Australia now the odd man in

When I was a teenager in the 1980s, Australia displayed an acute status anxiety about its place in the world. We were too small to be part of the G7 group of major industrialised countries, in the wrong hemisphere for NATO or the European Union, and looked unlikely to be accepted as part of the emerging order in Asia.

Politicians spoke openly about their fear that Australia would be left out of the post-cold war world, neither part of the West nor of Asia.

US political scientist Samuel Huntington saw Australia (along with Mexico and Turkey) as a “torn country” — split between its geography and its civilisational identity.

But things did not work out that way. Rather than being excluded, Australia gradually found itself to be “the odd man in”, as Paul Keating put it.

First, a combination of persistent diplomacy and changing Asian geopolitics saw the emergence of new forums such as the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation group and the East Asia Summit, which included Australia and New Zealand alongside the key Asian powers.

Rich in resources, Australia gradually developed mutually beneficial economic ties with north-east Asia’s industrial giants.

Then, the financial crisis of 2008 demanded a more representative gathering of the world’s major economies. Enter the G20, a revamped version of an ad-hoc coalition originally pulled together during the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Unlike the Eurocentric G7, the G20 includes the Asian superpowers (China, India, Japan), the Islamic world (Indonesia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia) and representation from Africa and North and South America, as well as Australia.

Next week’s G20 summit in Brisbane is the biggest gathering of international leaders in this country since the 2007 APEC meeting. While Russian President Vladimir Putin is currently getting all the attention, the more important issue for Australia is that we don’t simply “host the party” but maximise our opportunity to play a leadership role.

Treasurer Joe Hockey wants to focus the meeting squarely on economic issues such as global tax regimes and infrastructure finance. But a gathering of world leaders needs to deal with the big issues of the day, which is why global warming has also found its way in, despite Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s reluctance. With Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Barack Obama in attendance, corridor discussions on global security can be expected, too.

Perth has already played a role, hosting a meeting of the G20’s Development Working Group focussed on food security and agricultural productivity — both key issues for Australia.

Yet scepticism about the real value of such gatherings is justified. Claims of a $2 trillion payoff if all G20 proposals are implemented rely on a great deal of wishful thinking.

As my Murdoch University colleague Jeffrey Wilson has noted, the G20 faces “commitment issues”: members often fail to follow through on their promises.

The real work of the G20 relies on action by individual countries long after the meeting is over. Unfortunately, political sensitivities around controversial but important reforms mean many leaders quietly let their G20 commitments slip away once they return home.

For Australia, however, the high-table multilateralism of the G20 and APEC (meeting in Beijing this week) has other benefits. As a trading nation with a relatively small population a long way from the world’s power centres, Australia depends — perhaps more than any other major state — on a stable and open international order.

Meetings such as the G20 and APEC are fundamentally investments in that international order, and also offer new channels to link Australia to the world. In this context, the opportunity to embed habits of dialogue and constructive problem-solving is more significant than the current issues of the day.

Such gatherings also tend to elicit some urgency and creativity from our politicians and diplomats. Beijing’s hosting of APEC has pushed both sides to conclude the China-Australia free trade pact in Brisbane next week, while the presence of all the major states of the southern hemisphere at the G20 offers potential new coalitions of interest with southern Africa and Latin America.

International institutions may not have lived up to all our expectations.

But it is assuredly better to be a part of the action than to be left on the sidelines. The job now is to make it work.

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