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Summit Diplomacy Coming of Age

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ABSTRACT

This analysis views the practice of summitry as a controversial but irreversible development in modern diplomatic practice. The author first defines the concept of summit diplomacy, and then examines the advantages and disadvantages of diplomatic dialogue at the highest level. The reasons for summitry's explosive growth in the second half of the twentieth century are discussed in the context of the changing international setting of summitry. It is argued that the continuing spread of the practice of summitry has a price of its own. In particular it is suggested that the quality of summits does not keep pace with their quantity and that – in spite of summitry's continuing utility – the practice is increasingly problematic for the leaders themselves, their diplomatic support systems and their domestic constituencies. Optimism about the evolution of multilateral summitry in the literature of the 1990s has proven to be unwarranted. The multilateral summit meeting has all but reached a state of crisis and it increasingly has the potential to create more problems for the chief executive than it resolves. This crisis is evident in the relationship between political leaders and their electorates as summitry increasingly becomes the most significant area in which diplomacy at the highest level is required to meet public concerns. One could argue that this development amounts to summitry coming of age.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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SUMMIT DIPLOMACY COMING OF AGE

Jan Melissen

Political leaders love foreign policy. Presidents and Prime Ministers are increasingly performing diplomatic roles on the international stage. Today it is inconceivable for a Prime Minister in any Western country to leave his/her country's external relations exclusively to the Foreign Minister. As a result, political leaders who have made it to the highest office, whether or not they have previous experience in international affairs, know that their agenda will be packed with bilateral and multilateral meetings with their counterparts. Old hands and newcomers generally indulge in the practice of diplomacy at the highest level, and in 2002 Jan-Peter Balkenende was no exception. During his first meetings with the other 'political princes' on the European stage, the new Dutch Prime Minister, although inexperienced in international affairs and with little experience in the field of public administration, was beaming with confidence and satisfaction. Balkenende's first summit experiences were part of his education in the realities of international relations, and at home the newcomer's political star rose as a result of his meetings with his European peers. As long as politicians in highest office enjoy climbing to the summit, and as long as they feel that there is sufficient political merit in doing so, it can indeed be ruled out that this practice will make place for international dialogue at lower levels of representation. Most leaders are bestowed with egos that befit their office and show an almost instinctive reluctance to play second fiddle. They are like medieval kings or members of the same exclusive club, but it is important to bear in mind that their constitutional position may vary considerably. Some Prime Ministers are little more than *primus inter pares* in their cabinets, whereas others have fairly unlimited powers in their external relations.

The word 'summit' did not have any political or diplomatic meaning until Winston Churchill introduced it into international parlance. It was in 1950, four years after he employed the now immortal metaphor of the 'Iron Curtain' to refer to the frontier between capitalism and communism in Europe, that Britain's former war hero started calling meetings between the leaders of the great powers 'summit meetings'. During and after the war such meetings of minds at the highest level were his preferred medium, even

though few of them could be labelled as a diplomatic success. The archetype of the British political leader continued to believe that 'it is not easy to see how things could be worsened by a parley at the summit'.¹ Churchill's public advocacy of the summit was far from unprecedented. Some 30 years earlier Lloyd George had stated firmly: 'If you want to settle a thing, you see your opponent and talk it over with him. The last thing to do is write him a letter'.² The comments by these two political leaders are backed up by many others and seem to be substantiated by a modus operandi among political leaders that differs from the working methods of professional diplomats. The men and women in the highest circles of international politics are people readers rather than paper readers, and therefore place more faith in their own direct personal impressions than in more traditional, written forms of diplomatic communication. Against this background, it should come as no surprise that after 1945 the summit quickly gained in popularity among political leaders in the West and in the East and, as soon as circumstances permitted, also in the Global South.

If politicians' memoirs are a reliable guide, the majority of them believe strongly in the advantages of personal contact with their foreign peers. President Reagan only started to believe that he could come to an understanding with the Soviet Union when he first met Gorbachev in Geneva in 1985. Loneliness at the top, one can deduce from the writings of political leaders, is understood and can be shared with people in the same position. In such an atmosphere, good personal relations can have a distinctly beneficial effect on the business of foreign affairs. Many professional negotiators support the view that it adds to the interlocutors' credibility, and there is indeed sufficient evidence to suggest that a favourable personal chemistry can be decisive in complex or difficult negotiations. The flip side of personal contact at the highest level is, however, that it may result in the illusion of familiarity and mutual understanding. George Ball writes in his condemnation of the summit: 'when leaders have disparate backgrounds, customs and languages and, in many cases, ethical attitudes and ideologies, summitry is more likely to produce mistaken and misleading impressions than a clear meeting of minds'.³ Negotiating styles can differ greatly among the representatives of countries from disparate cultures, and there is a wide range of evidence to

1 John W. Young, *Winston Churchill's Last Campaign: Britain and the Cold War 1951-5*, Clarendon Press (Oxford), 1996, pp. 1, 28-33 and 331.

2 Gordon A. Craig, 'The Professional Diplomat and his Problems, 1919-1939', *World Politics*, 4:2, 1952, p. 146.

3 George W. Ball, *Diplomacy for a Crowded World*, Bodley Head (London), 1976, p. 32.

support the claim that such differences have resulted in fundamental misunderstandings among political leaders.⁴ But even a similar cultural heritage does not preclude differences of interpretation. Language problems are another potential source of misunderstanding, as was famously demonstrated at a meeting between Macmillan and de Gaulle at the end of 1962, when the British Prime Minister relied on his own French language skills and believed he did not require an interpreter. Misunderstandings between de Gaulle and Macmillan were not helpful in preventing a French veto on Britain's first application for EEC membership. Meetings between political leaders may also have distinct risks, as was shown at another fateful Cold War meeting between Kennedy and Khrushchev in Vienna, in 1961. Yet such failures did not deter Presidents and Prime Ministers from their unabated love of the summit. The practice of summitry has become an addictive drug for many political principals.

