

Asia DESTROYES US Pacific Hegemony. End of Alliances | Jomo Kwame Sundaram

While the US is busy destroying itself in Eastern Europe and West Asia, East Asia, too, is busy preparing for countering US warmongering. But not the way you think. South East Asia is engaged in its own cat and mouse game with the hegemon. Jomo Kwame Sundaram, Malaysian economist, research adviser at Khazanah Research Institute, emeritus professor, and former UN assistant secretary-general, discusses how the Iran war affects ASEAN energy, food, and trade. He examines Indonesia, the Strait of Malacca, ASEAN neutrality, BRICS, debt and the dollar system, and why the Non-Aligned Movement needs new life through peace, sustainable development, and resistance to militarization. Links: Jomo Kwame Sundaram Substack: <https://jomodevplus.substack.com> Jomo Kwame Sundaram at Inter Press Service: <https://www.ipsnews.net/author/jomo-kwame-sundaram/> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:01:01 Iran war impacts on Malaysia and ASEAN 00:04:07 How ASEAN sees the Iran war 00:07:33 Strait of Malacca and military pressure 00:12:38 Non-alignment and Indonesia's political shift 00:19:12 Indonesia's stability and foreign pressure 00:26:55 BRICS, debt, and the Global South 00:37:55 Why the Non-Aligned Movement faded 00:43:03 Peace and sustainable development 00:46:36 How to revive the Non-Aligned Movement 00:51:18 Can ASEAN lead non-alignment? 00:56:52 A positive vision for the NAM 01:00:14 Where to follow Jomo

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today, I'm talking for the first time to one of Malaysia's most prominent public intellectuals. I've got with me Dr. Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a research advisor at the Khazanah Research Institute and an emeritus professor at the University of Malaya, who also used to serve as an assistant secretary-general of the United Nations. Jomo, welcome.

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

Thank you very much for having me, Pascal.

#Pascal

Well, thank you very much for saying yes to this. And just before we start, I would like to also do a very quick shout-out to our colleague Winfried, who is organizing the Penang Peace Dialogue in 2026 on the 5th and 6th of September 2026, at which you will actually be speaking. If anyone is interested in this, I will link this below. This will be a very interesting and important dialogue, a

public forum in one of the most prominent ASEAN states, and will feature a lot of very important discussions on peace. And peace is what we want to discuss today. But maybe we start, Jomo, with a very brief overview of how the Iran war and maybe also the war in Ukraine are impacting you currently in Malaysia and ASEAN in general?

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

Well, many of us in East Asia generally rely on fossil fuel, on both oil and gas from the Gulf, not only from Iran, but also the other Gulf Emirates. And so oil is extremely important for us because we have not accelerated the energy transition, so to speak. And although many of us in Southeast Asia are in the tropical zone and could do much more, for example, with solar energy, wind is a bit trickier for some places in the region, but certainly we could have. But now there is a renewed sense of urgency about accelerating the energy transition to rely less on imported fuels, especially fossil fuels.

So we have had all kinds of consequences of this crisis. But for Malaysia and a few other countries, there are other major consequences. The major source of quite a number of fertilizers, which are important because of the significance of agriculture in the region, is again from the Gulf, usually generated using oil or gas. Yet another major import for some parts of the region, especially for countries like Malaysia, Vietnam, and others requiring refrigeration, is the import of helium. A great deal of helium is actually imported from the Gulf region as well.

So all this has important consequences for production. So it disrupts both consumption as well as production, and this has important consequences, as you can imagine, for the people of the region, for their jobs, for their livelihoods, and their well-being in terms of inflation and so on. But interestingly, there isn't a great deal of antagonism towards Iran. Most Muslims in this region are Sunni rather than Shiite and historically have not been especially sympathetic to Iran. But now, quite surprisingly, one finds a great deal of sympathy for the predicament of the Iranian regime in the region.

#Pascal

Does this also go beyond the Muslim population? I mean, the Muslim population of Southeast Asia is huge, right? Indonesia, 200 million. Malaysia, also around 100 million, right? And into Thailand. But what about the other ASEAN states? Do you have any indication of how they are perceiving the war in Iran? From my perspective, it's pretty clear that the United States and Israel are to blame. But are there other narratives in Southeast Asia that put it differently?

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

Quite a number of people, for example, from Thailand have been working in Israel and nearby. And for them, this is a matter of concern, of course, in terms of job disruptions and so on and so forth.

