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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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04.07.2019

G20 Gyration: Donald, Ivanka and Hollow Diplomacy



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Traditional diplomacy is being given a makeover – at least where it is not being abolished altogether and being replaced by a replica of The Apprentice. US President Donald Trump’s seizure of the art has been violent and molesting. Had Roman emperors had access to Twitter and the twenty-four hour news cycle, they might have had such moments, bothering the empire’s citizenry with their latest self-absorbed act. Imagine Caligula making his horse Incitatus consul and the hyperventilating postings of enthusiasm that would have followed.

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In the summations of the G20 leaders' summit in Osaka, scribes scrounged for meaning, hoping to bring magnifying glasses to insignificant detail; press attendees did their usual act, simulating interest or showing wonder at the spectacle. Caitlin Byrne of the Griffith Asia Institute pushed herself to find gains. "Significant breakthroughs including a pause in the escalating China-US trade war and the resumption of dialogue between US and North Korea".

The conservative National Review yearned for a new Euro-American bloc against the Yellow Peril, which did not quite eventuate. "In reality, the United States needs Europe to confront China. Americans and Europeans would be able to hold China to account through existing multilateral trade structures and coordinated responses, rather than one-off bilateral 'deals'."

The communiqué was suitably imprecise. The G20 leaders met "to make united efforts to address major global economic challenges." There was a promise to "work together to foster global economic growth, while harnessing the power of technological innovation, in particular digitization, and its application for the benefit of all."

There are acknowledgments of problems, albeit cushioned by assurances. Trade and geopolitical issues, or "tensions" had "intensified" but these would be addressed. The World Trade Organisation would be reformed; the "Osaka Tract" framework regulating the cross-border flow of data was endorsed, one described as "Data Free Flow with Trust".

Peering through this glass darkly, and we see cracks of varying degrees. "The digital economy is a crucial driver of economic growth," Trump said, along with every other leader, but he was clear that "we must also ensure the resilience and security of our 5G networks". (Huawei representatives, raise your hands.)

The enthusiasm for climate change action was lukewarm, lacking the sting of urgency that has found feet on the streets across countries, often led by young activists. In the leaders' summit rooms, the adults had decided that the environment could be lessened in its immediate importance. This, it was suggested, was due to Japan's efforts to placate the United States at a time both are negotiating a trade deal. The earth might as well go and fry: the powers shall have their trade pacts.

Global disruption is staple for the US president, and the rest of the G20 delegates in their Osaka meet had to mill about hoping for some letup in the recent push and shove between Washington and Beijing. A temporary suspension of hostilities was suggested: Trump would not be adding tariffs on \$300 billion worth of Chinese imports. US companies

would still be permitted to sell to Huawei – for the moment. Trump remains convinced that US hegemony is the knobkerrie and staff to wield, the top chieftain in the international relations show. Best make use of such implements before they lose force and shine.

No such summit could quite pass without the injection of slight farce. One of Trump's brood, Ivanka Trump, found herself in the media lenses, an intrusive reminder of this administration's keenness to push family into any conspicuous, and awkward position. The White House was a trophy in a game from the start; egged on and mocked, Trump dedicated himself to seizing it for himself and his interests. The impedimenta followed. (His promise to clean Washington's swamp was done with the selectively cleansing detergent of his inner circle.)

While not quite being in the big league of absurdity as Caligula's consul stand, Ivanka still qualifies as an envoy in a role more akin to the despotisms of old than a modern diplomatic outfit. Trump's nepotism tends to be filled with a distinct bravado. It rejects formality and embraces the politics of the malnourished playground. Given various Freudian flavourings that have attended his descriptions of his daughter, he was happy to flaunt the candy and seek compliments. Instead, an icy politeness, best expressed by IMF chief Christine Lagarde, was shown.

US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) dealt with the matter witheringly, attempting to draw Trump back from the world of the disruptive make believe. The subtext to her scolding: We are an empire, so behave properly as its big chief. "It may be shocking to some," she lamented, "but being someone's daughter actually isn't a career qualification. It hurts our diplomatic standing when the President phones it in & the world moves on. The US needs our president working the G20. Bringing a qualified diplomat couldn't hurt either."

Representative Ted Lieu (D-Calif) demanded an explanation from Ivanka Trump herself, showing the general consternation that continues to preoccupy the Democrats at Trumpist twist and turns. Additionally, he wondered "why Jared Kushner still has a security clearance."

Other leaders were also scolded for their ineffectual contribution. Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was taken to task by his opponents for being meek when having a chance to discuss disagreements with China's Xi Jinping. (The chance was, admittedly, a brief one.) Conservative Party MP Erin O'Toole obsessed about the Prime Minister's

body language with an amateur's enthusiastic glare. "Some will note the later handshake and others the early hesitancy. My concern stems from foreign policy missteps that have left us isolated."

Such complaints have a keeping-up-appearances relish to them. Trump, and some of his fellow leaders, have to be found wanting. But the G20 is hardly a gladiatorial stage of heavy breathing and chest beating, despite unconvincing endorsements that it is "the culmination of months of intense negotiations" that reinforce "the underlying habits of cooperation so desperately needed for ongoing global economic stability." At the best of times, it remains a forum of little traction and achievement, leaving a degree of frivolousness to creep in.

In that way, Trump thrives. Shallowness is depth. The camera gives him life; social media pumps the blood and propels. Besides, he had North Korea on his mind and duly showed that shaking hands with others is something he enjoys almost as much as, well, other, more self-focused things.

JULY 3, 2019