Although it is difficult to measure the success of summitry, it is easy to see that this form of dialogue has distinct diplomatic functions. The flexibility of the summit is beyond any doubt. For leaders without international experience it is of educational value. It alerts them to the importance of international issues and provides them with an opportunity to become familiarized with their peers. In contrast, the experienced politician may employ the summit to get a personal impression of counterparts, sound them out or use the occasion of the meeting to 'fly a kite'. Summits are ideal for private consultation, bypassing multiple bureaucratic layers, and they may take place at any stage of international negotiations.⁵ Some summits have performed a pre-negotiation function, whereas others were meant to keep up the momentum of ongoing talks or to confront specialists' talks with an impending negotiation deadline. While some summits have led to important breakthroughs, others merely rubber-stamped a deal that was in fact concluded at lower levels. The typical summit communiqué is a masterpiece in the art of compromise, with a degree of ambiguity so as to leave room for manoeuvre for follow-up talks or the leaders' post-summit confrontation with their domestic constituency.

4 For many examples on differences and misunderstandings between leaders from disparate cultural backgrounds, see Raymond Cohen, *Negotiating Across Cultures: Communication Obstacles in International Diplomacy*, United States Institute of Peace (Washington DC), 1997.

5 On the basic functions of summitry, see G.R. Berridge, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, Palgrave (Basingstoke), 2002, ch. 10.

Summits come in many shapes and sizes, and serial ones seem particularly well suited for purposes of negotiation. Their functionality in the sense that they are driving forward the policy process should not be underestimated. Their broader agenda allows for complicated package deals and at the multilateral level there also seems to be more scope for careful preparation at the highest level. Summit preparation by sherpas and other experts is a necessary condition of success in multilateral negotiation, but it is important to underline that it is not a sufficient condition of success. The frequently made claim that the dangers associated with summitry have disappeared in the case of the institutionalized multilateral summit is not corroborated by the crisis atmosphere surrounding a large number of recent meetings. Even if employed judiciously and sagaciously it does not necessarily serve the diplomatic purposes which it is purported to fulfil. The existing literature on summitry perhaps needs supplementing to take in these recent developments.⁶

The face of the summit

There are many different types of summits and it is therefore difficult to discover meaningful generalisations. There is for instance a wide gulf between the intimate *tête-à-têtes* of Allied leaders during the Second World War and the global summits at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Yalta (1945) and the Johannesburg summit on sustainability (2002) are nearly sixty years apart and have little in common, but both are clearly summits. It is not always an easy task to distinguish between summits and other kinds of high-level meetings. In the media many other meetings of some international importance are nowadays labelled as summits including gatherings of WTO Finance Ministers or global meetings of transnational pressure groups. Foreign Ministers' meetings, however important, are not summits, even though they may be essential for the preparation of summits, as was the case with the meeting of EU Foreign Ministers that cleared the way for the 1997 summit where the Amsterdam Treaty was agreed. The term summit is accurately applied only to meetings between incumbent heads of government and/or heads of state, or political leaders and the highest representative of an international organization. In terms of the purposes of summitry, it needs to be borne in mind that international meetings can have more than one

6 See G.R. Berridge, *Diplomacy*, p. 184; and David Dunn, *Diplomacy at the Highest Level: The Evolution of International Summitry*, Macmillan (Basingstoke), 1996, p. 265.

purpose. Ceremonial meetings or state visits, even state funerals, may still have diplomatic functions and they are in fact quite a suitable instrument for non-verbal communication or diplomatic signalling.⁷ State visits involving royalty of at least one of the parties are not summit meetings, although they may involve a lot of work for diplomats and can be used for diplomatic purposes. The latter was experienced by the sizeable Dutch delegation travelling with Queen Beatrix on a state visit to the former colony of Indonesia in 1995, when, according to observers, Dutch officials were the targets of a number of diplomatic signals from their hosts designed to snub them.

The summit should also be distinguished from other forms of direct, personal diplomacy among political leaders such as correspondence, telephone conversations or direct talks by means of video conferencing. George Bush's and Tony Blair's offices are now directly linked by video and frequently use this facility.⁸ Bush and Blair are not the first President and Prime Minister to make personal diplomacy the hallmark of their 'special relationship', even though modern technology has greatly facilitated their communications. Roosevelt and Churchill corresponded about the tactics of war in minute detail, whereas Eisenhower and Churchill exchanged letters about broader strategic and philosophical questions related to the Cold War. Kennedy's and Macmillan's personal diplomacy, at the dawn of the television age in international politics, was probably more intimate than that of any of their predecessors or successors, and Reagan and Thatcher frequently used the phone in order to stay in touch. In more recent periods of international crisis, personal diplomacy is also a preferred mode of contact between American and European leaders, as was perhaps best evidenced by the frequency of private consultation between President Bush senior and European leaders on the eve of the Gulf War at the beginning of the 1990s. Telephone diplomacy is employed particularly frequently for the purposes of alliance diplomacy or within regional international organizations such as the EU.

