

The Article

The ‘neo–non–aligned’ nations: are they our friends in need?



by [DAVID HOWELL](#) | [@LORDHOWELL](#)

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The non-aligned are back with us again. As the world’s analysts assess who stands where amongst the nations on the Ukraine horror, it is the non-aligned category that increasingly seems to dominate.

This is not what President Biden, or other Western leaders, say, or hope for, when they speak of the world being united against Russia’s unprovoked aggression. Sadly it is not.

As the outgoing Director of Chatham House, Sir Robin Niblett, reminded us [here](#) in a brilliant farewell speech last month on “Living with a Divided World”, only 39 countries are actually imposing any sanctions on Russia over its behaviour, out of a global total of 191. Of the rest, while a handful openly support Russia, with China in the lead, the vast majority refuse to take sides or become involved. They are, in Niblett’s phrase, the “neo-non-aligned”.

This category is easily the global majority by population, who want to be in nobody’s sphere of influence — political, military or cultural — and just use their best efforts and agility to take the most they can from either camp. The grouping also includes more than half of the supposedly like-minded 56 nation Commonwealth by population – a disappointing turn-out to which we will come below. So much for global solidarity against the most flagrant and ugly breach of international law of recent times.

Of course, there is nothing at all new about this non-aligned category. The 20th century knew all about the non-aligned, with 29 nations meeting at Bandung, under Indonesian chairmanship, in 1955. There they declared firm neutrality in the Cold War and the Communism-versus-free world confrontation, to the alleged fury of the US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who saw failure to oppose the Red menace as mortal sin.

But today's non-alignment is on a different scale and has an entirely different meaning. For one thing is not connected to the ideological divide which wracked the 20th century and defined the two worlds in collision so clearly. This is no neat line-up of the democracies against the centralist systems, or between capitalism and communism. Major countries considered to be democracies, like India, Brazil, Indonesia or South Africa are in the non-aligned camp. They are now in the company of other distinctly democracy-free regimes, such as Vietnam, with its odd, category-defying pattern of rampant capitalism with technocratic socialism, or Egypt, which began its revolution with one dictator and ended it with another, or the Saudis and several Gulf states (members of OPEC, let it be noted).

For another thing, the ranks of the non-aligned carry infinitely more weight and influence than their 20th century predecessors, thanks to the digital age with its powerful and ubiquitous decentralising impact in a now multi-polar world. National identities can not only be more loudly and insistently reasserted in the new cats-cradle of connectivity and instant and unceasing communication. Today's non-aligned also have new instruments of force and compulsion at their disposal, about which their forebears could only dream.

Thanks to new technology, combined with the legal authority given to every state by the UN Law of the Sea Convention of 1992 (and strengthened further in 1997), from the largest to the tiniest island community, every sovereign entity is provided with interference power over maritime movements and control over sea resources in large surrounding areas (12 miles of direct sovereign control and rights to all natural resources over a 200 nautical miles of surrounding shelf).

Not only that, but a small piece of territory can be the lift-off point above the earth's surface for intense aerial surveillance and defence, via rapidly

advancing drone innovation, and indeed via GPS systems for rivalries extending into space itself — the next main contested area, so we are told, of power and influence, both hard and soft.

Beijing's world policy planners have been far quicker to grasp this change of strategic significance than sleepy Western diplomacy, as exemplified either by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in London, or the State Department in Washington. Hence the surprise in both institutions at the sudden discovery of progressive encroachment by the Chinese into one smaller island or coastal state after another, stretching across all the continents from the South Seas to Central Asia, to Africa, east and west, to the Caribbean and Latin America.

News from one of the latest to attract interest, the Solomon Islands, that the Chinese were seeking a full naval base there, sent officials from both Washington and London scurrying to find out what they had missed. They found pictures of the Solomon Islands PM walking beside the Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang, in front of smart ranks of Chinese troops and a community feeling of general neglect by the West, and especially by its neighbour Australia, despite being a realm within the Commonwealth with the British Queen as head of state. They also found a clear local preference for China's pragmatic and supportive presence, versus hectoring and lecturing from America.

All this is part of a pattern described by one authority as China "hoovering up the developing world". It may not work always for China, with its hegemonic ambitions, any more than for America and the West. But what one can say definitely is that it is in these environs that the power game is now being played out, and just where general ignorance, disinterest plus condescension can be fatal. Friendship, like a plant, needs constant attention to flourish. Otherwise others move in.

