

Words from Bandung to relive in Bali and Delhi

(GS Paper 2, International Relation)

Context:

- Three back-to-back summits in the past fortnight cleared stand of countries on the Russian invasion of Ukraine: **the BRICS**, followed by the **G-7 summit** and then the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** Summit in Madrid.

India's participation:

- Indian Prime Minister attended the BRICS summit virtually, and then travelled to Germany for the G-7 outreach between the seven “most industrialised nations” and the special invitees in 2022, namely, Argentina, Indonesia, India, Senegal and South Africa.
- India was not a part of the NATO summit, which included an outreach to the United States's Indo-Pacific treaty allies, i.e., Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

BRICS Summit 2022:

- The Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa Summit hosted by Chinese President in virtual format was significant as it was the **first such multilateral grouping Russian** President attended since February 24, 2022 (the day Ukraine was invaded).
- Both China & Russia took aim at the unilateral economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union.
- The fact that India agreed to join the summit **showed India's commitment to BRICS as an alternate grouping** of economies spotlighted **India's refusal to shun Russia**, and agreement to **set aside the two-year stand-off with China's People's Liberation Army** at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in favour of multilateral meetings such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).



BRICS economic initiatives:

- The BRICS Beijing Declaration was a consensus document, as each member cited differing “National Positions” on the Ukraine issue. However, the BRICS economic initiatives that India lauded as “practical” contain several challenges to the western-led sanctions regime against Russia.
- In addition to **BRICS's New Development Bank (NDB)**, that has approved about 17 loans totalling \$5 billion for Russian energy and infrastructure projects, the “**Contingent Reserve Arrangement**” (CRA), and a **BRICS Payments Task Force (BPTF)** for coordination between their central banks for an alternative to the SWIFT payments system, **Russia also proposed building a global reserve currency** based on a “basket of currencies” and trading in local currencies.
- **Russia also committed to providing more oil and coal supplies to BRICS** countries, which will no doubt raise red flags in the West, as will the possible admission of countries such as Argentina and Iran that have applied to the BRICS mechanism.

G7 Summit:

- A day after BRICS, Indian PM left for the G-7 Summit at Germany's Schloss Elmau, proof of India's flexibility in dealing with both sides of the conflict.
- In a number of statements, the G-7 (the U.S., the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the European Union) targetted Russia's war in Ukraine and China's economic aggression.
- However **its outreach documents**, on “**Resilient Democracies**” and “**Clean and Just Transitions towards Climate Neutrality**”, the only ones that India and other invitees signed on to, were devoid of any mentions of either.

NATO Summit:

- At the NATO meeting, however, there was little sign of any restraint as the group comprising the U.S., Canada and European countries committed to more NATO actions against “Russian aggression”.
- These included, for the first time, a reference to “**systemic competition**” **from China as a challenge to NATO** “interests, security and values”.
- The presence of the U.S.'s trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific military allies at one conference sent out a clear message against a perceived Russia-China alliance.
- The launch of another **Indo-Pacific coalition** of “Partners in the Blue Pacific” (PBP), i.e., the U.S., the U.K., Australia, New Zealand and Japan, in addition to last year's Australia-U.K.-U.S. (AUKUS), is another signal of the U.S.'s growing focus on countries that it has military alliances with, against its adversaries.
- Apart from the Indo-Pacific partners at the summit, there were leaders of the five countries that have applied to join NATO, i.e., Finland, Georgia, Sweden, Ukraine (President Zelensky gave a virtual address), and Bosnia Herzegovina (its Defence Minister attended).
- The direct message was that **NATO would no longer consider Russian sensitivities on the subject of NATO expansion**.

India's policy:

- The outcome of all three summits points to a **growing polarisation**, even battle lines being drawn, between the Western Atlantic-Pacific axis and the Russia-China combine. So where does this leave India?
- The **Indian government has committed to a singular strategy**, albeit a defensive one, that does not condone Russia for its attacks on Ukraine, but one that does not criticise it either.
- First, **India has joined China as global economies that have most increased their intake of Russian oil**, and where India continues to source fertilizer, cement and other commodities from Russia using different means, including even paying in the Chinese Yuan to circumvent sanctions.
- Second, **India is working to diversify its defence purchases from Russia**, hostilities with China are high, and a strategic tilt towards the U.S. and Quad partners in the Indo-Pacific is growing.
- **On the multilateral stage, too, India remains a balancing voice** in the room: along with Brazil and South Africa, India ensured that the BRICS Beijing declaration did not carry the Russian position on the Ukraine war or any criticism of the West, while making certain with other partners of the global South that the **G-7 outreach documents carried no criticism of Russia and China**.

India must lead:

- It is time for India to **seize the moment for leadership** in a world that is becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the growing polarisation and the disruption due to the Ukraine war.
- In Germany, Indian PM found **common cause on this with the Indonesian President**, Joko Widodo, who is trying ensure that **both sides of the world attend the G-20 summit he will host in Bali in November**, amid growing worries that leaders of at least nine member countries (Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the U.K., the U.S., as well as the European Union) could stay away from sessions where Russia speaks.
- **As the next President of the G-20, India also must** shoulder the burden of ensuring that the G-20 stays together, and reassuring those worried by the brinkmanship of the West on one side and Russia and China on the other.

Gather the like-minded:

- At the United Nations General Assembly, for example, **a majority of 141 countries voted to castigate Russia for its invasion of Ukraine**, but much fewer, only 93, voted to oust Russia from the Human Rights Council. Even more significantly, **only 40 countries joined the U.S. and Europe-led sanctions regime** against Russia.
- This represents a large pool of independently-minded countries that do not see it in their own national interest to blandly choose one side over another.
- **Instead of abstaining on every vote** or being defensive about sanctions, therefore, **India's national interests would be better served by building a community of those like-minded countries** (from South America to Africa, the Gulf to South Asia and to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), who cannot afford the hostilities, and want to avoid the possibility of a global war at all costs.
- Like Indonesian President, who flew from Germany to Ukraine and Russia to talk, **Indian PM is amongst the few leaders today still able to speak to both sides**. The group of those who can urge for sanity to prevail must grow.

NAM:

- In 1955, it was in such a similar moment that India took leadership of (along with countries such as Indonesia and Egypt at the Asian-African Conference of 29 newly independent nations, at Bandung), a conference that eventually led to the **Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)**.

Conclusion:

- While the current Indian government has shown little interest in NAM or even in Nehruvian thought, it may be necessary to reconsider Nehru's words in a world fraught with danger nearly 70 years later.
- India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar will attend a Foreign Ministers meeting of the G-20, "the world's largest economies", in Bali (July 7-8), and the G-20 summit in November and India will take over the G-20 presidency in December.
- This is the time to rethink India's role in "growing the unaligned area" and bringing the "objective and balanced" outlook Nehru spoke of, to the forefront of India's strategic policy, by channelling that thought from Bandung, to Bali and Delhi in 2022.