



This is a repository copy of *Introduction*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/210372/>

Version: Published Version

Book Section:

Dobson, H. orcid.org/0000-0003-3124-8546 (2024) Introduction. In: Unpacking the G20: Insights from the Summit. Political Science and Public Policy . Edward Elgar Publishing , pp. 1-9. ISBN 9781786433541

<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786433558.00006>

© Hugo Dobson 2024. This is an open access work distributed under the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Users can redistribute the work for non-commercial purposes, as long as it is passed along unchanged and in whole, as detailed in the License. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd must be clearly credited as the rights holder for publication of the original work. Any translation or adaptation of the original content requires the written authorization of Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

1. Introduction

Towards the end of October 2008, in what would prove to be one of his final and possibly more significant acts as US president, George W. Bush announced that a summit meeting of G20 leaders would be held in Washington DC the following month. Although in existence since 1999 as a grouping of finance ministers and central bank governors, this decision to upgrade the G20 to the leaders' level in response to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and to invite both developed and developing countries was heralded as an important milestone in the evolution of global governance mechanisms.

For many of us who had been researching the role of informal mechanisms of global governance like the Group of 7 (G7) and Group of 8 (G8) for years, even decades, and in the process had established a reputation for going straight to the periphery of the problem, this came as something of a vindication. Having been largely overlooked as irrelevant sideshows at best, the attention of scholars, policymakers and journalists was now firmly placed on the informals, especially the G20. Dare I say, even the general public was now aware of the G20. Although several pundits predicted the death of the former world order as symbolized by the apparently defunct and irrelevant G7/8 (prematurely and incorrectly, as it turned out), the purpose and operation of informal groupings like the G20 and their possible impact were now hot topics.

At first, think-tankers and policy wonks led the charge and disseminated their analyses in the form of policy briefs, blogs and think pieces on technical issues related to the immediate causes of and solutions to the crisis. However, as academic publishing cycles kicked in and dedicated journals like *Global Summitry* were established, academic researchers clawed back the G20 as a field of study. As regards substantive research monographs and edited volumes exclusively focused on the G20, Cooper and Thakur's (2013) contribution to Routledge's Global Institutions series provided an excellent, one-stop, point of entry to the subject, exploring the purpose, function and practices of the G20 in a slim volume. Postel-Vinay (2014) produced a similar but different introduction to the G20, focused on its origins and the broader issues of legitimacy and efficacy. Kirton's (2013) *G20 Governance for a Globalized World* was a comprehensive, rich and empirically driven monograph concerned with tracing the history and development of the G20 from 1999 and a meeting of finance ministers to 2010 and a summit of leaders. Hajnal (2014) provided a similarly detailed point of reference. At the same time, a number

of edited volumes have added to our understanding. For example, Derviş and Drysdale's edited volume (2014) was a timely stocktake of the G20 and its evolution from 2008 to 2013, focused on traditional macroeconomic issues, alongside important and overlooked topics such as the G20's approach to climate change. Callaghan and Sainsbury's collection of essays (2015) came out of the 2014 Brisbane summit and focused largely on global governance challenges, but with some attention given to factions within the G20 as well as China's presidency in 2016. The Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University in China (2016) published the proceedings of the meeting of G20 think tanks that took place during the Chinese presidency. These were mostly short presentations on various aspects of the role, functioning and future of the G20, with some attention paid to the perspectives of emerging economies generally and China specifically.

Luckhurst addressed big questions with theoretical rigour regarding the impact of the GFC on global governance and the influence of the G20, arguing that it had become 'an important hub of global governance networks' (2016, 1). Thereafter, Slaughter (2019a) assembled a range of international relations (IR) perspectives on the G20 and in the process demonstrated that edited volumes can be consistent in the focus and quality of their contributions. Coinciding with the Saudi assumption of the G20 presidency in 2020, a special issue of the *South African Journal of International Affairs* took stock of the ten-year summit process and explored what it has become, how it might be reformed, how it engages with a range of non-state actors, and the role of rising powers (Benson and Zürn 2019; Berger et al. 2019; Brandi 2019; Cooper 2019; A. He 2019; Kaul 2019; Luckhurst 2019a; Mabera 2019; Parlar Dal and Dipama 2019; Villanueva Ulfgard and Vega 2019). Inevitably, however, the discussion regularly returns to the issues highlighted by Subacchi: 'Legitimacy, effectiveness and accountability are the three key points in any discussion of the Group of 20 ... [and a] lack of legitimacy is the G20's original sin' (2019, 703).

