

Diplomatic Summits: A Constructive Means of Conducting International Relations?

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Introduction

Diplomatic summits have existed since the advent of political organizations. However, the proliferation of “high-level political leadership” in diplomatic dialogue is one that has changed theory and practice forever. Consequently, the scale of the term “Summitry” has become an established part of the machinery for political interactions among states in the twentieth century. Not only has it become customary, but the parlance associated with these conferences has entrenched itself in colloquial conversations [1]. In recent times, a large percentage of time is devoted to “large gatherings of political and logistical complexity” to raise a host of issues and outline the framework for resolutions [2]. By its very nature, this is a task that is fraught with adversity and benefits.

This essay will attempt to delve into the depths of the concept of summitry. First, it will outline and explain the origins and evolution of diplomatic summitry, and the avenues through which the concept has been broadened in its usage to reflect a much wider type of high-level meaning. In light of this, it then investigates and analyses the positive and negative aspects of summitry drawing on the existing literature and employing case studies. The paper concludes by analyzing the comprehensive picture and defending satisfactorily the position that summit diplomacy, despite its pitfalls is a worthy and constructive means of diplomacy.

What is Summitry?

Since the end of the Second World War and the emergence of the Cold War, a unique method of conducting international relations has gradually taken precedence. This phenomenon is called “summitry” and its evolution has elicited a flurry of arguments by scholars as to the constructive nature of its manifestation. The Oxford Companion to American History declares “Summit conferences, as the term has been used since World War II, applies to the meeting of heads of government of the leading powers in an effort to reach broad measures of agreement” [3]. This definition begs the question: does the absence of an agreement render it insufficient to be baptized a summit? Nonetheless, it is a misapprehension to regard summits as a neo-expression [3]. For generations “the elders” of the Igbo tribe [They are comprised of the eldest males in society, and congregating together represent the highest decision-making body], in South Eastern Nigeria have congregated to discuss, and resolve domestic issues as well as conflicts with neighboring tribes [4]. Summitry is further described “as instruments for the negotiated settlement of outstanding issues” [5]. This may be at odds with some who contend summits today are not just “mere instruments” but are part and parcel of the institution of diplomacy. There is further argument that for a meeting to be defined as a summit it must include “recognized leaders of the great powers”, and it must be held at the “highest political level” [6]. There is no broadly appealing definition of summitry. However, a widely accepted understanding of the term can be ascribed to Dunn. He asserts it is the meeting of political leaders at the highest level regardless of frequency to negotiate pressing issues [1].

According to Berridge, summits can be further classified into three different types: “the serial summit” which includes high frequency gatherings such as the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings, and the World Economic Forum; the “ad hoc summit” that is characterized by issue specific meetings, that may eventually transform into serial summits, such as; the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro that has birthed copious subsequent summits; and the “exchange of views” summit usually organized by nations to foster mutual understanding, the Bermuda summit proposed by Churchill in 1953 to harmonize relations amongst the great powers, serves as an example [7]. The above conception of summitry reflects the times of the researchers, and as the concept evolves so does understanding of the terminology. There is no doubt that this will further drive the academic discourse on what summitry truly is and dwarf earlier proclamations.

Development of Summitry

Alluding to the above, summitry has evolved greatly, today there is a proliferation of conferences and discourse that leaders of nations are obligated to attend. Once again, the presence of top political leadership was not always a necessity. Wilson observed that “of the forty-two major international conferences that took place between 1776 and 1914 listed in Ernest Satow’s *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, only one, the Congress of Vienna, featured the presence of heads of state” [3]. The term “summit” was popularized in the 1950’s by Winston Churchill, and referred to meetings among leadership of the great powers [8]. Over the years, the concept of summitry has deepened and widened. The reasons include but are not limited to: the growing interdependence of nations, the emergence of nations as a result of decolonization, increased frequency, issues and actors; which are all further fostered by the overarching influence of globalization [9].

Dunn maintains the rise of summitry is a consequence of the paucity of resources of smaller nations who are less able to “finance and sustain a vast diplomatic service” and thus rely on summits for representation and negotiation [1]. The 2008 financial crisis revealed just how inter-reliant nations have become, and the 2008 “G20 Washington Summit on Financial Markets and the World Economy” illustrates the role of summitry in solving global issues. Merkel described it as convened to address the issue of how best to assure sustained economic health for all nations [10]. In light of this, one can thus grasp the role international interdependence has contributed to the expansion of summitry.

