

## The G20: Circus without a Ringleader?

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### Executive Summary

The tenth G20 summit took place in Argentina in November/December 2018. It was only the second time (after Mexico 2012) it had been held in a developing country. Mauricio Macri's government laid out an expansive agenda of particular interest to developing countries. Over 2,600 journalists were accredited, yet little of the substantive reporting focused on the themes that were supposedly guiding the agenda: the future of work; infrastructure for development; a sustainable food future; and gender mainstreaming. The focus on immediate personality politics and, at times, trivia, tends to crowd out the substantive agenda and reflects structural problems with the G20 itself. The ensuing 'circus' represents easy reporting for journalists socialised into the politics-as-parlour-game conceit of the hyper-speed social media and rolling news era. Without a better response to the upheavals of the contemporary era, and perhaps even institutional reform, the G20's potential as a serious multilateral steering committee for the global economy will remain unfulfilled.

### What is the point of the G20?

There is an enduring tension at the heart of the G20's constitution and mission. It is, on the one hand – and has been since it came of age during the global financial crisis – a potential, yet at present unrealised '[steering committee](#)' for global governance. In a context where substantial and undoubtedly necessary reform of the existing institutional paraphernalia inherited from the post-war Bretton Woods era [remains implausible](#), it can help overcome the inertia within bodies that are either insufficiently representative (as in the case of the IMF and World Bank) or too much so to achieve consensus and directional thrust (as in the UN General Assembly). Since the world is both characterised by a [rapidly changing distribution](#) of economic and political power, and the faltering, contested, but nonetheless inexorable emergence and expansion of a genuinely global political economy, this coordinating role [is ever-more critical](#).

On the other hand, the G20 could be considered little more than an expensive annual jamboree where world leaders

from a wider range of countries than in the past, their entourages and the global press hobnob in front of the full glare of the world's TV cameras. Rather than offering serious policy development to manage the global economy, it is a space in which the pressing diplomatic spats and controversies of the moment provide the key storylines and points of intrigue. Much of the international media, trading as it does in the currency of simplistic court intrigue and the relentless need to feed the hungry beast of ubiquitous social media superficiality, reproduces this summit-as-circus narrative, with personalities and gossip dominating the coverage.

Elsewhere, and in relation to the UK and Brexit, [I have described this form of politics](#) and its presentation to the public as little more than *Love Island in Suits*. Or, as Chris Grey [has put it](#), the politics of 'ceremonial spectacle'. On the Saturday morning (day two) of the 2018 G20 summit, the main – and in some cases, only – stories on the front pages of much of the 'serious' western media, for example, were the ['high five'](#) between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), and the [snatched camera footage](#) of the latter and French President Emmanuel Macron cryptically talking about their relationship of mutual trust.

So much innuendo – hints regarding arms deals and corruption are omnipresent – can be read effortlessly into these images by a speculative media feasting on [the aftermath of the Jamal Khashoggi murder](#) and the horrendous conflict in Yemen, that serious policy reporting is almost-intrinsically a secondary concern. Moreover, the veritable rogues' gallery that is the line-up of the 2018 cohort of leaders – mostly men, mostly authoritarian (or [with such tendencies](#)) and increasingly sceptical of globalisation – only intensified this sense of frivolity and decadence.

This is particularly so for the everyday Argentinians [inconvenienced by the summit](#): at a cost of over US\$100 million in a country saddled with a US\$57 billion IMF programme and a currency that was recently in freefall, they had to [contend with](#) an enforced public holiday, a city on lockdown and a shutdown of the subway transport system. The contrast with the [luxury and excess inside the media centre](#) could not be more striking.

### **The Circus...**

The tension between these two schizophrenic sides to the G20's personality was laid bare in Buenos Aires. In part, this was because the summit was hosted, for only the second time, by a (so-called) 'developing country'. The

Argentinian government of Mauricio Macri had laid out [an expansive agenda](#), with three main themes: the future of work; infrastructure for development; and a sustainable food future. These were [underpinned by](#) gender mainstreaming – the *sine qua non* of contemporary global development – continuing the positive approach taken [by the Trudeau administration](#) as it hosted the G7 meeting earlier in the year.