In summary, since 2008, our understanding of the G20 has expanded to encompass the role of the G20 – whether it be an improvised crisis committee or global steering committee (Cooper 2010), club or hub, a mechanism for hegemonic incorporation and/or collectivist cooperation, or neither (Beeson and Bell 2009; Chodor 2017); its informal nature, efficacy and the related questions of legitimacy and accountability (Blom 2022); its relationship with other multilateral organizations and groupings, as well as the expansion of its agenda from macroeconomic issues to include climate change; and the extension of the format to include *inter alia* a Business 20 (B20) of business associations, a Women 20 (W20) focused on gender issues and a Think 20 (T20) of think tanks and universities.

Within these contributions to our understanding of the G20 over time, the emphasis placed on the role of the state has clearly diminished since the GFC:

What the leaders of the G20 found was that power lies dispersed in the network—the mesh of states and markets, of corporations, non-state organisations and institutions. The G20 leaders, in their communiqué, look overwhelmingly to multilateral, institutional approaches to deal with problems that have become too large, too pervasive and too interdependent for any one state to address. What the subprime crisis, the ensuing liquidity crisis and the resulting collapse of economic activities has demonstrated is that some problems—of finance, trade, poverty and the environment—are too complex for the state, any state, even the largest, to confront. (Nordberg 2012, 301)

Although the urgency of the GFC passed, the literature on the G20 continued to develop and capture this complexity by focusing on the network, transactional and relational aspects of global governance and summitry. Mabela (2019, 585) quite rightly argues that ‘Conceptualising the G20 as global summitry frames it as a “process” involving a web of actors working below the leaders’ summit, including an array of public and private networks, ministers, sherpas, international organisations and transnational policy and regulatory networks.’

This scholarship accurately captures the developments in G summitry over time from the multilateral emphasis on intergovernmental cooperation of the original G7 process to the post-GFC omnilateral focus on a range of non-state actors, the expertise they possess, and the relationships they create. This book does not deny the reality or utility of these developments. However, it is equally true that by elevating the level of analysis to the global, and exploring what the G20 as a grouping means for the resolution of collective global action problems and provision of global public goods (and in turn what they mean for the G20), the perspectives of individual members have tended to get lost. It is sometimes surprisingly difficult to get a clear picture of how Argentina, Japan, South Africa or any member regards the G20, let alone attempt to answer the questions of what they are trying to achieve, what strategies they adopt and how successful they have been. This is unfortunate because even though the nature of the G20 has shifted from crisis to global steering committee and then beyond to a hub of global governance networks embracing a range of non-state actors, the G20 is ultimately a collection of nineteen countries and one intergovernmental organization (expanding to two with the announcement of the permanent membership of the African Union (AU) at the New Delhi summit in September 2023). State-centrism is an inherent aspect of the G20. Yet, the G20 is often written about in academic and journalistic terms as acting independently and possessing some kind of agency. This is peculiar as it is not the G20 but member countries and host nations that shape the agenda and outcomes. As Slaughter (2019b, 8) explains, in the simplest of terms: ‘The G20

has no constitution or treaty, no continuing secretariat or budget and, therefore, no capability to act independently from member states.’

Certainly, in the absence of any agency, the G20’s evolution and expansion both horizontally and vertically have brought a range of actors into play, including representatives from a range of regional and international organizations, special guests, working groups, ministerial meetings and stakeholder groups. Yet, as Tristen Naylor explains through the lens of English IR theory, ‘the G20 remains at its very core a club of states, albeit one with a network of non-state actors orbiting it and playing supporting roles in the management and maintenance of international society’ (2019a, 87–88).

