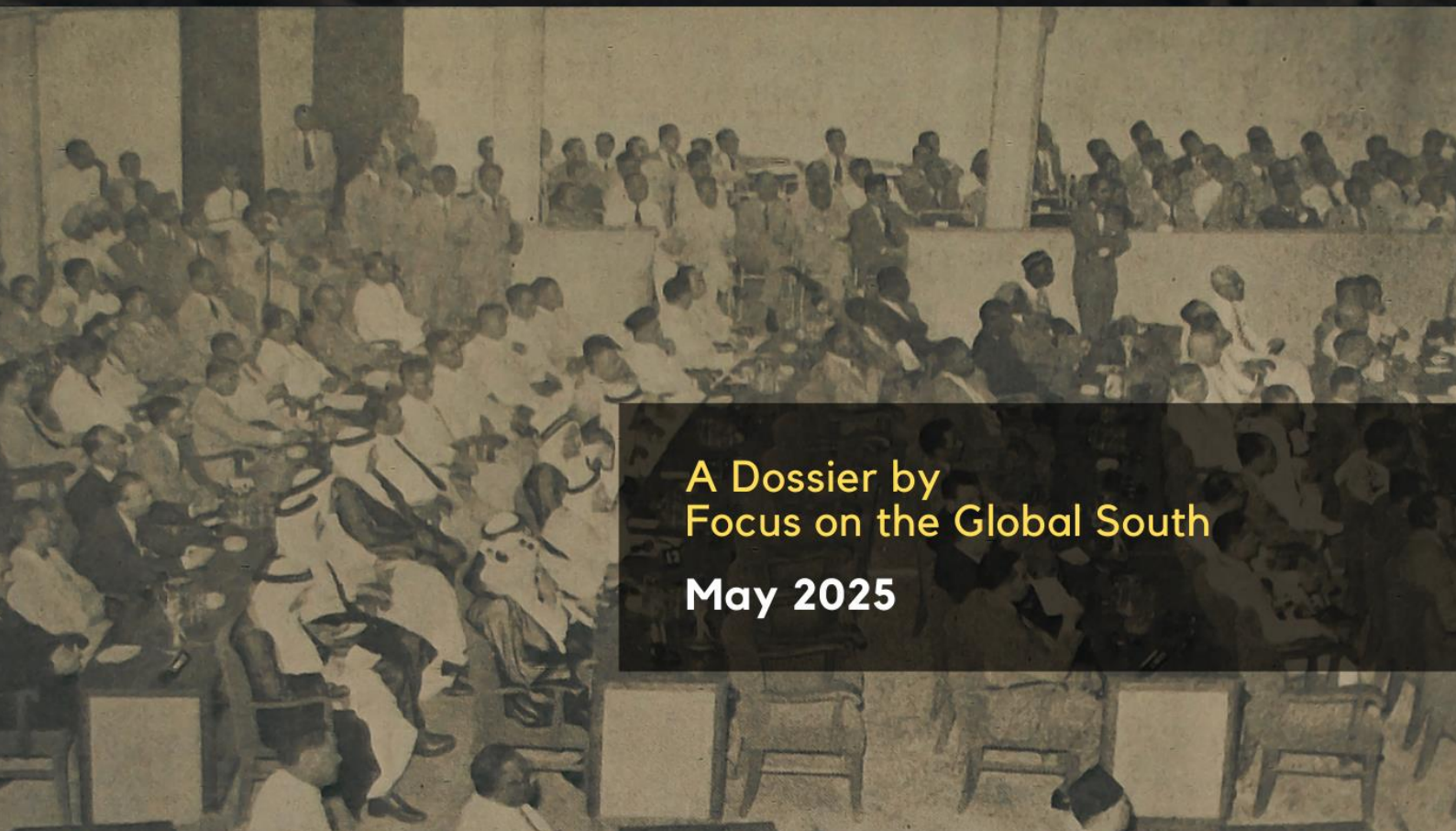




FOCUS  
ON THE  
**GLOBAL  
SOUTH**

# ***70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Bandung Conference***

*A turning point in anti-colonial and South-South solidarity, Bandung's legacy endures in today's global struggles for justice and self-determination*



**A Dossier by  
Focus on the Global South**

**May 2025**

*In April 1955, leaders and delegates from 29 Asian and African countries gathered in the city of Bandung, Indonesia, to chart a new course—one rooted in anti-colonial solidarity, mutual respect, and cooperation among the peoples of the Global South. The Bandung Conference was a turning point in anti-colonial and South-South solidarity; it gave voice to newly independent nations and laid the groundwork for the Non-Aligned Movement.*

*Seventy years later, the fire of Bandung still burns.*

*This dossier marks the 70th anniversary of the Bandung Conference. Through essays, reflections, and critical profiles, it explores the enduring relevance—and limitations—of Bandung’s vision in today’s struggles.*

Edited by: **Walden Bello**

Walden Bello was a founding director of Focus on the Global South, where he currently is a senior analyst as well as co-chair of the Board. He is also the International Adjunct Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York at Binghamton. The author or co-author of 25 books and numerous articles, he received the Right Livelihood Award (also known as the Alternative Nobel Prize) in 2003 and was named Outstanding Public Scholar of the International Studies Association in 2008.

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Published by: **Focus on the Global South**

May, 2025



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# The Long March from Bandung to the BRICS

Published on 13 March 2025



*The heads of state and government, accompanied by heads of delegation of Asian–African countries taking a group photo at the 60th anniversary of the original 1955 Asian–African Conference as the peak event of the 2015 Asian–African Summit at the Merdeka Building in Bandung, West Java, on Friday (24/4). (ANTARA FOTO/AACC2015/M Agung Rajasa/15.)*

*by Walden Bello, with contributions from Shalmali Guttal*

The Bandung Conference in April 1955 has achieved the stature of being a mythical moment in the history of the Global South. There have been many accounts that have highlighted its downsides—among them, the underrepresentation of leaders from Sub-Saharan Africa and the absence of anyone from Latin America, the way Cold War geopolitical rivalries found their way into the meeting, its legitimization of the nation-state as the principal unit of interaction among the peoples of the post-colonial world, the “rivalry” between Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou En Lai, and the disappointing aftermath exemplified by the India-China frontier war in the Himalayas in 1962.

Despite these undoubtedly important though arguably revisionist assertions, the “Bandung Moment” has achieved mythical status since, while its expression in the conference proceedings may have been less than perfect, the spirit of post-colonial unity among the rising peoples of the Global South pervaded the conference. Moreover, this spirit of Bandung has been a constant spur to many political actors to reproduce it in its imagined pristine form, leading to dissatisfaction with successive manifestations of Third World solidarity.

### **The Rise of Asian Solidarity**

Many accounts of Bandung have rightfully stressed the contemporary context of decolonization at the time it was held. It is also important to take account of the sense of regional solidarity that accompanied the anti-colonial nationalist movements that sprang up in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As the Indian scholar Sugata Bose points out, the martyrdom of Jose Rizal, who was executed by the Spaniards in December 1896, “posthumously elevated him to a pioneering figure in Asian resistance.”<sup>1</sup> The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw national revolutionary movements gather force throughout the Asian region, a major source of regional inspiration being the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty and Sun Yat Sen’s establishment of the Republic of China. A cosmopolitan network of Asian revolutionaries was forged in the coastal cities from Tokyo to Shanghai to Canton to Manila to Calcutta. With the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the establishment of the Communist International in 1919, this coastal highway in maritime Asia provided the means by which communist revolutionaries such as Ho Chi Minh and Tan Malaka worked to bring about revolutions that would transcend colonial borders.

### **Japan’s Role in Stimulating Pan-Asian Consciousness**

In the articulation of the emerging sense of a national identity with a regional or Asian consciousness in the pre-World War II Asian world, Japan played an outsized role. Following its victory over Czarist Russia in 1905, “all paths seemed to lead to Japan.”<sup>2</sup> Japan provided a model of how a country could be fundamentally reformed but also how the instruments of domination by the West could be used successfully against it. Nor surprisingly, eager young people from throughout Asia flocked to Tokyo, and it was in such places as the Kanda district of that city that “Asian intellectuals first came to know each other and to speak to each other.”<sup>3</sup>

Japan, however, developed as a Janus-faced entity that provoked both admiration and fear from other Asians. On the one hand, it posed a challenge to Western supremacy. On the other hand, it sought to join the imperial league, taking over in quick succession Korea and Manchuria, then in 1937, began a war to annex China. The Japanese imperial elite convinced itself it had a mission to lead Asia from colonial bondage to the so-called “Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.” The only problem was even as they sponsored governments and movements led by nationalists such as Aung San and Ba Maw in Burma, Sukarno in Indonesia, and Subhas Chandra Bose, the leader of the Indian National Army, the Japanese were brutal in dealing with the peoples of the occupied territories, particularly in China, Korea, and the Philippines. “Asian anti-imperialists experienced both high-minded idealism and high-handed arrogance of middle-tier Japanese military officers in Southeast Asia,” notes Bose.<sup>4</sup> Japanese attitudes towards their nationalist allies oscillated between supporting their aspirations to free themselves from the Western colonial powers and using them as pawns to promote Japan’s wartime goals. The Japanese effort to square the circle was most evident in the Assembly of the Greater East Asiatic Nations on November 5-6, 1943. The tide of war was turning against Japan, so it had become important to enlist the support of Asian nationalists to complement the military effort. With nationalists like Subhas Chandra Bose of India, Jose P Laurel of the Philippines, Ba Maw of Burma, and Prince Wan Waithayakon of Thailand in attendance, this assembly was, according to Ba Maw later in his later years,

the first visual manifestation of the new spirit stirring in Asia, the spirit of Bandung as it was called twelve years later when it was reincarnated at the Bandung Conference of the Afro-Asian Nations. That spirit had its first birth at the Tokyo Assembly in 1943. Even the Assembly’s joint declaration consisting of the five basic principles of a new

order in Asia foreshadowed the Pancha Sila or Five Principles, of the Bandung Nations.<sup>5</sup>

However, though some of the leaders they sponsored became significant actors in the post-war world, the biggest impact that the Japanese had on the peoples of Asia was their shattering of the image of Western invincibility in the first six months of the war, when the British, American, and Dutch armies and navies folded in quick succession to the Japanese military onslaught. The collapse of the British empire in Asia during those months, writes one of the foremost historians of the Pacific War, “did lasting damage to Britain’s reputation as a great power...It was a dignity never to be recovered.”<sup>6</sup> The western collapse in the war underlined that, despite their ultimate victory, the western powers would no longer be able to reimpose the old colonial order. As the young Burmese leader Aung San noted perceptively prior to the outbreak of hostilities, “Colonialism’s difficulty is freedom’s opportunity.”<sup>7</sup>

### **On the Eve of Bandung**

There were three major conferences celebrating Asian unity that preceded Bandung that built up the sense of regional solidarity that would culminate in the latter. The first was the Asian Relations Conference promoted by Jawaharlal Nehru in March, 1947. It was an Indian woman activist, Sarojini Naidu, who stole the show with a stunning speech that surpassed the eloquence of Nehru, who, a year later, would become Prime Minister of India. According to Bose,

In her grand perspective, “mountains and riverways” could not divide the “heat of Asia.” Nor had a “lack of vocabulary, a lack of dictionary knowledge of words, ever prevented the true understanding between hearts.” She made a compelling case for “the great diversity of Asian culture’ having ‘cemented the unity of the Asian people.”<sup>8</sup>

Close to 470 delegates--a great number of them coming from Southeast Asia, and with women outnumbering male diplomats and politicians--attended the Asia Pacific Peace Conference in Beijing from October 2 to 10, 1952. The conference saw fiery denunciations of the United Nations’ role in the Korean War, where a UN Command controlled by the United States, was in combat with North Korean and Chinese troops; its tolerance of continued colonialism in Southeast Asia; and its non-recognition of the People’s Republic of China.

One of the high points of the conference was the way the Kashmir issue was dealt with. Instead of letting the issue divide them, the Indian and Pakistani delegations staged what was described as “an emotional and sensational scene of Indian-Pakistan rapprochement,”<sup>9</sup> where the leader of the Indian delegation presented a Kashmiri lacquer box to the leader of the Pakistani delegation, and the latter in turn put a gold cap on the head of his Indian counterpart. A joint India-Pakistan declaration was then read placing the onus of the Kashmir crisis on “Anglo-American machinations and the ineptitude of the UN, to the cheers, kisses, and hugs of the two delegations.”<sup>10</sup>

Finally, there was the First Asian Socialist Conference that was held from January 6 to 15 in Rangoon, which was described as “a transnational hub for like-minded socialists from Indonesia, India, Burma, and Japan to engage in the work of socialist internationalism with an Asian inflection.”<sup>11</sup> A key organizer, Ram Manohar Lohia, urged Asian socialists to embrace “the politics of steering clear of the two big powerful combinations, not of following the middle

course between the two but of initiating and struggling for positive policies of freedom, social reconstruction, progress, and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>12</sup>

Asian unity and solidarity was a concept and infectious feeling that cut across the post-colonial state boundaries that were being set up as well as across the Cold War divide that the United States (US) was trying to impose in Asia, notably in Korea and Indochina. Bandung was not the beginning but a high point of a process that began late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and would continue after Bandung.

### **The Conference Proper: High Points**

The conference was one of those rare gatherings where the climax took place at the beginning, with President Sukarno's opening speech. Sukarno was a charismatic speaker, and you can feel that charisma emerge from the printed text, from the very beginning of his speech, in fact:

It is a new departure in the history of the world that leaders of Asian and African peoples can meet together in their own countries to discuss and deliberate upon matters of common concern. Only a few decades ago it was frequently necessary to travel to other countries and even other continents before the spokesmen of our peoples could confer.

I recall in this connection the Conference of the "League Against Imperialism and Colonialism" which was held in Brussels almost thirty years ago. At that Conference many distinguished Delegates who are present here today met each other and found new strength in their fight for independence. But that was a meeting place thousands of miles away, amidst foreign people, in a foreign country, in a foreign continent. It was not assembled there by choice, but by necessity.

Today the contrast is great. Our nations and countries are colonies no more. Now we are free, sovereign and independent. We are again masters in our own house....<sup>13</sup>

Particularly evocative of the spirit Sukarno desired was his reference to a gesture of concrete solidarity extended by the Indian anti-colonial movement at a critical juncture of Indonesia's struggle for independence:

As I survey this hall, my thoughts go back to another Conference of Asian peoples. In the beginning of 1949 --historically speaking only a moment ago--my country was for the second time since our Proclamation of Independence engaged in a life and death struggle. Our nation was besieged and beleaguered, much of our territory occupied, a great part of our leaders imprisoned or exiled, our existence as a State threatened. Issues were being decided, not in the conference chamber, but on the battlefield. Our envoys then were rifles, and cannon, and bombs, and grenades, and bamboo spears. We were blockaded, physically and intellectually.

It was at that sad but glorious moment in our national history that our good neighbour India convened a Conference of Asian and African Nations in New Delhi, to protest against the injustice committed against Indonesia and to give support to our struggle. The intellectual blockade was broken! Our Delegates flew to New Delhi and learned at first hand of the massive support which was being given to our struggle for national existence. Never before in the history of mankind has such a solidarity of Asian and African peoples been shown for the rescue of a fellow Asian Nation in danger. The diplomats and statesmen, the Press and the common men of our Asian and African neighbours were all supporting us. We were given fresh courage to press our struggle

onwards to its final successful conclusion. We again realised to the full the truth of Desmoulin's statement: "Have no doubt of the omnipotence of a free people".

Perhaps in some ways the Conference which has assembled here today has some roots in that manifestation of Asian-African solidarity six years ago.<sup>14</sup>

With that gesture of gratitude, Sukarno deftly made Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the towering figures assembled in that hall, informally the co-chair of the meeting.

Much-commented on by historians was another part of Sukarno's speech, where he placed the conference as a direct descendant of the American Revolution, pointing out that it was taking place on the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Paul Revere's ride through Boston warning of the coming of British troops in what turned out to be a futile effort to crush what the Indonesian president characterized as the "first successful anti-colonial war in history."<sup>15</sup>

This was a clever effort to assure the United States that it should not see the meeting as a threat to its interests. By the time of the conference, the Cold War was in full swing, and Sukarno was essentially telling the US that it should not be apprehensive about the presence of Zhou En Lai, the Prime Minister of China, at the meeting. Just as Nehru had ended the blockade of Indonesia in 1949, so was Sukarno communicating to the Americans and the world that Bandung was ending the blockade of China since it was not attending as a Soviet stooge but as part of the anti-colonial struggle that began in their country in 1775.

Zhou responded affably to Sukarno and Nehru's intention of making Bandung Chou and China's "coming out party." In fact, he stole the show. Instead of the fire-breathing Communist that western propaganda had led many at the meeting to expect, Zhou came across as the embodiment of reasonableness and affability. In a report on Zhou's performance in Bandung, A. Doak Barnett, a prominent American liberal scholar with close ties to the US government, wrote:

Chou's performance at Bandung was extremely skillful. During the early days of the conference, he played a patient, conciliatory, and one might say even defensive role. When attacks were made against the Communists, he kept his temper. He refrained from any of the propaganda blasts which typify Chinese Communist pronouncements from Peking. He did not assert himself, and for the most part, he stayed in the background. Then, on the last three days, he emerged as the main performer, and in a series of fairly dramatic diplomatic moves he assumed the role of the reasonable man of peace, the conciliator who was willing to make promises and concessions in the name of harmony and good will.<sup>16</sup>

With his reasonable mien and willingness to negotiate all the key issues China had with its neighbors and with the United States, like the question of Formosa (Taiwan), Barnett concluded, "Chou's personal influence on the delegates attending the conference may have subtle long-range effects which cannot now be accurately foreseen or predicted."<sup>17</sup>

Commenting on Zhou's busy schedule in Bandung, Prashad notes how "Tea with the 'centrists' Nehru and U Nu would be followed by tea with 'rightists' such as Carlos Romulo in the Philippines and John Kotewala of Ceylon... Finally Zhou and the Chinese delegation hosted a banquet attended by the major powers, but also the Arab states (represented by Crown Prince



Faysal of Saudi Arabia, Sewifel Islam Hassan of Yemen, Walid Salah of Jordan, Sami Solh of Lebanon, Mahmud Muntasar of Libya, and Ismail el Azhair of Sudan.<sup>18</sup>

Zhou's charm offensive with a light touch overshadowed Nehru's role. As Barnett put it in his first-hand report,

On balance...it was clear that Nehru did not do very well at the conference. His obvious effort to assert leadership, his intemperate and tactless criticism of those who opposed him, and his transparent pique when things did not go his way antagonized many delegates at the conference and irritated most, including some of his friends. If Nehru hoped that the Asian African Conference would create political ground swell which would point toward a neutralist Afro-Asia under his leadership as the wave of the future, he was disappointed.<sup>19</sup>

### **Unity and Solidarity**

Despite Nehru's failings when it came to personal diplomacy, he scored where it counted: the conference's coming out with a final declaration that would serve as a template for neutralism or non-alignment:

1. Respect for fundamental human rights and for the purposes and the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.
2. Respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations.
3. Recognition of the equality of all races and of the equality of all nations large and small.
4. Abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country.
5. Respect for the right of each nation to defend itself singly or collectively, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations.
6. Abstention from the use of arrangements of collective defense to serve the particular interests of any of the big powers, abstention by any country from exerting pressures on other countries.
7. Refraining from acts or threats of aggression or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any country.
8. Settlement of all international disputes by peaceful means, such as negotiation, conciliation, arbitration or judicial settlement as well as other peaceful means of the parties' own choice, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations.
9. Promotion of mutual interests and cooperation.
10. Respect for justice and international obligation.<sup>20</sup>

Mindful of the fact that there were still territories that remained under colonial control, the conference communique declared that "colonialism in all its manifestations is an evil which should speedily be brought to an end," calling for the self-determination and independence of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia from French rule. Also significant in light of recent events, was the declaration of unqualified support for Palestine: "In view of the existing tension in the Middle East, caused by the situation in Palestine and of the danger of that tension to world peace, the Asian-African Conference declared its support of the rights of the Arab people of Palestine and called for the implementation of the United Nations (UN) Resolutions on Palestine and the achievement of the peaceful settlement of the Palestine question."<sup>21</sup>

The emerging Cold War divide that the organizers feared would upend the conference was thwarted. In the end, a spirit of compromise prevailed, with the pro-western bloc refraining

from aggressively pushing the anti-communist agenda into the final declaration. They were most likely worried about being seen as disruptive of the dominant anti-colonial spirit of the meeting and being tarred with the word “neocolonial” that was then coming into vogue in progressive circles. Even Carlos P. Romulo, the Filipino statesman who was very close to the US and whom the US mainly relied on to push the anti-communist agenda, ended up with one of the eloquent expressions of the transnational solidarity that Bandung embodied:

Nation no longer suffices. Western European man today is paying the terrible price for preserving too long the narrow and inadequate instrument of the nation state. We of Asia and Africa emerging into this world as new nations in an epoch when nationalism, as such, can solve only the least of our problems and leaves us powerless to meet the more serious ones. We have to avoid repeating all of Europe's historic errors. We have to have the imagination and courage to put ourselves in the forefront of the attempt to create a 20th-century world based on the true interdependence of peoples.<sup>22</sup>

But they were also probably disarmed by Zhou's masterful performance. Romulo, America's man at the meeting, found Zhou to be “affable of manner, moderate of speech” by contrast with Nehru's ‘pedantry.’<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Zhou's influence extended to the wording of the final text, which had marked similarities to the declaration of peaceful coexistence that he delivered earlier at the meeting. However, the ideological divide did not disappear; it was simply contained, for the moment.

