



**GLOBAL INDIA PODCAST
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“India-China dynamics in multilateral and minilateral organizations”

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Episode Summary:

Minilateral and multilateral organizations like the United Nations, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Quad have become arenas of competition between India and China. Host Tanvi Madan discusses India-China interactions in these domains with Ambassador Syed Akbaruddin, a former Indian permanent representative to the UN, and Indrani Bagchi, former *Times of India* diplomatic editor and now CEO of the Ananta Center in New Delhi.

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MADAN: Welcome to *Global India*, I'm Tanvi Madan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, where I specialize in Indian foreign policy. In this new Brookings podcast, I'll be turning the spotlight on India's partnerships, its rivalries, and its role on the global stage. This season our conversations will be focused on India's relationship with China, and why and how China-India ties are shaping New Delhi's view of the world.

There's an iconic set of photographs from 2009. They were taken in Copenhagen at COP15, the United Nations Climate Change Summit. They depict a conference table. On one side sits U.S. President Barack Obama. On the opposite side—not just of the table but vis-à-vis the issues being discussed—sat Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. It was a different era, one in which India and China often cooperated on the multilateral stage—on climate change, on trade, on global economic governance, even on cyber governance.

The two countries were also part of small coalitions or minilaterals, or plurilaterals as India calls them. Earlier that same year in 2009, in fact, the Chinese and Indian leaders had joined their Russian and Brazilian counterparts for the first summit of the BRIC countries, which eventually became BRICS when South Africa joined them as well. They had a Russia-India-China trilateral, and India eventually became a member of the China- and Russia-driven Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Today, India continues to be a member of BRICS and SCO, but it's now more often sitting on the opposite side of the table from China when it comes to the multilateral and minilateral domains. From an arena of Sino-Indian cooperation, these domains too have become an arena of competition. The two Asian giants continue to be like-minded on some multilateral issues. But more often than not, their interactions are now competitive, if not adversarial, whether it's at the UN Security Council, in other global or regional organizations, or vis-à-vis the developing world or what we call today the Global South. China even criticizes India's membership of minilaterals such as the Quad.

Their bilateral tensions have spilled over into groupings such as the BRICS, where, for instance, Indian officials try to ensure that their Chinese counterparts don't succeed in getting language about Chinese initiatives, such as the Global Development Initiative, into joint statements.

To discuss India-China interactions in the multilateral and minilateral domains, I'm joined today by Ambassador Syed Akbaruddin and Ms. Indrani Bagchi. Ambassador Akbaruddin, or Akbar, is dean of the Kautilya School of Public Policy in Hyderabad. He previously served for a number of years as an Indian official, including as India's permanent representative to the United Nations in New York. He also served at the IAEA, or the International Atomic Energy Agency, on deputation.

Indrani Bagchi is chief executive officer of the Ananta Center in New Delhi. Prior to that, she covered foreign policy issues, including as associate editor and diplomatic editor for the *Times of India*, one of India's largest-selling English daily newspapers for nearly two decades.

Before I continue on to the interview with Akbar and Indrani, I want to thank you all for listening to or watching the podcast, providing feedback, and sending me questions on social media. I want to highlight that we'll be ending the season of the podcast early next year with a special Q&A episode in which I will answer audience questions about India-China relations.

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So, please do send us any questions you'd like answered or that you wished had been answered during the course of the season. You can do so by posting your question on Twitter, or X, with the hashtag Global India. All one word. Or if you'd prefer to submit your questions through email, you can send it to global India at Brookings.edu. That's GlobalIndia at Brookings.edu.

Now let's continue on to the conversation.

Welcome to the *Global India* podcast Akbar.

AKBARUDDIN: Thank you very much, Tanvi for having me on your show.

MADAN: Indrani, welcome to you as well.

BAGCHI: Thanks, Tanvi. Great to be on your show.

04:24 What is India's perspective on China's approach in the United Nations system?

MADAN: As we think about the U.N. system, Akbar, I feel there's nobody better to speak about this subject than you. You've been India's permanent representative at the U.N. in New York. You have also done stints in the '90s at that mission, but also been on deputation at the International Atomic Energy Agency. If we're talking about and thinking about China's approach in the U.N. system, from India's perspective, how have you thought about it?

AKBARUDDIN: So, Tanvi, if you are my age group, you've seen this evolve over 30, 40 years. And you're right. My first introduction to China and the U.N. was in the early '90s. At that stage, like India, China played what I would say is a defensive game. It's a game that it thought ... it's a primarily Western institution. It would intervene when it thought that its core interests were being impeded or impacted. Otherwise, it would stay back. But it never hesitated when its core interests were being impeded. For example, in the 1970s, China vetoed Bangladesh's entry into the U.N. as a member. In fact, that was within months of joining the U.N.

But otherwise, it would be much more restrained, would not participate very much, would allow others to do the dirty work and would wait until it felt it was essential to participate or put in its viewpoint.

