

1. THE SUMMIT IN WEST GERMAN FOREIGN POLICY

In analyzing Germany's participation in the thirteen economic summits since Rambouillet, it is important to note that economic summitry holds only a limited, if important place in the German foreign policy process. From the beginning the German government has continuously pointed out that the annual economic summits are not a decision-making institution.¹ This point is crucial, as it significantly qualifies the role of the summit in the practical foreign policy decision process of the Federal Republic.

The German government argues, further, that unlike institutions such as NATO and the OECD, the economic summit lacks a permanent bureaucratic and organizational underpinning. Moreover, the fact that only seven countries attend limits the impact of impact of the summit in that the leaders present at it cannot effectively make policy decisions for those countries left out of the process.²

Another reason why the German government has not viewed the summits as an effective forum for practical decision-making is the fact that distinct constitutional and/or practical political constraints in the various member countries prevent many leaders from making agreements in this forum and ensuring that they will

¹ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, November 17, 1975.
Personal interview with German official.

² Personal interview with German official.

be implemented.³ This is especially true for the largest summit member, as the US President needs the support of the Senate in ratifying binding international agreements. However it is also true for the German Chancellor, who, since the summit began, has had to rely on a coalition government and has thus had to take the views of his coalition partners into consideration. It would thus be very difficult for Chancellor Kohl to suddenly agree to some issue at a summit in a spontaneous decision with his peers, without first weighing and securing a consensus among the often varying views of the other parties in his coalition. In the German case, the complications of coalition government have been somewhat offset by the fact that the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP) has traditionally held both the foreign and economic portfolios and has thus had its own representative in every German delegation since Rambouillet.

If the summits are not viewed by the German government as places for reaching binding decisions, then what does it see them as? Both Social Democratic Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who attended the summit from 1975 to 1982, and Christian Democratic Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who appeared from 1983 to the present, have repeatedly emphasized their belief that the annual summit is a very valuable forum in which the leaders can meet relatively informally and discuss issues from all policy areas with one another. Other institutions usually only deal with one specific issue area, but the economic summit has allowed the leaders to

³ Ibid.

cover a broad range of issues. This is important, because it permits a fairly open exchange of views and gives the leaders the opportunity to focus on issues they would not normally cover. A very good example can be seen in Chancellor Kohl's sudden interest in the question of LLDC debt after his first real exposure to this issue at Venice in 1987.* The summit had thus created an awareness in the Chancellor and one that led to real political results. It is therefore apparent that the summit is still viewed in Bonn in the terms first expressed by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in 1975, who compared it to a "seminar for statesmen".⁵

With the value of the summit conceived in this way, what place does the institution thus have in the German foreign policy constellation. It is difficult to place the summit in a clear order of priority in Germany's external affairs. It is clear that it is not viewed as the most important forum in the rather wide array of international institutions, bilateral associations and special relationships that Germany has available to it. Since Germany is both the dominant economic power in Western Europe, and a central, irreplaceable partner in the Western Alliance, it a dominant role in German foreign policy is given to the European Community and its own summit meetings. At the same time, much stress is still placed on bilateral relations with the United States, the NATO process, relations with East Germany and ties

* Personal interview with German official.

⁵ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, November 17, 1975.

with the rest of the Eastern Bloc. The economic summit lies in the second tier of foreign policy priorities.

This does not mean that the government takes the Summit lightly. Careful preparation goes into every summit appearance. The German government has used it as an effective forum to underline its own priorities and achieve some agreement with its partners on economic fundamentals. It also recognizes the summit's importance, both in the media attention the summit receives and in the signals it can send to the general public.

Thus it would be more accurate to conclude that the economic summit plays a special role in the German foreign policy process, even if it does not represent the most significant aspect. If one bears in mind Bonn's view of the summit process as a whole, then it does become apparent that the summit has been a valuable and effective forum for the Federal Republic of Germany.