

The Non-Aligned Movement: In Pursuit of Validity and Relevance in the Contemporary Global Order

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This article examines the ways in which the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) could regain its “old” reputation and offer a new agenda that better corresponds to the post-Cold War world order. Even though the Cold War ended almost three decades ago and the notion of non-alignment has seemingly lost its relevance in the international arena, the NAM is still functioning and retains important potential for uniting a significant number of countries from the Global South. In addition to persistent issues that continue to put pressure on members of the NAM, new challenges have arisen that require the stable existence of meaningful alliances equipped with the necessary organizational flexibility and capability to adjust to the contemporary international environment. The NAM’s adjusted agenda for the contemporary world order implies enhanced North South dialogue, improved South South co-operation and a more efficient decision-making process achieved through restructuring its internal institutional framework.

Keywords: NAM, membership, South South cooperation, North South dialogue, institutional reform



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Introduction

The Cold War period (1947–1991), marked by a heightened rivalry between the two then superpowers, the Soviet Union and the USA, also gave birth to the idea of non-alignment, around which many developing countries from the Global South gathered in order to fight against dominance, colonialism, and poverty. A certain balancing of power was necessary in a world where two ideologically opposed blocks were competing ruthlessly and threatening to start another devastating global war.¹ The Non-

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Aligned Movement (NAM) was formed by several Third World² countries that did not want to formally align themselves with or against any major power bloc, but wanted to remain militarily and politically independent and neutral. Unaligned politics and the fight against colonialism were major revolutionary events in the 20th century that announced the entrance of the countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America as important players in world politics.³ The origins of NAM date back to the Bandung Conference in 1955, which was co-hosted and initiated by Presidents Sukarno of Indonesia, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt,

Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India.⁴ The principles and objectives⁵ adopted during

1 The Free Library, *Whatever happened to the non-aligned movement? Martin Evans recalls the 'third way' of Cold War international politics, now all but forgotten*, 2014, Available at: <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Whatever+happened+to+the+non-aligned+movement%3f+Martin+Evans+recalls...-a0172687098> (Accessed: May 18, 2020)

2 Alfred Sauvy, a French economist, formulated the term Third World referring to the group of underdeveloped countries that were “ignored, exploited, despised” and politically non-aligned with either the Communist Soviet bloc (Second World) or the Capitalist NATO bloc (First World) during the Cold War. Sauvy, A. (1952), “Three worlds, one planet,” *L’Observateur*, 14 August, n° 118, page 14. Available at: <http://www.homme-moderne.org/societe/demo/sauvy/3mondes.html> (Accessed: May 18, 2020).

3 Martin, E. and Phillips, J. “Algeria: anger of the dispossessed.” *New Haven* [Conn.], (Yale University Press, 2007), Available at: <http://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3420962> (Accessed: May 18, 2020).

4 Gottschalk, K. “Explainer: The Non-Aligned Movement in the 21st century,” *The Conversation*, 28 September 2016, Available at: <https://theconversation.com/explainer-the-non-aligned-movement-in-the-21st-century-66057> (Accessed: May 19, 2020).

5 The founding principles of NAM, better known as the Bandung Principles,

the conference are still the guiding basis for the Members and their political activity in international relations.

The Bandung Conference was a prelude to the First Summit Conference of Belgrade (1961), during which the Non-Aligned Movement was officially founded. Topics relating to overcoming the negative consequences of colonialism; boosting the principle of political self-determination, which implies mutual respect to sovereignty and territorial integrity; and developing the socio-economic conditions of Members became leading objectives that dominated the discourse of the NAM summits of the 1970s and 1980s.⁶ Those summits became low-cost channels for the new postcolonial political elites to introduce themselves domestically as well as internationally as representatives of new states that were seeking visibility and recognition as reputable agents in world politics.⁷ The end of the Cold War brought to a conclusion a quarter-century long bipolar world order and introduced a new global system and novel challenges that significantly affected international relations. The closure of West–East rivalry put the future of the NAM and its relevance in the new world circumstances to the test. Legitimate question arose immediately after the end of two-bloc politics regarding the sustainability of