That said, as China's economy grew, as China became more assertive on the global stage in its bilateral relations, obviously it started getting reflected in the multilateral system, too. So, I suppose somewhere around 2007, 2010 was the time when China graduated to a much more assertive role in the multilateral system. And you can also look at it in another way: if you look at China's financial contributions. So, China used

to contribute, when I was first there, less than 2% of the UN budget. Today, it contributes 15% of the U.N. budget in terms of the general budget and 18% for the peace and security. So, you can see the exponential change in China's role at the U.N. purely in financial terms.

And once you become a stakeholder with that magnitude of financial contributions, you start taking much more assertive positions. China now says, interestingly, that it's the first country which signed the U.N. Charter, and that's not wrong. China was the first country which signed the U.N. Charter. So, it projects itself as a U.N. insider all the way through, not some country which had come in between and then took time to adjust, et cetera.

It now has reinvented itself as a major stakeholder. It insists that its representation in terms of staff is much lower than what it should be, because at 18% it's very much low still compared to what it is.

Look at India on the other side. We've grown a little, relative. We also get some benefits because we are not a permanent member. So, they don't put a surcharge on us in the Security Council. So, our contribution today is about 1%, a little above 1%. Hasn't changed very much. When I was in there in the '90s, it just was about 0.6, 0.7. So, it's 1.01 or 1.02, et cetera.

So, you can clearly see that it's now become an assertive power and much more a stakeholder, which puts in more into the multilateral system and desires to get more. And that's the fundamental change that you can see over the last, say, 25, 30 years.

08:22 How does India see China's quest for leadership of international organizations?

MADAN: What we've also seen is China seek leadership of various international organizations. We've just had a report, in fact, from the U.S. Congress-mandated China Commission with a whole list of these organizations which China is leading. Indrani, how does India view this Chinese quest for leadership of these organizations, for these key positions? But also, what has China's approach to Indian membership of various and leadership of various organizations been?

BAGCHI: Well, we've seen certainly over the last decade, China has moved quite decisively to take leadership of what seemed to be innocuous organizations, initially, but then they became quite consequential. And if you look at the map, China actually heads some of the biggest organizations within the U.N. And that is not by accident. That is completely by design.

How does China view India's participation in these organizations? When it's an election, often India wins elections, and India does really well with elections. But China brings a greater heft to its position. But also India started late, much later than China when it came to lobbying to be heads of organizations. Akbar has in his day when he was PR [Permanent Representative] in New York, he worked to get many Indians in different UN organizations. But again, we started very late. I suppose, if you look at India and China, the asymmetry really shows very starkly when you look at your participation in the United Nations.

The other point is, of course, that India's hamstrung because it's not a member of the Security Council, not a permanent member. Whatever aspirations India might have, that's always something that draws us back.

In a straight election, India might be able to get, India has been able to get, many more votes when it has been elected, often even unanimous Indian elections. But then China can really bring muscle, money, et cetera to its own elections in bodies that actually take the big decisions. And that's where we are.

10:37 What has China's response been to India's quest for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council?

MADAN: And particularly, I think China's focused on standard-setting organizations as well.

Akbar, one thing Indrani mentioned was India not being a member of the U.N. Security Council. Now, who knows if and when reform happens and how that progresses. But nonetheless, you've had four out of the P-5 take a different view than China of India's membership of the Security Council. China has not endorsed Indian membership. Has that always been its position? What lies behind it from your perspective?

AKBARUDDIN: So, it's true that China has never been articulate on Security Council reform. It talks in generalities. It hasn't moved from square A. It says that it supports a greater role for developing countries in the U.N. system or in the Security Council. Now, this is a position that is held for, I think, maybe 25 years or 30 years.

But what it has done is: initially, the objections to India's permanent membership were from a rung of middle class. So, Italy, Argentina, Pakistan, perhaps Indonesia a little bit, but not very vociferously—these were the countries who were objecting to reform. When I was there last, that scenario had changed. It's now China that blocks every effort for reform. The others are at the periphery. China puts in a lot of resources. It takes Security Council reform very seriously. It lobbies with an array of states where it has now developed very strong links and forces them to come out and say this is not the time, et cetera.

So, China clearly has moved in terms of Security Council reform. It's moved to a very assertive and aggressive position where it says: Strategic patience is required. This is not the time because developing countries won't gain very much from it. Africa will be left behind. So, don't agree to it now. We need to wait for an appropriate moment, et cetera, et cetera. So, it clearly has become much more assertive in opposing any format of Security Council reform.

12:56 What has China's approach been to India's desire for membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group?

MADAN: Indrani, one place where at least the public saw this process play out of China blocking or having very strong views about Indian membership but also a waiver for India was the Nuclear Suppliers Group. You covered this extensively. For our audience who's not familiar, when India was trying to get a waiver at the Nuclear Suppliers Group, can you explain why it was trying to do this and what China's

approach was to that? And what China's approach to India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group has been as well?

