International Policy Coordination: Can We Afford It?

by W. Lee Hoskins

Policymakers and economists today embrace the argument that increased openness among the world's economies justifies—if not necessitates—a closer coordination of nations' economic policies. Their automatic, almost unthinking, acceptance of this idea reflects both the undeniable fact that growing trade and capital flows now tightly link the world's markets and an unwavering association of words like cooperation and coordination with images of harmony, peace, and prosperity. Only a fool would question the need for policy coordination, contend proponents of international cooperation. Are we not, after all, in the same boat, affected by each other's policies? We must pull together if we hope to progress.

The matter is not quite so simple. In a rush to enumerate the possible benefits of cooperation, we have neglected to recognize some of the potential costs. For those of us who believe that free markets guarantee the highest possible standard of living, the words cooperation and coordination ring like euphemisms for collusion against market outcomes and sound a threat to a proven source of lasting prosperity.

My concerns stem most recently from attempts at, and continued calls for, close global coordination of macroeconomic policies, but my fears have roots in other international developments, including policies dealing with the international debt situation. To be sure, certain types of cooperation are beneficial—indeed essential—to the smooth functioning of markets, but governments, through cooperation, often attempt to supplant markets and avoid market discipline. As such, we should keep a wary eye on proposals for global cooperation.

The Function of Markets and the Role of Government

Competitive markets are unique social machines that produce an efficient allocation of the world's resources and the highest possible standard of living. The price mechanism relays information to all components of the market, while the profit mechanism forces prices and costs to their minimum. Through these mechanisms, competitive markets foster a special type of economic cooperation, in which participants readily understand the objectives and in which markets maintain discipline quickly and without discrimination. This cooperation within markets rewards innovations and efficiencies and removes waste. It confers net benefits on participants in excess of what they could otherwise secure. Economists have recognized these qualities of open, competitive markets since the time of Adam Smith, and realize that the global scale of markets only serves to enhance them.
Markets require an institutional framework to reduce the inevitable frictions that will result as participants interact. In market economies, the institutional structure includes laws that guarantee property rights, including contracts, and laws that protect other rights of individuals. Moreover, a medium of exchange with reasonably predictable purchasing power can enhance the smooth functioning of the market mechanism. These institutions reduce transaction costs and allow markets to achieve economies of scale.

The market machinery does not always work, however. Sometimes markets do not fully internalize the benefits, costs, or risks associated with private activities to the responsible parties, or a "free-rider" problem exists. Frequently, economic shocks, starting in one market, can disrupt a wide range of economic activities throughout the economy. Sometimes the nature of goods or the characteristics of production confers monopoly powers on individuals. At other times, we make adjustments to the market, sacrificing efficiency, to correct for inherent institutional failures in the market's performance. We have come to recognize problems with governmental intervention in markets at the national level, but we often seem unwilling to accept that government intervention at the international level can impede the functioning of global markets just as easily.

- **Government Versus Market Objectives**

   Students of government dismiss the view that elected officials seek to maximize the common good. Policymakers, in their own self-interest, promote the desires of their constituencies, which often conflict with market outcomes. The world economy today is tied in a web of tariffs, taxes, subsidies, and regulations that are often more than not, lacks purpose other than to secure rents for certain influential segments of society.

   This tendency of elected government officials to define the common good in terms of their own self-interest and the interests of their constituencies causes us to question all government policies.

   Do these policies strengthen the institutional framework that enhances the market's performance? Do they provide adjustments to the market that help secure a high, sustainable standard of living? Or, alternatively, do these policies serve to supplant market discipline and market performance at the expense of real economic growth?

- **Interdependence and the Benefits of Global Coordination**

   The current perceived need for global policy coordination stems from evidence that markets for goods, services, and capital are now more open, or globally integrated, than in the past. Advances in transportation and in communications have increased the degree of international openness by making production and distribution on a global scale more feasible. The liberalization of trade and capital movements has permitted producers and investors to take fuller advantage of these advances. Indeed, trade flows have increased relative to GNP in nearly all major developed countries, and capital flows can be a large proportion of national savings and investment.

   Greater openness has enhanced economic interdependence among nations. Changes in economic variables in one country can have a more immediate, stronger influence on economic variables in another. A tendency to underestimate the growing importance of interdependence in markets has caused surprises in recent years. Inflows of foreign capital, for example, lessened the expected impact of large budget deficits on real interest rates in the United States.

