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NON-ALIGNMENT IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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I

Geopolitical realignment

The Non-aligned Movement (NAM) emerged as a reaction to the bipolar power struggle of the Cold War. In the period when peoples under colonial rule had begun to assert their sovereignty in the community of nations, leaders in Africa and Asia were acutely aware of the risks posed by the rivalry between two nuclear-armed blocs to their freedom of action and newly won independence. The rationale for the creation of NAM was succinctly expressed by President Sukarno in his address to the Belgrade Conference on 1 September 1961, namely, “that the creation of blocs, especially when based upon power politics and the armaments race, can only lead to war which, in this nuclear era, can only mean the extinction of mankind.”¹

The founders of the movement not only wanted to avoid their countries being drawn into conflicts that were not of their own making, but also aimed to preserve their freedom of action vis-à-vis either of the two competing superpowers – in Sukarno’s words, “to have the freedom to be free.”² In that context, they emphasized basic principles of the UN Charter – sovereign equality of states, non-use of force, and noninterference into the internal affairs – as guidelines of their action. In other words, the creation of NAM was an essential expression of the era’s drive for national self-determination in a framework of peaceful co-existence among equals.

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact upon the end of the so-called Cold War, the purpose of NAM, namely not to be drawn into a confrontation among rival powers, suddenly – though, in hindsight, temporarily – lost its salience. In the unipolar environment post-1990, preserving a state’s sovereignty meant being able to face the only remaining superpower, without virtually any space to manoeuvre. Under the aegis of the United States’ “New World Order,”³ to be “non-aligned” with the self-proclaimed global hegemon required each state to act in solidarity with other likeminded states. The sudden disappearance of the global balance of forces, with the seeming absence of ideological rivalry under the slogan of the “end of history,”⁴

¹ Address by the President of Indonesia before the Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-aligned Countries in Belgrade, 1 September 1961. (Transcript by Darwish Khudori.) – On the persisting risks of nuclear war, see Köchler, “Politics of Peace in the Nuclear Age,” in: *Current Concerns*, Switzerland, No. 21, 11 October 2022, pp. 1-3.

² *Loc. cit.*

³ Cf. Köchler, *Democracy and the New World Order*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. XIX. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1993.

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” in: *The National Interest*, Vol. 16 (Summer 1989).

had created a kind of vacuum in terms of how to define “non-alignment” and how to position the movement – and maintain its credibility – in such a unipolar environment.

However, the “unipolar moment” proved unsustainable rather quickly, turning out as an *interregnum* of sorts. What scholars described as “blowback effect” in the global struggle for power⁵ has now, in the second decade of the new century, resulted in the emergence of new antagonisms and divisions, and in a more complex geopolitical environment when compared to the bipolarity of the Cold War, in the time when NAM was founded. The rivalry between the United States and China more and more appears to absorb and supersede constellations where global and regional powers have competed for dominance. This has been obvious, *inter alia*, in the proxy war between the United States and Russia in and over Europe – where Russia enjoys the strategic support of China – and in the ability of China to act as mediator in regional disputes (as between Iran and Saudi Arabia, involving a traditional ally of the United States). In a wider context, the struggle for global dominance between China and the United States – particularly also in Africa, South-East Asia and the South China Sea – points to a *new kind of bipolarity*, indeed a rift, between the *Collective West* and the *Global South*, with competing ideological narratives.

Parallel to this geopolitical repositioning, countries of the Global South – such as Brazil, India, Iran, Indonesia, South Africa – are gradually emerging as powers in their own right and are joining in new regional and wider international groupings, which could indicate a trend towards a kind of *multipolar constellation* at the global level. Whether the new multipolarity will be genuine and sustainable, and not ultimately overshadowed and absorbed, as after World War II, by the rivalry between the two most powerful actors, in this case the United States and China, cannot be seriously predicted at this point in time.

