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Business Line

How can NAM live up to its name?

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The NAM summit, to be held later this month, should not be seen as a pawn in the hands of the host country, in this case Iran.

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The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was born out of a desire to keep out of Cold War rivalry and forge an independent, anti-colonialist role. In the post Cold War era, it has sought to redefine itself.

There is the desire to forge stronger cooperation linkages between developing countries, and articulate their views more strongly in global forums.

There is also an anti-hegemonistic trend, aimed at countering perceived dominance in the international system by the US as the sole superpower.

At one time, NAM countries such as Cuba postulated the USSR as a “natural ally” of the non-aligned movement. This concept was the result of a clumsy approach by the US to the NAM, and shrewd handling by the USSR.

The US approach to NAM was, “if you are not with us, you are against us”, thereby making the US a “natural enemy” of NAM for many years. The US even today views the NAM with suspicion as being dominated by tendencies hostile to the US.

Growing numbers

The NAM has grown over the years, and now includes 120 members (including Azerbaijan and Fiji which joined recently) and 19 observers. In addition, countries can participate as guests. The Summits are held every three years, at which the Chairmanship rotates among the regions — Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The present Chairmanship is held by Egypt from Africa, which is in the throes of political changes. The next summit will be held in Teheran, August 28-31, 2012, at which Iran from Asia will take over the leadership of NAM till 2015.

The Chairmanship and host country is selected by rotation. In 2015, it will be the turn of a Latin American country to host the Summit and lead the movement. Indications are that Venezuela will assume this role.

NAM is best represented in Africa (53 members), followed by Asia (39 members), and Latin America (26 members). Europe has only two members — Belarus and Azerbaijan. The disintegration of Yugoslavia has eliminated a founding member, while Malta and Cyprus have withdrawn from membership for the greener pastures of the European Union.

Major countries of Latin America, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, are only observers.

The comparative weakness of NAM in Latin America and Europe is due to the role of alliances in these regions, especially during the Cold War period.

Contentious issues

The NAM machinery consists of a Coordinating Bureau that meets regularly between Summits, and a number of sectoral coordinating committees.

In addition, the group coordinates its work during meetings mainly at the UN but also in specialised agencies, where it may also be under the umbrella of the broader group of G-77 + China. Due to the large membership, coordinating positions in NAM has become more difficult.

At each Summit, a lengthy final document is issued (510 paragraphs at the 2009 Summit), together with some special resolutions. These documents mostly repeat what was said earlier, with very little new content. NAM has been trying to shorten its final documents and streamline its work, but convincing countries to give up their pet issues is not easy.

The host country plays a key role in preparing the draft final documents which are approved by the Coordinating Bureau in advance of the Summits. However, there are some contentious issues where the text may get finalised only during the Summits.

Iran has begun the process of issuing invitations to the Summit.

Curiously, Turkey and Tajikistan, non-members, have been invited and are likely to participate at the highest level, presumably as observers. Iran's troubled relations with Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain may lead to complications.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been invited to attend, but other commitments may result in the Indian delegation being led at a lower level.

Iran's nuke agenda

Iran has a major dispute with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the US and European Union over its nuclear programme. It has signed the NPT and is entitled to pursue nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. But it also has obligations under the NPT regime, including IAEA inspections and safeguards. These issues remain unresolved.

The suspicion remains that Iran is developing its nuclear capability keeping the nuclear weapons option open. A firm declaration that it would not test a nuclear device or develop nuclear weapons would help clarify the situation. Iran's posture on its nuclear programme also has some domestic political linkages.

NAM has affirmed the right of countries to pursue nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. The next summit may see intense activity around this issue, with Iran seeking a strong endorsement from NAM for its position.

In return, what assurances can Iran give to the NAM? What can NAM do to resolve issues with the IAEA? These are important questions that must be faced squarely.

The NAM summit should not become a futile exercise or be seen as a pawn in the hands of Iran. Meanwhile, the US, and especially the Congress, will be watching closely the positions and roles of members at the NAM summit.

Further along, if Venezuela is to be the Chairman in 2015, it may well bring NAM into the contest between some left-leaning Latin American countries such as Cuba and Venezuela, and the US.

The US badly needs to repair its troubled relations with Latin America, an effort which will perhaps resume after the presidential elections.

Reconciling the role of a host country as NAM Chairman and its national stand on certain issues is problematic. Member states of NAM need to provide some moderation. It may be a good time to revisit the idea of a troika Chair for NAM and other mechanisms to make NAM stronger. NAM should not become simply an instrument for the host country's foreign policy.

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