The Commonwealth and the Cold War, neutralism and non-alignment

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The leading Commonwealth historian and commentator, Peter Lyon published his book *Neutralism* in 1963, underlining the Cold War as ‘the setting in which neutralism occurs and is shaped.’ He analyzed ‘neutralism’ as an ideology and a doctrine, providing the main precepts of the leading neutralists, and the implications for their state policy. Lyon went on to categorize neutralism’s varying forms:

- new state neutralism
- pioneer neutralism
- neutralization
- buffer status
- traditional neutrality
- previous isolationism

The Commonwealth was not synonymous with this political neologism, ‘neutralism’, but it demonstrated important characteristics of the phenomenon, in what its member states did and what their statesmen said. In the Cold War era, the Commonwealth represented ‘a global sub-system’ which both permitted and enabled multiple identities. Lyon defined neutralism as meaning ‘non-involvement in the Cold War’. Yet individual Commonwealth countries were also members of military alliances (Britain; Canada; Australia and New Zealand) or were preoccupied by Cold War geo-strategic issues that impinged upon their national politics and politics (Singapore). It included members whose leaders were identified as ‘Cold Warriors’, and passionate socialists. A significant minority of Commonwealth states became active members of the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. For the Commonwealth, there was a degree of fluidity in positioning and outlook in international relations, with vital accommodation through the practice of ‘consensus’. For this unique voluntary association of sovereign states, neutralism was not a doctrine, but a general policy, allowing for flexibility and initiative. Leaders could be ‘conservative on East/West issues, but radical liberals on North/South matters’. There were significant similarities, as well as differences between various neutralists in the Commonwealth. India, under Jawaharlal Nehru and his successors, and Kwame Nkrumah’s Ghana initiated ‘pioneer neutralism’; other Commonwealth Afro-Asian states adhered to ‘new state neutralism’ to underpin their post-independence nation-state construction and development – ie their ‘neutralist’ stance was associated with relative weakness in the international community; Britain, although a stalwart member of NATO, did not view global geo-politics entirely through Cold War lenses; Canada, a fellow member of NATO, certainly tended towards ‘buffer status’ and international morality on Third world issues, as a determined point of national differentiation against her larger southern neighbor; Australia, too, used the Commonwealth and neutralism on certain issues highly deliberately as a vehicle to enhance her medium power status and international prestige. For the Commonwealth group of nations, the Cold War ‘as a battle of systems and ideas’ was an ideological struggle which meant different things to different actors, enabled varying configurations in the lattice of international relations, while they still maintained a marked degree of group identity.

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1 Peter Lyon: *Neutralism* (Leicester University Press, 1963)
2 Chief Emeka Anyaoku interview with Sue Onslow, October 2013.
3 Lyon, p.20.
5 Lord Owen, in his opening address at the conference, Rhodesian UDI: 40 Years On, remarked that Rhodesian UDI was not a Cold War issue. In contrast, the Rhodesian Front government and the South African Government did regard the struggle between the white minority government and radical black nationalist movements as a ‘front line in the Cold War in Southern Africa’. Brian Oliver to Sue Onslow, 2008.
Definition of the Commonwealth:

Between 1949-1990, as a direct product of British decolonization from the Indian subcontinent, Sub-Saharan Africa and its salt water empire in the Pacific, the Commonwealth came to include 49 member states of varying size, 23 of whom were small states, with very different agenda and developmental needs to those larger members from the global ‘North’. As indicated above, its heterogeneous membership included NATO countries (UK and Canada); ANZUS members (Australia & New Zealand); the Non-Aligned Movement (India, Guyana, Ghana, Tanzania, Zambia); the Organization of African Unity OAU (Tanzania, Nigeria, Zambia, Ghana); CARICOM and the OECS – the Organization of East Caribbean States (Jamaica, Guyana, St Lucia, Barbados, Grenada). Bound by a common philosophy, a degree of shared historical culture stemming from British imperialism and use of language, it defied ideological typecasting in the Cold War era. As indicated, leading members – in terms of size, political, military and economic power - most certainly did not espouse ‘neutrality’. The United States continued to value the ‘old Commonwealth’ because of the ‘Five Eyes’ intelligence sharing network. Other insidious Cold War linkages existed across Commonwealth states from the transition of intelligence gathering from M15 to M16, seen in Alan Rowley’s work as M16 Station chief based in Addis Abba in 1964-1965 to establish new networks of intelligence in newly independent Southern African states. Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew determinedly interpreted Cold War geostrategic challenges to his city state. In contrast, Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, were leading lights in the Non-Aligned Movement. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana joined India in the ‘Initiative of the 5’ at the founding NAM conference in Belgrade in 1961. Indeed, by the late 1970s, there was a remarkable similarity of membership of the Commonwealth and the NAM: 22 nations within the larger organization of 87. Diplomats at the American Embassy in London only half jokingly commented that they regarded the Commonwealth ‘an English-speaking Non-aligned Movement.’

The Commonwealth as a transnational network of diplomatic activity:

The Commonwealth did not conform to bloc politics, nor did its members vote as a pack in international fora, although the association certainly contained a vocal Afro-Asian minority voice at the UNGA and in the Committee of 24 – the Special Committee on Decolonization.

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7 Between 1975-1990, the membership grew from 34 to 49.
8 By 1978, 23 out of 86 NAM countries were in the Commonwealth. These were Bangladesh, Botswana, Cyprus, The Gambia, Ghana, Guyana, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Malaysia, Malta, Mauritius, Nigeria, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia. The following Commonwealth countries held positions on NAM Coordinating Committees:
   1. Trade (Guyana – foundation of the Trade Information Cell within the APEC/TTI project in Georgetown. For circulating trade and business information in developing countries)
   2. Monetary and Financial Cooperation – India and Sri Lanka (for the promotion of the Central Bank for NAM developing countries)
   3. Fund for Economic and Social Development
   4. Industrialization (Guyana)
   5. Transport (Guyana)
   6. Technical Cooperation and Consultancy Services (India)
   7. Scientific and Technological Development (India)
   8. Employment and Development of Human Resources (Sri Lanka)
   9. Role of Women In Development (India, Jamaica)
   10. Research and Information Systems (India, Sri Lanka)
   11. International Cooperation for Development (Nigeria.) [Taken from Com.Sec Archive 2011/247 conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs at Non-Aligned meeting, Belgrade July 1978.]
9 Sir Roger Carrick interview with Sue Onslow, 2013.
10 Sir Peter Marshall to Sue Onslow, March 2014.
11 Ryan Irwin: Gordian Knot (2012)
So unique, and unusual, and with membership agenda so at variance, many people thought would break apart, or become ‘an irrelevant talking shop.’ The potential for schism between old and new Commonwealth was considerable (primarily newly independent African states), and the necessary speed of adjustment required for a post-colonial age placed further strains on the organization.

Notwithstanding the multiple identities of the Commonwealth, the association’s non-aligned and neutralist initiatives in Cold war international politics, and economic diplomacy are significantly under-appreciated. This was enabled by six principal, and inter-connected factors:
1. The Commonwealth’s structure
2. The evolving role of the Secretary General
4. International discourse: the realm of ideas
5. Specific events

The Commonwealth’s structure

I must underline that the Commonwealth was not a British led organization. Certainly, it had evolved from the British Empire and Commonwealth, but from 1949 the label ‘British’ was formally dropped. While there might be a British hangover which continued to see the Commonwealth as a wider British world, for the other five members – Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa and India – their coming of age and sovereign independence meant parity, not hierarchy. This was starkly underlined by the threatened schism in the Commonwealth over the Suez adventure in October/November 1956, as India and Canada publicly criticized British intervention in the UNO General Assembly, and India threatened to leave the association. In his fence-mending tour of the British empire post-Suez in 1957, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan publicly stressed how he had been ‘greatly impressed by the friendship and strength of common purpose which still bound (India, Pakistan and Ceylon) to the rest of the Commonwealth.