Dunn also noticed the role technological advancements has played in propagating summits; he elaborated its role in reduction of communication by proxy, and highlighted how it has improved relations among high level leaders, further augmenting their involvement in foreign policy matters. One example was the “Moscow–Washington hotline” established in 1963 which created a direct link between the leaders of the U.S. and the Soviet Union [11]. Advancements in transportation have also enhanced the appeal of summitry. For instance, it took nine days for President Wilson to arrive in Versailles for the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, this stands contrary to the 7 hours it took President Obama to attend the NATO summit held in France in April, 2009 [12].

This essay also argues that public opinion and enhanced role of the media typifies summitry today. Its addition is an incentive for leaders to be either more cautious or daring. This is exemplified in 1938 when Prime Minister Chamberlain signed the “Munich Pact” with Hitler. The people of England were initially delighted and his popularity ascended, but the mood quickly dampened after subsequent events [13]. Likewise, this is further demonstrated in 1979 at the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks when President Carter was accused of acquiescing to the demands of the Soviets. This led to his refusal to shield himself from the rain in Vienna. Mitchell explains President Carter said “I’d rather drown than carry an umbrella” [14], to avoid being compared to Chamberlain, caricatured by the media, and swallowed by public opinion. This further highlights the significance of public opinion and the role of symbolism within summitry.

Another notable addition to the realm of summitry, according to Berridge is the funeral summit. This creates an opportunity for political leadership to discuss matters in an informal setting [7]. For instance, the funeral of Winston Churchill created an opportunity for Prime Minister Harold Wilson to relate with French President

Charles De Gaulle to resolve astounding issues around the European Economic Community.

Summitry in Context

Barston defines diplomacy as “concerned with the management of relations between states and other actors”. In light of this, is summitry a constructive means of conducting diplomacy? Does it employ and take into cognisance the key tenets of diplomacy? Does it have any benefits? Uis essay contends the answers are in the affirmative, and further argues that diplomatic summitry encompasses all substantial gatherings regardless of frequency, drawing together key decision makers and high-level political leadership, either by planning or fortuitous means. As knowledge becomes confirmed by further studies, more categorical statements can be made. Ue essay will proceed to elaborate on various aspects of summitry, employing case studies to highlight the positives and negatives within certain themes, and elucidate the benefits of the phenomenon to the practice of diplomacy.

According to Dunn, “Summitry evolved from political crisis” [1], this is evident in preceding summits ranging from the Congress of Vienna, to the Geneva summit. When also taking into account Henry Kissinger’s assertion that “Diplomacy is the art of restraining power” [15], one can thus analyze the benefits of summitry within the context of peace and maintenance of order. Ue immediate post 1945 years were characterized by unease, and panic due to the dawn of the nuclear age [11]. Uus, leaving diplomacy solely in the hands of diplomats was no longer an option. Summits posed an alternative; they brought opposing leaders to the table, and o9ered a chance for the leaders to gauge the strengths and weaknesses of their counterparts. Uis is evident in the Reykjavik summit in 1986, which signals the closest the world has come to eliminating nuclear weapons, generally because of the existence of understanding and compromise between Reagan and Gorbachev [1]. It was enormously symbolic and led to the opinion that the leaders were personally engaged in the maintenance of peace; a direct result of the summit was the ratification of the Intermediate- Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) in Washington. On the contrary, the Vienna summit held in June, 1961 o9ered a chance for President Kennedy to meet with his rival Soviet Premier Khrushchev; by most accounts it was a failure. When asked by a columnist how the session went, Kennedy replied “Worst day of my life... he savaged me” [16]. Uis further intensified distrust amongst the two powers. Ue above instances elucidate the role of summitry in creating an avenue for nurturing personal relations amongst top political leadership and consequently promoting harmonious relations between nations as a direct result.

