



## Real reform of the multilateral system starts with the UNSC

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**T**he war in Ukraine and the multiple challenges ranging from the Covid-19 pandemic to the real and present danger of climate change and the burgeoning debt crisis have once again underscored the urgent need for real reform of the multilateral system. India has been saying so at the UN for thirty years, we have been saying it at G20 over the last decade and we have been talking about it at these BRICS forums each year. Five years ago, at the BRICS leaders retreat in Johannesburg, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a passionate case for reformed multilateralism. However, it is a sad reality that very little progress has been achieved and the contribution of BRICS itself to the reform process has been quite modest. This is particularly true when it comes to presenting an alternate vision for reforming

the United Nations Security Council where we have started to hear phrases like ‘true multilateralism’ and ‘reinvigorated multilateralism’ instead of real reform.

As BRICS think tanks, it is important to take a dispassionate view of this failure and to try to identify the causes. One of the reasons clearly lies within BRICS itself. It lies in the fact that two of the five BRICS members enjoy the unequal benefits of an anachronistic post-1945 architecture and mostly appear to be content with the status quo. They would like to use the existing frameworks to become the dominant players in their own regions. Expansive notions of security and memories of nebulous historical rights are invoked when convenient. At that time, neither international law nor the sovereignty and inviolability of borders nor the awards of international tribunals are allowed to come in the way of national ambitions. However, when the prevailing system does not match with their interests, they become advocates of a ‘true multilateralism.’ They invoke staunch opposition to the perceived hegemony of the West and start focusing on international law rather than a rules-based international order.

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Prime Minister Modi again addressed this issue squarely in his remarks at the BRICS virtual summit in 2020 when he said, “But today the multilateral system is facing a crisis. Both credibility and effectiveness of global governance institutions are being questioned. The main reason for this is that these did not change with time. These are still rooted in the thinking and reality of a world which was seen 75 years ago. India believes that reforms are a must in the UN Security Council. We expect support from our BRICS partners in this matter.”

It is important to start with this recognition that the current form of multilateralism – whether it is called true multilateralism or untrue multilateralism, isn’t working. That is why India’s proposal of a reformed multilateralism matters not just to the three less-privileged members of BRICS but also to the many voices of the Global South that aren’t present in BRICS. Failure to carry out reforms will exacerbate the present situation wherein the multilateral system loses relevance, and the international system continues to splinter into an ever-increasing number of plurilaterals and minilaterals.

India, to be fair, occupies a somewhat unique position in the UN system, being a founding member of the League of Nations and a charter member of the UN in 1945 even before it became independent. The UN started with 51 members and an 11 member UNSC with five permanent and six non-permanent members. By 1965, the membership had grown to 117 states and the UNSC was expanded to 15 states by adding four non-permanent members. Since 1965, the membership of the UN has increased to 193; Japan, Germany and India have become three of the five largest economies; and yet, the basic structure remains unaltered and unrepresentative. The voice of the Global South often remains marginalised and unheard.

Moves towards UNSC reform in terms of its membership, veto provision and working methods started again in the late 1970s and came on the agenda of the UNGA in 1979. It took another fourteen years before the UNGA could set up an Open-Ended Working Group in 1993 “to consider all aspects of the question of increase in the members of the Security Council, and other matters related to the reform of the Security Council.” Another decade passed and the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN was marked in 2005 with a report from the UNSG proposing two distinct models for expansion of UNSC. An inter-governmental negotiations process started in 2008 and in December 2009, 129 member states formally requested the IG chair to begin

text-based negotiations. The President of UNGA circulated a text in July 2015 and in 2019, a revised paper identifying areas of agreement and divergence was circulated but in reality, very little has changed. The process, in fact, was designed to fail because as India’s Minister for External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar has pointed out, there is ‘no record-keeping that allows progress to be recognized and carried forward.’ The notion that negotiations can begin only when consensus is achieved, he pointed out, was a classic case of placing the cart before the horse.