Throughout those countries, though we no longer had authority, we still had great influence … The Commonwealth was not breaking up, it was growing up. The Commonwealth as a whole still had great influence in the world, and there was no reason why that influence should not increase. And the UK itself had great opportunities to influence world affairs through the medium of Commonwealth association. The material strength of the Old Commonwealth members, if joined with the moral influence of the Asiatic members, meant that a united Commonwealth would always have a very powerful voice in world affairs.

So while the modern Commonwealth may have its roots in British imperial history, to regard it as a clapped-out vehicle for British neo-colonialism is a fundamental misrepresentation. In the early 1960s Macmillan envisaged the Commonwealth as a magnet for newly independent

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13 Sir Peter Marshall, Deputy Secretary General (Economic) 1983-1988, to Sue Onslow
14 The Declaration of London of 1949 was drafted by British Cabinet Secretary Burke Trent, expressly to recognize India’s new status as a Republic.
15 At the outset, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee privately argued, that the British government would call it ‘what we bloody well want’.
African states to resist the siren call of Soviet-led socialism, and to underpin British great power standing in the international community. The growing number of Commonwealth members, however, had other ideas. The expansion of its membership in the 1960s with newly independent African states, and emergence of an Afro-Asian bloc saw a fundamental reconfiguration of the international system in the UNO. India and Ghana provided critical input in Belgrade NAM founding conference in 1961, as key members of ‘the initiative of 5’. This approach of bridging the developed and the developing world, and a determined independent line in international affairs was underlined by vehement Commonwealth opposition to South Africa’s reapplication to join the Commonwealth in March 1961, and equally firm Afro-Asian views on the iniquities of Rhodesian unilateral bid for independence before transition to black majority rule 1964-1965.17

Despite its heterogeneity, the Commonwealth possessed clear organizational structure and bureaucratic support. The creation of the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965 brought an important new element to the Commonwealth as an organization, ‘changing its structure, function and image’.18 The original intention was for the Secretariat to provide conference support for the regular heads of government meeting, which had previously been provided by the British civil service. The Secretary General position was initially viewed to be the equivalent of a senior High Commissioner. However, over the next decade the Commonwealth underwent a significant transformation. Its heads of government met at biennial meetings which rotated round the Commonwealth from 1970. By 1979 it had clearly identified legal-institutional form; there were designated resources for the incumbent; the personality of the Secretary General and his ‘idiosyncrasies’ and political agenda were a factor in international relations, although there remained important systemic challenges confronting the head and his staff.19 The political culture was deliberately ‘informality’, underlined when from 1973 the heads’ meeting included a ‘Retreat’ of leaders – an extended weekend of informal, private discussion and exchange, expressly without their publicity teams, advisers and officials. (In 1973, Pierre Trudeau’s innovation was just Heads of government and their spouses; it was later modified to include a very small number of personal staff.) Leaders ‘actually got to know each other. And the main business was conducted at the Retreats. This did not happen in any other international forum. (Trust quote from Fraser.)’ Golf became ‘part of the personal diplomacy’ 20

The bureaucratic support structure similarly expanded and developed its own autonomy and identity. This expanded from 2 people at the start in August 1965 – the Secretary General and his Canadian PA, Joyce Tilsey - to approximately 420 supremely qualified and committed civil servants by the late 1980s, recruited from all over the Commonwealth to cover international affairs, economic affairs, development and trade issues, women and gender, education, health, human rights and youth. It is notable that individual Commonwealth governments sent high-caliber diplomats to the Secretariat in London, in addition to their High Commissioners.21 This reinforced ‘daisy chains’ of officials and their networking capabilities,22 quite apart from

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17 Ronald Hyam and Peter Henshaw: *The Lion and the Springbok*
20 Bob Hawke, *Memoirs*, p.319
22 Britain, in contrast, was somewhat notorious for not appointing high-caliber staff to the Secretariat, or indeed to Commonwealth countries. Within the Foreign Office in the 1970s and 1980s, ambitious civil servants ‘concentrated on Europe’ – meaning the European Economic Community, and Cold War issues. Thus, the Embassies of Washington, Paris, Bonn and Brussels were deemed plum posts, with second-tier diplomats dispatched to Commonwealth postings. One newly appointed Deputy High Commissioner in Canberra was asked on arrival, ‘What have you done wrong?’ This pattern of appointments reinforced the perception that the Commonwealth was not a key element of British foreign policy. Sir Peter Marshall, and Sir Charles Cullimore to Sue Onslow
the demonstration of the importance Commonwealth governments attached to the association's work. This was reflected in individual heads' prior preparation: the evidence of extensive briefing, assiduous attendance and engaged debate – the practice of reading long prepared statements in the executive sessions only emerged in the 90s; commitment of time to these meetings, which lasted 7-10 days; and their diplomatic follow up.23 The biennial heads' meeting was supported by a corresponding meeting of senior officials in alternate years. Ministers of Finance met – and meet – annually before IMF/World Bank annual meetings in Washington; Ministers of Health, Education and Law meet triennially.

Although not a treaty organization nor military alliance, through its leaders, and the Secretary General and his staff, the Commonwealth developed institutional form, and norms. In practice, this 'official' Commonwealth combined international summity, diplomatic activism and conflict mediation, and privileged the role of diplomacy through the latitude permitted to its Secretary General embedded in the Commonwealth Secretariat's founding Memorandum of 1 July 1965. The inter-governmental heads meetings also established the practice of working committees on specific issues (most notably, sanctions in Southern Africa); and task groups – for example, the Eminent Persons Group which toured South Africa for 4 months in 1986, and made recommendations on a possible Negotiating Concept to both ANC and the PW Botha government.

The Evolution of the role of the Secretary-General:

Therefore, although not a separate political entity, the Commonwealth possessed important attributes of international organization and one which – arguably – had a greater degree of cohesion than the NAM,24 precisely because it possessed permanent administrative backup, to its roving conference organization, and systematic and detailed, rather than ad hoc note taking. The original intention had been that the London-based Commonwealth Secretariat would simply provide organizational support for biennial meetings, as the British civil service had done before 1965. Originally the intention had been that it

Begin modestly and remains careful not to trespass on the independence and sovereignty of the member governments whose servant it will be... In particular the Secretary General will from the outset establish close relations with Commonwealth governments. By this means the Secretariat will gradually accumulate.

The energy and drive of the new Secretary General, Arnold Smith ensured any idea that his role was confined to being a note taker in heads' meetings died a rapid death.26

This is another important distinction of the Commonwealth in organizational form: the association possessed a titular head (the British monarch), a rotation of 'host' and thereby enhanced publicity and standing of the host government; and a permanent elected official with the standing of a senior High Commissioner, but who increasingly was accorded the respect and latitude of a Foreign Minister. The international civil service based in London drew directly on British administrative norms, and permanent administration was provided by Commonwealth diplomats and civil servants, both appointed and head-hunted to serve at the

24 The archives at the Secretariat at Marlborough House in London are extensive, organized on best British archival practice, and scarcely used. Similarly, the personal papers of SG Arnold Smith are copied in the Canadian National Archives, SSR's papers are at the University of the West Indies in Bridgetown, Barbados (his memoirs are in the process of being published); Chief Emeka Anyaoku's papers are similarly stored at Marlborough House. Arnold Smith, Chief Emeka Anyaoku and SG Sir Don McKinnon have also published their memoirs.
26 Sir Robert Muldoon to Arnold Smith, repeated in Smith: Stitches in Time.
Secretariat in London. At the start there was clearly designated financial support from members, with the principal bulk of funding from ABC countries – Australia, Britain and Canada. Therefore, the Secretary General had resources at his disposal, and a remarkable degree of autonomy on expenditure.

