

The Rise and Fall of the G20: What is the point of this Carnival in Rio?

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Executive Summary

If the G20 did not exist in 2024, would we invent it? Would it need inventing, and could it even be done? All international institutions are constrained by path dependencies as they evolve – sometimes to the detriment of their evolution – and the G20 is no different. As a body established in the wake of the global financial crisis to oversee the recovery and bring together the ‘rising powers’ with the core G7 states, this strange entity has, almost two decades later, still struggled to define a clear role for itself.

Is it a club, a steering committee, a forum, or a conventional international organisation? It has had the potential to be each of these things at different points, without ever fully consolidating

as one of them. Perhaps this amorphousness is a strength. But it is more plausibly a weakness, because the G20 faces a potential legitimacy crisis in a world where questions of sustained economic stagnation, geopolitical upheaval and accelerating climate change are inescapable. Consequently, the tensions it embodies – occasionality vs permanence, representativeness vs exclusivity, narrowness vs width, steering vs governing – have become even sharper and in need of resolution.

Where did the G20 come from?

The G20 was once the new kid on the block. The epitome of a more diverse and engaged multilateral global order that had redefined global cooperation towards a more concert-based system

to resolve intractable global economic crises. The annual summit came of age [with the shift](#) from a Finance Ministers' meeting format to one of global leaders during the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC). This upgrading enabled a form of collective decision-making that – in recognition of the rapid emergence of the so-called 'rising powers' or [BRICS countries](#) and the [relative decline of the core G7 states](#) – brought in a wider range of voices from both the Global North and South aimed at stemming and stabilising the tsunami of economic disorder engendered by the crisis.

The G20 thus became a crucial '[steering committee](#)' that – to some degree – overcame the legitimacy and efficiency challenges facing existing mechanisms. The years following its establishment in this format have seen the G20 become a crucial site of global politicking. It is the forum within which key global leaders can still sit down together and deliberate vital issues with less restrictiveness than would be the case in, say, the G7 (efficient, but increasingly illegitimate) or the UN (more legitimate, but far less efficient). Of course, the G20 has not found the perfect balance of the two – by definition, there is always a trade-off – but it is hard to imagine the diplomatic

calendar without it, and all members appear broadly committed to it. For the most part, leaders still attend – although Russian President, Vladimir Putin is [notably absent from Rio de Janeiro](#) – and host countries work hard to develop an expansive agenda.

The world of 2024 is not the one of 2008. In fact, astonishing as it may sound to anyone who remembers the collapse of Lehman Brothers, almost two decades have now passed since the GFC (and it is a quarter of a century since 9/11). Many places face not acute financial collapse, but chronic stagnation, something exacerbated by the [second 'once in a generation' crisis](#) of the Covid-19 pandemic, in turn fomenting the rise of populist and nativist politics alongside powerful and unaccountable digital monopolies. Geopolitical upheaval – including but not limited to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine – sundered that premise of a new multilateral order. Although not a feature of our analysis here, these challenges are overlaid by rapidly accelerating climate change that presages the imminent shattering of key tipping points, notably the demand of [the most vulnerable countries](#) – most of whom [have no representation in the G20](#) while constituting the 'marginal

majority' of the world's states – to keep global heating to 1.5C below pre-industrial levels.

Why is it struggling?

Observers have long lamented the G20's patchy record of achievement. But it arguably faces a deeper set of challenges that potentially threaten its value – and even its viability – as a global forum. Given wider upheavals, the membership increasingly appears a fractured and divisive grouping with drastically varying outlooks. This is exacerbated as domestic political pendulums swing more wildly than ever, with countries changing hands more frequently between [nationalists and multilateralists](#) with very different norms and values regarding the meaning and importance of geopolitical stability. Moreover, this does not necessarily reflect an inevitable authoritarian-democratic divide: China, [despite its evident illiberalism](#), has often sought to defend global multilateralism – [including at this G20 summit](#) – while the US has frequently done the opposite, something [only likely to intensify](#) during Donald Trump's second presidential term.

