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Nonalignment and Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy

By Shakthi De Silva

SYNOPSIS

Nonalignment as a foreign policy option for small and medium-size countries was a feature during the Cold War when the world was dominated by two power blocs led by the United States and the Soviet Union. As the world becomes multipolar, with the US, China and Russia forming the triumvirate, and regional powers, notably India, Japan and Indonesia, emerging, questions have arisen whether Sri Lanka's longstanding nonaligned foreign policy is still relevant and useful.

COMMENTARY

The 1945-1990 Cold War era was characterised by the division of the world into two competing blocs led by the United States and the Soviet Union. This bipolar dynamic dominated global geopolitics, shaping alliances, conflicts, and foreign policies of nations around the world for over four decades.

The world today is witnessing a shift from a bipolar dynamic to a multipolar reality comprising the US, China and Russia. Asia itself has also seen the prominence of India, Japan, Indonesia and Australia. As countries big and small navigate through the complexities of a fluid and uncertain geopolitical landscape, the question of nonalignment's relevance in shaping the foreign policy strategies of countries like Sri Lanka looms large.

In a recent [foreign policy forum](#) in Sri Lanka, a panel of ambassadors and experts discussed the contemporary relevance of the nation's policy of nonalignment. While some argued that nonalignment may be obsolete in today's multipolar world, the prospect of abandoning the longstanding policy was met with hesitation. Unfortunately, the participants did not explain what nonalignment is before they took on the question whether nonalignment bore any utility in a multipolar world.

Indeed, what is nonalignment? Is it an antiquated foreign policy that only served states during the era of bipolarity? Does it not hold value in a multipolar world?

Nonalignment and What It Entails

Defining nonalignment requires us to distinguish between its conceptualisation as a movement and as a foreign policy approach.

[The Non-Aligned Movement](#) (NAM) emerged in 1961 during the height of the Cold War, with its primary objective being the advancement of the economic and political interests of developing Third World nations. As for [nonalignment](#) as a foreign policy, it essentially means that nations choose to remain unattached to a particular great power or power bloc. This does not entail a unanimous consensus among nonaligned nations on all international matters; indeed, strategic [inclinations](#) toward the Western or Socialist camps were discernible throughout the Cold War, including in Sri Lanka's diplomatic engagements. As such, nonalignment as a foreign policy is a [posture](#) aimed at fostering amicable relations with all nations, without entailing allegiance to any particular power or bloc.

The adoption of nonalignment by Third World nations, including Sri Lanka, was motivated by a confluence of factors, with economic imperatives playing a pivotal role. Sri Lanka's [1952 Rubber Rice Agreement](#) with the People's Republic of China is a notable example of this economic pragmatism. Adopting the agreement resulted in the US [suspension](#) of aid to Sri Lanka but it did not deter the island's leaders from approving the agreement, which was aimed at alleviating domestic difficulties. Then [minister of finance](#), J. R. Jayewardene's [assertion](#) that "we would trade with the devil if it suits our purpose and if it does not in any way barter away our freedom" encapsulated the essence of this pragmatic pursuit of national interest.

Nonalignment, however, should not be confused with self-serving foreign policies adopted at the expense of principles. Indeed, key principles commonly articulated as the [Panchaseela](#) undergird the nonaligned ethos. They include:

- 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 conjunction with these principles, nonaligned nations also stood for the resolution of disputes through discussion, they acted in support of moves for global nuclear disarmament and vehemently opposed colonialism and neocolonial practices. Nonalignment, therefore, stands in contradistinction to neutrality – the latter reflects a strict adherence to non-engagement in the event of a conflict between states.

Sri Lanka's posture during the 1956 Suez Canal crisis is a good example of how nonaligned principles feature in foreign policy decisions. During the crisis, Sri Lanka [criticised](#) the military action taken against Egypt by Britain, France and Israel and demanded their withdrawal from Egyptian territory. Sri Lanka [supported](#) Egypt's right

to nationalise the Suez Canal but requested that it assured other states of their freedom to use the waterway.

Sri Lanka also [adopted a principled stance](#) as Congo descended into [violence](#) during the early 1960s soon after independence. Congolese soldiers attacked their Belgian commanders, [weakening](#) the authority of the administration of President Joseph Kasavubu and Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. Sri Lanka opposed the Soviet call for the withdrawal of UN forces while also opposing the US intention to recognise the Kasavubu government. Instead, Sri Lanka supported, and at times, co-sponsored UN resolutions that placed UN peacekeeping forces in the country and called for peace and stability in the African nation.

Sri Lanka's decision in early January 2024 to send a naval vessel to the Red Sea to join the Western coalition's efforts to stop Houthi attacks – mounted in support of Hamas in its war with Israel – on merchant ships in the Red Sea can also be seen in this light. While doing this, it also [advocated](#) for the “inalienable rights of the people of Palestine to self-determination and the realisation of an independent sovereign state of Palestine”. It is in Sri Lanka's national interest to ensure that global trade remains unhindered, while it maintains at the same time, a principled stance on international issues consistently and without prejudice.

In sum, nonalignment emerged in the backdrop of ideological contestation where systemic pressures worked to pull newly independent states into separate confrontational blocs. Nonalignment, therefore, was a renunciation of zero-sum choices when it came to how these states could chart their foreign policies.

Nonalignment does not, however, signify a transactional approach in foreign policymaking. Indeed, a nonaligned value-based approach is not necessarily in contradiction to an interest-based foreign policy. Rather, foreign policies based on nonalignment during the Cold War should be viewed as an outcome of a national interest-based approach toward foreign policymaking.

Thus, a nonaligned state is not reflexively aligning against any great power, but rather showcasing to the world its desire to engage with all actors, great and small. In fact, a nonaligned foreign policy during the Cold War enabled nations like Sri Lanka to be flexible about how they were able to exercise their agency and autonomy when it came to the process of foreign policymaking.

Is Nonalignment Still Viable?

Should we dispense with nonalignment in this multipolar world? It is clear that small and medium powers have more leeway in foreign policymaking now than was the case during the rigid bipolar world of the Cold War. As major powers strive to achieve regional hegemony and increase their spheres of influence, nonalignment will continue to provide Sri Lanka and other small and medium powers the agency and latitude required to make decisions in line with their national interests.

The legacy of nonalignment in Sri Lanka's post-independence foreign policy endures as a vital cornerstone of its diplomatic identity. While the geopolitical landscape has evolved significantly since the end of the Cold War, the principles of nonalignment

continue to offer Sri Lanka a nuanced framework for navigating complex international relations.

As the nation confronts economic challenges and seeks to assert its agency on the global stage, the adaptability of nonalignment to contemporary realities becomes increasingly pertinent. Moving forward, Sri Lanka should consider continuing its unwavering commitment to the principles of nonalignment in the backdrop of shifting geopolitical dynamics.

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