

The Embedded Conundrum of South-South and Triangular Cooperation: A Prologue to Shifting Frontiers from Collaboration to Contention

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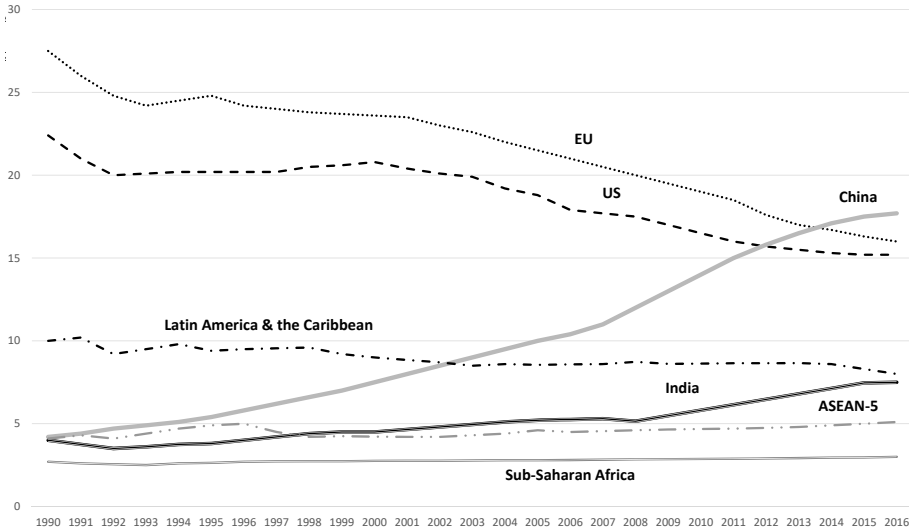
This special issue discusses, in-depth, the embedded conundrum of South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC) whose frontiers are shifted from collaboration to contention within the United Nations (UN) development system and beyond. This introductory article provides the conceptual framework—the contention-collaboration spectrum—that guides all the contributors and serves as the collective starting point for this project. The moving frontiers of SSTC reflect the shifting historic relationships between the global South and North as well as Southern partner countries. The framework enables the six articles of this special issue to investigate the paradoxical structure of contrasting dynamics of SSTC, which has always been exposed to historical transformations at multi-levels of analysis: global governance, regional engagements, middle power perspectives, and the UN development system and beyond.

Keywords South-South cooperation, triangular cooperation, contention, collaboration, global South, UN development system

I

The rise of the global South over the last two decades has sparked a chain of events navigating uncharted shifts in global development architectures, including normative rules, practical agendas, development partners and mechanisms of implementation (Aynaoui and Woertz 2017; Gray and Gills 2016). Since the financial crisis of 2007-08, a series of ascending records on global South's economic growth may have offset global North's economic downturns and its decreasing impacts on the governance of international aid systems. As Figure 1 illustrates, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) gauges that China's projection of gross domestic product (GDP) based on purchasing power parity (PPP) share of world

Figure 1. GDP on PPP Share of World Total



Note: ASEAN-5 encompasses Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore. Source: IMF (2021).

total surpassed that of the European Union (EU) in 2013 and that of the US in 2016. Moreover, the total sum (29%) of PPP shares of EU (14%) and US (15%) in 2026 will be almost equivalent to that (28.3%) of China (20.2%) and India (8.1%) in the same year. By contrast, the rest of the global South—including ASEAN-5, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean—still faces rough going under the arduous condition of their PPP shares. Accordingly, the rise of the global South calls for scholarly scrutiny, with regards to not only the emerging prowess of its economic power in comparison to traditional donors of the global North, but also growing inequality, which has been continuously swelled between Southern economic powers (China and India) and the other Southern small economies.

Such contrasting dynamics in the global South can be properly reflected by reinvigorating South-South cooperation (SSC) and its related form, triangular cooperation (TrC), both of which are investigated in this special issue. Public attention to SSC anchors its conceptual basis noting that SSC can be “defined as the transfer or exchange of resources, technologies and forms of knowledge between countries of the former *Third World*” (Fourie, Nauta, and Mawdsley 2019, 1). The United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) defines SSC as “a broad framework of collaboration among countries of the South in the political, economic, social, cultural, environmental and technical domains,” through “a bilateral, regional, intraregional or interregional basis” (UNOSSC n.d.).¹ On top of SSC, the conception of TrC encompasses an extended hybrid

