

7. The Summit Preparations, Process, and Reform

John Kirton

Hello, I'm John Kirton, Director of the G8 Research Group at the University of Toronto and your lead instructor for G8 Online 2002.

In this session, "The Summit Preparations, Process and Reform," we explore how the annual G7/G8 Summit is prepared and produced, by focusing on past and possible future reforms of the Summit process.

We know that the Summit, as currently constructed, has been quite successful in producing important commitments, and in having member states comply with them. But since the start of the Summit in 1975, there has been plenty of proposals for reform. The Summit leaders have periodically considered the question of Summit reform, and made some important changes of their own over the years.

A number of observers and participants, inspired by the **librarian** conception of the Summit, have argued constantly for a short **minimalist** Summit. It would have little preparation, few members, a focused agenda, an informal, leaders-driven process and limited involvement by the media, outside countries, international organizations citizens (Hodges 1999).

Others, influenced by **trilateralist** thinking, prefer a highly institutionalized **maximalist** Summit. It would have elaborate preparation, a broad membership and agenda, highly engaged ministers and officials, extensive media coverage and outreach, and perhaps even its own secretariat to put its decisions into effect (Ikenberry 1993).

Those who view the G7/G8 Summit system as a democratic **concert** offer particular prescriptions in between these poles. This **middle-of-the-road model** calls for all — and only — democratic major powers to be members, a flexible agenda focused on linked economic-political priorities, and a leaders-driven proc-

ess that controls preparation and implementation, and reaches out as necessary to involve others in its work (Odom 1995, Kirton 1994). Among these minimalist, maximalist and middle-of-the-road recipes, which have been relied on, and which have been most effective in producing the desired results?

I argue that most of the minimalist and maximalist reform proposals have not been adopted, and should not be. For they fail to take advantage of the G8's inherent character as a democratic concert. Indeed, many of the recent modifications, especially in past decade, have strengthened the G8's institutional form as a democratic concert, and thus helped fuel the substantial rise in co-operation and compliance we have seen. If we look ahead, the prospect is for incremental change in the Summit process, aimed primarily at making the G8 more transparent and inclusive in a globalizing age.

A. Membership

In the great debate on reform of the Summit process, the greatest energies have been devoted to membership. Just who should belong? Some, in keeping with the concert equality model, have defended the status quo, in which the original six at Rambouillet in 1975 (France, the United States, Britain, Germany, Japan and Italy) have joined by Canada since 1976 and, for most matters, by the European Union since 1977 and Russia since 1998. A few, consistent with the **American leadership** model premised on a predominant America, have suggested that the membership be reduced. This could be done by having the European Union alone represent the individual big four European countries, or even by having a G3 or G2 that leaves out Canada, Russia the individual European countries and,

some even now suggest, Japan. Many others, loosely following **liberal-institutionalist** logic and wanting the G8 to be more representative, legitimate, powerful or effective, call for expansion. Here rapidly rising China is the most common candidate, for inclusion (Kirton 2001). India, Brazil and other emerging market economies feature in many lists. And in the past, Belgium, the Netherlands and Australia have sought or been proposed for membership in the club. In ways that those who support the **false new consensus** model would recognize, some have even called for the leaders of the world's major multinational corporations to be invited. They have done so on the grounds that these firms are more powerful than most countries in a market-driven age.

Amidst these competing conceptions, which path has been — and should be — pursued? Both the revealed preference of the G7/G8, as shown by its actual behaviour over its 28 years, and the logic of its underlying concept as a democratic concert, point overwhelmingly to maintaining the status quo with only minimal change. As its history shows, the G7/G8 never excludes or expels any existing major power members, unlike the **League of Nations** founded after World War One in 1918. As the recent case of Russia shows, the G7/G8 system can expand, unlike the **United Nations Security Council's** club of Permanent Five veto powers. But the case of Russia also shows that as a democratic concert the G7/G8 will automatically add any democratic major power, whatever its earlier status, after it has become a durably democratic polity. There is indeed a case of the G7/G8 associating more closely with China, a move publicly recommended by recent Summit hosts Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany and Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi of Japan (Kirton 2001). But the next best candidate for inclusion, in the still distant future, is India, where a deeply democratic devotion has been durably demonstrated amidst many challenges over the past 55 difficult years.

