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The G7 Summit Is Theater — and the Audience Knows It

The performance is not for the leaders' own publics. It is staged for Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Pyongyang — and the gap between the script and the machinery behind it has never been wider.

The G7 leaders left Evian-les-Bains this week having agreed to be “ready to consider” extending military production licenses to Ukraine and to increase arms deliveries. They commended Ukraine’s resilience, declared a “new momentum,” and committed to increasing pressure on Russia’s war economy. What the joint statement did not do was address the \$52 billion budget gap left after the EU’s own €90 billion loan to Ukraine — a gap a senior EU official acknowledged was raised in the room and then left undiscussed, with no indication of which country would contribute what.

That sequence — sweeping language, a real number left conspicuously unaddressed — is not an aberration. It is the G7’s operating mode, and it has become the rule rather than the exception precisely because the G7 has lost the capacity to do anything else.

An Agenda That Has Become Aspirational, Not Operational

Look at what recent summits have actually produced as headline language: protect global democracy, rebuild Ukraine, de-risk from China, strengthen supply chains, accelerate the green transition, ensure AI safety. Each is a defensible, even admirable, goal. None arrives with a binding commitment, an enforcement mechanism, a dedicated budget, a timeline, or an institution charged with following through. It is a wishlist released annually under the heading of a communiqué, not a plan.

The G7 No Longer Commands the Economy It Speaks For

In the 1990s the G7 accounted for more than 65 percent of global GDP in nominal terms. Today that figure sits at roughly 43 percent and continues to fall, while China alone approaches a fifth of global output and the expanded BRICS+ bloc now out-produces the G7 in combined terms. The G7 still represents enormous wealth and remains the anchor of the dollar-, euro-, and yen-denominated financial system. What it no longer has is the structural dominance that once let its communiqués function as instructions to the rest of the world rather than aspirations addressed to it. The institution kept its voice. The floor under that voice has been quietly removed.

Domestic Politics Make the Promises Impossible to Keep

Every leader who signs a G7 communiqué returns home to a fragile coalition, a polarized legislature, a binding budget constraint, or an election within the year. They can agree, in Evian or anywhere else, to sweeping language about global action. They cannot, on their own signature, deliver the money, the industrial capacity, or the legislative votes that would turn that language into outcomes. What a G7 leader can promise and what a G7 leader can actually pass through a

domestic legislature are two different inventories, and the gap between them is precisely the space the summit's rhetoric is built to paper over.

The Performance Is Not Really for Domestic Audiences

This is the part of the dynamic most commentary misses. G7 communiqués read as though they are written to reassure voters in Paris, Washington, or Tokyo. Their more important audience sits elsewhere: Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, Pyongyang. The unity on display is a deterrence signal, not a domestic talking point — an attempt to project cohesion specifically because the underlying cohesion is the thing actually in question. It is the geopolitical equivalent of a family posing for a smiling photograph immediately after an argument, performed for the benefit of whoever might be watching the family rather than for the family itself.

The Gap Between Rhetoric and Capability, Documented

On Ukraine, the G7 has repeated some version of “support as long as it takes” at every summit since 2022. The actual machinery behind that promise tells a different story. A Pentagon report found US ammunition contracts for Ukraine running up to eighteen months behind schedule, and European manufacturers report comparable timelines — six to eighteen months once production begins, with two to three additional months simply to arrange shipping even when ammunition already exists in stock. Europe's defense industry aimed to reach two million artillery shells annually by the end of 2025; the target slipped into 2026. This week's summit statement leaves the \$52 billion Ukrainian budget shortfall unaddressed entirely.

On China, the G7's preferred verb since 2023 has been “de-risk.” The trade data has not cooperated with the rhetoric: China remains Germany's largest trading partner, supply chains across the bloc remain deeply intertwined with Chinese manufacturing, and no unified G7 China strategy exists beyond shared language. The de-risking vocabulary has changed faster than the underlying dependency has.

On climate, the G7 has pledged sums denominated in the trillions while the actual climate finance delivered runs to a fraction of those commitments — a gap long documented by the OECD's own tracking of developed-country climate finance flows against pledged targets. On artificial intelligence, the G7's Hiroshima Process produced voluntary principles and a code of conduct, not enforcement: no shared regulatory framework, no binding standard, no body with the authority to compel compliance from a G7 member, let alone from China or any other AI power outside the bloc.

