

# The Nehru Years



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An International History of  
Indian Non-Alignment

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 juggernaut

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# 1

## Introduction

When speaking of politics, do we think of non-alignment? If not, why is that the case? What have we forgotten about non-alignment and what do we remember incorrectly? What were the conceptual premises of non-alignment, what were its critical, liberatory, normative commitments? What was the relevance of non-alignment when it emerged and what does it tell us about the international relations of the twentieth century? This book offers qualitatively new ways to tackle these questions.

I situate non-alignment in a long tradition of thinking about politics and war as transformative of world order. Both politics and war are frames of analysis for non-alignment, which is fundamentally concerned with political thought, utopia, war, political ruin and the end of a possible future. The umbilical force that ties politics and war together has a grip on world order and hence, has always been of primary concern to non-alignment. Critique, as a method, is also foundational to non-aligned politics, so, in the first instance, the book is devoted to interrogating what critique does for non-aligned politics. This book will present non-alignment as critical of both politics and war and thus, also critical of world order. Rescuing politics from ideology,

globalizing ways in which we think about war, embracing varied ideas of world order – these were urgent and compelling tasks for twentieth-century political thinkers from India. This book will also foreground this groundswell of modern international thought.

In this history, empire and the nation-state present as competing frames of analysis. This book presents non-alignment as a critical political vision, so there is a focus on the sources of this critique. This brings us to a discussion of the non-aligned engagement with the problem of empire. This book historicizes empire as a force with particular attributes in specific locations and time periods. Within that frame, I discuss non-alignment as a politics of anticolonial resistance. I argue that non-aligned critique has its origins in the critique of empire and cannot be fully understood outside of that intellectual practice. In order to develop a vision of postcolonial future, it was necessary for anticolonial individuals to explore the concept of the nation-state, also a key theme in the development of non-aligned thought. Even though it is true that non-aligned solidarities were often also built across national lines, it is also equally significant that the nation-state as a political formation was adopted and celebrated within non-aligned thought as a mode of political expression. In non-aligned thinking, relations between nation-states could concretize the links between multiple intellectual traditions that offered responses to the challenge of colonialism. Within this frame, I discuss non-alignment as a politics of aspiration. Consequently, the book is a history of non-alignment in the contexts of anticolonialism, decolonization and postcolonial diplomacy, which are treated as distinct and overlapping historical periods but also as modes of theorizing world politics through resistance and ambition.

What conceptual work does the idea of non-alignment do? Non-alignment was a political vision built through historical consciousness. So, its first task was to identify other political visions,



their historical origins, their manifestos. Any political vision seeks to identify pathways to survival and success in shaping the world order. Of course, this leads to questions about why political projects fail, and what projects are not recognized as political to begin with – why some political visions become sanctioned, and many others don't. A failed political project is significant because it contains within it the seeds of an alternative political imaginary and possibilities of regeneration. In the twentieth century, a racial rule of difference attempted to foreclose political imagination to large swathes of peoples who were colonized. The anticolonial thought that arose as a consequence of and response to imperial power was then subjected to repeated erasure through historical narrative. This erasure of political thought has turned into an absence in International Relations theory that mustn't be viewed as real. Anticolonial thinkers are not historically absent but have been whited-out of International Relations theory in a process of selective redaction. This study of non-alignment is attuned to these histories, is built on them and privileges them. Non-aligned thought also allows us to escape empire, not just in its colonialist, European or Eurocentric forms, but by opening up a space to move beyond critiques of Eurocentrism<sup>1</sup>. The campaign to besmirch radical politics is much more cynical than can simply be grasped by only calling it "Eurocentric". Decolonizing International Relations theory should involve recovering older traditions of decolonial political thought. These traditions are exciting because they present a sustained engagement with questions of empire without being beholden to the idea of empire as the only terrain on which political thought could be given shape.

A history of non-alignment gives us a prescient view of politics and war as fundamentally constitutive of the world order, but also as provocations to think of world reordering. For non-alignment, politics and war as frames of analysis precede questions of empire

and the nation-state, which are treated as objects of inquiry<sup>2</sup>. Thus, such a history shows us how political thought from the colonies can be profitably read as both – subverting empire in all its forms while also refusing the preponderance of empire as a structure for analytical thinking. Despite its preoccupation with the colonial question, non-alignment is able to step out of empire's long shadow by drawing attention to the international. Non-alignment is pertinent as modern international thought as well as an internationalist political project. I argue that the nation-state is a central actor in both imperial and internationalist ideas of world order, so it is consistently central to non-aligned thought. I discuss through ideas of Asia, Europe and Africa how ideas of the international were developed within non-aligned thinking. An internationalist vision drove the postcolonial diplomacy of newly decolonized nation-states that had become independent through anticolonial resistance. The path between a colonial past and an international future was charted through spirited diplomatic practice, which propelled nation-states into a dynamic present. Thus, the study of non-aligned diplomacy could ignite a rethinking of ways in which nation-states approach the international.

One of the anxieties driving this book was the ahistoricism of narratives about non-alignment and attendant inaccuracies. So, it was natural that the book began by suggesting alternative ways to study non-alignment. This book is an international history of Indian non-alignment because one of its core themes is the relation between India and the international. It is interesting to make India the site of political ideas for two reasons – engaging with Indian political thought from the twentieth century revises ways in which we understand the nation-state and the international as contiguous concepts but not necessarily in oppositional or harmonious terms. The story of twentieth-century Indian non-alignment is the story of unsettled theories of how India inhabited the world. In an opening chapter, the

political thoughts of Rabindranath Tagore, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru serve as an origin point for thinking about non-aligned politics. In the political thoughts of these three thinkers, the relation between India and the world is not entirely reconciled. These thinkers have disputed ways of relating the Indian political self with that of the larger international system. Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru are often reduced to some form of liberal thought. In this book, I will treat them as presenting radical ideas of India in the world. Their visions are germane to this discussion also because they are also incompatible with one another – their debates serve us well in shattering the myth of a monolithic Indian political tradition, and even less so, a liberal one. Shared commitments in this tradition existed in the realm of anticolonial thought which is vital to the theorization of the Indian nation-state in the international system, removed as it were from competing imperial-colonial ideas of the international. Moreover, for these Indian thinkers, the anticolonial had to be treated as a political actor, not only as a historical category and so, I suggest that Indian anticolonialism presented radical philosophic possibilities and widened the scope for twentieth-century politics beyond liberal internationalism.

I have discussed the nation-state emerging out of empire and expanding into the international as pivotal to India's non-aligned politics. But what about Indian non-alignment and war? For this, I turn to the person of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. India's colonial experience and the years right before independence in 1947, when India occupied a unique positionality between a colony and a nation, were a particularly generative experience for Nehru. In fact, even after India had become independent of British rule, anticolonialism remained central to Nehru's political thought. The agitation for independence was a formidable act of political agency. It became even more so after 1947,

when India gained freedom, but most historical accounts only concede Nehru that radicalism as long as India was colonized. It was as though at independence, Nehru personified in him the State so starkly that he was not allowed to be a larger source for ideas. This has led to all sorts of distortions in interpreting his thought, so much so that writing on Nehru suffers equally at the hands of sympathizers and detractors. His foremost biographers, in an effort to rescue him from the charge of realpolitik, let it be believed that he was simply bewildered at the excesses of the post-war world. Proponents of this school of thought rely too heavily on Nehru's rhetorical practice to the extent that much meaning has been drained from his writings by selective reading intended to emphasize his liberalism. There is little understanding of his deployment of rhetoric as a certain kind of performance of anticolonialism. On the flip side, a focus on his rhetoric rather than on his ideas has allowed conservatives to endlessly pillory his liberal, and consequently for them, fantastical politics. Thus, even though criticism of Nehru's writings abounds on both sides, it offers not much more than a manipulation of his thought. I suggest that a most serious casualty of this approach has been a deep study of the Nehru period in India's international history<sup>3</sup>.

