

# Assessing Azerbaijan's Chairmanship of the Non-Alignment Movement

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*"Geography is Destiny."*

– Napoléon Bonaparte (attributed)

On 6 November 2022, Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry called on—successfully, as it turns out—the participants of the COP-27 climate summit in Sharm El Sheikh “to discuss the pressing issue of funding arrangements needed to deal with existing gaps, responding to ‘loss and damage.’” In this way, the strategic agenda of COP-27 came into direct conceptual contact with one of the main objectives advanced by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) from the onset of Azerbaijan's chairmanship of the Organization. As a matter of fact, the final outcome document of the eighteenth NAM Summit held in Baku in October 2019 twice mentioned the critical issue of compensation for the irreversible “loss and damage” to developing countries, including NAM member states, brought about by developed countries in the past and continuing into the present in the context of human-induced climate change (by and large, developing countries in general and NAM member states in particular have contributed the least to climate change; “loss and damage” is thus seen by its proponents as addressing the inequalities behind the climate crisis).

It is against this background that an overall assessment can be made of Azerbaijan NAM chairmanship, which celebrated its third anniversary on 26 October 2022. During this time, Baku has actively promoted several important initiatives, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, raising the importance of NAM to a new level.

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Moreover, the relevance of NAM increased after the outbreak of the armed conflict in Ukraine in February 2022. A multi-layered discussion about the concept of non-alignment and a non-aligned posture has entered the agenda of a majority of UN member states, which are now asking themselves the question of what is better (literally, which way is safer for the protection of state sovereignty and independence): to be part of a large military-political alliance like NATO, or to remain neutral in international relations—especially in conflicts involving great powers?

The experience of Azerbaijan demonstrates that maintaining a neutral and non-bloc status in the modern world is an optimal strategy for young states that do not possess nuclear weapons. At the same time, it does not exclude the very fact that Baku defends its interests and principles in the international arena, a cornerstone of which is respect for the territorial integrity of all UN member states.

At the same time, the Azerbaijani side manages to maintain a balance of power in the region and have friendly relations with its three most powerful neighbors (i.e., Iran, Russia, and Türkiye) as well as conduct mutually-beneficial and trusting cooperation with such poles of global power as the United States, the European Union, and China.

By and large, the concept of non-alignment is a model for the prudent conduct of an effective foreign policy whilst also helping to avoid conflicts and build strong relations with a wide variety of states, including even those that may be in conflict with one another.

## *The Concept of Non-Alignment in the Modern World*

The term ‘non-alignment’ was first used at the United Nations in the context of a refusal by two of NAM’s later co-founders, India, and Yugoslavia, to associate themselves with any of the belligerents involved in the Korean War. The concept of non-alignment, in other words, is explicitly rooted in a free and active choice by sovereign states to put the interests of their countries above the interests of other states, blocs, and alliances operating in the international system after World War II. Its necessity arose in response to the appearance of two centers (or two poles) of power, which produced a novel global arrangement characterized by an all-encompassing rivalry between two superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union). This came to be known as ‘bipolarity.’ The urgency of a third option began to increase in the first decade and a half of the cold War era due to the emergence of newly-independent sovereign states in various parts of the developing world in the era of decolonization and the fact that their leaders saw no advantage in aligning themselves on the basis of ideology or the balance of power with one or another of the superpowers.

Simply put, against the backdrop of the intensification of the ideological confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, many states preferred to remain neutral and not join either camp. But this was not a passive neutrality characterized by isolationism or withdrawal. An early attempt at systemizing this concept was made by Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Zhu Enlai of China in 1954 in codifying the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; and peaceful co-existence. These can be said to constitute the sublimation of a strict interpretation of the Westphalian norms of state sovereignty.

Another preliminary step in the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement took place in April 1955 at a conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, with the participation of 29 countries from Asia and Africa. The concluding document from this meeting listed ten principles of peaceful coexistence and international relations. These include respect for human rights; the principles and purposes of the UN Charter; respect for the territorial integrity of states; the recognition of the equality of all races and nations; the refusal to intervene and interfere in the internal affairs of states; the renunciation of aggression against the territorial integrity or political independence of states; and the settlement of international disputes by peaceful means.

Then, in July 1956, India's Nehru and Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser were hosted by Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito at his Brijuni island residence to sign a declaration that signaled the intention of the three men to forge ahead with the establishment of some sort of institutional arrangement revolving around the nascent doctrine of non-alignment. One of the document's clauses reads as follows: "Peace cannot be achieved with separation, but with the aspiration towards collective security in global terms and expansion of freedom, as well as terminating the domination of one country over another."