Therefore, the Commonwealth as a bureaucratic entity was also sufficiently small to avoid international bureaucratic inertia. The challenge to the new Secretary General Arnold Smith was to create this international bureaucracy from scratch, and to carve out a distinct identity and areas of multilateral activity for the Commonwealth. Therefore in the 1960s, early Commonwealth initiatives in the context of the Cold War were confined to heads of government. One such example was the proposal in June 1965 for Commonwealth mediation in the Vietnam conflict. This was a reflection of American pressure on the Wilson government for active participation in the Vietnam conflict at the June 1965 London meeting. Prime Minister Harold Wilson told the assembled Commonwealth Prime ministers that he was acutely concerned of a ‘further buildup of forces.. and that the Vietnamese conflict could escalate with .. incalculable effects’

‘The World now looked to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers to take some action… The fact that Commonwealth had different views about the conflict would make any action taken by the Commonwealth collectively all the more significant and should available to take any initiative to bring the participants in the conflict round a table that would end the fighting.’

Wilson’s proposal was that the meeting should request 3 Prime Ministers ‘representing all shades of opinion in the Commonwealth to go, not as individuals or as representatives of their own countries but as delegates of the Commonwealth Prime Minister’s meeting, visit all capitals, and then report back. The suggestion was for ‘the 3 Prime Ministers should discuss with the Heads of Government concerned the basis on which a conference could be convened and a peaceful honourable and lasting settlement achieved’.

This innovative suggestion provoked intense debate among his fellow Prime Ministers. As the debate continued throughout the afternoon, a consensus emerged for swift action the Canadian PM commented, ‘he had never attended a conference where there had been such a meteoric action’, but the gravity of the situation in Vietnam justified it … The Commonwealth as a whole should take a neutral line.’ Debate revolved around whether the emissaries should go to Moscow, Peking or Washington first, as the dispute lay essentially between ‘China and the USA’; and whether UNO should be involved (because would antagonize China). Although nothing came of this Commonwealth exploration of its ‘good offices’, as reported to the next Commonwealth Prime Minister’s meeting in London in September 1966, it established a precedent for Commonwealth pro-active diplomacy.

The Commonwealth as a diplomatic actor and its place in international diplomacy evolved rapidly, in large part due to the use of the policy space the association provided. It certainly faced a mounting series of internal crises: the Rhodesian UDI issue, Indo-Pakistan war, and the Nigerian civil war. It is tempting to conclude that the Commonwealth was fatally riven by this concatenation of crises, and thus was an international non-entity. Sceptics continued to predict the demise of regular meetings, yet they persisted; and yet ‘because it exist(ed), it was used’. Without minimizing the public damage to the cohesion of the organization, these crises provided important institutional mediation learning experience. India and Pakistan

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28 Margaret Doxey: A History of the Commonwealth Secretariat
30 T Miller, International Organization 1970
resolutely refused such international arbitration, and the Rhodesia issue was essentially one of Rhodesian Front defiance and British formal power, but weakness. It threatened to rupture the association, and was the principal why there was a prolonged gap between September 1966 and January 1969 London meetings. Commonwealth heads were kept informed of the protracted negotiations between London and Salisbury. (At the 1966 September meeting, Prime Minister Harold was furious to be kept waiting by African Commonwealth leaders meeting in caucus beforehand – their established practice before UN General Assembly meetings. This was not allowed to happen again at subsequent conferences.)

In addition to the challenges of Rhodesian UDI, the first Canadian Secretary General Arnold Smith was confronted by an internal Commonwealth crisis in the Nigerian civil war, which assumed important Cold War dimensions.\(^{31}\) His failure to bring the warring sides to compromise, was not for lack of trying: there were repeated probes by Secretariat officials – Smith used Nigerian diplomat Chief Emeka Anyaoku, himself an Igbo, as an important source of intelligence and fact-finding,\(^{32}\) and Anyaoku’s house in London was a regular meeting point for both Federal Nigerian and Biafran politicians. Smith himself was not involved in the protracted attempts at mediation in Kampala in 1968, which were chaired by President Milton Obote.\(^{33}\) The humanitarian catastrophe in Biafra, had a direct impact on Smith’s determination to mediate in the Pakistan civil war of 1970, which saw the emergence of the independent state of Bangladesh. Smith’s arguments lay that the humanitarian crisis of 4m refugees in neighbouring India could not be addressed unless there was rapid diplomatic recognition of the new state of Bangladesh, and the Secretary General played an important proactive role in gathering international support for internationally recognized independence.\(^{34}\) This was over and above the originally intended terms of reference of his post. Smith consequently dispatched Emeka as his special envoy around three crucial African states to secure their support – or at least agreement not to oppose. Nigeria was expressly left till last, and President Gowan was persuaded not to object, as Tanzania and Ghana had already given their support.\(^{35}\)

Again, directly associated with the growing authority of the Secretary General, Smith took the initiative to contact both FRELIMO and the Portuguese government of General Spinola, and his successors in 1974-1975. Following the ‘Carnation Revolution’ in April 1974, Smith got in touch with Spinola in Lisbon – encouraging him to accept full decolonization before Spinola himself was prepared to consider this, and offering to discuss the model of a Commonwealth relationship between Portugal and its former colonies; Smith also contacted Samora Machel, head of FRELIMO.\(^{36}\) Again, Smith’s approach was to operate outside the context of the Cold War, as he determined to support independent nation state building. The SG clearly appreciated that the abrupt departure of the Portuguese colonial administration, white flight and widespread destruction to Mozambique’s infrastructure and already limited industrial installations, left substantial challenges for the new Mozambique government post-independence. Its geographic proximity to Rhodesia made it a particularly important regional player, and Smith clearly perceived that Machel’s determination to sever trade with Rhodesia would further exacerbate the colonial legacies. Again, it was Smith’s initiative to promote Commonwealth financial and particularly technical assistance via the Commonwealth Technical Cooperation Fund to remedy these gaps in state power: the British Labour

\(^{32}\) Chief Emeka Anyaoku interview with Sue Onslow; and Arnold Smith papers, Canadian National Archives and Library.
\(^{33}\) Gerald Hensley to Sue Onslow, April 2014.
\(^{34}\) Arnold Smith papers, Canadian National Archives and Library. See also Arnold Smith: Stitches in Time; Chief Emeka Anyaoku interview with Sue Onslow.
\(^{35}\) Chief Emeka Anyaoku interview with Sue Onslow. See also Arnold Smith: Stitches in Time; Arnold Smith papers Canadian National Library and Archives.
\(^{36}\) Chief Emeka Anyaoku interview with Sue Onslow.
government registered its particular appreciation of a Commonwealth initiative, rather than a bilateral enterprise or ostensibly Western aid projects – precisely because of the neutralist credentials of the Commonwealth. Smith’s work in the first decade of the Commonwealth Secretariat’s existence laid vital foundations for his successor’s foreign policy activism.  

