

Big ambition meets geopolitics

Are Southern voices and the SDGs the way to success for In- dia's G20 presidency?

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Bonn, 21 August 2023. “One Earth – One Family – One Future” is the theme of India’s G20 presidency in 2023. The slogan underlines the need for a cooperative approach to address the challenges of the ongoing “global polycrisis”. In its presidency, India aims to achieve “actionable consensus” in a heterogeneous group of high-income and emerging economies on priorities such as green development and climate finance, women-led development, Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE), digital transformations, and reform of multilateral institutions. This agenda is overshadowed by divides within the G20 amidst geopolitical tensions following Russia’s war in Ukraine, difficult US-China relations, and the membership of the geopolitical competitors in the group.

In an attempt to circumvent the tensions, also expressed in the contrast between BRICS and the G7, the G20 presidency has focused on the relationship



between the global “North” and “South”. Advocating for a reform of the international system, India highlights the underrepresentation of countries in the Global South in international organisations. Beyond the request for a “seat at the table”, decision-making power in these organisations is crucial. Connected to this push for change, India sees an opportunity in chairing the G20 to transform the group into an institution in which the voices of the Global South can be properly heard. This is reflected in strong advocacy for the African Union's (AU) permanent membership in the G20 together with a general plea for inclusiveness of perspectives beyond the G20.

The “IIBSA” sequence of G20 Presidencies – Indonesia (2022), India (2023), Brazil (2024), and South Africa (2025) – provides a unique opportunity to make Southern perspectives and their development concerns a priority in four consecutive years. While far from constituting a “monolithic block”, the countries share challenges and economic and political roles in their respective regions, with the potential to establish common ground on global problems and priorities. India has actively involved representatives from Indonesia, Brazil and South Africa in the processes of India's G20 Presidency, supported by the established troika system which connects the previous and the future presidencies with the current one. Going beyond the G20, the “Voice of the Global South Summit” reportedly consulted 125 countries, particularly countries from the Global South, on their development priorities and expectations from G20 under India's presidency.

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Building on this understanding of interests and conflict lines, India aims at framing the G20 as a group for development and growth, claiming that peace and security issues were outside of its mandate. It remains to be seen whether the attempt of moving the “geopolitical elephant” out of the room will support the success of India's Presidency including a joint Communiqué at the G20 leaders' summit and substantial progress on the G20 priorities. To secure

that success, India sees a solution in re-orienting its G20 narrative towards the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as an existing common point of reference and framework for cooperation. This is reflected in the prominent position of issues like energy transition or woman-led development.

Beyond the connection to the SDGs, the presidency is characterised by efforts to “narrate the story of India”; by showcasing Indian concepts, such as “LiFE” or digital public infrastructure (DPI), and by organising the processes of the G20 and its many engagement groups across the entire country. The idea to “make India ready for the world, and the world ready for India” is combined with strong hopes for an extended role of the G20 in world affairs, and high ambitions for domestic and international visibility of Indian leadership therein. As the presidency is approaching the final phase to prepare for the leaders' summit, super-charging the rotating chairpersonship this way translates into increased pressure to live up to its own high ambitions for India's global role.

Combining both domestic and international spotlight on India's presidency and the pressure to deliver, the ‘southernised’ G20 priorities following from the IIBSA group, and the reference to the 2030 agenda as an existing, “lowest” common denominator is an opportunity for sustainable development and international unity. The Indian presidency will not substantially advance on all SDGs as the current geopolitical situation is difficult to navigate – this would be true for any G20 presidency. Still, India's orientation towards the SDGs is a chance to strengthen joint normative orientations in times when backsliding tendencies become visible, and in view of the emerging discussions about the post-2030 framework. It can also help maintain the G20 as a common platform, and counteract a dangerous fragmentation of the international system with a possibly enlarged, China-dominated BRICS and the G7 as separate sides. Finally, should the G20 manage to initiate reform by including the AU, it could also fuel hopes that the dysfunctionality of the multilateral system, suffering from an inadequate representation of the Global South, can be addressed in other institutions as well.