

China-India Brief

A publication of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation

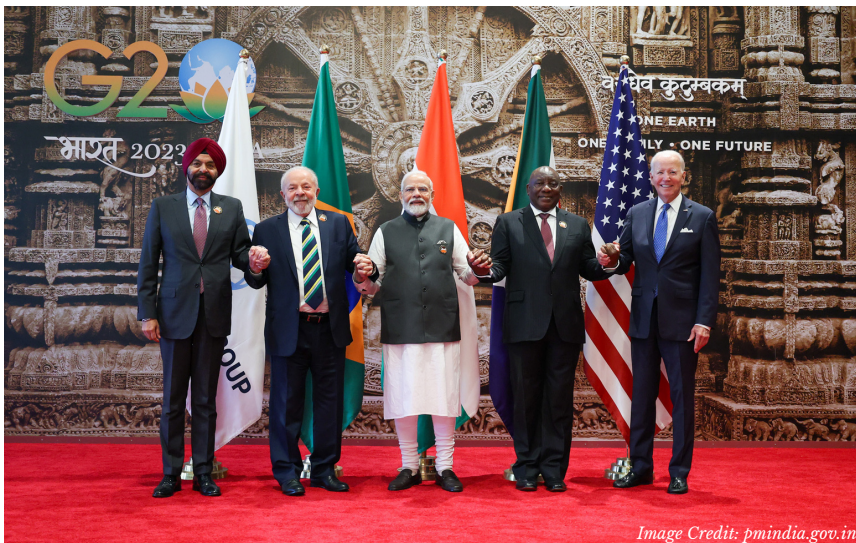


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Guest Column

The G20 Summit: India takes on China for Leadership of the Global South

By Byron Chong

The Group of 20 (G20) Summit that concluded earlier this month in New Delhi has been hailed as a resounding success for India's global image. As chair for this year's event, India announced a slew of new initiatives that championed the interests of developing nations, allowing it to position itself as a serious contender to China for leadership of the Global South. In fact, many of the deals reached could be interpreted as attempts to weaken Beijing's sway over the developing world.

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AND GLOBALISATION

The *China-India Brief* is a bi-monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia's two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

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Overall, the summit not only highlighted India's intensifying rivalry with China, but also underscored India's importance to the United States (US) and its allies in their efforts to counter China's global influence.

Countering China

Among the key outcomes of the two-day gathering was the admission of the fifty-five member African Union (AU) into the G20. The move greatly expanded the representation of developing countries within the bloc and aligned with New Delhi's goal of promoting itself as the 'voice of the Global South.' However, India's decision also served to weaken China's immense influence in Africa. Drawn by an abundance of natural resources and huge export markets, Beijing has been strengthening diplomatic and economic ties with many African nations over the last decade. Bringing the AU into the G20 would be a way to improve engagement between its members and other developed countries and loosen China's grip over the continent.

Another announced initiative was the plan to reform multilateral development banks (MDBs) and expand their lending capacities. Besides improving access to funding for developing countries, the move could also be an attempt to weaken China's influence and status as the key source of developmental loans and aid for poorer nations. If MDBs could offer more attractive financing options to developing nations, they would be less inclined to seek Chinese loans.

Perhaps the most overt indication of India's intention to compete with China was the announcement of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). A massive rail and shipping project that will connect India with Europe through the Middle East, the IMEC is clearly meant to challenge China's own global infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Xi's Absence

Despite its many positive outcomes, the summit was marred by the absence of Chinese President Xi Jinping. No official reason was given, though significantly, this was the first time a Chinese leader has failed to attend the annual summit since it began in 2008.

Xi's decision to stay away could have been motivated by long-running tensions with India. Their latest border standoff has been ongoing since 2020 and show no signs of resolving anytime soon. China has bristled at India's expanding security cooperation with the US and its allies as well as its membership in the Quad—a grouping widely seen as an effort to counter China's rise. Bilateral relations have also been strained by New Delhi's stronger opposition to Beijing's South China Sea claims and its expanding restrictions over Chinese apps and investments over recent months. And at the recent BRICS summit in August 2023, Xi's proposal to expand the grouping's membership reportedly faced opposition from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. While Xi ultimately got his way, Modi's objections may have been seen as a personal



affront. Choosing to skip the G20 Summit hosted by India could thus be Beijing's way of signalling its displeasure and humiliating New Delhi.

