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IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

Elections are won in India on the grounds of good governance, not on G20. If elections are won on those things, then the Congress should have done the Commonwealth Games in a spectacular manner and won the elections



WHY AMITABH KANT

Amitabh Kant, who's worked in the government for four decades, is experienced in governance as well as communicating the government's initiatives. From campaigns like Incredible India to Make in India, he is viewed as someone who excels in branding. In the year of the G20, Kant — as the G20 Sherpa — has the onerous

task of hosting a successful summit. The task is challenging due to the Russia-Ukraine war that has polarised the world. Trusted by the PM, he is best placed to explain the government's goals and how he intends to bridge the differences and build consensus among all the stakeholders, both domestic and global.



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Shubhrajit Roy: Last year, when you were asked to take up the role of the G20 Sherpa, what was PM Modi's brief to you about this job?

When I took over, I didn't even know what the job was. When I deeply studied the subject, I realised that it's a job unlike what I've done in the past. This is about working with different countries and one's ability to negotiate. G20 is essentially an economic forum designed to drive global growth and development and, therefore, about your ability to work across not merely countries, but across different ministries of the government. It's about how you use this opportunity to transform India and help states build a brand, and push for one driving economic product. It is an opportunity that is multi-sectoral and multidisciplinary, and a fascinating job.

Shubhrajit Roy: While interacting with the states, it is challenging to navigate the dynamic between the Opposition-led states vis-à-vis the Centre?

No. I never had that challenge. The first Sherpa meeting was held in an Opposition state — Rajasthan (Jaipur). I worked with both the CM and the bureaucracy and they cleaned up Fatehpur Lake, did up all the roads, and did their own branding. It was wonderful working with the Rajasthan government. And we have, in recent times, worked with several opposition states. The lie in working in very close partnership, both at the political and bureaucratic levels, which you do in a short period of time. It's very unlike a football World Cup, where you are doing everything in 12 days. It's about hosting 215 meetings throughout the year in 56 cities. Therefore, you have to organise everything throughout the year in partnership with the states. Both cooperative federalism and competitive federalism play a key role. We've tried to make G20 not the government's presidency but a people's presidency. It's the PM's meeting with all the chief ministers and governors that made them like a partner in this process. The states have an opportunity to do tremendous infrastructure work on the ground.

Shubhrajit Roy: The G20 presidency would come to India in 2023 and India moved to 2022 and snatched it with Indonesia. Many in the Opposition say that the government is trying to use the G20 presidency to maximise political projection domestically just six months before the general elections.

Elections are won in India on the grounds of good governance, not on G20. If elections are won on those things then the Commonwealth Games should have done the Commonwealth Games in a spectacular manner and won the elections. The G20 presidency is an opportunity for India to get into an international forum. For a presidency like this, you need three things. First, a great political narrative, good political leadership which has the acumen to deliver a top story G20 presidency and the development story that you're weaving around. Which, in India's case, is economic. The infrastructure work, digital public infrastructure, and climate action work give an opportunity for you to tell the world that we have adopted digital and technological. This is also an opportunity to say that you've been the pharmacy and vaccine capital of the world. Second is content. It is important how well you craft your issue notes. Third is how well you execute. You're going to get over two lakh guests in this period. Each of them can go back as cultural and spiritual ambassadors to promote Brand India and Incredible India. All three have to work together to be able to give a great G20. We need not look at it from the eyes of a political correspondent. Look at it from the perspective of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to brand and promote India.

Shubhrajit Roy: The Ukraine conflict has posed a challenge for India. How did you bridge the gap between the Chinese, the Russians and the West despite divisions in India (2022/2023)?

I was almost broadly left that Indonesia will find it very difficult to achieve a communiqué towards the end. All these recommendations then came to the Sherpa track. The Sherpas discussed for about five-and-a-half days and we could not achieve success. We must understand that G20 is an economic forum. It's supposed to discuss growth and financial prosperity. It's not a political body. The Security Council of the United Nations is. The perspective (in Bali) was to bring out the economic perspective and not the political perspective. The G7 argument was that the fallout of the war caused a huge economic impact. It's impacting three times higher. It's impacting food, there's a challenge of food and moving out fertiliser, which will impact

'We have tried to make G20 not a govt's presidency but a people's presidency'

