

Perceptions, Promotion and Pre-eminence: India's Presidency of the G20

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journals.sagepub.com/home/iqq**Chris Ogden****Abstract**

New Delhi's taking on the G20 Presidency represents a highly important—if not watershed—moment for Indian diplomacy. For an India that is transitioning from being a developing to a developed economy and whose great power rise centres upon core goals relating to development, modernisation, status, leadership, importance, prestige and pride, assuming the G20 Presidency seems transformational. A central part of the G20's remit also concerns constructing and maintaining global financial architectures and governance mechanisms, which India can now crucially influence as her own economic clout increases on the global stage. Moreover, New Delhi's Presidency signifies a pivotal time for the legitimacy of the G20 and one which potentially heralds a more representative era for the grouping, which will only enhance India's global pre-eminence.

Keywords

India, G20, great power, leadership, diplomacy

Introduction

The G20 is the world's foremost intergovernmental forum for the development and enhancement of international economic cooperation. India has been a G20 member since its inception in 1999, and New Delhi's taking on the forum's Presidency represents a highly important—if not watershed—moment for Indian diplomacy. Of note too is that India's now assumes the middle position in the G20 Troika between the last (Indonesia) and next (Brazil) Presidencies, which is the first time that this has consisted of three developing states. Such an event is seen by many observers to signify a pivotal time for the legitimacy of the G20 and one which potentially heralds a more representative era for the grouping. Moreover, a

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central part of the G20's remit concerns constructing and maintaining global financial architectures and governance mechanisms. For an India that is transitioning from being a developing to a developed economy and whose great power rise centres upon core goals relating to development, modernisation, status, leadership, importance, prestige and pride, assuming the G20 Presidency seems transformational.

Crucially, the G20 members collectively represent around 85% of all global GDP, over 75% of global trade, and around two-thirds of the world population. Taken together, they encompass the most important constituencies for New Delhi to use to promote its great power credentials. Within this context, they are also frequently those states that can benefit most from having closer ties to India, be that economically, militarily, culturally, strategically or diplomatically. This observation applies both to those G20 states that are developed and developing and are indeed the two groups which India now effectively straddles as it pursues its deep-seated modernisation and development aims. It is also these states that will ultimately convey great power status upon India by recognising its prowess and achievements. Such peer acknowledgement is frequently the core arbiter of gaining pre-eminence in global politics, the capstone of economic and military power. In addition, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has noted that India's G20 priorities will be shaped in consultation with 'our fellow-travellers in the global South, whose voice often goes unheard' (BBC, 2022), indicating a wider geo-economic and geo-political meaning.

Disseminating New Delhi's Leadership and Worldview

Displaying international leadership directly informs this search for—and attainment of—recognition and, moreover, constitutes another element of how to be a great power on the international stage. For New Delhi, the G20 Presidency is thus a crucial platform from which India's leaders can not only craft positive perceptions of India but also overcome any negative perspectives in the global sphere concerning South Asia's foremost force. It is further about constructing a self-confident image, a sense of destiny and restored stature, which are as important for internal audiences as they are for external ones. Underpinning this strategic policy is the purposeful positioning of Prime Minister Modi as a dynamic and driven global statesman capable of creating new and mutually beneficial diplomatic common ground with other states. He has also argued that the G20 is a 'matter of pride' (BBC, 2022) for Indians. The G20 Presidency is thus India's best opportunity in the last few decades—and arguably since independence—to positively promote what India can offer the world and augment her global status. It can also significantly influence the collective economic agenda of G20 members.

Furthermore, India can show itself capable of helping resolve major crises relating to a slowing global economy, the huge debt crises affecting scores of states and mounting global poverty rates resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic (Basu, 2022). Again, such an agenda stretches beyond the G20 and encompasses

the global South, and also includes potentially reforming the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation to better support all developing economies. Related to resolving all of these challenges and concerns, Modi has also underlined the urgent need to ‘depoliticise the global supply of food, fertilisers and medical products, so that geo-political tensions do not lead to humanitarian crises’ (Ghoshal, 2022).

