

Not quite the end of the Third World?

Written by Nick Chan

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NICK CHAN, MAR 31 2010

This editorial is a response to Clive Hamilton's piece, 'The End of the Third World'

One of the few things to catch the imagination out of last December's UN climate conference in Copenhagen certainly was Tuvalu, standing up to make a desperate plea for its continuing existence. But despite Clive Hamilton's claim that this marks the 'tectonics plates' shifting and a rift emerging within the Third World, it is more likely that Tuvalu's actions will come to be little more than a wistful memory. Hamilton's argument is an intuitive one. But it deserves far greater caution and skepticism, because the longer course of the climate negotiations has had its share of apparent ruptures between developing countries.

By most expectations, the G77 was should have been dead and buried some twenty years ago. If nonalignment between the capitalist and communist worlds was its *raison d'être*, the ending of the Cold War should have left it without a compass. The rise of the Asian tigers and the widening divergence in economic development among Third World states should have left any notion of shared interests in tatters. And on climate change, this tent under which low-lying states, rapidly industrialising countries and oil exporters huddle seems so implausible that it should have come crashing down well before now.

Instead, longevity has its legacies, and the demonstrated solidarity of the G77 is held together by a remarkable glue. There have been moments when it has indeed seemed about to come tumbling down, most notably at the first COP in 1995, when a breakaway group of developing countries left the oil exporters exposed and the G77 unable to reach a common position. But unity has by and large been the byword, the only apparent defense against being picked off one-by-one by industrialised states in an uncertain world and cajoled into mitigation commitments.

That Tuvalu forced the suspension of the whole conference is noteworthy, but its stance is nothing new. The small island states and least developed countries have long been aware that it is they who will bear the brunt of climate impacts. They have long advocated targets and measures that are far stronger, and at a pace far quicker, than what the rest of the world has been willing to contemplate. At every meeting they express their frustration with the inching pace of progress. The tragedy is that all that their 'brave stand' will earn is an ovation.

Hamilton is right that China was caught in a pincer at Copenhagen, one that left Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao uncomfortably exposed. But it would be too hasty to suggest that China has abandoned "its policy of defending the interests of poor countries." In fact, there's little reason to think that such a policy has ever existed in anything more than rhetoric. The "Chinese juggernaut" has long been keen to smooth over the differences between G77 members, because membership of this coalition provides cover for avoiding binding mitigation commitments.

In this, it finds ready support from the great swathe of middle-sized developing countries whom are wary of similar commitments, and especially a slippery slope from China and India downwards to them. In light of the miserable record of developed countries to meet their Kyoto mitigation obligations, this doesn't seem entirely unreasonable. Their determined defense of principle 7 from the FCCC, that action by developing countries depends on the extent to which developed countries implement their commitments, reflects this fear.

For China, additionally, the backing of the G77 allows it to claim the lion's share of climate finance, such as in

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projects financed under the Clean Development Mechanism (again to the detriment of the most vulnerable). And you can be sure that it will be going all out to ensure that the G77 holds together in some form, even if the G77 declines in relevance relative to the nascent BASIC grouping. A foot in both camps, perhaps?

And for the small island states, they may occupy the moral high ground. But the high ground, even if behoven of campaigners and the media, leaves them dangerously isolated. Without substantial finance for adaptation imminent, a retreat back into the G77 may be the only option. Without substantial finance for mitigation, however, the rest of the G77 are unlikely to play ball and be willing to take steps on making mitigation commitments of their own. It all presents a very tall order for the industrialised countries who are supposed to find the hundreds of billions for both types of finance.

The G77 is undoubtedly an “awkward alliance”, but one in which the “stridency of the weak” will find little support. Instead, the “imperative of maintaining the appearance of G77 unity” still casts a spell over most of its members, one that has yet to wear out. As Mark Twain might have put it, it would appear that rumours of the Third World’s death have been greatly exaggerated.

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Nicholas Chan recently completed his D.Phil in International Relations at St. Antony’s College, Oxford University, on developing country coalitions in the UN climate change negotiations. He holds an M.Phil in International Relations from University College, Oxford University, and a B.Sc in International Politics from Aberystwyth University. He has been a delegate at UNFCCC since 2011, and his research interests are on global environmental politics, constructivist IR, and the global South in world politics. He tweets at [@nickdotchan](#).