

THE POWER OF NON-ALIGNMENT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: NAM

Balancing the superpowers: Jawaharlal Nehru, Gamal Abdel Nasser and Josip Broz Tito in Brijuni Islands in 1956. | Photo Credit: [HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES](#)

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and its precursor, the Bandung Afro-Asian conference in 1955, were examples of soft balancing by weaker states towards great powers engaged in intense rivalry and conflict. As they had little material ability to constrain superpower conflict and arms build-ups, the newly emerging states under the leadership of India's Jawaharlal Nehru, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and Indonesia's Sukarno, and later joined by Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito, adopted a soft balancing strategy aimed at challenging the superpower excesses in a normative manner, hoping for preventing the global order from sliding into war.

The founders of the NAM, if alive today, could have taken solace in the fact that in the long run some of their goals were achieved due to a radical change in the policies of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev.

The NAM is often not given credit for what it deserves, because by the 1970s, some of the key players, including India, began to lose interest in the movement as they formed coalitions with one or the other superpower to wage their conflicts with their neighbours. It is also not theorised by scholars properly. The Western countries often portrayed non-alignment as pro-Soviet or ineffective and the general intellectual opposition was the result of the Western scholarly bias against a coalitional move by the weaker states of the international system. This is very similar to how upper classes or castes respond to protest movements by subaltern groups in highly unequal and hierarchical societies.

The international system is hierarchical and the expectation is that the weaker states should simply abide by the dictates of the stronger ones. It is often forgotten that when the Bandung meeting took place, the world was witnessing an intense nuclear arms race, in particular, atmospheric nuclear testing. The fear of a third world war was real. Many crises were going on in Europe and East Asia, with the fear of escalation lurking. More importantly, the vestiges of colonialism were still present.

Despite all its blemishes, the NAM and the Afro-Asian grouping acted as a limited soft balancing mechanism by attempting to delegitimise the threatening behaviour of the superpowers, particularly through their activism at the UN and other forums such as the Eighteen Nation Committee on Disarmament, as well as through resolutions.

"Naming" and "shaming" were their operational tools. They worked as norm entrepreneurs in the areas of nuclear arms control and disarmament. They definitely deserve partial credit for ending colonialism as it was practised, especially in the 1950s and 1960s in Africa, parts of Asia and the Caribbean through their activism at the UN General Assembly which declared decolonisation as a key objective in 1960.

The non-aligned declarations on nuclear testing and nuclear non-proliferation especially helped to concretise the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty. They also helped create several nuclear weapon free zones as well as formulate the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. The tradition of 'non-use of nuclear weapons', or the 'nuclear taboo', was strengthened partially due to activism by the non-aligned countries' at the UN. The non-aligned could find solace that it took a few more decades for a leader like Mr. Gorbachev to emerge in one of the contending superpowers, and that many

of their policy positions were adopted by him, and later partially by the U.S.

As the great powers are once again launching a new round of nuclear arms race and territorial expansion and militarisation of the oceans, a renewed activism by leading global south countries may be necessary to delegitimise their imperial ventures, even if they do not succeed immediately. If these states do not act as cushioning forces, international order could deteriorate and new forms of cold and hot wars could develop. China, the U.S. and Russia need to be balanced and restrained and soft balancing by non-superpower states has a key role to play in this.

If the present trends continue, a military conflict in the South China Sea is likely and the naval competition will take another decade or so to become intense, as happened in earlier periods between Germany and the U.K. (early 1900s), and Japan and the U.S. (1920s and 1930s).

The U.S. as the reigning hegemon will find the Chinese takeover threatening and try different methods to dislodge it. The freedom of navigation activities of the U.S. are generating hostile responses from China, which is building artificial islets and military bases in the South China Sea and expanding its naval interests into the Indian Ocean. Smaller states would be the first to suffer if there is a war in the Asia-Pacific or an intense Cold War-style rivalry develops between the U.S. and China. Nuclear weapons need not prevent limited wars as we found out through the Ussuri clashes of 1969 and the Kargil conflict in 1999.

What can the smaller states do? Can they develop a new 'Bandung spirit' which takes into account the new realities? They could engage in soft balancing of this nature hoping to delegitimise the aggressive behaviour of the great powers. The rise of China and India, with their own ambitious agendas, makes it difficult that either will take the lead in organising such a movement.

China's wedge strategy and its efforts to tie Afro-Asian states through the Belt and Road Initiative have limited the choices of many developing countries. However, despite the constraints, many have been able to keep China off militarily by refusing base facilities and also smartly bargaining with India and Japan for additional economic support. They thus are already showing some elements of strategic autonomy favoured by the NAM.

More concrete initiatives may have to rest with emerging states in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) grouping. Engaging China and India more intensely while restraining the U.S. and Russia from aggravating military conflict in Asia-Pacific can be the effort of the developing countries. Norm entrepreneurship has its value, even if it does not show immediate results.

The alternative is to leave it to the great powers to engage in mindless arms race and debilitating interventions, which rarely create order in the regions. Restraining the established and rising powers through institutional and normative soft balancing may emerge as an option for developing countries in the years to come. They still need a leader like Jawaharlal Nehru to bring them together.

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