

WHAT IS IN A NAM AND INDIA'S ALIGNMENT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: NAM and its relevance

India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, said recently that non-alignment was a concept of relevance in a specific era and a particular context, though the independence of action enshrined in it remains a factor of continuity in India's foreign policy. This is about as explicit an assertion as one is likely to get from our political leadership of an obvious post-Cold War fact: that non-alignment, as a foreign policy concept, is dead.

Non-alignment was a policy fashioned during the Cold War, to retain an autonomy of policy (not equidistance) between two politico-military blocs. [The Non-Aligned Movement \(NAM\)](#) provided a platform for newly independent developing nations to join together to protect this autonomy. It was a disparate group from many continents, with varying degrees of proximity to, and dependence on, one or the other bloc; and broadly united around NAM's flagship campaigns for de-colonisation, universal nuclear disarmament and against apartheid.

One of the blocs was disbanded at the end of the Cold War. De-colonisation was largely complete by then, the apartheid regime in South Africa was being dismantled and the campaign for universal nuclear disarmament was going nowhere. Freed from the shackles of the Cold War, the NAM countries were able to diversify their network of relationships across the erstwhile east-west divide. Non-alignment lost its relevance, and NAM its original *raison d'être*.

For a few years now, non-alignment has not been projected by our policymakers as a tenet of India's foreign policy. However, we have not yet found a universally accepted successor as a signature tune for our foreign policy. Successive formulations have been coined and rejected. Strategic autonomy was one, which soon acquired a connotation similar to non-alignment, with an anti-U.S. tint. Multi-alignment has not found universal favour, since (as the External Affairs Minister said elsewhere) it may convey the impression of opportunism, whereas we seek strategic convergences. Seeking issue-based partnerships or coalitions is a description that has not stuck. "Advancing prosperity and influence" was a description Dr. Jaishankar settled for, to describe the aspirations that our network of international partnerships seeks to further.

In the wake of the current stand-off with China, there have been calls for India's foreign policy to shed its inhibitions and make a decisive shift towards the United States, as the only viable option to counter China. The government has been more nuanced in its approach. The External Affairs Minister clarified that a rejection of non-alignment does not mean a rush to alignment: India will not join an alliance system.

The fact is that 'alliance' is as much a Cold War concept as non-alignment. During the Cold War, the glue that held countries of an alliance together was composed (in varying proportions) of ideological convergence and an existential military threat. With the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the Warsaw Pact, this glue dissolved and the international options of alliance partners widened, just like those of NAM countries. The strategic interests of alliance partners are no longer congruent. This is evident in the Euro-Atlantic alliance. U.S. President Donald Trump's words and deeds have highlighted divergences within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and even widened them, but strains have periodically surfaced even earlier — over the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, for example, or on policy towards Russia or West Asia. Turkey is constantly exploring the limits of NATO discipline.

Alliances in the Asia-Pacific face a bigger definitional dilemma. They were originally forged to deter the USSR. The threat to the alliance partners today is from an assertive China, which they

are reluctant to define as a strategic adversary, because of their economic engagement with it and the huge military asymmetry.

It is often overlooked that geostrategy derives from both geography and politics. While politics is dynamic, geography is immutable. Two major imperatives flow from India's geography: economic and security interests in the Indo-Pacific space and the strategic importance of the continental landmass to its north and west. The former has inspired the Act East policy of bilateral and multilateral engagements in Southeast Asia and East Asia and the Pacific. Shared India-U.S. interests in dealing with the challenge from China in the maritime domain have been a strategic underpinning of the bilateral partnership since the early 2000s.

In the immediate-term, Indian and U.S. perspectives are less convergent in India's continental neighbourhood. Connectivity and cooperation with Afghanistan and Central Asia need engagement with Iran and Russia, as well as with the Russia-China dynamics in the region. Russia bestrides the Eurasian landmass bordering India's near and extended neighbourhood. Seemingly paradoxically, a close Russia-China partnership should move India to broad-base relations with Russia (beyond the traditional defence and energy pillars). A strong stake in relations with India could reinforce Russia's reluctance (which still persists) to be a junior partner of China.

As the U.S. confronts the challenge to its dominance from China, classical balance of power considerations would dictate a modicum of accommodation with Russia. There was an analogous logic in the Richard Nixon-Henry Kissinger outreach to China in 1971, when the Soviet Union was the more formidable rival. The political lessons from the current pandemic could help reawaken that historical memory. Equally, the U.S. could acknowledge that India's development of trade routes through Iran would also serve its strategic interest of finding routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan and Russia, respectively.

Five years ago, a group of U.S. strategic analysts had suggested (in a report for the Council on Foreign Relations), that the U.S. should see ties with India as a joint venture (not an alliance), in which they could pursue shared objectives to mutual benefit and accept that differences of perspectives will have to be addressed.

This template could have wider applicability for bilateral relations in today's world order, which former National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon has described as militarily unipolar, economically multipolar and politically confused. COVID-19 may scramble the economics and deepen the confusion further.

India will acquire a larger global profile next year, when it commences a two-year term on the UN Security Council. The strategic choices that it makes in its bilateral partnerships will be closely watched.

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