   A concern most often cited by advocates of coordinated macroeconomic policies is that global interdependence has increased the risks of systemic failure. This term eludes precise definition, but it implies a complex in which the financial system and currency markets, emanating from the actions of only one country or events in a single market, in an integrated world economy, individual countries might not be able to insulate themselves against such contagion and its enormous costs.

   Observers often point to two recent events as evidence of the increased risks of systemic failure. One is the international debt crisis, which gained wide recognition in late 1982. The debt crisis threatens not only large banks, but also many mid-sized regional banks and small banks through their lending arrangements with debtor countries and through their domestic and international correspondent-lending relationships. The repercussions of widespread defaults could have had serious global implications. The stock-market collapse of October 19, 1987 offers a second, more recent, example of the risks of systemic failure. This collapse spread rapidly through stock markets around the world, posing a threat to global economic growth and stability. Although unaffected from these recent experiences, the world remains vulnerable to similar types of events.

   In listing the arguments for closer international policy coordination, I also should note that this global interdependence, which complicates economic interactions and increases the risks of systemic failure, often serves to discipline policymakers. Nations that have adopted inflationary policies have seen the market's disapproval quickly reflected in capital flows, in exchange-rate movements and, with some delay, in trade patterns. Similarly, the increased ease with which manufacturing and financial firms can move about the globe places a check on regulation and taxation. Simply stated, greater international interdependence increases the opportunities for investors and traders to protect their wealth from the mis-guided policies of individual countries.

   Proponents of global policy coordination argue that because of economic integration, the chances of achieving substantial benefits through multilateral cooperation are greater now than at any other time. In many respects, they are correct. The potential benefits from the mutual reduction of trade restraints and from the further liberalization of capital movements undoubtedly grow as markets expand. I applaud such market-enhancing international cooperation as GATT and the U.S.-Canadian Free Trade Agreement. The removal of artificial restraints on markets can increase the standard of living worldwide. Moreover, one cannot deny the value of shared information, common purpose, and coordinated efforts during those rare periods of clear economic crisis. In today's economic environment, such shocks can ripple through markets quickly and forcefully.

   In contrast to these efforts, many of the recent proposals for global policy cooperation call for a detailed harmonization—a fine tuning on a grand scale—of monetary, fiscal, and regulatory policies among the major developed countries. Recent meetings of the Group of Seven (G7) countries, for example, have focused on developing a set of "objective indicators"—including unemployment, inflation, current-account balances, exchange rates, and money growth—that could trigger policy changes in participant countries. Often have recommended targeted-zone arrangements or fixed-exchange-rate regimes, which presuppose a willingness to coordinate basic macroeconomic policies closely. Some advocates of coordination have sought solutions for the international-debt situation that involve greatly expanded roles for governments and quasigovernment international organizations.

- **Market Adjustments and the Costs of Cooperation**

   The evolving importance of globally integrated markets creates both the enormous potential for nations to benefit from economic integration and the great danger that such cooperation could entail substantial costs by subverting markets for political ends.

   Consider, for example, recent allegations that the G7 countries are relying on a loose system of reference zones for exchange rates and on a set of economic indicators to guide their decisions about the compatibility of macroeconomic policies and about the appropriateness of adjustments. Many can find little concrete evidence that these reference zones and indicators actually have influenced macroeconomic decisions in the separate G7 countries. This judgment might not be entirely fair. The G7 has never announced a complete set of "indicants" along with the relative weights in policy discussions, nor has it revealed reference zones for exchange rates. Furthermore, we do not know what policy would otherwise have been.

   To date, most of the cooperative efforts have attempted to stabilize exchange rates; the industrialized nations have faced some attacks on the fundamental problems underlying their current-account imbalances. Under the guise of cooperation and exchange-rate stabilization, the United States and the other major industrialized countries have financed a growing share of the balance-of-trade deficits and from the further liberalization of capital movements through official reserve flows. While some might contend that this slowed the adjustment process to a manageable pace, one could argue just as forcefully that this official financing has avoided the adjustment that the exchange market ultimately will demand—specifically,
an increase in U.S. private savings and a substantial reduction in the U.S. budget deficit. I doubt that cooperation has led countries to adopt markedly better policies, or that it has reduced exchange-market uncertainty. Failing this, it has imposed substantial costs.

