

Afterword

Globalization and Summit Reform:

A Leader's View

by

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As an early supporter of the global public policy development known as the L-20 project, I am pleased to have the opportunity to add my own comments based on personal experience.

As many readers may know (or guess), international meetings vary widely in terms of how well they function. Even the best organized Summits, especially those with multiple heads of government present, are difficult to launch on time. There are delegations to seat, papers to distribute and water jugs to fill. A busy hum usually fills the hall.

But for every meeting, there comes the moment when a hush falls over the room. That's when the most important leader enters it. That hush can be most instructive. In this regard, no player is more important than the President of the United States, but increasingly the ability to create that hush is being shared. This is but symbolic of what we all instinctively know.

The simple fact is that great economic or military power begets proportionate international influence, and brings with it significant responsibility for the well-being of the global community. And in the highly interdependent circumstances of rapid globalization, the effective exercise of this responsibility by the most powerful countries directly affects not just them but all of us.

So my first reflection on the L-20 project as it has developed so far has to do with the nature of power, and the question of which countries are likely to wield it in the years to come. We stand at the brink of a period of significant change when it comes to the balance of global influence. The impetus for this change comes from a number of quarters.

First, since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ascendancy of the United States and its allies, it has become apparent that military paramountcy alone is insufficient to ensure that a country's foreign policy goals will be met.

Second, from an economic perspective, the number of key players is multiplying, especially given the startling and welcome progress by China and India. The phenomenon of globalization may have had its roots in the fertile commercial soil of a dynamic American economy, but its extension across the world has inevitably brought with it the development of significant partners and rivals. As international markets in trade and investment become freer, the less likely it is that a single country will dominate them.

All of which is to suggest strongly that within the next few decades the United States will be joined by others at the pinnacle of power. In addition to the Europeans and the Japanese, they will be joined by China, India, Russia and Brazil, with possibly a South-East Asian trading bloc close behind.

And even if only a partial transition to multi-polarity occurs, we face a significant institutional challenge, because for the moment there is no effective framework within which this broader distribution of power can be contained, managed and mobilized for the common good of humankind.

This is the fundamental reason why the L-20 is needed -- we need a body that can form the consensus required to deal on a timely basis with issues of all kinds that have global repercussions.

In particular, the world needs to continuously round off the hard edges of globalization. We need to make globalization work for all. This is not simply the responsibility of the United Nations or its system of institutions. It is the responsibility of national governments -- all of whom, one way or the other, despite their vast differences in circumstances, are dealing country by country with many of the same issues.

The practical reality is that issues of growth, trade and aid on the one hand, and environment and poverty on the other hand, require a level of international coordination that is fundamentally different today from any preceding period of history. And while successful international institutions are essential if the world is to work, national governments are the masters of those very institutions - not the other way around.

Which is where the L-20 comes in. Meetings of a select group of national leaders to deal with deadlocked global issues which only they have the ability to move forward would in my view represent an important first step in making the framework for international decision-making more effective, while not detracting from the strengths of existing bodies.

Indeed, given its potential to break deadlocks in contentious areas, I believe the L-20 would be an invaluable ally of the UN, for example. I am not alone in believing this. The High Level Panel of Eminent Persons appointed to advise members of the United Nations on necessary reforms in the lead-up to the Millennium +5 Summit specifically recommended that an informal caucus of leaders, styled in the character of an L-20, be created outside and independent of the UN to serve as its catalyst and conscience for achieving results.

In terms of most of the important questions today, answers will only be found if national capitals engage one another directly. Thus, the L20 should be results-oriented, focusing only on those issues where core political leadership is needed to move the world forward.

My own conception of how an L-20 group might be constituted may differ somewhat from the views expressed by some participants in the course of the project workshops. The fundamental criteria for L-20 membership, I believe, are as follows: first, the countries chosen must include the G-8 and other leading economies; second, they must possess the requisite social and political stability; and finally, the major regional powers regardless of economic ranking should be included. A group of this sort will be effective only if the most powerful countries on a regional basis are represented at the table.

To take a practical example in the case of Africa, this would probably mean that South Africa, Nigeria and Egypt would be members. Although it could be argued that countries in other parts of the world might deserve to come ahead of any one of them in terms of relative Gross Domestic Product, no others would match them in terms of relative geo-political clout within their own region. This would be even more true in the case of Egypt, which meets the added requirement of ensuring appropriate representation from Islamic countries.

