



Dislodging the legitimate 'dictators'

Kishore Mahbubani Posted online: Fri Dec 03 2010, 04:08 hrs

President Obama brought many gifts to India. The biggest gift he brought was a clear signal that US-India relations have entered a positive new terrain. Many of the suspicions that had continued to persist as a relic of the Cold War differences between India and America have gone. A new era has certainly emerged in Indo-American relations.

One symbolic indication of this new era was provided by President Obama's categorical support for India's admission as a new permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC). There can be no doubt that Obama was completely sincere in expressing this support. Despite this, the big question remains whether this strong support brings India any closer to joining the UNSC as a permanent member.

It is vital to remember here that the question of UNSC reform and expansion has been discussed by the UN for almost two decades. In 1992, the UN set up the "Open-ended Working Group on UNSC Reform". Some wag has wisely suggested that the name of the group be changed from "open-ended" to "never-ending", which would be a more accurate description of its performance.

So what is holding up UNSC reform? The simple answer is that there is a natural gridlock in place. For every country that wants to join, there is a neighbour or rival that feels uncomfortable. Hence, for a Brazil that wants to join, Argentina is uncomfortable. For a Japan that wants to join, China and South Korea feel uncomfortable. Despite the apparent closeness of the European Union member states, many EU states do not welcome Germany's candidature as a permanent member. When I served as Singapore's ambassador to the UN, my Italian counterpart used to quip, "Why should only Germany and Japan join? Italy also lost World War II."

The resistance to change, however, does not come from neighbouring states only. Among the larger membership of the UN, there are also deep qualms about adding more permanent members with a veto. Why is this so? The simple answer is that the five permanent members (or P-5, as they are commonly referred to) have abused their veto powers. In theory, they are meant to use their privileged status to "maintain or restore international peace and security". In practice, they have used their veto powers to protect their national interests, not the interests of the international community.

To make matters worse, the P-5 have refused to accept any kind of democratic accountability or transparency for their performance as permanent members. Even though the charter says explicitly that the UNSC is obliged to submit a report to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) (where all 192 UN members are represented), the P-5 refuse to accept any kind of explicit or implicit accountability to the 192 members. Indeed, many P-5 members actually believe (secretly) that far from the UNSC being accountable to the UNGA, the UNSC is actually superior to the UNGA. The UNSC is in one way more powerful than the UNGA because it can make decisions that are mandatory for all 192 members. Hence, when the UNSC imposes sanctions on Iran, all states have to comply.

What happens when a person or an organisation is given absolute powers without any balancing accountability for these

powers? The simple answer is that the person begins to behave like a “dictator”. Indeed, in some ways, the P-5 are the only legitimate “dictators” left in the world. And, as dictators, they do not want to see any dilution of their powers.

Ironically, even though the US is the world’s most powerful democracy domestically, it does not accept the principle of democratic accountability for its international performance. Instead, like any other great power, it does not wish to accept any constraints on its behaviour. This is another reason why the US is not keen to see any real reform in the UNSC. Many years ago, I had a private meeting with a senior US diplomat. I asked him for the bottom-line of the US position on UNSC reform. He replied candidly, “15 members already give us tremendous problems when we try to secure a consensus. A larger number is not in America’s interests.” I wasn’t the first to learn this American bottom-line position. My Pakistani colleague had told me the same point earlier. This is why he was confident that no UNSC reform would happen soon. To be fair, the US is not the only P-5 member which is reluctant to expand the UNSC. In a US diplomatic cable which was leaked this week, an unidentified Chinese official was quoted as saying that China wanted the United States to maintain its position on UNSC reform and not be “proactive” on the matter. “The P-5 should not be diluted. If we end up with a ‘P-10’, both China and the United States would be in trouble,” he told the American ambassador.

All this therefore creates a painful conundrum for India. There can now be no doubt whatsoever that India deserves a permanent seat in the UNSC. Indeed, a UNSC without India as a permanent member will clearly be seen to be illegitimate. Yet, to secure the support of the 186 other non-permanent members of the UNSC, a plan must be put forward that makes the UNSC more transparent and accountable. Any such plan would be explicitly or implicitly opposed by the current P-5. In short, any exercise to reform the UNSC is enormously difficult. Success would require the wisdom of a Solomon. Or maybe an Obama.

The writer is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore and the author of ‘The New Asian Hemisphere’ canasiansthink@expressindia.com