Similar arguments apply to the developing-country-debt situation. To be sure, quick U.S. actions in providing bridge loans helped to avoid outright defaults in some instances, and the cooperative efforts of governments and of the International Monetary Fund helped to initiate adjustment programs in many debtor countries and to secure rescheduling agreements from banks. These actions reduced the risks of systemic failure.

Many have argued, however, that this cooperation between debtor and creditor governments also has helped many banks to avoid the repricing of their assets, and that cooperation has not done little to ease developing countries' debt burdens or to foster a lasting adjustment in debtor countries. Substantiating this appraisal, developing-country debts trade far below their book values in secondary markets, as does the stock of highly exposed banks in equity markets. These policies have not significantly reduced uncertainties associated with the long-term prospects for uninterrupted debt service and probably have increased the overall real-resource costs of adjustment.

### Coordination and the Costs of Uncertainty

In addition to the potentially large real-resource costs, which I have thus far attributed to the tendency of governments to supplant markets, international coordination could create additional costs by generating market uncertainty. Private market participants base decisions, in part, on the expected actions of governments. When future policies are uncertain, market participants attempt to hedge by raising prices or by avoiding actions that might leave them vulnerable to policy changes. Recent proposals for detailed international policy coordination could actually increase uncertainties, if they create doubt about the willingness and ability of governments to implement them.

Nations willingly cooperate when all benefit. Mutual gains most likely result when cooperation is narrow in scope, when the number of participants is small, and when the resulting policies promote the smooth functioning of markets. Bilateral trade agreements are an example. When cooperation is more complex, however, as in the case of macroeconomic policy coordination, success often requires that countries take actions contrary to some of their individual interests. Compliance then entails burdens, which countries historically have attempted to avoid or to shift.

Consider our experiences with macroeconomic policy coordination since 1985. In light of the sparse U.S. progress toward lowering our budget deficits, our part of the bargain, one could argue that the dollar's depreciation has shifted more of the adjustment burden onto our trading partners—an outcome that was not completely the result of international coordination and cooperation. Because international policy coordination—unlike markets—often lacks a credible system for enforcement and burden-sharing, it can create uncertainties about the extent of compliances.

Even if nations are willing to coordinate broad policy objectives, many observers doubt that they can. The sharp differences among economists about the true state of the economy, and about the interrelationships among policy levers and economic variables, are almost legendary. If economists cannot agree on how the economy works, can we expect governments to agree on and implement coordinated, effective macroeconomic policies? One also might wonder about the outcome if the world cooperated, but adopted the wrong model of how the world works. This, of course, is a problem at the national level, but international cooperation could greatly increase the costs of an error.

Many of the proposals for detailed international coordination reminded me of policymakers' "fine tuning" efforts of the 1960s and 1970s, when they attempted to achieve many targets simultaneously. The thrust of policies shifted frequently, and those policies generally missed on all accounts. The markets' mistrust of policymakers was reflected in an inflationary psychology that complicated and extended the fight against inflation. If we now make domestic objectives subject to international targets and events, economic agents once again could lose confidence in the willingness and the ability of policymakers to pursue important domestic goals.

### Conclusion

Governments obviously play an essential role in a market economy. That markets today extend across national boundaries does not alter this role; indeed, global markets enhance it. We should explore opportunities for international cooperation that enhance the performance of markets and reduce the risks of systemic failure, but we must consider both the benefits and costs of such policies.
Many have advocated a greatly expanded role for international policy coordination. They argue that as markets become increasingly integrated, the potential benefits from such coordination become enormous. I caution that such policies often seek to supplant markets and to avoid market discipline, risking enormous costs in terms of real economic growth and efficiency.

Much of the current thrust toward global cooperation is concerned with macroeconomic policy coordination. Given the political and economic realities of the world today, I believe that a move toward detailed coordination of macroeconomic policies would not improve, but could very well jeopardize, our standard of living.

Instead, I would urge countries to adopt, to announce, and to steadfastly maintain long-term nominal targets for policy, consistent with zero inflation and long-term real growth potential. This would not stabilize exchange rates, but it would remove much of the uncertainty about future policy that contributes to exchange-rate volatility. Flexible exchange rates would adjust, making the plans of individual nations compatible, and would provide a buffer to external policy errors and shocks. Such broad, individually motivated targets would be credible, predictable, and—most important—capable of maintaining the integrity of private markets.

**Footnotes**


4. Through successive rounds of negotiations, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) has achieved multilateral reductions in trade barriers.


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