

Colin Robertson: Jaw-jaw is still better than war-war, just very expensive

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The term 'summit' was coined by Winston Churchill for face-to-face diplomatic encounters between leaders. Summitry is predicated upon the idea that better personal relations between leaders can yield diplomatic benefits or as Churchill put it, 'jaw-jaw' is better than 'war-war'. This was particularly important during the Cold War when the intent was to encourage the leaders of the Soviet Union and United States to reach for the red telephone rather than the red button.

The summitry industry is booming as never before and in colour and content resembles a medieval caravan. Cocooned in security and pomp, last year was a record for the conference set – leaders and their delegations, the fixers – hoteliers, chefs and chauffeurs, and the spin doctors who play the media. Camp followers are a rainbow of big and small organizations representing a kaleidoscope of causes, with more than a couple of loonies to provide colour and a photo-op for the paparazzi.

The G7/8 began as six in 1975 when French president Giscard d'Estaing invited the US, Japan, UK, Germany to Rambouillet to talk international politics and economics in the wake of the Arab oil shocks. Thanks to US president Gerald Ford Canada was invited to the 1976 meeting in San Juan; the Russians began attending in the nineties and were formally included in 1997.

The G20, originally a meeting of finance ministers, their deputies and central bankers, was formed in 1999 in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. Paul Martin was a key architect. They began meeting at the head of government level in November, 2008 when President Bush convened them in Washington to deal with the economic crisis. Since then, the G20 leaders have been meeting twice a year (London in April, 2009, Pittsburgh in October 2009 and this November in Seoul).

Before the annual June meeting of G8 leaders, their principal advisors – called 'sherpas' – tour the world to tee up agenda and draft the communiqués. Feeding into the process are supplementary meetings that begin in January involving foreign and finance ministers, their deputy ministers and central bankers, as well as ministers of the environment, labor, tourism and development.

The summit meetings are a bit like a Russian doll. There is the G8 at the core, then the G8 plus various combinations of countries and organizations (eg. UN, IMF, World Bank) depending on the subject, gradually expanding until all the G20 players plus other invitees are sitting round the table on the final day. Meanwhile, a series of 'pull-asides' and 'bi-laterals' between the players, sometimes spontaneous and sometimes planned, is also taking place.

In advance of the meetings later this week, there was a G(irls)-20 summit to focus on the Millenium Development goals organized by Belinda Stronach, Oxfam, Save the Children and the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. A B(usiness)-20 summit facilitated by Canadian Council of Chief Executives CEO John Manley and Canadian Chamber of Commerce CEO Perrin Beatty will be held concurrent with the leaders summit. Meanwhile, there will also be various civil society gatherings in and around Toronto, including a 'Faith and Business Summit' that will feature Karl Rove.

Do we really need a G20?

Yes. Henry Kissinger has described 2009 as the year when the new world order began as the United States, arguably for the first time since the Second World War, was obliged to recognize that its economic strength was no longer sufficient to go it alone. The G-8 had already become eclipsed by the rise of China and India. Today the G-20 accounts for 80% world trade and GNP.

There will be discussion about increasing the representation beyond the traditional donors on the IMF and World Bank. A tax on banking transactions as insurance against future bank failures has been a running discussion with France, Germany, Britain and the United States favoring a tax and the most of the rest, including Canada, Australia, China, India and Brazil, saying in varying degrees that it is not necessary if the proper regulatory regime is in place at the national level. Capital and liquidity levels for banks have already been raised in most jurisdictions as well as regulations and legislation to make more transparent the now notorious derivative trading and credit swaps. Unanticipated events, like the London bus bombing during the Gleneagles summit in 2005, also influence proceedings and, in that situation, focused leaders' attention on terrorism.

What is the aim of these summits?

This year's "to do" list is similar to that of last year: resuscitate the global economy as it heads unevenly to an exit ramp of deficit control from the biggest stimulus package in world history, take stock of the Eurozone's effort to contain the Greek contagion, and advance freer trade in what is now the longest running trade negotiations.

If this isn't enough the leaders will also discuss how to save the planet from climate change, keep the increasing millions of mouths fed, watered and free of pandemics; keep the lid on terrorism and crime (drugs and people smuggling); and, though we're not sure how, to prevent everything going up in a nuclear cloud. The devil is in the detail and it is often in the small, unreported bits that incremental progress is made. There is, participants also agree, real value in the informal discussions between leaders – getting the measure of one another – than in the set-piece presentations.

