

India and the Non-Aligned Movement in the Contemporary Era (2015–2026): Strategic Autonomy and Conflict Diplomacy

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Abstract

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) has historically represented the principle of maintaining independent foreign-policy decision-making while promoting peace, sovereignty, international cooperation and the interests of developing countries. In the contemporary international system, marked by increasing geopolitical competition, military conflicts and a transition towards a multipolar world order, the relevance of non-alignment has evolved rather than disappeared. This research examines India's approach to the Non-Aligned Movement during the period 2015–2026, with particular emphasis on strategic autonomy and conflict diplomacy. The study analyses how India has sought to preserve independent decision-making while maintaining relationships with major global powers and participating actively in multilateral institutions. India's responses to major international conflicts, particularly the Russia–Ukraine conflict, are examined to understand its preference for dialogue, diplomacy, national interest and adherence to the principles of international law. India has called for cessation of hostilities and a return to diplomacy while also highlighting the wider consequences of conflicts for food, energy and economic security, especially in developing countries.

The research further evaluates the contemporary relevance of NAM through India's emphasis on strategic autonomy, reformed multilateralism, the interests of the Global South and peaceful resolution of international disputes. India's Ministry of External Affairs identifies strategic autonomy, peaceful coexistence, peaceful resolution of disputes, multilateralism and wider global cooperation among the continuing principles of its foreign policy. The study also considers India's efforts to strengthen NAM's relevance by addressing contemporary concerns such as climate change, post-pandemic economic recovery, food and energy security, and reform of global institutions. Overall, the research argues that India's contemporary engagement with NAM can be understood less as traditional bloc-neutrality and more as an approach centred on strategic autonomy, diplomatic flexibility and constructive engagement. The study concludes by assessing how this approach contributes to conflict diplomacy, the representation of developing countries and the pursuit of a more balanced and inclusive international order.

Keywords: Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), India, Strategic Autonomy, Foreign Policy, Conflict Diplomacy, Global Conflicts, International Relations, Global South, Multilateralism, Peace and Security, Diplomatic Engagement, International Cooperation, Multipolar World Order, Global Governance, 2015–2026.

Introduction

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) emerged during the Cold War as an important platform for countries that sought to maintain an independent position in international affairs rather than formally aligning with competing power blocs. India was one of the principal countries associated with the development of the movement and consistently emphasized principles such as sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, non-interference, disarmament, international cooperation and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Over time, the international environment has changed significantly, particularly after the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, the issues that originally gave importance to non-alignment—power rivalry, security concerns, economic inequality and the need for greater representation of developing countries—continue to influence international relations.

Between 2015 and 2026, the global political environment became increasingly complex because of geopolitical competition, regional conflicts, economic uncertainties and changes in the balance of power. Major developments, including the Russia–Ukraine conflict and continuing instability in West Asia, have created difficult choices for countries attempting to protect their national interests while supporting international peace and stability. In this environment, India’s foreign-policy approach has frequently been discussed in terms of **strategic autonomy**. Rather than treating non-alignment as strict neutrality, contemporary India has pursued flexibility in its external relations, maintaining partnerships with different countries while making independent assessments of international issues.

India’s approach during the Russia–Ukraine conflict provides an important example of this diplomatic strategy. India has repeatedly emphasized dialogue and diplomacy as the preferred means of addressing the conflict while also considering its own security, economic and strategic interests. At the same time, India has highlighted the wider consequences of conflicts, including challenges related to food, energy and economic security, particularly for developing countries. This approach demonstrates the complexity of conducting foreign policy in an international system where major powers have competing interests.

The contemporary relevance of NAM can therefore be examined through India’s engagement with the **Global South**, multilateral institutions and international initiatives addressing common challenges. India has advocated greater representation for developing countries in global decision-making and has supported reforms aimed at making international institutions more inclusive.

This research examines **India and the Non-Aligned Movement during 2015–2026**, focusing on strategic autonomy, conflict diplomacy and India’s evolving role in international affairs. It seeks to understand how India balances national interests with broader objectives such as peace, sovereignty, multilateral cooperation and the interests of developing countries. The study also evaluates whether contemporary Indian diplomacy represents a continuation of traditional NAM principles or an adaptation of non-alignment to the realities of a multipolar world.