1975-1990: Leaders

The Commonwealth’s autonomy and identity in the international system gathered cogency and importance in the 1970s because of a particularly charismatic group of post-independence leaders. These were international statesmen whose views commanded international attention and respect - Lee Kwan Yew, Pierre Trudeau, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, Indira Gandhi, Malcolm Fraser and Michael Manley. The importance and visibility of this cohort of Commonwealth leaders was further underlined by their longevity in office, and the extent to which they were able to command international press coverage. By the early 1980s, this list had been joined by Margaret Thatcher, Robert Mugabe, Bob Hawke, Rajiv Gandhi. This was an era of elite politics – underlined by individual leaders’ role in their nation’s independence, and their inclusion of G-7 leaders. Therefore the structures of the Commonwealth both enabled and benefited immeasurably from this personal network of heads. Furthermore, this high-level personal access offset their own country’s limited administrative and technical capacity. In an era of the telephone and telex, personal contact and friendships engendered that critical but intangible element of ‘trust’ in international diplomacy which provided the continuing glue for the Commonwealth as an active association.

These meetings rapidly developed a distinct political culture: as Julius Nyerere put it, ‘a family gathering, where it was possible to be frank about one’s difficulties’. Heads actually got to know each other, and the main business was conducted at the Retreats – where no official notes were taken. In Malcolm Fraser’s words: ‘That doesn’t happen in any other international forum. You meet people and come to understand them, and to trust them. And things become possible in international affairs that previously were not possible.’ The Commonwealth as a vehicle for foreign policy enabled leading figures. International news agencies and networks were largely ignorant of the Commonwealth, apart from the showcase of heads’ meetings, and considerable care was taken to ensure maximum press accreditation – even including South African journalists. Heads themselves used the media coverage of Commonwealth biennial meetings to boost their international exposure, and domestic standing. In the former Director of Information, Tony Eggleton’s view, it was ‘a ready made vehicle to raise Malcolm Fraser and Australia’s standing in the world in international affairs’. (ie it also serve domestic agenda of Liberal Party, particularly important as the Australian constitution required elections every three years. This meant there was a constant electioneering atmosphere in national politics. News agencies such as Reuters, Agence France Press and Associated Press certainly did not view the international news environment through this prism, but the leading news agencies did pay attention to the highly respected Commonwealth-focused independent news agency, Gemini Press under the leadership of

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37 Richard Bourne to Sue Onslow.
38 Patsy Robertson in conversation with Sue Onslow.
40 The indications are that Mrs Indira Gandhi and Mrs Thatcher discussed Sikh extremism and the Golden Temple in Amritsar at the Goa Retreat in November 1983, and Thatcher agreed there to provide British military assessment of the possibility of a military operation to remove the militants.
41 Fraser, p.490.
42 Clyde Sanger interview with Sue Onslow; Patsy Robertson, Witness Seminar on the History of the Commonwealth Secretariat, June 2013.
43 Fraser, p.494
44 Derek Ingram interview with Sue Onslow.
veteran journalist and long-standing Commonwealth commentator, Derek Ingram. Ingram himself was assiduous at using the informal policy space of Commonwealth heads meetings, and the regular breaks in executive sessions, to interview leaders. The Secretary General’s reception at the start of a CHOGM was another ideal point for journalists to interact with political leaders, as the guest list was deliberately designed to enhance this interaction between heads and accredited journalists.

In this earlier era of a marked lack of international meetings, African and Asian Commonwealth heads particularly valued the ‘international summity’ for its visibility, the quality of debate, and the access to world leaders. The ‘old’ Commonwealth heads also took these meetings seriously. Mrs Thatcher – a quintessential Cold Warrior – was a stalwart supporter of the Commonwealth ideal, even if she found herself increasingly at odds with her fellow Commonwealth leaders over the issue of economic and financial sanctions against South Africa in the mid-late 1980s. She prepared assiduously for heads of government meetings, attended seven in all and stayed throughout the length of each CHOGM, took detailed notes during the executive sessions and intervened actively. Furthermore, she ensured that she was accompanied by the Foreign Secretary, Secretary of the Cabinet, and Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office. Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser regarded the organization as the ideal vehicle to pursue his idealism for racial and social justice, in addition to providing an important platform for Australia as a middle ranking power in the international community. He formed a close personal friendship with Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley – an unlikely combination of Australian conservative and Jamaican socialist – as both felt that development was a key factor in promoting international security. Although their initiative in 1979 for a Common Fund failed, it was symptomatic of the Commonwealth as a unique umbrella organization but also an international forum for economic ideas and activity.

The focus and attention of individual heads is underlined by the quality of level of discussion at executive meetings. The historian is immeasurably helped by the assiduous and detailed note-taking: individual heads are identified, and their remarks extensive. The Zimbabwe initiative convinced Fraser’s successor, Bob Hawke that the Commonwealth was far more than the talking shop depicted by sceptics. ‘Used properly it could be an instrument for achieving peaceful transformation in dangerous situations – of giving a glimpse of ‘the light on the hill’ to the oppressed in many parts of the world.’ It included ‘nations at every stage of economic development’. The bonds ‘forged by a common heritage of British imperialism survived decolonization’; they remained vibrant thanks to the Secretariat, programmes of training and assistance, and the biennial heads of government meeting.

Hawke’s opening speech at Nassau, in which he rewrote the draft, ‘trying to unlock the Commonwealth’s strength (with) the essence of that strength (as) understanding the limits of power, which in turn was crucial for the work of the conference (on South Africa). This reflected the growing stature of middle powers (Canada, & Australia) in international and multi-lateral fora as the ‘lattice work of international politics’ meetings between heads helped exchange ideas, and reinforce attitudes. This global interchange is further illustrated in the

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45 Michael Fathers, Reuters, and Director of Information, Commonwealth Secretariat 1995-1997, interview with Sue Onslow. Derek Ingram interview with Sue Onslow. Richard Bourne interview with Sue Onslow
46 Derek Ingram to Sue Onslow.
47 Commonwealth Secretariat Directors of Information, Mrs Patsy Robertson and Mr Michael Fathers, to Sue Onslow
48 Stuart Mole, Joe Clark, Pik Botha, interviews. See also ICWS Witness Seminar: Negotiating with Apartheid, available on www.commonwealth.sas.ac.uk
49 Sir Peter Marshall letter to Sir Sonny Ramphal, December 2013
50 Malcolm Fraser: Political Memoirs.
51 Bob Hawke, Memoirs, p.316 and P318.
52 Bob Hawke, Memoirs, p.360.
recollections of Mike Codd, Bob Hawke’s special adviser, on the network of leaders/international experts for an international bank boycott of South Africa 1987, at the Vancouver CHOGM meeting, and Hawke’s dispatch of his private emissary to see Wolfersohn in Washington to get American support for sanctions. 53

The Commonwealth, the Cold War and non-alignment.

This caliber of international leadership, and commitment to the Commonwealth was matched by the appointment of Shridath (‘Sonny’) Ramphal as Secretary General at the Kingston Heads of Government meeting in 1975. The former Attorney General and Foreign Minister of Guyana, Ramphal had risen to prominence in Non-Aligned Movement meetings in 1971 and 1973. In politico-cultural terms, Ramphal was part of a wider Indian world within the Commonwealth, which permeated his outlook and certainly enabled his activities. Indira Gandhi had been a key supporter of his candidacy and one of Ramphal’s first personal appointments was to recruit the head of the Indian Prime Minister’s Office, the intellectually brilliant but abrasive Moni Malhoutra, to run his private office in London. Ramphal brought a charisma and intellectual vigor to the post of Secretary General, and a particular outlook of his new position as a policy initiator in coordination with heads, rather than simply responding to their instruction. Building upon Arnold Smith’s legacy, this produced a particular dynamism in Commonwealth diplomacy and activities in a critical period of the Cold War 1975-1990.