A summit requires agreement on the time and location of a meeting. The venue of the summit may be uncontroversial and a matter of routine among

7 See Erik Goldstein, *The Politics of State Visits*, DSP Discussion Papers no. 26, Centre for the Study of Diplomacy (Leicester), 1997; and Jan Melissen, 'Diplomatie na de dood: De begrafenis van Rabin als geïmproviseerde politieke top', *Internationale Spectator*, 50:1, pp. 3-7.

8 David Dunn, *Summitry Revisited*, paper presented at the annual conference of the British International Studies Association, London School of Economics, 16-18 December 2002.

the participants. This is true for the European Council of EU heads of government and state, which has clear arrangements that are respected by all member states. For the same reasons, the location of G8 meetings and a number of other multilateral summits has rarely been a subject of disagreement. At other times however the venue of summits has been a subject of intense controversy because of the practical and symbolic significance of the meeting place.⁹ Before the modern era, security considerations were often related to the choice of an appropriate location for a meeting at the highest level. In the Middle Ages it was not uncommon for kings to meet on a raft in the middle of a river, separated by a wooden gate that would make it impossible for either side to inflict physical harm. Such meetings became much less frequent but still occurred in later centuries, as is evidenced by the encounter between Napoleon and Tsar Alexander on the river Niemen near Tilsit, where they divided the spoils of Europe following the defeat of the German emperor.

During much of the twentieth century the choice of a summit location was still the first obstacle to overcome at a range of meetings between political leaders. It is well known that at the beginning of the Cold War Stalin persuaded his Allied counterparts four times to meet on territory that was under Soviet control (Tehran in 1943, Moscow in 1944, and Yalta and Potsdam in 1945). All East-West meetings between 1945 and 1989 did in fact start with pre-negotiations about the location for the meeting. The issue was not always uncontroversial among Allies as close as Britain and the United States.¹⁰ In terms of the superpowers the 1989 Bush-Gorbachev meeting at Malta, which became known as the ‘seasick summit’, is a well-documented example of a meeting characterized by pre-summit haggling about the venue. The choice of Malta was inspired by a number of considerations, including President Bush’s fascination with Roosevelt’s habit of meeting other leaders on board a ship.¹¹ Mobile venues were not the prerogative of Allied leaders: Hitler and General Franco met on a train in the Spanish Pyrenees. In the post-Cold War era, and even more so after 11 September 2001, the issue of

9 Jan Melissen, *Diplomatie: Raderwerk van de internationale politiek*, Van Gorcum (Assen), 1999, pp. 66-67.

10 Jan Melissen, ‘Pre-Summit Diplomacy: Britain, the United States and the Nassau Conference, December 1962’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 7:3, November 1996.

11 Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War*, Little Brown (London), 1993, pp. 128-129 and 160; and James Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992*, Putnam (New York), 1995, p. 169.

‘venue’ has taken on entirely new dimensions. Whereas the traditional controversy about the location of the meeting was one among the leaders themselves, today’s concerns about venue emanate from the potential dangers posed to the summit by non-participants, *inter alia* a variety of protest movements or even potential terrorists. Summits, particularly multilateral ones, now generally take place in an atmosphere of high military alert.

Limiting the definition of summitry to the time that two or more political leaders spend together, as is the case in most of the literature, seems to make sense on analytical grounds. Nevertheless, the broader context in which such meetings take place is essential for our understanding of the evolution of this instrument of diplomatic conduct. It may be obvious, but still serve as a useful reminder, to underline that the summit is not an isolated event. As Hans Morgenthau noted in the early days of modern summitry: ‘as instruments for the negotiated settlement of outstanding issues, summit meetings are a supplement to ordinary diplomatic procedures – they are functionally connected with those procedures. They follow ordinary diplomatic negotiations as they are followed by them, each laying the groundwork for the other’.¹² The summit can be instrumental in speeding up such negotiations as well as domestic decision-making. Many diplomats, particularly in their post-retirement contributions to the public debate, have reiterated the point that summits help to conceal the context of the wider diplomatic process. As a former Dutch ambassador to Washington put it: ‘Summits are news. The public is presented with the stars and believes that constitutes diplomacy. What remains concealed are the text writers, the endless rehearsals and all the other preparatory work without which that one performance would not take place’.¹³ Focusing on the physical meeting without much reference to the wider diplomatic context does indeed tend to reinforce the cliché of the summit as an example of improvised diplomacy.

There may, however, be another reason to take a broader look. Between 1945 and the present, the international system has completely altered and the changed international setting of contemporary summitry has a bearing on the talks themselves. In a multipolar international system with one ‘hyperpower’, political leaders no longer require Cold War spectacles for an assessment of international issues. This systemic change was preceded by the gradual

12 Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, McGraw Hill (New York), 1985, p. 122.

13 J.H. Lubbers in ‘Bescheiden blijven in de buitendienst’, *NRC Handelsblad Weekeditie*, 23 April 1996.

transformation of summit agendas. Cold War summitry is usually equated with the practice of high politics, but well before the end of the Cold War the summit agenda became much broader, including economic and other low politics issues. The so-called 'Economic Summits' of the 1970s emerged against the background of the collapse of the Bretton Woods international financial system, the oil price shock of 1973-1974, accelerating inflation, rising unemployment, protectionism and concerns about the limits of economic growth. As a result of growing interdependence, issues of domestic and foreign policy were increasingly seen as interrelated and started to receive attention at the highest levels.¹⁴

Today, with a greater awareness of the interconnections of global politics at all levels, and the rise of non-territorial issues such as environmental degradation, migration, Aids and international crime, it is not just the changed international system that has affected summitry. The impact of the changing societal setting in which summitry takes place is no less important in the post-Cold War world. Political leaders are more and more aware of their constituency in civil society, increasingly persuaded that citizens should be closer to the process of foreign policy-making. There is increasing recognition that, one way or another, NGOs and other non-state actors do have an identifiable stake in future international dialogue. The world in which summitry takes place is no longer bilateral or multilateral, but is increasingly a polyilateral international society with a great variety of governmental and non-governmental actors and stakeholders.¹⁵ The transformation of the international environment will not be discussed here, but it has clear implications for contemporary summitry. However, these issues can only be addressed through a thorough understanding of the origins and history of summitry.

