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G-What, G-How and G-How Many?

The future of the G8 political agenda

In the context of this month's G8 Leaders Summit, observers, international relations experts and policy analysts have been speculating on what will impact most on public opinion with the eyes of the world focused on the premises of the *Guardia di Finanza* – the venue for the three-day event in L'Aquila. The choice of the Italian Presidency to move the Leaders' meeting location from the Sardinian island of La Maddalena to the city of L'Aquila (thus creating the first, so to speak, "itinerant" logo in the history of multilateral conferences) has served to focus international attention on the G8 Summit several weeks in advance. The press has highlighted the public relations aspects of this decision, as well as the logistical challenges faced by the Italian hosts. However, there has been little attention paid to content-related issues. In order to fill this gap, the following pages explore some inter-related aspects concerning the ongoing reliability of the G8 as a forum for global governance, with a particular focus on the dynamics of the political agenda.

The G8 format has *in nuce* the potential to play a pivotal role in a variety of key areas of international cooperation. The rationale behind this informal and poorly structured exercise is basically to stimulate normative, legal, and technical developments to be promoted in wider and more institutionalized settings for multilateral cooperation. Based on this understanding of the process,

and witnessing the rapid emergence of the G20 as a new vehicle for the consolidation of policy consensus amongst world leaders, this policy brief addresses three key questions. First, is the G8 format still functional? Second, what areas should be given priority within such a specific framework? And third, how can the effectiveness of this exercise be improved?

G8, G14 or G20?

The rise of the G20 in the firmament of flexible multilateral fora has induced commentators to question whether the G8 has lost its *raison d'être*. The dramatic financial crisis that struck the world economy in 2008 necessitated a review of the key rules that apply to economic and financial governance and fostered an emerging consensus on the formal and informal procedures, moral principles, and behavioural norms to be shared at global level. Against the backdrop of such a challenge, the G20 appears to represent the most appropriate forum for debate and consensus-building.

In general, the results of the G20 London Summit in this regard are promising. The "Global plan for recovery and reform" adopted on 2 April last in the British capital has been presented by the Heads of State and Government as an excellent starting point, which enabled the identification of both short and medium term measures

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Abstract

In recent years, the G8 political agenda has often been marginalized from policy analysis, with the main focus falling on issues such as development, climate change and the economic crisis. However, political items represent an important factor in considering the future evolution of the G8 as a forum for global governance.

Arguing for a revitalization of political issues and themes related to transnational security challenges, this paper suggests that, in the years to come, ad hoc outreach exercises might be preferable to a formal expansion of the current membership.

While economic and financial issues may be more appropriately dealt with in a broader framework, political items should remain for now an exclusive competence of the Group of 8. At this stage, a formal expansion of the current G8 format for all agendas could indeed end up undermining some of the political accomplishments thus far achieved, especially in terms of East/West relations. In addition, G8 countries should strive for improvement on two important principles: accountability and feasibility.

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to counter the current financial and economic crisis. Leaders' satisfaction apart, what should not be disregarded is that, very quickly, world markets responded positively to what turned out to be a very ambitious «\$1.1 trillion programme of support to restore credit, growth and jobs in the world economy»¹. The deal signed by the 20 Heads of State and Government was backed up by the activities of four *ad hoc* Working Groups that in March released their detailed policy prescriptions on international monetary and financial regulations – addressing, amongst other critical issues, the problems of transparency and integrity – as well as the reform of International Financial Institutions.

Those who advocate the dissolution of the G8 in favour of the G20 – or claim that the current structure of the Group of 8 should be expanded to extend full membership to the current Outreach-5 Countries (Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and South Africa)² – certainly have some convincing arguments on their side. However, it can also be argued that it is still early to abandon completely the current G8 format. To support this view, it is important to distinguish between technical issues related to economic/financial governance and political issues. If we focus on the political agenda and try to assess successes and failures within the G8 framework, there are grounds to defend the current format. In this context, *ad hoc*

outreach exercises (such as the regional forum on Afghanistan and Pakistan organized on the margins of the Foreign Ministers' meeting in Trieste with a very innovative formula) might be preferable to a formal and permanent expansion of the current structure. Broadening the G8 membership at this point, also for political cooperation, risks bringing in new international actors that have a low degree of "like-mindedness" (e.g. on human rights issues) and that tend to interact by responding merely to a logic of relative gains, instead of approaching cooperation with a genuine wish to think in terms of absolute gains. Moreover, at this particular moment in time, widening could also undermine the results thus far achieved in the G8 framework in terms of East/West political rapprochement.