B. Agenda

With such a membership, what should the G8's agenda be? Discussion of the Summits' appropriate agenda feature several debates. One concerns breadth — should the G7/G8 Summit cover a full range of issues (as it did Okinawa in 2000) or should it focus only on a few core themes (for example, crime, jobs and money at the 1998 Birmingham Summit, and Africa, economic growth and terrorism at the 2002 Kananaskis Summit). Another deals with ambition — should it stick to “safe bet” issues where leaders can look good at assuredly successful Summits or should it deal in high-risk fashion with the most difficult issues that only leaders can successfully solve, or where they may spectacularly fail? Another debate concerns geography — should it deal with matters of concern only to its G7 member countries or should it take up issues that affect the global community as a whole? Yet another addresses **sovereignty** — should it concentrate on relations among sovereign states or should it deal intrusively with the domestic affairs of its member countries and those outside? And a final debate relates to the economic-political balance — is it essentially an economic summit or should it deal with political and security affairs as well?

Here again, the revealed preference of the actual record shows that the G7/G8 has been — and should stay — a democratic concert, with an agenda appropriate to such an institution. This agenda aims to preserve and promote democracy and its associated values; it is thus ambitious, domestically intrusive and global, it embraces and interrelates economic and political-security matters, and it is comprehensive or focused as the occasion demands.

In the early years of the Summit, the dominant concern with **stagflation** and the **crisis of governability** bred an overt preoccupation with economic and energy affairs, even though another important European preoccupation was reducing dependence on the Soviet Union and freeing their governments of Communist

parties. After the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the agenda became more overtly political. After the 1989 crumbling of communism, the Summit focused on offering financial assistance (and Summit participation) to the former Soviet Union in ways that ensured that the “second Russian revolution” and its democratic triumph took place. At Kananaskis, sustaining growth will co-exist equally and interrelate with combating terrorism as priority themes, while reducing poverty in Africa — perhaps the most ambitious subject currently imaginable — will also require increasing both international economic assistance and the good governance and the rule of law within African states.

C. Frequency, Format and Formality

With these members, and this agenda, what format should the Summit have? In 1992, British prime minister John Major proposed to his fellow leaders that the Summit meet less frequently (perhaps every 18 months rather than annually), and do so as a much more informal meeting attended only by the leaders. It was understandable that a British prime minister would think in this way. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and the Executive Board of the **International Monetary Fund**, and a major member of the European Council, and biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Britain is in a privileged position to pursue its global political and economic agenda, even if the G7/G8 Summit was not available to it every year. Moreover, British prime ministers uniquely command majority governments that control their legislatures without coalition or factional partners, and usually have extensive ministerial experience. They can thus easily hold their own at a short, freewheeling, informal, leaders-only summit, without attending ministers or extensive preparations and lengthy carefully negotiated consensual communiqués prepared and pre-scripted by officials long in advance.

Thus it is not surprising that it was a British prime minister — Tony Blair — who, for the 1998 Birmingham Summit, abolished the attendance of the foreign and finance ministers who had participated in every Summit since the start (Kirton and Kokotsis 1997/98). He instituted a leaders’ retreat of the sort long had by the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. Similarly, Canada’s Jean Chrétien, who has also had a secure, single-party majority in a parliamentary government since he came to office in 1993, tried unsuccessfully to have a leaders-only summit when he hosted at Halifax in 1995. For Kananaskis 2002, he has succeeded in mounting the shortest Summit ever (at 30 hours over two days), the most isolated and informal Summit ever (held in a secluded mountain retreat), with the fewest number of attending officials and journalists ever (as each national delegation will number no more than 30 and only 100 journalists will be allowed to bus up to Kananaskis each day). Furthermore, Prime Minister Chrétien, also for the first time in Summit history, seeks to abolish the extensive, prescribed leader’s communiqué (Kirton 2002).

These successful Canadian and British efforts to reform the Summit process show that even the smaller members can shape the Summit institution, as the concert equality model suggests. Such minimalist reforms in logic and in practice give these smaller members an institutional advantage that helps compensate for what they lack in relative capability alone. These changes help account for the Summit’s improved performance, in co-operation and in compliance, in the years since 1998.