Amitabh Kant, G20 Sherpa of India during its presidency year, on navigating the complex geopolitical and economic issues during the most turbulent period in the world and bridging the gap between the Chinese, the Russians and the West. This conversation took place before the G20 Foreign Ministers meeting, and was moderated by Deputy Chief of National Bureau Shubhrajit Roy



Amitabh Kant, G20 Sherpa of India and former CEO of NITI Aayog, was in conversation with Deputy Chief of National Bureau, Shubhrajit Roy (right) on March 13.

food production next year. Therefore, this war has a significant economic impact. On the last day, India played a key role in helping draft the preamble to the communiqué. India had abstained from the Security Council resolution, so we took the Security Council resolution word by word. Emerging 141 had voted for it, and 21 were against it. We built an alliance with the Troika and emerging markets and finally managed to convince G7 that this is the only way forward. We convinced them because we built up an alternative group of emerging markets. After we took them on board, we went to Russia. The Russian Sherpa wanted to get the deal from their Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, who was in Cambodia. He came to Bali but fell ill. We did several things to convince Russia to agree and finally agreed. Thereafter, China, at the last minute objected to a line — "This is not an era of war but an era of diplomacy and dialogue". The line was important because it was added by PM Modi. We finally held several bilateral meetings with China and managed a communiqué. That's how we could get the Bali agreement out. India played a very significant role in assisting and supporting Indonesia to get that agreement.

Shubhrajit Roy: What did you tell the Chinese to get them around?

It's very difficult to get these things out in structured bilateral meetings. My belief is that it needs to be informal. We had to discuss bilaterally with China. They were wanting something that we finally managed to put in the communiqué somewhere else.

Shubhrajit Roy: Was there an intervention from the foreign minister or the PM?

In the case of Russia, I don't know from what level (the intervention came). But Lavrov finally cleared it. But I don't know at what level was it cleared.

Shubhrajit Roy: Did PM Modi reach out to Vladimir Putin at that time?

I don't want to dwell on that. But eventually, it's the leaders' declaration and it is accepted by all the leaders. Without the leaders' acceptance, it doesn't get passed. Sherpas are like the envoy of the PM. They're supposed to take the leader to the top of Mount Everest. Either you fail or you succeed. So you have to take your leader into confidence. We are in the most turbulent time because positions have hardened. With one year of the war, you've seen the scenario with US President Joe Biden going to Ukraine and Putin's address. There are tensions and we'll have to look at the external environment and manage it.

Shubhrajit Roy: At G20, India, China, and the Global South, have similar views when it comes to development, growth, climate change, which is completely opposite to what the developed world has. Then India shares certain values with the G7 which it doesn't with Russia and China. How do you navigate that?

The important things to make your priorities clear. You have Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) — 200 million people have gone below the poverty line. In the post-COVID era, 100 million people have lost their jobs. Instead of progressing, SDGs have regressed. You need a new action plan to accelerate the pace of the SDGs. It's important because when leaders of the world meet, it's not just about a communiqué, it's about the personal equation of the leaders because, after all, they are responsible for the lives of citizens around the world. Look at climate action and climate finance. A country like India is not responsible for carbonising the world. We only consume 15 per cent of the carbon space. We are entitled to 175 per cent. But the PM's belief is that we must be the first country in industrialisation without carbonising. We are climatically blessed and have top-class entrepreneurship. But for climate action to happen, you need long-term financing, which is not available. You need good instruments of hedging, blended finance and credit enhancement, and first-loss guarantees. All this can only happen through multilateral finance. The developed world, which committed \$100 billion per year in Copenhagen (2009), has not lived up to it.

Shubhrajit Roy: In your conversations with other G20 countries, is India's position as a democratic superpower being questioned? Especially when you have people being deported for feeding some protest-

ers on the streets or a documentary being banned on instances of human rights violations of minorities?

No country in the G20 has ever brought it to us that there's any kind of impact on democracy. I'm the greatest believer in democracy. I think that there's no greater and vibrant democracy than India, both historically and otherwise.

Anil Sank: How much of a disappointment was the fact that the Finance Ministers meeting communiqué could not come through? With the tightrope that India's been walking since the war started, do you see it being bowed in?

