

India's Changing Outlook on International Forums

By Juanita Justin and Jayashri Ramesh Sundaram

India has been engaging with the international community since the formation of the United Nations. It has been part of various crucial summits that have shaped our international system. Be it criticism or a diversion from previous policies, the current government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken steps that have increased hope in India's foreign policy with respect to the international system. It has proactively displayed eagerness in becoming a leader at the global stage and among the developing countries. In 2014, the presence of SAARC leaders at Modi's oath ceremony showcased India's renewed interest in regional and multilateral forums. However, the momentum could not be sustained and a decline of regional cooperation was witnessed over the years. The article will discuss the distinction observed in India's approach towards international and regional summits under the Modi administration.

India has been engaging with the four emerging economies – Brazil, Russia, South Africa and China by integrating themselves through BRICS partnership. This has created a platform for India to enhance its leadership capabilities in the international system. In 2015, on India's request, BRICS established a multilateral rule-based system – New Development Bank (NDB) – to challenge the western domination in global trade and transactions. The NDB is still in the stages of development compared to the existing international institutions such as the World Bank and IMF. However, with the introduction of the NDB, India now has more influence in multilateral forums paving its way into international financial institutions. The NDB has given India the power to question western-based WTO regulations influencing the international trade and has demanded the revision of the multilateral trade regulations in G20. The WTO regulations have been viewed as unilateral and protectionist, impinging on the sovereign rights of the countries to act within their own area of national priority.

Modi, during the G20 Summit in 2018, addressed the issues of international trade and discussed the need to revise the WTO regulations to ensure transparent, open and inclusive multilateral trade. The international order is no longer bipolar; the world has become more interdependent as power and influence are being diffused among new emerging states, reshaping western-dominated international institutions.

India in recent years has been more insistent in achieving its own interest rather than complying with US interests. Despite US objections, India signed a multi-billion-dollar defence deal with Russia in 2018, giving priority to its BRICS' partner over the US, which showcased India's national interest in the matter. The shift in power is also evident in the Commonwealth of Nations where the UK believes India is key for the forum's revival. Modi was the only leader who was given an audience with Queen Elizabeth II and this shows how strategic India is to the commonwealth.

India has explicitly engaged at multilateral forums taking initiatives on issues like climate change, reforms of international institutions and so on. The Modi administration was appreciated for highlighting the importance for global action on climate change. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the then President of France François Hollande, taking a global position on climate change, established a first treaty-based international forum International Solar Alliance (ISA) headquartered in India. ISA aims to collaborate with solar resource-rich countries and create common approaches to adapt to new, clean and renewable energy. Sixty-eight of the potential 121 solar-rich tropical countries have signed the ISA framework agreement. India leading the ISA is significant as it is currently the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases and its exploration into the green economy will help other developing countries struggling with similar domestic problems.

Under the Paris Climate Agreement, as of 2018, India has managed to reduce its greenhouse gas emission intensity by 21 per cent and 35 per cent of the country's power capacity of the promised 40 per cent is based on renewable, non-fossil fuel – hydroelectric and nuclear energy. But when it comes to India's green mission for increasing the forest cover to absorb the excess CO₂ from the atmosphere, the rates have actually gotten worse. However, India has been working hard to fulfil its commitments by the 2030 deadline. India has the potential to reach countries that are more vulnerable to climate change, specifically the ASEAN countries, due to the strategic, economic and defence partnerships with the region. By tackling an issue on the global agenda, such as climate change, ISA makes India relevant, expanding its ties with other countries and strengthening its influence globally. Modi intends the ISA to challenge the role of the OPEC as the core energy suppliers in the future.

Besides oil imports, India aims to diversify its trade relations with its major oil supplier Saudi Arabia through the GCC-India Corridor. The Corridor increases investment opportunities, introducing other areas of cooperation and bilateral trade with the Gulf Cooperation Council

(GCC) countries, granting easy access to invest in sectors such as food processing, healthcare, education and infrastructure. This has been beneficial to Indian investors as there has been an increase of investments into GCC countries from 4.7 per cent in 2011 to 16.2 per cent in 2016. The strategic partnerships were also established to enhance defence relations between the countries. During Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's visit in 2019, Modi addressed the threat of terrorism referring to the Pulwama attack and insisted on intensifying the cooperation on sharing intelligence and combating terrorism. The leaders agreed to take verifiable steps against terror infrastructure to end terrorism in all its manifestations.

However, on the regional front, little has been done to enact counter terrorism measures, considering the strained relations between India and Pakistan which has affected the SAARC as well. This was observed when Pakistan refused to be part of the South Asia Satellite launched by India, and when India in 2016 boycotted the 19th SAARC summit. Given the tensions between the countries, India has been unable to deliver on the proposals such as establishing the SAARC Centre for Good Governance for strengthening regionalism.

In addition to the animosity with Pakistan, the Chinese influence has contributed to the tensions among the diplomatic and political circles in India. The Indian Ocean Region Association (IORA) is another forum where India has expressed the desire to take a leadership role but has been unable to assume responsibility due to its inefficiency. While it is the reluctance to keep its resentment with Pakistan away at SAARC, it is the shortfall of naval capacities in the Indian Ocean Region that India battles with. With India's apprehension of China's 'string of pearls' strategy of encircling India in the region, it is in India's interest to bring all the Indian Ocean nations together to balance the former's influence. India also hopes to strengthen itself in the Indian Ocean region through its partnership with the Quad. Although India's relations with China are defined by its geopolitical tensions, India has taken steps to benefit from China's economic position in the world. Joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2017, India aims to further deepen its connection with China and Central Asia.

Beijing, also cognizant of the economic benefits in its relationship with India, has also supported India's membership to APEC. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation is an inter-governmental forum of 21 Pacific Rim member economies that promotes free trade throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Despite skipping the APEC meet that China had invited India for, the latter's membership continues to gain support. Modi's proactiveness has indeed strengthened the hope that the country could finally attain membership after nearly two decades. The narrative of

protectionist approach and lack of economic preparedness still leaves India's membership hanging in the forum.

Modi's presence was felt at the international forums and his decisiveness on certain issues highlighted his priorities for the nation. India's engagement at multilateral forums has enhanced its leadership capabilities, strengthening its position in the international system. However, in the South Asian region, India has been largely caught up in a geopolitical power balance. Nonetheless, its attempt to lead the region has garnered support from the international community. Regarding the US sanctions on Iranian oil trade, India initially did not give in to Trump's demands; but the Iranian oil imports gradually declined when the US cancelled its waivers to India. But, on matters of national security and harnessing advanced military weaponry India is unhinged, completely overlooking US disapproval and pursuing its own strategic interests. India in the past five years has improved its bilateral ties with other major economies. This has strengthened India's international diplomacy creating an optimistic outlook for the future.

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