

## 7. France and the Sea Island Summit

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Hello, I'm John Kirton, professor of political science and director of the G8 Research Group at the University of Toronto, here today to talk to you about France and the G8.

In many ways France, along with the United States, is the most important country in the G8, from the first summit in 1975 through to the 2004 Sea Island Summit itself. France credibly claims to be the founder of the G8 Summit, as the first gathering was held at the invitation of French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing at the Château de Rambouillet on the outskirts of Paris in November 1975. Since that time, many of the great leaps forward in the development and performance of the summit have come when France has inaugurated the seven-year hosting cycle, as it did at Versailles in 1982, Paris in 1989 and Lyon in 1996. France did so again last year at Evian in June 2003. At Evian, the summit was defined by the great drama of whether the transatlantic war between the United States and France over the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq would be set aside so that a G8 summit success could come. That drama has returned for Sea Island due to America's initial plans for a summit very different than that of Evian, and over the content of a [United Nations](#) Security Council (UNSC) resolution that would define how authority in Iraq would be transferred from the U.S. to a new, sovereign Iraqi government on June 30, 2004.

At Sea Island on June 8–10, 2004, as during the 30 years before, Franco-American differences will provide much of the defining polarities and public drama around which G8 summit diplomacy and success revolve. But at Sea Island, as in earlier years, France and the United States are destined to come together and co-operate, through a process of balanced, mutual adjustment, in which France in the end largely gets what it really wants.

### **The Debate over French Summit Diplomacy**

To be sure, this optimistic judgement is but one view in a vigorous debate among several schools of thought about the content, causes and consequences of France's summit diplomacy. The first school sees France as a growing partner due to declining power. In this view, France, as founder of the G7, as it was then, seeks a deliberative summit dominated by elected heads, featuring informal, secretive, free-wheeling debate, focused on economic issues such as international monetary system, exchange rate stability, North-South relations and developing country debt, and one in which it aligns against America with support from Italy and the European Union. However, France has shifted to become an all-European leader, and harmonious partner, as Franco-American divisions erode. These shifts have been driven by France's emphasis on domestic autonomy and external independence, its traditional leadership in Europe, eastern Europe and Africa, its presidentially predominant *étatisme* and increasing the declining power that its relatively closed, uncompetitive economy provides.

A second school sees France as a growing G8 system builder due to American power. In this view, there has been a radical transformation in France's approach, toward the lavish formal summits starting in 1981, toward a "soft" then "hard" security agenda starting in 1989, and ultimately toward building the G8 as one of many consequential international institutions to contain an ever more powerful and unilateralist U.S. Here, the core cause is less France's declining power on its own side of the Atlantic than the emergence of a pre-eminent America, first with the advent of the Reagan revolution in the 1980s, then with the victory in the cold war in the 1990s, and finally with the booming American Goldilocks economy that made

America a *hyperpuissance* led by President George Bush.

A third school sees France fostering a G8 for informal economic concert governance in a globalizing world. Here France seeks a status quo club of the world's economically most powerful countries that share common values, where the purpose is free dialogue rather than negotiation and institutionalization, where the agenda is restricted to issues of economics, North-South dialogue and common weaken conscience, where each member contributes equally to the agenda, where outspoken disagreement is ruled out, where the result is a soft consensus encoded in short, non-binding communiqués. This approach is driven by the pace of foreign policy and the G8 as part of the President's domestic *domaine réservé*, by French democratic institutionalist respect for the existing prerogatives of the legalized security institutions of the [United Nations Security Council](#) (UNSC), the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#) (NATO) and the [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe](#) (OSCE), and of France's desire to preserve the pre-eminence of the regional European Community. Even in the economic terrain, France looks first to preserve the prerogatives of the EU with its hard law and particular rules in which France has a prominent place.

A fourth school points to French security minimalism in the G8, giving the G8 a role as French sees it in the security field, but in a restricted way. The French look to the G8 to put non-traditional security problems, such as terrorism and organized crime — issues not directly addressed by the UN Charter — on the international agenda. In this way, the G8 can be a catalyst for a moribund UN, as in Kosovo in 1999 or in the liberation of East Timor a few years later. This limited security role reflects the fact that the G8 lacks the legitimacy of the UN but shares the same "unit veto" procedure in which each individual member can say no and which allows France to stop what it does not like through its voice in the G8,

just as with its voice as a veto among the five members of the UNSC.