The processes unfolding in the global power arena are considerably more diverse than they were when a new balance of forces was negotiated after 1945. In that period, regional associations of states were largely formed under the auspices, or under the shadow, of either of the two superpowers. This was the case for NATO and the Warsaw Pact in the military field as it applied to the European Community (EC), now European Union, and COMECON⁶ in the economic and, to a certain extent, in the political domain.

⁵ Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Case and Consequences of American Empire*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000.

⁶ Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (of the Soviet bloc).

The Non-aligned Movement represented a fundamental challenge to the division of the globe along a “logic of power” that threatened the very survival of humankind. The members simply had no confidence in the superpowers’ reliance on “nuclear deterrence,” based on what the pundits of the Cold War era referred to as “mutually assured destruction” (MAD). NAM advocated an *alternative* world order based on the principle of sovereign equality of all states (originally envisaged, but not implemented, by the United Nations) – a system of inter-state relations where they could emancipate from the tutelage of those that sought to partition the globe along spheres of influence according to the colonial mindset of earlier centuries. Some of the countries that had established NAM in 1961 later joined in regional cooperation projects such as the OAU (1963), now African Union (AU), and ASEAN (1967) that were focused on strengthening ties in the economic, social and cultural fields in order to promote regional peace and stability and make the member states more resilient from outside pressures and interference.

Today, when the unipolar constellation – post-Cold War – has obviously proven to be untenable, some of the emerging countries of the South, most of them members of NAM, are committed to new forms of cooperation with the aim of bolstering their independence and expanding their scope for action in the ever more competitive global arena. In distinction from earlier initiatives, new frameworks such as BRICS or SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) seem to go beyond a narrow pragmatic approach, aiming to create alternative structures that can operate independently from the traditional Western-dominated system. It remains to be seen to what extent these groupings will evolve into rival power blocs with geostrategic ambitions, proceeding from primarily economic goals to a wider political agenda – similar to the gradual transformation of the European Economic Community of the 1950s to today’s European Union, an entity that openly aspires to a role of supranational actor (albeit in tandem with the United States).

An aspect of uncertainty in this kind of geopolitical “realignment,” to borrow a topos from the late Zbigniew Brzezinski,⁷ will be the impact of historical rivalries among key actors such as China and India on the *efficiency* and *sustainability* of these new associations that were intended, by its founders, to create an alternative to a system of global governance which is still predominantly shaped by the “Collective West.” The challenges lie in overlapping memberships and irreconcilable loyalties these may entail –

⁷ “Toward a Global Realignment,” in: *The American Interest*, Vol. 11 (July-August 2016).

as in the case of India's simultaneous participation, on the one side, in BRICS and the SCO, and Quad (the so-called Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the United States, India, Japan and Australia), on the other – a daring experiment of realpolitik, indeed of squaring the circle between adherence to the Global South and a strategic – or merely tactical? – commitment to the West. In spite of optimistic pronouncements of subsequent summits,⁸ the risk of these bold initiatives being weakened according to the old-fashioned maxim of *divide et impera* is still real.

⁸ Concerning the BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, see, e.g., the assessment by Fyodor Lukyanov: “BRICS is the quintessence of the global trend towards a redistribution of power and a reorganization of the international system.” (*BRICS shows us where the world is heading – Conflict with the US and its allies may be inevitable, but it's not the aim of the group's members*. RT.com, 28 October 2024)

II

What rationale for NAM in the 21st century?



First Summit of the Non-aligned Movement, Belgrade, Yugoslavia, 18-24 April 1955

From right: Yosip Broz Tito (Yugoslavia), Sukarno (Indonesia), Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Jawaharlal Nehru (India).

In the changing geopolitical landscape, and in view of the complex mix of circumstances, the Non-alignment Movement is faced with the challenge how to *adapt* its modus operandi and at the same time *preserve* the “spirit of Bandung,” i.e. its commitment to the founding principles of the movement.⁹ The space for a credible and co-ordinated pursuit of a non-aligned agenda by the member states is becoming ever narrower in the face of an emerging plurality of power centers at the regional and global levels, with some members of NAM establishing their role as major global players in their own right. This has increased the risk for the movement of being marginalized by its own members. How to prove the continued relevance of non-alignment if member states join powerful global actors, including “NAM observer countries,” to form new groupings that are aimed at countering the hegemony of the “Collective West”? Will this not contribute to the reemergence of a new division of the globe along rival blocs?

