

## Summitry Diplomacy: Positive and Negative Aspects

Angela Caramerli

*Danubius University of Galati, Romania*

*angela.caramerli@idanubius.ro*

**Abstract:** Summits are meetings involving representatives of the highest level of states or international organizations. In contemporary society, these gatherings have a high frequency involving heads of state or government in debates that affect the international environment. But in some cases, these meetings are criticized because presidents or prime ministers may lack expertise in certain areas or the preparation of career diplomats. In addition, their decisions could be led by personal affinity. The intention of this paper is to question the effectiveness of the summitry diplomacy and its purpose within the international community.

**Keywords:** diplomacy; lack; pressure; leader; inappropriate

The term “summit” in its current design was first used by the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in a speech on the Soviet Union on February 14, 1950. He talked about the need to debate the issues of Europe “at the highest level,” adding that “it is easy to perceive how things can be worsened by negotiation within a summit” (Reynolds, 2007, p. 1). It is not known exactly what prompted Churchill to use this concept to the mean what is found today in international relations, but it seems that the British newspapers were reviewing the escalating of the Everest peak during those days. The reiteration of the term in the House of Commons in a speech on May 11, 1953 rooted this concept. Periodicals also have published cartoons on this topic, such as the Daily Mirror (June 7, 1955). Thus, the term “summit” means, as Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian language specifies, “a meeting at the highest political level” (Coteanu, 1998, p. 1041).

Diplomacy at the highest level has a specific structure and specific features. In some circumstances it is very effective, but in other ways it is criticized. Therefore,

the role of this research is to analyze the positive and negative implications of the summits.

From a certain perspective, summits are not appreciated because some consider that career diplomats and experts are more qualified in the field of diplomacy, economics or legal issues than heads of state and government who have limited knowledge. G.B. Berridge added the argument that the Heads of State and government aren't that skilled regarding negotiations because they are not as attentive to details, they are always pressed for time or too interested in advertising (Berridge, 2010, p. 164). In addition, they do not always take into account cultural differences between countries and they tend to be guided by personal affinities on other political leaders.

The idea is reinforced by political leaders' option to rely on verbal agreements, which can be worded vaguely. In addition, these agreements could be personalized by personal affinities of Heads of State or Government. This may be a negative option because when the office changes the agreements could lose its value.

Another delicate issue could be determined by the Heads of State or Government status. Because they are the ultimate authority in a state, they cannot delegate the decision role when a deadline is too small (Berridge, 2010, p. 164). This fact does not allow an efficient analysis of the problem. In this situation, Berridge notices two mistakes that leaders could do: to abandon the negotiations, leading to a diplomatic failure or to accept too many concessions to provide purposeful diplomatic activity (Berridge, 2010, p. 164). The second mistake is even worse because it is not only eventually followed by a "too expensive" deal, but is also irreversible and it has long period effects.

The criticism of David Watt is expressed in the same direction: "Heads of government, with their massive egos, their ignorance for the essential details and their ingrained belief in the value of back-slapping ambiguity, simply mess everything up"<sup>1</sup>. To shape this idea, G.R. Berridge selects appropriate examples of great leaders whose failure of diplomacy changes the face of the summitry. One of the most inappropriate behavior is offered by the Shah of Iran in a high-level

---

<sup>1</sup> Watt, David, *The Times*, July 3, 1981 apud (Berridge, 2010, p. 164).

meetings with U.S. President Jimmy Carter in which the Shah told that his belief was that the Organization of African Unity was an “impotent” body.<sup>1</sup>

Internationally speaking, there are plenty of blunders made by the highest representatives which support the opinion of some experts that heads of state and government do not have the necessary training and do not demonstrate an appropriate behavior as the career diplomats usually do. These elements are highly important because their attitude may harm relations between states. A good example is provided by the Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi who at the EU summit of December 2009 sent drawings depicting women's underwear over time to the representatives of other countries (Pisa, 2009). He drew sport underwear, French underwear or women's underwear through the ages, such as the worn in ancient Egypt. He sent the drawings to Chancellor Angela Merkel and Baroness Catherine Ashton.

Italian Prime Minister's behavior was also inappropriate at the NATO summit in 2009 when Angela Merkel found herself in the situation of waiting him on the red carpet, due to a telephonic conversation that Berlusconi was carrying on (Dumitroiu, 2011). Berlusconi has greeted by hand Mrs Merkel and continued to speak on the phone while the representative of Germany finally decided to start the ceremony without him.