All these threads came together in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in September 1961 during the first Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries. The summit's resulting Belgrade Declaration called for the abolishment of the "old order based on the domination [...] of colonial-imperialism and neo-colonialism in all their manifestations." Doing so, the document asserted, would establish a "new order based on cooperation between nations, founded on freedom, equality, and social justice for the promotion of prosperity." This would need to involve the acceleration and enhancement of the development and collective self-reliance of developing countries by strengthening and expanding South-South technical cooperation in the context of international development cooperation. The key objective of NAM was said to be the achievement of sustained and sustainable people-centered development and to enable developing countries to become equal partners in international relations.

In 1961, 25 countries participated in the Belgrade NAM Summit. Today, NAM gathers together 120 countries. It is the world's largest international organization after the United Nations itself, which counts 193 member states.

As Oxford University's Ngaire Woods notes, non-alignment “enables smaller countries to advance their values and interests without tethering themselves unconditionally to a superpower’s international policies and preferences. For the superpowers, this is challenging. Blind allegiance is more comfortable and allows them to project greater power.”

In parallel with this, today NAM is an important platform for states that have contradictions in bilateral relations and, moreover, are in a de facto state of conflict like, for example, Iran and Saudi Arabia or Pakistan and India.

### *Azerbaijan and the Non-Aligned Movement*

Since the very beginning of the restoration of its independence in December 1991, Azerbaijan has adhered to a non-bloc foreign policy posture: Baku has never been involved in the activities of any military alliance. Thus, in April 1999, Baku refused to sign a protocol on the extension of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty, which in May 2002 was transformed into a full-fledged international organization, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

An independent course has allowed and still allows Azerbaijan to maintain a balance in the region and, being encircled by a variety of players, not to enter into confrontation with any of its large neighbors. One of the most striking examples, of course, is the unique balance it maintains between Israel and Iran, despite, of course, a huge number of contradictions and disputable issues. In fact, Baku is believed to be the only actor in the world (perhaps along with Moscow only) that simultaneously maintains good ties with both Tel Aviv and Tehran.

In May 2011, Azerbaijan codified its non-aligned posture when it received the unanimous support of NAM member states for admission into the Organization as a full member. At that time, one of the key issues for Baku was drawing the attention of NAM members to the occupation of 20 percent of its sovereign territory by Armenian forces. Unlike Armenia, which still has only an observer status in NAM, Azerbaijan has repeatedly managed to promote its interests in this influential forum, which comprises two-thirds of UN member states representing 55 percent of the world’s population.

Thus, in May 2012, following a meeting of the NAM Coordinating Bureau at the ministerial level meeting in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, a clause related to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict was included in the final document. The states participating in NAM were unanimous that this conflict should be resolved on the basis of respect for the territorial integrity and the non-use of force against the territorial integrity and the inviolability of the internationally recognized borders.

In May 2014, in Algeria, following the results of the seventeenth NAM Ministerial Session, a final document was adopted, in the paragraph 421 of which the participants

of the event expressed regret that the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains unresolved, despite the existence of various UN Security Council resolutions. In addition, in this document, all NAM member states expressed support for the resolution of the conflict in full respect of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

## *Azerbaijan's NAM Chairmanship*

A new page in Azerbaijan's membership in NAM was written during the seventeenth NAM Summit, which took place in Porlamar, Venezuela, in September 2016. Then, in the final document, it was decided to transfer the chairmanship of the organization in 2019-2022 to Azerbaijan. In addition, in the final statement of NAM, the commitment of the member states of the Organization to the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan was once again emphasized.

In October 2019, Baku hosted the eighteenth Summit of NAM Heads of State and Government. During the Baku Summit, the heads of state and government expressed regret that, despite the existence of relevant UN Security Council resolutions, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains unresolved and threatens international and regional peace and security. The same document called on the parties to continue negotiations to resolve the conflict on the basis of the principles of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of UN member states. Finally, after the Baku Summit, the chairmanship of the Movement for 2019-2022 officially passed to Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani side has accordingly conducted itself quite effectively in its NAM chairmanship, especially given the fact that Baku's term heading up the Organization corresponded to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.

