Global Times: Belgium-Chile alliance racing China on BBNJ seen as ‘betrayal’ of Global South consensus: experts

Beijing, China Nov 18, 2026 (Issuewire.com) - The surprise announcement by Belgium and Chile to jointly bid to host the Secretariat of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement) is unjustifiable, as "it's like a three-way bidding process in which two parties collude to rig the competition," said Zheng Miaozhuang, a researcher at the China Institute for Marine Affairs under the Ministry of Natural Resources.

At a regular press conference on November 12, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning flagged six flaws in the joint bid. With only two months left before the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the BBNJ Agreement and the vote, the proposal is clearly aimed at closing ranks against the other candidate, China's Xiamen, experts told the Global Times.

The experts said the so-called "North-South cooperation" slogan was misleading, calling the move a political deal that undermines fair competition and serves to preserve Western dominance at the expense of the broader Global South. They urged the international community to remain vigilant.

Join forces to pressure China

In 2025, Belgium nominated Brussels and Chile nominated Valparaiso to host the BBNJ Agreement secretariat. Their sudden announcement of a joint bid has transformed what was originally a three-way race involving Belgium, Chile and China into a "two-against-one" contest, undermining what had been a fair, friendly and transparent competition.

"Xiamen has clear advantages in both facilities and supporting infrastructure, putting some pressure on Brussels and Valparaiso," Zhao Chang, an associate research fellow at China Institute for Marine Affairs, told the Global Times.

Since China launched its bid for the BBNJ Agreement secretariat, it has received positive responses from the international community, Zhao said. Belgium and Chile each have notable shortcomings compared with China. Chile faces gaps in conference infrastructure, public security, financial support and information and data resources, while Belgium's bid lacks broad support from developing countries.

"By announcing their joint bid just two months before the first meeting, Belgium and Chile aim to address their respective weaknesses and combine their strengths, seeking to achieve an effect greater than the sum of their parts. They are also seeking to promote a 'North-South partnership' narrative and win support from both developed and developing countries to increase their chances," Zhao said.

The sudden "collaboration" between Belgium and Chile also reflects clear signs of political maneuvering.

"If Xiamen wins the bid to host the BBNJ Agreement secretariat, it would mark the first time a UN body's headquarters is established in China and the first time a UN ocean-related body's headquarters is located in the Asia-Pacific, filling a geographical gap in the distribution of international organizations and helping make global governance fairer, more balanced and inclusive," a source familiar with the matter told the Global Times.

This is a scenario some Western countries do not want to see, the source said, adding that they would therefore seek to obstruct China's bid through various means.

"The joint bid is not ordinary cooperation between two candidate countries. With the selection of the BBNJ Agreement secretariat entering its final stage, Belgium and Chile are pooling Chile's Latin American representation with Belgium's European diplomatic resources, scientific research databases and experience in hosting international organizations to promote a so-called 'North-South partnership' narrative and win support from more swing countries and regional blocs," Zheng said.

Zheng said the move was aimed at pooling the two countries' votes against China and amounted to a joint effort to contain and suppress China's bid, running counter to the Agreement's original purpose and undermining a fair and equitable selection process.

Chile's Global South identity reduced to political tool

Under their proposal announced by the two countries on November 6, if their joint bid succeeds, the secretariat of the BBNJ Agreement would be based in Valparaiso, Chile, while Brussels would house the base for the treaty's information-exchange mechanism.

"Under the proposed division of responsibilities, Valparaiso would nominally take on the secretariat's main functions, while Brussels would retain the physical and technical infrastructure for the clearing-house mechanism and host meetings of subsidiary bodies. On the surface, this appears to be a functional division between a developed and a developing country. In reality, however, it means that 'the secretariat is nominally based in a developing country, while key governance nodes remain concentrated in a developed country,'" Zhao said.

Zhao said the information-exchange mechanism serves as a key technical hub for the secretariat's support for treaty implementation and international cooperation, handling information collection, benefit-sharing coordination, matching capacity-building needs with available resources, facilitating scientific cooperation and ensuring database connectivity.

Although Chile would nominally retain management authority over the mechanism, its day-to-day operations and technical services would rely heavily on resources based in Belgium. This could make it difficult for the secretariat to fully exercise its management authority, effectively leaving the secretariat in Chile while concentrating key resources for daily operations, professional cooperation and future capacity expansion in Belgium, Zhao said.

Meanwhile, under the "Belgium-Chile proposal," meetings of subsidiary bodies would also be held in Brussels, a "concession" by Chile to Belgium. "Hosting subsidiary bodies would further attract experts, national representatives, research institutions and social organizations, concentrating more opportunities for professional exchanges and cooperation in Belgium," Zhao said.

"Belgium and Chile have disregarded the legal basis established by the Agreement, which stipulates that there shall be one and only one secretariat and one host country, and that the secretariat's location is to be decided by the Conference of the Parties. Their deliberate division of the secretariat's functions raises questions about their true intentions in the bidding process," Zheng said.

In the early stages of its bid, Chile linked Valparaiso's candidacy to developing countries' calls for greater geographical balance in the allocation of international institutions, thereby winning support from many developing countries, Zheng noted.

Chile's abrupt alliance with Belgium betrays the stance of developing countries. Its carefully cultivated "Global South" narrative will serve largely as a legitimacy cover for the Belgium-Chile proposal, turning into a tool for Western countries to advance their own interests, Zheng said.

Belgium-Chile proposal raises concerns

Although Belgium and Chile have continued to promote their joint bid, the proposal has not been discussed with the broader membership of the Agreement. Their behind-the-scenes division and allocation of secretariat functions raise legal questions. The potential impact of the 12,000-kilometer distance and four-hour time difference between Valparaiso and Brussels on the secretariat's operations also remains unclear.

"The proposal is likely to significantly increase the secretariat's operating costs and undermine its efficiency," Zheng said. With UN agencies facing tight budgets, the BBNJ Agreement secretariat should follow the principles of lean, efficient and cost-effective operations in its early stages. Splitting its functions between Europe and the Americas would increase operating costs, raise participation expenses for treaty parties, particularly developing countries, and reduce efficiency.

Zheng added that under the Agreement, the secretariat is responsible for managing the information-exchange mechanism, which involves extensive data transmission, storage and application and requires timely maintenance and unified management. Given the distance and time difference between Valparaiso and Brussels, the secretariat in Chile would struggle to manage the mechanism effectively.

Many parties have also raised concerns over the transparency of the information-exchange mechanism. In contrast to Belgium and Chile's move to effectively add a second host country in a manner that runs counter to international organizational practices, China's bid has been open and transparent, relying on its merits and genuine commitment.

Zheng said bids should be fairly evaluated and collectively decided in accordance with the Agreement and its rules of procedure, adding that compliance, transparency and fair competition are essential to turning a host country's capabilities into a public good serving all parties to the Agreement.

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