

When a soft power meant business

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On September 9, as India clinched the G20 Leaders' Declaration, many were left surprised by its diplomatic achievement. The grand Bharat Mandapam, bedecked and ready for this celebration days in advance, was as though aware of what was coming.

The venue became the nerve centre from where the consensus was finally forged amid complex global circumstances, which made India's task all the more challenging.

International affairs experts feel that it was the moment India became a big stabilising force in a highly divided world, and this elevated its image of a soft power that means business like never before.

"Consensus-building has been India's forte, but never has the country done it at this scale. The world was waiting for a shared outlook and we could achieve it," said Sreeram Chaulia, dean, Jindal School of International Affairs. "G20 has silenced the critics who would say that India is not a team player."

The New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, as the office of chief economic advisor recently put it, came in the complex backdrop of the interlocking crises of food, fuel and finance, emerging global challenges, and a fractured geopolitical situation.

"It was not a routine statement. The New Delhi declaration required deep thinking, serious negotiations and persistent work. This whole business of holding events throughout India burnished our credentials as a democracy," said Rajiv Bhatia, former ambassador and distinguished fellow, Gateway House, a foreign policy think-tank.



The New Delhi Leaders' Declaration came against the complex backdrop of interlocking crises

Bringing leaders of the world's most powerful nations under its roof, Bharat Mandapam also laid out the red carpet for the newest entrant to the G20 club — African Union, a move that had India's big push.

"African Union's entry as the 21st nation member is seen as an important achievement and obviously boosted India's influence in African countries," said Shyam Saran, former foreign secretary who has also served as the prime minister's special envoy for nuclear affairs and climate change. "India's role as a major actor is reinforced."

As the G20 focused on economic issues, there was also an expectation that it would become a problem-solving club to address geopolitical tensions surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war followed by the Israel-Hamas conflict. The language around the issue had become a major roadblock for a joint communique.

"How India dealt with

Ukraine had to be consistent with its domestic interest. India had to save the dignity of Russia. It looked like an impossible task. It was complex," Bhatia added.

That said, India's focus to be the voice of the Global South has earned it support in the region. Some experts believe it has even changed the structure of the G20 into a development organisation and not just an elite club.

From strengthening the multilateral development banks, managing global debt vulnerabilities to regulating crypto assets, and financing the cities of tomorrow, the agenda focused on issues that particularly echoed with the developing world.

"It is a big achievement for non-members. G20 was criticised for elite multilateralism... G20 cannot ignore the momentum India has built up," Chaulia added.

Can India use its global position to its advantage now? Experts said that India is pushing for reforms at the UN

Security Council and seeking a seat at the table. "We are drumming up support but we know how polarised the world has become," Bhatia said.

Some also feel that while India has mounted a successful event, it would be extremely difficult to keep that momentum going.

"We cannot maintain the same level of high... Some of the shine from the G20 has been taken away because of the Pannun affair (the alleged plot to kill pro-Khalistan leader

Gurpatwant Singh Pannun). It is a setback," Saran pointed out.

Setback or not, much of the perception about India's strong global position is drawn not just from hosting the G20 but also from its successful

economic performance.

Meanwhile, the glitzy Bharat Mandapam, which has come up where once other celebrated structures stood, has become symbolic of an India breaking away from the past to forge a new course.

