

Policy Perspectives

India's G20 Presidency: Reflections and Learnings

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Abstract

India's yearlong G20 presidency, culminating in the New Delhi Summit, has left an indelible mark on the global socioeconomic agenda. With meticulous planning and inclusive diplomacy, India managed to drive consensus around its key priorities while balancing competing interests of world powers. The presidency was characterized by extensive public participation, making it the most participatory G20 to date. India's ancient ideal of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' was skilfully woven through the motto 'One Earth, One Family, One Future', focusing on sustainability, inclusiveness, and shared global aspirations. The unanimous adoption of the New Delhi Leaders Declaration, a first in G20 history, reflected India's success in consensus-building. India's progressive agenda on women's empowerment, showcasing of homegrown innovations, and the inclusion of the African Union as a permanent member were defining features of its presidency. The post-summit follow-up process and virtual G20 Leaders' Summit underscored India's commitment to realizing the endorsed vision. India's G20 presidency marked its coming-of-age as a global power, displaying capability, nuance, and wisdom, and raised hopes of reinvigorating multilateralism in a fractured world.

Keywords: Diplomacy; G20; Democracy

As the curtains closed on India's yearlong G20 presidency that culminated in the New Delhi Summit, India emerged with enhanced prestige on the world stage. Prime Minister Modi characterized the summit not just as a diplomatic event, but a celebration of India's vibrant democracy and diversity. Accounting for 85% of global GDP, 75% of world trade and 2/3rd of the world population, the G20 Summit was the highest-profile international gathering in the history of independent India. Not only did India showcase world-class event management competencies, but with meticulous planning and inclusive diplomacy, it also managed to drive consensus around its key priorities while balancing competing interests of world powers.

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An in-depth analysis reveals how India has left its mark on the global socioeconomic agenda.

1. Making G20 a Jan Andolan with Jan Bhagidari

India organised 227 physical events across 60 cities in 28 States and 8 UTs through a decentralized public engagement model during the year of its Presidency. This allowed extensive participation, making it empirically the most participatory G20 to date. Over 100,000 participants, from 135 nationalities, attended the G20, Engagement Group and related meetings. During these events, India's inclusive traditions, and cultural richness were on full display. Over 300 cultural events, with the participation of over 18,000 artists, showcasing local and national art forms, were organised. Millet-based dishes were incorporated into the menu at most events to celebrate the International Year of Millet.

India's G20 Presidency witnessed 40 workstreams including 13 Groups under the Sherpa Track, 8 under the Finance Track, 11 Engagement Groups, 2 Standalone Ministerial Meetings, and 6 Special Initiatives. Some of the new initiatives included the Startup20 Engagement Group, Chief Scientific Advisors Roundtable, Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group, Conference on Crime and Security in the Age of NFTs, AI and Metaverse, and Cooperation in counternarcotics and traditional medicines. Top academic institutions, leading think tanks and civil society organisations enthusiastically participated in a variety of intellectually stimulating events held during the three quarters leading to the Summit Event in September 2023. The year-long Jan Bhagidari activities touched over 7 crore people across India.

2. The Unanimously Adopted Declaration

While tricky negotiations had reached a stalemate during the year, observers doubted substantial outcomes. However, deft diplomatic handling yielded incremental progress on contentious issues. Finally, in an unprecedented accomplishment of consensus-building, the New Delhi Leaders Declaration (NDLD) and its 83 paragraphs were adopted at the Summit. It was the first-ever unanimous communique without dissenting footnotes in G20's history. Unlike previous G20 presidencies led by developed economies, India adopted a uniquely decentralized, developmental, and collaborative approach.

An analysis of past communiqués conveys that India gave far greater weightage to issues such as reforming multilateral institutions like the IMF, WTO, and the UN for amplifying the marginalized voices of nations from the Global South. In contrast to rigid stances, India's presidency emphasized a more inclusive and cooperative multilateralism. Its stance on food security aligned more with Indonesia and Saudi Arabia than the confrontational stances of Western nations post-Ukraine. It reaffirmed commitments to rules-based international trade and investment.

NDLD called for enhancing financing for developing countries to bridge the SDG investment gap. This aligned with its focus on socio-economic transformation, differentiated from G20 partners like Germany that prioritised macroeconomic resilience. Compared to past hosts like Italy and France, India placed relatively less emphasis on setting new climate ambitions in favour of stressing implementation and finance. It promoted Mission LiFE to encourage the global citizenry to espouse sustainable lifestyles. Compared to Indonesia in 2022, India expanded the health agenda to cover its domestic needs. But it maintained continuity with previous G20s on coordinating pandemic preparedness and response. It also promoted holistic wellbeing by mainstreaming its ancient medicinal and wellness knowledge systems like Ayurveda and Yoga.

