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Issue Brief

In Defence of Non-alignment

A. Vinod Kumar

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S*ummary*

Beyond principles like neutrality and equidistance, India's non-alignment policy was about the autonomy of decision-making and flexibility of choices in pursuit of national interest. It also demonstrates how visionary leadership seeking to influence international politics could develop ideational frameworks to propel their grand strategy.

India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar's recent statement that "non-alignment was a term of a particular era and a particular...geopolitical landscape" could be viewed as an iteration of the notion about non-alignment movement (NAM) being a relic of the Cold War-era world order and the recognition that the world has since moved towards a polycentric system with a handful of great powers competing to enhance their spheres of influence and establish their hegemony. Yet, even while pronouncing that the era of 'great caution' and 'dependence on multilateralism' is behind us and that India will leverage all opportunities to play a proactive international role, the EAM was emphatic about the continuity of 'independence' as followed in the non-alignment years by staying shy of any alliances.¹

Nonetheless, the underlying tone has been the notion assigned to 'non-alignment' as an ideological burden of the past when political idealism pursued by the then leadership had supposedly incurred costs on India's national interest or denied what could have been rightfully there for the country. Since hindsight judgement holds this approach of 'neutralism' as responsible for many setbacks and compromises for India, which made it supposedly lose out the coveted membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), resulted in denial of a nuclear umbrella, and aggravated its vulnerability over contestations with neighbours.

Albeit most of these issues had different underlying dynamics leading to varied outcomes, the post-generational derogation of non-alignment seems to have become an ineluctable prologue to arguments in favour of a 'realist' shift in grand strategy, implying a more proactive quest for great power status, a definitive pursuit of national interests, and like the EAM remarked, leveraging the international situation to play an autonomous role and take more risks.

However, the fundamental objective of being non-aligned in the bygone era - when states breaking free of colonial shackles were being sucked into a new form of global politics - was the conviction of the leadership that it will be in the best interests of the country. At the time, the cost of being aligned to any one bloc was assumed to be much higher than the cost of being neutral, which, in turn, secured the autonomy of sovereign choices and flexibility in taking strategic decisions.

Ruminations by personalities who were involved in decision-making that testify to the primacy of national interests in determining the pursuit of non-alignment are being increasingly validated by a host of archival records that are now accessible.

¹ **"EAM's interaction on Mindmine Mondays, CNBC (July 21, 2020)", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, July 30, 2020.**

Why Non-alignment?

The quest to influence the making of post-colonial world order was duly shaped by Jawaharlal Nehru's concept of internationalism, characterised by his idea of 'One World' with non-alignment among its five core elements.² While espousing these ideals, Nehru was also lucid about where India has to place itself in the evolving global political system. Through various elucidations, Nehru asserted that India had the influence and potential for playing a prominent role in global affairs given its unique geographical (a bridge between East and West) and political positioning (as a former colony with a tradition of nationalist struggle against imperialism). In his address to the Parliament in February 1953, Nehru remarked, "the strength which limits or conditions the foreign policy of a country may be military, financial or, if I may use the word, moral. It is obvious that India has neither military nor financial strength. Furthermore, we have no desire to and cannot impose our will on others."³

Though non-alignment has been a natural outcome of the Nehruvian conceptions, its actual relevance was in determining the space for India and the third world in the Cold War spectrum from the early 1960s, when the superpower competition began to acquire numerous dimensions – of conflict, cooperation and détente. Furthermore, after its initial mobilisation as an anti-imperial voice, the movement was about the struggles of members to engage and reconcile with the normative structuring of the global order by the superpowers. India's non-aligned postures, for that matter, remained contested and subjected to varied interpretations as it evolved in the next four decades of pivoting India's foreign policy.

Nehru had two streams of thought on the virtues of being non-aligned: (a) as a model of third world self-sufficiency bereft of influence of imperialism or colonialism, and (b) as a platform to safeguard the interests of those who wished not to align with the superpowers in their rivalry. Addressing the Parliament in February 1953, Nehru said: "To become part of a power bloc means giving up the right to have a policy of our own and following that of somebody else. We should co-operate with others or consult them but at the same time must follow an independent policy."⁴ T. N. Kaul, who served under Nehru and Indira Gandhi, took it further by stating that non-

² The five elements included: a) shaping a post-colonial world by countering colonialism, imperialism and racialism, (b) non-alignment by staying away from the superpower bloc rivalry, (c) peaceful co-existence for a cooperative international order, (d) prevent internationalisation of conflicts, and (e) disarmament.

