

THE G-20 CAN BE THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL ALTERNATIVE

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At the handover ceremony during the G20 Summit in Bali, in November | Photo Credit: AFP

As India begins its presidency of the G-20 (Group of Twenty), there is a certain reluctance on its part to take the bull by the horns and try to end the Russian invasion of Ukraine. India has gone out of its way to say that Ukraine will not be the centrepiece of the G-20 this year. This position is because of the fear of failure, especially because of the position India has taken not to condemn Russia; it is not because the Russian invasion is not the most urgent issue for the world to resolve. But after the G-20 summit in Bali, Indonesia, in November, there is greater understanding of the Indian position — as articulated by U.S. President Joe Biden himself. Considering that the Bali declaration was virtually drafted by India, New Delhi has been recognised as a potential honest broker who may be able to end the devastating war.

The alphabetical rotation of the G-20 presidency has brought India to the right place at the right time, especially when the world is looking for an alternative to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which has been paralysed by the veto. Most recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the UNSC's credibility hit rock bottom. Any reform of the UNSC, particularly the expansion of its permanent membership, will be strongly resisted by the permanent members and a large majority of the General Assembly because it does not benefit anyone except those who aspire to be permanent members.

Every candidate has a strong opponent waiting to pounce the moment there is any serious proposal to make the candidate country a permanent member. Among the proposals made in the last three decades, there is none that can command the votes of the five permanent members as well as two-thirds of the members of the General Assembly. Although the G-20, which consists of 19 countries and the European Union (EU), was set up by the G-7 countries in 1999, and upgraded to the level of Heads of State/Government in 2008 to address "major issues related to the global economy, such as international financial stability, climate change mitigation and sustainable development", its composition is such that it looks like it is an expanded Security Council. It is representative of all the significant countries of the 21st century and is balanced between developed and developing countries. The present permanent members and

declared aspirants have been included while Africa and Latin America have also been represented. The EU represents a very important segment of the global power structure. A consensus decision of G-20 should be universally acceptable.

A gradual transformation of the G-20 from an economic body to a political body can be initiated on the basis of the Bali Declaration, which constitutes the consensus in the group on the Russia-Ukraine war. If the G-20 emerges as peacemaker in Europe, it will attain legitimacy as a group to promote international peace and security; it can gradually become an alternative to the UNSC.

The most important difference will be that no one can prevent its meetings by use of the veto. Care should be taken not to isolate anyone and promote a solution, which is acceptable. Russia will have to reason out its behaviour rather than threaten the use of the veto to intimidate the international community. The grave danger of a permanent member waging a war and vetoing every resolution against it is a reality that the UN should address.

The first step for India to take is to highlight the Bali Declaration and to present a road map during the preparatory process for the G-20 and persuade the sherpas to take it on its agenda. The response cannot be negative except by Russia as it has to negotiate as an equal with the other members of the G-20. If Russia is looking for an escape route, even Russia will accept India's role as an honest broker in the process. This will enhance India's capacity to deal with the crisis in a formal way within the G-20. It will accomplish India's ultimate goal of securing the reform of the UNSC. Once the basic work is done, the UNSC can formalise the decision and implement it for international peace and security.

Being an honest broker in international peace and security is a role that is not new to India. Although it has taken strong positions on decolonisation and rights of the developing countries to play a role as a leader of the non-aligned world, it kept the conversation going among the protagonists and promoted a balanced outcome. India was the author of several landmark resolutions of the UNSC on the question of Palestine and administered the healing touch whenever confrontation developed in multilateral fora. India was a part of efforts made to prevent the expulsion of Egypt from the Non-Aligned Movement at the Havana summit when the Arabs turned against Egypt.

Flexibility in negotiations even while being principled in its national position gave India a role in many situations. As the President of the G-20, the fund of goodwill that India has earned in the UN will be an asset at this critical moment.

The legitimisation of the G-20 as a global arbiter in international affairs will create a multilateral instrument where all members are equal. Though it may take a very long time for it to replace the UNSC, a beginning will have been made in making the UN an effective instrument in stopping wars and building cooperation. Such an opportunity comes, but rarely in history. It will be worth the effort even if it only plants the seeds for the beginning of a new UNSC.

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