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Anticipating the South African Tenure in the Chair of the G77: The Context and Contours

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SA elected to Chair

The ministers of the G77 plus China met on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in late September 2014 in New York, USA, as it often does, to discuss its business and plans for the coming year. It elected South Africa as a rotating chair of the group for 2015, giving it the arduous task of strengthening and maintaining unity of purpose, vision and action in respect of major international developments anticipated in 2015. Although established in 1964 by 77 countries and China has a special status in the G77, it has since expanded to 134 countries of diverse size, regional location, power status and interests. As the biggest multilateral organisation, it is one of the most significant actors in the complicated international diplomacy. What agenda for South Africa's second coming? How will this impact on Africa? What role for civil society?

Chairpersonship of the G77 and China

The chair of the G77 plus China has a huge responsibility of steering this big multilateral group, now comprised of 134 countries, towards a common position on major international developments, encouraging the implementation of past decisions and maintaining the general cohesion of the group in an international environment marked by fluidity and uncertainty. Part of this fluidity is explained by the sharpened differentiation within the developing world that takes on regional/continental, economic class and paradigmatic lines. The most obvious differentiation is between major developing countries called emerging powers and the least developed countries. This generates does not necessarily generate conflict among G77 member states, but it does make the constellation of interests within a lot more complex now than in the past. Therefore, the

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chair of the group has the unenviable task of keeping the body relevant and effective in a challenging environment.

Officially, while the South Summit is the highest decision-making body of the G77, the chairpersonship is “the highest political body” held on rotational basis by country representing its three regions of Africa, the Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean. It provides space for an energetic and capable holder of the chair to champion internal cohesion and external agency in ways that visible advance the G77 agenda. The duties of the chair are more significant than it is assumed from the seeming vagueness of the rules, but it is the competence, capacity and agency they bring to the position that makes the most significance. Observations of the functioning of the G77 over the past five decades show that member states that have big missions in the UN, big ambitions in international affairs and significant political capital at the global level register notable progress in the pursuit of the G77 agenda, be it in respect of common positions in international negotiations or the role of the G77 in the Second Committee of the UNGA dealing with UN finance matters, the Third Committee on social and humanitarian affairs, and the Fifth Committee on administrative and budgetary issues.

There are also committees on decolonisation, disarmament and international security, and legal affairs. A few countries are generally regarded as having been influential and sometimes dominant in G77 business and relatively more successful chairs, namely: Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, India, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa, Tunisia and Venezuela. Seven of these have successfully chaired the organisation two times with only Pakistan having the distinction of having chaired trice.

However, when they possess the necessary energy for particular policy agendas, small and island states like Cuba and Fiji have been able to animate the G77 internal debate and project G77 collective power in advance of specific policy agendas. When the Pacific island, Fiji, chaired in 2012, it energetically championed small islands concerns about climate change impacts and slow responses to the need for mitigation of carbon emissions and vulnerable states’ financial and technological requirements for climate change adaptation. Though its New York diplomatic mission had no more than four members of staff in all, the island showed vigour in its

efforts to promote internal unity and common position in response to the external environment. While it found that the volume of work presented a huge challenge for island states, the Fiji Permanent Representative to the UN said, “but we as islands can do this.” So, he continued, “I think we should never shy away from holding international responsibilities just because we are small islands. We have people who can do any role anywhere in the world, good people in our own region and countries.”¹

What Agenda for SA’s chairpersonship?

South Africa had its first stint in the same position in 2006, taking over from the island of Jamaica that had done remarkably well to get the G77 voice elevated in the discussions of the first five years of the Millennium Development Goals at the UN Summit of 2005. To build on this, South Africa promised to focus on opportunities for enhancing momentum coming from the UN Summit in the hope for greater development opportunities for developing countries, reliable and predictable financing for development, and harnessing links between security and development.² Explaining the spirit with which South Africa would take the opportunity, the then second deputy minister of foreign affairs, Ms. Sue Van Der Merwe, said: “South Africa is committed to a just and equitable global economic order as well as the achievement of sustainable development.”³

In this, the heydays of South Africa’s role in international multilateral diplomacy generally, the country was able to report that its tenure had been marked by unity and energy, commitment and action on commitments. The G77 displayed the power of its collective diplomacy in its robust defence of developing countries’ interests in the Doha Development Round of the World Trade Organisation, those these negotiations collapsed over differences between developed countries and the G77 constituency. At the UN, the G77 during South Africa’s tenure supported a number of important developments including the establishment of peace building support office, the commitment of increased resources for the Human Rights Council, the adoption of new accounting standards and so forth.

