

## DEMYSTIFYING INDIA'S MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN G-20 SUMMIT 2023

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



### Introduction

India celebrated the 18<sup>th</sup> G-20 Summit as its ‘historic’ achievement in multilateral diplomacy. The biggest reason is brokering of consensus among member states over the issue of Russo-Ukraine conflict and eventual release of the joint declaration. Before the Summit, speculation was rife in the international community whether the members of G20 would be able to reach an agreement on the divisive issue or leave this multilateral global economic forum to decay due to major power rivalries. In this context, the release of Joint Declaration, “G20 New Delhi Leaders’ Declaration” took intensive efforts by the Indian diplomats. According to India’s G20 Sherpa, Amitabh Kant, the consensus took 200 hours of non-stop negotiation, 300 bilateral meetings, and 15 drafts with their counterparts on the contentious Ukraine conflict.”<sup>1</sup>

For this very ‘achievement’, New Delhi garnered appreciation from the world leaders. China praised New Delhi for “sending the positive signals” through Joint Declaration.<sup>2</sup> As expected, Russia declared

1 “200 hours, 300 Meetings: India’s Sherpa Amitabh Kant Shares Most ‘Complex’ Part of G20”, *The Times of India*, September 11, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/200-hours-of-non-stop-negotiations-15-drafts-led-to-consensus-on-ukraine-indias-sherpa/articleshow/103546541.cms?from=mdr>

2 Zoya Mateen, “G20: China Says Delhi Declaration Sent a Positive Signal”, *BBC*, September 12, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-66783015>

the joint communique as its “diplomatic win” because it contained no mention of Russia as an aggressor in the Ukraine conflict.<sup>3</sup> The western leaders also lauded the outcome of the negotiations in G20. The UK Prime Minister of Indian origin, Rishi Sunak, commented that the communique used “very strong language” about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> The White House National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, appreciated India for “standing up for the principle that states cannot use force to seek territorial acquisition or violate the territorial integrity and sovereignty or political independence of other states.”<sup>5</sup> The very fact that both Washington and Moscow are supporting the joint declaration over their most-contentious issues, nowadays, warrants an in-depth analysis of G20 Summit.

### Evaluating Indian Achievements at G20 Summit

On the eve of the 18<sup>th</sup> G-20 Summit 2023, held on 9-10 September in New Delhi, the international system entered a crucial phase. The major power politics divided the world into China-Russia and U.S.-led Western blocs with a ‘Global South’ struggling to defy the perils of another ‘cold war.’ The 15<sup>th</sup> BRICS Summit had already taken place which was marked as “another reset of international relations” and credited as China and Russia’s another power stroke to push the international system into a post-Western multi-polarity. While the U.S. is consumed with the Beijing-Washington rivalry, India – as the G-20 chair and partner of the U.S. – hosted the G20 Summit and was expected to deliver on many fronts.

New Delhi, by coinciding these crucial developments in the global arena, labelled its G-20 presidency as “*Amritkaal*” (pivotal moment).<sup>6</sup> India’s G20 Presidency was more focused on defying the *realpolitik* and saving the Indian presidency for its political gains at home and abroad. This is also why the ruling party – Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – appeared more focused on optics than on securing a substantive long-term objective amidst a chaotic world order. By hosting G20 Summit, BJP was eyeing primarily one major goal. As the Lok Sabha elections are approaching, BJP wanted to cash the G-20 Summit as ‘Bharat Moment’ for its political gains at home front.

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3 Devirupa Mitra, “G20 Declaration: As the West Scrambles to Justify 'Softened' Language on Ukraine War, Russia Exults”, *The Wire*, September 10, 2023, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/g-20-declaration-as-the-west-scrambles-to-justify-its-softening-stance-on-moscow-russia-exults>

4 Bethany Minelle, “G20: Ukraine Hits out at Russian Invasion Declaration, Calling it ‘Nothing to Be Proud of’”, *News Sky*, September 9, 2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/g20-ukraine-hits-out-at-russian-invasion-declaration-calling-it-nothing-to-be-proud-of-12957977#:~:text=Rishi%20Sunak%20said%20the%20communique,the%20Black%20Sea%20grain%20deal>.

