

POLICY SOLUTION

REVIVING THE G20: FROM CONSENSUS- SEEKING TO OPEN, PROBLEM-SOLVING COALITIONS



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Reviving The G20: From Consensus-Seeking To Open, Problem-Solving Coalitions

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Core Recommendation

The United States should use its 2026 G20 Presidency to establish a three-tier operating architecture: consensus where possible; broad consensus where feasible; and open, problem-specific pivotal-power coalitions where necessary. The United Kingdom should carry this reform forward during its 2027 Presidency, making it a repeatable G20 practice.

Diagnosis: The G20 Is Losing The Capacity To Solve Problems

The G20 again stands at a crossroads. At the 2009 London Summit, a common financial emergency aligned the interests of the major economies. The United Kingdom helped connect leaders' decisions to the operational capacities of the IMF, multilateral development banks, and other institutions, mobilizing more than \$1 trillion and establishing the G20 as the central forum for global crisis management.²

Today, interdependence is deepening while political agreement is becoming harder. Strategic rivalry now permeates trade, technology, energy, finance, supply chains, and industrial policy. Problems such as sovereign debt, climate transition, critical minerals, artificial intelligence, and development finance require combinations of capabilities that do not map neatly onto G20 membership. Some indispensable participants lie outside the G20; some G20 members have little operational relevance to a particular agreement.

Consensus remains valuable. It protects sovereignty, exposes objections during negotiation, and gives common commitments political legitimacy. But when consensus becomes a prerequisite for every form of cooperation, it produces two failures. The first is deadlock: one or a few members can prevent agreement. The second is less visible but equally damaging: lowest-common-denominator commitments preserve unanimity while becoming too weak to change collective outcomes.

The G20 is consequently at risk of being judged by its ability to negotiate language acceptable to all members rather than by its capacity to generate solutions. As geopolitical fragmentation increases, ever more diplomatic effort may produce ever less substantive action. Without an additional operating pathway, the institution risks losing effectiveness, relevance, and purpose precisely when cross-border cooperation is most necessary.

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² G20, London Summit – Leaders' Statement, April 2, 2009, <https://g7g20-documents.org/database/document/2009-g20-united-kingdom-leaders-leaders-language-london-summit-leaders-statement>.

Assessment: Broad Consensus Helps, But Does Not Go Far Enough

The 2025 Johannesburg Summit supplied an important precedent. Despite U.S. absence and opposition, and Argentina's refusal to endorse the declaration, South Africa proceeded because the text commanded overwhelming support among participating members.³ This broad-consensus practice can prevent isolated opposition from blocking willing governments, without binding dissenters or introducing formal majority voting.

But broad consensus cannot solve every problem. An overwhelming majority may support only a moderate commitment, while effective action may depend on a smaller or differently constituted group. Climate action may require major emitters, clean-technology producers, financial centers, and critical-mineral suppliers. Debt restructuring requires the debtor, relevant official and private creditors, and international financial institutions. AI governance requires jurisdictions controlling frontier capabilities, compute, semiconductors, major markets, and regulatory influence.

Existing "club," minilateral, and plurilateral arrangements demonstrate that smaller-group cooperation can overcome free riding and accelerate action.⁴ Their weakness is the risk of closed blocs, discriminatory standards, institutional duplication, or fragmentation. The G20 therefore needs a legitimate coalition pathway that is problem-specific, voluntary, institutionally supported, and designed from the outset to widen.

The G20's comparative advantage is political orchestration. It need not become a supranational authority or build a large bureaucracy. It can define objectives, convene countries with pivotal capabilities, and mobilize the IMF, World Bank, WTO, OECD, Financial Stability Board, UN agencies, development banks, standards bodies, businesses, and scientific networks for analysis, finance, implementation, and monitoring. The Mutual Assessment Process illustrates how the G20 can set political direction while specialized institutions supply technical capacity.⁵

Policy Solution: A Three-tier Architecture For Effective Cooperation

The United States should use its 2026 Presidency to establish a cumulative three-tier operating architecture. First, seek consensus whenever sufficiently ambitious G20-wide action is possible. Second, where universal agreement is unavailable but overwhelming support exists, permit willing members to proceed through broad consensus without imposing obligations on dissenters. Third, where neither route can generate effective action, convene a pivotal-power coalition comprising the countries whose participation and capabilities are necessary to address the defined problem.

