

2 Palestine: Where realpolitik once again trumps over human tragedy

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Abstract

With Palestine as the contextual framework, this article deconstructs the working of realpolitik and the impact it has on humanity. While individual cases differ, following strands stand out:

- *The fear of military power dictates political and economic alliances*
- *double speak and obfuscation become instruments to justify unjust actions*
- *the argument of “national interest” is stretched to unleash devastation and death on gargantuan scale that is as mindless as ineffective*

2.1 Deconstructing Realpolitik – from Concept to Reality

The driving force behind realpolitik is power. Realpolitik suggests a no-nonsense view and a disregard for ethical, i.e. involving or expressing moral approval or disapproval, considerations. In diplomacy it is often associated with relentless, though realistic, pursuit of the national interest. The concept was an early attempt at answering the conundrum of how to achieve liberal enlightened goals in a world that does not follow liberal enlightened rules.

Over time, realpolitik has come to represent two things for furtherance of national interest: pursuing economic well-being without any let or hindrance, and security. While there's much merit in both these instruments of national interest, the security aspect often takes on macabre forms with horrendous consequences.

Without ignoring the efficacy of realpolitik in the pursuit of national interest, this paper tries to focus on the terrible consequences of the exercise of power. This paper takes a close look at this second aspect through the prism of Palestine.

2.1.1 Realpolitik - How world leaders behave

Pratap Bhanu Mehta expounds the same view in his piece, “What Israel-Palestine conflict reveals about world leaders”.¹ He holds that Israel-Hamas conflict shows governments today are making bedfellows of extremists.

States across the world are pushing societies deeper into the abyss and amidst this carnage and heightened political risk of a wider conflict; there is not one significant world leader who is acting in a way that is not morally myopic or politically ill-judged. Mehta elaborates:

¹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/israel-palestine-conflict-ghaza-israel-war-muslim-countries-stand-on-palestine-9006499/>

Iran always has maintained an infrastructure of violence that has served its political purposes but destroys the societies in which they are embedded, from Palestine to Lebanon. The Arab regimes have nurtured the Palestinian cause as a pretext, but have little concern for their welfare.

The gap between Europe's perception of its own importance and its power has never been greater; Macron's civilising mission is now reduced to simply curbing free discussion on the Palestine issue and Germany's idea of moral nuance is to de-platform Palestinian writers.

Even Turkey is more interested in using Palestine for its neo-Ottoman fantasies. As for the rest of the world, it was important that the UN General Assembly at least make a humanitarian gesture asking for a ceasefire. But it is a toothless advisory and not a single country has an action plan to stop the unfolding carnage in Gaza.

Mehta also feels it was a misjudgement not to pass a resolution condemning Hamas. This is not because a ceasefire in Gaza should be linked to condemning Hamas, or for the sake of neutrality or two-sidedness.

But condemning Hamas is the morally right and the politically prudent thing to do. China can at best watch from the sidelines; at worst smell an opportunity in the self-destruction of the West.

Mehta has also an interesting take on India: "As for India, one anecdote will suffice. I was at an international meeting recently, where someone, not unsympathetic to India, asked this question: "India claims to be the leader of the Global South. But let us ask the question, 'who is following it?'"

2.1.2 Realpolitik of America as the root cause of Israel-Palestine war

Just recently Henry Kissinger – the greatest exponent of realpolitik passed away at the grand old age of 100. What is remarkable is that major newspapers have recounted the devastation and human tragedy caused by Kissinger's realpolitik:

*"Kissinger's legacy extends beyond the corpses, trauma, and suffering of the victims he left behind. His policies, Grandin told The Intercept, set the stage for the civilian carnage of the U.S. war on terror from Afghanistan to Iraq, Syria to Somalia, and beyond. "You can trace a line from the bombing of Cambodia to the present," said Grandin, author of "Kissinger's Shadow". "The covert justifications for illegally bombing Cambodia became the framework for the justifications of drone strikes and forever war. It's a perfect expression of American militarism's unbroken circle."*²

Kissinger and the Presidents he served have already demonstrated that leader behaviour is crucial to the play of realpolitik and the devastation that this causes to society. At most one may contend that his brilliance was that of the devil and being America's most powerful diplomat, his sway on executing foreign policy is unlikely to be replicated. However, this argument doesn't hold water.

²

<https://theintercept.com/2023/11/29/henry-kissinger-death/>

Recently, John Mearsheimer, an international relations scholar at University of Chicago and one of the most influential and controversial thinkers in the world on the topics of war and power, in a podcast on Israel-Palestine, Russia-Ukraine, China, NATO and WW3³ lays bare the ruthlessness behind the actions of the powerful that has caused and is causing untold devastation in Gaza.

Writing for a recent issue of Foreign Policy (Oct 18, 2023)⁴, Stephen M. Walt, the Robert and Renée Belfer professor of international relations at Harvard University, tries to locate the causes of the present bloody conflict between Zionist Israelis and Palestinian Arabs:

“Inevitably, arguing over which of the immediate protagonists is most at fault obscures other important causes that are only loosely related to the long conflict between Zionist Israelis and Palestinian Arabs. We should not lose sight of these other factors even during the present crisis, however, because their effects may continue to echo long after the current fighting stops.

Where one begins to trace causes is inherently arbitrary - Theodor Herzl's 1896 book, The Jewish State? the 1917 Balfour Declaration? the Arab revolt of 1936? the 1947 U.N. partition plan? the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, or the 1967 Six-Day War? But I'll start in 1991, when the United States emerged as the unchallenged external power in Middle East affairs and began trying to construct a regional order that served its interests.”

Walt goes on to state that the 1991 Gulf War and its aftermath, the Madrid peace conference, the United States was firmly in the driver's seat. Yet Madrid also contained a fateful flaw, one that sowed the seeds of much future trouble.

Iran was not invited to participate in the conference, and it responded to being excluded by organizing a meeting of “rejectionist” forces and reaching out to Palestinian groups—including Hamas and Islamic Jihad—that it had previously ignored.

Iran viewed itself as a major regional power and expected a seat at the Madrid table, which was “not seen as just a conference on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but as the defining moment in forming the new Middle East order.” Tehran's response to Madrid was primarily strategic rather than ideological: It sought to demonstrate to the United States and others that it could derail their efforts to create a new regional order if its interests were not taken into account.

And that is precisely what happened, as suicide bombings and other acts of extremist violence disrupted the Oslo Accords negotiation process and undermined Israeli support for a negotiated settlement. Over time, as peace remained elusive and relations between Iran and the West deteriorated further, the ties between Hamas and Iran grew stronger.

³
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4wLXNydzeY>

⁴
<https://Foreignpolicy.Com/2023/10/18/America-Root-Cause-War-Israel-Gaza-Palestine/>

2.1.3 Palestine-Israel war, the violence of pure identity

Delving into the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Sa'di and Abu-Lughod's study's outlines the historical emergence of Palestinian collective memory, the challenges to it by marginalized voices and the moral and political implications of its erasure by citing,

*"Palestinians preserved their historical heritage and integrated it into their contemporary lives using various symbols, maps, land deeds, house keys, stories, customs, and poetry. By employing diverse theories and approaches, researchers have shed light on how the Palestinian displacement from their homeland continues to impact their cultural identity in the present."*⁵

Sanjay Srivastava, Professor, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS, University of London calls the Palestine-Israel war, the violence of pure identity.

According to him, the recurring tragedy that is the Palestine-Israel relationship tell us about the dangers of interpreting human histories through the constraining lens of religious imagination, and Palestine's tragedy — and the extraordinary human suffering it has caused — is a cautionary tale for all societies that seek to flatten complex histories of co-existence among populations into the fiction of the "superiority" of any one group over others.



