

THE G20 PRESIDENCY: IS INDIA READY FOR A MORE GLOBAL DIPLOMATIC ROLE?

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Introduction

The G20 presidency is a vital platform for the global economies to project their leadership and mediation skills. However, due to its preoccupation with self-serving agendas, the Indian presidency of G20 has been stung by myriad challenges. India, a self-proclaimed leader of the Global South, came on the stage as the president of G20, vowing to *inter alia* promote the issues of the Global South. On its agenda were matters related to climate change, inclusive economic growth, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), digital infrastructure, multilateralism, and women-led development. However, matters of the Global North, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict and U.S.-China competition, have been the points of contention that have witnessed major polarization and have elicited zero constructive contribution from the G20 president (India). India's G20 Indian presidency has been riddled with controversies due to several issues handled rather imprudently by the BJP government.

India's Global Leverage

The most pressing challenge that earned the title of 'controversial G20 presidency' was handling of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. India's so-called 'neutrality' and failure to forge any consensus

statement/communiqué on the subject at the G20 meetings nearly pre-determined this title. A British newspaper predicted that India's presidency would likely be 'controversial' due to Prime Minister Modi's support for Russia during the ongoing conflict and India's refusal to condemn Russian 'aggression.'¹ They also commented on India's close trade links with Russia (primarily oil), which have been the key driver of PM Modi's support for Russia. A Russian think-tank had opined that India and Russia, also members of BRICS and SCO, would play a significant role in shaping the G20 agenda. This conveyed a sense that the Indian G20 presidency would honour the long-standing India-Russia strategic and economic relationship and not side with the West in condemning Russia.² The G20 meetings were platforms to deliberate on matters that impacted both the Global North and Global South due to globalization; however, India's selective approach served to undermine the overall purpose.

This could in large part be because India is extracting benefits from the ongoing conflict, as also evident in the case of the U.S.-China competition. This demonstrates that instead of consistently following universal principles, Indian approach is driven more by selectivity and narrower self-interest. How India dealt with the matter of Russia and Ukraine at the G20 meetings could create an impression that it may be amenable to tilting towards the non-Western camp. In actual fact, however, India would not pluck itself out of the Western-dominated groupings, as it is essentially acting as a 'fence-sitter' cashing on existing differences and contradictions.

India, as the G20 president and also a so-called 'neutral' party on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, could have come forward with a peace plan as did China or a proposal for mediation to lower the threshold of the active conflict.³ However, no such initiative came forth from New Delhi. Undoubtedly, the matter is too complicated to be resolved at the G20 platform; nevertheless, India could have sought to facilitate some exchange between the U.S. and Russia on the side-lines of the G20 gatherings seeking to contain and somewhat dilute the tensions. But this did not happen.

¹ Patrick Wintour, "China and Saudi Arabia boycott G20 meeting held by India in Kashmir," *The Guardian*, May 22, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/22/china-saudi-arabia-boycott-g20-meeting-india-kashmir>

² Nivedita Das Kundu, "India-Russia Relations in the Context of India's G20 Presidency: Opportunities and Challenges," Valdai Discussion Club, July 4, 2023, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/india-russia-relations-in-the-context-of-india/>.

³ Maheen Shafeeq, "Washington has Blinders on When it Comes to India," *International Policy Digest*, June 19, 2023, <https://intpolicydigest.org/washington-has-blinders-on-when-it-comes-to-india/>.

Instead, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar focused on ‘divergences’ within the fractured G20 and unwillingness to reconcile the differences between various parties.⁴ Indian Prime Minister Modi went a step further and appealed to the members of G20 to reach a consensus on matters of poor countries even if East-West split over Ukraine continues.⁵ Many experts believe that the Modi government has no particular leverage with either Russia or Ukraine to facilitate a settlement.⁶ Ukraine has shown eagerness for an invitation to G20 meetings, to which India is yet to respond. The presidency of G20 presented a trial run for a more global role that India hopes for; however, misplaced focus and misleading approaches have illustrated that India is purporting to take on a role for which it is barely ready.

In comparison with the previous presidency of G20 held by Indonesia in 2022, the matter of Russia and Ukraine became a reason for deadlock. It was understandable as the tensions were fresh. However, while U.S.-China tensions were simmering as Indonesia chaired G20, President Joe Biden and President Xi Jinping had their first face-to-face interaction in Bali, where candid and long conversations on issues of strategic importance for U.S.-China relations took place. The meeting of the two presidents was a concrete step towards lowering the tensions, as the two countries have had multiple follow-up meetings since then. During the Indian presidency of G20, no such prospect has been in sight so far. The 18th G20 Heads of State meeting is coming up on September 9-10, 2023, where India has a chance to show its global diplomacy skills to steer the G20 summit toward a more positive outcome. Whether India can pull this off is yet to be seen.

