

Non alignment is still relevant, but it needs to be re-defined for the current global realities

By Dennis Sammut

In 1955, in the city of Bandung in Indonesia, leaders of 29 countries, many of them just recently independent, met for the first Afro-Asian summit of its kind.

WWII had only ended a decade before, and the world had not yet fully recovered from its consequences, Despite this, another world war appeared to be brewing as the liberal democracies, led by the United States, faced the Soviet Union and its allies, at first in Europe, but soon globally.

Most of the 193 states that today constitute the United Nations had not yet been born – these were still the early days of decolonisation. But those that had already secured their independence, such as India, Indonesia and Egypt were keen to hasten the end of colonial rule all over the world. In Bandung they gave expression to this aspiration, and to a willingness not to join either of the two blocs. They were joined by China and others in a bid to give a voice to Afro-Asian countries, and create a third force between the two competing superpowers.

After Bandung, there was a period of reflection – a testimony perhaps that this endeavour was far from simple. Both the United States and the Soviet Union wanted influence in the newly emerging countries, but were wary of what a new third force would mean for their interests.

It took six more years before the movement for non-alignment was formally created, at another summit, this time in Yugoslavia – although initially it was called the Non-Aligned Conference.

Non-alignment is not neutrality

Non-alignment is not the same as neutrality. Neutral countries commit not to support or give preference to one country or group of countries, against another. It had been pursued successfully as a policy by European countries such as Switzerland and Sweden in WWII. But others, such as Belgium, had their neutrality ignored when they were invaded and occupied by Nazi Germany.

Non-alignment, on the other hand, is interpreted more narrowly as not being part of a military alliance. So in practice you could be non aligned whilst still supporting politically or even in some circumstances militarily one group or another. Cuba was always considered non aligned despite being an enthusiastic supporter of the USSR.

The importance of personalities

In discussing the history of the Non-Aligned Movement it is necessary to remember the important role of personalities in forming and shaping it. The anti-colonial, anti imperialist

struggle had brought to the fore leaders who emerged to lead their nations out of colonialism into freedom. With hindsight we can say that they were political giants who inspired millions and who changed the destiny of their countries not through force but through the sheer power of their ideas and their personalities. They quickly became household names, recognised throughout the world: India's Nehru, Egypt's Nasser, Ghana's Nkrumah, Cyprus' Makarios – to mention just a few. In Yugoslavia for their launching summit in 1961 the leaders were hosted by Josip Broz Tito, the leader of the Yugoslav partisans who had heroically resisted Nazi occupation, and subsequently, equally heroically, had resisted the pressures of Stalin to incorporate Yugoslavia in the Soviet bloc.

Core-agenda

The core agenda of the non aligned group centred around five principles: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in domestic affairs; equality and mutual benefit; peaceful co-existence. In practice the movement became the vanguard in the process of decolonisation, and in resisting big power hegemony.

Because of its anti-colonialist, anti imperialist agenda and rhetoric the Non-Aligned movement always faced the risk of being branded an anti western, anti American group. It did indeed oppose many US and western policies, and was in confrontation with European colonial powers for most of the 1960s and 1970s. But the core group of the movement, led by Tito's Yugoslavia, always resisted Soviet attempts to dominate and monopolise it. In practise, the movement gave the countries of the south a voice in international politics. What they could not achieve through power, they achieved through sheer numbers. Together, in the United Nations they became one of the largest, most vocal and most important groups. From within the movement emerged other initiatives of South-South co-operation.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought an end to the cold war, and for many the scope of the Non-Aligned Movement no longer existed.

The European countries that were part of the Movement and helped give it a global perspective left: Yugoslavia disintegrated in several states, whilst Malta and Cyprus joined the European Union. In the 1990s the Movement appeared as if it was going to simply fade away into history, but since it did not have an expensive organisational burden, and due to its loose leadership system, it survived. Now, many feel its time has come again. With the west in open confrontation with Russia in Ukraine, and with China emerging as the second global superpower, the spirit of Bandung has somehow revived.

The Non-Aligned Movement today

Today, the Non-Aligned Movement has 120 member countries – nearly two-thirds of the United Nations' members that bring together 55% of the world population. Most of them are in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Slowly a process of re-inventing the non-aligned movement has been ongoing for some years, and it has been given an impetus by Azerbaijan, who took over the Chairmanship of

the Movement in 2019, and due to covid, has had it extended until the end of 2023 when Uganda takes over.

Azerbaijan has been quietly re-defining NAM, nudging it to adopt more practical measures of mutual support and co-operation, as manifested during the covid crisis, and giving the movement some additional organisational capacity. Azerbaijan has also resisted pressures to move the movement into being too much anti-west, or too much anti-Russia. As always striking this delicate balance is one of the challenges.

But there is a risk that the Non-Aligned Movement will by default try to slide back to the role it played during the cold war, not appreciating that the current divide is across a different set of fault lines. Ukraine is providing the litmus test.

Ukraine poses a dilemma

Those who are arguing that the war in Ukraine is an East-West confrontation, even suggesting somehow that it is Russia that is under attack, are not only mistaken, they are fooling themselves. There is no hiding the fact that it was Russia that in February invaded Ukraine, in a second wave of a process started in 2014 to dismember the country. The speeches of Russian president Vladimir Putin, questioning the very existence of Ukraine are there for all to read. The Movement needs to remember the five core principles from Bandung in 1955 and Yugoslavia in 1961: **mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in domestic affairs; equality and mutual benefit; peaceful co-existence.** Russia has violated all the five principles. It is right therefore that it is condemned for its actions. Most members of the Non Aligned Movement now understand this. In a resolution at the UN General Assembly last week the majority of the 120 members of NAM voted with western countries and others to condemn Russia. But 45 countries, most of them NAM countries, abstained or were absent. They were wrong. Their role was to be on the side of Ukraine, in the same way that NAM countries in the past had been on the right side of history by supporting the struggling people of Africa and Asia. In fact I would go so far as to suggest that it is only when these forty five countries decide to openly condemn Russia, that the leadership in the Kremlin would finally understand that they have made a mistake, and leave Ukraine to its people.

NAM can be a bridge between China and the West

The Non-Aligned Movement can play a different role in the emerging competition between China and the West. China has so far been a much more cautious player on the international arena than Putin's Russia. This leaves room for diplomacy, and plenty of scope for NAM to play a role in diffusing the tensions that have emerged. It is likely that the West and China will find themselves increasingly competing in the Global South. This competition needs to be kept within bounds, and it is the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement who can contribute best to ensure that is the case.

Giving a voice to the Global South

The Non-Aligned Movement in the 21st century has different roles to play. It is a changed world from the 1950 and 1960s. But there is still an imbalance in the international system. The Global South remains under-represented and with a weak voice in the global corridors of diplomacy. The new spirit in the Non-Aligned Movement should be channelled towards a better heard, better understood and more effective presence of the Global South in the international system, to be on the side of justice, especially when the weak are under attack from the powerful, and to contribute to global peace

A talking shop, but not toothless

It is true that the Non-Aligned Movement was for most of its history, and remains now, essentially a talking shop. There are other structures that provide more tangible ways for co-operation. But yet this role of talking shop should not be underestimated.

The movement that brings 120 countries together can muster moral authority and can be an effective force in wielding diplomatic pressure. But it must remain loyal to the spirit of Bandung, whilst adapting to the new challenges and dangers facing the world in 2022.

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