Source: https://akm-img-a-in.tosshub.com/indiatoday/images/story/202310/story-of-the-day-124153899-16x9.jpg?VersionId=oulb340zZoUI3FQfnS_8waUmunmSsu47&size=690:388

⁵

Saloul, I. A. M. (2009). *Telling memories: Al-Nakba in Palestinian exilic narratives*. [Thesis, Universiteit van Amsterdam], pp. 3-7

The history of the “ethnic cleansing” of Palestinians remains largely an untold story- not merely as the political event of the establishment of the state of Israel (or loss of Palestine), nor even as the humanitarian event of the creation of the world’s most enduring military occupation and refugee problem, but rather as the existential experience that continues to define most Palestinian history, shatters their society and at the same time consolidates their shared national consciousness.

This narrative is notably eclipsed by pervasive public commemorations of the Holocaust and celebrations of Israel’s establishment, much of which, as Norman G. Finkelstein succinctly puts it, is “a tribute not to Jewish suffering but to Jewish aggrandizement” (2001: 8).

The near-total omission of Palestinians’ history of *al-nakba*⁶ from mainstream academic and public discourses in Europe and the US has nevertheless not impeded the continued cultural life of memorizations of the catastrophe across different generations of exiled Palestinians.



This exposes the intentional strategies of Zionist leaders. Indeed, memories of *al-nakba* reinforce the centrality of the land in Palestinian discourses of identity. "Throughout history, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, amidst adversity, have showcased remarkable resilience in preserving their cultural identity and unity.

Despite facing numerous challenges, these communities have managed to maintain their heritage and cohesion, serving as a testament to their strength and determination."⁷

⁶ *Al-nakba* means catastrophe in Arabic. It refers to the mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Before the Nakba, Palestine was a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society . <https://www.un.org/unispal/about-the-nakba>

⁷
Ibid

But more tellingly, multiple Jewish and Israeli scholars of the Holocaust – like Omer Bartov and Raz Segal have raised the issue of genocide. Segal, an associate professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Stockton University in New Jersey, has accused Israel of a “quite explicit, open and unashamed” genocidal assault on Gaza. Writing in Jewish Currents days after Israel launched its military retaliation against the Hamas attack, Segal said the country was already committing three of the five acts stipulated in the UN genocide convention. He defined these as:

“1. Killing members of the group. 2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group. 3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.”

2.2 History of Conflict and Displacement in Palestine/Israel

Having looked at the scale of human tragedy, we now proceed in this section to the larger question of displacement. In this larger tragedy, realpolitik has not only provided no answer, but has complicated the situation where there seems no escape. Power, the bedfellow of realpolitik, has rewarded the more powerful and dispossessed the weak. And war is the medium through which this power is first wielded; later, the negotiating power of the victor and its allies have legitimised the displacement.

First, a little bit of context. An article in The Indian Express, “How Jews first migrated to Palestine, and how Israel was born”, stated that *much* before the official creation of Israel in May 1948, Jewish migrants had been settling in Palestine. And rhetorically, two questions are posed: “How did Palestine 'end up paying for Europe's crimes'? And “How did the Jews manage to carve out a state in a land where they were a small minority?”⁸

The Jewish migration (Aliyah) to Palestine began sometime before World War I. The first wave of arrivals, from 1881 to 1903, is known as the First Aliyah. The migrants began to buy large tracts of land and set to farming it. Very soon, these arrivals meant losses for the native Palestinians, but it was some years yet before the conflict would be framed in these terms.

What possibly changed the face of West Asia forever was the Balfour Declaration of 1917 (named after then British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour) to a wealthy British Jew, Baron Lionel Walter Rothschild. This sealed the fate of lakhs of Palestinians. The British government needed Jewish support in its World War I efforts. To secure that, Balfour backed the Zionist cause. His letter to Rothschild read:

“His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”⁹

⁸ <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-history/how-jews-first-migrated-to-palestine-how-israel-was-born-898361/>

⁹ *Ibid*

The *Express* article holds that this would become the template for many future resolutions on Palestine — while there would always be some lines about the “rights of Palestinians”, little would be done on the ground about it.

After World War I, the Arab frustration and feelings of being cheated were erupting into attacks on Jewish settlements, on railroad tracks, on civilians. There were some attempts at talks between Jews and Arabs; notable being a 1919 pact, that soon came to nothing.

The years 1936 to 1938 saw immense bloodshed, with Palestinians attacking Jews and the British, the British imposing collective punishment on Palestinian villages, and the Jews carrying out killings of their own.

The Palestinians call this period ‘al-thawra al-kubra’, or the great rebellion. One of the armed groups was called Black Hand, led by Izzedin al-Qassam. The military wing of Hamas today is called the al-Qassam Brigades.



Source: https://hournews.ir/Media/Photo/23/10/23101101002742_Org.jpg

Around this time, the Peel Commission, set up by the British, proposed partition as the only solution to the problem. The Jewish side negotiated for better terms, but the Palestinian side boycotted the suggestion.

In May 1939, a White Paper released by the British was much more favourable to the Palestinian side. However, the divided Palestinian leadership did not capitalise on the chance. Eventually, the British did what they had with Partition violence in India — let trouble simmer to breaking point and then withdraw.

In 1947, with neither side agreeing to a partition or any other solution, and distrust and hostility at an all-time high, the British announced they were exiting Palestine, and the question would be settled by the UN. On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted to divide Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem under UN control.

The proposed Jewish state was to consist of 55 per cent of the country, including the largely unpopulated Negev desert. Its population would comprise some 500,000 Jews and 400,000 Arabs. The Arab state was to have 44 per cent of the land and a minority of 10,000 Jews.” The Arab areas would include the West Bank and Gaza.¹⁰

The outraged Palestinian side rejected the resolution. Israel, on the other hand, declared independence on May 14, 1948. This entire period was marked by civil war, and the Israeli military groups managed to drive out a large number of Palestinians.

The creation of Israel is called *Naqba*, or the catastrophe, by Palestinians, who see it as the day they lost their homeland. Immediately after Israel’s declaration of independence, it was invaded by Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. However, the determined Israeli side, bolstered by arms and funds from the US, managed to beat them back.

The 1949 Armistice Agreements between Israel and neighboring Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria ended the hostilities of the 1948 Arab–Israeli War. In the peace deal Israel and Arab states divided up the land. No Palestinian state was created; Egypt controlled Gaza while Transjordan (later Jordan) formally annexed the West Bank.

After fighting stopped in the 1948 war, Israel refused to allow refugees to return to their homes. Since then, Israel has rejected Palestinian demands for a return of refugees as part of a peace deal, arguing that it would threaten the country’s Jewish majority. Displacement has been a major theme of Palestinian history. In the 1948 war around Israel’s creation, an estimated 700,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled from what is now Israel. Palestinians refer to the event as the *Nakba*, Arabic for “catastrophe.”



Source: https://static.972mag.com/dev/uploads/2019/07/Palestinian_refugees_1948.jpg

¹⁰
Ibid

2.2.1 Wars and the realpolitik of accommodation

In the 1967 Mideast war, when Israel seized the West Bank and Gaza Strip, 300,000 more Palestinians fled, mostly into Jordan. The refugees and their descendants now number nearly 6 million, most living in camps and communities in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. The diaspora has spread further, with many refugees building lives in Gulf Arab countries or the West.

The Yom Kippur war erupted in October 1973, on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, Egypt and Syria launched an attack in Sinai and the Golan Heights. The war lasted three weeks and ended with a ceasefire secured by the UN. But it wasn't until 1978 that the Camp David accords were signed by Israel and Egypt. In a peace treaty six months later Israel agreed to give back Sinai to Egypt, and to grant Palestinians autonomy.¹¹



Source: https://static.972mag.com/dev/uploads/2019/07/Palestinian_refugees_1948.jpg

The next major development was in 1993 when Israel and the Palestinians, represented by the Palestine Liberation Organisation, signed the first Oslo accord, which set out a five-year period of Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip under a new entity, the Palestinian Authority.