While previous G20s focused on setting policy direction, India contributed by stressing tangible outputs and outcomes. Its nuanced positions on a host of issues struck a delicate balance between competing interests and prioritised sustainable and equitable growth benefiting all segments of the global society.

3. One Earth, One Family, One Future

India skilfully wove its ancient ideal of ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’ through the motto of its Presidency, ‘One Earth, One Family, One Future’ that focused on themes of sustainability, inclusiveness and shared global aspirations. While each of these represents global priorities for the 21st century, they also represent India’s domestic primacies for achieving the vision of a Viksit Bharat by 2047. The resonance is evident.

3.1 One Earth (Sustainability)

Food and energy security, climate financing, clean transitions and disaster resilience are issues that align with sustainable development for the planet. Given the recent turbulence in prices and supply, food and energy security predictably took focus under India's presidency. India is the world's largest producer of milk and pulses and the second-largest producer of rice, wheat, sugarcane, groundnuts, and fruits and vegetables. Its focus on food security and sustainable agriculture is backed by substantive capacity along with its priority to feed its population - the largest in the world. The NDLD contained strong commitments to boosting fertiliser supply, agricultural productivity through climate-smart technologies, food systems resilience and stabilizing energy markets through clean transitions.

India succeeded in building consensus around the new Global Partnership on Food and Energy Security, co-led by key developing countries like Indonesia, Nigeria, Egypt, and Argentina. Having built a formidable renewable capacity of 167 GW, the 4th largest globally, and improved farmer access through a host of schemes, India could project its successes as templates for others.

The climate section accommodated India's equity and climate financing stance while recommending accelerated action. It highlighted disaster resilience and blue economy partnerships, aligning with its needs as a climate-vulnerable maritime nation. Thus, India succeeded in delicately balancing its interests with the wider reform agenda.

3.2 One Family (Inclusiveness)

Advocating for vulnerable economies and deprived strata of society reflects inclusiveness towards the global family. India's progressive agenda on women's empowerment was a defining feature of its G20 presidency. During the last decade, India has demonstrated its commitment to gender equality across multiple fronts. Schemes like PM MUDRA Yojana and Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao have actively promoted economic and social progress, while legislative moves like the Women's Reservation Bill 2023 have signalled political intent. As a result of sustained efforts, India has succeeded in raising female literacy to 70% thereby expanding opportunities for millions. The country has also made giant strides in reducing maternal mortality and improving women's health outcomes.

During its G20 leadership, India cemented its position as an advocate for women-led growth and development. Its presidency provided a platform to collaborate with member countries in mainstreaming gender in policy frameworks. It is because of ground-level improvements and noteworthy progress made in the last decade in empowering women across social and economic spheres that India could nudge other emerging economies to adopt a similar inclusive development model. By placing women at the centre of its G20 agenda, India left an indelible mark on the global discourse.

3.3 One Future (Shared Aspirations and Technology)

Positioning emerging technologies for bridging digital divides embodies creating a shared future and fulfilling shared aspirations. By showcasing homegrown innovations like 'India Stack' and its locally developed 5G technology, India displayed its indigenous capabilities and offered these as templates for other developing countries. The proposal for a 'One Future Alliance' underscored India's commitment to bridging digital divides through South-South cooperation. The balanced references to data openness and privacy reflected India's middle path on cross-border data flows.

The Summit produced a groundbreaking G20 Framework for Leveraging Digital Public Infrastructure, capitalizing on India's success with open-source platforms annually processing over \$1 trillion in digital payments and used for delivering 2.2 billion vaccination doses under CoWIN. Launching global initiatives on digital health and the crypto regulatory framework established India's role in steering conversations on critical emerging technologies. While advanced economies sparred

over polarized stances, India charted a balanced middle path on technology governance, reflecting its matured understanding of opportunities and risks. Its collaborative approach to initiatives like the Global Digital Health Initiative displayed wisdom earned from its own digital transformation journey. The Summit delivered a landmark agreement on voluntary licensing and technology transfer for critical pandemic technologies. By showcasing its digital and climate capabilities, India strengthened its position as a vital source of innovation and talent.