And there are other kinds of disruptions. The current Philippine government has been very supportive of the U.S., and the recent turn of the Indonesian government towards the U.S. has also created some concerns. But it's very difficult to tell because the tradition of getting opinion surveys is still not terribly strong. And as you can imagine, for archipelagic countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia, it is not easy to get feedback.

But it is important to remember that Indonesia has never housed military facilities of any external power, whether the U.S. or even its antagonists during the Cold War and after that. And we also find that, as far as the Philippines, there had been a very strong tradition, especially during the previous Marcos, the father of the current president of the Philippines. During the Marcos era, there was a strong campaign in the Philippines to get rid of the American bases there.

Most spectacularly, there was a major airbase called Clark Air Base, and there was also a major naval base called Subic Base. And this was a very major part of the campaign against President Marcos and his martial law regime from the 1970s into the first half of the '80s. So this tradition is still strong. So I don't think the Philippines, although it has long been allied with the U.S., is especially receptive to continuing to have U.S. military bases. Now there are 11, four of which are almost directly facing, in northern Luzon, directly facing the Taiwan Straits, Taiwan, and China itself.

#Pascal

Hey, just a very quick note. The best way to support this channel is by signing up for my free Substack. You can also help with a paid subscription there, or you can get some of our new merch on neutralitystudies.com. Links below. See you there. This is very interesting. You know, the Philippines has had this kind of up and down relationship with the United States. The common perception is that right now we're rather in an upward trend. I'm quite interested in your view of this as maybe being not as strong as it might seem from the outside.

But maybe let's just also discuss a little bit Indonesia, because what we are seeing in this country, in Iran and with the Strait of Hormuz, must be very, very concerning to you and the Indonesians, that suddenly the U.S. and Iran are setting up a new precedent. It's like a major lifeline of world trade, a strait, is suddenly somebody's possession, right? And the Americans are actually saying, "No, no, no, it's ours," actually, because you have the other major choke point of world economy, which is of high interest, especially to the U.S., is the Strait of Malacca. Eighty percent of Chinese energy imports come from the Strait of Malacca. How do you perceive the danger of this precedent suddenly becoming very acute to you over there?

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

Earlier this month, the Indonesian government agreed to provide the Americans with overflight facilities. So it is now possible for planes, as well as drones and so on, based in Australia, to fly over Indonesia through the Philippines right into the area of conflict in, say, the Taiwan Straits. This is a

matter of grave concern. It should be noted that in 1967, ASEAN was created. And in 1973, six years later, before the end of the war in Vietnam, ASEAN leaders, foreign ministers, all of whom were clearly non-communist, if not anti-communist, agreed to create a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality.

And this commitment was quite remarkable, especially in those days, because of the nature of the regimes who signed on to this. And it has been a source of major pride in the region. However, it has to be said that a number of regimes in the region have not actually been—ZOPFAN refers to the zone of peace, freedom, and neutrality—and a number of regimes have not exactly been neutral, to put it mildly. And they have, more importantly, provided military access as well as facilities. And this has increased significantly in the recent period. So there is a great deal of concern that inadvertently the region will be drawn into larger conflicts.

The new geopolitics, as some people would have it, is a matter of grave concern. So there is a great deal of concern. And of course, the Straits of Malacca—we in Malaysia are on one side of the Straits of Malacca. The other side of the Straits of Malacca is basically Indonesian. There are alternative routes, for example, through the Sunda Straits and so on, but those are firmly in Indonesia. So the question of access through the Straits of Malacca is a matter of concern. And whether or not this whole region becomes militarized depends a great deal on major governments in this region, such as Indonesia.

#Pascal

What is currently going on is the most natural thing on earth, because what we've seen in previous periods is that the hegemonic powers, currently the United States, they fight primarily against the ones that they view as their main enemies, but then they also fight against the ones that try to remain neutral. They constantly try to get rid of that neutrality. And actually, in ASEAN, we've seen two attempts at neutrality. ZOPFAN is, to my knowledge, essentially a brainchild of Malaysian foreign policy at the time inside ASEAN and very much supported by the rest.

The other one is what Indonesia used to champion, the Bandung Conference in 1955, out of which then grew the Non-Aligned Movement. And non-alignment is also, like, a very important concept. And you wrote recently about it. How do you think that today Indonesia, which championed non-alignment, Malaysia, which champions this ZOPFAN and embedded it also inside the whole of ASEAN, all 11 states today—how are these concepts of remaining outside of other power struggles, how is that developing?

