



The Threat of Virtual Summitry to the G7's Success

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The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted every facet of life, with international summitry being no exception. Last year's G7 meeting was forced online by the crisis, making 2020 the first year in the group's history that its leaders did not meet in person. The club adapted and moved its activities online, allowing the G7 leaders to discuss the urgent concerns of the pandemic and the economic crisis it ushered in. While the formal business of the club could still be conducted, much of what gives the G7 added value in global governance was undercut by going virtual.


As we begin to consider the post-pandemic future and the continued evolution of the G7, it is important to recognise that, despite some advantages, the digitalisation of diplomacy could actually undermine the very elements of summitry that made the G7 successful in the past, threatening the viability of the club in the 21st century.

Much is gained in the move online - the complexities of scheduling meetings between world leaders are reduced, and no time is lost to travel, or energy sapped by jet lag. It is, after all, easier and cheaper to conduct diplomacy online, and in many ways the move is an obvious next step in the advance of communications technologies—following revolutions in diplomatic practice prompted by the earlier advent of the telephone and the telegraph.

When it comes to the personal summitry that typifies the G7 and the complex global challenges to which it is directed, however, no matter how good online meeting platforms are, there is no substitute for getting people together in a room. What makes the G7 effective in global governance cannot be reproduced online.

In 1975 French President Valéry Giscard envisaged the G7 to be an intimate affair in which the leaders of the advanced, industrialised economies would assemble to address shared problems. Giscard proposed a meeting in which the leaders alone would gather, temporarily freed from the gaze of the media,

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the tinkering of bureaucracies, and the demands of parliaments and political parties. While the annual event has evolved, the core of what gives the G7 its success has endured—a retreat at which those at the apex of their political hierarchies could engage in free and frank exchange, unencumbered by the usual constraints of their offices.

Online meetings reimpose many of those constraints. What renders summitry valuable in the diplomatic toolbox is fundamentally premised on physicality. Most damaging in the move online is the loss of ‘inter-moments’—the informal, apparently unscripted happenings between formal proceedings at summits. These are the quiet chats in the corner of a room, the impromptu conversations between meetings; the off-the-cuff exchanges during breaks.

While they might seem insignificant, any practitioner will stress that it is on the sidelines of summits where much of the action really takes place. It is in inter-moments that relationships are built and affirmed, that negotiating positions are sussed out, that favours are asked, and that ideas are mooted. Moreover, when someone is online they’re always ‘on’—always being recorded, leaving no room for plausible deniability, nor room for privately building rapport and trust. All of this is nothing less than the bedrock of diplomatic practice. Yet, without any quiet corners in cyber space, all of this is lost in the shift online.

While online G7 meetings have been held this past year, gone are the informal chats on the margins, and even formal summit sessions have been largely reduced to the reading of pre-prepared statements, eliminating frank discussions and leaving no room for substantive engagement over leaders’ positions and pressures. The type of summit that Giscard envisaged has been hollowed out.

When the G7 met this year, its attention was rightly focused on the complex challenges of Covid, climate change, and economic crisis; but the club must also examine its own form and structure, charting its future for the years and decades to come. How the G7 works is as critical to its success as questions about who is included or to what issues it devotes its attention to.

We’ve learned from Covid that no amount of phone calls, video chats or socially distanced anything can really make up for not being together. The same is true for summitry, which at its essence is about people and relationships. Meetings can still be had and policies can still be debated online, but what gives the G7 its real, added value is fundamentally and solely to be found in the opportunities that arise when people are physically brought together. ■

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