

## The Non-Aligned Movement Then and Now

Article by Paul Stubbs

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**Faced with the nuclear threat and bipolarity of the Cold War, the non-aligned movement has since the 1960s put forward an alternative model based on decolonial solidarity and a fairer global trading system, but ultimately failed to materialise its most far-reaching economic proposals. Today, non-alignment narratives are revived by the BRICS and sometimes by EU ambitions, but a just multipolar world should prioritise environmental cooperation and have the Global South at its centre.**

***Green European Journal:* Starting off with a very simple question, what was the Non-Aligned Movement?**

**Paul Stubbs:** Well, it still exists so we can't refer to it in the past tense. But what's behind the question is that there was a golden age of the Non-Aligned Movement, which has long gone. The founding mission of this grouping of countries was to actively challenge the idea that the world is divided between two superpowers. They were not interested in becoming a third bloc but opposed the division of the world into a US-led Western capitalist bloc and a Soviet-led Eastern communist bloc.

Socialist Yugoslavia somewhat unexpectedly played a leading role, but the Non-Aligned Movement was made up mostly of the newly independent states of the Global South in Asia and Africa, and the peripheral countries of Latin America. Why it came about can be a long and a short story. Part of it was that when the Bandung process of Afro-Asian solidarity [29 Asian and African states aiming to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation meeting in Indonesia in 1955] didn't keep going, Yugoslavia – which was deeply committed to anti-colonial politics – saw an opportunity.

It had broken ties with the Soviet Union in 1948, but didn't want to rely entirely on aid from the United States. It saw an opportunity to gather heads of states together first in Belgrade in 1961, then in Cairo in 1964, in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1970, and so on. Every three years or so there were summits, and between these inter-ministerial meetings. By the time of the Colombo conference in 1973, more than half of the member states of the United Nations were members of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Yugoslavia was always important, but it was not the only big player. In the 1960s, there was a core of countries driving the Non-Aligned Movement, including India and Egypt for a while. In the 1970s, it was Algeria, Tanzania, Zambia, and others. Of course, some of these countries were socialist and received support from the Soviet Union and China, but they were mostly socialist in a non-dogmatic, non-Stalinist, and certainly non-Eurocentric way.

**Apart from the intergovernmental processes around the conferences, did the Non-Aligned Movement also have economic aims?**

Absolutely. Yugoslavia was looking for new geopolitical allies and markets. It was very keen on advancing trade relations between the members of the Non-Aligned Movement. In the 1960s, the Non-Aligned Movement was more about self-determination, as well as security from the nuclear annihilation

threatened by the Cold War. But in the 1970s it was much more about building a new economic order and a new model of economic cooperation between countries in the periphery of the global economy. The slogan for this cooperation was collective self-reliance, which is a lovely phrase, because it's self-reliance but not on a nation-state level. It's about the idea that we are stronger commercially if we rely on each other, we can work together on changing the terms of trade in our favour, we can remove customs tariffs, and so on.

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The Non-Aligned Movement had very high aspirations which failed to materialise. But you did have circulation of workers. Some of that came from the richer countries to the relatively poorer countries within it. Yugoslavia sent technicians to many places and Yugoslav companies built roads, dams, conference centres, and more. In many countries, Zambia for example, there was a significant Yugoslav presence. And there was an exchange of students across the movement, though it was mostly one way – from other countries to Yugoslavia – and it was mostly men from technical disciplines rather than a gender-balanced exchange in the humanities or social sciences. Many of those people were the elites of their countries and went back to form part of the political leadership, creating ever closer bonds between the member states. Its legacy is alive today; when there was the migrant crisis along the Balkan route, you suddenly discovered people all over Croatia and other post-Yugoslav states who spoke Arabic as their first language, because they'd come as students and stayed.

It wasn't only economic. There was artistic exchange as well. Some of the best African literature from the 1960s and 1970s was translated into Serbo-Croatian. The President of Senegal Léopold Senghor was a poet who came to Macedonia and received a prize at the prestigious Struga poetry festival. It cemented circuits of decolonial solidarity from below, I would say.

**Was the Non-Aligned Movement unified by any shared vision of the world? If it didn't want to be communist and didn't want to be capitalist, what did it want to be?**

This is really important and there's a huge debate about this question. Having said it didn't want to be socialist, there were at its height more self-proclaimed socialist states in the Non-Aligned Movement than within the Soviet sphere, such as the African socialist states of Ghana, Tanzania, and Zambia, India for a while, and Nepal. Chile was a member at one point. The movement didn't profess to be socialist for two reasons. First, it did want other, non-socialist, states in it; Saudi Arabia was a member at the start for example. Second, it also had this principle – which I think is a positive one – of the rights of states to define their own political, social, and economic systems free from interference from outside.

