

# Delhi's moment as voice of Global South

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The G20 summit has concluded with host India and its political leadership basking in the sweet glow of success, and domestic and international adulation. There was a massive public relations build-up to the summit, celebrating the occasion as an affirmation of India's emergence as one of the most consequential nations of the world and its leader, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi as an international statesman. There were doubts whether the outcomes would live up to the celebratory ambience.

There was the knotty issue of the Ukraine War, the unexpected absence of China's top leader Xi Jinping from the summit and, of course, the legacy of complex issues from earlier summits, including the indebtedness of poorer developing countries, particularly from Africa, the tepid response to the climate crisis even as it threatens planetary survival, and the unwillingness to engage in international cooperation and regulation of powerful technologies such as cyber

and Artificial Intelligence, which can greatly enhance human welfare but could, if unrestrained, become instruments of unmitigated doom.

On all these counts, the New Delhi summit proved to be more substantive and forward looking than its predecessors, and that too, in a fractured geopolitical setting, with deepening tensions among the major G20 countries. Importantly, India declared early on its intention to represent the concerns and aspirations of the Global South and the proposal to invite the African Union (AU) was part of this effort. India succeeded in mobilising a consensus to admit the AU into the G20 at the very first of the three sessions. This is an important achievement and will enhance India's credentials as a friend and well-wisher of Africa. The Global South is still a largely amorphous entity, lacking a clear identity but will begin to crystallise slowly. India, not China, will have the first-mover advantage in emerging as its leading voice.

How India would manage the deeply polarising issue of Ukraine was the chief preoccupation at the summit. The lack of a consensus language on this divisive issue would mean that the New Delhi Declaration would end up with a chair summary instead of a consensus declaration. There would be comparisons with the previous Bali summit in 2022, when host Indonesia managed to secure a consensus docu-

ment. A consensus formulation on Ukraine did emerge and all credit must go to India's extremely able negotiating team. But without detracting from India's consensus-building abilities, it is clear that a decision was taken by the United States (US) and other G7 countries to accept considerably weaker language on the Ukraine War than at Bali as the price to be paid for not spoiling India's coming out party.

Unlike at Bali, there was no direct condemnation of Russia for its aggression against Ukraine and its occupation of that country's sovereign territory. Ukraine was quick to criticise this with justifiable vehemence.

Xi Jinping's absence from the summit did not dim India's shining moment. While Premier Li Qiang attended the summit, his presence and that of his country barely registered. Had Xi participated, some of the attention from India's presidency would have been deflected to his anticipated bilateral meeting with US President Joe Biden.

There might have been a bilateral with PM Modi, and against the background of recent tensions on the India-China border, this, too, would have kept the spotlight on him irrespective of the outcome. Instead, the spotlight stayed throughout on Modi. It is unusual for China to be away from the centre of international attention. Xi's absence should be counted as a diplomatic misstep by Beijing,



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India declared its intention to represent concerns of the Global South **PTI**

There were other important developments at or around the summit that were noteworthy. On the eve of the summit, there was a bilateral meeting between Biden and Modi and a joint statement was issued. This is unusual since Modi had undertaken a State visit to Washington in June this year and a lengthy and substantive joint statement was already issued at that time. Much of that earlier joint statement found reflection in the latest one, but on a couple of important items, such as the GE-jet engine technology transfer deal and the acquisition of advanced drones, there was swift progress.

Both sides appear eager to portray their growing partnership in defence and high technology. The US has clearly taken a bet on India and is eager to demonstrate this. Despite its multi-alignment professions, India is more aligned with the US today than it ever was with the erstwhile Soviet Union during their extended strategic partnership. This is an important and consequential shift in the evolving Asian and world geopolitics.

Another important initiative is the proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor announced on the

sidelines of the summit. This will involve sea links between India and West Asian ports, from which rail links are planned to the Mediterranean ports such as Haifa (Israel) and Piraeus (Greece).

Key partners are the US, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the European Union and several European countries. This is potentially a significant project rivalling China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that has run into difficulties.

The declaration and other documents reflect several ambitious commitments on climate finance, indebtedness, multilateral development bank reforms and tackling financial risks. The wish list is ambitious but the developed world itself is facing severe economic headwinds. The times are not propitious for delivery on these commitments. Nevertheless, India has done well to raise the profile of these challenges and it will now be the turn of Brazil to raise the torch higher. It will be a difficult act to follow.

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