NAM in the 21st Century: South's Strategic Rise

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The non-aligned movement in the 21st century: from rejection of blocs to strategic affirmation of the Global South

(Noema Magazine, From Bandung To BRICS+)

Bandung, Indonesia, 24 April 1955. As the last representatives of the countries attending the Asian-African Conference leave their seats, a new world order emerges – The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This was affirmed a second time when the movement was officially created at the Belgrade Conference in 1961. This rejection of imperialism (both Soviet and

American), this desire to develop in parallel with the 'Great Powers' and, more broadly, the creation of cooperation in the 'economic South' (Willy Brandt, 1980, North-South: A Programme for Survival) were the result of these countries' desire to become alternative players in a bipolar world.

However, since then, the bipolar world of the Cold War has gradually changed into a multipolar world, in which the order of the blocs has been permanently blurred. The Non-Aligned Movement has also evolved : technological progress and the emergence of regional economic engines, still independent, particularly through the BRICS, stand as evidence of this transformation.

How has the Non-Aligned Movement, born out of a desire to reject blocs, been transformed into a strategic instrument of the Global South, exacerbating rivalries in a multipolar world, and to what extent is this evolution being reinforced in global governance?

In 1945, with the colonial powers exhausted by the Second World War, many colonies revolted or unilaterally declared their independence. This was the case, for example, in Indonesia and French Indochina in Asia, and Egypt and Algeria in Africa. The decolonisation of these countries, which resisted their former masters, attracted other countries seeking recognition. India and Pakistan, also newcomers to the international scene, began to sign agreements with the People's Republic of China, which had won the Chinese Civil War (1927-1950). This was evidenced by the Panchsheel Agreement (literally: Five Principles) in 1953, the first bilateral agreement between China and India. Among other things, this historic agreement recognised the annexation of Tibet, deemed illegal by the West, and proclaimed the principles of peaceful coexistence that would become the foundation of future non-alignment: respect for sovereignty, equality, non-interference and the rejection of the use of force, following the terms of the Panchsheel Agreement, 1954.

2.1 A formal evolution

The conferences in Bandung (1955), Brioni (1956) and Belgrade (1961) would enshrine the movement. Bandung, bringing together 29 countries from Asia and Africa, established an ideological framework: rejection of colonial domination, refusal to enter into military alliances with blocs, and solidarity between recently independent countries. In Brioni, like the Allies in Yalta, Josip Broz Tito (Yugoslavia), Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt) and Jawaharlal Nehru (India) formalised this project and became the figureheads of a movement that sought to be the 'third way' between East and West. The Belgrade conference marked the true founding act: 25 countries participated, affirming their desire to preserve strategic autonomy and create their own diplomatic space. Far from being a simple forum, the movement was structured around regular summits that sought to transform neutrality into

collective strength. Tito summed up the idea by describing the conference as opposition to the exclusivity of blocs, which are a danger to world peace.

From then on, the members of the movement met at congresses, as evidenced by the Fourth Conference of Heads of State and Government of Non-Aligned Countries in Algiers (1973). The 75 countries and organisations present to the summit agreed to focus on economic development rather than seeking international recognition. This shift in the movement's original logic illustrates a strategic repositioning : political independence cannot be guaranteed without true economic independence. However, the end of the Cold War weakened the movement's cohesion: the disappearance of the Soviet bloc, the break-up of Yugoslavia and diplomatic realignments – such as Egypt's rapprochement with the United States and Indonesia's distancing itself from the anti-revolutionary East Asian blow – weakened the fundamental unity of the non-aligned countries. No longer proceeding as a coherent group within the UN, they lost influence within international politics (Jürgen Dinkel, The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics, 1992 (Brill, 2018), p. 233. Strategic dispersion and the diversity of national interests reduced its influence on major global policy directions. But although the movement appeared marginalised in the 1990s, its institutional existence and ideological heritage remained, paving the way for renewed interest in a multipolar world undergoing restructuring.