The Oslo II accords, under which Israel handed over security responsibility to the Palestinian Authority in parts of the occupied territories, were signed in 1995 with the intention of a permanent treaty five years later. That did not happen.¹²

Five years later came the Abraham accords with bilateral agreements on Arab-Israeli normalisation signed in 2020. The name of the Abraham Accords is rooted in the common belief of the Abrahamic religions - particularly Judaism, Christianity and Islam - regarding the role of Abraham as a spiritual patriarch.

¹¹ <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2023/11/20/the-a-to-z-of-the-arab-israeli-conflict>

¹² *Ibid*

The first round of deals was between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in September 2020.



[Source: Image](#)

Sudan normalised relations with Israel the following month and Morocco in December 2020. Negotiations between Israel and Saudi Arabia were disrupted by the war between Israel and Hamas which began in October 2023.

The Abraham accords are a perfect example of the “practical” aspects of realpolitik – focus on economic benefits without being encumbered by ideological or moral constraints; more so under the stewardship of the master deal maker, former US President Donald Trump.

In exchange for Morocco's recognition of Israeli sovereignty, the United States recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. For the Sudan-Israel normalisation which is still on-going, the United States has incentivized the deal by agreeing to drop Sudan's status as a “State Sponsor of Terrorism” while also providing a loan of US\$1.2 billion to help the Sudanese government clear the country's debts to the World Bank. Although Sudan signed the declarative section of the agreement, it did not sign the corresponding document with Israel, unlike the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.¹³

So, in spite of all the talk about Arab support for Palestinian cause, none of the above treaties and accords address the issue of mass displacement of Palestine people. It was³ as if, over time, the Palestine issue was not just put on the backburner but a non-issue. The deadly and horrific terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel in October 2023 which killed around 1200 civilians and the capture of 240 hostages and the even more brutal retaliation by Israel Defence Force has brought back the Palestine issue centre stage all over the world.

On November 2, 2023, in view of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, Bahrain said in a statement that the Israeli ambassador left Bahrain, that Bahrain recalled its ambassador to Israel, and suspended all economic relations with Israel, citing a “solid and historical stance that supports the Palestinian cause and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.” The statement was made by Bahrain's parliament and Israel said they had no knowledge of the decision.¹⁴

¹³

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Accords

2.2.2 Gaza: Scarred, ruined, and silenced by death

This is the evocative title of Salam Abu Sharar's piece recently published in *Frontline*¹⁵ where he says that with Israel dropping 6,500 bombs in a week, the number the US used in Afghanistan in a year, the people of Gaza focus only on recognising the dead. Andre Damon says that after two weeks of constant bombardment that killed dozens of doctors, patients and refugees, Israeli forces entered Al-Shifa hospital and raised the Israeli flag over it and thus "Israel's war on hospitals has normalized war crimes".¹⁶

But does anything happen on its own? Do we see the working of another crusader of realpolitik; another Kissinger? Writing for The Guardian, columnist Robert Tate quotes Jewish holocaust scholar, Omer Bartov, a professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at Brown University in Rhode Island, that multiple Israeli ministers and senior figures, including the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, had made "genocidal statements" and "terrifying pronouncements" that have never been revoked. Bartov also singled out comments by Maj Gen Giora Eiland, a former head of the Israeli national security council who told Israel's Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper on 10 October that

"Gaza will become a place where no human being can exist. 'The way to win this war faster and at a lower cost to us necessitates the collapse of the systems on the other side, not the killing of more Hamas fighters,' wrote Eiland, who expanded his enemy definition to include the Gaza population whom he said cheered Hamas's atrocities... The international community warns us of a humanitarian disaster in Gaza and of severe epidemics. We must not be deterred by that ... severe epidemics in the southern strip will bring victory closer and diminish the number of IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] casualties."

Robert Tate further notes Bartov's conclusion: *"Israeli rhetoric and actions are preparing the ground for what may well become mass killing, ethnic cleansing and genocide, followed by annexation and settlement of the territory."*¹⁷



¹⁴
ibid

¹⁵
<https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/death-gaza-strip-in-israel-bombings/article67469653.ece>

¹⁶
<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2023/11/16/tltc-n16.html>

¹⁷
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/dec/04/john-kirby-white-house-genocide>

2.2.3 No guarantee of return

That's in part because there's no clear scenario for how this war will end. Israel says it intends to destroy Hamas for its bloody rampage in its southern towns. But it has given no indication of what might happen afterward and who would govern Gaza. That has raised concerns that it will reoccupy the territory for a period, fueling further conflict.

The Israeli military said Palestinians who followed its order to flee northern Gaza to the strip's southern half would be allowed back to their homes after the war ends. Egypt is not reassured. El-Sissi said fighting could last for years if Israel argues it hasn't sufficiently crushed militants. He proposed that Israel house Palestinians in its Negev Desert, which neighbors the Gaza Strip, until it ends its military operations. Riccardo Fabiani, Crisis Group International's North Africa Project Director says, "Israel's lack of clarity regarding its intentions in Gaza and the evacuation of the population is in itself problematic (and) [T]his confusion fuels fears in the neighborhood."¹⁸

Egypt has its own problems. It is dealing with a spiraling economic crisis and already hosts some 9 million refugees and migrants, including roughly 300,000 Sudanese who arrived this year after fleeing their country's war. But Arab countries and many Palestinians also suspect Israel might use this opportunity to force permanent demographic changes to wreck Palestinian demands for statehood in Gaza, the West Bank and east Jerusalem, which was also captured by Israel in 1967.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi made his toughest remarks, saying the current war was not just aimed at fighting Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, "but also an attempt to push the civilian inhabitants to migrate to Egypt." He warned this could wreck peace in the region.

Jordan's King Abdullah II gave a similar message a day earlier, saying, "No refugees in Jordan, no refugees in Egypt." Their refusal is rooted in fear that Israel wants to force a permanent expulsion of Palestinians into their countries and nullify Palestinian demands for statehood. Egypt fears history will repeat itself and a large Palestinian refugee population from Gaza will end up staying for good.¹⁹



[Source: Image](#)

¹⁸
ibid

¹⁹
<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-global/egypt-arab-countries-palestine-refugees-gaza-explained-8990382/>

2.3 India and Palestine - the journey from idealism to realpolitik

India emerged as a significant player in international diplomacy on this issue. The roots of this thinking can be attributed to Mahatma Gandhi.

In an article published in *Harijan* on November 26, 1938, Mohandas Karmachand Gandhi began by admitting that it was “a very difficult question” and that he was sympathetic to their “age-long persecution” of the Jews. But he proceeded to see it in the light of the valid claims of the other side. “My sympathy does not blind me to the requirements of justice,” he wrote.

“The cry for the national home for the Jews does not make much appeal to me...Why should they not, like other peoples of the earth, make that country their home where they are born and where they earn their livelihood?...Palestine belongs to the Arab in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French.”²⁰

He also exhorted both the Jews and the Arabs to follow a non-violent approach to conflict resolution. He made it a point to say that he was not “defending the Arab excesses” in resisting what they rightly regarded as an “unwarrantable encroachment upon their country”.

But he also noted the heavy odds faced by Palestine in such resistance as he condemned the violent nature of the fight for the homeland of the Jews “under the shadow of the British gun”.

Deploing the use of “the bayonet or the bomb” in the struggle, he urged Jews to seek settlement in Palestine only by the goodwill of the Arabs, and by attempting a change of Arab heart.

