

Ukraine turns G20 into 'wrestling' club of bickering 'pugilists'!

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December 1, 2022 when India assumed the G20 Presidency, New Delhi has been the nerve-centre for global diplomatic enclaves representing 85% of the world economy. If one goes by the public relations peacocking - billboards and kiosks at attention-grabbing roundabouts in major cities across India, Prime Minister Modi has been prepping for this high-profile summitry by confabbing with trusted and competent faces in the government and also outside government, for long! For him, the once-in-20-years rotational presidency is a gilded opportunity to not only catapult India's heft in the reshaping global geopolitical order but also to earn tangible plaudits closer to general elections in India! To capture the frontal memory-chip of common Indians, as many as 200 G20 Working Group meetings are slated to be held before they culminate into the titanic event to be attended by the global leaders in early September. Unlike Indonesia, a part of the G20 *troik*, which had '**Recover Together, Recover Stronger**' as the *leitmotif* in 2022, India's zeitgeist for 2023 is '**Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam**' (One Earth, One Family, One Future) - dynamically inclusive message with the mother-planet-in-jeopardy as the cynosure! Predictably, the Opposition parties in India sees red in 'saffron' and also lotus cradling '0' of G20 representing the globe but the logo goes well with the inclusive trope adopted by India!

When India was receiving the baton from Indonesia, it was acutely aware of the bedevilling legacies of red-hot economic and geopolitical issues. Though critics and naysayers may accuse Mr Modi of geopolitical hallucinations to help steamroll differences among major geopolitical powers but the Prime Minister had the necessary gen to placatingly navigate through the ever-widening canyon of differences. And that is how India began beating drumbeats of issues more pertinent to Global South - post-pandemic economic recovery; soaring debt burdens; skyrocketing inflation; climate finance, counter terrorism and climate change. To deal with these economic challenges roiling the global economy, the forum of G20 was created in 1999. And, unlike the UN forums, it has more impressive track record to bring squabbling forces on one page and find a lasting solution **a la**

Asian financial crisis, the economic meltdown, debt-restructuring of low-income economies and the new global taxation order. Notwithstanding the swelling rivers of differences, the G20 forum with no permanent secretariat or officials has consistently been producing satisfactory results. But, as we all know that geopolitics and economics are like Siamese twins and economics has to vacate its chair of rationality and pragmatism whenever geopolitics scales to 'wuthering heights'!

In Cob(Web)-814 in May last year ([G20 - India's Presidency - Keep eyes peeled for new bubbles of geopolitics & geoeconomics!](#)), I had erred on the side of caution and observed that "***the presidency may turn out to be a crown of thorns ...and India will have to play the role of a 'fire brigade' to douse fresh 'ambers' of differences so that this forum is not hollowed out of its raison d'Ãatre***

" Unfortunately, my fear has come out live! The flavours of geopolitics over Ukraine war have robbed the forum of its real nub! Though there were many pivotal agenda items for discussions but bickering over Russian invasion has hollowed out the meat of deliberations at the two critical recent meetings of the Finance Ministers and Foreign Ministers. The US-led big tent like the previous year, wanted to officially pillory the invasion whereas two giant powers of Russia and China were determined to out-hawk the West and wanted to sidestep the Ukraine issue in the official communique. Oh my gourd! A victim of groupthink culture perhaps! There was **nuffin**

umbilically tied to the corrosive economic issues but the two camps well-nigh acted like scalded cats! Against this backdrop, the third camp of emerging economies could not play any creative role and the Chair had no option but to release only the summary details of the meetings. Although the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had a 10-minute **tete-a-tete**

with the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, a career diplomat working beyond the retirement age of civil servants in Russia, for the first time in person but it turned out to be an un-sporty exchange of the unchanged diplomatic moorings. Russia and China accused the West of hijacking the forum and paying no attention to the issues hurting the Global South!