³ *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches 1949-1953*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, 1954.

⁴ "Defining Foreign Policy", Speech by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru during debate on the President's Address in Parliament, New Delhi, February 17, 1953, in *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches 1949-1953*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, 1954.

alignment was a bridge between two hostile ideological blocs, and a policy of independence to judge issues on its merits irrespective of external pressure.⁵

Though it needed courage of conviction to adopt an independent policy against power blocs, as Kaul puts it, there was considerable confusion about where NAM members placed themselves in the global pecking order – as a third alternative or a neutral group. Nehru attempted an explanation on this:

My approach to foreign policy...you may call it neutral or whatever else. But I fail to see how this approach is neutral. Neutrality as a policy has little meaning except in times of war. If you think there is a Cold War today, we are certainly neutral. We are not going to participate in a Cold War which is worse than a shooting war.⁶

In an earlier speech to the United States (US) Congress in 1949, Nehru had stated: “India is not neutral. India cannot and shall not be neutral where peace is threatened and freedom is denied, for to be neutral in such circumstances would be the denial of all that India stands for.”⁷

M.C. Chagla, who was Indira Gandhi’s foreign minister, expounded this further in 1967:

India’s policy of non-alignment did not mean neutrality. By not aligning herself with any power bloc, she was not subservient to any country and reserved the right to pass judgment on international issues. At the same time, she was aligned to certain principles and certain causes: to disarmament, to doing away with nuclear weapons, to anti-communalism, apartheid, and so on.⁸

Such elucidations notwithstanding, the West essentially saw India’s non-alignment as a negative policy. Then US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles termed it as immoral, a policy of expediency, of sitting on the fence, and so on, and contended that “those who are with us are with us and those who are not are against us.” In fact, most Western analyses of non-alignment treated it in relation to the bipolar world: as an effort to mediate superpower rivalries or to prevent global war, a repudiation of traditional machinery of power politics, reactive diplomacy,

⁵ “Speech to Georgetown University delivered on 21 January 1975”, T.N. Kaul Papers (II and III Instalments), Subject File No. 3 (Part – I), *Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML)*, New Delhi. The latter elucidation comes from Kaul’s speech at Asia Society on 25 September 1974, *T.N. Kaul Papers* (II and III Instalments), Subject File No. 2, 1974, NMML.

⁶ “The Larger Scheme of Things”, Reply to debate on Foreign Affairs in Lok Sabha, June 12, 1952, in *Jawaharlal Nehru’s Speeches 1949-1953*, n. 3.

⁷ *Kaul Papers*, Subject File No. 2, n. 5.

⁸ As quoted in “The Proceedings of the Conference of Governors Held at Rashtrapati Bhavan on 30 November”, December 1, 1966, *M.C. Chagla Papers*, File No. 92, NMML.

representing a posture of moral superiority, substituting balance of power model, etc.

Ashok Kapur, though, differed with such assessments and instead argued that rather than staying away from bloc conflicts, non-alignment was about getting involved in global politics as a 'low-risk' strategy to gain influence despite the condition of material weakness and to gain influence through diplomatic means. Neutralism and equidistance, Kapur felt, only meant a rejection of military alliance, not any other politico-economic or cultural-intellectual relations as India had all such interactions with major powers of both blocs.⁹

Echoing similar views, Sampooran Singh described non-alignment as an expression of the desire to attain maximum independence in national decision-making.¹⁰ Singh quotes then Home Minister Y.B. Chavan as defining the policy of non-alignment as "national independence in the formulation of our own policy to consider all the issues of international importance on its merits, examine them from the point of view of national interest, and arrive at conclusions of our own." Singh also underlined a statement made by Nehru after the 1962 conflict that "there could be no non-alignment with regard to China," and that India had failed to understand and grasp 'neutralist realism' and had been pursuing 'neutralist idealism'. Similarly, Raj Krishna impressed upon the fact that the military significance of non-alignment is "that it avoids a complete military alliance with any one power in order to permit limited military agreements with all powers."¹¹ This policy permitted India to obtain military hardware from many camps, though also exposing its military vulnerabilities to all and sundry and ending up using equipment of all hues.

