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A Primer to the G8/G20 Toronto and Huntsville Summits

By

Colin Robertson

CDFAI Senior Fellow

and

Senior Strategic Advisor for McKenna, Long and Aldridge

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Robertson is Senior Strategic Advisor for the U.S.-based law firm of McKenna, Long and Aldridge. He writes on international affairs and is a frequent contributor and commentator on CTV, CBC and CPAC.

He is current President of the Canadian International Council's National Capital Branch. Mr. Robertson sits on the board of the Conference of Defence Associations Institute, Canada World Youth and he is honorary chair of the Canada Arizona Business Council. He is a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs.

A career foreign service officer from 1977-2010, Colin Robertson served as first Head of the Advocacy Secretary at the Canadian Embassy in Washington and Consul General in Los Angeles, with previous assignments in Hong Kong and in New York at the UN and Consulate General. In his final assignment he directed a project on Canada-US Engagement at Carleton University's Centre for Trade Policy and Law with private and public sector support. A member of the team that negotiated the Canada-US FTA and NAFTA, he is co-author of *Decision at Midnight: The Inside Story of the Canada-US FTA*.

He is a former President of the Historica Foundation. He was editor of *bout de papier: Canada's Journal of Foreign Service and Diplomacy* and President of the Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers. He has taught at Carleton University and the Canadian School of Public Service.

He indicates that his smartest decision was marrying his wife Maureen Boyd, a Vancouverite, former journalist and author. They have three children, Allison, Sean and Conor. Robertson reads voraciously, runs slowly, swims, cycles, and cross-country skis.

WHAT IS A SUMMIT?

The term 'summit' was coined by Winston Churchill for face-to-face diplomatic encounters between leaders. Summitry is predicated upon the idea that better personal relations between leaders can yield diplomatic benefits or as Churchill put it, 'jaw-jaw' is better than 'war-war'. This was particularly important during the Cold War when the intent was to encourage the leaders of the Soviet Union and United States to reach for the red telephone rather than the red button.

The summitry industry is booming as never before and in colour and content resembles a medieval caravan. Cocooned in security and pomp, last year was a record for the conference set – leaders and their delegations, the fixers – hoteliers, chefs and chauffeurs, and the spin doctors who play the media. The camp followers are a rainbow of big and small organizations representing a kaleidoscope of causes, with more than a couple of loonies to provide colour and a photo-op for the paparazzi.

The G7/8 began as six in 1975 when French president Giscard D'Estaing invited the U.S., Japan, UK, Germany, and Italy to Rambouillet to talk international politics and economics in the wake of the Arab oil shocks. Thanks to U.S. president Gerald Ford, Canada was invited to the 1976 meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The Russians began attending in the nineties and were formally included in 1997.

The G20, originally a meeting of finance ministers, their deputies and central bankers, was formed in 1999 in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. Paul Martin was a key architect. They began meeting at the head of government level in November, 2008 when President Bush convened them in Washington to deal with the economic crisis. Since then, the G20 leaders have been meeting twice a year (London in April, 2009, Pittsburgh in October 2009 and this November in Seoul).

Before the annual June meeting of G8 leaders, their principal advisors, called 'sherpas', tour the world to tee up the agenda and draft the communiqués. Feeding into the process are supplementary meetings that begin in January involving foreign and finance ministers, their deputy ministers and central bankers, as well as ministers of the environment, labor, tourism and development.

The leaders' discussion is carefully planned and the communiqués are drafted in advance of the meetings. Nonetheless, the intent is to give leaders an opportunity to put aside their scripts and engage in free-wheeling discussion. Unanticipated events, like the London bus bombing during the Gleneagles summit in 2005, also influence proceedings and, in that situation, focused leaders' attention on terrorism. Unanticipated changes in the principals (Julia Gillard replacing the deposed Kevin Rudd as Australian prime minister yesterday) and early departures (last year China's Hu Jintao left early to deal with the Uighurs) also affect the dynamic.

The summit meetings are a bit like a Russian doll. There is the G8 at the core, then the G8 plus various combinations of countries and organizations (eg. UN, IMF, World Bank) depending on the subject, gradually expanding until all the G20 players plus other invitees are sitting round the table on the final day. Meanwhile, a series of 'pull-asides' and 'bi-laterals' between the leaders, sometimes spontaneous and sometimes planned, is also taking place.