⁹ Formulated by the leaders attending the *Asian-African Conference*, convened at the initiative of President Sukarno in Bandung, Indonesia, 18-24 April 1955.

There is indeed a situation of “geopolitical apory” where an increasing number of member states may be tempted to join one of the new groupings to preserve their freedom of action in a complex constellation of conflicting national interests, and with the United Nations – because of the great power veto – as mere observer, unable to fulfill its mission of maintaining international peace and security. How can the movement’s commitment to the basic principles of the UN Charter remain relevant at a time when a new balance of power is being “negotiated” among a multitude of players some of whom are core members of NAM? Under these circumstances, it will be difficult for the movement to maintain a cohesive vision, which would be necessary to be an effective player on the global scene.

In the face of the (structural) paralysis of the UN Security Council, and in view of a considerable number of states resorting to a strategy of self-help (in fact, *unilateralism*), should, one might ask, “non-alignment” be *reasserted*, possibly *redefined*, in the sense of a commitment not to take part at all in the struggles for geopolitical repositioning by whichever parties? Would the proven wisdom of staying aloof from the antagonists in the *bipolar confrontation* of the Cold War – the rationale of NAM upon its founding – be adaptable to a more complex competition among *several* players, or groups of players, i.e. along *multipolar* lines, as it appears to unfold right now? In a period of transition and strategic unpredictability – where everyone needs to hedge his position – this doesn’t appear to be realistic.

For the time being, the new multipolarity – if it is not eventually eclipsed by a form of North-South bipolarity (a new Cold War of “Collective West vs. Global South”) – will mean *overlapping geopolitical alignments*, implying conflicting loyalties and, in the case of members of NAM, potentially eroding the very idea of non-alignment. For the more powerful among those countries, it may well augur an effective departure from the agenda set out in Belgrade – in another era – in favor of an assertive strategy as global players.

Against this backdrop of challenge and change, when “splendid isolation” (i.e., being non-aligned, staying away from alliances)¹⁰ may not anymore be strategically beneficial or significant the way it was during the bipolarity of the Cold War, members of NAM may nonetheless return to ideas and demands articulated at the initial conference in Belgrade. In 1961, the founding states, in the words of President Sukarno, were convinced that

¹⁰ Such an attitude is not identical or to be confused with a legal status of permanent (military) neutrality such as that of Switzerland or Austria.

“different social systems can coexist.”¹¹ This particularly related to the era’s rival *ideologies* of socialism and capitalism. Today, one of the crucial questions of world peace is whether *civilizations* can peacefully coexist.¹² The movement’s members in all corners of the globe, representing different cultures and traditions, are well positioned to address this issue which seems to have become one of the most vexing problems for the former colonial powers, in their foreign as well as domestic politics.

Another issue on the agenda in Belgrade was that of colonialism, resp. *neo-colonialism*. The urgency of the problem was again confirmed, in connection with the right of self-determination of peoples under foreign occupation, at the NAM Ministerial Meeting in Baku in 2023.¹³ In the modern geopolitical context, decolonization remains an unfinished project. This not only relates to the 17 “Non-Self-governing Territories” listed by the UN, mainly islands still ruled by Europe’s old colonial powers. Those possessions are, so to speak, remnants of imperial rule that otherwise ended in the 20th century. Because of the principle of “the land dominates the sea,” effectively enshrined in UNCLOS,¹⁴ these island territories have not only symbolic, but enormous strategic and potentially economic value for those who claim sovereign rights over them.

