

# The World Cup of diplomacy

India, Indonesia and the United States will chair three key multilateral groupings in 2023. Which of them will make the biggest global impact?

**Kishore Mahbubani**

The race is on!

Soccer's World Cup in 2022 is over. The final game could not have been more exciting. Next year, be prepared for another competition, albeit an unusual one, but possibly more exciting and with far greater ramifications globally – the World Cup of diplomacy.

Unusual because three key countries – India, Indonesia and the United States – will be taking over the chairmanships of three significant multilateral groupings – the Group of 20 (G-20), Asean and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) – respectively. In 2022, by an unusual coincidence, all the summits for the three major groupings were held in South-east Asia (in Bali, Phnom Penh and Bangkok).

The big diplomatic question for the world is which of the summits of the three groupings in 2023 will be the most successful.

In 2022, there was no question that Indonesia won the race with its hosting of the G-20 meetings in Bali in November.

At the Bali meeting, Indonesia delivered two outcomes that improved the geopolitical chemistry of the world: the meeting between US President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, which muted talk of a war over the Taiwan Strait, and the encounter between Mr Xi and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which calmed relations between the two Asian giants.

Can India, Indonesia and the US do better in 2023?

## INDIA: G-20 CHAIR IN 2023

India has announced an expansive G-20 agenda that homes in on some of the most pressing challenges facing a world convulsed by the effects of climate change and economic setbacks, the effects of which have driven hundreds of millions into extreme poverty. To focus minds, Mr Modi, in his op-ed published in *The Straits Times* on Dec 1, crystallised what is at stake into a starkly simple and unifying



There will be three big summits in 2023, namely those of the Group of 20, Asean and Apec. The big diplomatic question is which of the three will be the most successful. If all host nations succeed in scoring some of their goals, the world will be a far better place in 2023, says the writer. PHOTO: AFP

theme: One Earth, One Family, One Future.

The choice of theme is appropriate as it reflects our new global reality: Planet Earth has become a small, interdependent and interconnected global village. As a wise old saying states, we will have to hang together, or we will hang separately. We cannot ignore the larger global and planetary risks facing us, which Mr Modi identified as "climate change, terrorism, and pandemics".

While India is right to focus on long-term global challenges, it cannot ignore the immediate challenges.

The Ukraine war is still dragging on, sadly. The world would breathe a huge sigh of relief if India could arrange a meeting between Mr Biden and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, just as Indonesia did with the Biden-Xi meeting. And only New Delhi can arrange such a meeting because it remains one of the few powers that is trusted by both Moscow and Washington.

It would be a great achievement if through its intervention India managed to help bring an end to the nightmare of the Ukraine war so that we can rightly concentrate on the many pressing long-term global challenges, the impact of

which falls heavily on the very poor.

India made a brilliant (literally speaking) decision when it illuminated 100 monuments from Dec 1 to 7 to herald its assumption of the chairmanship. If, by the end of its chairmanship, New Delhi succeeds in helping to light the way for the world – especially for the people of Ukraine – out of the current pall, India would have delivered a glorious success.

## INDONESIA: ASEAN CHAIR IN 2023

Indonesia's top priority as Asean chair is a significant one that plays to the region's strengths.

On Nov 9 (a few days before the G-20 meeting), I was privileged to have been hosted to breakfast by President Joko Widodo in Bali, at which he emphasised that economic growth would be the dominant focus of Indonesia's chairmanship of Asean. This was confirmed by Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi at the Conference on Indonesian Foreign Policy on Nov 26, when she said: "Economic growth is the story of Asean. That is why Indonesia's chairmanship will embrace the theme of Asean Matters: Epicentrum of Growth."

Growth is an appropriate theme for Asean as it has outperformed

the world in this area. In 2000, Japan's economy was eight times larger than Asean's. Now, it's 1½ times larger. By 2030, Japan's economy will be smaller than Asean's.

Unfortunately, just as India's chairmanship of the G-20 will be dragged down by the Ukraine war, Indonesia's chairmanship will be similarly weighed down by Myanmar. In life, there are impossible problems. Myanmar is one such impossible problem. It could have been avoided if both ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the Myanmar military had been prepared to compromise. Sadly, no such compromise is possible any time soon.

Thus, Indonesia is wise to focus on growth rather than on Myanmar. Nonetheless, it should conduct quiet diplomacy to find a way out of the Myanmar impasse.

Unlike India and Indonesia, the US has neither turned on the lights at 100 locations nor had a senior leader announce its goals with its Apec chairmanship. This is such a tragedy. Instead, some lower-level officials announced a few priorities: supply chain resilience, digital trade, connectivity, opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises, climate change and environmental sustainability.

This contrast between the high-level announcements in India and Indonesia and the low-level announcements in the US was glaring.

There was also another missed opportunity – Washington could have easily secured a diplomatic victory by announcing that 2023 will mark the 30th anniversary of the US hosting of the first-ever Apec summit in Blake Island, Seattle. Such a link between the 1993 and 2023 summits would symbolically demonstrate that the US has been a long-term custodian of the Apec process. And it could have also pointed out that the 1993 summit was a brilliant success.

The stellar achievement of the 1993 summit was the breakthrough in China-US relations. It was four years after the Tiananmen Square tragedy. China was still shunned by the West. The summit in November 1993 was also a year after the presidential election in the US, during which then Democratic candidate Bill Clinton announced that he would not coddle the tyrants of Beijing.

Chinese President Jiang Zemin was expecting a bitter confrontation with Mr Clinton at the Apec summit. This may explain why he read out his

speech too fast. Fortunately, the Taiwanese representative spoke to Mr Jiang in Mandarin and told him to slow down. I was present at the Blake Island summit as the note-taker for Singapore's then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. Thus, I saw with my own eyes Mr Clinton "coddling" Mr Jiang. It was a historic breakthrough.

## US: APEC CHAIR IN 2023

The US should also aim for some ambitious goals when Apec meets in San Francisco in November 2023. The theme that the US has chosen for its chairmanship of the grouping is "Creating a Resilient and Sustainable Future for All". While this is a good theme, most senior and thoughtful policymakers know that the real game is trade. Former US president Barack Obama was right when he said: "If we don't write the rules, China will write the rules out in that region." This is why he signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

The best thing that the Biden administration could do to support the long-term interests of the US would be to join the 11-member Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which succeeded the TPP after the US, under then President Donald Trump, abandoned the deal. Sadly, this would be politically impossible in the US because American public opinion is opposed to free trade agreements.

In view of this, the wisest thing that the Biden administration could do with its chairmanship of Apec is to educate the American public on the wisdom of engaging East Asia through trade.

Therefore, instead of using its Apec chairmanship to change the world, the Biden administration should use it to educate the American public. If this leads to greater American economic engagement with East Asia, the US would have scored a spectacular goal with its chairmanship.

In short, the three chair countries, India, Indonesia and the US, face very different challenges in 2023. But if they all succeed, the world will be a far better place next year. Let's hope that they all succeed in scoring some goals. The World Cup of diplomacy at the end will leave little doubt that it was far more significant than the World Cup of soccer.

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