

India: The Hype Over the G-20 Summit

Monday 18 September 2023, by [Radical Socialist \(India\)](#) (Date first published: 18 September 2023).

Even more than in the case of his predecessors, the Modi government has sought to use foreign policy related initiatives for domestic purposes, namely to project himself as a world statesman and India under his reign as a growing and recognized world power, which it is not. Indeed, because of both Pakistan and China, India cannot even successfully claim to be the dominant and uncontested regional power.

The costs incurred of playing host to the summit, as revealed by BJP leader Meenakshi Lekhi, is over 4200 crores or more than four times the budgeted amount and much greater than the costs incurred in any previous G-20 summit. This is itself probably an under-estimate. Most of it was spent on building the complex that housed the 3-day summit meetings, on putting up the guests at hotels, giving them hugely expensive gifts, providing security arrangement but ridiculously excessive amounts were undoubtedly spent on 'beautification' of the specific routes and places that visitors would be travelling to officially or for organised sight-seeing. This 'beautification' did not mean reconstructing former slum sites or providing decent and permanent homes for the homeless. Rather, it was for grandiose publicizing of the occasion in which pictorial images of Modi were set up at a scale and frequency that would have made Hitler's faithful propagandist Goebbels proud.

The Indian media almost unanimously went gaga with any number of foreign policy 'experts' going on about how politically important the event was and how important it was that there was a consensus on the final declaration. That there was a consensus was a huge face-saver for the Indian government since a failure would not only have been a huge embarrassment but could have imperilled the persistence of the G-20 itself. The price paid for avoiding this was a text that was simply an exercise in platitudinous 'diplomatese' that would offend no one, and therefore gave no serious direction on how global problems of war, alliance confrontations, inequities of capitalist development, ecological damage, could be meaningfully addressed.

To understand why this is the appropriate judgement we need to understand the true historical purpose and meaning of G-20. This body emerged in 1999 from the initiative taken by the G-7 after a series of global financial crises had taken place during the decade of the nineties. The aim was to bring in the major world economies of Russia, China and a select few of the leading countries of the South ('middle powers') by weaning them away from the grouping of G-77 that after expansion comprised 134 developing countries. The G-20 would then a) rob the developing world of its effective leaderships; b) simultaneously pander to the egos of incoming ruling class governments now delighted to being recognized as belonging to the global country elite; c) help to better stabilise the global capitalist order through agreed upon policies regarding the organisation of trade, investment and financial flow even as there would remain competition for uneven distribution of benefits for respective ruling classes and their representative governments. The developmental and social concerns of the mass of people in the developing countries, and even of the poor, indigent and deprived within the 'middle powers' now in the G-20, have never been of primary importance.

Existing tensions and even hostilities between the key countries within the G-20, notably between US/UK/EU and Russia and China means the grouping is of no political consequence when it comes to

seriously enhancing human security, preventing wars, promoting democracy and opposing authoritarian movements and regimes even among its member countries.

What finally about the much talked about and commended inclusion of the African Union (AU) alongside the EU and the other 19 countries? Perhaps it might now graduate to being called the G-21? Please note that even as the EU is a member its three most powerful countries---Germany, France, Italy---have separate independent membership. But at least the EU is a coherent entity having unified social policies and significant economic power. The AU is nothing like the EU. Though comprised of 55 member countries and despite its founding declarations twenty one years ago, it is still not a customs union, not a single market, has no central bank or common currency. Its member countries are divided into eight different regional economic communities (REC) and the relationship of the AU towards them is so weak that there is no foreseeable prospect of these RECs dissolving to become a single AU economic community. Politically, the picture is more dismal. The AU's role as a peacekeeper and mediator in inter-state and intra-state conflicts has been infrequent, limited and at best supplementary to other major actors, domestic or even forces from outside Africa. The AU depends on external donors for over two-thirds of its annual funding while on average, some 30 member countries each year fully or partially default on their required contributions. Worse, the stronger governments shape its direction and the failure of the AU to adequately or seriously address the developmental needs of the continent's poor has resulted in serious criticisms from a host of progressive civil society associations throughout the continent. There have also been serious allegations of corruption at its highest levels of governance.

Those who want a transformative agenda and practice for addressing our problems worldwide of 1) mass poverty amidst obscenely rising inequalities of income and wealth; 2) ecological sustainability; 3) sustenance, expansion and deepening of democratic freedoms; and 4) securing a much more peaceful and just global order, should not look to bodies like G-20 whatever the hype provided by Modi, his acolytes and a self-deluding Indian elite.

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