

LKI Foreign Policy Forum III
Reassess the Relevance of Non-Alignment in a Polarised World



The 3rd LKI Foreign Policy Forum titled ‘Reassessing Non-Alignment in a Polarised World’ was held on 21st February 2024. The forum held on a quarterly basis, brings together experts to discuss contemporary foreign policy issues and to contribute to the development of a Sri Lankan perspective on foreign policy and international relations. Ahead of the Forum, Foreign Minister M.U.M. Ali Sabry who delivered the opening address, observed that “non-alignment means not becoming a bystander” and “that you are not forced or coerced into a camp to take sovereign decisions”.

Moderating the session which featured 4 prominent experts in the field, LKI Executive Director Ambassador Ravinatha Aryasinha at the outset emphasized the importance of understanding both – the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as an organization, and ‘non-alignment’ as a concept and foreign policy strategy. He noted that for Sri Lanka, as it was to many member countries between the 1960s -1980s, NAM enabled the conceptualization/operationalization of important initiatives relevant to its membership including the Indian Ocean Peace Zone, the Law of the Sea, a New International Economic Order, a New International Information Order and a developing country emphasis on global disarmament – many in which Sri Lanka was to play a prominent role. However, since the ending of the Cold War, non-alignment was to lose

its influence in global affairs due to the diverse interests and alignments of its member states. He observed that in recent times while the need to re-orient non-alignment to meet the changing global dynamics was regularly spoken of, NAM countries have failed to offer a cohesive strategic response and re-orientation. Amb. Aryasinha suggested that while the voting patterns of NAM countries in the UN General Assembly during recent crises – particularly on Ukraine and the Gaza, provided a barometer to judge as to how non-aligned states were responding to issues in real-time, what the ingredients of a re-oriented non-aligned policy required closer study.

The Executive Director of the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies (BCIS) Prof. Gamini Keerawella who focussed on the evolution of the NAM noted that it had 3 distinct phases where emphasis was on; first de-colonization, second on meeting the cold war challenges, and third in grappling with post-cold war dynamics. He cautioned against analysing Sri Lanka's foreign policy in the early period solely through the lens of non-alignment, referring to examples such as that Prime Minister D.S Senanayake's neutrality was complemented by a defence agreement with the UK, and Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike's non-aligned approach with permission for U.S vessels to access Sri Lankan ports. He emphasised that the disintegration of the Soviet Union did not necessarily mean a win for the U.S, and that emerging challenges have required a re-definition of foreign policy in non-aligned nations. He cautioned that current Sri Lanka foreign policy too should not be analysed solely in terms of non-alignment, but must additionally take into account; the domestic, South Asian (mainly India related), Indian Ocean Region, and global contexts as well.

Former Foreign Secretary and Chairman of the Pathfinder Foundation Ambassador Bernard Goonetilleke referred to the emergence of multipolarity on the international stage and the current outlook of the global economy where in the next decade, China, the U.S and India will be the three largest economies. He said countries like Sri Lanka cannot rely on the benevolence of these global economic powers and non-aligned countries must establish their own leverage for economic gain. He explained that it requires non-aligned foreign policy to be fine-tuned, and for the 120-strong Non-Aligned Movement to re-group and re-invent itself, rather than being passive. He observed that in the case of Sri Lanka, while President Gotabaya Rajapaksa embraced neutrality and publicly declared this position at the inauguration ceremony in Anuradhapura in 2019, beyond expressing this intent, there had been limited follow up. Five years on, he argued that we must assume that Sri Lanka is continuing to pursue this position of neutrality and non-alignment. Amb. Goonetilleke highlighted how nations have shifted alliances based on their perceived self-interests without knowing the long-term consequences of such decisions. He reiterated the need for Sri Lanka to prioritise domestic interests and to ensure that a comprehensive foreign policy serves to empower the nation amidst shifting global dynamics.

Dr Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, Executive Director of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), questioned "what non-alignment means in the modern day and what are you non-aligning against". He challenged traditional notions of non-alignment, advocating for a more nuanced understanding in today's geopolitical context. Rather than rigid ideological stances, he

questioned whether pragmatic decision-making, such as voting based on self-interest, could be considered a form of non-alignment, citing Singapore's foreign policy approach as a convincing example. He also said NAM does not offer resolutions on challenges that arise from non-western interventions. As the balance of power is shifting towards China and India, Sri Lanka must assess its foreign policy based on what it can gain from engaging with the rest of the world, rather than basing it on the moral authority of non-alignment, which he argued no longer exists. Specifically, regarding economic prosperity, he emphasised the need for Sri Lanka to pursue advancement through aligning with those countries that bring the greatest economic benefits, rather than sacrificing economic leverage, through adopting a non-aligned foreign policy.

Chief International Relations Analyst, Factum, Uditha Devapriya saw pragmatism as increasingly having come to define non-alignment, resulting in some contradictions and ambiguities even with respect to Sri Lanka. Observing that Sri Lanka's foreign policy decisions omit valuable perspectives from the grassroots level, he said while southern perspectives place emphasis on engaging with bilateral partners, northern perspectives consider foreign policy to be a secondary concern behind the prioritisation of Tamil rights and recognition. He further elaborated that the Sri Lankan people on the ground were deeply suspicious of being given aid with strings attached. He advocated for a proactive foreign policy strategy that takes consistent decisions that align with past policies, and has credibility both domestically and internationally. He urged that public opinion should influence these decisions and experts must engage more with policymakers so that decisions are sustainable and address broader challenges in the Global South.

In the question-and-answer session which followed the aspects discussed included; whether non-alignment and neutrality was the same, what multi-aligned foreign policy was in the Global South, whether pragmatism and self-interest lacked principle as a foreign policy strategy and hence could be used to justify anything, whether Sri Lanka's soft power engagement was consistent with non-alignment, and also the need for Sri Lanka to develop a holistic and proactive foreign policy that maximises benefits without creating additional pressures on bilateral relationships.
