

ABSTRACT

France's unique position as the founder of the seven-power summit helps account for the continuity of its behaviour at the annual gathering from 1975 to the present. This continuity is manifest in the French conception of the seven-power summit as an institution, the issues and positions France promotes through it, and the summit partners and adversaries with which France deals.

France has consistently sought to make the summit a deliberative rather than decision-making body, and one dominated by the elected heads, focused on economic rather than political issues, and characterized by informal, secretive, free wheeling debate. With equal persistence, France has sought to use the summit as an effective vehicle for securing reform of the international monetary system, exchange rate stability, and a co-ordination of approaches to North-South relations and third world debt. Furthermore and in parallel, France has resisted moves towards rapid multilateral trade liberalization and the reduction of agricultural trade and production subsidies. Finally, France has gradually acquiesced as the summit has evolved into a forum for discussing East-West relations. In these pursuits France has repeatedly found itself in opposition to the United States (as the other great pole of attraction in the summit), with support from Italy and the European Community (on all matters not relating to actual Group of Seven (G-7) membership), and quite willing to stand unmoved, if need be, in an opposition of one.

However marked, this continuity has not precluded some notable changes in France's summit participation over the past fourteen years. During this period, France's representation at the summit passed from the centre-right Presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1974-1981), to that of socialist François Mitterrand governing with the full majority parliamentary support of his own party (1981-1986), then to "co-habitation" between President Mitterrand and a centre-right majority led by Prime Minister Jacques Chirac (1986-1988), and finally to a re-elected President Mitterrand (May 1988).

Throughout these electoral changes France's summit participation has been characterized by four broad, interrelated trends. The first has been an erosion of France's individual influence, as the summit group added strictly political issues to its agenda, expanded its membership, became more institutionalized, and contributed to some movement on the issues of agriculture and trade. The second corollary trend has been a shift towards Paris acting as a partner in a growing European coalition, based on the strengthening of France's special bilateral relationship with Bonn. The third has been a reduction in Franco-American frictions as the negotiated transatlantic truces of the 1970's and the bitter public disputes of the early 1980's have given way to a Paris-Washington convergence on such core issues as exchange rate management, East-West relations, and terrorism. The fourth trend has been the declining centrality of Franco-American polarity as the defining axis of the summit's coalitions. Indeed, during the 1980's, while European members such as Britain and Germany have moved closer to the United States on certain core issues (macroeconomic policy, trade, and agriculture), states from the American-influenced Pacific group (Canada and Japan) have supported French initiatives on North-South relations and third world debt.

France's summit participation over the past fourteen years thus reflects in part the particular world view, partisan affiliation, political situation, and economic policy performance of the incumbent President of the Republic. Yet it primarily derives from enduring national interests giving rise to France's emphasis on domestic autonomy and external independence. France's behaviour is based on its traditional self-proclaimed leadership role in European Community affairs, as well as on its particular historically and geographically reinforced relationship with Eastern Europe and a considerable part of Africa. In addition, France's behaviour at the summit has been shaped by its relatively closed economy which has been affected by a loss of international competitiveness, and by France's strong tradition of "étatisme", constitutionally-enshrined and institutionalized in the status of foreign policy as the "domaine réservé" of the Presidency.

In 1988, France's participation at the Toronto Summit largely followed the established pattern. The political uncertainty then prevailing in France did not seem to have reduced the margin of manoeuvre of its representatives during the summit. Indeed, the Toronto Summit even saw signs of renewed French activism.