Another example is offered by Boris Yeltsin. He is known for his unexpected actions such as dismissal of the entire government for four times during a single term (BBC News, 1998). However, one of the most inappropriate behavior observed regarding Yeltsin happened at a bilateral summit in Ireland in 1994. Once the presidential plane landed, the Irish Prime Minister Albert Reynolds came to greet him with a group of dignitaries and red carpet, but the Russian president did not appear because he was sleeping. Often, his behavior was attributed to his alcohol fondness. This was a great problem regarding the fact that the president was responsible for the Russian nuclear system.

One of the biggest criticisms regarding summits refers to exorbitant prices spent to organize the meetings in addition to ensuring security. Although at the beginning summits involved high costs, they have increased further in recent years. The situation is determined by the extension of dangers such as terrorism and street movements organized by protesters who find an opportunity to express their

---

<sup>1</sup> (Sullivan, 1981, p. 129) apud (Berridge, 2010, p. 165).

dissatisfaction. G.R. Berridge offers some examples, such as the G8 Summit in Geneva in 2001 when it has been spent over 100 million pounds, money which included the installation of a missile defense system in the airport where the guests arrived. The following year, the Canadian government used 140 million pounds to organize the summit in a retired State Rocky Mountains to avoid anti-globalization protesters. In 2008, Japan invested fabulous sum of £ 238 million to organize the G8 summit on Hokkaido isolated (Berridge, 2010, pp. 165-166).

In the same manner, bilateral summits could cause some inappropriate behavior internationally. When President Barack Obama announced his meeting with his Turkish counterpart during the G20 Summit in 2009, the Greek government has shown its displeasure. Regarding the relations between the two neighboring countries is could have been for the Turkish state to show the same attitude if the chief of the U.S. would have preferred a discussion with Greek President (Berridge, 2010, p. 166).

Heads of State and Government which gives too much time to summits do not allocate the necessary time to the country's internal affairs, and this option may cause a negative image in the society. An appropriate example is offered by Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair who were criticized in the English press as more and more absent (The Economist, 2001). Summits can be energizing experience, but they have the ability to "be a drain on the participants' energy" (Mellisen, 2003, p. 16), especially in terms of long sessions.

Summits are also used for advertising, but in certain conditions this attitude of using summits as propaganda may show lack of professionalism that emphasize propaganda avid personality. Because high-level meetings have an aura of extreme importance, the political leaders use this drama and the advertising opportunity. As that, heads of state and governments sometimes offer more attention to the journalists present at the meeting than the summit itself. The press gives the impression of stage events more than a meeting of a political nature (Mellisen, 2003, p. 13).

However, the benefits given by summits are highly important and they determine the continuity of this type of meetings. For example, summits between heads of state of the Soviet Union and the United States have shaped the states and political leaders' attachment for the international society regarding the idea of peace and security. In addition, these meetings have shown the desire of both parties to resolve problems peacefully respecting international law and UN Charter

principles. G.R. Berridge emphasizes the summits symbolism like the one in 1990 in Paris, which ended the Cold War (Berridge, 2010, p. 166).

Summits have a positive impact proving political leaders' intention to work for the country. Although they may have a negative effect because the heads of state and government keep busy, they show an active involvement of presidents and prime ministers to solve problems faced by the states.

Such a meeting between political leaders could lead to the improvement of the public image of a state. When a head of state actively participates in meetings of high level and sends a positive image to the public, the entire state benefits from this activity. Through the media, people from other countries have the opportunity to know leaders, who are the symbol of their country and a positive view on them means a positive attitude toward the country they lead. From this point of view, the summits are highly relevant because it is very difficult to change the vision of a group of people, especially when each nation has its stereotypes about other nations. A good example is offered by U.S. President Barack Obama. When he became president, the country's image has improved significantly, especially in European countries. In Germany, for example, the percentage of those who appreciate American state grew by 33% (Capital Online, 2009). He managed to bring a more positive vision in the eyes of the international society. US drew public opprobrium following President George W. Bush' international policy.

The benefits of these summits are expanding, especially regarding the work of state representatives. Summits maintain the political leaders connected to the current problems faced by the international society. Thus, heads of states and governments are always looking for new solutions to the issues to be resolved. At the same time, they may provide early changes in the international system and could prepare actions to mitigate harm of possible crises. Summit also could help the leaders to visualize the positive situations to establish new collaborations and agreements.

Another advantage that appears regarding the functions of a summit is marked by the pressures created around decision-making process. Due to time limitations and the need to follow certain data for convening summits, especially for serial summits, experts and other staff are determined to analyze problems and solutions in a systematic way to reach agreements in a shorter period. In this regard, the emphasis is put on efficiency, work is creating dynamic national ministries which allows a better adaptation to crises if necessary. This system could be beneficial for international agreements which are signed in a very difficult way without losing

money because of a late deal. While the heads of states and governments are involved, the decision making process could be accelerate, more issues, particularly economic, could be fixed in less time.

