

The Japan Times It's time to replace the outmoded G7

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There's a plan to replace the G7 with a D10 club of democratic partners. What does that mean? The G7 is a longstanding group of seven democracies — mostly Western except Japan, which used to be regarded as honorary “Western” — whose leaders gather annually to discuss, and sometimes even tackle, great world issues and defend and promote democracy. The members are Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States.

The G7 has a distinctly 20th century flavor. Unlike the larger G20, it dates from the before the full flowering of the digital age and before the massive rise of Asian power. The 2021 meeting, due to take place this coming June, will be chaired by Britain, whose turn it is to be host; and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is determined to bring it more into the modern, and very different, world that now surrounds us.

For a start, he has invited three other nations to attend as guests — India, South Korea and Australia. And now there is talk of permanently expanding the old inner group into a larger team of like-minded countries, reflecting the new realities of world power, as well as the new dangers. Hence the Democratic 10 plan.

As a further signal to emphasize that he would like to see change, Johnson has chosen as the meeting place not London or any other great city in the U.K., but the seaside village attachment to a modest sized town in Cornwall, the U.K.'s version of the Riviera (when the weather allows). It is called Carbis Bay and it is right next door to the charming and ancient town of St. Ives, well used to tourists and artists, but possibly a bit surprised to find itself hosting world leaders.

The top figures will get rooms in a luxurious nearby hotel, but their fleets of officials and advisers will have to find accommodations in St. Ives itself or further afield. Presumably the locals have an idea about what is going to hit them.

As a warning from this writer, who once attended a G7 with Margaret Thatcher in 1980 in Venice: When then U.S. President Jimmy Carter arrived, he came with 800 staff and an aircraft carrier that parked in a disruptive manner in the Venice lagoon. President Biden will probably have a slimmer entourage but it

will still be something of a shock to a peaceful seaside town to be invaded by this size of gathering.

There are two other ways in which the old G7 differs from the past and demonstrates the urgent need for new clothing. First, for a while the G7 used to be the G8, which included Russia in the happy post-Soviet days when it was hoped Russia just might get its act together and move to join the democracies. That was under Putin version 1.0. But under Putin version 2.0, Russia has long shown that it belongs to the awkward squad and prefers trouble-making to trouble-solving, and has not much time for democracy anyway. So, Russia was sent packing and the G8 reverted to the G7 again.

The second difference is more immediate and fundamental. When it first began, the G7 always included the president of the EU Commission, and of course the U.K. was still an EU member. Later, it even added the president of the EU Council of Ministers as well.

But with the U.K. now outside the EU, and in a changed world, is there still a place for these two dignitaries at the table of seven heads of state? After all, the EU is not a state, never has been, and is becoming even less so as restive members seek more powers and as Brussels over-centralization is shown to be less efficient in the digital age (as demonstrated by the recent fiasco over vaccine distribution).

The issue has already come up in London, where it has been queried whether the EU representative should now be treated as a fully accredited ambassador, or as just as head of a very respected and welcome neighboring institution.

These issues strongly indicate that it is time for the G7 to move on and grow, and the D10 idea sounds like a good way to go forward, especially when the number of world democracies appears to be shrinking. The case for change plays nicely with the need for a stronger front against Chinese expansion, of which the U.K. certainly intends to be a part.

But there is one bigger and deeper question. How clever is it to line up and divide the world too sharply between the chosen democracies and the rest when the democratic models themselves of the past so clearly need strengthening against new doubts and threats, as evidenced by rising street power and populism in many Western capital cities?

Could there be a danger of appearing to gang up in a clash of civilizations and philosophies? The need today is for a subtle and balanced combination of firmness against Chinese aggression, human rights abuses and obvious international misbehavior, with a careful embrace of China's colossal economic

dynamism. Any new democratic club needs also to show openness to learning new methods of governance in Asia that seem able, with the help of new technology, to ally technocracy with democracy and to provide the sensitive and quality government lacking in the West.

If the G7 can transform into this wider role, then that will indeed count as helpful progress. But if it just means just more East-West megaphone diplomacy and polarized hostility, then it will be an innovation the world could do without.