As Foreign Minister of Guyana 1970-1974, Ramphal had taken a prominent part in the Non-Aligned Meetings meetings, and particularly had attracted support from Indian Premier Indira Gandhi. An Indo-Guyanese lawyer and politician, Ramphal’s formative political experiences were the failure of his senior colleague and fellow nationalist Chegge Jagan to achieve independence in 1964 because of American pressure on the British government fearing another radical nationalist Caribbean government.

Therefore during Ramphal’s stewardship, Marlborough House marked the crossroads of a particular constellation of forces.

1. Leadership by an activist Secretary-General, who occupied prominent positions on major international commissions of enquiry on social justice and climate change: The Brundtland Commission, the Brandt commission. 54

2. Elite politics and the role of Heads: the permeating influence of Non-alignment and neutralism by key international leaders, emphasized by the practice of elite politics. These Commonwealth linkages were further underpinned by the network of High Commissioners in London, such as the Committee on Southern Africa, which met regularly at Marlborough House. Furthermore, in each Commonwealth country, High Commissioners would meet regularly providing avenues of information and exchange not available to other ambassadors. 55

3. Communications: in the age of the telex and the telephone, Ramphal relied heavily on personal diplomacy and the telephone. While small Commonwealth state heads might hesitate to telephone Downing Street, or to speak to another international leader 56 – Ramphal had no such compunction. His relationship with Prime Minister James Callaghan and the Foreign Office under David Owen was good, and although relations during the Thatcher era were clouded by the British Prime Minister’s highly

53 Bob Hawke biography, p.202-207
54 Give website address of both.
55 BDOHP, Churchill College, Cambridge: Sir Len Allison interview
56 Joe Clark interview with Sue Onslow, 2013.
public aversion to economic sanctions, each respected the other. The
Commonwealth as an organization therefore relied importantly upon tangible as well
as intangible elements necessary for diplomacy: Personal contact, longevity of
leadership and ‘trust’.  

4. Intellectual acumen: quality of head-hunting and appointments was impressive. This
was helped by arcane management practices.  

5. Visibility, information systems and networks. Ramphal had important connections
with the Anti-Apartheid Movement and radical nationalists, both based in London and
as regular visitors. Marlborough House provided training for South African journalists
– although the ANC was suspicious because the white liberal Donald Woods was
recruited as a consultant; The Information Division was consistently attentive to
ensure liberation movements representatives, the ANC, ZAPU, ZANU and SWAPO
received accreditation to heads of governments meetings (from 1975 onwards).
Gemini News Service intersected with this ideological climate of a New Informational
Information Order (NIEO) and its associated determination that the Western
dominated press should not define and drive the news agenda. On the other hand,
being based in London was an important asset for the Secretary General and his
staff, as SG Ramphal expressly used private briefings of particular British journalists
as a means to exert pressure on the British Government on the issues of Rhodesia,
South Africa, and Namibia. Commonwealth foreign policy activism on Rhodesia,
and then South Africa, in which Ramphal took a particularly prominent stance, has
been described as the organization’s ‘grand strategy’ – or the closest it came to
having one.  

6. Delivery: The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation. This provided
functional cooperation underpinning diplomatic relationships, and supported much
needed manpower skills development. It was funded by voluntary contributions, with
Canada and Britain providing the ‘lion’s share’. Set up in 1971 with an initial budget of
$1m, it was expanded to $44m by the end of Ramphal’s term in 1990. It was known
jocularly by Commonwealth Secretariat staff as ‘Dial an Indian’ – this enabled swift
dispatch of technical expert from similar legal/business culture. This provided
important practical underpinning to the public international political diplomacy, and
drew expressly on ideas of South-South cooperation which had emerged at the
Asian-African movement’s meeting in Bandung, in 1955.

Not only was the Commonwealth demonstrating marked traits of the Non-Aligned Movement,
and non-alignment under Ramphal’s stewardship, by the late 1970s the Commonwealth
members had contributed to the alteration of the NAM’s goals and outlook. Writing in 1978,
the Commonwealth Secretariat International Division noted:

57 Michael Frendo interview with Sue Onslow
58 Interviews with Sir Peter Marshall, and Stuart Mole.
59 Anti Apartheid Movement papers, Rhodes House Library, Oxford. Ambassador Abdul Minty interview with Sue
Onslow
60 Michael Fathers to Sue Onslow.
and advice to the ZAPU and ZANU delegations at the Geneva Conference in 1976, as well as behind the scenes at
Lancaster House in 1979. (Chief Emeka Anyaoku interview with Sue Onslow. See also Onslow Zimbabwe: Land and
the Lancaster House Settlement, British Scholar, April 2013. The Commonwealth’s stance on economic sanctions
against South Africa, and in particular its pressure on Mrs Thatcher to concur, has been extensively covered in the
literature. See eg. Geoffrey Howe, Conflict of Loyalty; Bob Hawke: Political Memoirs. Margaret Thatcher, The
Downing Street Years. Robin Renwick, Unconventional Diplomacy in Southern Africa
62 Anthony Ellman, Witness Seminar: A History of the Commonwealth Secretariat (June 2013) and Raja Gomez
interview with Sue Onslow
63 See Bandung final declaration; Gerald Hensley interview with Sue Onslow, 2014.
‘whilst the original impulses for non-alignment as conceived at Bandung in 1955 were the unfettered independence of those nations emerging from colonial rule, and for their peaceful development, for non-aligned countries at that time and up to the late sixties, imperialism was the main threat: non-alignment countries therefore looked upon both the Soviet Union and China sympathetically by virtue of their shared view of the threat of western imperialism. In recent years, however, this premise has become increasingly blurred and confused as a result of various factors ie. the growth of the Sino-Soviet split, and after, Vietnam, the rapprochement between the US and China; global accommodations and mutually advantageous ‘understandings’ between the super powers: the large increase in the movement’s membership including many with a history of a pro-Western bias; shifting alliances ie Egypt and Sudan away from the Soviet Union and Vietnam away from China; and the demonstrable growth of Soviet ambition and influence in various parts of the world particularly in Africa.’ Here, a majority of Commonwealth countries were increasingly disturbed about Cuba’s disruptive role within the NAM. (See Appendix 1)

Commonwealth and Economic diplomacy

The other area of Commonwealth diplomacy in the Cold War era, and its bridging ideological divides between East/West and North/South is in the realm of economic diplomacy. This followed a different sine wave of activity. For the majority of Commonwealth nations from 1965 (22 by 1970), the principal processes at play were transitions from decolonization. The nominal date of political independence might be deemed to confer political sovereignty, but decolonization was a process not simply a date. New heads of government and their small executives had the apparent structural trappings of statehood – and jealously guarded their sovereignty and independence. Their equally important quest was development and the associated search for economic sovereignty. For the new Commonwealth states, there were important communalities: a passionate attachment to political and territorial sovereignty; foreign policy remained the preserve of the executive head of State, the President, or elected head of government, the Prime Minister’s office, and therefore privileged the role of special advisers and leading civil servants, with small foreign ministries that focused upon day-to-day international affairs, and limited administrative expertise. This then in turn underlined the importance of the biennial Commonwealth heads of government meeting as a venue for discussion on foreign policy issues – closely linked to issues of domestic legitimacy, such as support for racial justice, and pursuit of social justice – and the public image of international contacts and importance, which was played back into the domestic sphere.