BAGCHI: So, among the four nonproliferation regimes, which is the Nuclear Suppliers Group, Wassenaar Arrangement, the Australia Group, and MTCR—the Missile Technology Control Regime—one of the promises made to India by the U.S. when India and the U.S. negotiated and signed the India-U.S. nuclear deal was that the U.S. would facilitate a single waiver for India to conduct nuclear commerce.

That occupied a mammoth piece of diplomacy between 2005 and 2008, as the U.S. and India worked really hard to convince other countries, other members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, to grant India that waiver. In 2008, when the Nuclear Suppliers Group was debating this, it was China who walked out of the Nuclear Suppliers Group meeting at midnight.

As you said, I covered it extensively, including sitting in front of the Nuclear Suppliers Group building, which is actually the Japanese mission in Vienna. And we sat on the pavement because they wouldn't let us inside. But the Chinese actually left the building. And it took a phone call from Condi Rice to Hu Jintao in the middle of the night, China time, to get a "yes" from him.

Now, this was China in 2008. For two years prior, China had used a galaxy of countries, including a bunch of European countries like Ireland, Austria, Netherlands, you name it, Norway, to block the Indian requisition for a waiver.

But anyway, China, as it turned out, you know, realpolitik won in the end. That was an exercise of American power. China relented and India got that waiver. But I think China realized that this would rebound on China in a very different way.

So, when India applied for actual membership—remember that what we got in 2008 was just a waiver—but when we applied for actual membership, China very openly blocked us. And today the state is that India is a member of all the other three nonproliferation regimes, but it is not a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. And China has used a whole number of excuses, including getting Pakistan in as a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. So, I have grave doubts that we will ever become either a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group or, frankly, a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

MADAN: And of course, today the U.S.-China relationship not in the state it was for the kind of persuasion or otherwise that the U.S. could extend to get China to "yes" on either of those—

BAGCHI: Yes, but you know what the other thing, Tanvi, is while China is, and what Akbar said, was China's right now very openly opposing India's permanent membership to the U.N. Security Council. But it doesn't seem like the other four are really doing any heavy lifting, frankly. They're like, okay, you know, we want you there, but China doesn't want you there. And really, does anybody want to open that club up? I am not so sure.

MADAN: Well, especially not with a veto, right? Because people have talked about, essentially second-tier permanent membership. President Biden did talk about this in his U.N. speech, but it's not quite clear if anybody is going to move on this.

17:09 What other concerns does India have about Chinese activities at the UN?

Akbar, what have the other concerns for India been in terms of China's activities at the U.N. system? I know both of you have mentioned Pakistan in different ways. Has the China-Pakistan partnership played out at the U.N. in ways, or have there been other concerns that India has had about Chinese activities at the U.N.?

AKBARUDDIN: So, before I go to that, I'd just like to quickly jump in on what you said about others not willing to do the heavy lifting. So, let me tell you, I haven't heard any U.S. diplomat ever in my 30 years plus at the U.N. ever speak once in favor of India as a permanent member. President Biden says, President Obama says, President Bush says, President Trump says, and it figures regularly in bilateral outside the U.N. context. But never once have I heard even a third secretary from the U.S. mission say, or just read out from the statement saying that President Biden and Prime Minister Modi met and U.S. support. So, there is blame to be apportioned everywhere in that issue.

Of course, this is a primary, a major issue, but there are other things. For example, counterterrorism. Now, for much of India, counterterrorism is focused on Pakistan engagement with terrorists, cross-border terrorism. And there, there is a nexus between China and Pakistan whereby China does not allow any Indian effort [to get individuals designated as terrorists via the UN 1267 committee] to go through. Now, we have succeeded a couple of times, but that's because the price we have to pay and the heavy lifting we have to do, like in the NSG waiver, it's a huge cost to get. So, [Jaish-e-Mohammed leader] Masood Azhar, we tried four times and finally made it—over a period of 15 years, with the help of others.

So, they come with very many interesting conceptions saying that why don't Pakistan and you first agree? Now, if we had wanted to agree and work it out, why would we come to the U.N.? I mean, we could do it bilaterally. And I have been once or twice an observer where the present foreign minister, Wang Yi, said, Who is Masood Azhar? I haven't even heard of him. Why is he coming into this conversation? So, it's pretty clear China is hand in glove with Pakistan and for reasons that it may want to protect its ally and a strategic ally at that. So, that nexus has only deepened.

For many years, we could see that evolving in different areas, but we've now started seeing it after post-2019, even on issues of Kashmir. Now, for the first time after 50 years, China tried to bring up a discussion on Kashmir in the informal consultations. That it failed is a separate issue. But it's the first time since 1971 that China tried. Previously there were other states, smaller states, who want to do good, try to help India and Pakistan, et cetera, say, well, why don't you work out and all? But this was the first time China tried, and it masqueraded as a champion of human rights, saying human rights in Kashmir are being violated, et cetera. Again, this is the first time I ever heard China talk as a champion of human rights because it's always on the defensive in these things.

