

Why overhyping India's G20 presidency is a risky move

On 15 November, at the G20 summit in Bali, Prime Minister Narendra Modi got up from the official dinner table and shook hands with the Chinese president Xi Jinping. This was their first interaction since 2019, when the two leaders met during an informal summit in Chennai. Modi had not met the Chinese leader since the border crisis began in Ladakh, in May 2020, largely because of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. In September this year, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Samarkand, the two leaders had not even exchanged a smile during an official photograph.

Modi's move at Bali suggests that Indian calculations have changed since the twentieth party congress in Beijing last month, where Xi was elected for a third norm-defying term as the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. Modi did not tweet pictures of the meeting with Xi—even fleeting interactions with other global leaders have been posted. The government has been vague about the proceedings, captured on official video, giving no clue of what motivated Modi to get up from the official banquet and walk up to Xi to have a word with him. The Chinese, too, have been silent about the brief conversation.

This is not the first time Modi has taken the initiative with Xi, during an ongoing border crisis. In 2017, with Indian and Chinese soldiers arrayed against each other in Doklam in Bhutan, Modi had similarly walked up to the Chinese leader for an informal interaction on the sidelines of a G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany. The spokesperson of the Indian ministry of external affairs had tweeted a picture of that meeting, and thereafter Indian media reports credited Modi for achieving a breakthrough on Doklam. The then foreign secretary S Jaishankar, told the parliamentary standing committee on external affairs that it was the 7 July conversation in Hamburg that “initiated diplomatic communications with the Chinese side in Beijing to seek resolution of this issue.” But most analysts argued that it was Xi's desire to have a successful BRICS summit in China, in September 2017, that led to the so-called disengagement at Doklam in August 2017. This distortion of external realities to suit a domestic political narrative, a tactic frequently deployed by Modi's government, could have dangerous consequences.

Domestically, the disengagement in Doklam was projected not merely as a resolution to a vexed problem but as a victory for the Modi government. It took just a few months for the truth to come out. Satellite imagery showed that while the Indian forces returned to their posts, the Chinese People's Liberation Army continued to remain on the plateau, barely a few hundred metres away from the standoff site. Since then, the PLA has constructed massive infrastructure in the area, bolstered its permanent deployment and started building alternative roads to access the Jampheri ridge. In March 2018, the Modi government was forced to [acknowledge](#) in parliament that the PLA had “undertaken construction of some infrastructure, including sentry posts, trenches and helipads” after disengagement.

The current situation in Ladakh is even more worrisome. The army chief General Manoj Pande succinctly elucidated at an event in Delhi some days ago that the PLA's military build-up has not reduced while it has constructed a lot of infrastructure. Rather ominously, the Chinese side refuses to discuss the two areas, Depsang and Demchok, where disengagement has not taken place. Even in the other five areas where disengagement has taken place over the past thirty months, the PLA is unwilling to discuss the next stage of de-escalation. The Chinese foreign ministry has blamed India for the crisis, and flatly refused a return to the status quo as it existed in April 2020.

Given that Beijing is unwilling to concede anything substantive in Ladakh, are we then in for a Doklam redux? Will the Indian government somehow claim that the problem on the border has been resolved and bilateral ties with China have returned to normal? This seems probable, as the government's target here seems to be the domestic audience, whereby any concessions made to China are kept under wraps. The border crisis is an uncomfortable fact

for Modi and his party to live with, so much so that they have been reticent to talk about it. Such is the pressure of not reminding the public that Chinese soldiers are in territory controlled by India, that the ruling party ignored the sixtieth anniversary of the 1962 war, despite the easy opportunity to target Jawaharlal Nehru and the Congress party. Going into the general elections of 2024, a live border crisis with China could suddenly surface as a bigger problem for Modi. For his party, it is a double whammy as it does not permit them to target Pakistan as an adversary, a campaign tactic Modi has mastered since his days as the chief minister of Gujarat.

