

The 5+5 Dialogue 2012

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Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi opens the 5+5 Dialogue at the Auberge de Castille

BC Radio 4's recent programme titled 'Summit Fever' raised the question of whether international summits are necessary and if they actually achieve anything. It emerged that while some regard summits as a superficial and unproductive PR opportunity for the political elite, others see them as a critical part of the international diplomacy and policy making process in a world which is increasingly interconnected and interdependent. Either way, summits can often symbolise the turn of a new era in world affairs.

Such a summit – the Western Mediterranean Dialogue – was hosted by Malta in October 2012. Also known as the '5+5 Dialogue,' it was attended by Heads of Government from ten very newsworthy countries on the western Mediterranean rim. These included five North African states: Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania; and their counterparts across the Sea: France, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Malta. The Western Mediterranean Dialogue receives little press outside of its member countries. Indeed the latest summit was hardly reported by British or American press. While unfortunate, this is because traditionally the issues discussed have largely been specific to the region. Although the Dialogue was first launched as a 5+4 Foreign Ministers' meeting in Rome in 1990, the first and only 5+5 (Malta joined in 1991) Summit for Heads of Government was held in Tunis in 2003, when Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben

Ali and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi were in power. The issues discussed in the past, while important in enhancing the relations between member states, were not particularly world changing or headline grabbing.

But this year's summit was different. Issues such as the eurozone crisis and the Arab Spring are undeniably matters of global concern. Each 5+5 country is directly or indirectly involved in one or both of these phenomena. And this made the 2nd 5+5 Heads of Government Dialogue a globally significant one. Originally scheduled to take place last year, the summit was postponed due to major revolutions in two of its member states. With the situation now stabilising somewhat in Libya (though certainly in Tunisia), the Dialogue was rearranged with a view to reconnecting the two continents and speeding up the processes of democratisation and economic integration, as well as to put checks in place for the ongoing problem of illegal immigration (a problem further exacerbated following the revolutions) and to tighten cross border security. Moreover, this is a pivotal time for each member nation. In North Africa, Tunisia is consolidating its achievements a year after the revolution, Libya is holding its first ever democratic elections, Mauritania is tightening security to capitalise on its recent oil discoveries, Algeria is celebrating its 50th anniversary of independence, and Morocco's constitutional reform is keeping revolution at bay. The economy is the focus on the other side of the Mediterranean, as France pushes through its biggest austerity budget in recent times, Italy's 'Save Italy' austerity programme comes into full force and Portugal looks to recover following its bail-out last year, while Spain contemplates whether it too should take a bail-out package. And then there is the bridge connecting two worlds, the host country.

Malta is probably the most economically and politically stable country of the group. This alone warrants particular attention. Being an island in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, Malta is the only member country that does not share a border with any of the others. It is an EU member but it probably has just as much in common linguistically, historically and geographically with North Africa as with Europe. This gives it a unique advantage. At one of the southernmost points of the European Union, Malta has long viewed itself as a bridge between Europe and North Africa. It is a small island in size, but one with a steadily




increasing international clout. The country is an active member of the United Nations, the Commonwealth, the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Union for the Mediterranean and various other international and intergovernmental organisations. Since independence in 1964 it has maintained a policy of neutrality and nonalignment; its Constitution confirming it to be “a neutral state actively pursuing peace, security and social progress among all nations by adhering to a policy of non-alignment and refusing to participate in any military alliance.” Perhaps this is why despite its trivial size, Malta is no stranger to hosting gigantic international summits. It famously hosted the Bush-Gorbachev summit in 1989 just weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Then in 2005 Malta hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the biggest event in the calendar of the Commonwealth, which invites 54 Heads of Government, their delegations and international media to discuss a variety of issues relating to member nations. Malta performed as an ideal host on both occasions. There was little reason for doubt this time.

The opening ceremony took place at the Auberge de Castille, built by the Knights of Malta and subsequently used as the headquarters for the French and British colonisers. Many of the meetings took place at Verdala Palace, summer residence of the President of Malta. Built initially by the knights of Malta, the palace has been used by Napoleon as a military prison and then as the official residence of the British governors of the island. The summit consisted of a series of working lunches, ministerial meetings, photo shoots and roundtable discussions on a range of issues affecting the region. The opportunity was also used to conduct multiple bilateral meetings. Though no official outcomes relating to the eurozone crisis were declared, the 5+5 Dialogue offered the opportunity to have an informal exchange on EU matters, away from the endlessly draining meetings in Brussels, and against a more relaxed and refreshing Mediterranean backdrop. It all culminated in what is now known as the Valletta Declaration – a unanimously agreed document that reinforces the member states’ commitment to general cooperation and collaboration on a number of economic, diplomatic and security issues.

But some immediately tangible deliverables were also announced. Tunisia is to set up a joint task force to deal with the ongoing migratory flows in the western Mediterranean area which are resulting in a serious humanitarian crisis. Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki, who will receive the prestigious Chatham House Prize later this year, insisted that the formation of a task-force must not be a security matter but a humanitarian one. “Human lives come

before economic or political issues” he said, adding that it is time for Europe to help North African states address this problem and avoid human tragedies. He is of course referring to the countless lives lost during the dangerous journey that some 2,500 Africans per week take on often ramshackle ships to cross illegally into the European continent. The proposal was supported by other member nations, who are each to some extent affected by this. A further effort to tackle the same issue was proposed by the host country itself, which announced the setting up of a Maltese vocational centre of excellence in the Libyan city of Misrata to train and prepare youth for enhanced employability prospects. This is in line with the *Valletta Declaration* which demands that “Southern European countries also need to contribute to solving this problem by helping south Mediterranean countries harmonise training opportunities with market needs, provide more work opportunities and raise awareness among young people about finding opportunities in their own countries now that the importance of immigrating towards the north has receded due to the economic crisis in Europe.” The outcomes emerging from the Malta Summit, as annexed to the Declaration itself, will be followed up by the 5+5 Dialogue Foreign Ministers’ meeting due to be held in Nouakchott, Mauritania in March 2013.

The Dialogue’s primary objective according to Malta’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr Tonio Borg was to serve as a “confidence building forum” and to “influence future trends” relating to the western Mediterranean region. Indeed, the fact that all ten Heads of State or Heads of Government turned up was itself a testament to the importance of the Dialogue to all members. The next steps are critical in building momentum for the 5+5 Dialogue, as well as in consolidating its ongoing relevance to regional affairs. 

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The Dialogue was attended by ten Heads of State as well as observers from the European Commission, the Arab Maghreb Union, League of Arab States, the Union for the Mediterranean and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean