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

Well, as you know from your leadership in neutrality studies, neutrality and non-alignment are not strictly synonymous. And what we do have in 1955 was an initiative of the Sukarno regime, the founding father of Indonesia. And in 1965, there was a bloody coup, and arguably about a million

people were killed in the aftermath of that coup. And there was a new regime, which called itself the New Order, led by General Suharto, who used to be the father-in-law of the current President of Indonesia, President Prabowo.

But importantly also, President Prabowo's own father, the late Professor Sumitro, was a leader of the right-wing faction of the Indonesian Socialist Party. So the Indonesian Socialist Party had different factions, and Professor Sumitro is now—it's well documented now—collaborated with, worked with Alan Dulles, at that time head of the CIA, and was also... They supported, in 1957-58, a couple of regional rebellions in Indonesia to subvert the Sukarno regime. That attempt failed, and he fled to Malaysia. Some people claim that he was trying to get into Singapore, but because of the conflict in Suez in 1956, the conflict over Suez, relations between the US and the UK were not the best.

And so, Singapore was then still a colony of the British, and he was not allowed into—sorry, Professor Sumitro was not allowed to base himself in Singapore. So he based himself in Malaysia. And General Prabowo, President Prabowo, grew up, went to primary school in this country and lower secondary school as well. But he was implicated in three different massacres, if you will, involving East Timor, Aceh, as well as Western Papua. And because of that, he had difficulties in terms of his relationship to the U.S. legal system. One should remember that there are at least three Asian leaders who have had similar difficulties.

One, of course, was Narendra Modi. After the Babri Masjid massacre, depending on which numbers you take, between 2,000 to 6,000-plus people were killed following the Babri Masjid episode. And for a long time, he had difficulties getting into the U.S. and so on and so forth. And then, of course, President Ferdinand Marcos Sr., who fled the Philippines in 1986, he went with his family to Honolulu and settled there. But subsequently, the Marcos family, after President Marcos himself passed away, his family has not been particularly welcomed in the U.S. So, again, you have a difficulty with the U. S. legal system.

And it's only since he was elected vice president before and then now president, and then later president, that he's been able to overcome some of these problems. So you can see that at least three Asian leaders, and possibly other leaders as well, have had difficulties with the U.S. and have been very anxious to improve their relations. And the current regime in Washington has been quite keen and happy to oblige on certain conditions and so on and so forth. So there is a transactional element, if you will, in this relationship. Now, there are going to be many consequences. The Chinese government, for instance, was very friendly with the Indonesian government. Much of the financing, for example, for the nickel processing in Indonesia has come from China and so on and so forth.

Whether all this will be affected remains to be seen, but it has already begun. There are claims about some changes in the economic relations between Indonesia and China. I think, to some extent, President Prabowo and his team probably anticipated this outcome, and they probably factored it in as well. But this is probably going to adversely affect the growth of Indonesia. So there

is quite a great deal at stake. And whether or not, how Indonesians more generally will be affected remains to be seen. But I think it has to be said that many of these decisions are not exactly uncontroversial. They're not exactly very popular on the ground. And this is also the case in the Philippines and so on. So we have a very contentious development in the region.

#Pascal

The art of neutrality is the art of giving everybody something without giving anyone everything and constantly, for lack of a better word, balancing these interests, but being useful to everyone. But overflight rights from the Indonesian side are a very big one. Do you view this as one of the transactional policies in order to gain something in another area for Indonesia? And also, how stable do you think the current political configurations are in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and so on? Because a major threat to any non-aligned nation, and a nation that doesn't want to get behind U.S. foreign policy, is a color revolution.

The United States is a master at color revolution, a master at covert operations. We know that. There's tons of books on it, very good books. Indonesia, what happened with how Suharto overthrew Sukarno and then instigated what came later, the purge against the left that cost a million people's lives, teachers, and a lot of the intelligentsia of Indonesia. I mean, absolutely horrible things happened. And those were actively supported and instigated by the United States. How dangerous is the situation today? Because the easiest environment to operate in is one of political volatility and not highly organized political processes. What is your assessment?

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

It's very difficult to tell in Indonesia's case, and very difficult to anticipate many of these twists and turns. As you know, in India recently, nobody anticipated the birth of what is called the Cockroach Janata Movement, which has gained tremendous support from tens of millions of people in India. Now, of course, tens of millions may not sound very much for a population of over 1.4 billion, but still, it is quite significant. Many people see this as probably the most significant development in India, especially northern India, for a long time. The south of India, of course, remains dissenting from the north for a variety of other reasons, which I won't get into right now. But in Indonesia, what we have is an archipelagic situation.