Thus, on 4 May 2020, at the initiative of the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, a videoconference was organized by the contact group of NAM member countries to combat the pandemic. The meeting was attended by 25 heads of state and government of NAM member states, one vice president, one deputy prime minister, and 11 ministers. As a result of the meeting, a declaration was adopted and a NAM working group to combat the COVID-19 pandemic was established. The team was tasked with developing a single database that eventually reflected the main medical, social, and humanitarian needs of NAM member states in the fight against the pandemic.

Again, at the initiative of Azerbaijan, a high-level segment of the special session of the UN General Assembly on combating the COVID-19 pandemic was organized on 3-4 December 2020. At this event, 37 heads of state and 40 heads of governments as well as 67 ministers took the virtual floor. "Since the outbreak of pandemic, Azerbaijan is in close contact with the World Health Organization. We are grateful for its valuable recommendations and sending its specialists in the early days of the pandemic. The WHO named Azerbaijan an example in the fight against the pandemic. We have made

two voluntary contributions to the WHO [and], to date, Azerbaijan has provided humanitarian and financial assistance to more than 30 countries,” Aliyev said.

On 23 March 2021, within the framework of the forty-sixth session of the UN Human Rights Council, at the initiative of Azerbaijan, as the chairman of NAM, a resolution titled “Ensuring Equal, Reasonable Price, Timeliness, and Universal Availability of Vaccines Against COVID-19” was adopted. In total, 133 states became co-sponsors of the resolution, which is a fairly high figure for a resolution adopted in this UN body. On 18 November 2021, within the framework of a meeting of the Third Committee of the seventy-sixth session of the UN General Assembly, a resolution titled “Ensuring Equal, Reasonable Price, Timeliness, and Universal Availability of Vaccines against COVID-19” was put forward by Aliyev on behalf of the members of NAM and subsequently adopted.

At the same time, the Second Karabakh War took place during Baku’s NAM chairmanship. Undoubtedly, the successes of the Azerbaijani army on the battlefield played a decisive role. However, it was extremely important for Azerbaijan to collect support in the service of the legitimacy of its “Iron Fist” counter-offensive operation in the international arena. Thus, on 19 October 2020, closed consultations in the UN Security Council were held to discuss the war. In particular, a draft statement on this issue was circulated by Russia in its capacity as UNSC President. However, as a result of the preliminary work and negotiations conducted by the Azerbaijani side with the Council’s permanent members as well as with the NAM non-permanent members, the adoption of this draft statement, which had contradicted the position of Baku and did not contain reference to relevant Security Council resolutions, was prevented.

“We know that the member countries of the Non-Aligned Movement played an important role in supporting Azerbaijan at the UN during the voting on various resolutions, which made it possible to adopt important and necessary resolutions during the Karabakh conflict,” said historian Rizvan Huseynov. In general, all previously adopted documents within the NAM framework diplomatically buttressed Azerbaijan’s victory in the Second Karabakh War. It is unlikely that the position of the world community, anchored by the 120-strong members of the Non-Aligned Movement, would have been so unambiguous with regards to the conflict over Karabakh and, more broadly, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, if not for the active engagement of Azerbaijani diplomacy within the framework of NAM and, especially, during Baku’s chairmanship of the Organization.

Azerbaijan has also introduced several institutional innovations during its NAM chairmanship, the cumulation of which has deepened interactions between its member states. For instance, Aliyev stated at a NAM Interim Foreign Ministers Conference in July 2021 that the “Azerbaijani chairmanship intends to develop the parliamentary dimension of cooperation among NAM member states.” In November 2021, an announcement was made on the establishment of the Parliamentary Network of the Non-Aligned Movement. Official Baku has emphasized that this network “will promote the fundamental values and

principles of the Movement, provide parliamentary support for decisions made by the member states of the organization, and also contribute to the resolution by parliaments of issues of common interest to the member states of the Non-Aligned Movement, play the role of a new platform multilateral cooperation in the fight against emerging global risks and threats.”

Another innovation centered on the involving the next generation of leaders in the work of the Non-Aligned Movement. Thus, Azerbaijan led the way in establishing, first, a NAM Youth Network in October 2021 and then, transforming it into NAM Youth Organization in July 2022. The permanent headquarters of the Organization is located in Baku, with regional offices slated to be established in other NAM member states. A representative of Azerbaijan will chair the organization for the next three years. Transforming the NAM Youth Network into a fully-fledged multilateral organization means that this nascent institution will be able to access international platforms more conveniently. It is symbolic that the document establishing the NAM Youth Organization is called the Shusha Accord on account of it having been agreed in the liberated city that is known as the cultural capital of Azerbaijan.

