

Thoughts on the G7

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I was asked some questions by a journalist yesterday on the G7, in writing. I have no idea if they will use any of the comments I made: they may be too complex for the style of the intended publication. So I will share them here.

Q: What are the highlights of the G7 summit?

I have watched G7, G8 and G20 Summits for a long time, and attended a couple. Usually you can detect a theme, and say there is a notable feature that characterises the outcome of a meeting. This time that is not true. Unless we look a little deeper that is. Then we can see that this Summit was characterised by differences, whether between the UK and the EU and the major European countries or the US and China over trade and the US and France over tax and Iran. What characterised this Summit is the fact that the world's major nations are now so far apart, and that the gaps seem to be getting wider.

Q: What happened after the arrival of the foreign minister of Iran?

This was a big surprise that I think few expected. I hope the US did know about it in advance. It is not clear. What is apparent is that the visit did highlight how much Europe wants to keep the Iran nuclear deal going, and how indifferent the USA is to that. France tried to pull off a stunt to help it achieve Europe's goal. I am not at all sure that it worked. In that case this might have made things worse, not better.

Q: Comparing the G7 of 2018 and the current one, what changes were there?

The G7 in 2018 was not easy. Remember Trump left early and there was no final communiqué as a result. This time the communiqué was abandoned to try to keep things on track, but that is a sure sign of how relationships have deteriorated between the US and its partners, and also between the UK and the EU, where the stresses were only thinly disguised. The 2018 Summit was a shock because it was apparent that the world was in diplomatic crisis that was being evidenced by very real stresses. This Summit confirms that things are still really bad, and getting worse.

Q: President Trump insisted on the readmission of Russia to the group. Could this situation occur in the future?

It is anyone's guess as to what Trump is trying to achieve with his line on Putin and Russia. It seems unlikely that Europe is going to forget the annexation of Crimea in a hurry. There does therefore seem no appetite in any European capital for Russia's return. There seems little doubt Trump is committed to seeing that happen. The question is whether he will have Putin as his surprise guest at next year's Summit in the USA just as France had Iran this year. I would not rule it out, whatever the rest of the G7 think.

Q: This summit was the first of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, how was it?

Boris Johnson was always going to do better than his predecessor, Theresa May at this event. She hated them and he loves an audience. That said, most people in the UK at least think he did better than expected. There were no obvious gaffes and no silly pictures, for both of which he is famous. And that was surprising. He had a difficult path to tread. Trump was praising him more than he wanted for the sake of his home audience, where this is substantial mistrust of a potential US trade deal, whilst the stresses with the EU were never far away, but carefully kept under wraps so that they did not distract from the whole event. In summary, better than expected, but no real indication of the troubles to come.

Q: If you would like to add something on this subject it is well received

Three big questions emerge from this Summit.

The first is whether they are now worth doing when the participants are so obviously in disagreement with each other. I suggest that is why they are still worthwhile, but I wonder for how long the countries involved will agree.

Second, it is obvious that little was achieved here when on the environment, trade inequality and tax there was so much to do. The failure of the world to address the common issues it faces is troubling.

And third, a new format to these events is needed. People are alienated by the showmanship, the excess and the obvious falsehood that these events always seem to embrace now. Leaders might be much wiser to do low key meetings in the future and get things done. Not a lot actually happened in Biarritz.