The distinction between relative and absolute gains represents one of the most lively debates in international relations theory and studies of multilateral institutions. To a certain extent, such a dispute encapsulates the core points of division between the realist and the liberal institutionalist traditions. Evidently, such a disagreement is crucial when it comes to the destiny of international institutions and cooperative dynamics, particularly in the security field. On the one hand, realist scholars stress that states tend inevitably to lose interest in cooperation if they expect to gain less than others. On the other hand, academics contributing to the development of the liberalist tradition suggest that, whenever mutual benefits are possible, states tend to become less and less preoccupied with relative gains. In the eyes of liberal institutionalists, states are concerned with maximizing their own welfare rather than merely looking at the benefits that other states achieve through cooperation. In other words, from

the institutionalist perspective, it does not really matter who is gaining the most from multilateral initiatives, what (should) matters is that everybody has his own "return" from cooperation, even if to different degrees. According to this view, cooperation can become, even in the field of political and security initiatives, a win-win game. On the contrary, if we suppose that realists have a point, then states address their gains in comparative terms, thus assessing cooperation also in terms of the benefits potentially achievable by others. In this case, cooperation becomes instead a zero-sum game.

A better focus: more politics

The idea that the current G8 structure should be maintained for a few more years to further consolidate East/West relations, leads inevitably to the conclusion that the G8 political agenda should be revitalized, while issues relating to economic and financial governance can be transferred to the G20 format. Consolidation of political items and global security challenges must be accompanied by some methodological improvements, particularly concerning the activities of the G8 Foreign Ministers. For its part, the 2009 Italian Presidency has taken some steps that served to raise partners' attention on global security issues and political affairs. Amongst other initiatives, Italy organized in Rome a G8 Conference on "Overcoming Nuclear Dangers" (16-17 April) and one on "Destabilizing Factors and Transnational Threats" (23-24 April). Both events were jointly organized by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior.

Moreover, the Italian Presidency placed global security threats (terrorism, transnational organized crime, piracy, non proliferation and

¹ G20, *Global plan for recovery and reform*, London, April 2, 2009. Online, available at <http://www.londonsummit.gov.uk/resources/en/PDF/final-communique>.

² Overcoming the scepticism of some partners, Italy has successfully worked for the inclusion of Egypt in the Outreach-5 exercises organized under its 2009 Presidency in L'Aquila.

disarmament) on top of the Foreign Ministers' agenda, at their meeting in Trieste on 25-27 June 2009. Specifically, the debate in Trieste demonstrated that a prolonged diplomatic preparation can pave the way for consensus even on highly sensitive issues. For instance, amongst the various items addressed in the final Chairman's Statement, it is worth noticing that there was even a clear call on Israel to freeze settlement activities in the West Bank, including their "natural growth"³.

The problem with the G8 however, is that when consensus on normative principles is reached or a given strategic orientation is established, it does not necessarily result in concrete action. The above mentioned consensus on condemning the Israeli settlement policy, for instance, was followed by a counter-reaction from Israel. The plan to expand Settlement Adam in the West Bank, approved by the Israeli government on 29 June – only three days after the G8 meeting in Trieste – is an interesting demonstration of how political pressure can be weak, if it is not backed up by reactive diplomacy. This example demonstrates that, given its structural limitations, the G8 does not have its own, so to speak, "institutional diplomacy", in spite of the role traditionally exercised by the presidency in office. However, a series of few calibrated procedures could help (at least) containing this shortcoming. The G8 can become a more trained watchdog of regional crises and transnational security issues if four proposals are adopted.

³ G8, *Foreign Ministers' Meeting - Chairman's Statement*, Trieste, June 26, 2009. Online, available at http://www.esteri.it/MAE/EN/SalaStampa/ArchivioNotizie/Approfondimenti/2009/06/20090626_G8Meeting.htm.

