

The Geopolitical Challenge of the Non-Aligned: Iran 2012-2015

Written by Marina Diaz Sanz

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MARINA DIAZ SANZ, SEP 26 2012

The play is over. On August 31, 2012, the 16th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) closed down with the release of the Tehran Declaration[i] and a Final Document[ii] in which NAM members “reaffirmed and underscored the Movement’s abiding faith in and strong commitment to its founding principles, ideals and purposes, particularly in establishing a peaceful and prosperous world and a just and equitable world order”. It will be remembered as the first NAM Summit celebrated in Iran; as the scenario in which the restoration of high-level diplomatic relations between post-Mubarak’s Egypt and the Islamic Republic took center stage; as the Summit in which the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon –disregarding US and Israeli objections upon his visit to Tehran- called for action against bloodletting in Syria and for responsibility to Iranian authorities in handling the nuclear affair; and, at least, also for Morsi’s criticism on Iran’s staunch support for al-Assad’s regime. Defined by Morphet as an ‘institutional manifestation of the Global South’[iii], observers of the year 2012 seek to pinpoint what NAM is about today, especially now that the organization will be presided over by Iran for the next term.

Multilateralism. What for?

Roughly once every 3 years since 1961[iv], we hear and read comments by analysts who, with slight differences, draw upon two basic stances towards NAM. On the one hand, those who, in a bid for contributing not only to the theorizing but also to the practice of multilateralism, congratulate themselves on the existence of an alternative arena for setting and discussing a global agenda that takes the Global South into consideration. By contrast, there are those who dismiss this forum for its lack of real leverage in world affairs. The latter usually start by raising objections towards the very name of the grouping. They argue that Non-Alignment is a ‘relic of the past’[v], since in the wake of the Cold War and upon the end of the bipolar world, there is no need to be non-aligned with an Eastern or Western bloc that no longer exist. Contrarily, those who endorse the Movement’s claim that the original name is a testimony of the historical juncture in which the NAM came to life, that the Movement has evolved concomitantly to political, economic and military transformations and, therefore, its existence is fully justified.[vi]

To the usual analyses, this year’s summit adds the lure of having the Islamic Republic of Iran as host country. Faced with the declared ‘crippling sanctions’[vii] by the West for its ambiguous nuclear program, and with criticism for standing by al-Assad’s regime, last August, the country, led by Supreme Leader (rahbar) Ali Khamenei, had the chance to make a show of force (or lack thereof) before an international audience (the biggest since 1979). And this is precisely what observers and analysts have been pondering over in the aftermath of the meeting. Delegations of 120 Asian, African and American countries attended the Summit in Tehran. At first glance, the significant number of attendees points to a high interest in not missing the opportunity to show muscle on behalf of the so-called Third World countries.[viii] However, rigorous analysis must try to unveil the real implications that lay behind such figures. Does the considerable attendance to the Tehran Summit translate into a single-voiced positive backing of Iran’s nuclear program and stance towards uprisings in Syria? Does it, moreover, represent a departure from U.S. involvement in the Iranian issue? Does it hint to the formation of a Global South (multi)pole against a potential U.S./Israeli preemptive attack on Iran? This article is set out to offer provisional answers to these questions from an analytical position that favors regional dynamics over global scale analyses. It tries to foresee which form the NAM may take in the future and how Iran and the NAM may influence regional and international security.

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NAM: An Effective Alliance?

The above questions can be given a common answer: 'not necessarily'. It can hardly be denied that the massive attendance to the Summit celebrated in Tehran does engender a highly symbolic force that points at a legitimization of the Islamic Republic in the actual context of tension-laden relations with the West due to Iran's ambiguous nuclear program. As heirs of Nehru, Nasser and Tito's endeavor to foster a "restructuring of the global system in the direction of greater equity in the North-South relations"[ix], the leaders that recently met in Tehran under the chairmanship of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad awaited the moment to discuss key issues for the global agenda. These days when the world's security seems to depend on what happens in the Middle East (or rather, the Greater Middle East[x]) and when the West is trying to elucidate whether we can or cannot live with a nuclear Iran, whichever events take place in the Islamic Republic are accurately scrutinized. And the real force of what happened last August is not the 162 page-long Final Document that claims for a reform of the UN Security Council, the end of terrorism or a re-launching of the Middle East Peace Process, but what happened at the margins.

