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Non-alignment in 2009?

The Non-Aligned Movement, instead of being a Cold War spectre, has resonance during this economic crisis

by **Devaki Jain**

Is the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) relevant today? We can perhaps expect an answer to this haunting question from the 15th summit of the 118 nations that belong to this political club, founded more than 50 years ago—which is taking place in Egypt this week.

The phrase “non-aligned” suggests a political space of neutrality—a definition by negation—between two powerful blocs, East and West; socialist and capitalist, to put it starkly. But the club’s purpose, domain and actions were far greater than the literal interpretation. The key word was “movement”. The club became a movement to claim sovereignty for the newly liberated nations from superpowers—it also provided them with independence to design their futures from their own histories and cultural and economic landscapes. Sovereignty and liberation were the key words.

The key issues that make NAM relevant today are that the multilateral spaces—the United Nations as well as related agencies such as the World Trade Organization and international financial institutions (IFIs), which were set up as level playing fields to negotiate “fair play”—have revealed their biases, their failures to prevent the recent recession. And they are struggling to rearrange global economic governance.

In the meantime, over the last 15 years, countries of the global south such as India, China, South Africa, Mexico and Brazil have shown the vitality of their economies through their growth rates and capabilities—despite the recession. The recent G-8 meeting in L’Aquila, Italy, affirms not only their strengths, but also their bargaining power; and the broadening of a power group such as the G-8 into a G-14.

But for NAM in the 21st century, while the nuts and bolts would be trade and the goal economic strength, this is not a sufficient match to light the fire of solidarity in a club of such disparate members. They are disparate not only in their economic conditions but also in their political stances and internal situations. Therefore, for us to forge that solidarity and broaden what already has begun—and has been affirmed in L’Aquila last week—there is a need to reinvoke the political umbrella that NAM provides.

Otherwise, a mere agenda of commitments on trade and terror, which do not seem to be the same to all the members and groups, will not bind such a group into what it can, and what it needs to—become. The end in sight, people's liberation from hunger, deprivation, the cruelty of local wars, and the ground realities in which the less privileged live—needs to be talked about more.

The summit being held in Cairo is propitious, as Egypt's father figure, the late Gamal Abdel Nasser, was one of the active founders of NAM along with Jawaharlal Nehru. Nasser still holds a prominent place in the public mind in Egypt.

What makes NAM relevant is that other multilateral spaces have revealed biases and failures

Today, our leaders and countries have become factored into or, trapped in, one or a single-minded macro purpose driven by global power. The only reality that is accepted as smart and realistic is growth—and that, too, is export-led. Locked into this quest, NAM has lost its identity: Let me clarify that the identity I talk about is not civilizational or cultural, but a movement-oriented identity, the anti-domination identity.

India can reclaim its place if it puts itself out, imagines a Nehru and a Sukarno, a Nyerere, even a Gandhi, and argues that political solidarity to affirm collective economic bargaining power through regional and other trade arrangements are for the masses to win their second freedom. In his inaugural speech in 1994, Nelson Mandela asked for bread, water and salt, expressing the yearning of his people after being liberated from the apartheid regime. This means something that is emancipatory, rather than “inclusive”—a term which is losing its power due to the ground-level realities.

The summit has also recognized the importance of drawing on women in leadership to articulate the concerns of women, by arranging a “summit” of “first ladies” on the economic crisis and women.

Data from all corners of the world reveal that women are the worst hit by the recession, as they have engaged with their economies in deep and difficult ways in order to provide sustenance to their households—the poorer they are, the more the engagement.

Yet this is not fully articulated in the declarations or in the bailouts and stimulus packages, except in providing social safety nets, where those women want economic protection and support.

By drawing attention to such a crisis in the lives of less privileged sisters, the first ladies' summit can make a difference. And perhaps, if India offered to host a NAM women's conference—or set up a think tank or a women's commission on the global economy, addressing the needs of women in NAM countries—this aspect of women's roles in their political economies would receive the recognition and healing touch that these women deserve.

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