According to Caramerli, summits can also lead to a “too expensive” deal as leaders are under pressure to produce results within a very finite period [6]. For instance, in 1978 the “Camp David Accords” was frantically orchestrated by President Carter and signed by Egyptian President Anwar El-Sadat and the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Ue accords led to a major framework for peace in the Middle East. It was hailed as a momentous feat and led to both leaders receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 [17]. However, the deal also led to the expulsion of Egypt from the Arab league from 1979 to 1989 and some say it might have caused President Sadat his life [18]. Within this context, one can appreciate how summitry has facilitated interaction and coexistence among nations that do not possess diplomatic ties, because of its embodiment of personal proximity and its employment of theatrics, public opinion, and deadlines.

Another important factor within the realm of summits is its role in “agenda setting” and the emergence of regional gatherings. During the advent of decolonization and the intensification of the Cold War, there was desire by opposing power blocs to attract nascent nations into respective spheres of influence. In 1955, the Bandung summit occurred and drew together twenty-nine African and Asian nations sharing the bond of colonialism. Aler two more summits transpired, it led to the 1961 Belgrade summit that established the “Non-Aligned movement” [19]. According to Kwame Nkrumah, a founding father of the movement “We face neither East nor West, we face forward” [20]. Uis further affirms the role of summits in “agenda setting”. Also, inherent in summits of all kinds are the dangers posed to the delegates. It could contribute to illness and exhaustion brought about by travelling, and even more severe cases. For instance, the 1955 summit was marred

by the “Kashmir princess incident”; an assassination attempt on the life of the Zhou Enlai the Chinese premier [21].

The enhancement of trade has also contributed to growth of summitry. In today’s times, economic and regional situations have led to diplomatic gatherings. Though some arguments exist that it represents an opportunity for leaders to escape the heat of domestic situations, it has produced some noteworthy benefits. For instance, the Maastricht treaty which established the single currency within Europe is as a direct result of summits organized by the European Union (EU). Indeed, purely economic organizations have produced remarkable actions as well. For example, in 1986 “the Davos symposium was memorable because of the historic public meeting between Prime Minister Turgut Özal of Turkey and Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou. The two leaders sat on the same panel in an economic session” [22]. Furthermore, club networks such as the G8 and G20 summits have increased understanding and interaction among high level leadership at the premier level, encompassing not just the political leadership but finance, trade and industrial cabinet members [23]. However, another negative aspect of summits is the enormous costs of these events, notably the G8 and G20 summits held in Canada in 2010 were widely criticized, official figures put the cost of the summit at

\$1.1b, ironically the theme of the latter event was tagged “recovery and new beginnings” [24].

In today’s times, conflict and trade are not the only issues to bring together a vast array of key decision makers for a summit. Divergent issues such as climate change have led to a rise of non-state actors, significant individuals, and subject experts. The bone of contention remains the contribution of these gatherings to diminishing the importance of diplomats. The 1992 Earth summit in Rio de Janeiro involved “40,000 people, and 183 countries, and about 7,000 representatives of the media”. However, due to the plethora of conflicting interests, the summit was not as successful. It did however lay the framework for future cooperation and produced documents adopted by the global community to intensify pressure and pursue ratification [25]. In 2015, the Climate Change Conference held in Paris, again it drew together major state and non-state actors [26]. However, the real drudgery that resulted in global cooperation to reduce global emissions occurred through the channels of old fashioned diplomatic negotiation, particularly between China’s team led by the special representative on climate change Xie Zhenhua, and the U.S. team led by Secretary Kerry [27]. Likewise, in 1987 the success of the Washington summit was as a result of background negotiations between Secretary of State George Shultz, and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze [28]. This further demonstrated the role summitry played in enhancing appreciation of the finesse, and skills embodied by diplomats in the art of negotiation.

Conclusion

Summitry as a constructive means of conducting international relations has evolved tremendously, and has contributed immensely in promoting and stabilizing relations amongst nations. The current president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, put it eloquently in an opinion editorial published in the Washington post in 2013, said:

In a world where global politics is no longer a zero-sum game, it is — or should be — counterintuitive to pursue one’s interests without considering the interests of others. A constructive approach to diplomacy doesn’t mean relinquishing one’s rights. It means engaging with one’s counterparts, on the basis of equal footing and mutual respect, to address shared concerns and achieve shared objectives [29].

The above quotation encapsulates the essence of this essay, that diplomatic summitry, though characterized by certain pitfalls, is a worthy and beneficial means of diplomatic relations and is enveloped in benefits for all parties involved.

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