

Summitry analysis and diplomacy



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This essay represents the perfect and imperfect world of summitry and it also discusses on how summitry can be integrated as a constructive mode of diplomacy. Summitry has indeed changed the landscape of political interactions between states and political leaders across the globe over the past years. In respect to this, Churchill questioned the crowd during one of the House of Commons' meeting in 1953, "if there is not at the summit of the nations the wish to win the greatest prize of peace, where can men look for hope?" (Churchill cited in Eban, 1983, p. 360). The idea behind Churchill's statement is that, it explains on how summitry can be an instrument in getting states actors to gather at one place to discuss on international political issues among them (Dunn, 1996, p. 4). Ideally, summits not only have been used as a tool to break down intense barriers between nation states leaders, but it has also helped state leaders to be more focused in addressing issues of their concerns in the best possible way. Although, in the real world of summitry, this is not always the case. As Plischke argues in *Modern Diplomacy*:

It should not be regarded as an instant elixir for the assuagement of crises... to dissimulate relief from the realities of inter-governmental ailment (1979, p. 186).

To begin with, this essay will discuss both on some of the possible strengths and flaws of the different types summits. It also argues on how summitry can be infused as a tool of a constructive means of diplomacy and it will also unearth some factors that could help determine the success of summits. The first part of this essay discusses on how summitry could be a tool in the engagement of public diplomacy and followed by with an insight on how

timing is crucial in initiating a summit. Meanwhile, the second part of this essay details on how summitry could provide an opportunity for state leaders to administrate and show their capabilities in winning a summit.

The perfect and imperfect world of Summitry

Summits are designed in such a way where each and every one of them has various themes and different objectives to be fulfilled. One must be able to segregate the different types of summits and its goals in order to further the understanding on the roles of summits. For instance, bilateral, multilateral, regional and global summits. Now, this boils down to one question, how effective are these summitries in resolving the targeted issues? The answer to this is rather subjective. Since each summit has its different purpose, the measure of success would vary as well and therefore it is difficult to layout the positive and negative aspects of summitry in general (Melissen, 2003, p. 4). For instance, the Yalta summit in 1945 and the Paris Conference of Parties 21 (COP 21) in 2015 are seventy years apart and may have little significant in common. Hence, generalising summits into one big picture would be very difficult.

Looking at the different types of summits, the Rio Earth Summit or also known as United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was one of the largest intergovernmental global climate conference ever organised. It was represented by over one hundred and eighty countries and participated by over one hundred states and government leaders across the globes. It was indeed a media magnet event that catches the attention of the news and broadcasters from all over the world (Dunn, 1996, p. 220). This

calls for an engagement in public diplomacy for state and government leaders. The purpose of the summit was to synthesise the global economic landscape or development towards a more forward looking context which takes into account on the preservation of the environment (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 1998). Dunn also mentioned in *Diplomacy at the Highest Level*:

It was hoped that this serve as a blueprint for how the nations of the world could preserve the environment and achieve sustainable development in the twenty-first century (1996, p. 222).

In relation to this, the Rio Earth Summit were seen to be a quite symbolic kind of summitry (Dunn, 1996, p. 249). This is due to the nature of the summit in which it possesses a propaganda value to it that could be either used for good purpose or just for the sake of winning the hearts of the domestic and general audiences through their participation. Not only it was the largest and the most costly climate change summit that was ever held, but it was also attended by hundreds of state leaders from all over the world. Hence, the opportunity to engage in public diplomacy was pretty massive (Palmer, 1992). To put it briefly, attending such an eventful summit was worth every moment of being noticed by the public considering the number of media coverage during that time was enormous. According to Dunn, attending the summit was very much an attestation to these state leaders in showing their relentless commitments towards the preservation of the environment regardless if they did not agree upon the discussed agendas during the meeting. They want to be perceived as a leader who 'cares' about just everything and they wish to give an impression to the general