So, you can see how strong the bond is, that it is willing to go into areas where it is not on a comfortable wicket. Yet it did so. It tried and it failed. But it shows that counterterrorism, again like Security Council reform, is an area where China would not be comfortable in India moving ahead.

21:09 What concerns does India have about China's approach in other multilateral organizations?

MADAN: Indrani, do you want to add anything to that or other concerns, whether at the U.N. in New York or in other multilateral organizations, have there been concerns that India has had?

BAGCHI: From China? Yes. I would say, frankly, something that the world let the ball slip, literally dropped the ball on, was in 2016 when the U.N. Law of the Sea [UNCLOS], and when the Permanent Court of Arbitration awarded Philippines a victory in that case against China's building artificial islands on the South China Sea, awarded the entire South China Sea to the Philippines. Nobody endorsed that. We pretended that it did not happen. I mean China certainly pretended that that award did not happen. And nobody held China to account on the rules-based order, on the international laws that everybody is supposed to ...

Of course, I mean, the U.S. is on a weak wicket there because the U.S. itself is not a signatory to UNCLOS. But to protest today that China's militarized the South China Sea when there was a decision, a verdict, nobody stood by Philippines then. We always talk about the Chinese not obeying the rules-based order and we get the rules-based order thrown at India.

But if you remember, in 2014, India actually accepted a verdict by the same Permanent Court of Arbitration to resolve to demarcate a maritime boundary with Bangladesh and awarded, if I'm not mistaken, something to the tune of 20,000 square kilometers of the Bay of Bengal to Bangladesh. India did not contest the ruling. It helped to demarcate the exclusive zone for Bangladesh and, frankly, the maritime boundary.

But do you hear anybody saying that India is a big upholder of the international rules-based order? We don't get any of that. Instead, we are always held up for challenging the international rules-based order. But that's not true. The rules-based order is challenged by the very titans who are supposed to uphold the rules-based order.

So, it's not just in the U.N. system. Akbar talked about the counter-terrorism committee, which is the 1267 Committee. I think it is like pulling teeth for Indian diplomats to get terrorists named. And I think we are on the fourth or the fifth block of, I think, one of Masood Azhar's brothers even today.

MADAN: I will say, I think, on the arbitral award, you did have some countries actually stand up for Philippines. I think the challenge, though, is one that I think the U.N. system faces across the board, which is once a fait accompli has been presented, you can stand by Philippines, but reversing those decisions or getting enforcement is a crucial problem. I mean, one thing you have seen is American Navy leadership often actually points to India's acceptance of the arbitral award. But again,

you can point to, [that] as an example, but that enforcement, as how do you reverse this decision? Hence, I think the importance of actually trying to prevent these things in the first place.

24:23 What have been the areas of India-China cooperation on multilateral issues?

Akbar, we've talked about some of these concerns, but we have seen China and India cooperate at the U.N. I remember, it must have been 4 or 5 years ago, where in answer to a question, you called China and India "frenemies," where you said, we do compete, but we do work together. What are some of those areas where India and China have worked together on multilateral issues or at the U.N.?

AKBARUDDIN: So, like I mentioned, our initial engagement with China at the U.N. was largely a cooperative one. If you look at development issues where India and China, which considers itself to be the largest developing country, et cetera, cooperated on a whole host of things. However, the second one was Sustainable Development Goals. Again, these were areas when the SDGs were being negotiated, the idea was that they should be bottom up rather than the MDGs, the Millennium Development Goals, which were the choice of the Secretary-General, and he would have been influenced by others, et cetera. So, on a host of economic issues, there was cooperation.

A second area where there has been cooperation is climate change. And that has been again on phasing down this big controversy where China and India cooperated.

The issue is that these areas have become smaller compared to the areas of differences. And as you said, it's very easy to work out and stop at the beginning rather than change.

So, increasingly after 2015, as India-China relations also started deteriorating bilaterally, you could see at the U.N. too that there were this array of differences which came out. In fact, if you go back and look at it, 2014, we proposed the International Yoga Day. China at that very General Assembly, Xi Jinping talked of One Belt, One Road. Nobody noticed it because the way he said it, it was not something that was attractive.

And then China, while we got a resolution, China started populating Xi Jinping Thought into a whole array of U.N. resolutions. And when we started pointing out, for us it was easy to look at One Belt, One Road, because we had very serious objections to it of a sovereign nature. But the U.S., it allowed it through even in Security Council resolutions on Afghanistan, et cetera. And when we pointed it out to them, they did realize and it was quite a difficult task to claw back.

In fact, if you now see any of the resolutions, they have been cleansed because usually the next iteration comes the next year, et cetera. Those have been cleansed. But it took 2 or 3 years even for the U.S. to understand what was happening, because China will say "community of shared destiny." It would say "win-win situation." And everybody would say, what's wrong with win-win? This is a good term, et cetera. Little realizing that this was integral to Xi Jinping Thought.

