

## A new NAM for the new norm

From all accounts, the Cold War is breaking out again. The United States has identified both China and Russia as adversaries, whose leaders, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, are strong and determined to stand up to a faltering Donald Trump, who is desperately clinging on to doctrines of ultranationalism and nuclear hegemony.

Mr. Putin has just announced that Russia has invincible doomsday machines like an underwater drone armed with a nuclear warhead powerful enough to sweep away coastal facilities, aircraft carriers and a hypersonic vehicle impossible to intercept as it flies in a cloud of plasma “like a meteorite”.

Cuba is in the dog house again and the “axis of evil” has emerged once again under Iran’s leadership. This time it is a three-cornered Cold War, without any corner having committed countries to act together as military allies. Potential allies are hedging, with no viable grouping to protect the interests of the weak and the poor. If the Cold War is here in a new form, can a reincarnation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) be far behind?

NAM is anathema today even to those who helped shape it and revelled in it for years. India was one of its leaders, if not the leader. India had a stake in its integrity and India toiled tirelessly to keep it on the middle road, not to be hijacked by Cuba to the left or Singapore to the right. We fought to keep Egypt within it when every Arab country wanted it to be ousted in 1979 after the Camp David agreements. Indira Gandhi risked a bear hug from Fidel Castro as she took the NAM gavel to save it from the uncertain leadership of Iraq. Had it not been for India, NAM would have been wound up at a ministerial meeting in Ghana in 1991 soon after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. It was characterised as the “last gasp of the old style radicals”.

India argued vehemently against those who felt that NAM had outlived its utility. Since the essence of nonalignment was freedom of thought and action, India insisted that it was valid whether there was one bloc or no bloc. Even while building alliances with others, we availed of the NAM umbrella to promote our national strategies when it suited us. The very lack of homogeneity and unity in NAM enhanced its utility for us. One forum where we effectively used the NAM constituency was the Working Group on UN Reform, where we blocked an effort by the U.S. and others to add Germany and Japan as permanent members and close the doors for further expansion.

An effort was made in 2012 to craft a ‘Nonalignment 2.0’ in the context of the new global situation, India’s growing importance and the rivalry between the U.S. and China. The report moved the concept of nonalignment away from its origins. It reiterated that India needed to move quickly to extend its global role and influence. But the authors said India’s big challenge would be to aim at not just being powerful but to set new standards for what the powerful must do. India’s legitimacy in the world will come from its ability to stand for the highest human and universal values and at the global level, “India must remain true to its aspiration of creating a new and alternative universality.”

In a situation where the world is no longer bifurcated between two dominant powers, nonalignment today will require managing complicated coalitions and opportunities in an environment that is not structurally settled, the report said. The policy of “strategic autonomy” recommended that India should not take sides in the rivalry between China and the U.S. The report emphasised that for its strategic and foreign policy to be successful, India must sustain domestic economic growth, social inclusion and democracy.

Coming as it did in the wake of a strategic partnership with the U.S., a revival of NAM, even with

caveats of various kinds, did not seem to appeal either to the Manmohan Singh government or the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party. For Prime Minister Narendra Modi too, NAM was nothing but a relic of the Nehruvian past and it did not form part of his vocabulary.

As he pursued his priorities of development, security, neighbourhood and the diaspora, maintaining a constituency of the poor nations of the world had no place. In his transactional foreign policy, it is easier to act alone rather than as the spokesperson of a group. It was no wonder, therefore, that he did not find it necessary to attend the NAM Summit in Venezuela in 2016. India, which conceived and nursed the concept, was ready to cast it into the dustbin of history. We began a journey from the leadership of the super poor to become a super power.

Into the second half of his term, Mr. Modi's balance sheet shows an altogether different scenario. As a close defence partner of the U.S. and a member of the "Quadilateral", India is right in the U.S. camp. As the baton of the orchestra passed into the hands of a wayward conductor, the new symphony in India-U.S. relations promised in 2016 has not quite materialised. Both China and Russia, which have been identified as adversaries in the U.S. world view, have their problems with India. Doklam and the Maldives have shown that China is in no mood for a compromise. In fact, China has attributed the increase of its defence budget to the formation of the Quadilateral, which is being seen as a direct threat to China.

An obvious way is to revive NAM by breathing new life into it and making it fit to deal with the new norm. But it has baggage, which may be difficult to unload. A movement conceived in the context of a bipolar world may not suit a tripolar world, which could become a multipolar world. A partnership of near equals like IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) with similar interests without any ideological conflict is probably the best model to follow. Something on the lines of the G-15 organised by India and like-minded countries some years ago could be put together with the objective of dealing with the kind of issues identified by Mr. Modi at Davos — climate change, terrorism and protectionism. The members may have links with the U.S., China and Russia, but should be able to work together without the undue influence of the three.

Mr. Modi is not someone who will hesitate to think out of the box to achieve his objectives. Given the present impasse in international relations with little leeway for game-changing initiatives, India will do well to move away from being a camp follower of one of the emerging poles to create our own fourth pole.

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