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?

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

Unveiled because three key countries – India, Indonesia, and the United States – will be taking over the chairmanship 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 (G-20 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 shortage of events and conversations that Indonesia won the race with India and Asean. The G-20 meetings in Bali in November, the Apec summit in Phnom Penh, and the three-day Asean talks in Bangkok, which included talks of a war over the Taiwan Strait, are the three meetings between Xi Jinping and Indonesia’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 2023

India has announced an expansive G-20 agenda that includes some of the most pressing challenges facing a world convulsed by the effects of climate change and economic shocks. The effects of which have driven hundreds of millions into extreme poverty. To focus minds, Mr Modi, his key policy focus in The Straits Times on Dec 1 crystallized what is at stake in a society and unifying 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, interconnected and interdependent 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 places that is treated by both Moscow and Washington.

It would be a great achievement if through its intervention India could 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 pain, India would have delivered a glorious success.

INDONESIA-ASEAN CHAIR 2023

Indonesia’s top priority as Asean chair is a significant one that plays to the region’s strengths. On Nov 14 (a few days prior to the G-20 meeting), I was privileged to have been hosted to breakfast by President Joko Widodo in Bali, at which he emphasized 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 emphasize the theme of Asean Matters Epiphenomenons 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 1.5 times larger. By 2020, 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 roiled 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 900 locations nor built any senior leader announcements. The U.S. administration’s chairmanship is an act of 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 the first-ever Apec summit in Hawaii, 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 could it 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 codify the treaties 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 Chinese representative spoke to Mr Clinton in Mandarin and held him to slow down. I was present at the APEC summit in Singapore on Singapore’s prime minister’s note-taking for Singapore’s then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew. Thus, I saw with my own eyes Mr Clinton “cradling” Mr Yew. It was a historic breakthrough.

US-APEC CHAIR 2023

The US should also aim for some ambitious goals when Apec meets in San Francisco in November 2023. The US has chosen for its chairmanship of the group 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. Forst US president Barack Obama was right when he said: “If we don’t write the rules, China will write the rules out in the region.” This is why I signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

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

In this respect, the Biden administration should use its Apec chairmanship to change the narrative. The US could focus on the world’s economic recovery needs, and the Biden administration could rally the Apec countries to back its agenda.”

In short, the three chair countries, India, Indonesia and the US, face very different challenges in 2023. But if they all work well, the world could have a far better place next year. Let’s hope that this will happen and that some goals. The World Cup of diplomacy is very much possible.

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