



209 Iowa Avenue
Muscatine, IA 52761 USA
563-264-1500
563-264-0864 fax
stanley@stanleyfoundation.org
www.stanleyfoundation.org
Richard H. Stanley, Chair
Vladimir P. Sambaiew, President

Policy Memo

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SUBJECT: The Apex of Influence—How Summit Meetings Build Multilateral Cooperation

On May 10-11, 2012, experts on international politics and policy gathered at the Kellogg School of Management in Chicago for a conference on **The Apex of Influence—How Summit Meetings Build Multilateral Cooperation**. With Chicago serving as the focus of summits hosted by President Obama later in the month, it was an ideal setting for a broader and deeper consideration of the role of summit diplomacy. The meeting was organized jointly by the Stanley Foundation, the Global Summitry Project of University of Toronto’s Munk School of Global Affairs, and the Roberta Buffett Center for International and Comparative Studies at Northwestern University.

The quandary for the world’s various multilateral bodies is a shortfall between the urgent global challenges demanding action and the fairly anemic supply of international cooperation in response. Since summit diplomacy is widely used to leverage top-level political leadership to achieve progress, the recent conference offered insight into the contribution of summitry:

- By convening themselves in a variety of groupings, world leaders maintain channels to work both with their closest allies as well as heterogeneous “unlike-minded” sets of nations.
- Particularly as the Eurozone crisis has consumed so much focus, the calendar of summit meetings looks more like a rolling discussion among world leaders than a competition among multilateral groupings.
- The involvement of leaders is often crucial for progress even when the subject matter or activity is the province of lower-level technical experts.
- Summit planners should keep their communiqués free of placeholder or boilerplate language and focus on the most significant agenda items.

In a way, summit meetings force the issue of multilateral effectiveness. Whenever world leaders are collected in the same place, it is by definition a rare event. Between the leaders’ political clout and overloaded schedules, there is an extra onus for such gatherings to produce results in order to justify all the effort. In fairness to them, however, many issues on the docket come with very high “degree of difficulty” ratings—entailing moves that are tough politically and/or substantively. Often, the only way progress can be achieved is through steady incremental steps, leaving policymakers to struggle for due credit from a skeptical and impatient news media.

All Summits Are Not The Same

The program for the conference focused on a range of multilateral bodies that hold summits and featured panels of experts who focus on the different groupings. As the panelists outlined essential differences among the various forums (NATO, the Eurozone, G-20, and G-8), it became clear that summits cannot all be judged against the same measuring stick. A security alliance, currency union, and forum for international economic cooperation represent very different strategic and diplomatic contexts. The countries of NATO or the Eurozone are bound tightly to one another, whereas the G-20 is a heterogeneous group of “unlike-minded” nations.

The challenges for a multilateral body can also shift over the years. For the discussion of NATO, Frances Burwell from the Atlantic Council of the United States reviewed some of the challenges its summits have tackled since the end of the Cold War: adding former East Bloc nations to its membership, updating the alliance’s strategic concept, and now planning the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan.

Enlargement of NATO’s membership in the 1990s represented a significant strategic realignment, and the presence of leaders from Poland, the Czech Republic, and other new allies lent great political symbolism to those summits. A number of experts emphasized that the summit attendance sheet remains important even for summits that lack such historical significance. Making sure to show up is a key way for leaders to signal their mutual respect.

The NATO strategic concept was one instance in a notable category for the assessment of summits: detailed technical matters that are generally delegated to lower-level officials. There are two ways of looking at this relationship between technical issues and a top-level political forum, and both were voiced by participants at the conference. For some analysts, it is silly to ask heads of state to discuss questions for which they lack substantive expertise (a view that has led many G-20 observers to advocate leaving much of the economic agenda to finance ministers).

Below the Summits’ Surface

If one sees prodding action as a key function of summit meetings, this is often a matter of political leaders giving mandates for work to be done by others. Indeed, one of the conference panels focused on a sustained initiative that is a creature of the G-8 summits: the Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction. The senior US official responsible for the Global Partnership, Ambassador Bonnie Jenkins, was one of the panelists and vouched for G-8 leaders’ crucial role in ensuring follow-through in the effort to prevent dangerous weapons or materials from falling into the wrong hands. More broadly speaking, conference co-organizer Alan Alexandroff of the Munk School of Global Affairs offered his “iceberg theory” of summitry, emphasizing the value of work carried out below the surface of the summits themselves.

Similar points about the division of labor can also be made about the way summit processes link to the efforts of other multilateral bodies, especially for a loosely structured process like the G-20. The conference keynote speaker Berenice Diaz Ceballos, a senior member of the Mexican foreign ministry’s Sherpa team helping President Calderon prepare to serve as summit host, stressed this complementary relationship in her remarks. “As an informal, political high-level mechanism, the G-20 is also focusing on creating synergies and avoiding overlap with the work of other multilateral fora,” Ms. Diaz Ceballos said. “On the contrary, the G-20 has played a prominent role in enhanced coordination and communication between international organizations.”

As a broadly shared critique of bad summit practices, the discussion warned against issuing communiqués that are watered down with vague boilerplate statements or loaded up with pet issues from every corner of the bureaucracy. Such documents merely foster perceptions that the leaders are papering over their failure to accomplish anything. Fortunately, summit planners have begun recognizing this problem and have been working to streamline communiqués to highlight the most significant issues and steps. The most famous example of this problem has been the G-20's formulaic call for trade negotiators to successfully conclude the Doha Round of talks, which after more than ten years show scant grounds for success. At their last summit in Cannes, the G-20 leaders took a more honest approach—admitting that failure to chart a path forward for the Doha talks in 2012 would spell their doom. At the very least, this move has opened up debate about alternative ways to promote trade liberalization other than traditional global agreements.

Summit Functions: Both Tangible and Intangible

A presentation at the conference wrap-up by Matthew Goodman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, who worked in the Obama White House on summit planning, broke down the intangible and tangible functions that leaders perform at summits. At the intangible level, they affirm their engagement by attending; getting acquainted with each other personally; learning about one another's political considerations and constraints; and getting situated within a given multilateral body's agenda and underlying values. The tangible functions relate to the substantive policy steps and discussions of summitry: agenda-setting to open new issues or set the parameters for how they will be addressed; offering impetus or guidance for the work of governmental or multilateral bureaucracies; setting mileposts and timelines for progress to be achieved; and marshaling and responding to peer pressure for national-level action.

Archive video of the full day's discussion can be accessed at http://fora.tv/conference/stanley_foundation_the_apex_of_influence.

The analysis and recommendations included in this Policy Memo do not necessarily reflect the view of the Stanley Foundation or any of the conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

For further information, please contact David Shorr or Keith Porter at the Stanley Foundation, 563-264-1500.

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