

Opinion **Geopolitics**

## UN credibility depends on adjusting veto rights to match shift in global power

Imagine the poetic justice if the UK were to cede its UNSC seat in favour of India

**KISHORE MAHBUBANI**



An informal meeting in 1945 between the Big Four of the UN; US Secretary of State Edward Stettinius, Lord Halifax from Great Britain, AA Gromyko from the Soviet Union and VK Wellington of China © Hulton Deutsch/Corbis/VCG/Getty Images

**Kishore Mahbubani** YESTERDAY

---

*The writer, a distinguished fellow at the National University of Singapore, is the author of [‘The Asian 21st Century’](#)*

Fifteen years have passed since [Martin Wolf wrote](#), “Within a decade a world in which the UK is on the United Nations Security Council and India is not will seem beyond laughable.” The laughable situation continues.

The founding fathers of the UN were wise in incentivising the great powers of the day to stay in the organisation by giving them privileged positions as permanent veto-wielding members. However, they were unwise in not instituting a mechanism for substituting yesterday’s great powers with tomorrow’s great powers.

In 1945, the UK was a great global power with colonies around the world, including India. As recently as 1980, the UK’s GDP was three times the size of India’s, at \$564bn to \$186bn. By 2045, when the UN celebrates its 100th anniversary, Goldman Sachs projects that India’s GDP will be around \$18tn — nearly four times as big as the UK’s projected \$5tn. It would then be truly untenable for Britain to be a veto-wielding member while India is not.

The UN will lose all credibility if this situation persists. More dangerously, India

would be strong enough to announce that it will not abide by [UNSC](#) decisions if it's not a permanent member of the council.

There's an obvious, although, for the moment unlikely, solution to this: the UK should cede its seat to India — subject, of course, to the [politics](#) and mechanics of the council. In theory, the UK would be giving up a lot by doing so. Yet, in practice, nothing would change as it has already in effect relinquished its veto. British leaders have long known that if the UK were to exercise its veto alone, there would be global outrage — which is why they have not exercised a solitary veto since 1972. Indeed, they have not cast a veto at all since 1989.

Even more sadly, the British have ceased to take any independent positions in the UNSC. Even when they were uncomfortable with US positions in the council, they never expressed dissent. For instance, during the build-up to the Iraq war in 2003, they felt obliged to go along with the American position even though France and Germany fiercely opposed it (and rightly so).

By leaving the Security Council, the UK would liberate itself from the compulsion to support the US position regardless of its merits. Indeed, it could become a better friend by giving frank advice to a country that has yet to accept that the world has changed fundamentally. The unipolar world is over; a new multipolar world is emerging. British sagacity can help the Americans transition to this different world.

This massive shift in global power represents the strongest reason for injecting India immediately and permanently into the UNSC. The country is uniquely able to straddle the eastern and western worlds: it can work with the US in the Quad (which includes Australia and Japan), and with China and Russia in the larger Brics group.

Importantly, it would be able to represent the views of the majority of the world's population as power shifts from the G7 to the global south. India understands the needs and aspirations of the global south in a way that few nations can. This explains how it successfully engineered G20 membership for the African Union.

There would also be poetic justice in the UK ceding its UNSC seat in favour of India. While many in the UK believe that the era of the British Raj was a benevolent one for Indians, the opposite is true. As Shashi Tharoor eloquently said, “Britain's rise for 200 years was financed by its depredations in India. In fact, Britain's industrial revolution was actually premised upon the de-industrialisation of India . . . [In this period] between 15-29 million Indians died of starvation in British induced famines.”

The UK is still unable to return the Koh-i-noor diamond to India, even though it was

looted by British imperialists who took it away from a 10-year-old ruler after imprisoning his mother. But perhaps it could offer India something even more valuable: a permanent seat in the UNSC.

Sir Keir Starmer's government will need some time to settle in before it can even contemplate such a radical move. There would be fierce resistance from the British establishment to giving up a perk from the past, just as the feudal lords resisted the transition to more democratic political arrangements.

Yet, as 2027 will mark the 80th anniversary of India's liberation from British rule, it would be the perfect year for the UK to make this great gift to India. It would finally close the chapter on British colonial rule of India and help to cement another hundred years of friendship between the UK and India. At the same time, we will have a UNSC that represents the great powers of today, not the great powers of yesterday.

---

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2024. All rights reserved.

---