This, in turn, reveals the fallacy of relying upon an 'informal' gathering comprising a changing cast of global leaders with unpredictable and fluctuating visions for international order, including their very commitment to the G20. Indeed, not only did Putin swerve this summit, but Argentina's bombastic libertarian President, Javier Milei, [denounced much of the communiqué](#). There are at least four specific tensions facing the G20. First, its informality reflects its '[occasionality](#)': as summits rotate between members, there remains a sense of impermanence and incoherence. Second, the majority of the world's states are excluded, but this exclusivity does not necessarily generate the corresponding efficiency (and may induce illegitimacy). Third, the G20's remit is, to some degree, unclear: it is neither sufficiently narrow and penetrating nor sufficiently broad and comprehensive to be the decisive apex committee for managing the global economy. Fourth, following this, few agree whether it should primarily 'steer' or rather seek to govern these processes.

These tensions highlight a wider debate about whether the body could become a [fully institutionalised](#) international

organisation with a permanent secretariat or whether it should remain as something more diffuse. Both options have their pros and cons, but the danger with the latter is that it inherently reflects a status quo characterised by institutional stagnation rather than evolution. This reinforces the tendency for G20 summitry to be defined by whatever the most immediate pressing diplomatic conflicts are at a given moment rather than a substantive policy agenda geared towards shaping and managing longer-term strategic considerations. Put more crudely, and given how trivial some (but not all) of those conflicts are, this direction of travel can lead the G20 to being, as one of us once called it, [little more than a circus](#).

In the case of Rio de Janeiro, though, carnival might be a more adequate description. But this is something Lula worked hard to avoid, elaborating a serious agenda focused on [three core issues](#): reform of international institutions, global sustainability, and global hunger. Nonetheless, as is increasingly the case with G20 hosts, these issues also arguably reflect their own personal pet projects. For Lula, focusing on these issues *is* the most important part of dealing with

intractable problems and he is not incorrect to argue that a coalition of economies such as the G20 has the ability to deal with some of these challenges. Yet the functioning of international institutions, global hunger, and sustainability are all moonshots unless this group of leading states also engages seriously with the conflicts raging around that world that threaten any collective global effort to respond to these wider challenges. And, following our argument above, it is those pressing conflicts that have – along with Lula’s thematic agenda – usurped much of the G20’s bandwidth, in contrast to the kind of sustained and focused set of objectives that could, if it was constituted differently, be at the core of its management of the global economy.

Whither Ukraine?

President Lula’s well-choreographed focus on sustainability and reform, alongside outreach to civil society and indigenous groups, has been supplanted by the now all-encompassing focus on the ongoing war in Ukraine and the escalation of the conflict following US President [Joe Biden’s announcement](#) on the Sunday that the US would now allow the

Ukrainians to use ATACMS munitions on Russian soil in defence of Ukrainian territorial gains in the Kursk region, and in the face of the much anticipated onslaught of North Korean troops in the war. This has shifted the narrative of the G20 completely.

It is quite clear, though, that Lula has not wanted to talk about Ukraine any more than necessary in Rio. The fact that it appears only once in the [leaders' communiqué](#) – which, unusually, emerged on the first day of the summit – as part of a broader platitude about durable peace to be achieved through the principles that underpin the UN. This lies in direct contrast to [the unified declaration](#) made a few days earlier by the G7, stating that on the anniversary of 1,000 days of war since the Russian invasion that the G7 stands in solidarity with Ukraine and its efforts to secure its freedom and territorial sovereignty.

The absence of Russian President Vladimir Putin had dominated early press discussion of the summit, but in reality the avoidance of causing trouble for Lula over the International Criminal Court's (ICC) arrest warrant that is outstanding for the Russian leader has also allowed the Brazilian President to avoid engaging with either the failed peace negotiations the Brazilian

government had attempted earlier in the conflict or that fact that Brazil's traditional 'non-aligned' status has enabled them to avoid engaging with any punitive sanctions on Russia over the illegal war while also allowing Lula to align Brazil more closely with Russia within the BRICS, a body which [is itself expanding rapidly](#) to take in more authoritarian countries.

Although much of the focus on the G20 had been on the potential disruption that would be caused by the re-election of Donald Trump, the real steal of the show has come from lame-duck Biden's ATACMS announcement, which was quickly described by Russian officials [as a major escalation](#) of the conflict by the US. The irony of this statement will not be lost on those Ukrainians who have suffered the impact of a [mass Russian rocket and drone assault](#) designed to both cripple Ukrainian infrastructure and power generation, as well as send a clear message to the international community that supports Ukraine that Russia is still in this war to win it. The humiliation of German Chancellor Olaf Schultz was a mere helpful byproduct from the Russian perspective as it sent a clear signal of rejection of any renewal of soft diplomacy to encourage Russia to be

reasonable in any form of peace negotiations.

