

Opinion

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HUMAN-CENTRIC VISION
Prime minister Narendra Modi

I have relentlessly tried to draw your (G20 leaders') attention towards a human-centric vision (for development) rather than a GDP-centric approach. Today, many nations like India have much that they are sharing with the world

World's coming closer

Support to SDGs and the Global South will be the real test for G20

THE QUICKNESS WITH which the unanimous G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration was adopted at the 18th summit in Delhi with a willing commitment to forswear war and "territorial acquisition" is a clear reflection of the world's desperation for peace and its recognition that there's only a shared future. The heartening thing is even a nation (Russia) that is at war has agreed to this prescient formulation. With the induction of the 55-country African Union, G20 now consists of 97 nations, and the declaration has struck all the right notes. If the 1975-born Group of Seven rich nations (G7) prided itself in its exclusivity, the G20 is clearly and irreversibly for greater inclusiveness.

Formed in 1999 after the Asian financial crisis, it was upgraded to the level of heads of state/government in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007. Soon followed the first Leaders' Summit in Washington in 2008, which was successful in avoiding catastrophic fallout of the crisis. The G20 now represents more than three-fourths of the world's population, close to 90% of the world GDP, and is really "a global forum." The rich nations, faced with an intractable growth problem, are more acutely aware now that without supporting the poor and low- and middle-income countries, and credible follow-up action on the assorted financial and other commitments they make at the global fora, the future is at stake for one and all. While that is the largerview which has been buttressed in great measure by India's presidency, the contingency is the continuing headwinds to global economic growth and stability, an uneven recovery and challenges to long-term growth.

While all this is kosher, the Global South will do well to make a realistic assessment of whether and how much the various G20 declarations over the previous 17 summits have produced results in terms of a tangible shift in the economic power from the West. A more even distribution of capital is required for its adequate supply where the growth potential is largely untapped and high. This is crucial for sustainable development, the milestone goals set for which are badly off track. The fact is the financial commitments by the rich world in relation to sustainable development goals (SDGs)—integral to which is debt forgiveness for vulnerable low and middle-income countries—have left much to be desired. The debt resolution is restricted to a handful of highly indebted and amounts to mere facilitation of debt servicing, rather than real mitigation.

For sure, climate financing by the West has been quite short of the target of annual contribution of \$100 billion set in 2010, and the expectation is that the funds flow will reach the threshold for the first time in the current year. Similarly, there is a wide and seemingly unbridgeable gap between the capital support needed for multilateral development banks and the commitments made. The official development assistance (ODA) by the rich world has been far smaller than required to reach the SDGs and this was the main reason why the 2030 Agenda looks unachievable now. The New Delhi declaration has indeed called upon the developed countries to "fully deliver on their ODA commitments", but such exhortations have a poor history of compliance. While the consensus formulation regarding Russia-Ukraine war has taken the limelight and could have a salutary impact on global economy, the real test of for G20 is how forthcoming the rich would be in supporting the Global South and SDGs.

No need to exaggerate to publish on climate

It reads like a climate denier's dream come true: A prestigious climate scientist publicly confesses he fudged research in order to get published. That's basically how excited headlines in right-wing media have portrayed scientist Patrick Brown's claim that he oversold the influence of climate change on wildfire risks in order to get a paper published recently in the prestigious journal *Nature*.

But the real story isn't quite that simple. At the top of his would-be mea culpa, Brown links to a column I wrote about the Maui wildfires, citing it as an example of how the media contributes to a narrative that such conflagrations are "mostly the result of climate change." While I appreciate the link, I must point out that nowhere in my column do I argue climate change was the primary cause of the Maui fires. I do strongly suggest it was a contributing factor, with much of the leeward side of the Hawaiian islands trapped in a drought cycle that has and will continue to be exacerbated by global warming. But of course a host of other factors contributed to the Maui disaster, from questionable land management to human error. Assigning a precise percentage of the blame to climate change is impossible, at least for me, and probably for any actual scientists. That sort of thinking should feel familiar to Brown, because that's how his *Nature* paper about wildfires begins, except more science-y.

In the rest of the paper, Brown and his seven co-authors use machine learning to try to figure out how climate change has affected, and will continue to affect, the risk of wildfires, mainly by drying out undergrowth and grass. They found, to a reasonable degree of certainty, that climate change has in fact increased wildfire risk in the recent past and will increase it even more in the near future. The paper is well-reasoned, not obviously overhyped, and peer-reviewed. Brown even stands by it. But Brown also claims, in *The Free Press*, that he and his co-authors "didn't bother to study" other factors contributing to wildfires. This decision was made, according to Brown, to ensure the paper fit a narrative that climate change is the world's primary problem and that reducing greenhouse-gas emissions is the only solution. Veering from that path will cause prestigious journal editors and peer reviewers to reject your paper, Brown says.