### **Absent Voices**

Yet the threat posed by the ideological rift did not mean there were no other sources of tension at the conference, though these lay, for the most part, below the surface.

One was the presence of very few women, and the absence of a mention of women's rights in the final declaration—a curious omission because as Bose notes, women's rights had “formed such a key element in unofficial Asian conferences in the past.”<sup>24</sup>

Another was that, as Homer Jack, one of the conference's attendees, put it, “Africa was very much a junior partner” in the Afro-Asia solidarity movement.<sup>25</sup> Only four African countries were present, the dominant one being Egypt, from North Africa which was mainly regarded as an Arab country. Indeed, as one analyst points out, “Egypt's president, Gamal Abdel Nasser took a patronising view of Africa. He not only endorsed the imperial framing of Africa as “the dark continent” but also signaled Egypt's duty of ensuring “the spread of enlightenment and civilization to the remotest depths of the jungle.”<sup>26</sup>

Another major tension was the non-participation of regional or continental movements, such as the Pan-African movement, which had played such a key role in previous Afro-Asian meetings, owing to the insistence of the five governments, the so-called “Colombo Powers” (Burma, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka) that convened the conference, that only governments of nation-states would be invited. As a result, as one analyst noted, “the pursuit of cultural cooperation and global cultural diversity, Third World solidarity and the possibility of an alternative movement for the transformation of the international order was dimmed by a commitment to building interstate alliances and regional hegemonies, and the anti-solidarist pursuit of national interest.”<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the presence in Bandung and later events of regional or continental solidarity movement, and not just states, could have helped mitigate or counter the ethnic tensions and conflicts stoked by the arbitrary territorial divisions departing colonial powers were making, decisions that struck many as being without rhyme or reason except administrative convenience. In Africa, in particular, such arbitrary divisions became the vessels of new “nation states” with little organic basis on the ground.

A third key actor that was missing in Bandung was the peasant movement. In many countries represented in Bandung, there were strong peasant movements. In Vietnam and the Philippines, for instance, the peasants had formed the backbone of national liberation movements. True, it might not have been possible to have representation from peasants in these two countries that had just undergone peasant-based insurgencies—one successful, the other unsuccessful—at the height of the Cold War. However, the host country itself, Indonesia, boasted of massively organized peasant organizations. There were, for instance, millions of peasants in the Indonesian Peasant Front (BTI) affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and many others in the Petani, which worked with Sukarno’s Nationalist Party.<sup>28</sup> Had the presence of organized social forces such as peasant movements been institutionalized in Bandung, they could have been a source of transnational pressure for domestic social reform within the decolonizing countries.

In any event, Bandung, for all the positive contributions it made to decolonization, had the one questionable legacy of legitimizing the nation-state as the principal, if not the only, vehicle for developing relations among the post-colonial societies, to the detriment of other relations of South-South solidarity.

### **Post-Bandung: Positives**

The 20 years after Bandung saw major developments in the evolution of the spirit of Bandung. Over two years after the meeting, the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference was held in Cairo in late 1957. Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was at Bandung, was the force behind the meeting. Nasser had shaken the world and drew massive support from the Third World when he nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 and hung on to it despite British and French efforts to retake it, with the military complicity of Israel.

In what appeared to be a competitive move to claim the Bandung spirit, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana hosted the Conference of Independent African States in Accra in April 1958 and the All-African People’s Conference in December of the same year. At the same time, some of the original sponsors of the Bandung meeting, the so-called “Colombo Powers,” and other rising personalities seemed to be miffed by the charismatic Nasser’s drive to capture leadership of the Afro-Asian movement. One historian describes these dynamics:

Nasser and Nkrumah engaged in ‘soft-power war between 1957 and 1959 by way of rival conferences and claims of the defence of the Bandung Spirit’. In March 1957, for instance, Nkrumah announced that Ghana would hold the first Pan-African Nationalist Conference. The idea for such a conference, it was later revealed, was ‘to match Bandung on an African scale with Asia as observers’. On the other hand, Egypt planned to host the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Conference, a move which was seen as challenging Nkrumah’s bid for Pan-African unity. In the end, Ghana hosted the Conference of Independent African States in Accra in April 1958 and the All-African People’s Conference in December of the same year. According to comments attributed

to George Padmore, Nkrumah's advisor at the time, the April conference partly aimed to keep 'for Black Africa priority over the Afro-Asian movement in Cairo'. In Cairo, the December 26, 1957–January 1, 1958 Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference was dubbed 'the second Bandung'. Anup Singh, secretary of the preparatory commission, declared: 'Let Cairo be the People's Bandung'. This did not go down well with the Colombo powers, who viewed the conference as nothing more than an Egypt–Soviet Union alliance, hinting at the unlikelihood of a second Bandung conference. In Africa, some leaders saw the conference as an overreach by Egypt, with one West African leader commenting: 'None of the West African Nationalist movement accept Nasser as an African Leader.'<sup>29</sup>

These were, however, friendly rivalries within a brotherhood. The spirit of solidarity articulated in Bandung had its next most important manifestation in the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Belgrade in 1961, with Sukarno, Nkrumah, Nehru, Nasser, and Joseph Broz Tito, president of Yugoslavia, serving as the midwives. Close on the heels of the NAM was the founding of the Group of 77 during the first meeting of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964.

The UN had been criticized in Bandung for allowing itself to be used by the United States, particularly in Korea, when its multinational force fought against North Korea and China under the banner of the UN Command controlled by the US. However, by the early sixties, with more and more countries becoming independent, the balance of forces within the UN began to shift and the General Assembly became more and more a convenient site for the developing countries' missions in New York to coordinate their interests. By 1965, the UN had 117 members, the 77 developing countries being in the majority. The changing view of the UN from an instrument of the big powers to an agency that could advance the interests of the Third World was expressed by Kwame Nkrumah, the president of Ghana when he addressed the UN in 1960: "I look upon the United Nations as the only organization that hold out any hope for the future of mankind."<sup>30</sup>

Bandung's legacy at the international level was clear. At the regional level, the record was more mixed. Inter-state alliances in the Middle East and Africa tended to be evanescent. Perhaps the most successful case of the Bandung model of inter-state solidarity at the regional level in the decades after the conference took place in Southeast Asia, as Amitav Acharya perceptively points out:

[One] might argue, with the benefit of hindsight, that the real winner at Bandung was neither China nor India, but the future ASEAN. The suspicion of both India and China, the big powers of Asia, generated at Bandung paved the way for a regionalism of smaller nations to emerge in Asia—one that is led by none of the big powers. This was realised with the establishment of ASEAN in 1967...By paving the way for a regionalism of smaller nations...the Bandung conference might have decisively shaped the trajectory of Asian regionalism, which continues to this day to be ASEAN-centric. What is more, the informal, interpersonal and consensus-driven nature of the interactions among the top leaders at Bandung might have presaged the 'ASEAN Way'—the non-coercive and non-legalistic mode of interactions that marked the formative years of ASEAN.<sup>31</sup>

Still, despite its having two major documents suffused with the spirit of non-alignment, the declaration establishing ASEAN as a “Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality” (ZOPFAN) and that creating the “Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone” (SEANWFZ), ASEAN leaned toward the United States, which manipulated it to try to isolate Vietnam in the region after it lost the Vietnam War in the mid-seventies. It was only with Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia joining ASEAN in the 1990’s that the body became substantially non-aligned.

Moreover, the so-called ASEAN consensus rule meant that it was mainly non-controversial issues that could elicit shared declarations. And it should also be added that Bandung helped institutionalize ASEAN’s rule of strict non-interference in one another’s affairs, one of whose consequences has been ASEAN’s immobility while massive human rights violations were taking place in its member countries, such as Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, and are now occurring on a massive scale in Myanmar.

### **Post-Bandung: Negatives**

Yet, not everything in the aftermath of Bandung was an advance. There were two significant setbacks: the Sino-Indian border conflict in 1962 and the counterrevolution in Indonesia in 1965-66.

Sugata Bose has characterized the Sino-Indian border war as a “fratricide” that was tragic owing to the fact that it was triggered by a colonial legacy, the arbitrary British drawing of borders between India and China in the 19th century. Two years of fruitless negotiations centered on the so-called McMahon Line drawn by the British in 1914 as the eastern border between the two countries. Since it had been arbitrarily drawn by an imperial power, China refused to concede its legality while India stubbornly insisted on it. After over the issue was resolved by force by the Chinese with massive attacks on both the western and eastern sectors of the border, with Indian forces retreating in a rout before China made a unilateral ceasefire after a month-long war. Seven years earlier, Nehru had insisted on inviting Zhou to the Bandung conference in the interest of Asian unity against the West. That ideal died in the border war, leaving a “twenty year legacy of diplomatic non-engagement between the two Asian neighbors at the highest levels of government.”<sup>32</sup>

Three years later, in 1965, it was the turn of Indonesia to suffer a deep rent in the solidarity forged in Bandung. A failed coup became the trigger of a terrifying genocide that claimed over a million lives. Communists and alleged communists were the main victims of this army-run operation, but thousands of victims were Indonesians of Chinese lineage, who were doubly damned as Communists and as a fifth column for the People’s Republic of China. What was a close relationship between China and Sukarno forged with amity in Bandung was replaced by a government that was anti-Chinese, anti-communist, and anti-Beijing.

By the end of 1970, fifteen years after Bandung, three of the Big Four in Bandung, Nehru of India, Nasser of Egypt, and Sukarno of Indonesia had passed away, their last years being marked by a decline in their political fortunes. Nehru could never get over the humiliation of India’s defeat in its border war with China. Nasser’s reputation as a leader of the Third World had fallen victim to Egypt and the Arab world’s disastrous defeat by Israel in the 1967 war. Sukarno spent the last years of his life powerless and a virtual prisoner of General Suharto. Only Zhou remained alive, but he was under constant political attack from what came to be known as the “Gang of Four,” Mao’s most loyal allies in the Communist Party elite, and was



only able to stay in power because Mao needed him to stabilize China as he directed his Red Guards and the Gang of Four to destabilize it.

Still, despite the passing of the Bandung generation of key leaders, the Global South solidarity had been institutionalized as the Group of 77 that functioned as a bloc within the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

### **The Tricontinental Alliance**

Latin America was absent at Bandung, which was an Afro-Asian affair. One of the reasons for this was that many of the Latin American nation-states emerged during a much earlier period of decolonization, in the early 19th century, when liberation movements led by Simon Bolivar and Jose de San Martin threw off the Spanish yoke. Another was that they were not involved in the Second World War, which had shaken the foundations of colonialism in Asia and Africa and led to increased interactions among anti-colonial forces across borders.

In the 1960's, however, the region was shaken politically by the Cuban Revolution, which triggered solidarity from states and people's movements in Africa and Asia. Its leaders, Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara, underlined the common condition of subordination that Latin America had with the peoples of Africa and Asia in their relationship to the West. This realization led to the Cairo Conference in 1962, which was the first time the Latin American, Asian, and African blocs jointly tackled the problems of development. This unity was reinforced intellectually by the development of an economic theory that placed Africa, Asia, and Latin America in a position of structural subordination to the Global North. This was the paradigm developed by Raul Prebisch, an Argentine theorist who was probably the most influential economist produced by the Global South in the 20th century.

Prebisch took off from his observation of trade data that showed that over time the terms of trade turned against the goods produced by the agricultural and mineral-exporting countries of the developing world, which he termed the "periphery," in their relation to the industrial goods produced by the industrially developed countries, which he termed the "center." Over time, Prebisch contended, the developing countries suffered a decline of 30 per cent in their terms of trade, meaning that the developing countries had to use more and more of their agricultural products to purchase fewer and fewer manufactured goods.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the trading relationship was likely to get worse because northern producers were developing substitutes for raw materials from the Global South, and northern consumers would, according to Engels' Law, spend a decreasing proportion of their income on agricultural products from the South. Prebisch's perspective came to be known as "structuralism," because it saw the developing world as trapped in the structure of unequal relations of the global trading system inherited from the colonial period.

Remarkably, at around the same time, Hans Singer, another UN economist, was doing research on global trade trends and was coming out with the same conclusions as Prebisch, so that the phenomenon of deteriorating terms of trade for the Global South came to be known as the Prebisch-Singer Theory.

Prebisch was not simply a theorist. He was a good writer and educator, and, as Ali Allawi put it, "he set to work to attract a number of brilliant economists and policy experts who single-handedly created a development discourse that stood in marked contrast to that from the

multilateral institutions and Western capitals. Studies poured out of CEPAL (or Economic Commission for Latin America, in English), each one adding to the growing edifice of the structuralist school."<sup>34</sup>

But what attracted both developing country economists and technocrats to it was that it described what one analyst described as "bloodless but inexorable exploitation" of the non-industrial world by the industrialized world,<sup>35</sup> irrespective of how different the developing countries' internal social and economic structures were. It offered the possibility of creating a united economic front among different regimes, whether they were Arab monarchies, liberal democracies, authoritarian regimes, or left-wing national liberation governments.

The absence of internal differentiation of the developing country economy in the Prebischian model was its strong point when it came to building an international alliance of the Global South. It also allowed it to be distinguished from the Marxist or communist perspective that greatly worried the North. To some of Prebisch's colleagues, however, this was both a theoretical defect and a political illusion, that is, there were classes in the developing country that benefited from the unequal integration of the South in the global economy. Among those who evinced dissatisfaction with the simple center-periphery model were a trio of Brazilians, Celso Furtado, Theotonio dos Santos, and Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

This spelled trouble at CEPAL, as Allawi notes: "Furtado's historical orientation and his emphasis on the unequal status of classes and the moulding of institutions to favour the ruling elites...had the whiff of an underlying Marxist bias. They were all anathema to Cold War Washington, irrespective of the dry, scholarly jargon of CEPAL."<sup>36</sup> Anxious to keep Washington at bay while keeping together his motley assembly of developing countries, Prebisch inevitably clashed with Furtado, leading to the latter's departure from CEPAL.

Prebisch was not just an economist but a political entrepreneur, and his strategic objective was to enhance the power of the Global South in its dealings with the Global North. The major fruit of this effort was the establishment in 1964 of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which became over the next decade the principal vehicle used by the developing economies in their drive to restructure the world economy.

### **From UNCTAD to the New International Economic Order**

With Prebisch as its first secretary general, UNCTAD advanced a strategy that did not focus on aid but on restructuring the global trading system. This had four prongs. The first was commodity price stabilization, through the negotiation of floors below which commodity prices would not be allowed to fall. The second was a scheme of preferential tariffs allowing Third World exports of manufactures, in the name of development, to enter First World markets at lower tariff rates than those applied to exports from other industrialized countries. The third was to defend the use of a protectionist trade policy as a mechanism for industrialization, a process now better known as industrial policy. The fourth was to push for accelerated technology transfer to the South. The UNCTAD agenda focused on global trade reform, not aid, but it nevertheless did not shy from demanding aid, on the rationale that aid was not charity but "compensation, a rebate to the Third World for the years of declining commodity purchasing power."<sup>37</sup>

The UNCTAD strategy formed the core of the agenda articulated by the historic Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) adopted by the General Assembly on May 1, 1974, the main points of which were:<sup>38</sup>

- Just and equitable relationship between the prices of raw materials, primary commodities, manufactured and semi-manufactured goods exported by developing countries and the prices of raw materials, primary commodities, manufactures, capital goods and equipment imported by them with the aim of bringing about sustained improvement in their unsatisfactory terms of trade and the expansion of the world economy;
- Extension of active assistance to developing countries by the whole international community, free of any political or military conditions;
- Ensuring that one of the main aims of the reformed international monetary system shall be the promotion of the development of the developing countries and the adequate flow of real resources to them;
- Improving the competitiveness of natural materials facing competition from synthetic substitutes;
- Preferential and non-reciprocal treatment for developing countries, wherever feasible, in all fields of international economic co-operation whenever possible;
- Securing favourable conditions for the transfer of financial resources to developing countries;
- Giving to the developing countries access to the achievements of modern science and technology, and promoting the transfer of technology and the creation of indigenous technology for the benefit of the developing countries in forms and in accordance with procedures which are suited to their economies;
- The need for all states to put an end to the waste of natural resources, including food products; the need for developing countries to concentrate all their resources for the cause of development;
- The strengthening, through individual and collective actions, of mutual economic, trade, financial and technical cooperation among the developing countries, mainly on a preferential basis;
- Facilitating the role which producers' associations may play within the framework of international cooperation and, in pursuance of their aims, inter alia assisting in the promotion of sustained growth of the world economy accelerating the development of developing countries.

The UNCTAD and NIEO objectives were ambitious, but the Group of 77 felt that in the mid-seventies, they had the momentum, with the US debacle in Vietnam and the successful coordinated effort by the OPEC countries to drive up the price of oil during the Israeli-Arab War of 1974 and again in 1979.

During the fourth conference of UNCTAD in Nairobi in 1976, agreement was reached, without dissent from the developed countries, on the Integrated Program of Commodities (IPC). The IPC stipulated that agreements for 18 specified commodities would be negotiated or renegotiated with the principal aim of avoiding excessive price fluctuations and keeping prices at levels that would be fair to producers and consumers. It was also agreed that a Common Fund would be set up that would regulate prices when they either fell below or climbed too far above the negotiated price targets. UNCTAD and Group of 77 pressure was also central to

the IMF's establishing a new window, the Compensatory Financing Facility, which was meant to assist Third World countries in managing foreign exchange crises created by sharp falls in the prices of the primary commodities they exported.

Another UNCTAD achievement was getting the industrialized countries to accept the principle of preferential tariffs for developing countries. Some 26 developed countries were involved in 16 separate "General System of Preferences" schemes by the early 1980's.

These concessions were, of course, limited. In the case of commodity price stabilization, it soon became apparent that the rich countries had replaced a strategy of confrontation with a Fabian, or evasive strategy of frustrating concrete agreements. A decade after UNCTAD IV, only one new commodity stabilization agreement, for natural rubber, had been negotiated, an existing agreement on cocoa was not operative, and agreements on tin and sugar had collapsed.

Still it appeared that "Prebischnomics," much like Keynesian economics much earlier, had conquered the world. There were skeptics, but the empirical data on the deterioration of the terms of trade, the foundation on which a whole theoretical and policy edifice was built stood the test of time. In the 1990's, 40 years after Prebisch and Singer published their identical conclusions, the theory was tested by a group of economists using four centuries of trade data. "Their conclusion was clear," notes Allawi. "The evidence they deduced for a large number of commodities showed a long-term decline in their relative price."<sup>39</sup>

Prebisch may have won the intellectual struggle, but it was not ideas that determined the direction of the global economy but power. The very success of Prebisch's ideas in providing a strategy for reform of the global trading system for the South served as the trigger of a backlash by the Northern powers.

