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INTRODUCTION

When the French President Valérie Giscard d'Estaing convened the leaders of five other countries—the USA, the UK, Italy, Germany, and Japan—in 1975, he had in mind an informal gathering albeit in the magnificent setting of the Rambouillet Castle. The following year in Puerto Rico, a new meeting was organised by US President Gerald Ford, and the inclusion of Canada heralded the start of what became the G7. The style and format of the talks at Rambouillet and in Puerto Rico set the tone for the way the Summits continued to be held in subsequent years, based on leaders adopting a relaxed approach with one another and discussing issues with candour.

If informality and openness have been a constant feature of the G7 summits, other factors have been introduced over the years. Among them, a number of issues that initially were not within the scope of the G7 as well as the addition of ministerial meetings have had a substantial impact on the effectiveness of its deliberations.

The effectiveness and legitimacy of the G7 have been questioned at various times, and those criticisms should not be dismissed. We were fully aware of them when we launched the 2017 Italian presidency. The slogan we chose—'Building the Foundations of Renewed Trust'—tried to give a sense of the multifaceted challenge we all had, where the word 'trust' was meant to have different interpretations. Do our citizens still trust our ability to respond to their needs? Do we trust each other? And above all, are we still able to be an authoritative and trusted guide for an ever-changing world?

As we will see, the way the G7 has been working throughout the last fifty years has not fundamentally affected its relevance. On the contrary, the current international scenario still requires it to perform a positive role. However, it is worth going through the way the G7 has developed before answering our question: does the G7 still matter?

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HISTORY OF THE G7

The idea of regular consultation among representatives of some leading industrialised countries emerged at the beginning of the 1970s as a response to the economic crises that had shattered the international economic and financial system. A first attempt to coordinate economic and monetary policies was made in 1973 by the US Treasury Secretary, George Shultz, who convened his counterparts from France, Germany and the United Kingdom. The experience was repeated the following year with the addition of Japan, thus establishing the G5.

The world economic and financial situation was such as to call for the direct involvement of the Heads of State and Government of the major world economies. A process started leading to the establishment of the G7 in 1976. The following year the European Economic Community (later the European Union) was included, initially only in the area of its exclusive competence. It was in 1981 at the Ottawa Summit that the EEC became a full member participating in all the activities of the G7, the only exception being as chair of its meetings.

A relevant shift was the attempt to include Russia to transform the forum into a G8. The first effort goes back to 1991, when the Soviet Union was invited to attend debates organised in parallel to the G7 London Summit that year. Three years later the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, was invited to the Naples Summit of 1994, which formalised the start of the so-called G7+1 format, whereby Russia was only invited to meetings to be held at the end of each summit. Russia formally joined the group at the Denver Summit in 1997—upon invitation by the US and UK. It was hoped, with strong advocacy by US President Bill Clinton, that the participation of Russia would bring the country, led by its first post-Soviet leader, closer to the West at a time when NATO was accepting the membership of some former Soviet allies (and satellites) in Eastern Europe. The first Summit under a Russian presidency was held in St. Petersburg in July 2006, while the second, originally scheduled to take place in 2014 in Sochi, was suspended due to Moscow's annexation of the Crimean region of the Ukraine. The summit was therefore held in Brussels, for the first, and so far, only occasion, without Russian involvement. That was the end of the G8.

Starting from the end of the last century, the growing relevance of transnational issues, coupled with the economic and financial crises affecting economies in Latin America and Asia, led the G7 countries in two directions. First, it inspired a progressive widening of the agenda and of the range of its meetings, on which I will elaborate in the following section. Second, it spurred the need to involve other countries in their discussions by inviting them to the G7 summits, which for some years now has become normal practice. These countries, however, do not participate in the actual meetings but in special outreach sessions dedicated to them. Each presidency has the prerogative to identify the invitees. It usually does so on the basis of its own foreign policy priorities as well as its presidency programme. It is a double-edged practice: on the one hand, it makes it possible to expand the number of countries that are invited to G7 meetings over the years, and on the other, it becomes an impromptu exercise with little continuity.

HOW THE G7 WORKS

Alongside the involvement of other countries, the widening of the G7 agenda also called for an adjustment of its working methods. This took three main directions.

First, the more specialised features of some issues required a level of complexity that could not be demanded solely of the leaders. Several ministerial meetings have therefore been included in the overall programme of each presidency. There is not a fixed number or an agreed type of ministerial meeting; this being the choice of each presidency. The number of meetings has increased in the last few years as a reflection of the variety of issues dealt with by the G7. It is also a way to involve an increasing number of constituencies in the country of the presidency. This should not raise concern or contempt, as it encourages the direct participation of a wider spectrum of local authorities and ordinary people. During the 2023 Japanese presidency, fifteen ministerial meetings were held, and the Italian presidency of this year has announced that it will organise twenty such gatherings.

The so-called engagement groups that each presidency organises have a different purpose. These dialogues with representatives of civil society—including business and labour representatives, women, the younger generation, think tanks, the scientific community—can be challenging. The youth meetings, for instance, are often quite lively; they give an important contribution to the work of the presidency by bringing about instances that otherwise risk being on the side-lines of the G7.