public that they are trying to make some changes (1996, p. 249). This approach is often used as a form of public diplomacy and indeed, it can be considered as a constructive mode of diplomacy. For example, Bush used the opportunity to be seen as a good ' leader' by attending the summit despite of the series of situations that was going on in the US during that time. His hands were tight with different kinds of issues including his upcoming re-election. Hence, to be seen under the limelight were one of the many ways for him to attain more credits from the domestic audiences (Dunn, 1996, p. 233). As stated by Hamilton and Langhorne in *The Practice of Diplomacy*, " air travel and television cameras have made world statesmen of the humblest party hacks" (1995, p. 221). Having said that, summit has not only been beneficial for state leaders but also for the politicians in hope to enhance their status in the public from meeting all these world leaders. In respect to this, symbolic summits are not just limited to this kind of agenda, but it could also exemplify the relations between nations through summits. To support this statement, as documented by Dunn in *Diplomacy at the Highest Level*:

The handshake on the White House lawn between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin in 1993 was equally important as an attempt to symbolize the new era of relations between Israel and the Palestinian people (1996, p. 248).

On the other side of this coin, level of preparation process in terms of timing also matters in ensuring the success of a summit. Regardless of its positive strand in the engagement of public diplomacy, Rio Earth Summit was barely a mere success. For instance, Rio Earth Summit was not a perfect timing for countries like the US. Considering that US was perceived to be the

paramount actor in this conference, but in the actual fact, the US delegations were really keeping their heads down throughout the meetings (Dunn, 1996, p. 233). How does timing has got anything to do with this? In the case of the US, the country's economy was going through a recession and as mentioned earlier, President Bush was also due for his nearing re-election. One of his main concerns were also the risk of committing into any agreement on the sustainable developmental programmes that was discussed during the summit. The potential results from agreeing to any agreements from the summit were rather ambiguous as it could jeopardise the US's employment level even further and also, his fear for losing the trust and his wealthy conservative supporters from both the political parties the US (Dunn, 1996, p. 233). Hence, this explains for the quiet actions from the US delegation at Rio Earth Summit. Therefore, the summit could have been more favourable if the US did not have to hold back due to their situations back home. In addition to this, US was not the only one who were torn in leading the conference, the EC (European Community) could have also done a greater job at it but of all the EC state members, only Germany was set on making an equitably significant amount of commitment towards the agreement. The rest of the other EC state members like Italy and France were on the same boat as the US due to their respective issues in their home countries (Dunn 1996, p. 233). As articulated by Weihmiller, Doder and Newsom in *U. S.- Soviet Summits*, that, timing of a summit has been seen as one of the critical factors in ensuring the success of a summit (1986, p. 98). In retrospect, the issue on timing were noticeably reflected during the Kennedy - Khrushchev summit in 1961 at Vienna which severely affected the resolution to the root of the problem. It was too soon to be holding another summit as the Paris

summit of the year before that were not settled yet and to top it all, the issues with Berlin previously has lead this summit to a total flop (Weihmiller et al., 1986, p. 99). In this context, when summit is initiated at a wrong time, it could lead to a waste of resources and also, affecting diplomatic relations between state leaders as the subject discussed during the conference remains unresolved. Therefore, it remains debateable to as whether or not if summitry can be an elixir or regarded as an effective mode of diplomacy.

On a brighter side, summits could also provide room for state actors or non-state actors to show their capabilities in leading a summit especially on international level that could not be consummated on a lower level (Dunn, 1996, p. 251). This has been seen on some climate change conferences such as the recent Paris Agreement (COP 21), Kyoto Protocol (COP 3) or even Copenhagen Agreement (COP 15) in 2009. The European Union (EU) in particular. The EU has tremendously manifested the world with their pro-climate change leadership. What they are doing is an incontestably positive in attracting other state members to follow their footsteps. As Maljean-Dubois and Wemaera states in their journal, *Carbon & Climate Law Review*, “EU has always claimed a climate leadership role in the climate negotiations, leading by example with its ambitious climate policy” (2016, p. 3). That said, summitry is not only impactful in terms of public diplomacy, but it is also a constructive method in improving diplomatic relations through positive movements by a bold leader such as the EU. Although to be fair, the United States were one of the first and the most powerful supporters of international climate change and environmental agreements. However, the limelight has shifted to the EU as the major leader in global environmental scene