And this archipelagic situation makes certain things possible, but also raises the possibility—makes the communications difficult despite this age of the internet and so on and so forth. So it's very difficult to assess the kind of dissent which we have. And there's a spatial element, a geographic element to the dissent in many instances. Many people in the outer islands, for example, do not feel terribly happy about their status vis-à-vis Java. And actually, Java is much more complicated in the sense that the western part of Java, although part of the island of Java, is actually Sundanese and has a long tradition of its own. And this is precisely where the Bandung Conference was held, in the western part of the island of Java, in a place called Bandung.

Now, so all these regional elements are extremely difficult to read, certainly from abroad, but even from Jakarta, where some of my informants tend to be and much of the reportage comes from Jakarta. It becomes very difficult to read the situation and to assess the situation. But it also means that in the event that there is some kind of explosion, let us put it, social explosion, it is very difficult to anticipate how it will pan out, what its consequences are, because you have longstanding regional dissent, the dissent which President Prabowo's father, for example, tried to build upon. Some of it still simmers on.

And then you have, for example, the problems associated with Western Papua. And the island of Kalimantan, for example, is where the new capital of Indonesia is supposed to be located. And that island has been transformed over the last few decades from an island which was largely forested into an island which is now almost completely covered by oil palm plantations. So there's a major transformation of the geography and the economic geography and where people are making money and so on and so forth.

There's also the argument that the president has sought to strengthen himself by not only resorting to his ex-father-in-law's strategy of privileging the military, but also this time by privileging the police. So you can have a seeming social peace because of the combination of military and police domination and control, but it doesn't necessarily mean that all is well. So it's very difficult to tell what is likely to happen in Indonesia. It's in a way a smaller country than India, of course, in terms of population. But precisely because of its archipelagic character, there are certain elements which make it quite different from India, for example. Okay.

#Pascal

But basically, quite a lot of entry points for anyone who would like to sow dissent or threaten Mr. Prabowo. You know, if you don't go along with X, then maybe there's going to be an uprising over there, right? I mean, these kinds of games are absolutely imaginable. But let's maybe talk a little bit about the Non-Aligned Movement, because one of the surprises to me is that in the last four years, I would say since 2022, the Non-Aligned Movement didn't gain more currency again. Southeast Asia was very important for its start.

It was never formalized the way other organizations were formalized. It never had a headquarters, but it has an important voting bloc within the United Nations. I mean, around 77 states that group together and identify themselves with the Non-Aligned Movement. Yet it didn't become something similar to what the BRICS now are seemingly becoming, which is kind of an alternative way to organize—not against the West, but organize, you know, despite the West doing certain things these ways. Can you maybe talk a little bit about how you see the BRICS developing and the non-development of NAM?

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

Yes, I think that's a very stark way of presenting the difference, but I think it is very important and useful. The BRICS have developed, as we know, from almost an accidental arrangement. Jim O'Neill famously described the original grouping of four countries as the BRIC, and then they added South Africa to bring Africa into the grouping. And then subsequently it has developed in ways which I'm sure you have discussed many times before in your program. But I think what has happened, and why I am less enthusiastic about the BRICS, although I appreciate and recognize its potential, is the fact that the BRICS right now is clearly and self-consciously a grouping of the more well-to-do countries of the Global South. There is no deliberate effort to try to capture the interests and difficulties of the poorer countries, and often the most precarious countries in the Global South.

This, I think, is extremely important. So, for instance, if you think back to 2002, 2003, when the US Fed started raising interest rates, this resulted during the earlier period, partly due to what was called quantitative easing, a great deal of credit became relatively cheap and more easily available to poorer countries. And so you had a borrowing binge, with relatively poor countries borrowing in commercial markets, on commercial terms, because of the suppression of interest rates in the West, not only the US Fed, but in Europe as well. Now, what happened after that was that when interest rates went up, ostensibly because of inflation in the West, and this suspiciously coincided with the time when Russia invaded Ukraine.

So you had these interest rates going up. And as soon as interest rates went up, there was a reversal of flows of funds. So there was a tendency in the past, and unfortunately it still continues, to borrow shorter. So you borrow, you know, you get it for three months, six months, even a year, and you roll it over. So you re-borrow after the three months, re-borrow after the six months. The lenders like this because they see it as a way of continuing to adjust to changing conditions. But it puts the borrowers in a very difficult and vulnerable situation. So when the interest rates started going up, there was initially a slow, but then it quickly became a stampede of capital flight, which had gone to the poorest countries. It was reversed.

