

# Sweeping G-20 communique glosses over big-picture issues



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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe wants to train attention on the fact that the Group of 20 (G-20) leaders managed to come to a consensus and sign off on a declaration at the Osaka summit that ended last Saturday.

But it was a loose and sweeping communique over 13 pages that, when read between the lines, exposes deep fissures and little progress on the key issues of free trade and climate change.

Still, Mr Abe told a post-summit news conference: "I wanted to have the maximum potential coming out fully displayed as a united G-20, by not accentuating the differences but shedding light on common ground (on the basis for us to) work

tenaciously to find solutions."

This raises the question of how much was actually accomplished behind the pomp and pageantry of the political theatre. Free trade and climate change are important big-picture issues that the world can easily agree to uphold.

But how can the yawning differences in the steps needed to address these issues be bridged within the G-20 bloc that together accounts for more than 80 per cent of the world economy? How can concrete collective action be taken that is both fair to developed and developing economies?

These remain unanswered, though the Yomiuri daily said it bears recognition that there was agreement on promoting free trade, reducing marine plastic litter, reforming the World Trade Organisation and the need for a "Data Free Flow with Trust" framework to promote security.

Others were not convinced.

Dr Shiro Armstrong of the Australian National University wrote on the East Asia Forum website that the G-20 document could "barely manage the lowest common denominator language", adding that "Japan's tactic was to conclude a summit along a path of

least resistance". He noted: "There was no mention of the rules-based order in the communique, signalling an edge towards rule by might rather than rules among the major powers."

The Japan Times, calling the communique "remarkably light", said: "Ultimately, Abe's efforts were undone by an unsolvable dilemma: producing a consensus meant leaching the final declaration of any substance."

The Asahi daily added: "We need to scrutinise carefully the results... from the viewpoint of whether it has offered answers to major challenges facing the world."

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And given that political hot potatoes like the Hong Kong extradition Bill and the Saudi killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi seemed to have been given short shrift, the Asahi said: "This can only be interpreted as a sign that such sensitive issues were eschewed altogether to ensure the success of the summit."

Japan's emphasis on a consensus at the G-20 also belies its pullout from the International Whaling Commission a day after the summit closed. It has stood firm despite worldwide condemnation and yesterday, it resumed commercial whaling for the first time in 31 years.

Tokyo, however, insists it has done its homework to protect the animal, by setting an annual quota of 383 whales comprising species it says are abundant.

It stresses that the quota "would not deplete the whale population even after hunting the animals" and, in a bid to deflect criticism, said other countries like Norway and Iceland also conduct whaling.

This, perhaps, is a prime example of how a nation's deep-rooted position – like the one the United States has taken on protectionism and against the Paris climate deal – will not budge even in the face of global pressure.

"In the conversations among the leaders, there were some straight talks against the US and China," Keio University economist Fukunari Kimura told The Straits Times, saying he had expected the weakened declaration.