Xi may also have guessed (rightly) that he would get a frosty reception at the G20. His closest ally—Russian President Vladimir Putin—was not attending, and many of the other G20 members were either US allies or its close security partners. Among such a hostile crowd, Xi likely feared that the other leaders would gang up and pressure him into accepting initiatives that were not in China's best interests. Coming at a time when Xi faces rising criticism at home for his handling of China's economic woes, and emerging cracks over his previously undisputed control of the Chinese Communist Party—reflected by the sudden and unexplained removal of his defence and foreign ministers, as well as a rare closed-door reprimand by senior party

officials—being seen as caving in to external pressure on a global stage like the G20 would have been taken as a national humiliation and politically disastrous for Xi. As such, the decision to send Premier Li Qiang in his stead, could have been Xi's way of avoiding personal, as well as national, embarrassment.

Another possibility is that China simply does not see the G20 as a priority anymore. In the past, China valued its membership in such international groupings as a means to engage with other major powers. Now however, with its immense economic and political influence, China can afford to be more selective. Beijing may have decided that it should prioritise those multilateral bodies that it can easily control or manipulate to serve its own global interests, like the BRICS. Conversely, for international frameworks where China commands less authority and influence (and potentially be

challenged), like the G20, it should take a backseat, or even try to undermine. Indeed, Xi's absence at the G20 was in stark contrast to his appearance at the recent BRICS Summit where he was given a red carpet welcome and featured front and centre.

India is the Key

Interestingly, the summit also highlighted India's importance to the US and its allies. New Delhi would not have been able to push through so many of its initiatives without the backing of its fellow G20 members. Ensuring India's successful chairmanship was a way to bolster its image as a global player and cement its leadership of the Global South. Through India, developed nations could more easily build paths to engage with emerging economies and push back against China's influence.

Washington's reliance on India to bridge the gulf with the developing world is unsurprising. American foreign policy over the last decade has focused primarily on upholding international rules and norms. Though important for maintaining peace and stability, and rallying allies and likeminded partners, such lofty principles hold little appeal for poorer nations. Indeed, America's political messaging often comes across as somewhat condescending for states grappling with day-to-day challenges of addressing infrastructure deficits, supply shocks and natural disasters.

Surprisingly, even China's outreach has been far from a universal success. Though Beijing has provided vast amounts of development aid and loans to developing

countries through its BRI projects, many have been left with crushing debt, fuelling an anti-China backlash. Moreover, its assertive behaviour in the South China Sea and elsewhere has only served to reinforce its image as a bully.

In contrast, India is seen as a less domineering and a more trustworthy partner which has been at the forefront of advancing the interests of developing nations, including efforts to reduce debt, improve health security, as well as accelerate digital transitions.

Yet, all this does not necessarily mean that India's leadership of the Global South is assured, or that China is out of the running. Most developing countries are highly pragmatic when accepting external assistance. So long as conditions are reasonable and sustainable, they are unlikely to turn down any lucrative opportunities—whether from India, China, the US, or Europe. In fact, many developing countries have taken advantage of the ongoing great power rivalries to further collaboration with multiple parties, since working with one does not preclude them from working with others. In such an environment, China knows that so long as it can continue to outspend India and the US in rolling out funding, it will retain its place of privilege and leadership among the developing nations. Beijing neither intends nor has reason to cede its position, and will likely double down given New Delhi's unmistakable tilt to the West and its increasingly overt attempts to counter China's rise.

Conclusion

This year's G20 Summit highlighted the growing contest for influence over the Global South. India demonstrated its ability to lead and represent the developing world, positioning itself as a viable alternative to China. While Beijing has focused its efforts on winning over friends through financial inducements and keeping the US and its allies out of the Global South, New Delhi's approach has centred on increasing the representation of developing nations in global governance and cooperating with—rather than confronting—the West. Xi's decision to skip the summit was likely an attempt to discredit the G20 as a platform for international economic cooperation. Yet, his absence allowed Modi to claim the spotlight and push his interests with little opposition.

