



Indian Council
of World Affairs

CONCLUDING ON A HIGH NOTE IN THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

An Assessment of
India's Term 2021-2022

T S Tirumurti

INDIAN COUNCIL OF WORLD AFFAIRS

SAPRU HOUSE, NEW DELHI

2023



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A wide-angle photograph of the United Nations Security Council chamber. The room is semi-circular with a large, curved wooden table at the front, surrounded by blue chairs. The walls are covered in large, colorful murals depicting various scenes of human history and conflict. The ceiling is high with numerous recessed lights. The floor is a light-colored carpet with small green square tiles. The text "CONCLUDING ON A HIGH NOTE IN THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL" is overlaid in the center of the image.

CONCLUDING ON
A HIGH NOTE IN
THE UN SECURITY
COUNCIL



India has just concluded its 8th two-year stint in the UN Security Council (UNSC) on a

high note – as President of the Council for the second time. In fact, getting a second Presidency was a unique opportunity that India was fortunate to have. And by any yardstick, our two-year term between 2021-2022 has been unprecedented.

It has been my privilege to serve as India's Ambassador/ Permanent Representative to the United Nations in the Security Council for 18 out of the 24 months. This has undoubtedly given me an opportunity to not only contribute to the shaping of our

policy towards the UN and the Security Council, but also to make a difference to the way some important issues were handled in the Council. In this, I was fortunate to work with and benefit from an extraordinarily dynamic,


focused and hardworking team in the Permanent Mission of India in New York assisted by our equally capable and ever dependable colleagues from the Ministry. I am confident that we moved the needle forward on all our priority issues, and took important even pioneering steps.

India entered the Council when the pandemic was at its peak.


India entered the Council when the pandemic was at its peak. I arrived in New York much earlier in 2020 when there was complete lockdown, both in India and New York. One could walk several blocks in Manhattan without meeting a soul. I did all the lobbying for our UNSC elections in June 2020, on mobile calls or through zoom to colleagues I was meeting (virtually) for the first time! I soon became the self-styled Dean of Covid UN Ambassadors since I was the first one to arrive during Covid! I presented my credentials to the UN Secretary General through a zoom call! And for many months after, my only company at home in Manhattan were the three suitcases I lived out of and the East river flowing below.

Fortunately, the Council, as indeed much of the UN, found a creative step of conducting its sessions virtually – on VTC. Negotiations and meetings were held virtually. Anticipating this, not just in the Council but in other UN-related meetings and negotiations as well, we converted a room in our Permanent Mission into a well-equipped studio to attend such meetings. This was a big boon for our officers, who could attend meetings and conduct negotiations in a more focused manner without, at the very least, ruining

We entered the Council at a time when the Council was extremely polarized, especially the P-5 members. P-5 had their respective but divergent views on where the United Nations and its organs fit into their global vision, premised broadly on their self-interest. As a result, paralysis in decision-making, especially in the Council, had accentuated.



India went into the Council with a clear focus on its priorities. They included inter alia maritime security, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping, reformed multilateralism, its neighbourhood and of course the Global South.




their eye-sight. After entering the Council on 1 January 2021, in five to six months, UNSC resumed its work physically in the Council Chamber though our studio continued to be used for a range of meetings in the UN and its Committees and for negotiations. And almost all our side events were done virtually.

We entered the Council at a time when the world's financial resources were being deployed to fight this once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. States had to first make sure their citizens survived and huge resources were required to sustain their basic needs. Millions slipped back into poverty. Donor countries had to divert or 'repurpose' much of their funds, earmarked earlier for achieving SDGs 2030 or/and Paris 2030 for climate change, to cater to basic humanitarian needs. In addition, developing countries, particularly Africa and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), had to witness vaccine inequity and hoarding by developed countries.


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especially the P-5 members. P-5 had their respective but divergent views on where the United Nations and its organs fit into their global vision, premised broadly on their self-interest. As a result, paralysis in decision-making, especially in the Council, had accentuated. This affected even more the ability of the UNSC to tackle on-going conflicts on its agenda. Old conflicts on the agenda festered in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, Palestine, Central African Republic, Sudan, South Sudan and the Sahel region. Some got progressively worse e.g. Afghanistan, Yemen, Palestine, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Burkina Faso and Haiti. And to add to an already overloaded agenda of the Council, several new ones were added on including Myanmar, Ethiopia, Guinea and finally Ukraine.