The issue of who sits at an L-20 table brings with it, of course, concerns about legitimacy. An informal meeting of this sort is by definition self-selected. The heads of government represent only the key nation states on a region-by-region basis, and the whole enterprise is far from an exercise in direct democracy. Despite the heartfelt concerns of academics such as Gerry Helleiner and Michael Zurn, I believe that this approach is the only practical way forward. In this regard as in many others, the L-20 is a way station on the road to more effective global institutions. Keeping in mind the need to “test-fly” new international mechanisms, we cannot afford to make the perfect the enemy of the good.

In terms of numbers, the simple truth is that about twenty people in a room is probably a reasonable estimate for a group attempting to tackle highly political, cross-sectoral problems. Much larger, and a real conversation is impossible; very much smaller, and meaningful regional representation is difficult. In my view, however, exact adherence to the number twenty is much less important than achieving credible regional representativeness.

On the basis of my experience with the G-20 Finance Ministers and the G-8 Summits, a critical factor is the network of personal relationships which small groups of politicians can build up over time. The better you know the person across the table, the better you are able to make the accommodations needed for generating progress on a given set of issues.

Certainly the personal element is absolutely necessary if peer pressure is to be brought to bear and serious political risks taken – and make no mistake, the resolution of difficult problems requires the willingness to take a chance. After all, if the issues were straightforward, presumably they would not reach leaders for decision. Only leaders can take the leap of faith -- the kind of calculated risk, the breaking of an established precedent -- that can lead to real progress. Officials can bridge gaps, but only leaders can jump gaps.

Nor are leaders immune to the human tendency of failing to understand where the other side is coming from because of cultural differences – in English, the concept is described as ‘ships passing in the night’. The only answer to the misunderstandings that can occur because of this is for the differences to be put on the table. For leaders, that table can be set by the L-20.

For these reasons, I am not in favour of the “variable geometry” proposal, which calls for a different combination of leaders to deal with different topics. The elusive personal chemistry which will ultimately drive positive outcomes can only be conjured up if the same people meet repeatedly (subject, of course, to the exigencies of each country’s electoral system). Inviting countries for part of a meeting only, as is the case of the G8 + 5, or on a rotation basis, may work in other fora or it may be good showmanship, but it won’t work in the context of leaders driving to a solution.

What is needed for successful international dialogue is the kind of familiarity, the recognition that only comes from people who have met often as a group, who know they will continue to meet in the future and who know the dynamics of the room. That’s what happens at the G-8; it’s what happens at the G-20; and it’s what should happen at the L-20.

As well, it is important to emphasize that an L-20 would not be any sort of “constituent assembly”, so the direct presence of civil society delegates is not the way to go. Each leader can and should be held accountable in this regard by way of the established processes for consultation which each government has developed with its own civil society.

Finally, I would like to address what I regard as a central conundrum which L-20 project participants tried to grapple with – the greater ambivalence of the United States to the concept as compared to other members of the G-20. Here I have one key point to make, based essentially on my earlier characterization of our era as one in which we are moving inexorably away from uni-polarity and towards an international order with multiple centres of economic power.

My view is that the United States will never have a better opportunity than the present to shape the institutional arrangements which will govern the future multi-polar world. The longer the U.S. delays its investment in new approaches to working with emerging regional powers, the more difficult the inevitable bargaining will be and the less influence it will have.

And specifically with respect to the L-20 project, my further view is that full American engagement in the work flowing from this project could

provide them with important advantages in the collective task of laying the foundations for innovation and change in a rapidly evolving global environment. Based on the way in which the United States has always risen to meet its international responsibilities, I am confident that Americans will take on this challenge.

In this regard, I was pleased to see that there will in fact be a “next stage” which aims to enlist former government leaders in a “proof of concept” replication of how a leaders’ group might work in practice. In addition to this valuable initiative, I would hope that the network of experts and think tanks from around the world which has collaborated over the past three years will continue to work together on this and other key issues. As Anne-Marie Slaughter’s insightful observations suggest, it is the network form as reflected in the L-20 which is likely best suited to address the governance challenges of the 21st century.

In conclusion, let me simply emphasize my belief that it would be a serious mistake to delay significant reform of global decision-making any further. The problems of globalization are too immediate, its benefits too great, for us to wait. The world beyond the G-8 wants in. They are going to get their wish. The question is -- are they going to get it in a way that is constructive, or will the transformation come about in a way that leaves lasting resentment?

I believe the L-20 is part of the positive answer to that question.

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