Another advantage is provided by serial summits, which could be very effective for negotiations. Serial summits are part of a regular series, while ad hoc summits are focused on one meeting. In this regard, the serial summits allow to the representatives of countries to keep a strong communication and serious negotiations because the rules are well known and the leaders usually know each other's. In the same manner, the public tends not to be as aroused regarding serial summits because they happen often (Berridge, 2010, p. 168).

If the subject is extended by the ad hoc summits, there is an advantage regarding the improvement of the relations between states. Ad hoc summits it is used for the highest level representatives to attend different ceremonies which allows leaders to create a positive atmosphere and balance, there are also free discussion among participants which could induce an improvement in their relations with each others.

Jan Melissen believes that one of the most important aspects of summits is marked by the flexibility of these meetings (Mellisen, 2003, p. 3). They are designed to educate the "new incomers" with their peers in order to seek a closer collaboration and partners worldwide. In addition, negotiations in these meetings have a special character. Heads of state and governments prepare very well with masterpiece communiqués showing "the art of compromise, with a degree of ambiguity so as to leave room for manoeuvre for follow-up talks to leaders' post summit confrontation with their domestic constituency" (Mellisen, 2003, p. 3). Though some of them are criticized by the diplomats due to inappropriate behavior, most of them manage to have a diplomatic approach, and they manage to implement an effective policy for their state.

Although perceptions on the heads of state are not always positive and they are criticized because of exaggerated loyalty to some old partners, loyalty that could sometimes lead to disaster, there could be also seen many positive sides of these actions. When two political leaders fail to communicate very effectively and tend to a certain affinity, relations between the two countries can pursue a more positive direction than in the case of simple bilateral relations. The idea is outlined by the British Prime Minister Lloyd George who said that "If you want to settle a thing, you see your opponent and talk it over with him. The last to do is write him a

letter”<sup>1</sup>. He believes that summits are great opportunities to communicate with other heads of state and governments as they may provide greater clarity.

As it could be noticed, there are pros and cons elements over summits. Even though there are many criticisms regarding the personal affinities and inappropriate behaviors of presidents and prime ministers, there are also leaders who changed the politics in a good direction. The heads of state and governments have many responsibilities, but they also have more power and this attribute gives them the competence to improve things. The summitry diplomacy’s presence internationally demonstrates the need for such meetings even though they could be very expensive. The communication and cooperation established through these meetings cannot be so easily substituted by other diplomatic forms, so until a better solution in terms of financial, political or otherwise is not found, summits will remain, at least for a long while, a common activity in the international society.

## Bibliography

BBC News, “Yeltsin is the masterpiece of the unexpected” (March 23, 1998) retrieved May 14, 2012 from *BBC News*: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/68619.stm>.

Berridge, G.R. (2010). *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Capital Online (2012). *State Unite și-au îmbunătățit imaginea în lume datorită lui Obama/ The United States has improved its image in the world thanks to Obama*. (July 24, 2009) retrieved May 15, 2012 from *Capital*: <http://www.capital.ro/detalii-articole/stiri/statele-unite-si-au-imbunatatit-imaginea-in-lume-datorita-lui-obama-122673.html>.

Coteanu et alii (1998). *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române/Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language*. 2nd Edition. Bucharest: Academia Română, Institutul de Lingvistică “Iorgu Iordan”.

Dumitroiu, Oana (November 17, 2011). *Secrete de premier: Cele mai mari gafe ale lui Berlusconi/Prime Minister Secrets: Highest Berlusconi's blunders*. Retrieved May 15, 2012 from *Business 24*: <http://www.business24.ro/silvio-berlusconi/stiri-silvio-berlusconi/secrete-de-premier-cele-mai-mari-gafe-ale-lui-berlusconi-1502114>.

Melissen, Jan (2003). *Summit Diplomacy Coming of Age. Clingendael Discussion Papers on Diplomacy*.

Pisa, Nick (December 14, 2009). *Silvio Berlusconi drew women's underwear at EU summit*. Retrieved May 13, 2012 from *The Telegraph*:

---

<sup>1</sup> (Craig, 1952, p. 146) apud (Melissen, 2003, p. 2).

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/6804619/Silvio-Berlusconi-drew-womens-underwear-at-EU-summit.html>.

Reynolds, David (2007). *Summits. Six meetings that shaped the thentiest century*. Philadelphia: Basic Books.

The Economist (October 11, 2001). *That's enough loyalty. May we have our politics back, please?*  
Retrieved May 13, 2012 from *The Economist*: <http://www.economist.com/node/813509>.