Yugoslav socialism was itself an interesting assemblage and mixture; it even referred to itself as market socialism, and in some conjunctures this was more socialist than market and in others more market than socialist. So whilst the Non-Aligned Movement didn't have a socialist imaginary, it did have an egalitarian imaginary, certainly in terms of geopolitics and relationships between nation-states. One of the justifiable criticisms of the Non-Aligned Movement is that it paid very little attention to internal inequalities and oppressions within countries, some of which were nationality- and ethnicity-based.

The Non-Aligned Movement was just one of many overlapping worldmaking projects of the period. The African Union was one; the Islamic Council was another. Because of the Non-Aligned Movement, for example, Islamic intellectuals in Yugoslavia could make links with Islamic intellectuals in Iran, or Iraq, or

Saudi Arabia, or other countries of the world.

We shouldn't see it only in terms of what it wasn't rather than what it was. The Non-Aligned Movement advocated complete disarmament, both because its members didn't want to get blown up in a global nuclear war, but also because they wanted that arms money to go to welfare and wellbeing instead. They also wanted to reform the United Nations. They wanted a United Nations that wasn't what Amílcar Cabral – one of Africa's foremost anti-colonial leaders – called a "giant with its hands tied behind its back". They argued for no veto powers, less power for the Security Council, and more power for the General Assembly. And they wanted the UN agencies and committees to be more representative of the makeup of the world. One member, one vote. This of course was opposed by the Americans and the Soviets, and later by the Chinese.

### **How did the Non-Aligned Movement's decline start?**

In the 1970s, there was an attempt for the Non-Aligned Movement to not just be a talking shop but to articulate something positive and real. It was about building a New International Economic Order. Together with the G77 – a coalition of developing countries within the UN aiming to promote its members' collective economic interests – and with OPEC (the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries) and other forces, it articulated a vision of a different world in which trade relations would be far more equal and in which the periphery would not be held back by the protectionism of the core capitalist countries.

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The 1970s were very much about running with this idea of a new international economic order. But that was destroyed by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan at the end of the decade, who brought a far more radical oppositional stance to this new order. Their view was "we have to destroy it; we can't pretend to be going along with this". So, they bought off some of the OPEC states and gave development assistance to the least developed countries as well as putting economic and political pressure on many other countries. The result was a stick and carrot kind of thing. By 1979, the new international economic order was kind of dead.

In 1979, Cuba took over the three-year chairmanship at the Havana conference. The Yugoslavs had always tried to balance anti-American rhetoric with allowing criticism of the Soviet Union, but this proved difficult with Castro. The result is that, after 1979, you had an explosion of interesting ideas but less of a purchase on reality.

Then, in 1989, the chairmanship returned to Belgrade, but Yugoslavia was already falling apart. That year, the Berlin Wall fell, and two years later Yugoslavia effectively no longer existed. The Non-Aligned Movement continued after that, and it still exists to this day. It holds conferences, but it's much more divided now by disputes and it's not very relevant.

### **How important was OPEC and the oil crisis to both the New International Economic Order and the Non-Aligned Movement's decline?**

In 1973, OPEC's Gulf states caused the first oil crisis over Israel's invasion of Egypt by restricting oil production, raising the price of a barrel of crude oil dramatically, and stopping oil exports to the US and its allies. The Non-Aligned Movement and G77 at the time consisted of both oil exporters and oil importers. Yet in 1973, they all saw OPEC's response as a great thing because it showed the power a group of commodity producers can have. If one group of commodity producers can take power in this way, why couldn't other groups of commodity producers – of copper, coffee, or silk? It showed that commodity producing power could be a force for good. Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito talked about the Non-Aligned Movement as a “moral force”, but what he meant was that it combined morality with actual force and that force at that moment was primary commodity production if the terms of trade could be altered in favour of the Global South.

That idea was really powerful. Many countries knew that it was against their immediate material interests to support OPEC, but kept support going because they saw it as part of creating the new international economic order and therefore in their long-term interests.

But then you get the second oil crisis in 1979. After impoverishment upon impoverishment and – not to go too far down the “ruined promises” decolonial story – a lot of the visionary leaders had been killed or overthrown, and you end up with a different set of realities for non-aligned countries. One group of states from the periphery started doing well under global capitalism, while others were in deep crisis. Oil was crucial to fracturing the former unity.

**To bring us up to the present day, the BRICS (made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, and poised for enlargement in 2024) like to speak to the imaginary of the Non-Aligned Movement. To what extent is there continuity?**

The BRICS have now become incredibly important partly because they refer to actual non-alignment and the new international economic order. It's also been supported by a group of leftist activist intellectuals – like Vijay Prashad and the Tricontinental Institute – but also Progressive International, who are now explicitly referring to the need for a new non-aligned movement and a new international economic order. Partly, they see the BRICS as the best hope. I see it perhaps more as the least worst hope. The BRICS currently is a group of countries with very different social and economic systems, but also very different understandings of democracy and authoritarianism. You have authoritarian states in India, the Russian Federation, and China. You have South Africa, where the promise of a post-revolutionary, post-apartheid socialist utopia is in ruins. Brazil remains a hope, of course, for the kind of politics I would like to see. With Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, Latin America seems to be the place from which a new progressive politics could emerge.

