

## Onus falls on G20 to manage political tensions

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Five years have passed since the peak of the global financial crisis and the elevation of the G20 from a meeting of finance ministers to a meeting of leaders. The organisation has helped states to make substantial progress towards financial recovery, although there is still more work to be done on preventing the next financial crisis.



The geopolitical situation has begun to change, and not for the better.

Crises of a different type — geopolitical and security crises — could begin to affect the functions of the G20. While this does not mean that the G20 could or should take on foreign policy challenges, it does mean that the G20 needs to operate in more creative ways to deal with a changing geopolitical landscape.

Discussions of foreign policy and security have entered the G20 spectrum before — in 2012 the Mexican presidency held a foreign ministers' meeting, and in 2013 the crisis in Syria forced foreign policy on to the agenda of Russia's summit. But neither of these summits was able to move the needle on tough geopolitical and security issues. The Australian government has to confront the prospect that the Russia–West crisis over Ukraine is not likely to have subsided by the time of the Brisbane summit, and other crises — from the East China Sea to Egypt to Syria to North Korea — could also force themselves into the frame in November.

There is no question that a phase of mounting geopolitical tensions has begun. The Middle East is undergoing the violent process of revolution and counter-revolution that will likely last another half decade — possibly longer. Geopolitical strains are rising in Asia, where tensions between

major economies could undermine the ability of some G20 members to cooperate within international fora. There are also tensions in a series of policy domains where governance mechanisms are comparatively weak, including cybersecurity, the broader domain of internet governance, maritime security, and energy security. And finally, the recent events in Ukraine highlight that geopolitical tensions in Europe and between the West and Russia are very real.

At the very least this suggests the need for an active agenda for managing geopolitical tensions. Is that a job for the G20? If the answer is no that begs the question: who else? The UN Security Council does not have all the players in it, and is a tool far better suited to operational crisis management than it is to processes that lower geopolitical tensions. And the G8 is too narrow. There is an argument to be made that the G20 may not be the place to go to ameliorate geopolitical tensions but, for now, it's the only answer we have: where else can emerged and emerging powers come together to discuss pressing issues?

Still, the G20 must not give up its core agenda of economic recovery. On the contrary, the core agenda of the Australian G20 must surely be continued focus on sustained economic growth. However, the Australian G20 can concentrate its efforts on the financial issues, while at the same time innovating on foreign and security policy questions to contribute to a lowering of geopolitical tensions or the management of geopolitical crises.

There are two options within the G20 to do this: establish a foreign ministers' track, or explore more innovative, less formal options. Specifically, for Brisbane, the Australian government should ask the leaders to bring with them to Brisbane a senior national security official. It should be left to individual leaders to decide who to bring with them — their foreign minister, their national security advisor, or their diplomatic advisor. The decision should be theirs, and perhaps influenced by the agenda.

Australia should also host an informal side event for these officials, chaired by either Australia's national security advisor or the foreign minister. And at the time of inviting, the meeting should have no planned outcome — no statement, no communiqué; it should be an informal session.

But the Australian government should communicate to the G20 members, through informal channels, that it intends this informal session to be available in the case of a major crisis brewing which demands G20 leaders' attention the way the Syria crisis did.

While the Australian government would inevitably face some pushback, it has deep enough relationships with all the critical players to weather criticism or concern should some G20 members be uncomfortable with this approach. There will be no advances in the management of geopolitical tensions without innovation and some risk taking, and the history of effective multilateralism tells us that middle powers, with close ties to the top powers, are best placed to play this role.

It is past time for the G20 to innovate in the domains of foreign policy and security, and find creative ways to contribute on the geopolitical side of things. The G20 may not be the perfect vehicle for that function but, for now, it is the only one available. And if the G20 does not ramp up efforts to forge the tools necessary to manage rising geopolitical tensions, it will find that the

underlying relationships allowing the G20 to perform as it has — criticisms aside — on the financial and economic issues will begin to erode, putting the core functions of the G20 themselves in jeopardy. It is not too late to manage rising geopolitical tensions, and maintain a degree of stability in great power relations; the G20 has an important role to play.

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