



Non-Aligned Movement: Nepal's Enduring Commitment

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the historical context of the inception of the Non-aligned Movement amidst the Cold War rivalries between the US and the erstwhile Soviet Union. In addition, it sheds light on the competing discourses around the notion of non-alignment; explicates Nepal's adherence to core values and principles of non-alignment in its foreign policy frameworks; and recommends some policy reform measures to reinvigorate the NAM's normative significance and visibility on the global geopolitical arena. The moral and strategic element of non-alignment is of paramount value in the conduct of Nepal's foreign policy, considering its unique geostrategic positioning, its increasing aspirations to play an effective role in global affairs, and the means at its disposal to this end. Despite internal contradictions and an externally weak geopolitical manoeuvre, the NAM continues to offer the Third World countries like Nepal lying on the periphery of global geopolitics a collective forum to advance their shared interests through strengthened multilateralism. A qualitative, analytical method is employed to deal with this subject. Subjectivity, incomprehensiveness, and inadequacy in content analysis of available literature for some constraining reasons, inter alia, are its limitations.

KEYWORDS: Non-alignment, National Interests, Cold War, Decolonization, Multilateralism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Non-aligned Movement (NAM) was born against the backdrop of the heightened Cold War that characterized global geopolitics in the aftermath of WWII. As an intergovernmental association of newly independent states in the wake of decolonization in the 1950s and afterward, it sought to pursue an independent foreign policy path by not siding with either of the power alliances to preserve their sovereignty and hard-won independence [1]. Though this regional grouping formally took shape in September 1961 in Belgrade (now the capital of Serbia) of former Yugoslavia with the convening of its first Summit, the concept of NAM as such had already crystallized in the Asian-African Conference, popularly known as "Bandung Conference" of 1955 held in Indonesia.

The WWI (1914-18) and WWII (1939-45) of the twentieth century brought about unprecedented loss of human lives- over 70 million deaths combined- and substantial destruction of physical properties. The Allied powers reveled in their victory over the Axis powers, but their wartime unity started to crumble soon. The world leaders had a shared feeling that humanity couldn't afford another third World War with a possibility of more catastrophic nuclear warfare. The volatility of the Cold War interstate relations, prompted largely by the power competition between the two superpowers for global supremacy necessitated a force of balance to mitigate the West-East tensions, and to preserve lasting global peace and security. Considering this geopolitically precarious situation, the Heads of State and Governments of 29 participating countries in the Bandung Conference envisioned creating a balancing third force of the global South for advancing their shared interests of national independence, socio-economic development, and the crusades against neo-colonialism and imperialism [2].

The NAM, as a united front of the third-world countries, was conceived under the leadership of prominent leaders of the time: *Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India; Josip Broz Tito, President of former Yugoslavia; Sukarno, President of Indonesia; Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of Egypt; and Kwame Nkrumah, President of Ghana.* They are often credited as the founding fathers of the NAM in recognition of their valuable contribution to the inception of this forum. These leaders advocated for a middle path for these developing countries amidst the Cold War tensions [3]. As a result of what many scholars call the "Initiatives of the Five", the NAM was institutionalized as a collective forum of non-aligned states to forge mutual collaboration in addressing their common development problems, endeavor towards the promotion of global peace and security through

strengthened multilateral cooperation and engage actively in critical issues with global ramifications. The catalytic force that glued the NAM members together was a feeling of their resentment that they lacked a voice on pressing issues of global interests and concerns [4]. This new-found consciousness of being left out in global decision-making processes, and the desire to play the role of “subject” rather than “object” as much assertively as possible resulted in the genesis of the NAM.

The NAM membership has increased from 25 at the time of its founding in 1961 to 120 members, as of now, with other 20 States and 10 international organizations as observers, thus making it the second-largest intergovernmental body after the United Nations (UN). The NAM represents nearly two-thirds of the UN members and over half of the global population. This numerical and demographic size is one of its greatest strengths for making its effective political and diplomatic footprint in international relations. As an ardent advocate and believer in the NAM values and principles, Nepal accords high importance to non-alignment in its external relations. However, a deviation from this non-aligned foreign policy by the political leadership in Nepal's relations with the immediate neighbours during certain historical periods remains squarely an aberration. That non-alignment in principle is the soul of Nepal's foreign policy cannot be overstated.

