

A long-drawn test for India's diplomatic skills

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarks on a week-long journey to Japan, Papua New Guinea and Australia from May 19, a number of substantive global issues are on the anvil in his discussions with leaders of the G-7 outreach in Hiroshima, Japan, as well as during his travels from there, with bilateral issues taking a back seat to India's position in the multilateral sphere. These mandate a very careful balance between the two ends of an increasingly polarised world that has been blown apart after the Russian war in Ukraine. This is also a world that looks uneasily at facing the geopolitical challenge from China, worries over trade access, supply chain reliability, and food and energy security.

Although the Quad Summit (Australia, India, Japan, U.S.) due to be held in Sydney has been cancelled in the wake of U.S. President Joe Biden's domestic troubles, all four Quad leaders will meet on the sidelines of the G-7. Following this foray with the Indo-Pacific "coalition of democracies", Mr. Modi will be in Washington in June for a state visit – a rare honour accorded by the U.S. President, that has been reserved for only two Indian leaders in the past, President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1963) and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2009). This visit will be marked by many strategic forays to bring India-U.S. ties closer.

Almost immediately after his return, Mr. Modi will need to pivot to the opposing coalition however, hosting the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit scheduled for July 3-4, where he is expected to receive China's President Xi Jinping, Russia's President Vladimir Putin, the Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, leaders of central Asian states, the soon-to-be added SCO members, the President of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi, and the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, and other guests.

The world of the SCO

The composition of the SCO, which includes those being inducted as observers such as Myanmar, gives the impression of it being a largely anti-western grouping, with practically every country sanctioned by the West as a part of it. With the SCO, a grouping that represents most of the world's population, GDP growth, and energy reserves, India has comfort in its common stand against unilateral sanctions such as those against Russia.

A lesson or two may also be learnt from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Council for Foreign Ministers (SCO-CFM) held in Goa earlier this month, where India's bilateral relations with mainly Pakistan, but China and even Russia, were



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allowed to overshadow more substantive multilateral outcomes. This is of particular annoyance to Central Asian countries, that have always insisted that no bilateral issues are brought up at the SCO, lest it go the way of the other regional South Asian grouping, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

A week after the SCO summit, Mr. Modi will pivot back to the European Union, as chief guest at France's national "Bastille day" parade; visits to other European capitals are likely. August will see yet another turn, with the BRICS summit in South Africa. Mr. Modi will engage with the leaders of Russia, China, Brazil and South Africa on an alternative BRICS payment mechanism to the dollar-dominated international system, along with other ideas on the agenda seeking to build a counter-narrative to the U.S.-European Union combine. In September, as Mr. Modi hosts every global leader at the G-20 summit in Delhi, his diplomatic skills will be tested again – not since 2010 have leaders of all permanent members of the UN Security Council visited Delhi in the same year, let alone at the same time.

Striking a balance

The timing of these engagements is no accident, nor is it explained by India's traditional adherence to the principle of non-alignment. If anything, Mr. Modi has consistently refused to attend Non-Aligned Movement in-person summits thus far, and has preferred his own version of "multi-directional engagements". In 2017, the same year that India took part in reviving the Quad in the face of overt belligerence from Beijing, India also joined the SCO as a full member, agreeing to host the summit this year. New Delhi also exchanged places with both Italy and Indonesia in order to host the G-20 in 2023. If it is hosting the two major summits in the same year, it is by choice, not coincidence.

It is to India's credit that it continues to maintain this balance, and is being courted by countries across the global divide, even as it seeks to hold out against two nuclear-armed land neighbours at its frontiers. Mr. Modi has even managed to maintain India's "sweet spot" without needing to follow Indonesian President Joko Widodo's example in travelling to Kiev, or inviting Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and its Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba to address the G-20, in order to strike a balance on the war.

While India's attempts at being a "balancing force" (as a senior official put it) are playing out much more visibly, it is also setting off a trend – many countries in South East Asia and the Global

South, not to mention countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Israel, are managing their ties with the West without joining its stand on Ukraine or sanctions. France's latest reiteration of "Strategic Autonomy" after French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Beijing indicates that even the western coalition has its fissures on this point. Clearly, autonomous strategy or multi-alignment has paid off for India in this critical year.

Disturbing the balance

There are a few unlikely "black swan" events that could jolt India off its careful tightrope walk and force a rethink of its policies one way or the other. A sudden success for Ukraine in its much-delayed, upcoming spring offensive, for example, would require New Delhi to reconsider its unalloyed ties with Moscow. Any major aggression by China across any part of the Line of Actual Control would be another such event requiring a strategic overhaul. India may also be forced to rethink if Russia turns more belligerent over the payment problem or withhold supplies of defence hardware to India under pressure from China. Equally, any decision by the U.S. and Europe to "force a choice" on India: to go forward with unilateral sanctions for the increase in Russian oil inflows processed at the Rosneft-owned refinery in Gujarat, or through the old threat of Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act-Related Sanctions (CAATSA) for India's acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile systems. In the absence of these "at present unlikely" scenarios, India is likely to continue to try to work its interests on both sides of the geopolitical fence.

India's tasks ahead will be made more difficult if New Delhi fails to ensure at the SCO summit in July or during the BRICS summit in August, that Moscow and Beijing accede to a consensus on a joint communique at the G-20 summit in September. The U.S.-led G-7 bloc seems sanguine in allowing the differences in text to continue, suggesting that the "two outliers" can be ignored, or even omitted from the group. For India, tasked with forging a consensus, which has accompanied every G-20 summit in the past, the failure to issue a joint statement would be an ignoble distinction. Given the high stakes involved, the next 100 days will decide whether India can retain its reputation in forging a fair balance between its conflicting interests across the global divide, while remaining a gracious and successful host as the world comes home for the G-20.

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Walking the tightrope seems to have paid off for India, but the multilateral challenges it faces will multiply