Accepting nomination as chair on behalf of South Africa, Ms Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, the Minister for International Relations and Cooperation, pledged to build on the work of its predecessors, especially Bolivia, to advance developing countries' interests in the year of intergovernmental negotiations of the post-2015 development agenda. It undertook to work for the unity of the body. This goal is made easier by the fact that dialogue on this agenda had long started

Ultimately, the G77 foregrounds the importance of the unity of the developing countries and this finds expression in common negotiating positions for international negotiations and dialogues. Therefore, it is part of the role of the chair to think through, plan and act to promote and deepen cohesion in the manner in which the G77 conducts itself and in how its members speak during negotiations. For this reason, the chair is expected to promote sufficient internal discussion and consultation including the diplomatic missions of member states to the UN.

The chair does not however dictate the agenda that the G77 embraces, but this comes mostly from previous decisions and major international issues that the G77 has to take a position on. Similarly, the issues that South Africa will lead the G77 in dealing with are imposed by the international environment in 2015 and on-going G77 work programme. The most important focus will be on ensuring the unity of the developing world in intergovernmental negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda as the timelines for the Millennium Development Goals approach their lapse. Critical to this is to champion the common positions already taken by the G77 on the MDGs and on ideas towards the post-2015 agenda as well as ensuring convergence of positions between those of the G77 and those of developing regions that constitute the group. Fortunately, there are obvious common points across the south including the principle of common and differentiated responsibilities, the eradication of poverty as an apex priority, the integration of development goals and sustainable development goals, quantified and time-based commitments, predictable financial resources, and strong accountability measures. There will be discussions on financing for development, global peace and nuclear non-proliferation, and special needs of the least developed states and the small island

states. The usual political questions of sovereignty as it pertains to Argentina-UK tensions over the Malvinas islands in Latin America, disputes over the Chagos archipelago, the occupied Palestinian territories, the US embargo against Cuba, and external intervention in various parts of the world.

Implications

South Africa will have to align its own interests with the broader interests of the global south. To this end, it will have to spend something thinking through the maze of differences in the nuances of individual country positions to promote unity of purpose. It will have to show how the common good is also good for South Africa's domestic constituencies.

As the chair, South Africa's multilateral diplomacy skills will be tested during a period when it is also required to play an active role in BRICS, G20 and the UN in general. Critical among these skills is endless consultations and resolution of international differences in order to keep the unity of the group. This will be difficult because some G77 member states, such as the ALBA countries for instance, hold quite extremely strong views on some major international issues.

South Africa will have stay true to its ambition to be known as a state that reaches out to publics and non-state actors by ensuring that unlike its first tenure marked by limited civil society engagement it will increase its outreach to publics to ensure that its work as the chair is generally understood. This should not be limited to procedural approach of consultation or information sessions, but should take the form of robust critical engagement to enrich the country's understanding of the G77 and its bearing on domestic interests. It could promote research by public universities and research institutions on the G77 and its agenda.

Recommendations

South Africa has a precious opportunity to use the chairpersonship of the G77 to help transform the agency of the global south from making lofty undertakings to taking concrete measures to implement what has been agreed.

It has the opportunity to strengthen the G77 secretariat by attracting more financial resources and ensuring sound and efficient management systems are in place. The more it affirms the secretariat as an organ of the group by working closely with it, the better for the organ.

The continuous interface with various components of the global south including the diplomatic clubs that have emerged as part of the voice of the south as well as regional organisations will help deepen links between the G77 and other structures of global south agency.

The engagement of publics in the world generally and the South African public in particular will help strengthen

the legitimacy of the G77 and the South African chairing of the group.

Notes

- 1 SPREP, 2013. 'Fiji, Chair of G77 – We, as Small Islands can do this.' Available at <http://www.sprep.org/climate-change/fiji-chair-of-g77-qwe-as-small-islands-can-do-this> (accessed on 7 September 2014).
- 2 'South Africa Accepts the Nomination as Chair of the Group of 77 and China for the Year 2006.' Available at <http://www.dirco.gov.za> (accessed on 23 October 2014).
- 3 Van der Merwe, S. 2005. '<http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/2005/merw1211.htm>.' Available at www.dirco.gov.za (accessed on 29 October 2014).



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