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Non-Alignment in the Era of the Global South

Samir Bhattacharya

Abstract

The concept of non-alignment originated during the Cold War as a ‘third way’ for nations wanting to remain neutral between the capitalist liberalism of the United States (US) and the communism of the Soviet Union. Officially founded during the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in April 1955, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) today has 120 member nations, all of them from the Global South. Every African country, except for South Sudan, is a member of NAM. As the world moves towards increasing multi-polarity, NAM can again gain relevance. It would, however, require some revisions in both structure and scope to respond to the changing global realities and emerging challenges of the 21st century. As Uganda takes over the NAM presidency for the next three years, this paper defines ‘non-alignment’ in the current era and reflects on whether and how NAM can still serve the interests of the Global South, particularly Africa.

The 19th summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), held in January this year and hosted by Uganda, carried the theme, ‘Deepening Cooperation for Shared Global Affluence’.¹ About 4,000 guests from different member states, including leaders from nearly all the 120 member countries of NAM, attended the summit. The Kampala Outcome document was then adopted by the Foreign Affairs Ministers of the attending countries and later announced at the Heads of State summit.²

In the 69 years since NAM’s inception, Uganda is only the fifth African country—after South Africa, Zimbabwe, Algeria and Egypt—to host a NAM Summit.³ Now that an African nation will head NAM for the next three years, in what ways can the continent benefit? This paper examines the current state of NAM against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving international order, making the case that some of the organisation’s founding objectives have taken on new forms while others are still relevant.

The West’s retaliatory measures against Russia in different multilateral forums, following Russia’s attack on Ukraine in February 2022, garnered little African support. In some ways, the response to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution of February 2022, condemning Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine which was supported by only 27 African nations, captured today’s zeitgeist.⁴ It was a fitting illustration of the rise of the multi-polar world that has supplanted both the Cold War era and the unipolar dominance of the United States (US) of the 1990s. Similar to the Ukraine crisis, many other emerging issues may require collective action by the NAM member states.

Amid the rapidly changing dynamics of the new world order, a scenario may well arise where the world will be divided among multiple competing blocs or power centres. From that perspective, NAM is at an inflection point where it will not be able to respond to the current challenges unless its agenda and organisational design are modified. This paper reviews whether NAM’s current agenda and structure remain relevant, and to what extent reforms can respond to the needs of the Global South.

Introduction

With 1.4 billion people, Africa currently accounts for 17.5 percent of the global population. Given current trends, this could increase to 25 percent by 2050. Africa is also the world's youngest and fastest growing continent, with approximately 250 million young people. Once properly implemented, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) will be the world's largest single market, surpassing the European Union (EU).

While Africa has mostly been viewed as a battleground for influence between the US and the erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and lately between the US and China, African agency is becoming more visible than ever, reflected in the increasing participation of African countries in different multilateral forums, including the G20 and BRICS.

“NAM will no longer be able to respond to the current global challenges unless its agenda and organisational design are modified.”

The Evolution of NAM Structure and Scope

NAM is an institution from the Cold War era, established to offer a collective voice to nations that did not wish to take sides in the superpower rivalry between the US and the USSR.⁵ Its genesis goes back to the Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung, Indonesia, in April 1955, where the term ‘third world’ was also coined.⁶ The first Conference of Non-Aligned States took place six years later, in September 1961, in Belgrade, capital of the erstwhile Yugoslavia, under the leadership of President Josef Tito. It was attended by delegates from 25 countries across four continents, with President Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt, President Sukarno of Indonesia, President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India as its founding leaders.

For the next few decades, the member states would focus on a number of subjects as priorities for discussion: anti-colonialism and self-determination, sovereignty and non-interference, an end to discrimination and apartheid, general and complete disarmament, the importance of the UN, and the promotion of economic development.⁷ Nkrumah used the term “neo-colonialism” in one of these conferences to describe how the US and other former colonial powers continued to maintain control over recently independent governments.⁸

Nevertheless, even while NAM’s equidistance remained its defining characteristic, it underwent multiple transformations over the decades. In the 1970s, for example, some members attempted to develop the group as a formal voting bloc in the UN General Assembly. There was a discernible transition to a more activist set of new leaders who called for incorporating an economic dimension in the NAM agenda.

