

G-20 diplomacy and a shifting world order

India scripted amazing success at the G-20 meeting in Delhi on September 9 and 10 and, despite the odds, succeeded in producing a consensus Declaration worthy of an event of this magnitude. Securing an agreement on almost a hundred issues on the agenda, apart from that on the Russia-Ukraine war, was no mean achievement. All told, the G-20 outcomes seemed to mirror the hopes and the wishes of the wider global community. India, as the host, could rightfully take a large measure of credit for this result. The New Delhi Declaration does indeed seem to have something for everyone. From condemnation of terrorism to climate issues, from trebling of renewable energy capacity to matters such as lifestyle for sustainable development and reform of multi-lateral development banks, apart from highlighting India's contributions such as digital public infrastructure and Unified Payments Interface, the Declaration seemed to echo the prevailing mood in the G-20 of favouring compromise over conflict and fully endorsing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's dictum of "One Earth, One Family, One Future".

Consensus on the Ukraine conflict became possible with the West agreeing to 'climb down' from its demand not to point fingers at Russia for the Ukraine conflict, and giving up on the insistence to proclaim Russia as guilty. The New Delhi Declaration thus sharply differs from the Bali Declaration of November 2022 where, by a majority vote, the Russian Federation was condemned for its aggression in Ukraine. The difference between two Declarations is that while Bali was accusatory in tone, New Delhi sought a resolution to the conflict. Russia and China have since hailed the New Delhi Declaration in sharp contrast to their criticism of the Bali Declaration.

For India, which is a founder-member of the G-20, formed in 1999 as a grouping of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors (it was upgraded to summit level in 2008), and which hosted the G-20 meeting in 2002 (of Finance Ministers and central bank governors), the world has come full circle. Today, India is amongst the leaders whose word counts. A better outcome could not have been wished for.

China's perception, need for caution

Euphoria about the G-20 outcome under India's presidency, however, needs to be tempered, given the many dark clouds that exist on the horizon. China might have welcomed the Delhi Declaration, but there is inherent foreboding in its affirmation that the G-20 was intended to be a 'forum for economic cooperation' and 'not a platform for resolving geo-political and security issues'. Also, while welcoming the establishment



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of an India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor Plan (announced during the G-20), China has sent an implicit warning that it should 'not become a geo-political tool'. It is evident that China's perception is that the G-20 was being used by the West solely to try and impose its world view. A few other world leaders also do not seem to have given the Delhi G-20 a 'thumbs up', with some observing that hardly any of the geo-strategic and geo-economic issues had been sorted out. The South Korean President, for instance, warned that the world is in a 'period of poly-crisis encompassing geo-political competition, spiralling inflation and continuation of the protracted war with Ukraine'.

India, for its own sake, has to be wary, given the fluid situation across the globe. China remains a hegemon in Asia, notwithstanding China's economy becoming embroiled in an extended stalemate. While many in the West view China's situation of 'debt deflation and demographic decline' as an opportunity, they remain oblivious to the reality of China's known capacity to resort to various means to overcome its problems. India, however, cannot afford to do so.

India remains an obvious target for China and is in its 'cross-hairs'. While the West can possibly live with a situation in which several of its strategies to contain China have failed, India cannot. Two aspects – the West's acknowledgement of India's growing economic strength, and India's membership of the Quad (which is now openly accepted as a key grouping in the anti-China phalanx) – call for abundant caution on India's part, since China is unlikely to take kindly to either.

The return of two blocs

Ineluctably, the character of G-20 has been changing in recent years. Contrast the role of G-20 during the 2008-09 economic crisis, (when leading economies tried to find ways and means to prevent the world from plunging into a prolonged economic crisis) with its role in recent years, where the main focus of the G-20 has been on global political conflicts and less on the nature of the global economic landscape. Many analysts hew to the view that under the rubric of the G-20, a subterranean conflict is being waged today by two opposing blocs to alter the balance of power. The two camps (one led by the West and the other by China-Russia) have already earned the sobriquet of 'enduring rivals', engaged in a battle for global supremacy.

The 'rules-based world order', meanwhile, has become a 'catch-all phrase' of merely one segment. The reality is that the world faces 'emerging world disorder', the return of two antagonistic blocs, and shrinking space for the

non-aligned. The stalemate in the Ukraine conflict and the eclipse of Russia's hope of a quick walkover in Ukraine seem to have encouraged the U.S. to strengthen and expand the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) under its leadership.

A new NATO is set to become even more dependent on the U.S. for military supplies and capabilities, to be able to act as a bulwark against 'Russian expansionism'. It has, in turn, raised the prospect of a U.S.-equipped 'territorial force' emerging in Ukraine. Outside Europe, a number of non-NATO allies are being inveigled to join a U.S.-led alliance to counter 'authoritarianism' (represented by Russia and China) which is proceeding apace. Japan and South Korea have already capitulated to the West's wooing. Australia has become a key partner in the U.S.-led alliance in the Southern Hemisphere.

