

India at the UNSC 2021: Reinforcing Reforms

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Summary

India will enter the United Nations Security Council in early 2021 as a non-permanent member for a two-year term. The Indian agenda heavily focuses on reforming the multilateral system but the COVID-19 pandemic could affect the forum's proceedings sooner than later.

On 20 June 2020, India was elected as a non-permanent member to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for another two-year term from January 2021. This will be India's eighth time at the UNSC, on a non-permanent basis without veto powers, as it pursues United Nations (UN) reforms for a permanent seat. India will replace Indonesia, whose term ends at the end of 2020, on the UNSC and it will join Vietnam as one of the two non-permanent Asian members. The triumph was foreordained since India was the only country vying for the seat from the Asia-Pacific region. This certainty did not make India complacent. The Ministry of External Affairs crafted a plan titled NORMS (New Orientation for a Reformed Multilateral System) that focused largely on reforming multilateralism. The path to the seat might have been the easiest time at the UNSC for the next few years as the body deals with a flurry of global challenges, including a pandemic that will require multilateral coordination. Indian diplomats will have to roll up their sleeves to achieve the five stated goals under NORMS – find new opportunities for progress; effective response to international terrorism; reforming multilateral systems; comprehensive approach to international peace and security; and technology with a human touch.

India's latest UNSC stint comes at a critical juncture when the appetite and desire for global cooperation is at a nadir which could also affect India's approach and areas of focus. India will likely have to highlight issues that matter beyond the interests of the UNSC's permanent members who will likely to not agree on much. Reforms of the UN, UNSC and other global institutions are a key plank of India's NORMS which should receive support from middle powers and other states. India's path for a reformed multilateralism will be sought through five 'Ss' - Samman (Respect), Samvad (Dialogue), Sahyog (Cooperation) and Shanti (Peace) to create the conditions for universal Samridhi (Prosperity). India has called for reforms in multilateral institutions ranging from the UNSC to the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and World Health Organization (WHO) to make these organisations reflect global political realities.

Yet, it remains to be seen whether the UNSC's permanent members will countenance this reformist agenda. Each of the five permanent member states is preoccupied with the Coronavirus and other domestic political matters that are not likely to cease when India's term commences in 2021. Moreover, the politics around multilateral engagements, particularly in the United States (US), United Kingdom, Russia and China has become far too bellicose for positive engagement to occur. The ongoing standoff between China and India

in the Himalayas could sully Beijing's attitudes toward New Delhi and snuff out any hopes of Chinese support for multilateral reform despite potential benefits to them. Moreover, China might not prefer wholesale reform, given how it has shaped the politics and procedural aspects of rule-making within institutions like the International Telecommunication Union, WHO and World Trade Organization to extend its influence. That said, the UNSC permanent members' expected reticence and possible intransigence should not detract from the reality that India should use this two-year stint to openly claim that the time has ceased for the permanent members to continue ignoring demands for accommodation as power disparities diminish further. Focusing on the UNSC and global governance reform nonetheless allows India to display its seriousness as a major power. India will need to bat for reform just as powers like the US clamour to exit the very institutions they helped found.

Counter-terrorism will remain a key priority for India at the UNSC. Soon after being elected, the Indian Permanent Representative's office quickly signalled its desire to make terrorism a focus by calling the UNSC to depoliticise the process of sanctioning terrorist groups to ensure any justifications given are barred. This terrorism focus follows from India's last stint in the UNSC in 2011 and 2012 where Indian diplomats chaired the UN's counter terrorism committee bringing in the concept of 'zero tolerance' for terrorism. India's desire to focus on counter-terrorism also stems from its recent success when the UNSC designated Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar a global terrorist with support from other permanent members, including China. Indian officials can be expected to continue work on the unfinished Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism that New Delhi broached in 1996 even as the appetite to negotiate such an agreement remains unlikely. The multilateral discourse on terrorism has come a long way since then, partly due to India, but work remains to gather consensus to root out terrorist financing and issues related to nuclear terrorism. Besides terrorism, peacekeeping has been a key part of India's engagement with the UN and the UNSC. India's upcoming stint should bring a fresh look at its peacekeeping mandate and how to best protect peacekeeping forces as they hold down hotspots.

Terrorism, peacekeeping and multilateral reform aside, it is likely COVID-19 will preoccupy multilateral discussions in 2021. If efforts underway to develop a vaccine find traction, the multilateral system will then have to support the global production and distribution of a potential vaccine when the pressures for national restrictions, given where vaccine research and development occurred could be high. If so, COVID-19 could front India's agenda next January at the UNSC.

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