

Statement by the Permanent Representative of the Netherlands, Ambassador Herman Scaper

The Group of 77

Like to begin by thanking the Center for UN Reform Education for the publication of this very interesting and useful book.

As all of us here who spend a large part of their time on GA-matters know, the G-77 plays a central role, and in some areas *the* central role in the General Assembly, but - as the authors note in the introduction - surprisingly little recent literature is available about its genesis, its structure and the way it operates.

It is very useful to gain this perspective for a person like me, representing a country which is not a member of G-77, and not likely to become one, being a country of the North, or North/West - the authors use both terms.

North by North West, that's the famous thriller by Alfred Hitchcock, in which the hero - Cary Grant - has to throw himself to the ground in order not to be hit by a plane coming directly at him.

I must admit one sometimes gets that same feeling when in a difficult or heated debate one is confronted by the assembled mass of the G-77, the main difference being of course that I am not Cary Grant.

What makes the book particularly interesting is that it is not a dry academic study, but that it is to a large degree based on interviews with representatives of both G-77 countries and other member states, who often are willing to speak their mind and to discuss openly the strengths and weaknesses of positions of the different groups and countries, including their own.

What comes out very clearly is the identity of the G-77 as the Group that represents the South and the whole of the South, except Palau. However, which countries belong to the South is not a given. It is as much a political-economic characterisation as a geographical description. Five countries have left the Group; three because they joined the EU and two (Mexico and South Korea) because they joined the OECD.

This would seem to imply that the interests of the G-77, that is the South, are seen as "by definition" being different and sometimes contrary to the interests of the North. The authors quote a former Chair of the G-77: "double dipping is not allowed". But perhaps things are changing in this respect. Chile is, as far as I know, still a member of the G-77 although it has become a member of the OECD. And as the authors point out, whether membership of the G-20 is incompatible with that of the G-77 is not being debated, at least at this moment.

But it is interesting to note that Lydia [Swart], in the final chapter, writes that it seems quite likely that the emerging economies, such as the BASIC countries, will increasingly be tempted to act as independent brokers between the North and the South, just as the EU has on many occasions acted as a mediator between the US and the South.

On the other hand, the G-77 has until now been successful in maintaining a remarkable cohesion of the group, notwithstanding the multiple fault lines, as the authors describe it, within the overall membership. Part of the explanation for this is, I assume, that using the G-77 as the central forum to determine policy and conduct negotiations on development and some other issues serves the interests of both smaller and bigger nations within the group.

Smaller nations, because these often don't have the capacity to deal with all the issues on the agenda, and the G-77 compensates for this by developing positions that on the whole reflect the interests and wishes of these smaller nations, which they would not be able to defend effectively if they were on their own, each one trying to make the best of it individually.

For larger nations within the Group the advantage of the G-77 is that it enables them to play a leading role within the GA, backed up by a group which represents nearly 2/3 of the membership. The book identifies 10 of them by name, and singles out two in particular: Cuba and Egypt, so it is very appropriate and welcome that ambassador Abdelaziz has joined us here today. It is interesting that among these 10 countries mentioned, Asia is under-represented. This is, however, not further discussed in the book; a subject for the next edition perhaps.

The downside of this remarkable cohesion I mentioned, is that all the different constituencies within the G-77 need to see their interests and wishes reflected in the positions of the Group. As the book points out these positions are rarely reviewed and updated to reflect new realities, and since each has its own proponents they tend to be fairly inflexible. This leads to considerable irritation at the side of countries of the North/West, criticism that the G-77 speeches and positions are carved in stone, unbalanced and repetitive.

This is of course a criticism one can also hear concerning positions of the EU, which are also often the outcome of a complicated internal negotiation process. And as the book makes clear most G-77 members continue to share a strong resentment towards the sense of entitlement and superiority that many of the richest countries display in the UN, and feel that the North is arrogantly dictating policies based on their own perceptions.

Strong language this, which surprised me a bit, but whether this sense of entitlement and superiority is real or not, there is apparently a perception among many G-77 countries that this is the case and this political reality needs to be taken into account when we try to come to agreed outcomes.

But at the same time there are two differences in the positions of the countries from North and from the South I would like to mention. The first one is that the G-77 have an overwhelming majority in the General Assembly. This also leads to a certain arrogance and sense of entitlement, it would seem.

Take the issue of the scale of assessments for instance, where the position of the G-77 is as far as the EU is concerned, clearly a case of arrogant power politics, in which we basically get the message from the G-77: we have the majority, you'd better shut up.

Another example, relating to entitlement: why should it be the prerogative of the G-77 to draft nearly all the resolutions in the Second Committee, as is now the case? The fact that these resolutions are in the end adopted by consensus or with an overwhelming majority doesn't mean very much. If you know you are going to lose each and every vote, there is quickly a tendency not to put up a big fight and to spend political capital on a losing cause.

But this also means that there is little buy in from the North, little interest in implementation, so that many resolutions in the Second Committee get lost in the tsunami of resolutions that the GA produces each year, and are often simply filed and forgotten and in any case neglected by countries from the North.

The second difference between the position of the countries from the North and the South, is that the North is not nearly as united in the GA as the South. There is no real counterpart to the G-77, whose representatives can speak for all the countries from the South (except Palau) and China.

On the side of the North there are many different players, of which the EU represents the largest group, but with smaller groups like the CANZ, and countries like the US, Japan, Norway and South Korea and several others, each playing their own role.

Such a differentiation in the North, to a certain degree, weakens the position of the countries of the North within the GA, but it also makes it possible for some of them to act as a broker in finding acceptable compromises, as was the case for instance some time ago when the EU helped to broker deals between the US and the G-77.

However, in the final chapter Lydia sounds a warning, which is certainly relevant, I think, when she writes that with the EU increasingly less inclined to a moderating role (I already mentioned the anger and irritation at the side of the EU on the position of the G-77 concerning a revision of the scale of assessments) and the current US administration more positively engaged, a convergence of positions of the countries of the North could very well happen.

This in turn could, in Lydia's view, lead to an even more pronounced stalemate between two monolithic blocks, which may well further undermine the relevance of the GA.

Let me be clear this is not a development my country, and most countries of the North, would welcome. But we need to make an effort to steer developments in another direction.

First of all we have to recognize that the world is changing fast, and that increased cooperation is necessary between North and South on problems where our shared interests are more important than our differences. Global public goods, such the environment, water and food security are obvious examples.

Secondly, this means that we should try to do away with this reflex to redefine issues immediately into a North-South issue where we only look to our own group to find the appropriate answers, but instead invest more in identifying points of convergence.

This can be done through both formal and informal channels (such as High Level Commissions, Groups of Friends, cross regional groups etc). Proposals to set up such groups should not fall victim to knee jerk reactions that these are attempts to break up the unity of the group.

If not we have to fear that the sombre warning of the other author of the book, Jacob Lund, will become a reality, when he writes "As the negative trends in this book show, there is a very real danger that the UN will become increasingly irrelevant if these trends continue to add to the debilitating divide between the developed and developing worlds. "

Thank you for your attention.