In light of the above, this paper endeavours to shed light on varied aspects of the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) as an organization; its role and contribution to the South-South Cooperation; debates around the question of NAM's relevance in 21st-century global politics; and Nepal's enduring commitment to non-alignment as a core substance of its foreign policy framework.

2. NAM'S SEMANTICS

What is generally understood as non-alignment is a state of neutrality or absence of affinity or association with any other group, alliance, or entity. It suggests a context or situation of disengagement or remaining aloof from any bloc or alliance in terms of strategic and military cooperation. The concept of non-alignment didn't emanate from some initial deliberations among newly independent states or based on preconceived theories, or ideas but rather as a common quest for political, and economic independence of long-subjugated states, and as a reaction to the emergence of two rival Cold War blocs in global affairs [5]. Although non-alignment resembles some semblances to notions of “neutrality” or “neutralism”, the former is far more comprehensive and carries richer meanings than the latter. To put it in another way, neutrality or neutralism implies rather a passive, unpurposive position of not taking sides with parties at loggerheads. On the contrary, non-alignment transcends beyond the perimeter of neutralism to objectively assess an issue, independent of any external influence or coercion on its merit basis; to engage proactively with relevant stakeholders to find just ways to address the issue; and to ensure the victory of truth over untruth, justice over injustice. The emergence of the NAM, as a non-aligned bloc of Third World countries, should rather be seen in this broader light.

Malhotra (2004) is of the view that as a positive policy, non-alignment tries to promote certain good values such as decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s; New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the 1970s, New Information Order on the basis of equity, justice, and freedom in subsequent years while opposing negative values like colonialism, racialism, armaments, and domination [6]. As an activist and dynamic policy, it seeks a proactive role of non-aligned countries in global affairs and advocates for taking sides by assessing independently the merit of each case. He thus argues that a particular tilting in non-alignment based on the merit of the issue is “legitimate” and non-alignment does not refer to a policy of equidistance from both of the superpowers in the Cold War conflict.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, advocated for a non-aligned foreign policy in his anti-colonial efforts for India's independence in 1947 without actually mentioning the term while Tito, who was keen on former Yugoslavia's detachment from the Soviet Union, found in Nehru a sympathetic supporter of such a policy [7]. At least six Pan-African Conferences held between 1900 and 1945, the Asian Relations Conference of 1947, the Asian States' Conference of 1949, and most particularly the Bandung Conference of 1955 had set the stage for the NAM to emerge as a force for political and economic independence [8]. However, Indian diplomat V.K. Krishna Menon is considered to have first used the term ‘non-alignment’ at the UN, later used by Nehru in his 1954 speech in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

The ten Bandung principles as enumerated in the final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference of 1955 provided a fundamental philosophical foundation for the NAM as they emphasize respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity of all states as well as for human rights, the UN Charter, and self-defense; recognize equality of all races and nations; and stress abstention from aggression, use of force and peaceful settlement of disputes including promotion of mutual interests and cooperation. The participating countries of the 1955 Bandung Conference expressed a firm conviction that the adoption of these principles in interstate friendly cooperation would significantly contribute to the cause of international peace and security while heralding common prosperity for all through South-South cooperation in political, economic, social, technical, and cultural fields.

In a similar vein, the 14th Havana Summit of 2006 has clearly laid out the NAM's purposes as promoting multilateralism with the UN's central role in global affairs; serving as a forum of developing countries for advancing their common interests; defending international peace and security and settling all international disputes by peaceful means; encouraging sustainable development; promoting peaceful coexistence between nations; condemning all manifestations of unilateralism and domination; strengthening South-South cooperation; and democratizing the UN, among others. It is therefore quite explicit that the NAM's principles and purposes aim at maintaining a peaceful, just, and prosperous world order underpinned by core values of global unity, cooperation, and peaceful co-existence.

