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The North-South Conflict as "True Global Conflict"

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THESIS STATEMENT

The Cancún Charade 1981

Historical Lesson Concerning Failed Global Management

In this paper the author will analyse why the much heralded North-South Summit in the Mexican sea side resort Cancún “had” to fail, and that this “No-Model Cancún” provides an excellent case study for historical lessons – especially in view of the series of summits in the 1990s.

1) Limits of Top Level State Actors

The Brandt Report was an effort initiated by the President of the World Bank Robert McNamara in 1977 to overcome the blockades in the North-South dialogue of the 1970s on state level as well as to overcome the stalemate on the level of the United Nations concerning the global negotiation process to generate sustainable and equitable development in the South.

Willy Brandt talked to his friend and Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky already in December 1979 about an option for a summit which should carry on the work of the independent experts and personalities of this NGO-Commission on political decision makers level. The Austrian Chancellor was sceptical about the chances for such a summit, but then was convinced that a small group of key actors from top players in the national arena both from the South and from the North could agree in dialogue to open real global negotiations.

22 presidents, prime ministers and chancellors participated, representing 2/3 of the world's population and ¾ of the global economic power, but too many were excluded who could have played an important role (for the non-aligned countries the acting chairman, Fidel Castro from Cuba; the Soviet Union did not accept to attend, and Brandt, too, was excluded because of resistance from member states of the Group 77). Brandt's exclusion was a clear indication that such a prominent personality as a de facto NGO representative did not fit into the rather orthodox “state only” mainstream concept of the 1980s, which should, however, erode over this “lost” decade until the 1990s.

The structural limits of this group were reflected in the fact that 2 key actors, Kreisky and Helmut Schmidt from the Federal Republic of Germany were ill and could not attend, as well as the Soviet “Nomenklatura” around Breshnev, Tichonov and Gromyko was not sure whether their geriatric leadership could really well perform in such a tight atmosphere.

Many planners of this meeting did not realize that the planned “seclusion” of world leaders did not function well despite the “show of informality” (all men except UN Secretary General Waldheim not wearing ties); in the opposite the strict security performed by the Mexican army sealing off 5.000 people in a rather small area (3.000 journalists plus delegations and hotel staff) produced a strange pressure to finish a final document that the conference had to end after 2 days at 6.30 pm although most delegations stayed over night. But, to be quite frank, there is no indication that “one day more would have made all the difference” as President Nyerere had suggested.

2) Hidden Interests

Especially the Reagan Administration did – quite contrary to ambivalent signals from the Carter Administration – agree surprisingly to participate but with the primary aim to “raise the costs” of Soviet “adventurism” in the Third World and to advocate development in the “Less Developed Countries” mainly by private investment rather than through development cooperation. As a sideshow the US model – which by the way was in the long run not implanted into US economy due to large budget deficits – “economic domestic order” and less foreign “aid” was proclaimed. “Global negotiations” were not intended at any point of this summit by the US.

3) Neoliberal Supply Side overruled Late Keynesianism:

Both Brandt and Kreisky had pursued a different strategy – Brandt when asking for radical disarmament and transformation of the thus saved funds into massive transfers to the “poor”, Kreisky – although due to a sudden illness did not participate in Cancún and turned over his co-chairmanship to the Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau – advocating a new “Marshall-Plan for the South” (using a 200 billion US Dollar fund, sponsored by the industrial nations and the OPEC; only 50% should be paid back by the South) . Whereas Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister from Great Britain pleaded for tax cuts, Brandt had asked for a global tax (carbon tax).

4) Free Agenda and Free Speech

Due to experiences with similar previous diplomatic and political conferences (e.g. UNCTAD in Manila in 1978 or UNIDO in New Delhi in 1979) Cancún should offer a different setting allowing everybody of the 22 participants to speak about everything, a procedure contrary to US views. Especially Kreisky, who in general was very sceptical towards the outcome in Summit meetings, liked this idea to open up the strict diplomatic framework and to open room for manoeuvre. His Co-Chairman Lopez Portillo from Mexico, however, pleaded for detailed preparations thereby reducing the originally planned free setting, which already was a reduced framework because of exclusion or self-exclusion of important actors.

5) Media Impact

Especially before the conference there did exist relatively high media attention (e.g. a cover story in Newsweek), but the impact on public opinion in general – certainly not a elite level already being interested in North-South issues – remained meagre (e.g. in Austria at that time only 19% had an idea what “North-South.Dialogue” meant, 48% did not know anything about this topic despite the high media reflection of Kreisky’s efforts and proposals). I, doubt, too that even on the level of the decision makers present the personal atmosphere did really change perceptions or opinions (some observers at the time said that “Reagan” was somehow “educated” since he saw and heard real people like Nyerere whom he before considered an anti-American revolutionary).

6) Missed Opportunities

Especially Trudeau thought that the Austrian delegation (represented by Foreign Minister Willibald Pahr) and the Algerians as well as Venezuela “killed” the conference follow up by not backing his formula that UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim should nominate a committee of independent experts for preparations of “Global Negotiations” and that the Heads of State should continue communication exchanges on this very issue of North-South relations. In return the Austrians thought that Trudeau was not able to “exploit” the full range

of manoeuvre within the US proposals since there were signs of disagreement in the Reagan administration and that Kreisky might have been more successful in sounding out the “real” limits of agreement at the time. In my opinion both arguments do not reflect the fact that especially the US as well as important actors of the Group of 77 could not find a “bridge” to overcome the main structural problem of the Cancún meeting: It was a meeting of representatives of “elites” including the “South” states, but excluding representatives of the “periphery” (according to the models of Senghaas and Galtung) who in the 1990s were able to at least express themselves on the grass roots and NGO level. The key issue, the growing globalisation of international economy and the negative effects of this trend on large parts of the South – symbolized by the debate about Multinational Companies – was nearly excluded, since still the agenda was dominated by “traditional” issues of the North-South issue. The “hot topics” of the Brandt report (disarmament) were not really discussed.

7) Results

Willy Brandt – the “father” of the group who had developed the idea of a North-South-Summit – was quite well aware of the nearly non-result of the meeting, but stressed the importance of the personal meetings of world leaders – especially with regard to further political image building. As far as minor concrete agreements were concerned Brandt underlined the consensus in the area of energy (Mexican proposal for global energy policy) and the support of an energy bank of the World Bank by Saudi Arabia.

Cancún remains a historical, but remembered failure in the first efforts for what could be one day “global governance”. The French President Mitterrand correctly stated that after Cancún nobody talked to him about global or even multilateral negotiations anymore. Cancún clearly showed the limits of traditional state management at the time, but certainly implied long range options which partly were realized in the Summits of the 1990s, “Roads in Repair” leading to Global governance, as a collection of articles, published by the Stiftung Entwicklung und Frieden by Thomas Fues and Brigitte I. Hamm as editors, was called – but still the roads are in a very bad shape and many are not even built.

The fact that some elites in the national, international and European decision making structures today in 2001 might have been confronted with this failure as part of their political socialisation in their youth are the most important long range effects towards “building of awareness” how difficult global governance in practice is. The topics and problems as outlined in the Brandt report and discussed before and at Cancún 1981 are pretty much similar to the topics nowadays – even after the end of the Cold War and some changes in parts of the “South”, which has been enlarged by countries from the former Communist bloc.

Es gilt das gesprochene Wort.