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To the new order, strategically

Kishore Mahbubani | February 4, 2014 9:39 am

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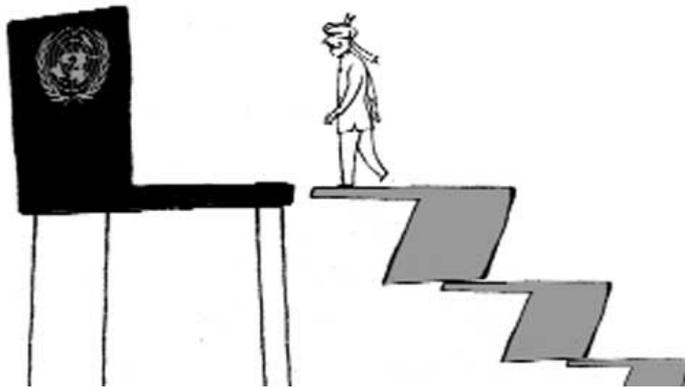
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SUMMARY

Can India, unlike Sisyphus, successfully push the boulder of UNSC reform to the summit?

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The US was uncomfortable with the G4 proposal to increase UNSC membership to 25.



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I have never understood the myth of Sisyphus. Why would any intelligent person push an immense boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll down, and to repeat this action for ever? Oddly, this is what India is doing with its quest to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It is pushing a huge boulder uphill with no prospect of it ever reaching the top.

Why not? Let me emphasise that India's case for a permanent seat on the UNSC is indisputable. Like China, it represents almost a fifth of humanity. Its GDP is number three in the world in purchasing power parity terms. It is also acknowledged as a legitimate nuclear power. As the eminent Financial Times writer, Martin Wolf, has said, "Within a decade, a world in which the United Kingdom is on the United Nations Security Council and India is not will seem beyond laughable. The old order passes. The sooner the world adjusts, the better." If India's case is indisputable, why are India's labours so Sisyphean?

The simple answer is that any reform of the UNSC will be a package deal. Despite India's growing weight in the world, there will be no reform just to let India in. Both Latin America and Africa feel excluded from permanent membership of the UNSC and have, like India, equally strong claims to have at least one permanent member on the UNSC. Since UNSC reform will have to be endorsed by the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the combined votes of Latin America (33) and Africa (54) can block reform if they are excluded from any reform formula.

In acknowledgement of the fact that any reform will have to be a package deal, India decided to form an alliance with three other aspirant states — Brazil, Germany and Japan — to mount its campaign for a permanent seat on the UNSC. These four states (G4) mounted a determined push to get permanent membership (without veto power for at least 15 years) through a UNGA resolution in 2005. While this push did gain some momentum, it ultimately failed. Like Sisyphus's motion of pushing a rock uphill, it was destined to fail for several reasons.

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First, the G4 did not include a single African candidate. To be fair, this is also due to the fact that the African group could not agree on a single candidate, unlike in Latin America, where Brazil stands out as the obvious candidate. Second, as long as relations between China and Japan remain troubled and unsettled, China cannot acquiesce to Japan's quest for permanent membership. Hence, China mounted a ferocious global campaign to block Japan. Here, even though the US technically supports Japan's claim to a UNSC seat, it quietly supported this Chinese campaign. In short, the story of UNSC reform is a story of one cunning move underlying another cunning move. Third, with the UK and France already taking up two permanent seats on the UNSC, Europe is already over-represented in permanent membership. Europe provides only 7 per cent of the world's population but it has 40 per cent (two out of five) of the permanent seats on the UNSC. It was cunning of the UK and France to support Germany's quest for permanent membership. By doing so, Germany was obliged to thank the UK and France. However, by pushing for even greater European over-representation in the UNSC, the UK and France were effectively condemning the prospects of UNSC reform and thereby preserving their permanent seats even longer.

The big question that India faces in UNSC reform is an obvious one: can it be equally cunning as the other great powers and propose a formula that will, unlike Sisyphus, result in India successfully pushing the boulder of UNSC reform to the summit? The simple answer is that it can. This is why I have proposed in my book, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West and the Logic of One World*, that India should advocate a new 7-7-7 formula for UNSC reform, where there would be seven permanent members, seven semi-permanent members and seven elected members.

This 7-7-7 formula is more likely to succeed for several reasons. First, the US has made it absolutely clear that it will not allow the UNSC to expand beyond 20 or 21. This is why the US was uncomfortable with the G4 proposal to increase UNSC membership to 25.

Second, the 7-7-7 formula would add a Latin American (Brazil) and African (Nigeria) member. Many have questioned Nigeria's eligibility given its internal travails. Yet Nigeria's potential is huge. Few are aware that even though Nigerians make up less than 1 per cent of the black population in the US, they make up nearly 25 per cent of the black students at Harvard Business School. In relative terms, the Nigerian diaspora is hugely successful. Nigeria's population is three times larger than South Africa's. Third, as China is already a permanent member, it is unlikely that the rest of the world will agree to add two more Asian states as permanent members. They will ask Asia to choose between India and Japan. Clearly India's case is stronger. Finally, India's biggest opponent in UNSC reform has been Pakistan. Under the 7-7-7 formula, Pakistan will not be a loser.

When India becomes a permanent member, Pakistan will become a semi-permanent member.

Hence, it will have an incentive to support the 7-7-7 formula over the G4 formula that India has been pushing so far.

In short, India has a simple strategic choice to make if it wants to succeed in its quest to become a permanent member of the UNSC. It can continue to push the G4 formula and end up like Sisyphus, almost reaching the top but never reaching the top. Or it could support the 7-7-7 formula and succeed in its quest.

Mahubani is author of 'The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World'



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The entire idea is based on world population figures. I believe if the UN was to exist as a body that can perform some action in the world - it will have to have states who are stable and powerful to have a leadership role. A multitude of states that cannot act independently are likely to become gridlocked, and their ability to do anything meaningful, will be severely curtailed. Equal representation is a noble Idea for the purposes of equality. However it will take more than equality to have a purposeful and meaningful UN not just a debating society

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