- (1) The schedule of the Foreign Ministers' Meeting should be reviewed. Being traditionally organized only two weeks before the Summit, the importance of the rendezvous between the heads of the eight diplomatic services (joined by the EU Commissioner on External Relations and the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy) is overshadowed by the proximity of the Leaders' meeting, where nevertheless the political agenda only has a marginal relevance. It would be preferable if Foreign Ministers met some weeks earlier. Moreover, the informal lunch that is organized on the margins of the United Nation General Assembly in September should be followed by a formal working session, through which Ministers could assess the impact of the strategic principles agreed in the first part of the year, maybe by releasing a formal Chairman's Statement also on that occasion. Finally, Ministers should hold an informal session (on the model of the Gymnich meetings of the EU)⁴ at the very beginning of every year, in order to debate the key political goals and objectives that each Presidency

⁴ The so-called "Gymnich meetings" are organized in average once every six months. These rendezvous are occasions for the EU Foreign Ministers to engage in open exchange of views and informal debates, which usually turn out to be brainstorming sessions to define the main common guidelines of international politics to be promoted by the EU. The name "Gymnich" comes from the German castle that in 1974 hosted the first meeting of this kind.

- envisages as potential G8 priorities.
- (2) Political Directors should be more active in promoting ad hoc statements that address regional crises. The Italian Presidency has tried to innovate in this regard. Past Presidencies promoted the adoption of standalone declarations on regional crises most exclusively on the margins of Ministerial Meetings or Summits. By promoting in mid April the release of a statement on the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka⁵, the 2009 Italian Presidency has demonstrated that there are grounds for the G8 to be pro-active even outside the context of formal meetings.
- (3) The Ministerial meeting on Development Cooperation should be organized in the second part of the year, thus becoming an important moment of strategic reflection on the main guidelines and orientations related to aid, technical assistance and capacity building that are agreed upon by the Leaders on the occasion of the Summit.
- (4) There should be a clearer link between the work of the Foreign Ministers on global security issues and the activities of the Justice and Home Affairs Ministerial, which is usually convened at the end of May. The interface between the two dimensions can be offered by the G8 Roma/Lyon Group, which gathers experts on antiterrorism and the fight against transnational or-

⁵ G8, *Statement on Sri Lanka by G8 Foreign Ministers*, Rome, April 25, 2009. Online, available at <http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/foreign/formin090425.html>.

ganized crime. As the case of piracy for instance shows, the activities of the JHA and of Foreign Ministers are complementary: while the former debate the most critical judicial issues (from the possible creation of an international tribunal for the prosecution of pirates, to the idea of intensifying financial intelligence sharing to track and seize pirates' assets) the latter define the main strategic objectives and normative principles.

Improve accountability and feasibility

The "how" question cannot be considered exhaustively answered simply by the policy developments suggested above. There are two other principles that need to find better correspondence in the G8 realm: accountability and feasibility. These two challenges have constantly represented a weak point for the G8, and have exposed it to the often violent criticism of anti-globalization movements all over the world. The "People of Seattle" built their original narrative on the idea that a few world Leaders, assembled on the basis of their national GDPs, were debating "the destinies of the world". Over time, this simple but effective opposition has developed into a more sophisticated attack against the ability of G8 leaders to mobilize resources for the developing world and concretely agree on initiatives and plans to help eradicate the most intractable scourges affecting the planet: poverty, insecurity and environmental degradation. A broad coalition of NGOs and pressure groups has targeted the G8 for its ineffectiveness: criticism has focused on the discrepancy between commitments made (particularly on the occasion of

Leaders' Summits) and concrete follow-up that, even in the best case scenario, has been only partial. The gap between statements and actions is an inevitable weakness of the G8, particularly in consideration of the fact that many last minute promises emerge from the Leaders, gathering in quasi informal working lunches and dinners, where enthusiasm, goodwill, and confidence predominate, but sometimes are not backed up by proper feasibility studies and long term planning.

