

KRISHNA MENON AT THE UNITED NATIONS¹

Krishna Menon represented India at the United Nations in 1946 and again from 1952 to 1961.

He was unquestionably one of the few statesmen who had a decisive influence on the development of the United Nations until the Non-aligned Movement could become an organised group to be reckoned with.

What he accomplished on the international scene, as India's spokesman and envoy, and indeed as the voice of the nations emerging from colonial rule into independence, is not fully understood and recognised even in India.

He was often attacked in the mass circulation papers in the United States as anti-Western. For instance: "Mouthpiece Extraordinary and Troublemaker Plenipotentiary" (*Life*, October 25, 1954); "Leading Troublemaker for the US" (*US News*, February 25, 1955); "Mediator Krishna Menon is a doubtful friend of the United States and the West" (*Saturday Evening Post*, July 2, 1955); "Machiavellian Mr. Menon" (*Readers' Digest*, September 1962).

Krishna Menon never bothered to defend himself against such attacks and even seemed to relish the attention he received. He never took credit for his achievements, deferring always to Prime Minister Nehru. The impression that was left was, therefore, highly misleading.

Krishna Menon had his detractors and his foibles. But he also many friends and admirers at the United Nations, as well as in the diplomatic community and among intellectuals and public leaders. His advice was often sought at the United Nations and he helped several delegates from the smaller countries in their careers.

The allegation that he was driven by intense hostility to the West had less to do with what he said or did as with the international situation and the United States' policies at the time.

The attacks, it may be recalled, were provoked by his role in promoting an end to the hostilities in Korea, Vietnam and the Suez, in securing the release of American airmen captured in China, in resolving the East-West deadlock which blocked admission of many small countries to the United Nations, in pressing for nuclear test ban and in campaigning for the representation of China by the

¹ Published in *Patriot*, New Delhi, April 30, 1987; *Mainstream*, New Delhi, May 2, 1987; and *Telegraph*, Calcutta, May 3, 1987.

People's Republic. He became the scapegoat for the United States when its short-sighted policies were inevitably leading to disaster. Looking back, hardly anyone would question today, even in the United States, that his initiatives represented positive and praiseworthy accomplishments.

A reading of the records of the United Nations shows that he had, in fact, shown great restraint in the face of the high-handed behaviour of the United States delegates, who could not resist the temptation to manipulate the procedures in the United Nations with the assurance of a safe majority.

He hit back with passion, when India was slighted.

But why the attacks on Krishna Menon and not on other Indian delegates to the United Nations?

Krishna Menon had been a radical during his leadership of the India League, welcoming the support of the British Communists as the Indian National Congress sought support from all quarters. At the first session of the United Nations General Assembly, he had antagonised Western delegates, including John Foster Dulles, by fighting against the trusteeship agreements presented by the Western colonial powers. The United States agencies tended to brand people as "good guys" and bad guys", and he was on the second list. But there were deeper reasons for the hostility to him.

The Indian delegation in 1946, in which he was only an alternate representative, was composed of respectable "moderates". But because of its strong anti-colonialist stance and its confrontation with South Africa on racism, the Western powers, especially the United States, concluded that the Indian Government, under the leadership of Nehru, was pro-Soviet. They began to befriend Pakistan after the partition of the sub-continent.

Indian diplomacy, surprised at the Western attitude, tried in the next few years to secure Western goodwill and support by concessions on the India-Pakistan disputes, moderation on colonial problems and support to the West on issues such as the Korean question. But it was unable to change the Western bias.

Krishna Menon came on the scene after Indian foreign policy took clearer shape. India's acute concern over the danger of a widening conflict in east Asia, its refusal to sign the United States-sponsored peace treaty with Japan, the attempts in the United States Congress to pressure India during the acute food scarcity in 1951 and the moves towards a military agreement between the United States and Pakistan, as well as the Indian general elections, helped shape the policy. There was no more the conviction that India could defend her national interests by sweet reasonableness to the United States. On the issue of Kashmir, for instance, Krishna Menon was not only uncompromising but attempted to undo the concessions made earlier. His marathon speeches in the Security Council were an

attempt to change the context of the discussion.

On a broader level, Indian diplomacy in the United Nations and in world capitals was unrelenting in espousing colonial freedom, when the colonial powers sought to drown freedom struggles in the Cold War. It was promoting a "peace zone". with the newly-independent nations forming an independent force in world affairs. It was seeking every means to contain conflicts and promote disarmament and a nuclear test ban. Krishna Menon was the initiator of the proposal for the Asian-African Conference in Bandung and played an important role in the establishment of the Non-aligned Movement.

That was a period when the composition of the United Nations was changing with the attainment of independence by many new nations. The automatic majority of the West was replaced, within a decade, by a Non-aligned majority and the two superpowers had to adjust to the new reality. During that process, India bore the brunt of hostility of the West, thereby enabling the smaller countries to assert their independence. Delegations of erstwhile colonial powers felt embarrassed when India and the new nations could act more independently than their governments, which were bound by the restraints of alliances.

In the United States establishment, in the early fifties the dispute was largely between the advocates of "containment" of the Soviet Union and those who sought to push back the frontiers of the Soviet "empire". For both, the fate of the so-called "Third World" nations was to remain in the Western orbit irrespective of their interests or views. India's vision of ever-growing zone of newly-independent and non-aligned countries was opposed to the American strategy.

Krishna Menon often disagreed with the Soviet positions, as he did with Western proposals in the United Nations. He fought against attempts to treat issues of peace and disarmament as matters to be settled by bargaining among the major powers, with the rest of the nations merely applauding them, and what he resented were moves by industrialised countries to monopolise nuclear technology and impose a new colonialism. But no balancing of votes or statements could win appreciation from the United States, while India opposed and tried to frustrate power politics in the United Nations.

The role of Krishna Menon cannot, therefore, be seen in terms of the reactions of the "West" or the "East" to his performance in the United Nations or outside. It must be assessed in the context of changes in the world scene from the beginning of the "cold war" to the moves for a "detente" in 1961.

While Krishna Menon got most attention as a "mediator", he was conscious that the finding of formulas was secondary to dealing with the substance of problems and disputes.

When the question of Cyprus was brought to the United Nations as a contention

between the Greek desires for "Enosis" and Turkish demands for partition, he did not try to mediate between the two. He insisted that the question was one of independence of a colonial territory from British rule, rather than a dispute between Greece and Turkey. In a sense, he was one of the founders of the independence of Cyprus.

It is not possible to deal in this article with the many issues on which Krishna Menon left an imprint. But I would like to recall that he was anxious that India should not be seen as imposing its weight or its leadership on smaller countries. He often encouraged delegations of smaller countries to take the lead in United Nations debates even when he had led in formulating a common position. During his time, India did not seek membership in the United Nations Security Council but deferred to smaller Asian countries. Instead, India was a member of the Trusteeship Council pressing for the freedom of colonial countries.

He was firm in opposing the intrusion of McCarthyism into the United Nations Secretariat.

Krishna Menon is part of the history of the United Nations and of several new nations around the world. He was an internationalist, born of the Indian national movement, who played a pivotal role in the struggle for the democratisation of international relations.