In addition, Macri had undertaken impressive outreach, and consciously used the summit as a way of both signalling Argentina's potential fulcrum role between the Global North and South, as well as announcing the country's 'reinsertion' into the global community. The [invited guests](#) included Paul Kagame of Rwanda (representing the African Union), Andrew Holness of Jamaica (representing the Caribbean Community), Singapore (representing ASEAN), Amadou Ba of Senegal (representing the African Union's implementation agency, NEPAD) and Chile. This, in fact, suggests three things about the G20 membership.

One is that it is not, strictly speaking, composed of the self-proclaimed 'largest economies in the world': Nigeria, for example, is considerably bigger than South Africa. A second is that decisions about membership are extremely political and thus inherently fluid: arguably Chile,

as a more stable and wealthier country (in per capita terms) has as much of a claim to full membership as Argentina. If this argument stands up, though, regardless of absolute size, Singapore, as a distinctly well-governed and highly developed small country surely also should be considered as a member. The same might be said for Switzerland, New Zealand, and, when compared to Saudi Arabia, Iran surely has at least as big a claim to a legitimate place.

The third is that, even with the 2018 mix of invited guests and members, the G20 is still far from representative: no representative of the Pacific Islands Forum was invited to mirror their Caribbean counterparts, and it remains the case that the '[marginal majority](#)' of over 100 of the world's states (and a third of the global population) has no meaningful stake. In a recent analysis of the body's founding [by Catherine Tsalikis](#), it is noted how even the number twenty was itself arbitrary, and exposed an enduring tension between representativeness and having a sufficiently small and cohesive group around the table to get things done. In short, then, there is much to like about the tilt towards developing-world interests in Argentina 2018.

However, [just as in Canada](#), the objectives were essentially derailed by the soap

opera. This could not have been any clearer from the optics: from the picture of Kagame [looking like a lost parent](#) at a children's party while other people's infants threw ice cream at each other, to the stark contrast between the aforementioned rogues' family photo and that of the spouses (all women) painted [a dishearteningly regressive](#) picture.

Three issues dominated the agenda, and they were not those envisioned by the Argentinians. First, there was the fallout from the Khashoggi affair and speculation about the supposedly difficult conversations the Saudis would be having with the US, UK and France (or at least that is how it was spun by those countries). Second, there was the ongoing US-China trade dispute, which has [dominated global summitry](#) now for the best part of a year. Finally, there was the omnipresent overhang of the domestic travails facing US President and former reality TV star, Donald Trump, and the [abrupt cancellation](#) of his bilateral meeting with Putin in response to further Russian aggression towards Ukraine, and as the Mueller enquiry appeared [to creep ever-closer](#) to Trump's inner circle at home.

### **In search of a ringleader**

All of this highlights a bigger problem: we still do not really know what the G20 is

actually for. Part of the issue is, indeed, about simple personalities. Amidst the most uninspiring crop of global leaders in recent memory, only the handful of adults in the room genuinely seem to comprehend how high the stakes are for global multilateralism. Chinese President Xi Jinping [appears to be one](#) of the most prominent defenders of the rules-based order, and must, along with Macron and Angela Merkel, the EU and some of the developing country members, be privately exasperated in private by the machinations going on elsewhere.

The rest essentially play two roles: either they are involved in the various parlour games, or they find themselves acting as onlookers stuck firmly on the sidelines. Although much has been made of [the new populism](#) and its supposed reticence towards globalisation, these nationalist leaders are not truly social democrats trying to temper the worst excesses of global overreach, but budding, and in some cases fully-fledged, [authoritarian neoliberals](#).

With a different set of leaders, then, it is quite plausible that some order could be brought to proceedings. In one sense, it would then be what many have traditionally [considered it](#) to be: an effective 'G2' that brings China and the US together to share responsibility for coordinating the global economy. Indeed,

one could even argue that the spats that have animated this year's coverage – especially the US-China trade dispute – show that it is still performing an incoherent version of this role.

