
Essay

The Summit Meeting: The Role and Agenda of Diplomacy at its Highest Level

by Peter R. Weilemann

In July this year the heads of states and governments of Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, the United States, and Russia and the president of the European Union will come to Japan for the 26th world economic summit, also known as the G7/G8 meeting. They will be accompanied by hundreds of bureaucrats and other government officials. Thousands of journalists will cover the event, and the entire world will watch the proceedings and debate the results. However, there is an ever-growing number of critics who ask what such an event is good for.

Summit meetings have become an ordinary fact of life in modern international politics. They are not a new invention but as old as human history. Most history textbooks tell of events where emperors, kings, or chiefs came together, in bilateral meetings or within the framework of multilateral conferences or conventions, to settle disputes or make peace. Summits were also sadly noted in the past for missed opportunities to reach agreements.

The expression "summit" to characterize such meetings, however, was first used only in

1955 to describe one of the failed cold war conferences of the four powers (the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union) in Geneva. And it is only in more recent times that such meetings are no longer extraordinary events. They have instead become a common pattern in international politics, in which non-participation by a leader makes more headlines than participation does.

But what is a summit? Some might recall the meeting at Potsdam where Josef Stalin, Harry S. Truman, and Winston Churchill came together to agree on a new European order after WW2. Others will cite the superpower summits between US presidents and Soviet leaders during the cold war. By a treaty ratified in 1963, France and Germany established bilateral meetings of the heads of government on a regular basis twice a year, an idea that was the precursor of many similar institutional arrangements among other European countries. Since the mid-1970s, heads of states and governments of the European Union (or what was then called the European Community), have come together two or three

times a year, an arrangement that has become institutionalized in the Maastricht Treaty. Other regional summits come to mind, such as the African summits, the APEC summits and the meetings of the Heads of Commonwealth states. Global or world summits, including the Earth Summit in Rio and the World Social Summit in Copenhagen, also began to crop up in the early 1990s.

But what appears to be a summit may not always be so. Like the emperors and kings of the past, today's presidents and heads of states or government might meet at the occasion of a funeral when one of their equals has passed away. Or they might come together during the United Nations General Assembly sessions or see each other during state visits. So-called private meetings of leading politicians are today as common as they were when ruling dynasties were linked through marriage and other familial bonds. Although journalists tend to be rather free in labeling such meetings "summits", political scientists fear that such indiscriminate use could blur the concept of summit. To gain more clarity, they establish two essential criteria.

The first key element of summitry is executive participation, diplomacy at the highest possible level.¹ Participation here might mean not only state leaders, but also leaders of international organizations such as NATO or the European Union. The second is that summit meetings are distinguished by the form of personal contact, meaning that participants communicate face-to-face. This makes a difference, because it is more difficult and usually involves a ceremonial dimension that represents a greater commitment of time, energy, and political risk than is present in, say, a telephone call.² Additional characteristics of proper summits are that most

meetings lack formal decision-making competencies in the sense of legal or constitutional bases attributed to them. Moreover, most do not command permanent administrative support or a secretarial structure independent of national administrations.

To better understand the role of summits, it makes sense to differentiate types of summits according to formal criteria, such as whether they are bilateral or multilateral, regional or worldwide. Much more helpful, however, is to make a distinction by goals. This is not an easy task, since there seem to be no limits in choosing a summit's specific topic. US-Soviet summits were often dominated by arms control issues. The NATO Summit in

April 1990 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Atlantic alliance originally planned to conclude a new "strategic concept" but in the end the whole event was dominated by the Kosovo conflict. The so-called "Conclusions of the President" published after each meeting of the European Council usually amount to more than a dozen typewritten pages (not including appendices) covering almost every issue the EU is concerned with: institutional reforms, enlargement, employment policies, environmental issues, and many other areas.

As Peter Hajnal and John Kirton explain in this issue of *NIRA Review*, the evolution of the G8 agenda is also remarkable. Originally the heads of state met to debate international monetary and exchange rate issues. With the passing of time, however, these meetings have become more and more political. Already by 1981 or 1982, discussion of East-West relations featured prominently on the agenda. The main issue at the 1988 Tokyo Summit was terrorism. In the early 1990s the World Economic Summit, which took place in Houston,

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¹ Dunn, D. (1986), p17

² Ibid, p19

London, and Tokyo, was preoccupied mainly with the transformation of Russia and the former Soviet-bloc countries of Eastern Europe. The most recent summit in Köln in 1999 was overshadowed by the Kosovo crisis, but it also might be remembered for its proposals of debt relief for "Third World" countries.

Because the specific subjects of summits can vary greatly, the setting of the agenda is a highly political process. It shapes the outcome of such a meeting and determines its specific outlook or character. There are summits, such as peace conferences, whose single purpose is to end conflict. Other summits are convened to establish a new order or develop an existing one. Some conferences at the highest level serve as instruments to give new orientations or to reassure the participants of their common political goals or values. And some summit meetings take place to improve coordination among nations. Any judgment of the benefits and drawbacks of international summitry must be made against the background of the specific purpose of such meetings and the tasks they are meant to accomplish.

Among the numerous summit meetings that are held today only a few are convened as peace conferences to end military conflict. Nor are there many recent examples of summits where heads of states come together to create or establish a new order. Certainly the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) summits of the 1970s and early 1990s were useful in their time in helping to establish new rules of order for the transatlantic area between Vancouver and Vladivostok. The European Council, besides being a coordinating body, always contained strong impulses toward shaping a new European order. A few bilateral summits in the recent past also produced big changes or new structures in international politics, such as US President Nixon's visit to China and his

meetings with Mao Tse-tung, or the Camp David agreement between Israel and Egypt reached under US tutelage. But most summits belong to the category of orientation meetings; by definition, they produce no concrete results. The general public and professional commentators therefore often consider summit meetings to be little more than expensive media spectacles with few tangible outcomes.