In advance of the meetings later this week there was a G(irls)-20 summit to focus on the Millenium Development goals organized by Belinda Stronach, Oxfam, Save the Children and the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. A B(usiness)-20 summit, facilitated by Canadian Council of

Chief Executives CEO John Manley and Canadian Chamber of Commerce CEO Perrin Beatty, will be held concurrent with the leaders summit. Meanwhile, there will also be various civil society gatherings in and around Toronto, including a 'Faith and Business Summit' that will feature Karl Rove.

DO WE REALLY NEED A G20?

Yes. Henry Kissinger has described 2009 as the year when the new world order began as the United States, arguably for the first time since the Second World War, was obliged to recognize that its economic strength was no longer sufficient to go it alone. The G-8 had already become eclipsed by the rise of China and India. Today the G-20 accounts for 80% world trade and GNP.

There will be debate on the exit ramp from stimulus. President Obama is worried that drastic austerity measures in Europe will choke global growth, strangle recovery and create a double dip similar to that experienced in 1937. Last week's British budget that slashed some budgets by 25%, similar to what Canada did in the mid 90s to escape what the Wall Street Journal called a flirtation with 'Third Worldom'. Every country has different domestic political demands, and that is what drives decision-making. Yet there is acknowledgment, if not acceptance, that globalization obliges greater coordination and the requirement to 'hang together' lest they hang separately – thus Germany's intervention, however reluctant, in saving Greece.

There will be discussion about increasing the representation beyond the traditional donors of the IMF and World Bank. A tax on banking transactions as insurance against future bank failures has been a running discussion with France, Germany, Britain and the United States favoring a tax and most of the rest, including Canada, Australia, China, India and Brazil, saying in varying degrees that it is not necessary if the proper regulatory regime is in place at the national level. Capital and liquidity levels for banks have already been raised in most jurisdictions as well as regulations and legislation to make more transparent the now notorious derivative trading and credit swaps.

There is the larger debate about what the New York Times' David Brooks describes as the struggle between democratic capitalism and state capitalism and the emergence of sovereign wealth funds. This also raises questions around the future of the market economy and the regulatory power of states, especially in the nexus of the energy sector, the environment and climate change.

WHAT IS THE AIM OF THESE SUMMITS?

This year's "to do" list is similar to that of last year: resuscitate the global economy as it heads unevenly to an exit ramp of deficit control from the biggest stimulus package in world history; take stock of the Eurozone's effort to contain the Greek contagion; and advance freer trade in what is now the longest running trade negotiations.

If this isn't enough the leaders will also discuss how to save the planet from climate change; keep the increasing millions of mouths fed, watered and free of pandemics; keep the lid on terrorism and crime (drugs and people smuggling); and, though we're not sure how, prevent everything going up in a nuclear cloud. The devil is in the detail and it is often in the small, unreported bits that incremental progress is made. There is, participants also agree, real value in the informal discussions between leaders – getting the measure of one another – than in the set-piece presentations.

WHAT ABOUT DELIVERABLES?

Don't expect a lot - these meetings have become a continuum of ongoing dialogue on the big picture issues of the day. But in terms of leaders' summits these are the most important.

In anticipation that they would be on the hot seat, the Chinese signaled last week that they will allow their currency to begin to move upwards against the dollar, although by how much and how soon will be the questions raised in Toronto. The yuan is currently pegged at 6.83 per U.S. dollar. The last time it was allowed to float (2005-8) its value rose 21%.

Last year, Prime Minister Harper argued successfully for 'accountability' in the promises made by the summiteers. On Sunday a document was released on behalf of the G8 that, surprise, surprise, says the promises have been generally kept, notwithstanding the pressures of the recession. The U.S., Russia, and Italy dodge providing a figure but confirm their aspirational intentions. In terms of Official Development Assistance (ODA) as a percentage of GDP the others assess themselves as follows: UK .6%, France .46%, Germany .4%, Canada .33%. The EU has pledged to reach .7% by 2015. The report also says Canada doubled its aid to Africa by 2009 and is on target to double its foreign aid by 2011 and to untie all food aid by 2012.

