

Unlikely Event

The G20 summit is not the crowning glory Modi hoped for

SUSHANT SINGH 30 August 2023



Caravan Columns

Eighty-five percent of global GDP. Seventy-five percent of global trade. Nineteen member countries. Nine guest countries. Eleven international organisations. All under one roof. At the G20 summit, 9–10 September, New Delhi.

If there was a television promo for the G20 summit under India's presidency, the panoply of images would be fast moving, with Narendra Modi as the hero of the story. The branding exercise must always be about him and stick to the narrative of India as a *vishwaguru*—teacher to the world—with the G20 as evidence. A visiting European journalist, based out of China, was truly perplexed at the ubiquitous presence of the G20 logo across Delhi, months before the scheduled summit. He compared it to how Barcelona had been awash with Olympics branding in 1992. China's celebration of the 2008 Beijing Olympics would be a better comparison, as an Asian neighbour, but for the fact that the Modi government has failed to build the infrastructure, particularly around the main venue in Delhi, that it had promised to build for the summit.

Many readers would scoff at the comparison with the Olympic Games, but that bracketing of a multilateral summit with the world's greatest sporting extravaganza was done by Modi himself. Inaugurating the International Exhibition-cum-Convention Centre at Delhi's Pragati Maidan, last month, he claimed that "whenever a country hosts an Olympic summit or a major event, its profile changes significantly on the world stage." He went on to declare that the "importance of such events in the world has grown immensely." This is evocative of the time when he was slyly complimented by his party senior LK Advani as "a brilliant event manager."

All events tell a story. The G20 summit is a story in two parts. The first is about Modi as an individual and his unbridled ambition as a politician. The second is about India and its geopolitical standing in the world. Since 2014, we have witnessed an attempt to fuse the two, rather profitably, with India's geopolitical standing being employed in the service of the political ambitions of one man. The foreign minister, S Jaishankar, a retired diplomat who is now a political lightweight with no base of his own, [boasted](#) last year, "There is no gainsaying the fact that Prime Minister Modi looms large on the world stage." He may have gone overboard with his flattery in positing that Modi's language, metaphors, appearance, mannerisms, and habits define a persona that the world has come to recognise. But it served the political goal of making his benefactor synonymous with India, if not above it, towering over other leaders.

The G20 summit in Delhi threatens to unpick that fusion. At a domestic level, Modi can still hype the event as a moment of personal glory, where he has personally raised India's global standing. There will be images and clips galore—and numerous WhatsApp messages full of half-truths and full lies—which will be loyally regurgitated by the mainstream media, social-media trolls and YouTube influencers alike. India's rotational presidency of the G20 will become Modi's personal presidency of 20 global leaders. Every leader would be shown bowing before Modi and seeking his pearls of wisdom. The summit will be hailed as an

unqualified success. The fiction will be amplified by ministers and party leaders, all directed towards fabricating a mythology around Modi. This has been ongoing since a comic book showed him as a school child catching a crocodile single-handedly. The technique has only become more refined since.

But each story must have a meaning. The meaning of the story of the G20 summit lies in its outcomes, the minimum being a leaders' declaration issued at the summit. At Bali, in November 2022, where India was handed the presidency of the G20, the grouping had issued a unanimous leaders' declaration, which stated that most members condemned the war in Ukraine but "there were other views and different assessments of the situation and sanctions." Other assessments and recommendations on food and energy security, climate change and global economic cooperation were unanimous even though there were no tangible and concrete agreements or announcements. All ministerial and official meetings since, under India's presidency, have failed to issue a joint communique—something that nearly every meeting before India's presidency was able to do. With such a poor track record as the president of the grouping, nothing short of a miracle will rescue the Delhi summit. The Ukraine war, with China and Russia now objecting to the language used at Bali, has been the main stumbling block. However, there have been other differences too—over reforms to multilateral institutions and, more recently, on climate change.

Negotiators are going to be working hard in the first week of September to find common ground for a leaders' declaration, but positions on both sides—the G7 and China–Russia—have hardened, leaving little scope for compromise. India has tried to shift the goalpost by harping on the entry of the African Union into the grouping and by positioning itself as the voice of the Global South. It seems neither has, so far, moved to the top of the G20 agenda. Some Indian officials have stated that a "chair's summary" that covers many areas of agreement indicates a successful summit. Even then, the Delhi summit would lag far behind the Bali summit.

