

# Modernizing the G8 Summit

August 18-22, 2008

Bellagio, Italy



## Leading a “Globalized” World

Peter Heap, Senior Research Associate  
Centre for Global Studies

As the American Presidential campaign picks up momentum through the summer, foreign observers watch with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. The excitement is generated by the apparently boundless possibilities for change represented by the imminent arrival of a new Chief Executive to head the single most powerful country in the world. The apprehension stems from the complete lack of control which the rest of global community has over an electoral decision which will directly affect their interests in a variety of ways.

From an international perspective, one of the most intriguing topics to begin surfacing as the two candidates engage on specific issues is the role which the United States could or should play in revitalizing the institutions through which countries make collective decisions.

For the moment, only the outline of a difference in approach is visible, with Senator McCain proposing a “League of Democracies” as a way to “... harness the vast influence of the more than one hundred democratic nations around the world to advance our values and defend our shared interests” and Senator Obama focused on more purpose-built bodies such as a “Global Energy Forum” to address climate change and energy security and a “Shared Security Partnership Program”, “... a new alliance of nations to strengthen cooperative efforts to take down global terrorist networks, while standing up against torture and brutality”.

As it happens, since 2003 a group of current and past foreign policy practitioners and academics from more than 40 countries including the US have been addressing the practical alternatives available for institutional renewal. This long term effort, led by the Centre for Global Studies (CFGS) at the University of Victoria and the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) at the University of Waterloo, both in Canada, has so far produced a number of useful findings.

Prompted by an initiative from Paul Martin, prior to his becoming Canadian Prime Minister, project participants explored in detail the feasibility and usefulness of establishing a forum of government leaders similar to the G-8 but more geographically representative. The starting point for this extended review was threefold – first, the phenomenon of globalization had clearly outstripped the management capacities of the existing framework of international institutions; second, the remarkable growth of several large developing economies rendered obsolete the continuing domination of international organizations by a handful of developed countries; and, third, the nature of the challenges

thrown up by globalization (especially their cross-sectoral characteristics) made the direct involvement of government Leaders imperative.

Originally, it was assumed that a group of about 20 Leaders would be required to ensure inclusiveness while still allowing for a meaningful conversation around the table. More recently, the conclusion was reached that a smaller gathering would work better – along the lines of the existing G-8 countries plus the “outreach 5” first invited to the 2005 Gleneagles Summit (Brazil, China, India, Mexico, South Africa), probably with a major Islamic country as well (eg Egypt). Not surprisingly, discussion of the composition of this new grouping revealed that no matter how carefully criteria for membership were developed, the final determination of who would be at the table would undoubtedly emerge from an exercise in raw politics closely related to the issues which it would initially address.

Accordingly, the project’s more than 30 meetings have focused on determining which subjects leaders could most fruitfully concentrate on. The full spectrum of global issues was canvassed, and rated against their ability to generate:

- a value-added initiative that could be agreed upon in a way not likely through existing forums or organizations;
- a workable solution, i.e. a forward-looking suite of practical actions and promises that offered politically attractive outcomes for the countries involved;
- legitimacy through adequate regional representation; and,
- tangible results with substantial, broad-based benefits, realistic and acceptable financing mechanisms and organizational feasibility.

In the end, the promising areas were seen to be -- climate change/energy security, nuclear proliferation, and infectious disease. In fact, variants of all these topics turned up on the agenda of the recent Hokkaido G-8 Summit. All that was missing, however, was substantial progress, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that in large part this stemmed from fundamental flaws in the current G-8 mechanism (notably its composition). Leaders themselves, whether past, such as Martin and Blair, or present, such as Sarkozy, Brown or Medvedev, have come to believe that a more inclusive grouping was vital if deadlocks on key issues are to be broken.

To return to the American election, the encouraging development is that both candidates understand that the United States has a major interest in shaping the reform of institutions and processes which have served the world well for seventy years but which need refurbishment to meet the challenges of new circumstances. Certainly, participants in the CFGS/CIGI project were convinced that the “unipolar moment” in international relations had passed and that, in the words of one former ambassador – “... the US will not keep power unless it shares it”. America led the world in institution-building in the wake of the Depression and the Second World War; it must do so again.

*Peter Heap has recently published an account of the CFGS/CIGI project, Globalization and Summit Reform: An Experiment in International Governance, Springer/IDRC*