Despite their nominal political independence, the economic sovereignty of new Commonwealth states however remained compromised: as ‘late developers’ with immature or skewed political economies inherited from the colonial era – the majority of African Commonwealth countries were mono-crop or mono-mineral. There was a shared faith in the role of the state as the driver of development, and over-confidence in the state’s ability to effect rapid change. Therefore, in terms of hard power and associated influence in the international system, individually these new states were significantly constrained.

International association with the Commonwealth, and the Non-Aligned Movement, materially advanced their soft power and ‘voice’ in international politics. The Commonwealth also offered bilateral and multilateral networks of commercial and financial support, and expertise,

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64 Nicholas Bayne, ‘The Commonwealth in the international economy’ in James Mayall (ed) The Commonwealth, p. 103-121
65 T Mkandawire: The State and Development (check reference, & publication date)
because it included Group B economies: Canada, Australia, Britain (a permanent member of the UN Security Council).

Individual members of the Commonwealth had played a prominent part in the emergence of the New International Economic Order debate, and the activities of the G-77 group of developing countries. (Prime Minister Michael Manley of Jamaica was chair of the G-77) This threatened to set individual developing country governments against the developed world. ‘Australia’s interests those of the Third World (its political economy: agriculture and commodities; and the extent to which Australia was locked out of world markets.)” The developing nations were pushing hard for financial institutions to have open access to world markets; they wanted the right to form trade associations, and regulate the activities of multinational corporations. Not surprisingly, North/South discussions were full of tension, resentment, distrust and difficulties.’ During Malcolm Fraser’s premiership, Australia consistently sided with the South to use its unique position to engage with the North. Fraser’s attempts were largely frustrated.

Ramphal’s particular contribution to international collaboration was his determination to act as a bridge between North and South – or, as his Assistant Secretary General (Economic) put it, West/South. (In Sir Peter Marshall’s view, the Soviet central command economy had ‘nothing to offer’ the debate about development; the confrontation was between the NIEO/Group of 77 national governments and the Western developed nations.) Following the lead of Michael Manley, host at the Kingston CHOGM in 1975, Commonwealth heads had agreed to set up a series of expert groups to examine the underlying issues, and to make recommendations for international collaboration in multilateral organisations and frameworks. (these focused on the key issues in the North/South dialogue: ‘the shape of the international economic order, commodity agreements and the Common Fund, industrialization, protection, market access, economic recession, debt problems and financial institutions.’) Ramphal had taught himself economics precisely because of his awareness that too many politicians did not understand the dynamics of the international political economy. Ramphal recruited leading economists from around the Commonwealth to serve at the Secretariat and to energize its position as a leading ‘intellectual think tank’: these include Peter Marshall and the brilliant, Dr Vishnu Persaud. (This intellectual gathering was reinforced by the later appointments of Rumman Faruqi, and Indrajit Coomaraswamy.) Again, the network of officials is important: Marshall had served at the UNO and the mission in Geneva, and thus had an acute understanding of the politics of New York (the preserve of heads, and their foreign ministers), and contacts with the separate world of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (the world of Economic/Finance Ministers). Once Ramphal had gained observer status for a Commonwealth Secretariat official in both New York and Washington, the Secretariat was situated in the different nexus of Geneva, Washington and New York. Persaud was a Caribbean economist of considerable distinction, whereas Rumman Faruqi had been seconded to the UN and World Bank, and Indrajit Coomaraswamy was a highly regarded former Governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka. The benefit of Marshall’s contacts with Downing Street and Whitehall were immeasurable. The Economic Affairs Department provided briefing material for Commonwealth Ministers of Finance before annual IMF/World Bank meetings, as well as to Non-Aligned Movement meetings.

How much of an impact did this expert group activity, and Ramphal’s participation in wider commissions have? While this debate improved awareness of the issues, each had little

66 Malcolm Fraser, Political Memoirs, p.466.
67 Bayne, p.106.
68 Raja Gomez interview with Sue Onslow
69 Sir Peter Marshall, and Dr Vishnu Persaud interviews with Sue Onslow
70 Dr Vishnu Persaud interview with Sue Onslow
last lasting impact.\textsuperscript{71} The Melbourne Declaration on economic issues proved ephemeral, as the World Economic Summit at Cancun in 1981 spelled the beginning of the end of hope for a NIEO. The 1980s were the era of 'African crisis' in their political economies, the Berg Report and a prescriptive framework by the World Bank/IMF of STABs/Structural Adjustment Programmes. Therefore Commonwealth attempts to straddle the ideological divide of African socialism/state sovereignty and forces of globalization and free market, therefore, ran up sharply against the power of the international financial institutions who, armed with the hammer of economic liberalization and deregulation, believed all problems 'looked like a nail'.\textsuperscript{72} To its contemporary critics, the Commonwealth – at intergovernmental level as well as in the Secretariat - seemed to have a marked political penchant for declarations and process, rather than substance and clear policy outcomes. The Commonwealth Secretariat budget, and the separate and autonomous Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (administered by the Canadian government), amounted to ‘the UNO cafeteria, or annual car parking expenditure’.\textsuperscript{73} The organizational structure of the Secretariat was byzantine, as the SG operated with personal coteries and privileged access. This complicated information sharing in the office of the SG and International Affairs division; whilst it made those outside the ‘magic circle’ feel ignored and demoralized; this diminished the effectiveness of the organization itself.\textsuperscript{74} There was scant financial record keeping, and a degree of institutional racism with an undertow of tensions over regional diplomatic allocations and appointments. Ramphal himself was acutely aware of the dichotomy between the African Commonwealth’s harsh criticism of apartheid, but evident failure to improve political and human rights in their own countries. This came to the fore over Idi Amin’s murderous regime. At the 1977 London Summit, Ramphal persuaded heads to make an early tentative move towards universal human rights.\textsuperscript{75} (This seems more significant with the benefit of hindsight, than it did at the time.)

\textbf{Commonwealth and neutralism:}

The Commonwealth as an inter-governmental organisation and bureaucratic entity was not caught up in East-West confrontation. By 1976 it had become ‘a unique organisation’. Unlike UN, it did not include either of the superpowers, and there was no P-5 veto arrangement. Did this make it irrelevant? Some, for example, Malcolm Fraser and Brian Mulroney of Canada, did not think so. They regarded it as a vehicle for foreign policy activism, and as a source of national and international strength. The Singapore Declaration of 1971 - ie membership declared its opposition to racism, effectively placed it outside the Cold War contestation. ‘As an association linking four developed states with a rapidly growing number of newly independent developing states, its major concerns from the 1960s onwards reflected those of the Third World: decolonization and the eradication of white minority rule in southern Africa; economic development and the redress of global economic inequality. These same themes featured prominently in the work of the United Nations and its agencies; they were also in the forefront of concern for the non-aligned movement and the Organization of African Unity.\textsuperscript{76} As the NAM fractured with Cuba’s ideological assertion that the Soviet Union was the natural ally of non-alignment and the invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, a NAM member, the Commonwealth acquired even more of an image as ‘an English speaking Non-Aligned