were declared during the Afro-Asian Conference of 1955 as the following: 1.- Respect of fundamental human rights and of the objectives and principles of the Charter of the United Nations. 2.- Respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations. 3.- Recognition of the equality among all races and of the equality among all nations, both large and small. 4.- Non-intervention or non-interference into the internal affairs of another -country. 5.- Respect the right of every nation to defend itself, either individually or collectively, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations. 6.- Non-use of collective defense pacts to benefit the specific interests of any of the great powers. 7.- Refraining from acts or threats of aggression and use of force in against the territorial integrity or political independence of any country. Non-use of pressures by any country against other countries. 8.- Settlement of all international disputes by peaceful means, such as negotiation, conciliation, arbitration or judicial settlement as well as other peaceful means of the parties' own choice, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations. 9.- Promotion of mutual interest and cooperation. 10.- Respect for justice and international obligations. Archive Non-Aligned Movement, "NAM Principles & Purposes." Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20190331135723/https://mnoal.org/nam-principles/> (Accessed: May 20, 2020).

⁶ Archive Non-Aligned Movement, "NAM History." Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20190725215620/https://mnoal.org/nam-history/> (Accessed: May 21, 2020).

⁷ Jurgen D. and Skinner, A., *The non-aligned movement: genesis, organization and politics* (1927-1992), Leiden: Brill, 2019, p.44.

non-aligned ideals. Due to the fact that the reasons for forming the NAM disappeared from the international scene, there was seemingly nothing left for members to be non-aligned to. However, Gottschalk argues that non-alignment to the remaining world power – the USA, along with its Western allies – has become a new gathering point.⁸ In addition, the socio-economic issues that remain a considerable part of the NAM’s agenda have received ever more emphasis and remain eagerly discussed.

Today, the Non-Aligned Movement represents, after the UN, the largest international organization; it accounts for about 55% of the global population.⁹ Moreover, the NAM has managed

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to maintain its cohesion despite all the differences, diversity, and internal disputes among the Members, which illustrates one of the unique features of this movement; its resourcefulness, which makes the idea of nonalignment durable and keeps it alive. That is why relevant contemporary issues relating to the environment, security, and human rights, as well as persistent socio-economic issues, can be addressed through an improved NAM agenda that promotes the establishment of a permanent Secretariat, special committees, and a stronger platform for the further development of South–South and North–South

cooperation. Moreover, the NAM could act as a vocal representative of the developing nations of the Global South that are still lagging behind the industrialized North. Therefore, the Movement remains a relevant international actor that gathers together a considerable number of developing states and provides them with a platform for promoting their national interests as NAM members. The idea of non-alignment is still valid, especially in the contemporary unipolar world order in which the unprivileged countries of the Global South need a stronger institutional framework for promoting and protecting their own interests against the US hegemony and Western dominance in international relations.

⁸ Gottschalk, *op. cit.*

⁹ Rauch, C., *Farewell Non-Alignment? Constancy and change of foreign policy in post-colonial India*, (Frankfurt: Peace Research Institute Frankfurt., 2008), p.3.

Why do we need NAM?

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the binary Cold War world order, the USA, as the remaining superpower, began dominating world affairs and entrenching an unchallenged “Western imperialism” on the global stage. Concurrently, the NAM has openly criticized the hegemony of the single superpower as well as the dominance of Western ideas and ideology within international political circles.¹⁰ Such resistance and assertive criticism highlight the anti-Western stance of the movement, which offers an alternative perspective on international relations that have become increasingly Western-oriented. Even though some Members are more reluctant to discuss political issues associated with the US-led global order than to challenge economic arguments that are directed towards exploitative global capitalism, NAM continues to channel the genuine aspirations of many developing countries to challenge the Western-made rules that regulate contemporary international society and their eagerness to strengthen their own political autonomy, that is, their ability independently to set priorities and make decisions in matters of foreign policy and security.¹¹ On the other hand, the post-Cold War international order will not remain unipolar forever, especially as the USA has been showing signs of weakening and other states, such as China and Russia, have become more active and influential in the international system.^{12, 13} One could argue that the NAM’s opposition to mainstream politics, its promotion of political, economic, cultural and ideological heterogeneity, as well as the constantly changing nature of the international system have remained a powerful justification for the NAM’s continued existence and relevance.