It was in this dismal context that in December 2022, India proposed a New Orientation for a Reformed Multilateral System or NORMS arguing for a substantive reform of key institutions with the objective of making them more effective to address contemporary challenges. India has drawn attention to the stresses that have been building up in the international system and have been amplified, first by the Covid pandemic and later by the war in Ukraine. The reality confronting us today is that Western priorities have once again sucked out the resources that are so badly needed for the Global South. Solemn, signed international financial commitments have fallen by the wayside and the Global South is now being sold the logic of private finance to address global public requirements.

India’s case for permanent membership of an expanded UNSC in line with the Kofi Annan model of adding six additional permanent members is unequivocal in terms of its contribution to peace and security and its progress towards Sustainable Development Goals. It has been the largest contributor to UN Peace Keeping Operations (PKO), having participated in 50 out of the 71 PKOs since 1948, with 175 Indian peacekeepers being martyred in these operations. Its expansive programs for financial inclusion, universal healthcare, education of girl child and digital public infrastructure will go a long way in helping India meet its SDG commitments and potentially create models that can be adapted according to the needs and priorities of other states. Its initiative to establish the International Solar Alliance and its rapid strides in expanding the use of renewable energy make it one of the global leaders in addressing the challenges of climate change. And its rapid economic growth is likely to make it the world’s third largest economy after the US and China before the end of this decade.

India has joined hands with Japan, Germany and Brazil to form the G4 and campaign for an expansion in both the permanent and non-permanent member categories of the UNSC. By any objective evaluation,

the G4 meet all the criteria relevant for permanent membership. Their proposal also includes two permanent seats for member states from Africa and six non-permanent seats that provide better representation to other regions, including one for the Small Island Developing States (SIDS). But progress has been thwarted by the lack of support from Russia and China and the opposition from a group of mid-level states like Mexico, Pakistan, Turkiye, Italy and South Korea who are primarily motivated by their opposition to permanent membership status for their larger regional rivals.

India, in the meantime, is using its presidency of the G20 group until September 2023 to make a persuasive case for multilateral reforms and to make sure that the concerns of the Global South resonate across each of the 200-odd G20 working group and other meetings being held through the course of the year. The Voice of Global South Summit convened by India in January 2023 was attended by a remarkable 125 countries. It was aimed at building a Unity of Voice, a Unity of Purpose. The Summit showed a real hunger for change and a craving for leadership. It also put a sharp focus on issues that really matter to the Global South – on challenges ranging from a rising debt burden, food and fertilizer insecurity, on health and climate justice, on access to technology and digital public goods.

Some of these issues also require reform of the multilateral financial institutions. However, even as the Global South seeks reform of IMF and the World Bank, it is important to recognise that they are no longer the largest sources of debt for several countries. It is one of BRICS' own members that has emerged as the largest creditor. And it is wrong to project concerns about debt trap as a Western conspiracy. They are a real worry across many countries in the Global South. Unsustainable debt levels have become the primary source of financial stress in countries like Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Angola in Africa and in Sri Lanka and Pakistan in India's own neighbourhood.

India has tried to use the finance ministers' meetings during its G20 presidency to see if a consensus can be forged, if some mechanism can be created to provide urgent, badly needed debt-relief to these struggling nations by bringing multilateral financial institutions and creditor nations on the same page. Any substantive action on this front requires data about the quantum, the duration and the terms of the debt arrangements. However, tight secrecy clauses negotiated in bilateral aid agreements by a major creditor nation prevent



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even this basic data from becoming available. The impact of the ensuing delays was starkly visible in Sri Lanka's default on its external payments obligations in 2022 and it took a \$4 billion emergency package of financial and humanitarian assistance to avert looming political unrest even as the principal creditor nation evaluated its options.

A candid analysis of the challenges involved in real reform of the multilateral system therefore requires a degree of introspection within the BRICS framework even as the group engages energetically with other international actors to press the reform agenda. There is no dearth of issues that could be taken up for action but for the sake of brevity and focus, this author would highlight just two:

1. The BRICS Summit in Johannesburg in August 2023 could come out with a consensus statement supporting the G4 proposals for reform of the UNSC.
2. BRICS members could commit themselves to providing transparent data on their bilateral aid agreements as a first step to addressing the debt crisis afflicting several countries of the Global South.

By doing so, BRICS has the opportunity to become a part of the real reform of the multilateral system. ●