By 1990, NAM had more than 100 members and had expanded the scope of its purview to economic issues and controversial ones like the Israel-Palestine conflict.⁹ Zimbabwe strongman leader Robert Mugabe was elected chairman to host the NAM in 1986. During that time, while still emphasising apartheid in South Africa and the Israel-Palestine conflict, NAM also began to increasingly focus on the dual issues of development and disarmament. During the 1990s, NAM states were united in their call for third-world economic development, seeking a New International Economic Order (NIEO), and hoping for nuclear disarmament.

The Evolution of NAM Structure and Scope

In 1991, the Soviet collapse set off a period of struggle and conflict within NAM.¹⁰ With some of its principal objectives becoming irrelevant with the end of the Cold War, there were even calls to dissolve NAM. At its 1992 Jakarta Summit, NAM reiterated the need for its continued existence in a resolution. The final Jakarta Declaration stated, “The collapse of the bipolar structure of the world presents unprecedented opportunities as well as challenges for cooperation among nations.” It called for strengthening non-aligned state coordination at the UN through the NAM Coordinating Bureau.¹¹ Disarmament and development emerged as the two key issues to bind the NAM states together.

During the Cold War, NAM successfully served as a buffer between the Soviet Union and its allies in the Warsaw Pact (now defunct), on one side, and the US with its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) alliance on the other. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, NAM lost its principal purpose.¹² This was mainly due to the belief that the world system was heading toward a permanent, unipolar new order headed by the US.¹³ Nevertheless, its members continued to meet regularly and address various topics, including human rights, global economic equality, and even resistance to uni-polar US hegemony.

As the world slowly transits from a uni-polar to a multi-polar one, the question of alignment has become an issue once again. With multiple centres of power, the Global South understands the need to stay neutral and avoids direct alignment with any hegemon. While this can help them avoid getting caught in conflicts between the global powers, complete non-alignment will not solve the problems of NAM states either. These countries must develop a new form of non-alignment in light of the changing realities of the 21st century.

Non-Alignment in a Multi-Polar World

In this increasingly multi-polar world, the concept of non-alignment has drastically evolved. Developing countries, especially in the post-Cold War order, are opting for issue-based alignments¹⁴ and seldom remain strictly non-aligned. Instead, they usually veer toward one or more great powers to obtain some security support while eschewing close alliances. Since flexible security arrangements offer the optimal balance of risks to rewards in the event of strategic uncertainty, limited alignments bode well for these countries. Although rewards such as defence support and other types of assistance are often linked to a country's level of association with any great power, the benefits come at the cost of autonomy and the associated dangers of dependency that could lead to either abandonment or entrapment in the long run. A strong alliance frequently carries more risks than benefits compared to a more flexible partnership arrangement.

Formal treaties to build alliances are typically characterised by strong, institutionalised defence ties. They often have responsibilities related to mutual defence as well. The most substantial pledges are generally made to formal alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—in part because they call for public signatures or ratification as well as legislative or judicial assessment. Formal treaties are not the only foundation for alliances, however. Occasionally, robust informal alliances can also develop. They are not contingent on formal laws and procedures but rather on the identification of common ground, personal pledges, and a history of collaboration demonstrated by the establishment of military bases, the exchange of intelligence, and joint military exercises. Examples are the US's relationship with Israel since 1967¹⁵ and the Sino-Vietnamese alliance during the Vietnam War.¹⁶

However, true non-alignment implies no meaningful security cooperation with any single power. A non-aligned country may participate in joint exercises or training, yet typically does not allow great powers access to defence facilities on its land, even on a commercial basis. However, it could occasionally exchange defence delegations and share specific intelligence with a great power.