Moreover, country-specific perspectives, identities and capabilities clearly matter, as seen in the G20’s genesis when Canadian Finance Minister Paul Martin and nominee for US Treasury Secretary Larry Summers drafted the original membership of the G20 at the level of finance ministers and central bank governors in 1999, admittedly in arbitrary fashion:

The rationale for choosing members was quite clearly a mix of instrumentalism and personal preference. As acknowledged by Paul Martin, a quantitative assessment of the candidates was part, but not the only part, of the process: ‘I felt very strongly that [the G20 had to be made up of] the regional powers’, Martin states, and ‘Larry felt that [as well] and then he also had geopolitical concerns ... In the choice of Indonesia over Thailand, the deciding factor was likely influence. The same is true with Saudi Arabia, although of course the Saudis were also close allies with the United States (US). Also interesting is the non-choice of Malaysia, which had imprisoned its finance minister, Anwar Ibrahim, or the selection of Argentina over Chile, despite the kudos given to the latter country for its impressive return to democracy and economic performance. (Cooper and Pouliot 2015, 344)

Naylor similarly captures this country-specific horse-trading: ‘Excluding any incumbents was “out of the question” in crafting the new group, and the inclusion of new members was decided based on whom they perceived to be the regionally “systematically significant” countries who subscribed to a largely neo-liberal economic agenda and upheld a standard of good governance domestically’ (Naylor 2019b, 26).

Looking beyond the origins of the G20, country-specific perspectives, identities and capabilities have continued to matter, even if the role of the state is no longer exclusive. For example, G20 processes around finalizing its outward communications are predicated on country-specific positions and the resulting compromise: ‘G20 communiqués, especially the final one at the end of the leaders’ summit, are always an exercise in compromise. With 20-plus viewpoints, it would be impossible to produce an agreement that completely satisfies all the participants.’¹

Ultimately, as Schirm (2013, 685) argues, ‘the causes for the positions of G20 members can be found in economic interests and ideas dominant in the domestic politics of countries’. Kalinowski argues along similar lines: ‘... that if we want to understand international economic conflicts and competing preferences for international institutions we need to investigate the domestic origins of these conflicts’ (2019, 2). We should also remember that the array of actors and stakeholders outlined above tend to be predicated on countries, both in the obvious case of governmental representatives such as ministers and sherpas, and also in the less obvious cases of official engagement groups created by the G20, which reflect the priorities and culture of the host country. In short, the G20’s member countries – plus the European Union (EU) and the AU from 2023 – still matter.

Cooper and Thakur (2013, 125) were right when they wrote that ‘[t]he G20 should operate as the hub of a network not just of countries, but also of international institutions, recognizing interconnections among issues and fostering points of common interest’. Yet, when surveying the ever-expanding literature, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the G20 is first and foremost organized around and shaped by countries, especially governments and their leaders. The networked characteristics of the group are important but second order aspects. By enhancing our understanding of the approach taken by member countries, we will in turn enhance our understanding of the G20’s developing role in global governance. As Cooper and Thakur go on to state, ‘[t]he G20’s destiny is to be the hub of a global network: by the top 20, but of and for all’ (2013, 135). The first step towards this ‘destiny’ is to understand the roles, perceptions and behaviours of the members. This provides a more nuanced context by which to understand the development of the G20.

When attention has focused on the member countries of the G20 – Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Türkiye, the UK, the US, and the only G20 member that is not a country, the EU, up until the AU’s addition in 2023 – the focus has usually been on the big hitters like the US, the host in any given year or the most prominent of the rising powers. These contributions are often short-form journal articles, book chapters, or journalistic blogs. One notable exception is Kalinowski’s (2019) detailed book-length tracing of the domestic origins and differing capitalisms that underpin the US, EU and East Asian positions in the G20 on the governance of international finance. Kalinowski’s ambitious goal is to look ‘beneath the surface of international statements and the shadow play of events such as G20 summits ... [and refer] to historical developments, structural investigation, and the uncovering of power dynamics to investigate international cooperation and conflicts’ (2019, 236). Rather than provide a similarly broad historical sweep, the focus of this book is firmly on what happens within the forum of the G20.