Heyday at the highest level

Summitry antedates modern times. The expansion of diplomatic traffic and the coming into being of the resident ambassador, initially on the Italian peninsula in the fifteenth century, provided alternatives for direct meetings

14 Hans H.J. Labohm, *G-7 Economic Summits: A View from the Lowlands*, Clingendael Paper (The Hague), February 1993, pp. 5-8.

15 Geoffrey Wiseman, *'Polyilateralism' and New Modes of Global Dialogue*, DSP Discussion Papers, Centre for the Study of Diplomacy (Leicester), 1999.

between kings and princes. The rise of the resident ambassador as an 'honest spy', in the words of the Dutchman Abraham van Wicquefort, strengthened the case for indirect communication and delegated negotiation in early modern Europe. Diplomatic dialogue gradually became more professionalized and institutionally strengthened with the establishment of Foreign Ministries, first in France and subsequently in the capitals of the other key players in the European diplomatic system. Meetings at the highest level did continue to be attractive despite this upsurge in professional diplomacy and summitry *avant la lettre* was never short of professional critics. As early as the fifteenth century, Philippe de Commines advised that princes refrain from meeting their counterparts and leave the art of international negotiation to skilled and well-prepared envoys. François de Callières, the foremost author on diplomacy under the *Ancien Régime*, wrote in 1716 that it is an important task of diplomats to ensure that the passions of their political masters do not prevail over their interests.¹⁶ Two centuries later Harold Nicolson complained: 'The art of diplomacy as that of water-colours has suffered much from the fascination it exercises upon the amateur'.¹⁷

In spite of its ancient roots modern summitry as an institutionalized phenomenon is a mid-twentieth century development. Before the Second World War summitry was a rare occurrence in international affairs. It was for instance not until 1919 that the US President first participated in a direct face-to-face meeting with one of his peers. The explosive growth of summitry was facilitated by political developments and dramatic progress in civil aviation after the War, whereas the telephone revolutionized personal diplomacy between political leaders in a more general sense. The multilateralization of post-war politics was an important incentive for the rise of the multilateral summit, although it took more than twenty years for this process to reach maturity. The 1940s and 1950s are well known for a number of highly dramatic encounters at the highest level, but Foreign Ministers travelled much more than their superiors. American Presidents did not seriously engage in serial summitry until the 1960s but their Secretaries of

16 Philippe de Commines, *The History of Commines*, Nutt (London), 1897, vol. 4 (this English edition is based on the 1596 translation); and François de Callières, *The Art of Diplomacy*, edited by H.M.A. Keens-Soper and K.W. Schweizer, Leicester University Press (New York), 1983, pp. 96-97 (original title: *De la manière de négocier avec les souverains*).

17 Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, Oxford University Press (New York), 1980 (from first edition in 1939), p. 52; the second quotation is from Craig, 'The Professional Diplomat and his Problems', p. 146.

State were actively involved in shuttle diplomacy as a routine activity a decade earlier (although the term itself was not in use until Henry Kissinger coined it in the 1970s). In Europe, the proximity between capitals allowed for a greater frequency of personal contact at the highest level, but multilateral summitry was still rare. The only 'serial summit' of the 1960s was the Commonwealth heads of government meeting. Multilateral summits did not become a *regular* occurrence until the 1970s.

Aside from the ongoing technological revolution and the gradual emergence and growth of multilateral institutions four other factors have made international summitry a permanent feature of the diplomatic landscape.¹⁸ First, during and immediately after the Second World War the summit seemed to the public to be the best forum for dealing with the great problems of war and peace and the reshaping of alliances in an emerging bipolar international system. The impact of the meeting of world leaders like Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin was such that after the war public expectations of the summit became wildly exaggerated. Popular opinion in the United States and Europe became absorbed by the unrealistic expectation that a meeting of minds between the leaders of the great powers could solve the industrialized world's most pressing problems. Some leaders, notably Winston Churchill, fuelled such emotional reactions, and the practice of summitry soon drew a response from the vocal US foreign policy establishment. Dean Acheson, Secretary of State under Truman, famously lamented that 'when a chief of state or head of government makes a fumble, the goal line is open behind him', and just before he entered the Kennedy administration, also as Secretary of State, Dean Rusk emphasized that 'the costs of error or misunderstanding are multiplied by the seriousness of the issues and the power of the President'.¹⁹ But the popularity of the summit went from strength to strength and most political leaders travelled more than their immediate predecessors. By the 1960s, the absence of regular diplomatic dialogue between the two superpowers, a shared wariness of diplomatic services among the US and Soviet political elites, as well as its utility as a magnificent propaganda instrument in the hands of the leaders themselves, ensured the continuation of summit diplomacy.

18 This section is an elaboration of earlier accounts of the origins of modern summitry in David Dunn, *Diplomacy at the Highest Level*, ch. 1 and Jan Melissen, *Diplomatie*, pp. 62-65.

