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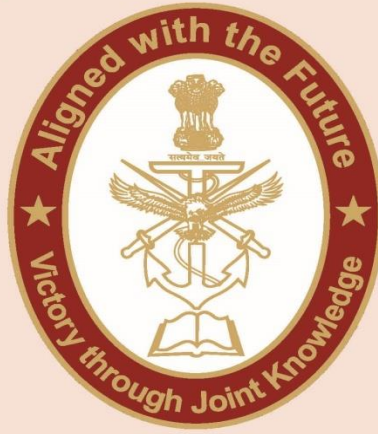
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FIRST FOREIGN MINISTERS' MEETING OF G20 MEMBERS AT JOHANNESBURG: TAKEAWAYS FOR INDIA

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First Foreign Ministers' Meeting of G20 Members at Johannesburg: Takeaways For India



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Introduction

India, after a successful stint, handed over the G-20 presidency to Brazil in November 2022. From Brazil, the G-20 presidency was passed on to South Africa for a period from 1 December 2024 to 30 November 2025. South Africa assumes the Presidency of G-20 at a time when the world is grappling with geopolitical disagreements and conflicts, economic uncertainties, energy insecurity and climate change. Against this backdrop, the first Foreign Ministers' meeting under South Africa's G20 Presidency on 20-21 February 2025 became significant for laying down a roadmap to find viable and consensus-based solutions.

Background

The Asian financial crises of the late 1990s, which commenced in Thailand in July 1997, soon cascaded and engulfed other East and Southeast Asian economies.¹ Besides its economic impact, the crisis also caused political upheaval in Thailand and Indonesia. The tremors of the crisis were felt across the globe beyond the geographical boundaries of Asia. This compelled the Group of Seven countries (the G-7) with large

economies to accord due importance to the growing economies for the sustenance and growth of the world economy. In September 1999, their intention manifested in the announcement to “broaden the dialogue on key economic and financial policy issues among systemically significant economies and promote co-operation to achieve stable and sustainable world economic growth that benefits all.” This announcement culminated in official recognition of a group of countries christened as the ‘Group of Twenty countries’ (the G-20).²

The G-20’s mandate was to discuss economic issues over which consensus cannot be reached and offer amicable solutions in the interest of all concerned. In the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, member countries expanded the mandate to include strict measures against the financing of terrorism. Collectively, the G-20 members represent two-thirds of the world population, 85% of the global gross product and 75% of international trade.³ Although its agreements or decisions are discretionary and not legally binding, they provide a roadmap for global cooperation and collective actions. From being a financial crisis managing platform, the G-20 has grown to become a forum for discussing wide-ranging issues having global humanitarian and geopolitical implications. The spirit of inclusiveness and progressivism of G-20 was encapsulated in the statement of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, made while accepting the Presidency of G-20 by India on 1st December 2022 when he said that this will be “inclusive, ambitious, decisive and action-oriented.”⁴

India’s G20 Presidency

For India, the Presidency of G-20 came with a set of challenges. As G-20 President, the global community looked upon India to expedite global economic recovery in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The G-20 was expected to dispel the looming clouds of Ukraine crisis over global food and energy security. In addition, India’s G20 presidency was expected to address climate change and promote sustainable development. By invoking consensual-driven deliberations across a broad spectrum of global issues, India’s Presidency infused a new dynamism and energy to G20 and succeeded in building consensus by fostering dialogue and engendering cooperation. India strongly advocated in favour of multilateralism by bolstering consensus among developing countries and advanced economies.

First Foreign Ministers' Meeting under South Africa's G20 Presidency

In his opening address during the first Foreign Ministers' meeting under South Africa's G20 Presidency on 20-21 February 2025, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa pointed out that 'Geopolitical tensions, rising intolerance, conflict and war, climate change, pandemics and energy and food insecurity threaten an already fragile global coexistence'.⁵ He further emphasised that these challenges are interrelated and require a coordinated response. He added that South Africa, as G-20 President, has identified the following four priorities⁶:

- (a) To strengthen resilience and response to climate-induced natural disasters.
- (b) To ensure debt sustainability for low-income countries as debt payments are diverting critical resources away from development.
- (c) To seek financial support for a just energy transition from countries commensurate to their respective economies.
- (d) To harness critical minerals for inclusive growth and sustainable development.

