

G20: INDIA'S PLATFORM FOR GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

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A man walks past a model of the G20 logo outside the Finance Ministry in New Delhi on March 1, 2023. | Photo Credit: Reuters

The [G20](#) was born out of the Asian financial crisis 25 years ago. It was upgraded to convene heads of government after a global financial and economic crisis a decade later. Today, however, the organisation that styles itself as the 'premier forum of international economic cooperation' appears to be descending into deadlock with the Foreign Ministers of Japan (currently chairing the G7) and South Korea declining to attend the Delhi meet and [Russia, China and the EU publicly sticking to their differing positions](#) on the [war in Ukraine](#).

As leader of the G20 this year, India could watch this happen — as appears to have been the case with the Finance Ministers' gathering at Bengaluru — or strengthen the organisation. To do the latter, however, India would have to take a stance on Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. There can be no hiding behind Russia and China's argument that war and politics are not the preserve of the G20. The war in Ukraine is affecting the global economy, climate change, nuclear stability and the Charter principles of the United Nations that underpin the rule of law in international relations. The first two are central to India's agenda as chair this year; without the other two, the G20 cannot function.

At the G20 Finance Ministers' meet last week, when for the first time ever, the [group could not agree on an outcome document](#), India found itself in the uneasy situation of having to explain whether it supported its own Chair's summary, which noted that the majority of states condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and rejected the use or the threat of use of nuclear weapons.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman would not confirm whether India was part of this majority. The question of India's position was a valid one: two days earlier, New Delhi had abstained on a vote at the UN General Assembly calling for 'comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine', which passed with a majority of 141 states voting for it. India, and 31 others, including China and Pakistan, abstained on a call for Russia to withdraw its forces from Ukraine and cease hostilities.

There is a time for leaving the door open for dialogue with both sides of a conflict, and there is a time for calling out fence-sitting as a wasted opportunity. That energy was expended in Bengaluru to overcome India's reservations about calling Mr. Putin's invasion of Ukraine a war at all (India wanted the conflict to be referred to as a crisis) means that time was taken away

from discussions on debt restructuring and cryptocurrency regulation, topics India has indicated it would like the grouping to focus on. Japan's Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki observed that Russia's invasion had upended the 'foundations of the global order', making it 'difficult for the G20 to engage in constructive discussion.'

Condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not about supporting the United States or encouraging NATO expansion: it is about upholding the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity enshrined in the UN Charter, which Russian military action in Ukraine, with the avowed intention of regime change, has undermined. These are also the same principles that India has relied on for international support in the four wars that it has fought since independence.

The concern is global: this is not just a European problem. The war has affected oil and gas prices, exacerbated inflation and disrupted global food supplies and prices, adding to the precarity of life for millions in parts of Africa and Asia. Further, it has escalated nuclear risks, not just in the form of threats of the use of nuclear weapons, but threats to Ukraine's nuclear power plants, all five of which have come under direct shelling this past year.

Rafael Grossi, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), reported that 'every single one' of the Agency's 'pillars' of nuclear safety and security 'has been compromised.'

The war in Ukraine could drag on, eventually petering out into a frozen conflict. The longer it continues, the weaker Russia — sanctioned and isolated by most developed economies — will become, and consequently, the more dependent it will be on China for markets, political cover and perhaps even weapons. The irony of India not taking sides means that it is helping Russia become a client state of China. At the same time, India's refusal to recognise Russian aggression for what it is means that even within the G20, the group that it leads this year, decisive action on how to rebuff Russian aggression as a precursor to regaining some global stability is moving into smaller coalitions of the willing within this larger group.

After India denied Ukraine's Finance Minister Serhiy Marchenko an invitation to address the gathering in Bengaluru, Japan, as chair of the G7, invited him to a meeting on the sidelines at which the G7 renewed their financial commitments to Ukraine and discussed further sanctions on Russia. India has, thus, found itself in the odd position of hosting a group but staying away from the main party where all the action is taking place.

Ironically, India reportedly played a vital role last year in helping the Bali summit reach consensus, with the final document echoing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remark to President Putin that "now is not the time for war." It would be a tragedy if India saved the Bali summit but lost the New Delhi one because it was unable to take a position on upholding the principles of another international organisation.

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