19 Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*, W.W. Norton (New York), 1969, p. 480; and Dean Rusk, 'The President', *Foreign Affairs*, 38:3, p. 365.

A second key factor in the proliferation of summits in the post-war era was the increased centralization of foreign policy-making in the West. The democracies moved a little in the direction of personal control of foreign policy by the chief executive as practised in non-democratic countries. The increasing appetite of Prime Ministers and Presidents for foreign policy has been a gradual and variable development, particularly in Europe. The French President's constitutional powers in external relations have always far exceeded the foreign policy role and aspirations of the Prime Ministers of, for instance, the Netherlands. The modern practice of EU heads of government meetings, a counterpoise to the increasing supranational influence of the European Commission, originates from the Franco-German summit that was institutionalized by French President Giscard d'Estaing and German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. Foreign policy today is unimaginable in the European Union without Prime Ministers claiming a central role in the field of intra-European relations, but it is important to stress that this was much less apparent in the first three decades after 1945. Paradoxically, the visibility of the leaders at summits camouflages the extent to which they increasingly tend to rely on professional diplomats and other experts, and *ergo* the increasing influence of these professionals on summit outcomes.²⁰ Nevertheless, the practice of summitry tends to reinforce the chief executive's control of foreign policy. Contemporary memoirs give evidence of personal friction and the frustrations of Foreign Ministers. Geoffrey Howe is one of many Foreign Ministers who complained bitterly about his boss. As he writes in his memoirs, 'the Foreign Office and I had to spend more time on managing, informing or finessing Number 10 than on getting the whole rest of the world into line'.²¹

Third, the expansion of the number of states and the concomitant rise of regional diplomacy has resulted in the multiplication of summit meetings. The rise of summitry is at least partially a consequence of the expansion of international society in the aftermath of decolonization. It should be noted that many post-colonial newcomers inherited authoritarian systems of rule, failed to create democratic structures and did not possess anything that even remotely resembled a well-staffed diplomatic service, all of which made them well disposed to meetings at the highest level. The same was true for the concentration of political power within a tiny top cadre and the existence of

20 Jan Melissen, 'Multilaterale top is over zijn hoogtepunt heen', *Internationale Spectator*, 56:1, January 2002, pp. 1-2.

21 Geoffrey Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty*, Macmillan (London), 1994, p. 7.

personality cults that were deeply rooted in the leadership traditions of some new countries. In a number of cases, centralized decision-making was not an indigenous phenomenon but inherited from colonial powers. Whatever its origins, though, it proved generally popular among post-colonial debutantes in international affairs. Similar developments can be observed today in Central Asian countries as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and these have had serious political consequences both domestically and in terms of their socialization into international society.²²

While recognising that the superpower summitry of the Cold War was substantially different from its present incarnation, it is worth noting that the return of Central and Eastern Europe to the European fold, has led to a dramatic increase in bilateral and multilateral summitry in both western and eastern halves of the continent. Generally speaking, the more relaxed post-Cold War international climate in Europe is conducive to more summitry. In some transition countries the need to create diplomatic services from scratch, and in others the effects of massive staff changes and the entry of politically correct but inexperienced individuals into the diplomatic service, as well as the coming to power of a new generation of assertive political leaders, have all together resulted in a diplomatic environment where the summit flourished. The urgency and magnitude of a host of domestic and cross-border problems – including social strife, economic dislocation and environmental degradation – in a period of turmoil in public administration, produced a similar effect. Leaders naturally felt that they had a personal stake in the restructuring of the international architecture in their region, which led to changing patterns of interdependence and a great increase in regional diplomacy. Before the 1990s regional diplomacy had already become a striking feature outside Europe as a consequence of the increasing need for trade cooperation in the Global South. Above all in Latin and Central America, top-level meetings have mushroomed as a result of the creation of groupings like the G3, the southern common market MERCOSUR, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Rio Group. The Organization of American States (OAS) now meets more frequently at the highest level than previously.

Fourth, the importance of the media and public opinion in international affairs has acted as an incentive for leaders to become more visible before their constituencies. In the post-war era statesmen were quick to recognize the

22 Jan Melissen, 'Toppen brengen vaak hun geld niet op', *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 November 2001.

propaganda value of the summit, which was better suited to the demands of television than less spectacular meetings by Foreign Ministers or even talks by anonymous experts. Diplomacy at the highest level thrives in the limelight, it involves an important element of drama and the main characters were quick to claim the role of stage directors. Professional diplomats like to have things shipshape, under control, and the same is true for 'politician-diplomats' at the top. When circumstances permit, the choreography of the summit is prepared in minute detail and it is hardly exaggerated to state that, at some summits, leaders tend to talk as much to the press as they do to one another. As a Dutch newspaper headline in 2002 summed up: 'Government leaders give summit in Seville much theatre'.²³ The media presence at some summits is now so enormous that the meetings look like staged events. Even when deliberations take place behind closed doors, summiteers are highly conscious of the fact that the 'ladies and gentlemen of the press' are waiting outside the conference room. Therefore, 'the intrusion of the media into every phase and level of the negotiation process changes the whole spirit and nature of diplomacy'.²⁴ Media presence is a fact of life and diplomacy will have to accommodate and take advantage of the changed rules of the game. Press attention and the demands of public opinion do not, however, sit easily with at least some basic requirements of sound diplomacy, such as confidentiality and ambiguity. Diplomacy at the highest level has become politicized and political leaders are increasingly held accountable in a policy environment where parliaments expect to be informed on the minutiae of foreign policy. The summit is thus not only the expression of the direct political ties between the leader and his people: the political leader is also perceived as the elected diplomat-in-chief.