2.3.1 From heady support to measured equidistance

Thus, India's solidarity with the Palestinian cause has historically been beyond rhetoric. In 1947, India voted against the partition of Palestine at the United Nations General Assembly.

India was the first Non-Arab State to recognize PLO as sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in 1974.

India was one of the first countries to recognize the State of Palestine in 1988. All this is because the sentiment of solidarity with the Palestinian cause in India has deep socio-historic and geo-economically strategic roots, and it has frequently played a significant role in shaping India's foreign policy concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²¹

The Congress Party's legacy of support for the Palestinian cause dates back to India's independence movement where leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru who served as India's first Prime Minister, were staunch advocates for Palestinian self-determination.

²⁰ Vardhan, A. (2021, May 24). From pre-independence to 1990s: India's stand on Israel-Palestine has been tightrope walk. Newslandry. <https://www.newslandry.com/2021/05/24/from-pre-independence-to-1990s-indias-stand-on-israel-palestine-has-been-tightrope-walk>

²¹ Ibid

Palestinian students often came to Indian colleges at that time right up to the 1980s and in 1978 the government even allowed the PLO to open an office in Delhi.²² In 1996, India opened its Representative Office in Gaza, which was later shifted to Ramallah (in the West Bank) in 2003. Even prominent leader, Yassar Arafat was seen weeping at the funeral of “his sister, Indira Gandhi.”²³



Source: https://imgnew.outlookindia.com/uploadimage/library/16_9/16_9_5/IMAGE_1660292225.webp

India's position was that it supported “the Palestinian cause and called for a negotiated solution resulting in a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, living within secure and recognised borders, side by side at peace with Israel”. Then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated this position in November 2013. So did then President Pranab Mukherjee, in October 2015. Stanly Johny, International Affairs Editor at *The Hindu* writes that until 2017.

India dropped the references to East Jerusalem and the borders in 2017 when Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas visited Delhi. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said back then, “[W]e hope to see the realisation of a sovereign, independent, united and viable Palestine, coexisting peacefully with Israel. I have reaffirmed our position on this to President Abbas during our conversation today.” In 2018, when Mr. Modi visited Ramallah, he reaffirmed the same position, with no direct reference to the borders or Jerusalem.²⁴

Asked about this subtle change in India's position, a senior diplomat with the MEA told *The Hindu* in 2018 during PM Modi's Palestine visit that the issues of border and capital are among the most contentious of the Israel-Palestine conflict. “So it's up to the parties to reach a consensus on these issues. As regards we are concerned, we support the two-state solution, which means we support statehood for the Palestinians.” It is this position India has reiterated during the latest Gaza crisis.

²² Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds. (2012). National Intelligence Council. https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/GlobalTrends_2030.pdf, pp75-77.

²³ Guha, S. (2023, October 19). Friend, She Is My Elder Sister': Revisiting Yasser Arafat's Ties With Indira Gandhi. Outlook. <https://www.outlookindia.com/international/-friend-she-is-my-elder-sister-revisiting-yasser-arafat-s-ties-with-indira-gandhi-news-325476>

²⁴ Stanly Johny, What is India's Palestine position? *The Hindu*, Oct 23, 2023. [news@newsalrth.thehindu.com](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-palestine-position/article6666666.html)

2.3.2 India and Israel: has realpolitik nudged out the Palestinian cause?

As we have observed earlier, realpolitik has essentially two dimensions, economic and security. In the case of Indo-Israeli relations, both these elements come into play. Though it was only after the Oslo peace process was underway in 1992 did India open formal diplomatic ties with Israel.

Over the subsequent decade, a burgeoning if still understated defense and technology partnership brought Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to New Delhi in 2003. By then, Israel was already India's second largest arms supplier after Russia. Yet, as a recent United States Institute of Peace (USIP) analysis puts it

*"...Modi ushered India's relations with Israel completely out of the shadows. In 2017, he took a celebrated and much-photographed trip to Israel, the first for any Indian prime minister. Then in 2018, he feted Netanyahu in New Delhi. The Modi-Bibi "bromance" captured headlines in both nations, as the two took pains to play up their partnership."*²⁵

The tilt toward Israel has been aided by at least two geopolitical developments. First, India has deepened its economic and diplomatic ties with UAE (with a lessening of its traditional ties with Iran and Egypt), and UAE itself has moved closer to Israel, culminating in the Abraham accord.

The second has been I2U2, the coming together of the foreign ministers of India, Israel, UAE and USA in 2021.

So possibly it wasn't a surprise that Prime Minister Modi was the first major leader to tweet "India's solidarity with Israel at this difficult hour" after the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, and three days later a further tweet "People of India stand firmly with Israel in this difficult hour. India strongly and unequivocally condemns terrorism in all its forms and manifestations."

It was only on October 12 the Indian Ministry of External Affairs reiterated India's longstanding position in support of a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine, on October 18 in the immediate aftermath of the Al-Ahli hospital blast, Modi pointedly avoided fixing blame on Israel, tweeting only general condolences and concern.

Then, on October 27, New Delhi joined 44 other countries in abstaining from the symbolic United Nations General Assembly resolution for a humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza. If one thought that this was no more than a subtle shift with little significance, Sonia Gandhi's op-ed in The Hindu removed any doubt:

*"The Prime Minister had made no mention of Palestinian rights in the initial statement expressing complete solidarity with Israel." She added, "The Indian National Congress is strongly opposed to India's abstention on the recent United Nations General Assembly Resolution."*²⁶

²⁵ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/11/amid-war-middle-east-india-israel-ties-reach-new-milestone#:~:text=Only%20after%20the%20Oslo%20peace,to%20New%20Dehi%20in%202003>

²⁶ Sonia Gandhi, "A war where humanity is on trial now", The Hindu, Oct 30, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/a-war-where-humanity-is-on-trial-now/article67473719.ece>

But the USIP analysis referred to earlier has an explanation for New Delhi's evolving stand on Israel-Hamas war:

*"Modi's India now has a major stake in avoiding any regional military escalation that would destroy such prospects for good. Thus, whatever sympathy Indians may have for Palestinian civilians, New Delhi has none for Hamas or its backers in this fight. A quick Israeli victory followed by the imposition of a Gulf-friendly governing authority in Gaza would serve Modi's purposes better than any other outcome. If instead the flames of Gaza ignite the wider region in war, India would see its past diplomatic investments go up in smoke and, worse, could face the dangerous prospect of a reinvigorated terrorist threat at home as well."*²⁷

One can therefore argue that India's strategic considerations have now essentially been reversed. India had once reluctantly embraced Israel because of its burgeoning defense and national security needs. But its ideological sympathies then lay with the Palestinian cause.

Today, India reluctantly expresses solidarity with Palestine because it doesn't want to alienate partners in the Arab world. But its sympathies now lie with Israel.

2.3.3 Polarisation of India and Its Impact

Sociologists are likely to explain that this shift in sympathies is undergirded by the worldview of a significant section of Indians who perceive their country as an ethno-nationalist majoritarian state facing the existential threat of Islamist terrorism, and who always saw elements of Israel in their own vision of India.

Indeed, they were strong proponents of normalization of relations with Israel long before it became India's policy.

This shift is significant, more so when the state power and social structure tend to conflate. On the ground therefore, there's no nuanced statements or actions. An article in The Diplomat captioned "A Changed India Looks, Emotes, and Thinks Like Israel" reports:

*"In the state of Uttar Pradesh, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath issued orders to crack down on those supporting Palestine. Uttar Pradesh police suspended a Muslim constable for a fundraising post in support of Palestine. A case was also registered against an unidentified person for posting pictures of aerial bombings of Gaza. Meanwhile, prominent Indian news anchors declared that Israel's war against Hamas was a "war for all of us."*²⁸

This is not to suggest a wholesale shift. India is a vast and heterogeneous country and on the Palestine question, nothing captures this more than the pair of pictures below.