The NAM's summit celebrated in Tehran last August has provided observers avid for answers to world security problems with a privileged scenario of where to look. The NAM Summit has, thus, acted as a frame for gauging the state of alliances in the region, but more importantly, for sending a message that defies Western geopolitical hegemony. Beyond bombastic declarations that come out of multilateral Summits like the NAM's, and in order to rightly understand why, for example, Iran and the West are enmeshed in this nuclear stand-off, looking at regional dynamics that give significance to political events in the *longue durée* is imperative. It stands out as a clear fact that the NAM cannot be a monolithic single-voiced entity because while agreeing on a fairer global agenda, I can hardly imagine how similar Vanuatu's and Jordan's national agendas may be; the latter being highly influenced by the regional contexts in which these countries are inscribed. In reference to Middle Eastern countries, observers are aware that despite sharing the table at occasions like the recent NAM Summit, suspicions and animosities between neighbors like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council country members towards Iran are undeniable, especially with regards to Iran's nuclear program and Iran's alleged attempt to influence Shia populations in those countries. In view of the limited scope of its regional alliances, Iran has in recent years looked for partnership in Latin America and they have found the support of Castro's Cuba, Chávez's Venezuela, Evo Morales' Bolivia and Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua (all of them Non-Aligned countries). For its part, India, which brought the biggest delegation to the Summit, has also shown its support to Iran by not cutting economic ties with the Islamic Republic as the Western sanctions demanded.

The Revisionist Foreign Policy of Iran and the Future of NAM

At the core of the NAM we find, therefore, supporters and detractors of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy alike, thus making it difficult to predict which side NAM members would take in the event of an undesirable preemptive attack against Iran.[xi] The fact that, as a principle, the Movement refuses to provide itself with a military structure or align with any of the existing ones hinders any possibility for concerted retaliation in the event of a launched attack against any of its members. The only way the NAM can act as a multi(pole) opposing what they may interpret as 'imperialist' policies is by posing an ideological challenge that may win the battle over Western superiority. In this same vein, the NAM will probably continue to exist for many years as a forum for discussion and, in the next 3 years, it may serve as a loud speaker for the Islamic Republic's demands for a more multipolar world in which they are a key player. If the Iranian leadership has welcomed the NAM Summit with zeal, it is probably due to the fact that, following Adib-Moghaddam, "utopian-romantic ideals formulated during the revolutionary years, and institutionalized as central norms of the Islamic Republic, inform the contemporary grand strategic preferences of the Iranian state" (2008: 35). The early foreign policy strategy of "Na sharqi, na gharbi, jomhuri ye eslami" (Neither East, nor West, but an Islamic Republic) has been read under different lights depending on who was in charge of the Iranian presidency.[xii] But despite the differences, Iran has always posed a challenge to the (false) universalism that international organizations like the United Nations claim to represent.[xiii] Iran and the NAM embody again a turning against a 'geopolitics of exclusion' that systematically and de facto disregards the demands coming from certain parts of the world. Whether this strategy will in the short run materially benefit those who abide it is difficult to say. However, instances like the NAM –despite its effectiveness or lack thereof– demonstrate that a certain 'geopolitical reasoning'[xiv] that favors Western powers and their interests is faced by an alternative reading of international relations.

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Conclusion

At the end of the day, the real value of a Movement like that of the Non-Aligned lies, in my view, on its potential to challenge what IR scholar Adib-Moghaddam calls the 'international political culture,'[xv] in which current international relations are embedded. When discussing the motivations that led the U.S. to get involved in the Second Gulf War upon Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, he states that "The impression was created that deviation from the rules and norms of appropriate behavior enshrined in the international political culture of the 'new' global system, will only be tolerated to the extent that US interests are not compromised. The new world order norm was hence the forerunner of the norm of 'preventive intervention', formally accepted as the US national security strategy in the aftermath of 11 September 2001" (2006: 77). This also applies to Western-Iranian relations today, and where the red lines (according to US standards) fall. The Non-Aligned do not seem to agree on the writing of international relations that assign them the role of a passive agent, and it is precisely from that locus of enunciation that they are posing a geopolitical challenge. The NAM will continue to exist as a Global (South) forum for discussion, which represents a geopolitical challenge. Real politics will be played at regional and trans-regional levels.