The successful landing of Chandrayaan-3 just a week before the Summit attracted global attention and commendation for India's scientific prowess and indigenous capabilities in space technology. Achieving this rare space feat cemented India's position as the very first country to land on the South Pole of the Moon. Attaining such a significant milestone gave India superior credibility thereby boosting its influence.

4. Enhancing Africa's Potential

India signalled the rise of the Global South within the G20 by giving the African Union (AU) a prominent role and a permanent seat. The inclusion of the AU, representing 55 African countries and 1.4 billion people, expanded the G20 to cover 80% of the world's population compared to just 63% earlier. This fulfilled a long-standing demand of African nations for representation in premier global bodies. According to the IMF, the AU bloc's collective GDP is around \$7.573 trillion. Moreover, Africa's population is set to hit 2.5 billion by 2050, representing 25% of humanity.

The continent's youthful demographics and rapid urbanization signal enormous economic potential. Though recent growth has slowed, Africa's massive working-age population, expanding middle class, and new pan-African free trade pacts together offer the possibility of a major demographic dividend. If these advantages are harnessed effectively, Africa could emerge as a vital engine of global economic dynamism. By bringing the AU into the G20 fold and intensifying partnerships, India has invested in Africa's future trajectory.

5. Key Learnings from India's G20 Presidency

The uniqueness of India's G20 Presidency was threefold: meticulous planning and coordination throughout the year, deft diplomacy during the Summit, and a focus on implementation post-presidency. Through active public participation with a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, India's G20 Presidency emerged as a 'People's G20'. With a progressive global socioeconomic agenda rooted in Bharatiya culture and ethos, India stood for the 'Voice of the Global South'. In January 2023, the Prime Minister chaired a first-of-its-kind virtual summit with the same nomenclature and participation from heads of States of 120 countries to identify and represent the common concerns of the developing world during its Presidency.

Several events during the Summit conveyed India's emergence as a global champion of green growth and the torchbearer of democracy. India spearheaded the Global Biofuels Alliance to promote sustainable biofuels and relevant standards. This reflected India's focus on clean energy and climate action. India championed the Green Development Pact for commitments to reduce emissions, boost renewables, and protect biodiversity. The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor, a comprehensive transportation corridor ensuring food security and securing global supply chains, launched on the sidelines of the Summit by Heads of States from three continents was another milestone. The highlight of the Summit was a visit by all Heads of States to Rajghat for paying collective homage to Mahatma Gandhi. This underscored India's ancient message of non-violence and peace and emphasized India's commitment to eternal values in a changing society.

Post the Summit, an extensive follow-up process was initiated to design the path forward for NDLD and suggest actionable issues for implementation. In the first fortnight of November 2023, NITI Aayog organised a series of workshops in collaboration with various think tanks and subject experts on themes including Data for Development, Tourism, Digital Public Infrastructure, Sustainable Development Goals, Trade, Women-led Development, Reforming Multilateral Development Banks, Climate Finance and Green Development. This approach displayed India's seriousness in sustaining engagement beyond the Delhi Summit. By mobilizing experts and policymakers domestically while maintaining international momentum, India underscored its commitment to realizing the vision endorsed by G20 leaders.

A virtual G20 Leaders' Summit was organised on 22nd November with participation from all G20 leaders and with the objective of pushing for effective implementation of various G20 decisions through relevant national and international platforms. This was the finale of India's yearlong Presidency that concluded on 30th November.

Thus, India's presidency not only won global acclaim but also amplified its voice on the world stage and boosted its leadership profile. It marked India's coming-of-age as a global power, displaying capability, nuance, and wisdom.

6. The Road Ahead

In a fractured world and polarised geopolitical system, the NDLD has raised hopes of reinvigorating multilateralism and catalysing action on critical challenges. As India has passed the baton, the world is watching how successors like Brazil and South Africa will carry forward its development-focused agenda. If future summits match India's diplomacy and commitment, it will significantly rebuild fractured global trust. If not, it may exemplify how even the most skilful diplomacy cannot paper over deep ideological rifts for long.

With the phenomenal success of its G20 Presidency, India has charted its own unique path on the world stage - balancing global ambitions and domestic primacies, securing gains while building bridges. If this defining moment catalyses sustained

engagement on collective global priorities, its impact will be truly far-reaching. That India managed conflicting priorities amidst simmering geopolitical tensions speaks volumes of its diplomatic and geopolitical maturity. India can derive immense satisfaction from a presidency that enhanced its global stature and foregrounded development. Sustaining that goodwill and engagement will be the real long-term success of Bharat's leadership.