“collaboration in which traditional donor countries and multilateral organizations facilitate South-South initiatives through the provision of funding, training, management and technological systems as well as other forms of support” (ibid.). Contrary to traditional North-South cooperation (NSC), SSC-driven development cooperation such as knowledge sharing, expertise, and resources to meet their own development goals does not just originate from the colonial experience but stems from the non-aligned Third Worldism of the 1955 Bandung Conference whose legacies have converged upon solidarity, mutual respects, non-intervention, etc. (Rothermund 2014; Kothari 2005). Moreover, the rise of the South leads to consolidating the presence of South-South and triangular cooperation (SSTC), as SSC has been spotlighted as a complementary alternative for NSC, or even as a replacement superseding the conventional function of Northern donor countries (Gosovic 2014; Bergamaschi, Tickner, and Durán 2017).² The advent of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), endorsed by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September 2015, also triggered SSC to be incorporated into main stages of international development communities as one of key alternative sources of development financing and means of implementation (UN 2015).

One aspect of the South’s contrasting dynamics lies in SSTC’s positive value affording instrumentality and complementarity (De Renzio and Seifert 2014; Chin and Quadir 2012). This notion assumes that the practical engagements SSTC arranges for are complementarily implemental for helping developing countries achieve their own development goals on behalf of traditional donors. Southern donors involved in SSTC, in this regard, tend to opt for *collaborations* with other Southern counterparts based on non-aligned solidarity of the Bandung spirit. Thus, SSTC’s complementary functions resulted in attracting public attention from traditional donor groups and multilateral bodies—particularly the UN—in the field of development cooperation. The core of SSTC’s agendas and initiatives, however, still confine themselves to low-cost technical cooperation (knowledge sharing, capacity building, etc.), rather than high-cost infrastructure projects (Kim and Lim 2017). Indeed, Southern providers are unable to mobilize and disburse a large scale of financial resources to fulfill infrastructure development plans. Having said that, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has run through beyond such a tacit rule in the global South, and Xi Jinping’s China has rather aggressively invested various loans to infrastructure-related projects in Asian and African partner countries (Alden and Large 2011; Broadman 2008).

The other side of the South’s contrasting dynamics, which diverges from collaboration, involves the drift of *contention* causing SSC partners to tighten vigilance against Northern donors who are mostly former colonizers and heightens the alertness on strong Southern donors’ strategic engagements in weak partner states of the global South (Quadir 2013; Kahler 2013). While SSTC has traditionally been an effective tool for deepening and widening solidarity between

Southern developing partners, it could also be strategically manipulated by strong Southern donors—specifically, China or India—to keep smaller powers within their political sphere of influence. As Sebastian Haug contends in this special issue, the UN fails to integrate SSTC as a common institutional footing across its development system. Alongside the UN's highly diverse SSTC support landscape and its complex political dynamics, both of which Haug points to as the causes of the UN's sluggishness in SSTC mainstreaming, the root cause may arise from the embedded sovereignty of Southern strong powers. Such a phenomenon suggests that nations can strategize SSTC as a useful sovereign asset to be employed against each other or Northern great powers at any time (Whitfield and Fraser 2008). Similar to how the North's traditional donors have a realistic preference for bilateral aid when directly influencing recipient partners, the South's strong powers are likely to implement South-South development cooperation through bilateral channels when pursuing their national interests, rather than through multilateral cooperation including TrC (Gulrajani 2016; Schudel 2008).³

In a nutshell, the underlying nucleus of SSC and TrC alike embodies contradictions whose centroid of motion inherently moves between collaboration and contention. The moving frontiers of SSTC reflects the shifting historic relationships between the global South and North as well as Southern partner countries, rather than a static thing (Cheru 2011; Comaroff and Comaroff 2016; Kothari 2005). The changing contours of historical conditions always serve as a critical exogenous variable in the SSTC actors' decision-making process. The sequence of historic transformations through two world wars—the collapse of Western imperialism, the racial revolt against white supremacy, and the rise of the decolonized powers in the Third World during the Cold War period—prompted newly independent states of the South to contend against the former colonizers in the global North and simultaneously uphold collaborative relations with Southern partner states via SSC equipped with non-aligned movements. Another series of historical events—the collapse of the Cold War, US predominance and the rise of BRICS, and US-China strategic competition—stimulated Southern developing countries to shift from South's solidarity-centered traditions for collaboration to a more realistic plan that empowers their own strategic concerns against the global North and other potential competitors in the South.⁴