Thus, there is no doubt that working with the youth of the world will bear fruit in the long term. All other things being equal, today’s young leaders in various countries ought to play an increasingly important role in their respective countries, and their at least warm and respectful attitude towards Azerbaijan will be very useful for Baku in the time ahead.

All in all, Baku’s chairmanship in NAM has been efficient, intensive, and fruitful. On the third anniversary of Azerbaijan’s NAM chairmanship, the Foreign Ministry released the following statement: “over the past period, the Republic of Azerbaijan has made hundreds of statements on behalf of members of the Movement at the UN headquarters, where the NGO operates, as well as at other international events, put forward dozens of draft resolutions and other initiatives, and organized coordination meetings with ambassadors and other levels.”

Thus, when incoming NAM chair Uganda announced in July 2021 that it would assume its duties with a delay of one year, NAM member states—given the successful chairmanship of Azerbaijan in the movement—turned to Baku with a request to preside over the Movement during this additional period. The Azerbaijani side also responded positively to the appeal, given its commitment to the fundamental principles and values of the movement and the valuable experience of effective chairmanship of the movement in a difficult period. As a result, Azerbaijan’s NAM chairmanship has been extended until the end of 2023.

As political scientist Vasif Huseynov has assessed, “Azerbaijan is hopeful that the Movement will preserve this momentum of cooperation in the years beyond the country’s

chairmanship and will raise the voice of member countries in the face of increasingly confrontational international politics.”

## *The Idea of Non-Alignment in the Wake of the Recent International Developments*

Discussions about the concept of non-alignment gained renewed attention in the spring of 2022 after the start of the war in Ukraine. Largely Western critics of geopolitical non-alignment began to argue that this concept is very dangerous and does not guarantee the security of a country that is located in an unstable environment between other large countries (sometimes entire military-political blocs). They emphasized that in the event of an aggravation of the conflict between global powers, one or another neutral country will be drawn into a bloody conflict, as happened with Ukraine. It is known that, for example, in Moscow the current war is interpreted as a confrontation between Russia and the West and not as a confrontation between Russia and Ukraine.

In this regard, opponents of the concept of non-alignment cite as an example Sweden and Finland—countries that, having become frightened by the perceived threat posed by Russia since the onset of the conflict over Ukraine, chose to pick a side and set aside their longstanding policy of neutrality that had been elaborated during the Cold War.

With respect to the conflict over Ukraine, one can begin by reviewing the relevant text of the infamous NATO Bucharest Summit Declaration from April 2008:

NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO. Both nations have made valuable contributions to Alliance operations. We welcome the democratic reforms in Ukraine and Georgia and look forward to free and fair parliamentary elections in Georgia in May. [The NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP)] is the next step for Ukraine and Georgia on their direct way to membership. Today we make clear that we support these countries' applications for MAP.

This event, in parallel with several waves of expansion of the Alliance that the Kremlin interpreted as constituting broken promises made in the early 1990s, in fact, became the starting point of the future derailment of relationship between Russian and the West.

From the onset, the prospect of NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia was perceived in Moscow as an existential threat. And the Kremlin, considering these two countries as falling within its zone of responsibility and influence, consistently sought to do everything to prevent even the possibility of Kyiv and Tbilisi joining the North Atlantic Alliance. Western countries, on the contrary, showed their approval in every way to Ukraine and Georgia, which sought to become full-fledged parts of the West.

Clearly, from this moment onwards, neither Kyiv nor Tbilisi could have been considered to be adherents of the concept of neutrality or non-alignment. In this regard, it is noteworthy that neither Georgia nor Ukraine were members of the Non-Aligned

Movement, although Ukraine still maintains observer status in it. Interestingly, even going back as far as September 1996 (i.e., during the period of the first Leonid Kuchma administration), Ukraine's then-Foreign Minister Gennady Udovenko, commenting on Kyiv's obtaining observer status in the Movement, stressed that his country's strategic goal is "integration with European and Euro-Atlantic structures."

Perhaps strengthening its neutral and non-bloc status could have helped Georgia to avoid a direct bloody clash with Russia in August 2008, and done the same with Ukraine in 2014-2015 and, of course, now, starting from February 2022.