This mirrors almost exactly what is happening throughout the 56 nations of the Commonwealth – the network that seemed not very interesting to UK strategic planners in the pre-digital age, or the age of blocs, treaties and alliances. Suddenly, the planners and policy-makers find themselves in a new age, where it is precisely this unstructured, voluntary type of association, linking peoples, professions and interests at every level via connectivity, as much as, or more than, governments, which offers far the

best means for Britain to retain its exceptionalism and transmit its undoubted soft, hard and smart power influence across the planet.

Why has it proved so difficult to log into the new situation? Some still argue that you can't keep up with everybody, although with the help of the internet and Zoom, that is exactly what you can now do, every week, every day. Other more well-versed diplomats would protest that they have long understood exactly the demise of the old imperial hierarchy and the need to replace it with an almost apologetic stance both inside and outside the Commonwealth family. That indeed maybe part of the trouble. Having gone through the various phases of decolonisation the needle may be stuck, or the web page jammed, on the need never to say or do anything which could be called neo-colonialist or interfering.

Instead, goes the conventional wisdom, play it safe and do nothing too specific in that area. Focus instead on other interests, such as being at the heart of Europe (now a cancelled cause) or keeping the US special relationship burning bright – also not going too well. Exceptions always to be made for the undoubted affection for the Queen, (and, we hope, for the continuing monarchy), and for the highly popular and well organised Commonwealth Games.

Either way this abject failure to keep on side what was once labelled the developing world in all its complexity and variety, and to let the non-alignment mindset settle in, comes at a heavy price. In the current crisis-filled landscape confronting Western nations, the “hottest” two issues currently on the front burner are the raging inflationary infection, rising towards fever level, and the looming climate violence as greenhouse gases keep climbing, and fail dismayingly slow to respond to best Net Zero endeavours.

On the immediate inflation front soaring energy prices are the main driver – prices which were already accelerating as the world recovered from Covid long before the Ukraine invasion. Russia's nasty games with both oil and gas supplies to Europe have put the process on steroids. The rush of recipients, (mainly Germany) to combine this, in a jumble of confused timescales, with longer term energy security and permanent escape from dependence on Russian oil and gas, which until recently seemed so safe, has added to the price and supply mayhem.

The glaringly obvious short-term remedy to a very immediate crisis of real suffering and deprivation would be to turn to the world's other main oil and gas producers for a burst of additional output, for which the capacity does exist, despite denials.

The plain economic sense would be both to restrain demand, as quickly as practicable, and to expand supply fast. But it is mostly the non-aligned states which again lie across this path. OPEC overall does not want to antagonise their Russian friends, (although some less non-aligned OPEC members, such as Kuwait, would like to do more to help), and another giant producer, Iran, is of course under Western sanctions.

If the JCPO Nuclear Agreement could be sorted out, Iran could release another 1 million barrels per day of oil straight away. Since a reported 82% of US Democrats and 67% of all US voters want this to happen now, it clearly ought to be a high Western priority. The hope must be that, despite the interregnum in London, the talks with Iran in Vienna on the issue, just about to resume, will be given the maximum positive push.

Meanwhile, as long as Moscow sees two-thirds of the world's nations in non-aligned tolerance towards its appalling excesses, and happy to help skirt round Western sanctions, Russian atrocities in Ukraine will continue, the energy supply fears will persist and the consequent headline inflation, permeating through the entire UK production system, as through many others, will stay high. A good example of Russia's supply of "Get Out of Jail Free" cards is what happens in Singapore, a Commonwealth member, which plays a key part in the global transshipment of Russian exports, by-passing Western trade obstacles. All of this comes at a heavy price for the West.

In the wake of persisting high inflation figures, there inevitably ensues wage-earner fury at impending huge real wage cuts, impossible cost-of-living increases and higher mortgage payments. Angry street protests and "Can't Pay, Won't Pay" revolts of the *Gilets Jaunes* variety cannot be far away, along with rising political instability, lack of confidence and consequent lack of investment.

But there is more.

The great world energy transition required, and promised at COP 26, to stop emissions inexorably rising, can only happen with the full cooperation of China, along with most of coal-burning Central Asia, the entire Indian sub-continent and numerous African states — in short, most of the non-aligned world.