So, the areas of cooperation, since I said that in 2017 or so, have shrunken and the areas of divergence has grown. So, I'll just give you one more example. So, the Quad. Till 2020, we never had a meeting of Quad countries at any international platform. I remember Ambassador Nikki Haley, who is now making headlines and waves in the U.S. presidential election, repeatedly asking me when she was the PR [permanent representative], let's have an informal meeting of the Quad. And repeatedly I was told no informal meeting, no nothing. This is as late as 2018 or something like that.

And then, that was our considered a position, that this is a headquarters driven agenda, shouldn't be proliferated into the U.N. domain, et cetera, which was fine if we followed the same path for BRICS, if we followed the same option for SCO [Shanghai Cooperation Organization]. But we were meeting as BRICS ambassadors. SCO has a resolution in the U.N. about cooperation and we were members of the SCO, so we would be coaxed to support some of those things that we are not happy with. But we had in an SCO context of give and take, maybe we had agreed to it at a certain stage.

So, I think over the years we've definitely moved on. And now if I was asked that question, I don't know what my answer would be now for that.

29:08 How India engages in tactical cooperation with China

MADAN: You know, it's interesting now, I think not just at the U.N., but around the world, Quad ambassadors meet regularly. I used to keep a list thinking, oh, you know, the Twitter list, thinking this would be interesting. But now I've stopped keeping track because it happens so often.

Indrani, we did see some tactical cooperation in terms of striking deals to get something done between India and China, for example, at the Financial Action Task Force, this body that is for countering terrorism financing and money laundering. What has India's approach been to that kind of tactical cooperation?

BAGCHI: Well, if you remember, the tactical cooperation that we did have with China in the FATF, the Financial Action Task Force, pertained to Pakistan remaining in the gray list. But the tactical deal—and frankly, multilateral diplomats, in my view, are literally masters of the deal because they must master tactical deals. And China got India's endorsement for being the next president of the FATF.

So, it worked both ways. China needed India's endorsement because India's endorsement came. Then the American endorsement came. So, China got a clean path to presidency the following year, and we got Pakistan to stay on the gray list. There was really no way Pakistan would have been out of the gray list and nobody was going to put Pakistan in the black list. So, yes, those deals have been there.

But on climate change, and Akbar is right, because we used to have this fantasy about us, India and China, being developing countries. I think somewhere close to a decade ago we got wise to this. And I remember the former national security adviser used to say that we are not the same. China's pollution levels and ours just cannot be compared. So, we cannot have the West tarring us with the same brush. We should actually be in a different place. Because we used to have this romantic idea

that we were like the Chinese. We're not. I think that moved from the time of the Paris Accord, I think, where we were on a different scale.

MADAN: And I think another area you've seen this shift or understanding and acknowledgment that India is not China was cyber governance. I remember there used to be this debate where India's initial view had been in these discussions that, like Russia and China, was going to take a multilateral approach, that it's basically a state driven system. And over time actually moved towards the position that Brazil essentially, I think, has—and the West, yes—but it was really, I think, the Brazilian position that India was closer to, which is a multi-stakeholder approach, that actually beyond the governments, private sector and civil society also matters. Very much this recognition that India is different from China.

32:06 Why has India participated in the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, but not other Chinese-led initiatives?

Akbar, I do want to move from the multilateral system to some of these new initiatives, new organizations, new coalitions that have been forming. We've seen different countries take the lead on this. We've seen China take the lead in something, for example, like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. You talked about One Belt, One Road. That is something India has not joined, has boycotted, in fact, been very vocal about it, but it did join something like the AIIB. What explained that difference in terms of participating in one Chinese initiative but not—

AKBARUDDIN: So, I think they are two different animals if you look at it through the multilateral lens. So, the Asian Infrastructure Bank is a multilaterally negotiated treaty outcome. So, there were discussions. India was participant in the discussions, and the outcome was a treaty which everybody agreed to. Also, let's not forget, while China was the initiator of that, the Bank is in China and China is the largest contributor, it's the only international bank that India is the second largest contributor.

So, you can clearly see that there is an advantage for us because we want finance from multilateral development institutions of every sort. The World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the New Development Bank of the BRICS, and of course, the AIIB. So, I think that's the fundamental difference.

And look at what is BRI, or One Belt, One Road. BRI is a hub and spoke arrangement. So, all the spokes lead to the hub. There is no multilateralism unless this is a new format of multilateralism, because China decides what it will provide assistance for. There is no treaty there. Or if there is a dispute, you go to Shanghai courts and find solutions to it. China will decide what every year is the budget allocation, et cetera, et cetera. So, they are fundamentally different.

The AIIB—yes, it's a non-Western, although several Western countries have also joined it since.