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[i] Tehran Declaration, The Declaration of the XVI Summit of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement issued on 30-31 August 2012, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran. <http://m.nam.gov.ir/Portal/File/ShowFile.aspx?ID=6d1ea997-6620-465d-881c-e4f64970415b> [ii] Final Document, 16th Summit of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, 26-31 August 2012. <http://m.nam.gov.ir/Portal/File/ShowFile.aspx?ID=212cfdbf-6dbc-4185-a4f5-01fe30a0c772> [iii] See Morphet, Sally (2004): "Multilateralism and the Non-Aligned Movement: What is the Global South Doing and Where Is It Going?", *Global Governance* 10, pp. 517-537. [iv] Recalling the spirit of the Bandung Conference (1955), officials from 25 Third World governments and representatives from 19 liberation movements met in Belgrade (Yugoslavia) and institutionalized the existence of a non-aligned world that claimed for "(i) an independent policy based on the co-existence of states with different political and social systems; (ii) consistent support to movements for national independence; (iii) non-membership of a multilateral military alliance concluded in the context of Great Power conflicts; (iv) in case of bilateral military agreement with a Great Power, or membership of a regional defence pact, the agreement or pact should not be one deliberately concluded in the context of Great Power conflicts; and (v) in case of lease of military bases to a foreign power, the concession should not have been made in the context of Great Power conflicts" in Willetts, Peter (1978): *The Non-Aligned Movement. The Origins of a Third World Alliance*. London: Frances Pinter Ltd. [v] Hennie Strydom offers a thoughtful summary of the NAM's origins, goals and policies in *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Reform of the International Relations*. *Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law* 2007, Volume 11, pp. 1-46. Koninklijke Brill N.V. [vi] The Qatari broadcasting company Al Jazeera has carried out full coverage of the Summit, counting also on the analyses of experts from different institutions and think-tanks. <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2012/08/201283183424802737.html> [vii] For a detailed account on the pace of negotiations and the state of relations between the West and Iran due to the nuclear stand-off, see Trita Parsi (2012): *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran*. Orwigsburg (Pennsylvania): Yale University Press. [viii] The concepts of 'Third World' and 'Non-Alignment' are intimately related, for it is precisely out of that Third World that remained between the First capitalist world and the Second communist world of the Cold War that the Movement of the Non-Aligned came to existence. According to Randall, Vicky (2004): "Using and abusing the concept of the Third World: geopolitics and the comparative political study of development and underdevelopment", *Third World Quarterly*, 25: 1, pp. 41-53, "The boundaries of the Third World can also be re-specified to exclude some old members and include some new ones. The term is needed to denote the continuing imbalance of economic and political power between (and not only within) the world's nations. Given this axis of

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inequality, it also provides an important rallying point as a focus of symbolic identification. In addition, it may be desirable to hold onto the idea of a North and South as a corrective to current clash of civilization arguments" (2004: 52). Furthermore, for an in-depth account of Third Worldism and its non-aligned version, see Berger, Mark T. (2004): "After the Third World? History, destiny and the fate of Third Worldism, *Third World Quarterly*, 25: 1, pp. 9-39. [ix] Ali Mzrui's "Foreword" to Willetts, Peter (1978): *The Non-Aligned Movement. The Origins of a Third World Alliance*. London: Frances Pinter Ltd, p. xiii. [x] The reach of the concept Middle East falls short to yield a representative picture of that world in which most security concerns seem to concentrate. See Sharp, Jeremy T. (2005) *The Broader Middle East and the North Africa Initiative: An Overview*. CRS Report for Congress. [xi] There has been massive academic production that ponders over the possibility of an attack against Iran's nuclear capabilities and the possibilities for the Islamic Republic to retaliate. See, for instance, Raas, Whitney & Long, Austin (2007): "Osirak Redux?", *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 7-33. [xii] For further elaboration on this idea, see, for instance, Dehshiri M.R. and Majidi M.R. (2008-09): "Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Revolution Era: A Holistic Approach", *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. XXI, no. 1-2, pp. 101-114. [xiii] See Falk, Richard (1997): "False universalism and the geopolitics of exclusion: the case of Islam", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 7-23. [xiv] Gearóid Ó Tuathail elaborates on the concept of 'geopolitical reasoning' as referring both to the formal (academic), but rather the practical geopolitical production that accompanies "the practices of practitioners of statecraft, such as statepersons, politicians, and military commanders" (1996: 60) in his *Critical Geopolitics*. London: Routledge. The gramscian concept of 'hegemony' offers the conceptual framework that links 'geopolitical reasoning' with the practice of the United States as the 'ruler writer' for the world community. [xv] See Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (2008): *Iran in World Politics. The Question of the Islamic Republic*. New York: Columbia University Press; And (2006): *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*. London: Routledge.

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