Non-Alignment in a Multi-Polar World

Further, issue-based or multi-alignment partnerships mean fewer obligations and a less binding security arrangement, such as preferential arms sales agreements, cooperative training exercises, and other military assistance. These relations are typically open and do not come with an obligation to conduct joint exercises or any promise of military support in times of crisis. Rarely do multi-alignments grant advantages to a major power. Instead, great-power allies may enjoy commercial access to military installations and some level of technical or logistical support. Contemporary American relations with Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia are a few examples.¹⁷

“Flexible security arrangements offer the optimal balance of risks to rewards in the event of strategic uncertainty.”

Evolution of Non-Alignment in Africa

The Bandung Conference was significant for Africa as it boosted the independence movements across the continent, providing much-needed direction and leadership. Without question, this helped Africa to expand its importance in global affairs. Ghana, the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence (in 1957), paved the way for others in the continent by embracing non-alignment as a foreign policy strategy.¹⁸

By 1960, Africa was ready to participate in the first Non-Aligned Countries Summit. Among the 25 participating countries, 11 were African. Even though the extent of adherence to non-alignment differed across states, all of them had by then made non-alignment the cornerstone of their foreign policies.

There were 27 independent African states in 1961. The continent, however, was in crisis, primarily due to the Congo conflict^a and the Algerian War of Independence,^b which explains the absence of some of the independent countries at the summit. As African nationalism and Pan-Africanism increased, it led to the creation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which held its first summit in Addis Ababa in May 1963.¹⁹ Along with the principles of self-determination and majority rule, non-alignment was also entrenched at the core of the OAU Charter announced at the summit.²⁰ Point number 7 of Article 3 of the charter called for “an affirmation of a policy of non-alignment concerning all blocs” as one of its seven fundamental principles.²¹ Both the Charter of the OAU and the Special Resolutions that have followed were designed to uphold the aims and objectives of non-alignment.^{c,22}

a Internal power struggles broke out in the Democratic Republic of Congo immediately after it won its independence from Belgium on 30 June 1960. The conflict, which lasted for years, saw the military involvement of the US, the USSR, and Belgium (apart from the UN).

b The war lasted from 1954 to 1962, as Algeria fought and won its independence from its colonial ruler, France.

c The OAU was disbanded in July 2002 and has been supplanted by the African Union.

Evolution of Non-Alignment in Africa

Nonetheless, Africa's commitment to the non-alignment principle is fraught with inconsistencies. The Addis Ababa summit issued a declaration stating that the goals of non-alignment could not be achieved if any non-African power continued to keep military personnel on the territory of any independent African state.²³ Yet, the OAU Council of Ministers^d passed a resolution a year later that essentially rendered the previous one void. Specifically, it removed any explicit mention of the need to remove military installations from African territory.²⁴

The flexible approach of African countries was useful in their quest to pursue divergent goals in their foreign relations. Some states professed non-alignment even as they became closely integrated with the defence strategies of external powers. Most Francophone states, in particular, retained French military bases in their territories, primarily to secure economic benefits from France. Some even pleaded for active French intervention to defend and preserve their national integrity.²⁵ Certain African states offered military facilities to the superpowers.²⁶

Thus, in the 1970s, to protect their territorial integrity, Angola and Ethiopia—both of which had undergone recent political convulsions leading to left-wing governments taking over—sought the help of the USSR, following which a sizeable contingent of Cuban troops were stationed in both countries. In response, neighbouring governments looked to the US and other Western nations for military support. The US withdrew naval facilities from Angola and Ethiopia before providing their rivals, Kenya and Somalia, respectively, military and economic support. Strictly speaking, all these countries should have been disqualified from membership of NAM. It can be argued that at this stage, NAM compromised on its non-alignment principle to retain the existing members.

Africa's economic integration into the global capitalist system and growing reliance on external (Western) powers also remains critical. Despite the OAU's Lagos Plan of Action, announced in April 1980 and which stressed the need for collective self-sufficiency, few African nations could break free of reliance on the leading Western economies. The Lomé Conventions

d The OAU council of ministers comprised the foreign ministers – or any other designated minister – of the participating countries.