### **The Evidence of French Summit Diplomacy, 1975 to 2003**

To arbitrate this vigorous debate, we turn to the evidence on France's summit diplomacy to see what it shows France really does with, and within, the G8 club.

The grades given by Sir Nicholas Bayne to each summit for the overall achievements delivered by each shows that France, as host, always produces successful summits, at least according to the average that each seven-year summit hosting cycles provides. Rambouillet in 1975 earned a grade of A-, while the whole class over the first cycle earned an average of only B-. Versailles in 1982 got C, against a class average of C- for the second cycle. The Summit of the Arch at Paris in 1989 — the summit that successfully ended the cold war — earned B+, compared to C+ for the third cycle as a whole. Lyon 1996 got a B, as the rest of the class finally caught up to France for the fourth cycle with its grade of B as well. While the grade for Evian 2003 and the fifth cycle is not yet in, the 30-year cadence suggests that France is likely to do well at Sea Island, as are the United States and the Summit itself.

France is fond of declaring that the G8 Summit should not be a *directoire*, trying to run the world. Yet a close look at the success of French-hosted summits in producing concrete collective decisions shows that France, in fact, operates the G8 as a decisional *directoire*. France's first summit produced only 14 decisions, against a first-cycle average of 31. But the 65 decisions produced in 1982, the 61 in 1989 and the 127 in 1996 were all well above the cycle average at the time. Evian 2003 generated 206 decisions — the highest number in the three-decade history of the forum. This record suggests that it might well be through the G8, rather than the United Nations Security Council or [International Monetary Fund](#) (IIMF), that France wants to govern the world.

As a proudly independent great power, France — like the United States — jealously guards its unilateralist prerogative, and is reluctant to be bound by what is decided by international institutions controlled by others. Not surprisingly, for the first 15 years of G8 summitry, France had the lowest level of compliance with its G8 commitments, with the U.S. was in a close second spot. Since then, however, French compliance has steadily improved. Indeed, France and the United States have been complying to a high degree with the priority commitments they made at Evian.

Overall, France ranks first in hosting successful, high-performing, well-above-average summits overall. It mounts long summits in big cities. Its summits generate many communiqués, with many words and many commitments, which are complied with to a substantial degree. Yet French-hosted summits give birth to no G8 ministerial institutions and produce fewer remit mandates than the norm. France thus creates unusually formal, directional, decisional and delivering summits, with virtually no institutional binding at all. In sharp contrast to the perennial French proclamations, France's revealed preference is for a leaders-controlled *directoire*, reminiscent of the Concert of Europe of the nineteenth century.

### France's Priorities for Sea Island

With this 30-year record, what will France's contribution at the American-hosted June 2004 Sea Island Summit likely be?

France is approaching Sea Island at the guardian of the Evian legacy, with a desire to continue its great success in ending the transatlantic war over the American-led coalition's war in Iraq. Above all, this has led it to join with Germany in the quest to make America's pet project — the Greater Middle East Initiative, or GMEI — a Sea Island success. Here a particular challenge was the component concerning the UN resolution required to hand over authority to a new Iraqi government on June 30, and the residual responsibility that

the United States would retain. This old game in the old UN context has tended to bring out the old divisions as Sea Island draws nigh.

As the guardian of the Evian legacy, France was in the forefront of those supporting an expansion of the Sea Island agenda in ways that gave some of their Evian priorities a greater afterlife. In the first rank in this regard stood Africa, and its famine and food security, peace support, private sector development and global health (beyond polio).

Elsewhere, the French were likely to bring two additional issues to the summit table. The first was on financing for development, where Jacques Chirac had become attached to the idea of a tax on international transactions such as oil to raise the necessary funds. A second was sustainable development in general, and water in particular, where Evian had made much forward movement, but which Sea Island threatened to entirely shut out.

### Conclusion

Will France and the United States be able to overcome their remaining differences, to make the Sea Island Summit a success? As the Summit approaches, the solidarity shown by the presence of George Bush and most other G8 leaders on the beaches of Normandy on June 6 to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the American and Allied liberation of France will provide a strong surge of solidarity, based on a reminder of how much France needs the United States. Moreover, on the final day of the Sea Island Summit, the presence of six invited African leaders to discuss a wide array of economic, social and security issues will show that America knows how much it needs France. This shared sense of mutual necessity will do much to make the two transatlantic powers and their proud presidents pull together, to make G8 as their shared contribution to global governance — and its Sea island installment — a very substantial success. •

**References and Recommended Reading**  
To come

**Discussion Questions**  
To come.

**Quiz**  
To come