Though a diplomatic victory for India, the summit also highlighted a potentially worrying sign—China's growing isolationism. If Beijing does intend to only prioritise forums that it can influence, then engagement opportunities—either official meetings or sideline discussions—would drastically reduce, and the gulf between China and India, as well as much of the West, will only widen. Addressing disagreements will become more difficult, and even finding common ground on key international issues such as climate change and sustainable energy would be increasingly challenging.

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News Reports

Bilateral relations

Envoy calls for closer China-India ties at ceremony for 74th National Day

China Daily, September 28

Ma Jia, Chargé d'Affaires of the Chinese Embassy in India, has called for China and India to work more closely together at a ceremony marking China's National Day.

'India-China relationship has never been easy', says EAM Jaishankar

Mint, September 27

Jaishankar made the comments at the 'Discussion at Council on Foreign Relations' event in New York.

India cancels minister's trip to Asian Games in visa row with China

The Straits Times, September 23

The New Delhi sports minister has cancelled its trip to the Asian Games in Hangzhou, saying that Chinese authorities had denied accreditation and entry to Indian athletes from a region claimed by Beijing.

China bars three female Indian athletes from Asian Games: Reports

Al Jazeera, September 22

Three Indian athletes from the northeastern Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, a region claimed almost in full by Beijing as "South Tibet", have been forced to pull out of the Asian Games in Hangzhou after not receiving clearance to enter the country.

China and India in the Region

India-China power play dominates Maldives run-off vote

Channel News Asia, September 28

Maldives votes in a presidential run-off on Saturday (September 30) that could drastically rebalance its relations with India and China.

Sri Lanka responds to Indian concerns, drafts SOPs for visiting foreign ships

Hindustan Times, September 28

The Sri Lankan government is set to unveil new SOPs for visits by foreign ships or aircraft, including military assets, as part of efforts to address India's concerns over port calls by Chinese vessels.

Quad partners India and Australia intensify work on undersea cables amid Chinese inroads

India Narrative, September 25

Both India and Australia have reaffirmed their continued commitment to developing the regional infrastructure that is key for growth and prosperity in the region.

India-Canada row: Chinese media says West's 'collective silence' exposes their 'double standards'

Business Times, September 24

Chinese media outlets have called out the deep-seated rifts within the Western alliance system for having "no purpose unless they serve the West's strategic interests".

Trade and Economy

China jitters turn private equity investors toward India, Indonesia

Nikkei Asia, September 28

India and Indonesia have become two of the most popular destinations for private equity investors, who are increasingly nervous about continuing to invest in China.

New Trade Initiative Offers India Major Gains in Middle East

Voice of America, September 27

The so-called India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, or IMEC, is backed by the United States and is widely seen as a challenge to China's Belt and Road Initiative, which has already developed major infrastructure projects in some of the same countries.

India jobs and investment to double, says Foxconn, as it moves away from China

Reuters, September 17

Apple supplier Foxconn aims to double its workforce and investment in India by next year and is expected to assemble up to 50% of Apple's iPhones by 2027.

Apple witnesses strong demand for iPhone 15 series in China, but challenges persist amid competition from Chinese rivals

Global Times, September 16

The Chinese market's demand for Apple's new iPhones remains strong.

Energy and Environment

China, India lead Asia's biggest hydropower crunch in decades

The Straits Times, September 22

Hydropower generation in Asia has plunged at the fastest rate in decades in China and India.

China climate envoy says phasing out fossil fuels 'unrealistic'

Reuters, September 22

China's special climate envoy added that fossil fuels are needed to safeguard economic growth and maintain global energy security.

US, China barred from UN's 'Climate Ambition Summit'

EURACTIV, September 20

Secretary-General António Guterres announced that the UN climate summit would have "no nonsense" by only inviting leaders of countries with concrete plans to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions.