In a less visible, though more pervasive sense, colonialism has all along persisted in the sphere of ideas – as a form of ideological imperialism, with the “Collective West” claiming supremacy by insisting on the universality of “Western” values. Since the collapse of the power balance of the Cold War, norms exclusively defined by those countries have often been used to create a pretext to justify interference or armed aggression, in outright violation of the UN Charter’s ban on the use of force in international relations. In view of the concerted efforts of Western states to insert their language or phraseology, with the values it transports, into UN documents, the critical voice of NAM will continue to be indispensable in the fora of the United Nations. Decolonization will only be complete if the ideological dominance of the West over the drafting of covenants and other instruments of international law is effectively ended.

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*

¹² Cf. Köchler, "Co-existence of Civilizations in the Global Era," in: *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, Issue 2020, No. 1, at https://glocalismjournal.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/04/K%C3%B6chler_gjcp_i_2020_1.pdf.

¹³ *Baku Declaration of the Ministerial Meeting of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement*. Baku, Azerbaijan, 5-6 July 2023, esp. paras. 4 and 9.

¹⁴ United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

In that regard, NAM may also reconfirm its earlier commitment to a “New International Economic Order” (NIEO) and to a “New International Information and Communication Order” (NIIO), projects that were effectively abandoned under Western pressure in the period of the Cold War.¹⁵ If multipolarity eventually takes hold as characteristic of a genuine “new world order,” these projects will have a better chance to be realized, and their pursuit will give added meaning and credibility to the agenda of non-alignment. Also, if NAM wants to distinguish itself from the Group of 77 (now 134), which shares these concerns, it should continue to act as “the principal platform representing the developing countries in multilateral fora, in particular the United Nations Organization,” as the Joint Coordination Committee between the G77 and NAM suggested in its meeting in Algiers in 2014.¹⁶

Apart from active participation in the debates on and codification of the principles for the reordering of the geopolitical landscape after the preceding bipolar and unipolar phases, including initiatives for structural reform of the United Nations on the basis of sovereign equality of states: what kind of rationale remains for the pursuit of non-alignment in a multipolar context? The question is all the more urgent at a time when the United Nations appears unable to maintain peace, or reform its Charter so as to be able to remove the procedural obstacles to the exercise of its core mandate of collective security.

In an era of global interdependence, which is shaped by competition between a multitude of actors for the control of resources and the management of our collective future (euphemistically labeled “global governance”), an effective and credible non-aligned policy may resemble what in another context was described as “active neutrality.” Such a policy does not require a country to be detached from all conflicts and struggles of humanity, or not to take side with any camp, whether just or unjust, but to navigate – and potentially mediate – between diverging interests without being drawn into struggles for global domination.

In the emerging multipolar landscape of the 21st century, NAM may keep its relevance as a *balancing force* vis-à-vis the polarizing effects of these power struggles,

¹⁵ Cf. Köchler (ed.), *The New International Economic Order: Philosophical and Socio-cultural Implications*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. III. Guildford (England): Guildford Educational Press, 1980, and: *The New International Information and Communication Order: Basis for Cultural Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence among Nations*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. X. Vienna: Braumüller, 1985.

¹⁶ *Joint Communiqué*, Ministerial Meeting of the Joint Coordination Committee, Algiers, 30 May 2014. Quoted according to Mourad Ahmia (ed.), *The Collected Documents of the Group of 77*. Vol. VI: Fiftieth Anniversary Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 414.

provided overlapping memberships of some member states with newly formed blocs will not paralyze its decision-making.¹⁷ In principle, the requirements for operating *independently* in a bipolar context (as it existed during the Cold War) are not different from those of operating independently in a multipolar constellation. The task is just more complex.



¹⁷ In the bipolar context of the Cold War, the constructive role of the movement – depending on loyalty to its principles – was highlighted by the International Conference on the Principles of Non-Alignment, convened by the International Progress Organization in Baghdad (1982). In their *Final Communiqué*, the delegates “affirmed the importance of the Non-Aligned Movement and the role of its historic pioneers in confronting the polarisation pressures exercised by the superpowers ...” (Hans Köchler, ed., *The Principles of Non-Alignment: The Non-aligned Countries in the Eighties – Results and Perspectives*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. VII. London: Third World Centre, 1982, p. 277.)