A pivotal power is not a fixed category or synonym for a middle power. It is a country able materially to affect success through market size, finance, technology, critical inputs, production or consumption shares, regulatory authority, geographic position, implementation capacity, or influence over others. The relevant constellation therefore changes with the problem and may include non-G20 countries.

³ Tim Cocks, Julia Payne, Nqobile Dlodla, and Andrea Shalal, "G20 Summit in South Africa Adopts Declaration Despite US Boycott, Opposition," Reuters, November 22, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/g20-leaders-meet-south-africa-seeking-agreement-despite-us-boycott-2025-11-22/>.

⁴ Robert O. Keohane and David G. Victor, "The Regime Complex for Climate Change," *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (2011): 7–23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710004068>; William D. Nordhaus, "Climate Clubs: Overcoming Free-Riding in International Climate Policy," *American Economic Review* 105, no. 4 (2015): 1339–1370, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.15000001>; Bernard Hoekman and Charles Sabel, "Open Plurilateral Agreements, International Regulatory Cooperation and the WTO," *Global Policy* 10, no. 3 (2019): 297–312, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12694>.

⁵ International Monetary Fund, *The G-20 Mutual Assessment Process and the Role of the Fund*, IMF Policy Paper 2009/11 (Washington, DC: IMF, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781498335089.007>; Kenneth W. Abbott, Philipp Genschel, Duncan Snidal, and Bernhard Zangl, "Two Logics of Indirect Governance: Delegation and Orchestration," *British Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 4 (2016): 719–729, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123414000593>.

Every G20-supported coalition should meet five safeguards: transparent participation criteria; non-discriminatory accession for countries able to meet the commitments; compatibility, where possible, with wider multilateral rules; capacity-building or transitional arrangements for prospective entrants; and periodic review. Participation must remain voluntary, and non-members must acquire no obligations. These conditions turn coalitions from exclusive clubs into pathways toward wider cooperation.

From Commitment To Delivery

Stage	G20 Presidency action	Required output	Test of success
Identify	Define the problem, externalities, capabilities, and pivotal actors	Short coalition mandate	Participants match functional requirements
Convene and enable	Bring in G20/non-G20 actors and mobilize existing institutions	Timed agreement and implementation plan	Responsibilities and resources are assigned
Monitor and demonstrate	Set metrics, publish progress, and evaluate benefits	Transparent performance report	Commitments alter measurable outcomes
Expand	Apply accession criteria and support prospective entrants	Regular accession rounds	Membership and impact widen over time

During 2026, the United States should seek political recognition of the three-tier architecture and select two demonstrator coalitions with the United Kingdom and other Troika partners. Candidates could include AI interoperability and infrastructure, a specific sovereign-debt bottleneck, or resilient critical-mineral supply chains. Each pilot should publish a short mandate identifying the problem, pivotal participants, measurable objectives, implementing institutions, and accession conditions.

The United Kingdom should use its 2027 Presidency to review the pilots, launch accession rounds, and secure Leaders' recognition of the coalition pathway as legitimate G20 practice. A light Troika continuity mechanism should record mandates, commitments, monitoring arrangements, and accession requests, while technical follow-through remains with existing organizations. Success should be measured by commitments implemented, resources mobilized, observable outcomes, new members joining, and coalitions continuing.

Proposed G20 Leaders' Commitment

“We will seek consensus wherever sufficiently effective G20-wide action is possible. Where universal agreement is unavailable, willing members may proceed through broad consensus or voluntary, problem-specific coalitions, without imposing obligations on non-participants. Such coalitions should include countries whose capabilities are pivotal to success, use existing international institutions for implementation and monitoring, and remain open to subsequent accession on transparent and non-discriminatory terms.”