3. A NOBEL MOVEMENT

Amidst the Cold War competition, the non-aligned countries rallied around a shared interest of seeking greater economic justice, racial equality, and independence from colonial rule, and thus formed an enduring coalition of like-minded states in multilateral institutions [9]. These countries were banded together with a common motto of taking autonomous decisions in global affairs and choosing to decide their own political, economic, and social systems. This is, in fact, a meeting point of consensus among the non-aligned countries with so heterogeneous political and social systems. Without an iota of doubt, there were some exceptions. Some states are alleged to have resorted to "alignments within non-alignment". The true spirit of non-alignment does not allow such an inward-looking, vested policy that seeks benefits out of a tense situation between the two rival blocs rather than working to lessen the geopolitical tensions for a broader interest of global peace, security, and prosperity.

The NAM has been formed rather as a movement without an institutionalized structure in order to avoid bureaucratic implications that may arise thereof [1]. It does not have a permanent secretariat to coordinate its administrative works, serve as a channel of communication to the wider public, and act as a centre of research and development. Each of the NAM members holds the Chairship, which is handed over to the host country organizing the Summit of the Heads of State and Government every few years, generally once in three years. Currently, Azerbaijan has been leading the NAM as Chair for 2019-2023 since the organization of the 18th Summit in Baku on 25-26 October 2019. The next summit is scheduled to take place in Kampala, Uganda in January 2024.

In its over six decades of existence, the NAM has witnessed a growing trend of institutionalization. At the apex of its institutional structure is the Summit of the Heads of State and Government, which, as the highest policy-making and decision-making body, adopts a final document reflecting principled positions of the member countries on pressing global issues of mutual interests. Senior Officials and Ministerial Meetings precede such NAM Summit that comprises two committees: one for political issues, and the other, for economic and social issues. Other arrangements for discussions within the NAM framework include Foreign Ministers' Meeting during the UNGA, sectoral Ministers' Meeting, Coordinating Bureau, Troika, Non-aligned Security Council Caucus, various Working Groups, Contact Groups, Taskforce, and Committees including Joint Coordinating Committee, among others.

The NAM has three windows for willing states and organizations to participate in its deliberations: full membership, observer, and guests. The five-fold criteria, drawn up in June 1961 for inviting states to the first NAM Summit in Belgrade, still serve as eligibility requirements for membership:

- Independent policy with co-existence of states and non-alignment or a trend in favour of such policy;
- Support for national independence movements;
- Non-membership of a multilateral military alliance in the context of the Great Power conflicts;
- Non-conclusion of a bilateral military agreement or non-membership of a regional defense pact in view of Great Power conflicts;

- No demand for concessions for providing military bases, if any, to a Foreign Power in the Cold War context. [10]

4. NON-ALIGNMENT: MORAL AND STRATEGIC VALUE FOR NEPAL'S FOREIGN POLICY

As a founding member of the NAM, Nepal is avowedly committed to the NAM spirit, principles, and objectives in its bid to contribute towards creating a just, peaceful, and rules-based world order. As the NAM philosophy stands for a force of morality, equity, and justice in international relations, Nepal's belief in and adherence to its founding principles is unswerving. This is well manifested in the incorporation of non-alignment as one of the core underpinnings in Nepal's foreign policy framework.

As a matter of fact, non-alignment has constituted an important pillar of Nepal's foreign policy ever since its birth as a unified, modern nation-state in 1768. Envisioning security volatility both internally and externally, the late King Prithvi Narayan Shah- a unifier of a modern Nepal- charted out a pragmatic foreign policy of domestic power consolidation and maintaining friendly relations with neighbouring powers. In his divine counsel, he described Nepal as "a yam between two boulders", vindicating a geopolitically delicate positioning of the country between the gigantic powers- China in the north and several powerful empires including the rising British East India Company in the Indian Sub-continent. Sensing the colonial ambitions of the Britishers, PN Shah embraced an expansionist foreign policy through the unification drive of smaller principalities intending to build a unified Nepal, strong enough to defend itself against foreign invasion. In this regard, the discourse on the unification vs expansionism of Nepal merits an equally meticulous analysis. Whatever a *raison d'être* behind this, the existence of present-day Nepal owes a great deal to PN Shah's drive of unifying *Baise (twenty-two)*, *Chaubise (twenty-four)*, and other principalities existing then. As a strategy for survival, PN Shah counselled to maintain relations of friendship with the Chinese Emperor as well as the Emperor of the Southern Seas, and to pursue tactics of persuasion, even deceit, if need be, in the defensive rather than offensive fight [11]. This indication of a balancing act between the northern and southern powers of the time also suggests the strategic expediency of a non-aligned foreign policy for Nepal in safeguarding its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence.