\textsuperscript{71} This was the conclusion of the Secretariat review of Commonwealth contributions to international economic issues, conducted in 1990. Bayne’s chapter draws extensively on this.
\textsuperscript{72} Sir Peter Marshall interview with Sue Onslow
\textsuperscript{73} Mark Robinson interview with Sue Onslow
\textsuperscript{74} Stuart Mole interview with Sue Onslow; Sir Peter Williams, Witness Seminar The History of the Commonwealth Secretariat, June 2013. Stephen Chan, former Commonwealth Youth Programme; Purna Sen, former Director, Human Rights Division. The British government remained cool throughout the 1980s
\textsuperscript{75} Sir Sonny Ramphal interview with Sue Onslow
\textsuperscript{76} Margaret Doxey: Behind the Headlines, Canadian Institute for International Affairs, Vol. 49,4, 1992
Movement’. 1983 seems to represent the culmination of particular nexus of alignments and strategic preoccupations, as India hosted both the Non-Aligned Movement triennial meeting in March, and then the CHOGM in Delhi in October. Like her father before her, Mrs Gandhi had always concentrated India’s foreign policy strategy and international diplomacy on Non-Alignment rather than the Commonwealth.\(^{77}\) Yet it was hoped that by hosting the CHOGM in India in the same year, would strengthen India’s interest and public commitment to the Commonwealth platform. Ramphal had initially anticipated that Delhi would be a ‘boring’ meeting – the briefing papers are focussed largely on the international economic situation\(^{78}\); but the American invasion of Grenada earlier that month and Caribbean conviction that Mrs Thatcher’s protests to Ronald Reagan had been half-hearted, ensured it was a particularly heated meeting.\(^{79}\) The Commonwealth did not regard it as Operation Fury as a Cold War crisis; instead, it was seen as a violation of international law and the sovereign territory of a Commonwealth country. But this was against the backdrop of the superpower strategic standoff, and current impasse on strategic weapons negotiations. The dynamics of discussion were further complicated as the meeting now contained two nuclear states, as well as ardent opponents of nuclear proliferation. The Australian government had already registered concern at the proposal for a nuclear free Indian Ocean\(^{80}\), as this implied to the residents of Western Australia that the American nuclear umbrella of ANZUS no longer covered them. Host Indira Gandhi opened the proceedings with a stark warning that the standoff between Washington and Moscow on arms limitations was a serious challenge to world peace. Trudeau publicly called for a reinjection of energy in to the stalled START talks between Washington and Moscow. This idea, according to the Commonwealth press Spokesperson Patsy Robertson, had ‘really taken root among heads’ as they focussed on his peace initiative.\(^{81}\) Buoyed up by the reception of his fellow heads, and the Goa Declaration on International Security which proclaimed, Trudeau’s next stop was Moscow to urge a resumption of negotiations.

The other intense Cold War division between leading Commonwealth countries was New Zealand’s passionate espousal of a nuclear free Pacific in the 1980s. This fractured the ANZUS alliance and New Zealand Prime Minister, David Lange’s relations with the Reagan Administration, as well as his Australian counterparts. The issue of New Zealand’s nuclear free stance was not expressly addressed at Commonwealth Heads’ executive sessions, but Lange found himself excluded from the inner circle at the Nassau heads’ meeting Retreat, who sought to persuade Mrs Thatcher on economic and financial sanctions against South Africa, and he found himself with those ‘pressing our noses against the window’.\(^{82}\) Given how much his government’s stance had antagonized the Australian Labour government, this was ‘not surprising’.\(^{83}\)

**Conclusion:**

Unlike the Non-Aligned Movement, the Commonwealth was not a direct product of the Cold War. But it did represent disassociation from the Cold War contestation. The principal forces at play and preoccupations for the majority of its members were transitions from colonialism at a time of change in the international system: namely, state building, the pursuit of development and modernity. So the Commonwealth was with the Cold War, but not of it. It


\(^{78}\) These are in the Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, and available digitally on the Margaret Thatcher Foundation website.

\(^{79}\) Sir Ron Sanders interview with Sue Onslow, 2012.

\(^{80}\) Malcolm Fraser: Political Memoirs?

\(^{81}\) *The Ottawa Citizen*, 23 November 1983

\(^{82}\) Bob Hawke, Gerald Hensley and Simon Murdoch interviews with Sue Onslow, 2014.

\(^{83}\) Bob Hawke interview with Sue Onslow. See also Gerald Hensley: *Friendly Fire* (2013)
provided an alternative cross-ideological meeting point, and indeed the Cold War context of a battle of systems and ideas, gave the voluntary association’s shared agenda of social justice a particular purpose, in addition to the grand strategy of opposition to apartheid. It pre-dated and survived the ideological struggle between Soviet-led socialism, and Western led liberal democratic capitalism. It possessed human and material resources, and was valued by its members as an instrument and arena for pursuing foreign policy goals. With many of the attributes of a ‘soft power’ organization, on the issue of sanctions against Rhodesia and subsequently South Africa, the Commonwealth also took on ‘hard power’ elements, satisfying Joseph Nye’s ‘smart power’ yardstick. It had ‘several operational environments’, and ‘contexts for action’: the internal administrative environment, the environment created by member states and their heads; and ‘a wider environment beyond the membership in which other states as well as other international organizations. As a voluntary association its principal energies were devoted to promoting state strength and enhancing international influence and input: a ‘soft power’ force multiplier. (Democracy and good governance only belatedly featured as it evolved into an explicit values–based organization with the Harare Declaration of 1991.) Particularly in the era of SG Sonny Ramphal, the Secretariat – the brain of the Commonwealth, if its heads of government meeting was the showcase and beating heart – it commanded a prominent position because of the range of expertise in the realm of economic debates and diplomacy. Its Economic Affairs Division provided briefing papers for Non-Aligned meetings. As American diplomats recognized, it was ‘an English speaking non-aligned movement’ that reflected a combination of the agenda of an Indian wider world of social justice, and an African shared agenda of racial justice, bound by a refusal to be corralled by what it saw as artificial constructs of a bipolar international system.

Was the Commonwealth therefore an important diplomatic actor in contemporary international politics? Yes, in terms of the campaign to support racial justice. It also sought to underpin African nation state building – liberation movements transitions to ruling parties of power – as well as the particular needs of nation building in small states in the Caribbean and Pacific. The position and prestige of role of the Secretary General accumulated, as successive office holders exploited the policy space provided by the Commonwealth to pursue conflict mediation, as well as ‘outer diplomacy’. The Commonwealth also mattered in the realm of ideas: economic diplomacy followed a different trajectory to political diplomacy, and again the association provided cumulative leadership, information sharing and accommodation between North-South. The Commonwealth’s role, and individual Commonwealth diplomats and economists, in mediating between the confrontational stance of the NIEO and G-77 agenda which set government against government, was an important factor in establishing collaborative approach of the International Development Strategy.

This paper has given instances of the Commonwealth’s determined attempts to remain outside the confines of the Cold War, and suggests that the international system of 1965-1990 was more multipolar and multi-dimensional than IR theorists have postulated. Those examining international organizations and soft power have singularly failed to look at the Commonwealth, that unique and multi-dimensional voluntary association. The Commonwealth did indeed typify ‘power and persuasion in an age of networks’, rather than simple ‘also-ran status’ in a bipolar Cold War. It was at the Retreat of heads of government where the Commonwealth, its philosophy, identity, activities and diplomacy came centre stage.