Chinese solar module imports down 76% in H123, despite China's global exports growing one-third

Fortune India, September 19

The decrease in exports to India followed the imposition of tariffs as India shifts away from imports to focus on building and utilising domestic manufacturing capacity.

Analyses

Why India and Vietnam won't be joining US' China containment

South China Morning Post, September 26

By Richard Heydarian, a Manila-based academic

Aside from scepticism at Biden's stab at realpolitik after criticising authoritarian regimes, both Vietnam and India prefer a world dominated by neither the US nor China.

Canada-India row over murdered Sikh separatist complicates West's bid to counter China

South China Morning Post, September 23

By Saira Bano, Assistant Professor at Thompson Rivers University

Tensions over the Sikh Khalistani protests in Canada further complicates efforts by Canada and its allies to improve relations with India in their strategic attempt to counterbalance the increasing threat posed by China.

Prachanda's China visit highly anticipated as Nepal seeks ties of equi-proximity with both China, India

Global Times, September 22

By Wang Shida, Deputy Director of the South Asia Institute of the Contemporary International Relations Research Academy of China

Nepali Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal hopes to strengthen relations between China and Nepal and seek further avenues of bilateral cooperation.

China and India are not playing a zero-sum game in the global south

Think China, September 19

By Zhu Zhiqun, Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Bucknell University

It is an overblown rhetoric to think that the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor is a sign that India has joined the US in countering China and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Rather than a zero sum game, these multilateral structures could be complementary and a step closer towards multipolarity.

Books and Journals

Deconstructing media narratives of the Indo-Pacific strategy: Exploring India's ontological security and national identity in the *Times of India*

Humanities and Social Sciences
Communications 10, no. 314 (2023)

By Zhou Li, Associate Professor at the School of Foreign Languages in Southwest Jiaotong University; and Li Sheng, Associate Professor at the School of Foreign Languages and Cultures in Chongqing University

India's attempt to forge a distinct role for itself in the global order started soon after independence in 1947. Since this watershed event, India's policymakers have gradually recast their initial strategy of nonalignment, as they realized that Nehruvian "soft" power was not adequate for creating an especially dynamic presence in an increasingly volatile international environment. In response to this realization, India embarked on a journey of transforming its diplomatic benchmarks. In 2017, to counter China's assertiveness across the region, India joined then-U.S. President Donald Trump's advocacy in launching the Indo-Pacific strategy. Transforming the nation's diplomatic benchmarks while maintaining a coherent narrative of national identity was the main challenge. This paper examines the role that media narratives play in maintaining that coherent national identity.




To do so, we analyzed 47 reports by the *Times of India* (TOI) on the Indo-Pacific strategy in order to reveal how elite media strategically framed the nation's regional policy, thereby ensuring its ontological security—its sense of continuity and order—while conveying its global aspirations.

Our team



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THE CENTRE ON ASIA AND GLOBALISATION

The Centre on Asia and Globalisation is a research centre at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. It conducts in-depth research on developments in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, and aims to provide academics, decision-makers, and the general public with objective analysis on issues of regional and global significance. The Centre's motto "Objective Research with Impact" reflects its commitment towards ensuring that its analysis informs policy and decision makers in and about Asia.

OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

- *Partnership or Polarization? Southeast Asian Security between India and China* edited by Evan Laksmana and Byron Chong (Contemporary Southeast Asia, 2023)
- *Asian Conceptions of International Order: What Asia Wants* edited by Kanti Bajpai and Evan Laksmana (International Affairs, 2023)
- *How Realist Is India's National Security Policy?* edited by Kanti Bajpai (Routledge, 2023)
- *Deterring Conflict and Preserving Peace in Asia* edited by Drew Thompson and Byron Chong (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, 2022)
- *What Can the United States Learn from China about Infrastructure?* by Selina Ho in *The China Questions 2* (Harvard University Press, 2022)
- *India Versus China: Why they are Not Friends* by Kanti Bajpai (Juggernaut Books, 2021)
- *Winning the Fight Taiwan Cannot Afford to Lose* by Drew Thompson (Strategic Forum, 2021)
- *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations* edited by Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho and Manjari Chatterjee Miller (Routledge, 2020)



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