### **The End of the Bandung Era**

The push for the NIEO came in the 1970's at a time that the US was not only wracked by domestic dissent over the Vietnam War but also by the phenomenon of "stagflation," or the simultaneous rise of inflation and unemployment, which was not supposed to occur according to the famous "Philips Curve" in Keynesian economics. Not surprisingly, in this troubled atmosphere, an angry mood brewed among forces that felt the US was being assailed by destabilizing influences both in the domestic front and the international front. The NIEO and the United Nations thus became a lightning rod for criticism.

Conservative think tanks took the lead in fanning the reaction. The Heritage Foundation, for instance, accused the Global South of having a systematic strategy to undermine the Global North:

At the Algiers non aligned summit of 1973, the Group of 77 urged political unity to gain economic power. The participants demanded extensive economic concessions by Western nations. The following year they moved their campaign to the UN General Assembly, and approved the "Declaration on Establishment of a New International Economic Order" and the "Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States." These resolutions were the philosophical framework for a decade-long assault on the West in pursuit of a New International Economic Order.<sup>40</sup>

What did the Global South want? Practically everything:

A key element of NIEO's demands is financial redistribution: international taxation, increased foreign assistance, the right to expropriate private foreign assets, commodity price protection, and commercial preferences regarding shipping and trade generally. Technological redistribution, through mandatory transfer of industrial, seabed, space, and pharmaceutical technology has been another NIEO tenet.<sup>41</sup>

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), which was negotiated throughout the 1970's, was seen as part of an effort by the Global South to bring under its control and distribute the planet's natural resources; and where it could not obtain legal title to natural resources and other assets, it sought to "regulate them:"

Private business data flows are under attack internationally and by individual Third World countries; proposals for strict control of the international pharmaceutical trade are pending before more than one UN body; other international agencies are drafting restrictive codes of conduct for multinational corporations; and UNESCO has proposed international restraints on the press.<sup>42</sup>

The neoliberal, free-market counterrevolution came to power in Britain with Margaret Thatcher's becoming prime minister in 1979 and in the United States with Ronald Reagan's election as US president in 1980. Reagan's radical perspective was summed up by his pithy comment: "Government does not solve problems. It subsidizes them." Thatcher agreed: "Free enterprise works because, like democracy, it gives power to the people."

The climax of what the United Nations had titled the "development decades," the 1960's and 1970's, was supposed to take place at the Cancun Summit from October 22 to 30, 1981. Attended by leaders of 22 countries, including Reagan and Thatcher, the meeting was expected by many to herald a new era of North-South relations, wherein the North would be more receptive to the South's demands for global structural reform. Instead, it marked the end of the Bandung era and the prelude to four decades of economic counterrevolution.

### **Crisis for the South, Opportunity for the North**

The campaign for the NIEO came to an abrupt end in the early 1980's. The cause was the so-called "Volcker Shock," the steep rise in the federal funds interest rate pushed by US Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker in the late seventies and early eighties, when the rate reached as high as 19 per cent. The Volcker Shock meant to end the upward inflationary spiral in the US in the late seventies, but it had the knock-on effect of triggering the so-called "Third World" debt crisis owing to the steep rise in interest payments they had to fork over to transnational banks.

During the seventies, the profits derived by the OPEC countries from their raising the price of oil were placed in Western banks, which then proceeded to relend them at relatively low interest rates to developing countries. There was both careless lending and careless borrowing. In the case of Latin America, at the end of 1970, total outstanding debt from all sources totaled only \$29 billion, but by the end of 1978, that number had skyrocketed to \$159 billion. By 1982, the debt level reached \$327 billion. US banks led the lending spree: by 1982, the nine largest US money-center banks held Latin American debt amounting to 176 percent of their capital; their total LDC debt was nearly 290 percent of capital.<sup>43</sup>



The spark for the crisis occurred in August 1982, when “Mexican Finance Minister Jesús Silva Herzog informed the Federal Reserve chairman, the US Treasury secretary, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) managing director that Mexico would no longer be able to service its debt, which at that point totaled \$80 billion. Other countries quickly followed suit. Ultimately, sixteen Latin American countries rescheduled their debts, as well as eleven LDCs in other parts of the world.”<sup>44</sup>

In response, many banks stopped new overseas lending and tried to collect on and restructure existing loan portfolios. The abrupt cut-off in bank financing plunged many developing crisis countries deep into recession, leading them to run to the IMF and the World Bank to lend them money to service their loans and enable them to continue functioning.

This was the opportunity that the US and other governments had been waiting for to roll back the gains of the Global South.

What economic historians John Toye and Richard Toye rightfully characterized as the “conservative counterrevolution” of the 1980’s had three major prongs: structural adjustment or the so-called Washington Consensus, which was applied to most of the developing world; the defanging of the United Nations system that had been the key weapon the countries of the Global South had advanced their demands; and the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) as the overseer of global trade.<sup>45</sup>

In the mid-1980s, IMF and World Bank-imposed structural adjustment, the main elements of which were radical privatization, deregulation, and trade liberalization, became the principal vehicle for a program of free market liberalization that was applied across the board to Third World economies suffering major debt problems. By the mid-1990’s, more than seventy developing and post-socialist economies had submitted to this one-size-fits all approach imposed from distant Washington. While the overt justification for structural adjustment was to enable the indebted countries to repay their debts, the strategic objective was to dismantle the system of state-assisted capitalism that served as the domestic base of the national capitalist elite. In 1988, a survey of SAPs carried out by the UN Commission for Africa concluded that the essence of SAPs was the “reduction/removal of direct state intervention in the productive and redistributive sectors of the economy.”<sup>46</sup> As for Latin America, one analyst noted that the United States took advantage of this period of financial strain to insist that debtor countries remove the government from the economy as the price of getting credit.” Similarly a retrospective of the decade of adjustment published by the US-controlled Inter-American Bank in 1992 saw the remedy to Latin America’s economic crisis as lying in “the withdrawal of the producer state and state-assisted capitalism, the limiting of the state’s responsibilities to its constitutional commitments, a return to the market for the supply of goods and services, and the removal of the obstacles to the emergence of an independent entrepreneurial class.”<sup>47</sup>

By the end of the twelve-year-long Reagan-Bush Sr era in 1992, the Global South had been transformed by structural adjustment.

### **Defanging the UN**

The most dramatic act of the northern government’s assault on the United Nations system was their successful dismantling of the UN Center on Transnational Corporations whose high-

quality work in tracking the activities of global firms in the South had earned the ire of the corporate community. Also abolished was the post of Director General for International Economic Cooperation and Development, which had been among the few concrete outcomes, and certainly the most noteworthy, of the efforts of the developing countries to secure a stronger UN presence in support of international cooperation and development.<sup>48</sup>

Wielding the power of the purse, the United States, which funded 20 to 25 per cent of the UN budget, moved to silence NIEO rhetoric in all other key agencies dealing with the North South divide, among them the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The UNDP was reduced to a minor player in the disbursement of multilateral aid to developing countries, most of which was channeled through the World Bank and the regional development banks influenced by the World Bank.

But the focus of the northern counteroffensive was the defanging, if not dismantling, of UNCTAD. After giving in to the South during the UNCTAD IV negotiations in Nairobi in 1976 by agreeing to the creation of the IPC, the North, during UNCTAD V in Belgrade, refused the South's program of debt forgiveness and other measures intended to revive Third World economies and thus contribute to global recovery at a time of worldwide recession.<sup>49</sup> The Northern counteroffensive escalated during UNCTAD VIII, held in Cartagena in 1992. At this watershed meeting, the North successfully opposed all linkages of UNCTAD discussions with the Uruguay Round negotiations of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and thus managed to erode UNCTAD's negotiation functions, calling its existence into question. UNCTAD's main function would henceforth be limited to "analysis, consensus building on some trade-related issues, and technical assistance."<sup>50</sup> Indeed, although UNCTAD managed to survive this onslaught, it was rendered impotent by the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1994. It continued to serve, however, as the source of quality research that questioned many of the trade policies promoted by the North.

### **The WTO: Climax of the Northern Counterrevolution**

When the Uruguay Round was being negotiated, there was considerable lack of enthusiasm for the process by the developing countries. After all, these countries had formed the backbone of UNCTAD, which, with its system of one-country/one-vote and majority voting, they felt was an international arena more congenial to their interests. If UNCTAD was no longer an alternative, then they preferred GATT, the predecessor of WTO, which focused mainly on reducing tariff barriers among the industrialized countries, did not require the liberalization of developing country agricultural markets, and had weak enforcement capabilities. Largely passive spectators, with a great number not even represented during the negotiations owing to budget constraints, the developing countries were dragged into unenthusiastic endorsement of the Marrakesh Accord of 1994 that sealed the Uruguay Round and established the WTO.

With their economies dominated by the IMF and the World Bank, with the structural adjustment programs pushed by these agencies having as a central element radical trade liberalization, rendered much weaker as a bloc owing to the debt crisis compared to the 1970's (the height of the NIEO), most developing country delegations felt they had no choice but to sign on the dotted line, especially when the alternative, they were told, would be their being isolated in global trade like North Korea. Moreover, they were warned, unless they got in on the ground

floor, that is at the founding of the WTO, their being able to get into the organization in the future was not assured.

When they signed on to the WTO, many developing countries had not had the capacity to read the over 700 pages of fine print in the 19 sub-agreements that constituted the WTO Agreement. Over the next few years, however, these countries realized that they had signed away much policy space for development. The Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), which affected most of them, was, they realized, mainly meant to pry their agricultural markets open to highly subsidized commodities from the US and the European Union (EU).<sup>51</sup> Their common desire to industrialize was now blocked by two major agreements: the Trade-Related Investment Measures Agreement (TRIMS) and the Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights Agreement (TRIPS).

In their drive to industrialize, countries like South Korea and Malaysia had made use of many innovative mechanisms such as trade-balancing requirements that tied the value of a foreign investor's imports of raw materials and components to the value of his or her exports of the finished commodity, or "local content" regulations which mandated that a certain percentage of the components that went into the making of a product was sourced locally. These were now banned under TRIMs.<sup>52</sup>

Like the TRIMs agreement, the TRIPs regime was seen as effectively opposed to the industrialization and development efforts of Third World countries. Earlier industrializing countries undertook what might be called "industrialization by imitation." The TRIPS regime made this route almost impossible with its strict patent rules that imposed draconian penalties on countries that violated them. The new regime was described by UNCTAD as "a premature strengthening of the intellectual property system ... that favors monopolistically controlled innovation over broad-based diffusion."<sup>53</sup>

The policy space the South had under GATT principles like "Special and Differential Treatment," which recognized that the countries of the South could not be expected to follow trade rules governing trade among the industrialized countries owing to their underdeveloped status, was drastically reduced in the WTO owing to the weak enforcement of these rules in the new organization.

### **The South Fights Back: Seattle, Doha, Cancun**

Counterrevolutions, like revolutions, have one big problem: they tend to overreach, creating a pushback from its victims. Not satisfied with the elimination of significant policy space for development in the Global South through the Uruguay Round, the big powers of the North wanted more. They wanted another trade round, to be held in Seattle, in late 1999, to intensify the process of trade liberalization, at a time that many developing countries had not yet amended their laws and constitutions to comply with the demands of the Uruguay Round. Moreover the EU in particular wanted to expand the WTO's remit beyond trade to include investment regimes, competition policy, government procurement rules, and trade facilitation. The developing country governments went to Seattle in late November 1999 for the WTO's Third Ministerial Meeting with great reluctance to make more concessions. Also converging on that city were some 50,000 protesters from different parts of the world that were alarmed by the WTO's intrusions into agriculture, labor rights, environmental policy, and development space.

Decision-making at the WTO could only be done by consensus rule. The northern governments had initially seen consensus as something they could easily get from weak third world governments. Instead, the consensus rule turned out to be the WTO's fatal flaw.

The synergy between developing country resistance at the Sheraton Convention Center and massive street protests turned downtown Seattle into a war zone where the police ran wild. In Seattle, the already apprehensive governments of the South were emboldened by the street protests and refused to sign a ministerial declaration that would have legitimized the North's demands, and with that the Third Ministerial Conference collapsed. Since the WTO had become the principal arena where the North-South conflict played out, the North's defeat had a massive worldwide resonance.

Seattle may well have been the turning point in the battle against globalization. Before Seattle, there had been many studies, some released by UNCTAD, showing that corporate-driven globalization was not, in fact, leading to a reduction of poverty and spawning more dynamic economies. These were, however, regarded as "factoids" by the established media and academics. After the Seattle debacle of the WTO, the established media began to talk about the dark side of globalization, and then came the spectacle of prominent defectors from the globalist camp like the financier George Soros and economist Jeffrey Sachs, the author of "shock therapy" in Poland. In a very real sense, truth was ratified by action, in this case the action of thousands of protesters in the streets of Seattle.

But the EU and the US were undeterred. The Fourth Ministerial Meeting in Doha, Qatar, in November 2001, saw developing countries subjected to tremendous pressure to agree to the launching of a new round in order to "save" the global economy following the terror attacks on the US on September 11, 2001. But there was more than moral pressure in the name of the anti-terrorist struggle involved. There were also threats of retaliation for recalcitrance, combined with offers of massive aid packages for compliance. Most countries were excluded from decision-making, which was limited to a select group of 35 governments handpicked by the EU and the US. The result was the "Doha Development Round", which had nothing to do with development and everything to do with expanding developed-country access to developing country markets.

But the bitter experience of being subjected to divide-and-conquer tactics in Doha proved to be a turning point for developing-country politics in the WTO. Alliances were formed—among them the Group of 20 led by Brazil, India, South Africa, and China—to demand cuts in developed-country agricultural subsidies and greater access to developed country markets, and the Group of 33 led by Indonesia and the Philippines to push for the creation of "special products" that would be exempted from tariff reductions and for "special safeguard mechanisms" like protective tariffs against imports from the developed countries. The stubborn push by the EU to bring into its ambit non-trade issues like investment rules sparked the creation of the Group of 90, whose walkout triggered the collapse of the Fifth Ministerial in Cancun in 2003.

If lack of organization led to their being outmaneuvered in Doha, effective coalition building enabled the developing countries to outmaneuver the developed countries in Cancun, with

technical and moral support from NGOs and social movements seeking to shut down the meeting in a protest atmosphere much like Seattle's.

The Cancun collapse meant the end of the US's effort to use the WTO as the principal mechanism of global trade liberalization. While there were more ministerials after Cancun, they could not break the stalemate between the Global North and the Global South. This outcome was remarkably like the scenario of a strategy prescribed by Focus on the Global South in 1999: "Where structures are hopeless, the next best solution is to have non-functioning structures or no operative structures at all."<sup>54</sup> Such was the fate of what one WTO director general called "the jewel in the crown of multilateralism."<sup>55</sup>

### **Farmers at the Center of Resistance**

As pointed out earlier, one key element in the collapse of the ministerials was the very vital role of global civil society organisations (CSOs), and among the most energetic and visible forces in the opposition were farmers' and peasant movements. The threat of being subjected to the disciplines of the AoA brought peasant and farmers movements and their CSO supporters into the political arena, pushing their governments to resist what they portrayed as the irreversible crisis, if not extinction, of agriculture if quantitative restrictions on agricultural commodities were to be lifted, tariffs lowered, and genetically modified seeds by TNCs like Monsanto introduced.

Peasant movements were active not only in the domestic front but in the international arena. Peasant organizations, many of them affiliated with the international peasant movement La Via Campesina (LVC), were shock troops in the streets of Seattle, Geneva, Cancun, and Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, hundreds of Korean farmers disputed the streets with the police and led the effort to try to penetrate and close down the Hong Kong Ministerial where the Fourth Ministerial of the WTO was taking place in December 2005, leading to many of them being arrested. Among the key events that led to the collapse of the Third Ministerial in Cancun in September 2003 was the suicide at the barricades of the street struggle of the Korean farmer Lee Kyung Hae to protest the threat to peasants everywhere represented by the WTO.

### **The Global South Pushes Back against the IMF I: Argentina**

Like the WTO, overreach undid the IMF. Argentina led the pushback.

In Argentina, radical financial liberalization that included pegging the value of the peso to the dollar was fervently supported by the IMF in the early 1990's. The approach led to the unraveling of the economy later in the decade. The crisis unfolded with frightening speed in late 2001, forcing Argentina to go to the IMF for money to service its mounting debt. After agreeing to earlier requests, the IMF refused its pupil this time, leading to the government's \$100 billion debt default. Businesses collapsed, people lost jobs, capital left the country, and riots and other forms citizen unrest toppled one government after another.<sup>56</sup>

When Nestor Kirchner won the elections for the presidency in 2003, he inherited a devastated country. He saw the choice as debt or resurrection, putting the interests of the creditors first or prioritizing economic recovery. Kirchner offered to settle Argentina's debts but at a steep discount. He would write off 70-75 percent, repaying only 25-30 cents to the dollar. The bondholders screamed and demanded that the IMF discipline Kirchner. Kirchner repeated his offer and warned the bondholders that this was a one-time offer that they had to accept or lose



the rights to any repayment. He told the creditors that he would not tax poverty-ridden Argentines to pay off the debt and invited them to visit his country's slums to "experience poverty first hand." Faced with his determination, the IMF stood by helplessly and a majority of the bondholders angrily accepted his terms.

Indeed, Kirchner played hardball not only with the creditors but with the IMF. He told the Fund in early 2004 that Argentina would not repay a \$3.3 billion installment due the IMF unless it approved a similar amount of lending to Buenos Aires. The IMF blinked and came up with the money. In December 2005, Kirchner paid off the country's debt to the IMF in full, with financial assistance from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, and booted the Fund out of Argentina.

### **The Global South Pushes Back against the IMF II: The Asian Financial Crisis**

A bigger catastrophe hit the IMF in the Asia-Pacific, where its policy interventions provoked the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98.

The Fund was heavily criticized on three counts. First, it had encouraged the governments of the region to eliminate capital controls, thus provoking uncontrolled capital flows. Second, it assembled multi-billion dollar "rescue packages" that went to rescue not the people suffering from the crisis but to compensate the foreign financial speculators that had lost millions in dubious speculative ventures, thus encouraging "moral hazard," or irresponsible investing. Third, its measures to stabilize the damaged economies intensified the crisis, since instead of encouraging government spending to counteract the collapse of the private sector, it told the governments to radically cut spending, leading to a "procyclical" negative synergy that ended in deep recession.

In just a few weeks, one million people in Thailand and 22 million in Indonesia fell below the poverty line. The only country that contained the crisis was Malaysia, which refused to follow the Fund's dictates and imposed capital and currency controls.

Eventually, the Fund was forced to admit that the "thrust of [the recommended] fiscal policy...turned out to be substantially different...because the original assumptions for economic growth, capital flows, and exchange rates...were proved drastically wrong."<sup>57</sup> But things were never the same again. The IMF was so reviled for its performance that Asian governments developed IMF-phobia, swearing never again to ask the IMF for rescue even in the most dire circumstances. Like Kirchner in Argentina, Thaksin Shinawatra came to power in the midst of a crisis in 2001 with a promise to get the IMF off Thailand's back. Promoting expansionary policies, Thaksin oversaw the recovery of Thailand. Upon his early repayment of the \$17.2 billion emergency loan it contracted from the IMF, Thaksin declared Thailand "liberated" from the IMF in 2004.<sup>58</sup> He considered this one of his proudest achievements.