But the Belt and Road is clearly a different kettle of fish, which is China's new model of multilateralism, if I may call it so, and so fundamentally different from the AIIB, which follows a traditional path of multilateralism. But initiative taken by China, like in the New Development Bank of the BRICS, where again we have a good say. All of us as founder members get the same amount of shares and then China put in an

extra money and it gets the extra share. So, I think we need to distinguish between those two elements. It doesn't have a debt trap concern there because the Bank follows rules. Basically, it's built on the model of the World Bank with an additional funding arrangement.

35:00 What was India's motivation for joining groupings like Russia-India-China and the BRICS?

MADAN: Indrani, long before AIIB or even BRI, you had India join—we didn't use to call them plurilaterals or minilaterals as they've been called today—but India did join groupings like the Russia-India-China trilateral, what used to be BRIC and is now BRICS and now BRICS Plus with Brazil, Russia, India, China and then when South Africa joined. When India joined those, what was the motivation for India to do so?

BAGCHI: Well, until the '90s, I would say, India's approach was to stay away from these groups. We missed out a lot. For example, APEC [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation]. We were invited. We stayed away, and then the door closed. That was a learning within the Indian system. And after that, we've joined anything that came our way—everything. We lobbied for almost two decades to join SCO. It was called the Shanghai Five, if you remember, the original.

RIC [Russia-India-China] was a Russian creation. And somewhere after the BRICS report came out, they decided to bring Brazil in, became BRIC, killed RIC, and then the Chinese brought in South Africa. But what we have today is a strange concoction, in my view, because we have the original 4 or 5 of the BRICS, but we have this other new lot.

The idea clearly is inspired by China. China really wants to grow this as an anti-West alliance, an anti-West grouping. Very hard. If you look at the new members, yes, Iran will always be anti-West. But UAE, Saudi Arabia? I don't think so. India? So, what the BRICS Plus looks like today is a bit of a contested space.

But yes, to go back to your point, anybody calls us—we've now got Quad Pluses. Have you noticed? There are two Quad Pluses that at least have met once during the pandemic. Whether they meet again or not, we don't know. We reactivated the Japan-India-U.S. trilateral, which had a meeting [in 2018] and followed soon after by an RIC meeting. We even resurrected the RIC out of nowhere, because the RIC was subsumed into BRICS. Yet we have resurrected them.

And during the G-20, I noticed that IBSA—India, Brazil, South Africa grouping which could have actually been the best one out of the lot—but IBSA suddenly found expression because IBSA signed an agreement with the U.S. It was an agreement that completely passed everybody by. Nobody noticed it. But, I think these plurilateral groupings are becoming interesting, contested spaces. Which is good.

38:03 As relations between India and China have deteriorated, has there been a spillover effect in minilaterals such as BRICS and the SCO?

MADAN: Just to follow up, Indrani. I noticed it partly because I was thinking as BRICS expansion was going on, these three democracies amongst BRICS are the ones who have the most to lose in terms of diluted influence with an expanded

BRICS to some extent. And so, it would be natural for them to start doing more together, and then I think there was a meeting on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly this last year.

In terms of contested spaces, as Akbar was saying, as China-India relations deteriorated, you saw an impact at the U.N. Have you also seen this in these plurilaterals like BRICS, like RIC, which I believe has not met since 2020 at the leader level? Has there been a spillover effect of China-India relations in these organizations or in India's attitude to these: BRICS and Russia-India-China or even Shanghai Cooperation Organization?

BAGCHI: I think so. Akbar spoke about China putting its constructs, whether it is Xi Jinping Thought. And if you look at, say, SCO, even BRICS, the new words are the GSI, the Global Security Initiative, the GCI, the Global Civilization Initiative, and I forget the next one. But China tries to put all of these into the multilateral documents now. And it remains for India to push back. So, therefore, China also pushed back against using *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* in the G-20 documents, if you remember. But certainly this is one of the tasks of our diplomats today, is to push back against the China narrative, or mainstreaming the China narrative into a multilateral document.

MADAN: For our listeners who are unaware, *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* is the diplomatic mantra that the Modi government has been using, which is "the world is one family," a Sanskrit term.

39:57 How does India see the role of its partners such as the US, Russia, and European states in multilateral organizations?

Akbar, we've already heard them mentioned in different ways, the U.S., Russia, even European partners. What role have these other major or even middle powers been as India and China have interacted, competed, cooperated in multilateral organizations? How has India seen their role and has it changed over time?

AKBARUDDIN: So, actually, I think this question ties up into your earlier question of the role of these plurilateral or minilateral systems that we have seen. Now, many of these, for example, the RIC, R-I-C, or the SCO, these were all at a time when India was trying to start looking for partners everywhere. There were not many options of the Quad variety then.

So, it looked at Afghanistan, where should it play a role in Afghanistan? It thought that the SCO will be there. It wanted to be among the big boys, so, it said, which other big boys will have us meet at foreign ministers level every time? Russia, India and China. So, these predate the new surge of engagement with the West, which is perhaps a phenomenon of the last, well say, after the nuclear deal, which is 2007, '08, et cetera, and all when ties started becoming ...