Such an unsavoury scenario was predicted by geopolitical 'cartomancers' after the US President Biden hopped to Kyiv on the occasion of first anniversary of the Ukraine War on February 24. With the White House nosing fresh intelligence about China mulling to smuggle lethal

weapons into Russia, the US security advisors have taken a view to harden the Western response to the on-going war as they sense a palpable danger in the crisis cannonballing into mega military scuffles. With America already in a war-mode (war by other means!) **a la** restrictions on technology exports and regulation of US investments into Chinese companies,

China may soon peel off its skin of ambivalence to openly back Russia. **Plus ca Change!**

Perhaps an existential compulsion originating from the doctrine of neighbourhood! The US has also roped in some allies to stymie exports of chips and other critical technology to China which is trying to score over the West in the AI development sector. The US intelligence agencies have of late turned so paranoid that they see a Trojan Horse even in monstrous China-made cargo cranes commissioned at American ports. They fear that there may be sensors to cull sensitive data of materials used by the US military. In fact, China has also pathologically reacted to the US defence budget by jacking up its own military outlay by over 7%. **Aha!**

A new arms race just accelerating and exacerbating non-military global issues like climate change!

Interestingly, the US has also launched a new charm offensive in Africa and Latin America to gain access to critical minerals mines of Cobalt, lithium, copper and nickel which were grabbed by China when the West was in deep slumber for almost two decades. Some of US allies like Canada have launched a crackdown on Chinese funding of mines. Some of the miners in Canada have raised voice of working capital hardships, recently. All such cut-throat race and overtures of cloistering China from the West-dominated trading and financial systems have evidently drawn the battle-lines. And Mr Xi Jinping has, for the first time, blamed America last Monday at NPC meeting for its policy of 'containment, encirclement and suppression' of China - an unusual departure for a Chinese leader who normally indirectly blame foreign powers for their economic woes or even internal problems. **Lo and behold**

, too many powers are now playing the giddy goat and giving the hairy eyeballs to each other! Eerily scary for the world, indeed! What is scarier is - Although the US politicians are generally divided over everything but for China - a classic example of groupthink syndrome! The hawkish views now horrifyingly prevail over both sides of the aisle! There is none to put one's finger in the sinking dyke! This inevitably means inching closer to potential military clashes if Chinese overtures against Taiwan become more bellicose! China's 'grey zone' actions have multiplied and Taiwan is now at the vanguard of global embankment to save democracy!

Against such a rising silhouette of confrontational stance, leave aside India, no country of whatever diplomatic heft one may have on the global scale, can construct any creative 'arches' to bridge the differences. The relations among the big military powers have lurched into treacherous zones and no amount of efforts by the Chair or other diplomatic butlers can friendzone them at any forum, forget G20! Besides the lengthening shadow of global recession, the world is heading for tearful times ahead! However, New Delhi's efforts cannot be discounted for securing success during its presidency. Its legacies will linger on for gathering the record number of foreign ministers numbering 40 - the highest ever in the history of G20 Summits. Secondly, India managed to elbow through all tents to rope in African Union as new member of the forum. Thirdly, meaningful deliberations were hosted on a raft of economic issues like debt-restructuring, climate finance, greening of economy and regulations for crypto assets. Multiple meetings of officials and Ministers have fructified into consensus for cooperation in areas like energy, culture, corruption and many other issues straddling across the continents. India has been on the job to cajole Russia to open dialogue and diplomatic faucets to find a peace-riding solution to the Ukraine problem. It may be prescient that before the September Summit of heads of governments, India may succeed, may be partially, in brokering truce so that Mr Putin could also attend the meet in person.

The year 2023 is overwhelmingly propitious for India which is going to preside over UN Security Council in December. Then, India is also slated to lead the SCO forum which was launched by the four Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It was set up to curb terrorism in the region and enhance border security. It was later joined by Russia and China. In 2017, India and Pakistan also joined. Iran is expected to be inducted as its new member this year. SCO has expanded its scope of activities to economic and trade relations. Given the neutral position of India, New Delhi will see a huge jump in its trove of diplomatic goodwill and will be better positioned to broker an amicable solution to vinegary issues which are bothering the West today! India just needs to carry on with its diplomatic endeavours which would one day yield constructive results which would be lapped up by the West.

It is a bit too early to pass a judgement on India's legacies during its G20 Presidency

as the wheel of time and also the ship of geopolitics may change their courses in more commendable directions. After all, future is always hooded and cloaked in thick fog! Let's hope that sanity descends on the global leaders and the will of peaceniks prevails over all fractious issues making eardrum-piercing gurgling noise today! Let it be my naive hope until it is dashed! One can shrug off bad times if 'drunk men' stop thinking themselves sober and the world comes together! Ground-breaking efforts at warp speed are already galloping towards breakthroughs! Just giddy-up!