India's 2019 G7 Tryst: Taming Global Technologies

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Summary

India has been invited by host country France to participate in the G7 Summit in Biarritz from 24-26 August 2019, which is an opportunity for it to highlight its global importance, particularly in the discussions around global technology issues where India's contributions could be a game-changer for other developing countries.

World leaders will gather in Biarritz, France on 24 August 2019, for the annual G7 Summit. Host nation France has tweaked the G7 format this year, inviting democracies that have regional influence which has made India a participant alongside Australia, South Africa and Chile. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will attend the summit as a "Biarritz Partner" on the invitation of French President Emmanuel Macron.

Macron plans to invigorate the summit by placing globalisation front and centre to ask how the phenomenon can be tamed to produce benefits for all. Under this capacious rubric falls issues like inequality, environmental degradation, counterterrorism, digital governance, artificial intelligence and forging a renewed partnership with Africa. No doubt, the agenda has special relevance for India as it, too, grapples with these issues. Besides several bilateral meetings with other world leaders, including US President Donald Trump, Modi is expected to speak on these multilateral matters, particularly energy and climate change, oceans, and the effects of digital transformations.

India's addition to Biarritz is the legacy of a decade of strong strategic ties between Paris and New Delhi. Both countries have become robust multilateral partners. On multilateral issues like the UN Security Council, climate change, particularly the Paris agreement, maritime security along the Indian Ocean rim, as well as space and nuclear issues, French and Indian interests generally mesh. Their multilateral congruence now looks to cover technology issues like digital governance, data protection, cybersecurity, space, satellites and artificial intelligence, issues where both countries are setting a roadmap for further cooperation.

There is a clear focus on technology issues at this G7. Discussions on the data economy will focus on how countries can craft sensible laws on data transfer, collection, and retention in a way that does not harm their development. The prevailing G7 view supports the creation of data laws that balance privacy concerns and innovation. In other words, craft data rules that protect the rights of citizens to hold data while not making it onerous for firms to manage customer data. This position could drive India to loosen further its draft data protection laws that initially veered toward localisation and retention. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) now appears to have shifted its initial position; recent changes suggest that New Delhi will mandate that only 'critical' information gathered from data is to be held in India. Such a policy shift will soothe the Trump

administration as US officials and companies have criticized India's move toward data localization, claiming such rules will distort trade flows and curtail tech investment given the costs of retaining data in multiple locations. A liberal data protection approach will find support among G7 partners.

Also, on the Biarritz agenda is artificial intelligence, specifically what guidelines should countries devise to regulate AI technologies such that the latter services, not harms, jobs and livelihoods. The AI emphasis continues from last year's Canada-led G7 meeting which prompted the creation of an International Panel on Artificial Intelligence (IPAI), modelled after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). India's presence at the G7 AI discussions could reorient its strategy on AI development and application. Currently, plans are afoot to see how AI can be adopted and deployed to address challenges like food security, healthcare, agriculture, etc. Having India at the forefront of G7 AI meetings could redound back to spur and structure domestic AI plans. A larger goal, however, for India from the G7 AI discussions is to map the effects of AI on jobs, specifically gauging potential losses should AI absorption accelerate. India's desire is to push for a citizen-centric AI.

Another key technology issue on the G7 docket is digital globalization or figuring out how digital flows can be better regulated. One part of this issue focuses on ensuring digital interactions do not foster violence and that citizens can trust their digital infrastructures. Difficulties around the combating of hate speech and misinformation have heightened the need to create a workable framework to address such problems in web platforms. Expecting progress on this issue could be difficult since policies governing fake news, closely tied to free speech, are drafted domestically but sharing views could influence how such laws are drawn up. Currently, a handful of countries - Germany, Australia and France are looking to adopt legislation to prevent the spread of false information online. France and India's positions appear to converge here; Paris and New Delhi back data sovereignty where adequate levels of data protection exist for citizens.

Despite India's sustained engagement with the G20, which appears to have lost some steam, India's G7 presence should send a clear signal of her global importance, not least since it will prove impossible to tackle challenges being discussed without India present. At Biarritz, India has a unique opportunity to emphasize that solutions to global technology challenges like data protection, AI and fake news must place the interests of citizens, not just special interests, at the core. By doing so, India gives voice to other developing countries absent this weekend.

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