

Commit Global, Manage Local: Why Bundling the Environment, Climate and Energy Helps None of Them

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Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the environmental theme of the 44th G7, how countries have previously addressed the issues of climate, energy and the environment, and the novel approach to these themes at the G7 Summit in Charlevoix. It questions the premise of the relevance of the G7 for the global climate, clean energy, and environmental commitments, both as bundled under a single theme and in light of the US administration's approach therein.

Introduction

Ever since the [establishment](#) of the United Nations Framework Climate Change Council (UNFCCC) in 1992 and the [ratification of the Kyoto Protocol](#), the issue of climate change ascended to, and successfully retained

its position as one of the key issues targeted by global governance. In fact, the first commitment of the G7 [came 7 years before that](#), in 1985. Even before the focus on climate, energy in the context of renewable energy resources was to be the other high-profile issue to [appear frequently](#) on the agendas of the G7 meetings. Last but not least, the environment, particularly in the context of marine and ocean protection assumed a stable role at the G7 summits, being first introduced in Tokyo in 1986.

Last year, at the 43rd G7 Summit in Taormina, climate, energy, and oceans (in the context of plastic waste pollution) found themselves [bundled together](#) with the economy and sustainable growth. However, the final communiqué [failed](#) to show a united G7 front, as President Trump [raised](#)

[objections](#) against the suggested language on climate change. In this respect, Canada, as the host country of the 44th G7 summit, took a more nuanced approach, [awarding climate, energy, and oceans \(read plastics\) a single headline](#), expecting to bridge the gaps left from Taormina.

Nevertheless, with Taormina exposing the existing divides on climate change and the Charlevoix agenda witnessing the relegation of the environmental themes, the G7 summit in Charlevoix raises another question. How effective is bundling different issues together when attempting to get all G7 members to commit to them?

Furthermore, does it even make sense to seek ambitious global commitments on issues such as climate and energy, where: i) local geographic factors play a role; and ii) the Trump administration has increasingly opposed committing to addressing climate change?

From Taormina to Charlevoix

In their preparations for the G7 summits in Taormina and Charlevoix,

Italy and Canada respectively shared an overall ambition to confirm the G7's role as the Western democracies' tool for soft global governance. Given the G7's ability to shape global politics lies in the ability of the its members to unite on global issues, it was in the interests of both Italy and Canada to set an agenda that would provide fertile ground for a strong agreement and limited space for signs of disunity. Given the contentious nature of climate politics for the Trump administration, marrying US opposition and the 'G6's' commitment was to prove a difficult diplomatic exercise.

Prior to the 43rd G7 summit in Taormina, Italy was extremely well prepared to lead by example in getting the other G7 leaders to commit to the climate change, clean energy, and plastics agenda. In March 2017, Italy presented its ambitious [energy transition roadmap](#), which foresaw an 80% reduction in CO₂ emissions from levels in the 1990s. During the summit, despite efforts to find language on climate and energy that the US would

be willing to support, the final communiqué explicated that the US 'is in the process of reviewing its policies on climate change' and could therefore not commit to addressing the issue of climate change and upholding its commitment to the Paris Agreement.

A very similar pattern was observable in the run up to the 2018 G7 Summit in Charlevoix, which Canada initially dedicated primarily to plastics and ocean protection, with (learning the lesson from Taormina) climate and energy taking a secondary position. In February, the main theme of the summit and the number one point on the agenda of the G7 Charlevoix were plastics. Ahead of the summit, Canadian Minister of the Environment and Climate Change Catherine McKenna [spoke](#) about the high likelihood of the G7 members signing a [plastics charter](#), which would have seen the G7 countries commit to concrete timelines for phasing out single-use plastics in reaching 100% recyclability by 2050. Following Italy's playbook, Canada took extremely

ambitious steps to give credibility to its focus on protecting oceans and removing marine litter. Canada secured the [endorsement](#) of Coca-Cola and Unilever and introduced a novel approach to monitoring plastic waste and committing as much as \$2bn to ocean protection.

In contrast to Taormina, where Trump publicly opposed any language on climate change, this time he was [quoted](#) to have been looking forward to the summit, possibly signalling his non-opposition to Canada's plastics agenda. However, in March, three months ahead of the summit, the G7's agenda saw its first significant changes as environmental issues were [relegated](#) to 4th place and the word 'plastics' no longer featured in the headline of the summit's theme, being replaced by *climate change and clean energy* instead.

Why is it important to look at the how the agenda was shaped? As was described earlier, the G7's power lies in its ability to agree on geopolitical

issues and, through its economic and political prowess, drive the global political agenda. However, on climate, energy, and plastics, this started proving increasingly difficult and raised the question of the necessity of using the G7 summits to seek commitments in unlikely places and the effectiveness of the vague commitments that were to follow.

The 44th G7 Summit in Charlevoix

Even before President Trump called on US officials to [denounce](#) the joint communiqué, the main written output of the summit saw [further relegation](#) of the environmental themes further down the agenda to the very last place, preceded by the peace and security theme. The part of the Communiqué dedicated to climate, energy, and environment theme was further riddled with not so subtly threaded statements of disunity on energy, climate, and the environment.

Already the first point of the section on “*Working Together on Climate*

Change, Oceans and Clean Energy” (Paragraph 23 of the Communiqué) explicitly states that all G7 members ‘recognise that each country may chart its own path to achieving a low-emission future’.

In fact, analysts would be hard pressed to find signs of unity in the communiqué, No liberal interpretation of the five points dedicated to the environmental themes could yield the conclusions that all the G7 leaders found common ground on at least one of the environmental sub-themes.