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10 Tharoor, S., “Viewpoint: Is the Non-Aligned Movement relevant today?” *BBC News*, 30 August 2012, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-19408560> (Accessed: May 25, 2020).

11 *Ibid.*

12 Keethaponcalan, S.I., “Reshaping the Non-Aligned Movement: challenges and vision”, *Bandung J of Global South* 3, 4, 4 October 2016, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40728-016-0032-3> (Accessed: May 28, 2020).

13 Singh, B., “Non-Alignment Movement: It’s Relevance in Present Context”, *International Journal of Research - Granthaalayah*, 5(6), 2017, p. 276. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.820965> (Accessed: May 28, 2020).

Another relevant feature of the movement concerns the geopolitical commonality of most of its members. Almost all member states are from the Global South and share common colonial histories and socio-economic settings.¹⁴ Therefore, there is potential for further fostering of much-needed South–South cooperation. Many developing countries from the Global South face serious challenges regarding economic sustainability and growth. Improved South–South collaboration could help to alleviate many economic issues, thereby bringing development and prosperity to all members. Developing nations of the South possess huge economic potential and their favourable demographics, demand, and location¹⁵ provide a solid base for fruitful economic progress. However, the Global South lacks the enhanced co-ordination and co-operation that could otherwise improve its challenged socio-economic situation.

The NAM’s agenda is permeated with the “Southern solidarity” that continues to play an important binding role within the Movement. Keethaponcalan argues that it was precisely this sense of solidarity and co-operation that inspired the gathering of 29 countries at the Afro-Asian Conference in 1955 that was an important initial step in establishing the Non-Aligned Movement.¹⁶ The idea of solidarity, as a beacon of unity and partnership within the Movement, could further enhance South–South cooperation and enable the overall economic empowerment of the South. It was recognised at the NAM’s highest levels that “South–South and triangular cooperation has the potential to enhance capacity-building, strengthen human resources and leverage the catalytic role of education and human development in the creation of employment opportunities”¹⁷ and this could eventually lead to a stronger economy with improved production of high-value goods and services.

14 Keethaponcalan, *op. cit.*

15 Non-Aligned Movement, *Drishti*, 24 April 2019, Available at: <https://www.drishtiiias.com/to-the-points/Paper2/non-aligned-movement-nam> (Accessed: May 28, 2020).

16 Keethaponcalan, *op. cit.*

17 Ministerial Meeting of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement, Caracas, Venezuela, 18–21 July 2019, p.174 (para.782). Available at: [https://www.namazerbaijan.org/pdf/Caracas-Final-Documents-\(2019\).pdf](https://www.namazerbaijan.org/pdf/Caracas-Final-Documents-(2019).pdf) (Accessed: May 30, 2020).

Apart from South–South cooperation, there is space and need for the encouragement of North–South dialogue in the future. In order to tackle the issue of the North–South divide, the NAM must act as a strong platform for protecting and promoting the interests of its members that, in most cases, are too weak and small to compete individually with the developed, powerful countries of the North.¹⁸ As part of a larger movement, developing countries have better channels to communicate their own national interests and a stronger position at the negotiating table. Regular international meetings and conferences are recognized as productive spaces where “the interests and concerns of developing countries including middle-income countries, and countries in special situations”¹⁹ could be taken into account and discussed. Such international gatherings help in fostering the North–South dialogue and co-operation that are crucial for effectively solving current economic issues. The Chair of the Movement has identified the need for further deepening and expanding the increasingly dynamic relationships with the G8, the European Union, the Group of 77, and China in order to intensify collaboration between developing and industrialized countries and thus overcome, or at least alleviate, the gap between the South and the North.²⁰ It is important that the NAM continues developing institutionalized channels of communication and co-operation with industrialized countries through which it can more constructively advocate for the interests and ideas of its members.

