

Changing the order of battle

U.S. President Donald Trump meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, Finland on July 16, 2018. | Photo Credit: [Reuters](#)

Increasingly, leaders in both democracies and authoritarian regimes are beginning to take a direct role in matters such as foreign policy, even as they preside over the destiny of their nations. Notable among those engaged in summit diplomacy are President Xi Jinping of China, President Vladimir Putin of Russia, and President Donald Trump of the U.S.

Diplomacy is one of the world's oldest professions. Summit diplomacy is, however, a comparatively recent phenomenon. In previous centuries, world leaders met occasionally, and it was the advent of World War II that gave a fillip to summit diplomacy. The U.K., for instance, was aghast when Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain personally undertook a trip to meet Adolf Hitler in 1938, as war clouds enveloped Europe. Summit diplomacy, thereafter, picked up pace as the war progressed, and one of the most vivid pictures of the time (of the Yalta Conference) featured U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin. In the immediate post-war years, however, traditional diplomacy seemed to make a comeback — but more recently, given the inability of traditional diplomacy to sort out intractable problems, summit diplomacy has come into its own.

Summit styles are personal to each leader. One common feature, however, is that Foreign Office mandarins and ministers in charge of foreign affairs are being pushed into the background. Nuanced negotiating stances are no longer the flavour of diplomatic intercourse. Summit diplomacy again tends to disdain diplomatic rigmarole.

Personal leadership tends to be highly contextual. At times what appears inappropriate could become the norm. Attitudes also change given different situations. While leadership styles may differ, what is apparent is that leaders engaged in summit diplomacy are not unduly constrained by the need to adhere to the Westphalian order.

Strong leadership and summit diplomacy do not necessarily translate into appropriate responses. Mr. Trump, hardly constrained by diplomatic etiquette, firmly believes in the aphorism, 'what starts with him changes the world'. He hardly ever debates the question, 'what will the world look like after you change it?' He is clearly an advocate of the thesis that 'a crisis by definition poses problems, but it also presents opportunities'. Most of this is, no doubt, anathema to traditional diplomats, but the U.S. President seems to be following in the wake of former French President Charles de Gaulle, 'moving in the direction of history'.

Mr. Putin is less mercurial than Mr. Trump. He is, nevertheless, unflinching in his belief that he has the answers to Russia's problems, and how to take Russia from the low point of the Yelstin years to future glory. Having established an entente with China, he is now intent on raising Russia's stakes in Europe by confronting the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and also hopes to establish itself as a key player in Eurasia. Relations between Russia and the West are possibly at their nadir today, but Mr. Putin believes that he can do business with Mr. Trump, even though there are few others in the U.S. today willing to deal with him or Russia.

At the opposite end is Mr. Xi of China, who is in the process of establishing a new political orthodoxy? Mr. Xi's 'thought' is being portrayed as the culmination of a century's historical process and philosophical refinement, produced through an ongoing dialectic of theory and practice, and encapsulating 'traditions' of the Qing dynasty, Maoist socialism and Deng's policies of reform. The chasm between the thought processes of Mr. Trump and Mr. Xi, hence, could not be wider. It

would be interesting to see how Mr. Trump, who does not flinch from pursuing a zero-sum policy, ensures that there is no open confrontation with the ideologically oriented Mr. Xi.

What the world is surprisingly discovering is that with many more countries sporting 'maximum leaders' at the helm, summitry can help cut through the Gordian knot of many existing and past shibboleths. It is uncertain at this time whether this is more make-believe than real. The meeting between Mr. Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, in Singapore in mid-June, is a classic example of 'daredevilry' at the highest level which could only be attempted by leaders cocooned in their own personal beliefs ignoring past history and current problems. The meeting, which the two principals claim to be a success, has certainly lowered the temperature in Northeast Asia, irrespective of what professional diplomats and others believe. It has kindled some hope that North Korea may desist, at least for now, from persisting with its nuclear shenanigans. Doomsday prophets claim that this is only a mirage, but in the topsy-turvy world that we live in, most people are willing to clutch at any straw that might provide a pathway to peace.

The Trump-Putin meeting held in Helsinki last week, in July, has evoked a similarly negative response from the majority of western countries, especially among the diplomatic and policy-making fraternity. Much of the anger seems directed at the sheer gall of Mr. Trump in rejecting conventional wisdom in the West that Russia is Enemy No.1, and in challenging their beliefs by effecting a meeting with the Russian President. Aggravating their angst further, Mr. Trump has implicitly claimed that the Helsinki meeting was not only a success but in the long run could also prove to be of still greater real value than the association with NATO allies.

Indian Prime Ministers have also experimented on occasion with variants of summit diplomacy. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was in effect his own Minister for External Affairs, conducted policy discussions with a whole range of world leaders, achieving a mixed bag of results. He was successful as the architect of the Non-Aligned Movement, but met with setbacks in his China policy. In 1988, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi ended a 25-year India-China stalemate by personally taking the initiative to reopen talks with Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese leadership. Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee achieved a temporary respite from cross-border attacks from Pakistan by engaging with General, later President, Pervez Musharraf. Likewise, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh established a fairly successful 'back-channel' with Pakistan, thanks to his brand of summit diplomacy with President Musharraf. In the case of Indian Prime Ministers, what is different is that they did not seek to 'buck the trend', but while going with the flow use their personal credibility to achieve results.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is, to all intents and purposes, a firm believer in summit diplomacy. In the past four years, he has circumambulated the globe on quite a few occasions, meeting and discussing foreign policy issues with leaders of several countries, sometimes on more than one occasion.

Unlike Mr. Trump, Mr. Putin or Mr. Xi, he has, however, made no attempt to effect any systematic change in foreign policy, nor talked of establishing a qualitatively new order in the realm of foreign affairs so as to add gloss to Indian foreign policy. Also, unlike Mr. Vajpayee, who set up a National Security Council and established the post of National Security Adviser, he has not created any new institution to give impetus to his foreign policy imperatives. Yet, the informal summits held recently with Mr. Xi (in Wuhan) and Mr. Putin (in Sochi) have contributed to improving the 'fraying' relations with China and Russia.

The issue discussed here is not whether claims of success are true or not, but that summit diplomacy is taking leaders into hitherto uncharted waters, and producing results that traditional diplomacy has struggled for years to achieve — whether they be long-lasting or short-lived. If diplomacy is generally viewed as 'war by other means', then summit diplomacy is changing the

'Order of Battle' in a bid to succeed where all else has failed.

This may have been unthinkable before the turn of the century. The 21st century is, however, demonstrating in many fields that this is the Age of Disruption. There is no reason why disruption in the area of foreign affairs should not alter staid diplomatic practices that were more relevant to the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

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