Regional Matters

India and China have also been unable to secure a breakthrough in their relations during this phase. EAM Jaishankar and then Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang had two bilateral meetings on the sidelines of G20 meetings on March 2 and May 4; however, there was evidently no forward movement. While chairing the G20, India also held the presidency of SCO for the year. China has expressed

⁴ Matthew Lee, “US, Russia hold highest-level talks since Ukraine Invasion,” *AP News*, March 3, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/us-russia-ukraine-g20-blinken-lavrov-1af60a2c2918e9c0777b33b3e71bd54b?utm_source=homepage&utm_medium=RelatedStories&utm_campaign=position_01.

⁵ Matthew Lee, “US, Russia hold highest-level talks since Ukraine invasion,” https://apnews.com/article/us-russia-ukraine-g20-blinken-lavrov-1af60a2c2918e9c0777b33b3e71bd54b?utm_source=homepage&utm_medium=RelatedStories&utm_campaign=position_01.

⁶ Rhea Mogul and Vedika Sud, “Grand test for Indian diplomacy as American, Chinese and Russian ministers meet in Delhi,” *CNN World*, March 2, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/01/india/india-g20-foreign-ministers-meeting-intl-hnk/index.html>.

displeasure⁷ over India's decision to hold the SCO summit virtually, which constricted possibilities for addressing matters with its neighbours China and Pakistan. Jaishankar, in a statement, stated that "India-China relations cannot be normal until peace at border areas is disturbed."⁸ While India has been pushing for talks to resolve the border disputes, it instead took steps that further escalated the border tensions. This illustrates that despite simultaneously holding the presidency of G20 and SCO – platforms that bring global actors together and whose decisions impact not only India but the world - India has been acting rather myopically and focussing primarily on self-projection and narrower partisan agenda.

To further illustrate the controversial nature of its presidency: India has held two meetings in the disputed regions with China and Pakistan. The G20 Tourism Working Group meeting in Srinagar (IIOJK) and a Youth-20 event in Leh Ladakh received strong disapproval from China, Pakistan, and several other countries and international organizations.⁹ Pakistan issued a statement stressing that "the [Indian] move was irresponsible in its latest series of self-serving measures to perpetuate its illegal occupation of Jammu and Kashmir."¹⁰ On August 5, 2019, India had taken illegal and unilateral steps to change the internationally recognized 'disputed' status of Jammu and Kashmir; the G20 meeting/event in the occupied territories were a desperate attempt by India to elicit legitimacy for its 'illegal' occupation. This Indian move was met with strong resistance and a boycott of the meeting by China, Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, Egypt, and Oman, while Indonesia sent a junior official.¹¹ The boycott illustrated a sense among these countries that India had politicized G20 and acted unwisely, abusing the G20 platform to advance narrow national gains.

7 Kiran Sharma And Ck Tan, "Putin claims unity, Xi slams decoupling at India-hosted SCO talks," *Nikkei Asia*, July 4, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Putin-claims-unity-Xi-slams-decoupling-at-India-hosted-SCO-talks>

8 Nayanima Basu, "Will Modi-Xi Handshake In Bali Turn Into A Hug In Delhi When India Hosts G20 Summit? Answer Is, No," *ABP News*, June 1, 2023, <https://news.abplive.com/blog/opinion-will-modi-xi-handshake-in-bali-turn-into-a-hug-in-delhi-when-india-hosts-g20-summit-answer-is-no-1606275>.

9 Maheen Shafeeq, "G20 Meetings in Disputed Territories," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, May 2, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-g20-meetings-in-disputed-territories/>

10 Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, "India's Plans to Hold G-20 Meetings in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir," press release, 11 April 2023, <https://mofa.gov.pk/indias-plans-to-hold-g-20-meetings-in-indian-illegally-occupied-jammu-and-kashmir/>

11 Kamran Yousaf, "Five countries skip G20 meeting in Srinagar, confirms Foreign Office," *Tribune*, May 25, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2418575/five-countries-skip-g20-meeting-in-srinagar-confirms-foreign-office#:~:text=Five%20countries%20skip%20G20%20meeting%20in%20Srinagar%2C%20confirm s%20Foreign%20Office&text=ISLAMABAD%3A,disputed%20Jammu%20and%20Kashmir%20region>.

Conclusion

India took over the presidency of G20 with great fanfare; but, so far, the Indian presidency has not been anything beyond a ceremonious rotation. India's presidency has proven unable to craft any outcomes on matters of global geopolitical significance that shape the pressing challenges of both the developed and developing world. Leaving aside any major initiative to help address the Ukraine-Russia conflict, India could not even manage any conciliatory diplomatic move to lower the tensions. The G20 presidency was an opportunity for India to take on the onerous responsibilities that came with taking up a more global role. The purported 'neutrality' on the one hand, and so-called 'multi-alignment' on the other hand, have severely constrained India's ability to navigate the complex geopolitical environment with credibility. On regional issues, India failed to work out any forward movement with China over the border disputes. Rather, India managed to make matters worse for regional stability by holding G20 meetings/events on disputed territories.

India needs to realize that the prestige that came with the title of G20 presidency also entailed obligations of promoting and preserving the interests of all, and not just itself. Despite promoting the theme of 'one family,' India seems neither ready for a truly global role nor inclined to shed controversial agenda to salvage its G20 presidency through some consequential initiative that serves global good beyond its own narrow self-interest.