At Davos, Mr. Harper said he would make maternal and child health his priority. Unfortunately for him it got caught up in a debate on whether family planning would include funding of abortions. The 'Muskoka Initiative' will likely result in significant commitments by G8 nations, as well as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and this will help momentum leading into September's United Nations stocktaking summit in New York on Millennium Development Goals to end poverty.

The G8 will also take stock of nuclear non-proliferation with a focus on Iran and North Korea. President Obama has said that nuclear proliferation is the one issue that keeps him awake at night and in April he hosted what, for an American president, was the biggest gathering of foreign leaders in Washington at the Nuclear Security Summit. Earlier this month the UN Security Council voted to impose new sanctions that target Iranian banks suspected of connections with nuclear or missile programmes, expand the arms embargo and call for a cargo inspection regime.

WHY DO THEY COST SO MUCH?

Security costs have ballooned and this week's summits are estimated at nearly a billion dollars. Security forces alone number in the thousands – remember the quonset hut picture outside Huntsville? Security chiefs have cowed conference organizers into providing a degree of protection that can border on absurdity, as we've seen with the uprooted saplings on Toronto streets for fear they be used as clubs. The necessity of providing security in two places, Huntsville (G8) and downtown Toronto (G20), means future G8/20 will likely be held in the same location.

No one wants a bang on their doorsteps and no one wants to forbid 'democratic' protest. The raggle-taggle crowd of high-minded do-gooders and anti this-and-that's realize that if they can create a ruckus and incite the authorities to bang a few heads and spray tear-gas (remember the Vancouver APEC 'pepper spray' conference in November 1997 or the Quebec City Americas summit in April, 2001) they will achieve the publicity that fuels media attention and fundraising.

Leaders don't help matters with their insistence on bringing a large entourage of advisors. Then there are the media that accompany them – the estimate is that there will be over 2000 at Toronto. At the Montebello summit (1981), the first Canadian summit, Pierre Trudeau limited delegations to principals plus 15. The rest were obliged to stay in Ottawa. The leaders all liked the informality and spending time alone. Collectively, they spent 16 hours together at Montebello (now the collective time is around 3 hours). Jean Chretien made an effort to re-establish this approach when he hosted his first summit at Halifax in 1995. The scaled back trappings and entourage earned it the sobriquet 'Chevrolet Summit'.

DOES CANADA MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

We certainly have the capacity to make a difference and to be a helpful fixer. Our bilingualism and pluralism also give us a feel for nuance and sensitivity in seeking solutions to problems. We belong to most of the multilateral clubs, including two in which the U.S. is not a member – the Francophonie and Commonwealth. Together, they give us a valuable voice and ear into much of Asia and Africa. Recently we have begun to pay more, although not enough, attention to Mexico and Latin America.

History, geographic propinquity, economic integration and culture (what for the rest of the world is football we call soccer) has also given us the capacity to be an 'interpreter' of the U.S. to the rest and of the rest to the U.S.. This matters, as the U.S. is still the paramount world power with a track record of remarkable resiliency in time of crisis. However, the schizophrenia of our own relationship with the U.S. can also bring out the worst in our diplomatic temperament: that of a scold and nag, or what former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson (whose mother was Canadian) once described as the 'stern voice of the daughter of God'.

But when we are on our game, we are informed, a constructive conscience, consensual and act especially as a bridge between developed and developing nations. At the summit table our performance comes down to leadership and personal relationships. Over the years we have come up with useful initiatives, including Pierre Trudeau on North-South, Brian Mulroney on South Africa, Jean Chretien on Africa, Paul Martin on the creation of the G20 and now, Stephen Harper on maternal and child health.

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CDFAI was created to address the ongoing discrepancy between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically, Canadians tend to think of foreign policy – if they think of it at all – as a matter of trade and markets. They are unaware of the importance of Canada engaging diplomatically, militarily, and with international aid in the ongoing struggle to maintain a world that is friendly to the free flow of goods, services, people and ideas across borders and the spread of human rights. They are largely unaware of the connection between a prosperous and free Canada and a world of globalization and liberal internationalism.

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