²⁷
USIP, op. cit

²⁸
<https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/a-changed-india-looks-emotes-and-thinks-like-israel/>



People hold placards and banner in solidarity with Israel in Ahmedabad on Monday, Oct 16, 2023



Show of support: People wear the keffiyeh during a Palestine solidarity meet organised by the Solidarity Movement at Fort Kochi.

3 G20: Significance, Limitations and Geopolitics

Sneha Mahapatra and Somnath Ghosh



Source: <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/ITtlkCMxB9c/maxresdefault.jpg>

The recently concluded G20 summit in Delhi has put the spotlight on this grouping. Apart from tracing the historical antecedents that led to the formation of G20 and its subsequent evolution, this paper examines its structural dimensions that shape the agenda, decision making process and quality of outcomes. The paper also highlights the geopolitical considerations, including relations between and among states that determine member inclusion and quality of participation. In the course of this discussion, the paper also sheds light on India's Presidency and the effectiveness of G-20 as a forum so far, and in future.

3.1 Historical antecedents

3.1.1 Well before the G-20, the origins of the G7

As the world reeled from the first oil shock in 1973 and the subsequent financial crisis, the heads of state and government of the six leading industrial countries – France, West Germany, the USA, Japan, the United Kingdom and Italy - met in 1975 to discuss the global economy.

This meeting was the initiative of French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. The first summit meeting was held at the Chateau de Rambouillet, 50 kilometres south-west of Paris.

At this first G6 summit, the leaders adopted a 15-point communiqué, the Declaration of Rambouillet, and agreed to meet in future once a year, under a rotating Presidency.

In 1976 Canada joined the group, which henceforth became known as the G7. Very next year, in 1977, the President of the European Commission was invited to attend the G7 summit. Today the President of the European Council also attends the summit meetings.

Then, in the 1980s the G7 extended its interests to embrace foreign and security policy issues. International challenges at that time included the long-standing conflict between Iran and Iraq and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. But on 18th May 1988, the Soviets began their final withdrawal from Afghanistan. Soon thereafter, Soviet Russia was formally admitted to the group, making it the G8.

Ironically this got reversed 25 years later due to another military action by Russia. In February-March 2014, Russia invaded the Crimean Peninsula, part of Ukraine, and then annexed it. The United States and the European Union responded by enacting sanctions against Russia for its role in the crisis, and urged Russia to withdraw.

Further, as a result of Russia's violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine with the annexation of Crimea, the heads of state and government of the G7 decided not to attend the planned G8 summit in Sochi under the Russian Presidency. So, rather than meeting in Sochi, the other member states met on 4 and 5 June 2014 in Brussels, again as G-7. But let us go back to how the G-7 incubated the G-20.²⁹



Source: https://www.brunswickgroup.com/media/11061/shutterstock_1988522312.jpg

3.1.2 G7 and the global financial crises of 1998-1999

A series of substantial debt crises swept through emerging markets in the late 1990s. These crises included the Mexican peso crisis and extending to the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the 1998 Russian financial crisis, and the notable collapse of the hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management in the autumn of 1998.

A forum was needed to discuss the response to these crises. Apart from the World Bank and the IMF, there were no other bodies at the international level where the developed and developing countries could come together and exchange ideas on global financial and economic issues. The World Bank and the IMF annual meetings were large and unwieldy where finance ministers delivered written speeches. The need for a more compact deliberative body was sorely felt.

²⁹

<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/service/the-history-of-the-g7>

Paul Martin who is often times described as "the crucial architect of the formation of the G20" and his American counterpart the then Treasury Secretary Larry Summers, realized that the existing structures like the G7, G8, and the World Bank and the IMF were inadequate for ensuring financial stability in an increasingly globalized world. In recognition of this limitation, they conceptualized a new, more inclusive and permanent group consisting of major world economies.

This envisioned group aimed to provide both a voice to emerging economies and share with them the responsibilities for addressing global financial stability challenges. The initiative to form such a group was taken by the G7 during the 1999 autumn meeting of the IMF and the World Bank in Washington.³⁰



3.1.3 From G7 to G20 - India among the first to join G20 in 1999

When the G-20 was being conceived, India was one of the first developing countries to be asked to join. Yashwant Sinha, then Finance Minister of India recalls the events:

"Paul Martin, the finance minister of Canada acting on behalf of the G7, invited me to a meeting in which he mentioned the idea that had already been discussed in the G7 to constitute a bigger and more representative group of finance ministers and central bank governors consisting of the G8 and some important emerging market countries to deliberate in depth upon the developing financial and economic global situation. He told me that India was naturally the first country in the group of emerging market countries he felt he should talk to.

"Will India agree to become a member of the group?" he asked me. I replied in the affirmative and then we went on to discuss the names of the other countries to be included in the group and its mandate. Discussions with the others followed and the G20 came into existence in September 1999. Martin became its first chairman and the first meeting of the group was held in Berlin in the renovated Bundestag building in December 1999. I was elected the second chairman of the group a little later. My chairmanship of the G20 was a small piece of news in the financial papers in India as was my chairmanship of the development committee of the World Bank. In the Vajpayee government, we believed in doing our work quietly without much fanfare."³¹

³⁰ <https://risingkashmir.com/one-earth-one-family-one-future-india-at-the-helm-of-g20-de6ca70b-274f-49c4-95df-79fa7723f1ab>

³¹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/g20-presidency-in-the-vajpayee-era-when-india-did-not-strut-8345539/>

Although the next meeting was scheduled to be held in Delhi in the autumn of 2001, it was shifted to New York to show the world's solidarity with the US following the terrorist 9/11 attack.

The G20 finance ministers and central bank governors finally met in New Delhi in autumn 2002 under the chairmanship of Jaswant Singh, who had by then succeeded Yashwant Sinha as finance minister.

3.1.4 Evolution Since 2009

Recognizing the inclusion of diverse political systems, former CFR fellow Stewart Patrick highlighted the G20's 2008 elevation as a pivotal moment in global governance. He argued that this group is the most appropriate platform for addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.³²

The G20 was widely credited for its swift response during the 2008 financial crisis, with experts acknowledging its pivotal role in rescuing a faltering global financial system.

In 2008 and 2009, G20 nations collaborated on a \$4 trillion spending initiative to stimulate their economies, rejected trade barriers, and implemented extensive financial system reforms.³³

During its 2009 summit, the G20 proclaimed itself as the central forum for international economic and financial collaboration. Over the following decade, the group has gained increased prominence and is acknowledged by analysts for wielding significant global influence.³⁴



³²
ibid

³³
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/international-business/g20-countries-account-for-85-of-global-gdp-75-of-world-trade/articleshow/47670497.cms>

³⁴
Officials: G-20 to supplant G-8 as international economic council". CNN. 25 September 2009. Retrieved 25 September 2009

3.1.5 Different Presidencies of the G-20 and expanding its scope

An important issue is which member nation gets to chair the G20 leaders' meeting for a given year. All countries within a group are eligible to take over the G20 Presidency when it is their group's turn. Therefore, the states within the relevant group need to negotiate among themselves to select the next G20 President. Each year, a different G20 member country assumes the presidency starting from 1 December until 30 November. This system has been in place since 2010, when South Korea, which is in Group 5, held the G20 chair.³⁵

An important decision taken was to divide the member countries into five groups to make it easier to select an annual chairman. Group one consists of Australia, Canada, Saudi Arabia and the US; group two of India, Russia, South Africa and Turkey; group three of Argentina, Brazil and Mexico; group four of France, Germany, Italy and the UK and group five of China, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea. The countries within the group decide which from amongst them will take over as chairman when it is the group's turn.