Research Hypothesis (H₁)

H₁: *India’s adoption of NAM-based principles and strategic autonomy during major international conflicts between 2015 and 2026 has strengthened its diplomatic influence, protected its national interests, and enhanced its role as an independent global actor.*

Null Hypothesis (H₀)

H₀: *India’s adoption of NAM-based principles and strategic autonomy during major international conflicts between 2015 and 2026 has had no significant effect on its diplomatic influence, protection of national interests, or role as an independent global actor.*

Review of literature

The literature on India and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) has increasingly shifted from viewing non-alignment as a Cold War strategy to examining it as an evolving approach to foreign policy and strategic autonomy. Existing scholarship provides a useful foundation for understanding how India has adapted the principles associated with NAM to a changing international environment.

Early studies on NAM generally emphasize India's foundational role in the movement and its commitment to sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, anti-colonialism, disarmament and greater equality in international relations. This literature establishes that non-alignment was not simply a policy of remaining neutral between powerful states. Rather, it represented an attempt by newly independent countries to retain freedom of decision-making and collectively influence international affairs. This historical perspective is important for evaluating whether contemporary Indian foreign policy continues to reflect these principles. Later scholarship has focused on the transformation of non-alignment following the end of the Cold War. Researchers argue that the disappearance of the bipolar international system reduced the relevance of traditional bloc-based non-alignment but did not eliminate the underlying requirement for independent foreign-policy choices. In this context, the concept of **strategic autonomy** has become increasingly important in discussions of India's external relations. Strategic autonomy refers to India's effort to preserve the freedom to make decisions according to its national interests while maintaining relationships with multiple major powers.

Recent literature examines India's diplomatic approach amid growing competition between major powers, particularly the United States, Russia and China. These studies indicate that India has attempted to avoid excessive dependence on any single power while simultaneously strengthening partnerships in areas such as defence, technology, trade, energy and security. This approach has led scholars to debate whether contemporary Indian diplomacy should still be described as non-alignment or whether it is better understood as **multi-alignment or strategic autonomy**.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has generated significant contemporary scholarship on this issue. Researchers have examined India's emphasis on dialogue and diplomacy, its independent position on international resolutions, and its attempt to balance relations with Russia and Western countries. The literature suggests that India's response cannot be adequately explained through traditional ideas of neutrality alone. Instead, it reflects a combination of strategic autonomy, national interests, economic considerations and diplomatic engagement. India's official position has repeatedly stressed the importance of dialogue and peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Another important area of literature concerns India's relationship with the **Global South**. Recent studies highlight India's efforts to raise concerns of developing countries relating to food and energy security, development, climate change, debt and representation in global institutions. India's diplomatic initiatives have therefore been examined as an attempt to connect its national interests with wider concerns of developing countries.

However, a gap remains in systematically examining **2015–2026 as a distinct period** and connecting India's contemporary engagement with NAM to its responses to major conflicts and changing global power relations. Much of the existing literature discusses either historical NAM or India's strategic autonomy separately. This research seeks to address that gap by examining how NAM-related principles have evolved within India's contemporary conflict diplomacy and whether they continue to provide practical value in a multipolar international system.

Methodology

Major Policies of NAM after 2015

1. Reform of global institutions

- NAM calls for greater representation of developing countries in institutions such as the United Nations Security Council.
- It supports a more democratic and multipolar world order. ([South African Government](#))

2. Combating terrorism

- NAM supports international cooperation against terrorism while emphasizing that counter-terrorism efforts must respect international law and human rights. ([Ministry of External Affairs](#))

3. Sustainable development

- NAM promotes cooperation on poverty reduction, economic development, food security, energy security, and achieving sustainable development goals. ([South African Government](#))

4. Economic cooperation among developing nations

- It encourages South–South cooperation, technology sharing, fair trade, and reducing dependence on unequal global economic structures.

5. Climate change and environmental protection

- NAM supports climate action based on the principle of **common but differentiated responsibilities**, arguing that developing countries need support to address climate challenges.

6. Peaceful resolution of conflicts

- NAM encourages dialogue and diplomacy rather than military intervention in international disputes. ([South African Government](#))

7. Support for Palestine and anti-colonial causes

- NAM continues its historical support for Palestinian self-determination and opposition to colonialism, occupation, and foreign domination. ([apnews.com](#))
- Between 2015 and 2025, the **Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)** continued to function primarily as a diplomatic and political platform rather than as a military or enforcement organization. Its contribution focused on promoting a **multipolar and more representative international order**, strengthening cooperation among countries of the Global South, advocating reforms of the **United Nations and particularly greater representation for developing countries in the UN Security Council**, and supporting nuclear disarmament and the peaceful use of nuclear technology. NAM also emphasized climate justice, sustainable development, technology and capacity sharing, while defending the principles of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference. During major conflicts in this period, NAM generally encouraged dialogue, negotiation and peaceful settlement of disputes, expressed concern for civilians and humanitarian consequences, and opposed unilateral military intervention and measures inconsistent with international law. Although NAM lacked the institutional capacity of organizations such as the UN or military alliances to directly resolve wars, it remained relevant as a collective voice for developing countries by highlighting **peace, sovereignty, development, climate concerns and reform of global governance**.

