

THE G 8 SUMMIT IN ST PETERSBURG

The Group of Eight leading industrial nations summit taking place in St Petersburg is taking place at an extremely delicate moment in post Cold War relations. In addition to focusing attention on inconsistent Russian domestic and foreign policy trends in recent years, it also provides the leaders of Canada, Japan, the United States, Russia and the four EU member states of Britain, France, Germany and Italy, to stipulate policy positions on an ever growing agenda of contemporary security challenges.

Russia officially became a G 8 member at the 1997 Denver, Colorado summit highlighting its commitment to transform itself into a prosperous global democracy. The three main themes that Russia has selected for this year's summit, namely energy security, infectious diseases and education will also be joined by numerous other topics including regional security, democracy, intellectual property protection and trade. Russia's mixed track record when it comes to political and economic reform is certain to be a topic of discussion behind the closed doors of the G 8 summit as President Vladimir Putin's counterparts seek reassurances that Russia is not going to back track from the reform agenda it signed up to in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War.

With political uncertainty in different parts of the international system resulting in record high energy prices this year the leaders of the most industrialised countries of the world will also be seeking to assurances from Russia about its energy supplies. Russia's decision to halt briefly energy supplies in January 2006 to Ukraine and its overtures to China to create an energy hub between the two countries has forced the energy security issue to the top of the political agenda. If the global economy is to continue to register positive growth Europe and the rest of the developed world must ensure that Russia remains a reliable partner when it comes to supplying energy. Russia's goal of becoming a member of the WTO should only happen if such guarantees are forthcoming.

While the G 8 summit should not be expected to solve regional conflicts and crises it is nonsensical to have such a high powered gathering not seek to address in a coherent and proactive manner the main security challenges that risk plunging global relations into further turmoil. In addition to the participation of the European Union Commission President Barroso throughout, the two day G 8 summit will also see the involvement of other world leaders and leaders of international organisations at different intervals. These include President Hu of China, Prime Minister Singh of India, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, and the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohammed El Baradei.

The escalation of hostilities in the Middle East in the run up and during the G 8 summit dictates that attention be given to immediately introducing crisis management mechanisms to contain the spread of military activity in the region. Representatives of the Middle East Quartet who are all present at the St Petersburg G 8 summit and other global leaders must realise that failure to act in avoiding a regional conflict in the Middle East will result in further volatility in global markets and also further fuel negative perceptions across the Arab world against the developed and indifferent industrialised world.

With post Cold War relations at such a defining moment the time has come for a renewed sense of leadership to emerge among those that have the power to make a difference. The G 8 summit in Russia offers an excellent opportunity for the leaders of the most developed states of the world to commence a process that focuses on projecting stability so that next year's G 8 summit in Germany, at a time when Germany will have also just held the Presidency of the EU) can further such a global agenda.

Here are some recommendations that would signal that such a process is underway. First, serious consideration needs to be given to enlarging membership of the G 8 to include both India and China. The current G 8 have 45 per cent of the world's GDP whereas inclusion of China and India would move this to the 60 per cent level, thus enhancing the forum's ability to influence global political and economic relations.

Second, with so much riding on stability in the Middle East, the international community in general and the Quartet in particular must carry out a re-think of their policy towards the Middle East. It has never been more obvious that only a concerted international effort can prevent the Middle East from a full-scale conflict that would have major negative repercussions for everyone. In addition to again focusing international diplomacy on the Israeli and Palestinian equation, similar high-level diplomatic attention needs to be dedicated to stabilising the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan and to avoiding a confrontation with Iran. Decisive leadership by all parties with an interest in global political and economic stability is urgently necessary.

Third, the world's most powerful leaders must do more than pay lip service to reducing the north-south development gap that dominates contemporary international relations. While some tentative steps towards implementation of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals have taken place, a much more comprehensive global effort is necessary if regional and global disparities are not to become a permanent feature of the international landscape.

The strength of the G 7 / 8 summits since their first gathering in 1975 has been in their ability to influence global relations in a positive manner. The 2006 G 8 summit in St Petersburg will demonstrate whether such a forum remains a credible political and economic mechanism or whether its relevance as a promoter of prosperity and peace has disappeared.

Dr. Stephen C. Calleya
International Relations Analyst