

IT'S TIME TO DROP THE G8

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In 2008, the global financial crisis forced a shift in summitry from the Group of 8 to the Group of 20, demonstrating that a more inclusive forum is better able to address the worst global recession in many decades. One year later, in the fall of 2009, the G-20 declared itself “the premier forum for international economic cooperation.” In effect, the G8 gave up its claim of dominance in the field of international economic cooperation, which had been the *raison d’être* for its creation in the mid-1970s.

This fundamental shift in summitry suggests that the days of the G8 are numbered; but in June, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper will host the G8 Summit the day before the G-20 meets in Toronto. French President Nicolas Sarkozy plans to chair both the G8 and the G-20 in 2011. Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi, chair of the G8 in 2009, made no effort to do away with it. Because it is the only Asian participant, Japan has manifested a keen interest in keeping the G8. And the U.S. administration also appears to think that the G8 has a continuing role to play.

But what would that role be now that the G-20 has proved itself a valuable leaders’ forum? It has certainly demonstrated its authority during the crisis by successfully coordinating global policy for economic recovery and offering a framework of peer review intended to create conditions for strong, sustainable and balanced global growth.

The future of the G8 is unclear. But judging from some of the statements made by G8 leaders, they see the group as having a continuing role in those non-economic areas in which they still play a dominant role, such as security, nuclear proliferation, development assistance and maybe the Middle East. However, on further reflection, the G8 is not truly dominant in any of these realms. China is a key player in dealing

with threats from North Korea and needed for making Iranian sanctions stick; 39 non-G8 countries joined in the recent 47-nation summit on nuclear proliferation; traditional advanced country official aid now accounts for only about 60 percent of total development assistance; and Turkey (a G-20 member, but not a member of the G8) is bidding for leadership in the Middle East.

Another function for the G8 could be that it serves as a trilateral caucus of the advanced countries composing it (North America, Europe and Japan). This runs the danger of making the G8 at least look like, and indeed become, a bloc of "like-minded" countries convening before G-20 summits to seek a common front against the rest. Prime Minister Harper ran into a decidedly negative reaction from China and South Korea when he proposed to hold the G8 before the G-20 Summit in Canada this June. He did not bend to their opposition but he felt it. The risk of other blocs forming and hardening over time, i.e., a BRIC bloc, an Asian bloc or a Muslim bloc, could then become a reality.

We have argued for some years that the G-20 summit should be created to fill the void at the apex in the international system, which the G8 created after losing legitimacy due to its reduced relative weight in the world economy and its lack of effectiveness. We now believe that the G8 should dissolve, since the G-20 is in full swing. This offers an opportunity to break out of pre-formed, traditional alliances and enter a more fluid

and flexible process of discussion, negotiation and bargaining.

The global challenges of the 21st century are multiple, complex and inter-connected. National interests, pragmatically interpreted, will align differently across countries for different global issues. Hence, pragmatism has a critical role to play in formulating a country's position in bargaining across issues and in seeking coalitions with partners that will shift with issues. Different countries would then align with each other on different matters. Compromises might therefore be more easily reached and better outcomes anticipated because governments will be willing to contemplate tradeoffs across issues and pursue outcomes based more on substance rather than on ideology or pre-existing alliances.

If the G8 were to fade into the sunset, this would make it more likely that the pattern of "the West against the Rest," which was characteristic of the late 20th century and embodied in the G8 itself, would be replaced by new dynamics of G-20 summitry based on pragmatic leadership and shifting coalitions. As long as the G8 keeps meeting, especially just ahead of G-20 summits, it potentially perpetuates the old pattern of alliance politics. There would be a high price to pay by not embarking on a new trajectory for global cooperation and leadership, which is now within the grasp of the G-20.