Where Paragraph 24 of the Communiqué is dedicated to climate change and expresses the commitment to the implementation of the Paris Agreement by all G7 members except the US, Paragraph 24 simply describes US energy policy. This essentially shifts the narrative from climate-change focused energy solutions to ones that help the US achieve energy security.

However, it would be short-sighted to only allude to the disagreement of the G6 and the US stance on climate change. Perhaps more peculiar with regards to the (retroactively denounced) Joint Communiqué of the 44th Summit of the leaders of the seven most advanced economies of the world was the G5+2 dynamic on the commitments to addressing plastic pollution via the endorsement of the [G7 Ocean Plastics Charter](#), which not only the US, but also Japan did not endorse. It can be argued that for a global commitment, the initial endorsement of all G7 leaders of the '[Charlevoix Blueprint for Healthy Oceans, Seas and Resilient Coastal Communities](#)' to support coastal communities, share scientific data on ocean health, address the issue of sustainable fishing, and 'recognise the urgency of the threat of plastic waste to marine ecosystems' is sufficient. However, it is precisely the Plastics Charter that outlines concrete steps that the G7 countries need to take to turn their commitments into actions, and actions into measurable

improvements for coastal communities and marine ecosystems.

Therefore, if anything, the past two G7 summits have shown growing disagreements rather than the intended unity between the G7 leaders on environmental issues. This calls into question whether the G7 is the right platform to address issues that, while not bound by national boundaries, cannot be tackled by blanket global solutions and require a more location-specific approach.

Commit Global, Manage Local (or not)

Climate change, CO₂ emissions, plastic waste in oceans and rivers, and even energy (consider LNG trading between the US and Asia, the EU's interconnected energy markets with complex network ownership structures) have not been bound by nation-state boundaries for a long time. Yet, getting even a small group of the world's most advanced economies to commit to a global

approach to these issues seems increasingly difficult. More so, it raises the question of the usefulness of blanket global commitments to environmental issues: are global commitments to environmental issues useful or effective? The answer is a firm 'yes' to global commitments, a firm 'no' to bundling environmental issues together, and a slightly hesitant 'no' to the G7 being the correct platform to make these commitments (for two more years at least).

First, global commitments to addressing environmental challenges absolutely make sense. On the question of climate change, the world witnessed monumental success during COP21 in Paris when the Paris Climate Accord was signed and, within a year, [ratified](#) by a sufficient number of countries to have entered into force. With energy, the International Energy Agency (IEA), the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), and many other international agencies, organisations and forums have successfully advocated a switch to

low-carbon energy solutions. Finally, on plastics, the [EU](#), the [UK](#), and [Canada](#) have advanced domestic policy solutions to tackle the global problem of plastic pollution.

Second, while global environmental commitments make sense, the individual policy areas need to be addressed by issue-specific communication channels. While EU-China cooperation (with China being a member of the G20, but not the G7) on setting up a Chinese emissions trading system (ETS), which in the future is expected to merge with the existing EU ETS, evokes feelings of global commitment to addressing climate change, the G7's failure to even sign under a commitment to addressing climate change is worrisome.

At the same time, there seems to be little that the G7 countries disagree on when it comes to liberalising energy trade – after all, Asia is the biggest market for American LNG, four of the G7 members (UK, Italy, Germany, and France) participate in an

interconnected electricity and gas market, and Canada engages in cross-border energy trade with the US. At the same time, some states in the US and some members of the EU do not yet have existing low-carbon energy sources and still depend on carbon-intensive fossil fuels for energy. However, when energy and climate are bundled together under a single theme and leaders cannot agree on the climate language, it calls into question unity in other areas, i.e. energy, where any agreement would otherwise be highly likely.

Last, and following from the second point, the G7 is not, and for the next two summits will not be, the right platform to make commitments on environment, climate, and energy. The Communiqué, and the subsequent [headlines](#) in the media, made it abundantly clear that unity was definitely not something that the summit evoked. On the environmental topics, the Plastics Charter was endorsed by only five of the seven members and climate change by six,

rendering the G7 unable to send a strong political signal to the world that the seven most advanced global economies are committed to cleaning the planet up. All this is notwithstanding the fact that media attention was largely on the Trump-Trudeau spat that followed Prime Minister Trudeau's post-summit press conference.

Conclusion

This policy brief has looked at the last two G7 Summits: the 43rd G7 Summit in Taormina, Italy and the 44th G7 Summit in Charlevoix, Canada, establishing how both summits tackled the topics of the environment, climate, and energy. It analysed how the individual host countries tried to find language that can accommodate the growing wedges between the G7 members' positions in the aforementioned issues, arguing that the divisions now run too deep to make it viable for G7 to seek reasonably strong and clear commitments on environmental

themes, especially if they remain bundled together.

Such analysis might lead one to think that the G7 is a redundant format for environmental themes. However, on a closer observation, the opposite is true. The G7 is a prime focus group for assessing the moods of Western democracies and a barometer of geopolitical moods. If anything, the G7 is a very useful format that informs us of where countries can work together on a global scale and where more issue or location-specific formats are desirable. In this particular case, it shows that on the environment, countries serious about clean energy, climate change, and marine waste

should seek other channels to drive an ambitious global environmental policy.

Consequently, the G7 leaders need to start approaching the summit free of the intrinsic desire to achieve consensus regardless of how unsubstantial. Furthermore, those global leaders, who are able and willing to take a strong and principled stance on environmental themes will need to pursue alternative channels of environmental diplomacy to retain their global agenda-setting ability.

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