84 Doxey, p.4. Doxey observed that the Commonwealth, although well served by historians, was largely overlooked by international relations specialists.
85 Unnamed American diplomat to Sir Peter Marshall, 1983, Sir Peter Marshall interview with Sue Onslow
86 Sir Peter Marshall, in ...
In terms of its role in international affairs, the influence of the Commonwealth in the 1970s-1990 was enhanced by the political activism of the Secretary General, Shridath Ramphal, and his passionate espousal of New International Economic Order issues and the need for the Commonwealth to take a proactive role in international political affairs. In terms of mitigating the Cold War, did the Commonwealth make a difference? Its influence and activities should not be over-stated. Considerable attention has been paid to the place of Commonwealth diplomacy towards Southern Africa and the pursuit of racial justice – first in the Secretary General’s contribution to the settlement of the Rhodesia issue, his work at the Lusaka CHOGM to persuade the British leader to accept an all-party conference, and his ‘outer diplomacy’ around the Lancaster House negotiations; he was also the linchpin in the Commonwealth’s support for the anti-apartheid and liberation movements and negotiated transition in Namibia and South Africa, Less attention has been paid to Commonwealth contacts and diplomacy in support of negotiations to end the Nigerian civil war, Bangladesh independence, Mozambique’s transition to independence 1974-1976; the overthrow of Amin in 1979; and the Caribbean Cold war crisis in Grenada of 1983, where the Secretary General was engaged in intense behind-the-scenes diplomacy first to prevent the military intervention, then not to endorse it whilst averting a split in the organization. Although not the ‘vertebrate with teeth’ originally envisaged, neither was it ‘a jelly fish without a sting’ as an international organization and unique ‘sovereign regime’, and a subsidiary diplomatic global player which skillfully exploited its filigree of formal and informal networks. The ‘official’ Commonwealth helped insure leaders and diplomats were better informed about debates, and helped spread ideas and attitudes through its intersection with other international meetings and bilateral summits. Its greatest contribution seems to have been as a national confidence booster: leaders and the Secretariat wanted to believe in it, so they did. ‘It existed, so it was used.’ But as Henry Kissinger remarked, a policy initiative is not important; its outcome is. Here the Commonwealth’s report card is much less impressive – a victim of the ‘hard power’ calculations of the Cold War era.

Appendix 1.
Taken from Com.Sec Archives, 2011/247 conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs at Non-Aligned meeting, Belgrade July 1978.]

Commonwealth Secretariat additional note:

“It is in this context that the so-called Cuban factor assumes crucial significance vis-à-vis the relevance and future direction of the Movement. There are essentially three aspects to the Cuban factor, all potentially divisive for the movement. All three were foremost in the minds of the Belgrade participants.

Most fundamental was (and no doubt remains) Cuba’s thesis that the Soviet Union and other socialist countries (but not China and Roumania whose application for observer status was successfully opposed by Cuba at the 1976 Colombo Summit) are the natural allies of the Non-Aligned Movement and should therefore be accorded a special relationship by non-
aligned countries. It is because this thesis is fundamentally ideological that it poses the most serious challenge. And although effectively resisted at Belgrade – with President Tito (one of whose main aims in helping to found the Movement was after all to strengthen his independence from the Soviet Union leading the opposition – that an attempt should be made to alter the basic definition of non-alignment in such a fundamental way must remain a source of deep concern particularly for those anxious to maintain the off-challenged unity of the Movement, Yugoslavia and India. That next year’s summit is to be held in Havana is an added worrying factor, especially since Cuba has so far shown no sign of moderating its position.

The second potentially divisive issue was Cuba’s strenuous efforts at Belgrade to defend and justify its military involvement in Africa. This, of course, constituted a logical extension of its ideological thesis. On the one hand, so-called moderate members (led by Egypt) expressed the view that Cuba’s troops in Africa were acting the role of a Kremlin’s mercenary force and, in this regard, questioned Cuba’s credentials as a non-aligned nation; the so called radicals (led by Afghanistan and as expected supported by Angola and Ethiopia) on the other hand, welcomed Cuba’s internationalist assistance in the legitimate struggle against oppression. On this issue, honours were evenly divided: Cuba’s draft endorsing the right of non-aligned states to request foreign military assistance and a rival draft condemning foreign intervention under any pretext whatsoever were both dropped in favour of the following vaguely worded paragraph:

The Ministers point with concern to the more and more overt recourse to interference in the internal affairs of independent, particularly non-aligned countries in order to influence their socio-political development, their foreign policies, and to circumscribe their independence.

Interference in internal affairs is becoming one of the principle forms of attack against the non-aligned movement and the unity of non-aligned countries. This statement can be taken to mean interference by anyone. On this whole question India once more played a major moderating role. Without condemning anyone in particular, the Indian Foreign Minister, Mr Vajpayee, warned that the Movement was in danger of being ‘dragged into the vortex of power rivalries’, adding that the ‘permanent dependence on foreign military forces was bound to dilute a nation’s non-alignment and independence.’

The third controversial Cuban issue was Havana, the venue of next year’s summit, and the subsequent important role the host nation could play by virtue of its election to the Movement’s Presidency for three years, ie until the following summit. Indeed this question became inextricably enmeshed with the other two issues highlighted earlier. Spear-heading the move to boycott the Havana Summit unless Cuba modified its policies were Somalia and Zaire. In the end, however a major showdown was avoided: those unhappy with the venue perhaps ultimately felt it would be preferable to acquiesce than provoke a full scale clash certain to cause serious damage to the movement. This danger nonetheless remains, even if only below the surface. Much will depend on Cuba’s policy, particularly prior to next year’s Summit. From the attitudes adopted in Belgrade, should Cuba’s policy remain rigid, a not insignificant number of members could very well stay away or, as a continuing sign of protest, send low-level delegations.

That one member could cause such concerns perhaps owes more to the unfortunate lack of overall cohesion within the Movement than to the extent of its own power and influence. It could be argued that the Movement’s existing difficulties presented the Cubans a convenient situation which could be exploited in furtherance of their own interests. In this context, the frequency with which non-aligned nations resort to arms against each other is a theme strongly underlined by the Foreign Minister of Singapore, Mr Radjaratnam:
The great powers do not dare to fight each other. They now fight wars by proxy through local powers whom they provide with a flow of arms which is now reaching tidal proportions. These proxy wars are being fought in the Third World, in the non-aligned areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The following are among the issues of direct relevance to the Commonwealth discussed at the Belgrade Conference:

1. Cyprus
The Ministers reaffirmed their full support and solidarity with Cyprus and demanded the immediate implementation of the relevant General Assembly and Security Council resolutions. To this end, they conserved that the SC should take all appropriate measures, including if necessary measures under Charter VII of the Charter.

2. South Africa
All of South Africa’s policies were condemned in the strongest possible terms. They also urged those states that maintained economic, military and nuclear relations with South Africa to terminate them and to cooperate with the UN, in particular, to work towards the early convening of the Security Council to consider enforcing an oil embargo against South Africa. In this connection, they urged Iran to join them in making such an embargo effective.

Tributes were paid to the Front Line states for their enormous economic and other sacrifices in the struggle for the liberation of Southern Africa. They appealed to the international community to provide these states with additional assistance for their economic as well as defence needs. They also called for assistance to enable Lesotho implement fully the UN resolutions on apartheid and bantustans and to help all neighbouring states cope with the large influx of refugees. Foreign ministers also reaffirmed their commitment to support the early adoption of an international convention against apartheid in Sport.

Namibia (total support for SWAPO’s position) Walvis Bay is an integral part of Namibia

Zimbabwe: . the conference totally condemned the so-called ‘internal settlement’ as a “sham”. It once again declared that a just solution is only possible if it is based on the wishes of the majority, “as represented by the Patriotic Front”.

Belize
The Foreign Ministers endorsed the policy of the Government of Belize and, in urging strict implementation of the UNGA Resolution 32/32, called on all non-aligned States and the international community “to render all practical assistance necessary to enable Belize to advance rapidly towards an early and secure independence with full sovereign and territorial integrity.”

Indian Ocean
The main point of difference between the respective positions of the Belgrade Conference and the London Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting was that the Foreign Ministers regarded the talks between the Great Powers as limited in scope.

UNO
..They considered that Non-Aligned and other developing countries should have greater representation in the Un organs.