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Riding Two Horses: India's Challenge Helming G20 and SCO

By P. S. Suryanarayana

SYNOPSIS

Widely seen as a middle power, India seeks to project itself as a "leading power". It is charting a new path as the champion of the Global South while helming the Group of Twenty (G20) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) this year. In these leadership roles, Delhi is messaging China whose expanding primacy in world affairs is a key factor in both fora.

COMMENTARY

The overarching [theme](#) of India's G20 presidency is "One Earth, One Family, One Future". Against this ambitious theme, Delhi will face a formidable task facilitating a pan-G20 convergence of national interests on geoeconomic issues at the annual summit of the G20 in September 2023.

For the SCO summit, also to be held later this year, the theme which India chose is "SECURE SCO". This slogan is the same "[mantra](#)" which the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi voiced at the Qingdao SCO summit in 2018. In framing the G20 and SCO summits in this fashion, India is messaging its most consequential rival, China.

Strategic Messaging Amidst an Elusive Consensus

India's focus on "One Future" for its G20 presidency is in sync with China's advocacy of a "[shared future](#)" for humanity. But, at the G20 foreign ministers' meeting in Delhi on 2 March 2023, China did not support India and others in acknowledging the global economic fallout of Russia's war in Ukraine.

For Chinese President Xi Jinping, Sino-Russian ties seem to matter very much during

his current “new era”. His stated aim in this “[new era](#)” is to pave the way for China’s rejuvenation and leadership in a potential new “win-win” global order.

Delhi too has not turned its back on Russia, which has often supported India, including by providing some critical supplies during the current Ukraine war.

Leadership of the G20 requires careful balancing of the interests of the China-Russia partnership with those of the United States-led West, whilst also caring for the developing countries of the Global South. However, at the G20 foreign ministers’ meeting, India failed in its balancing of the different factions when China and Russia emerged looking like outliers.

At this meeting, the key issues were in [paragraphs 3 and 4](#) of the Chair’s Summary & Outcome Document. Paragraph 3 documented the majority’s decision to “acknowledge that security issues can have significant consequences for the global economy”, while paragraph 4 concluded that “Today’s era must not be of war”. However, capitalising on the G20’s consensus practice, Russia and China dissociated themselves from these propositions and from the majority’s blaming of Russia for the economic consequences of the Ukraine war.

It is significant to note that these two paragraphs, which China and Russia found unacceptable, were quite similar to the related paragraphs in the Leaders’ Declaration at last year’s G20 summit in Bali. After this summit, India had also highlighted that these were a “[derivative](#)” of Modi’s “message that this is [not the era of war](#)”. It is also significant that Modi reaffirmed, “now is not an age of wars”, when he met Russia’s President Vladimir Putin on the margins of the Samarkand SCO summit last year.

India’s messaging to China could not have been clearer. By portraying the present times as an “aspirational age” and an “era free of wars”, Modi was juxtaposing his message with Xi’s unfolding “new era”. The ongoing Sino-Indian military standoff at the disputed borders, which recently resulted in deaths on both sides during Xi’s “new era”, was probably on Modi’s mind.

An Indian concern is that, ahead of the Chinese New Year in January 2023, Xi “inspected the [combat readiness](#) of the armed forces” including the troops facing India. This was at odds with Xi’s signalling towards Moscow, in which “[peace](#)” along the Russia-Ukraine front (an Indian wish too), was on the agenda of his in-person talks with Putin in March 2023.

The Global South: An Emerging G20 Constituency?

Another apparent messaging to Xi is Modi’s current effort to position the Global South as a G20 constituency. Beijing’s outreach to the developing countries is well known. India’s effort to mainstream the concerns and aspirations of the Global South within the G20 framework is arguably in line with Xi’s concern as well. On 12-13 January 2023, in a pioneering multilateral exercise, India hosted (in a virtual format) the Voice of Global South [Summit](#) in which participants from 125 countries attended.

According to India’s former Permanent Representative at the UN, T. S. Tirumurti, “India is in the best position to champion the cause of the Global South in G20”. He

cited India's "robust development partnerships with its neighbours and Africa, [and] inclusive outreach during COVID, especially with small island developing states".

Another key factor behind Modi's ambition is the food security issue confronting the Global South during the ongoing Ukraine war and India's efforts to address it.

And, addressing a Global South concern, in February 2023, the G20 finance ministers unanimously tasked a working group to "develop a G20 Note on the [Global Debt Landscape](#) in a fair and comprehensive manner". This met China's repeated calls for a close look at the practices of all creditors of international relevance.

A Regional Challenge

China's dominant presence is a factor that India must deal with while hosting the SCO summit later this year. As a country that joined this forum at Moscow's initiative, an additional challenge for India is to safeguard its ties with Russia when addressing the Ukraine war, especially since Modi has engaged not only Putin but also Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

The theme "SECURE SCO" is Modi's depiction of the desirable attributes of the organisation. These are: 'S' stands for provision of security to citizens, 'E' means ensuring economic development, 'C' is for connectivity in the region, 'U' symbolises unity, 'R' represents respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and 'E' is a call for environment protection. By depicting 'R' in this manner, Modi is messaging to both China and Pakistan (also an SCO member) that sovereignty and territorial integrity are inviolable principles in international relations.

Modi is concerned about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which passes through areas India deems as its sovereign territories. But China and Pakistan remain nonchalant about India's concern. It should not be surprising, therefore, that India is the only SCO member opposed to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) whose "flagship project" is the CPEC.

Among the SCO members, India and Pakistan are the only two that have not signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear-Weapons (NPT). The SCO found a way of accommodating these two countries as exceptions to the consensus in the Samarkand Declaration of September 2022, which, among other points, stated that the NPT signatories *among the SCO members* "stand for the strict observance of the provisions of the treaty".

This stipulation may require some deft handling with reference to Iran, whose alleged nuclear proliferation activities are a multilateral concern. Iran's admission as a new member state is expected to be finalised at the SCO summit India would host later this year.

As for the BRI, the SCO members "reaffirming their support" for it were identified by name, with India not figuring in the list.

By this process, the outliers in the NPT and BRI – India and Pakistan in the case of the NPT, and India alone in the case of the BRI – were not identified. This contrasts

with the G20's naming of the outliers in the case of the attempted consensus on the Ukraine issue.

Overall, India's diplomatic skills will be acutely tested as the country's political leadership seeks to ride two galloping horses in the global geoeconomic domain (G20) and the regional geostrategic space (SCO) to address a deteriorating state of international relations among the world's contending major powers. As such, it is not clear what eventual dividends India will obtain from such a fluid situation.

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