We went into the Council with a clear focus on our priorities. They included inter alia maritime security, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping, reformed multilateralism, our neighbourhood and of course the Global South. Apart from organizing high-level UNSC meetings during our Presidency,



We were also elected to Chair the Counter-Terrorism Committee for 2022 thanks to some relentless and hard bargaining since the vacancy for the Chair wasn't for that year but the next.




we consistently pursued these priorities in all our initiatives across our two years.

We were also elected Chairs of two important Committees of the UNSC namely the 1988 Taliban Sanctions Committee and the 1970 Libyan Sanctions Committee. The irony was that the 1970 Libyan Sanctions Committee was set up when we were last in the Council in 2011! After a decade, we were back as Chair of this Committee – an indication of how conflicts never quite get resolved once they get onto the agenda of the UNSC! Subsequently, we were also elected to Chair the Counter-terrorism Committee for 2022 thanks to some relentless and hard bargaining since the vacancy for the Chair wasn't for that year but the next.


When we entered the Council, we were directly impacted by developments in two of our neighbours – Myanmar and Afghanistan. Our presence in the Council was indeed fortunate since we could be involved and contribute to tackling these two issues of vital concern to us. We witnessed military takeover in Myanmar soon after we came into the Council i.e. on 1 February 2021. During our Presidency of the Council in August 2021, Taliban forcefully seized power in Afghanistan.

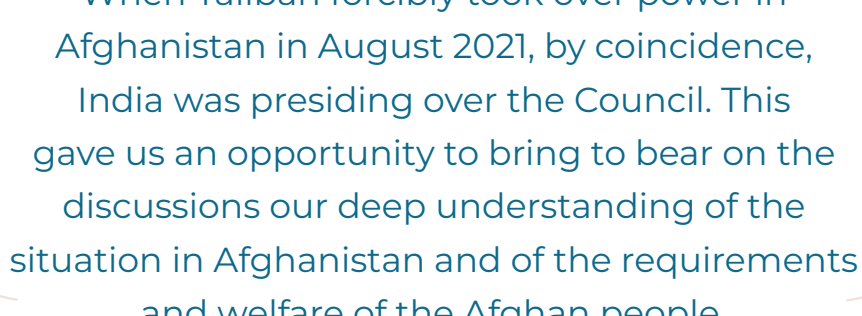
In Myanmar, the UNSC immediately called for return to the path of democracy,

stopping of violence, restoring election results and release of prisoners. ASEAN was expected to lead the way on this issue. However, as time went by, the West started shifting the goal posts and their objective and took an aggressive posture. Even UNSG's Special Envoy said that she will 'stand in the trenches' with the opposition, and stymied whatever chances she had of visiting Myanmar to help find a solution! The P-5 members were pulling in opposing directions, while ASEAN counselled caution. The West-led UN General Assembly resolution, where all neighbouring countries and those in the neighbourhood abstained, made the polarization even more stark. India shares a nearly 1700 kms of border with Myanmar and it was vital to ensure security of the people of Myanmar, stopping of violence, bringing in stability, releasing of leaders and that democratic process went forward. With a view to resolving the issues and realizing the sensitivities of the different players on this matter, India worked behind the scenes to ensure balanced and comprehensive Council pronouncements and tried to create space for ASEAN and others to find a way forward. We bridged gaps and extreme views to find a constructive way forward. The UNSC resolution on Myanmar was adopted under our Presidency in December 2022 though we abstained



On Myanmar, India worked behind the scenes to ensure balanced and comprehensive Council pronouncements and tried to create space for ASEAN and others to find a way forward.






When Taliban forcibly took over power in Afghanistan in August 2021, by coincidence, India was presiding over the Council. This gave us an opportunity to bring to bear on the discussions our deep understanding of the situation in Afghanistan and of the requirements and welfare of the Afghan people.

on the vote since, as we reiterated in our Explanation of Vote “Under the current circumstances, we are of the considered view that a UN Security Council Resolution may entrench the parties in their inflexible positions rather than encourage them to pursue an inclusive political dialogue.” Given the rush of refugees into North-East India, we also underlined that “the consequences of instability will affect the neighbouring countries the most, and it is therefore important to consider their views and perspectives seriously.”


When Taliban forcibly took over power in Afghanistan in August 2021, by coincidence, India was presiding over the Council. This gave us an opportunity to bring to bear on the discussions our deep understanding of the situation in Afghanistan and of the requirements and welfare of the Afghan people. The fact that we had also been dealing with Afghanistan as Chair of the Taliban Sanctions Committee helped us to see the situation in perspective. This balanced perspective was particularly important since the West and the UN Secretariat applied a different yardstick to Afghanistan as compared to Myanmar under the guise of bringing the Taliban around. Barring France, the other four P-5 members engaged them straightaway

without many of the larger concerns of the international community being met. India played a quiet but determined role in steering discussions and negotiations in a constructive direction. This finally resulted in the adoption of a very important UNSC Resolution 2593 on the last day of our Presidency.