Even relatively conservative financial commentators like Martin Wolf of the Financial Times discussed this quite extensively. So this reversal of funds made a huge difference. The other important observation I would like to make here is that the former first deputy managing director of the IMF, Gita Gopinath, who was a professor at Harvard and, I believe, has got a new professorship at Harvard right now. During that period when she was the first deputy managing director of the IMF, she gave a speech where she observed that it was actually in the best interest of developing countries to be non-aligned, not to get involved in the new geopolitics, the so-called Second Cold War, and so on and so forth. Now, so this view that the argument I'm making is not an argument which is an isolated view.

It is an argument which is backed even by conservative commentators, mainstream people who are involved very much in the world of finance and so on, who actually see what is happening as not being in the best interest of Global South countries. So I think there is a strong argument to be made across the board. It's not some isolated argument of some radical elements on one side of any

particular political spectrum or other. I think this is the thing which unites the entire Global South. When you think about what the BRICS did during this period, there was no particular initiative of the BRICS which was sensitive to... There were certain BRICS countries who were concerned, undoubtedly, but BRICS as a grouping did not act. And this is very important for us to recognize, the limitations of BRICS in terms of protecting.

So it's all fine for what the World Bank and the IMF call the middle-income countries, and especially the high middle-income countries, as they call them. But it's not necessarily in the interest of the others. And if you look at the composition of BRICS members, people who have been invited in the last round, for example, these are countries who are all across the map in terms of where they stand on the political spectrum. You have the United Arab Emirates, for example, and then you have Egypt there and a number of other countries. It's across the board. Now, Turkey has not joined, for reasons best known to itself and so on. But you also find that on a number of issues, major countries such as India, part of the original BRICS, have hesitated. And President Trump and the White House have been rather antagonistic to the BRICS because it sees the BRICS as actively promoting the...

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

as weakening the dollar, trying to weaken the dollar. Now, it is true that a couple of the BRICS governments have actually, at some point or other, articulated positions of trying to get away from dollarization and so on and so forth. That's undoubtedly true, but it's not the BRICS position per se. And it's important to recognize that the countries which have been most vocal about it, Brazil and South Africa, are countries which have the smallest trade surpluses compared to the others. So they are in the weakest position to try to accelerate the process of de-dollarization, so to speak. And that's the irony of it. So, you know, my own view is that, you know, it's a rhetoric.

It's, you know, but the fact of the matter remains that, you know, arguably about four-fifths, 80% of international economic transactions are still denominated in dollars. And this has to be a voluntary process, that the transacting parties have to want to switch to some other currency for various reasons. And that has already been happening and is part of the reason why certain central banks and other financial authorities have been switching from holding U.S. dollar assets, for example, into holding gold. The gold rush of the last three years, for example, is partly related to this. But, you know, it's still a drop in the ocean.

It's not as if, you know, and I don't think anybody should be preoccupied with trying to do it. It's like, you know, the old joke about wagging the dog. It's not worth the effort. It's not worth the effort. And for those who think that that's a very important mode of resistance, even then, even among the BRICS member countries right now, it's not everybody who agrees to this. This might have been the position of the original five BRICS, of at least two of the original five BRICS. And even Russia, for example, the main reason they may want de-dollarization is because of what has happened to their dollar assets. You know, it's not because of a principled position which they hold.

#Pascal

No, and, you know, de-dollarization, if history is any kind of use here, then it's that we've never seen a major currency, the global reserve currency, completely disappear. Even the British pound is still one of the important currencies in the entire basket, right? So it's very unlikely that the U.S. dollar will be completely displaced within the next 10 years, let's say, by the Chinese yuan. But the BRICS are working on creating a new kind of infrastructure, a different kind of infrastructure, especially for payment clearance and so on, so that it becomes, at least in theory, possible for major nations and major companies and corporations to try to clear their trades in something that is different than the U.S. dollar, or something that is not completely controlled and doesn't run necessarily through New York, or anything that the United States just has its thumb on.

I mean, one of the largest weapons it had was the SWIFT transaction system. And that's not necessarily a U.S. dollar issue. That's just the fact that this communication system is controlled by the United States. They can switch it on and off whenever they want. And that has major impact on countries whose banking systems then depend on that. But why is it then that the Non-Aligned Movement is not engaged in this kind of global infrastructure building at the moment? Is it a form of inertia, or are things going on that I just don't see that are actually still taking place within the Non-Aligned Movement grouping?

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

It's difficult to tell. The Non-Aligned Movement seemed to become irrelevant after the end of the First Cold War. So by the early 1990s, the Non-Aligned Movement continued to exist, but it seemed to fade into irrelevance. Important to emphasize that India, for example, after hosting the Non-Aligned Conference in the late '80s, India set up a research capacity, the only Non-Aligned Movement to actually try to build a research capacity for the movement. It was called the RIS, Research and Information Systems. But unfortunately, the subsequent—the current regime in India has transformed that facility into sort of a subsidiary of the Commerce Ministry of India.