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(1975, 1980, and 1985) that bind Africa to the European Economic Community (EEC) bluntly demonstrate Africa's dependency on Europe. African countries have increasingly turned for economic support to the same countries they had earlier condemned as "neo-colonial".

African states have also borrowed heavily from Western sources. In the 1990s, Africa's total external debt was US\$271.9 billion, almost double its 1982 figure of US\$140 billion;²⁷ by the end of 2021 it stood at around US\$824 billion—a serious threat to the prospects of economic recovery and development of the continent.²⁸ Thus, for economic reasons, many African countries remain tied to the apron strings of the western powers and have sacrificed some of their non-alignment for economic advantage.

“Africa’s commitment to non-alignment is fraught with inconsistencies.”

Relevance of NAM for Africa

Africa has historically been an active participant as well as a working ground for NAM. As many African countries were still under colonial rule when NAM was conceived, its establishment galvanised the struggle against colonisation on the continent.²⁹ With the emergence of African nationalism and an increasing number of African nations becoming independent, they accepted non-alignment as a rational philosophy steering the continent in international affairs and safeguarding its domestic needs and interests. Today, every African country barring South Sudan is a member of NAM, comprising a significant bloc in its total membership of 120 countries.³⁰

Currently, Africa is going through a transition, steered primarily from within. In January 2015, the African Union (AU)—which supplanted the OAU in 2002—announced its ‘Agenda 2063’, which included “silencing the gun” (i.e., putting an end to armed conflicts) and establishing the AfCFTA (which was subsequently started in 2018). The agenda is a testament to Africa’s aspirations.³¹ The recent inclusion of the AU in the G20^e will advance the cause of a just, equitable, more inclusive, and representative world, and provide Africa with a seat at the high table where it can raise its concerns.

To be sure, the changes in Africa today do not represent a turning point or an abrupt regional transformation; they are a natural course of organic evolution. The continent has evolved since the scramble for Africa in the 19th century, experiencing European imperialism and surviving the multiple Cold War-era proxy wars of the 20th century. African countries recognise that this is the era of active diplomacy and dynamic partnerships, which calls for agility and versatility from their policymakers. Naturally, these countries will seek multiple alliances to fulfil their requirements. However, these alliances will not be based on ideological affinity, as in the last century, but on economic or military convenience. It would be reasonable for them to stay as far away from conflicts as possible and to

^e The G20 (or G21), started in September 1999, is a grouping of the world’s leading economies – the US, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Australia, Canada, Saudi Arabia, India, China, Japan, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, Turkey, Indonesia, South Korea, the EU and now, the AU.

Relevance of NAM for Africa

defend their own interests using a new formula of non-alignment that combines strategic autonomy and multi-alignment.

A growing number of peacekeeping or security missions from different countries of the world, including half the UN peacekeepers, are working in Africa. While this reflects the vulnerable security situation in the continent, it also suggests that to create an independent security framework, often referred to as ‘Pax Africana’, while continuing on the path of socioeconomic development, African countries need to be more united. One of their primary objectives, with Uganda holding the three-year rotating Chair of NAM from December 2023, is to advance this strategy. Uganda will continue to strengthen the organisation into a more coherent bloc and promote unity in the Global South, even beyond Africa.

During the Cold War, non-aligned nations were frequently able to use the rivalry between the US and the USSR to pursue their own agenda without caving in to pressure from either side. The refusal of many African countries, in 2022, to support the West’s stance on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its subsequent sanctions against Russia, was proof that non-alignment, in its basic form, is still alive.³² African countries have little incentive to fully align with any superpower. By carefully managing relations with multiple powers while cultivating strategic links with like-minded states, the continent aims to find a strategic sweet spot.

Indeed, many African nations have been successful in pursuing a ‘multi-alignment’ approach while maintaining their standing as non-aligned powers in a strategically important area. They demonstrate their strategic autonomy by joining various partnerships established by seemingly opposing camps in the current intensifying great-power rivalry. For example, Ethiopia joined BRICS,^f the Global South’s leading platform, while simultaneously partnering with the US, which remains its largest bilateral donor. (Although Ethiopia lost its status as a beneficiary of the

^f The BRICS platform originally comprised Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, but in 2023, Ethiopia, Iran, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates were included as well.

