

The G20 in face of politicization: Avoiding or embracing contestation?

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As the 'liberal consensus' cannot be taken for granted any longer, the G20 is facing today similar challenges to the ones affecting other multilateral fora, most notably politicization. The G20 has to take the decision on whether it prevents politicization –and sticks to devoting its efforts to highly consensual issues, even if this means shifting to new ones- or it embraces it –turning itself into an unmatched space for open and fair discussion even if this harms decision-making. This policy-brief provides concrete recommendations on how to move forward successfully in both of the alternative paths the G20 has ahead.

Challenge

Global multilateral institutions emanating from the post-1945 world order have proven ineffective in too many occasions since the end of the Cold War. From security-oriented ones (the UN Security Council) to those devoted to financial and economic cooperation (World Bank, International Monetary Fund) all seem today less able to advance their respective goals. They suffer from different but shared malaises which harm their effectiveness: problems of fair representation of the plurality of actors involved and complexity of the global society they claim to embody; inability to reach large consensus and foster cooperation; decreasing levels of legitimacy as a consequence of their paralysis and unfair representation; or institutional and bureaucratic reluctance to go beyond current state-of-the-art in their actions and policies. At the core lies the difficulty to adapt their goals and methods to a fast-paced changing reality.

The G20 came into existence responding to this paralysis. In front of the aforementioned problems, the G20 represented a more egalitarian space for discussion among its participants, enlarging the scope of the G7 and G8 to a more representative group of 20. It escaped from unequal modes of participation among members by establishing a consensual mode of decisionmaking. The G20 also prevented stillness by devoting its efforts to tackling more technical and less politicized issues, where building wider consensus resulted less complicated. This still holds true at the time of expanding its portfolio from financial and economic issues to other fields of activity.

After twenty years of relative success, however, the G20 might be facing today similar challenges to the ones affecting other multilateral fora. Politicization, understood as “increased salience or rising awareness of an issue, polarization of the stances taken by actors about such issue and mobilization and expansion of the range of actors involved in the associated debate” (Grande & Hutter 2016, 8) might be the most pressing one. The risk is thus that the G20 detracts from its essence and is being transformed into another contested multilateral space.

Politicization might materialize in the G20 in two different dimensions. On the one hand, issues covered by the G20 might increasingly become more politicized. Some of the former consensus, so-called the global “liberal consensus”, upon which the G20 functioned is being eroded. The discussion at the G20 revolved around how to improve multilateralism, better advance freetrade or effectively fight together global climate change. The ultimate goals were broadly shared by all its members.

Yet now this seems to be no longer the case. Free-trade is questioned by the commercial war dynamics and chauvinist policies put forward

worldwide. Populism and nationalism distrust multilateralism as a global cooperative method. Climate change is not recognized as a global threat by all the actors around the table. The G20's methodological discussion on how to achieve common global goals has the risk of being transmuted into a clash over fundamental values and eroding consensus.

On the other, a second dimension of politicization might be triggered by the first one, namely politicizing the G20 itself. In such a process, participants would use this space of dialogue and compromise as a platform for globally displaying and discussing political contestation, which might harm the G20's effectiveness and legitimacy.

In face of the growing presence of politicization both as a consequence of the issues under discussion and the increasing contestation among G20 members that these generate, the G20 can either reevaluate the topics it deals with (thus preventing the impact of politicization) or embrace politicization (and thus use this forum as an arena for a true global discussion. Worse, the G20 can remain silent on the trend of growing politicization, and thus gradually becoming -as other international forums have- increasingly irrelevant.

Proposal

Option 1: Preventing the impact of politicization through the reevaluation of the topics dealt with at the G20

The main consequence of politicization and its associated divisiveness is that they preclude reaching broad and meaningful agreements. The G20 has traditionally struggled with reaching agreements on the technicalities to implement a given solution; yet, it barely experienced the current levels of division over some general formerly-shared principles or objectives like advancing free trade and combating protectionism (see the G20 Leaders' Communiqué at Hangzhou Summit, for instance).

The first option that G20 members have ahead is making every effort possible to prevent the divisive effects of politicization by reevaluating which topics are dealt with at the summits. Sticking to the issues that are likely to forge broad consensus would mean that the G20 becomes resilient enough and takes controversially issues out of its agenda, as well as moving towards more consensual fields of activity. This might be achieved by:

- **Introducing mechanisms to pre-test levels of consensus.**

As the 'liberal consensus' cannot be taken for granted any longer, the G20 needs to provide itself with new mechanisms testing the level of consensus among its members on the issues to be covered at the Leaders' Summit. Even if Preparation Meetings have historically carried out a similar function, this might not be enough to pay heed to current levels of division. The creation of a Task Force devoted to grasping the state-of-opinion among members or assign this responsibility to a Sherpa team would secure a detailed mapping of contentious and agreeable points. An incremental approach (first at G7/8 level, then at Heiligendam Process group and final to all the members) is desirable. Their work should be presented to the host country as it would inform the decision on what topics might be included in the G20 agenda. Not doing that might condemn the Leaders' Summits to concatenated watered-down Communiqués and consequent ineffective and vapid Action Plans.

- **Dropping long-lasting topics of the G20's agenda.**

If we accept the G20 to be an space mainly designed for advancing global multilateral cooperation in an effective manner –unlike other global governance institutions–, its members might need to be flexible in deciding what topics make it to the discussion floor. This might be difficult in occasions, especially when it comes to foundational topics of the summit like macroeconomy or financial stability. If consensus should always take precedent, members must be adaptable enough to temporary rid any topics or sub-topics from the agenda on which global consensus is not assured.