Another notable example, and one that is more similar in intent to my own, is Kirton's (2016) monograph on China, the *ne plus ultra* of rising powers, and its emerging leadership role specifically within the G20. This appears to be the lone book treatment with a country- and G20-specific focus, although China has provided a focus for a number of journal articles and book chapters, occasionally on specific issues like development (Cooper and Farooq 2016; Gao and Wouters 2022). Contributions to leading journals and edited volumes have explored other rising, emerging or middle powers as a collective, or specifically in the case of India, Russia, Türkiye and Latin America, and occasionally on specific issues like development (Heine 2010; Cooper 2013a; Luckhurst 2015; Cooper and Farooq 2016; Downie 2017; Panova 2017; Parlar Dal and Kurşun 2018; Parlar Dal 2019; Sachdeva 2022). European scholars have produced a welcome body of work focused on the EU's position and performance within the G20 (Debaere 2010; Debaere and Orbie 2012; Debaere 2014; Debaere, Lesage and Orbie 2014; Nasra and Debaere 2016). I myself have made a humble contribution to our understanding of East Asia's role in the G20, specifically of Japan as a great power seeking to manage and reverse its perceived decline (Dobson 2012a; Dobson 2013a; Dobson 2017), to a lesser extent of Korea as the first Asian presidency of the G20 (Cherry and Dobson 2012), and, once again, the inescapable China (Chin and Dobson 2016). So, we are presented with an opportunity, compellingly captured in the words of Bradford (2011, 250):

The ascendance of G20 summits is emblematic of a wholly new moment in international life for still another reason. G20 summits are not just meetings of leaders of nations; the G20 represents a meeting of historically diverse cultures. The G20 represents a global encounter of cultures, a powerful new interface of cultural differences. This is the 'grand narrative', which involves all of us as individuals—including our identities, our communities, and our cultures, all of which are now interpenetrated by 'others' of different cultures, traditions, and sensibilities.

Whether you agree or not, this does beg the question of why diversity and cultural differences tend to be sidelined in the study of IR generally and global summitry specifically. It may be that the changing fortunes of area studies as a field of inquiry relative to disciplinary concerns have discouraged researchers from focusing on country-specific perspectives in the G20. In any case, we need to understand these cultures that form this 'grand narrative'. The unapologetically straightforward objective of this book is to contribute to this somewhat disparate sub-field by bringing together for the first time in one volume the diverse country-specific perspectives of G20 members over seventeen summits from Washington to Bali, across fifteen years from 2008 to 2022. To make an unwieldy subject manageable, and with respect to the demands of publishing timelines, the book's coverage ends when the G20

presidency passed from Indonesia to India on 1 December 2022 and the AU was added as a permanent member the following year. However, references to the Indian presidency of 2023 and beyond will be woven into the book where possible (see Appendix 1).

To this end, this book is based on a range of sources: the extant primary and secondary literature, summit documentation, communiqués and declarations (helpfully archived by the University of Toronto's G20 Information Centre), participation observation while working as an accredited journalist in the summit's official international media centre (IMC) or contributing to official engagement groups, and interviews with a range of G20 stakeholders. It is structured around six thematic chapters with the perspective of each member country woven into the focus of each chapter. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of my original book proposal for this suggestion. It hopefully avoids the pitfalls of dedicating individual chapters to each G20 member, which might privilege an artificial one-size-fits-all approach and fail to reflect the differences in their capabilities, perspectives and levels of engagement. Chapter 2 will provide a history of the G20's genesis and evolution from a meeting of finance ministers in 1999 through to its upgrade to a meeting of leaders in 2008 and beyond to the Indonesian-hosted summit of 2022. In line with the approach outlined above, this history is focused on country-specific perspectives on the most effective role the G20 can play as an informal mechanism of global governance, how it should develop, which challenges it should focus on, which countries should be represented, as well as its relationship to the other informal and more formal mechanisms of global governance. Not all members of the currently constituted G20 have agreed on these existential questions. Non-members certainly have not, although the confines of space mean that non-G20 countries' perspectives cannot be addressed in detail here and become the natural sequel to this volume. The intention of this chapter, and the book as a whole, is to explore how the perspectives and positions of the member countries have changed over time in light of the constructivist idea that states can learn and their interests are fluid (Wendt 1999).