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While one of NAM’s founding ideologies, anti-colonialism, seemingly lost its appeal and underwent a kind of transformation, other socio-economic struggles continue and new challenges, such as widespread poverty, ecological crises, excessive foreign debt, terrorism, and religious and ethnic clashes, have arisen as leading contemporary issues of the Movement. These relevant concerns require more international attention and a proper institutionalized framework for their advocacy and resolution.

¹⁸ Keethaponcalan, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Ministerial Meeting of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement, *op. cit.* p.109 (para 377.5).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109, para (377.1,2,3,4).

Even though colonialism, in its traditional meaning, has almost disappeared from the international political scene, different forms of neo-colonialism persist, such as economic control and the hegemony of external forces, and these continue to press upon the underdeveloped countries of the South.²¹ Nevertheless, Strydom argues that the demise of colonial rule left the majority of members vulnerable and unable to independently resolve their own problems owing to inherited weak and undemocratic institutional systems that still generate internal problems and necessitate the extended “protection” of powerful states.²² As the debate around the post-colonial heritage and the reasons for the perpetuated weak position of most members continues, the NAM needs to entrench itself as a powerful neutralizer of unilateral military intervention and economic coercion and to become a stronger representative of the Global South.

Institutional Reform and Organizational Change

For an organization, especially an international one, to sustain its effectiveness and keep pace with contemporary ideas and the current environment, it is very important to remain open to continuous institutional reform and organizational modification. The NAM should show a degree of institutional flexibility in order to respond more successfully to novel global challenges. Although the Movement has demonstrated an exceptional achievement just in the fact that it has managed to gather together a considerable number of heterogeneous countries from different parts of the world,²³ it still lacks a proper institutional framework that would otherwise give the NAM a strong unified platform for effective decision making. Keethaponcalan points out that the absence of a permanent secretariat of the organization, which could act as an international representative of the 120 Member states, is an unacceptable structural flaw that prevents further development

²¹ Keethaponcalan, *op. cit.*

²² Strydom, H., “Non-aligned movement and the reform of international relations”, *Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law Online*, 2007, Vol.11, pp.6,7, Available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5a0d/a00a60bb214db2ee265890340af5cc04dce.pdf> (Accessed: June 7, 2020).

²³ Singh, J., *Emerging International Order and Non-Aligned Movement*, (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 1996), pp. 327-28.

of the organization.²⁴ Such institutional weakness leads to a perpetual state of ineffectiveness and indecisiveness, thus reducing the Movement to a merely figurative organization without real international power to act upon its members' requests and interests.

Critics point out that the NAM lacks clear rules and a strong institutional framework. Structural defects prevent the organization from becoming a relevant international actor with a powerful agenda that projects relevance and validity to the international community. Koechler (2009) accurately refers to the core of the NAM's institutional struggles when stating that "the NAM has no charter. It has no statute unlike other international organizations. It is an informal structure of cooperation without any permanent secretariat so there is no obligation in strictly legal terms to adhere to any policies or allegiances but only that member states should support each other under the principles of non-alignment."²⁵ Establishing a permanent secretariat could bring more unity and assist in enabling the Movement to respond more reliably to the current global issues that, more than ever before, require partnership and united institutional action.

Some critics believe that the Movement's activity is unjustifiably reduced to occasional summits of Heads of State or Government of the non-aligned countries that merely indulge in long speeches and manufacture pompous, unimplemented resolutions.²⁶ These summits are still considered to be "the highest decision making authority of the Movement" with "a rotating three year duration chairmanship of the Ministerial Committee on Methodology".²⁷ Not having a strict organizational culture damages the international image of NAM and prevents the Movement from acting in a concrete and well-defined manner. Leadership on

²⁴ Keethaponcalan, *op. cit.*

²⁵ See Amies, N., "Non-Aligned Movement struggles for relevancy in post-Cold War world," *Deutsche Welle*, Bonn, Germany, 13 July 2009, Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/non-aligned-movement-struggles-for-relevancy-in-post-cold-war-world/a-4475706> (Accessed: June 15, 2020).

