

The 2019 UN General Assembly – India's Strategic Multilateralism

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Summary

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has had a full plate at the annual United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) meetings in New York in September 2019. Modi has covered a series of issues like climate change, trade, global health, infrastructure cooperation, counterterrorism and conflict while meeting world leaders, accepting awards, launching various causes and trying to sew up a bilateral trade agreement with the US. The UNGA meetings demonstrate that India's multilateral agenda is broad but strategic and reflective of policy priorities and interests - not the other way around. More than ever, India's multilateral instincts, interests and intentions are a pathway to fortify and advance domestic policy goals; simply put, Delhi's multilateral focus is, and for three decades has been, strategic and rational, unburdened by lofty ideas concerning what India represents or should represent globally.

The 2019 UNGA agenda appears to be dominated by one issue - climate change, which had been the subject of days of protests worldwide led by frustrated youth. A series of unpredictable climate events this summer - fires, floods, famines and heat waves - has generated a fresh impetus to reduce global carbon emissions. Yet, palpable public exhalations around climate change that manifest through epic marches in global capitals is scotched by inhospitable political forces – a vacuum in climate leadership exemplified by a disinterested United States, a cooling global economy that places a premium on growth, not mitigation, and a regulatory rollback against climate change, in western countries, through the reversal of rules covering vehicular emissions, coal expansion, pipelines and deforestation. When politics in western countries militate against concrete global climate progress, it is time to focus on domestic mitigation that could redound back to further the climate cause. India's current climate policies serve as a lodestar here. Modi reaffirmed India's commitment to fulfil its nationally determined contributions (NDC) as per the 2015 Paris climate agreement. New Delhi's commitment to solar energy will be on full display as Modi unveils the Gandhi Solar Park, an installation of solar panels at the UN headquarters. The Indian government has instituted robust energy efficiency policies that ensures India's emissions remain compatible with the Paris target of capping temperature increases to 1.5 degrees celsius despite plans to build more coal plants. Climate also featured in Modi's meeting with the Pacific Island nations for whom climate is the priority. Besides financial assistance, India's focus on renewables and promises to share that technical expertise provides an alternate pathway for island countries to combat climate change. India's proactive and strategic multilateral climate agenda dovetails domestic climate initiatives.

Modi also addressed the first ever UN High-level meeting on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) that hopes to convince UN member states to develop affordable broad-based health policies. Co-sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO), the meeting underscored

the view that no person should be denied adequate health access. Here too, global health interests align with India's own cause to boost domestic health coverage through the government's *Ayushman Bharat Yojana* (National Health Protection Scheme), the world's largest healthcare initiative. Modi's UHC endorsement reflects commitments made to augment domestic health coverage. The strides made towards expanding health coverage in India, despite gaps in *Ayushman Bharat's* implementation, sends a message to other large and small countries that size is no impediment when drafting inclusive health policies. That India is willing to expend enough financial resources to build resilient health systems enhances global health security when risks to the latter continue to proliferate. New Delhi's incentive to boost health access, affordability and delivery stems from a domestic purpose that aligns with current global health priorities, not vice versa. Historically, India's importance to global health was as a recipient of international health assistance, knowledge and campaigns mounted by entities like the WHO to nip the spread of infectious diseases. Now India's importance to global health is driven by resolving domestic health gaps. New Delhi looks poised to contribute to global health stability by insuring the welfare of its citizens who constitute a fifth of humanity.

On security, Modi joined several world leaders at the Leaders' Dialogue on Strategic Responses to Terrorist and Violent Extremist Narratives where he voiced India's concerns on cross-border terrorism with a focus on Pakistan. The forum gave the government a chance to pushback against the critical global narrative by embedding the Kashmir policy around counterterrorism given the proclivities of an unpredictable neighbour. The forum also allowed Modi to underscore the importance of the proposed UN comprehensive convention on international terrorism that has been lying in the cans. Earlier this year, India's UN representative Syed Akbaruddin called to revive the convention a day after his office triumphed in securing the designation of Masood Azhar, the founder and leader of the Pakistan-based terrorist organization, Jaish-e-Mohammed, as a global terrorist. Focusing on counterterrorism enables India to project itself as a constrained rising power that must, occasionally, deploy harsh measures to neutralize cross-border threats.

India's multilateral agenda at UNGA comports with the Modi government's development focus, highlighting how New Delhi's policies are helping address climate change, health inequities and terrorism. New Delhi's strategic multilateralism is not new, however, but the consequence of three decades of India's integration with the global economy that gives New Delhi multiple opportunities to shape international rules and causes that advance incumbent interests while bolstering its reputation as a partner keen to address challenges like climate change through domestic policies. Strategic multilateralism begins at home.

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