New Delhi’s Presidency also comes from a position of rising strength in these regards, with India having the world’s fourth largest economy in GDP PPP, which was worth \$10.2 trillion in 2021, behind the European Union (\$21.8 trillion), the United States (\$23.0 trillion) and China (\$27.3 trillion) (World Bank, 2023). Moreover, at 8.7%, India’s annual GDP growth is now outstripping all of these entities (European Union – 5.4%, United States – 5.9%, China – 8.1%), and virtually all other major economies (World Bank, 2023). The Indian government’s recent launching of the ‘Make in India’ plan to encourage manufacturing and create jobs and the ‘Digital India’ drive to expand digital infrastructure and access to technology have significantly fed this success.

Hence, concerning taking such a leading global role, and as per official Indian narratives, as a ‘nation deeply committed to democracy and multilateralism, India’s G20 Presidency would be a watershed moment in her history as it seeks to play an important role by finding pragmatic global solutions for the wellbeing of all’ (MyGov G20, 2023). Additionally, the overarching theme of ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’ (meaning either ‘One Earth One Family One Future’ or the ‘World is One Family’) further reflects such sentiments, perhaps with an implicit assumption of India as the world’s current—if not future—patriarchal and guiding figure. Moreover, Prime Minister Modi has also highlighted how this theme relates to a ‘universal sense of one-ness’ (MEA, 2022) that, in some sense, seeks to draw—potentially even assimilate—other states to India’s outlook.

Another dominant narrative is that India’s G20 Presidency ‘marks the beginning of ‘Amritkaal’, the 25-year period beginning from the 75th anniversary of its independence on 15 August 2022, leading up to the centenary of its independence, towards a futuristic, prosperous, inclusive and developed society, distinguished by a human-centric approach at its core’ (quoted in PM India, 2022). From this basis, the importance of the G20 Presidency goes far beyond the G20 to be about India itself—its status and ambitions. This promotion of an Indian worldview through distinct perspectives, narratives and mantras will remain a central feature within the next year and beyond. Notably, these elements feed into and build upon other key perspectives from New Delhi and Prime Minister Modi. Evident echoes can thus be seen concerning Modi’s major development refrain of *sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwa, sabka prayaas* (‘together, for everyone’s growth, with everyone’s trust, with everyone’s effort’) (Times of Oman, 2021) that can be maximised through economic means, primarily international trade. Ultimately, such an aim will help to preserve and augment New Delhi’s autonomy in international relations.

Significantly, and while intoned by all previous Prime Ministers, Modi has recast the longstanding strategic aim of self-reliance by calling it *atmanirbhar Bharat abhiyan* (‘self-reliant India Mission’) that rests on the five pillars of

‘economy, infrastructure, technology-driven system, vibrant demography and demand’ (Panda, 2020). The propagation of a *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) specific form of Indian foreign policy further plays into this approach. We can thus expect India’s complementary SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision for the Indo-Pacific to also feature in G20 debates. In these ways, observers have noted how the G20 Presidency will mark the moment when India moves from being a ‘rule-taker to being a rule-maker’ (Bhatia and Kripalani quoted in Ghosal, 2022), thus heralding a new era in her international affairs. In light of next year’s general elections in India, such growing—and proactive— influence will only be a positive domestic stimulus for the BJP’s and Modi’s political credentials.

Promoting India’s Achievements and Ambitions

The scale of the Presidency is also a highly palpable dimension that will provide myriad opportunities for such self-promotion. As such, for India, the G20 consists of hosting ‘over 200 meetings in 50 cities across 32 different work streams ... (that will allow) G20 delegates and guests to get a glimpse of India’s rich cultural heritage and a year-long India experience’ (MEA, 2022). Reflective of this sheer scope and size, the G20’s wide remit relates to core areas pertaining to Renewable, Health, Digital India, LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment), Sustainable Development Goals, Multilateral Reforms, Trade & Investment, Agriculture, Startups, Culture, Education, Employment & Skilling, Financial Inclusion, Tourism, Women-led Development and Anti-Corruption. In this way, the G20 Presidency represents a major challenge—in terms of both its logistical and diplomatic bandwidth—but also offers up significant perceptual rewards if competently undertaken.