Thereafter, Chapter 3 will focus on the response to the GFC and the management of the global economy, the G20's *raison d'être*. The centrality of these priorities was evident when the G20 designated itself 'the premier forum for international economic cooperation' at the 2009 Pittsburgh summit and they have remained core business on its agenda ever since. However, at the same time, a series of G20 presidencies have placed development on the agenda, partly in response to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and with a specific focus on trade, health, education and gender, but also in an attempt to promote their own developmental models. Thus, Chapter 4 will explore country-specific perspectives on the treatment of sustainable development within the G20.

Chapter 5 will focus on some of the defining issues of our time – climate change and energy transitions. In tandem with the agendas of other mechanisms of global governance, such as the UN, and in light of the inclusion in the G20 of a number of key stakeholders on these issues, the G20 has from its outset sought to formulate a range of responses to these challenges shaped by the support and reservations of its members.

Chapter 6 will focus on security issues generally and terrorism in particular. The agenda of the G20's progenitor, the G7/8, in only a few years came to focus on broader Cold War-related security issues as well as the specific threat of terrorism. The G20 has experienced a similar development, as seen most starkly at the Antalya summit of November 2015, which took place days after the Paris shootings. With such a broad and varied membership, G20 members have inevitably welcomed or resisted this evolution and responded differently.

Chapter 7, the final thematic chapter, will shift the focus from a specific policy area to the unintended and extraneous aspects of G20 summitry beyond global governance. For each member country, the G20 is not just a mechanism of global governance created to address shared challenges. G20 leaders also engage in these summits with one eye on the domestic reception of their performance and outcomes of the summit. This is especially the case when they are acting in the role of host, an aspect that throws light upon the local impacts of hosting a summit, from policing to economic and reputational benefits. Chapter 8, the final and concluding chapter, will provide a summary of the above chapters that organizes like-minded members into subgroups within the overarching elite group of the G20.

One obvious pitfall in a book of this kind relates to its potential lifespan. All it takes to make the book outdated is for one more summit to take place between submission of the final manuscript and its eventual publication. In fact, this was the case with the expansion of both the G20 and BRICS summit processes in the summer and autumn of 2023. However, this is just one of the risks that is part and parcel of undertaking this kind of research; no project can be future proof. This book attempts to mitigate against this kind of risk by having a single voice and an overriding organizing principle running through its chapters. Furthermore, the recent expansion of the membership of both the G20 and BRICS reinforces the rationale for exploring the perspectives of their members.

Another important consideration is that even if a country-specific approach is adopted, this book still needs to account for the uneven nature of most countries' engagement with the G20 because of changes in government. This undoubtedly represents a challenge, especially in a forum like the G20 that places an onus on the role of individual leaders and the interpersonal relations they establish. Think of the rollercoaster ride that has been the UK's experience in the G20, from Gordon Brown to David Cameron to Theresa May, via

Boris Johnson and Liz Truss (who never even got to attend a summit), and most recently with Rishi Sunak, all played out against the background of the GFC, Brexit and Covid-19. This contrasts starkly with the relative stability of Germany's interaction with the G20 under Angela Merkel predominantly, or Türkiye's under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (see Appendix 2). However, this book treats these considerations not as anomalous but rather as an integral part of the narrative in making sense of any given country's overall engagement with the G20 over time.

In summary, *Unpacking the G20* provides a comprehensive analysis of the G20's development and practices from the perspectives of the nineteen countries, and one intergovernmental organization, that have shaped it. It covers the reaction of each member to the upgrading of the G20 to a summit of leaders in 2008, its development thereafter into the 'premium forum for international economic cooperation', the expansion of its agenda beyond macroeconomic issues to a range of global collective action problems, and related debates regarding its various impacts. The innovative feature of the work is that the starting point for the analysis is the viewpoint of the countries and intergovernmental organization that constitute the G20 rather than from the perspective of global governance or the various issue areas it seeks to address. Ultimately, the G20 is predominantly a group of countries, so what do they think of it, what do they seek to achieve, what strategies do they adopt, and in turn how does the G20 impact on them domestically?

NOTES

1. *Arab News*, 24 February 2020.