The list of realist thinkers, scholars, and analysts that cautioned against both Tbilisi and Kyiv opting to pursue a course of action that the Kremlin perceived as a direct pushback against its vital national interests is long; so is, for that matter, the list of those that championed such a posture for the exact same reason. With respect to the former, the name Maryna Vorotnyuk stands out for a number of reasons. Associated with the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and previously with the Centre for European Neighbourhood Studies at the Central European University in Budapest, she wrote in the summer 2020—i.e., two years before a start of the full-fledged war—that

Ukraine should follow the analogy of Austria, which adopted a neutrality law and a special law precluding its unification with Germany. In this vein, Ukraine can guarantee its statehood through a neutrality status and a law preventing it, or parts of its territory, from joining Russia. Russia, in this case, would be expected to respect this arrangement. [...] Ukraine should not serve as either side's outpost against the other.

Tellingly, the title of her paper was "The Concept of Non-Alignment in Ukrainian Strategic Thinking."

Like Ukraine and Georgia, Azerbaijan has a rather difficult geographical position. Sitting, for example, between NATO member state Türkiye, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other hand, Baku is forced to constantly maneuver and not annoy or arouse the suspicions of its neighbors. Both are former empires that at various points held onto territories that are today integral parts of Azerbaijan. The same, of course, can be said of Iran, the country's neighbor to the south.

In October 2008—i.e., mere months after the Russo-Georgian War—veteran Azerbaijani diplomat Vafa Guluzade said that "Azerbaijan is under threat." This was a tense moment for Azerbaijan. Another, tenser one was the period that began at the end of 2015 and continued until mid-2016, when Russo-Turkish relations were derailed after a Russian military aircraft was shot down by Türkiye on the Turkish-Syrian border. The wisdom and finesse of Azerbaijani diplomacy allowed Baku to avoid conflicts with any of them at that time (and since, of course).

For sure, the course towards non-alignment and neutrality allows Baku not to get involved in any conflicts that do not directly impact on its sovereignty and territorial integrity, such as the war in Ukraine. At the same time, Baku (nor any other NAM

member state, for that matter) does not interpret non-alignment to mean the absence of priorities and principles. Thus, for Azerbaijan, one of the key issues, as noted above, was and remains the principle of respect for territorial integrity. That is why, for example, Baku did not support the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and reaffirmed respect for the territorial integrity of Ukraine in 2022. “Guided by the norms and principles of international law and the UN Charter, Azerbaijan respects the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all countries, including Ukraine. We will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Ukraine,” Aliyev emphasized on 24 August 2022 in his letter of congratulations to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine on the country’s Independence Day.

Armenia, unlike Azerbaijan, does not prioritize respect for territorial integrity. Therefore, Yerevan did not support Kyiv, and generally prefers to refrain from commenting on the situation in Ukraine. In addition, Armenia, being only an observer in NAM, does not have a clear strategy regarding neutrality or non-alignment. Therefore, Yerevan constantly needs to pick sides—a tactical rush between different major powers like Iran, the United States, and France whilst remaining strategically constrained by its close alliance with the Russian Federation.

Azerbaijan, in its turn, being a country with a clearly defined non-bloc status, has never needed to confirm its loyalty to anyone. At the same time, in the context of the ongoing peace process with Armenia, Baku takes active and prudent steps to ensure it takes into account the interests and preferences of all the outside stakeholders (mediators, facilitators, and supporters of the talks). On the other hand, the Azerbaijani side reacts harshly to any biased statements and moves by these same outside powers, as in the case of President Emmanuel Macron of France, who in October 2022 accused Russia of “clearly playing the game of Azerbaijan with Turkish complicity and returned there to weaken Armenia.” Paradoxically, France still wants to claim the role of facilitator (and perhaps even mediator) in the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In any event, it is obvious that at the moment Russia and the European Union are involved in the struggle for the right to become the chief outside power in the peace process. Azerbaijan has, so far, dexterously engaged with both without having had to opt for one over the other in a zero-sum manner. Baku continues to successfully manage competition between outsiders for influence in the South Caucasus whilst fortifying its position as the region’s keystone state.

Thus, it is extremely important for Baku to maintain a balance between the facilitation/mediation efforts of Brussels and Moscow without irreversibly tilting to one or the other capital. It is precisely a cautious, equidistant position that will allow Azerbaijan to achieve the most acceptable conditions for itself in the ongoing negotiations with Armenia, regardless of which outside power comes out on top.

To sum up, the non-bloc status and the concept of non-alignment, using the example of Azerbaijan, demonstrate the productivity of this approach and the real benefits for states who properly define their interest as avoiding to become involved in any conflict between global powers.

As Ngaire Woods notes, neutral states “should not be faulted for pursuing non-alignment to achieve self-reliance” because, according to her, “resisting the pull of the major superpowers can help to ensure a more equitable world order.”