There are several examples of this kind, even in the most recent Summit Declarations. For example, looking at the results of the Hokkaido/Toyako Summit, amongst many promises contained in the section of the final statement customarily devoted to "Development and Africa", the Leaders of the eight most industrialized economies committed «to expand access to long-lasting insecticide treated nets, with a view to providing 100 million nets through bilateral and multilateral assistance, in partnership with other stakeholders by the end of 2010». What at first glance seems a relatively "simple" promise to fulfil, is actually a considerable challenge from both logistical and financial points of view. Surely, it is better to have ten promises half fulfilled than no promises at all. But overambitious targets have been exploited by anti-global networks that have consolidated their ability to identify these kinds of shortcomings and highlight them.

The 2009 Italian G8 Presidency has thus a great challenge: to promote mechanisms that will turn the G8 into a more "accountable" exercise. This idea was actually launched on the margins of the 2008 Summit in Japan. On that occasion, the Leaders left the Summit with an unequivocal promise: we will

make the G8 more accountable. In this respect, an important achievement of the Italian Presidency has been the evaluation process launched on the delicate area of peacekeeping and peacebuilding, which could be used as an interesting example of ad hoc assessment exercise. The G8 presented at the 2004 Sea Island Summit a clear series of objectives, outlined in the ad hoc "Action Plan on Expanding Global Capability for Peace Support Operations". Among others, these included: (1) train and, where appropriate, equip a total of approximately 75,000 troops worldwide by 2010; (2) enhance African peace support operations capabilities and their related activities – which is in line with a principle that in the G8 has become a mantra: that of "regional ownership of conflict resolution initiatives"; (3) increase our contribution to the training of carabinieri/gendarme-like forces both by continuing to support existing centers dedicated to that purpose, notably those in France and Italy, and those in Africa, and by supporting new initiatives in that respect⁶.

Reading between the lines of the Action Plan, it is clear that partners pursued the promotion of concrete initiatives that would guarantee a more rapid deployment of peace support operation, as well as the creation of a new balance between the two traditional pillars of peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions – the military and civilian components – with the relatively new pillar represented by police forces and gendarmeries. In Hokkaido/Toyako, considering the 2010 deadline set out in Sea Islands,

⁶ G8, *Action Plan: Expanding Global Capability for Peace Support Operation*, Sea Island, June 10, 2004. Online, available at <http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/summit/2004seaisland/peace.html>.

G8 Leaders agreed a generic formula to task experts “to submit a progress report prior to the Summit in 2009”.⁷ In order to fulfill this task, the Italian Presidency has initiated a review process, coordinated by an ad hoc G8 Special Representative of the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Peace Initiatives in the Horn of Africa. The review process has involved a series of meeting with experts from all G8 countries, as well as from the United Nations, the European Union and the African Union. The report to the Leaders was drafted at a conference of the G8 Experts on Peacekeeping/Peacebuilding, in the presence of representatives from the United Nations and the African Union. The report confirms that G8 partners’ actions are in line with the commitments and the objectives agreed upon at the Sea Island Summit, including that of forming 75.000 peacekeepers by 2010. Moreover, the analysis provided by the G8 experts offers a further reflection on how to fulfil the gaps in terms of physical, human, and financial resources, particularly for peace operations conducted by regional organizations in Africa.

The practice of relying on national experts gathered on an ad hoc basis – even for issues previously not followed by a consolidated working groups – has proved to be an effective means of monitoring the development of G8-sponsored initiatives. It will be of the utmost importance for the credibility of G8 processes that such a practice is continued, but also expanded for all areas of cooperation promoted within this framework. In other words, institutionalized groups of

technical experts and diplomatic representatives shall systematically assess existing commitments in view of upcoming deadlines, as well as continue to be the starting point of operational G8 processes. Moreover, these assessment processes should be more systematic and inspire as well a better public diplomacy. This could thus allow the institutionalization of bottom-up decision making that serves the purpose of respecting feasibility, and regular assessment processes that can make the G8 more reliable in the eyes of the global community.

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⁷ G8, *Chair's Summary*, Hokkaido/Toyako, July 9, 2008. Online, available at http://www.mofa.go.jp/POLICY/economy/summit/2008/doc/doc080709_09_en.html.