Manoeuvring Non-alignment

The inherent scope for flexible policymaking was abundantly evident during the non-alignment decades when India engaged in realist statecraft involving both superpowers with significant policy swings that could easily fall between neutrality and alignment. The decision to seek US assistance when the Chinese attack happened in 1962, the efforts to obtain military equipment from both the superpowers, the food aid from the US (PL-480) and the Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union are notable examples of the policy initiatives that transcended the non-alignment constraints. While dependent on the Americans for food aid, India also had to grapple with its balancing games when it came to arms supplies to Pakistan,

⁹ Ashok Kapur, *India's Nuclear Option: Atomic Diplomacy and Decision Making*, Praeger Publishers, New York, Washington, London, 1976.

¹⁰ Sampooran Singh, *India and the Nuclear Bomb*, S. Chand & Co. Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1971.

¹¹ Raj Krishna, "India and the bomb", *India Quarterly*, XXI (2), April-June 1965.

which illustrated Washington's preferential policies towards Pakistan as a Cold War ally even while humouring India to ensure that it does not veer towards the Soviets.¹²

An outcome of this manoeuvring was Indira Gandhi's decision to sign a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1971.¹³ Though the US endorsed it as a peace treaty, Indira Gandhi used the aggravating crisis in East Pakistan as a rationale for the treaty, terming it as an 'additional deterrent'.¹⁴ Yet, the impact of the peace treaty was not just the eroded credibility of India's non-alignment, but also its hyphenation with the Soviets till the end of the Cold War. This led to the US and its allies taking an inimical approach on various issues, evident from hard reactions to India's peaceful nuclear explosion (PNE), the pro-Pakistan tilt on Kashmir, animosities over trade policies, constant targeting of India's strategic programmes, and so on.

P.N. Haksar, who was Prime Minister's Secretary and played a key role in the treaty drafting, described the India-Soviet relationship as "favourable exclusiveness."¹⁵ A loaded phrase, it seemed to reflect the actual character of the relationship at the height of the Cold War (and non-alignment), and which, as Haksar points out, was not the case in India's relations with *any other country* (emphasis added). The fact that India's space programme and military hardware acquisitions were rapidly progressing with Soviet assistance during this period explains Haksar's emphasis on India being 'accustomed' to this exclusiveness. Haksar also highlighted the fact that Washington had not changed its policy of feeding Pakistan's defence capability.¹⁶ Similarly, Moscow was also reluctant to change the India-China boundary maps in their official records to depict the Indian claims of the border – both being instances of how enlightened self-interests guided national interests more than bloc politics or ideological frameworks like non-alignment.

¹² Discussions between India and the US (Defence Minister Y.B. Chavan and US Defence Secretary Robert McNamara) on military sales happened after the Sino-Indian conflict with the US showing an inclination to support the modernisation of India's armed forces. The *B.K. Nehru Papers* give a glimpse of these discussions that initially included India's request for the F-104G aircraft, which the US declined, and later focussing on the F-5s and F-6s. While showing a willingness to supply the AMX tanks lying redundant after the Korean War, the US side was perturbed that India was already buying and producing the Soviet MIGs and had concerns of 'intermingling' of the US military equipment with those of the Soviets. See Subject File No. 18, *B.K. Nehru Papers*, NMML. Details of the US military supplies to South Asia are also available in the AMS Files of the MEA Transfer List at the National Archives of India, New Delhi.

¹³ For a draft of the treaty text negotiated between the two parties and the conversations Indira Gandhi's representative, D.P. Dhar, had with the Soviet leaders, see Subject Files No. 49 and 51, *P.N. Haksar Papers* (IIIrd Installment), NMML.

¹⁴ Gandhi told this to the US President Richard Nixon in a meeting at the Oval Office on November 04, 1971. See Memorandum of Conversation, *P.N. Haksar Papers*, Subject File no. 277, (IIIrd Installment), NMML.

¹⁵ Prime Minister's Secretariat, Top Secret Internal Note from P.N. Haksar to Prime Minister dated 13-7-1968 (regarding Soviet military hardware to Pakistan), Subject File No. 135, *P.N. Haksar Papers*, (IIIrd Installment), NMML.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Incidentally, well before opting for a friendship treaty with Moscow, both the US and the Indian Government had mulled the scope for a bilateral friendship and commercial agreement, if references in some of the private paper collections and archival records are to be believed. The active dialogue channel with Washington driven by the regular food aid confabulations, discussions over sales of various American platforms to India (and Pakistan), an active civilian nuclear cooperation centred on Tarapur plant, and a favourable Lyndon Johnson administration at the helm, among others, seem to have encouraged both parties to fiddle with such ideas, though the bonhomie did not seem to carry into the Richard Nixon administration.