The heyday of the modern summit can be divided into two stages of roughly 30 years each. It was not until the Second World War that the wider public had developed a sense that the summit meeting was becoming a more familiar phenomenon. The war was the cradle of the modern summit. Bilateral or trilateral meetings became the typical species of the summit in the early Cold War, and encounters between the leaders of the two superpowers soon became the archetype of the post-war summits. They were about antagonistic negotiations, and their diplomatic purposes were undermined by

²³ *NRC Handelsblad*, 26 June 2002.

²⁴ Ernest R. May, 'News and Diplomacy', in Gordon A. Craig and Francis J. Loewenheim (eds), *The Diplomats 1939-1979*, Princeton University Press (Princeton NJ), 1994.

rising public expectations. About thirty years after the first wartime summits, in the first half of the 1970s, the rise of multilateral bodies, as well as developments such as progress in civil aviation, allowed for the spread of the multilateral summit meeting. G8 summits and meetings of the European Council originated in the 1970s. In the last three decades of the twentieth century, the continuing spread of meetings at the highest level for all sorts of purposes has made the summit the most visible form of diplomacy and one with a wide variety of forms. International summitry is a matter of routine for leaders in virtually every corner of the world and they increasingly talk not just 'high politics' but also 'low politics', as far as that is still a useful distinction. Summits nowadays have a multifaceted agenda, which creates multiple opportunities for package deals across different policy areas. It is hard to imagine international politics without meetings at the highest level. Summitry is unlikely to disappear and it is safe to assume that summitry will continue to transform in the twenty-first century – as it has done in the last 60 years.

Post-modern blues

Few weeks go by without meetings between heads of government. More often than 'politician-diplomats' wish to admit, domestic business has to give way to the pre-eminence of international affairs. It is only a domestic emergency that makes leaders cancel an international summit meeting. Until the 1970s most international negotiations were conducted and concluded by diplomats and their foreign ministers, without the need for heads of government or state to give *actes de présence* at any stage of the talks. Today's reality is that most political leaders are highly visible and deeply involved in diplomacy and international politics.²⁵ The practice of summitry in the Western world greatly accelerated in the 1980s. More than ten years on, in the post-Cold War environment, there is a lot more traffic on the highway to the summit and multilateral summitry has become widespread. Summitry breeds summitry. There may be many different reasons why politicians decide to go to the summit, and they are not always designed to meet the requirements of international negotiation. Some international organizations have deliberately introduced the summit to raise their public profile, as was the case with the

25 This section is an elaboration of Jan Melissen, *Summitry at a Price? A Commentary on the Study and Practice of Diplomacy*, paper presented at the 'Summitry Conference', Department of International Relations, Boston University, 19-20 March 2002.

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and, in vain, with the little known Council of Europe. Wheeling out Prime Ministers and Presidents does not always have the desired effect and may even have a boomerang effect. These kind of public relations exercises involve high stakes and one can for instance run the risk of highlighting differences among members on the role and importance of the organization, as was the case with the first post-Cold War summits of the OSCE. Alternatively, the high visibility of summits may underline the feebleness of international organizations, which is not unusual in the Global South. It is hard to point out what has been the positive result or, for that matter, what negative developments have been averted by the heads of governments' meetings of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives). It is equally difficult to make a solid case for some African or Latin American summits, or at least a great number of such gatherings, apart from the fact that it is always 'good to meet'.

Negotiation may in theory be the hard core of summitry, but in practice there may at times be little substance to the negotiations and some summits are predominantly informal encounters. Particularly at bilateral meetings between leaders who have developed a degree of personal acquaintance, the summit may be a useful device for a free-ranging exchange of views that is unconstrained by rigid agendas or bureaucratic routine. There is, for instance, quite a lot of deliberately informal bilateral summitry between the big three in Europe, where particularly Franco-German meetings serve to signal like-mindedness and a joint commitment to other EU members. Some multi-lateral summits also offer scope for friendly and relaxed get-togethers, bilateral networking and even leisure activities. It is hard to forget the image of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders at their Shanghai meeting in 2001, standing in line for the photo opportunity, wearing the traditional local garment. Informality, however, is the exception at the multi-lateral level, and most of the time is reserved for bilateral fringe meetings. On the majority of occasions multilateral summits have a more formal character, with carefully orchestrated closing ceremonies and a considerable degree of pomp and circumstance. As far as such summits are concerned, it is tempting to conclude that, as one of the major rituals of international politics, they have 'taken over the symbolic and ceremonial domain of diplomacy'.²⁶ In any case,

26 Abba Eban, *Diplomacy for the Next Century*, Yale University Press (New Haven and London), p. 93.

it can be argued that it is the ceremonial aspect rather than the substance of the negotiation or exchange of views that makes the multilateral summit 'real' to the general public.

The age of television has turned out to be a blessing for the summit. The perception of politics and diplomacy in the television age is increasingly defined by what is visible, and leaders are therefore reluctant to give up the trappings of summitry. At one point this development led the British newspaper *The Economist* to lament that normal politics 'has come increasingly to depend on the person and the office of the Prime Minister – an office from which Mr Blair is increasingly absent'.²⁷ Indeed, if the number of summits taking place were an indicator of the popularity of dialogue at the highest level, summitry never had it so good. But this popularity has a price of its own.