(Kelemen and Vogel, 2009). In light of this, summitry can also give a fair opportunity for leaders from small nations to represent themselves on the highest league table and hence, making them more noticeable in the global diplomatic arena. This was proven when the Small Island Developing states (SIDS) and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) managed to turn the table at the COP 15 at Copenhagen in 2009 (de Águeda Corneloup and Mol, 2013). Climate change is a threat for small island nations especially those of which nations which are prone to extreme weather conditions. As stated by de Águeda Corneloup and Mol in *International Environmental Agreements*, “The raise of sea temperature threatens marine ecosystems, on which small island populations usually strongly depend” (2013, p. 282). The SIDS were able to negotiate through the representative organisation, AOSIS and be heard by the rest of the other state members at COP 15. Being in a vulnerable position themselves, this has helped them to initiate action plans through several leadership skills and remained as significant as other state members at the summit. Their perseverance has lead them to some fairly successful negotiations especially on the 1.5 °C target as it was finally embedded in the Copenhagen Accord (de Águeda Corneloup and Mol, 2013). However, summits on climate change are often being seen as highly sensitive area and often associated to the level of power that the state actors have. For instance, considering SIDS state members are seen to be on a weaker side as they have very little power on the international level, structural power of state actors is often regarded as a determining factor in any international negotiations (de Águeda Corneloup and Mol, 2013). As disclosed by Ambassador Dessima Williams of Grenada at the COP 15 summit:

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We went in, AOSIS fought for everything we could come out with...as you could see we didn't come out with much (Wasuka cited in de Águeda Corneloup and Mol, 2013, p. 291).

To put it briefly, no matter how much effort has been pumped into these summits by these weaker states, level of structural power of state actors is still one of the major determinant in negotiation process on any international summits.

Summit: yes or no?

What can be concluded based on the arguments above is that, despite of its contestations on the effectiveness and its constructive role in diplomacy, summitry has become an indispensable means of convention both on regional and international level. As Dunn argues in *Diplomacy at the highest level*:

Summitry has evolved considerably in the post-war period. From being an exceptional and therefore high-profile event, summitry has developed to become a frequent and routine instrument of international diplomacy (Dunn, 1996, p. 265).

However, one cannot deny that summitry has its substantive risks particularly on how the timing matters in initiating a summit especially involving states from all across the globe. The aim of a summit is not to only discuss on the subject of interests, but also to produce a fair outcome by the end of the meetings. Or else, the effort of organising a summit will be in vain if nothing comes out of it. Hence, it is crucial to take into account timing as

one of the important factors during the preparation period. Although to be fair, factors like economic recessions and political instability of other state members are something that is rather inevitable. In this respect, the power position of one's state has also been a major determinant in ensuring the success of reaching the summit's objectives.

On a lighter note, summitry has been proven to be an effective mechanism for some weaker states to be prominent in the global arena despite for its limited structural power. In addition to this, summitry also has a unique nature that it could be use as tool in promoting public diplomacy especially in a global scale summit. This has been utilised as a best practice by state leaders and diplomats in pursuit of grabbing the attention of the public eye including the media. Especially in an era of free flow of information, state leaders and diplomats find summits to be quite amusing as public opinions matters in today's world of politics. Regardless of the outcome of the summit, these leaders do not walk out of the conference with empty handed. Some walk out of the summit with pride and several accomplishments, but in many instances, most of them walk out with just one thing, a free publicity to themselves. Which how I would like to put it as, ' free-riding at its best'.