Another significant instance was the L.K. Jha mission to convince the nuclear powers to agree on enshrining nuclear guarantees in the draft Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that was then shaping up at the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee (ENDC).¹⁷ While the Soviets were ready to declare that India would be protected against a nuclear attack if it signed the NPT, the then US President, Johnson, who was advised by his aides to “strengthen Jha’s hand in New Delhi against the hawks who want to go nuclear,” found himself constrained by a constitutional problem of giving a guarantee to India only as a formal treaty with Senate’s approval.¹⁸ Doubtful of reprisal from the nuclear powers in the event of a Chinese nuclear attack, the Indian Government eventually shunned these proposals with Foreign Minister M.C. Chagla declaring that “such assurances could be multilateral or unilateral, but could be accepted only if they do not impinge on our non-alignment policy.”¹⁹ The nuclear powers did not hide their rancour, with a US diplomat, William Foster, remarking that “Indians had great pride in their non-alignment. It is very difficult to work out a way in which both positions can be met simultaneously.”²⁰ This was a notable instance when non-alignment was used to exit from a complex diplomatic campaign that involved both superpowers.

A document shared by Haksar with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on the eve of her March 1966 visit to New York throws light on the prevailing thinking about India and non-alignment in Washington. A note addressed to the US President states in a subsection titled ‘Respecting India’s Independence’:

Our attitudes toward India have greatly matured from the days when Secretary of State John Foster Dulles condemned India’s non-alignment under Nehru as immoral... have proven the futility and stupidity of attempting to preach or bully the uncommitted nations of the world into

¹⁷ L.K. Jha as Secretary to the Prime Minister went in April 1967 on the nuclear guarantee mission to the Soviet Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

¹⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, President Johnson with L.K. Jha, B.K. Nehru, V. Sarabhai and W.W. Rostow, Washington, 19 April 1967, Foreign Relations of the United States (XXV), South Asia, Document 440, and Telegram from Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson, Document 438.

¹⁹ **Statement** in Rajya Sabha of June 13, 1967.

²⁰ Quoted by A.G. Noorani, “India’s Quest for a Nuclear Guarantee”, *Asian Survey*, (7) 1967.

the western camp. President Kennedy set up on the proper course when he announced our policy as trying to make the world safe for diversity.²¹

The note lists the reasons why India's non-alignment is of positive benefit to the US. First, it says, India demonstrates to the rest of the underdeveloped world that it is possible to be closely affiliated with the US in the common venture of self-development without becoming an American puppet. India's independence from both the East and the West creates the very opportunity upon which the US is trying to capitalise in its assistance to India. Reduced to its simplest terms, the US is trying to show the half of the world which does not want alignment with either the East or the West that there is a way to economic development and self-determination which does not sacrifice national interest.²²

Noting that Nehru saw the Chinese invasion of India in 1962 as motivated by a desire to drive India out of neutralism and into the Western camp, the note proclaims that non-aligned nations will act as brakes on the Cold War by refusing alignment with the Communist world or the West, a beneficial check on the conduct of both blocs, hope for world peace, and a channel of communication to mediate disputes between competing blocs. Instructing that such nations must not be aligned and respected as impartial, the note concludes by stating that India well fills in this role and that it should not be pressured to join the Western camps. The purpose of the US aid, the note points out, "is not to buy political allegiance of India to policies which are not supported by all our western allies."²³ Though the author of this note and its context is not known, that it figured in Haksar's dossier to the Prime Minister is an indicator that the government saw it as a serious reflection on the thinking within the US government on non-alignment.

In conclusion, it could be surmised that the non-alignment was not merely defined by principles like neutrality and equidistance, but also by the autonomy of decision-making and flexibility of choices to act in the best interests of the country. As is evident from the many instances of realistic decision-making and unrelenting pursuit of national interests, non-alignment was a decisive practice of realist statecraft or pragmatic conduct of international relations. When seen from that perspective, the era of non-alignment could provide immense insights on how visionary leadership seeking to play an influential role in international politics could develop ideational frameworks that would propel the grand strategy of their choosing.

²¹ Papers related to Indira Gandhi's Visit to New York, March 1966, Subject File No. 34, *P.N. Haksar Papers* (I and IInd Installment), NMML.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

About the Authors



A. Vinod Kumar is Associate Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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