It is the presidency's prerogative to define a set of priorities, in consultation with other members, for the year ahead and that country is responsible for hosting and organizing the annual Leaders' Summit. Leaders traditionally release a final statement or communiqué summarizing agreed initiatives and policy advancements.

In June 2010, Singapore's representative at the United Nations cautioned the G20 that its decisions would impact nations of all sizes. Emphasizing the need for inclusive financial reform discussions, Singapore played a pivotal role in establishing the Global Governance Group (3G),³⁶ an informal coalition of 30 non-G20 countries, which included microstates and several Third World nations. The purpose was to collectively articulate their perspectives within the G20 framework more effectively. Singapore's leadership of the 3G was acknowledged as a justification for its invitation to the G20 summits and its related processes from 2010 to 2011 and from 2013 to 2023.³⁷

A 2011 report released by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) argued that large Asian economies such as China and India would play a more important role in global economic governance in the future. The report claimed that the rise of emerging market economies heralded a new world order, in which the G20 would become the global economic steering committee. The ADB furthermore noted that Asian countries had led the global recovery following the late-2000s recession. It predicted that the region would have a greater presence on the global stage, shaping the G20's agenda for balanced and sustainable growth through strengthening intraregional trade and stimulating domestic demand.³⁸

³⁵ *The Rotating G20 Presidency: How do member countries take turns?*. boell.de. 30 November 2016. Retrieved 3 March, 2019

³⁶ "Press Statement by the Global Governance Group (3G) on its Ninth Ministerial Meeting in New York on 22 September 2016". mfa. 22 September 2016. Retrieved 23 July, 2017.

³⁷ ["Singapore among five non-G20 nations to attend Seoul Summit" Archived 22 July 2012 at archive today. International Business Times. 25 September 2010.](#) Retrieved 12 February 2013.

³⁸ <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28608/asia2050-executive-summary.pdf>

On 1 December 2016, Germany became the host and President of the G20 and began to work within the so-called G20 Troika, which in addition to itself consists of the previous 2016 G20 President (China) and the subsequent 2018 President (Argentina).³⁹

Today the G20, composed of the finance ministries of the world's major economies, encompasses both developed and developing nations, and represents approximately 80% of the global gross world product (GWP), 75% of international trade, two-thirds of the world's population, and 60% of the Earth's land area.⁴⁰

Economic and financial coordination remains the centrepiece of each summit's agenda, but issues such as the future of work, climate change, and global health are recurring focuses as well. Broader agendas became more common in the decade following the global financial crisis, when the G20 was able to turn its attention beyond acute economic crisis management. However, at recent summits, countries have struggled to reach a unified consensus—the hallmark of previous iterations of the conference—as the interests of high- and low-income economies continue to diverge.



Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e7/Cumbre_de_Washington.jpg

3.1.6 Issues addressed beyond the economy

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a major test for the group, which Patrick has criticized for largely failing to move beyond “uncoordinated national policies.” However, G20 countries did agree to suspend debt payments owed to them by some of the world’s poorest countries, providing billions of dollars in relief.⁴¹

Although climate change has been a focus of recent summits, meetings have yielded few concrete commitments on the issue. At the 2021 Rome summit, countries agreed to curb emissions of methane and end public financing for most new coal power plants overseas, but they said nothing about limiting coal use domestically. (China, the world’s largest emitter, permitted more domestic coal power plants in 2022 than any year since 2015).

³⁹ <https://www.boell.de/en/2016/11/30/rotating-g20-presidency-how-do-member-countries-take-turns>

⁴⁰ <https://www.oecd.org/g20/about/>

⁴¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/what-is-the-g20-whos-in-it-and-what-happens-at-its-summits>

At the 2022 gathering, Indonesia agreed to close coal power plants in exchange for \$20 billion in financing from high-income countries, including the United States. But as of 2023, it is still building coal-fired plants.⁴²

The following year, Indonesia held the G20 presidency from 1 December 2021 to 30 November 2022. During its presidency, Indonesia focused on the global COVID-19 pandemic and how to collectively overcome the challenges related to it. The three priorities of Indonesia's G20 presidency were global health architecture, digital transformations, and sustainable energy transitions.⁴³

3.2 Structure as a facilitator and inhibitor

Policy and international relations experts argue that the G20's composition is superior to that of G7. The G20 including emerging democracies like Brazil, India, and Indonesia, along with influential autocratic nations such as China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, better reflects the current distribution of international power compared to earlier groups like the G7.⁴⁴ (Russia's G7 membership was indefinitely suspended in 2014 due to its annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region).

Interestingly, the expansion of G7 into G20 has not extinguished the existence of G7. While G7 members are members of G20 as well, G7 has retained its separate identity. In a sense the relationship of G7 with G20 is similar to that of Security Council with General Assembly of the United Nations; but without the element of veto power. The G7 with smaller number of members with similar economic and political configurations was a much tighter and cohesive grouping. In contrast, the G20 is diverse and less compact, if not unwieldy.

In addition to these 21 members, the chief executive officers of several other international forums and institutions participate in meetings of the G20. These include the managing director and Chairman of the International Monetary Fund, the President of the World Bank, the International Monetary and Financial Committee and the Chairman of the Development Assistance Committee.

An issue that has occasionally surfaced relates to the establishment of a permanent secretariat. It has been argued that the G20 has been using the OECD as a secretariat. In 2010, President of France Nicolas Sarkozy proposed the establishment of a permanent G20 secretariat, similar to the United Nations. Seoul and Paris were suggested as possible locations for its headquarters. Brazil and China supported the establishment of a secretariat, while Italy and Japan expressed opposition to the proposal. South Korea proposed a "cyber secretariat" as an alternative.

Like the G7, the G20 is not based on a treaty and has no permanent secretariat. In 2008, in the wake of another global financial crisis, it was decided to raise the G20 to the summit level. Two tracks were created: One of the finance ministers and the central bank governors and the other of Sherpa to tackle other issues like climate change.

⁴² <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/g20-leaders-try-cap-global-warming-1.5-degrees-draft-2021-10-30/>

⁴³ https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&id=9051&lid=5884

⁴⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/what-is-g20-what-are-key-issues-2023-summit-2023-09-04/>

3.2.1 Who gets to join, and who cannot

Although the G20 has stated that the group's "economic weight and broad membership gives it a high degree of legitimacy and influence over the management of the global economy and financial system", its legitimacy has been challenged.⁴⁵ A 2011 report for the Danish Institute for International Studies criticised the G20's exclusivity, particularly highlighting its under-representation of African countries and its practice of inviting observers from non-member states as a mere "concession at the margins", which does not grant the organisation representational legitimacy.

Concerning the membership issue, US President Barack Obama noted the difficulty of pleasing everyone: "Everybody wants the smallest possible group that includes them. So, if they're the 21st largest nation in the world, they want the G-21, and think it's highly unfair if they have been cut out." Others stated in 2011 that the exclusivity is not an insurmountable problem and proposed mechanisms by which it could become more inclusive.⁴⁶

Moreover, Norwegian Prime Minister, Støre believes that the G20, a group of influential countries making global decisions, "isn't fair because it leaves out many important nations, including Norway" He has stated that decisions affecting the whole world should involve everyone, not just a select few. This exclusion, according to him, undermines the importance of international organizations formed after World War II, and he advocates for a more inclusive approach in global decision-making.