UNSCR 2593 laid down clear benchmarks which Taliban had to meet, including on stopping cross-border terrorism from Afghan soil, including from proscribed UN terrorist entities in Pakistan under 1267, on protecting rights of women, minorities and children, on ensuring an inclusive government and on providing humanitarian assistance. Our caution to the Council members to go slow on their engagement with the Taliban fell on deaf ears and finally hit home only after they saw for themselves things taking a turn for the worse in that terrorism didn't decrease but actually increased, Taliban's links with Al Qaeda continued if not strengthened, severe restrictions were imposed on women and girls and there was no inclusive government in sight. As we emphasized in our December 2021 Council statement while adopting a mandate for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, “Going forward, even as



It was during the Ukraine conflict that India's independent and principled stand showed the world that we need to do whatever it takes to create space for dialogue and peace, even in the midst of intense fighting and high emotions, when all levers were being weaponized.



we cater to the immediate humanitarian needs of the people of Afghanistan, our approach to Afghanistan will be guided by the commitments expected from resolution 2593, and our long-standing friendship with the people of Afghanistan.”

However, it was during the Ukraine conflict that India's independent and principled stand showed the world that we need to do whatever it takes to create space for dialogue and peace, even in the midst of intense fighting and high emotions, when all levers were being weaponized.


To state the obvious, our decision of 27th February, 2022 to abstain on the Council vote on the draft resolution on Ukraine was not taken lightly. Interestingly, while Russia vetoed that draft, all three Asian countries abstained, including China, UAE and India. As we mentioned in our Explanation of Vote, “taking into consideration the totality of the circumstances, we have decided to abstain.” This is the position we took over the next few months while

abstaining on Ukraine related resolutions whether in the Council or in the UN General Assembly – take decisions keeping the totality of the circumstances and our own national interests in mind. India's position on conflicts has been consistent – immediate cessation of hostilities and return to path of dialogue and diplomacy.


Needless to add, considerable pressure was brought to bear on India both in Delhi and in New York. In fact, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres requested me whether India, as a democracy with a strong leadership, could speak to both sides and underline the need for an immediate ceasefire and return to negotiations.


Prime Minister himself spoke to the two Presidents on many occasions. As Prime Minister said, today's era is not of war.

Our priorities were fine-tuned as days went by, but our overall position and policy remain steadfast. To begin with, India had more than 22,000 students and citizens in Ukraine. We managed to




In the Council, we spoke out forcefully against sanctions causing distress to the Global South inter alia on oil, food and fertilizers.





During our Presidency, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chaired (virtually) for the first time a high-level UNSC meeting on Maritime Security.




evacuate them to safety, in a chaotic and deteriorating landscape, barring the tragic loss of one student. Even the situation in Sumy where 700 students were holed up, was resolved with proactive but quiet diplomacy in Delhi and New York.


While we have consistently refused to be drawn into a rhetorical exercise, India did not hesitate to speak out on specific issues in the UNSC, including on civilian killings in Bucha which we “unequivocally” condemned and supported the call for “an independent investigation.” We were critical of civilian casualties and called for “sustained prioritization of urgent humanitarian relief.” India rushed relief and medical supplies to Ukraine. In the Council, we were equally vocal on safety of nuclear plants in Ukraine, including on Zaporizhzhia NPP. We also refused to back moves to throw Russia out of the Human Rights Council or to isolate it from UN bodies.

The impact of the conflict not just paralysed the work of the UN in the first three or four months but soon exacerbated food,

fertilizer and fuel insecurity, especially in the developing countries. Realising the impact on food security, India immediately allowed export of wheat to countries in need, including to Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sudan and Yemen. In the Council, we spoke out forcefully against sanctions causing distress to the Global South inter alia on oil, food and fertilizers. In his speech at the UNSC debate in May 2022, our Minister of State for External Affairs said “It is clear that hoarding and speculation is at work. We cannot allow this to pass unchallenged” he said. He added “It is necessary for all of us to adequately appreciate the importance of equity, affordability and accessibility when it comes to food grains. We have already seen to our great cost how these principles were disregarded in the case of Covid-19 vaccines. Open markets must not become an argument to perpetuate inequity and promote discrimination.” We were echoing the sentiments of numerous developing countries severely impacted by the unilateral nature of the sanctions imposed by the West on



During our Presidency in August 2021, we held a high-level meeting on terrorism chaired by our External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar.