Things are being made tougher by China, which has vehemently [objected](#) to the use of the Sanskrit phrase "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam"—The world is one family—as it meant the use of a non-UN language in a G20 text being negotiated. India has conceded by using only the "English version" of the phrase, "One Earth, One Family, One Future," in its summary documents and outcome statements. Over the past few weeks, Beijing has taken a more confrontational stance over several other phrases introduced in the text by the Indian G20 negotiating team. Most of them have Modi's personal imprint. Evident examples of this, as [pointed](#) out by Suhasini Haider in a column for *The Hindu*, are Modi's domestic policy, "Lifestyle for Environment initiative," re-packaged as a G20 goal, the promotion of millets and terms such as "gender-led development." Chinese negotiators pointed out that such language was supplanting UN-approved terms from the Sustainable Development Goals.

New Delhi's strained ties with Beijing are now playing out at other summits as well. In July, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit, under India's presidency—changed to a virtual format at the last moment—India refused to sign an SCO economic development strategy. This document, proposed by Tajikistan and agreed on by other SCO members, was vetoed by India as it contained "China-specific" references to the Belt and Road Initiative and the new Global Development Initiative. Mirroring the G20, at the SCO summit, joint statements on millets and environmental lifestyles, proposed by Jaishankar, were not adopted after facing stiff Chinese opposition. Things have not improved between the two countries since.

If the border crisis with China remains unresolved till the Delhi summit, Modi will be equally uncomfortable in hosting a bilateral meeting with the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, on its sidelines. As a host, it would be inappropriate for him to refuse Xi a bilateral meeting, but a failure to demonstrate any progress on the border issue has the potential to seriously embarrass Modi. He has already been put in a tough spot by the Chinese statement that claimed Modi had sought the meeting with Xi on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Johannesburg. Modi's interaction with Xi at the conclusion of the summit dinner in Bali was also invoked for a second time by Beijing, after the Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, met with the national security advisor, Ajit Doval, at Johannesburg on 24 July. The Indian foreign ministry was forced to accept that the two leaders had discussed the need to stabilise India–China relations, which the ministry had earlier played down as an "exchange of courtesy." This may not be of great interest to global media, but Indian commentators and journalists remain hungry for any morsel of information about the situation on the China front. Moreover, Beijing has now scotched any hopes of a compromise on the Ladakh border crisis by releasing an official map of China that includes Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin.

For the foreign media coming to India, there will be huge interest in the democratic backsliding under Modi, particularly due to the ongoing [violence](#) in Manipur and the recent anti-Muslim attacks in Haryana by Hindutva mobs and the Bharatiya Janata Party government. Good news is no news, and bad news of this kind becomes particularly enticing for the global press because of Modi's past record in the 2002 Gujarat riots and the western leaders' recent wooing of him. His apathy and administrative failures threaten to cast a dark shadow over India's hosting of the summit. They could play the same role as was done to Modi's state visit to the United States by a single question posed to him at the White House, by the journalist Sabrina Siddiqui, regarding alleged human-rights violations of minorities and the curtailment of free speech.

Nothing will salvage Modi's diplomatic reputation if India becomes the first country hosting the G20 presidency that fails to issue a leaders' declaration. It is something that the global media, which will be swooping on the Indian capital, will not allow the world to forget. There could be headlines about the G20 having outlived its purpose and how it runs the risk of ending up as another United Nations General Assembly annual session, where leaders make big speeches and meet other leaders in New York.

In line with the G20 norm of annual rotation of presidency, India was scheduled to host the G20 summit in 2021 and Italy in 2022. In 2018, Modi requested Italy to host the summit in 2021 and allow India to host it a year later, as part of the celebrations around 75 years of Indian independence. Then, after Indonesia made a similar request, India agreed to defer its presidency to 2023. It gave India time to hurry through the construction and beautification work for hosting the summit. More crucially for Modi, it optimistically timed the hosting of a successful summit with the take-off of his campaign for the 2024 general election. It would be a personal winner riding on the back of India's diplomatic achievement. His partisan supporters may well pretend that it is still Modi's personal triumph, but geopolitical realities have pushed the summit to the brink of disappointment. The twain shall not meet. This is the real story of the G20 summit in Delhi.

SUSHANT SINGH is a consulting editor at *The Caravan*.

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