

Non-alignment redux

As the 18th mid-term ministerial meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) concluded in early April in Azerbaijan, the question of India's non-alignment status resurfaced, even if the country's official position on the matter has arguably remained unchanged over the years. Indeed, as a founding member of NAM, India has remained committed to the purposes and principles of the movement.

The NAM question initially arose in response to the erstwhile bipolarity of political power during the Cold War years, with most nations aligning themselves to either the U.S. or the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union spurred the question of what the essence of NAM was, and with respect to whom the NAM countries remained non-aligned. The 'Ten principles of Bandung', which were proclaimed in the Asian-African Conference in 1955, outlined the principles of NAM. Being the largest member-state of NAM, India has been one of the leaders of the movement since the time of Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the founding fathers of this movement.

Against the backdrop of this history, it would be a mistake to see NAM merely as a rejection of Cold War bloc politics. Non-alignment stood — and presumably still stands — for policy autonomy for the erstwhile newly independent countries. These countries banded together because of their shared traditions and history, which included anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism and anti-racism. The idea behind non-alignment thus conceived was to promote peace and security in a global arena where superpowers were constantly posturing to achieve their hegemonic ambitions. In that context, NAM helped preserve the sovereignty of many young nations, including democracies such as India which wished to follow the path of strategic independence.

Today, questions are being raised about India's non-aligned credentials, particularly after India joined the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a coalition seen by many as a counterforce to China's rise in the Indo-Pacific. Coinciding with this is Russia's drift from India and the emergence of a Russia-China-Pakistan trilateral. The key question is: given the perception in some quarters that India is well-inclined towards the U.S. and its allies, while it has simultaneously allowed a drift away from its old allies such as Russia, is it not far less credible for India to claim to be non-aligned?

If non-alignment is seen purely through the prism of alliances, a question mark hangs over India's non-aligned credentials. However, India can still claim to be non-aligned if non-alignment is assessed through the principles of NAM. Regardless, there is little doubt that India needs to do more to explain what non-alignment means to it now as the global order has changed dramatically in recent years.

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