

The G-7, G-20 paradox

The G-7 countries are democratic domestically but are dictatorial globally. By contrast, the G-20 group, which has many autocratic regimes, represents a more democratic forum for governance.

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The G-7 is dictatorial, while the G-20 is democratic.

This statement is obviously paradoxical. The G-7 countries are very proud of their liberal democratic societies. And they should be. However, while they are democratic domestically, they are dictatorial globally. By contrast, the G-20 group, which has many autocratic regimes, is more representative of the world's population.

The spiritual essence of democracy is conveyed in the phrase: a government of the people, by the people, for the people. In short, it must represent a hundred per cent of the people. The G-7 represent just 10 per cent of the world's population. Yet, they make decisions and take actions that disrupt the lives of billions of people, including the world's poor, without factoring in their interests and concerns. This is what dictators do.

The G-7 countries were right in imposing sanctions on Russia after its illegal invasion of Ukraine

in February this year. But in designing the sanctions, the G-7 countries protected the interests of their own population, which makes up a minority of the world's population. Indeed, the G-7 countries, especially the European countries, could have hastened the war's end by boldly cutting off all the gas supplies from Russia immediately. They didn't do so because they didn't want their own people to make any sacrifices. However, both the illegal Russian invasion and the subsequent sanctions led to massive increases in fuel and food prices, disrupting the lives of hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people, who had to make serious sacrifices.

Since the G-7 countries didn't want to impose sacrifices on their own people, it was strange that they complained when China, India and other developing countries stepped up their purchases of Russian oil at a discount. This led to two sharp responses from the Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar. His two sharp responses resonated around the world. In response to criticisms about increased Indian oil purchases from Russia, he said: "India's total purchases of oil from

Russia in a month is probably less than what Europe does in an afternoon." He also said, equally biting: "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems but the world's problems are not Europe's problems."

Substitute G-7 for Europe and you get the essence of the problem with the G-7.

It takes care of the interests of the most privileged 10 per cent of the world's population. It ignores the interests of the remaining 90 per cent. This is why the G-20 represents a more democratic forum governance. As Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* wisely said: "The G-20 contains 63 per cent of the world's people and 87 per cent of its output (at market prices). It contains the world's most powerful countries and ones from every continent. It is our best chance for global economic governance."

Even though the G-20 is a more democratic representation of the world's population, some Western leaders are now suggesting that they should boycott the next G-20 leaders' meeting, which will take place in Bali from Nov 15 to 16 2022, if Russian President Vladimir Putin is invited to attend.

Any such Western boycott of the Bali Summit would be unwise. Indeed, it would damage the standing of the Western countries in the eyes of the majority of the world's population in several ways.

Firstly, it will show the West acting in an "undemocratic" way by ignoring the wishes of the majority of the G-20 countries which want the meeting to continue, especially since the world is suffering from major global problems today. Secondly, if Mr Putin attends the G-20 meeting in Bali, he will hear the disapproving voices of both the West and the Rest on the invasion of Ukraine. He will also hear strong pleas to end the war as it is disrupting the lives of so many around the world. Professor Barry R. Posen of MIT has argued persuasively in *Foreign Affairs* that the most likely result of the war in Ukraine is protracted conflict with painful losses on both sides. It's thus in everyone's best interests to "seek a diplomatic end to the war now". His reasoning is sound.

We're more likely to get a diplomatic solution if Mr Putin hears clearly from his peers, both in the West and the Rest.

Finally, in ethical terms, the constituency we should care about the most is that of the very poor. On July 7, the United Nations Development Programme reported that an estimated 71 million people have fallen into poverty because of the skyrocketing food and fuel prices caused by the war in Ukraine, and that 750,000 people are at

immediate risk of starvation. Given these dire challenges for the poor, it would be criminal to sabotage the November meeting of the G-20 leaders.

The West should also remember one important historical fact before taking action to undermine the Bali meeting. At the height of the Global Financial Crisis, when the Western countries were feeling threatened by an economic implosion, they convened the G-20 London Summit on April 2, 2009 to launch a global stimulus package to rescue the world economy. All the G-20 countries – including the developing countries – participated in this US\$1.1 trillion (S\$1.53 trillion) rescue package, which was instrumental in turning things around for the embattled Western countries. The Rest didn't hesitate to help the West in its hour of need. Perhaps the West should now consider repaying this debt by stepping up at the forthcoming Bali meeting to help the Rest.

Ultimately, to put it very simply, all eight billion people on Planet Earth are now on the same boat. We will sink or sail together. Let's use the forthcoming G-20 meeting in Bali wisely to steer this common boat of ours.

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