There is no disappointment because India achieved a lot in the finance track, including on global debt. It was one year of the war, which is a very complex time. We go along, our objective should be to try and build a consensus and bring everybody around. In this process, I will do very sustained and effective bilateral work.

Anil Sank: Is there a dichotomy in the fact that we've clearly enunciated our position on the war? There were disagreements and the communiqué could not be wrapped up. Is there a problem there?

No, it's not a problem with us. There's a hardened position of some countries on one side and Russia and China on the other. They said that the Bali communiqué, with paragraphs three and four, is the final communiqué, which is a political document. So Russia and China said that the finance ministers' meeting is not a political meeting. You can't have that same paragraph in every working group meeting. Should you have it in the tourism working group or the labour working group or the skill working group? That was their contention. Some

other countries said that this paragraph should find a place everywhere else. We have to find a way out of this. It's not for the finance ministers, which is a technical group, to find a solution. That solution will need an appropriate forum.

Shubhrajit Roy: Do you think the positions have hardened since Bali?

When you're dealing with geopolitics, that particular moment of time — one year of the war, you have Biden going to Kyiv and the Russian president's viewpoint. You one has a strong domestic viewpoint. You have to allow some time to pass. If you rush up and force issues, it will make things complex. Patience is a huge virtue.

Liz Mathew: According to many BJP leaders, controversies like the BRIC documentary and the Hindenburg report were attempts from "international forces to defame India" in a year of G20 presidency. What's your take?

I'm the G20 Sherpa and I remain very focused on what I do, which is that we must achieve success at G20. I start focusing on political issues. I'll not be able to deliver G20.

Liz Mathew: How do you view PM Modi's personal equation with world leaders?

I only saw him in Bali and he has a very fine equation with all the world leaders, including Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz, and Biden. He's the only elected leader whose popularity remains very high. Leaders of the world have great respect for him. The political narrative and the development story are very important ingredients. India's achievements in terms of execution on the ground have been phenomenal.

Shubhrajit Roy: Your ability to communicate the Indian story to the world and people is really similar to the Prime Minister's (version).

I'm not a politician, just a civil servant. But I work on data. My data is based on my ability to read, write and analyse.

Amrithan Khan: When you have closed-door meetings with the PM and other critical people, what are the key substantive agenda? What would be the takeaways from this G20 for India?

My belief is that this is definitely India's decade because of several things that we've done. We have a young demographic that will remain at the median age of 29 till close to 2070. We've done a huge amount of digitalisation across the world. With our work on renewables, we've achieved NDC targets nine

years ahead of schedule. If you can use your weather conditions to use renewables to crack water and produce green hydrogen, you can be the centre of the world. Then there is Indian entrepreneurship. Not merely the large companies, but young entrepreneurship is top class. The only challenge is your ability to get long-term funds and that's getting hedging instruments to be able to push that story to make India the champion of the world.

Aanchal Magazine: We have six months left for the Leaders' Summit. What's different from the Bali Summit is that we are seeing global economic issues like slowdown and mounting debt. Will these take a backseat amid the whole geopolitical issue?

Those issues are at the forefront. A full consensus was achieved on all issues, including the finance issues and global debt. The challenge was only on the geopolitical issue of paragraphs three and four. Everybody arrived at an agreement on other issues. Even China agreed on global debt.

Harikrishnan Sharma: How do you see the discussions moving on the issue of food and fertiliser security?

They're very important issues, especially for Europe because you aren't able to get fuel, you're making Europe totally uncompetitive. If you're not able to get fuel, your cost of production goes up three-and-a-half times. You can stack up energy, but you aren't able to get energy at the right price. If you aren't able to get fertiliser this year, it'll have a huge impact on food production. Therefore, it's necessary for the world. That's the position India has taken.

Sudhakar Sharma: While we've said, this is not an era of war, in practice, it has been perceived as being benevolent to Russia. At a platform like G20, amid our strategic partnership with some of the Western powers, how difficult is it to manage the narrative?

It's a complex world and one of the most turbulent periods in the world's history. But India's challenge is to be able to bring everybody together and finally arrive at an agreement as far as the economic growth and developmental issues are concerned. We must understand that for political issues, the G20 is not the right forum.

Shubhrajit Roy: What next for Amitabh Kant?

I'm not ambitious. I just want to quit after December and play some good golf. I've also finished a book on 75 years of business and enterprise in India.

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