



Original Article

Understanding India's Changing Foreign Policy: An Analysis with Special Reference to G20 Presidency

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Over the past few years, India's foreign policy has witnessed significant changes. As an emerging global power in terms of relatively strong economy, political stability and military capability; India has proved its growing significance in the world affairs in a troubling time marked by the Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Palestine conflict, China's increasing aggression etc. Focusing on the G20 (Group of Twenty) summit held at New Delhi last year, this article seeks to explore India's changing foreign policy dynamics over the past few years. In the course of discussion, the article examines how India manages to craft its national priorities vis-à-vis global aspirations in a polarized world.

Keywords: Indian Foreign policy, G20 presidency, Russia-Ukraine War, Global South

Introduction:

Foreign policies are the strategies governments use to guide their actions in international arena. It's a decision making process and spell out the objectives state leaders have decided to pursue in a given relationship or situation (Goldstein and Pevehouse 2014: 90). Foreign policy is a dynamic phenomenon. It changes according to how a country pursues its national interests. The Indian foreign policy has also undergone several changes since independence due to both domestic and international factors. In recent years, particularly after the Narendra Modi government came to power, significant changes have been witnessed in the Indian foreign policy initiatives. The aspiration to become *Vishwaguru* – 'global teacher' necessitates the policy makers to go beyond 'immediate neighbours' or the traditional allies and 'expand its leadership position in global south' (Konwer 2024: 1). India's G20 presidency in 2023 has often been considered as an example of its changing foreign policy directions in a multi-polar world. The "successful" hosting of G20 summit is a testimony of New Delhi's aspiration to become a global actor. In this context, this article seeks to understand India's changing foreign policy initiatives over the past few years with special reference to the G20 summit. The article tries to explore how India manages to craft its national priorities vis-à-vis global aspirations in a deeply polarized world. In the process of discussion, the article traces the origin of G20 group and the challenges before India and how it addresses those issues.

The G20 Journey: From Washington DC to New Delhi: India has attracted global attention for "successfully" hosting the G20 summit 2023 in New Delhi, soon after its historic landing of the *Chandrayan-3* on Moon's South Pole. A series of year-long events have been organized across the country after India took over the G20 Presidency from Indonesia last year. The concluding session was held in the newly constructed *Bharat Mandapam* – an international exhibition-cum-convention centre, Pragati Maidan on 9 and 10 September. The 2023 summit was critical for India primarily due to the Russia-Ukraine war continued for more than one and half years and increasing Chinese aggression. It is widely believed that, the New Delhi summit would go a long way in "achieving the milestones for common good" inspired by the theme "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*" or "One Earth-One Family-One Future".



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G20 is relatively of recent origin. It was formed in 1999 as an international economic forum after the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998. The group is not a “cozy club of the world’s richest countries. Unlike G7 (Group of Seven), it has several developing countries or emerging economies from the Global South” (Bhattacharya, 2023). In the beginning, it acts as an informal forum for the Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors of the most important industrialised and developing economies to discuss international economic and financial stability. The group met at the level of Finance Ministers and Governors of Central Banks since 2008 (G20 Background Brief, 2023).

The first G20 summit was held in 2008 in Washington DC, USA followed by London, UK in 2009. The member countries annually host the summit in rotation with an exception of USA hosting it twice. In the subsequent years, countries like Canada, China, France, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, etc. hosted the multilateral summit. It needs to be mentioned here that, Saudi Arabia hosted the summit in 2020 in online video conferencing due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2022, Indonesia hosted the summit in Bali under the “shadow of the Russia-Ukraine conflict”. In the Bali summit, the baton of G20 was handed over to India. After taking over the G20 presidency, Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India expressed that “the G20 would take upon itself the task of promoting human-centric development which would align with the concerns and aspirations of the Global South, including addressing issues relating to climate change, climate finance, debt restructuring of the poorer nations through the Common Framework for debt” (cited in Jayaramu, 2023).

World Leaders at *Bharat Mandapam*: An Eventful Year:

The New Delhi G20 is the 18th annual summit based on the theme – “One Nation-One Earth-One Future”. The summit hosted 19 member countries and the European Union. Being the President of summit, India invited 9 guest countries – Bangladesh, Egypt, Mauritius, Nigeria, Netherlands, Oman, Singapore, Spain and UAE. In addition, 14 international organisations were invited including the regular G20 International Organisations (UN, IMF, WB, WHO, WTO, ILO, FSB and OECD), the Chairs of Regional Organisations (AU, AUDA-NEPAD and ASEAN) and ISA, CDRI and ADB (G20 Background Brief, 2023). However, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping did not attend the summit. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Premier Li Qiang represent them respectively.

One of the major aspects that distinguish India’s G20 summit from earlier summits is the series of year-long events across the country which was organized at various levels highlighting local culture and craft. Various programme have been organized at school, college and university level to aware students about India’s foreign policy and global dynamics. It also helps to percolate down foreign policy initiatives among the masses. However, the year-long events have been criticized due to its financial burden on national exchequer and security reasons.

India’s Concerns: From Russia-Ukraine Conflict to China’s Absence:

One of the most discussed issues during the New Delhi summit is India’s position on the continued Russia-Ukraine war and how India comes out with a unanimous declaration. The Russia-Ukraine war has polarised the grouping and “the biggest challenge before India is to negotiate a ‘compromise’ document in the G20 communique” (Roy: 2023). The war has taken aback the entire world economy and no one has the ‘magic’ answer when and how the war will end. India’s position on the Russia-Ukraine war has been remained “pragmatic” considering its political-economic and military relations with Russia. Therefore, it has been observed that, “unlike in last year’s Bali declaration in which Russia was described as the aggressor and asked to withdraw its troops from Ukraine fully and unconditionally, the New Delhi Declaration called it ‘the war in Ukraine’. There was no condemnation of Russia either, unlike in Bali” (Subramanian: 2023).

