approach to peace, security and development had similarly

been sustained by a multi-stakeholder approach.

The UN has already adopted a multi-stakeholder approach for its activities under the Tunis Agenda to respond to the emerging digital order, and Agenda 2030 to achieve the SDGs. The call for “reformed multilateralism” based on democratic decision-making, prioritising development, and including all stakeholders comes at a critical time for India’s foreign policy. India’s role as an elected non-permanent member of the UNSC and the incoming Chair of the G20 during 2021-2022 provides a window of opportunity for the country to play a leadership role to reform and transform the UN.



Diplomat Asoke Mukerji was India’s AMBassador and PERMANENT Representative to the United Nations in New York (2013-2015)