

A CHAOTIC WORLD, THE PERILS OF MULTILATERALISM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

'The time is not opportune for collective bargaining when countries are holding their cards close to their chest and scheming for positions of advantage' | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

Today at a Quad summit, tomorrow at a BRICS summit and the day after at a G-7 summit is a statesman's dream come true. The exchange of ideas with world leaders, seeking common ground on burning issues and recalibrating our policy accordingly are at the heart of diplomacy. But at a time when the world is trying to grapple with the impact of unprecedented problems which arose in the first two decades of the 21st century, the various intergovernmental organisations and groupings, which are undergoing fundamental changes, may not be fertile places for building peace. The time is not opportune for collective bargaining when countries are holding their cards close to their chest and scheming for positions of advantage. The least common denominators are so shallow that joint statements read like a string of diverse statements without any political glue. Bilateral engagements may be much more productive at this point in history.

The 14th virtual BRICS summit hosted by China (June 23-24) was a clear attempt by China to hijack the grouping, going by a blueprint it has prepared for the new world order. Curiously, BRICS was not meant to be a political grouping when the acronym, BRIC, was coined by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill in 2001 to categorise Brazil, Russia, India and China, which were expected to collectively dominate global growth by 2050. Seeing the possibility of developing a non-western global economic system, China welcomed the idea of BRICS as the nucleus of a new economic grouping and invested energy and resources in building it. The others, joined later by South Africa, were also attracted by the idea of creating a catalyst for an alternative to the Bretton Woods Institutions.

The composition of the group had its own contradictions right from the beginning. Two permanent members of the Security Council together with three aspirants to permanent membership appeared like two carnivores and three herbivores invited to the same meal with little possibility for a change in menu. But the grouping focused on possibilities of cooperation among them by developing institutions such as the New Development Bank, the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement and cooperation in certain sectors. The fundamental question of support for the three countries to secure permanent membership was fossilised on China's position that the role of the developing countries should be enhanced, implying that there shall be no expansion of the permanent membership of the Security Council. Russia's support for India also got diluted as a result. Even at the best of times, the BRICS partnership did not result in support for its three partners.

The situation in BRICS had undergone a sea change by the time the BRICS summit was held virtually under the presidency of China towards the end of June. The entire fragile framework of limited cooperation was shattered with the bloodshed at Galwan, when China unilaterally sought to alter the situation on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and, even worse, halted the process of disengagement from certain sectors. The treaties, agreements and agreed procedures are required to be rewritten to form the basis of future cooperation. If Pakistan's raising bilateral issues and the Kashmir issue on every occasion merited a boycott of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India, attending a BRICS meeting under the

chairmanship of China was a major concession. The only justification for India's attendance was that it did not want to miss a conclave that could determine the dynamics of the future course in the Indo-Pacific. But both China and Russia do not favour even the change of nomenclature of the region from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific.

The joint statement of BRICS was of 7,500 words, none of which seemed to indicate the beginning of a new relationship within BRICS. The change of Russia was even more dramatically different since February 2022. Neither the Soviet Union nor Russia had supported India against China since 1962, because of the "brother and the friend" syndrome. Russia showed some inclination to facilitate a discussion between India and China, but after February 2022, Russia is legally obliged to take the Chinese side in any future showdown between India and China. If Russia had agreed to end the war and begin negotiations with Ukraine and China had disengaged from areas occupied in 2020, it would have marked a change for the better. With Russia continuing its war in Ukraine and China continuing to occupy Indian territory in Ladakh, there was little credibility in many of the words they used in the Joint Communiqué. Words such as responsive, effective, transparent, democratic, objective, action oriented and credible sound hollow as they come from Russia and China, which have violated every one of them.

The way China brought in 13 like-minded countries through the back door for a high-level dialogue on global development smacked of unfair means to expand the group with their friends. China pushed for expansion at the summit itself even at a time when BRICS had no credible global agenda. China showed no enthusiasm to bring India into the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) even after India met the criteria of a liberalised economy. Repeating sentences from old BRICS documents as though there was no change in the world has not contributed to the solidarity of BRICS. China seems to think that BRICS would be an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was designed to dominate the world by getting small and weak countries in a debt trap. The Sri Lankan experience has exposed the Chinese strategy; it has been India, not China, which has come to the rescue of Sri Lanka.

India's presence at G7 meetings are not rare and Germany invited the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, to attend the G7 summit in Bavaria (June 26-28) even when there were rumours that in the clamour about democracy and religious freedom and India's neutrality in the Ukraine war, India might be excluded. The G7 made its own statement on the Ukraine war on expected lines and India was only involved in other issues such as environment, energy, climate, food security, health, gender equality and democracy. But the G7 was so preoccupied with its increasing involvement in the war through the supply of money, sophisticated weapons, etc., that other issues were cursorily treated. The imposition of sanctions has been difficult without the cooperation of all countries; the European nations were pressured to impose sanctions against Russia even if it was not in their own interest. Since it was a war summit, it did not produce any results on other major issues. Curtailing energy supplies from Russia would hurt Germany, France, Japan and others, but they could not get any exemption.

Mr. Modi's presence at the G7 summit enabled him to pursue several vital projects with G7 countries, but they will have to be pursued away from the theatre of war — an issue that has fully occupied the G7 countries. India's gain has been the opportunity it got to interact with world leaders, though it was tinged with the disappointment that India, as a Quad member, did not condemn Russia's action in Ukraine.

The limited gains of India at the BRICS and G7 summits have been in contrast with the enthusiastic welcome Mr. Modi received in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which the Prime Minister visited for a few hours. Apart from paying his respects to the late President of the UAE, Mr. Modi must have smoothed the ruffled feathers of the UAE and other West Asian countries,

which were hurt by the totally objectionable remarks made by two former spokespersons of the ruling party. The few hours of bilateral meetings in the UAE were more productive for Mr. Modi than the days he spent at the two summits.

Multilateral negotiations will be increasingly difficult in the present chaotic global situation. It is only by working bilaterally with potential allies that India can attain the status of a pole in the new world with steadfast friends and followers.

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