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NAM must stand by ideals

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I DECLINED to accompany Tun Razak to the third Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1970, which supported decolonisation and national liberation movements. He was not amused. I cheered the aims of the summit as he well knew, but had to forgo the trip for personal reasons.

In the then bipolar world, NAM was influential, if not powerful. It was a worldwide symbol of resistance against the manipulation of power and militarisation of the world by two competing superpowers.

Now the movement faces only the United States, which has decided to do what it wants whatever the cost; it will pay any price to uphold its honour and save face.

Listening to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the opening of the 13th Summit on Monday anguished me, and still does. I recalled a vanished era when NAM nations were in no small measure able to help to reduce East-West tensions and the nuclear arms race. That has been replaced by a feeling of hopelessness and frustration against an increasingly arrogant sole superpower.

Overcoming that feeling will require a consensus on action by substantial numbers. Consensus is never an easy thing, and for that reason what comes out of it can turn out to be the easiest.

"To me, consensus seems to be the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies. So it is something in which no one believes and to which no one objects," former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher once said.

The 13th Summit of NAM had to be careful not to fall into the trap that many of its detractors were certain it would. It didn't, but not by enough to silence the doubters.

After some last-minute toing and froing, the delegates of the 116 member countries (Timor Leste and St Vincent and the Grenadines were admitted on Monday) wrought agreement by a stretch on the dominating issue of Iraq.

NAM delegates cleaved to a rather elastic middle ground, saying no to war but urging Iraq to do all it can to avert one. This was no mean feat, bearing in mind that its members included right-wing pro-Western governments as well as the trio President George W. Bush demonised as the "axis of evil" - Iraq, North Korea and Iran.

Iraq lobbied hard to obtain a forceful declaration against the threat of war. So did North Korea, whose nuclear programme has put it at loggerheads with, and exposed the hypocrisy of, the US.

The Iraqi statement spoke up against war as a matter of principle, but placed much of the onus of forestalling an invasion on verifiable Iraqi disarmament. It was drafted by diplomats - those experts at face-saving - who were probably haunted by taunts of "irrelevance" and wanted to keep NAM in some way engaged in the crisis in the Middle East.

"We need a balanced declaration. The picture will not be that white or black, it will be referenced to the UN Security Council resolution," one of them was quoted as saying.

I don't disparage their efforts: six NAM members - Angola, Guinea, Syria, Pakistan, Chile and Cameroon - are in the 15-member United Nations Security Council. Seven votes against can defeat a resolution. But I don't believe it will make a difference to the US, Britain and their allies either way. In any event, any of the other three permanent members - Russia, China or France, who seem to be opposed to the war - can exercise

its veto.

Bush is determined to attack Iraq, come what may, with or without a Security Council resolution permitting the use of force. The US troop build-up is creating a military logic and momentum of its own, in spite of world opinion and the millions, including Americans, who have taken to the streets to protest the war.

Only the toppling of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, America's actual *raison d'etre* for waging war (not disarmament), can send the soldiers home.

But America needed at least a patina of international support. So Bush threw down the gauntlet last November, shaming the Security Council into unanimously passing Resolution 1441, which warned Iraq of "serious consequences" should it be in breach of prior resolutions compelling it to give up weapons of mass destruction. Weapons inspectors were rushed in to make sure that it did.

Now, before the inspectors' work is done, Bush is preparing another gauntlet for the international community, giving not just Iraq a "last chance" but the UN itself a "last chance" to prove itself.

Washington is defying the Security Council to stand in its way, threatening the UN with the familiar cudgel of "irrelevance" should Iraq be let off the hook.

I don't blame NAM diplomats for finding themselves in something of a bind over this question of "relevance". Should they let the US go off on its own and remain forever on the sidelines or grab the long coattails of American unilateralism in the hope of slowing it down?

For better or worse, NAM has no real choice but to work through the UN, the World Trade Organisation and other multilateral forums as a potentially decisive lobby group for the membership it represents. NAM's numerical weight is considerable - it takes up two-thirds of the seats in the UN and covers half the world's population.

But this movement of mostly small developing countries has little but the loftiness of its ideals in a world dominated by money, power and all the other attributes of an international system built on the survival of the strongest. In order to remain relevant, it has to stick steadfastly to those ideals, not dabble in the heavily-slanted rules of diplomatic engagement.

NAM can begin to turn the tables on those rules and the other structures of international relations that keep developing countries perpetually at a disadvantage.

The US has done much huffing and puffing to float Iraq as a test case of international resolve. NAM should not turn down the challenge, for it might not be the UN whose credibility is at stake over the prospect of war, but the US if it charges ahead without the support of the world community.

Don't believe all of Bush's bluster. America is itself split over going it alone. Commenting on the impending new draft resolution on Iraq, US Senator Chuck Hagel, a Vietnam veteran and member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said: "When America undertakes these large challenges, big projects with our allies, with multinational organisations under the UN, we're successful. When we try to do it unilaterally, we are not.

"Vietnam was a unilateral action. That ended in disaster for the US after 11 years. We need public opinion with us. We need world opinion with us."

America's military superiority might ensure a swift victory in Iraq, but the consequences of a devastated Baghdad could swirl the global anti-terror campaign into an unending cycle of violence, fear and instability.

America's credibility would suffer, if it hasn't already.

Deep rifts are opening over Iraq, within Europe and between the US and Europe - old allegiances such as the Atlantic Alliance and Nato are being sorely tested. This isn't just about Iraq, but about differences in how the world is perceived and how a single superpower should fit within it.

NAM should aim high, as high as it can, while such shifts are taking place. They could well change the fundamentals of international relationships.

Dr Mahathir, in his speech on Monday, proposed that NAM begin the first bold steps, not just to oppose war in Iraq, but to outlaw war itself. He said: "Unless we take the moral high ground now, we will wait in vain for the powerful North to voluntarily give up slaughtering people in the name of national interest.

"We must work for a new world order, where democracy is not confined to the internal governance of states only but to the governance of the world. We must work for the revival of the United Nations and multilateralism. We know we are weak. But we also know we have allies in the North. They too want the abolition of wars."

For that to happen, NAM needs a solid consensus. Thatcher didn't get it quite right. Consensus is about finding a middle ground that everyone can step into, not an area large enough to enable them to sit on their hands. In any democratic organisation, consensus and leadership reinforce each other.

There can be no meaningful or effective leadership without consensus, and no meaningful or effective consensus without leadership. Thatcher found this out to her cost and her Conservative Party's decline continues to this day.

Neither should NAM lurch for the one, only to lose the other. The world has changed from the time of its founding and is changing now.

The worst thing it could do at this point in time is to adapt to the world of yesterday instead of looking ahead to the global environment of tomorrow.

I'm afraid NAM today confronts a new hegemonic theory of war between states, between Goliath and David. The new focus isn't conflict resolution between North and South, it's recolonisation by another name.