

G20 needs India to renew its legacy, and India needs a global megaphone like G20 to get its message out

Make in India for Each Other



Deepak Mishra

Long before India assumed the G20 presidency, there has been an increasing chorus of voices, mostly from the West, pointing to the growing irrelevance of this once powerful body. The G20 Bali Summit last November even skipped the pretence of the 'family photo-op', leading *The Economist* to focus on the dynamics of distrust around the G20 summit. In contrast to the scepticism abroad, the exuberance at home surrounding India's presidency has been nothing short of extraordinary.

In a *Mann ki Baat* episode, Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged citizens to take G20 to new heights by making it a 'jan andolan'. Hoardings have sprung up across India, informing the virtue of the country's G20 presidency. While past G20 meetings have often been confined to the capital cities and financial centres, India intends to hold 200-plus G20 events in 35 cities, stretching from Kashmir to Kerala.

GoI's effort to popularise G20 seems to be bearing fruit. More people have searched 'G20' on the internet in the first month of India's presidency than in the first month of any previous presidency. Within India, G20 has replaced the Union budget as the talk of the town. As per Google Trends, online searches involving 'G20' exceeded those for the 'budget' by 16:1 in December 2022.

So, why is India pouring so much of its political capital into G20? Clearly, it cannot be the temporary transactional

benefits that accrue to the host nation, such as increased tourism revenue or higher development assistance. Nor does the explanation that emphasis on G20 is to divert people's attention from real problems, such as inflation and unemployment, hold much sway. If anything, the G20 Summit will attract more scrutiny of the economy over the next few months, especially from Western media.

So, what gives? The most plausible explanation seems to lie in today's fragile geopolitics, in which India and G20 need each other for mutual benefit. An inclusive and democratic G20 is what a rising India needs to project its global ambitions and counter an authoritarian China. And with dwindling support in rich countries, G20 needs new friends in the developing world to renew its legitimacy and India offers that tantalising prospect. In fact, India and G20 not only need each other; they seem to be made for each other.

Talking Heads

G20 is a big-tent organisation. While its elder cousins such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Trade Organisation (WTO) have struggled to maintain a cordial relationship with their detractors, in G20, the critics are integral to the organisation. In G20 lingo, they are called the 'Engagement Groups', comprising of non-state actors such as civil society organisations (C20), business associations (B20), think-tanks (T20), youth associations (Y20), women's organisations (W20) and labour associations (L20). These engagement groups are core to the G20 architecture: they deliberate on various priorities and contribute to the G20 process, just like government-led 'working groups' do. Some of them even issue their own communiqués.

Along with the inclusive structure,



Ample scope for amplifier and amplified

G20 has a rotating presidency. Each country holding the presidency sets its own agenda and priorities, giving the G20 process a democratic halo that its elder cousins sorely miss. For example, India has chosen digital economy, Lifestyle for the Environment (LiFE) and reforming multilateralism as some of the priorities for its presidency, bringing a unique Indianness to this year's G20.

Cynics say the engagement groups make G20 unwieldy. Their criticism is not entirely misplaced. But what the sceptics fail to understand is that for politicians, especially in a democratic set-up, engagement groups are like megaphones, they amplify the messages. India seems to be in the enviable position of holding the global megaphone when the world is looking for new directions.

Comprising one-sixth of humanity, being the fifth-largest economy and the fastest-growing G20 country, India needs a megaphone like G20 to get its message out, both at home and abroad. At home, it wants the people to know that when it comes to global diplomacy, India is playing in the big league. And for its global audience, India wants to convey that it is not just a rising power but also a responsible one.

It gave away 235 million doses of Covid vaccines to the poorest countries

when the rich world was busy procuring vaccines for their citizens; that India is the largest contributor to digital public goods; that India came to the aid of its neighbours such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives at their time of need; and stands ready to fight for the interest of the global South, be it on debt relief, climate justice or attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Hear, Hear!

Will India's massive investment in G20 pay off? Its presidency has got off to a good start. But for the summit in New Delhi in September to succeed, India needs to show some tangible outcomes:

- ▶ Debt relief for the poorest countries.
- ▶ Increased funding to fight climate change.
- ▶ Concrete reforms of the multilateral development organisations.
- ▶ Global consensus that Russia must be persuaded to end the war in Ukraine.

With its growing clout and credibility, and a neutral voice, India has the opportunity to be taken as a serious contender at the global high table. And through its high-decibel campaign, India is reassuring the world that it is up to that task.

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