Reviving the South Movement

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As crowds of grassroots demonstrators gathered in Washington, DC to protest meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in April, their concerns were echoed by many of the international leaders who met in Cartegena, Colombia, and Havana, Cuba, for the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and the meeting of the Group of 77 nations, respectively. "We believe consciousness is rising, including in the north, about the inequality and insecurity globalization has brought," said President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, who spoke at the G-77 meeting in Havana. Arthur Mbanefo, spokesman for the Group of 77, so-called because it originally comprised 77 developing nations, echoed Mbeki's approval: "We are very supportive of demonstrations that could forcefully handle these concerns."

Such confluence of high-level meetings and grassroots Western concerns lead some to question whether the South Movement - a collection of nonaligned countries dedicated to peace and prosperity for the world's southern hemisphere - is beginning to see a resurgence after ten years of confusion following the Cold War's end. Both of the organizations that met in April have more than 100 member countries and together they represent more than 80 percent of the planet's population - and both are increasingly dominated by African countries.

Both NAM and the Group of 77 were established in the 1960's at a time of increasing polarization of the world between the United States and the Soviet Union. Faced with the choice of paying obeisance to either side, a few nations, initially led by Yugoslavia, declared that "non-alignment was the answer of the developing world to the policies and rivalries promoted by the then existing superpowers." In September of 1961, 25 nations gathered in Belgrade to lay the seeds of the Non-Aligned Movement and the South Movement in general. Today 113 nations are officially members of NAM and the Group of 77, which was formed in 1964.
to work within the confines of the UN system, now numbers 132 countries.

According to the latest World Bank figures, around 1.2 billion people were forced to survive on less than a dollar a day in 1998. 57 percent of the world's population existed on just six percent of the world's income. Considering that the South Movement was formed in order to uplift poor nations from poverty forty years ago, it is obvious that a great deal of work remains to be done, a fact lending urgency to this year's meetings.

According to its official website, NAM has "helped reduce the polarization which had transformed the world into two armed camps, and led the fight against colonialism, and contributed to the independence of more than 100 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. NAM also played a historical role in the fight against 'Apartheid', as well as in fighting discrimination world-wide." But the fall of the Soviet Union left many wondering what relevance, if any, the NAM had in the new world order.

Held April 8-9, the Cartegena summit sought to dispel any lingering questions about NAM's importance, or about its mission. Doubts about whether the nations shared a common agenda were quickly dispelled as member countries expressed a common interest in increased transparency and participation in global economic discussions through the United Nations, World Bank, and IMF; the question of nuclear chauvinism and proliferation; and the use of sanctions against individual nations.

Although NAM members remain united on many issues, interests and perspectives within the organization have diverged in some ways. Two decades ago, when NAM was at its peak, the member nations were at a more equitable level of development. Now a number of nations, especially those of South East Asia, have economically eclipsed the rest of the group, and do not feel that NAM can address individual issues of concern as well as bilateral negotiations with rich nations and international financial institutions could. This partial defection of economically prosperous nations has prompted African countries, already the largest bloc, to become more vocal within the group, with South
Africa in the lead.

This spring's NAM summit was notable for placing a democracy standard for member nations, although it was not fully ratified. The new rule would suspend from NAM states under military rule, including the Ivory Coast, Myanmar and Pakistan. The order was passed after intense lobbying by India, which cited the Organization for African Unity's recent decision to ban dictatorships from active participation - a decision that weakens the numerical strength of NAM, and, according to some critics, has little to do with any of NAM's stated objectives. Despite the discord, most observers agree that the high level of participation in this NAM summit demonstrated the participants' desire to breathe life into an organization still looking for direction.

The other South summit, which took place in Havana just after the NAM meeting, was the first ever summit meeting of the Group of 77. With 132 member nations, G-77 is the largest bloc within the United Nations. More than 40 heads of state and 110 delegations came to Cuba for the event, held April 12-14. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was also in attendance.

In his opening address, Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, who is the current chairman of the G-77, set the tone for the summit. "We must rededicate ourselves to make South-South cooperation a more dynamic aspect of international cooperation for development," he told the audience. Obasanjo strongly condemned Western nations for "their reluctance to change the institutional arrangements, policies and practices that continue to nurture and sustain the prevailing North-South disparities and constitute a major threat to international peace and security," and singled out the WTO for harsh criticism. Obasanjo concluded by demanding that industrialized nations "must demonstrate, not just in words but also in practice and in deeds, their commitment to genuine partnership with the countries of the South."

Less contentious than the NAM summit, the G-77 meeting's final declaration was heavily focused on economic issues and called for a greater voice for developing nations in global economic decisions. The document also demanded increased aid and exports
to underdeveloped nations, greater technology transfers, and the cancellation of unsustainable debt that is forcing many countries to spend more on loan interest than on social services. It was agreed that at the upcoming millennium summit of the UN General Assembly, the G-77 would work together to push for a common agenda for development. Near the end of the summit, Cuban president Fidel Castro promised to supply 3,000 doctors for a third world health program, declaring that the overall plan "could save at least one million lives each year in Africa."

Questions remain about the viability of the South Movement in general, and NAM in particular, but the number of delegations present at both summits would seem to be a sign of increased vigor. And with the shift towards issues of trade and mutual cooperation rather than aid, the movement has demonstrated its ability to remain cohesive and relevant in times of change. Ultimately, if the members of the South Movement are able to contribute to a more equitable distribution of wealth throughout the world, neither the NAM nor the G-77 summit will have been in vain.