Yet the bigger issue is that, within a body of a large number of increasingly diverse members – which are typified by rapidly shifting power dynamics – the G20 is itself inherently difficult to lead. Because there is no decisive leadership on show, the circus has no ringleader, and some of the performers are running amok. Or, at least that is how it appears from media portrayals of the summits.

The final [G20 Declaration for 2018](#) was rather disorienting in this regard. It was actually full of detail on different themes, although it was almost entirely consistent with the early drafts that circulated amongst the parties. This suggests one of two things. Either the leaders had successful discussions about the issues that animated the Argentinian agenda, and were able to develop them into substantive statements and action points, or they were perhaps so uncontroversial that it was easy to reproduce bland statements without much discussion necessary.

If the latter, it maybe tells is something quite revealing and interesting: namely,

that the host's thematic agenda functions partly as a convenient fig leaf to show progress, and facilitate discussion on big-picture issues like climate change and global finance, even though the actual function of the G20 is to provide for dialogue between the major global leaders about whatever, at a given moment, may seem quite pressing, it ultimately ephemeral. As Julian Borger [noted](#) during the summit, EU Council President Donald Tusk consciously appealed 'to the leaders to use this summit, including their bilateral and informal exchanges, to seriously discuss real issues such as trade wars, the tragic situation in Syria and Yemen and the Russian aggression in Ukraine'. So, even key actors were encouraging the participants to effectively circumvent the main agenda items in favour of issues of immediate concern.

On this reading, what appears initially schizophrenic may actually be an evolving reality where the twin elements of the summitry process interact with each other such that the 'serious' policy business provides cover for the necessary discussion of (relatively speaking) everyday ephemera and, at times, even trivia. This, of course, is not to say that the issues themselves are trivial, rather that the immediate diplomatic challenges, however thorny, are of a different scale to, say, the unfolding disaster of climate

change or reshaping the global governance architecture.

### **Beyond Argentina 2018**

If the G20 is to be rendered more effective, though, it essentially has to find a better way to manage the three problems identified above. First, it must grapple with the deep and destabilising shifts of economic power that are occurring across the world, and the wider patterns of fragmentation in global patterns of production and finance.

Second, it needs to reconcile the marked differences in forms of capitalism amongst the membership, and the wider world. These are often overstated in fear-mongering about the 'rise of economic nationalism' – countries [have always sought](#), as part of their conscious development strategies, to engage in varying forms of state intervention and openness to global flows of capital, people and ideas, and this waxes and wanes over time – but nevertheless reflect a need to accommodate demands for greater policy space.

Third, this has to be done in such a way that the benefits of globalisation in general – free(ish) trade, greater interconnectedness, cultural exchange – are protected, even as states seek to

recalibrate their relationship with it in an era of crisis and deal with its most malign effects. Perhaps most importantly, this is where *the purpose* of the G20, as that steering group is most critical: for it is only by governing globalisation effectively that lofty goals such as making it work for everyone may ever be realised.

A key part of this may well be the need to find an actual ringleader to command the circus, even if the most way things are reported will be difficult to shift. The really big thinking on how to [remake global governance](#) in a world where the existing neoliberal order – if not multilateral cooperation per se – is crucial. To do this, it is surely time to seriously consider a permanent secretariat, however modest, to provide for consistent steering of the G20 summit process itself, so that it does not just lurch from country to country with little coherence between either annual agendas or the task of balancing the immediate spats and bigger, strategic issues.

This, as Tony Payne has [recently argued](#), is now necessary in order for the political space to be carved out in which that kind of long-term thinking can be undertaken. One small country that is strategically located amongst the rising powers of the East, that is well-governed, stable, secure, and a neutral, trusted interlocutor with a [history of effective diplomacy](#) is



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Singapore. It would not be a bad choice, in my view, for such a secretariat to be located.

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