Perhaps more devastating, the crisis brought the long simmering conflict within the US elite over the role of the Fund to a boil. The US right denounced the Fund for promoting 'moral hazard,' that is, irresponsible lending that ensured private foreign creditors that they would be paid back no matter what. Some, including former U.S. Treasury Secretary George Shultz, called for the IMF's abolition. Meanwhile, orthodox liberals like Jeffrey Sachs and Jagdish Bhagwati attacked the Fund for being a threat to global macroeconomic stability and prosperity. Late in 1998, a rare conservative-liberal alliance in the U.S. Congress came within a hair's breath of denying the IMF a \$14.5 billion contribution.<sup>59</sup>

### **The World Bank's Crisis of Legitimacy**

A parallel crisis of legitimacy engulfed the World Bank. In the 1990's and 2000's, the Bank had come under attack for the social consequences of its structural adjustment programs and the environmental impacts of its funding of fossil fuel-enabling and mega-dam projects. However, the most damning assault on its credibility was delivered by a team of prestigious economists that accused the Bank of fudging its data and making up public relations missives instead of serious studies. The panel headed by Nobel Prize awardee Angus Deaton did not mince words:

[World] Bank researchers have...done extremely visible work on globalization, on aid effectiveness, and on growth and poverty. In many ways, they have been the leaders in these issues. But the panel had substantial criticisms of the way that the research was used to proselytize on behalf of Bank policy, often without taking a balanced view, and without expressing appropriate skepticism. Internal research that is favorable to Bank positions was given great prominence, and unfavorable research ignored. In these cases, we believe that there was a serious failure of checks and balances that should have separated advocacy and research. The panel endorses the right of the Bank to strongly defend and advocate its own policies. But when the Bank leadership selectively appeals to relatively new and untested research as hard evidence that these preferred policies work, it lends unwarranted confidence to the Bank's prescriptions. Placing fragile selected new research results on a pedestal invites later recrimination that undermines the credibility and usefulness of all Bank research.<sup>60</sup>

The Bank's refusal to acknowledge real-world refutations of its pro-globalization advocacy and its unbalanced, one-sided research led to justifiable rejection of its advice by the people who were suffering from the policies it was implementing, confessed Paul Collier, head of the Bank's Research Development Department of the Bank from 1998 to 2003:

The profession has been unprofessional, fearful that any criticism would strengthen populism, so that little work has been done on the downsides of these different processes [of globalization]. Yet the downsides were apparent to ordinary citizens, and the effect of economists appearing to dismiss them has resulted in widespread refusal of people to listen to "experts." For my profession to re-establish credibility we must provide a more balanced analysis, in which the downsides are acknowledged and properly evaluated with a view to designing policy responses that address them. The profession may be better served by *mea culpa* than by further indignant defenses of globalization.<sup>61</sup>

Like the Asian Financial Crisis in the case of the IMF the panel's judgment that the Bank was mainly churning out public relations material was one from which the World Bank never really recovered. It limped along diminished over the next two decades, with critical voices on both the left and the right raising questions of the value of the billions of dollars being burned up to subsidize 12,300 personnel engaged in implementing wrong-headed policies.

### **A Southern Actor Inflicts Defeat on the North**

The Global South's fighting the Global North to a stalemate in the WTO, its successful defiance of the IMF and global capital in Argentina and Thailand, and a deep crisis of credibility of the IMF and the World Bank, were not the only setbacks experienced by the western capitalist elite. On the political and military front, the US was lured by Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda to

a disastrous 20 year intervention in the Middle East that ended in an inglorious surrender in Afghanistan in 2021. Al Qaeda and other radical Islamic movements were not state actors, but their actions led to weakening the domination of the South by the North, driving home the cost of expanding and maintaining empire to a US population that was increasingly unwilling to countenance imperial adventures. As the foremost student of Al Qaeda, an analyst with the CIA put it, “Though the 9/11 attacks turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory for Al-Qaeda, Osama still changed the world and continued to influence global politics for nearly a decade after.”<sup>62</sup>

Articulating this truth is not meant to justify Bin Laden's and Al Qaeda's horrific deeds; it is simply to acknowledge the massive negative impact of 9/11 and its aftermath on the power of the United States, from which, in many ways, it is still reeling today.

### **The China Factor**

A major force that contributed to the changing balance of power between the Global North and the Global South was the rise of China. While the first 25 years of the People's Republic of China were marked by conflict with the United States, following US President Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing, it became one of accommodation and cooperation. Led by Deng Xiao Ping, China sought a path of rapid development by inviting foreign capital, but it was one taken from a position of strength: the People's Republic was the product of a successful anti-imperialist struggle and boasted of a strong state with the capacity of bargaining on equal terms with the West.

Beijing' strategy was to offer China's force for exploitation by foreign capital in order to comprehensively develop the economy, an important quid pro quo being the acquisition of advanced technology. It is difficult to understand the strategy in conventional economic terms, and is best understood as one that is akin to a military strategy of trading space for time.<sup>63</sup> Attracted by a cost of labor that was two to five per cent the cost of labor in the United States, US transnational corporations, with the acquiescence of Washington, entered the informal contract.

This devil's bargain was costly. A recent estimate shows that for the period 1960-2018, among developing countries, China suffered the greatest loss in terms of value transfer—or unequal exchange—the figure coming to some \$19 trillion.<sup>64</sup> One must also note the tremendous environmental and social costs, such as massive air pollution, forced dislocation of hundreds of thousands by mega-infrastructure projects, extensive landgrabbing from peasants by local authorities, and corruption. But, to the Chinese Communist Party, the deal with foreign capital was a bargain worth making. The result was the the fastest run in history from being a complete outsider to the global capitalist system to being at its very center, China's becoming the world's biggest economy, the rapid reduction of poverty to two per cent of the population, and the creation of a base for self-sustaining technological innovation.

Like the Soviet Union decades earlier, China, by the 2010's, became an alternative pole to the West and provided policy space for developing countries. This was especially the case when it came to development assistance, where they were in search of aid and loans that would not carry the stringent conditionalities of those provided by the IMF and World Bank. By the end of the second decade of the 21st century, China, in the words of one specialist, had become the “world's largest development bank,” its agencies, the China Development Bank and the

Export-Import Bank of China having provided nearly a trillion dollars worth of financing, mainly to countries in the Global South.<sup>65</sup>

China also launched three ambitious international projects, the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB), New Development Bank, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, for which Chinese President Xi Jin Ping committed \$1 billion, has been China's biggest gambit not only to influence developing countries but also those of Europe. Drawing on the historical image of trade routes from China to Europe—one the overland “Silk Road” via Central Asia, the other the “Maritime Silk Road” that had Southeastern China as a starting point—Beijing offered to finance a plan of infrastructure building across regions that it claimed would lead to collective prosperity.

China, it is true, has seen its share of crises over the last three decades, but these are crises of growth that are inevitably produced by rapid unbalanced development, as the economist Albert Hirschman would put it.<sup>66</sup> Also eliciting concern have been China's intentions in offering generous infrastructure and other aid programs (some which have had negative impacts on many rural communities in the Global South) and its territorial conflicts with the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea. However, these have not prevented China's state-assisted model of development becoming increasingly attractive to the Global South, despite initial reluctance by Beijing to acknowledge its relevance beyond China. For many in countries in the Global South, China had accomplished a change in North-South relations without firing a shot. Its super-industrialization was the obverse of the deindustrialization of the US as TNCs fled to China in search of cheap labor and made it the anchor of their global supply chains. Moreover, what China provided was a lesson not only in how to break Western domination but to use the West as a means of national resurrection. For those with a longer view, China's rise to the summit of the global capitalist economy was the latest, most remarkable phase of the Global South's 150 year old struggle to end the 500-year-old yoke of western hegemony.

### **BRICS: Common Concerns and Contradictions**

BRICS, as is well known, was a name coined by Goldman Sachs analyst Jim O'Neill to refer to promising emerging markets for finance capital that would extend the boom of the global economy in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But one can say that even if O'Neill had not invented the name, the BRICS –Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa--would most likely have emerged as a conscious formation of big, rapidly developing countries with an ambivalent relationship to the traditional center economies of Europe and the United States.

Perhaps the key arena where “BRICS consciousness” was forged was in the World Trade Organization. As noted earlier, quick on the heels of the WTO's establishment in 1995, the US and EU wanted more trade concessions from developing countries. In response, India and Brazil emerged as the key actors in a defensive strategy that resulted in the formation of the Group of 20. This formation emerged as the most formidable opposition to the unequal trade liberalization that the North was foisting on the South, and was instrumental in bringing about the collapse of the Fifth Ministerial Meeting of the WTO in Cancun in September 2003. The group, led by Brazil, India, and South Africa (and fortified with the accession of China to the WTO in 2001), played a decisive role not only in halting the Euro-American drive for greater liberalization in the agriculture, manufacturing, and services sectors of developing countries, but in stopping the North's effort to expand the WTO's authority into the areas of investment, competition policy, government procurement, and trade facilitation.

The agendas of the BRICS in the WTO were not always the same. For instance, in agriculture, Brazil was more interested in opening up export markets for its soybeans and other plantation products in Europe and the United States, while India put the emphasis on protecting its small-scale and peasant agriculture. But they were willing to subordinate their differences to a common comprehensive anti-liberalization and pro-development agenda that helped bring the Doha Round of negotiations to a standstill.

The BRICS are capitalist regimes, and the role of the state in the economy is more pronounced and successful in some rather than in others. One of the key features they had in common was their “dialectical” relationship with the center economies. On the one hand, they benefited from globalization and the entry of foreign investment. On the other hand, all have also manipulated foreign capital to accumulate technological and management expertise to eventually wean them off their dependence on the latter. Even as they have developed as dynamic centres of accumulation that energized or re energized global capitalism as a whole, they have followed what might be considered the goals of enhancing their geopolitical and geoeconomic power vis-a-vis the traditional centers of global economic, political, and military power.

Complementarity and contradiction are twin aspects of their relationship to the dominant powers, and this is exhibited most sharply in the relationship of China to the United States, where, as noted earlier, it used American capital and the US market to fuel its emergence as the US’s main competitor globally.

If competition is pronounced at the economic level, it is even fiercer at the geopolitical level since there is a greater degree of “relative autonomy” in the political relations among states than in their economic relations. During the second decade of the 21st century, Beijing moved from its policy of “peaceful rise” on the global stage to overtly challenging, in the Western Pacific, the military power of the United States and Japan, two economies to which China was deeply integrated. At the same time, ties between Russia and Europe and the United States, two blocs with which Moscow has developed significant ties, especially when it comes to finance and energy, deteriorated as the Putin government pushed back against NATO’s expansion right onto Russia’s doorstep in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, this being a key factor in the current war between Russia and Ukraine.

The BRICS developed institutionally in a gradual fashion. The New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingency Reserve Arrangement (CRA), which were conceived as performing functions akin to the World Bank and IMF respectively, were formed in 2015, but they remained relatively low profile, perhaps so as to assure the West they were not meant to supplant these key institutions of the western-dominated multilateral system as well as discourage developing countries to think of them as major alternative sources of development and emergency finance. As of the end of 2021, the cumulative lending of the NDB came to only nearly \$30 billion,<sup>67</sup> a fraction of World Bank lending for the period 2015 to 2021.

However, the resistance of the US and Europe to much-needed reform of the IMF and the World Bank to give more voting power to the Global South, the growing debt problems of the developing countries that portended a new global debt crisis, and Trump’s sidelining of multilateral agencies as instruments of US power, accelerated a sense of an emerging vacuum



in the frontlines of the North-South conflict. The result was more and more countries knocking for admission. As of January 1, 2025, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Indonesia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have joined the original five members. A number of current and prospective members have significant surplus funds potentially available for development lending. Aside from China's massive resources, the UAE has \$2.3 trillion in its sovereign wealth fund; Saudi Arabia, which has delayed its membership but is expected eventually to join, has \$1.3 trillion in its fund. These sums could potentially bolster the firepower of the current Contingent Reserve Arrangement and the New Development Bank.

Now a 10-country organization, BRICS currently boasts a total population covering over 40 percent of the world. They also have a substantial 28 percent share of the global economy, equivalent to \$26.5 trillion. That so many countries, including Thailand and Malaysia, are queueing up to join indicates that the Global South realizes that the scale is steadily tipping against the West, which has grown increasingly defensive, grouchy, and insecure.

Not surprisingly, by 2024, some 50 countries were knocking at the door of the BRICS. The BRICS summit held in October 22-24 in Kazan Russia was, as the European Parliament's Think Tank admitted, a success both in geoeconomic and geopolitical terms:

Under Russia's presidency, BRICS (acronym for the founding states – Brazil, Russia, India and China) held its first summit following the group's expansion on 1 January 2024, from 22 to 24 October in Kazan (Russia). With more than 30 delegations, 22 heads of state or government and several representatives of international organisations including United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres attending, the summit was a diplomatic success for Russia: it offered President Vladimir Putin the opportunity to demonstrate to the world that Russia is not isolated. For the first time, a NATO member, Türkiye, attended the summit, and applied to join BRICS. The meeting in Kazan underlined BRICS's ambition to foster relations with the Global South, and its aim of shaping an alternative multipolar world order, particularly in the global financial and trade system.<sup>68</sup>

With the US-dominated global multilateral system facing uncertainty under President Donald Trump, who does not have the same allegiance to the Western alliance as previous US presidents, the BRICS have become increasingly attractive to the Global South as both a source of development funds as well as a political alliance. It is backed by something that the General Assembly, for all its virtues as a site of alliance building for the developing countries, lacks: economic clout. This is likely to create more pressure for clearer formulation of its policies and institutionalization of its decision making structures and those of its agencies, the CRA and NDB.

### **Trump and the Global South**

For the Global South, the current period is a time of great uncertainty.

There are contradictory trends. In the US, with Trump's ascension to power a second time, it is certain that the next four years will be bad for the climate, women, migrants, and minorities. In the US, Europe, Israel, and a number of countries in the Global South, like India and Brazil, we have witnessed the rise of fascist movements, some of which have seized power.

At the same time, there are strong indications that Trump is dumping the paradigm of liberal internationalism or expansive imperialism where the US elite was committed to fighting on all fronts in the world where they felt US imperial interests were threatened. Trump appears to be retrenching to the Americas, focusing on reinvigorating the imperial heartland, North America, while strengthening the US grip on Latin America in an aggressive reiteration of the Monroe Doctrine.

What is emerging is an imperialism that is on the defensive, with the priority being setting up tariff walls against foreign imports, harsh measures to prevent the entry of non-white migrants and expel undocumented workers, destroy the global supply chains set up by US transnational capital and reshore or bring back their productive facilities to the US.

It is likely that we are entering an era of geoeconomic competition emerging whereby free trade and the free movement of capital are being replaced by close cooperation between national capital and the state to limit foreign penetration of the domestic market and prevent the acquisition of advanced technology, especially artificial intelligence (AI), by rival corporate-state actors. Unilateral economic actions rather than multilateral initiatives via the Bretton Woods institutions, and unilateral military strikes rather than joint assaults under NATO appear to be the preferred approach of the US under Trump.

But despite the complexity of the moment, one can perhaps cautiously advance the proposition that the balance of the advances and reversals in the Global South's struggle with the Global North in the seventy years since Bandung, the balance favors the former. Indeed, it is difficult to disagree with a recent assessment of the noted economic historian Adam Tooze, to the effect that,

...{W}e're already in a multipolar world. I think it's anachronistic to cling to a different view. I think we exited the unipolar moment in the 2010s. This doesn't mean that there aren't still huge domains of US power and even US predominance. The three obvious ones are military power, global finance and certain areas of high tech.

However, in a more general sense, we've seen the fragmenting of American power. Its delegitimation, the soft tissue of US hegemony, has suffered considerable attrition. The ability of US elites to articulate the different dimensions of power is really threadbare at this point.

This doesn't preclude the tub-thumping efforts at reasserting US dominance. Nor does it preclude the more nostalgic Atlanticist version, which is what we saw with Biden ... but they are pushing against the tide of dramatic movements.

I'm not a monocausal person analytically, but if you want to nominate one driver, it would be the scale of global economic development, which has created proliferating centres of competence and power. This means that a whole range of actors can now engage in various types of power politics that they were previously unable to do. The most dramatic case is China, but Indonesia, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Brazil are all passing certain thresholds and constitute a new kind of polycentric order.<sup>69</sup>

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci had this memorable saying, "The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters." What he was trying to say was that you cannot have opportunity without crisis.

The crisis of global capital and US hegemony offers both great risk and great opportunity. The geopolitical conflict between the US and China that is turning out to be a major feature of the coming period brings with it the danger of war, but it can also open up the path to a world where power could be more decentralized, where there could be greater freedom of political and economic maneuver for small, traditionally less-privileged actors from the Global South, playing off the superpowers against one another, where a truly multilateral order within a multipolar world could be constructed through cooperation rather than be imposed through either unilateral or liberal hegemony.

### **Moving Forward**

The push of the Global South to parity with the Global North since Bandung has experienced advances and retreats, offensive and defensive phases.

Bandung arose at a moment of anti-colonial consciousness. Today most of the world has been freed of direct colonial control, but the legacy of settler-colonialism continues to hobble the economies of South Africa, Zimbabwe, and several other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. But the most egregious example of the persistence of colonialism is Israel, which continues to deny by massive force the rights of the people of Palestine, going to the extent of carrying out Nazi-like genocide in Gaza, and functions as a hugely destabilizing force in the Middle East. Israel, it must be stressed, receives massive support the United States, former colonial powers France and Britain, and from Germany. The anti-colonial mission of Bandung is unfinished.

On balance, however, the Global South has tipped the balance in its favor.

This does not mean that the North-South divide no longer matters. But it does mean that it has become more porous, and with the US and Europe increasingly drifting from each other and the US under Trump refocusing its energies on being a regional power, it is likely to increasingly be matched or overshadowed by other relationships in what is definitively a multipolar world.

The BRICs may not be the only game in this multipolar universe for developing countries, but it is a strong candidate to be one of the principal ones.

One major challenge for the BRICS and other alternative poles that may emerge is not only how to become more structured but how to ensure they do not simply copy the Bretton Woods model of monopolistic hegemony of a few over the majority in the guise of multilateralism. Can the most politically or economically powerful countries of the Global South avoid the temptation of falling into a similar great power relationship with the less advantaged ones?

Another challenge is how to go beyond representation of people only by nation-states in the western Westphalian tradition to include peoples' organisations, social movements, unions and other civil society formations as central members and participants in decision-making.

Related to this is how these emergent alternative poles can be made to pressure their members to enact internal reforms towards greater participatory democracy, equality, human rights and all forms of justice--not in a coercive way, like the IMF and the World Bank, but by way of moral pressure, including not just positive but also negative reinforcement.

The best way to advance the spirit of Bandung is to go beyond its political, ideological, and organizational limitations. Most of the governments of Global South may no longer be beholden to colonial powers, but many are dominated by political and economic elites that hold down most of the people. Upholding the Bandung spirit means a commitment not only to free the country from colonialism and neocolonialism but to make sure the voices that were not heard at Bandung—the voices of women, peasants, indigenous people, the planet—are listened to and their interests are placed in the forefront of the agenda for change.

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# A City That Once Burned for Freedom: The Bandung That Was, The Bandung That Is

Published on 20 March 2025

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Right in the middle of one of the busiest streets in the city, on the wall of a pedestrian bridge of the Asia-Africa street, just a stone's throw from the historic venue of the Asia-Africa Conference (*Konferensi Asia Afrika* in Bahasa Indonesia, commonly referred to as *KAA*) in 1955, is engraved a sentence that captures the essence of the city of Bandung in one phrase:

*“Bumi Pasundan lahir ketika Tuhan sedang tersenyum.”*  
*The land of Pasundan was created when God was smiling*  
– MAW Brouwer



The quote from MAW Brouwer is on the pedestrian bridge wall on the *Asia-Afrika* street. The street, previously known as *Groote Postweg* (in English: the Great Post Road), was named to honor the Asia-Africa Conference. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The quote from Martinus Antonius Wesselinus Brouwer<sup>1</sup>, a Dutch-born writer and academic who spent most of his time in Indonesia, is not just a beautiful string of words, but also a reflection of how Bandung has long been seen as a charming city—for its breathtaking scenery as a city surrounded by mountains with its chilly breezes in the morning and warm sunshine during the day, and also for its fiery spirit that makes it a creative hub—the same spirit which led its people to set the city ablaze in defiance of colonial rule.

More than just its scenic appeal, Bandung was also a witness to one of the most defining moments in international relations during the post-colonial era: the KAA, also known as the Bandung Conference. Between 18 and 24 April 1955, 29 nations from the continents of Asia and Africa gathered at *Gedung Merdeka* (in English, the name means ‘Independence Building’), marking a critical moment for newly independent nations to stand tall on the world stage.

Back then when geopolitics was still largely dominated by the West—many of who still sought to reassert their influence on their former colonies<sup>2</sup>—KAA served as a declaration that the world’s political landscape could no longer be dictated solely by former colonial empires. The nations of Asia and Africa refused to be treated as the pawns in global political plays dictated by imperialist powers. They demanded political sovereignty and an equal voice in global governance, pushing back against a world order still dominated by Western powers. In Bandung, the voices that were once silenced finally echoed, bringing the message that independence was not only political sovereignty, but as much, the right to have a position on the world stage on more equal and fair terms.<sup>3</sup>

*“...For many generations our peoples have been the voiceless ones in the world. We have been the unregarded, the peoples for whom decisions were made by others whose interests were paramount, the peoples who lived in poverty and humiliation. Then our nations demanded, nay fought for independence, and achieved independence, and with that independence came responsibility.”*<sup>4</sup>

– Sukarno

Seventy years have gone by since the conference. The world has evolved, along with Bandung. The city is now an innovative hub for creativity and entrepreneurship, serving as a center for education and innovation. Still, for many beyond Indonesia's borders, Bandung is primarily known as the site of KAA, a significant event in the history of Global South diplomacy.