Source: <https://cloudfront-us-east-2.images.arcpublishing.com/reuters/QJABQX3XARNH3CAZSGHA7BFQ3M.jpg>

⁴⁵ <https://www.cgdev.org/article/overhaul-g-20-sake-g-172-financial-times>

⁴⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13600826.2020.1739630?needAccess=true>

In addition, before the 2009 G20 London summit, the Polish government expressed an interest in joining with Spain and the Netherlands and condemned an "organisational mess" in which a few European leaders spoke in the name of the collective EU without legitimate authorisation in cases which belong to the European Commission. During a 2010 meeting with foreign diplomats, Polish president Lech Kaczyński said:

"The Polish economy is according to our data the 18th world economy. The place of my country is among the members of the G20. This is a very simple postulate: firstly – it results from the size of the Polish economy, secondly – it results from the fact that Poland is the biggest country in its region and the biggest country that has experienced a certain story. That story is a political and economic transformation." ⁴⁷

Poland's GDP in 2021 (over \$655 billion according to IMF estimates) was significantly larger than those of South Africa (\$415 billion) and Argentina (\$455 billion), which have the smallest economies among G20 countries. Poland has been campaigning to replace Russia in G20 ⁴⁸.

During a visit to Washington in March 2022, Poland's development minister, Piotr Nowak, told US Trade Representative Katherine Tai that there should be "no place for Russia in the G20" after it "violated the rules of international cooperation by attacking Ukraine". Nowak further argued that Poland's admission to the group would be a mark of success for Western institutions, showing how they had effectively supported Poland's post-communist transition over the last three decades.⁴⁹

Independent of the Polish minister's plea, that very month U.S. President Joe Biden called for the removal of Russia from the group. Alternatively, he suggested that Ukraine be allowed to attend the G20 2022 summit, despite its lack of membership.⁵⁰ Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also said the group should "re-evaluate" Russia's participation.⁵¹

Russia claims it would not be a significant issue, as most G20 members are already fighting Russia economically due to the war.⁵² China suggested that expelling Russia would be counterproductive.⁵³ In November 2022, Indonesia and Russia stated that Vladimir Putin would not attend the G20 summit in person, but may attend virtually.⁵⁴

Interestingly, during the 2022 summit, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy delivered a video statement where he repeatedly referred to the assembly as the 'G19,' expressing his stance on the exclusion of Russia from the group.

⁴⁷ Kamila Wronowska (2 March 2010). *"Polska w G-20 – warto się bić?"* [Poland in the G-20 – is it worth the fight?]. *dziennik.pl* (in Polish)

⁴⁸ <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/03/23/poland-campaigns-to-replace-russia-in-g20/>

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ [Canberra considers barring Vladimir Putin from G20 in Brisbane over Crimea crisis". The Australian. 20 March 2014. Retrieved 7 October 2015](#)

⁵¹ Boisvert, Nick (31 March 2022). *"Trudeau calls on G20 to reconsider Russia's seat at the table". CBC News*. Retrieved 31 March 2022

⁵² Pettypiece, Shannon (24 March 2022). *"Biden says allies must stay united against Russia, expel it from the G-20". NBC News*. Retrieved 25 March 2022

⁵³ Sommerlad, Joe (25 March 2022). *"What is the G20 and could Russia be expelled?". The Independent*. Retrieved 25 March 2022

⁵⁴ Teresa, Ananda (10 November 2022). *"Russia's Putin will not attend G20 summit in Bali in person". Reuters*. Retrieved 12 November 2022.

That the Global South must be paid greater heed to is an obvious fact, one to which the upholders of the order established after the Second World War have remained deaf for too long. However, the worst thing would be for the countries that make it up to emerge as new agents of inertia, at a time when the world is threatened with fragmentation.⁵⁵

So, when New Delhi presided over the admittance of the African Union (AU) - also the first inclusion since 1999 - expanding representation to fifty-five countries, this allowed Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to "showcase his status as the leader of a rising India," according to CFR's Manjari Chatterjee Miller and Clare Harris.

3.3 India's Presidency

India took over the Presidency from Indonesia. As the 2023 host, India sought to cast itself as a voice for the so-called Global South, framing the agenda around issues facing lower-income countries. These included rising debt levels, persistently high inflation, depreciating local currencies, food insecurity, and increasing severe weather events associated with climate change.

The fanfare and razzmatazz surrounding India's 2023 G20 presidency was such that most Indians would be forgiven if they thought that this was the first time that the Summit was being held and it was India that was hosting it. The Delhi meet in 2002 was after all so low key and it was in such a distant past.

3.3.1 Summit theme

The New Delhi summit was held on September 9 and 10. The summit was essentially the culmination of all the G20 processes and meetings held throughout the year among ministers, senior officials, and civil societies. The theme of the summit Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam or "वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्" in Sanskrit or translated as "One Earth, One Family, One Future" in English.

In an interview on 26 August 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed optimism about the G20 countries' evolving agenda under India's presidency, shifting toward a human-centric development approach that aligns with the concerns of the Global South, including addressing climate change, debt restructuring through the G20's Common Framework for debt, and a strategy for regulation of global cryptocurrencies.



वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्
ONE EARTH • ONE FAMILY • ONE FUTURE

Source:

<https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/image/image001CHJU.jpg>

⁵⁵
Ibid

3.3.2 India's G20 priorities

India's G20 priorities encompassed financing sustainable urbanization, leading in the energy transition, and enhancing global health systems. The focus on upgrading city infrastructure and services acknowledged the challenges of rapid urbanization, but critics questioned the feasibility of mobilizing \$5.5 trillion annually and stress the importance of addressing existing urban issues.

In the realm of energy transition, India's commitment to renewable/s has been commendable, yet sceptics raised concerns about the ambitious targets and the actual implementation of programs like the National Hydrogen Mission. The call for G20 collaboration on critical minerals and supply chains faced scepticism regarding the practicality of such coordination.⁵⁶

On healthcare, the emphasis on global cooperation post-COVID-19 is vital, but critics argued that more concrete steps were needed for equitable vaccine distribution and healthcare access.

Additionally, while the mention of the Digital Health Mission was promising, there were concerns about data privacy and the potential exclusion of marginalized populations.

While the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) support was acknowledged, critics have questioned the feasibility and impact of initiatives like creating "Investable Cities" and the Climate and Health Hub. Scepticism was also there regarding the effectiveness of ADB's support in achieving tangible outcomes, particularly in the context of addressing complex challenges like climate change and health crises.

While India's G20 agenda was ambitious and commendable, a critical lens revealed potential challenges in implementation, financing, and the actual impact on the ground. Addressing these concerns and ensuring transparency and accountability was crucial for the success and lasting legacy of India's G20 Presidency.



⁵⁶ <https://www.adb.org/news/features/indias-g20-presidency-opportunity>.

3.3.3 Challenges to Consensus

A rough edge to the summit was the absence of three leaders: Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. No previous G20 summit has had so many absentees among leaders. Of the missing leaders, Xi's absence was perhaps the most telling – he leads the world's second-largest economy - and has never skipped a G20 summit in the past.

Commenting on this, Ashok Kantha, former Indian ambassador to Beijing and also former secretary in India's foreign ministry where he oversaw relations with 65 countries, observed: "This will be seen as a negative signal from China – both in bilateral and global relations. It sends a signal that relations are still in a downward spiral and shows China's lack of commitment to G20".

During the 2023 Delhi Summit, any labeling of Russia as a war-monger, along with any explicit condemnation of its actions, was muted. The broad invitation for all nations to respect "territorial integrity and sovereignty" left Moscow unimpressed, considering its historical actions that contradict such principles. Notably, Vladimir Putin's absence in India prevented a potentially embarrassing image for the G20, avoiding a situation where the Moscow leader would be present at a memorial dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi, an advocate of non-violence and the father of Indian independence.

