

Bilateralism takes the lead after the Osaka G20 summit

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The G20 leaders' summit in Osaka last month concluded with the announcement of several important multilateral achievements. But these were in many ways overshadowed by bilateral meetings, both on the fringes of the G20 summit itself and immediately thereafter.



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced at the closing session of the 2018 summit in Buenos Aires that this year's Osaka summit would include as priority agenda items the promotion of free trade, global health, climate change, and women's empowerment. And at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2019, he added global data governance to the agenda — proposing the 'Osaka Track' that would promote the free flow of data across borders 'with trust' and prevent any one nation from hoarding its data.

Although there was support in general at the Osaka summit to further facilitate the free flow of data, countries such as India, China, and South Africa opposed attempts to interfere with their domestic data governance systems.

On climate change, 19 members reiterated their commitment to the Paris climate accord, but the United States alone — as in Buenos Aires — committed only to reducing its greenhouse gas emission. Still, all 20 members supported the 'Osaka Blue Ocean Vision', an initiative proposed by Japan to address the problem of marine plastic waste by reducing additional marine plastic litter to zero by 2050.

On trade, the Osaka leaders' declaration stated, 'We strive to realize a free, fair, non-discriminatory, transparent, predictable and stable trade and investment environment, and to keep our markets open'. But the absence of any mention of fighting protectionism was

notable, wording that was rejected by the United States.

That there were no major blunders at the Osaka summit meant that Abe could declare the meeting — the first time Japan hosted the G20 — [a success](#) ^[1]. Seated as the summit chairman between US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping, Abe was able to appeal to observers that he was playing a central leadership role on the world stage.

His main audience, of course, was the Japanese public, who would be voting less than a month later in the Upper House elections. The election outcome would determine whether Abe and his coalition partners [retain enough seats](#) ^[2] to proceed with his top policy priority — revising for the first time the Japanese Constitution.

Most analysts judge the summit to have been ‘successful’ in that no leader walked out and a leaders’ declaration was announced, but few believe that any major breakthroughs were achieved. In this sense, the Osaka summit evinced more show than substance. But the summit contributed to the Japanese public’s perception that Abe is a world-class leader, which means that it achieved Abe’s goal of increasing the likelihood of his Liberal Democratic Party minimising its losses in the Upper House elections.

Although the G20 summit is a multilateral forum, many of the more consequential issues and meetings in Osaka were bilateral. In many ways, the summit was overshadowed by the US–China trade war and the temporary truce announced following a meeting between Trump and Xi; the warming of Japan–China relations reflected by a cordial meeting between Abe and Xi in which they agreed on Xi’s state visit to Japan in 2020; UK Prime Minister Theresa May’s confrontation with Russian President Vladimir Putin over the Salisbury Novichok poisonings.

US–Japan relations also featured heavily, especially after widely-reported statements by Trump expressing dissatisfaction with the US–Japan Security Treaty because it was ‘unfair’ — obligating the United States to go to the defence of Japan but not vice versa.

Recognising the limitations of the multilateral forum, Abe himself held bilateral meetings in Osaka with nearly 20 leaders, including Trump, Xi, Putin, European Council President Donald Tusk, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Abe’s rejection of a bilateral meeting requested by South Korean President Moon Jae-in was widely interpreted as retaliation for recent South Korean actions — unilateral dissolution of the foundation created in South Korea as a result of the 2015 bilateral agreement on ‘comfort women’, a South Korean destroyer radar ‘locking in’ a Japanese patrol aircraft (denied by South Korea) in 2018, and recent verdicts by the South Korean Supreme Court relating to Japanese companies’ actions during Japanese colonial rule and World War II. This rejection was a way for Abe to show his base, immediately before the Upper House election, that he remains ‘tough on South Korea’.

But the event that attracted by far the most media attention was the [meeting between Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un](#) ^[3] in the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea on 30 June. Although Trump and Kim portrayed the meeting as a spur-of-the-moment

impromptu event triggered by Trump's Twitter message aimed at Kim, it turns out to have been a carefully orchestrated media event designed to create maximum suspense and drama.

Trump the reality TV host and Kim the son of movie maniac Kim Jong-il were a perfect couple to steal the thunder from the relatively uneventful multilateral summit in Osaka. For Trump and Kim, their historic meeting was bilateral showmanship at its best. To what extent it leads to achieving the US goal of complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of nuclear weapons in North Korea and to what extent it is merely a delaying tactic by Kim to buy more time to develop his nuclear arsenal and missiles [remains to be seen](#) ^[4].

As long as the Trump administration with its 'America First' bilateral approach continues, the prospects for truly revitalising multilateralism, including at the G20, remain dim.

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[1] a success: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/07/18/abes-fragile-success-at-the-g20/>

[2] retain enough seats:

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/07/14/abe-faces-obstacles-to-domination-of-japans-upper-house/>

[3] meeting between Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un:

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/07/01/north-korea-a-year-after-the-singapore-summit/>

[4] remains to be seen:

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/07/19/denuclearising-north-korea-what-must-happen-next/>