Let’s explore the allure and importance of Bandung: Why was it selected for KAA? What part did it play in Indonesia's fight for independence? Does the solidarity that characterized KAA still resonate in its streets, or has it faded to a mere historical memory?

### **Bandung: *Paris van Java* or Something More?**

When KAA was first planned, Indonesia naturally emerged as the leading candidate to host the event. Having recently gained independence, Indonesia positioned itself as a bridge between Asia and Africa, navigating the diverse agendas of post-colonial nations. Scholars like Herbert Feith have highlighted Indonesia’s active role in fostering diplomatic ties across the Global South, mainly through the leadership of Sukarno.<sup>5</sup> A charismatic and vocal leader, he relentlessly advocated solidarity among developing countries and anti-colonial struggles. On multiple occasions, he asserted that the struggle against colonialism was far from over and that newly independent nations needed to unite<sup>6</sup> and therefore, his vision of an anti-imperialist front made Indonesia an ideal host.

The next question was, where exactly should the conference be held in Indonesia?



Jakarta, as the capital, seemed to be the obvious choice, but in the end, Bandung was selected as the historic venue.<sup>7</sup> Bandung in 1955 was different from Jakarta, which was rapidly developing as the center of government. Although relatively close to Jakarta, Bandung was much calmer, smaller, and easier to manage from a security perspective. These considerations were necessary for a gathering of such scale—the venue needed to be where world leaders could engage in discussions without excessive political disruptions.



Braga street in Bandung, 1938. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Bandung has also long been known as the "*Paris van Java*," a moniker bestowed upon it during the colonial era due to its elegant *Art Deco* buildings, wide tree-lined boulevards, and temperate climate, which set it apart from the sweltering heat of Jakarta. Dutch colonizers saw Bandung as an ideal retreat<sup>8</sup>, a place that could mirror the sophistication of Europe in the tropics. But beneath this romanticized image lies a question: Why did Bandung have to be Paris? Why couldn't it simply be Bandung?

The nickname reflects a broader pattern of colonial urban planning, where cities in the colonies were often modeled after European counterparts to create a familiar sense of 'civilization' for the ruling elites.<sup>9</sup> But in doing so, it also imposed a hierarchy—suggesting that Western aesthetics were the standard to aspire to, rather than celebrating the indigenous character of the land.<sup>10</sup> Even as Bandung flourished into a hub of commerce and culture during that time, the "*Paris van Java*" label reinforced the idea that its value lay in its resemblance to a Western metropolis rather than its own indigenous, Sundanese identity.

This made it all the more important that Bandung was chosen as the site of KAA. The very city that once embodied colonial aspiration was now transformed into a site of resistance. *Gedung Merdeka*, the conference's main venue, held its own irony: once known as *Societeit Concordia*<sup>11</sup>, it had been an exclusive gathering place for Dutch expatriates—where



Indonesian locals were not allowed to enter. By hosting the KAA, the same building that once symbolized European privilege became a witness to Global South history as formerly colonized nations came together, not to mimic their former rulers, but to assert their sovereignty and demand equality.



*Societiet Concordia* before its renovation in the 1920s. Exclusively for Dutch expatriates, the building famously had a rule 'Verboden voor Honden en Inlander' (in English: Prohibitions for Dogs and Natives). [Wikimedia Commons](#)

### **A City in Flames: the Fire That Defined Bandung**

A key aspect of Bandung's identity is its revolutionary past. Less than a decade before KAA, the city was engulfed in flames during one of the most dramatic episodes in Indonesia's fight for independence: *Bandung Lautan Api* (The Bandung Sea of Fire).

The event occurred in March 1946<sup>12</sup>, in the chaotic aftermath of World War II. Following Japan's surrender in August 1945, Indonesia declared its independence, but the Dutch, backed by British forces, sought to reclaim their former colony. As part of their campaign, Dutch troops, assisted by British forces, moved into Bandung, demanding that Indonesian fighters retreat from the city. Under intense military pressure, the Indonesian leadership faced an impossible decision: surrender the city to the Dutch, or resist at all costs<sup>13</sup>.

The response was extraordinary and unorthodox. Rather than allowing Bandung to fall back into colonial hands, Indonesian freedom fighters—alongside local civilians—made the fateful choice to burn down the southern part of the city before retreating to the mountains<sup>14</sup>. It was an act of revolutionary defiance: if they could not keep their city, then neither would their oppressors.

That night, the sky above Bandung turned red as flames consumed homes, businesses, and key infrastructure. Over 200,000 residents were forced to evacuate<sup>15</sup>, leaving behind only scorched earth and the memory of resistance. The strategy was both tactical and symbolic—it denied the Dutch a functional city while proving that the people of Bandung would rather destroy their homeland than let foreign powers rule it.



Destroyed houses in the Southern part of Bandung after the Sea of Fire, April 1946. [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Almost a decade later, when Bandung was chosen as the host for KAA, the decision carried profound significance. The city that once set itself ablaze in the name of freedom now became the meeting ground for newly independent nations.

### **Indonesia's Strategic Ambition at KAA**

Thus, Bandung was seemingly the ideal place to host the conference—its cool weather, controlled atmosphere, and its symbolic weight as a city of resistance made it a powerful setting for an anti-colonial movement and gathering of Global South leaders. But while the venue itself was fitting, a bigger question loomed: was Indonesia, as a newly independent nation, in a position to host an event of this scale? Only ten years after securing its independence, Indonesia was still struggling to rebuild from the devastation of colonial rule. Economic stability was a distant dream<sup>16</sup> and political challenges were mounting<sup>17</sup>. Hosting KAA was a bold, if not reckless move. So why did Sukarno insist on pushing forward?

Perhaps for Sukarno, KAA was never just about hosting a diplomatic event. It was an opportunity to place Indonesia at the forefront of the global anti-colonial movement. Perhaps Sukarno sought to prove that Indonesia was not merely a young nation searching for its place on the world stage, but a leader in the solidarity movement among newly independent countries and anti-colonial struggles.



The plenary session at KAA. [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Behind this grand vision, however, lay a strategic political agenda. One of Indonesia's key objectives at the KAA was to garner support for its claim over West Irian (now West Papua)<sup>18</sup>, which was still under Dutch control at the time. Although the KAA did not directly result in widespread international backing, it helped establish the moral and political narrative that Indonesia's claim over West Papua was part of the larger anti-colonial struggle.

Yet, the question often overlooked was whether the Indigenous Papuans themselves had been consulted. The KAA championed the principle of self-determination, yet in Indonesia's pursuit of West Papua, the voices of Papuans were largely absent from the discussion<sup>19</sup>. Like many other regions of the world undergoing post-colonial transition, West Papua was becoming a territory disputed by two countries and between two perspectives about what it means to be independent, to be truly free.

At present, the continuing human rights violations in West Papua remain one of the darkest legacies of Indonesia's post-colonial history. The fight against colonialism was so loudly and proudly voiced in Bandung, but does the Indonesian government genuinely walk the talk? History shows that the right to self-determination enshrined in the conference was never truly upheld for the people of West Papua, who, until now, are still under military occupation<sup>20</sup> and restricted in their freedom of expression, association and self determination<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, the repression of activists working for the freedom of West Papua is still rampant<sup>22</sup>.





Free West Papua Protest in Jakarta, December 2022. The main poster reads: "The UN has to take responsibility for the ongoing colonialism in West Papua." Photo: [Ambrosius Mulalt](#).

West Papua was not the only contradiction in Indonesia's post-KAA trajectory. The Bandung that once hosted the conference as a symbol of anti-colonialism would undergo a transformation in the decades to come, one influenced by shifting national priorities and the rise of authoritarian rule.

By the late 20th century, Indonesia's political landscape had changed dramatically. The nation that had once championed global solidarity increasingly prioritized economic growth and the so-called 'stability' over its founding ideals. This shift would influence Bandung's evolution—not just as a city of history but as a place caught in the broader tensions between politics and progress.

But what happens when stability comes at the cost of political expression?

While the legacy of the KAA continues to be honored through plaques and ceremonies, the political forces shaping Bandung are no longer the same. The city that once set the stage for former colonies to reclaim their agency is now more widely known for its independent fashion brands, coffee culture, and creative start-ups. But while its creative industry flourishes, does it still nurture the radical energy that once made it a city of resistance?

This question, however, does not belong to Bandung alone—it is reflective of a larger national dilemma.

### **A City That Once Led, A City That Fell in Line: Bandung's New Order Legacy**

The transformation of Bandung was not coincidental; it was influenced by significant political changes in Indonesia, particularly during Suharto's *Orde Baru* (New Order) regime (1966–1998). Once a center for radical student movements, Bandung experienced a notable decline

in political activism during this period.<sup>23</sup> The universities, which had previously encouraged and thrived on anti-colonial discussions, became closely monitored by the government, leading to a systematic discouragement of political engagement among students.<sup>24</sup>

As Sukarno's rule progressed, his concentration of power and economic mismanagement fueled growing unrest, culminating in protests and in the mid-1960s, students from *Institut Teknologi Bandung* (ITB) —where Sukarno studied engineering in the 1920s (then known as *Technische Hoogeschool te Bandoeng*)<sup>25</sup>—together with *Universitas Padjadjaran* (Unpad), and *Universitas Katolik Parahyangan* (Unpar) actively protested against Sukarno's administration.<sup>26</sup> These coordinated student actions across Bandung's universities significantly contributed to the political pressure that led to the eventual transition to Suharto's New Order regime.

The transition itself, however, was marked by violence and repression. The 1965 coup that ousted Sukarno and brought Suharto to power—later revealed to have been backed by foreign interests, including the United States<sup>27</sup>—left deep scars. For many students who had initially opposed Sukarno, the brutal anti-communist purge and authoritarian turn of the New Order quickly replaced any hope of reform with a climate of fear and disillusionment.<sup>28</sup> During the New Order, the tradition of political discourse and engagement threatened the regime, and students in Bandung participating in political protests often faced arrest, censorship, or expulsion.<sup>29</sup> The Suharto regime feared that Bandung, due to its vibrant intellectual environment, might become a center for dissent. Consequently, while Bandung remained a lively academic city, its political discussions became increasingly restricted.



Poster of ITB students' resistance against the Suharto regime in 1980, two years after the Normalization of Campus Life/Student Coordination Board (NKK/BKK) policy was implemented. The text on the red poster: "You impoverished your people, you fooled your nation, you sold this country, you oppressed us with your weapons. Now it's 1980, we still don't like the Suharto regime". Photo: [Rahmat M. Samik-Ibrahim/VLSM](#).

So during this time, Suharto prioritized economic development. While student activism was stifled, Bandung's independent industries flourished, particularly fashion, design, and small



businesses. This began Bandung's emergence as a "creative city." The city gained recognition for innovation, though not necessarily for political involvement. In many respects, this period laid the foundations of the 'apolitical' Bandung of recent years.

However, repression could not last indefinitely. As Indonesia moved into the late 1990s, economic instability and political discontent reignited student activism.<sup>30</sup> Bandung emerged as a central hub of resistance against Suharto's regime. Students organized demonstrations, demanding an end to authoritarian rule and echoing the city's rich history of resistance.

The 1998 *Reformasi* movement, which ultimately led to Suharto's resignation, saw Bandung reclaim its political voice. While Jakarta witnessed the largest demonstrations with student protesters occupying key government buildings, Bandung also emerged as an important site of student-led protests that contributed to Suharto's resignation.<sup>31</sup> Universities throughout the city became rallying points for students who organized marches and demonstrations, calling for democratic reforms.<sup>32</sup>



The students in Bandung gathered in front of the Gedung Sate, the seat of the governor of West Java, during the nation-wide *reformasi* protest in May 1998. Photo: Djoko Subinarto/[telusuri.id](https://telusuri.id)

Decades earlier, Bandung's streets had burned in resistance against colonial rulers. This time, they echoed with the chants of students resisting authoritarian rule. The same city that had defied foreign domination was then standing against its government, proving that the fight for justice does not end with independence. For a brief and crucial moment in the country's history, Bandung seemed to, once again, be the city of radical energy.

### **Bandung Today: A City That Remembers, A Nation That Forgets?**

However, as democracy settled in after 1998, the momentum of political activism in Bandung faded once again. Post-*reformasi*, the city, much like the country, shifted its focus toward economic development<sup>33</sup>. The independent creative industries thrived, the tourism sector expanded, and student movements became less prominent. While Bandung remained a

center for intellectual discourse, the type of political mobilization that once defined it gradually diminished.

For a time, Bandung seemed to drift into political apathy. Between the early 2000s and mid-2010s, student activism in the city was seen as less radical than in Jakarta or Yogyakarta<sup>34</sup>, leading to the perception that Bandung had become more interested in creative entrepreneurship than political resistance. As Bandung gained international recognition as a UNESCO Creative City in 2015<sup>35</sup>, its identity became more associated with innovation and commerce rather than political activism.



Asia-Afrika street at dusk is one of the must-visit sights in Bandung. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Yet, in recent years, Bandung has begun to reclaim its reputation as a politically engaged city. In response to pressing national and global issues, student activism and public demonstrations have resurged, signaling that the spirit of resistance has not been lost but was merely dormant.

In January 2024, students at the ITB protested against the university's policy encouraging tuition payments through online loan platforms<sup>36</sup>. Hundreds marched to the rectorate building, expressing concerns over the financial burden imposed by such schemes. The protests highlighted the students' demand for more equitable and accessible education financing.

Most recently, the *Indonesia Gelap* (Dark Indonesia)<sup>37</sup> movement further exemplifies Bandung's reawakened activism. In February 2025, hundreds of students gathered in front of the West Java Regional House of Representatives (*DPRD Jabar*) building in Bandung<sup>38</sup>, protesting against budget cuts and policies perceived to undermine social support systems. Clad in black, symbolizing a nation in darkness, these demonstrations were part of a nationwide movement challenging the administration's austerity measures.

Not only are there actions against the government, but Bandung is also the site for international solidarity actions. Thousands of protesters organized a rally in support of Palestine<sup>39</sup>, and the same solidarity was shown when they raised more than USD 75,000 in donations for the Rohingya<sup>40</sup>. These actions show that Bandung's legacy of resistance and South-South solidarity still lives on, carried on by a new generation that refuses to be silent in the face of injustice and oppression.



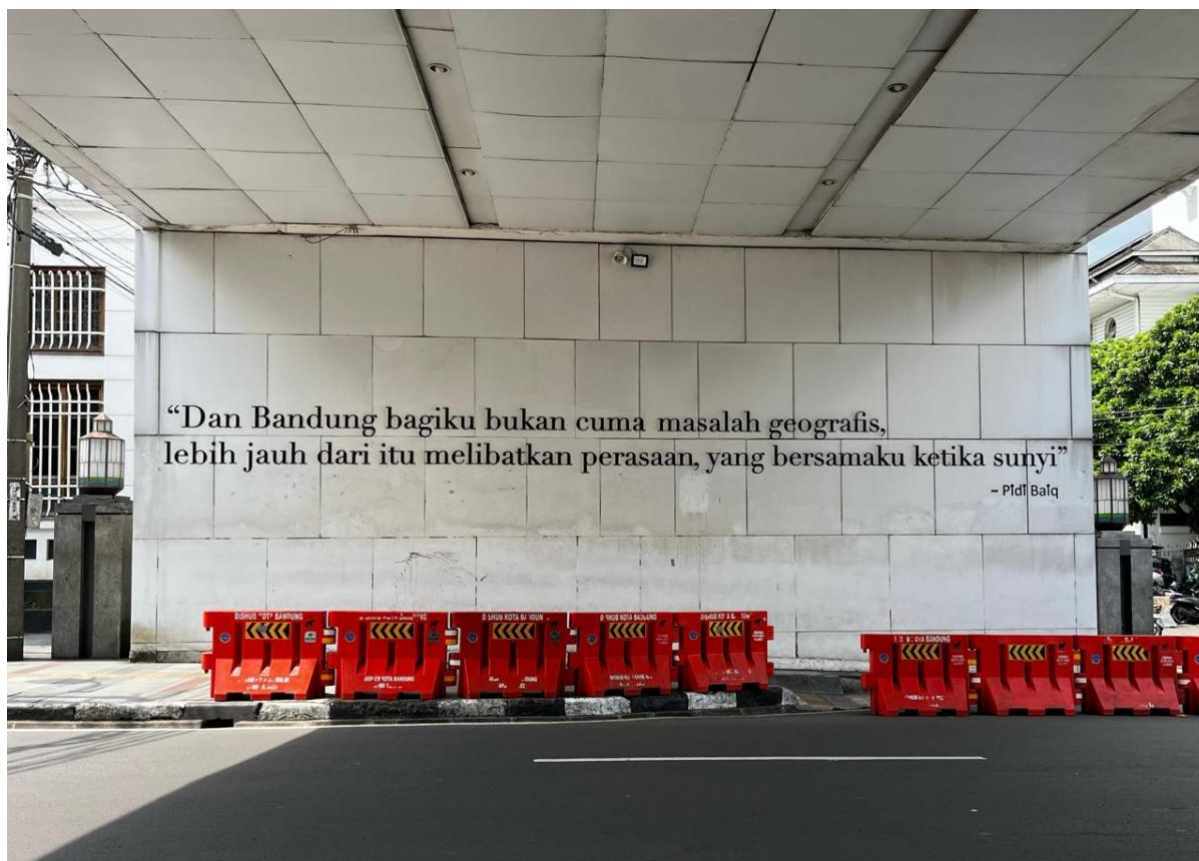
In June 2024, thousands of people gathered in front of Gedung Merdeka. They marched through the streets of Asia-Afrika to show solidarity with the Palestinian people and to call for #FreePalestine. Photo: [jurnalposmedia](https://jurnalposmedia.com).

The question, then, is whether this renewed activism in Bandung will continue to grow, or whether it will once again be dampened by economic pragmatism and political fatigue.

And, among all these actions demanding justice, the starkest reminder of the promises left from the Bandung of 1955 lies in the protests for West Papua. Gedung Merdeka, the same site where the KAA once championed self-determination for colonized nations, now witnesses demonstrations by Papuan students and activists demanding their own right to self-determination<sup>41</sup>. The irony is inescapable: a city that once symbolized freedom from colonial rule now stands as a backdrop to the struggle of Indigenous Papuans, who remain subject to militarization, human rights abuses, and suppression of their political voices and identities. The very ideals that Bandung once stood for—justice, independence, and equality—are now being demanded by those who are still denied them.

Seventy years later, as we walk these same streets, we must ask: Has independence truly liberated everyone, or have we simply learned to live with new forms of subjugation? Bandung still remembers. But remembrance alone is not enough. If Bandung and Indonesia are to truly honor the legacy of the KAA, then the question is not only whether we recall its ideals but whether we have the courage to fight for them once again.





Another quote is on the opposite side of the pedestrian bridge wall on *Asia-Afrika* Street. The quote is by Pidi Baiq, a renowned artist from Bandung, and it roughly translates to, 'And Bandung, for me, is not just a matter of geography; it goes far beyond that, carrying emotions that linger with me in solitude.' Photo by: Farid A.

## Endnotes

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## Key Profiles at the Bandung Conference

*Published on 8 April 2025*

### **Zhou En Lai: The Consummate Diplomat in Bandung**

*by Walden Bello*



日本語: Zhou Enlai, Premier of China. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Zhou En Lai, the People's Republic of China's chief representative at the Bandung Conference, was a key actor in all the major phases of the Chinese Revolution.

