

As G-8 Meets, Asian Leaders Seek a Bigger Role

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SINGAPORE — As Group of 8 leaders meet in the seaside resort of Deauville in northern France, most Asian leaders' eyes are focused on the Group of 20 summit meeting planned for Nov. 3 and 4 in Cannes, which is expected to grapple with how to set the global economy and its wobbling recovery on a more sustainable and balanced path to growth.

Since the economic meltdown of 2008, as far as many Asian leaders are concerned, the G-8 has been supplanted as a forum for discussing global issues by the broader G-20, which includes the emerging-market economies of China, India, Indonesia and Brazil and, all told, represents 85 percent of the world's economy and two-thirds of its population.

"We believe that there is a growing consensus in the international community that the G-20 is an appropriate, effective forum to deal with a variety of challenges facing today's global economy," said Oh Joon, South Korea's ambassador to Singapore.

"Many of these issues, including global economic imbalances and international monetary cooperation, warrant engagement of both advanced and emerging economies, which can be provided by the G-20," he said. "In fact, the G-20 leaders designated the G-20 as the premier forum for international economic cooperation at their Pittsburgh summit in September 2009."

He continued: "As for the G-8, it is not proper for a non-G-8 country to discuss its future. But we understand that there will not be much of an overlap between the agendas of the two forums. For example, at the upcoming summits at Cannes, the G-20 will continue its deliberations on international macroeconomic cooperation, reform of the international monetary system, development cooperation, etc., while the G-8 is likely to have on its agenda issues such as the Fukushima nuclear accident, the role of the Internet, and development partnership with African countries."

Gregory Chin, associate professor at York University in Toronto and acting director of global development at the Center for International Governance Innovation, a Canadian research institute, said that among Asian governments, the G-8 "was last seen as a relevant force at the time of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis," when it was still the Group of 7.

At the time, the International Monetary Fund, run by the G-8 countries of Europe and North America, largely dictated what governments would do to get through the crisis. Since then, Mr. Chin said, "Asian governments have taken measures to mitigate against having to rely on the I.M.F. in the same way. There was strong resentment in Asia toward the G-7's control of the global financial institutions, and the medicine that was offered." Today, he said, "only Japan seems to be hanging on to the G-8."

Mr. Chin said most Asian leaders now see the G-20 as better reflecting the evolution of the world economy than the G-8 and believe the larger forum has more potential to encourage benefit-sharing, as well as burden-sharing, among the key participants. But he said some Asean members, like Singapore, were “more reserved” about the G-20.

Tommy Koh, ambassador at large at Singapore’s ministry of foreign affairs, said the G-8 represented the “old order.”

“The 2008 global financial crisis showed that a body that more accurately reflected the weight of emerging economies was needed to help steer the world out of that crisis,” he said. “G-20 has thus supplanted the G-8 as the main body for global financial and economic cooperation,” he said. “That said, the G-8 still remains as a forum for political and strategic discussions, and as a caucus within the G-20.”

While the G-20 is more representative than the G-8 and better reflects the emerging order, it still lacks the kind of legitimacy the United Nations has, Mr. Koh said. “Small and medium-size countries feel marginalized by undemocratic forums such as G-20,” he pointed out.

To alleviate that problem, Singapore led like-minded countries to form the global governance group.

The group, conceptualized in April 2009 at the G-20 London Summit meeting, includes 28 countries: Bahamas, Bahrain, Barbados, Botswana, Brunei, Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Jamaica, Kuwait, Liechtenstein, Malaysia, Monaco, Montenegro, New Zealand, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Qatar, Rwanda, San Marino, Senegal, Singapore, Slovenia, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates, Uruguay and Vietnam.

“The 3-G’s basic objective is to build a bridge between the G-20 and the U.N. and to encourage the G-20 not to take actions that would undermine the U.N.,” said Vanu Gopala Menon, an ambassador who is Singapore’s permanent representative to the United Nations, who coordinates the global governance group.

Singapore attended the G-20 summit meeting in Seoul last year and has been invited to the Cannes gathering.

“Unlike the U.N. where we all have a voice, the G-20 process is closed,” Mr. Menon said. “It was in this context that Singapore convened the first meeting, which subsequently brought together a number of small and medium-size countries in the hope of developing a constructive dialogue on coordination and cooperation between G-20 and non-G-20 members.”

Mr. Menon said Asian countries in the global governance group generally agreed that “the G-20 catalyzed global actions during the financial crisis that ultimately helped avert a possible global economic depression.

“Nevertheless, there remains a need for the G-20 to be more consultative, inclusive and transparent in its deliberations for there to be wider support for its actions.”

Several U.N. members that do not belong to the Group of 20, like Norway, have criticized it for its lack of legitimacy.

The global governance group has advocated that the G-20 take on a “variable geometry” configuration allowing non-G-20 states to participate in G-20 ministerial and other gatherings on specialized issues. For example, Singapore and Switzerland could be brought in on discussions about financial institutions, in which they have significant interests, while on a subject like agriculture, non-G-20 members that have an important stake, like New Zealand, could be included.

Mr. Menon said the global governance group was currently focused on the work of the G-20 and had so far submitted four sets of papers related to development, labor, food security and the volatility of commodity prices.

Mr. Chin said the G-20 and, to some extent, the G-8 served another purpose for Asian countries: curtailing China’s rise.

“Multilateralism is seen as an institutional means through which other Asian countries can increase predictability and certainty in their relations with China,” he said, “both to lock in their access to the fast-growing Chinese domestic market and to foster mutually accepted procedures and norms for conflict management and resolution.”