



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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Cover Image:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Indian Space Research Organisation's Telemetry, Tracking and Command Centre in Bengaluru on August 26, 2023. (Source: [PM Modi/Official Twitter Account](#))

Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, along with leaders of BRICS at the 15th BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa on August 24, 2023. (Source: [BRICS Summit/Official Website](#))

US President Joseph Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at Camp David for Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the United States trilateral meeting on August 18, 2023. Source: ([US Embassy and Consulates in Japan/Official Website](#))

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Global Horizons

by

Nalin Surie

The spectacular and perfect landing of India's Chandrayaan-3 on the lunar south pole on August 23, viewed live across the world, was without question the high point of the month not only for India, but also for many countries, both developed and of the South. The ability and determination of India's space scientists to learn from the unfortunate crash of Chandrayaan-2 four years ago, and deliver a successful landing, conveyed a message widely appreciated and recognised. That the landing happened during an ongoing BRICS Summit gave out its own set of signals, including the further strengthening of India's S&T structure and its foreign and security policies.

August was hardly a vacation month. Intense activity continued as part of the complex and deep ongoing churn in international relations, the final outcome and complexion of which remains uncertain.

The United States (US) continued its dual policy vis-à-vis China, seeking to box it in, both in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, while at the same time restoring channels of communications on diplomatic, security and economic aspects. China has responded in some measure, but communications on defence and security issues remain stalemated. At the same time, the US continued to firmly backstop its own, and NATO's, support for Ukraine in the war with Russia, which appeared to be essentially bogged down and set for the long haul. China has a vital stake in the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

An important outcome of US diplomacy in East Asia was the first ever US-ROK-Japan trilateral summit held in Camp David on August 18 and decisions taken to ring-fence their coming together from leadership changes in these countries. The clear but unstated cause for this success was the actions of China in the region, and the assessment of these two hard core allies of the US that China now poses a direct threat to their security and that of Taiwan. It is ironic to say the least that China has brought Japan and ROK together after decades of lack of trust between them on account of historical factors.

The outcomes of the trilateral summit are to be institutionally supported and constitute a significant move by the US on the chessboard to check China and its hegemonic activities in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. They include elevating trilateral defence cooperation; the commitment to consult on threats and coordinate responses; maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and

addressing economic coercion; and enhancing economic cooperation to build a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Needless to say, the Chinese reaction has been visceral.

Secretary of State Blinken has invited the Chinese Foreign Minister to visit in the autumn, and the US Commerce Secretary Raimondo visited China from August 27-30 to find ways and means of managing the bilateral trade and economic relationship against the perspective of US efforts to decouple/de-risk supply chains and high technology transfers to China. From reports of her meetings, it would appear that the Chinese are standing firm and seeking reciprocity. They are aware that they hold several important cards in the existing, extensive economic relationship with the US and their own technology development plans are being put in place. Interestingly, the Chinese holding of US Treasury bills is now down to USD 835 billion, the lowest since 2010. For their part, US experts seem to believe that the Chinese economy is now in serious trouble and President Xi's policies may further aggravate the situation. President Biden, for instance, referred on August 12 to the state of the Chinese economy as a ticking time bomb. These assessments need not, however, be taken at face value.

In a reminder of its unilaterally declared boundaries, China published a fresh map on August 31. Serious protests were lodged not only by India but also by the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Taiwan. Nepal, too, reportedly felt aggrieved that its claims on India were not correctly depicted in the Chinese map!

The war in Ukraine staggers on. The Chinese Defence Minister visited Russia and Belarus in mid-August. There are reports that some Chinese suppliers have found ways to bolster Russia's war effort with supplies of both lethal and non-lethal equipment.

A fresh grain export agreement for Ukraine has yet to be worked out with Russia, but there are reports that President Erdogan of Turkey will once again play midwife.

Saudi Arabia hosted a meeting on August 5-6 of senior officials from about 40 countries to try and find ways of ending the war in Ukraine. (India attended at the level of its National Security Advisor, as did the US.) China was invited and attended. Russia was not invited. Ukraine President Zelenskyy attended. Details of outcomes and follow up are not clear, but there will no doubt be further efforts to find ways and means to end this war, whose impact has willy-nilly spilled into the Global South in a variety of ways, and not just in matters of food and fertiliser security. An earlier, more limited version of this meeting had been

held in Copenhagen in June, where too India had participated. The moot question though is whether any solution can be worked out without Russia's direct participation.

Within Russia, the expected happened. Wagner PMC head Prigozhin was killed on August 23 when the aircraft he was travelling in crashed. How this will impact on President Putin's inner circle, and on the future of the Wagner PMC operations in Russia/Ukraine and Africa, is no doubt a work in progress. President Putin did not attend the BRICS summit in South Africa, and will not attend the G20 Summit in Delhi in September either.

In Africa, serious new developments have taken place, while the situation in Sudan continues to be dire. The coups in Niger, an ECOWAS member, in late July and in Gabon (Central Africa) on August 30 have again put the spotlight on the need for genuine democracy, the rule of law and elimination of outside influence and interference. This will require a concerted and genuine effort on the part of major powers who seek proxies in these countries for their own benefit. It will also require the international community to genuinely assist the African Union and regional organisations in Africa that wish to engender democracy and the rule of law among their members.