Relevance of NAM for Africa

US's African Growth and Opportunity Act or AGOA^g in January 2022, following its civil war and ensuing allegations of human rights violations, there is a strong possibility that it may be reinstated soon.³³) South Africa, one of the top beneficiaries of AGOA, is another example. It remains a BRICS member and considers China and Russia its friends, conducting joint naval exercises with them in February 2023.^{h,34}

It is an unhappy reality that African nations, which have condemned the neo-colonial characteristics of Western policies towards developing countries, are also dependent on those same policies. The borrowing practices of African states from Western sources, for example, have increased their external debt. Many African nations have long been held hostage by western powers due to their economic imperative. It is this that has led many of them to partially compromise their non-alignment principle.

Nonetheless, the dismantling of foreign military sites—be they of the US, France, China, or Russia—is a prerequisite for any new non-alignment to work in Africa. Fence-sitting, or maintaining a neutral geopolitical stance, or even merely voicing ‘concern’ over transgressions of the international order’s basic rules and laws, may not always be appropriate.³⁵

g Launched in 2000, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) is a landmark preferential trade programme that allows countries in sub-Saharan Africa, deemed ‘eligible’, to export products to the US tariff free. Ethiopia lost its ‘eligibility’ following its internal disturbances and response to them.

h February 2023 marked the first anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. On 24 February 2022, Russia launched air and missile attacks on Ukraine’s Donbas region, soon escalating into a full-fledged war.

NAM states, by definition, do not wish to be forced to choose a side in the intensifying conflict between China and/or Russia and the US. In a multi-polar era, however, they are bound to find themselves wedged between these powerful nations. NAM has been marked by hostility to developments such as the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the reduced funding of global development, disparities in energy use and environmental commitment between the developed nations and the developing world, and other perceived “sins of the West.”

In a world where great-power rivalries and *realpolitik* increasingly characterise international affairs, NAM’s fundamental principles of peaceful co-existence are more crucial than ever. In the 21st century, they need to be practical and applicable as well. What needs to be done?

Structure

- NAM currently comprises 120 member states, 18 observer nations, and 10 observer organisations. It is the second largest association of nations after the UN. Yet, it lacks an executive body, a secretariat, and a constitution because it is not an international organisation. Its Joint Coordinating Bureau (JCB) at the UN in New York oversees all of its operations, including a monthly meeting of representatives of all NAM nations at the UN. It also puts NAM choices into practice. Formerly inconsistent summits are now held every three years. Foreign ministers also meet between summits; ministerial meetings are held on particular issues too. NAM should consider setting up a permanent secretariat in order to play a bigger role in global governance.
- NAM should reflect more on achieving self-sufficiency instead of continuing to rely on the West for development assistance. It needs to develop strategies to seize control over potentially exploitable natural resources. It should encourage wealthy countries to invest in its member states.
- Non-alignment should continue to be upheld—not as the movement’s primary goal but as one of its tenets. What NAM needs to do is to

reframe the idea and give it a precise definition. It should not seek any kind of ‘union’ with the current Western alliance or any other potential power centres, but maintain its independence.

- Some members have objected to NAM’s very nomenclature. Indeed, India has of late refused to speak of ‘non-alignment’, preferring the phrase ‘multi-alignment’ instead. This is not merely an issue of semantics. Some have even proposed a new name along the lines of ‘Southern Solidarity Organisation’ for NAM.³⁶ During the January 2024 summit in Kampala, heads of state and government of NAM discussed the need to create an official symbol and flag for the movement that would represent cohesion, solidarity, and unity among member states, and alignment with NAM’s lofty goals, values, and mission. They may now deliberate on a new name as well.