Most significantly, the burden of summitry falls on the leaders themselves, whose agenda is increasingly crowded with engagements abroad. Frequent foreign trips and the status that they bestow upon leaders may of course have electoral value, but the absence of the chief executive on the domestic political scene can entail an element of considerable political risk. Various political leaders, among them Richard Nixon and Margaret Thatcher, have experienced the loss of critical political support during their absence from home. Summitry can be an energizing experience, away from the daily chores of the highest office, but it can also be a drain on the participants' energy. The latter was plainly demonstrated at the Nice European Council in 2000, when lengthy and badly chaired meetings between overtired and irritable politicians resulted in shouting matches that did little to enhance their prestige at home. Particularly in the European Union, political leaders have expressed their disgust with all too frequent and long-drawn out multilateral meetings where many of the deliberations of Europe's chief strategists are in fact about matters of minute detail. It is evident that some summiteers in Europe have begun to feel the strain of what could be called summit fatigue. The problem for leaders, particularly with multilateral summitry, is that the decision not to go may be hard to justify *vis-à-vis* their peers and their domestic constituency. It is impossible, as a matter of routine, to send a Foreign Minister to the summit. Neither does absence at the highest level tend to go unnoticed. The German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, for instance, was absent at the United Nations golden jubilee summit, but the following day he met his French counterpart for an informal meeting. The

27 *The Economist*, 13 October 2001.

press reported both occasions. More often than not, opting out of summits is a mere theoretical option, one that poses problems of protocol, and one that is potentially hazardous for image-conscious politicians. Alternatively, not showing up may be a powerful diplomatic signal, as has been demonstrated repeatedly at summits on Middle East issues.

Second, the price of summit proliferation is high in terms of the burden that it imposes on scarce diplomatic resources. In the last ten to fifteen years many Foreign Ministries have had to manage with increasingly limited resources and the recurring spectre of budget-cutting exercises. The preparation and diplomatic follow-up of meetings at the highest level has become more or less perpetual for some international organizations. Serial summitry – not just an episode with a beginning and an end, but an ongoing diplomatic effort – requires formidable backup from the Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister's office and, depending on the subject matter, also from sectoral government departments. Some developments inherent to summitry are awkward for routine-based diplomatic services, such as for instance unforeseen agenda changes as a result of unexpected international developments. Summitry is a flexible instrument of international dialogue, but what goes largely unnoticed is that such flexibility has to be facilitated by numerous diplomats and other experts, frequently in extremely compressed time periods. Multilateral summitry is a particularly time-consuming business for those in supporting roles. Faced with the enlargement of the European Union from 15 to 25 members in 2004, it is not hard to guess how Dutch diplomats feel about being the first member state to manage the summits of an enlarged Union.

The price of summits in terms of economic costs has skyrocketed and has become a subject of much adverse reporting in leading international newspapers: public spending on diplomacy is hardly newsworthy, but this is different when isolated international events produce multimillion dollar bills 'for the taxpayer'. Exorbitant expenses are above all required for draconian security measures that nowadays go hand in hand with multilateral summitry. Public concern about summits should also be seen against the background of a changed relationship between political leaders and the public. The electorate increasingly holds 'diplomats-in-chief' accountable for what they say, for what they do, and also for what they spend. Extraordinarily high expenses for meetings of international leaders do not turn politicians into good role models, and they are hard to justify when the general public is asked to tighten belts. There are few press reports about the big summits of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century – such as big UN global conferences, APEC, G8 and big EU meetings – that do not question the

multimillion dollar bills for summit extravaganzas. Just one example was the G8 meeting in Genoa, which cost 19 million US dollars, including expensive security arrangements, plus 90 million dollars on improvements to the city. NATO's Prague Summit in 2002 was another occasion where, particularly in the far from prosperous countries of Central Europe, the general public was appalled by – quite literally – the price of summitry. It is possible to suggest that many contemporary summits offer little value for money.

Summit climb-down

The optimism about the future of summitry in the diplomatic studies literature of the 1990s has turned out to be unwarranted. One could argue that some 30 years after its institutionalisation, multilateral summitry has reached all but a state of crisis – one that is unlikely to be remedied by going forward to the past (that is, by referring summit talks to lower levels). The problems of diplomacy at the top are diverse and summit inflation has many causes. At first glance it is evident that it has proved difficult for the quality of summit talks to keep in step with their quantity. As a result, presentation often triumphs over substance, which is evidenced by the language and content of many multilateral summit communiqués.²⁸ Some Latin American leaders see one another, for instance, more than four times a year in various multilateral groupings. European leaders meet much more often in an even greater variety of bilateral and multilateral settings. The puzzle for the European Council of EU political leaders is how to design a 'driving machine' that will continue to be effective in a Union with 25 or 27 heads of government – and to do so in a way that will satisfy both small and big member states.²⁹ In contrast with the powerful EU summit, the NATO equivalent has always been an almost ritualistic affair. It appears that little more than symbolism can be aspired to in meetings with 28 NATO heads of government and state. Yet another forum, spanning the globe but much more modest in size, is the G8. Its 'conversations' originated in Giscard d'Estaing's fireside chats of the mid-1970s, which used to have the charm of flexibility

28 Jan Melissen, *Summitry at a Price?*

29 On the challenges for the EU summit, see Peter van Grinsven and Jan Melissen, 'Europese Raad tussen marginale aanpassing en radicale hervorming', *Internationale Spectator*, 56:9, September 2002; and Peter van Grinsven and Jan Melissen, 'Hervorming Europese top onvermijdelijk', *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 June 2002.