In each case the G7 is speaking in the language of a hegemon while acting with the operational capacity of a committee that cannot raise its own funds, compel its own members, or enforce its own communiqués.

The Archetype of a Broader Pattern

The G7 did not invent this dynamic; it may simply be the purest expression of it. NATO performs alliance solidarity that several of its own members increasingly decline to practice when a fellow ally actually needs help. The EU performs economic integration without the enforcement machinery, the shared budget, or the unified industrial policy that integration would require to be more than a declaration. American governance performs legislative function while gridlock prevents most of what gets performed from becoming law. Each of these institutions retains its

rituals — the summit, the communiqué, the joint statement — well after the operational capacity to back those rituals has eroded. The G7 fits the pattern seamlessly because it was never anything but ritual to begin with: it has no treaty, no enforcement mechanism, no secretariat with independent authority. It was performance from its founding in 1975. What has changed is that the underlying economic dominance which once made the performance credible has shrunk by more than twenty percentage points of global output, leaving the ritual to carry weight it was never built to bear alone.

The Cleaner Comparison: What Davos Admits That Evian Does Not

There is a useful contrast sitting one rung over on the institutional ladder. The World Economic Forum, which convenes its own annual gathering of elites in Davos each January, is frequently lumped together with the G7 in popular criticism, as though both were variations on the same exercise in empty global summitry. They are not, and the difference is instructive.

The WEF is not a government body and has never claimed to be one. It is a Swiss nonprofit foundation funded primarily by roughly a thousand member corporations, convening political leaders, executives, and central bankers as invited guests rather than as office-holders exercising sovereign authority. It cannot commit a dollar of public money, pass a law, or enforce a single one of the principles it publishes. Its entire product is the meeting itself: the panels, the framing language, the informal coordination that happens in the corridors between sessions. Davos has never pretended to be a decision-making body, because it was never built to be one.

The G7 is different in exactly the respect that matters here: it retains the formal architecture of a sovereign decision-making body — seven heads of government and the EU, issuing a joint statement using the language of collective commitment — while its actual output has drifted closer and closer to what Davos produces honestly: framing language, aspirational goals, and elite signaling, without the treaty basis, enforcement mechanism, or shared budget that a body of seven governments would be expected to wield. The G7 is performing the function of Davos while still dressed in the costume of a government summit. At least Davos is not pretending to be anything else.

The two institutions share one further feature worth naming, because it cuts in both directions. Each has become a magnet for the same kind of overreading from critics convinced that elite people meeting and talking is itself proof of secret governing power. The WEF's "Great Reset" branding, intended as a 2020 pandemic-recovery framing exercise, has been credited by online conspiracy theories with a coercive global authority the organization has never possessed and structurally cannot exercise. The G7 suffers something closer to the mirror-image error: the public continues to credit it with the structural dominance it held in 1990, long after that dominance eroded to its current 43 percent share of global output. Both errors come from the same place — judging an institution by the spectacle of its meeting rather than by what the meeting can actually compel anyone, anywhere, to do.

Why the Gap Is the Actual Danger

The risk is not that the G7 is irrelevant. Institutions that openly concede irrelevance get ignored, which is its own kind of safety. The risk is that the G7 continues to speak as though it retains the capacity to deliver outcomes it no longer has the machinery to produce — and that adversaries, who are reading the communiqués as deterrence signals rather than domestic talking points,

eventually calibrate their behavior to the actual capability rather than the stated one. That gap, between what the G7 promises and what the G7 can enforce, is exactly the space in which a miscalculation becomes possible: an adversary acts on the accurate assessment that the language exceeds the capacity, while a G7 leader continues to assume the language itself is doing deterrent work it stopped doing some years ago.

When institutions lose operational capacity, they do not generally announce the loss. They compensate with performance — longer communiqués, more sweeping language, more elaborate photo opportunities — precisely because performance is the one tool that remains fully within their control. The G7 cannot mobilize an industrial base on command, compel a member's legislature, or enforce a shared China policy. It can produce a unified statement. So it does, year after year, with the statements growing more ambitious as the machinery behind them grows thinner. That is not hypocrisy. It is what institutions do when practice becomes too expensive and performance remains free.

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