

International Affairs Forum Interview: Ambassador A. Gopinathan

Ambassador A. Gopinathan is the Deputy Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations. He is shortly to take up the post of Indian Ambassador to Egypt.



IA Forum - India, as a member of the so-called Group of 4, is bidding for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Why do you believe that India should be given such a seat?

Ambassador Gopinathan - First I should point out that the term 'so-called G4' is no longer an accurate one - the G4 is a reality. The Prime Minister and Presidents of Brazil, Germany and Japan met in September 2004 in New York and formally announced that they would be getting together to advance their proposals for reform, as well as their own aspirations for permanent membership of the Security Council.

We believe that the time has come for some decisive action on expansion of the number of permanent seats and not just for the non-permanent ones. If we were only to expand non-permanent membership then we would merely be perpetuating the status quo. Any change, therefore, in the status quo warrants expansion of the permanent membership as well.

To understand why is India deserving of a place we should go back to what others have said - that it is important to reflect contemporary realities. We must ask how do we change from the structure that was created in 1945, and that was altered slightly, but not with new permanent members, in 1965.

Undoubtedly Germany and Japan have become great powers since then and are great contributors, especially financially, to the United Nations. But we believe that developing countries should have an extended voice and this would certainly be the case by including Brazil and India, as well as two African nations as we have proposed.

IA Forum - What other reforms of the UN would you like to see?

Ambassador Gopinathan - We would also like to look at reform from a broader perspective. The challenge set out by the Secretary General in the 58th session, when he established the High Level Panel, was how do we make the UN more effective and efficient and how do we make it more responsive to the general membership - especially developing countries who make up most of the membership.

There are therefore two bench marks - making it more responsive to the membership and more responsive to the particular challenges of the 21st century. There could also be a third standard - how does it reflect contemporary realities.

We look at reform as a process that includes reform of the role of not just the Security Council but also the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), reform of the management and the Secretariat, and also the various organs of the UN. We believe there need to be systematic reforms and we need to look at how the different bodies interact - how can we multiply the synergies.

One example I just mentioned is the Economic and Social Council. It should oversee implementation and should be given responsibility for oversight of specialized agencies. We need to ask how we can make ECOSOC a more effective instrument.

IA Forum - There has been a lot of focus on divisions over reform of the Security Council. Is there any danger that other reforms will be sidelined with all the attention on this debate?

Ambassador Gopinathan - The process is already underway and a new text has already been produced. The kind of reforms we are talking about - management reform, peacebuilding, and others, are a separate issue from the Security Council reforms and will not get sidelined.

IA Forum - What do you think are the biggest challenges now facing the UN?

Ambassador Gopinathan - The more we see new threats emerging the more important it is that we don't forget what could be called the old threats such as poverty, disease, unemployment and even providing clean drinking water. These are all still major challenges.

This is not to downplay the importance of dealing with challenges such as counter-terrorism. and we also recognise the dangers of nuclear proliferation. But we see these things as a series of challenges and a failure to address one has an impact on the others. We believe that there is an intrinsically close relationship between all of these issues.

IA Forum - Do you think the UN can play a role in addressing the danger of weapons proliferation?

Ambassador Gopinathan - Nuclear disarmament is something that all of us signed up to and committed ourselves to. But now there are other areas of WMD which have come to the fore, and there are steps still not being taken and more can be done. India has taken its own steps by creating a non-proliferation act which seeks to tighten the rules on export controls. But that agreed goal of disarmament was to prevent the dangers that the UN now faces.

IA Forum - Do you think the Millennium Development Goals are realistic?

Ambassador Gopinathan - If you listen to Professor Jeffrey Sachs, then he says the goals are achievable. I am just giving him as an illustration. If we leave it solely to the developing countries, then the goals cannot be achieved. We cannot just tell these countries to tighten their belts, adopt good governance and follow the free market mantra. But if we involve developed countries then we can achieve them.

The World Bank estimates that development assistance needs to be doubled and focused on the poorest countries if the Goals are to be met. And we need to agree a global compact between the developed and developing countries. There are other ways they can be help - through the Doha trade negotiations for example. Developing countries have been pleading for more access.

We also need to reform the trade regime - not to a level playing field, but one that is tilted slightly in the developing countries' favour. Debt relief is another area. As is the financial and trade architecture itself - there needs to be a transformation of that.

Another important area is that of Intellectual Property (IP) rights regimes. These regimes have often functioned as technology denial regimes where they should instead be technology facilitators. IP regimes need to be flexible and take into account individual country circumstances so that we can provide improvements in areas of agriculture, public health and other matters of development.

IA Forum - Thank you very much for your time Ambassador.

