

India Rethinks the Non-Aligned Movement

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Summary

As India strengthens its own voice in world affairs, a more active engagement with the Non-Aligned Movement and, more broadly, the Global South, is coming into view. The new activism is expected to help India mobilise international support on issues of national concern as well as generate greater political space amidst the unfolding rivalry between the United States and China.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's video address to an online summit of the Contact Group for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in early May 2020 has generated much criticism as well as commendation. But why has a seemingly routine speech by the Indian Prime Minister on promoting global cooperation in combating the Coronavirus received so much attention?

One reason is the billing of the brief intervention as the first address to the NAM by Modi. After all, he had skipped the last two NAM summits at Venezuela in 2016 and Azerbaijan in 2019. Critics of the National Democratic Alliance's foreign policy convinced themselves that this Prime Minister had no real attachment to the NAM or the non-aligned legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru. For the traditionalists, Modi's engagement with the NAM was a welcome return to old roots. For those who see the NAM as a political dinosaur, Delhi's renewed enthusiasm for it appeared a waste of time.

Both critics and supporters of Delhi's renewed interest in NAM, however, miss the recent evolution of the Indian thinking on it. External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has frequently spoken about India's stakes in the so-called 'Global South'. He was invoking a term that refers to the entire developing world and not just members of the NAM. The minister has talked about consolidating India's long-standing political equities that Delhi had created in the last many decades.

The new interest in the 'Global South' is not a throwback to seeing the NAM as an anti-Western ideological crusade. Addressing the [ministerial meeting of the 2019 Baku summit](#) of the NAM, Jaishankar underlined Delhi's awareness of the global change since the founding the movement: "The world today has moved on from what the NAM founding leaders faced in Bandung in 1955. The scales of global geo-political balance have shifted, and continue to do so, propelled by forces of globalisation and transformational technological progress. Long-held assumption and alignments rooted in the legacies of colonialism and the ideology of the Cold War are making way for new configurations and partnerships."

Jaishankar is also trying to wean India away from the ritualism that has come to mark India's engagement with the NAM. Since the end of the Cold War as India focused on redefining its great power relations and modernising its regional policies, Delhi had a lot less time for the

NAM. Delhi's minimalist engagement with the NAM summits had become a performance without purpose every three years. There was no attempt during the previous governments to assess or evaluate India's prospects for the NAM.

That appears to have changed in the second term of the Modi government. It is now betting that the NAM remains a critical diplomatic forum for the pursuit of India's international interests. For example, reforming global institutions is high on India's international agenda and the backing of the NAM is crucial in realising this objective.

As Jaishankar put it during the same address, "Multilateralism is undoubtedly under strain today. It is important that our Movement that represents two thirds of the world's population – continues to work together and take the lead in building multilateral governance structures" that are capable of meeting the 21st Century challenges.

The NAM forum also presents India with an opportunity to articulate its concerns about Pakistan and the latter's support for cross-border terrorism. In talking about the COVID-19 crisis, Modi did not forget to mention the subject. He underlined [India's 'health diplomacy'](#) in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. He also highlighted India's recent global initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure.

A closer look at Modi government's foreign policy pronouncements and actions reveals a four-fold rationale to intensify the engagement with the NAM.

One, those who say the NAM is a relic of the Cold War must also acknowledge that a new Cold War is beginning to unfold, this time between the United States (US) and China. As the conflict between the world's two most important powers envelops all dimensions of international society, India has every reason to try and preserve some political space in between the two giants.

Second, in the last few years, Delhi paid lip service to the NAM but devoted a lot of diplomatic energy to forums like the BRICS that brought India closer to Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa. Given the Russia and Chinese leadership of the BRICS, Delhi inevitably began to routinely echo the international positions of Moscow and Beijing rather than represent the voices of the 'Global South'. India is also a member of the so-called Quad grouping that includes the US, Japan and Australia. The Quad is less institutionalised than the BRICS but, here again, the focus is on great power politics rather than promoting the interests of the developing world.

Third, there is an acute awareness in Delhi that a rising China, which is now an observer of the NAM, has gained much ground in the 'Global South' with its Belt and Road Initiative and that India some catching up to do.

Finally, as a nation wants to become an independent pole in global affairs, India could do more with forums like the NAM that can help mobilise support around issues of interest to Delhi. For example, an independent Indian voice backed by support within the NAM can make a big difference to the outcomes of the impending contentions at the World Health

Assembly at the end of May 2020 on reviewing the World Health Organization's performance during the COVID-19 crisis.

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