5 “G20: Russia and US Praise Summit Declaration as Talks Enter Final Day”, *The Irish Times*, September 10, 2023, <https://www.irishtimes.com/world/asia-pacific/2023/09/10/g20-russia-and-us-praise-summit-declaration-as-talks-enter-final-day/>

6 “Logo & Theme”, *G20 2023*, India, <https://www.g20.org/en/g20-india-2023/logo-theme/>

The official invites of G-20 were sent by relinquishing the state name “India” and opting for “Bharat” instead. The theme of the Summit was also in Sanskrit “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” or “One Earth. One Family. One Future”.<sup>7</sup> According to the Indian government, the theme “draws inspiration from the ancient Sanskrit text of the *Maha Upanishad*” as it essentially touches upon life of all kind – be it human or non-human – and its interconnectedness.<sup>8</sup>

However, there lies much more beyond the optics that exposes the very faultlines that run deep in India's G20 Presidency as well as the Group, both at bilateral and multilateral levels. In fact, this whole spectrum of divide was in play not only before the Summit but also during the proceedings and afterwards. Notwithstanding the fact that, in the G-20 Summit 2023, the disagreements were so intense among member states, no traditional group photo could be taken.<sup>9</sup>

### Modi's Not India's Diplomatic Triumph

In and around the vicinity of the avenue, large banners with prominent pictures of Modi were erected; the stalls were cleared; and slums, demolished.<sup>10</sup> It was done with the intent to shine light only on the ‘rising’ India and hide its “poor” from the world.<sup>11</sup> BJP's attempts to give a Hindu nationalist outlook to G20 Summit drew ire from opposition party National Congress and international experts as well. Congress MP Shashi Tharoor “criticized BJP for excluding the Congress party from the event and turning it into its political asset.”<sup>12</sup> The West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, described mentioning of “President of Bharat” instead of “President of India” as BJP's “blatant attempt to distort the history of the country.”<sup>13</sup> Arun Srivastava lamented how

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “Inside This Weekend's G-20 Summit”, *Foreign Policy*, September 10, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/10/g20-summit-india-2023-global-south-china-modi/>

<sup>10</sup> Akash Hassan and Hannah Elis-Petersen, “‘Ashamed of Our Presence’: Delhi Glosses Over Plight of Poor as It Rolls out G20 Red Carpet”, *The Guardian*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/08/ashamed-of-our-presence-delhi-glosses-over-plight-of-poor-as-it-rolls-out-g20-red-carpet#:~:text=The%20new%20barricades%2C%20she%20soon,communities%20have%20been%20removed%20from>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Sanskriti Falor, “Morning Briefing: Shashi Tharoor on G20; How India Pulled the Joint Declaration; and All the Latest News” *The Hindustan Times*, September 11, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/morning-briefing-shashi-tharoor-on-g20-how-india-pulled-joint-declaration-and-all-the-latest-news-101694399807015.html>

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Elis-Peterson, “India or Bharat? G20 Invitations Throw up Questions Dating Back Centuries”, *The Guardian*, September 7, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/07/india-or-bharat-g20-invitations-throw-up-question-dating-back-centuries>

Narendra Modi used G20 Summit for his “self-projection” and watered down the prospects of “inclusivity” from national and international perspective.<sup>14</sup>

### Leader of ‘Global South’?

India rendered the inclusion of African Union (AU) into G20 as substantiating its self-styled leadership of ‘Global South.’<sup>15</sup> In the Summit, it claimed to work with the countries of the ‘Global South’ but to what extent that venture remains successful is subject to debate. India made a troika – the previous and two future G20 President: Indonesia, Brazil, and South Africa. It was an effort to work itself as a ‘leader’ of the ‘Global South’ to urge the western powers not to “politicize” G-20 Presidencies, which are primarily meant for dealing with the global economic issues. The troika conveyed to the western countries that the ‘Global South’ was not willing to let this multilateral forum be dysfunctional over “political” rows.<sup>16</sup> This led to many bilateral meetings and discussions among the leaders. The Indian Prime Minister talked to his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin whereas the South Africa President, Cyril Ramaphosa spoke to the Chinese President Xi Jinping.<sup>17</sup> That Prime Minister Modi chose not to speak to President Xi Jinping, on call, or asked for a virtual meet itself speaks for the extent of differences going on between the two for some time.

