

Non-Alignment 3.0 or Strategic Relevance?

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History

The votaries of non-alignment have either forgotten or don't seem to understand the original concept of non-alignment. It almost seems to have become a mantra, which is chanted periodically.

Non-alignment is a concept developed in the context of the Cold War between the USA and the USSR that followed World War II. The battle lines were drawn between the USA, its non-Russian World War II allies and the USSR and its acquired territories in Eastern Europe. India and other newly independent countries were not the object of hostility from either side. They were, however, expected to join the "Cold War" on one side or another. The issue of joining either side and fighting the Cold War, or joining neither side and staying out of the Cold War, were genuine issues. The Cold War ended with the collapse of the USSR in 1990, as did the issue which non-alignment addressed.

Non-alignment Post 1991

With the end of the Cold War, the question arose: "what was the war that anyone was aligned for or against or neutral towards"? The "Non Aligned Movement (NAM)" remained a secular mantra for the Indian left, socialists and communists. For a wide swath of intellectuals, it also became a substitute for rethinking India's foreign policy in the light of a changing India and a changed world environment. Indian growth accelerated sharply during the 1980s and further after the economic reforms of 1991. As India's economic heft in the global economy increased during the 2000s, it became impossible to resist a re-evaluation of India's foreign policy. The response of our ruling intellectuals was a hybrid concept called Non-alignment 2.0, an attempt to disguise the evolution of foreign policy in the 1990s and early 2000s, and reassure the Indian left that the pre-1990s Bipolar World was alive and well, with their favourite and once socialist country as one pole.

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In keeping with the growing dynamism of India's foreign and security policy, the DPG is expanding its focus areas to include India's broader regional and global role and the strategic partnerships that advance India's rise as a leading power. To support that goal, the DPG undertakes research and organizes policy interactions across a wide canvas, including strategic and geo-political issues, geo-economic issues and defence and security issues.

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Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito (right) with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (left) shown here meeting in 1956. The three leaders are considered to be among the founding fathers of NAM.
(Source: National Archives)

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By 2007-8, the geopolitical situation had completely and fundamentally transformed from the perspective of India and several Asian countries, though perhaps not for many Latin American, Caribbean, and African countries. Both sub-sets of countries were, however, actively making deals with old and new powers, while continuing to use the NAM forum to have a voice in multilateral institutions. For a while the four largest non-G7 economies, China, Brazil, Russia and India, tried to do the same through the informal grouping named BRICs. But China's global stance started changing from passive to aggressive around 2006 and even more so since the Global Financial Crisis in 2008. This has transformed it into a protagonist alongside the US over the last five years, with the US responding with its "Pivot (or rebalance) to Asia". The anticipation of an emerging new cold war between China and the USA has revived the outdated and irrelevant concept of non-alignment in India.

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But the US-China contest is not some distant cold war fought in the battle fields of Europe. It is an expansion and broadening of a war that has been fought against India by one of the protagonists, China, for more than half a century, while the other protagonist, the USA, did everything it could for thirty years to help the former become economically strong.

Belatedly, the USA recognizes the threat to itself from China, a threat India has faced with varying intensity for decades. China has continuously endeavoured to undermine our security since the 1960s by proliferating nuclear and missile technologies to India's hostile neighbour Pakistan (and other terrorist nations like North Korea). China's hostile actions since 2006 are too many to list in this short note, but a significant one was the declaration of Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet and the personal abuse of the President of India for speaking there (by none other than the Chinese Ambassador to India).

Beneficial Deals or Appeasement

How can one be "non-aligned" between a country willing to help us strengthen our economy, defence forces and strategic influence (albeit at a price) and a country working to undermine our national security (while extracting economic gains through non-market means)? The mind boggles at a disingenuous attempt to define the concept of non-alignment between a group of essentially friendly countries and another group of increasingly hostile countries. Unless of course the underlying idea is to appease one's enemies to avoid getting too close to anyone we dislike for ideological reasons, even if it professes the same democratic values and offers friendship.

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The issue here is not the 1950s issue of alignment versus non-alignment, but of how best to use the capabilities of a super-power to accelerate our economic growth and strengthen defence and strategic capabilities, while minimizing any adverse reaction from an aggressive, hostile power

which happens to be our neighbour. This requires leveraging our growing economic and strategic power to develop partnerships and make deals that further our national interests (economic, technological and strategic) and promote our security. Doing something merely to avoid getting punched by the local bully is appeasement, not mutually beneficial deal making.

which our interests overlap, to promote these overlapping interests and make deals with countries with which we have little strategic overlap (neutrals). We can also seek points of common interest and make deals even with countries that our hostile to us, but if and only if they promote our identified national interests. Constantly looking over our shoulder at what our adversaries will think and not doing deals that provide an overall net benefit to us merely because the antagonist will react negatively, is appeasement, not pragmatic promotion of one's interest in peaceful development. The primary objective of national security is to develop our economic and technological capabilities and increase our comprehensive national power. Enhanced strategic relevance, influence and space will be an inevitable tertiary outcome of a more prosperous, empowered India.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Barack Obama in their talk over tea at the Hyderabad House, New Delhi on January 25, 2015 (Source: MEA)

Conclusion

Foreign policy starts with a clear definition of national objectives and a realistic appraisal of which countries' interests are most closely aligned with ours (potential friends) and those who are most hostile to our interests (potential adversaries). One cannot be non-aligned between friends and enemies so defined. We must partner with each country with

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DPG POLICY NOTE
Volume I, Issue 5
August 2016