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Arguments from strength

TO an inquiry on whether the upcoming Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Kuala Lumpur would provide a chance for OIC members of NAM to issue a statement deploring United States policy on Iraq, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he was sceptical of the US taking seriously anything said by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. That is not to say, however, that it wouldn't be worth saying.

The awful thought that the NAM Summit might have to proceed during an American invasion of Iraq guarantees that the impending forum will be more focused on a single point than any of its dozen predecessors. Should this worst-case scenario actually come to pass, heaven forbid, there is no question that NAM KL would be the pre-eminent pulpit for the 114 nations - two-thirds of the world - to be represented here at their highest levels.

Future historians will shake their heads at how pivotal this American war on terrorism was on the fate of nations. It has marked transitions of civilisational ideologies and global orders. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was only the beginning of the end of the Cold War. This is the end, and Nato knows it. Held together since the demise of the Warsaw Pact by the unifying impulses of Europe rather than the North Atlantic Treaty, Nato's trans-Atlantic nexus now seems most evocative of the geological Mid-Atlantic Ridge - strained, volcanic and pulling apart.

The US, Britain and Australia might wish to see this as a reshaping of the historical Western Alliance, but that's only to be expected for the Pollyannas they must be in this belligerent undertaking. The truth is, it's struggling. The United Nations is performing heroically but tottering under the burdens of its mission to prevent war by all means. Inevitably, the world's other associations of nations will rise to the task of steadying a world spun wildly awry by unitary-superpower unilateralism.

The time is nigh for Asean, the African Union and the Commonwealth, for example, to stand up and be counted. Undoubtedly, the world will witness this in Kuala Lumpur next week at the NAM Summit, and again later this year at the OIC conference. This is the responsibility history seems to have thrust upon Malaysia and its leadership. The tectonic analogy still holds: a "crustal shift" has taken place, the centre has not held, and what was for so long on the periphery is now at the centre. Undoubtedly, the world leaders who will be speaking in Kuala Lumpur in several days' time will be fully aware of the unprecedented moment in history they command, and weigh their words accordingly.