II

What kind of narratives, conceptions, and geopolitical considerations do Southern providers use to implement, justify, and legitimize their SSC/TrC policies in other developing partner countries? How do they relate SSC and SSTC to their own strategic interests, or its dominant contemporary representations in the international arena? This special issue delves into the embedded conundrum

of SSTC whose frontiers oscillate between contention and collaboration. Under the far-reaching session of *South-South and Triangular Cooperation at the Crossroads: Global Crises, Regional Engagements, and Alternatives of the UN System* at the 2021 Annual Meeting of the Academic Council on the UN System (ACUNS), this research project began to investigate the paradoxical structure of contrasting dynamics of SSTC, which has been always exposed to historical transformations at the multi-level of analysis: global governance, regional cooperation, middle power perspectives, and the UN system per se.

Adopting the Weberian spirit of *verstehen*-based reflectivism, which needs to be encouraged in the wider study of SSTC, critical social science reflections on South-South development cooperation beyond its myths are incorporated into a more self-conscious application to the moving frontier of SSTC between contention and collaboration, embedded in historical changes of global development (Fourie, Nauta, and Mawdsley 2019; Bergamaschi and Tickner 2017; Finlayson 1990). Accordingly, this introductory article conducts a reflectivist overview of contemporary global development surrounding the recent resurgence of SSTC. It hypothesizes the contention–collaboration spectrum, assuming the coexistence of the pessimistic critics of the success of the South, as a derivative of the global capitalist development paradigm and the positive prospect of Southern economic development via the South’s assistance cooperation (Gray and Gills 2016).

Identifying the historical path of SSTC, the article further explores the new emerging and submerging powers within the global South (Eyben and Savage 2013; Vickers 2013). It would be a serious error to undertake Southern donors as a homogenous group and take it for granted over time. Indeed, while Southern donors claim to comply with horizontality and solidarity, each SSTC scenario, in reality, depends on different frameworks that reflect strategic and practical concerns. China’s intense engagement on the African continent, under the infrastructure development project of BRI, has brought about asymmetrical economic growth, despite its political rhetoric of solidarity and mutual benefit. As a result, the notion of China’s “exceptionalism” has transformed into “new imperialism” in Africa (Alden and Large 2011; Mohan et al. 2014). The competition of strategic intervention between India and China in sub-Saharan Africa has been criticized for lacking a sophisticated process of project coordination and the harmonization of different projects (Cheru and Obi 2011; Vieira and Alden 2011). These cases demonstrate the degradation of SSC from collaboration into contention; seldom do things improve from conflict to cooperation. The Southern donors’ national interests, including their geostrategic and economic motivations, accordingly, shape the course of SSC on the wide spectrum between collaboration and contention (Bergamaschi and Tickner 2017, 7).

SSC, with the specific emphasis on Southern donors, serves as a political signal of the emergence of South’s middle but great powers, thereby losing ground

in solidarity-based collaboration with recipient partners of the South (Vieira and Alden 2011). The emerging middle powers in the global South envisage and project the macro-effects of SSC on world politics, rather than the micro-impacts on recipient partners only: challenging the Western promotion of liberal international order all over the globe or supporting the rise of multipolarity beyond US dominance (Mawdsley 2012; Kahler 2013; Narlikar 2013). In this regard, Ngaire Woods (2008, 1205) argues that the emerging donors of the South have played a significant but silent role as a game changer for the new global architecture of world politics and aid industry:

[A] silent revolution is taking place whereby the emerging donors are not overtly attempting to overturn the rules of multilateral development assistance, nor to replace them. Rather, by quietly offering alternatives to aid-receiving countries, they are weakening the bargaining position of western donors. The resulting tensions underscore the urgency of reforming the multilateral aid system.

In fact, SSTC has been regarded as an effective statecraft that can introduce diversities into development models, help emerging Southern donors conducting the silent revolution in the global architecture of development assistance, and contribute to a shift in the balance of power within an increasingly multipolar structure of world politics (Quadir 2013; Broadman 2008; Mawdsley and McCann 2011; Weiss and Abdenur 2014). In the process, there would be contentious competitions between like-minded partner states within the South and more importantly, hegemonic competition between middle but great powers, such as China and India. Besides, we need to investigate the COVID-19 factor with regards to how the pandemic has been influencing the increasing multipolarity of world politics and the further expansion of the South's silent revolution.

