

INDIA'S G20 YEAR: LOOKING BEYOND THE HYPE

by

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India landed the leading role on the world stage in 2023, playing host to the [G20 Summit in New Delhi](#) as it took on the Presidency and arguably became the leading voice for the emerging Global South. Last year was one of firsts for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who saw his country overtake China as the most populous country, become the fourth country to [land on the surface of the moon](#), and become the world's [fifth largest economy](#). However, while the headlines for 2023 were overwhelmingly positive for Modi and broader India, a closer look at India's foreign policy reveals that not everything was cause for celebration.

The Good and the Bad

It was easy to see the good news. Back in May, countries from the Global South were keen on drawing India closer, evidenced by Prime Minister James Marape of Papua New Guinea, [who welcomed Modi](#) at the India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) Summit by reaching down and touching his feet, an act of respect in Indian culture. That theme of India as the standard bearer for the developing South continued into the BRICS Summit in South Africa. But beyond the hype of image and the elevation of expectations, India's year in foreign policy was less than stellar.

The G20 Summit was illustrative of bad news hushed by the spectacle of India's global branding. Modi was masterful in pushing through a joint G20 Declaration under the theme of "One Earth, One Family, One Future", but overall, the Summit whitewashed problems that followed India prior to the G20 and will now persist into Brazil's Presidency in 2024. A ["compliment sandwich"](#) of criticism is a more apt description, where praise softens negative feedback, making it easier for recipients to hear and receive difficult criticism. Modi rightly [elevated the African Union to permanent member status](#) within the G20,

giving it the same status as the European Union (EU), but the larger takeaways from the Summit were deep, unresolved divisions between India and the West, particularly over contentious issues like Ukraine and climate change.

For example, while the [G20 Communique](#) was complementary of Turkey's efforts to "ensure the immediate and unimpeded deliveries of grain, foodstuffs, and fertilizers/inputs from the Russian Federation and Ukraine", it completely ignored the reasons why UN and Istanbul-brokered initiatives were necessary in the first place, namely a unilateral, brutal invasion of a sovereign nation which has now [killed more than 350,000 Russian soldiers](#) and an untold number of Ukrainian military and civilian casualties. The Communique was also careful not to criticize Russia for its actions, in keeping with India's previous actions in the UN where it [repeatedly abstained from voting](#) on General Assembly Resolutions critical of Moscow as well as from voting on a UN Human Rights Council Resolution that [extended the term of the Special Rapporteur on Russia](#), Mariana Katzarova of Bulgaria.

Blowing Hot and Cold

On climate change, the Communique pushed India's commitment to renewable energy, but was [less committed to language that would phase out fossil fuels](#), the main source of contention at the COP29 Climate Change Conference [several months down the road](#). The only real mention in India's G20 Communique were vague references to ending mid-term fossil fuel subsidies. India's domestic consumption of fossil fuels, [including its tripling of underground coal mining](#), are reminders of both its national dependence and diplomatic reluctance—hardly indicative of the "green summit" leader it was billed in earlier months of the year.

India deserves ample credit for coming to the aid of Sri Lanka during its [troublesome economic crisis](#), to Pacific Island countries, [especially after volcanic eruptions in Papua New Guinea](#) in late November, and it has become a reliable security partner for Indo-Pacific countries, [especially for Japan](#). However, outside the region it did itself no favors

by swiftly coming to the defense of Israel shortly after the October 7 attack by Hamas militants, issuing a statement of support [without hesitation or reservation](#). The move was a radical departure from India's traditional diplomatic position in the Middle East, and for many reasons, undermined its position among Gulf state countries whose animosities toward the United States and Tel Aviv has grown as the conflict has escalated and [killed more than 22,000 Palestinians](#), two-thirds of which are women and children. India's ties with Israel have grown since 2013, and it has become a mass importer of Israeli weapons, which [were eighth worldwide at the time](#).

Worse, the ethnonationalism emanating from inside and outside of India has consequences in 2024, where [many millions will go to the polls](#). Nationalist rhetoric, [according to a Hindutva Watch report](#), spiked in the first half of 2023, with 255 documented incidents of hate speech gatherings targeting Muslims, with 80 percent of those events coming from areas that are governed by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Of Friends and Foes

India also did itself no favors by allowing the [potentially disastrous BRICS expansion](#), which now includes Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Argentina, who joined in August, [recently withdrew](#) as its new President, libertarian Javier Gerardo Milei, sought closer ties with the United States. The BRICS expansion arguably does little to benefit India in the long-term, as China, its regional rival, has significantly greater clout with each of the new members, especially Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In a geopolitical struggle with China, India cannot afford major disruptions to its image and public diplomacy in the Middle East. Its recently developed [India-Middle East Economic Corridor \(IMEC\)](#), a

passage involving several countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Greece and Israel, would be weakened the longer the IDF's war in Gaza persists. Already branded as a country reluctant to wean itself from fossil fuels, a wider conflict threatens India's oil imports from the region and puts greater reliance on an unstable Russia.

The so-called compliment sandwich being fed to the world regarding India's success in 2023 does no one any favors, nor do the glamorous headlines that add myth and undeserved image to India's foreign policy reputation, as for each security partnership secured or infrastructure project approved there are constant reminders of issues unresolved and swept largely under the rug. 2024 brings many of the same consequential issues back to the table, as bloody conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza linger, solutions reached at COP28 on climate change are tenuous at best, and Modi's deliberate obfuscation of Putin's geopolitical disaster makes mockery of Western efforts to contain the latter.

Evidenced by Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar's visit to Moscow late last year, India is moving from a neutral stance on the war in Ukraine to an [expanded trade arrangement](#) where in a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, discussed "the prospects for military-technical cooperation, including the joint production of modern types of weapons."

India's chaotic 2023 may be over, but it opens with a less-than-auspicious start to 2024.

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