Russia, in disregard to the deleterious impact it had on the Global South.


India pursued its priority areas during our stint with focus and a lot of hard work. To begin with, during our Presidency, Prime Minister chaired (virtually) for the first time a high-level UNSC meeting on Maritime Security. High-level dignitaries attended the meeting virtually, including President Putin, who attended a UNSC meeting after 2005, Prime Minister of Vietnam, Ministers and others. The Presidential Statement adopted by the UNSC was the first holistic document on the issue of maritime security which comprehensively covered a range of issues related to it, including, for the first time, a direct reference to UN Convention on the Law of the Sea as international law setting out the legal framework in the context of maritime activities. It also called for, inter alia, freedom of navigation, anti-piracy and combatting terror and transnational crime at sea. The negotiations were difficult and my colleagues handled them with great deftness and brought all members on board. The importance of carrying forward this comprehensive template on maritime security cannot be over emphasised.

As regards our focus on terrorism related issues, I have no doubt that we have considerably enhanced the


focus on terrorism both in the UN and outside. However, a brief overview of the contemporary context on combatting terrorism is important to truly appreciate how India kept the course on this matter in the UN.

11th September 2001 was a defining moment in the fight against terrorism. Before 9/11 the world was divided “your terrorist” and “my terrorist.” But 9/11 proved that terrorism in one part of the world could devastate the centre of Manhattan, New York. Suddenly they became “our’ terrorists. It became a collective fight at the global level. The UN Security Council passed a binding resolution no 1373 on 28th September 2001 and also established the Security Council Counter Terrorism Committee, whose Chair for 2022 was India.

But after 20 years, we are in the danger of drifting back to the era of ‘your terrorist’ and ‘my terrorist’. Currently, there are moves to categorize terrorism based on the motivations behind such acts. We are accosted with a situation where there was a dilution of focus on the broader set of terrorism related issues in Asia and Africa. We are now in the danger of slipping back to the “my terrorist-your terrorist” era. As External Affairs Minister said in January 2021 in the Council “Terrorists



As Chair of UNSC Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC), we kept the spotlight on the increase in terrorist activities in specific regions, especially in Africa and Asia, and on the use of new and emerging technologies for terrorist purposes.





India has been a strong advocate of introducing new and advanced technology in Peacekeeping Missions to overcome security and mandate implementation challenges.

are terrorists; distinctions are made only at our own peril.” It is in this context that India’s role in the UNSC became crucial and we managed to keep an unrelenting focus on terrorist related issues.

During our Presidency in August 2021, we held a high-level meeting on terrorism chaired by our External Affairs Minister (EAM). Speaking on this occasion, EAM recalled his statement to the Council in January 2021 and the eight-point action plan he had proposed to counter terrorism. They include:

- Summon the political will: don’t justify terrorism, don’t glorify terrorists;
- No double standards. Terrorists are terrorists; distinctions are made only at our own peril;
- Don’t place blocks and holds on listing requests without any reason;
- Discourage exclusivist thinking and be on guard against new terminologies and false priorities;
- Enlist and delist objectively, not on political or religious considerations;
- Recognize the linkage to organized crime;
- Support and strengthen the FATF; and
- Provide greater funding to the UN Office of Counter Terrorism.

EAM also called for ending the stalemate preventing the adoption of a Comprehensive Convention on

International Terrorism, which India has championed for so long. We made sure that right through the two years, other issues on the agenda of the Council also covered the terrorism angle.

As Chair of UNSC Counter-terrorism Committee (CTC), we kept the spotlight on the increase in terrorist activities in specific regions, especially in Africa and Asia, and on the use of new and emerging technologies for terrorist purposes. As CTC Chair, I interacted with a diverse group in various regions and on a variety of terror related developments. In fact, at the request of the African member states, we held a separate meeting on recent developments on terrorism in Africa was held to put the spotlight on the huge spurt in Islamic-jihadi terrorism spreading across the Sahel and North-west to the South-east of that continent. I personally travelled to Spain to meet a range of international and national NGOs and others and put forward the changing narratives and new and emerging tools of the terrorists. I also attended virtually several meetings across the globe as CTC chair.