One central aim of India’s Presidency is thus to promote India’s success in a vast array of areas central to the G20 (MyGov G20, 2023). These range across the core scope of India’s domestic and foreign policy, including the enhancement of her territorial extent, defence capabilities, infrastructure prowess, global diplomacy and commitment to renewable energy. On the government’s G20 website, these examples explicitly highlight particular achievements, including the unification of India (via the removal of Article 370 and the integration of the north-east), the launching of the INS Vikrant, engineering the world’s longest tunnel (the Atal Tunnel at Rohtang), having the world’s largest vaccination drive (*Vaccine Maitri*), building the world’s first solar-powered airport (at Kochi) or being the second largest manufacturer of mobile and PPE kits (MyGov G20, 2022). Modi has also noted India’s apparent status as the ‘Mother of Democracy’ (Basu, 2022). These specifically chosen successes convey an image of an India that is able to help its people and also those outside India and how India can—or aims to—proactively lead the world.

Of these, India’s quest to be more environmentally sustainable gained much attention in official pronouncements, along with a set of ambitious targets. These include a ‘Roadmap for Greener India’ based upon the five aims of ‘Panchamrita’ (the five ambrosia) relating to India increasing its non-fossil energy capacity to

500 gigawatt by 2030, getting 50% of its energy requirements by 2030 with renewable energy; reducing its projected carbon emission by one billion tonnes by 2030; reducing the carbon intensity of its economy by 45% by 2030; and the country achieving net zero by 2070 (DTE Staff, 2021). Such aims build upon India's initiation of the International Solar Alliance, launched in 2016. It also aims to position itself as a responsible and highly self-cognisant power. Here, New Delhi realises that as a state with the world's largest population and the world's fourth largest GDP (in PPP terms), it will invariably significantly impact environmental degradation but can also be at the vanguard of sustainability as a positive example to the Global South and beyond.

However, major difficulties can also arise whenever any state is at the centre of a prominent stage in world politics. When placed under greater scrutiny, greater focus can be given to a state's perceived shortfalls, especially by any strategic rivals who may be keen to debase a state's moment in the limelight. Equally, all states will always bring their own strategic interests to any negotiation, which has the capacity to threaten or even derail the purposes of the forum's leader at a particular time.

For India, this assertion applies in some measure to their relations with China, and it has already been evidenced by the hosting of a G20 meeting in Jammu and Kashmir in May 2023. This was the biggest international meeting to be held in the region since its special status was scrapped by the central Indian Government in 2019, which had created two federally administrated—Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. Commensurate with its own territorial stake in the region, but also perhaps reflective of an inter-regional rivalry with New Delhi, and as a way to debase the meeting, Beijing refused to attend on the grounds that it is opposed 'to holding any kind of G20 meetings in the disputed territory' (Wang Wenbin quoted in Mogul, 2023). For China, Kashmir is an issue of territorial concern due to Beijing currently controlling about 17% of its landmass (Aksai Chin and the Trans-Karakoram Tract), which was ceded to it by Pakistan in 1963. Furthermore, China's major regional ally, Pakistan, presently holds about 38% of the territory and lays claims to the entire region, which places it in direct disagreement with India, which currently holds 45% of the territory.

India was also criticised by a host of human rights groups for hosting the meeting in a territory that has been heavily beset by historical unrest. In addition, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues remarked that the Indian government was 'seeking to normalise what some have described as a military operation by instrumentalising a G20 meeting' (quoted in Mogul, 2023). Indeed, preceding the event, India held a series of security drills, which aimed to secure the safety of the various G20 delegates in a region beset by major insurgency since 1989. Such concerns also led to Turkey and Saudi Arabia not attending the meeting. In an attempt to detract from the region's highly militarised nature, G20 banners were used to mask military bunkers (Mollan & Hrishikesh, 2023), while some schools were closed and 'frisking, checking and search operations' (Mufti quoted in Mollan & Hrishikesh, 2023) in residential areas were increased. Such negatives were counter-balanced by assertions that the meeting would increase tourism to the area and thus enhance the local economy and level of development

in a bid to actively improve its internal security situation. As a Dutch delegate remarked 'it puts Kashmir back on the map, and it has shown us that Kashmir is a beautiful place' (quoted in Manzoor, 2023).