²⁶ Kochan, R., "Changing emphasis in the Non-Aligned Movement." *The World Today* 28(11), 1972, pp. 501–508.

²⁷ "Meeting of the Ministerial Committee on Methodology of the Movement of the Non-Aligned Countries, Caratagena de Indias, May 14–16, 1996, Head of State and Government of the Non-Aligned Countries. Government of Zaire, 14–16 May 1996. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20110402173236/http://www.nam.gov.za/background/methodology.htm#a> (Accessed: June 15, 2020).

global issues requires a strong institutional structure that includes a respectful permanent secretariat, better coordination among members, more frequent meetings, and an agenda with a more concrete scope of action.

In terms of further internal organizational reform, the NAM could establish an environmental commission that would scrutinize the issue of ecological degradation and provide advice on the course of action that could be taken by developing countries and other international bodies in the fields of environmental protection and the alleviation of ecological disasters in the Global South.²⁸ Furthermore, NAM could form a specialist Human Rights Committee that could assess the state of human rights in the developing world and, accordingly, set an agenda with proper actions and solutions.²⁹ Establishing a variety of different committees within the organization that could individually respond more appropriately to a range of relevant issues could bring not only greater effectiveness and productivity, but also democracy and equality, to the organization.

The NAM is aware of how organizational restructuring could help in democratizing and improving the efficiency of decision-making processes because it has been a vocal critic of the UN's conservative institutional framework. In this regard, the Movement points out that the UN has been misused by powerful countries that often overlook the interests of the developing world and continue to impose their own rules and ideas. Even though UN membership has grown immensely over the years, the UN Security Council has remained highly exclusive and is still controlled by a small number of powerful countries that can easily overrule even a much larger group of co-operating weaker states. The UN's current decision-making system does not meet, or care about, the needs of developing nations.³⁰ It is undeniable that restructuring the UN could bring more democracy and transparency to the organization.

The Movement continues to advocate for meaningful UN

28 "Relevance of Non-aligned Movement in the New World Order: A Critical Analysis," (n.d), Chapter 6, p.291. Available at: https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/111049/11/11_chapter%206.pdf (Accessed: June 15, 2020).

29 *Ibid.*, p.291.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 292.

institutional reforms because it perceives the UN as “the central and indispensable forum for addressing issues relating to international cooperation for economic development and social progress, peace and security, peaceful settlement of disputes, human rights and the rule of law, based on dialogue, cooperation and consensus-building amongst States.”³¹ For the NAM, the main aim of UN reform would be to transform “the UN development system [to become] more responsive, efficient and effective in its support to developing countries to achieve the internationally agreed development goals.”³² Much-needed UN reform could reshape and democratize the Security Council, a body that is still considered to be the most undemocratic and conservative organ of the UN. Reform could bring adequate expansion, democratization, transparency, accountability, and improved working methods to the Security Council.³³

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Advantages of NAM Membership

Even though the membership criteria are obsolete, liberal, and often violated,³⁴ the developing nations from the Global South could nevertheless gain greater political and economic power by being part of the second largest international organization in the world. The membership standard for joining the NAM has remained almost unaltered since the Movement’s inception. To become a member, a state has to respect and foster the following criteria: an independent, non-aligned foreign policy; non-membership in multilateral military alliances; support for national liberation movements; and the absence of bilateral military agreements or foreign military bases.³⁵ During the

31 Ministerial Meeting of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement, *op. cit.* p.41 (para 119.1.)

32 *Ibid.*, p.41, para 119.2.

33 *Ibid.*, p.41, para 119.6.

34 Shukla, S., “Non-Alignment in the New World Order”, *India Quarterly*, 1995, Vol. 51, No. 1. (January-March), p. 50.

35 Amies, *op. cit.*

course of the NAM's history there have been many challenges regarding its membership policy. The size of the Movement has increased immensely over the years but the enlarged membership has not been followed by proper institutional reform, which has led to vaguer and less effective NAM action plans.³⁶ However, apart from loose membership criteria and the large number of members, many unprivileged nations from the South could gain much more as members of a large international grouping such as the NAM than they could ever do individually.