And yet energy and climate consultant Richard Black did a quick survey of just the past month's publications in *Nature* and found papers suggesting Amazon deforestation is primarily the result of shoddy law enforcement; blaming a severe rainfall event in Japan on ocean waters mixing; suggesting underlying social vulnerabilities were more to blame than climate for extreme-weather disasters. That third paper was co-authored by Friederike Otto, a pioneer in the burgeoning science of attributing extreme weather events to climate change.

All of which suggests *Nature* has no problem publishing research that counters said narrative. *Nature's* editor in chief, Magdalena Skipper, has denied that her publication pushes any agenda and criticised Brown for trying to manipulate it. Skipper also pointed out that peer reviewers suggested Brown should include other wildfire factors in his research beyond climate, but he argued that it wasn't necessary for the purposes of his paper. This suggests not only that Brown's work might have had an easier time getting published had those factors been included, but also that, if any censorship was happening, it was Brown censoring himself.

It's true that there is an allure to lean into the lurid when it comes to climate. It's difficult to get readers to pay much attention otherwise. But it's also true that most climate scientists and writers still take great pains to avoid being too apocalyptic or definitive in their declarations. Many of us think and argue constantly about such messaging. That's a healthy thing. Pretending otherwise only gives comfort to climate deniers, confuses the science and makes real action far more difficult. It so happens that Brown is the co-director of the climate and energy team at the Breakthrough Institute, a nonprofit pushing "ecomodernism," or relying on technology to help humanity adapt to climate change. Implied is the idea that global warming isn't as catastrophic as many scientists warn it could be, further implying that action to transition from fossil fuels isn't urgent. If any narrative is needed debunking, it's that one.

INDIA RISING

IT ACCENTUATED INDIA'S GROWING GEOPOLITICAL CLOUT, BUT ALSO DIMINISHED ITS SOFT POWER

Assessing the Delhi G20 summit

THE NEW DELHI G20 Summit, the 18th since the grouping of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors (FMCBG) was elevated to the Leaders' level, is done and dusted. How is the Summit likely to be remembered going forward? India had never hosted, let alone chaired, such a high-level international meeting with all G7 leaders. The absence of president Putin of Russia and president Xi Jinping of China took some sheen off the event. It nevertheless accentuated India's growing geopolitical clout, and its hard image as a rising power and counterweight to China, at a time its growth is expected to overtake that of China. But it might have also diminished its soft power.

The success or otherwise of a G20 Summit rests on the Communique issued by Leaders. It is difficult for most people, other than camp followers of the G20, to navigate humongous and dense Leaders' Communiques, replete with guarded 'diplomatese', spread over scores of paragraphs and several pages. It contains nuanced distinctions between 'noting', 'acknowledging', 'welcoming', 'supporting' and 'endorsing' various proposals and reports that can cleverly conceal differences rather than indicate full consensus.

The G20 also has an ongoing agenda with multiple workstreams that pass from one Presidency to the next. That it has become the practice to reiterate what had been agreed in earlier communiques in subsequent ones has only compounded the problem of assessing where tangible new progress, beyond statement of intent, has been made. In any case the G20 has no enforcement mechanism, and it is mostly left to the countries themselves to implement what they have agreed to.

Each Presidency takes distinctive new initiatives, and these are duly incorporated in the text. The Communique 'noted' several initiatives taken by the Indian

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Presidency, such as the bio-fuels alliance, climate finance (where the ambitious numbers cited are eye-popping compared to what has been mobilised so far), volume 1 of the Experts Group report on MDBs (multilateral development banks), digital public infrastructure, women's empowerment, etcetera. To what extent these initiatives are implemented would depend on voluntary actions by the G20 countries themselves, whether they get on to the agenda of bilateral and multilateral lending agencies, and how subsequent Presidencies carry these forward.

With the passage of time, however, the paragraphs for which the Delhi Summit is most likely to be remembered are paragraphs 7-14 on the War in Ukraine, paragraph 76 that admitted the African Union (AU) as a permanent member of the G20, and the intriguing paragraph 78 on freedom of religion, expression and association.

The first two are manifestation of the India's growing hard power in global affairs. India made speaking on behalf of the Global South one of its priorities, and the admittance of the AU under its watch is a signal success for the Presidency. This was no doubt made possible by tailwinds behind the proposal, with all major players in the

G20 already on board.

The paragraphs on Ukraine, on the other hand, faced strong headwinds to the consensus language finally adopted. It was widely expected that the New Delhi Summit might be remembered as the first G20 Summit where Leaders refused to sign up to an agreed Communique. The Indian Presidency was however able to finesse its Summit with an

agreed Communique under challenging circumstances, which is a major achievement and indicative of its growing geopolitical clout. It had thus far been unable to get a consensus communique issued in any G20 meeting under its Presidency on account of hardening positions on the Ukraine war, which no longer made the strong language agreed by G20 Leaders at the Bali Summit acceptable to Russia

and China.

