

NAM - PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

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Question: Great power rivalry, the Cold War and the existence of military blocs gave rise to Non-alignment. With increasing co-operation now between the great powers, the reduction of tension between them and other related developments, is there a need for Non-alignment?

Answer: For several decades Non-alignment has been the cornerstone of our foreign policy. At present with the increasing rapprochement between the super powers there is a feeling among some that there is no need for non-alignment. It is true that one of the original principles of non-alignment was to remain "non-aligned" between the two Super Powers and their military alliances. But that is only one aspect of non-alignment. Unfortunately the term "non-alignment" has itself become the basis on which people judge the movement's relevance.

The early foundations of non-alignment were laid at the Bandung Conference in 1955. It was basically a gathering of a large number of newly independent Afro-Asian countries seeking to establish their own independent identity as a group opposed to colonialism and seeking to overcome its ill effects. There were also "aligned" participants (Pakistan, Turkey, Philippines) at Bandung. In the late 1950's for Yugoslavia, remaining "equi-distant" between the Soviets and the Americans was crucial because of its specific circumstances - the geographic location of the country and its own experiment with socialism - outside the Soviet pale. The considerable Yugoslav input became a crucial aspect in non-alignment.

If you remove that aspect altogether you are still left with other aspects. The Non-Aligned Movement is a grouping of 101 countries who feel the need for a forum of

their own. Political togetherness gives confidence. This is not quite the same thing as saying Unity is Strength. But certainly, membership in the NAM has enabled even very small states to take bold and courageous political positions on issues which they may not have been able to do in their individual capacities. Afghanistan and Panama are two examples of such issues. At times, this common approach or collective stance has been derided as the automatic tyranny of the majority at the United Nations. At the same time, the voice of the Non-aligned has been courted as well. Collective discussions at gatherings of the movement, at official level or at Summit or Ministerial levels, have helped many Non-aligned countries also to formulate their foreign policy on a whole range of issues. Take for example, the Falklands issue. Few even knew where the islands were located, but about 100 countries came to have a "policy" on the Malvinas - even the name changed with attendant political connotations. This policy was projected at the United Nations subsequently with telling effect.

In the context of development issues as well, what begins as a national endeavour, such as Sri Lanka's initiative on Shelter and Housing, can be presented to the Non-aligned and gain full international endorsement at the United Nations.

Another aspect is the decolonisation process which is now winding down. For example the NAM has played an active role in Africa - in the Independence of Namibia. They are also involved in the developments that are taking place in South Africa itself. Then the NAM played an important role in giving the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestin-

ian struggle international recognition. If you take a look at the history and the development of the PLO it is primarily the Non-Aligned Movement which gave the Palestinians a considerable degree of strength, confidence and the diplomatic and international acceptance they now enjoy.

An International Conference on the Middle East has been advocated, supported and promoted by the Non-aligned long before its vital importance was recognised by everybody else.

The principles of Non-alignment, taken independently from the great power equation, have remained valid. Fundamentally they spring from two basic elements - independence and international co-operation. From this you expand into all the other principles which are elucidated in the opening chapters of Non-aligned declarations in what is called the "theological" part. I won't catalogue them. Let me take an example: non-interference in internal affairs of states and non-use of force in disputes. These remain relevant to a country like Sri Lanka and have to do with the preservation of the independence of a state. The consistent application of these principles in specific circumstances is a different question and can be argued. If they are breached, individual members of the NAM, or outsiders, are to be put on moral trial, not the Movement. So all these aspects of Non-alignment remain important even if great power rivalry is no longer the rationale for the continuance of the movement.

There is of course much truth in the argument that the NAM has perhaps rested a little by the wayside while international events and developments have rushed past at a rather bewildering pace. We must honestly accept this. But that is not to condemn the Movement to a state of irrelevance. We need to re-assess the Movement with a sense of political candour and see how it can more effectively confront the challenge of change and benefit our people.

Rethinking and Restructuring

Q: What efforts have been made or need to be made, by the Non-aligned move-

ment to re-assess its role in international relations and to re-structure the movement to enable it to deal more effectively with what you called "challenge of change?"

A: Even before the rapprochement between the two super powers took place, as far back as in 1976 when Sri Lanka was the Chairman of the Movement, there was a strong feeling that the Movement will need to be restructured in terms of its decision making process, the frequency of meetings etc. As a result consultations were carried out by Sri Lanka with all the member nations and a final document was adopted by consensus at the Havana Summit. This set out what are in effect the rules of procedure and methods of conduct for Non Aligned Meetings and for promoting consensus.

But in the light of the latest developments what is required now is a much more deep-going analysis of the future of the movement for example of the kind of changes that the NAM needs to make given the new international environment of great power rapprochement, the emergence of economic determinants in interstate relations, the diffusion of power, the growth of new centres of global influence, and particularly the imperative need to ensure the economic survival and development of our nations. Economic development builds political resilience, in a domestic as well as international sense and the nexus with independence is obvious. We will also have to take into consideration the new uncertainty. Shall we say, rather than conflict, between the North and the South which will rise, probably not on political lines but on very strong economic lines. The future is very much going to be a struggle between different groups for economic influence and options. What is going on in the Gulf today is something interesting. In fact in the Gulf crisis, you have in a rather rough sense what is likely to take place in future. The political aspect of course remains. In the Gulf, you have an inter-reaction between political and economic factors with certain strategic elements as well. Iraq has taken military action in Kuwait and this needs to be handled in terms of UN and Non-aligned principles. When you take oil as a factor also fundamental to the whole matter, then you see another

international fissure, or fault, which has a North-South direction. It's very complex because there are cracks within the South as well, and more than hair-line cracks in the North too. Oil which is a vital resource, available to some developing countries, is certainly going to be a bone of contention once again - not merely as it developed earlier in the 1970's but in the future at a much sharper political and possibly military level as well. In any such conflict which could involve other issues such as Palestine, Non-aligned countries like Sri Lanka, or even bigger (in size I mean) countries like India will be deeply affected in an economic, political and security sense. Sri Lanka, in a social sense as well, given our 300,000 workers in the Middle East region.

