

INDIA'S MOMENT UNDER THE DIPLOMATIC SUN MUST BE USED

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'In geopolitics, national glory is not necessarily an enduring outcome' | Photo Credit: AP

New Delhi is on a geopolitical high. It hosted the G-20 Foreign Ministers meeting (March 1-2, 2023), the G-20 Finance Ministers meeting (February 22-25) and the Quad Foreign Ministers meeting (March 3), and national capital has been teeming with global leaders and thinkers attending the Ministry of External Affairs-supported Raisina dialogue (March 2-4). A few weeks ago, India also organised the 'Voice of Global South Summit' (January 12-13).

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For a country that has for far too long inhabited the sidelines of world politics, criticising and complaining, too powerless to assert itself, and often seen as an irritant by great powers for even having an opinion, India's pivotal position at the G-20, the Quad (the United States, India, Australia and Japan), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Global South today has given it a sudden surge in stature and reputation. And yet, one year is too short in geopolitics, and geopolitics is not always a function of happy coincidences.

For New Delhi, this is its moment under the sun, the near realisation of a long-awaited pivotal power moment. From the pre-Independence days, through the 75 years of its independent existence, Indian leaders, from Jawaharlal Nehru to A.B. Vajpayee to Narendra Modi have often spoken of India's role in the world — that its culture, history, demography and economic strength provide the country with a strong foundation for such a role. For most part of its history though, New Delhi was too weak to assert itself, or too unimportant, but the solid foundations laid through the decades are starting to make a difference. Contemporary India's pivotal position in world politics is thanks to a fortunate confluence of deliberate and unforeseen factors which appear to be working in New Delhi's favour. A far stronger economic and military power, courted by great powers, New Delhi has cleverly used the failure of the post-war world order today to its advantage. The worry about an aggressively rising China has further prompted global leaders to look for geopolitical alternatives in the Indo-Pacific region.

Contemporary Indian foreign policy is a textbook example of treading the fault-lines of world politics and, as External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar writes in his book, *The India Way*, "advancing national interests by identifying and exploiting opportunities created by global contradictions". To use pedestrian language, New Delhi has become adept at playing both sides

(though not without its costs). Consider this. India is the chair of both the United States/West-led G-20, and the China-centered SCO at the same time. It is seeking to be at the global high table while staking a serious claim to be the leader of the Global South. On the Ukraine war, New Delhi has not alienated, directly or indirectly, any of the parties involved in the war in a big way. While the looming threat of China has brought it closer to the U.S. and the West than ever before in its history, New Delhi is also an active member of multilateral forums which has China in it — BRICS and the SCO. Contemporary India speaks the language of revisionism and status quoism in the same breath, and with ease.

New Delhi's objective is not difficult to understand; it has long wanted a seat at the global high table. But it has realised that it has little chance of getting one currently, particularly with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) out of reach. It has, therefore, been hinting at the dysfunctionality of the UNSC, and the utility of more inclusive and flexible forums such as the G-20. Mr. Modi's argument at the G-20 Foreign Ministers meeting that "global governance has failed" is to drive home precisely that point. After taking a dig at the current global governance structures, Mr. Modi went on to say, "We are meeting at a time of deep global divisions. We have a responsibility to those not in this room", underscoring the importance of the G-20 and India's role in it. Even though the meeting ended without a joint statement thanks to the Ukraine war, it was a success for at least two reasons: one, it created the environment for the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to have a meeting for the first time since the war began a year ago, and two, when most other forums are unable to bring together the warring parties in one room, the G-20 has been able to do it.

So, in New Delhi's pursuit of actively seeking a seat at a restructured global high table, the G-20 has its utility as does the Global South. New Delhi's heart may or may not be with the Global South, but it has understood the instrumental utility of the Global South argument in its pursuit of power and status. If China can use the Global South argument for its geopolitical ends, India can definitely do so too.

In its pursuit for a seat at the high table, New Delhi also knows only too well that falling in line with the U.S./the West (on the Ukraine war for instance) reduces India's instrumentality (even for them).

'Fall in line, and you will be forgotten' appears to be the lesson that it has learnt about realpolitik over the past several decades. New Delhi has realised that it is its ability to carefully balance the global fault lines that increases its utility. So those seeking to enlist India's support for bringing more stability and order into the international system might want to consider what New Delhi is really after: a seat at the high table of international politics. Indeed, New Delhi's revisionist language is rooted in its desire to be part of a restructured status quo.

New Delhi's moment in the sun is not without its inherent challenges. For one, the sun will set, and the moment shall pass. Indian chairpersonship of the G-20 and the SCO ends this year, and Beijing will not let New Delhi take over the leadership of the Global South so easily. So, is New Delhi using this crucial year to strengthen strategic partnerships, seek geopolitical concessions, and create structures that enhance India's national security? In geopolitics, national glory is not necessarily an enduring outcome.

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The second important challenge pertains to optics and framing. Is New Delhi making friends during this diplomatic high or is it offending more than befriending? Some of the language that emanates from New Delhi in response to western or the U.S.'s statements/criticisms could be construed as needlessly offensive. While riding high on diplomatic successes, being subtle in

one's assertions has far more utility, notwithstanding the domestic political uses of harsh foreign policy assertions. Indian diplomacy needs to adopt the language of finesse and authority rather than that of aggression. Confident nations need not talk like reactionaries.

Third, balancing opposites has its limits. If you play all sides, you might not end up making strong strategic partnerships that should come to your aid if and when something major goes wrong such as a future conflict with China. While bridging the divide in world politics is a noble task, indecisiveness might not yield lasting partnerships.

Finally, there is always a danger of governments using diplomatic highs such as this towards domestic political ends rather than for geopolitical objectives. So, will New Delhi utilise 2023 to prepare for '2024' or to strengthen the country's place in the comity of nations?

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