

COLUMN

CULTURE, DIPLOMACY, INCLUSIVITY

How India Restored G20 Mandate in the face of Uncertainties

PANDEMIC aftershocks, wars geopolitical tension, geoeconomic re-posturing and a world more divided than ever with multiple poles vying to set a course of the new world order—this is the backdrop in which India assumed the presidency of the Group of 20.

While it was a truly momentous occasion for India, the world looked at us with mixed feelings, viewing us as a country that maintains deliberate strategic ambiguity and is non-allied with any world powers—a country that has always had *potential* but has hitherto only continued to have the potential. Having heard of us as a country with potential and demographic dividend, the sceptics were growing restless to see when we would realise them.

However, these mixed feelings faded from the moment get-go on December 1, 2022, when India assumed the G20 presidency from Indonesia. The presidency was launched to grand and rich cultural fanfare—after all, India is not just a country, but a civilisation—to the backdrop of the royal heritage city of Udaipur. The G20 delegates knew that this year would be different: it would be more than business and offer a cultural treat through sights, sounds, people and food.

When delegates visited the 15th-century Ranakpur Jain temple near Udaipur, their faces reflected the spiritual ecstasy and awareness that had set upon them. With this, we welcomed the world to the New India, an India that is rooted in its proud cultural heritage, stands by its civilisational values and is bold to set a G20 agenda.



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Steering the Mandate

Over the years, questions have been raised on the relevance of the G20, given the rise in multiple international multilateral forums where world leaders meet with regular frequency throughout the year, like at different platforms of the United Nations and the summits of G7, BRICS, QUAD, SCO, ASEAN, etc. At the same time, continents like Africa attach more value to other forums, as the entire continent of 54 nations stands represented at the G20 only by South Africa. Also, the global public is growing restless as it presumes that G20 is here to produce tangible outcomes, which are not easily visible. India has been able to steer clear of these rising misconceptions and reestablish the mandate of the G20.

Simply put, the G20 is a premier forum consisting of 20 developing and developed countries that meet through the year to discuss, deliberate and guide the world on the most suitable global philosophies and principles to address economic, developmental and growth challenges that face the world. These are then taken up by countries worldwide as a guiding voice when framing their national policies. The G20 philosophies and principles have found resounding global acceptance, as these are framed together by both developing and developed countries.

India, right from the beginning of its presidency in 2022, was clear in this regard. Respecting the sovereignty of all states, India began with its quest to drive the G20 on the path of consensus building for economic, developmental and growth-related issues, keeping in mind the needs and challenges of those most vulnerable to these challenges.

A Presidency for the South

India assumed the G20 presidency with the philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, or “One Earth, One Family, One Future”, which is drawn from the ancient Sanskrit text of the *Maha Upanishad*. This thought affirms the value of all life, be it human, animal, plant or microorganisms, and their interconnectedness on the earth and in the wider universe.

While all life is valuable, India has always been vocal about the value of life of the global south. Foreign minister S. Jaishankar has been categorical in affirming that whether it is the Ukraine crisis, the pandemic or the climate change, countries of the global south are the most vulnerable to any global upheaval.

The foreign minister of India said, “As the mother of democracy, India’s G20 presidency will be consultative, it will be collaborative, and it will be decisive.” India exhibited this trait in January 2023 when it hosted the Voice of Global South Summit. It saw the participation of 125 global south countries, ranging from the likes of The Bahamas and St. Kitts and Nevis in Central America; Guyana and Suriname in South America; Sao Tome and Principe to Liberia in Africa; Moldova to North Macedonia in Europe; and Tonga to Kiribati in Oceania. Never had the G20 gone to the smallest of countries, with a population of as less as 1.2 lakh people (in the case of Kiribati), seeking input. Each of the 125 participating countries was heard. Their concerns included, *inter alia*, the impact of climate change, debt vulnerabilities, access to vaccines during pandemics and reform of multilateral institutions.

India has ensured the reflection of these

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GETTY IMAGES

The redeveloped Bharat Mandapam, an international exhibition-cum-convention centre at Pragati Maidan in New Delhi, will host the G20 Leaders’ Summit to be held on September 9 and 10

concerns at all its G20 meetings. This has given the global north the first-hand nuanced perspectives of the so-far voiceless nations. India has also invited countries such as Nigeria, Bangladesh, Mauritius and Egypt to amplify the pressing issues of the global south.

