

Raising questions about the relevance of G20

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While terrorism was on the agenda of the G20 Summit and the leaders reaffirmed their resolve to fight it in all its forms, they didn't seriously deal with this menace which affects almost every society represented in the G20

The G20 Summit was held in Hangzhou, China, earlier this month, just a few days before September 11, the anniversary of the traumatic destruction of the World Trade Center in New York, 15 years ago. On that day, terrorists demolished this prominent landmark of New York City and killed almost 3,000 people. The G20 Summits have been criticised by leaders of some countries as a self-appointed group, and that its composition, while representing some of the most important countries in the world, remains arbitrary. The criticism also emphasises the fact that we no longer live in the 19th century, when the major powers met and re-drew the map of the world. The G20, quite apart from the fact that its summits also include a number of regular invitees from institutions and organisations which have major influence in the world, does represent 85 per cent of the Gross World Product (GWP), 80 per cent of world trade and two-thirds of the world population. It would, therefore, be logical to expect that this grouping would focus on some of the most difficult challenges and most intractable problems facing humanity and this planet at their annual meetings.

The Hangzhou Summit has issued a communiqué at its conclusion consisting of 48 paragraphs, which is full of platitudes and generalities. Its major emphasis is defined by the current economic situation, and refers to the weak economic recovery worldwide, clearly identified in the very first substantive paragraph of the communiqué which states "Downside risks remain due to potential volatility in the financial markets, fluctuations of commodity prices, sluggish trade and investment, and slow productivity and employment growth in some

countries. Challenges originating from geopolitical developments, increased refugee flows as well as terrorism and conflicts also complicate the global economic outlook.” The subject of terrorism is dealt with specifically in paragraph 45 by describing it as an issue which poses serious challenges to international peace and security, and endangers ongoing efforts to strengthen the global economy and ensure sustainable growth and development. While this paragraph reaffirms the solidarity and resolve of the G20 leaders to fight terrorism in all its forms and wherever it occurs, it does not deal seriously with this menace which today affects almost every society represented in the G20. It is, therefore, particularly relevant that Prime Minister Narendra Modi brought up the issue of terrorism, which is clearly a major threat to the human condition.

A recent article in *The Atlantic* magazine provides deep insight into the problem of terrorism, and the fact that 15 years after 9/11, the world is perhaps no better off, despite the enormous expenditure on combating terrorism. The article, which focuses essentially on the initiatives undertaken in and the threat that confronts the United States, justifies the question “Are we any safer?” It was just a few short decades ago that anywhere in the world visitors who went to airports for seeing off passengers could walk directly up to the gate where passengers boarded their aircrafts. Today, the elaborate security apparatus and procedures are not only a huge diversion of resources in the form of direct expenditure incurred by Governments, but also a source of delay and diversion of time of tens of millions of people all over the world. The US has incurred direct expenditure on Homeland Security over the last 15 years totaling close to a trillion dollars, but if we add to this, the opportunity cost of time of tens of millions of passengers getting to airports early for security procedures, the loss that human society incurs as a result would become incalculable.

Even more complex is the psychological cost and sense of insecurity that the current threat of terrorism carries as far as air travel is concerned. There are a large number of activities where security procedures are a huge drag on human well-being and security, whether it is entry into a cinema hall or a sports stadium. Despite all the elaborate arrangements to deal with the threat of terror, there is still widespread destruction and loss of life that takes place when terrorists succeed, as is inevitable, given the fact that terrorists are now often drawn from a class of highly educated persons who are tech-savvy. All in all, the words contained in the G20 communiqué, therefore, appear as a distraction from reality, which one expects the world’s most powerful leaders should really be grappling with, not only during their annual summits, but also in between.

One would expect that with the intellectual and analytical resources available to leaders of the G20 countries, some review would be undertaken of mistakes made in the past, and how these could be repaired and avoided in future. It is now obvious in hindsight that the intervention in Afghanistan led to the birth of the Taliban, but once short-term military and political objectives were achieved, the implications of this dangerous force remaining in existence were totally ignored. It is also now obvious that the ill-conceived invasion of Iraq and its aftermath gave birth to the Islamic State, which is now a vicious threat to many countries of the world. It would perhaps be desirable to devote an entire session of the G20 to the problem of terrorism. What is the point in focusing only on economic growth when the disparities across the globe and the exercise of prejudices and selfish power politics lead to serious and lasting threats to human security globally?

These, unfortunately, are not factored into the gross domestic product (GDP) of any country and, in fact, help to boost the measure of economic output. Clearly, the trillion dollars or so spent on Homeland Security in the US are added to the GDP of that country. But how do we account for threats to human security, often created by distorted policies in many countries? It is hoped that the Indian Prime Minister’s reference to terrorism is seen as an issue worthy of analysis and correction, far more than the issue of conventional measures of economic recovery across the globe. It would, therefore, be relevant to ask if the G20 is really with it in respect of what the world really needs. Or is this merely a club where leaders meet annually to issue insipid and irrelevant communiqués at the end of a collective ego trip?

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