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## **S5 versus P5: The Rise of the Small States?**

By Yang Razali Kassim

### **Synopsis**

*The Forum of Small States (FOSS) is emerging from its hitherto low profile at the United Nations in step with its growing influence. A related group called the "Small Five" (S5) is making a quiet but potentially significant impact on reforming the veto system enjoyed by the Permanent Five (P5).*

### **Commentary**

ON 1 OCTOBER 2012, a loose grouping of smaller members of the United Nations called the Forum of Small States (FOSS) celebrated its 20th anniversary. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon told the forum: "Being small does not mean an absence of big ideas." Indeed, six months earlier, on 4 April, a group of five small states calling themselves the "Small Five", had presented a draft resolution that was big in significance - improving the "working methods" of the powerful Security Council.

Should the S5 succeed, the end result would be nothing short of a reform of the way the veto is exercised by the exclusive Permanent Five (P5) of the UNSC comprising China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. But as bold as it may be, the initiative was destined to fail, given the way the Security Council is dominated by the P5 with their veto powers. The motion was, unsurprisingly, withdrawn by the S5 when the P5 signalled they would block it.

### **Rise of the small states?**

Still, the move caught the attention of the media which described the event in dramatic terms: One headlined it "Small Five" Challenge "Big Five" Over Veto Powers. Another flashed: "David v Goliath". Yet another described the "S5" as an "unlikely group" of small countries that came together to "challenge the unchecked power of the P5 and to try to build a more effective UN".

The S5, comprising Costa Rica, Jordan, Liechtenstein, Singapore and Switzerland, would prefer that their initiative not be so powerfully stated. Still, it was timely and significant: The UN is suffering a paralysis over Syria. There is hardly wiggle room for a political solution to the crisis. A major cause of this stalemate: the failure to get a P5 endorsement of the Kofi Annan peace plan. Russia and China flexed their veto three times - over resolutions they deemed would lead to international intervention and ultimately regime change in Syria.

Russia and China did not want a repeat of the UN-endorsed international intervention in Libya which they had

not vetoed – only to see NATO bomb the Gaddafi regime out of existence. Both insisted that international intervention must not be about regime change. The civil war now raging in Syria is partly due to the inability of the UN to step in as a result.

It was in the wake of this stalemate that the S5 found it advantageous to push its initiative to restrain the P5's veto. The aim was not to deny the P5's veto rights but to press for more transparency in its exercise, and for them not to block resolutions that could end conflicts.

### **S5, FOSS and UN reform**

The emergence of the S5 points to a significant, yet understated, development in international diplomacy - the rise of small states in an era of flux in the international system. It is in this context that the emergence of their "mother ship", FOSS, should be watched.

FOSS was initiated in 1992 by Singapore and others as an informal forum of small states. The idea was to find strength in numbers, and to "survive and thrive" by promoting "a predictable and stable rule-based international system". It began with 16 members but has since grown to be a "distinct constituency of small states" with 105 members, all having a population of no more than 10 million. Its two founding principles are inclusivity and informality; it has no formal structure, decision-making authority or common negotiating positions.

Singapore foreign minister K Shanmugam said the expansion of FOSS underscored the viability of the "small-state model"; in fact, FOSS has become a go-to platform in the UN for those canvassing support. FOSS' role, he added, is to play thought leadership, catalyse ideas to contribute in global affairs, multilateral diplomacy, international security and development issues.

Out of FOSS has grown another similar strategy in 2009 called the Global Governance Group or 3G of small and medium-sized states. This new initiative, also led by Singapore, is to give voice to the many states unrepresented in the Group of 20 – a new but still exclusive force in international relations. In engaging it, the 3G keeps the G20 process linked to the UN multilateral framework.

The common thread in all these is the desire to strengthen the UN as the anchor of a stable, rule-based international system in which the world body plays its role in international crisis prevention and settlement of disputes. That is why small states are calling for what Mr Shanmugam referred to as "an improvement in the Security Council's working methods" - a euphemism for a reform of the veto system which the P5 enjoys exclusively and unfairly.

### **Responsibility Not to Veto (RN2V)**

Aside from sharing FOSS' mission, the S5 has its genesis in the concept of the responsibility not to veto (RN2V). This idea in turn could be traced to a 2001 report to the UN which later gave rise to the principle of the responsibility to protect or R2P. The 2001 report by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) called for a restraint on the veto power of the Security Council. The push for such a reform, at least 20 years in the making, led to the emergence of the idea of RN2V. The core critique of the veto system is that it is draconian, opaque and tends to be abused in the name of power politics. The United States, for instance, has flexed its veto often, including in defence of Israel's interests at the expense of a long-term resolution of the Middle East conflict.

The need for a restraint on the veto this time has become more critical given the stalemate over Syria. There is no sign that the UN paralysis over the Syria question is being overcome. With the major powers in the Security Council locked in conflicting positions, the international community may well need the small states to break the stalemate.

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