Consequently, locating the contention-collaboration spectrum entails a nuanced interpretation of the institutional middle-range relations intersecting Southern providers, Southern recipients, multilateral agencies, and traditional donors of the North (Kim 2008). Categorizing such relational linkages also leads to a different set of institutional adaptations embedded in political and historical settings. In this sense, understanding political embeddedness and historical contingencies serve as a prerequisite for further analysis on the the moving frontiers of SSTC between collaboration and contention. Solving such a conundrum depends on how to fathom alternative directions (contentions) of the moving frontiers beyond conventional patterns (collaborations) of SSTC, how to identify institutional adaptations legitimizing and routinizing the new sources of contentions, and even how to predict the identity transformation of SSTC beyond post-colonial solidarity (Mignolo 2021; Baaz 2005).

III

In analyzing the contrasting dynamics of SSTC within and beyond the UN system, the special issue features six articles that critique the SSTC based on different analytical frameworks. The articles respectively focus on ideas and ideologies, norms and institutions, bureaucratic categories and practices, professional representations, and complementary functions, all of which underlie and sustain SSC practices. These articles are largely organized in three parts: (1) the institutional formation and historical fluctuation of SSTC within the UN system at the global level; (2) SSC's regional engagements in the context of ASEAN; and (3) middle-power multilateralism through the prism of the English School's international society framework.

The first part begins with Haug's critical investigation of UN support for SSTC, which addresses the organizational gap between UN's continuing efforts to mainstream SSTC and the lack of any systematic evidence on them. Evaluating the stance of fifteen UN entities on SSTC, Haug highlights the role of the UN in integrating SSTC supports into institutional processes in the UN development system, including the potentials and challenges of the UN's continued focus on how to mainstream SSTC. In a similar context, Denis Nkala and Yejin Kim illuminate a historical trajectory of SSC/TrC within the UN development system years since the Buenos Aires Plan of Action of 1978 (BAPA), by evaluating the records of the UN analytical documents such as the SSC reports by the General Assembly High-level Committee-commissioned Joint Inspection Unit. Nkala and Kim assert that SSTC has not achieved its potential because accompanying changes needed for the modalities have not been pursued and thus these development modalities remain largely cosmetic.

Continuing such a discussion, Wiebe Nauta outlines the challenges and opportunities of global solidarity formed by SSTC amidst the COVID-19 health crisis. In tackling the challenges of COVID-19 and other health catastrophes, Nauta proposes that the root cause of global health crises should be re-historicized, repoliticized, and decolonized by reflecting the voices from the global South. Consequently, the current architecture of UN-centered global governance should equip itself with the Durkheimian idea of "organic solidarity" that may be upgraded by Mittelman's (1995) term "supra-organic solidarity" and account for a hyper-globalized world evidenced by a highly unequal global division of labor.

Focusing on the regional level, the second part delves into the SSC's regional engagements for policy coherence and correspondence for development between ASEAN and the UN. With particular reference to the consensus building function that characterizes the ASEAN today, Shailaja Fennell gives more weight to the value of collaboration. Such regional consensus building not only advocates the ideas of a common identity, equality, and solidarity between developing countries

in the same region but also stimulates the interlinked connectivity of the *modus vivendi* between the UN development system and regional level institutions, and global South cooperation for advancing capacity and expertise in regional entities.

Lastly, the third part addresses the strategic and instrumental importance of SSTC for the self-reliance of middle powers and multilateral collaborations among middle powers. Bo Kyung Kim concentrates on the middle powers' struggles for nation-branding by recognizing SSTC as collaborative platforms and partnerships. Based on the English School's pluralist-solidarist spectrum, Kim underscores the varying patterns of middle powers in projecting their own collaborative signals to like-minded partner states for middle-power coalitions. China takes a bilateral-coalition approach for its role in global South leadership through BRI or sometimes BRICS. It can be thereby categorized as one of pluralist or near-pluralist cases from the perspective of the English School. Instead of pluralist bilateralism, South Korea seeks a middle-power coalition under MIKTA's solidarism-based multilateral framework,⁵ which reflects South Korea's status as an intermediary power searching for collaboration based upon solidarist minilateralism.⁶

On the other hand, Albert Sanghoon Park adopts a historical approach exploring four case studies on middle power multilateralism since the 1974 UN New International Economic Order. Based on his social-constructivist and discursive inquiry about how middle powers promote collective action, Park outlines that the historical vestige of middle power multilateralism triggers us to envision an alternative concept of "resilient multilateralism," which works on the basis of context specificity, complementarity, consensus building, and non-confrontation. The rise of the South and ensuing SSC in the early 2000s can be interpreted as one of historical momentums to forge and weather resilient multilateralism. Further discussing the sustainable running of resilient multilateralism would, therefore, be a necessary step to counter future shocks as well as open collaborative space for global action.