What about deliverables?

Don't expect a lot.

In anticipation that they would be on the hot seat, the Chinese signaled last week that they will allow their currency to begin to move upwards against the dollar although by how much and how soon will be the questions raised in Toronto. The yuan is currently pegged at 6.83 per U.S. dollar. The last time it was allowed to float (2005-8) its value rose 21%.

Last year, Prime Minister Harper argued successfully for 'accountability' in the promises made by the summiteers. On Sunday a document was released on behalf of the G8 that, surprise, surprise, says the promises have been generally kept, notwithstanding the pressures of the recession. The US, Russia, and Italy dodge providing a figure but confirm their aspirational intentions. In terms of ODA as a percentage of GDP the others assess themselves as follows: UK .6%, France .46%, Germany .4%, Canada 0.33%. The EU has pledged to reach .7% by 2015. The report also says Canada doubled its aid to Africa by 2009 and is on target to double its foreign aid by 2011 and to untie all food aid by 2012.

At Davos, Mr. Harper said he would make maternal and child health his priority. Unfortunately for him it got caught up in a debate on whether family planning would include funding of abortions. The 'Muskoka Initiative' will likely result in significant commitments by G8 nations as well as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and this will help momentum leading into September's United Nations stocktaking summit in New York on Millennium Development Goals to end poverty.

The G-8 will also take stock of nuclear non-proliferation with a focus on Iran and North Korea. President Obama has said that nuclear proliferation is the one issue that keeps him awake at night and in April he hosted what for an American president was the biggest gathering of foreign leaders in Washington at the Nuclear Security Summit. Earlier this month the UN Security Council voted to impose new sanctions that target Iranian banks suspected of connections with nuclear or missile programme, expand the arms embargo and call for a cargo inspection regime.

Why do they cost so much?

Security costs have ballooned and this week's summits are estimated at nearly a billion dollars. security forces alone number in the thousands – remember the quonset hut picture outside Huntsville? Security chiefs have cowed conference organizers into providing a degree of protection that can border on absurdity, as we've seen with the uprooted saplings on Toronto streets for fear they be used as clubs. The necessity of providing security in two places – Huntsville (G8) and downtown Toronto (G20) – means future G8/20 will likely be held in the same location.

No one wants a bang on their doorsteps and no one wants to forbid 'democratic' protest. The raggle-taggle crowd, of high-minded do-gooders and anti this-and-that's, realize that if they can create a ruckus and incite the authorities to bang a few heads and spray tear-gas (remember the Vancouver APEC 'pepper spray' conference in November 1997 or the Quebec City Americas summit in April, 2001) they will achieve the publicity that fuels media attention and fundraising.

Leaders don't help matters with their insistence on bringing large entourage of advisors. Then there are the media that accompany them – the estimate is that there will be over 2000 at Toronto. At the Montebello summit (1981), the first Canadian summit, Pierre Trudeau limited delegations to principals plus 15. The rest were obliged to stay in Ottawa. The leaders all liked the informality and spending time alone. Collectively, they spent 16 hours together at Montebello (now the collective time is around 3 hours). Jean Chretien made an effort to re-establish this approach when he hosted his first summit, at Halifax in 1995. The scaled back the trappings and entourage earned it the sobriquet 'Chevrolet Summit'.

Does Canada make a difference?

We certainly have the capacity to make a difference and to be a helpful fixer. As Australian PM Kevin Rudd observes: "The influence (of middle powers) relies on the power of their ideals and the effectiveness of their influence-building." We belong to most of the multilateral clubs, including two in which the US is not a member – the Francophonie and Commonwealth. At our best we are informed, a constructive conscience, consensual and acting especially as a bridge between developed and developing nations, and coming up with useful initiatives – thus, for example, the Kananaskis Action Plan on Africa (2002).

History, geographic propinquity, economic integration and culture (what for the rest of the world is football we call soccer) has also given us the capacity to be an 'interpreter' of the US to the rest and of the rest to the US. This matters as the US is still the paramount world power with a track record of remarkable resiliency in time of crisis. However, the schizophrenia of our own relationship with the US can also bring out the worst in our diplomatic temperament – that of a scold and nag, or what former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson (whose mother was Canadian) once described as the 'stern voice of the daughter of God'.

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