Manipulation of domestic political messaging, using routine diplomatic engagements to showcase Modi as a top global leader, has been a feature of this dispensation. It was the focus during the G20 summit in Bali, with Modi's Twitter timeline full of his pictures with global leaders. Other than a leaders' declaration which agreed to disagree on Ukraine, the summit achieved nothing of note—a far cry from the 2008 global financial crisis, when the grouping came to the fore for taking major decisions jointly. Issues and outcomes of foreign policy are rarely on Modi's agenda, as witnessed by his decision to skip the ASEAN summit and COP27 meeting because he was campaigning for assembly elections in Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat.

During these election campaigns, Amit Shah, the union home minister, and JP Nadda, the BJP's national president, have claimed that Modi stopped the war between Ukraine and Russia, to facilitate the extrication of Indian students. This claim had been officially denied by the spokesperson of the MEA when it was first made by party leaders and journalists in March. It thus comes as no surprise that India assuming the presidency of G20, which is a routine transfer, is being projected as a major achievement for Modi. The G20 has a rotating [presidency](#), based on five sub-groups, and it was India's turn to be the president last year. But the Modi government [requested](#) that it be allowed to defer it by a year, timing the G20 summit it would host just before the election campaign of the 2024 parliamentary elections.

The domestic narrative of the G20 presidency is already being built with an eye on the general elections—routine meetings with foreign officials in the run up to the summit are going to be held all over the country. As LK Advani once said, Modi is a good “events manager”. The aim of the event management of the G20 presidency is to project him as a highly respected global figure, at ease with other world leaders, who are all his personal friends. With the Indian economy in doldrums, unemployment at alarming levels, and little domestic achievements of note, a boastful foreign policy claim remains the safest bet to fuel the pride of Modi's supporters and voters.

As seen from the Bali summit, a showpiece G20 summit in Delhi is not going to be easy. Apart from the challenges of a world in turmoil—from Russian President Vladimir Putin's relations with the West to Chinese designs over Taiwan—there are three distinct fault lines that must be bridged for the grouping to be successful. The first is between geopolitics and geo-economics. The G20, which started as an economic grouping, is now dealing with economic situations created by geopolitics, where unanimity is nigh impossible. The second fault line is specific for India under Modi that wants to be seen simultaneously as a leader of the global south and a part of the high table of developed countries.

However, it is the third fault line, between domestic perception and external reality that is the most dangerous. The gap there forces the Modi government to try and cover up the Ladakh border crisis with China, even as India loses control over militarily important territory. The threat posed by China to parts of Arunachal Pradesh worries military planners but is unnoticed by the political leadership. In a survey of 7,000 Indians by the Stimson Center, 72.4 percent respondents believed that India would, probably or definitely, defeat China in the event of a war. In the same survey, nearly 90 percent of the respondents said that India would, probably or definitely, defeat Pakistan in case of a war.

It is this domestic bluster which brought India to the brink of launching missile strikes on a nuclear-armed Pakistan in March 2019, after the Balakot episode; Pakistan threatened to launch missiles in retaliation. And earlier this year, a BrahMos missile landed in Pakistan, after an accidental firing, according to the official statement. An escalation was fortuitously prevented by surprising maturity from Pakistan's military leadership. Even as Chinese troops sit inside

Ladakh, the Modi government refuses to engage with Pakistan to negate a two-front collusive threat from China and Pakistan. Rational strategic choices have been sacrificed on the altar of domestic bravado.

This chasm has led to India losing goodwill in the smaller countries of the neighbourhood, be it Nepal, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh, even as China gains ground in the region. Despite Indian pressure, Colombo permitted a Chinese spy ship to dock at its port. Disillusioned by the lethargic Indian approach, the Nepalese government continues to look towards China for infrastructure and support. By bringing in the Agnipath scheme for recruiting Gorkha soldiers from Nepal, India lost one of its staunchest supporters. The friendly Sheikh Hasina government in Dhaka could not prevent riots when Modi visited the country, an ignominy no other Indian prime minister has faced in Bangladesh.

It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see. That old mantra sits fine with today's India. The G20 summit in New Delhi as a simulacrum of a global *rajasuya yagna*—consecration of a king—for Modi will only widen that fault line between domestic perception and external reality. Beware of the dangers that lie ahead.