

Article and Book Reviews

The G8 – G20 Relationship in Global Governance

(edited by M. Larionova and J.J. Kirton)¹

The G8 – G20 Relationship in Global Governance offers insights into the increasingly fragmented world of plurilateral summitry. What the edited collection does so usefully is to highlight areas where the different summit processes – not only the G8 and the G20, but also the BRICS – hold comparative strengths and limitations. The volume is also valuable in highlighting the commonalities that bind these expressions of plurilateralism together. For all their differences, the G8, the G20 and the BRICS are embedded in common motivations and cultures. As well described in particular by the chapter of Dries Lesage, each was galvanized into life by a global shock, whether in the 1970s or the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. Each has evolved into a leaders' driven process, but with ample room for sherpas and a host of networking by other state and non-state actors. Each has a membership that is selective but also open-ended, with considerable capacity for adaptation.

This is not to suggest that the trajectory of plurilateral summitry is predictable, just that when the format appears to be fixed, additional changes occur. Although occurring later than the September 2013 St Petersburg G20 where most of the articles for this book were presented, the biggest jolt has been the reversion of the G8 back into its older format of the G7. As the editors denote in a footnote on p. 6: “as a result of Russia’s actions in Ukraine in March 2014, the G7 leaders suspended their preparations in the Russian-hosted G8 summit and decided to meet on their own in Brussels on June 4–5.”

Such surprises, however, magnify rather than detract from the main theme of the collection. That is to say, can some rough division of labour be drawn up among the different summit processes?

At first glance it would appear that it is the G20 that has the advantage of being the ‘hub’ institution around which the others revolve. Yet, in a manner that suggests the intellectual richness of this volume, the contributors challenge this type of assumption. Martin Gilman, for example, questions (p. 49) whether the G20 is just too diverse to do the job, and suggests that some tasks allocated to the G20 can – and should – be moved back to traditional formal institutions.

Certainly the G20 has lost momentum over the last few years, but to a large extent this problem reflects an unwillingness of leaders to move the summit from a crisis committee to a steering committee. St Petersburg provided an opportunity to deal with the Syrian crisis, which was addressed at the foreign ministers’ level but was not taken with full commitment to the leaders’ level.

Nevertheless, simply as a convening forum, the G20 has huge advantages. Alone among all the summits, it contains as members the traditional G7 countries, the BRICS including Russia, as well as a mix of significant middle powers (five of which have begun to meet as a MIKTA forum at the level of foreign ministers).

¹ The G8 – G20 Relationship in Global Governance (eds. M. Larionova and J.J. Kirton). Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015.

The strengths of a narrower G8 – and even more so G7 – are far more focused. As John Kirton suggests in a very good chapter on the Muskoka – Toronto Twin Summits of 2010, a main point of comparative advantage of the G7/8 is the ability to mobilize in specific functional areas such as the Muskoka initiative on Maternal, Newborn and Child Health. Working together as likeminded countries with a legacy of working together gives this activity a coherence lacking in the G20.

One of the major questions for the G7 is whether it can grapple back some prominence in the economic arena. As Zia Qureshi notes in a chapter on Crisis Management to Policies for Growth, any shift in this direction will necessitate “international peer interaction, policy coordination, or collective action” (p. 139). If this is the best option, however, some scepticism remains (as shown in the Gilman chapter) about the ability of the G20 to deliver on this basis.

A move back in to the economic agenda may be reinforced, moreover, by the relative success of the BRICS in pushing ahead with an agenda not only on areas of health, as highlighted by Marina Larionova and her colleagues at the International Organizations Research Institute at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow, but on the creation of the New Development Bank. As such, there may be a new incentive for the G7 to return to some aspects of the economic agenda.

Another more general question is the difference in accountability dynamic between the G7 and other summits. Whereas the G7 has contained some elements of an internal process of self-evaluation, the G20 has been evaluated in an increasingly extensive manner by external bodies such as the OECD, the WTO, UNCTAD and Global Trade Alert. But as Kirton points out in one of the concluding chapters, the need persists for “more adequate metrics and assessment processes.”

A third question about all the processes relates to their degree of state centrism. As elaborated in chapters by Mariana Larionova and her colleagues, on the one hand, and Peter Hajnal on the other, the Larionova chapter is the first full analysis of the B20 in the G20 complex and is full of detail about the evolution of this group. My only criticism is that some of the major episodes of engagement, notably the role of the Gates Foundation at Cannes in 2011, could have been teased out. The chapter by Hajnal, a veteran observer of G7/8 and G20 processes, provides an array of informative analysis about the role of civil society across a wide spectrum of behavior.

What emerges from the collection is a much clearer picture of the common roots of all the summits, amid the expansive diversity. While the catalysts for their coming into being have been quite different, there is a conformity about the practices that have taken shape. At the same time, there are signs of a common cycle among these institutions, a slow and cautious start, a shift to a higher profile due to an unsolved problem, a burst of collective action, and then some loss of momentum.

Larionova and Kirton do a really good job of projecting the big themes central to the life of the G7/8 and G20. To be sure, there are gaps. A stand-alone chapter on the BRICS would have been useful, as would a chapter dealing with the impact of geo-politics on summit dynamics. That being said, this is a valuable read not just for those involved in summit-watching, in academia and think tanks, but for a wider audience interested in where the uneven road of global governance is moving and how by whom it is being navigated in the 21st century.

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