That the Presidency was finally able to forge an even-handed consensus on Ukraine is indicative of both deft diplomacy and a weakening of the headwinds working against such consensus. Only time will tell whether president Xi Jinping did not attend the New Delhi Summit on account of bilateral or other geopolitical reasons. But the absence of two major players made

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Data protection Act: Mind the gaps

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Views are personal

Data is often referred to as the new oil, though the description is a gross understatement. Data is far more powerful. Like nuclear fission, it has the power to do enormous good or wreak incalculable harm. This double-edged characteristic underscores the importance of having adequate rules or laws for oversight over data generation, processing and usage. Hence, the government is to be lauded for coming out with the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act recently, which attempts to "provide for the processing of digital personal data in a manner that recognises both the rights of individuals to protect their personal data and need to process such personal data for lawful purposes and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto." Of course, this Act has been many years in the making and that is a strong indicator of the challenges and the many debates and consultations needed. However, "being right is more important than being fast". With this legislation, the government of India has clearly demonstrated its commitment to data protection. While the industry-friendly DPDP Act is a significant and commendable step towards safeguarding digital privacy and data handling practices in India, traces of concerns with the previous versions of the law are lingering, in addition to some new concerns arising from the introduction of new concepts and revisions.

Understandably, the Act empowers the Union government to exempt any gov-

ernment agency from the Act on grounds like sovereignty and integrity of India, security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, law and order management, etc. Such exemptions are doubtless essential, however, certain aspects of these exemptions do not gel well with principles of necessity and proportionality as laid down by the Supreme Court's judgment in the *Puttaswamy* matter that recognised the right to informational privacy as a fundamental right and specified certain requirements to be fulfilled for this right to be restricted.

The government collects vital data from all citizens and is one of the biggest data fiduciaries. Hence, such exemptions must be narrowly constructed to foster greater trust among the citizenry regarding sharing and processing their personal data. Moreover, clause 17 (1) (d) that denies the protections of the Act to foreign data principals must be revisited, considering its inconsistency with the protection norms provided in other progressive jurisdictions and the obstructions that might arise due to it in seamless fulfilment of adequacy conditions during bilateral and multilateral trade deals. Experts recommend that Clause 17 (1) (d) be removed from the Bill.

While the Act's focus on consent as the

primary ground for data processing is to be welcomed, it is equally important to address the difficulties this could pose for both individuals and businesses. To ensure ease of approach, emphasis on 'clear and plain language' must be given while giving organisations time to adjust their privacy policy.

It would be appreciated that it is impractical to ask businesses to provide microscopic granular notice, and no user will take the trouble to go through a long list and tickboxes (yes or no) for scores of boxes every time they sign it to an app or website.

The government has taken welcome steps to protect the interests of children and disabled people. However, it would be useful for the Indian rules to establish an age-appropriate framework based on best global practices. Exemptions for such data processing could be modelled in a manner encouraging responsible data usage without hampering business innovations. At the same time, rules should provide exemption in relation to monitoring and profiling in the best interests of children like safety and security.

The Act has brought far more clarity than earlier on the important aspect of the Data Protection Board (DPB). However, it

The clause denying protection to foreign data principals also needs to be relooked at, to harmonise the law with the protections accorded in other jurisdictions

is noted that the Board's selection process is executive-driven, where the government will select the chairperson and members of DPB in addition to setting the terms of office. The Board's function seems significantly diluted in terms of its actions protecting the interests of the data principals and promoting awareness about data protection, while emphasis is laid on determining non-compliance and imposing penalties. The earlier clause for enhancing functions of the DPB has also been removed, which is unfortunate.

On cross-border data transfers, the government is to be lauded for allowing this for data processing. It would add further strength to this aspect if there is more clarity provided regarding mechanisms like Binding Corporate Rules, Contractual Clauses, etc.

The government deserves rich kudos for coming out with a benchmark Act that could, in many respects, be a model for other countries. Of course, harmonising India's data protection rules with the global best practices requires a nuanced approach. Recognising that every legal framework has distinct merits, our rules should be an optimised blend of these insights, sculpted in accordance with India's socioeconomic context. Drawing from the world's best data protection practices and integrating business-friendly provisions, we can ensure a thriving digital ecosystem that respects individuals' rights while propelling innovation and growth.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

G20 summit

The 'softening of language' at G20 on the Russian-Ukrainian war looked like a compromise, if not a climb-down by the West. It is significant that even though the Leaders' Declaration lamented the war and referred to 'human suffering' engendered by it, Russia termed it 'balanced' and endorsed it. The nuance of wording,

'war in Ukraine', as against 'war against Ukraine' in the Declaration was not lost on us. The call to respect the territorial integrity of nations was too generic to be construed as a condemnation of Moscow. On combating climate change, no worthwhile or significant commitment was made, to move away from fossil fuels.

—G David Milton, Maruthancode

A win for India

The Delhi Declaration reflects India's vision of a human-centric globalisation and a reformed multilateralism. The declaration covers a wide range of issues, such as sustainable development, climate change, health, digital transformation, gender equality, and peace and security. It also acknowledges the challenges

faced by developing countries, especially the least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), and small island developing states (SIDS). The declaration also welcomes the African Union as a permanent member of the G20, a historic step.

—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh