

FRS – Japan Program

The importance of the G7 and the role of Japan in a multipolar era

Interview with Mayu Watanabe



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Question 1: What are the purpose and the relevance of the G7 in a multipolar era?

It has been almost half a century since the first Group of Seven (G7) summit was held at the Château de Rambouillet outside Paris in 1975. The G7 had grown out of a 1973 gathering of finance ministers from the United States, West Germany, France, and the United Kingdom related to the so-called Nixon shock that occurred in the United States. Over the following decades, the role and purpose of the Group have changed in response to various shifts in the global situation. Personal representatives of heads of state known as sherpas (named for the Sherpas of Nepal, who guide climbers up Himalayan summits) prepare for each annual G7 summit by conducting detailed negotiations (e.g., reaching

agreement concerning national interests among countries) and drawing up summit agendas. This meticulous preparation is intended to facilitate the deliberation of appropriate top-down decisions and measures at the summit by the G7 leaders to resolve various issues around the world.

At the same time, however, such meticulous preparatory negotiations have decreased the opportunities for heads of state to have their real thoughts heard, inviting the criticism that the G7 has lost substance. This situation has arisen from changes in the global situation in the half-century since the Group's founding. During that time, the challenges faced by humankind have become increasingly complex and intersectional, expanding beyond the pre-existing framework of politics and economy to include such issues as peace and security, fighting terrorism,

development, education, healthcare, the environment, and climate change.

However, as many experts have pointed out, the G7 itself does not decide government policies. This is because it did not receive that power to enforce policies from international organizations such as the United Nations. Moreover, unlike many other international forums, the G7 does not even have a permanent secretariat or office. To be sure, the importance of the G7 was self-evident during its early years in the 1970s and 1980s, as the G7 countries alone accounted for about 70 % of the world's GDP (today they account for less than 50 %). The G7's continued relevance came into question when the Cold War ended and it was no longer necessary for these nations to stay united against the Soviet Union. Afterwards, the G7 became the G8 starting from 1998, when Russia joined the Birmingham Summit, until 2014, when Russia was removed from the group. During this series of changes, the G7 steadily expanded its circle with the G20 finance ministers and the central bank governors' meeting organized in 1999 in response to the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and, later, with the G20 summit held in 2008. The acceleration of these activities promoted the rise of emerging countries such as the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), forming a multinational framework that would have seemed unimaginable about fifty years ago.

This development of a multipolar and complex international community caused the G7 to become a very highly systemized international forum drastically different from its earlier forms. This has led many experts to compare the G7's role in the international community today to that of a control tower at an airport, an important role indeed. Meanwhile, the rise of emerging countries such as China and India

has significantly changed the power dynamics in the world, which were formerly driven and led by Japan, the United States, and Europe. The question of how international rules should be established from now on to form a new international order is gaining more importance as the situation surrounding the G7 has become increasingly complex and multilayered. This raises the question of what the purpose of the G7 should be going forward. As international forums such as the G20 gain importance, I have heard people say on more than a few occasions that the G7 is no longer necessary, but I do not believe this to be the case. It is true that the G20 has become an important platform with a wide range of members that include China and Russia, two major powers, and even countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey that do not embrace democratic values much. However, the more participating countries there are, and the more diverse the values become, the more difficult it becomes to reach consensus. As such, while the G20 can supplement the G7, it cannot become an entity that decides the future of the international community, due to a lack of shared values among member nations.

The G7's primary significance lies in the fact that it is a framework of leading developed nations that share fundamental values such as liberty, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. As the democratic values to which these nations are devoted are currently being threatened, it is precisely now that the G7 must unite to protect these values. It is impossible to reach the hearts of a nation's people without a deep understanding of its universal values. The G7 is not only a place where the heads of state exchange their thoughts but also a place to deliver the voices of the people of each nation. Thus, going forward, the G7 must be an

international forum that works faster than any other to bring solutions to ever-changing global issues while walking in the shoes of each citizen. For this purpose, the G7 must pool its wisdom to grapple with each challenge faced by the international community while cooperating with the G20 and other forums to address individual, specific issues. The G7 can thereby continue to function as a pathfinder for international policymaking and retain its purpose.

“There is a limit in the power of international institutions, including the WHO. It is an inescapable fact because all countries try to use international institutions to promote their national interests rather than global interests”

Question 2: The concept of “shared values” is at the core of the discourse on “common interests” among democracies and beyond. What are the values shared among the G7?

Let us think about national interests. It is difficult to define them, because they vary from country to country. There are as many kinds of national interests as there are countries. Moreover, the national interests that a country announces to the international community can differ depending on the values of the head of state at the time, and differences in such statements among countries can cause friction and opposition, which, in the worst cases, can lead to war. The sherpas’ role, as mentioned earlier, is to reach detailed agreements between nations ahead of time to prevent such worst-case scenarios from happening. The mutual recognition of shared values is necessary in order to reach a consensus on the matters discussed at the summit. The history of modern nations has been one of various efforts and

attempts to build mutually beneficial relations by reconciling different national interests. To this day, various forms of international order have been established in the attempt to solve this problem of reconciling different national interests.

The international community is a collection of sovereign states, and throughout history, it has been the norm for influential great powers to create rules in the process of forming an international order. By great powers, I do not mean nations, such as today’s China, that dominate others through overwhelming military and economic might. Rather, what is important is the universality of shared values that form the foundation of the international order. Nations that lead the formation of an international order must have the diplomatic power to spread universal values in multiple ways to cover multiple facets of the international community.

The essence of the G7 lies in the fact that it is a group of democratic nations (Japan, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States). The G7 Cornwall Summit, held in the United Kingdom last June, demonstrated this essence with particular clarity. For one thing, the Leaders’ Declaration mentioned mainland/Taiwan relations for the first time, emphasizing the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and promoting a peaceful resolution to the cross-strait issue. The summit also reached an agreement on the B3W (Build Back Better World) project to provide large-scale infrastructural support in developing countries while curbing China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, South Korea, Australia, India, and South Africa were invited to this summit, and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson gave the name “D11” (Democratic Eleven) to this group composed of the G7 and these four, thus

making a move to expand the democratic camp of nations. These activities are intended to keep China's increasingly hegemonic moves in check, but they may also be rightly viewed as a revival of the G7. Today, the rise of emerging countries such as China and other factors have brought into question the purpose of the G7 and even led to some criticism of it as the "rich countries' club". Yet the international community has undoubtedly stabilized and prospered in the order built with a fair and broad perspective based on shared values by these seven countries with global influence (like the D11, G20, etc.) since the end of the Cold War. Above all, it is crucial that the G7 continue to produce steady results through trial-and-error efforts aimed at the universalization of shared values.

Question 3: G7 has traditionally been an important format for Tokyo. What is Japan's role in the G7?

My observation of the G7 summits over the past several years has given me the impression that what might be called a "G7 versus China" schema is becoming established within today's G7. While the G7 has shown some willingness to cooperate with China in areas where interests overlap, US President Joe Biden discussed US-China relations in a manner conforming to this schema of opposition at this year's G7 summit, and Prime Minister Johnson aimed to expand the democratic camp by shaping the D11. As mentioned above, this year's Leaders' Declaration included a definitive statement about Taiwan for the first time, giving this "G7 versus China" schema added emphasis. In addition, a meeting with ASEAN diplomats is scheduled to be held along with the G7 foreign and development ministers' meeting in the UK this December, and this

also shows that the G7 is increasingly vocal in its opposition to China.

However, caution is necessary because such moves could potentially be interpreted as meaning that the G7 nations are incapable of competing with China unless they are united. Moreover, the G7 nations do not share a uniform stance against China; while the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom feel especially threatened by China, Germany and France have been maintaining a cautious stance, for different reasons. For Germany, economic relations play a role. For France, strategic autonomy also does.

Under these circumstances, what role is Japan expected to play in the G7? Japan has been a member of the G7 since the Rambouillet Summit in 1975 and has been working to form a stable international order as one of the world's leading liberal democratic nations. Today, when the G7 is becoming increasingly unified in its opposition to China, Japan must hone its ability to reach agreements with other countries and to develop imaginative diplomatic policies addressing global concerns, transcending national interests. For this purpose, it is important to first better understand the strategic situation in Asia. As China continues to enhance its military and economic power, perceptions of China vary from country to country, depending on physical distance, cultural distance, and the strength of political and economic ties. Japan is the only Asian country in the G7, and it is a neighbor of China. For this reason, the G7 expects much from Japan's role as a window to Asia. In order to meet these expectations, Japan should spread accurate perceptions of Asia while employing its unique negotiation abilities to consolidate the G7's discussions. Japan has also an urgent duty to develop policies with an inclusive perspective

encompassing Asia, including India, and the Pacific region.

Incidentally, last year the Japan Forum on International Relations established a study group titled “The Hybrid Power of Japan”. This study group has been discussing how to enhance Japan’s national brand-strength by exploring how best to exercise “hybrid power”, which it determines by introducing non-quantitative criteria of national power into the analysis of the conventional, quantitative indices of national power. I have been participating in this project as deputy examiner, utilizing our global-scale think-tank network to conduct research on possible ways to support Japan’s diplomacy from the track-two position. We will continue to make our best efforts in the meantime as we closely follow how Prime Minister Kishida’s diplomacy unfolds.

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