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Beyond the optics
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Beyond the optics

To seize multilateral moment, India must invest in corps of negotiators to make its presence felt at global meets

SHYAM SARAN

THE YEAR 2023 is truly India's multilateral moment. India is host to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit scheduled for July 3-4, 2023. It is also host to the subsequent G20 summit to be held on September 9-10. No host country of previous SCO and G-20 summits has convened as many meetings as India has. These have often been accompanied by colourful side events. The locations have covered major cities of India, both ancient and modern. The summits themselves promise to be major, even spectacular events, showcasing India's rich cultural heritage and its contemporary achievements. One positive fallout of this effort has been the urgent improvement of our urban spaces. Another has been the increase in public awareness of India's external relations, not always a major concern among its people. That this is related to creating a larger-than-life image of the ruling dispensation and its leadership in the run up to the 2024 general elections is undeniable. But whatever be the motivation, it cannot be denied that India playing host to the SCO and G-20 summits this year has boosted its regional and international profile, expanded its diplomatic space, and created opportunities to advance its interests in a congested and contested geopolitical space.

But there are risks. An inordinate focus on the optics and preoccupation with event management may well impinge on India's capacity to manage both substance and spectacle. The latter must be harnessed in service of the former and not the other way round. One has the impression that the limited qualified human resources available to the state are too thinly spread over round after round of meetings. This may put the country at a disadvantage when it comes to safeguarding its vital interests, much less leveraging emerging opportunities for substantive gain. One knows from experiences with multilateralism that much of the intense bargaining on issues takes place in closed chambers or in the corridors or even in coffee lounges. Developing countries are always at a disadvantage because they are unable to field large delegations with knowledgeable and experienced negotiators. Without sounding parochial I would say that Indian negotiators have usually made up in quality what they lacked in numbers. But our effort to mount an impressive international event, hosting important leaders from across the world, should not take away valuable human resources from the real drama of upholding India's interests in negotiating forums away from public glare. What often seems to happen is that while India — other countries as well — sign up to declarations of intent to cooperate on various issues, these are forgotten until another cycle of meetings begin. There are many examples of contents of bilateral and multilateral declarations being regurgitated meeting after meeting with little to show in terms of follow-up. In other cases, declarations are followed up with practical negotiations, usually in working groups, to translate broader agreements into specific rules and policy measures. These do not carry the glamour and visibility of summits but are critical for ensuring that the emerging rules of the game have our well-considered inputs. This follow-up phase is where sometimes we are either missing or engaged with episodically.

India's external engagement has expanded and sometimes expanded at a blistering pace. We need a much larger corps of international negotiators with knowledge and expertise in multiple domains. Today, norm setting is taking place not just in trade and investment and climate change, but in newer areas such as cyber security, the security of space-based assets, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing. These are critical to India's future, and we should endeavour to be rule makers rather than rule takers.

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While multilateralism has value, the convening of meetings under the aegis of the SCO and G20 provide opportunities for bilateral engagement even with partners with whom relations may be adversarial or even hostile. The recent meetings of the SCO Defence Ministers and of Foreign Ministers enabled the Indian side to have a high-level dialogue with China, explore the possibilities of resolving the residual military confrontation in eastern Ladakh and gauge Chinese perspectives on a range of regional and international issues. Diplomacy is all about engagement, about conversations and navigating the areas of grey where compromise may be possible. It was disappointing that the visit of the Pakistani Foreign Minister, Bilawal Bhutto, the very first in 11 years, did not result in a much-needed bilateral dialogue between the two neighbours. As has happened so many times in the past, the prospect of a thaw in relations was undermined by a cross-border terrorist incident in Rajouri, with five Indian jawans losing their precious lives. This forestalled any possible dialogue between the two foreign ministers, given India's strong and consistent policy on confronting terrorism and its state sponsors. There are obviously powerful forces in Pakistan who are determined to scuttle any prospect of peace between the two countries. Pakistan is descending into economic chaos and political turbulence. Its erstwhile patron, the US and current "iron brother" China, seem no longer inclined to bail the country out as they were wont to do in the past. India could advance its interests and its security by reaching out to constituencies in Pakistan who see improvement of relations with India as an indispensable component of dealing with its crisis.

As host to both the G20 and the SCO and equally as a member of the Quad in the Indo-Pacific, India can pursue a foreign policy agenda consistent with its interests in each of these forums. The diplomatic effort in one provides leverage in the other, provided there is policy coherence and consistency and a clear awareness of our key priorities. One should avoid spreading ourselves too thin over a catch-all agenda just as one should resist the temptation to substitute substance with spectacle.

The writer is a former Foreign Secretary and Honorary Fellow at Centre for Policy Research, Delhi