

CUBA - Havana May Breathe Vigour Into Non-Alignment (by Praful Bidwai, IPS)

Wednesday 13 September 2006, posted by [Manuela Garza Ascencio](#)

[IPS](#) - Will next week's summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Havana, Cuba, be a wasteful jamboree marked by ponderous speeches and lofty but empty rhetoric? Or will it rejuvenate the movement and transform it into an exciting enterprise that reflects the aspirations of the vast majority of the world's people who live in 116 member-states and 17 observer countries?

Supporters of the first view are convinced that NAM has long been "irrelevant"; it's a "dead horse." NAM's core-rationale, they hold, was destroyed when the Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989, and with it the idea that countries could best advance their interests by remaining independent of both the Western and Eastern blocs. After the Cold War, the world is no longer divided into rival blocs.

Cynical proponents of this view also argue that in today's "globalised world", the best option for weak or developing countries is to ally themselves with the powerful West, in particular, the United States: the Americans have "the only game in town", join it, and you'll gain.

Supporters of the second, more optimistic, view hold that although bloc rivalry has ended, the rationale of a broad coalition of countries of the Global South still survives.

The world order is still deeply skewed, iniquitous and unjust and in dire need of reform. Indeed, unequal corporate-led globalisation has increased the urgency of reform, and of greater cooperation between the Southern countries, with their common interests and similar pasts.

There is a fair chance that the Sep. 11-16 summit, NAM's 14th since it was established in 1961, will prove the optimists right. If the Cuban attempt to infuse new energies and fervour into the NAM agenda succeeds, and if key states like China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Iran, Malaysia and Venezuela play a pro-active, positive role, NAM could emerge greatly strengthened and charged with new ideas from Havana.

Cuba has drafted the summit agenda in such a way that "new" issues like health, education and energy become central to NAM, even while the developing countries forge a common platform on questions like global multilateralism, reform of the "unjust" world order (and of the United Nations), remedies to corporate-led globalisation, fairer global trade, reversing climate change, as well as peace and nuclear weapons abolition.

For President Fidel Castro, who is recovering from a heart surgery, the Havana summit is not merely symbolically important. Cuban sources say his government views it as a decisive moment for the South to assert itself and affirm universal principles of equality, justice and global solidarity against hegemony, unilateralism, and the use of force to resolve conflicts. Cuban minister Abelardo Moreno has been quoted as saying, "the movement must be more pro-active in the future, rather than reactive; rich in initiatives, ideas and projects of its own."

Among the issues that will figure in formal and informal discussions in Havana are democratisation of global governance, removal of discrimination against states like Iran, Cuba and Venezuela, solidarity with the Palestinian and Iraqi peoples, and human rights violations committed in the conduct of the U.S.-led "global war on terrorism."

Also likely is some consultation on Venezuela's candidature for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. The U.S. strongly opposes Venezuela. It regards elected president Hugo Chavez

as a hostile radical. The Havana discussions will determine if most NAM members back Venezuela and thus make a strong political statement.

"Over and above political matters, the Havana summit will grapple with hard-core economic issues," says Nagesh Kumar, an economist and director of the Delhi-based Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS). "These concern the Doha round of World Trade Organisation talks, balanced North-South relations and greater South-South cooperation. If NAM evolves a broad, informed consensus on these, it can fight to promote principles like sustainable development, independence and sovereignty in decision-making, equality and economic justice."

Experts like Kumar feel greatly encouraged by the fact that some Southern countries have emerged as major global suppliers of goods and services, and as centres of final demand.

The South can evolve a robust and viable trade strategy because South-South trade has annually grown at 10 percent during 1990-2001, which is double the growth rate of world trade. South-South trade now constitutes 43 percent of total trade of the developing countries, and 11 percent of world trade.

Countries like China, India, Brazil and Mexico can play a crucial role in acting both as a North-South bridge and in helping the least developed countries. But they need to develop strategies and instruments for leveraging their strength.

RIS and similar think-tanks have made suggestions in this regard, including the creation of a South Bank to finance economic cooperation between developing countries, promoting South-South joint ventures in science and technology, and addressing social agendas, including health, environmental protection, and women's empowerment.

A special committee appointed by the Indian government on NAM's economic and social agenda, composed of social scientists, has taken some of these suggestions on board. It argues that NAM is the largest forum for developing countries outside the U.N. and has played a significant post-Cold War role as "a custodian of Southern interests."

The committee holds that non-alignment has long been "a platform for claiming sovereignty for the newly liberated nations" from colonial rule and for asserting their independence "to design their own future development based on their own history, culture and economic landscapes." Non-alignment has been a "great moral force capable of exercising significant influence" on international relations.

The committee has recommended that India should act as a "bridge power" among NAM member-nations and position itself to articulate their interests. India should take "unilateral" initiatives for the least developed countries, including "preferential treatment in trade", and "arranging for investments."

The Indian committee also suggests "detailed models" to foster ties among NAM countries through travel, and people-to-people contact, and special social sector programmes including a commission on women and development, and a "social charter" for the South.

If accepted, these recommendations will marginalise cynics within the Indian government and help it become pro-active in Havana.

NAM will be on a strong wicket while pressing for urgent remedial action against climate change by advocating a "Kyoto Protocol-plus" approach. It can also coordinate efforts to forge a common Southern front in WTO talks.

NAM needs to emphatically promote South-South economic and technological cooperation by reviving the Group of 15. Set up in 1989, this held great promise, but fell by the wayside. Some of the proposed projects, including cooperation in renewable energy, appropriate industrial technologies, agriculture suitable for acid and tropical climates, etc, cry out for revival.

The critical question is whether NAM's major players will muster the political will to address these issues with determination.

<http://www.ipsnews.org/news.asp?idnews=34664>