These aspects have driven much of the immediate reporting on the G20 Summit while the voice – and agency – of Ukraine as an independent state has been overshadowed by the idea that major powers have the right to enable and enforce a peace agreement that would be largely dictated by Russian terms, and perhaps be driven by a new Trump administration from January next year. Lula's administration has, since the beginning of the war, attempted to preserve an idea of neutrality in the conflict and shape an international position as a potential mediator in resolving the conflict. The President is on record as stating that Brazil does [not want to become involved in the Russo-Ukraine war](#), either through supporting the policies of Western states in arming Ukraine to resist the Russian aggression, or in engaging with or enforcing international sanctions on Russia.

Instead, Brazil's purported neutrality has been framed as having utility in ultimately shaping a peace agreement to end the conflict. So far, Brazilian efforts at influencing either side in the conflict have resulted in little to no progress in shifting either Russian or

Ukrainian positions on the end point of the war. At the same time, the continued willingness of Brazil to coalesce around a group of states that wish to challenge the pre-existing liberal international order, under the auspices of the BRICS, has continued to demonstrate that neutrality in position on the war does not extend beyond the waterline of self interest when it comes to both economic relationships and political aims in challenging what President Lula sees as the dominance of the US and a hegemonic global order controlled by Western interests. For Lula, reform of international institutions means multipolarity and the strengthening of a diverse range of political positions that includes authoritarian leaders and international pariahs.

Yet, multipolarity can also mean global instability. As the UK and France follow suit in [endorsing the use](#) of Storm Shadow missiles to strike targets inside Russia, the Russian government has responded by stating that this action will involve a change in Russia's policy on the use of nuclear weapons and a clear threat to escalate the conflict further. While Moscow has made these threats in the past, it is yet another indication of the importance of ending this conflict.

The fact that the G20 has absolved itself of this responsibility, particularly in light of Brazil's past record on calling for the non-use of nuclear weapons, is a worrying sign of its own growing irrelevance in serious global affairs. Returning to our argument above, this is problematic in two ways: the G20 is unable to decisively resolve the immediate geopolitical crisis, yet it still overshadows the substantive political-economic agenda.

Tackling global hunger without even mentioning Sudan?

Lula's focus on global hunger at the G20 is laudable. But the fact that neither he nor the leaders' communiqué actually engages with the growing famine caused by the Sudanese civil war (or, indeed, the situation in Gaza) is testament to both the political failure of the group but also to the lack of geopolitical insight present in the Brazilian host's outlook. If global hunger were a key pillar of G20 efforts, backed by Lula's domestic attempts to improve the lives of Brazilian citizens through programmes such as Bolsa Família, then the famine that is sundering the lives of so many would seem nonsensical to raise up the agenda in terms of both global

response to the starvation of those suffering but also to initiate a diplomatic effort to resolve the conflict.

The civil war in Sudan has been raging for over a year now with tens-of-thousands of Sudanese having been killed and an [estimated 8 million people displaced due to the conflict](#). With both Sudanese military forces and the Rapid Support Force (RSF) militia (formerly the Janjaweed militia responsible for a genocide in West and South Sudan in the early 2000s) committing atrocities and using hunger as a weapon there is a clear need for international engagement with the conflict and a resolution to a conflict of such scale. The fact that some members of the G20 have tried, and failed, to broker a ceasefire in the conflict could explain the unwillingness to engage with this topic. However, it should also be recognised that some member states are actively participating in the conflict through the use of non-state actor mercenary groups whilst non-G20 member states who were guests in Rio such as the United Arab Emirates, are also [actively backing one side of the conflict](#) and have just [significant funds to this year's G20 sustainability programme](#).

The World Food Programme has stated that 25 million Sudanese [are facing acute hunger](#) and there are 13 areas of the country that are at risk of famine. The announcement of the Global Alliance Against Hunger alongside smiling photoshoots and upbeat music videos produces a jarring sensation of disconnect between the G20 leaders and the real world as they talk about solving global hunger, and of coming together to establish a new and effective framework for doing so, but then fail to discuss or engage with a 21st Century famine.

