

COMMENTARIES | OCT 06 2022

India leads: Two to Tango with in 2023

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India is assuming the leadership of SCO and G20. While the two groupings have divergent goals, Delhi will need to ensure that the concerns of developing nations are not ignored. An assertive foreign policy that seeks to shape and steer conversations will help

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It is a busy season on Raisina Hill as India assumes stewardship of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and takes charge of the Group of Twenty (G20) in December. Leading these two plurilateral groups will be complex and challenging. The groupings have divergent goals, purposes, and memberships even as they grapple with Covid-19's disruptive impact on the global economy and conflicts during and after the pandemic. India will need to ensure that the concerns of developing countries are not relegated to the margins by the European conflict.

At the heart of the endeavour lies the challenge of dialogue and conversations with all, even as a subset of like-minded countries invest in frameworks that respond to decadal objectives. "Talk to all and work more with some" will have to be India's mantra for 2023 as it has a rare opportunity to make two distinct agendas align with its own.

At SCO, China's dominant position is inescapable, and it overwhelms the preferences and perspectives of others. Here, India and Russia may share a common imperative to balance China and make SCO focus on a broader policy and development agenda. As Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi pointed out during the SCO summit last month, this is not the time for war. Moving away from conflict to attend to the frailties of the economy may be beneficial for SCO and less contentious too. Many in the group are uncomfortable with the Russia-Ukraine conflict and would rather see this group focus on the development and human challenges the region is saddled with. India will have to reset the playing board skillfully. If China is playing "go", and Russia is playing "roulette", New Delhi will need to play smart chess.

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However, the nature of SCO and its purpose will ensure that politics takes centre-stage. In Samarkand, the Indian PM showed the way. Niceties need to be dropped, and hard questions must be posed, including on sovereignty, the expansionist tendencies of some countries, including China, and terrorism emanating from Pakistan.

Simultaneously, India must inject its growth imperative around technology, sustainability and green transitions into discussions and state its concerns over cyber security, online malfeasance, and white elephant infrastructure projects, among others. At SCO, India would do well to initiate debates on these issues, irrespective of the outcomes, and create space for discussions that may not have Beijing's blessings.

Diplomacy sometimes misconstrues the role of the host country to imply benign or agnostic participation. India, however, must maintain its determination to have an assertive foreign policy that seeks to shape and steer conversations towards the outcomes it desires.

All of this cannot be starkly divergent from India's G20 agenda. There needs to be a bridge linking what we aim to achieve through SCO and G20, although the methods and formulations used in each forum may differ. G20 requires a different type and style of hosting. India can leverage its experience to communicate with all actors involved and curate conversations that cater to diverse constituencies. "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas and Sabka Prayas" (inclusive development for all, everyone's trust and efforts) is an all-encompassing Indian approach that fits G20.

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Here, India will need to ensure that the clouds of war that loom over Europe do not pour down on its presidency. India must make it clear to its western partners that it will view any attempt

to reduce the impact of its G20 presidency seriously. At the same time, New Delhi must make clear to Moscow that steps towards de-escalation are essential from its end.

External factors will inevitably distract the grouping from anything that is discussed within it. The agenda that is engaged with and outcomes delivered at G20 may be bold (unlikely) or sub-optimal (more probable). However, thanks to G20's structure, global action will always be evolutionary. India's efforts must draw from Indonesia and deliver to Brazil and then South Africa.

PM Modi's reiteration of the importance of "democracy, diplomacy, and dialogue" at the SCO Summit is a message that the G20 leaders should also remember as they prepare to engage at the upcoming G20 Summit in Indonesia and beyond. G20's ability to navigate through economic and social crises should not become hostage to regional or bilateral politics.

India must make a clear and robust case to address larger goals in the spirit of cooperation. It must focus precisely on what it wants to achieve from each working group at G20 and aim to create a legacy and a future-oriented architecture, which will lend continuity to what it incubates.

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