He was a leading organizer of the Communist Party-led workers' uprisings in Shanghai in 1927, which were crushed by the Nationalist forces under Chiang Kai Shek. He directed the Communist Party espionage activities in the coastal cities, in which role he was able to escape arrest several times while inflicting damage to the Nationalist spy network. During the Long March he sided with Mao Zedong in the latter's efforts to reorient the strategy of the Chinese Revolution, gaining the latter's support in the twists and turns of the intra-party struggles in the succeeding decades. He negotiated the United Front with the Nationalists in 1937, which left the Communists relatively free from attacks by the Nationalists while leaving most of the fighting against the Japanese to the latter. What one historian described as his "suave diplomacy" in dealing with western visitors during the civil war gave the Communists an image of being pragmatic, non-doctrinaire reformers.<sup>1</sup>

He became Prime Minister of China upon the Communist assumption of power in 1949, retaining that position until his death in 1976. At his first major international conference, the Geneva Conference of 1954 that ended French colonialism in Indochina, Zhou's interesting encounter with the US government, which China had fought to a stalemate in the Korean War, was described by one analyst:

[At the Conference] Secretary of State John Foster Dulles...deliberately and sullenly evaded being introduced to him. The lead negotiator, former CIA chief Walter Bedell Smith, had been careful to keep a coffee cup in his right hand, to avoid shaking Zhou's. He used his left hand to shake my arm," recalled Zhou in 1972.<sup>2</sup>

But the American delegates' snub was more than made up for by Zhou's meeting with the famous comedian Charlie Chaplin, a campaigner for peace, at the sidelines of the conference. After Zhou regaled Chaplin with stories of the historic nearly 10,000-kilometer Long March, the astounded Chaplin assured Zhou that he would never have to walk that far again.<sup>3</sup>

His performance at the Bandung Conference gave him the image that the world had of him in the decades to come: reasonable, affable, charming, and polished. An American observer provided this memorable sketch of him in action:

During the early days of the conference, he played a patient, conciliatory, and one might say even defensive role. When attacks were made against the Communists, he kept his temper. He refrained from any of the propaganda blasts which typify Chinese Communist pronouncements from Peking. He did not assert himself, and for the most part, he stayed in the background. Then, on the last three days, he emerged as the main performer, and in a series of fairly dramatic diplomatic moves he assumed the role of the reasonable man of peace, the conciliator who was willing to make promises and concessions in the name of harmony and good will.<sup>4</sup>

Zhou's relationship to Mao was complicated. He never strayed away from his loyalty to Mao, to the point that critics after his death would say he was "slavish" in his obeisance to the latter. At the same time, although he seemed to occasionally doubt Zhou's obedience to him, Mao could not do without Zhou's skills in stabilizing China even as he was destabilizing it with his Red Guards' assault on the Communist Party establishment.

Zhou sought not only to protect himself but others who were politically or personally close to him, but he was sometimes unsuccessful. He was close to his fellow pragmatist, Deng Hsiao Ping, but this did not prevent Mao from purging Deng twice. His adopted daughter, the artist Sun Weishi, died in 1968 after enduring several months of torture by Red Guards.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps Zhou's most celebrated achievement was his negotiating President Richard Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972 with US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. In his dealings with Zhou, Kissinger was completely won over by the Chinese premier. As one historian of their relationship notes,

I cherish deep feelings for Zhou Enlai," Kissinger said. His writings are filled with praise for Zhou's and Mao's skill, subtlety, and intelligence, and for the "brilliant" way Chinese

leaders approached international relations. At dinner parties he stunned guests with testimonials to his “adoration” of Zhou.<sup>6</sup>

It was in one of his meetings with Kissinger that Zhou made his celebrated remark that showed his Chaplinesque sense of humor. Asked by Kissinger what he thought about the impact of the French Revolution, Zhou answered, “It’s too early to tell.”

Towards the end of his life, Zhou drew up the “Four Modernizations” Program for China, even as the country was still in the throes of the Cultural Revolution. It would be the program enacted by Deng, upon the latter’s coming to power after Mao’s death and the ouster of the so-called “Gang of Four” that had surrounded Mao. It is generally regarded as the blueprint that launched China onto its ascent to become the world’s No 1 (or No 2, depending on the metric used) economy in a record time of 40 years.

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### **Endnotes**

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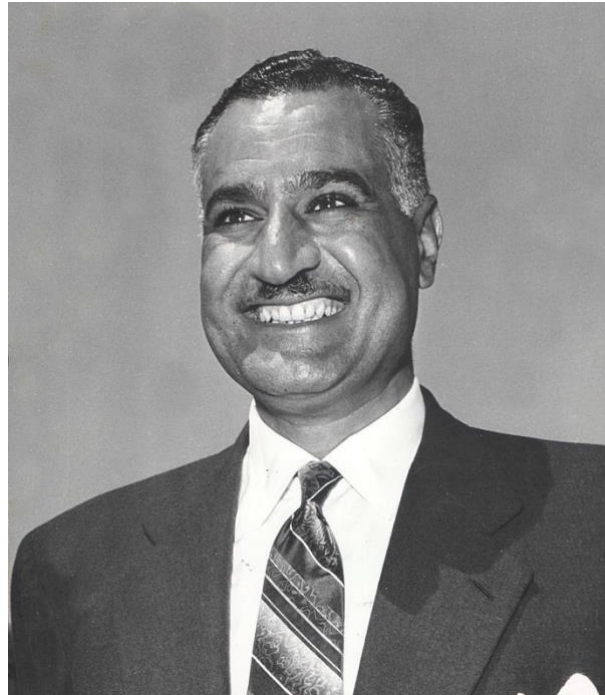
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## **Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Arab Voice in Bandung**

*by Walden Bello*



*Gamal Abdel Nasser u Beogradu, 1962. [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

One of the most consequential events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century took place on July 26, 1956, when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. Previously, the Canal had been run by a private company controlled by British and French shareholders backed by the power of the governments of France and Britain.

### **Seizing the Suez Canal**

Nasser's move led the British, French, and Israeli governments to hatch a plan to take back the Canal. Israel was to move across the Sinai desert to clear it of Egyptian troops, and, while Nasser was distracted by the Israeli incursion, British and French troops would seize the Canal. The military moves were successful, but they provoked a diplomatic storm. Angered because it had not been informed of the Canal's seizure by its British and French allies and worried about the global impact of a brazen colonial action, the Eisenhower administration warned the three conspirators to withdraw or face economic sanctions. In fact, the US sold its sterling bonds, thus provoking a devaluation of the British currency.<sup>1</sup>

These moves plus the condemnation of the United Nations forced the withdrawal of the troops of the three countries from the Canal. This retreat was later widely seen as the sunset of both British and French colonial power, and underlined the status of the two countries as satellites of the United States in the post-World War II era.

Nasser's victory at Suez made him a hero not only to the Arab world but also to the Global South as a whole.

### **Nasser at Bandung**



When Nasser attended the Bandung Conference more than a year before the Suez events, he still had not achieved his glittering reputation, though he was regarded as a charismatic Arab leader. He had led the Free Officers' Movement that took power in 1952, had introduced genuine land reform, and, after surviving an assassination attempt, had become chief executive before being formally designated president in June 1956, a month before his seizure of Suez.

At Bandung, Palestine was at the center of Nasser's intervention. He asserted:

Under the eyes of the United Nations and with her help and sanction, the people of Palestine were uprooted from their fatherland, to be replaced by a completely imported populace. Never before in history has there been such a brutal and immoral violation of human principles. Is there any guarantee for the small nations that the big powers who took part in this tragedy would not allow themselves to repeat it again, against another innocent and helpless people?"<sup>2</sup>

Owing to the hesitation of some delegations, however, Nasser was not able to secure a condemnation of Israel at Bandung. Nevertheless, the final declaration did assert "its support of the Arab people of Palestine and called for the implementation of the United Nations Resolutions on Palestine and the achievement of the peaceful settlement of the Palestine question."<sup>3</sup>

### **Nasser after Bandung**

Over two years after Bandung, Nasser hosted the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference held in Cairo in late 1957. This was dubbed the "second Bandung," with Anup Singh, secretary of the preparatory commission, declaring: "Let Cairo be the People's Bandung."<sup>4</sup>

Nasser went on to become one of key founders of the Non-Aligned Movement in September 1961, along with Josip Bros Tito of Yugoslavia, Jawharlal Nehru of India, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Soekarno of Indonesia.

An outspoken Pan-Arabist, Nasser led the formation of the United Arab Republic uniting Egypt and Syria, in 1958, but this venture fell apart in 1961 after a military coup in Syria. Nasser's reputation was tarnished by Egypt's defeat during the 1967 war with Israel. At the time of his death from cardiac arrest in 1970, however, he was still an iconic figure revered by the Arab masses.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted Joseph Massad, "Palestine at Bandung: How the Historic Asia African Conference Challenged Imperialism," *Middle East Eye*, April 4, 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/palestine-bandung-how-asian-african-conference-challenged-imperialism>

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## Carlos P. Romulo: Can an American Boy be Anti-Colonial?

*by Bianca Martinez and Joseph Purugganan*

Carlos Peña Romulo--soldier, journalist, and diplomat- led the Philippine delegation to the Bandung Conference in 1955, where he represented what many considered as the pro-american, anti-communist, and anti-colonial perspective and agenda.

The Philippines was formally granted independence by the Americans on July 4th 1946 after enduring a brutal Japanese occupation (1941-1945) during the Second World War, where America was largely portrayed as the country's liberator and saviour. One of the iconic images depicting this US-Philippines relationship during the time is that of General Douglas MacArthur, flanked by President Sergio Osmeña, and Philippine Army General Carlos P. Romulo. This image accompanied the news of the return of the Americans after its retreat to Australia in 1941.



Philippine President Sergio Osmeña Kenney (almost completely hidden), Colonel Courtney Whitney, Philippine Army Brigadier General Carlos Romulo, MacArthur, Sutherland, CBS correspondent Bill Dunn, and Staff Sergeant Francisco Salveron (left to right) wade ashore just south of Tacloban at Palo, Leyte, October 20, 1944. Courtesy of the MacArthur Memorial, Norfolk, VA.

The Philippine perspective that Romulo, known for his oratorical skills, articulated at Bandung had a strong anti-communist message, echoing the Cold War rhetoric after the war, but combined and couched with references to common concerns over “colonialism and political freedom, racial equality and peaceful economic growth.”

As one writer put it, Romulo was [carrying water on his two shoulders](#). On the one hand, taking on the task of “[chronicler and herald](#)” of America’s relationship with the Philippines and with the rest of the region-- how the granting of independence by the United States to the Philippines “showed the far east that their fellow Asians could be free and govern themselves.” And on the other hand, trying to push for an alternative, albeit a [less radical anti-colonial vision](#).



In a subsequent lecture in the University of North Carolina entitled the [Meaning of Bandung](#) delivered in 1956, on the first anniversary of the conference, Romulo described the role he and other pro-western voices in the conference played in challenging what he referred to as the neutralist agenda advanced by Nehru of India.

“Neutralism, these States would have us believe”, said Romulo, “takes no side in ideological conflict or cold war between the free and Soviet worlds.” He added that by “equating democracy and communism, democracy is already undermined”.

Romulo further expounded on this point on the issue of nuclear disarmament, arguing against what he perceived as the problematic neutralist position of “outlawing nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons, prohibiting their manufacture and use, and vocal opposition to further atomic experiments by the West in the Pacific while discreetly (being) silent to the atomic experiments in the Soviet Union.” This prohibition, Romulo argued, would “strip the free world of its deterrent and primary defensive power lodged in the atomic superiority of the United States .”

### **Under America’s shadow**

To understand the origins of the liberal anti-Communist position that Romulo advanced in the Bandung conference, it is important to consider the key historical moments that shaped his worldview.

Romulo was born in the Municipality of Camiling in Central Luzon on January 14, 1899, and grew up in a milieu where Americans had already successfully subdued the Filipino revolutionary movement for independence and engineered a social and political environment favorable to entrenching American control over the Philippines.

After the US victory in the Spanish-American War of 1898, it sought to “pacify” the Filipino revolutionary movement that resisted American colonial rule. This “[pacification](#)” took two forms: a benevolent approach, where social reforms and welfare projects were implemented by American occupiers to gain Filipinos’ trust, and a violent approach, which involved torturing, repressing, and executing revolutionaries. The benevolent approach resulted in the co-optation of large sections of the revolutionary movement, especially those from elite classes influenced by European liberalism and who saw alignment between their visions and American social reforms. Meanwhile, the violent tactics—including re-concentrating populations and imposing terror on revolutionaries and their supporters—created a chilling effect and social polarization, thereby making the revolutionaries’ guerilla warfare tactics more difficult to sustain.

A number of revolutionaries thus surrendered in the following years, including Romulo’s own father, Gregorio. As a young boy, Romulo [vowed](#) to “hate [the Americans] as long as [he] lived.” But this resentment dissipated when he entered high school, thanks to the influence of the Americanized education system established through the US’ benevolent assimilation policy. After high school, Romulo attended college from 1918 to 1921 in Columbia University, where his belief in American liberalism and benevolence was further reinforced.

Upon returning to the Philippines, Romulo worked for years under Manuel Quezon and was deeply influenced by his politics. Quezon, who was elected the first president of the Commonwealth of the Philippines under American rule, represented to Americans the “acceptable” way of advancing social change—not with warfare as the revolutionaries did, but from his “[dynamic ability](#) to mobilize followers through personal relationships.” Figures like Quezon appeased Filipinos’ nationalist tendencies without being antagonistic towards the US.

Romulo often portrayed US-Philippine colonial relations positively, expressing his feelings of [indebtedness](#) to Americans for the “privilege of believing in democracy” and viewing America as a “generous benefactor” and a “loyal friend.”

Romulo believed that achieving independence and establishing liberal democracy in the Philippines required working with the Americans, not against them. While he criticized the US when it violated liberal values, he recognized America’s global power and accepted it, viewing it as essential to work with the US in ways that appealed to their “benevolence” to gain benefits. This approach defined his colonial discourse throughout his political career.

### **Post Bandung: the Philippines and Southeast Asia**

Cold War geopolitics pretty much dictated Philippine foreign policy after Bandung, with the tensions between the West led by the United States and Western Europe on the one hand, against the communist Eastern bloc of Russia, East Germany and China that played out in wars and conflicts in the Korean Peninsula, Vietnam, Kampuchea and on issues of nuclear non-proliferation and broader regional security issues.

Aligned more with the West, the Philippines played key roles in the forging of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and subsequently of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

### **Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)- 1954-1977**

Patterned after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), SEATO was a collective defense treaty signed by the United States, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Pakistan. Its formation was a [response](#) to the “demand that the Southeast Asian area be protected against communist expansionism, especially as manifested through military aggression in Korea and Indochina and through subversion backed by organized armed forces in Malaysia and the Philippines.”

### **ASEAN (1967- present)**



*This photo of the “ASEAN-5” was taken in November 1971, during a Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting hosted by Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak (far left). All five ministers had gathered in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to issue the declaration on the zone of peace, freedom, and neutrality. The photo illustrates perfectly the “ASEAN Way,” a working style that is informal, personal, consensus-based, and open to compromise. Philippine Foreign Minister Carlos P. Romulo listens to Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik while Singapore’s Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam and Thai special envoy Thanat Khoman (center) look on. From <https://www.carlospromulo.org/journal/2021/7/28/asean>*

The formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 is largely seen as the jewel of this anti-communist crusade in Southeast Asia. ASEAN was formed as an alliance originally among the five countries of the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, to “unite against the spread of communism and to promote stability in the Southeast Asia region.”

Under the Marcos administration, the Philippines “normalized economic and diplomatic ties with China and the USSR, and opened embassies in the eastern bloc countries, as well as a separate mission to the European Common Market in Brussels. The Department of Foreign Affairs also highlights in its history how “throughout the 1970s, the Department pursued the promotion of trade and investments, played an active role in hosting international meetings, and participated in the meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).”

As Minister of Foreign Affairs under Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., Romulo oversaw the administration’s [foreign policy](#), which was “redefined as the safeguarding of territorial integrity and national dignity, and emphasized increased regional cooperation and collaboration. He

stressed "Asianness" and pursued a policy of constructive unity and co-existence with other Asian states, regardless of ideological persuasion".

He resigned from the Marcos cabinet soon after the assassination in 1983, of Senator Benigno Aquino, whom Romulo considered a friend. Even as a private citizen, he continued to advocate for [reforms in the United Nations](#), specifically an amendment to its charter "by convening a sort of constitutional convention", in order to remain relevant in light of global conflicts. He argued "that the world body should acquire a permanent military force of several thousand troops and that nations at war should be required to submit their hostilities to negotiation."

Romulo died on December 15, 1985, at age 87, in Manila, and was buried in the Heroes' Cemetery (Libingan ng mga Bayani) at Fort Bonifacio, Metro Manila. #



## Sukarno: The mind and heart of the Bandung Conference 1955

by Henry Thomas Simarmata\* and Dhia Prekasha Yoedha<sup>1</sup>



Official Portrait of President Sukarno. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

When Sukarno was arrested by the Dutch colonial authorities and detained in Banceuy Prison in Bandung in 1929, he was acutely aware that he needed to express his ideas and vision for a nation, a world free from humiliation and exploitation by others. While in prison, he wrote his *pledoi* (legal defense) titled “Indonesia menggugat” (often translated as “Indonesia Accuses” or more accurately, “Indonesia Calls for the End of Colonialism”). This *pledoi* was presented in court in Bandung in 1930. This legal defense was unique in that it used a colonial setting while providing a valuable opportunity to advocate for a unified voice against the dissolution of colonialism. He mentioned very little about himself in the defense.

Before, during, and after this *pledoi*, Sukarno consistently advocated for a unifying voice for independence. He collaborated closely with various individuals and groups, including ethnic communities from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Sukarno’s ability to play this role stemmed from his understanding that independence encompasses both struggle and ideology. In and out of prison throughout the 1930s and 1940s, he continued to engage with numerous individuals and groups who were calling for and working toward independence. During this time, Sukarno began to openly contemplate the unifying values of independence, which later evolved into Pancasila.

During the Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945, Sukarno again utilized the occupier’s setting of the *Chuo Sangi In* (The Central Body for Consideration) established in 1942, which

then became BPUPK (Badan Persiapan Kemerdekaan Indonesia/The Body for the Preparation of the Independence of Indonesia) in 1945, marking a significant push for independence. Sukarno's idea resonated as a call for "*Indonesia Merdeka secepat-lekasnya*" (Independence of Indonesia as soon as possible). Throughout this period, mainly while he was engaged in various discussions within the BPUPK, he became more aware of reality than ever before. He recognized that the colonialism he experienced closely resembled the European colonialism he had understood, paralleling the colonialism of the occupier. In his speeches, he referenced the Asian struggle for independence. Without inciting hatred against Europeans or other Asians, he highlighted the flaw inherent in any colonialism: the exploitation of humans by other humans (often, he expressed this in French, *l'exploitation de l'homme par l'homme*).

On August 17, 1945, Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta, his fellow "*proklamator*," initiated Indonesia's stance against "anti-exploitation." Despite the challenges of the first five years of independence, Sukarno, as the president of Indonesia, actively participated in international fora, including the newly formed United Nations, supporting fellow Asian nations seeking independence, such as India, Burma, Vietnam, and Ceylon, among others. As the 1950s approached, he recognized that Asia and Africa were regions where European colonialism attempted to reestablish itself after World War II. Sukarno was determined to accelerate the decline of European colonialism in Asia and Africa. The experience of Indonesia's fight for independence, particularly against the comeback of the Dutch backed by the Allies, underscored the necessity to end colonialism. Asia and Africa should never again serve as extensions of European colonialism.

The Bandung Conference of 1955 represented an amalgamation and mutual recognition of independence among the peoples of Asia and Africa. Sukarno and Nehru were both key drivers of the Bandung Conference. Still, the leaders of Asia and Africa were also very active, working alongside Sukarno and Nehru to promote the ideal of self-determination free from exploitation by others. Sukarno engaged all leaders of Asia and Africa and made significant efforts to seek a unifying voice against colonialism and exploitation. Meetings and discussions were held in preparation for the Bandung Conference.

In his opening speech at the Bandung Conference on April 18, 1955, Sukarno called for awareness of the ongoing presence of colonialism. "We are often told, 'Colonialism is dead.' Let us not be deceived or even soothed by that. I say to you, colonialism is not yet dead. How can we say it is dead so long as vast areas of Asia and Africa are unfree"

The Dasasila Bandung (Ten Principles of Bandung) was the call of the 1955 Bandung Conference. Today, it is primarily enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Right to Development. These principles are the foundation of the Non-Aligned Movement (in Indonesia: Gerakan Non-Blok). On September 30, 1960, before the UN General Assembly, Sukarno reaffirmed this principle in his famous speech "*Membangun Dunia Kembali*," or "To Build the World a New."

