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Is the romance of South-South cooperation coming to an end?

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Is the romance of South-South cooperation coming to an end?

Bonn, 11 September 2017. What has happened to the spirit of South-South cooperation (SSC), the emancipatory project of transcontinental solidarity born at the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia? While the South continues to demonstrate unity against the West, for example at the recent summit of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) in Xiamen, China, mounting tensions within the highly diverse group are clearly visible. A main factor is the growing geopolitical rivalry between China and India. This is bad news – not just for developing countries but for the world at large. The implementation of the transformative 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will only be feasible if Southern providers of development cooperation work together while striving for complementarity with traditional donors. The upcoming United Nations (UN) conference on South-South cooperation in Argentina in March 2019 will offer a unique opportunity for overcoming divisions among Southern powers and enhancing the global common good.

The Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), a think tank under India's Ministry of External Affairs, has significantly enhanced the international debate on SSC by hosting a string of well-attended conferences. A comparison of the recent meeting, known as Delhi 3 (with RIS's Delhi 1 and 2 events in 2013 and 2015), reveals stagnation as well as progress. One key finding is obvious: Southern providers of development cooperation still cannot agree on definitions and concepts for SSC. A platform of SSC providers created with support of the UN in 2013 has quietly faded away due to lack of consensus among the governments involved. Márcio Corrêa, a leading official of ABC, Brazil's SSC agency, succinctly observed that "major providers of South-South cooperation have not shown willingness to move in the direction of a common model".

In contrast, one area of significant progress concerns analytical work on the modalities and impact of SSC. Spearheaded by the Network of Southern Think Tanks (NeST), a growing body of empirical evidence has been generated. However, divergence is also apparent here as the studies use different conceptual frameworks for monitoring and evaluation. Debates at Delhi 3 were overshadowed by the growing tension between India and China, which is increasingly having a bearing on their respective SSC strategies. China concentrates all its efforts on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which targets numerous developing countries across Asia and Africa. Pushing

back, India has joined forces with Japan in launching the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). For the moment, neither side appears ready for dialogue and coordination regarding their competing schemes for promoting connectivity, trade and investment. Such frictions are amplified by China's desire to expand the BRICS grouping, for example by adding Indonesia and Pakistan. The move has been met with reservation by India which fears Beijing's ambition for global leadership.

The competition between leading Southern powers presents considerable risks for developing countries. Against their will, they may be confronted with a situation where they have to choose between one or the other. Regional organisations, for example the African Union (AU) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), should act as essential intermediaries to moderate potential conflicts and turn them into opportunities. Also, think tanks like NeST and the T(Think)20-Africa Standing Group need to play an important role in fostering mutual understanding and constructive approaches. As Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, Director of the South African Institute of International Affairs, puts it: "Africans value their partnerships with both India and China and would seek to work on complementarities rather than rivalries."

The symbolically charged event which will commemorate the 1978 UN Conference on Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries could set the stage for a constructive realignment of SSC, and help Southern powers get beyond their geopolitical disputes. After acrimonious debate along the North-South divide, the UN General Assembly was only able to reach a minimal consensus on the formalities concerning the event, with no agreement on substance. BAPA+40, referring to the adoption of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action forty years ago, will be hosted by Argentina from 20 to 22 March 2019. In addition, Argentina will soon assume the presidency of the G20 and host the next ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). This implies that the country will become a key player in global politics over the coming months.

Strengthening South-South cooperation is of key importance for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Industrialised countries should, therefore, take a positive stand on BAPA+40 and engage pro-actively with the preparatory process in order to ensure the conference's success.