

Europe's plot to take over the world

By Gideon Rachman

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At last! Ireland has passed the [Lisbon treaty](#) and now the European Union can move forward with its plan for world domination. Within months, the EU is likely to appoint a president and a foreign minister. [Tony Blair](#) is limbering up for a run at the top job. A clutch of Swedish, Dutch and Belgian candidates are jostling for the post of foreign minister.

Fortified by its new foreign-policy structures, the Union is staking a claim to be taken seriously as a global superpower. David Miliband, Britain's foreign secretary, says: "It shouldn't be a G2 of the US and China. There should be a G3 with the European Union."

But what happens in Brussels – or even in trilateral dealings between the US, China and Europe – is a sideshow. The real key to Europe's global ambitions is the Group of 20.

Jean Monnet, the founding father of the EU, believed that European unity was "not an end in itself, but only a stage on the way to the organised world of tomorrow". His successors in Brussels make no secret of the fact that they regard the Union's brand of supranational governance as a global model.

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The realisation that the G20 is Europe's Trojan horse struck me at the [G20's](#) last summit in Pittsburgh a couple of weeks ago. The surroundings and atmosphere were strangely familiar. And then I understood; I was back in Brussels, and this was just a global version of a European Union summit.

It was the same drill and format. The leaders' dinner the night before the summit; a day spent negotiating an impenetrable, jargon-stuffed communiqué; the setting-up of obscure working groups; the national briefing rooms for the post-summit press conferences.

All of these procedures are deeply familiar to European leaders – but rather new to the Asian and American leaders whom the Europeans are carefully entangling in this new structure. Watching an Indonesian delegate wandering, apparently carefree, through the conference centre in Pittsburgh, I felt a stab of pity. "You don't know what you are getting into," I thought. "You are going to waste the rest of your life talking about fish quotas." (Or, this being the G20, carbon-emission quotas.)

The Europeans did not just set the tone at the G20 – they also dominate proceedings, since they are grossly over-represented. Huge countries such as Brazil, China, India and the US are represented by one leader each. The Europeans managed to secure eight slots around the conference table for Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, the president of the European Commission and the president of the European Council. Most of the key international civil servants present were also Europeans: Dominique Strauss-Kahn, head of the International Monetary Fund; Pascal Lamy of the World Trade Organisation; Mario Draghi of the Financial Stability Board.

As a result, the Europeans seemed much more tuned into what was going on than some of the other delegations. Puzzling over the new powers given to the IMF to monitor national economic policies in the Pittsburgh conclusions, I was interrupted by an old friend from the European Commission, who recognised the language immediately. “Ah yes,” she said, “the open method of co-ordination.”

But does any of this really matter? After all, EU summits and statements have become a byword for tortuous and ineffective machinations that often have little real-world effect. The process that gave birth to the Lisbon treaty started eight years ago. Even after Ireland's Yes vote, Lisbon could still be derailed by recalcitrant governments in the [Czech Republic](#) or [Britain](#).

However, the saga of Lisbon can be read another way. Once the EU gets its teeth into an issue, it never really lets go. Processes started at EU summits – which often seem minor bits of bureaucratic paper-shuffling – often turn out to have important political implications, years later. The same could well be true of some of the decisions made in Pittsburgh – such as the language on tax havens and [bankers' bonuses](#).

From the very start, the EU advanced through small, apparently technical, steps focusing on economic issues – the so-called “Monnet method”. Monnet himself believed that Europe would be built through “the common management of common problems”. Is this so very different from President Barack Obama's recent appeal for “global solutions to global problems”?

Of course, there is still a huge gap between the capabilities of the modern EU and those of the G20. There is no army of G20 civil servants to match the bureaucrats of Brussels. There is no body of G20 law and no G20 court to enforce the group's decisions. Nor is there much immediate prospect that the US or China – both countries that zealously guard their sovereignty – will cede any serious powers to a G20 law-making body.

Yet the kernel of something new has been created. To understand its potential, it is worth going back to the Schuman Declaration of 1950, which started the process of European integration. “Europe,” it said, “will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements, which first create a de facto solidarity.”

The G20 now has some achievements and a burgeoning sense of solidarity between the members of this new, most exclusive, club. Who knows what comes next?

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