How does the Non-aligned as a group, I mean collectively, deal with this highly complex situation and protect the interests of our peoples which are bound to be threatened from new directions? Can there be indeed a cohesive collective response? Even if there is no military confrontation, the Gulf crisis will be bringing up many problems. There are bound to be sharp North-South differences as well because economic imperatives could push countries to all sorts of actions leading to all sorts of responses.

The Future of NAM

Q: On certain issues, the Soviet Union's perceptions coincided or approximated with that of the Non-aligned and the movement's positions were often supported by this super power. Given the new relationship of co-operation between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Non-aligned may not be able to count on this support. Is the movement weaker for this possible loss of support and what sort of "clout" can the movement exert by itself in the current international context? What contribution can it make through its own endeavours?

A: Soviet support can neither make nor break the Movement, though it has been a significant aspect. The question is whether the Non Aligned Movement will be able to play a major role in the new international order that is emerging. A great deal will depend on its method and on the few "weapons" or options that the Non Aligned have. They include resources

of which oil is a key one. Therefore to some extent (though hardly anyone describes it as such) what is going on in the Gulf could be the first real test of things to come, though you don't have a clear demarcation of forces. Developing a credible influence in current international affairs is an issue facing the NAM today. In fact one of the major issues facing the next Non Aligned meeting, which will take place at Accra sometime this year, would be to consider what kind of approach the Movement should have rather than whether the Movement has any role to play. Self-reliance is also part of independence. The Movement rejected dependence on what was described once as its "natural allies".

The Non Aligned Movement does not have the kind of mechanism which will enable it to professionally assess the complex economic and other problems facing the member nations. Here I am talking about the inability to set up a Secretariat. What we have instead is a number of countries getting together and coming up with some sort of a declaration based on certain political postulates - without a deep analysis of the issues involved, particularly economic issues.

If the forum of action will remain the United Nations, the movement will have to be a little more organized and to take into consideration the views of all the countries. We cannot operate in isolation. For example, the Americans had to seriously negotiate with the Non aligned group at the Security Council regarding the Gulf crisis. The Americans need and quite correctly seek legitimacy for their actions in the Gulf through all including the Non aligned countries. In that respect the Non Aligned Movement has a role to play. After all the NAM counts for one hundred and one countries. On any other issue, if any power wants to ride rough shod over international opinion and grab what it wants, it can do so. That doesn't require anybody's blessings. But if they are going to play by the rules and get some legitimacy and work on the basis of certain accepted principles, then these 101 countries can't be ignored. The problem is that we are not sufficiently well-organized and cohesive to play the kind of role we should be playing in critical situations - a mediatory role for example on the basis of sound principles.

Contd. on page 28

Contd. from page 13

We should not forget that virtually all the solutions to various regional international problems that the great powers have agreed upon in the recent past, are ones which had been advocated by the Non Aligned Movement for a long time. Whether it is the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan or Kampuchea or the granting of independence to Namibia or eventually accepting the PLO's right to speak on behalf of the Palestinians in the Middle East — all the solutions were based on principles enunciated by

the Non Aligned Movement. Does the Movement have the capacity to put into action its principles? Do all members have the political will?

Given a certain amount of imagination and forcefulness it would have been possible for the Movement to act as a mediator in the Gulf crisis. The Non Aligned Movement would have been acceptable to Saddam Hussein and to the multinational forces both of whom would have had to take our efforts into consideration because of our strength in numbers and our representation in the region. And if such an intervention was

made at the early stages we might have been able to defuse the tension or at least tone down the rhetoric. And it's precisely by such action that the NAM can gain some of its former clout.

The other issue on which I can see a NAM contribution is the Palestinian problem. Here too the EC and even the United States have accepted certain facts about the Palestinians that they have not accepted before. To that extent they are much closer to the Non aligned position and I think it's correct to say that the NAM played a part in this change of attitude. Therefore the NAM can play a catalytic

role in the Middle East – for example in arranging a Middle East Conference by engaging all UN or Security Council states.

The Non-aligned have pronounced on various situations following a somewhat complicated, but by and large fair, process. Once a consensus emerges, it is not enough to keep reaffirming it though this is certainly important. It is vital to win acceptance of these positions. For this there is a need to interreact with individuals and groups of states, to negotiate and even mediate on key items which affect us.

This inter-reaction does go on and it has been particularly effective in the field of disarmament. However, the mechanisms available in the movement need to be improved and be more flexible and more pragmatic, and I would say more imaginative. It is also important members scrupulously adhere to the principles to which they are committed. This will enhance the credibility of the movement and its negotiating strength will also be thereby increased.

Q: What about disputes between Non-aligned states themselves?

A: There are two types of disputes. First, those which the NAM takes up at its meetings – the Western Sahara, the Iran-Iraq dispute, Kampuchea, Kuwait and so on. Second, there are other disputes that are kept off the NA agenda – usually because one party prevents it. Often what is at issue is the commitment of a State to NA principles and the capacity of the collective diplomatic or moral authority of the movement to persuade or pressure the offending state to heed principles. The movement loses credibility even meaning if it remains silent when there is a breach of principles. ■