Scope

- Various international actors and analysts are of the view that NAM should change or redirect some of its ambitions and policies, as highlighted in the report of the South Commission, “The Challenge to the South”.³⁷ Indeed, NAM was established as a political organisation at a time when politics dominated global affairs. Later, it took up economic matters as a number of its member states were beset by severe financial problems, including extreme poverty and underdevelopment. The group called for a new international economic order, arguing that the West’s policies and actions had created the economic difficulties the South was facing. It thus turned into a political-economic organisation. This practice of revisiting the scope of NAM should be institutionalised.
- The negative impacts of climate change and cross-border terrorism are two concurrent threats for the Global South requiring collective effort. Doing so is crucial to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As it works towards a global governance system that is transparent, fair, and inclusive, NAM must also incorporate in its agenda new and emerging areas threatening peace and stability, such as the two mentioned, as well as contagious diseases and pandemic control, or transition to cleaner and greener energy.

Reforming NAM

- Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies are areas that will require South-South cooperation to avoid adverse outcomes, such as breaches of data security or a widening of the digital divide. NAM should work to become an expression of collaboration and solidarity across the Global South in all these matters.

“As great-power rivalries are increasing, NAM’s fundamental principles of peaceful co-existence are more crucial than ever.”

NAM has undergone revisions in both structure and scope since its inception; today, it faces an existential crisis. Several new coalitions have emerged, challenging the relevance of NAM.³⁸ There are developments such as the emergence of new technologies—from infotech and nanotech to AI—which are likely to drastically alter the nature of work and production. The threat of climate change remains. It has been seen that even with global threats where collective solutions seem logical, the solutions delivered are not always distributed equitably. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, the imperative was universal vaccination. Yet soon, it was found that wealthy countries had cornered most of the vaccines being produced, leaving very little for the poor countries of the Global South.³⁹

Mini-lateralism and multi-alignment are becoming the norm.⁴⁰ In this era, where binary concepts like “democracy versus authoritarianism” or “the West versus the rest” have become archaic, it would be erroneous to label countries using simplistic perspectives such as ‘non-alignment’ or ‘anti-Americanism’ dating from the Cold War era. As the world moves toward pragmatic flexibility and global interdependence, fluid coalitions will require enhanced diplomatic creativity. Undoubtedly, developing countries, including those of Africa, must stay open to any collaboration or platform that might serve their interests.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, NAM found itself in need of fresh legitimacy. It made adjustments to remain relevant by shifting its emphasis to the building of what NAM called a “new international economic order” and striving for more clout at the UN. It has demonstrated remarkable adaptability by doing so. Solidarity among developing countries has been further strengthened by a number of events, such as the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffsⁱ (GATT, the predecessor of the World Trade Organization), the 1995 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review and Extension Conference,^j and

i The Uruguay round of GATT (September 1986 - April 1994) covered every form of global trade, including services and agriculture, which earlier rounds of GATT had mostly left out. It was characterised by the developed West, led by the US under President Ronald Reagan, pushing back against the preferential trade arrangements that poor countries had enjoyed in earlier decades. The developing countries resisted these efforts.

j The conference, held in April-May 1995, revealed crucial differences between the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) and the Global South countries.

Conclusion

the growing sense of US hegemony. NAM countries still have a degree of collective influence in the UN, with coordinating offices in all of the main UN cities. NAM members regularly meet to discuss a unified perspective before crucial conferences and votes.

The Global South differs from the West in its cultures, values, concerns and ways of life, which makes an alliance representing its interests paramount. Non-alignment, however, should not be seen as unwillingness to work with the West or other current or potential power centres. NAM is not and cannot be a group focused primarily on protest. It needs to develop strategies to interact positively with the West and other power centres while fostering solidarity within the Global South. Selective collaboration is one way to do so, rather than permanently aligning with one key actor or seeing another as an enemy.

This paper makes the case that NAM should be continued, as it will continue to remain relevant to the creation of lasting solutions to the problems of developing countries. These countries still require institutional support to function effectively within a global order dominated by strong Western interests. To survive and become more meaningful, however, the organisation needs to be reconfigured. [ORF](#)

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