IV

In a nutshell, the six articles characterize SSC and SSTC not only as the logical outgrowth of a social construct formed by the dialectical relationship between epistemic knowledge and realistic power but also as a key successor of the Third World project aimed at governing poverty reduction and national development in the global South. Southern aid providers often collaborate with aid recipients of the South due to their own strategic purposes; strong powers of the South often contend with other Southern powers, for maintaining or challenging hegemonic leadership. In this regard, BRICS may not be the best case of SSC-based cooperation, as it is not representative of all Southern states and its member

states contend with each other by recognizing the others as possible competitors for hegemonic power inside the BRICS and beyond (Thakur 2014). Resultantly, moving frontiers between contention and collaboration would result in malleable identities of the global South—not a solid unitary entity equipped with solidarity and mutual respects—and blurring frontiers of SSTC.

It is vital to propose a paradigm shift that enables us to decenter our conventional gaze to the traditional dynamics of the global South and its associated SSTC, and depoliticize the structural agendas embedded in power politics inside the South. As Nauta underlines, a democratic shift, in which the poor, the vulnerable, and the underrepresented are brought back to the core of the knowledge-producing institutions, would be a possible scenario to transform contention into collaboration and restructure development agendas and aid practices, both globally and locally. Perhaps, more social constructivist and historical attentions are both required to revisit the characteristics of actors' behaviors, the distribution of resources, and the power dynamics within political fields of international development, by way of epistemological reflections for disclosing the historical trajectories of SSTC's impact on global development architecture and diversifying SSC practices in terms of politicization, legitimation, and implementation (Basaran et al. 2017; Kim and Lim 2017).

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Notes

1. Recent developments in SSC include varieties of modalities and referent objects beyond the traditional boundaries of foreign assistance: South-South trade, South-South flows of foreign direct investment, movements towards regional integration, and other forms of exchanges.
2. The six articles selected in this special issue use the terms SSC, TrC, and SSTC in accordance with contextual differences. SSTC is commonly seen as the hybrid combination of SSC and TrC.
3. Together with SSC's delivery of its aid through bilateral, rather than multilateral channels, SSC retains four further characteristics: (1) financial support is not necessarily the biggest share of SSC, but technical assistance usually plays a key role; (2) aid projects,

instead of aid program or budget support, are the dominant aid modality in SSC; (3) SSC delivers its aid with the non-aligned heritage of horizontal solidarity, reciprocity, and mutual benefits; and (4) SSC is supposed to respect the sovereignty of partner governments, adhere strictly to the principle of non-interference in domestic and political affairs, and elude conditionalities attached to its aid (Bergamaschi and Tickner 2017, 7-8; Aynaoui and Woertz 2017).

4. On account of rapid economic growth in the South's dominating states, particularly China and India, such hegemonic powers' compelling foreign aid, planned on the basis of their own strategic concerns, has been materialized as China's BRI projects and India's privatized bilateral assistance (Broadman 2008; Cheru and Obi 2011). Two Southern providers, in many cases, seem to show collaborative relationships; typically, China and India both are key players of BRICS (Thakur 2014). However, India keeps its distance from China's BRI by refusing to join the BRI projects, on the one hand, and sustain its active involvements in the US-led Quad initiative, on the other hand.

5. MIKTA is defined as an informal middle-power minilateral partnership between Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia. It was launched in 2013 by foreign ministers of the five member countries on the side event of the UN General Assembly, with the aims to support effective global governance, counter-terrorism and security, international energy governance, peacekeeping, trade and the economy, gender equality, and sustainable development.

6. Minilateralism means a smarter, more targeted approach of collective action as complements to traditional intergovernmental cooperation. It brings to the table the smaller number of countries needed to have the larger impact on solving a particular problem of global governance. Conventional cooperation bodies, such as the UN, IMF, and World Bank, may persist, but states increasingly participate in an array of flexible, ad hoc frameworks whose institutions vary based on interests, shared values, or relevant capabilities. These institutions (for example, G7, G20, ASEAN, BRICS, and the African Union) are minilateral rather than universal, regional rather than global, multi-stakeholder rather than state-centric, and voluntary rather than legally binding.

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