Having emerged in the context of decolonisation and the Cold War, the Non-Aligned Movement had to broaden its scope of action to adapt to a constantly changing international environment. From the 1970s onwards, successive summits reflected this desire: Algiers in 1973, Havana in 1979, Kuala Lumpur in 2003 and Baku in 2019 each marked a step in the redefinition of priorities. Non-alignment is no longer just military neutrality in the face of blocs, but an active principle that must be reflected in the global economy, international security, technological cooperation and climate issues. This shift, initiated by calls for a New International Economic Order (UNGA resolution 3201, 1974), reflects the conviction that political independence only makes sense if it is accompanied by economic, scientific and environmental autonomy, UNGA Resolution 3201 and UNGA Resolution 79/215.

3.1 **The diversification of specialisation**

Indeed, the fundamental lines of the movement have evolved since its founding. Many members, trying to avoid the use of the dollar system, tried turning themselves as economic powerhouses. As early as the 1970s, NAM members were calling for a New International Economic Order (resolution 3201 adopted by the UN General Assembly in May 1974), denouncing the unequal nature of world trade and the dominance of the Bretton Woods institutions. But it was at the turn of the 21st century that this demand took shape in new platforms – the rapprochement with the BRICS countries is the most visible manifestation of this. The creation of this coalition in 2009, followed by its expansion in 2023 (BRICS+: integration of Egypt, Ethiopia,

Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Argentina) offers Southern countries a credible alternative to the IMF and the World Bank. India and South Africa, both members of the NAM, are at the heart of this trade diversification strategy, which aims to reduce dependence on the dollar and promote the use of local currencies in international trade. Members of NAM also aimed to create monetary unions : this is the case of a few Western African countries (Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mali) that try to emancipate from the XFA (Franc CFA), minted by France, and to create the ECO – a common monetary unit between the ECOWAS.

3.1.1 **Security**

Security is another area where non-aligned states have found their place, not by creating a military alliance, but by becoming a pillar of UN peacekeeping. As early as the United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC, 1960-1964), India, Ethiopia and Yugoslavia had demonstrated the Movement's capacity for intervention. Since then, countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Ghana and Indonesia have been among the main contributors of peacekeeping, being for instance non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (United Nations, Security Council website), confirming the stabilising role of non-alignment in regional conflicts. At the same time, these states favour bilateral partnerships outside of alliances: Algeria is modernising its armed forces through ad hoc agreements with Moscow and Paris, Indonesia is purchasing fighter jets from both the United States and Russia, while India is equipping itself with Russian aircrafts from Mikoyan Gurevich or Sukhoi) and French ones (Dassault Rafale) while developing joint exercises with the United States since the 2000s (Malabar Exercises).

This stance of many non-aligned countries testifies not only a will to strategic auto determination, but also is an application of the Art of War principle – ***He who can remain calm and composed while waiting for a disordered enemy will be victorious***. (Sun Tzu, 5th century B.C.)

3.1.2 **Technology**

Technology has become a new framework for South-South cooperation. Countries considered as members of the Economic South – contra Willy Brandt's report – tend to work more together, in contrast to the previous situation in which those countries were more dependent on the Economic North. The Kuala Lumpur Conference (2003) emphasised the need to 'bridge the digital divide' (World Summit on the Information Society, 2003) between North and South, paving the way for more structured technological diplomacy. The IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) forum, created in the same year, launched projects in telecommunications, health and renewable energy. The New Development Bank of the BRICS countries (2014) now finances digital and energy infrastructure in Africa, Asia and Latin America. India has developed satellite programmes with African partners – programmating some investments on the African Union's Space agenda 2063 (following the official African Union's website), and partners, for instance, the