So it no longer serves its original function of providing some leadership. So the Non-Aligned Movement has had that. There are a few other think tanks which have existed for some time which are vaguely friendly to the Non-Aligned Movement but are not answerable in any sense to the Non-Aligned Movement. The other countries which have provided leadership have not tried to provide this. So India basically takes this initiative at the end of the First Cold War. So, you know, this is one of the ironies. Now, the Non-Aligned Movement continues to meet. One of the summits was held here in Malaysia in the early part of this century, and so on and so forth.

So it's been in existence on paper, and it meets, continues to meet, and so on and so forth. But it has not—with the end of the first Cold War, there has not been the leadership to try to reinvent itself. You know, I still remember that there was a possibility of this happening when, you know,

with the prestige of Nelson Mandela becoming the first president of the Republic of South Africa and so on and so forth, there was that possibility. And then soon after he steps down, Lula becomes— But there were, you know, it, it, we find that both South Africa as well as Brazil did not feel it had that kind of standing in the entire Non-Aligned Movement.

So it was left to countries like Cuba and so on to try to provide leadership. And of course, Cuba had fallen on difficult times from the 1990s with the end of the first Cold War and so on and so forth. So it really fell on hard times, in a sense. But more importantly, the actual capacity as such—there is no real secretariat and so on. It goes from leadership to leadership and so on. So this kind of gap is wanting, and it can be filled, and it should be filled. And to some extent, the Development Bank of the South has the potential to provide at least some capacities to this end. But for the time being, it is extremely difficult. And it's difficult, for example, for a country like China, which is seen by many as one major pole in what is emerging right now, to provide that kind of leadership.

So we have this problem. And so there is a lot of talk about non-alignment, but a lot of the talk of non-alignment is not the discussions, intergovernmental discussions. They're not interstate discussions. They are talks by well-meaning people in civil society, many former diplomats who recognize the potential in all countries, including in India, you know, recognize this potential, the need for the Non-Aligned Movement. And I think, given the end of the first Cold War, I think it is important for the Non-Aligned Movement to reinvent itself. As you mentioned earlier, for example, I do think it is very important, for example, to have a strong pacifist commitment. That probably is more important than anything else.

It is not in the interest of the Global South to be involved in wars and so on. Another crucial element, of course, because the Non-Aligned Movement, without people like Tito and regimes like that in the first Cold War, the commitment, I think, should be to sustainable development. The previous understandings of development, admittedly, during much of the second half of the 20th century, you know, were things like growth and industrialization and so on and so forth. There's a far greater sensitivity towards issues of sustainability these days. So sustainable development, which the United Nations is committed to, at least since 2015, is something which I think is broadly acceptable to the non-aligned. And those two would be crucial and necessary for moving forward.

#Pascal

It kind of surprises me that not more is happening because right now, if the time has ever been right, then it's probably now. Because the one thing we are not seeing is a move toward more alliance-building. The only alliance thinking we have on the globe is that of NATO and the West, but China and Russia, they're not really forming alliances. There's no other kind of, oh, let's gang up and then create a military and whatnot. So actually, a large part, I would say two thirds, if not three quarters of the world, are actually very open to the idea of non-alignment. And as you correctly said, pacifism is very compatible.

It doesn't even mean military pacifism, which is kind of a weird term, but since non-alignment or neutrality means that you can defend yourself, but you don't defend together against others, you don't necessarily need to get rid of your military just in order to have a pacifist DNA in the interaction with the world. One big problem is, of course, organization. And I know from one of Malta's former foreign ministers, Alex Sceberras Trigona, he told me when he was back in the late '70s or mid-'70s in the Non-Aligned Movement meetings, it was Tito who said, "We are not going to make a secretariat."

If we institutionalize this and have a secretariat, then it will be the Soviets that will undermine it and will infiltrate it and will take it over. That was apparently a fear of Tito. But if you don't have a central secretariat, then how do you set agendas and how do you reach out to other governments and create what you said, like at least ministerial-level kind of government coordination, which is something the BRICS have? The BRICS do the Sherpa thing. The BRICS do ministerial-level coordination among each other. Do you have any recommendations of how the NUM could be practically revived, even if it was just with a next conference in order to gauge everybody's positions?

