

The 16th Non-Aligned Movement Summit: Beyond the Politics of Spectacle

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JOELIËN PRETORIUS, FEB 26 2013

Much has been written on the politics of spectacle employed by Iran, the hosts of the 16th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in August 2012. The Iranian propaganda machine kicked into action to present Iran and its nuclear programme as benign and respected in world politics but for the unjust impositions of the West. The UK newspaper, the Guardian, ran an article entitled “Non-Aligned Movement summit: ‘You’d think Iran was hosting the Olympics’”, sarcastically underplaying the logistics of hosting delegations from 120 plus states. Iran’s strategy to use the NAM Summit to show the failure of the West’s efforts to ostracise it usurped media coverage of the Summit. It left NAM looking like an organization rhetorically fixated on its victimhood; a line that the West habitually uses to discard NAM’s real contribution.

There is no doubt that resistance to bullying and solidarity among NAM members are still major elements of the NAM agenda, but sifting through the statements presented by the NAM members at the 16th Summit, there is clearly a broader and more nuanced sense of the Movement’s past and present identity and role in international politics. The Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh captured this in his statement at the Summit: “In the past, individually we may have had little economic and military clout but the collective voice and reasoned interventions of our Movement commanded respect and credibility. That voice should again find true expression on a variety of issues.” The issues that he refers to include the recurring NAM agenda items: United Nations reform, Palestinian self-determination and development aid. However, it also includes novel ideas, such as how to harness NAM’s members’ abundant access to renewable energy sources and training youth in NAM states in the knowledge economy.

One arena in which the NAM position has consistently introduced a voice of reason into debate is nuclear non-proliferation. In the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) where nuclear exporting countries decide and justify who should and should not be recipients of nuclear technology and material in accordance with other non-proliferation norms, South Africa is seen to represent the NAM position. In two instances where Nuclear Weapons States (NWS) were in favour of exceptions to export guidelines that could easily have stretched export norms to breaking point, it was South Africa’s insistence that it could not “sell” these exceptions to its NAM allies that secured a move away from blanket to qualified exceptions. The first of these was the exception that the Bush administration demanded for India, a state outside the NPT that tested nuclear weapons in 1998, to allow US nuclear exports to this country. The NAM position presented at the NPT Review Conferences was clearly against exceptions to NSG guidelines even for one of its own members (India). South Africa, with other non-nuclear weapon states, could thus insist on India meeting certain conditions, including separating its military and civilian nuclear programmes, signing a safeguard agreement with the IAEA and declaring a moratorium on nuclear testing (Pretorius, J. 2011).

In the second instance, the US promoted the Additional Protocol, a more intrusive IAEA inspection and reporting regime than what the NPT requires, as a condition for access to nuclear technology. The NSG members were willing to exempt Brazil and Argentina, who made it clear that they will not sign Additional Protocols, from this requirement based on the bilateral arrangement that these two states have to inspect each other’s nuclear facilities. However, this agreement is limited in nature compared to the Additional Protocol. This time South Africa contested the proposed exception alone, again based on its alignment with the NAM position on this issue, which was against making the Additional Protocol a condition of supply. South Africa was able to negotiate different text that would allow the exemption for Brazil and Argentina to extend to other NNWS who had regional arrangements in place – making the introduction of the Additional Protocol (and SA’s agreement to it) palatable from a NAM

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position. In both these cases, the NAM position that SA invoked as its bargaining standard turned the debate from what some would call hypocritical allowances of what is in the interests of powerful states to the reasoned re-negotiating of a non-proliferation norm (Pretorius, J. 2012).

The principled position of NAM on non-proliferation, wielded against even its own members and states friendly to the NAM cause (Brazil and Argentina are NAM observers), could be used productively to contain Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions if this state does indeed have any. The West will benefit from harnessing the potential of NAM's influence on Iran in this arena, but it will require a look beyond Iran's use of the NAM chair for its own interests to acknowledging the positive role of the Movement in world affairs. It is after-all quite a feat for an organization that has been going for more than half a century to still get the highest ranking officials of 120 member states and 17 observer states to gather in a capital of a country branded a pariah by some of the most powerful states in the world.

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