

India's key role in 21st century non-alignment

As Covid-19, the climate crisis, and Russia's war in Ukraine exacerbate inequities in the world order, there is a strategic relevance for India to be a leader of developing nations in their quest for equity and autonomy

In times of uncertainty, old ideas have renewed relevance.

As the world reels from the tectonic shifts in global power equations emerging from Covid-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war, countries in the Global South have begun to express their disquiet over the possibility of a new Cold War. Frustrated with inequities, there is growing pessimism in the current world order (with all its uncertainties) to respond to their strategic, economic, and social interests. The inequities evident in the uneven Covid vaccine roll-out and the debates on climate crisis financing are a few illustrations of this. And several countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, have expressed discomfiture in picking sides in the Eurasian conflict.

It is against this backdrop that the old, till recently unfashionable, idea of non-alignment has made its way back to the global stage. A renewed non-alignment was a recurrent theme at a recent lecture series hosted by the Centre for Policy Research. Titled

India and the World, the event saw leaders, former diplomats, and statesmen from several countries in the Global South deliver perspectives on India's historical and contemporary global role. A return to a new 21st century non-alignment and India's leadership role in shaping this new uncertain reality that reflects its historical legacy, political credentials, and economic progress found many proponents. This is a period of transformation and turbulence, said former Egyptian foreign minister Nabil Fahmy. "Paralysed and polarised" is how Mohammed ElBaradei, former director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, described the current moment and "non-alignment", they argued, could play a key role.

The call to a renewed non-alignment is in part a consequence of frustrations with current inequities in the world order. It is also shaped by the elephant in the room — China. Countries in Asia and Africa are simultaneously economically dependent and actively seeking to create a bulwark against overreliance on China. Being drawn into alliances that impose choices is not in their strategic interests. Strategic autonomy, in its most instrumental form, is the only viable choice. Yet, increased economic dependence on China is raising anxieties that are, in turn, opening the pos-

sibilities for setting new standards, norms and values-based coalitions among like-minded nations that represent their collective interests.

It is in this turbulence that India's potential in reinventing a 21st century non-alignment exists. But, what would such a role entail? And, is India, at this present juncture, capable of taking on a leadership role?

For one, this is not a call to non-alignment of the past. Today's international landscape is different and so are India's strategic priorities. Unlike in the past, it is China — not Russia — that is at the centre of the global power tussle. For India, this has strategic implications, given our shared borders and China's emergence as a key developmental partner in Asia and Africa. Further, India's strategic and economic preoccupations have shifted since the heyday of NAM. It moved closer to align with western powers, notably the United States. An instru-

mental strategic autonomy has replaced the old non-alignment. This remains relevant to our geo-economic interests.

However, there is deep strategic relevance for India to respond to and take on this mantle of leadership. In the current turbulent world order, there is a glaring absence of leadership to credibly respond to global crises. This, as was visible through the pandemic, can hurt our national interest. By taking on a leadership role and



Yamini Aiyar



Angshuman Choudhury



India's stature and the call for renewed leadership emanates from the power of her example. It is the resilience of the Indian democratic project that distinguishes India as a non-western global leader like no other

ANI

representing the interests of developing nations, India can serve its own quest for genuine strategic autonomy and major power status. It will also empower India to demand a more equitable playing field when responding to transnational challenges, exemplified in the need for equitable climate financing.

But to take on this mantle, India needs first and foremost to demonstrate leadership in its own neighbourhood. While India has actively developed new alliances with major powers, from the Indo-Pacific to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, it has failed to craft a credible role for itself within the region. Critical platforms such as BIMSTEC and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation have been left moribund despite calls for renewal from within the neighbourhood. This also means India looking beyond the confines of traditional realpolitik and investing in democratic transformations in Afghanistan and Myanmar. Only by doing so, can it find wider space to engage in meaningful developmental cooperation in these countries.

India also needs to activate transregional cooperative frameworks with like-minded countries, including the

Asia Africa Growth Corridor that has the potential to diversify the spectrum of developmental choices for developing economies in Africa. Too much attention is paid to alliances India is part of, too little to the leadership role India can play in alliances with her neighbours and other developing countries where significant economic opportunities lie and where investments from India are needed.

Finally, India's stature in the globe and the call for renewed leadership emanates from the power of her own example. It is the resilience of the Indian democratic project that distinguishes India as a non-western global leader like no other. In his lecture, ElBaradei argued that India "has a moral calling to show the world" that democracy and socioeconomic development are "not only compatible, but also reinforce each other." Only a truly democratic, pluralistic and tolerant India can find relevance as a major power in the world. This is a lesson India's oldest friends have reminded us of, and one we must never forget.

Yamini Aiyar is president and chief executive, Centre for Policy Research. Angshuman Choudhury is associate fellow, CPR

The views expressed are personal