But minimalism by itself is not a winning model. The 1998 Birmingham Summit also introduced another important reform, drawn from the maximalist camp, through its admission of Russia as a full, permanent member of the new G8. This new G8 dominated the continuing G7 at their combined Summit each year. The addition of the now permanently democratic Russia reinforced the externally

predominant and more internally equal capabilities, democratic common purposes, and political control by popularly elected leaders needed by the G8 — along with its still constricted participation — in order to function as an effective centre of global governance with an agenda that adjusts to meet the particular global challenges of the day. The particular contributions of both the minimalist and maximalist prescriptions thus confirm that it is the concert model in the middle of the road that makes the Summit really work so well.

References

- Hodges, Michael (1999), "The G8 and the New Political Economy," pp. 69–74 in Michael Hodges, John Kirton and Joseph Daniels, *The G8's Role in the New Millennium* (Ashgate: Aldershot).
- Ikenberry, John (1993), "Salvaging the G-7," *Foreign Affairs* 72 (Spring): 132–139.
- Kirton, John (2001), "The G7/8 and China: Toward a Closer Association," pp. 189–222 in John Kirton, Joseph Daniels and Andreas Freytag, eds., *Guiding Global Order: G8 Governance in the Twenty-First Century* (Ashgate: Aldershot).
- Odom, William, "How to Create a True World Order," *Orbis* 39 (Spring 1995): 155–172.

Further Readings

- Guttry, Andrea de (1994), "The Institutional Configuration of the G-7 in the New International Scenario," in "The Future of the G-7 Summits" [Special Issue], *International Spectator* 29(2): 67–80.
- Hodges, Michael (1994), "More Efficiency, Less Dignity: British Perspectives on the Future Role and Working of the G-7," in "The Future of the G-7 Summits" [Special Issue], *International Spectator* 29(2): 141–159.
- Kirton, John (2002). "Guess Who Is Coming to Kananaskis," *International Journal* 57(1) <www.g8.utoronto.ca/g7/scholar/kirton2002/020507.pdf> (May 2002).
- Kirton, John (1994), "Exercising Concerted Leadership: Canada's Approach to Summit Reform," in "The Future of the G-7 Summits" [Special Issue], *International Spectator* 29(2): 161–176.
- Kirton, John, and Ella Kokotsis (1997/98), "Revitalizing the G-7: Prospects for the 1998 Birmingham Summit of the Eight," *International Journal* 53(1).
- Merlini, Cesare (1994), "The G-7 and the Need for Reform" in "The Future of the G-7 Summits" [Special Issue], *International Spectator* 29(2): 5–25.

Discussion Questions

1. What country should become the next G7/G8 Summit member? When and why?
2. In 1992, British prime minister John Major proposed to his fellow leaders that the Summit meet less frequently (perhaps every 18 months rather than once a year) as a much more informal, leaders-only driven process. Which of the G8 members would such proposals most disadvantage, and why?
3. To what extent can we connect changes in the Summit's membership, agenda, and format to changes in the commitments and compliance it has produced? Where are the links the strongest?
4. If the European Union can be represented at the Summit should not other regional institutions such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) forum be as well? If so, how should this be done?
5. What attributes and thus values are shared by those members who uniquely belong to the G8 (Japan, Germany, Italy, and Canada), in contrast to those of members who uniquely belong to the United Nations Security Council Permanent Five (China)? Which values would you prefer to dominate in the international order of the twenty-first century?

Quiz

1. The League of Nations was created at the end of:
 - a. the war of 1812
 - b. World War One from 1914 to 1918
 - c. World War Two from 1939 to 1945
 - d. the Vietnam war from 1954 to 1975
2. Since its 1945 founding the United Nations Security Council club of Permanent Five veto powers has expanded to include:
 - a. Japan
 - b. Italy
 - c. Canada
 - d. No one
3. The themes of crime, jobs and money were highlighted at the Summit in:
 - a. Toronto 1998
 - b. Halifax 1995
 - c. Birmingham 1998
 - d. Genoa 2001
4. The first Summit to be held among leaders only, without attending ministers, was hosted by:
 - a. France's Valéry Giscard d'Estaing
 - b. Canada's Jean Chrétien
 - c. The United States' Bill Clinton
 - d. Britain's Tony Blair
5. Canadian prime minister Jean Chrétien plans at Kananaskis in June 2002 to hold the shortest Summit on record, at only:
 - a. 12 hours in a single day
 - b. 30 hours over two days
 - c. 48 hours over two days and two nights
 - d. 72 hours and three days, including a leaders' retreat in Banff