There are certainly many drawbacks to summit meetings. The assumption that personal acquaintances between the leaders of states will prevent future conflicts between them has often been disproved by history. Summits that peacefully negotiated conflict resolutions seldom produced outcomes with long-term consequences.

During the cold war there was constant debate about their value. Some of the arguments exchanged then still provide ammunition for critics today. How can the head of a democratic country deal successfully with the leader of a totalitarian system or dictatorship? With the main actors rooted in different cultures it is suggested that such encounters can only lead to superficial understandings that in the long term could actually aggravate differences. Heads of states are not experts in highly complex matters such as arms control, trade, or other issues on summit agendas. They lack the diplomatic skills of professional diplomats and are often ill-prepared for these debates. Under the pressures of time and the enormous expectations from the public at home, politicians are often tempted to compromise with false solutions. Since most of the time summit agreements are not legally binding, statesmen do not even feel politically obliged to deliver the results agreed on or they fail to do so because of domestic constraints. Critics also complain that calling summit meetings forces politicians and bureaucrats to set the wrong priorities with respect to time, political resources, and energy. Nevertheless, most of these arguments can be dealt with. They have nothing to do with summits as such, but rather

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The advantages of multilateral summitry cannot be easily measured in short-term tangible results. In the long run, however, they certainly can produce more than just an improved atmosphere for international political negotiation, although this is a value in itself if handled properly and used with the right political instincts.

In this respect it is quite interesting to recall another line of argument used against summits. The debate on the evolution and future of the G8 meeting is a good example. Many consider the original idea of that meeting to have been betrayed. Instead of an informal gathering that allows an intense exchange of views at the highest level without protocol or bureaucratic constraints and free from any pressure to make decisions, today's world economic summits are highly formalized conventions. Very little room remains for free discussion and more and more increasingly complicated issues must be addressed. And to top it all, the final communiqué that supposedly summarizes the results of the debate is normally produced and agreed on far in advance. All this is true. But whether it is the wrong or right evolution depends very much on what is intended.

Summit meetings evolve with changes in the international order. Beyond atmospheric and such positive psychological benefits as the opportunity for personal contact between heads of states and government, summits today have potential as stabilizing elements in the international order. Since the end of the cold war, the scaling down of East-West confrontation and the vanishing North-South conflicts, summits have been freed of ideological dead weight. Furthermore, the

reality of the growing interdependence of nations and the impact of globalization has made closer international cooperation and the development of appropriate institutions a necessity. Summit meetings have gained new roles and special functions with these

developments. Within this context, I want to argue that summits are an important element of international political negotiation that bring the following benefits.

Personal contact between the heads of states and governments brings new elements into the equation of power. Certainly military and economic might still count, but the personality of a leader, the way he argues in debate, and the power of his intellect will be factored into the discussions at a summit meeting with the chance to redress imbalances in favor of the weaker side

and to produce results shared and accepted as legitimate by all. After all, summitry is a democratic invention and not one much liked by dictators.

Summit meetings have very practical effects. To prepare for a summit and in the interests of avoiding its failure, bureaucrats are forced to create goals and time-frames for solutions that otherwise might have been put off or never reached. The G8 meetings benefit from very careful preparation. As Hajnal and Kirton have pointed out, the so-called Sherpas, who are in charge of the preparation of the summit and who are the closest aides to the heads of states, meet several times a year as do the foreign ministers or finance ministers, in preparatory meetings. So a process of anticipation and coordination takes root within each national administration while the summit is in preparation. These meetings also quite often give fresh impulses or directions for international organizations.

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Commitments undertaken by a political leader during a summit meeting can open up new avenues in domestic political debate and provide fresh opportunities to overcome deadlocked situations. On the other hand an agreement or even a mere understanding on the interpretations of facts or specific situations reached by several heads of states also has norm-setting qualities for the international community. Such guidelines not only bind the participating nations together in implementing their policies, but they also set standards for others.

To preserve its useful role, however, the summit must be constantly under development and reform. One such reform would consider the problem of how to stop or reverse the current trend toward ever larger and more elaborate summits. The meetings can and should be reduced in size and the numbers of aides and fellow participants reduced with greater efforts made to dampen down the media spectacle surrounding the event itself. What also must be looked at more carefully is the agenda, especially, but not only, for the G7/G8 meetings. A summit meeting must not be made to become the problem solver for technical issues the bureaucrats have failed to agree on. Agendas

should be streamlined and more focused—a case of less is more.

Another issue has to do with NGOs. It has become quite fashionable to demand greater participation by NGOs in the summit process as if the actions of heads of states were out of tune with the public and not open to domestic democratic control. The rights and duties of such organizations should be carefully defined. Certainly it might be helpful if state and non-state actors work more closely together in the future than they have in the past. Finally, it sometimes makes sense to have the broadest political participation by all states. But opening up each summit can also have its price by impairing the capacity of states to act or by leading to outcomes that are meaningless because they reflect only the least common denominator. Legitimacy is not only a question of numbers.

If these reflections are heeded, summits have a bright future. In today's world, "summitry belongs to the dramaturgy of globalism which in turn belongs to the future of world politics."³

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³ Messner (1996), 169