In a multipolar world, where many powerful countries aim to control narratives through sharp power diplomacy, India has opened its arms to the world, shared its belief that the world is one family and reiterated that all voices matter. This approach is in sharp contrast to how more powerful actors behave, which indulge in needless wars in their quest to spread their supposed perfect model of governance, hoarding vaccines that could otherwise help poorer countries and forming super special invite-only multilateral forums focused to help their countries only.

True to its nature of inclusivity, India has now proposed to expand the G20 family by seeking consensus to include the African Union as a full-time member of this premier forum. The South Block of the Raisina Hill, with its focus on the global south, deserves to be dubbed as a G20 presidency for the South!

The Essence of Presidency

Addressing uncomfortable issues has been the essence of the Indian G20. India has been bold in reaching out to the world through the LiFE, or Lifestyle For Environment, approach. LiFE raises questions about the fundamental flaw in defining development, which has so far been based on trade-offs with the environment and consumption at its base.

This pro-planet-people approach, which is human centric and climate-action oriented, is a

renewed call to move towards sustainable choices and lifestyles. This is a subtle, yet typical, Indian way of calling out the global north/Western economies, which, at their core, are fuelled by over-consumerism.

Despite a fractured G20 due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, India, through its soft power diplomacy and expression of genuineness towards the cause of climate change, was able to bring together all of the G20 through unanimity and consensus and adopt documents like “G20 2023 Action Plan to Accelerate Progress on the SDGs” and “G20 High-Level Principles on Lifestyles for Sustainable Development”.

India continues to work with its G20 partners on a Green Development Pact to thrust forward a roadmap consisting of actions required to tackle climate change over the decade. This exhibits the skilful negotiations by Indian diplomats, who were able to convince the world to not box issues of climate change and the global south with other issues. This has strengthened the trust of the global south in the Indian leadership.

Cultural and Culinary Grouping

India has set a standard—which, I dare say, will not be broken—in ensuring that the G20 delegates return to their countries with an image of Incredible India. The delegates have been enthralled with iconic tourism destinations of India and delighted with the culinary superiority of Indian states. Whether it is savouring Onam *sadhya* in the backwaters of Kumarakom; Mysore *pak* and *neer dosa* in the rocky Hampi; *dal baati churma* in Varanasi; iconic Tamil Nadu *rasam* in Mahabalipuram; *biryani* in Hyderabad; *dhokla, jalebi* and *fafda* in Gandhinagar; *misal pav* in Mumbai; or even, as many delegates reported, eating the best *idlis* in Ladakh!; this has been a culinary experience like no other, which has added a bit of spice in the lives of those at the G20.

India has made it a point to showcase its cultural might through visits to renowned civilisational wonders and monuments of national importance. Amongst other

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experiences, delegates were left stunned at the magnificence of the iconic Sardar Patel Statue of Unity in Kevadia; blown away with the architectural wonder of Hampi; teleported to the golden age of the Mauryan Empire in Sarnath; dropped into disbelief watching Krishna’s butter ball at the temples complex of Mahabalipuram; and, left speechless as they stood at the rock-cut Ajanta caves and the intricate sculpture work of the Khajuraho temples.

The scenic Indian geography would be a great effort in expanding our tourism potential, with the delegates wanting to return to India while protesting returning to their home countries after the G20 meetings!

Transformation in the City

India now holds the record for having conducted 200 G20 meetings in 60 cities and towns. We now have 60 existing cities and towns upgraded to welcome international and national tourists. India had a clear-cut objective to ensure that we leave lasting public infrastructure, beneficial to the public long after its presidency ends. The national capital of New Delhi has benefited in its own way, as, now, it is home to the brand new, state-of-the-art and swanky Bharata Mandapam, which is slated to host the G20 Leaders’ Summit in September.

As India readies itself to host world leaders in New Delhi, the world holds its breath to see if India emerges successful in achieving a G20 Leaders’ Declaration, which has so far been a defining factor to decide on the success of any G20 presidency. While Indian diplomats are hard at work to achieve consensus in this regard, India, over the past 44 weeks, has achieved milestones close to a decade’s worth!

With India handing over the G20 2024 to Brazil—another important champion of voices of the global south, reformed multilateralism and tackling climate change—the world welcomes the transition with a sense of ease and trust as Brazil readies to protect those vulnerable in the face of global upheavals. 

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