So, the challenge is that we haven't been able to let go of institutions which are informal. So, the RIC is an informal institution. Doesn't have a secretariat, doesn't have a treaty, doesn't have anything, is just an arrangement.

Similarly, you look at the BRICS. Again, the challenge that we are now facing is unlike China and Russia, which are consistently engaged on the multilateral

landscape in every issue, we are not there yet. So, they can trade off on many things. For example, on the Security Council, every day they meet they trade off.

Now, when you go to the RIC, or to the BRIC, you have on the one side two partners who can who have a history of engagement among themselves and they give something up and take something from there. So, you have very little to offer in that scenario. So, here's your challenge, that you have limited trading options and therefore you are having this challenge of whether you should accept the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, or the Global Civilizational Initiative, which China will start populating very soon in the SCO.

Now, the way India operates is it looks at SCO in a very different manner than it looks at a multilateral organization. It looks at a SCO as a regional body where it can facilitate engagement with Afghanistan. So, we have a totally different set of actors handling that. And so, here's your challenge, that whereas they see the linkages very clearly, we don't see those linkages. So, in the SCO, you will suddenly find on data privacy issues which you are not now comfortable with, that data sovereignty should be only in the countries concerned. But in the SCO, look at the others, they don't have a challenge with the Chinese view on data privacy. They will all accept, the Russians will accept, so you are left alone. So, inevitably, these things are going to get harder and harder for you as you go.

Now, if you look back also and look what was our interests in Russia with the U.N.? It was that it would help us should this issue come up in the Security Council. That's the original basis on which our ties strengthened in multilateral organizations. Today, if you look at it, who will bring this issue to the U.N.? There's only one permanent member who can bring it. That's China, which also is a party to that dispute because it has a problem on other side of the thing.

And given Russia and China's engagement in multiple engagements there, there is no scope that the Russians will be able to block it. So, of necessity you are dependent on the three others who are permanent members. There are others are of course nonpermanent members.

So, the basis of our multilateral ties, which existed in the '50s, '60s, '70s, has now changed—both in terms of our domestic developments, where our economic models are diverging, but also internationally, because if we see as threats, we see a different threat than we had seen before. And Pakistan hopefully has been left behind. It's not a major multilateral threat for us. It's only China which can prop up Pakistan, et cetera.

So, coming back, you will see greater engagement with other middle powers, that is Italy or Germany or the U.K. I'm sorry to call U.K. a middle power, but that's what it is now, irrespective of where it is positioned. It has a disproportionate influence in the multilateral system. But that's another thing. But basically, these will be your allies because your challenges are not going to come from them.

And the last point is your challenges perhaps can come on a human rights front. But China is so much ahead of us in facing this problem. It will do the dirty work if it has to tackle on human rights, about generic human rights. Because actually we've become too defensive on human rights. We need to be a little bit more assertive,

because ultimately in multilateral situations, what is important is the legal framework. Nobody gets into the nitty gritty of situations. And the legal framework that we possess is second to none.

Sure, at a certain stage you may not be happy with how it is being implemented, et cetera. But compared to those who have no legal framework, who have egregious approaches to these, I think we need to be a little bit more forthcoming. Because that's our only challenge. Our biggest challenge in multilateral diplomacy is not political; it's going to be largely social because that's where the fault lines in our society too, are.

So, if we have to look down the path in the future, we need to look and find friends who can understand better our social challenges rather than try to have a dualistic approach to them. So, that's my bigger thing. And it is happening too, because our ties with France, Germany, Italy, have very expanded in the multilateral system as they have expanded, to be fair, bilaterally, too. It's not the same engagement that we have with them. And so, we've tilted in some format to middle powers who understand us slightly better now. Also, they have economic interests to be a little bit more understanding of us than they were before where those were very limited.

47:07 What are India's future challenges and opportunities when it comes to China in the multilateral domain?

MADAN: Indrani, Akbar mentioned a few areas where India is going to see challenges in the future. What do you think, especially when it comes to India-China, or China in the multilateral domain? Are there other challenges or opportunities for cooperation that you see on the road ahead?

BAGCHI: There will be more challenges, no question, for no other reason that I think China has taken a decision that it will grant India no quarter in the multilateral space. That it will exercise power in the multilateral space even if that is detrimental to India. I think our bilateral relations have gone down that path.

You need a countervailing force in the international system. To some extent we have the U.S. To a lesser extent, we have France. We had Russia; I'd say Russia is struggling itself right now. So, in that sense, my view is, yes, I agree with Akbar that we should be a lot more assertive. But we are playing with a weaker hand. But I have to say that we do play a pretty good game.