In a unique initiative, we brought the CTC meeting to India in October 2022 at a time when India was celebrating the 75th anniversary of our independence. The focus of this special CTC meeting was on the use of new and emerging technologies by terrorist groups and the gravity of the threat posed by them. The



India also proposed several names of terrorists for listing under the UNSC Resolution 1267 sanctions.



meeting was attended by more than 400 representatives from 54 member states, 33 international and regional organisations and many others. The landmark Delhi Declaration on Countering the Use of New and Emerging Technologies for Terrorist Purposes was adopted. The highlight was also a visit of the CTC to Mumbai to pay homage to the victims of the 26/11 terrorist attack in Mumbai at a solemn wreath laying ceremony at the site of the attacks.

India also proposed several names of terrorists for listing under the UNSC Resolution 1267 sanctions. In a significant development, the US joined us as co-signatories for these proposals. However, our attempt to list these terrorists was thwarted, and a block was placed against listing them. In fact, EAM called this out while presiding over the Council in December 2022 and said “The working methods of relevant mechanisms is also a subject of legitimate concern and debate. At one level, we have seen protections that come close to justification. Then, there are evidence-backed proposals that are put on hold without assigning adequate reason. Conversely, there have even been recourse to anonymity so as to avoid taking ownership of untenable cases”.

But in a significant development, two weeks after we left the Council, one of our proposals for terrorist listing under 1267 was approved by the UNSC. This was the

listing of Abdul Rehman Makki, Deputy Amir/ Chief of Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, first listing with India as a proposer in the Council (co-signed by the US). This was also the first terrorist to be expressly named for terrorist acts in Jammu and Kashmir. This is indeed a big success for our diplomacy.

India’s peacekeeping credentials need no elaboration. Suffice to say that we have contributed to UN Peacekeeping since 1950s, and cumulatively deployed more than 260,000 troops and personnel over 6 decades. India remains one of the largest troop and police contributors, providing more than 5,700 Indian peacekeepers, deployed in 9 out of 12 UN Peacekeeping missions at present. 177 Indian peacekeepers have made the supreme sacrifice while serving in UN peacekeeping missions, the highest from any troop-contributing country. India takes pride in having deployed the first-ever all women peacekeeping contingent in Liberia in 2007, which inspired a whole generation of Liberian women to take part in country’s security sector. Recently, we deployed in UNISFA an all-women platoon in Abyei. It may be recalled that in the midst of the pandemic, India readily responded to the call of the Secretary General and donated 200,000 doses of vaccines to all peacekeepers. India also responded positively to the UN call to



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India also underlined the role of women, their empowerment and women-led development, both inside and outside the Council where we were also elected to the Commission on Status of Women.



upgrade its field hospitals at the UN Missions in DR Congo and South Sudan.

During its Presidency in August 2021, India organized for the first time an open debate on technology and peacekeeping for “protecting the protectors”. The UNSC adopted a Presidential Statement on ‘Technology for Peacekeeping.’ India has been a strong advocate of introducing new and advanced technology in Peacekeeping Missions to overcome security and mandate implementation challenges. We also supported rolling out of the UNITE AWARE Platform aimed at enhancing safety and security of peacekeepers in select Missions and signed an MOU with the UNC4ISR Academy for Peace Operations in Entebbe, Uganda, to meet its training and technology needs.


During our August 2021 Presidency, we also drafted and spearheaded a resolution on peacekeeping on ‘Accountability of Crimes against UN Peacekeepers’ which the Security Council adopted as UNSCR 2589. This was probably the first resolution we were spearheading and tabling after several decades in the Council. This initiative was widely welcomed. This was followed by the establishment of Group of Friends on UNSCR 2589 during our December 2022 Presidency.

When I made my first statement after entering the Council during the flag


installation ceremony on 4 January 2021, I underlined inter alia that “India will be a voice for the developing world.” Being an alumnus of Ramakrishna Mission, I couldn’t but end my statement recalling the words of Swami Vivekananda “Each nation must give, in order to live. When you give life, you will have life; when you receive, you must pay for it by giving to all others.” And this is the statement we tried to live up to especially vis-à-vis our dealing with issues relating to the Global South in the UNSC.

Our close engagement with the developing world, especially Africa and the Middle East, was reinforced in the Council, given our historical relations with Global South. We stood for their territorial integrity, increased humanitarian and logistical assistance, correcting historical injustice, reform, development partnership, fighting terror and peaceful resolution of disputes. A polarized Council only made it more important for us to play that balancing and principled role we have been known for.

