

G20 in Hamburg: Leadership Nowhere in Sight – Not Yet

Published on 11. July 2017 by [Reinhard Bütikofer](#)

Rarely has a G20 summit seen so many losers. Chancellor Merkel, the host, lost on two fronts. She disappointed the widespread hope that she might be the new leader of the free world. She is obviously neither strong nor visionary enough to lead. Leading is not her thing. She is a moderator. Her main achievement was to convince 18 of the 20 participants that they should not defect from a treaty they had all signed on to two years ago. Big deal! This kind of leadership is 'thin as a soup made from the shadow of a pigeon that died of starvation' (Abraham Lincoln). And secondly, she lost face because of the terrible chaos in the streets of Hamburg. President Trump lost the last little bit of respect that he might have commanded because he insisted on playing petty games like skipping out of the climate discussion like a 12-year-old who refuses to attend chemistry class. He even wasted the obvious opportunity to unite everybody against the ongoing North Korean provocations. To say it in Trump's words: 'Very weak!'

President Erdogan made himself a loser by first signing on to a statement to uphold the Paris Agreement only to contradict himself a few hours later, but even that didn't gain him the title of the fastest flip-flopper of them all. In that category, Trump beat him by first announcing a common cybersecurity unit together with President Putin, the equivalent to setting up an anti-burglary unit with a burglar, only to distance himself from this idea two tweets later.

Putin probably saw himself as a winner. But that was a misunderstanding. When he could have taken advantage of the division among the countries of the West by offering himself as a reliable partner for either the US or the EU, he decided to show how ultra-smart he is by playing and disappointing both sides, which simply shows that he is an unreliable tactician.

Most of the other leaders disappointed, lost, because they were not leader enough to influence anything. They fall in the category of 'also-rans'.

Three people stood out: President Macron stood out because he had the good wit to announce an extra climate conference in Paris to pick up and to give new impetus to the climate agenda that President Trump and others had so badly damaged. Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker stood out because he had the courage to stare down American threats against steel imports by saying in no uncertain terms that Europe would be prepared to retaliate fast. He may not have averted future trade conflicts in that field, but this kind of valiant pushback was much needed. And President Xi stood out because he did nothing. He just showed the strategic patience that we all should be more afraid of than we actually are. He understood that as long as he would not fall over his own feet, all the divisions and contradictions shaping this G20 would end up basically strengthening China's hand.

The G20 is a necessary format and at the same time an impossible one. The G20 reflects fundamental changes in global power relations and global governance. This G20 was like no other before because it demonstrated and ratified the withdrawal of the United States of America from the global leadership role that they have played for about 70 years. It demonstrated that neither Germany nor Russia nor China are capable of filling the US' shoes. It demonstrated, however, that you can expect future leadership potential from two sides: If Europe could get its act together meaning that at least the European institutions plus France plus Germany must sing from the same hymn book, Europe could provide leadership. If Europe cannot do the trick, then leadership will fall to the Chinese by default. But, who knows, the inward-focussed plutocracy that is today's United States, might – anti-Trump and post-Trump – through democratic transubstantiation, rejuvenate itself, the West and global governance.