

Climate objectives and challenges of India's G20 presidency

[hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/climate-change/climate-objectives-and-challenges-of-india-s-g20-presidency-101684126606460.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/climate-change/climate-objectives-and-challenges-of-india-s-g20-presidency-101684126606460.html)

May 15, 2023

ByHindustan Times

Authored by Maharaj K. Pandit, professor & dean, Jindal School of Environment & Sustainability, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, NCR, India.

India's philosophy of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" is in sync with the overarching theme of its current G20 presidency – 'One Earth, One Family, One Future'. Not only does it offer a laudable extension of the philosophical paradigm, but it also declares India's well-defined intent for a peaceful sustainable world. While the G20 secretariat has identified various sub-themes for the year-round deliberations, here the focus is on four areas under the climate challenges that India may offer leadership in at the G20 forum.



The priority areas of U20 are climate change and sustainable development, including socio-economic issues. (Shutterstock image)

First, the climate challenge in terms of global and regional water security is the most critical area that needs urgent consideration of the member nations. Sadly, water has not received enough attention from groups of nations that it deserves. South Asia, in particular, comprises water deficit countries. China and India together constitute 36% of the world population, but their water woes are stark. India's water availability per capita declined drastically from 5,800 cubic meters/year in 1950 to 1300 cubic meters/year at current levels. Likewise, China's water availability per capita fell from 5,100 cubic meters/year in 1950 to 1,900 cubic meters/year at current levels. The ongoing warming will push water demand further and higher to alleviate negative impacts on agriculture

and for domestic consumption in these populous nations. The two neighbours are perilously close to being water-scarce nations (1,000 cubic metres/year) from being water-stressed ones at present (1,700 cubic metres/year). G20 must focus on water security as its top priority because of the ominous signs that water availability change data (1960-2018) presents in all the constituent nations barring Russia.

Second, energy security in the context of climate change deserves more focus at the high table. The international solar alliance is a laudable step in this direction, but G20 needs to remain mindful of the technological curve in new and renewable energy sources. Hydropower, in the context of recent events of slope destabilisation in the Himalaya, is likely to receive a push back, but India would do well to recalibrate its hydropower policy, not only as a 'low-hanging fruit' for energy security, but also for the criticality of hydropower infrastructure like dams in the nation's water security. This is true of many other G20 nations. The world may not run out of 'power' options, but the 'water' options across the board are getting more and more constrained by the day. Clearly, water pondage has geopolitical implications, therefore, G20 would be an appropriate forum to deliberate on the global energy-water security nexus.

Third, association between the climate crisis and ecological security of nations was never so serious as it is today. Most biodiversity-rich nations are witnessing species' elevational range shifts, species' crowding at higher, cooler elevations, enhanced rates of biological invasions, extinction of endemic species which calls for redrawing of the existing protected area boundaries. Plant invasions by exotic tree species are threatening native biodiversity, but more importantly these invasives are sucking the soils dry in an already compromised groundwater scenario. Disappearance of endemic species in global biodiversity hot spots such as the Himalaya and the Western Ghats in India are deeply worrying. These species are crucial for continuity and survival of local and regional livelihoods. In particular, this bio-resource is central to these communities as the first resource in terms of economy and human health. In absence of a better or more accessible health delivery system, these communities depend on locally available traditional medicinal plants which are being lost at alarming rates. This link must be recognised.

Fourth, environmental sustainability and global peace are linked which needs to be acknowledged. Conflict situations, in their various manifestations, within and between nation states, more often arise from disputes of trans-boundary natural resources or may lead to destruction and degradation of these very natural resources. From damaging pristine biodiversity and wildlife habitats to creating large-scale air, water and soil pollution, environmental resources are the first casualty in a conflict situation. The on-going Russia-Ukraine war reportedly has caused environmental damages of over \$55 billion. Local water bodies in Ukraine are heavily polluted with fuel oil rendering river and spring waters unfit for drinking and toxic for their aquatic life. Thousands of hectares of dense forests continue to be consigned to flames. The toxic fumes from bombs and the scurrying war traffic in air, land and water leave behind a trail of long-term environmental

impacts unlikely to disappear soon. The China-India border engagement impacting the unique Himalayan biodiversity and the need for its conservation were recently highlighted by the author.

Beyond human misery that unfolds each day of the conflict, the environmental costs of war including pushing millions into life of environmental refugees are colossal. Yet there is little global outrage on the environmental consequences of war and conflict. In fact, multilateral organisations, national governments and individuals seem to have turned more regressive since 1970s. Previously, there seemed more courage of conviction among stakeholders who boldly described the Vietnam war as “ecocide’ and even an International Convention on ‘ecocide’ was drafted. More attempts by UN agencies including inclusion of ecocide as a crime by the International Law Commission and later on in the form of Rome Statute under International Criminal Court. Sadly, all the efforts were failures and ineffective; some provisions were even expressly removed from the relevant codes.

Authored by Maharaj K. Pandit, professor & dean, Jindal School of Environment & Sustainability, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, NCR, India.