SatCom association in India (SatCom India Association official report)This particular association dresses a report on what are the cooperation fields between African partners and the Satellite and Communication ecosystem in India. Brazil has also engaged in cooperation on biotechnology and solar energy. This commitment reflects a strategic shift: non-alignment is not limited to defense or politics. Nowadays, the movement dedicates more and more to global issues, even beyond a certain political interest; still, this intervention of such outsiders is a clear stance to cut the grass under the foot of superpowers and to impose themselves as emerging actors. Venezuela, for instance, chose to abandon Israeli's assault rifles production to shift towards a Venezuelan production: Maduro's decision is, all political opinion excluded, also a move to show that non-aligned countries can valorise their know-how, especially in the field of defense; this know-how is also exported in more complex projects, such as the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor. This project aims to develop nuclear fusion as a renewable and clean source of almost infinite energy based in France, with China and India as the important members of the project.

3.1.3 **Intervention on the ecological issue**

Climate and food security have also become a cross-cutting theme for the Movement. Since the Havana Conference (1979), Southern countries have emphasised environmental injustice. The principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities', enshrined in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992), was defended by non-aligned countries as a guarantee of fairness. In Copenhagen (2009) and Paris (2015), the G77+China – most of whose members are from the NAM – formed a bloc demanding massive funding for adaptation. In terms of food, the 2007-2008 crisis was a wake-up call: India, Thailand and Vietnam, major rice exporters, put regulatory mechanisms in place, while several African countries strengthened their regional cooperation to secure supplies. Brazil, since the beginning of the Luiz Ignacio da Lula Silva term, tends to limit the impact of deforestation (Le Monde, 10 August 2023). These dynamics illustrate the transformation of non-alignment: from a defensive stance against blocs, it has become an instrument of collective mobilisation in the face of global challenges. In the ITER project (International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor), India and China joined the project to develop nuclear fusion, in order to create the strongest possible energy source on Earth, which would also accelerate the development of green energy, following the organisation's words.

3.2 **Old players and new members towards an emerging movement**

The Non-Aligned Movement was structured around historical actors who shaped its doctrine. India, a founding pillar, embodies continuity: Nehru laid the foundations for the 'five principles policy' (Panchsheel) as early as 1947, which is still invoked today in Indian diplomacy. Its contemporary strategy is one of multi-alignment, combining membership of the BRICS and rapprochement with Washington within the framework of the

Quad (United States, Japan, Australia, India). Egypt, under Nasser, was at the heart of the initial project, but its gradual alignment with Washington after the Camp David Accords (1978) weakened its role within the NAM, even though it retained institutional weight. Indonesia, host of Bandung in 1955, remains active through ASEAN and regional initiatives. South Africa, which joined the Movement after the end of apartheid (1994), illustrates the NAM's capacity for renewal and is now a key player on the African continent.

New partners are gravitating around this core. Mexico, a regular observer, maintains a diplomatic tradition of independence (Doctrina Estrada of 1930) and participates in NAM discussions despite its membership in the United States Mexico and Canada Agreements (USMCA). The United Arab Emirates, host of the 2011 Dubai summit, embodies a hybrid diplomacy: as military allies of Washington, they invest heavily in South-South energy and logistics cooperation networks. Vietnam, an active member since the end of the war (1975), has developed a policy of 'dynamic balance', multiplying partnerships with the United States, China and Russia, while maintaining a non-aligned identity in multilateral forums.

These trajectories reflect new diplomatic strategies. India embodies multi-alignment, participating simultaneously in the BRICS, the Quad and the NAM summits. Thematic coalitions, such as the G77 (created in 1964 and now comprising more than 130 countries), offer a structured extension of the NAM's demands on development and climate. Finally, transactional diplomacy, practised by states such as Indonesia and the Emirates, illustrates a pragmatic non-alignment, where alliances are chosen according to immediate and sectoral interests. Today's NAM is no longer a position of withdrawal: it has become a toolbox enabling states to deal with a multipolar international system.

Here's the graph : Combined gross domestic product (GDP) in purchasing power parity (PPP) of the BRICS Plus and G7 countries from 2000 to 2025, Statista.

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