

Joining the big boys

This article was published on 'The Times of India' on 30th September 2015

Shortlink:<https://goo.gl/8UbSwn>

“The future isn't what it used to be” is one of the many aphorisms attributed to Yogi Berra, a great American baseball player of the 1950s who passed away last week. He might as well have been talking about the conundrums that the United Nations faces today, especially about its Security Council that India aspires to join as a permanent member.

Time was that the vaunted UNSC was the Cold War club where the big boys played, keeping the world secure. Despite their great rivalries, they would prevent an assassination here or a regime change there from escalating into something more disastrous on a global scale. But the world today is a very different place, and UNSC's ability to impose or restore order is far more limited.

Just a quick glance at the situation in Ukraine and Syria shows that inability of the five permanent members to agree on key challenges, let alone solutions, is crippling this once powerful body. And the nature of threats itself has evolved, with those that challenge the world order growing from just nuclear concerns to non-state terror groups, mass migrations, climate change, and a looming water crisis.

However, the UNSC still has relevance, particularly in dealing with traditional nation-state nuclear threats that are so far beyond the pale that they cannot be ignored. Thus, the squabbling permanent members – be they former, present, or upcoming superpowers – have felt compelled to work together on the emergence of Iran and North Korea as nuclear states.

It is in this context that India's aim to be a permanent member of the UNSC is still relevant. In fact, apart from India's growing importance in economic terms, it is ever more odd for the world's largest democracy, projected to be the most populous nation by 2022, to not be part of such decision making. The UN today, with 193 member countries, faces vastly different challenges than it did when it started 70 years ago with 51 members. Earlier this month the UN accepted by consensus a text laying out the framework for discussing UNSC reform. Though opinions vary on whether this reflects a significant or only a technical breakthrough, it is nevertheless a move beyond the “having discussions about how to have discussions” stage. Despite this progress, it is unlikely that UNSC reform will happen quickly. In any case, it has been widely reported that this month's breakthrough, which India considers is in its interest, was opposed by some countries, including usual suspects Pakistan and China, and even Italy. What should be even more revealing is the apparent lack of support from old ally Russia and even the US, which has otherwise overtly supported India's case for being part of a restructured Security Council.

Of course, China has been a UNSC permanent member from the beginning, when India had supported its cause, but that is no reason to expect reciprocity. All nations act from their perceptions of their own national interest, and so will China and India in the present circumstances.

Thus it is appropriate that India is hedging its bets by working towards memberships of other multilateral groupings and agencies. These include a founding role in new economic institutions like the so called Brics bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). India has also been gradually getting more involved in existing groupings, both economic and strategic, such as Asean and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Similarly, it is finally getting serious about a role in the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the key internet administrative agency.

In addition, it is illustrative to examine the path taken by China over the past 35 years, during which it transitioned from being approximately at par with India in per capita income to becoming the world's second largest economy, five times that of India's. In recent years, China has used its new economic clout to win friends and influence countries through developmental assistance.

In fact, it has rapidly overtaken western nations in the amounts it sanctions for such purposes, dovetailed to its own future mercantile and strategic interests. Though India's growth trajectory has been shallower, it has nevertheless also started yielding similar manoeuvring room in foreign policy.

India's ongoing transition from a purely developing nation into one that is an aspirational middle income country, capable of extending aid to others, became apparent a decade ago during the Indian Ocean tsunami and other subsequent natural disasters. By 2012 India had formalised its overseas aid efforts by setting up the Developmental Partnership Administration (DPA) within the foreign ministry.

In 2013-14, the DPA had an annual budget of more than a billion dollars, and since then has scaled up its ambitions even more. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been a key driver of this, keeping up a frenetic globetrotting schedule in an effort to make up for lost time. His recent announcements of DPA assistance include projects worth \$2 billion in Bangladesh, and \$1 billion each in Nepal and Mongolia, among many others.

In this evolving scenario, UNSC permanent membership should remain a key foreign policy goal for India, but not the preeminent one. And every aspect of India's foreign policy, including this, would benefit immensely from faster economic growth.