For example, we abstained twice on the vote on South Sudan sanctions when we felt that unreasonable benchmarks and conditions were being imposed on that country. India was strongly supportive of the demands from African countries for greater assistance to fight terrorism and greater resources to resolve conflicts and strengthen peace-building efforts. On Syria,



In December 2021, we successfully thwarted a move by the West to wrest climate change from UN Framework Convention on Climate Change-led process (UNFCCC) and bring it under the ambit of the P-5 consisting of major historical polluters.




we were equally forthright and pointed out that “The ongoing cross-border operations will continue to negatively impact on the sovereignty of the Syrian State.” We were clear that “the presence of foreign forces as well as external support to armed groups is only making the situation worse.” In our December 2022 statement, we continued to “express concerns over such unilateral actions violating Syria’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. We believe that withdrawal of all foreign forces is essential to achieve nation-wide ceasefire.” We held the same position with respect to other issues relating to Ethiopia, Yemen, Iraq, the Sahel region etc. and reflected these in UNSC outcome documents. We voiced our concern that successive launches of missiles by DPR of Korea constituted a violation of the resolutions of the Security Council relating to the DPRK and affected peace and security of the region and beyond.

India placed importance on regional organisations taking a bigger role in resolving conflicts within their spheres of influence, including the African Union, ASEAN, ECOWAS, IGAD etc. We stressed in our intervention that “the Security Council should respect the regional approach adopted by countries involved, and work in collaboration with regional organizations to address these shared challenges.”


India also underlined the role of women, their empowerment and women-led development, both inside and outside the Council where we were also elected to the Commission on Status of Women. We underlined that checking impunity against women and stopping violence and exploitation in conflict situations has to be of paramount importance and that Member States should undertake measures to strengthen women’s participation in peace and political processes, thereby contributing to their economic inclusion.

There were also a wide range of thematic issues which had come up in the Council. Some of these issues were not even directly related to international peace and security. There has begun a disturbing trend in the Council, where the P-5 are increasingly prone to treat socio-economic and even environmental issues as impacting international peace and security thereby bringing them on to the Council agenda and politicizing them. As if the existing agenda of the UNSC wasn’t enough! On all such thematic issues, we examined them on merits and did not hesitate to take a firm approach while working with others in a constructive spirit.

In December 2021, we successfully thwarted a move by the West to wrest climate change from UN Framework Convention on Climate Change-led process




While UN has condemned phobias against Abrahamic religions i.e. anti-semitism, Islamaphobia and Christianophobia, we conveyed the need to also combat rising hate crimes and phobias against non-Abrahamic religions as well, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism.




(UNFCCC) and bring it under the ambit of the P-5 consisting of major historical polluters. The draft resolution introduced in the UNSC was defeated since India voted against the draft while Russia exercised the veto. If it had succeeded, climate change architecture would have, by now, kept out the voice of most of Global South, especially Small Island Developing States.

At a time when countries have negotiated collectively over full 30 years (1992-2022) and created an equitable architecture to combat climate change under UNFCCC, there are several moves by developed countries outside this process to cannibalize the UNFCCC process and decide on specific climate related issues elsewhere. This is to evade UNFCCC principles and commitments, especially Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and of Equity. In an Explanation of Vote after the draft resolution was rejected, India clearly mentioned that the UN Security Council was not the place to discuss either climate action or climate justice.

In my statement, I said that “the attempt to do so appears to be motivated by a desire to evade responsibility in the appropriate forum and divert the world’s attention from an unwillingness to deliver where it counts.” We pointed out in the Council that UNFCCC addresses both the immediate needs of the developing and the commitments of the developed and seeks a balance between mitigation, adaptation, financing, technology transfer, capacity building, etc. We asked: “Why is it that one needs a UN Security Council resolution to take action on climate change when we have commitment made under UNFCCC towards concrete climate action? The honest answer is that there is no real requirement for this resolution, except for the purpose of bringing climate change under the ambit of the Security Council. And the reason for that is now decisions can then be taken without involvement of most developing countries and without recognizing consensus. And all this can be done in the name of preserving



We felt that to infuse a sense of urgency to the reform process, a first debate of its kind discussion in the Council itself will be useful. Both the UN Secretary General and the President of the UN General Assembly participated in this open debate.



international peace and security.” India further contended that: “Climate change decisions are sought to be taken out of the wider international community represented in the UNFCCC and given instead to the Security Council. Ironically, many of the UNSC members are the main contributors of climate change due to historical emissions. If the Security Council indeed takes over the responsibility on this issue, a few states will then have a free-hand in deciding on all climate-related issues. This is clearly neither desirable nor acceptable.” Mentioning that the draft resolution was a step backward from our collective resolve to combat climate change, India underscored that the “it seeks to hand over that responsibility to a body which neither works through consensus nor is reflective of the interests of the developing countries.”