The BRICS decided at its last summit to at least double its membership. But that will make it still only half the size of the Non-Aligned Movement even in its early days. But in terms of the Global South voting patterns in the UN around the invasion of Ukraine, one can see an embryonic imaginary emerging about a multipolar world and the end of the age of hegemons.

Some of the people supporting this – and they're my friends – think that any challenge to US hegemony must be a good thing. They're probably partly right, but I would argue that the BRICS does not have that moral force that the Non-Aligned Movement had in the 1970s and that its challenge to US hegemony won't necessarily lead to a more progressive utopian world. It might well lead to a multipolar world. It might lead to a world that takes economic inequality between states or even climate justice more seriously, but I'm not even sure of that. The conditions for creating a new non-aligned movement like in the 1970s are limited. Maybe the vision of a new international economic order starts with a different

understanding of trade and financialisation. That seems to be where the BRICS are going; China has de-dollarised anyway.

Progressives throughout the whole world are going to have to try and be part of that agenda, but how it will go is open to what Stuart Hall called the play of contingency. One way or another, the Non-Aligned Movement was also about self-determination, improved terms of trade and economic justice, and disarmament, and those things are unfortunately not present in the BRICS development. The multipolar world that I would like would have the African Union and some of the Latin American progressives forming alliances, but I'm not a social engineer, so it is not for me to say, really. A scholar in the Global North can't put the chess pieces on the table. These things will happen in different ways, some of which we haven't really foreseen.

**Could Europe and more precisely the European Union aspire to any kind of non-alignment? Or will it always be part of the western world?**

Ukraine has brought back the discourse on Euro-Atlantic integration, meaning EU and NATO security, that is familiar to those of us who live in the post-Yugoslav space. Unlike the Non-Aligned Movement, the EU-NATO nexus has a vision of security which is militarised and which is also about a racist Fortress Europe. It's not difficult to imagine an expanded NATO in 10 years' time declaring war on environmental refugees from the Global South.

We should also not let the EU of the Ukrainian crisis make us forget the EU of the Greek crisis. Because the Greek crisis and the crisis of "indebtedness" of Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain was the "new radical fiscal waterboarding" EU, to quote Yanis Varoufakis. This was an EU all about protecting a neoliberal core and disciplining other states fiscally in the interests of those core countries.

Having said that, I have always been in favour of expanding the EU. Because an expanded EU would have to transform, it would have greater inequalities in it again, and it would have to then think about social and economic policies that were not just about defending neoliberal, German-Dutch, mercantile hegemony. It would have to think about environmental policy and the role that it can play in the world.

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To aspire to any kind of non-alignment, the EU would have to come to terms with Europe's dreadful past and violent racist present and try to become a moral authority. But the EU is far too mired in colonial power and now neoliberal power for that to be likely in the near future. A Europe from below, a Europe of social movements, a Europe that reaches out to other places in different ways, in less hierarchical ways, maybe...

**We have seen that after several decades the COP process has not achieved much. Will the environmental crisis encourage or discourage cooperation between states?**

The short answer is that I don't know. But it is a question that I am beginning to address – perhaps idiosyncratically – by looking at the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in

Stockholm in 1972. At least three things emerged from Stockholm. The first was the agenda of the Global North around environmental standards, which of course were then destroyed by the same Thatcher-Reagan coalition that destroyed the New International Economic Order. The second was a kind of Stockholm from below, the Stockholm of social movements and NGOs. That was very Northern-based, but a new “from below” today would have representatives from Global South indigenous movements. It could be the environmental wing of the World Social Forum, for example. The third Stockholm is the one that most interests me because it’s the Stockholm of the Global South. It’s the one that never really survived, partly because the UN Environmental Programme was strangled at birth. It was allowed to exist, but it was never given any real power. The Stockholm of the Global South would combine environmental protection with the struggle for global equality and global economic justice. That Stockholm is the one that’s most likely to lead to Global South-led economic, international cooperation on climate change in the future.

Of course: that’s not the way the world is. The international relations world is still dominated by the US, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. But China isn’t far behind. The US and China may have different ideas of environmental justice, but they might share one thing. The US will at some point elect Trump again or a new version of Trump. What they could do is unite the evangelical Right and the neoconservatives and invest in climate solutions for a privileged elite. The privileged elite of Evangelicals can be seen as God’s chosen people and the neoconservatives will be the rich and the powerful, and together they will do whatever has to be done with geoengineering to try to save themselves. Everyone else can rot and burn in hell. The Chinese could do the same, in a different way, because China is massive enough to be able to ramp up its levels of global emissions while also experimenting in certain localities with technological solutions to climate change. The Global South Stockholm of 1972 was deeply suspicious of technical solutions to climate change and that’s why.

The Stockholm of the Global South is our only real hope of a future. It’s why we all must be environmentalists, right? We all must be political ecologists, and decolonial ecology must be the frame through which we view the world. There’s no alternative, to channel Margaret Thatcher’s phrase.

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