

It's payback time for the empire

The sight of UK conceding a prestigious seat at the ICJ to India, a country it once ruled, shows how much the balance of power has shifted



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By Sreeram Chaulia

Rarely in the annals of global institutions do rising powers succeed in displacing pre-existing powers and rewriting the established norms underpinning the international order. India has done just that at the United Nations (UN) by getting Judge Dalveer Bhandari re-elected to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) after compelling the UK to withdraw its candidate, Judge Christopher Greenwood, in a hard-fought race.

Call it poetic justice or payback for imperialism, the sight of Britain conceding a prestigious seat at the ICJ to a country it once ruled marks an acknowledgement of how much the balance of power has shifted. After the Brexit referendum, the UK is internationally at its weakest position in decades. Having isolated itself from the

European Union (EU) and staring at an abyss-like future as multinational corporations and regulatory organisations forsake London, Britain is hardly in a healthy condition to vigorously defend all its glorious turfs in world forums.

The sun has already set on the British empire long ago. The Brexit vote has further eroded the outgoing globalised attitude that marked the idea of 'Great' Britain and pressurised British elites to re-evaluate their habitual eagerness to sustain a preponderant role in world affairs. 'Little' England's narrow nationalistic call to focus inward on domestic socio-economic iniquities and within the UK and stop pretending to still be a great power has emasculated the traditional British will to be dominant and influential in foreign spheres.

Whitehall's decision to vacate the ICJ seat to make way for India is but a late manifestation of the realisation in London that the will and the mandate of the majority of people in the UK is to concentrate on internal problems. Following India's victory, sections of the British polity and opinion-makers who nurture the grandiose vision of 'Global Britain' have decried London's surrender and bemoaned how their dream of resurrecting 'Empire 2.0' lies in ruins. But UK Prime Minister Theresa May pragmatically chose not to prolong the dustup with India precisely because she cannot afford to alienate a rising Asian giant and Commonwealth partner with whom the UK hopes to deepen economic and strategic ties as compensation for Britain's marginalisation from Europe.

The only means by which UK can stay relevant after Brexit is by entering into bilateral economic and military agreements with the US, China and India. Sacrificing the ICJ seat to India is one among the many policy adjustments that a post-Brexit UK has to make to avoid sinking deeper into oblivion.

In the initial rounds of the ICJ contest, London did behave adamantly and threatened to evoke undemocratic instruments like the 'joint conference mechanism' to push India out of the competition. But thanks to the phenomenal political lobbying by PM Narendra Modi with his counterparts around the world, his refusal to back down and India's accumulation of overwhelming support in the UN General Assembly, the UK came to its senses before the row got uglier.

Owing to the UK's unprecedented pullout, for the first time since its inception in 1946, the world court will have a bench without representation from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Reserving seats, votes and shares in the UN system and its allied intergovernmental sister entities has for long been taken as a birthright entitlement by European countries. Even when the US occasionally sought to bring in more non-European voices to the decision-making tables, the moves have been resisted by European countries motivated by post-colonial hangover, exaggerated self-importance and a nostalgic feeling that they are morally more evolved and democratic than developing nations.

Critics correctly point out the anomaly that there is no contemporary justification for both the UK and France, which are shrinking in relative economic and military might, to enjoy permanent seats in the UN Security Council. A single seat for Europe as a whole is more logical. Yet, it is anathema in London and Paris to abandon their places within the exalted 'P-5' group which has agenda-setting and veto privileges over global crises.

In its very conception, the P-5 was an undemocratic construct devised to placate key powers at the conclusion of WW II and keep them inside the multilateral system of managing international relations rather than outside the framework. From the apex, this undemocratic bloc has perpetuated itself across the UN system, including in the ICJ, by ensuring that it always has an overarching control over all the nodes governing the world.

India has been a principled challenger of this unfair arrangement. Its fervent advocacy for wholesale reform of the UN to make it less feudalistic and P-5-centric is yet to fructify due to insurmountable structural barriers. New Delhi has miles to go before attaining fundamental changes such as securing a permanent seat at the Security Council, empowering the General Assembly at the expense of the P-5, transferring weight from donors to troop contributors in UN peacekeeping operations, and defining the UN-led development, climate change, nuclear technology and counter-terror regimes.

Yet, the breakthrough achieved in ICJ shows that an inspired country armed with a proactive diplomacy which serves the ambition of becoming a 'leading power' can perform miracles, at least in secondary levels and tiers of global institutions. Modi

and his diplomatic team deserve congratulations for mounting a brilliant campaign against all odds. His conviction that India must try sincerely and believe in itself as a vector of transformation is a booster of national pride and harbinger of a reformed world order.

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