

Non-Aligned Movement Revives A Voice for the Third World

by Mike Billington

With the collapse of the Soviet empire, leaving the United States as the “only superpower,” the historic role of the Non-Aligned Movement reached an impasse. NAM was created as an alliance of Third World nations, mostly former colonies of the European powers, which opposed the idea that each nation must choose sides in the “bipolar” division of the world into a communist bloc and a capitalist bloc, led by the Soviet Union and the United States. The inspiration for NAM came from the African-Asian Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, from which the “Spirit of Bandung” spread throughout the world, in a moment of hope that colonialism could be ended peacefully, and the Cold War superceded by global economic development (see accompanying article). That hope was crushed as the United States and the Soviet Union carried out “proxy wars” across Asia, Africa, and Ibero-America throughout the following 30 years. With colonialism ended (at least in its 19th-Century form), and with the end of the bipolar world, the Non-Aligned Movement appeared to have become an anachronism.

However, the 13th Summit of NAM, held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on Feb. 20-25, came at a moment in which the world is faced with the collapse of the world economic order, and the threat of a ruling faction in the United States asserting itself as a new imperial power, rejecting both the authority of the United Nations, and any moral law preventing the use of U.S. military power pre-emptively against sovereign states. The outgoing chairman of NAM, South Africa’s President Thabo Mbeki, and the incoming chairman, Malaysia’s Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, launched a campaign to revitalize NAM as a force in the world, to meet this deadly new crisis.

The 116 member states of NAM make up 60% of the world’s nations, with well over half the world’s population. Mbeki and Dr. Mahathir argued that the fight against colonialism was now a fight against a unilateralism threatening to impose a new imperialism upon the world. As Dr. Mahathir said in his Feb. 23 speech to the Business Forum on South-South Cooperation (a new institution established within the framework of NAM): “The domination of the world by a select few remains. This is evident in their control of the international media, and institutions which deal with issues of world security and economy. The Security Council and the



Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia: “Truly, the world is in a terrible mess. . . . We must revitalize the Non-Aligned Movement.”

Bretton Woods institutions remain under the firm grip of a few countries. . . . The fundamental challenge to our Movement remains that of addressing the domination of the world by a select few, now no longer divided into opposing blocs. We have lost the option to defect to the other side. The only way we can protect ourselves is to close ranks and adopt common stands.”

This common stand has two legs: common economic policies, and opposition to the doctrines of unilateralism and pre-emption. President Mbeki, in his Feb. 24 speech to the summit, called for “the determination to act together as we negotiate global agreements with the North,” and that “we do everything we can to protect and advance the principle and practice of multilateralism, against the tendency toward unilateralism.” He made repeated references to the “Spirit of Bandung,” arguing that globalization has created “gross economic and technological imbalances and inequities that . . . are worse today than they were in 1955.” Regional and South-South cooperation are essential, he said, while NAM “speaks with one voice” to achieve “a more equitable, global financial ar-

chitecture.”

Similarly, Dr. Mahathir’s summit speech pointed to the global economic crisis, “with huge deficits burdening countries, jobs lost and poverty increasing even in the rich countries. No new investments in foreign countries or at home. . . . Truly the world is in a terrible mess, a state that is worse than during the East-West confrontation, the Cold War. All the great hopes following the end of the Cold War have vanished. And with the terrorists and the anti-terrorists fumbling blindly in their fight against each other, normalcy will not return for quite a long time.”

His conclusion set the direction for the future: “We are not irrelevant, We are not anachronistic. We have a vision, the vision to build a new world order, a world order that is more equitable, more just; a world order which is above all free from the age-old belief that killing people is right, that it can solve the problems of relations between nations. For all these we must revitalize the Non-Aligned Movement. And that vitality can only come from closing ranks and acting together.”

Iraq, Palestine, and Zimbabwe

The NAM summit did not shy away from confronting the concrete cases of the new imperial danger. The threat of a U.S./British Commonwealth war against Iraq was the dominating concern of the entire conference, just as the danger of a U.S. war on China in the 1950s was a primary concern of the Bandung Conference. The “Statement on Iraq” issued by the summit noted with “grave concern” the unilateral pronouncements of President Bush and his allies in the world, welcomed Iraq’s open reception of the inspection regime, called for lifting of sanctions as the goal of the inspections, and demanded the “establishment in the Middle East of a weapons of mass destruction-free zone, which includes Israel.”

A “Statement on Palestine” denounced the “continued destruction and devastation of Palestinian society and the Palestinian Authority, being caused by the Israeli occupying forces since 28 September 2000,” and “strongly condemned the systematic human rights violations and reported war crimes that have been committed by the Israeli occupying forces against the Palestinian people.” It hit Israel’s undermining of the Oslo agreements and obstruction of peace efforts such as the Mitchell Commission’s recommendations and the so-called Quartet (UN, European Union, United States, and Russia), and listed the numerous United Nations resolutions demanding an end to the settlements and the occupation, which Israel has ignored for decades. It called for the UN and the International Criminal Court to act against Israel’s crimes and blatant disregard of the UN resolutions; and offered support to Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, who submitted a paper to the summit but was prevented from attending by Israel.

The summit also spoke out on the situation in Zimbabwe,



South African President Thabo Mbeki exemplifies the great importance focussed by the Non-Aligned Movement as it met in Kuala Lumpur, on helping to stop a war in Iraq. Mbeki is seeking to hold Africa’s member-states of the UN Security Council to a firm “no,” backed by a resolution of 52 of 53 African heads of state.

which, by refusing to tolerate the continued stalling by the former colonial Lords in London in carrying out their agreements at the time of independence, has become a primary target of Western subversion and re-colonization in Africa. The Final Document of the NAM summit acknowledged the actions taken by Zimbabwe “in its endeavours at correcting historical injustices through the land redistribution programme,” and “condemned the unilateral imposition of targeted sanctions on Zimbabwe by the United States, Britain, the European Union, Switzerland, New Zealand, and Australia, in violation of the UN Charter.” It also expressed “dismay and great concern” at the International Monetary Fund and World Bank withdrawal of financial support, and demanded its restoration.

Malaysia will chair the NAM for the next three years, which is evidence that the institution will not stand still. Of the Declarations passed by the entire body of 116 member nations, Dr. Mahathir was most proud of the “Declaration on Continuing the Revitalization of the Non-Aligned Movement.” The members of the NAM know all too well that they cannot, on their own, achieve even the most immediate task before them: stopping the war in Iraq. But they also know that their voice, when unified as it is today, will be in harmony with those of goodwill in the advanced nations, and together they can change history.

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