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At G20, India Tests Geopolitical Clout Amid Xi's Absence

This year's summit will highlight emerging divisions and the struggle for influence in today's international relations.

Thursday, September 7, 2023 /

By: Carla Freeman, Ph.D.; Sameer P. Lalwani, Ph.D.

World leaders from the Group of 20 (G20) gather this weekend in New Delhi, India, for the intergovernmental forum's annual summit. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is aiming to leverage the summit to showcase India's growing international influence. The summit will be center stage for the emerging divisions in world politics and for major powers' efforts to woo the Global South. Yet, despite this competition, China's Xi Jinping has opted to not attend the summit in what many see as a snub to rival India. The White House has said it will come to the summit with a "[value proposition](#)" for the Global South, focused on multilateral development reform, climate financing, debt relief and technology.



Soldiers hold Indian and American flags as President Joe Biden and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India take part in a State Arrival Ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, June 22, 2023. (Doug Mills/The New York Times)

USIP's Sameer Lalwani and Carla Freeman discuss why this summit is an important moment for India, what Xi's absence means and how the United States should approach the summit.

Why is this summit a big deal for India?

Lalwani: Simply put, the G20 affords India the opportunity to burnish its global leadership credentials. This is the first time India has hosted a G20 summit, the annual convening of the world's 19 leading economies plus the European Union, which combined [contribute 80% of global GDP](#). The G20 was founded in 1999 in response to several world economic crises and is the premier forum to facilitate global economic cooperation as the world recovers from pandemics, inflation, supply-chain disruption and the costly consequences of climate change over recent years.

India seeks to play a bridging role at the G20 between the priorities of the developed world and the “Global South.” Most of the G20’s heads of state will attend the summit along with nine other guest countries invited by India, though Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin will be notably absent. Embracing its multi-alignment mantra, India has leaned into Western groupings like the Quad and G7 but also remained a pivotal player in non-Western blocs like [BRICS](#) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, while still serving as a standard bearer for the developing world as host of the Voice of Global South Summit in January.

India is well-positioned to leverage the G20 platform as a global intermediary because it commands respect and credibility from many sides due to its [steady economic growth](#) (with [favorable forecasts](#)) alongside growing [international esteem](#) of Indian influence and favorability.

New Delhi aims to navigate around controversial topics like Russia’s war in Ukraine to building consensus around climate finance, food and energy security, debt relief, sustainable development and digital public infrastructure. Consistent with these global public goods, India’s G20 Summit theme is a phrase from Hindu scriptures, “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*,” which means “One Earth, One Family, One Future.”

Of course, all state leaders are political animals, and Modi is no different. It’s no secret he hopes to ride a wave of international acclaim from a successful summit all the way to upcoming parliamentary elections, where he seeks a third term.

What does it mean that Xi is not attending?

Freeman: Xi Jinping’s decision to not attend the G20 in New Delhi was unexpected. It is the first time China’s top leader will not be at the gathering since the G20 began annual meetings in 2008. In retrospect, however, there are five reasons it should not have come as a surprise.

First, Xi just returned to Beijing from a challenging BRICS summit in South Africa where China-India relations figured prominently. Xi’s [push to expand](#) the grouping was successful but reportedly hard won in large part due to Modi’s initial objections. In addition, bilateral talks with Modi on the sidelines of the BRICS yielded agreement between the two leaders to try to deescalate tensions along their disputed border. However, [China’s publication of a new “standard map”](#) just days after the summit ended — which included the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and the disputed Aksai Chin plateau within Chinese territory — along with India’s ongoing military exercises on the border meant that strains over territorial claims were undoubtedly going to shade the two leaders’ G20 interactions.

Second, not attending the G20 allows Xi to send a signal that he prioritizes the BRICS, a grouping Beijing wishes to see expand further.

Third, Xi’s absence may also be intended as a show of support for Putin who is not going to be present at the meeting. There will be a push led by Western leaders for a statement condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and to press China to use its influence on Moscow to help end the conflict. At the 2022 G20, China joined Russia in opposing the use of the term “war” to describe the conflict in Ukraine.

Fourth, pressing domestic challenges certainly require Xi’s attention. Generally bad news on the state of China’s economy, social unrest from severe flooding and the [recent purge](#) of some of China’s top military leaders are just a few among the many issues that made international headlines in August.

Fifth and finally, Beijing and Washington are in the process of a difficult climb toward stabilizing the relationship, with the prospect that the [series of visits](#) to Beijing by top U.S. officials could pave the way for Xi to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders meeting in San Francisco this November. Xi may have chosen not to interact with Biden ahead of the November summit out of an abundance of caution.

Whatever Xi’s reasons for choosing to not attend the G20, China’s absence has significant downsides. For one, without the top leader of a country that represents more than 18% of global GDP and plays an outsize role in international development finance at the table, it is harder for the forum to act effectively to address the urgent concerns of emerging and developing economies from climate change to food security to debt restructuring.

Lalwani: [Media](#) have described Xi’s decision to skip the G20 summit as a deliberate affront to India and Prime Minister Modi. Even if true, the actual impact is more akin to a high school cafeteria snub than serious geopolitical consequence.

Regardless of Xi’s presence, a joint communiqué was always going to be difficult to produce because of an increasingly polarized and competitive international environment. India has accordingly been trying to steer clear of controversial issues like Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and focus on building consensus on global public goods — climate finance, food and energy security, debt relief and digital public infrastructure.

Xi's and Putin's absence also removes a level of intrigue that allows a focus on substance. Leaders and media coverage will be free to focus on the meetings that have been confirmed, like the [Biden-Modi bilateral](#), which is expected to affirm cooperation in defense, energy, education and humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

Finally, Xi's snub is unlikely to dent Indian public opinion of Modi. Over the past three years, despite the waxing and waning of relations with China between clashes, counter-offensives and de-escalation talks, [polling data](#) shows Modi has maintained steady approval, particularly for his handling of China. While Indians would have loved the visuals of Xi genuflecting to New Delhi for the G20, Modi is still likely to enjoy a political boost simply from the optics of playing host to 25 heads of state on his home turf.

How will Washington approach the summit and why is it important for U.S. interests?

Lalwani: Besides the inherent advantages of face-to-face diplomacy, the G20 summit also provides the United States a meaningful opportunity to build trust with swing states and the Global South. For the past few years, U.S. foreign policy has been laser-focused on defending a rules-based order by deterring China or blunting Russian aggression. While these efforts are important for peace and stability and have rallied U.S. allies and close partners, they have not won over much of the developing world, which currently composes most of the global population.

These swing states and developing countries have been less persuaded by the lofty principles of international order and more consumed by the daily material challenges of development, vast infrastructure deficits, supply shocks in food and energy, and deadly climate events.

Many of them find U.S. messaging on international rules gratingly [hypocritical](#) since the invasion of Iraq. Some even blame recent economic dislocations on pandemic travel bans, Western sanctions or inaction on climate change. Disinformation campaigns certainly stoke these grievances. Many of these countries seek answers in non-Western institutions like the Belt & Road Initiative, non-dollar currency transactions, or rival minilaterals like the BRICS grouping, which recently extended membership to new states in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, doubling in size.

The G20 enables the United States to hear from and message these skeptical countries at the highest level. President Biden's presence will contrast sharply with Xi's absence. The summit provides a platform to reinvigorate U.S. leadership, highlight policies supportive of the global economy and shape collective efforts to alleviate debt, bolster health security and stimulate energy transitions. And India as the host can play a unique bridging role — not only as an ally in this messaging but also as a character witness.

Freeman: Biden is traveling to New Delhi with an ambitious agenda. This includes reforms to the World Bank to enable it to increase lending for infrastructure climate change, poverty alleviation and hunger programs. The United States has been sharply critical of China's infrastructure development and opaque lending practices. Biden is also expected to push for debt relief for low and middle-income countries.

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Wednesday, February 19, 2025

By: Asfandiyar Mir, Ph.D.; Daniel Markey, Ph.D.; Vikram J. Singh; Sameer P. Lalwani, Ph.D.

Last week, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington marked the fourth meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and a foreign leader since the start of the new administration. Despite differences over tariffs, Modi's trip signaled that U.S.-Indian relations will continue along the positive trajectory seen in recent years, particularly in defense and technology cooperation. Trump made clear that he sees value in India's role as a counterweight to China, but that he also views Delhi as an important player and key partner outside the context of strategic rivalry.

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