

Diplomacy, Domestic Politics and G20 Summitry

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Over the past year or so, the G20 has emerged as an important institutional instrument for addressing critical global economic problems. Summits of G20 country leaders have already eclipsed the G8 but serious questions remain about whether and how the G20 can become something better and more effective than an enlarged G8. At the heart of this uncertainty is the complicated interplay between global diplomacy and domestic politics.

Linking local politics with global policies is a most difficult undertaking, especially when a healthy global commons appears to require tough and unpopular domestic policies. Can G20 leaders work cooperatively on pressing global challenges while representing and satisfying their national constituency interests? Is it possible to reach constructive, consequential agreements at global summits which can be sold to domestic publics and plausibly improve their well-being?

The challenge is especially daunting in the context of recent political developments, which are in full blossom in the United States but visible in many of the other G20 countries. First, trust in government is at record lows. The public is deeply skeptical of the capacity of government and the willingness of its leaders to deal effectively with the pressing problems confronting the country. Second, in these difficult times domestic publics often view the global community more as a threat (from terrorists and illegal immigrants, to their jobs and good wages) than a solution to problems that cross national boundaries. Third, increasing ideological polarization, hyper-partisanship and the permanent campaign have vastly complicated the task of assembling stable governing coalitions on behalf of responsible policy making.

In the United States, these political developments have led to an opposition party aggressively opposing G20-embraced steps to stabilize financial markets and stimulate the global economy and a public convinced that both interventions have utterly failed. To be sure, the lag in job recovery, the massive increases in deficits and debt, and the apparent benefits to financial elites deemed responsible for the crisis contribute to this public distemper and the political opening it provides the opposition party. "It would have been much worse without these interventions" makes perfect sense to policy analysts but constitutes an unconvincing slogan to citizens subject to economic distress and dislocation.

What, then, can the G20 do to ease the tension between essential global policies and domestic political imperatives of its member countries? The diversity of domestic politics in G20 countries requires that each leader manage his or her own situation. Centralized advice to members on dealing with their press and parliaments will be of limited utility to leaders experienced in the two-level game of diplomacy and domestic politics

(though helpful to those relatively new to the scene). More promising are strategies that equip leaders with incentives and resources to reconcile summit agreements with political forces at home. Carrots will likely be more effective than sticks in this setting but both are essential.

The former includes developing coordinated policies that can be seen as positive-sum (not simply pain-inflicting) and producing clear and compelling narratives that shape the international coverage of summits and boost the ability of leaders to make a persuasive case for following through on summit agreements at home. It might also involve some creative thinking about how best to stage summit events to allow leaders to convey critical political messages to their domestic publics.

Sticks can be helpful as well, if developed with an understanding of the political realities facing individual countries. These include systems for publicizing progress on pre-summit expectations and for monitoring implementation of agreements, both of which might provide leaders with leverage for good cop/bad cop strategies.