Despite denouncing the use of force for territorial gain, the G20 statement refrained from directly criticizing Russia by name, stating that there were "different views and assessments of the situation." This approach drew criticism from Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Oleg Nikolenko, who remarked that the G20 had "nothing to be proud of."

Moreover, the deteriorating relationship between India and Canada, marked by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's explosive accusations of Indian involvement in the assassination of a Sikh leader, cast a shadow over the recent G20 summit held in India. Trudeau's claims led to a tit-for-tat expulsion of diplomats and a frosty reception for the Canadian leader at the summit, underlining the severity of the tensions.

The suspension of trade talks between the two nations further underscored the economic impact of political differences. The dispute's global implications were evident as other G20 nations, including the United States, expressed concern and emphasized the need for a thorough investigation. Additionally, Trudeau's domestic political struggles and the perceived insensitivity to India's concerns about rising extremism within the Sikh diaspora in Canada pose challenges to Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy.⁵⁷

The Declaration, a result of intense negotiations among G20 member nations, also lacks a comprehensive reassessment of neoliberal market-driven economies and GDP-centric growth paradigms. It raised concerns over the Declaration's omission of critical issues such as the erosion of civic space and the global decline in democracy. "This alarming trend is especially pertinent in several G20 countries, including China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Türkiye, Mexico, and India, as highlighted by CIVICUS's Civic Space Monitor," it said.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ <https://www.orfonline.org/research/trudeau-has-lost-the-plot-on-india/>

⁵⁸ <https://thewire.in/rights/civil-society-calls-out-g20-declarations-omission-of-civic-space-erosion-democracy-decline>

3.4 An assessment of G-20

The obvious advantage of a forum like G20 is that it gets together some of the most powerful leaders of the world. For example, the 2016 summit in China also showed the power of bringing leaders together when President Barack Obama and the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, announced that their countries would sign on to the Paris Agreement on climate.



Source: https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160907_g20_hangzhou_summit.jpg

More recently, in 2021, the G20 supported a major tax overhaul that included a global minimum tax of at least 15 percent for each country. It also backed new rules that would require large global businesses like Amazon to pay taxes in countries where their products are sold, even if they lack offices there.

The plan promised to add billions in government revenue and make tax havens less of a driving force for corporations. But, as with a lot of G20 statements, follow-through has been weak.

According to the International Monetary Fund “The global tax agreement is an important step in the right direction, but it is not yet operational.”⁵⁹

3.4.1 Effectiveness

So, what accounts for this lack of effectiveness? There seems to be five major reasons.

The first is the *non-binding* nature of G20 Declarations, even when unanimous. For example, despite the G20 introducing a unified framework for debt treatment before its 2020 summit, only four countries—Chad, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Zambia—have sought debt relief under this arrangement. Experts attribute this low uptake to divisions among lending countries.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/06/world/asia/g20-summit-india.html>

⁶⁰ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-does-g20-do>

“No framework for coordination among official creditors can work if official creditors don’t have enough in common to work together,” CFR senior fellow Brad W. Setser wrote in March 2023. “The ‘Common Framework’ exists in name only.”⁶¹ International lenders are now considering ways to reform the framework. There are numerous such examples about G-20 intentional declarations not getting implemented for years.

Second, economic and strategic compulsions trump intent, with the latter pushed back to near future at best. For example, on the climate-energy nexus, it is noteworthy that the G20 countries account for almost 75% of global carbon emissions.

Despite these promises G20 members have subsidised fossil fuel companies over \$3.3 trillion between 2015 and 2021, with several states increasing subsidies; Australia (+48.2%), the US (+36.7%), Indonesia (+26.6%), France (+23.8%), China (+4.1%), Brazil (+3.0%), Mexico (+2.6%). China alone generates over half of the coal-generated electricity in the world.⁶²

Third is structural-systemic inadequacies. For example, apart from the contentious handling of climate change issues, G20 nations have been grappling with internal disagreements on how to address the economic repercussions that disproportionately affected emerging economies.

The conflict-related energy crisis stemming from the war in Ukraine has resulted in shortages of food, surging energy prices, and inflationary pressures.

These factors have contributed to a strengthening U.S. dollar, negatively impacting the currencies of emerging economies. Consequently, more nations are seeking financial assistance from international lenders, with over a hundred countries requesting urgent aid from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since the start of the pandemic. In 2022, IMF lending to struggling economies reached a record high of \$140 billion.

Fourth is the very composition of G20. In a recent article in The New York Times⁶³ (Sept 6, 2023) Why the G20 Keeps Failing, and Still Matters, Damien Cave says that “summits like the one in India have produced many ambitious statements — and, often, disappointing results.

Most of the grouping’s joint statements since it formed in 1999 have been dominated by resolutions as solid as gas fumes, with no clear consequences when nations underperform.” This is because the G20 was flawed from the start, with a membership roster based on the whims of Western finance officials and central bankers.

Robert Wade, a political economy professor at the London School of Economics, said “[German and American officials] went down the list of countries saying, Canada in, Portugal out, South Africa in, Nigeria and Egypt out, and so on.”

⁶¹ *Ibid*

⁶² *Ibid*

⁶³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/06/world/asia/g20-summit-india.html#:~:text=Many%20foreign%20policy%20experts%20argue,for%20modernization%20in%20international%20institutions>

An apocryphal story lies behind Argentina's membership of G-20. Argentina is neither an emerging economy nor among the 20 largest. It is a G20 member because one of its former economy ministers, Domingo Cavallo, was a Harvard roommate of Larry Summers, the U.S. Treasury secretary from 1999 to 2001; and the organization still suffered from a "lack of representational procedures," without a well-defined process for inclusion. "A given state is in or out, permanently".

Fifth, dissatisfaction with globalization and free trade has made it harder for G20 members to agree on a consensus about how to hold the world together. Conflicts have supplanted G20 team efforts.

Nationalism has surged as networked economies have come to look far riskier after the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, which has pushed up food and energy prices for countries far from the front lines.

Stewart Patrick, director of the Global Order and Institutions Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace said: "There's a lot more dissatisfaction with hyper-globalization, open trade and free capital. In a situation where the global economy is fracturing and countries are pursuing their own thing, the question is, what do you do when you still have rules and institutions that were created for a very different environment?" ⁶⁴

Finally, the cost and extent of summit-related security is often a contentious issue in the hosting country, and G20 summits have attracted protesters from a variety of backgrounds, including information activists, opponents of fractional-reserve banking and anti-capitalists. In 2010, the Toronto G20 summit sparked mass protests and rioting, leading to the largest mass arrest in Canada's history.⁶⁵



Source: https://uppingtheanti.org/images/uploads/_resized/G20-Kettling.jpg

⁶⁴ *Ibid*

⁶⁵ <https://www.g20.org/en/workstreams/engagement-groups/>

3.4.2 Looking ahead

Many foreign policy experts argue that the G20's failures simply point to the need for modernization in international institutions. Dani Rodrik and Stephen M. Walt's in *Foreign Affairs* said: "It is increasingly clear that the existing,

Western-oriented approach is no longer adequate to address the many forces governing international power relations." And they see a future with less agreement, in which "Western policy preferences will prevail less and each country will have to be granted greater leeway in managing its economy, society and political system."⁶⁶

Some have called for a reformulated G20, by discussing how to separate the benefits of trade from the risks of overindulging the free-market system that the organization was built to protect. "The G20 would be a natural place to begin hammering out what rules of peaceful coexistence permit countries to share in a more tempered globalization (and) that would be a positive agenda."⁶⁷



Source: <https://img2.chinadaily.com.cn/images/202309/11/64fe4565a310d2dc6d27986a.jpeg>

⁶⁶ Cave, *op. cit*

⁶⁷ Ibid