Russia and China, in turn, are deepening their 'strategic alignment'. Countries such as North Korea are cementing their relations with this bloc. The recent meeting in Moscow between Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has further deepened their relationship. China is exploiting its frontage in the Pacific Ocean to openly challenge U.S. naval power here. Russia and Türkiye have deepened their relationship based on shared interests and the personal friendship between Mr. Putin and the Turkish leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Russia is once again seeking to expand its footprint in Africa, and Russia's recent agreement to supply food grains to African States at subsidised prices, or even for free, is aimed towards this end.

Fading non-alignment

The many new alignments are set to deal a death blow to the concept of non-alignment. It is proving increasingly difficult for countries to remain non-aligned in the truest sense of the word. Even existing formations such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) are tending to find the situation untenable. Given the multiplicity of relationships and the 'lattice work' of security agreements that have emerged, the space for non-alignment has dramatically shrunk.

With the strengthening of rival camps holding divergent visions of the international order, the world confronts a dismal future. It may not be too far wrong to surmise, that notwithstanding all the glitz surrounding the 18th G-20 in New Delhi and the obligatory references to the importance of the Global South among its priorities, countries such as India (despite all the hard work they put in), will still remain notional pieces on the checkerboard of international politics, with hardly any decisive voice in determining the course of world events.

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Children, a key yet missed demographic in AI regulation

India is to host the first-ever global summit on Artificial Intelligence (AI) this October. Additionally, as the Chair of the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI), India will also be hosting the GPAI global summit in December. These events suggest the strategic importance of AI, as it is projected to add \$500 billion to India's economy by 2025, accounting for 10% of the country's target GDP.

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently called for a global framework on the ethical expansion of AI. Given the sheer volume of data that India can generate, it has an opportunity to set a policy example for the Global South. Observers and practitioners will track India's approach to regulation and how it balances AI's developmental potential against its concomitant risks.

One area where India can assume leadership is how regulators address children and adolescents who are a critical (yet less understood) demographic in this context. The nature of digital services means that many cutting-edge AI deployments are not designed specifically for children but are nevertheless accessed by them.

The governance challenge

Regulation will have to align incentives to reduce issues of addiction, mental health, and overall safety. In absence of that, data hungry AI-based digital services can readily deploy opaque algorithms and dark patterns to exploit impressionable young people. Among other things this can lead to tech-based distortions of ideal physical appearance(s) which can trigger body image issues. Other malicious threats emerging from AI include misinformation, radicalisation, cyberbullying, sexual grooming, and doxing.

The next generation of digital migrants must also grapple with the indirect effects of their families' online activities. Enthusiastic 'sharents' regularly post photos and videos about their children online to document their journeys through



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parenthood. While moving into adolescence we must equip young people with tools to manage the unintended consequences. For instance, AI-powered deep fake capabilities can be misused to target young people wherein bad actors create morphed sexually explicit depictions and distribute them online.

Beyond this, India is a melting pot of intersectional identities across gender, caste, tribal identity, religion, and linguistic heritage. Internationally, AI is known to transpose real world biases and inequities into the digital world. Such issues of bias and discrimination can impact children and adolescents who belong to marginalised communities.

AI regulation must improve upon India's approach to children under India's newly minted data protection law. The data protection framework's current approach to children is misaligned with India's digital realities. It transfers an inordinate burden on parents to protect their children's interests and does not facilitate safe platform operations and/or platform design. Confusingly, it inverts the well-known dynamic where a significant percentage of parents rely on the assistance of their children to navigate otherwise inaccessible user interface and user experience (UI/UX) interfaces online. It also bans tracking of children's data by default, which can potentially cut them away from the benefits of personalisation that we experience online. So, how can the upcoming Digital India Act (DIA) better protect children's interests when interacting with AI?

Shifting the emphasis

International best practices can assist Indian regulation to identify standards and principles that facilitate safer AI deployments. UNICEF's guidance for policymakers on AI and children identifies nine requirements for child-centred AI which draws on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (India is a signatory). The guidance

aims to create an enabling environment which promotes children's well-being, inclusion, fairness, non-discrimination, safety, transparency, explainability and accountability.

Another key feature of successful regulation will be the ability to adapt to the varying developmental stages of children from different age groups. California's Age Appropriate Design Code Act serves as an interesting template. The Californian code pushes for transparency to ensure that digital services configure default privacy settings; assess whether algorithms, data collection, or targeted advertising systems harm children; and use clear, age-appropriate language for user-facing information. Indian authorities should encourage research which collects evidence on the benefits and risks of AI for India's children and adolescents. This should serve as a baseline to work towards an Indian Age Appropriate Design Code for AI.

Lastly, better institutions will help shift regulation away from top-down safety protocols which place undue burdens on parents. Mechanisms of regular dialogue with children will help incorporate their inputs on the benefits and the threats they face when interacting with AI-based digital services. An institution similar to Australia's Online Safety Youth Advisory Council which comprises people between the ages of 13-24 years could be an interesting approach. Such institutions will assist regulation to become more responsive to the threats young people face when interacting with AI systems, while preserving the benefits that they derive from digital services.

The fast-evolving nature of AI means that regulation should avoid prescriptions and instead embrace standards, strong institutions, and best practices which imbue openness, trust, and accountability. As we move towards a new law to regulate harms on the Internet, and look to establish our thought leadership on global AI regulation, the interests of our young citizens must be front and centre.