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G-8 Needs an Identity Check

The Monitor's View

More than 30 years ago - before the G-8 summit turned into a spectacle of protesters, police, media, and heads of government with a vast entourage - finance officials from a clutch of six industrialized countries met under the moniker of the "library group."

The name said it all. Informal. Discussion-oriented. And yes, exclusive - which is a big complaint about its successor the G-8, whose members are now the US, Britain, Germany, Canada, Japan, Italy, France, and Russia (which joined in 1998).

Today, there's serious discussion about expanding its membership to 20. But the expansion talk, like a siren song, is to be resisted.

Proponents include Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin, former World Bank president James Wolfensohn, and the Brookings Institution think tank. They argue it's not possible for the G-8 to effectively tackle critical problems such as climate change and African poverty - this week's summit agenda - if it excludes affected and influential countries such as China and South Africa. (They're summit guests, along with nine other countries, but not members.)

And, the expansionists point out, a G-20 already conveniently exists as a forum for finance officials from the developed and developing world. With hardly any trouble at all, the G-20 could include heads of government.

But what makes proponents think that expanding an already unwieldy assemblage makes for effectiveness? When it comes to agreements, it's easier for a smaller group with government and economic similarities to come to terms. Besides, more-inclusive groups already exist. APEC's members, for example, ring the Pacific and focus on economics.

At the heart of the expansion debate is really an identity question. What's the G-8's purpose? Is it a discussion group, or a problem solver? How important is it that its members be democracies?

The G-8 has evolved from trying to coordinate its own domestic economic policies against global financial upheavals, to tackling world political and security concerns. After this summit, Russia will set the agenda as the group's rotating leader.

Considering shifts in demography and economics, the G-8 could indeed be more representative - but without ballooning. India, a democracy, seems like a prime candidate, while Russia, which is rolling back freedoms, is perhaps an undeserving member.

If the G-8 is a forum for influential leaders to coordinate on world problems, it seems democracy ought to be a shared value of members, as should a market economy. In any case, that purpose - before membership numbers - has to be cemented in place.