

Indian Power and the United Nations

Richard Gowan | 15 Nov 2010

President Barack Obama won fans in New Delhi last week with his call for India to take a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council. But while the president explicitly endorsed India as an "emerged" power, his declaration contained an implicit challenge as well.

Obama said that he wanted the U.S. to work with India on an "efficient, effective, credible and legitimate" U.N. Though phrased as diplomatic rhetoric, these words raised important questions that India's leaders must answer. Can India capture a permanent seat on the Security Council simply because of its growing economic leverage and military clout? Or should India invest more in terms of strengthening the U.N. to show that the country deserves its seat on the council?

India -- like Canada or Sweden -- is a country that many automatically associate with the U.N. Articles about multilateralism are, after all, often accompanied by photos of blue-turbaned Sikh peacekeepers. Yet New Delhi's policymakers are ambivalent toward the U.N.

It's true that India makes huge troop contributions to blue-helmeted peacekeeping operations -- Indians make up 10 percent of the 100,000 soldiers and police in U.N. missions. But this contribution is increasingly controversial at home. Worried by Pakistan's fragility and Chinese maneuvers in the Himalayas, some Indian officers want to repatriate their troops.

In early 2009, offended by Western criticism of its contingents' performance in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Delhi threatened to leave U.N. peacekeeping operations altogether. This summer, it pulled nearly 30 military helicopters from missions in Congo and Sudan.

Military analysts concluded that this was a pragmatic choice based on an overall shortage of aircraft. But U.N. officials remain nervous that India will disengage from peacekeeping efforts over the next few years. In private, some Indian diplomats argue that a big role in U.N. operations is incompatible with their ambitions to become a 21st-century military superpower.

When it comes to the U.N.'s direct contributions to India's national security, Indian experts are scathing. They are dismissive of the organization's state-building efforts in Afghanistan and its attempts to mediate with the Burmese junta. India worked hard to ensure that the Security Council did not intervene during Sri Lanka's assault on the Tamil Tigers last year.

India acceptance of the deployment of a U.N. mission to Nepal in 2007 to oversee the end of that country's 10-year civil war was unusual. But New Delhi insisted that the mission be kept small and placed political limits on its role. The resulting light-weight mission was a well-designed success, but the episode showed the limits of India's tolerance for the U.N.

India is even more allergic to suggestions that the U.N. assume a political role in the Kashmir dispute, notwithstanding a tiny U.N. observer force, launched in the

1940s, that is still in the region. It is also suspicious of the Security Council's engagement in nuclear nonproliferation -- a priority for the Obama administration -- fearing a threat to its own atomic arsenal.

Does all this impinge on India's claim to a full-time seat on the Security Council? Arguably, not at all. Sending troops on U.N. missions is hardly a prerequisite for permanent membership. After all, the U.S. has just 31 soldiers in blue helmets (.pdf).* And like India, all of the Permanent Five members prefer to deal with their vital national interests outside the council.

Indeed, one reason for India to want a permanent seat is precisely to ensure that its own interests are not compromised in the council in the future. In spite of Obama's emphasis on the need for an "effective" U.N., making India a full-time Security Council member could ironically be a formula for limiting U.N. engagement in security crises.

But India -- facing a protracted, frequently frustrating and perhaps even futile campaign to win a permanent seat -- could choose to take another approach to asserting its power at the U.N.: This would mean taking Obama seriously on the need to make the organization work properly, with a focus on fixing the many dysfunctional components of the U.N. system.

Instead of walking away from peacekeeping, for example, India could foster a strategic debate about how to adapt stability operations to new crises. In the past, major initiatives to streamline peacekeeping have usually come from the U.N. Secretariat or well-meaning European powers like Norway or the U.K. The next one should come from New Delhi.

There are some signs that India will play such a role, especially as it will hold a temporary Security Council seat in 2011-2012 -- a useful tool in the quest for permanent membership. Indian and U.S. diplomats in New York are developing increasingly close working relations. This should help add substance to the good mood engendered by Obama's diplomacy.

That doesn't mean that a U.S.-Indian alliance will become the new motor for the U.N. India remains far closer to China than to America on issues from climate change to human rights. But if India wants to show that it intends to be a decisive player in reshaping the international order, rather than just another power in search of recognition, it should link its ambitions for the Security Council to injecting some much-needed vitality into the U.N.

** Editor's note: The original version of this article incorrectly stated that the U.S. only has 11 soldiers engaged in U.N. peacekeeping operations. WPR regrets the error.*

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