While Chairing the First G-20 Foreign Ministers Meeting, South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Mr. Ronald Lamola, in his address set the two main objectives for the meeting. The first objective was to have a high-level strategic discussion on the global geopolitical environment and the second to reflect on South Africa's G-20 Presidency priorities and high-level deliverables.⁷ He implored the attendees to support the theme of South Africa's G-20 Presidency 'Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability'. The envisaged deliverables of South Africa's G-20 Presidency are Inclusive Economic Growth, Employment and Reduced Inequality; Food Security; Artificial Intelligence, Data Governance and Innovation for Sustainable Development.⁸

South Africa's Presidency of G-20 has a daunting challenge of garnering the support of 54 members of the African Union (AU) for amiable and equitable settlement of prevailing discords/ disagreements in the African continent. The conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, perpetrated by a multitude armed groups and forces from neighboring countries, carries a real risk of escalating into a wider regional conflict. The civil war in Sudan between two warring factions, which began on April

2023 continues unabated, killing almost 15,000 people and displacing more than 8.2 million.⁹ The jihadist insurgency in the central Sahel states of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger remains undiminished without a permanent solution in sight. Beyond the African continent, the Russia-Ukraine War enters its Fourth Year on February 24, taking a heavy toll on both nations. The tenuous cease-fire between Israel and Hamas is already showing signs of cracks.

Apart from finding consensus-driven solutions to global disputes/ discords/ disagreements, the G-20, under the Presidency of South Africa also need to expedite humanitarian efforts for alleviating poverty and hunger, achieving gender equality, education for all, universal health coverage and decent work opportunities. The climate crisis, from being merely a threat, has spiralled into reality of catastrophic proportions, which is evident from the fact that in the year 2024, the global average temperature exceeded 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels for the first time.¹⁰

India's External Affairs Minister at G-20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting at Johannesburg

The Foreign Ministers' meeting at Johannesburg was attended by India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar. The EAM assured India's support for priorities and deliverables set by South Africa as G20's President.¹¹ In his remark, he said that these priorities align with what India has advocated, both nationally as well as during its own G-20 presidency.

On the sidelines of the G-20 Foreign Ministers' Meet, Dr. S. Jaishankar met with Foreign Minister of Mr. China Wang Yi.¹² In a statement issued, he remarked that the two countries have worked hard to preserve and protect the G-20 as an institution, which is a testament of the importance accorded to international cooperation by both countries. He further added that both countries are members of the G20, SCO and BRICS and an exchange of perspectives on regional and global issues will mutually benefit both countries. He remarked that there have been notable developments on the management of peace and tranquillity in the border areas as well as other dimensions of ties between both countries.

Dr. S. Jaishankar held a trilateral meeting with foreign Ministers of Australia and France.¹³ The meeting focused on mutually shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region and the potential to strengthen each other's position. Dr Jaishankar used the opportunity to meet Algerian Foreign Minister Mr Ahmed Attaf. Both ministers had fruitful discussions on events unfolding in West Asia and potential avenues of multifaceted mutual cooperation.¹⁴ Dr Jaishankar held his first meeting with European Union Vice President Ms Kaja Kallas. Both the leaders discussed issues in the context of Europe and ongoing Ukraine conflict.¹⁵

The title of Dr Jaishankar's address was 'Discussion on the Global Geopolitical Situation' which he delivered on 20 Feb 25. Dr Jaishankar said that the spirit of global multi-polarity is deeply entrenched in the G-20 agenda. He remarked that the present global geopolitics is undergoing a tumultuous transition due to the challenges accrued as a result of the Covid pandemic, regional conflicts, financial instability, food insecurity and climate concerns.¹⁶ He emphasised that the G-20 needs to play a crucial role in steering the global economy through choppy waters.

Conclusion

The G20, since its inception in the year 2008, as the “premier forum for international economic cooperation,” earned its stripes by steering several global economic crises through troubled water. Despite the heterogeneity of members, the efforts of G-20 culminated in achieving a certain degree of economic cooperation and financial stability. It was the efforts of G-20 that were instrumental in reforming and revitalising the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. However, as prevailing geopolitical conditions are getting more complex and in many cases leading to wars and armed conflicts, the G-20 forum has the potential to be used for easing geopolitical tensions and finding common ground among members. India, as President of G-20 had shown that by fostering dialogue and engendering cooperation, consensus among members can be reached. The first Foreign Ministers’ meeting at Johannesburg has set the agenda for the twentieth meeting of G-20 Johannesburg Summit scheduled in the year from 22 to 23 November 2025 with anticipation that consensus building on contentious issues will be bolstered.

DISCLAIMER

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Endnotes

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