Beyond this ongoing regional dispute, India's G20 Presidency takes place at a time when the Ukraine conflict has created a deep diplomatic schism—if not a bottomless chasm—between Western states and Russia. Amplifying economic and military tensions, observers have pertinently noted how at the G20 'in terms of substance, the Ukraine issue will be looming over everything else' (Kugelman quoted in Pandey, 2023). Symptomatic of these differences, at a G20 meeting in Bangalore (Bengaluru) in February 2023, finance ministers were unable to agree on a closing statement regarding the war, with Russia and China refusing to take part. This lack of unity came about despite the best efforts of Indian diplomats, as well as preceding statements from Prime Minister Modi in September 2022 that 'today's era is not of war ... diplomacy and dialogues are things that touch the world' (quoted in Mukherjee, 2022). Apart from revealing the innate difficulties of international diplomacy, especially among the big great powers, the shadow of the Ukraine conflict has the capacity to consume – and limit – diplomatic goodwill between various G20 members and may derail talks in its wider conferences. Success for New Delhi's is still possible, however, with some observers noting potential parallels with Jawaharlal Nehru's diplomatic push to end the Korean War in the 1950s (Subramanian, 2023), which would augment G20 negotiations and India's global stature.

Indian diplomacy is also complicated by a clear Moscow–New Delhi axis, which defied many assumptions after the beginning of the Ukraine war that, as a major democracy, India would naturally fall in line with the West. Instead, New Delhi has refused to abandon its longstanding strategic partner, abstained in United Nations resolutions concerning Ukraine (Roy, 2022) and increased its gas and oil exports from Russia by 700% since early 2022 (Mathew, 2023). As such, New Delhi has preferred to maintain a path of maximum strategic flexibility, self-reliance and autonomy in global affairs and has even also offered itself up as a diplomatic bridge between Moscow and its Western antagonists. It is in this last regard that longstanding strategic ties between India and Russia may offer the sweetest diplomatic fruits, especially if New Delhi can position itself via the G20 Presidency as a peace broker between Russia and the West to bring about an end to the Ukraine conflict. Such a move would require great diplomatic prowess and agility from Modi and his diplomats but is not entirely inconceivable, particularly given the apathy and neutrality of many global South states towards Moscow (Dabroska, 2023).

Beyond this fault line, which will present conceptual and diplomatic challenges for many leaders across the developed world, other strategic synergies are visible between India and Russia. Feeding into competing worldviews against the unipolar proclivities of the current liberal international order, there is a convergence between New Delhi and Moscow regarding the promotion of a multipolar, balanced, stable and non-hegemonic world order. Sponsorship of such an outlook parallels their membership of groupings such as BRICS (Brazil–Russia–India–China–South Africa) and the Russia–India–China triangle. Moreover, other

BRICS members—most notably China—all subscribe to a similar mindset, which thus produces a clear sub-set of shared strategic interests within the context of the wider G20. For India, Russia and China (and to a certain, although unclear, extent also for Brazil), it is additionally maintained by collective ambitions vis-à-vis becoming great powers, promoting development and equality (in terms of realising equivalence with other leading powers, such as the United States) and pursuing non-intervention (i.e., denying criticism of anything seen as being a domestic issue, which for Moscow includes Ukraine; for India, Kashmir and for China, Taiwan). During India's G20 Presidency, such core Indian foreign policy objectives will only become more apparent.

Gaining Global Primacy

In the last few years, longstanding assertions from a wide range of Indian leaders, observers and protagonists that the state is slowly but surely gaining great power status have been reaching fruition. In this way, and across the economic, military and demographic measures central to ascertaining such a status, India is clearly gaining global primacy. As it does so, the focus of its leaders has increasingly moved to the enhancement of New Delhi's diplomatic capabilities—not only in terms of delivery but, more importantly, concerning how India is perceived internationally as an ambitious, competent and would-be world leader. The state's handling of the G20 Presidency clearly plays into these dynamics and has the capacity to unequivocally make India an undeniable and essential pillar of contemporary global affairs.

Despite some inevitable difficulties concerning certain issues (as was shown with the Kashmir example above), chairing the G20 Presidency will augment India's status and overall power. It will also give New Delhi, the BJP and Prime Minister Modi the opportunity to continually socialise other leading international actors into India's worldview. Doing so has the potential to produce vital future dividends in any bilateral or multilateral setting or negotiations and to augment India's standing across both the developed and developing worlds. That India was also President of the UN Security Council in December 2022 and is also the Chair of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from September 2022 to September 2023 intensifies and further validates observations that India is an emerging diplomatic powerhouse. Of course, especially in the context of the Ukraine war, India's G20 Presidency may not result in any tangible outcomes. However, becoming a great power often rests upon the intangible—a sense that a state is needed by others, that it is respected, that it can lead during adversity—and India will only reap further benefits in this regard.

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