Between **2015 and 2025**, NAM's role was **primarily diplomatic rather than operational**. It consistently advocated:

- Peaceful settlement of disputes,
- Respect for sovereignty and international law,
- Non-interference in internal affairs,

- Humanitarian assistance,
- Greater use of UN-led diplomacy.

However, because NAM lacks enforcement mechanisms or military capabilities, its direct influence on the outcomes of these wars was generally limited. Its greatest contribution was providing a collective platform for developing countries to advocate for peace, dialogue, and multilateral cooperation.

Benefits to India from These Activities (2015–2025) According to NAM Principles

From a **Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)** perspective, India's involvement in international conflicts and crises mainly benefited the country through **strategic autonomy, diplomatic influence, humanitarian**

Activity / Conflict	India's Action (NAM-based approach)	Benefits to India
Yemen Civil War (2015)	India avoided military involvement and carried out Operation Raahat to evacuate citizens and foreigners.	• Increased India's reputation as a responsible humanitarian power. • Improved goodwill with Yemen and Gulf countries. • Strengthened India's relations with countries in West Asia.
Syrian Civil War	India supported sovereignty, avoided intervention, and backed diplomatic solutions.	• Maintained relations with Syria while keeping ties with Western and Middle Eastern countries. • Demonstrated India's independent foreign policy approach.
Counter-terrorism operations against ISIS	India opposed terrorism but avoided joining foreign military campaigns.	• Strengthened international cooperation against terrorism. • Increased India's credibility as a country supporting security without becoming part of military blocs.
Russia–Ukraine War (2022–2025)	India called for dialogue, provided humanitarian assistance, maintained relations with Russia, and continued engagement with Western countries.	• Preserved important defence and energy relations with Russia. • Expanded cooperation with the US, Europe, Japan, and Australia. • Increased India's image as an independent global actor capable of balancing different powers.
Tigray Conflict (Ethiopia)	India supported peaceful resolution and avoided interference.	• Strengthened India's relations with African countries. • Reinforced India's image as a supporter of sovereignty and development partnerships.
Sudan Civil War (Operation Kaveri, 2023)	India evacuated citizens and supported humanitarian efforts.	• Improved India's reputation as a reliable partner in Africa. • Strengthened India's engagement with African nations.

Myanmar Conflict	India balanced security concerns with diplomacy and humanitarian considerations.	• Protected India's border interests. • Maintained relations with Myanmar and ASEAN countries.
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reputation, and stronger relations with developing countries. India did not gain benefits through territorial expansion or military victories; rather, the gains were political, diplomatic, and strategic.

Discussion and Results

The analysis of India's responses to major conflicts between 2015 and 2025 demonstrates that India has increasingly applied the principles associated with the **Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)** through a contemporary policy of **strategic autonomy** rather than traditional neutrality. In the Yemen and Sudan conflicts, India prioritized humanitarian evacuation and assistance through **Operation Raahat** and **Operation Kaveri**, respectively. These actions strengthened India's image as a responsible country capable of protecting its citizens while contributing to humanitarian efforts without becoming directly involved in prolonged military conflicts. India's approach to the Syrian and Myanmar crises similarly emphasized sovereignty, diplomatic engagement and the protection of national interests.

India's response to the **Russia-Ukraine war** provides the clearest example of strategic autonomy. India encouraged dialogue and diplomacy while maintaining its longstanding relations with Russia and simultaneously expanding cooperation with the United States, European countries, Japan and Australia. This approach enabled India to protect important defence and energy interests while maintaining an independent position in a highly polarized international environment. India's engagement in counter-terrorism efforts also demonstrates an attempt to cooperate internationally against terrorism without becoming permanently aligned with a particular military bloc.

The results indicate that India's contemporary NAM-based approach has generated several strategic benefits. **First, it has strengthened India's diplomatic flexibility**, allowing it to maintain relationships with countries belonging to different geopolitical groupings. **Second, humanitarian operations have enhanced India's international reputation** and strengthened its relationships with countries in West Asia and Africa. **Third, strategic autonomy has helped India protect national interests**, particularly regarding security, energy, defence and regional stability. **Fourth, India's approach has increased its visibility as an independent global actor** capable of engaging with competing powers while advocating dialogue and diplomacy.