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

As an outsider, I mean, I'm not associated with any government. I'm not associated with any... So it's extremely difficult to try to set conditions. Many of my friends who are also like-minded in the sense of wanting to revive the Non-Aligned Movement are setting all kinds of conditions. The Non-Aligned Movement must do this and that and the other. So, you know, I think having wish lists is a good thing. But I think right now, we have to have some minimal basis, you know, if you will, the lowest common denominator in order to get things going. And the fact of the matter remains that the Non-Aligned Movement exists. Countries have joined, governments have joined the Non-Aligned Movement over time.

Very few have actually withdrawn. And so it's something you actually should build on. And to have a minimal consensus, I think, is an important starting point. It then becomes, you know, you then, on that basis, minimal basis, you then begin to build. And one important element, for example, which already exists to some extent, is the G77, which is basically a caucus within the United Nations system. And it's a caucus which historically has served developing countries. But for all intents and purposes, there are very few non-developing countries, so to speak, which would be interested in the Non-Aligned Movement today. So that would be an important starting point.

I think, you know, Tito had very, very specific concerns, understandable because of his own experience, particularly with Moscow and with the Soviet Union and so on and so forth. But ironically, I mean, his difficulties with Stalin and the Belgrade Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement was at a time when arguably Khrushchev was at the height of his influence. It was only subsequently that Khrushchev's influence began to decline and so on and so forth. So one needs to think about what it is that Tito was concerned with, and should it be a concern for the Non-Aligned Movement?

One should not impose one's personal concerns and preoccupations upon a movement, and that becomes a stumbling block for the movement. So what your Maltese ex-Foreign Minister colleague has said is a very important insight. But the question is, do you want to encumber the potential development of, or in this case, the revival of the Non-Aligned Movement with those kinds of concerns? Once you start imposing all kinds of things, you're going to have all kinds of stumbling blocks towards reviving the movement. I think we now need to make it possible to revive it and let the organization develop its own character and priorities as it develops, not as preconditions for its revival.

#Pascal

No, you're absolutely right. One of the things that just to me seems would be very beneficial is if we had some ASEAN leadership actually in the Non-Aligned Movement, because ASEAN, to me, is proving that it is actually a model that works, unlike other regional groupings that have various problems, including the European Union, which currently is going through a transformation which, in my view, is absolutely horrible and horrendous. But ASEAN, with its consensus model, for all of its flaws, is actually one of the ways to try to start organizing and create a minimal consensus. Do you see any chances for Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam taking some leadership position in the NAM? Or let me ask it differently: how to incentivize these governments to actually start doing that?

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

Quite honestly, at this point, I'm not terribly optimistic about ASEAN providing that kind of leadership. ASEAN is quite seriously divided. Although we are talking about three countries which have aligned and committed themselves to supporting the U.S., they are very significant countries. So it's, you know, three out of ten, or three out of nine or eleven, depending on how you count, is nonetheless the most populous country, and so on and so forth. So I don't see ASEAN as providing that kind of leadership right now. This is why I mentioned earlier that initiatives such as the Development Bank of the South and so on and so forth could provide the intellectual infrastructure, so to speak, for helping to make possible this kind of movement.

I don't see this coming about. I mean, there may be leaders, but a few leaders, they are not... Let's take, for example, the four governments in West Africa associated with the Sahel. I don't see that as necessarily providing that kind of basis. They do not have the weight to be able to do what is needed. Likewise, you know, when you think about Lula's prospects, you know, his position is not... I think I do expect him to win the next election, but to win the next election, he will probably need to hold together a broad coalition, and that broad coalition may limit some of his initiatives. Likewise, in Latin America, some of the most ardent advocates of what is called activist non-alignment.

These are very well-meaning former diplomats and so on and so forth who have a great deal more knowledge about much of the history, especially involving Latin America and so on, on these kinds of

issues. But whether they can provide, you know, in the countries where they have influence—I mean, at least two of them are, for example, associated with Chile—and I seriously doubt the Chilean government is going to provide this kind of leadership. So where is that leadership going to come from? You know, Petro was defeated in Colombia. I mean, Petro's favorite candidate was defeated in Colombia. I really, you know, I'm not quite sure where a lot of this will come about.

And let's remember that there are groupings which are far more influential and powerful, which would actively undermine a revival of ASEAN. I'm thinking not only of NATO, but the OECD, for example. The OECD has for decades actively undermined the G77 on a whole variety of issues, most recently and famously on tax issues, but a whole range of other issues as well where they have done so. We have seen how international organizations which were once committed to multilateralism have changed the agenda because of what is favored in the West. Take, for example, the World Trade Organization. The World Trade Organization is not even committed to a neoliberal view of trade liberalization. It has basically given up on that because of what has happened, and they have basically moved to other things.