Nehru is not a thinker for our century – as this book will demonstrate, his ideas belonged very much to the previous century, but the period he was alive in was itself illuminated by his thought, so he requires our attention even if we were to shed light on that past, with negligible lessons for the present. The persuasive hold of his politics in his own time cannot be denied. Indeed, his Olympian writing offers a way to understand Indian resistance to borrowed theories. Nehru located India in political traditions and offered up large themes, not least of which are his meditations on war. This line of thought runs through the pantheon of the influential political thinkers of that period, but I suggest that Nehru's use of particular historical ideas was intended to

galvanize Indians towards the world and to arouse the world to India's power. India's rise to power in the mid-twentieth century is predicated in Nehru's political thought on India's theorization of war. This is not unworthy of deeper exploration, especially for widening the scope of International Relations as a discipline. Yet, attempting to locate Nehru's body of work in the larger canon of International Relations presents difficulties and raises questions about the constitution of that canon. The broader disciplines of history and political philosophy have made scant effort to situate Nehru in a political tradition – a lack felt equally by figures such as Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who too are unable to escape the fiction of the seer and the saint. Such abridged readings of twentieth-century Indian thinkers have also served to domesticate them, their cosmopolitanism and worldliness notwithstanding. In the opening chapter of the book, I write about Tagore and Gandhi as forebearers of an intellectual lineage, put into practice by Nehru. This political expression united the role of the anticolonial, discomfort with ideological politics, a critique of the nation-state with the imagination of an Afro-Asian space and resistance to the Cold War – ideas that come together and not always cohesively or unproblematically in Nehru's non-aligned politics. Nehru's anxieties for what extraordinary circumstances war could bring, and the recognition that any circumstance surrounding a war *was* extraordinary – this resistance to the spectre of war is central to the non-aligned political project.

Perhaps that is why non-alignment is primarily thought of in Cold War terms. The first order of the book is to disrupt that assumption. For this, I turn to the fin de siècle origins of non-aligned thinking. I show that non-alignment is anti-imperial politics that predated and outlived the Cold War. Second, even though we cannot only think of non-alignment in the framework of the Cold War, non-alignment helps us to think about the Cold War in broader terms. A history of

non-alignment is also a history of the Cold War. Naturally, as the concept of non-alignment was fundamental to India's international relations, it is prolifically used in the writing of India's political history, particularly in histories of the early years after independence. Even so, there has yet to emerge a serious discussion of what it has meant for India to be non-aligned. Why have Cold War histories been written for so long without a discussion of these themes? If now, more than ever before, public life depends on what we remember of the past, then why do we remember it so poorly? Primarily, this is a function of the origin myths surrounding non-alignment. There is extensive disagreement amongst scholars about its originary sources – I argue that it was the political landscape in India at the turn of the century that inaugurated non-alignment. This also means, rather more importantly, that I refuse the view that non-alignment is an artefact of the post-war period. Rather, I hold the view that the early life of the idea was an iterative process, with waves of unmaking and articulating political thought in the first stage, and that in later stages, the emphasis was firmly on the uptake of political action. These two phases roughly began in the late nineteenth century and came to a crescendo with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The study of early Indian non-alignment in the period right after Indian independence has also become excessively braided with the Cold War. Mostly, this is a function of an uncomplicated view of non-alignment as Indian foreign policy, or rather, as not much else. This book treats non-alignment as a riposte to ideological politics. The Cold War was a period of time that coincided with the emergence of independent India in world politics. But it was also a system that was in direct contradiction to the kind of international politics that India sought to practice. It constituted the moment in which ideology politics became the dominant form that world politics took. Indian non-alignment was predicated on the belief that as both blocs led by the two superpowers were practising a form of ideological politics,

they had more commonalities than differences, and were thus falsely opposed. A study of Indian diplomacy from this time offers an empirical corrective to the view that the Cold War was a competition between two antithetical political positions. At best, this history recognizes interventions by Indian political thought on world politics; at the very least, it allows for an escape from thinking of International History as national narratives locked into place by the Cold War allegiances of their respective states. Indeed, global histories of this period are increasingly concerned with India as an international actor; histories of modern India should also feature India as an international actor. This widens the scope of modern Indian history, but also of the study of the postcolonial condition of India. The Indian experience shows that the global struggle against the Cold War as well as national and transnational struggles for decolonization were intrinsically linked. Much of the history of the Cold War is thus, first, the history of decolonization. Such an examination of non-aligned politics also yields dividends for the writing of Cold War history itself, particularly in interrogating the narrative modes in which these histories are written. The idea of the Long Peace, for instance, is enraging and exhausting because of its blindness to the Indian experience of the Cold War. The Cold War sometimes stayed cold because of the enormous and world-altering contribution of Afro-Asian nation-states in regulating great power politics. Non-alignment provided a recess when capitalism and socialism were attempting to outweigh each other, even though capitalism already had, in the 1940s, pretensions to outlasting socialism.