Absence of Chinese President Xi Jinping from attending the summit was another issue of India’s concern. His absence was a departure from the earlier summits held in different countries raising doubts on China’s underlying motives. The decision to “stay away from the summit, and downgrade to the level of Premier Li Qiang, was a sign that despite the bonhomie of the consensus at the Delhi Declaration, the world’s geopolitical divide remains” (ibid). In fact, while the G7 – the grouping of the world’s richest democracies wants “condemnatory language on Russia’s actions and words, Moscow and Beijing will allow none of that in the declaration”. Therefore, the New Delhi summit has been alleged to be “overshadowed by the Russia-China conundrum” although their Presidents gave the summit a miss (Roy, 2023).

India’s Changing Foreign Policy: Managing Global Aspirations:

India’s G20 presidency has often been considered as an example of its changing foreign policy initiatives. The ‘successful’ completion of the summit is referred as “historic” due to several reasons. First, the year-long event that has been organised in 200-plus meetings in more than 50 locations across the country created a new template in size and scale (ibid). The event has been celebrated with a national spirit. Second, inclusion of the African Union (AU) is one of the most significant outcomes of the Delhi summit. India takes credit for backing the membership of the Union which is a grouping of all 55 African countries (Subramanian, 2023). Referring to the inclusion of AU, Narendra Modi observed that “India has proved the mettle of its leadership by making AU a full member” of the grouping (New Economic Corridor, 2023). Third, one of the most significant parts of the Delhi Declaration has been the consensus on the Ukrainian issue. India has taken a “neutral stance” over Russia’s invasion of Ukraine like Brazil. By not referring to

Russia by name – a concession to Russia, for which the Russian leadership praised the joint communiqué (Jayaramu: 2023). Fourth, the declaration of India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC), an ambitious economic corridor, connecting by rail and waterways was one of the major highlight of the event. In fact, US President Joe Biden terms it as “a really big deal”. It is widely believed that, the economic corridor will bring the three together and it will serve as a “geopolitical rival to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)” (Subramanian 2023). In his *maankibaat* programme, Prime Minister Modi referring to the proposed IMEC said that “it is going to become the basis of world trade for hundreds of years to come, and history will always remember that this corridor was initiated on Indian soil” (New Economic Corridor: 2023). In addition, India has also raised the issues of the Global South reeling under poverty, hunger, economic inequality etc. In this regard, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov observed that, “the summit was a success for India as well as Global South, the world’s developing countries”. To him, “the Global South’s position in the talks helped prevent the G20 agenda from being overshadowed by Ukraine,” and praised India for “truly consolidating G20 members from the Global South” (cited in Subramanian: 2023). The G20 Presidency, therefore, allows India to bargain in the world affairs often dominated by the USA and European countries.

Challenges and the Missing Priorities:

In the inaugural address, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed his concern over the “global trust deficit, turbulent global economy, North-South divide, distance between East and West and collectively work with a human centric approach to find solutions to major issues like terrorism, food and energy crisis, health, water and cyber security, not just for the present it also for future generations” (Jayaramu: 2023). However, these issues did not find adequate mention in the G20 declaration raised in the press conference of Peoples’ 20 Assembly held in Delhi. The civil society group states that “the G20 declaration falls short in offering a clear roadmap to tackle the pressing concerns of economic inequality, climate crisis, hunger, and energy issues” (cited in The Wire: 2023). Issues of economic inequality, climate crisis, poverty etc. are some of the perennial issues of the Global South and India is no exception. In fact, it has been alleged that, “to conceal India’s own poverty, Delhi’s poor were pushed out of public sight by demolishing slums, evicting street vendors and erecting curtain-like walls along streets. Even the street dogs were cruelly herded off to faraway shelters” (Bhattacharya, 2023). Having 26% of its population trapped in poverty, and ranked at 107th among 121 countries in Global Hunger Index (GHI) behind Afghanistan (109th), Pakistan (99th), Sri Lanka (64th), Nepal (81st) as per 2022 report; India could have prepare a roadmap to tackle global poverty including of its own (Tripathy: 2023).

In addition, the proposed IMEC remain doubtful due to the, “non-declaration of the timeline to its completion and non-availability of funding”. It is also skeptical how the proposed project will challenge China’s BRI – a trans-continental passage connecting South East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Russia and Europe. Absence of Chinese President indicates India’s strain relationship with China. It may eventually impact India’s claim of permanent membership in the UN Security Council. Moreover, the Indian Doctors for Peace and Development (IDPD), in a press release, has noted with concern that “the G20 declaration has not given any commitment on the abolition of nuclear weapons. It has mentioned much about the on-going war between Russia and Ukraine; the threat of use of nuclear weapons in this situation is real and grave” (Press Release: 2023).

In Conclusion:

The G20 presidency has widely been considered as India’s “diplomatic success” in a troubling time marked by the Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Palestine conflict, China’s increasing aggression and so on. India’s effort to raise issues of the Global South and inclusion of the AU as a member of the group reflects the changes of its changing foreign policy directions. In fact, India’s presidency is now seen as a point at which “the G20’s agenda began transition from being set and directed by the wealthy G7 nations that have dominated it from inception to become more representative of the developing world” (Subramanian 2023). However, the pressing issues like economic inequality, climate change, hunger, energy crisis etc. needs immediate and adequate attention from the global forum like G20. It should not be allowed to use to gain political mileage by any stakeholders. Moreover, as an aspirant for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, India can make a big difference by playing pro-active role. India’s success lies in how it walks together joining hands-in-hands taking other countries on board in addressing the perennial issues from the front.

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