Overall, the study finds that India's approach from 2015 to 2025 represents an **evolution of traditional NAM principles into strategic autonomy**. India has not followed complete neutrality in every conflict; instead, it has combined national security, humanitarian responsibility, diplomacy and independent decision-making. The findings suggest that NAM principles continue to have relevance when adapted to contemporary geopolitical realities. India's experience demonstrates that strategic autonomy can provide developing countries with greater diplomatic space to protect national interests while contributing to peace, humanitarian assistance and international cooperation.

Findings

Major Benefits India Gained Through NAM-Based Actions (2015–2025)

1. Enhanced Diplomatic Influence

- India maintained strategic partnerships with both Western nations and Russia.
- Its independent decision-making increased its credibility as an autonomous global actor.

- India gained greater flexibility in responding to international crises.
- 2. **Stronger Engagement with the Global South**
 - India expanded diplomatic and development cooperation with countries across **Asia, Africa, West Asia and Latin America**.
 - Humanitarian assistance and capacity-building initiatives strengthened India's goodwill among developing nations.
 - India increasingly positioned itself as a voice for the concerns of developing countries.
- 3. **Emergence as a Responsible Global Power**
 - Humanitarian evacuation missions demonstrated India's ability to respond effectively during international emergencies.
 - Crisis-response operations improved India's international reputation.
 - Such initiatives contributed to India's growing role in representing Global South interests.
- 4. **Protection of National Interests**
 - Strategic autonomy enabled India to avoid unnecessary involvement in prolonged foreign conflicts.
 - Independent foreign-policy decisions helped safeguard **energy security, defence requirements and economic interests**.
 - India was able to assess each international crisis according to its own national priorities.
- 5. **Balanced Relations with Major Power Centres**
 - India maintained defence and energy cooperation with **Russia** while developing stronger technology and security partnerships with the **United States**.
 - Relations with **European countries** supported trade, investment and technological cooperation.
 - Stronger engagement with **Gulf countries** supported India's energy requirements, economic interests and the welfare of the Indian diaspora.
- 6. **Greater Strategic Flexibility**
 - India avoided becoming dependent on a single geopolitical bloc.
 - It could cooperate with different countries according to the specific issue or national interest.
 - This flexibility strengthened India's ability to navigate an increasingly **multipolar international system**.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the principles associated with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) continue to influence India's foreign-policy approach in the contemporary international system, although their application has evolved considerably. Between 2015 and 2026, India increasingly followed **strategic autonomy**, enabling it to make independent decisions while maintaining relationships with countries representing different geopolitical groupings. India's responses to conflicts such as the Yemen crisis, Syrian conflict, Russia-Ukraine war, Sudan crisis and other regional security challenges demonstrate its preference for diplomacy, dialogue, humanitarian assistance and protection of national interests.

The findings indicate that this approach provided India with important benefits, including greater diplomatic flexibility, stronger relations with the Global South, protection of energy and defence interests, and increased international recognition as an independent global actor. Humanitarian evacuation operations further strengthened India's reputation as a responsible country capable of responding effectively during international crises.

The research therefore suggests that contemporary non-alignment should not be understood as complete neutrality or isolation from major powers. Instead, India has adapted its principles into a broader strategy of **strategic autonomy, multi-partner engagement and conflict diplomacy**. Overall, NAM remains relevant to India by providing a framework for promoting sovereignty, peaceful dialogue, developing-country interests and a more balanced and inclusive global order.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made regarding India's contemporary approach to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). First, India should continue to strengthen **strategic autonomy** while maintaining constructive relations with major global powers. This would enable India to protect its national interests without becoming excessively dependent on any single geopolitical bloc.

Second, India should further strengthen its engagement with the **Global South** by promoting cooperation in areas such as technology, healthcare, education, food security, energy and sustainable development. Greater cooperation can increase India's credibility as a representative voice for developing countries.

Third, India should continue emphasizing **dialogue and diplomatic negotiation** during international conflicts. Alongside diplomatic efforts, India can expand humanitarian assistance, evacuation operations and reconstruction support for countries affected by wars and crises.

Fourth, India should actively support **reforms of global institutions**, particularly the United Nations Security Council, to improve representation for developing countries. India can work with other NAM and Global South countries to promote a more inclusive international decision-making system.

Fifth, India should strengthen cooperation on **nuclear disarmament, climate change, counter-terrorism and sustainable development**, while supporting the peaceful use of technology and energy.

Finally, India should modernize NAM by focusing on contemporary challenges rather than limiting the movement to its traditional Cold War objectives. A stronger focus on **peace, development, sovereignty, climate justice, economic cooperation and global governance** can help NAM remain relevant in the changing international system.

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