Though it does add more influence of ‘Global South’ to G-20,<sup>18</sup> the fact remains that a crucial issue to global peace and economic prosperity<sup>19</sup> – the Ukraine conflict – still suffers stalemate. The previous Chair, Indonesia, sent invitation to the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky for virtual participation in the Summit as President Joko Widodo aimed at mediating between Moscow and Kyiv.<sup>20</sup> Under the Indian Chair, no invitation was sent to Kyiv<sup>21</sup> – let alone efforts for mediation. Furthermore, no substantive climate action, such as phasing out of coal, was mentioned in the

<sup>14</sup> Arun Srivastava, “Modi’s Used G20 Summit for Self Projection and the Guests Faked Smiles”, *Mainstream Weekly*, September 16, 2023, <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article13809.html>

<sup>15</sup> Shivangi Acharya and Sarita Chaganti Singh, “G20 Admits African Union as Permanent Member”, *Reuters*, September 9, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/g20-admit-african-union-permanent-member-new-delhi-summit-draft-declaration-2023-09-09/>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Five Key Takeaways from G20 Summit: ‘We Need Bolder Action’”, *Al Jazeera*, September 10, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/10/five-key-takeaways-from-the-final-g20-session>

<sup>19</sup> “One Year of the War in Ukraine Leaves Lasting Scars on the Global Economy”, *the United Nations (UN)*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/desa/one-year-war-ukraine-leaves-lasting-scars-global-economy#:~:text=The%20war%20has%20contributed%20to,many%20regions%20across%20the%20world.>

<sup>20</sup> Mathias Hariyadi, “Indonesia: A New Mediator between Russia and Ukraine”, *Asia News*, January 7, 2022, <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Widodo-tries-to-mediate-between-Kyiv-and-Moscow-56169.html>

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Mathers, “Ukraine War: Why the G20 Refused to Condemn Russian Aggression – and How that Might Change”, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-why-the-g20-refused-to-condemn-russian-aggression-and-how-that-might-change-213384>

Declaration, which was the top agenda of 'Global South' in the domain of Climate Justice.<sup>22</sup> Hence, it is safe to claim that India miserably failed to represent 'Global South.'

### **Joint Declaration Disregarded West's Concerns**

At the last G20 Summit, held under Indonesian presidency in Bali, the Ukraine issue became such a non-negotiable item<sup>23</sup> that it moved the only functional group of global economies to the brink of paralysis. This is why no joint communique could be released instead the Summit concluded with the Chair's summary leaving a lackluster impression on Indonesia's G-20 presidency. The G-20 Summit 2023 was hailed as India's diplomatic success mostly for brokering consensus among member states on the Ukraine issue and eventually releasing the joint declaration.<sup>24</sup> Operating from an exclusive Hindu-nationalist mindset, the BJP leaders had been looking for their diplomatic options to increase their negotiating space around the use of language on issue of Ukraine. However, just like previous Chair, India was confronted with the same dilemma: Ukraine issue. As U.S.-led G7 economies wanted a strong condemnation of Russia for its territorial expansion vis-à-vis, Ukraine, China and Russia firmly opposed any such move.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, India, by not inviting Kyiv to the Summit, gave a clear indication to the Western countries that Ukraine conflict is not on the cards. Also, it indicated that New Delhi was not going to let the Summit be a hostage to the Moscow-Kyiv conflict. Now, the only aspect left was "how to bring about a complete overhaul of the language of the Declaration and work around the red lines of all member states."<sup>26</sup>