The "Yam" discourse emerged in view of the rising power of the British East India Company in the Indian sub-continent, and the increasing influence of the Qing dynasty in China during the unification drive in Nepal, comprising the elements of "cautiousness, gradualism, peaceful co-existence, and friendliness" in foreign policy [12]. At the core of this "Yam Theory" is a strategy of developing friendships with outside powers in preserving national sovereignty, security, and independence, and strengthening the internal power for enhanced manoeuvrability. In this vein, this theory may be understood as a policy of accommodation, balancing, neutrality, and equi-proximity [12]. This speaks so explicitly about the genesis of some elements of non-alignment in PN Shah's foreign policy, eloquently expressed in his divine counsel.

Jung Bahadur Rana came to wield the executive power of Nepal as the first Rana Prime Minister- a de-facto ruler- following the notorious massacre "*Kot Parva*" in 1846. By then, the British East India Company had held sway over most of the Indian Sub-Continent politically and economically. In the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814-16, Nepal lost one-third of its territory and suffered a huge setback to its expansionist drive. This costly humiliating war ended with the signing of the Sugauli Treaty on 4 March 1816, which largely undermined Nepal's sovereign international personality. It was in this context that Jung Bahadur Rana and his successors, as part of the existential strategies, embraced a pro-British foreign policy of pleasing the Britishers to keep Nepal's sovereignty intact and perpetuate the Rana regime too. The most notable success of the Rana rulers' foreign policy is the regaining of *Naya Muluk*- Baki, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur- as a reward for Jung Bahadur Rana's military assistance to suppress the police mutiny of 1857 in the British-ruled India. Professor Khanal (2000), a veteran Nepali diplomat, stated that Nepal's national interests are largely shaped by its policy of non-alignment in foreign relations [13]. With this fact in mind, he dubbed the pro-British foreign policy of the Rana regime as the elemental need for Nepal's survival and a compromise with the harsh geopolitical realities of the 19th century.

Nepal joined the bandwagon of the global non-aligned movement in the wake of the Cold War in the 1950s, a watershed moment that witnessed the dawning of democracy in the country. Nepal's commitment to non-alignment was only vocal until 1954 due to its 'special relations with India' and limited external engagements with the UK, US, and France; Nepal's non-aligned policy, at a global level, sought relations of friendship and

peaceful coexistence with superpowers; cordial and cooperative relationships with uncommitted nations; and the furtherance of its self-interests as well as its views of the world in the UN and other global forums [11].

The entry into the UN in 1955, participation of a foreign secretary-level delegation of Nepal in the Bandung Conference, and former king Mahendra Shah's attendance at the first NAM Summit of 1961 brought about a landmark shift towards the adoption of non-alignment as one of the cardinal principles of Nepal's foreign policy discourse. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, 1990; the Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007 and the current Constitution of Nepal, 2015 have explicitly adopted non-alignment- apart from the UN Charter, international law, Panchasheela, and norm of world peace- as an underlying basis for the conduct of Nepal's foreign policy. As an ardent advocate of and a committed contributor to the advancement of the NAM principles and objectives, Nepal has actively participated in all of its Summits, and articulated her voice of reason on pressing global issues such as international peace, security, and development; disarmament, climate change, right to self-determination of peoples and countries under colonial domination; UN reforms; strengthening of multilateralism; terrorism and transnational organized crimes; socio-economic development of developing countries; and adherence to international law for just, peaceful and progressive world order. Of late, the debate about whether Nepal should continue to embrace or relinquish non-alignment in its foreign policy has gathered tremendous traction.