There is no G7 secretariat, which could have been seen as a prelude to a structured international organisation. All the preparatory works are in the hands of the rotating presidency, and, to this purpose, a key role is played by the personal representatives of the Heads of States and Governments: the Sherpas, and just like the Himalayan guides their job is to take their leaders to the summit! As well as coordinating a number of different working groups related to the ministerial meetings, their main task is the negotiation of the final statement of the Summit. Having had the honour to chair those meetings during the 2017 Italian presidency, I can say that it's not an easy job. Each delegation has its legitimate priorities and not always are they within the consensus. Quite often the result is what is known as 'the Christmas tree syndrome' which leads to the inclusion of almost everything in the final statement. It is not a bad thing in itself, since in the absence of a secretariat, the final communiqué is a sort of handover document between presidencies. On the other hand, a long text, sometimes not in a user-friendly style, can be seen as meant only for a limited number of insiders and not for a wider audience.

'The practice of organising ministerial meetings in various cities of the country holding the presidency can have the beneficial effect

Climate change, migration, artificial intelligence, sustainable development, health and pandemic response are all topics where the voice of the G7 needs to be heard. This requires shared vision and a mutual trust which is not always guaranteed. The human factor itself—the chemistry that is created between leaders—carries an important weight. The word ‘trust’ in the slogan of the 2017 Italian presidency also had this meaning. It was a reminder of the spirit of the original

While there is no question about the increasing importance of the G20, it wouldn't be right to see it as an alternative to the G7. The two groups have different scope and, ideally, they could complement one another. In fact, that was the original purpose of the G20 when President Bush convened its first summit.

A different case is that of BRICS. Formed in 2006 as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China), the group took on its current acronym in 2010 with the addition of South Africa. Its birth responded to the declared intention to represent those emerging powers considered to be underrepresented in the main international arena. In recent years, the group's aspiration to become a point of reference for the Global South has grown, almost as a counterpart to the G7. This year's enlargement to include five more countries (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) has increased its geographical and economic weight. The group now has a total population of about 3.5 billion, equal to 45% of the world's population and an economy that overall corresponds to 28% of the world's economy; the entry of oil-producing countries also means that BRICS overall contribute to 44% of world production.

Increasing its political weight in the same proportions will be more difficult. It is plausible that among the new members, Iran will push with anti-Western rhetoric that the

IS THE G7 STILL RELEVANT?

This year's summit will be the fiftieth in the G7's long history. New dynamics in international relations and the inclusion of new issues on the

Firstly, internal cohesion must be safeguarded and strengthened. When it is lacking, as in the above-mentioned case of failure to reach agreement on climate change, not only did the Group's credibility suffer, but the impasse represented a setback in negotiations in which the G7 was expected to play a leading role. This year there are important elections in the G7 membership: the European Parliament, the presidential elections in the US and probably a general election in the UK. Calling our citizens to choose their representatives is the essence of democracy and the change that every electoral process generates is always a positive factor. There is, therefore, no need to fear, but only to hope that the G7 as a whole will be strengthened.

Secondly, it is in the G7's interest to strengthen interaction with other groups. First, the G20, of which the seven countries and the EU are members. The issues dealt with by the two institutions overlap substantially, and coordination can only have beneficial effects. This was the case in 2017 with the concurrent presidencies of Italy in the G7 and Germany in 2020. There were frequent occasions for alignment not only at the level of Sherpa but also between the two leaders, who at their respective summits in Taormina and Hamburg played almost in tandem to pass some controversial points of the final communiqués. The synergy was facilitated by the fact that they were two G7 countries, but we should not exclude the possibility that it could also occur in different circumstances. This year, for example, the conditions are in place for Italy and Brazil to coordinate in the implementation of their respective G7 and G20 presidency programmes. Not only because they are countries with a longstanding friendship, but also because there are many issues in common: at the top of the list of Brazilian priorities appear climate change, the bioeconomy, and the fight against hunger in the world; all subjects on which it will not be difficult to connect. An agreement will be all the more productive if we consider the prominence that Brazil will have in 2025, with the presidency of BRICS and COP30.

Finally, the relationship with Africa must be reviewed. Countries of the continent are now regularly invited to the outreach sessions of the G7 summits. A positive fact in itself, but which now seems more the affirmation of a general principle—we cannot ignore Africa because it is engulfed by some of the great issues of our time, from climate change to migration—than any disposition to their effective involvement. It is certainly not a question of adding new structures, but we could start with a more active participation in preparation of the outreach work; for example, with Sherpa missions to African countries, or with ministerial sessions exclusively dedicated to specific topics defined by common agreement with the African countries and their regional organisations.

Relations with Africa, the ongoing war in Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East as well as relations with China are the highlights of this year's Italian presidency. Artificial Intelligence will also feature, an issue where the G7, in the wake of what the European Union is doing, will have to be able to make its voice heard to reconcile ethical considerations with the enormous potential that the technology offers in industrial and economic processes. These are all challenges that are marking the passage of an era. The continuing relevance of the G7 will be determined by its ability to offer the rest of the world a convincing vision in the hope that we are not already, as in Stefan Zweig's book, in the world of yesterday. ■



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