

FYI

G8

G8: Meaningful or anachronistic forum?

By ERIC JOHNSTON

Staff writer

Over the next six months, Japan will host a series of meetings of the Group of Eight countries, culminating in the Leaders' Summit at Lake Toya, Hokkaido, in July. Along with leaders of the G8 — Japan, the United States, Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Canada and Russia — the European Commission president and the leader of the country holding the presidency of the Council of the European Union will also be attending.

Together, G8 members account for two-thirds of the global economy, 72 percent of all military expenditures and about 96 percent of the world's nuclear weapons.

What is the purpose of the Group of Eight summits?

The original purpose was for the world's industrialized democracies to meet and discuss the global economy and finance. The summits' origin can be traced back to the mid-1970s, when the 1973 oil crises created a global recession.

At first, the United States created an informal group of senior financial officials from Britain, West Germany, Japan and France. In 1975, the heads of these countries plus Italy were invited to a summit in France, and it was agreed to formalize the yearly meetings.

Today, the original six members have expanded to eight with the addition of Canada and Russia, and the G8's purpose has evolved from coordinating macroeconomic and fiscal policies to addressing a host of political and social issues, now ranging from global warming to increasing financial aid for Africa.

How many G8 meetings are there and how are they structured?

The main G8 ministerial meetings involve labor, justice, environment,

finance and foreign ministers, all of which take place prior to the main Leaders' Summit. Each year, the G8 presidency rotates and the host country is responsible for setting the agenda.

To coordinate the meetings, each G8 member country appoints a "sherpa," usually a top diplomat whose responsibility is to coordinate their country's approach to the G8 meetings.

The sherpas meet with various ministries of their own countries as well as the other countries' sherpas to determine how the meetings will proceed, although the final agenda is decided by political leaders.

Are G8 summits really that influential, or are they simply a talk shop and a photo opportunity?

There is no doubt G8 meetings are extremely influential at times. In the short term, statements by G8 leaders can immediately calm, or spur, global financial markets or help defuse a political crisis.

In the longer term, they can provide coordinated policies to address issues of global concern. Harvard University's Joseph Nye has said the advantage of G8 meetings is that they force bureaucracies to focus.

In addition, prior to the G8 Leaders' Summit, there are informal bilateral meetings between G8 members, and, in recent years, with the leaders of non-G8 members China and India. G8 supporters say such meetings offer world leaders a much-needed opportunity for face-to-face discussions and trust-building.

However, the G8 has its critics, and not just from activist groups opposed to its policies. Academic experts have noted that, while G8 statements have increased over the years, the member states on their own have had little success in reducing poverty or combating global warming.

Richard Haass, a former U.S. State Department official who was director of policy planning, said the G8 has become an anachronism, while Daniel Tarullo, who served as a sherpa for G8 meetings under President Bill Clinton, has argued the G8 has undertaken too many issues it was not designed for, including discussing development policies.

It's important to note that the G8 meetings are political, not legal, in nature. Their purpose is to reach a consensus on what should be done, not create legal instruments to do it.

Supporters say this emphasis on consensus and diplomacy leads to more concrete actions later. Critics see the meetings as a waste of tax

money and, given today's ability to conduct meetings electronically, even causing unnecessary environmental damage through the use of aircraft and motor vehicles.

Do nonmember nations participate in G8 events?

There is a separate group, the G20, consisting of all G8 members plus China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, Mexico, Argentina, Australia and the EU.

Also included are the heads of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The heads of state of these G20 nations have begun appearing at G8 leaders' meetings in recent years, but do not formally take part in them.

What are the issues Japan will raise as host of this year's summit?

Climate change, the environment, including nuclear safety, and African development are the main issues, and much of the focus will be on whether Japan can move the G8 and the G20 toward some sort of an agreement on a post-Kyoto Protocol pact for climate change.

Behind the scenes, what are likely to be the most contentious issues?

How to further integrate China and India into the world economy, as well as China's environmental problems and how to solve them, could be quite contentious. Reaching a consensus on the role of nuclear power in combating global warming could also prove problematic and is likely to provoke protests from the many activist groups present.

At the end of the day, what emerges from all of these meetings?

A series of declarations by the G8 members, a chairman's statement, plus, often, a declaration from G8 members and certain members of the G20. In addition, G8 leaders are likely to issue separate statements on noneconomic issues or international political developments they wish to comment on, such as the humanitarian crisis in Darfur and North Korea's nuclear threat.

There will be many representatives from nongovernmental organizations at the G8 Leaders' Summit, including well-known international NGOs Greenpeace and Oxfam. The NGOs will issue their own statements as well.

*The Weekly FYI appears Tuesdays (Wednesday in some areas).
Readers are encouraged to send ideas, questions and opinions to
National News Desk*

The Japan Times: Tuesday, Jan. 29, 2008
(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)