and intimacy. Some people argue that even today they are like small manoeuvrable boats as opposed to oil tankers, but what meets the public eye is that they are massive media events with thousands of journalists following the travelling circus. Carefully planned displays of unity and final communiqués wrapped before the actual meeting breed cynicism among G8 summit watchers, and it is hard for the eight world leaders to communicate to the general public the importance of what is actually being discussed.³⁰

Yet whatever the flaws of the meetings of G8 leaders, NATO heads of government meetings and various regional summits in Latin America, Africa and Asia, these and other multilateral summits are unlikely to disappear. It is, however, difficult to escape the conclusion that most serial summits have a significant problem in the way that the general public perceives them. Summitry's reputation is going downhill and that trend is perilous for those who depend on public support. Adverse press reports and disappointing poll ratings are the stuff that politicians worry about, and behind the scenes summitry's waning popularity is therefore bound to lead to the conclusion that 'something must be done'. The traditional image of the political leader at the summit is one of a carefully calculating stage manager and master of spin, taking advantage of painstakingly timed and orchestrated meetings with his international peers. Cold War summitry was indeed a valuable political tool for leaders and often reflected positively on their reputations. After a number of sobering experiences at controversial summits in the second half of the 1990s, it has however become clear that meetings at the highest level also have the potential to turn against the chief executive. The diminished propaganda value of summitry is a serious headache for heads of government and international organizations, as far as their perceived failure to address a number of international problems adequately can be interpreted as either poor political leadership or as evidence of the bankruptcy of multilateralism.

One of the keys to understanding the changing face of diplomacy at the highest level is the wide-ranging, multifaceted agenda of contemporary summitry, which increasingly deals with issues that are much closer to people's perception of the international environment. Next to the traditional summit themes of war and peace and macroeconomic management, summits now also deal with more prosaic issues such as the quality of beef, the influx of illegal immigrants and air pollution – and where such issues remain unresolved at lower levels they are passed on to the summit. While past summitry was basically governed by national interests defined at the top, such

30 Jan Melissen, *Summitry at a Price?*

interests are now increasingly 'bottom-up' and directly related to the interests of citizens. Political leaders still go to major summits, but today 'they make decisions which are subject to very different pressures. The Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, the Duma, campaigns for debt relief, *Le Monde* and *La Repubblica*, opinion polls in Quebec, the SPD Congress and market opinion in London and Tokyo will all have an influence on what they choose to do – and what the summit will achieve'.³¹ It is therefore not a crisis of public relations that is the contemporary summit's main problem, but a crisis in the relationship between politics at the highest and the lowest levels of international society – between political leaders and large sections of the general public.

Dealing with civil society has changed the rules of the game. Few leaders are really troubled by the presence of the media, but recent summits have shown that civil society organizations are much more difficult to handle than the press. Third World activists, human rights' defenders, consumer rights' groups, trade unions, farmers, anti-globalization protesters and others have discovered the summit as a stage to promote their views effectively. Gothenburg or Genoa will not remember the EU and G8 summits that they hosted as quiet and civilized international meetings, but as beacons for loud and violent international protest. Like the political leaders themselves, a variety of pressure groups have become keenly aware of the advantages of operating in the limelight and they have shown themselves capable of mobilizing international support. At a higher level of non-governmental politics, well-known NGOs such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and others have staged sophisticated international campaigns and are now widely recognized as political and diplomatic players in their own areas of competence. It is at the summit where, in a sense, 'the highest and the lowest levels' meet, and where conflicts of interests between governments and civil society will continue to be articulated. The future of the multilateral summit is therefore one that should recognize the relevance of international civil society and, where appropriate, aim at working with representative organizations. As President Clinton pointed out at the turbulent WTO ministerial meeting in Seattle in 1999: 'the public must see and hear and, in a very real sense, actually join in the deliberations. [...] That's the only way they can know the process is fair and know their concerns were at least

31 Mark Leonard and Vidhya Alakeson, *Going Public: Diplomacy for the Information Society*, Foreign Policy Centre (London), 2000, p. 18.

considered'.³² At some summits there are more non-governmental players than at others. At the Johannesburg summit on sustainability in 2002, the number of representatives from civil society organizations and the corporate sector was overwhelming, often initiating new forms of collaboration among the public, private and corporate sectors. These groups – rather than the heads of government themselves – were centre-stage, which makes the word 'summit' in fact a misnomer for what happened at Johannesburg.

In conclusion, the early multilateral summit of the post-war period was a place where leaders met and deliberated about matters of state and public concern, while citizens waited outside with great expectations of the outcome. The future multilateral summit is increasingly a place where diplomacy at the highest level *meets* public concerns, where political leaders will have to show their commitment to working with non-governmental stakeholders, and where politicians will be increasingly convinced that their public image depends on the extent to which they address the interests of their domestic constituencies. Political leaders and international organizations will increasingly resist being caught up in summit meetings without having in place diplomatic strategies for communicating and dealing with the public at large, both at home and abroad. Such a development does in fact not amount to a crisis of summitry, but to summitry coming of age. It is part of a wider process of progression towards a more collaborative mode of diplomacy.³³ For many reasons, including the politics of prestige, democratic legitimacy and accountability, political leaders will remain pivotal in diplomacy – but it will no longer be so lonely at the top.

32 Quoted from Jan Melissen, 'Het internationale leiderscircus in een veranderende internationale omgeving', *JASON Magazine*, 27:2, 2002, p. 20.

33 See Shaun Riordan, *The New Diplomacy*, Polity (London), 2003, ch. 9.