Political scientists and historians in the 1960s looked to the political successes that non-alignment has enjoyed as an idea, often writing analytically sophisticated studies, locating non-alignment in international history, politics and law. Sadly, this approach was buried in the following decades by the relentless cataloguing of

its failures. Yet, one has to only look to the history of India at the United Nations (UN) to observe the innovativeness with which non-alignment was reproduced in that site. The founding of the UN brought new possibilities for transformative politics, and India occupied a leading role in that process through diplomacy and peacekeeping – both projects that deserve histories of their own but are also indispensable to this larger narrative. Descriptions of non-alignment are often inattentive to this aspect, or significantly underplay its originality. *The Nehru Years* is an international history of Indian non-alignment from the founding period following India's independence in 1947 and is wrapped up in 1964, with Nehru's death, signalling the end of the first long period of independent India's international relations. In the book, I use non-alignment/non-aligned politics/non-aligned political action to denote a particular understanding of world politics, a willingness to engage with this politics and the actual action itself.

The ways in which we think of both the political philosophy driving non-alignment and the historical manifestations of that politics are so closely intertwined that the chapters in the book are organized to make those connections more explicit. The chapter titles in the book are borrowed from Nehru's descriptions of the events under study. They are doubly interesting because they are signal terms marking the political environment in which Nehru thought non-alignment was operating. When he said, "India ploughs a lonely furrow", he was identifying non-alignment as isolating India, an effect Nehru sought to overcome through diplomatic practice. The Korean War took many surprising turns, but the armistice negotiations quickly fell into a lull; so unexpected was an agreement between the two superpowers that Nehru called it an "outbreak of peace". In 1956, as events proceeded quicker than non-alignment could reconcile with, Nehru spoke of the inability of foreign policy to distinguish between right and wrong



under “the fog of war”. Finally, as Indian troops sustained casualties in the Congo, and African states were estranged from Indian involvement in that crisis, we recall Nehru’s pronouncement decades ago that a “patched-up unity” only produced “bad ethics and worse policy”.

The opening chapter, Chapter 2, is a conceptual history of Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru’s international and political thought. The historical chapters that follow are built around Nehru’s ideas of Asia, Europe and Africa, which offer specific ideas of the international. Chapter 3 is a study of India’s involvement in the Korean War, particularly in the later stages of that war and in bringing it to a close through the successful negotiation of an armistice agreement between 1950 and 1953. A history of India’s role in the negotiations following the Korean War is insightful because it outlines India’s mediatory diplomacy. Next, in Chapter 4, I discuss the year 1956 as bringing together two crises that coincided in time almost to the hour but were starkly different in their causes and consequences. In the Suez Canal Crisis, India again assumed a mediatory role. The anticolonial fervour of the crisis and Indian empathy with the Egyptian cause did not stop India from mediating with both sides, contributing to the closing of the crisis. On the other hand, in the case of Hungary, Nehru exposed himself to severe criticism, both international and domestic, for India’s delayed and ambiguous response to Soviet actions in suppressing the revolution. Both these events are discussed in conjunction as an attempt to read them as a discursive moment, one in which Indian non-alignment as an approach to world politics encountered its first challenge. The next crisis we discuss goes even further away from the critical stance adopted by non-alignment in the early 1950s. In Chapter 5, I discuss the Congo Crisis, one where India was involved between 1960 and 1964. It is my contention that the advent of peacekeeping and the UN’s reliance on India’s troop contribution for its continued survival and success in the Congo exposed India to rapid alienation from

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African member-states and led to the loss of Indian lives. Reversals to India's foreign policy were soon overshadowed by problems on India's borders with China and eventually, the Sino-Indian War. The epilogue offers some final remarks on how we may approach non-alignment critically, and on lessons learnt from a diminished political vision.