The fifteenth BRICS Summit was held in Johannesburg on August 22-24. There was fulsome participation by PM Modi, Presidents Ramaphosa, Xi and Lula. Russia was represented by Foreign Minister Lavrov. A lengthy but workmanlike declaration was issued identifying work and cooperation areas. The relative focus on Africa and African issues was desirable. The idea also was for BRICS to mainstream the Global South.

The main political focus was on expansion of membership for which criteria appear to have been agreed and there was, from among a large number of prospective members, consensus on Argentina, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and UAE. All the original members obviously have good relations with the six new members for there to have been consensus. According to media reports, President Lula had, before the summit, postulated that new members would be selected according to their geopolitical importance and not the ideology of their governments. This begs the question why, for instance, countries like Nigeria and Indonesia were left out. Similarly, the support in the final communique for South Africa as a permanent member of the UN Security Council would leave countries like Nigeria and Indonesia doubly aggrieved.

More new members will undoubtedly be admitted at subsequent summits, but the process will become that much more difficult and may ultimately end up dividing the Global South.

Both PM Modi and President Xi were very active at the summit. In his remarks to the summit, Xi said that “we (BRICS) do not barter away principles, succumb to external pressure or act as vassals of others”. Also that “we BRICS countries should be fellow companions on the journey of development and revitalisation and oppose decoupling and supply chain disruption as well as economic coercion”. Chinese fears and concerns were out in the open, in spite of its huge investments in Africa and additional proposals made at the summit. It is noteworthy that the Johannesburg Declaration contains no references to Xi Jinping’s flagship proposals on BRI, GDI, GSI and GCI.

For his part, PM Modi at the summit, in addition to other concrete proposals redefined BRICS as “Breaking barriers, Revitalising economies, Inspiring Innovation, Creating opportunities, and Shaping the future”. He called for the BRICS to take steps to increase the self-confidence of the countries of the Global South, and for them to support India’s proposal to include the African Union in the G20.

In his briefing to the media on the BRICS summit, India’s Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra identified fifteen themes in PM Modi’s proposals at various meetings in and at summit related meetings. These include: timeline for UNSC reform, reform of multilateral financial institutions and WTO, expansion of BRICS, setting up a space exploration consortium of the organisation, offer of digital infrastructure stack of India, need for skill mapping/skilling/greater mobility among workers, protection of big cats, inspiring innovation, addressing the challenges of terrorism, climate change, conservation, cyber security, food and health security, resilient supply chains and disaster mitigation.

Interestingly, the Johannesburg BRICS declaration, in para 16 dealing with the addressing of regional challenges in Africa “to resolve international disputes and conflicts”, suggests that these be settled “on the basis of mutual respect, compromise and the balance of legitimate interests”.

Prior to the summit, the impression was seemingly created that the BRICS would move towards their own currency with the objective of moving away from the US Dollar in international trade etc. This motivated speculation obviously turned out to be incorrect. The Johannesburg document calls upon members to “encourage use of local currencies in international trade and

financial transactions between BRICS as well as their trading partners". This is already happening.

From India's perspective, the BRICS Summit was useful and productive. Expansion will obviously bring in greater complications and contradictions, but given India's good relations with all the new members these should be manageable.

On his return from the BRICS Summit, PM Modi paid an official visit to Greece on August 25, the first by an Indian PM after a gap of 40 years. The visit was long overdue, and addressed the important need to upgrade the partnership with a country with which India has traditionally had good relations, civilisational links and which is so critically located in Eurasia and is an EU member. The bilateral partnership, based on shared values and commitment to the Law of the Sea, has now been upgraded to a strategic one, with focus on defence and security issues, infrastructure, agricultural development, education, new and emerging technologies, and skills development. Trade is to be doubled by 2030, and an agreement on Mobility and Migration Partnership concluded. The latter is particularly important. The respective NSAs are to hold a dialogue on a regular basis.

The Deputy Foreign Minister of Greece, in an article on August 26, wrote that the visit was "rightly considered historic". Following the establishment of the bilateral strategic partnership, it is Greece's intention to "embark(s) on a more systematic and targeted cooperation with one of the world's most dynamic economies and a country with a significant role on the international stage".

The 19th Round of India-China Corps Commander level meeting was held on August 13-14 in an effort to resolve the remaining issues along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Western sector of the boundary. No real progress was announced, but both sides agreed in the interim to maintain peace and tranquility on the ground in the border areas.

Additionally, PM Modi, on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit, had a brief conversation with President Xi on August 24. Modi, according to the Indian side, reiterated to Xi that the maintenance of peace and tranquility in the border areas and observing and respecting the LAC are essential for the normalisation of the India-China relationship. The Indian side believed that the two leaders agreed to direct their relevant officials to intensify efforts at expeditious disengagement and de-escalation. When asked to comment on the Indian position, the spokesperson for China's MFA did not respond directly, but tried to obfuscate matters by first stating that it is the Indian side that had asked for the meeting, and then reiterating China's oft-repeated position on the bilateral

relationship based on generalities and that the boundary question does not represent the entirety of China-India relations. He further stated that both sides need to jointly safeguard peace and tranquility in the border areas, and to remove disturbances and obstacles and advance the bilateral relations along a sound and stable track. In effect, China seeks to keep the pressure on India to relent on moving ahead with ties without progress on the border.

September is going to be a significant month for Indian foreign policy, with the G20 Summit to be held in New Delhi on September 9-10 under India's chairmanship. Extensive preparatory work has been done, and it is the hope that in spite of the current vitiated international environment India will be able to persuade the G20 to look ahead cooperatively and address the series of critical issues confronting humanity.



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