There is “strength in numbers”, and that is precisely what many developing countries are aiming for when joining large alliances. Weak countries are aware of their limitations and bandwagoning does not always deliver the desired results but, rather, leads to distress, control and dominance by powerful hegemons. Being part of a larger grouping with members in the same or a similar situation could bring more decision-making power to each state individually. Moreover, an organization with more equal members is usually more democratic and tolerant. Enhanced equality based on common characteristics that the majority of members share could reinforce and strengthen the whole organization. The large size and diverse composition of the NAM should not be an issue if the decision-making process undergoes the necessary reforms

in addition to the implementation of UN reform that might bring more democracy and power to weaker, neglected member states.

Although it might seem that the NAM has lost its relevance and validity in the contemporary world since the era of fierce antagonism between the USA and Soviet Union ended in 1991, and there is seemingly nothing left to be non-aligned to anymore, the need for a vocal representative of many developing nations from the Global South is needed today more than ever.

Concluding remarks

Although it might seem that the NAM has lost its relevance and validity in the contemporary world since the era of fierce antagonism between the USA and Soviet Union ended in 1991, and there is seemingly nothing left to be non-aligned to anymore, the need for a vocal representative of many developing nations from the Global South is needed today more than ever. Especially in times when novel relevant challenges require united, global actions and

³⁶ “Relevance of Non-aligned Movement in the New World Order,” *op. cit.*, p. 278.

unresolved issues from the past continue to put pressure on many developing countries, the need for a large international grouping of states is even more evident. Before the Cold War came to an end, the NAM had acted as “the vehicle for developing countries to assert their independence from the competing claims of the two superpowers.”³⁷ In the current unipolar world order that has been affected with a range of new challenges regarding ecology, security, and peace, as well as old issues relating to widespread poverty, inequality and the powerlessness of the Global South, the NAM could act as a beacon of renewed Southern solidarity and an outspoken representative of unprivileged nations. Historically, the Movement has proved that it possesses a valuable ability to overcome internal differences and focus on the mutual interests and values of its members. For instance, it has managed to gather together ideologically opposed countries such as conservative Columbia, leftist Venezuela, pro-Western Malaysia and socialist Cuba.³⁸ Such solidarity within the NAM reinforces partnership and cohesion among its members, which is an important organizational feature in resolving existing and new issues.

The Non-Aligned Movement might have started as a political association in a bipolar world where maintaining and reinforcing hard-won political independence was the primary goal for the post-colonial, undeveloped nations of the South. However, today it has been transformed into a multiplex organization with a broad agenda that targets, in addition to political and socio-economic issues, environmental and security ones, and seeks global collaboration. Further development of South–South cooperation and the North–South dialogue requires a powerful organization that will represent and advocate for developing countries that have been unjustifiably neglected and perceived as less valuable by strong, industrialized nations. With certain institutional changes, NAM could gain more decision-making power within international relations and provide its members a stronger voice in the North–South dialogue. Establishing a permanent Secretariat and special committees that target specific

37 Tharoor, S., “Viewpoint: Is the Non-Aligned Movement relevant today?” *BBC News*, 30 August 2012, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-19408560> (Accessed: June 17, 2020).

38 Gottschalk, *op.cit.*

areas such as ecology and human rights could reinforce and democratize the NAM's institutional framework.

Membership in a large international organization is beneficial for developing countries that would otherwise be more exposed to the pressure and control of powerful countries. Even though some argue that the membership criteria of NAM need reforming and that the considerable number of members makes this organization ineffective, still many nations from the South are too weak and impoverished to negotiate their own interests individually. The Movement provides more effective channels for these nations to express specific challenges and values that otherwise would be discarded if presented separately. The NAM's relevance and validity lies in its incredible size, composition, and tireless struggle for a world order that is based on equality and equity rather than the dominance and control of the few. Institutional reform that introduces a clearer organizational structure and rules; includes and promotes relevant new and existing topics; and improves internal and external cooperation would establish a path along which NAM could concurrently regain its "old" reputation and respond effectively to the new challenges of the post-Cold War world order.