After the Asia-Africa Conference 1955, Sukarno, in some ways, predicted that the opposition by the colonial power and its extension against independence of Asia-Africa nations would morph into a boycott against the affair of Asia-Africa nations. Sukarno did not abandon his balanced attitude towards other nations, including the west, but he resisted the use of

polarising international deliberation and of foreign aid to drive Indonesian and Asia-Africa decision-making. He kept on promoting diversity by empowering international decision-making through NAM (Non-Aligned Movement). The famous “newly emerging forces” or NEFO was Sukarno’s choice of attitude (as against “old established forces” or OLDEFO). He promoted sports and exchange of intellectuals as a way to keep Asia-Africa as power to be understood, and as a way to defuse tensions.

Sukarno was deposed with the coming of “New Order”, a military-political establishment. The tragedy of the 1965 coup remains elusive and varied in interpretation until today. One thing is clear, though, that the generational stature of Sukarno was deliberately ended by the New Order starting in 1965-1966. The policy of “anti-communism” then started to be used and abused by the New Order as a way to control and dominate the society. However, his stature was unmatched in the nation in 1965 until he passed away in 1970. He still commanded a strong influence towards attitude of the nation. The general public was still very much in tune towards towards what Sukarno said. Despite harsh treatment of the New Order against Sukarno, Sukarno kept persuading general public to seek middle way in engaging New Order. He once said that he did not want a bloodbath in provoking general public to defend him against the New Order.

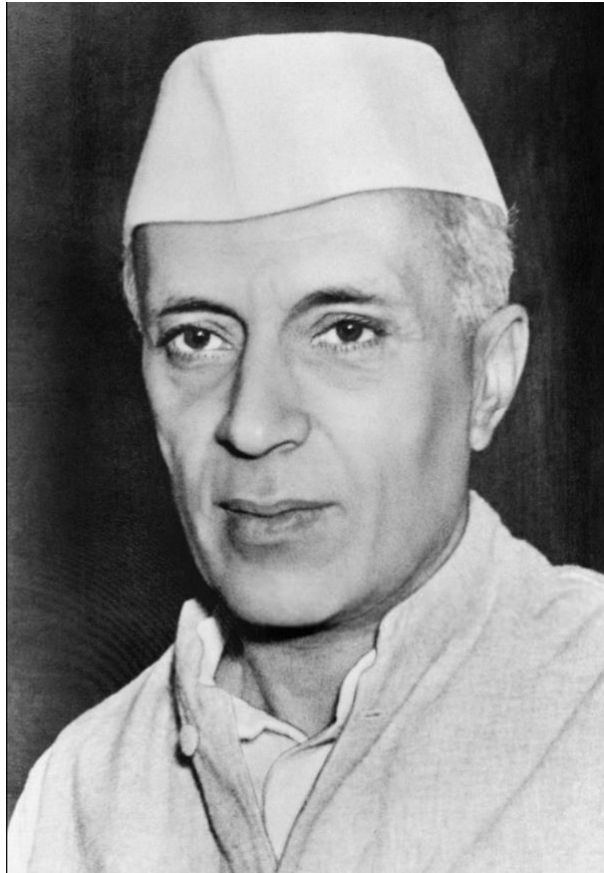
His stature is still unmatched in realising Dasasila Bandung. Until now, “Non-Aligned Movement” (NAM) is still the anchor of Indonesian key policies and political attitude. Especially out of initiatives and works by intelligentsia, journalists, environment activists, educators, the Dasasila Bandung is translated into a pursuit of equality between nations. The pursuit is to prevent domination of one power against the well-being of many. This pursuit is targeted into a peaceful (non-violent, non-aggressive) achievement of rich and shared Asia-Africa well being.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Thomas Simarmata & Dhia Prekasha Yoedha/ IAAC-Indonesian Institute for Asia-Africa Conference 1955

## Jawaharlal Nehru and the spirit of anti-colonial non-alignment

*by Meena Menon*



*Jawaharlal Nehru, Former Prime Minister of the Republic of India. [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

The idea of the Bandung Conference (April 18 to 24, 1955) as a meeting of independent countries of Asia and Africa, took shape as part of a process that came out of the need for these countries to come together to strengthen the decolonization process, and to hold their own in the Cold War world, dominated by the two superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union.

Jawaharlal Nehru was a central figure in charting a path for the new formally independent countries.

Newly independent countries were faced with many challenges – finding themselves in the position of governing large populations facing poverty, illiteracy and worse. Support and solidarity were essential. The Bandung conference aimed to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation and to oppose colonialism and neocolonialism.

Prior to the Bandung Conference, the prime ministers of Burma, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka) met in Bogor, Indonesia, in December 1954, and reached an agreement on co-convening an Asian-African conference, and to request Indonesia to host it.



Before the Bogor Conference, Jawaharlal Nehru, heading what was then the Provisional Government of India before official hand over of power in August 1947, hosted an Asian Relations Conference in Delhi 23 March to 2 April, 1947, a full 10 days. Since a provisional government could not officially host an international conference, a private body, Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) was the organiser. The Asian Relations Conference brought together many leaders of anti-colonial independence movements in Asia, and represented a serious attempt to assert Asian unity. Although the Conference was ostensibly a 'cultural conference' it did not steer clear of important political issues, and in fact even of many internal issues such as China-Tibet. The Prime Minister of Indonesia Sutan Sjahrir missed the opening session of the Asian Relations Conference as he was signing an agreement with the Dutch, but Nehru sent a chartered plane that allowed him to arrive in time for the closing ceremony. An Indonesia delegation was present, since the country had declared its independence on August 17, 1945, although the Dutch was to formally recognize this independence only on December 27, 1949. Participation in Nehru's Asian Relations Conference was remarkable in many ways. There were China and Tibet, French Indochina and Vietnam, the Jewish delegation, Egypt and Arab League, Soviet republics.

An excerpt from Nehru's speech at the 1947 Conference could easily be part of a speech written for today:

*"so even in meeting we have achieved much and I have no doubt that out of this meeting greater things will come. When the history of our present times is written, this event may well stand out as a landmark which divides the past of Asia from the future, and because we are participating in this making of history, something of the greatness of historical events comes to us all.....We seek no narrow nationalism. Nationalism has a place in each country and should be fostered, but it must not be allowed to become aggressive and come in the way of international development. Asia stretches her hand out in friendship to Europe and America as well as to our suffering brethren in Africa. We of Asia have a special responsibility to the people of Africa. We must help them to take their rightful place in the human family."*

A second Asian Relations Conference was to be held in Nanking, China in April, 1949, but due to the Chinese Civil War, it was held in Baguio, Philippines in May 1950. Nehru was instrumental in blocking a proposal for the creation of an Asian Regional Organisation that was made in the meeting. India's (and Gandhi's) non-alignment was one that was put peace at the centre, and any military alliance directed or seeming to be directed against Europe and the US was not acceptable.

### **Jawaharlal Nehru – his life**

Nehru came from an educated wealthy family, settled in Allahabad (now renamed Prayagraj by the Hindu nationalist government) in Uttar Pradesh. His father was an eminent lawyer and a moderate member of the Congress party. He was educated by British tutors first and then went to Harrow and Cambridge, after which he trained as a lawyer, since he was meant to be following in his father's footsteps. His exposure to liberal and radical writers while in England, his deep interest in the history and culture of his country and his burning faith in the India's future as an independent country, led him to jump into active politics when he returned to India. In the mid-1920s, he became a national figure by assuming leadership of the radical youth wing of the party. He was not afraid to challenge the party's old guard including Gandhi. He first became Congress President in 1929 at a relatively young age of 40. He campaigned

inside the party for complete independence from Britain and soon Gandhi declared that the time had come to start this phase of the battle. Nehru was friendly with the communist parties and he was deeply influenced by his reading of Marxism and the achievements of the USSR. He thought of China not as a political fellow traveler but as a potentially important ally to build an anti-colonial non-aligned bloc in which in his view India must play a leading role.

The history of India has become a matter of bitter debate today in domestic politics, when a hundred years after the peak years of the Indian Independence movement, its history and that of the Congress Party, especially Jawaharlal Nehru is being challenged and rewritten from the point of view of what was once a fringe group in the country's political landscape. The anti-colonial struggle encompassed almost all political ideologies and tendencies in India. But today a politically dominant Hindu nationalist discourse is fighting for space they believe was denied to them in the writing of the history of the Indian anti-colonial movement. As a result, contemporary Indian history is now a battlefield, spotted with hidden mines which can explode into violence and bloodshed without much warning. As many histories have shown, any attempt to force a single historical narrative has always been a sensitive and dangerous game.

### **Nehru's foreign policy**

Nehru saw internationalism and nationalism as two sides of the same coin. Even before freedom in 1947, while in prison, he wrote:

*"Sometimes we are told that our nationalism is a sign of our backwardness and even our demand for independence indicates our narrow-mindedness. Those who tell us so, seem to imagine that true internationalism would triumph if we agreed to remain as junior partners in the British Empire and the Commonwealth of nations. ....Nevertheless, India, for all her intense national fervour, has gone further than many nations in acceptance of real internationalism and the coordination and even to some extent, the subordination of the independent national-state to a world organization". (Discovery of India, 1946)*

The 40's saw a slew of countries throwing off the colonial yoke. But once that was done, the challenge of rebuilding was daunting to say the least. Clarity of priorities, finding common ground, identifying the main pillars of solidarity needed an engagement beyond national boundaries, especially in the era of the Cold War. From this came the ideology of non-alignment as the preferred foreign policy of the developing world. NAM was a progressive movement although it was a movement of countries, not to be confused with a mass movement. India and China were the biggest actors, but China was still too close to the Soviet Union to be fully trusted by the NAM countries. India always saw this as an opportunity and was more than happy to be seen as leader of the non-aligned movement. Nehru led this ambition, but it has remained a part of Indian foreign policy to date whichever party was in power.

Nehru was the main architect of India's foreign policy. It was said that India's foreign policy could only be found in Nehru's pocket. It is true that the foundations laid during his tenure as Prime Minister, that is from 1947 to 1964, i.e 17 years, it was Nehru who led Indian foreign policy, but naturally India's priorities were more domestic than international. Nehru's contribution to building a secular polity, laying the foundation for study and research in science and technology, all these are lasting contributions in the building of modern India.

Nehru's internationalism mostly stemmed from than from a need to secure India's borders, and to ensure regional stability for all Asians to prosper, ensuring peace and prosperity for all. The attempt to forge friendship with China was a step in this direction. So was Panchsheel, or the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, first formally enunciated in the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India signed on April 29, 1954, which stated, in its preamble, that the two Governments "have resolved to enter into the present Agreement based on the following principles:

1. Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty,
2. Mutual non-aggression,
3. Mutual non-interference,
4. Equality and mutual benefit, and
5. Peaceful co-existence

These principles, ironically, remained a cornerstone of official Indian foreign policy although just a decade later, China and India were at war over a border region. These principles were accepted as part of the resolutions that came out of the Bandung 1955 Conference.

### **Bandung and after**

The Bandung conference in April 1955 declared their refusal to align with either superpower. After a debate, the USSR faced censure along with the US. The Non-Aligned Movement was founded. Thereafter, the first NAM conference was held in Belgrade in 1961 under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito (Yugoslavia), Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Sukarno (Indonesia) and Jawaharlal Nehru. NAM played an important role in deterring dangerous escalation of the Cold War, regional hostilities and the arms race caused by the two contesting global superpowers.

Nehru would best be described as a secular liberal democrat, but given that today a large section of those who think of themselves as being part of the left occupy a similar ideological space, his position in Indian history and politics will need to be seen from a contemporary lens, when right wing ideologies are often overpowering the ideological space world-wide. On a global level, in a world always on the verge of cataclysmic war, the role of NAM is perhaps more important than we have been given it credit for. It is important for people's movements especially those who have been campaigning against war and nuclear arms, to push their own governments to build and support the principles of the NAM movement. In 2005, on the 50th anniversary of the original conference, leaders from Asian and African countries met in Jakarta and Bandung to launch the New Asian–African Strategic Partnership (NAASP). How do we view these attempts? What must a decolonized developing world do? It is impossible to ignore these questions now.

## Cut Meutia: The Spirit of Anti-Colonial Resistance from Aceh to Bandung

by Anisa Widyasari



Profil Cut Nyak Meutia. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The Asia-Africa Conference (*Konferensi Asia Afrika* in Bahasa Indonesia, commonly known as KAA), held in Bandung from April 18 to 24, 1955, marked a significant milestone for countries in Asia and Africa striving to free themselves from the constraints of colonialism. The conference upheld fundamental principles such as respect for sovereignty, equality, and the rejection of all forms of oppression. Nevertheless, this spirit of anti-colonialism and quest for freedom has been deeply rooted in the historical struggles of nations in the region long before the KAA forum held.

One figure who embodies this spirit is Cut Meutia, a female warrior from Aceh.<sup>1</sup> Through her leadership during the Aceh War, Cut Meutia not only demonstrated unwavering resistance against Dutch colonial rule but also defied prevailing gender norms that sought to confine women's roles to the domestic sphere. Her ability to command troops and engage in direct combat highlighted the active participation of women in anti-colonial struggles, challenging both colonial domination and patriarchal social structures. This reflection will examine Cut Meutia's contributions, explore their relevance within the context of the KAA, and analyze their significance through contextual feminism<sup>2</sup>.

### Brief Profile of Cut Meutia

Cut Meutia (*Tjoet Nyak Meutia*) was born on February 15, 1870, in Keureutoe, North Aceh, into a noble and devout Muslim family.<sup>3</sup> She grew up in an environment that strongly upheld Islamic values and traditional customs, which played a significant role in shaping her sense of duty and resistance. In a patriarchal society where women were typically confined to domestic roles, Cut Meutia's active participation in warfare was an extraordinary exception.<sup>4</sup>

After marrying Teuku Cik Tunong, one of the prominent leaders of the Acehnese resistance against Dutch colonial rule, Cut Meutia became actively involved in the armed struggle. She was not merely a companion to her husband; she directly participated in battles and contributed to devising military strategies against colonial forces.<sup>5</sup> Following Teuku Cik Tunong's execution by the Dutch in 1905, Cut Meutia assumed leadership, commanding the remaining troops and continuing the resistance despite dwindling resources and relentless Dutch attacks.<sup>6</sup> She fought until her last breath, ultimately being killed in combat on October 24, 1910.<sup>7</sup>

Her role as a female military leader during that era was remarkable. Not only did she symbolize resistance against colonial oppression, but she also represented the resilience, leadership, and courage of Acehnese women in the face of systemic challenges.

### **Cut Meutia in the Context of the Spirit of the KAA**

One of the key principles affirmed in the KAA was the right of all nations to self-determination, as outlined in the *Dasasila Bandung* (Ten Principles of Bandung). Within these principles, which includes the respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations<sup>8</sup>, the conference reinforced fundamental values such as respect for self-determination, equality, and the rejection of colonialism and oppression.<sup>9</sup>

Long before these principles were articulated in the KAA, Cut Meutia embodied this spirit of resistance and self-determination in Aceh. She led the fight for freedom from Dutch colonial domination, demonstrating that anti-colonial struggles were not solely the domain of men but also involved the active participation of women. Her determination and leadership paralleled the core values upheld in Bandung decades later, reinforcing the idea that colonial resistance was a universal struggle that transcended gender.

Furthermore, Cut Meutia's resistance embodies the spirit of solidarity and resilience against oppression, a key theme of the Bandung Conference. The KAA emphasized that the fight for justice and independence is the right of all oppressed peoples, regardless of race, gender, or social status.<sup>10</sup> In this light, Cut Meutia's legacy serves as a historical prove to the long-standing resistance movements that paved the way for Asia and Africa's collective struggle for decolonization.

### **Feminism Perspective: Cut Meutia as a Representation of Contextual Feminism**

Examining Cut Meutia's struggle through a feminist lens, she represents a form of contextual feminism—a feminist resistance that is deeply rooted in the social, political, and cultural realities of her time. While she may not have identified as a feminist in the classical sense, her actions embodied feminist principles such as gender equality, women's empowerment, and defiance against patriarchal structures.

This perspective aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique in *Under Western Eyes* (1984)<sup>11</sup>, where she challenges the Western feminist tendency to universalize women's experiences while overlooking local contexts and historical struggles of women in the Global South. Mohanty argues:

*“Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis.”*

In this light, Cut Meutia's resistance was not only against Dutch colonialism but also against the structural patriarchy embedded in Acehnese society at the time. Her leadership in the battlefield, a role traditionally dominated by men, challenged the notion that women should remain confined to domestic spaces. This reflects the intersectional nature of her struggle, where anti-colonialism and gender resistance coexisted.<sup>12</sup>

By situating Cut Meutia's role within the broader discourse of contextual feminism, we acknowledge that feminist movements take different forms across historical and cultural landscapes. Her legacy challenges the homogenization of feminist struggles and highlights the agency of indigenous women in shaping their own narratives of empowerment and resistance.<sup>13</sup>

### **Cut Meutia's Legacy in the Post-Colonial Era**

Cut Meutia's legacy continues to serve as an inspiration for the gender equality movement in the modern era. She demonstrated that women have the capacity to lead, make decisions, and drive social change, despite living in a deeply patriarchal society. While significant progress has been made, structural barriers to women's participation in leadership, politics, and social movements still persist—echoing the same challenges she faced in her time.

In the context of the KAA, Cut Meutia's spirit underscores that the fight against injustice must be inclusive, ensuring that all members of society—regardless of gender, class, or background—play an active role. Just as the KAA promoted international solidarity among nations fighting colonial oppression, the fight for gender equality also demands solidarity across socio-political and cultural divisions.

Beyond her direct involvement in anti-colonial resistance, Cut Meutia left a lasting impact on the historical narrative of women's contributions to national struggles. Her story challenges the male-dominated discourse of independence movements, highlighting that women were not merely passive observers but active agents of change<sup>14</sup>. Her leadership in armed resistance not only defied colonial domination but also confronted entrenched patriarchal structures, making her a significant figure in both nationalist and feminist historiography.

In the spirit of the Asian-African Conference, Cut Meutia's struggle serves as a powerful reminder that freedom and equality are universal rights—not only for nations but for all individuals, including women. Her legacy urges us to recognize that the fight against one form of oppression cannot be separated from the fight against others, reinforcing the need for an intersectional approach in post-colonial and feminist movements today.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Djajadiningrat, H. (1977). Tinjauan Kritis tentang Sejarah Perang Aceh.

<sup>2</sup> Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2*, 12(3), 333–358. <https://doi.org/10.2307/302821>

<sup>3</sup> Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan RI. (1996). Cut Meutia: Seri Pahlawan Bangsa. Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan.

<sup>4</sup> Djajadiningrat, H. Loc. Cit.

<sup>5</sup> Vickers, A. (2013). A history of modern Indonesia (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Reid, A. (1969). The contest for North Sumatra: Atjeh, the Netherlands and Britain, 1858-1898. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan RI. Loc. Cit.

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<sup>8</sup> Final Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference. In: Asia-Africa speak from Bandung. Jakarta: Indonesia. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 1955. pp. 161-169.

<sup>9</sup> Kahin, G. M. (1956). *The Asian-African Conference: Bandung, Indonesia, April 1955*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Mackie, J. A. C. (2005). *Bandung 1955: Non-Alignment and Afro-Asian Solidarity*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet.

<sup>11</sup> Mohanty. Loc. Cit.

<sup>12</sup> Crenshaw, K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics*. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139-167

<sup>13</sup> Pivak, G. C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271-313). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

<sup>14</sup> Jayawardena, K. (1986). *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. London: Zed Books.

# Unmasking Memories of Feminist Anti-Imperialist Movement: Where Were the Women in Bandung Conference?

*Published on 17 April 2025*

*by Salsabila Noor Aziziah\**

Progressive struggles around the world have been masked by the mainstream narrative of the Global North countries' victory following World War II. It is not easy to curate and recollect memories of past anti-imperialist movements, including one led by feminists transnationally. The spirit of the anti-imperialist movement led by women had emerged even before the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) of 1955 in Bandung. While the Bandung Conference was led by national leaders of African and Asian nations, these feminist movements were led by unheard feminist leaders across the world aligned with the spirit of solidarity and anti-imperialism.