### **Xi's Absence and Sino-India Rivalry**

New Delhi already had its differences growing with China, which is also one of its largest trading partners. Hence, it did not have that diplomatic leverage to convince it to withdraw its position. The resurgent Russia, being sanctioned and cornered by the West, was also not ready to reconsider its stance on Ukraine conflict. The Indian side documented that "China and Russia consistently shared the same perspective" while raising a new concern that "this forum should not be used for political

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<sup>22</sup> Biman Mukherjee, "G20 Declaration Fails to Address Climate Change Challenges ahead of Key UN Conference", *South China Morning Post*, September 11, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/3234144/g20-declaration-fails-address-climate-change-challenges-ahead-key-un-conference>

<sup>23</sup> Ica Cahayani, "Dilemma of Indonesian Presidency at the G20 Summit as the West Rejects Russia's Presence", *Modern Diplomacy*, March 27, 2022, <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2022/03/27/dilemma-of-indonesian-presidency-at-the-g20-summit-as-the-west-rejects-russias-presence/>

<sup>24</sup> "It Was a Success": US Praises India for G20 Summit", *The Asian Mirror*, September 12, 2023, <https://www.theasianmirror.com/top-stories/44558/it-was-a-success-us-praises-india-for-g20-summit/>

<sup>25</sup> Bhuvan Krishna, "G20 Summit: Here's How Prime Minister Modi's Team Forged Consensus on Contentious Ukraine Issue", *Swarajya Mag*, September 11, 2023, <https://swarajyamag.com/world/g20-summit-heres-how-prime-minister-modis-team-forged-consensus-on-contentious-ukraine-issue>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

objectives.”<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, while New Delhi has been a part of U.S.-led informal and formal partnerships to counter the Chinese influence, it was not a viable diplomatic option either to press upon Washington and other western countries, in its individual capacity, to reconsider their demand as well.

This is the first G20 meeting that President Xi Jinping skipped since his ascendance to Chinese presidency. The experts are rendering Xi Jinping's absence from the meeting to the ongoing Indo-China border dispute, New Delhi's active partnerships in anti-China constructs like 'Indo-Pacific,' and QUAD – to name a few.<sup>28</sup> According to the Senior Analyst for China at Crisis Group, Amanda Hsiao, the absence of Chinese President at the G20 Summit indicates that Beijing sees G20 as a limited option to support Chinese narratives and initiatives as it has other multilateral forums to do so, such as SCO and BRICS.<sup>29</sup>

Earlier, too, Beijing skipped the G20 meetings that India hosted in the disputed territories: Leh, Laddakh, and Srinagar, Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK).<sup>30</sup> It is on the same account that India's mainstream news agency, ANI, termed China as a “disruptive force in various meetings” of G20.<sup>31</sup> As Chinese President's absence could have affected the release of joint communique, India's External Affairs Minister Jaishankar rebuffed any such happening stating in an interview with ANI, “...Xi's absence would not affect the bloc's ability to produce a communique.”<sup>32</sup>

### **India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) Rivals Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

The most important factor driving the wedge between the two neighbors is New Delhi's adamant and constant push towards not endorsing Beijing's venture of economic corridors i.e., Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and particularly its flagship project with Pakistan: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Heads of State Summit 2023, India

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Fareeha Naaz, “G20 Summit 2023: Why China's President Skipping the Mega Event”, *Mint*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/g20-summit-2023-why-chinas-president-xi-jinping-skipping-the-mega-event-11694158742232.html>

<sup>29</sup> Helen Davidson, “Why Is Xi Jinping Missing the G20”, *The Guardian*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/08/why-is-xi-jinping-missing-the-g20>

<sup>30</sup> Maheen Shafeeq, “G20 Meetings in Disputed Territories”, *ISSI*, May 2, 2023, [https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/IB\\_Maheen\\_May\\_2\\_2023.pdf](https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/IB_Maheen_May_2_2023.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> “Analyzing New Delhi Declaration: Insights from G20 Summit”, *ANI*, September 12, 2023, <https://aninews.in/news/world/asia/analyzing-new-delhi-declaration-insights-from-g20-summit20230912092119/>