Another issue which was not directly related to the Council’s agenda but had high emotional quotient was the matter of Ethiopia building a dam on the Nile – the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). India worked constructively with Kenya and all other members to work out an acceptable compromise on the draft text, since it was important that bilateral negotiations between the parties were not jeopardized but encouraged and pronouncements by UNSC did not set the wrong precedents for other bilateral negotiations elsewhere. India’s principled position has been that “as a general rule,

trans-boundary water issues do not belong to the domain of the UN Security Council.”


This tendency to bring thematic topics into the UNSC is not new but the frequency, in recent times, has considerably increased, with some elected members taking the lead, no doubt egged on by some in the P-5. These are not strictly within the UNSC mandate and also usurp the mandates of other organs of the UN. Climate change is a case in point.

For the first time, India raised the issue of contemporary form of religiophobia in the Council. The UN resolutions have usually reflected and recognized phobias against Abrahamic religions only but ignored those against non-Abrahamic religions. While UN has condemned phobias against Abrahamic religions i.e. anti-semitism, Islamaphobia and Christianophobia, we conveyed the need to also combat rising hate crimes and phobias against non-Abrahamic religions as well, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. Religiophobia was also used to provide a justification for terror diluting the principle that there cannot be any justification for terror.

On 12th October 2021, while attending the high-level debate in the UNSC, Minister of State for External Affairs stated, and I take the liberty of quoting it at some length: “As regards religious identities, we are witnessing how member-states are facing newer form of religious phobias.



We have been firm and forthright but constructive and solution oriented. We have been the bridge in a polarized UNSC. We have always had the global interests in mind, especially of the Global South, without compromising on our national interests.



While we have condemned anti-semitism, Islamophobia and Christianophobia, we fail to recognise that there are more virulent forms of religious phobias emerging and taking roots, including anti-Hindu, anti-Buddhist and anti-Sikh phobias. We have seen in our own neighbourhood and elsewhere the destruction of temples, glorification of breaking of idols in temples, violation of gurudwara premises, massacre of Sikh pilgrims in gurudwaras, destruction of Bamyán Buddhas and other religious iconic sites. Our inability to even acknowledge these atrocities and phobias only gives those forces encouragement that phobias against some religions are more acceptable than those against others. If we chose to be selective about criticizing such phobias or ignoring them, we do so at our own peril.' This warning by our Minister of State in 2021 has been prescient in the face of increasing recent violent incidents of rising phobias against non-Abrahamic religions, inter alia, in the US, Canada, Australia and our neighbourhood.

The culmination of our tenure was a UNSC open debate under our Presidency in December 2022 on another crucial thematic issue – the need for immediate reform of the Council. The paralysis of the UNSC stood exposed by the Ukraine conflict. This has brought home the fact that the Council is progressively outliving its utility as defender of international peace and security. We felt that to infuse a sense of urgency to the reform process, a first debate of its kind discussion in the Council itself will be useful. Both the UN Secretary General and the President of the UN General Assembly participated in this open debate.

India has been one of the strongest proponents of reform of the Security Council to ensure that UNSC regains

its importance and relevance in the contemporary world. In 1945 UN had 51 countries. Now we have 193, but UNSC still retains its anachronistic structure. We have backed the expansion of seats in the Council both in the permanent and elected categories. The matter of "Question of Equitable Representation on and Increase in the Membership of the Security Council" has been on the UNGA agenda for well over three decades. As EAM put it in the December 2022 UNSC open debate, "while the debate on reforms has meandered aimlessly, the real world meanwhile has changed dramatically. The changes have been evident in terms of economic prosperity, technology capabilities, political influence and developmental progress. The broad dispersal of capabilities and responsibilities has been expressed for example, in the emergence of the G20." However, the UN has carried on as if nothing has changed outside.

The structure of discussion in the UN under the Intergovernmental Negotiating process has been deeply flawed. One, it is the only one in the United Nations that is conducted without any time frame. Two, it is also singular in being negotiated without any text. And three, there is no record keeping that allows progress to be recognized and carried forward. In effect, it has been turned into a talk shop by a small group of countries acting as spoilers and hiding behind the smokescreen, citing lack of consensus. In fact, there are suggestions that negotiations start only when consensus has been achieved! As EAM said, "we cannot have a more extreme case of putting the cart before the horse."