- **Granting the host country even a stronger say in the G20's agenda.**

It seems reasonable to let the host country take the decision on adding and dropping topics from the agenda depending on the expected level of consensus. Its decisions could be based, on the one hand, on its evaluation of the mechanisms to testing consensus and, on the other, with direct consultations with the G7 and other critical veto players.

- **Taking advantage of opportunity niches for reaching global consensus.**

Time flexibility is a must amid this set of conditions. The scheduling of the Leaders' Meeting cannot turn its back to the electoral reality of many of its participants. Advancing or postponing the meetings in light of the calendar cycle of some members –especially in those situations when, by doing so, the leaders participating might have different stances on the global liberal consensus- might be convenient. Paying attention to and reacting to potential leadership changes in the members' capitals can be a useful manner to tackle some of the politicization's disturbing effects.

- **Avoiding getting trapped into attempts to foster consensus.**

Perseverance is not always, and in every context, worth it. Devoting too much efforts on striving for consensus on issues that all voices detect there is little room for coming to terms might be counterproductive. The implementation of 'red-botton' systems all along the discussion process –from Preparation Meetings to the Leaders' Summit itself- would allow members to table off conflictual topics.

Option 2: Embracing politicization

Alternatively, the G20 might embrace politicization. The procedural mechanisms in place make the G20 an unmatched space for open and fair discussion. This might be even more relevant, and necessary, when it comes to highly politicized issues. The G20 was born out as a space for improving the global discussion as it stress the egalitarian nature of all its members, unlike many of other global governance institutions. In this set of equality, participants felt more prompted to freely channel their concerns and priorities, which the unanimity model reinforced. All these elements make every summit a perfect space for frank, face-to-face dialogue among those international actors with actual capabilities for promoting global change. Embracing politicization would mean incorporating every controversial global issue in the summit agenda and using the G20 as a space for honest discussion.

This second option could further the G20's normative power vis-à-vis other (blocked) multilateral institutions. By representing a parallel track where issues stalled in global institutions are advanced, the G20 would remain central for the improvement of international cooperation and multilateralism. This might be achieved by:

- **Incorporating a permanent line of action on how to improve the global governance architecture.**

Among the topics increasingly affected by politicization, the flaws and necessary reform of the global governance architecture is one of the topics that would signal that the G20 has embraced politicization. In the last three decades, several reform attempts have been unfruitful: the United Nations Security Council membership and veto reform; the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank voting shares' reform; or the stagnation amid the perpetual Doha Round at the World Trade Organization.

This has prompted, on the one hand, a sense of frustration among many global actors who lessen the legitimacy formerly lent to these institutions; on the other, many actors have started articulating parallel orders through new analogous institutions (most notably, the New Development Bank).

There might be no better multilateral space than the G20 to advance the discussion and think about how to reform and modernize the current global governance architecture. It might be necessary to articulate and formalize a parallel track within the G20 for face-to-face, open and egalitarian discussion among its members.

- **Establishing mechanisms to transfer in discussions from other international organizations.**

Establishing an opt-in mechanisms to import grounded-down discussions from other international organizations might be useful. Every G20 member –or any other from specific international organizations- should be able to request the G20 to discuss impasses on issues covered by that IGO and offer advisory opinion. Articles 53 and 96 of the United Nations Charter, on the opting-out mechanisms to regional arrangements and on the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice respectively, might be inspiring on that respect. The institutionalization of this mechanism would provides the G20 with legitimacy beyond efficiency. Advancing cooperation with the UN framework organizations would be a must if the discussions on potential reforms were to be brought up in G20 summits.

- **Establishing mechanisms to transfer out decisions to international organizations.**

Conversely, similar mechanisms to return to the original international organization every compromise advanced at the G20 would be necessary. Once the discussions at the G20, due to their comparative advantage, were able to break concrete deals on the issues at stake – for instance, the reform of global governance mechanisms- the agreements could be materialized and institutionalized at the original IGO. Making this would socialize the adopted decisions among the rest of the members of the international community, maximizing its impact and providing further legitimacy.

- **Renouncing to a compulsory Communiqué after every Leaders' summit.**

Opting for embracing politicization might mean that, in many occasions, no deals among G20 members are reached. Transforming the Summits into a space centered on high-level dialogue and open, face-to-face discussion needs to come in hand with assuming that its members do not necessarily need to accept a Communiqué –or an Action Plan- after every gathering. The pressure to break deals for the sake of communication – and creating the false feeling of success and cooperation- might go against the freedom to explore and debate pressing global topics.

- **Establishing clear protocols on media access to discussions.**

Another great challenge associated with embracing politicization has to do with the possibility of transforming the G20 Leaders' Summit into a showing-off space for global dissenting leaders. It might be tempting to use this privileged space as platform to gain credit in front disengaged domestic audiences. This situation is further increased as a greater presence of media creates "strong incentives to privilege postures over consensus searching" (Destais, 2016). It would thus be necessary to establish clear protocols on access to the discussions. So if the aim is to make these valuable, every member must feel comfortable enough to put forward real concerns and priorities, without the media pressure.

Worst option: Doing nothing and risking irrelevance

The most hazardous challenge the G20 faces in the described scenario is taking no conscious decision about what is best for its members. Acting as if politicization was not a raising reality is not a reasonable option. Part of the paralysis suffered nowadays by other global governance mechanisms and institutions is a consequence of not being able to cope with previous politicization waves. If it does not embrace the debate regarding possible options in face of politicization, and instead tries to remain in an unsustainable middle ground, the G20 might repeat the mistakes of other international organisations and gradually have its relevance questioned, both by its participants and the public opinion. Not taking a decision on how to manage this new reality would thus also become an existential challenge for the G20 in the mid-run.

References

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