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Weighing up the real value of the G8 summit

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It is easy to be cynical over the value of summits such as the G8 meeting recently concluded in Northern Ireland. After all, this year's meeting was preceded by the erection of fake shop fronts in Northern Ireland to disguise empty businesses, and when Birmingham played host in 1998 the city council sprayed the grass verges green.

There is also something paradoxical about demonstrators protesting at the cost of these meetings and by doing so pushing up the security bill still further. Yet despite all the expense and fanfare, summits are an essential tool of global governance.In a world of nation states there is no substitute for the coming together of the principal protagonists of world politics. By their nature political leaders are extremely egotistical and believe that they can convince their opposite numbers of their points of view more convincingly than mere diplomats. So the meeting of these egos is a useful way to temper those expectations.

As host this time David Cameron briefed journalists beforehand that the collective arguments of the Western leaders would prevail upon Russia's President Putin to 'see sense' on Syria.

As it turns out, however, hearing first-hand the strength of Putin's concerns for the future of Syria resulted in all sides modifying their demands. While the West hoped for an international conference on Syria next month in Geneva without President Assad being present, what was agreed was a meeting in September with participation being left unresolved.

In the meantime Russia agreed to work towards the removal of Assad but not necessarily his regime. While both sides continue to arm rival factions in this civil war this may seem like the continuation of the impasse. Yet in reality it also represents an important narrowing of the ground between the main players who hold the keys to the resolution of this conflict.

The rebels and the West started off by demanding the end of Bashar al Assad and his regime, while Russia was unwilling to abandon its regional ally. By contrast, however, White House spokesman Ben Rhodes indicated: 'This process will have to lead to a new governing authority in Syria. This is not simply a negotiation about having a dialogue. This is a negotiation about a transition to a new government.'

By direct negotiation and compromise some progress on Syria has been made. The initial agenda on 'trade, tax and transparency' also made some modest advances, and there were also commitments in the communiqué to renounce the payment of ransoms to terrorists, and to support 'sustainable economic growth' – such that each participant has something to take home to their domestic constituencies. To the outsider it may all seem like the fake smiles of the shop fronts of Lough Erne, but even progress in small steps is worth having in international politics.

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