



PolicyWatch 1975

Iran's Confidence Bolstered by Non-Aligned Summit

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Ayatollah Khamenei is taking credit for Iran's supposed ascendancy, giving the West an opportunity to show that the disastrous ramifications of the regime's policies are his responsibility.

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit, to be held in Tehran next week, comes at a particularly convenient time for the Iranian regime, which in recent months has argued that the country is progressing on every front rather than suffering under international pressure. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has strenuously asserted his role in this "progress" both at home and abroad. Ironically, the United States and its allies have a strong interest in reinforcing the image that he is fully in charge.

WAR OF IMAGES

Tehran's preparations for the summit have paralyzed the city for days, with many streets being repaved and buildings and parks beautified. Yet despite this flurry of activity and the UN secretary-general's scheduled attendance, NAM gatherings are not significant events on the international stage. The summits are held every three years; at the 2009 gathering in Sharm al-Sheikh, members elected Hosni Mubarak as secretary-general, a role that new Egyptian president Muhammad Morsi inherited (he is attending the Tehran summit as current chair). The 2006 summit in Havana elected Fidel Castro, who stepped down before his term was up. Although nearly all NAM member and observer countries (numbering 120 and 19, respectively) have sent delegations to each summit, many were not represented by heads of government. Presumably, the Tehran summit will have similar attendance and result in Mahmoud Ahmadinejad being chosen as secretary-general -- and, like his predecessors, he will leave office before his term is up.

The regime sees the event as an opportunity to show that the West's efforts to politically isolate Iran for its nuclear program have failed, and that there is no international

consensus against the Islamic Republic. Tehran has frequently pointed to NAM statements as supporting its position on the nuclear impasse. Yet the lengthy documents issued after each NAM summit do nothing of the sort -- although they reflect the widely held view that Iran has the right to a peaceful nuclear program, they do not criticize the UN Security Council sanctions, much less call them illegal as Tehran does. In fact, the 2009 summit documents do not mention the Iranian nuclear issue at all.

Tehran also sees the summit as an important part of the political war for supremacy in the Middle East and the broader Muslim world. Khamenei wants the great powers and Israel to believe that the "Arab Spring" has benefited the Islamic Republic. The regime has therefore emphasized Morsi's attendance as a way of showing that recent events in the region constitute an "Islamic awakening" that can repair the broken bridges separating Iran from the heart of Arab nations for more than three decades.

In particular, Iran hopes to dismiss its various differences with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which go beyond theological and ideological issues and extend to the ongoing Syria crisis. In Tehran's view, Morsi's presence at the summit is a way of showing Sunnis in Syria and elsewhere that Iran is backing the Assad regime not for sectarian reasons, but because the West is supposedly the one stirring up troubles there. Strikingly, Tehran is deviating from the tactic it used in Iraq and Afghanistan of betting on all horses; in Syria, it has put all its money on one unimpressive nag, Bashar al-Assad. Backing a leader who is increasingly using ethnic hatred to stay in power is difficult to reconcile with Khamenei's own frequent statements on subject; as he put it in an August 19 sermon, "[Our enemies] highlight religious, ethnic, racial, and linguistic differences, while there are no such things in Islam."

FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH?

Tehran's triumphalist tone on foreign affairs is matched by its self-confidence about matters at home. In an August 23 speech, Khamenei stated that everything in the country is moving forward, and that even foreign research centers recognize the progress Iran has made. He accused critics of being "delusional because they have wrong assessments," referring to those who blame Tehran's nuclear policy or Syria policy for inviting international pressure. In addition, despite his obvious discontent about Ahmadinejad's efforts to assert independent power for himself, Khamenei praised the government for accomplishing many projects in various areas, making startling progress in science and technology, elevating Iran's influence abroad, and highlighting the Islamic Revolution's values. He also reiterated that the country's "resistance economy" would overcome all obstacles put in place by Iran's "enemies." In his view, a "resistance economy" means "carrying on the pace of progress and diminishing the economic system's vulnerability to enemies' ploys."

While emphasizing the country's "triumphs," Iran's leaders have ignored bad news at home. When earthquakes shook East Azerbaijan province earlier this month, for example, state television and radio were reluctant to report the disaster. Initially, Ahmadinejad did not even issue a condolence statement to the victims, though he did take the time to issue one abroad soon after the quakes -- to the president of Sierra Leone on the death of his mother. Much of the affected area's Azeri population interpreted the government's negligence as chauvinism against non-Persians, who make up half the country, but most analysts understood the miscalculation as part of the regime's focus on foreign policy and

excluding bad news.

Another problem being swept under the rug is factionalism among the political elite. Khamenei wants conservatives to stop fighting each other and recognize that the country needs unity in the face of foreign threats. In a July 26 speech, he argued that the Iranian people are united but officials are not: "These differences that occur sometimes among officials -- and futilely and unjustifiably appear in the media -- damage the national unity...[They] should know that blaming each other for problems will not bring anyone credit and popularity." Khamenei is also trying to prevent any real competition in the next presidential election, scheduled for June 2013. Until then, he will no doubt continue to use his authority to stop Ahmadinejad and the parliament from fighting over various issues, especially economic policies. And despite his significant discontent about Ahmadinejad's political moves, Khamenei will likely continue supporting him until his presidential term ends.

KHAMENEI'S SUPREME ROLE

To the extent that Tehran prioritizes foreign policy in the media and official statements, it reinforces the personal role of Khamenei, in whose hands rests responsibility for nearly all such matters. Indeed, Khamenei has taken even greater control over foreign affairs in recent months. Chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili now presents himself as reporting directly to the Supreme Leader, and he relies greatly on his deputy Ali Bagheri, a former deputy intelligence minister who is close to Khamenei. Similarly, Qasem Soleimani -- head of the elite Qods Force and closely tied to Khamenei -- seems to be the one designing and implementing the regime's Syria policy, not Ahmadinejad's team.

This approach is risky for Khamenei, however, because emphasizing the nuclear impasse and the Syrian war may lead many Iranians to conclude that his foreign policy is the main cause of their economic woes. It is therefore in the West's interest to reinforce the image of Khamenei as the person in charge of the nuclear and Syria portfolios. The Iranian people should be fully aware of who is responsible for their country's current course and the disastrous ramifications of the regime's policies abroad. Toward that end, Western governments should focus sanctions -- be they for human rights, terrorism, or nuclear violations -- on Khamenei and the organizations and institutions under his direct supervision instead of on the people or economy in general.

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