

India's G20 presidency, where photo-ops are mistaken for outcomes and a stage for a summit



For India, the presidency of the G20 is nothing if not a big party. The government has turned it into a tourism festival, with mid-level functionaries from member countries being garlanded, made to sport turbans and watch dancers welcome them to dull and drab preparatory meetings for a summit that will only be held in September. As a spectacle, the New Delhi summit will dwarf the Non-Aligned Movement summit and Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting that the national capital hosted in 1983, though it will host a smaller number of heads of state/government.

With the Indian government directing all its energies towards making the G20 summit a huge success, there are many questions in the air: What is the point of the G20? What does India bring to the table? How does the presidency further India's strategic interests?

The evolution of G20

It was the G7 that was instrumental in founding the G20 in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis. On behalf of the G7, Canada's then finance minister, Paul Martin, [extended an invitation](#) to his Indian counterpart, Yashwant Sinha, who promptly accepted. The first meeting of the G20 was held in Berlin in December 1999, where Sinha was elected its second chairperson.

The next meeting was to be held in Delhi in the autumn of 2001, but the 9/11 terror strikes led to the venue being shifted to New York to show the world's solidarity with the US. The G20 did meet in New Delhi a year later under the chairmanship of Jaswant Singh, who had succeeded Sinha as the finance minister in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government.

Originally envisaged as a forum for the member nations' finance ministers and central bank governors to discuss global economic and financial issues, the G20 was upgraded to the level of heads of state/government in the wake of the global economic and financial crisis of 2007, and in 2009 it was designated the "premier forum for international economic cooperation." Today, [its members](#) represent around 85% of global GDP, over 75% of global trade and about two-thirds of the world's population.

The G20, which does not have a permanent secretariat, holds a summit every year under the leadership of a rotating presidency. For deciding the presidency, the member countries are divided into five groups. India took over the presidency from Indonesia, and Brazil will take over in 2024.

Unlike most other global institutions formed at the end of World War II—the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund—the G20 is a modern grouping, more akin to the World Trade Organization and the Conference of the Parties, or COP, climate summits. The G20 fits in with what US President Joe Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, [recently described](#) as “the new template for US foreign policy—a world in which the post-1945 global structure is changing fast.”

As Sullivan said in late December, “It's 2022, not 2008.” The world has changed dramatically since the G20 was formed, and especially so since the 2007-08 global financial crisis, when the bloc's member countries faced a common challenge. The scenario is very different today: India and some developing countries are facing high fuel, food and fertilizer prices; Russia is suffering because of the sanctions imposed by the West; China is grappling with slowing economic growth, a belated COVID-19 outbreak and a technological war with the US; Europe is reeling under the challenges thrown by the Ukraine war; while the US is confronting the demons of its own broken domestic politics.

Unlike in 2008, most of these economic issues are now directly linked with geopolitics—primarily the ongoing hot war between Russia and Ukraine, and the emerging cold war between the US and China. Disentangling the economic challenges from the geopolitical ones is a futile exercise, as was evident at the Bali G20 summit last November. India claimed credit for drafting the declaration that essentially said that the member countries agreed to disagree on geopolitical issues. The 51-para, 9,700-word Bali Declaration was full of platitudes and good intent. But it had nothing concrete, like most previous such declarations that were forgotten hours after they were released.

Risks of overhyping India's presidency

New Delhi has now changed tack and suggested that India will be the “voice of the Global South” at the upcoming G20 meeting. That has been India's position since Independence, as established by Jawaharlal Nehru, but the Narendra Modi government is yet to spell out what it means when it makes this claim today. The government is hastily organizing a virtual summit of developing countries this week to learn about their developmental challenges and priorities, which will be channelled into the deliberations of the various working groups and ministerial summits of the G20. It will be instructive to look at the issues that India, as the self-styled spokesperson for the Global South, will focus on.

Status-wise, notwithstanding the fact that it is the fifth-largest economy in the world, India is a poor country. India's per capita income is a little over \$2,000 a year, the lowest among the G20 countries. Indonesia, which sits just above India on the list, has a per capita income three times that. At the top is the US, where the average annual income is more than \$70,000. The participation of women in India's labour force is lower than that of Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. India is also home to nearly a quarter of the world's extreme poor (going by the World Bank's \$1.9/day poverty line). Of our approximately 1.4 billion population, [only about 66 million—less than 5%—have a middle-class daily income](#) of between \$10 and \$20 in terms of purchasing power. Despite having 18% of the world's population, India represents [less than 5% of the global market](#) by value.



But India's geographic size, population, geostrategic location and nuclear weapons make it a bigger power than the sum of all Indians, and New Delhi is desperate for a seat at the global high table that would validate Modi's overhyped domestic image of a powerful global leader (just listen to the [foreign minister's petulant gripes](#) about India not being a permanent member of the UN Security Council). The government would like us to believe that India is now influencing the global discourse, offering solutions for global problems and acting as a bridge between warring nations, but that is far from the truth.

In chasing a "powerful" image, India, in fact, now sits at an uncomfortable fault line between the developed world and the Global South. If it tries to truly represent the latter at the G20, New Delhi will be pilloried by the West as an obstructionist ringleader, as has been done earlier at WTO and COP meets. It is unlikely that Modi would want to be portrayed in such a negative light at home. Also, such criticism could quickly transcend into questions about India's declining democratic credentials since 2014.

Indubitably, the G20 summit this year is about Modi's domestic politics. As [Yashwant Sinha reminds us](#), "In India, now we do everything with an eye on elections." New Delhi tried its best to assume the chairmanship of the G20 in 2018, a pre-election year in India, but Argentina, whose turn it was, did not oblige. India was then scheduled to become the chair in 2021, but the government succeeded in [getting it postponed](#) by two years. 2023 is a pre-election year, and the propaganda and PR machinery is already in full swing.

But there is a risk in loudly proclaiming that the G20 presidency marks India's moment to lead the world—a coming-out party similar to what China had with the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. Over the past 32 months, China has shown that it has no hesitation in putting India in its place, while an unstable Pakistan could play spoiler as well. That's the danger with projecting an overhyped mage. The slogan and logo for this year's summit, the number of meetings with junior officials in India, the arrangements for foreign dignitaries in various cities—all have been hyped by the mainstream Indian media as part of a major national achievement, while ignoring very substantive issues.

This is event management on a global scale—remember [L.K. Advani's comment](#)?—where photo-ops are mistaken for outcomes and a stage for a summit. [As seen on the China border](#), inflated opinions are often a trap. Reality has a way of eventually catching up.

Obiter dicta

Though not a popular work, Peter Hajnal's *The G20: Evolution, Interrelationships, Documentation* is an exhaustive record of the multilateral grouping. *Rising Powers and Multilateral Institutions* by Dries Lesage and Thijs Graaf (eds) has a chapter on G20 but provides the context and coverage of other multilateral institutions.

Photographs by Getty Images.

About the author



[Sushant Singh](#)

Sushant Singh is a senior fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. He has taught at Yale University (Fall 2019 and Fall 2021) and was deputy editor of The Indian Express. A winner of the prestigious Ramnath Goenka Excellence in Journalism Awards in 2017 and 2018, he had earlier served in the Indian Army for two decades. He is also the author of Mission Overseas and co-author of Note by Note: The India Story.