Getting even a modicum of that cooperation was always going to be difficult, and made no easier by the constant well-meaning chorus, which none other than the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has now joined, that the global warming story is all the fault of the advanced industrialised nations, who put so much carbon into the atmosphere in the first place. They, it is insisted, should now pay up – at a price probably in the trillions – and certainly many times the non-appearing \$100 billion originally promised by richer countries..

What Archbishop Welby says, backed by a chorus of developing countries, may or may not be apportioning the historic blame correctly, but it is not going to check the climate's downward spiral, or the expansion of greenhouse gases, for one instant. We have just reached the point where radical new initiatives are now plainly required to reinforce the Net Zero endeavour, and extract carbon from the atmosphere on a truly global scale, faster than the world is pumping it in. This is the kind of out-of-the-box step now being called for by the UNFCCC, by increasingly desperate decarbonising campaigners and worked on by the best brains, such as scientists at Imperial College in London.

But we now learn that China, the Hamlet of this drama, will not be there on stage, nor will many of the growing non-aligned camp.

This is because Chinese climate cooperation with America has now been officially withdrawn with a great fanfare, thanks to Nancy Pelosi and the Chinese hyper-reaction to her presence in Taiwan. So here comes the next great test for the non-aligned ranks. Having stood aside, or acquiesced, while Russia tries to murder its small neighbour, where will they be when China follows suit and starts to throttle Taiwan by blockading it – a process for which there have been long preparations and which may have already begun?

Or if and when America intervenes with weapons, warships and aircraft, and China steps up to full scale invasion of the island in response (as many predict), will it be the same silence from the non-aligned, all round — which China will of course see as the green light to press ahead?

Or will we see a genuinely united world at last standing firm for the rule of international law, upholding of sovereignty, and the cause of accountable government of some sort?

With the non-aligned ranks growing fast, all this seems just a dream.

President Biden, in a highly inappropriate phrase, has called his country's task "winning the 21st century". But if the implication here is that there is an American-led sphere of influence to be recaptured for a superior version of the rule of law and renewed American hegemony, that is just what will drive ever more adherents into the non-aligned camp. They simply no longer see the choice or the picture that way. As Robin Niblett remarks in his Chatham House speech, they see double standards on both sides. The difference now is that they are not only in a position merely to say "a plague on both your houses" to the two giants, as at Bandung, but to act to defend and pursue their own interests with far more effect.

Among other things that will make China's "historic" Taiwan mission easier, and the shock to the whole global supply pattern bigger, bearing in mind that Taiwan supplies a huge percentage of the micro circuits which now make every aspect of life in advanced societies tick.

Washington's error has been to cling to exalted notions of world leadership when in a network world that phase of American primacy has passed. Its undoubted power now lies in a mosaic of partnerships, constantly refreshed, and always respectful, of other identities and other sovereignties, not in hegemonic war against a perceived rival for world leadership. That was the fatal misconception in Vietnam sixty years ago, ending in total disaster.

The UK's errors have been, first, to fail to accept that, as America changes, so should the special relationship and, second, to take its eye off the one ready-made network which gives it unique entrée to the neo-non-aligned world on fair and friendly terms — namely the Commonwealth.

It may be not too late to retrieve this kind of exceptionalism. Because the Chinese will not succeed everywhere, because fences with European neighbours can be mended, because there is still some residual Commonwealth support for Britain, because we have the reinforcement of the eternally friendly Japan, the nation can still worm its way belatedly into the heart of Asian scene of enrichment and advanced technology, where the next fifty years of global growth will mostly occur and the UK must be.

On the political Left, as the pages of the *New Statesman* confirm, some still have difficulty in seeing the UK's potential new story and world role taking shape. Others persist in looking back to a UK future inside a somehow modernised EU, seeing all the talk of Indo-Pacific engagement and evolving Commonwealth networking, as a distraction.

But others again, including a handful of politicians, have closed the book on Dean Acheson's jibe about having lost an Empire and not found a role. They are beginning to see new shapes for the UK coming through the mist of world instability and upheaval.

What about the UK itself mixing with the neo-non-aligned? Is that going too far for the Mother of Parliaments, the land that "sober-suited Freedom chose", and champion of the rule of law (most of the time, at least)? Well, perhaps. But there should be no illusions that the philosophical foundations of the UK's past and present existence, and of the ideological battles of the past 200 years or so, are being given a thorough shaking. The ranks of the non-aligned are growing and pushing ahead. Perhaps it is they, rather than a divided West, or an over-reaching China, who are now setting the pace.