This debate is partly prompted by India's "policy of multi-alignments" with the world's emerging as well as major powers based on its vital national interests: for example, strengthened bilateral cooperation with the US on defense, semiconductors, and technology transfer, space exploration and in other socio-economic fields despite policy differences on Russia-Ukraine conflict; maintenance of status quo of friendly relations with Russia and purchase of Russian oil, gas against the western sanctions; and growing economic and trade cooperation with China irrespective of their border skirmishes and geopolitical rivalry. However, it should be borne in mind that the geopolitical case of Nepal is quite different from India's, in terms of national power shaped by geography, demography, economy, and technological advancement as well as the means of manoeuvrability in regional and global politics.

Different political parties and regimes, despite their conflicting ideologies, have adopted non-alignment out of geopolitical obligation and based on historical experiences as a balancing policy [14]. Despite all these narratives in favour of or against the continuity of a non-aligned foreign policy of the country, the NAM is very important for Nepal to do away with both superpower confrontation and rivalry between the immediate neighbours; to articulate "safe lines and narratives" on critical global issues; to access a sort of insurance for the collective security of geopolitically small states; and to avail the instrument of multilateral diplomacy for enhancing Nepal's assertive roles in global governance including in the UN [15]. Professor Subedi (2022) advised adopting "a policy of permanent neutrality", like Switzerland's, for preserving Nepal's core national interests including for the benefits of Nepali people as well as the wider Hindu Kush Himalayan region that has witnessed, for long, enduring internal political upheavals and external interventions likely to return due to competition among various global actors for spheres of influence [16]. Acharya (2023) also underscored the need to develop certain principles to consider policy proposals from great power or neighbours and respond to them based on their "economic viability and benefits rather than political preferences" while retaining our independent decision-making without having to act for or against these proposals [17]. Therefore, our policy of non-alignment does not allow us to side with one superpower, alliance, or neighbor at the cost of the other, but dictates our foreign policy decisions to prioritize our core national interests without jeopardizing theirs.

Delivering his remarks at India Foundation, New Delhi in August 2017, Sher Bahadur Deuba, former Prime Minister of Nepal, highlighted that Nepal's foreign policy is geared towards materializing the interest of the Nepali people and that Nepal takes a stand in line with its fundamental national interests, UN Charter, non-alignment, and the merit of the issue (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2017). An important diplomatic approach to safeguard Nepal's national interests would be strict adherence to the Panchasheel, non-alignment, and UN Charter both in words and deeds [18]. Considering Nepal's unique geostrategic position and more benefits than risks that come with values and principles of non-alignment, the time has not come yet for Nepal to reconsider relinquishing its long-embraced non-aligned foreign policy.

5. RELEVANCY OR REDUNDANCY

On the question of the NAM's relevance in view of the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, international relations scholars and political analysts have remained sharply split. For some, the NAM is politically irrelevant as the demise of the Cold War has fulfilled its primary political objective. Others argue that the NAM continues to remain a relevant and important association for advancing the economic agenda of the New International Economic Order (NIEO), and several other causes including the UN reform, disarmament, South-South Cooperation, and North-South Dialogue, climate change, and control of terrorism.

Inter-state conflicts, heterogenous and unequal political structure, and the absence of a clear ideological concept except for a consensus on a non-aligned foreign policy approach among the NAM members have caused serious setbacks in its functioning as a unified group [19]. The NAM is also alleged to have lacked charismatic leaders who can steer this association amidst the present uncertain global order as the founding fathers did with their powerful worldviews on anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-racialism, disarmament, international peace, security, and development. Many of its members are under fire for breaching their non-aligned principle and taking a closer side with either of the superpower blocs. This anomaly of 'alignments within non-alignment' called into question the very genuineness of the NAM's founding principles and objectives. What is more, the undemocratic image of certain members; lack of harmonious positions on key global issues; duplication, and proliferation of works with the UN, G77, and the Commonwealth; absence of a coordinating mechanism; outdated economic policy stand; failure to deliver tangible results and weak status as a club of poor countries, etc. are what make the NAM appear as redundant in contemporary global politics.