<sup>32</sup> “Absence of Few Leaders at G20 Not Unusual: Jaishankar”, *The Tribune India*, September 6, 2023, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/india/absence-of-few-leaders-at-g20-event-not-unusual-jaishankar-542000>

was the only country that did not support BRI in its joint communique.<sup>33</sup> On the contrary, in a bid to drive a wedge among the member states, New Delhi supports International North-South Transport Corridor (INSCTC).<sup>34</sup> In this G20 Summit as well, the most-hyped outcome remains the launch of India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).<sup>35</sup> Not only U.S.-China rivalry but also Indo-China disagreements are defining the undertones of the gatherings of global economies at multilateral forums like G20. In fact, New Delhi has been raising the stakes in its favor by siding with the West on their contain China' pursuit and, at the same time, shrinking their space by partnering with China and Russia when it comes to serving its own interests. Since India sided with the Chinese and Russian perspective, by making a troika of influential economies of the 'Global South', the West had to withdraw its demand to mention Russia for condemning the aggression in Ukraine conflict.<sup>36</sup> The West was instead rewarded with the agreement of IMEC as an alternative achievement in G20 Summit.

### **Budding of India-Canada Row**

The above discussions also reflect and explain New Delhi's *modus operandi* to work its way around the differences with other states. The recent Canada-India diplomatic row is a case in point. Prime Minister Modi did not hold any bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Trudeau.<sup>37</sup> As a response, Justin Trudeau skipped the G20 dinner. Even at the arrival, he was not treated at par with the other world leaders.<sup>38</sup> Within a week, New Delhi-Ottawa simmering tensions erupted into a full-blown unprecedented diplomatic fiasco. Instead of capitalizing on the opportunity to engage in a meaningful discussion with Canada, India chose to snub its top leader. The same is happening with China and Pakistan. Instead of finding the ways to settle the disputes and differences through negotiations, dialogues, and employing the multilateral forums for engaging in meaningful discussion, New Delhi opts for pressure tactics.

### **Conclusion**

Claims that G20 Summit was India's 'diplomatic triumph' hold less substance. In fact, India made many compromises on the issues of crucial significance to global peace and prosperity. Ukraine and

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<sup>33</sup> Ume Farwa, "SCO Summit 2023 and Regional Integration", *ISSI*, July 27, 2023, [https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/IB\\_Farwa\\_July\\_27\\_2023.pdf](https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/IB_Farwa_July_27_2023.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> "New Trade Initiative Offers India Major Gains in Middle East", *VOA*, September 27, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/new-trade-initiative-offers-india-major-gains-in-middle-east/7287689.html>

<sup>36</sup> Suzanne Lynch and Alex Ward, "West Goes Easy on Russia to Save the G20", *Politico*, September 10, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/west-russia-ukraine-war-save-g20-summit/>

<sup>37</sup> "Snubbed At G20, Canada's Trudeau Leaves India To Face Backlash At Home", *RFI*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20230913-snubbed-at-g20-canada-s-trudeau-leaves-india-to-face-backlash-at-home>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Climate Change top the list. New Delhi, like in SCO, failed to prove itself as a farsighted leader that can instrumentalize such a global economic forum for larger gains, especially with its neighbors and the states with which it has differing opinion. This is why, within a week, New Delhi moved from “a G-20 high to a post-Canada low” and that, too, because of its “prickly nationalism.”<sup>39</sup> This is exactly where the rub lies: the ‘Hindutva’ ideology. Hence, driven by this mindset, the BJP looks for the options of its own aggrandizement while dismissing the minorities at home and playing with the differences among major power. New Delhi, as of now, aspires to create its own sphere of influence – be it economic, political, or diplomatic. Notwithstanding the fact, its own disputes with the neighboring countries – China and Pakistan, most specifically, and its political will to engage with the West in the anti-China initiatives just to stake the chips more in its favor reflect how ‘exclusive’ New Delhi’s foreign policy vectors are.

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<sup>39</sup> “Prickly Nationalism: From a G-20 High to a Post-Canada Low”, *The Wire*, Sep 24, 2023, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/global-press-views-on-india-canada-row-nijjar-allegations>