#Pascal

Yeah, I know, you're absolutely right. But the thing is that we are seeing right now that these institutions, and with all of these nice and well-sounding slogans, at the end of the day still were like the post-Second World War version of the colonial empires, right? They extend the colonial control over the rest, and that function they served. And now that the jargon doesn't serve it anymore, they just get rid of the underlying jargon and they use new methods. But it's still, in my view, part of what's needed is a decolonial process. That thing has not ended, and in this sense, yes, all of the former colonial institutions and so on will work on undermining all of that.

And you can see even the anti-United Nations speeches by the U.S. president, or even the criticism coming from Europe, is basically the criticism that the UN is not serving them enough. And it's doing too much of what Global South countries want. So it's still a very, very unequal world. But maybe just in closing, what is your optimistic or positive vision for what a revived non-aligned movement could or should do?

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

I think the most important condition for anything else is to not only try to bring about peace in various different ways, depending on the context and so on and so forth in the short term, but also to try to undermine, in reverse—and this is much more ambitious—the imperatives which now exist towards militarization and war. I mean, let's face it, if we think what has happened since the end of the first Cold War in terms of the unipolar world, the perpetuation of NATO and so on and so forth. But what has happened in the last year and a half? Ten countries being bombed in the first year of the new presidency, and a whole range of things happening.

Now, none of the antagonists have a chance of ever winning, militarily speaking. But the fact that many of them have resisted, and Iran basically has been a model of successful resistance. They will never win, but resistance is, in a sense, victory for Iran. But rather than trying to emulate Iran and so on and so forth, I think we really need to try to create the conditions for peace. And basically what we have seen—and what, I mean, President Trump's greatest achievement has actually been—is the militarization of the West. I mean, you know, but you remember in the old days, during his first term, he talked about going up to 2% of GDP. You know, now he says 5%, and they all say, "Yes, sir, yes, sir."

You know, and, you know, they are providing their schedules for increasing military spending and so on and so forth. And they submit them to Washington, and they are arguing over details of this whole imperative, and then the celebration of it by Chancellor Merz and others as military Keynesianism providing a new lease of life for growth. All that is, I think, it has to be discredited and undermined. In the old days, when I was a student of economics, one of the first things you were asked was about the choice between guns and butter. Nobody talks about that anymore. I mean, it's such a simple, basic thing. Nobody talks about that anymore.

#Pascal

Yeah, that's a horrible thing this military Keynesianism idea is doing. It says the guns are the new butter, or guns will bring us the butter, and that's horrible. I belong to the people who call all of these others complete warmongering fools, but fine, there's others who disagree. Jomo, it has been a very great pleasure to hear your analysis and also your visions. People who would like to read more from you, where should they go?

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

Well, I have a Substack column published quite frequently, every fortnight, and sometimes more frequently because of the World Cup, for example. I just published something on the Cup, but I publish with Inter Press Service, which is an old thing which was set up, inspired by the late Seán MacBride and so on, for the establishment of a new international communications order. But this is really something from, in a sense, my generation. And I wish to find new ways of communicating, you know, and your efforts, for example, are extremely important. But I'm fascinated by this Cockroach Janata movement in India and what it holds.

Because it is not just a color revolution kind of thing. The potential is there. And what happened in Nepal as well raises the possibility that perhaps we are moving beyond the color revolution. We have movements which are rather inchoate, unfamiliar to us, but they are raising new issues which perhaps we need to pay attention to. So I need to understand much more from the younger generation, perhaps even younger than you, Pascal, how new ideas are being communicated, what are the new hopes, what are the new aspirations? And this, I think, is the hope for all of us.

#Pascal

You know, it is a hope for all of us, and it's actually quite difficult because what we are talking about here is also the modes of communication. YouTube, Substack are long-form communication formats, and other groups, especially younger groups, they communicate in different, shorter forms. And this is something that's just difficult to actually have proper back and forth. But once again, you're doing a fantastic job. I will put the link to your Substack in the description box below. And let me do one more shout-out to our colleagues at the Penang Peace Dialogue on the 5th and 6th of September. If somebody wants to join and see you, Jomo, in person, there will be about 10 seats reserved for Neutrality Studies, so people can go there and actually listen to what is happening in real peace dialogue. And we'll just keep at it. And with that, Jomo Kwame Sundaram, thank you so much for your time today.

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

Thank you very much, Pascal.

#Jomo Kwame Sundaram

All the very best to your efforts.