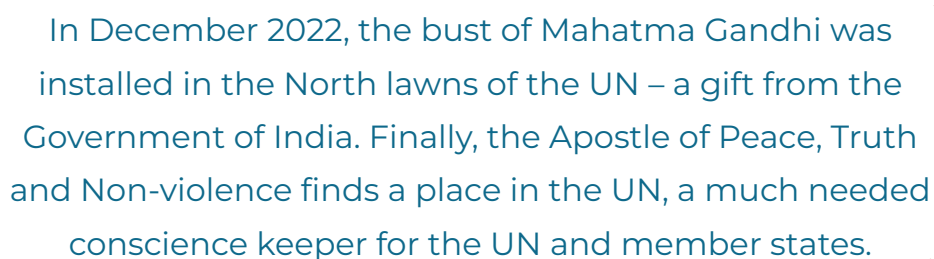
Three decades since the formation of the Open-Ended Working Group on UNSC Reforms, we have nothing to show as

progress. India has probably the best credentials for a permanent membership of the Council. Attempts to propose piecemeal changes by the handful of nay-sayers will not find traction with the wider UN membership as an alternative. We and most of the others are insisting on expansion in both categories of membership. And so, the stalemate continues without any solution in sight. That's why we decided to have this UNSC reform debate in the UNSC itself for the first time, when it is usually held in the UNGA format.

To sum up, one can see clearly why this stint of India in the Council has been unprecedented. The range of conflicts as well as issues dealt with over these two years was qualitatively and quantitatively higher if not different from the earlier ones. We have been firm and forthright but constructive and solution oriented. We have been the bridge in a polarized UNSC. Our presence in the Council when swift developments took place in Myanmar and Afghanistan was particularly fortuitous and helped us to steer a constructive way forward, while protecting our interests. We have always had the global interests in mind, especially of the Global South, without compromising on our national

interests. In fact, we strived to advance our national interests with an independent and not-afraid-to-stand-alone-if-necessary foreign policy. We showed flexibility where feasible, made our redlines clear and worked sincerely and hard to bridge divergent positions of Council members. We were convinced that if the UNSC does not undergo urgent reform, other plurilateral groups like the G20, which has broader representation and hence greater credibility, will steal a march over the UN and take away from the UN whatever decision-making authority it still has. Our performance over two years is an eloquent testimony as to why India needs to be at the horseshoe table permanently.

In December 2022, the bust of Mahatma Gandhi was installed in the North lawns of the UN – a gift from the Government of India. Finally, the Apostle of Peace, Truth and Non-violence finds a place in the UN, a much needed conscience keeper for the UN and member states. This joins the earlier gift in 1982 of the 11th century idol of God Surya, which now overlooks the corridors outside the UN General Assembly. With these two – one inside the UN building and the other outside, India is truly in the best of hands. ■



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The author served as the Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations in New York between 2020 and 2022 and President of the Council in August 2021. This included 18 months of the 24 months of India's tenure in the UN Security Council 2021-22. The views expressed by him are personal.

AMBASSADOR T.S. TIRUMURTI



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti was a career Indian diplomat with a career spanning 37 years. Since joining the Indian Foreign Service in 1985, he has represented India's interests in various capacities before retiring in June 2022. He served as Ambassador/ Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations in New York between 2020-2022. He was President of the UN Security Council for August 2021 and Chairs of Taliban Sanctions Committee, of Libyan Sanctions Committee and also of Counter-terrorism Committee of the Security Council. Prior to this, he was the Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs handling the Economic Relations portfolio between 2018-2020, which included, inter alia, India's development partnership, and relations with Gulf and the Arab World and Africa. He was also on the Board of Directors of Exim Bank for 2018-2020.

Ambassador Tirumurti has previously served at the Indian Embassy in Cairo, Egypt, where he got his diploma in Arabic language. He was First Secretary at the Permanent Mission of India to the UN in Geneva, Switzerland. He was also the first Indian Representative to the Palestinian Authority in Gaza. Later, he served as Counsellor at the Indian Embassy in Washington D.C., USA and Deputy Chief of Mission in Jakarta, Indonesia. He was India's High Commissioner to Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur between 2013-2018.

Ambassador Tirumurti served as Under Secretary (Bhutan), Director (Foreign Secretary's Office), Joint Secretary (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Maldives) and Joint Secretary (United Nations Economic and Social) during his stints at the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi. He has also been India's negotiator in Climate Change and Environment related issues for several years.

Ambassador Tirumurti has degrees in Commerce and in Law. He is also the author of three books. He is married to Mrs. Gowri Tirumurti, partner in law firm M/s Anand & Anand, which specializes in intellectual property rights. They have two children.



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