On the flip side, many scholars see the continued economic, moral, diplomatic, and geopolitical relevance of the NAM in view of the evolving power conflicts in a yet uncertain multipolar world, primarily dominated by the US and its allies, ASEAN and BRICS. The NAM stands for a force of morality, advocating for peaceful co-existence, end of any form of domination or hegemony, peaceful settlement of disputes, respect for human rights and international law, democratization of international relations, equality among nations, and right to pursue one's own political, economic and social systems, among others. Non-alignment is considered not merely a policy of passive neutrality or aloofness from conflicts or issues that concern the world at large, but also a positive and dynamic policy of active engagement in global governance processes to contribute to the cause of a just, equitable, and prosperous world for all.

And, for geopolitically small states like Nepal, the NAM offers them the role of 'subject'- not object- to make their voices heard and to advance their shared interests as a united force in multilateral forums including in the UN. If the NAM remains true to its principles, it musters the ability not only to check superpower rivalry, but also to avoid untoward risks of entanglements in such geopolitical confrontation.

6. NAM'S AGENDAS FOR REFORMS

The NAM has come of age in many respects. Still, it is not there yet in materializing its lofty objectives and translating its normative principles into concrete actions. As a collective forum of the global South, it may take on constructive roles in carrying forward several agendas in 21st-century international relations.

First, it should consolidate common positions among the members on pressing global issues including global peace, security, development, climate change, terrorism, human rights, and democracy so as to lobby strongly and collectively in the UN and other multilateral forums. **Second**, it should further strengthen the democratic governance system with rule of law, social inclusion, and constitutionalism at home, and endeavor with one voice to reform global governance including the UN reform. **Third**, it will have to work tirelessly to make the developed North live up to its commitments to global development- providing 0.7 % of GNI to developing countries and 0.15-0.2 % of GNI to LDCs- and climate financing. **Fourth**, the numerical strength of this body may well be utilized to eliminate the remnants of colonialism and imperialism by raising a united, collective voice for the democratic rights of peoples under neo-colonial or alien domination. **Fifth**, it will require abandoning a policy of 'alignments within non-alignment' while embracing the NAM's founding principles and objectives in spirit and letter in a bid to truly democratize international relations and further consolidate multilateralism under the UN's stewardship. **Sixth**, it is now a ripe time to consider framing an institutional mechanism to harmonize unanimous positions and views on critical global issues. In order to reorient and revitalize the NAM, these recommendations are, however, not exhaustive.

7. CONCLUSION

The Non-aligned Movement (NAM) is a reactionary policy initiative of the Third World countries with lesser geopolitical manoeuvre to find a relatively safer middle way in the Cold War tensions. As the second-largest intergovernmental body after the UN, the NAM has provided a political platform for these weaker, neutral, and formerly colonized countries to pursue their own political, economic, and social systems in a more independent fashion. The lack of consensual positions on critical global issues; the dearth of leadership; undemocratic credentials of some members; intra-state and inter-state conflicts; outdated economic agenda; number vs real political strength paradox; duplication of issues with the UN, G77, the Commonwealth; “alignments within non-alignment” and absence of a secretariat or a coordinating mechanism, among others, are structural constraints within the NAM. However, the NAM's core principles and objectives have timeless relevance as they envision creating a just, democratic, and prosperous world order underpinned by respect for sovereignty, equality, international law, and peaceful coexistence. As a founding member of the NAM, Nepal continues to accord utmost value and priority to its principles and objectives in the conduct of its foreign policy. Given its special geostrategic situation, lesser geopolitical strength, and growing aspiration to play an effective role in global governance, Nepal can well leverage the NAM platform to avert unnecessary entanglements in regional, global power conflicts, and to promote its vital national interests through strengthened multilateral diplomacy under the UN stewardship.

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