Why did Gaza and Lebanon deserve no more than a footnote?

The war in Gaza, and the 7th October attacks conducted by Hamas on Israel have dominated Western news outlets for months. The escalation of the conflict into Lebanon and the tit-for-tat military action conducted by both Iran and Israel has created a regional tinderbox that leading Western states, such as the US, have struggled to keep a lid on.

Even as a regional conflict, the ongoing travesty and suffering in both Gaza and in Lebanon caused by this war has led to wider calls for significant

humanitarian aid access and accusations of both [war crimes and genocide](#), the G20 has completely sidestepped the issue. The resultant communiqué from the leaders is simply performative in its nod towards a redundant two-state solution (at least in the immediate future) and the usual platitudes about Palestinian rights.

The fact that the G20 contains some previously very vocal states on Palestinian rights and a multitude of non-Western states who have repeatedly called out what they see as Western hypocrisy when it comes to the conflict in Gaza and the war in Ukraine, are in turn, silent when it comes to shifting this regional conflagration into the G20's in-tray. The silence on this subject in such a preeminent forum of global cooperation, and what the host government sees as a platform that could help shift towards a just and multipolar order, is deafening. The reason this matters for our purpose here is that a core justification for the G20's existence is its greater inclusivity and inspiration of southern voices. Yet, on this issue, those voices appear to have been silenced.

A failure of leadership?

Returning to our opening point, would we invent the G20 in 2024 were it not to exist? It is sometimes said that the body is really a 'G2' or 'G3', of value precisely because it brings together the US, China and the EU. It is difficult to argue that there is no truth in this, in a world where all three are pursuing staggering levels of interventionist industrialisation in the industries of the future – using protectionist tools to build and reshore production networks that only make sense in economies of their continental scale – to generate a degree of [‘strategic autonomy’](#) no other individual state can either replicate or contend with. We suspect that, if we needed to invent a new body from scratch, today, it would be one that institutionalised these three actors as dominant partners, with the other BRICS countries, the UK, Japan, Australia and so on in an outer ring.

Nonetheless, the point of the G20 is to demonstrate global leadership. This was meant to come through bilateral and multilateral agreements within an informal and personal space. It has once again failed to demonstrate leadership on some of the most pressing global issues, arguably undermining what should be its

substantive core agenda of shoring up multilateralism and steering the global economy. But we cannot blame Lula alone for this. The G20 has structurally shifted towards a pantomime performance of solidarity amongst leaders and states who do not share a similar interest on global issues and outcomes. Perhaps, if Lula and others are right that a multipolar order is preferable for managing international affairs, then a multipolar G-Summit format is the route to actual progress.

Yet, when measured on the metric of how successful the Rio summit has been, this can be assessed through the opening paragraph of the leaders' communique that states that they reaffirmed their commitment to 'leaving no one behind' while addressing major global challenges and crises. When the above three conflicts are measured against this statement the Rio G20 has abjectly failed. If it wishes to survive as a global forum of cooperation that actually tackles intractable problems, then it requires substantial reform, perhaps even with a permanent secretariat to provide administrative capacity and coherence (elsewhere [one of us has advocated Singapore](#), for a range of reasons). Essentially, the G20 needs to decide what it is: is it a

club, an informal meeting place, a [‘hybrid focal point’](#), or is it a serious international organisation with a tightly defined remit?

Our preference would be for it to move in the latter direction, although there are many ways this could happen, and all of them would imply a deliberate journey towards one end of the spectrum implied by the four tensions described earlier. One vision would be for a G20 that pares back its core agenda to a few issue-areas, even returning to its origins as a finance ministers’ forum for responding to international financial crises. Another would be paring back (or expanding) the membership to render it more focused or legitimate. Yet another would be to narrow its remit in terms of action – i.e. steering but not governing – while perhaps expanding it

to offer directional thrust across all areas of global governance. The point is that, at present, it is everything and nothing, beset by stasis and short-termism. A widened remit, membership *and* activity has only rendered its value and significance muddier, driving it into a cul-de-sac of ineffective announcements and bland proclamations that are only given a shine of respectability by the carnival atmosphere that justifies a global leader’s presence at its regular, but ineffective, jamborees.

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