The other part is there are multilateral organizations which we should promote. And at the top of the list is the Commonwealth. It is a group of 54, 55 countries with a shared history. And China is not part of the Commonwealth. It is a good playing ground for India. We need to be a lot more assertive. We need to be a lot more involved in Commonwealth. We used to look down on the Commonwealth and didn't really give it that kind of importance. But the Commonwealth is something that we should.

This whole Global South business: there is no point in resurrecting old groupings like G-77, which has now become G-134, I think. Or NAM [Non-Aligned Movement], et cetera. I don't think they have any real relevance. The Global South, it is actually India's to define. It is India's to define, it is India's to shape in a 21st century mold. I

think we did a decent job with the Voice of the Global South for the G-20, bringing in the African Union. The key is to be able to show that we can get the G-20 to work even with 54 countries having just joined in to this group of 20.

So, there are still areas where India can be much more creative, much more assertive with its multilateral diplomacy. I think the question is largely of capacity and of political will. I think we do have political will because we've reaped the benefits of successful multilateral diplomacy. Akbar has an absolutely superb book out on how India negotiates. But, I think we need to do a little more. The Indian system has the bilateralists and the multilateralists. I think we need to add to our multilateral arsenal.

MADAN: The Global South is also interesting because I think it is part of that engagement with at least developing countries writ large, not necessarily the Global South as a whole. But it's going to be both an arena of China-India competition, but I also think it helps create space for India that needs, as you said, other partners, even beyond the major and middle powers.

It's a different matter that most of the Global South, when there's an India-China problem, much like the nonaligned world, will not say very much. But at least for specific things, including memberships of organization and speaking up as developing countries, that they'll have a role.

51:02 Lightning Round: What are the biggest myths around India-China dynamics in these international organizations and groupings?

Akbar, we usually end our discussions with a question, the lightning round question, and it usually involves talking about a myth. So, if I had to ask you what is the greatest myth or misunderstanding that you hear about India-China dynamics in the multilateral domain or in these multilateral, unilateral groupings, what would your myth on that front be?

AKBARUDDIN: So, actually, it goes back to the time when I first confronted Chinese diplomats going back to the 1990s. I grew up with the belief that China thinks long term. It thinks in generations, decades, centuries also. It plays this long game. And so, I used to think that every word they say has been measured, it's been calculated, et cetera. And then very soon I realized that they are human, too. They are not the superhumans that we've made them out to be. They make mistakes. And it's just that we have to be nimble enough to use the opportunities that come our way.

And that perhaps is where they have a advantage over us, because they send back people to the same countries and specialize. Because, as we started by saying, that we have a weaker hand multilaterally because we don't spend that much money, we don't provide that much of resources. So, if that is so, we have to be nimble in terms of the process. And that's where being nimble on the process means—investing more in the human resources, et cetera.

So, I quickly learned that the BRI is not a 100 year thing, because it started as OBOR, One Belt, One Road. After some time they changed it to BRI. Now they've added Global Development Initiative. So, it's not a reflection of a country which has thought this through for decades or centuries. They are human like us.

And we started I didn't at that state contest that China is being assertive in terms of global institutions. But that was a few years ago. Today, if you go back and look at the list of international organizations headed by Chinese, there's only one. Because the world took some time to understand the "Ugly American." It's taking a faster time to understand that there is another ugly personnel coming up. So, the pressure that you put on small countries tends to fly in your face where they can do things when they don't know who's going to be held accountable. When you are held accountable, they will do other things. But when they know that nobody knows in the secrecy of a ballot, et cetera, people react differently.

And so I think that this myth that the Chinese look for a 100-year-long game is only a myth. Because later I found that actually apparently this starts off with a conversation between Zhou Enlai and Dr. Kissinger in 1972 when Dr. Kissinger asked Zhou Enlai, what do you think of the French Revolution? And so, Zhou Enlai says it's too early to say how it is. And all the West took it up saying that after 200 years also the Chinese are saying it's too early. But actually, later on, the interpreter said, well, he made a mistake. It was the Students' Revolt of 1968 that Zhou Enlai was thinking off. Myths are made like these. They're all human. And we need to understand that with human ingenuity, we can address them too.

MADAN: Indrani, what is your greatest myth on this front?

BAGCHI: That China hides behind a group, it's a fungible group, of countries when it needs to oppose anything in a multilateral situation. So, when we see that a multilateral initiative has seven countries or eight, 10 countries opposing it, you peel away the layers, you'll find that it's actually the Chinese at the end of it. So, a lot of global opposition is also inspired opposition.

[music]

MADAN: With that, thank you both for joining us for this episode looking at India-China dynamics in the multilateral and unilateral domains. Thank you very much, Akbar.

AKBARUDDIN: Thank you.

MADAN: And thank you to you as well, Indrani.

BAGCHI: Thank you.

MADAN: Thank you for tuning in to the *Global India* podcast. I'm Tanvi Madan, senior fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution. You can find research about India and more episodes of this show on our website, Brookings dot edu slash Global India.

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