In looking at global history, feminists often question: where were the women? What barriers did they face in the world of diplomacy? What were their struggles in post-World War II reality? What narratives did they bring about? These are critical points to be discussed further to unmask memories of feminist movements against imperialist power. One important aspect to note from the feminist anti-imperialist movement is that their struggle was not only against imperial state power, but it was also a different strand the international feminist movement, where women of colonized nations consolidated their power to reject the Western-dominated feminist agenda and develop South-South solidarity based on their commonality.<sup>1</sup> Thus, women were important actors in shaping the anti-imperialist movement, and the Bandung Conference was a formative moment for the internationalist feminist movement in the Global South.

Unfortunately, this monumental history of progressive feminist movements against imperialism has been poorly documented and remains scattered, limiting its access to scholars and the public. This article is an effort to unmask the memories of women surrounding the Bandung Conference that highlights several dimensions (1) imperialism as a women's issue; (2) women's anti-imperialist efforts prior to the Bandung Conference; and (3) post-Bandung women's movements.

## **Imperialism as a Women's Issue**

At that time, the internationalist feminist movement of Asia featured three interlinking strands of feminist analysis and activism. The first strand focused on social reform feminism, where women sought to improve access to education, health care, social welfare, and modern cultural and religious practices. This strand emerged within colonized societies to push the shift in social relations of gender. The second strand consisted of nationalist and state feminism that looked for equal rights of women in independent nations and full participation of women in public life. Lastly, the least discussed strand of feminism was the leftist, mass-based feminism that sought to restructure the economy, social relations, and political practices that disenfranchised women. The second and third strands were heavily intertwined in newly



independent Asian nations, as both shared a common commitment to women's legal and state-based inclusion. However, leftist feminism departed from nationalist and state feminism to continue demanding transformation in relations of production and reproduction against the newly inaugurated government.

Asian and African women were at the forefront of making interventions within the feminist movement to highlight their struggle against imperialism. During the Congress of Women's International Democratic Federation<sup>2</sup> (WIDF), delegates from Asia and Africa redefined fascism from the perspective of imperialism. They reminded the organization that fascism was a powerful force behind military conflict but colonialism was another, as colonial powers withheld freedom from their colonies. By focusing on the political economy of colonialism, they emphasized the loss of opportunity to enjoy basic dignity and well-being of the colonized people.<sup>3</sup> At that time, women realized that the fabric of their daily problems stemmed from the intersection of the systems of colonialism, fascism, and patriarchy.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the need to form a mass-based transnational women's movement that fought these systems simultaneously became urgent.

However, their advocacy did not end after the formal independence of their nations. In fact, there were at least two factors that impeded the full promise of self-determination. The first factor was military and economic coercion of imperial powers, which made land reform and nationalization policies difficult to implement. This was mainly characterized by financial capitalism and US imperialism. The second factor was the national structure of propertied classes and business lobbies that hindered nations from creating meaningful economic reform. These two factors were mutually reinforcing, as the colonial forms of industrial ownership continued under the newly formed government. In the face of these problems, women's movements continued to raise issues of endemic inequities created within the capitalist class system. Whether under a colonial or independent state, they demanded a change in national priorities for poor, working-class, and middle-class women.

This momentum also marked an attempt to withdraw from the charity model of feminist transnationalism to an embrace of a solidarity approach.<sup>5</sup> There were two characteristics of solidarity: (1) a solidarity of commonality and (2) a solidarity of complicity. A solidarity of commonality referred to a universal women's human rights agenda that invoked shared values and goals that would benefit women across the world. In contrast, a solidarity to end complicity responded to different power relations between women based on their class, nation, or ethnicity. This resulted in unequal benefits and negative effects. Therefore, solidarity against complicity meant holding colonized and colonizing nations responsible for the atrocities they carried out in their nation's name or by their nation's people. There was also a push for Western women to fight against their own complicity with imperialism by embedding anticolonial struggles in their national work.

### **Women's Anti-Imperialist Conferences Leading Up to Bandung**

The Asia - Africa Conference (Bandung Conference) of 1955 was held in Bandung, Indonesia as the culmination of a non-aligned and anti-imperialist movement. But in order to highlight the feminist struggles against colonialism, it is important to look into the events leading up to the Bandung Conference. One early momentum to be documented as part of the Pan-Asian women's movement was the Asian Relations Conference<sup>6</sup> of 1947, hosted by the Indian Council of World Affairs in New Delhi. The aim was to provide a cultural and intellectual revival

and social progress in Asia, independent of all questions of internal as well as international politics. The Conference was claimed to be “non-political” as there was no communique or resolution to put pressure on the Government, but there were important topics being discussed. There were eight topics covered in the Conference, including national movement for freedom; racial problems; migration; transition from colonial to national economy; agricultural reconstruction and industrial development; labor and social services; cultural problems; status of women and women’s movement. Working groups formed around these topics.

Jawaharlal Nehru, as the leader of the transitional government in India, was present at the Conference to welcome delegates, encouraging them despite the tumultuous political and social change of their respective countries. The Asian Relations Conference was attended by women from twelve Asian nations who participated in the Status of Women and Women’s Movement group. Among them were important figures such as Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, an Indian social reformer and freedom fighter. By the end of the Conference, the Women’s Group called for (1) organized efforts to promote the education, social, political, and economic interests of the people, particularly the poor; (2) removal of all inequalities, restrictions and disabilities imposed upon women by virtue of custom, religion, or law; (3) acknowledgment of the pressing need to improve the “tragically low percentage of literacy [...] among women in the majority of Eastern countries,” and addressing the need for the immediate introduction of free, basic education on a universal scale; (4) legally implemented more equitable property, marriage, and divorce laws for women.<sup>7</sup> After the discussion, the group voted in favor of reviving the All Asian Women’s Conference.<sup>8</sup>

Following the Asian Relations Conference, three members of WIDF—Jaikishore Handoo from India, Vivian Carter Mason from the United States, and Jeanne Merens from Algeria—published a report on racism and colonial oppression titled “The Women of Asia and Africa.” This report highlighted the shared struggles against colonialism in Asia and Africa. It was a stepping stone to prepare for the Asian Women’s Conference. The latter was planned to be held in India; however, WIDF delegates realized that it was difficult to draw in support from Indian officials. The objections toward the conference in India at that time represented a shift from cross-border solidarity to what was called *nationalist individualism*.<sup>9</sup>

Sarojini Naidu, a nationalist leader at that time, stated, “At the present time I see no necessity for the functioning of women’s organizations.” Others, such as Renuka Ray, a member of the Indian Constituent Assembly, felt the conference would be a threat to the fragile new government and that it might destabilize Nehru’s and the Congress Party’s political position. Euro-American pressure on Nehru and his government’s distrust of Indian communism finally undermined the plan to host the Asian Women’s Conference in Kolkata.

Nevertheless, Indian communist women activists held an all-Indian conference that involved regional leftist women’s groups and allied organizations for workers and peasants. This conference then became the seed that led to the establishment of a revolutionary women’s organization called the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW).



*Asian Women's Conference in Beijing 1949.<sup>10</sup>*

One of the most important women's conferences prior to the Bandung Conference was the Asian Women's Conference (AWC), held in 1949 in Beijing, China, and hosted by WIDF and the All China Women's Democratic Federation. The Conference drew 367 women from 37 countries<sup>11</sup>, marking it as the emergence of an international women's movement committed to building a left-oriented mass-base and revolutionary women's movement. AWC derived its framework from the communist and left traditions of organizing and Marxist-Leninist theory. They organized peasant and rural women instead of women from metropolitan centers, as rural women were the main source of colonial extraction in the Global South.

In her speech Chinese leader Soong Ching Ling addressed the common enemies of women—foreign imperialism, which resulted in colonialism, and home-grown feudalism.<sup>12</sup> She also encouraged women of Asia to be the leaders of their own liberation, as they could not expect sympathy from the imperialists. There were a few points that she concluded were important rights to be fulfilled, including:

1. Equal rights of women in marriage;
2. All rights in the family and in inheritance equal to men;
3. The rights of mothers to their children;
4. Child-care through increased creches, nurseries, kindergartens, sanitation facilities and education in personal hygiene;
5. Legislation providing equal pay for equal work, maternity leave with full pay and outlawing of child labor;
6. Compulsory free education for all children and the spread of the teachers' movement to wipe out illiteracy;
7. Funds for higher education for women.

During the Conference, Indonesian leader Lillah Suripno pushed for anti-imperialist wording to be explicitly stated and not merely “peace.” However, it was agreed that peace in this context was strategically anti-imperialist. Women in colonized states were the leading force of the fight against imperialism, while their supporters in colonizing countries used their power to block the export of imperialist weaponry and logistics. The conference was the culmination of efforts in merging the women's movement in China and Asia with the global socialist women's movement.

### **Women's Movement Continuing the Bandung Spirit**

The Bandung Conference of 1955 was attended by Asian and African leaders who later formed the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) based on the 10 points of the Bandung Declaration. It is worth noting that while the Declaration stated full support of United Nations Charter principles, it did not explicitly mention women's rights. Nonetheless, the momentum of the Bandung Conference further strengthened feminists in the Global South and Global North to look at women's and girls' issues using a structural approach. Race, colonialism, and economic inequality were central to the agenda of the women's movement at that time.

NAM, as an attempt to collectively conceive a community of nations in the Global South, was formulated on clear political and ideological lines.<sup>13</sup> This idea of newly liberated countries demanding that their agency and voice be recognized aligned with women's movements around the world which demanded that women not be treated as passive victims but seen as active subjects and recognized for their steadfastness in resisting oppression.

Following the 1949 Asian Women's Conference in Beijing, solidarity within the women's movement broadened and brought together women from Asia and Africa to Colombo in 1958. The Asian-African Women's Conference was hosted from February 15–24, 1958, supported by five Asian women's organizations: the All Ceylon Women's Conference (ACWC), Women's Welfare League from Burma, the Kongress Wanita Indonesia (Indonesia Women's Congress/KOWANI), the All Pakistan Women's Association, and the All India Women's Commission (AIWC). All of these organizations had committed to improving women's education as well as access to health care and social development. Although they had a long tradition of social reform feminism, they also used nationalist and state feminist analysis to push for women's interests in the governance of their independent nations.

The Asian-African Women's Conference invoked a similar Non-Aligned Movement spirit following the Bandung Conference. There were at least six common concerns<sup>14</sup> discussed at the conference: (1) health problems that included maternity and child welfare, family welfare services, training of health personnel; (2) educational concerns including access of women and girls to equal educational opportunities, social and fundamental education, and vocational education; (3) women's citizenship problems that covered franchise, voting rights, and opportunities to participate in public life including the UN; (4) slavery and trafficking of women and girls; (5) labor problems such as labor exploitation, child labor, hazardous occupations, and labor welfare; (6) promotion of cultural, social, and economic cooperation between the Asian and African regions in the context of world peace.

Indian deputy foreign minister and lead delegate at that time, Lakshmi Menon, underlined the importance of tackling illegal trafficking of women and girls in Asia and Africa—Menon stated

that it had only been solved in Communist countries, as other countries' attitudes were only perpetuating it.<sup>15</sup> In the presence of UN agencies as observers, Chinese women walked out of three plenary sessions in protest of their country's exclusion from the UN. This space was not only a site where women exchanged experiences but also where they demanded their recognition.

In the lead-up to the second Asian-African Women's Conference, there was a debate about whether or not it was important to create an organizational body, pushed by India's AIWC. Ezlynn Deraniyagala, President of ACWC at that time, conveyed her disagreement by describing the Conference in Colombo as still an early step for women of Asia and Africa to break down geographical barriers, build sisterhood, and work together transnationally.



*Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo.*<sup>16</sup>

Eventually, a decision was made to host the Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo in 1961. This conference was hosted by the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO)<sup>17</sup> inviting state feminists and leftist feminists linked to NAM. A total of 247 women from 50 countries, including 36 official delegations and 6 individual observers, were present at the 1961 Cairo Conference. The aim was to discuss the path for women's emancipation and encourage national liberation in Asia and Africa. The demand from the 1961 Cairo Conference was to push for an energized, progressive state and activist legal systems. The Afro-Asian Women's Conference involved nationalist feminists, state feminists, and also left-wing and revolutionary feminists such as Hajrah Begum.<sup>18</sup> This conference was also directly linked to the Bandung Conference and the Third World project.



*Afro-Asian Women's Conference banner in Cairo.<sup>19</sup>*

Women were *not only present in the hall but also at the podium* of the Afro-Asian Women's Conference. Indian social activist Nameshwari Nehru gave her speech, while Aisha Abdul-Rahman, a renowned Egyptian journalist and anti-Nasser feminist, was also recorded. At the conference, it was discussed that imperialism confined emancipation; therefore, liberation was the first step for women to seize their places in society. This also led to a more coherent agenda to highlight the role of women in national liberation movements. The 1961 Afro-Asian Women's Conference's final recommendations included issues such as marriage rights, equality in the economic field—from equal pay and distribution of land to vocational training—and inclusive policy prescriptions for women who did not work for a wage.<sup>20</sup>

### **NAM and Bandung legacy in recent feminist movements**

The early days of the Bandung Conference and the women's movement conferences surrounding it represented the interconnecting and internationalist nature of the movement in Asia and Africa. It is important to underline the larger context of the Cold War in which these conferences took place. Anti-communist suppression was rampant at that time, particularly against left-wing women's movements. This then resulted in the suppression of memory. The history of the women's movement in relation to the Non-Aligned Movement was also dominated by the contributions of left-wing and socialist women's organizations. The bias against archiving these opinions by the prevailing anti-communist atmosphere made it difficult to discover memories, archives, and records of their meetings.

Indian organizations such as NFIW had been burning records every five years for their security, but they also kept documents regionally in households instead of centralizing them at the national level. On top of that, the outcomes of these conferences were not well advertised. It may have seemed that the conference appeals and discussions were not disseminated widely.



However, they were spread widely in left-wing presses and gatherings. Many of these memories exist in the form of oral histories and have been transcribed to be stored in museums.

At a time when the US and Soviet Union (USSR) were busy segmenting the world to create blocs, NAM emerged as a multilateral forum and political entity led by newly liberated nations to reject great power politics. The grouping was not meant to create a different bloc from the existing ones, but it had clear political and ideological lines. Its basic elements lay in its approach to the struggle against imperialism and neo-colonialism, as well as moderation in relations with all big powers.<sup>21</sup>

While there was no explicit reference to women, gender, or women's rights in the Bandung Declaration, it continued to affect women's movements in the following years. Feminists of the Global South and Global North took a structural approach in addressing issues of women and girls by being cognizant of race, colonialism, and economic inequality. With the spirit of NAM, feminists also challenged the definition of the UN Charter. In the beginning, the UN viewed "women's issues" as a social development issue instead of connecting it with the larger international development agenda. On top of that, women from the Global South asserted their agency in contributing to their countries, not merely as receivers of social services.<sup>22</sup> NAM in 1981 also underlined the global economic impacts on women, drawing from cases of harmful practices conducted by multinational corporations on women in both developing and developed countries. NAM then became an imagined community of Third World struggles where women from different histories and locations came together in opposition to all forms of systemic domination.<sup>23</sup>

The dynamics, however, have fundamentally changed today. Globalization and economic liberalization have been rampant since the inception of neoliberalism in the 1980s. Countries in the Global South have faced multiple crises that deepen poverty and inequality. We are also facing a rush in regional and bilateral trade agreements where liberalization and privatization have become key agendas that affect the lives of people. Women's rights are heavily co-opted by neoliberal interests to integrate women into the global capitalist system, where a few women control the means of production and the majority face exploitation. The women's movement of today is not only challenged by external factors such as the rise of militarism, capitalism, and patriarchy but also internally, pushing it to take a broader approach in addressing the issues faced by women.

There is a need for the global women's movement to look at the root causes of gender-based violence and discrimination against women. It must not limit its analysis to the question of identity and representation but also examine the structural socioeconomic factors that prevent women from fulfilling their rights. Moreover, with emerging initiatives such as South-South Cooperation, the women's movement must take a critical approach in ensuring that the agenda is not brushed by the same neoliberal interests but represents a truly just and equal international cooperation based on solidarity among nations.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>14</sup> *Asian-African Conference of Women 1957-61*, <https://compass.fivecolleges.edu/islandora/object/smith:1359476> accessed on March 5, 2025.
- <sup>15</sup> Garima Karia, "Forgotten Femissaries: Women's Diplomacy in the Afro-Asian World (1945-1975)" *McGill University*, [https://www.mcgill.ca/arts-internships/files/arts-internships/aria\\_final\\_poster\\_qarima\\_karia.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/arts-internships/files/arts-internships/aria_final_poster_qarima_karia.pdf) accessed on March 5, 2025.
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- <sup>17</sup> AAPSO is a mass-based organization that has national committees in 90 Asian and African countries. The organization held its first conference in Cairo 1957 and is considered as a popular extension of the objectives of NAM. <https://www.aapsorg.org/en/welcome-to-aapso.html> accessed on March 10, 2025.
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# Thailand and the 1955 Bandung Conference: Small Nation and the Age of Anxiety

*Published on 22 April 2025*

*by Kheetanat Wannaboworn*

“Should Thailand decide to accept the invitation to the conference, the embassy should encourage Prince Naradhip, who could serve as a skillful protagonist in the interest of the West to attend”

The State Department Telex to the US  
Embassy in Bangkok  
1 February 1955

Thailand was 1 of the 29 countries represented in the first Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in April 1955.<sup>1</sup> In the same year, Thailand became the signatory member of the Manila Pact - the Southeast Asia Collective Defense, whose establishing purpose was for the containment of communism in the region, specifically from China. Bangkok was where the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was located from 1955 until 1977.

In diplomatic history, the 1955 Bandung Conference was a starting point of contemporary Thai-Chinese foreign relations amidst hostilities created since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.<sup>2</sup> Between 1948-1955, the expansion of communism was the focus of Thai foreign policy, particularly the perceived threats from PRC's support to the communist movement in Thailand.<sup>3</sup> It was China's new role in the Far East after World War II that required Thailand's foreign relations to adjust, nevertheless.

In the bipolar world, how Thailand interacted on the world stage at the Bandung Conference was a sensitive question. The failure of Thailand's World War II policy of cooperating with Japan was clearly the reason behind Thailand's alignment with the US after the war. Under the 'Shadow of the West,' however, the seed of Sino-Thai's diplomatic relations was planted. For this reason, the logic and reality of Thai foreign policy making at the 'Age of Anxiety' is important to understand non-alignment or neutralism as the backdrop of the Spirit of Bandung.

## Thailand and Post-War International Orders



(Left) Thai citizens hold welcome banners for delegates attending the SEATO Ministerial Meeting at Ananta Samakhon Throne Hall. The meeting took place from 23-25 February 1955. Photo: [thestatestimes.com](http://thestatestimes.com). (Right) Prince Wan Waithayakorn or Prince Naradhip, known as Prince of Diplomacy, photographed at an international forum. Photo: [Bangkok Post](http://Bangkok Post).

In September 1954, Thailand became one of the founding members of Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), with other signatories' states including France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Pakistan, and the United States. SEATO was one of various efforts of the US-led postwar military institutions to contain communism globally, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949 (NATO) and the Australia-New Zealand-United States Treaty in 1951 (ANZUS), following the announcement of Truman Doctrine in 1947.<sup>4 5</sup>

Between 1953-1954, the American-led initiative was not the only attempt to stabilize the world order after World War II. China's reorienting its foreign policy towards neutralism and non-alignment in 1952 also proved successful in opening conversation with the rest of the Global South, starting with the Colombo Powers, who were the initiators of the first Asian-African Conference. The proposal on the Five Principles from Zhou En-lai's meeting with Nehru in late 1953 was brought forward to the United Nations and influenced the Geneva Conference and its concluding agreements in July 1954 on the Indochina War, preventing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, to take part in all forms of international military alliance.<sup>6 7</sup>

It was this very achievement of Chinese diplomacy that shaped the US's antagonistic perception of China and intensified its containment policy in Southeast Asia, the most concrete expression of which was the founding of SEATO. There were only two Southeast Asian countries that participated in the founding of SEATO: Thailand and the Philippines. Burma and Indonesia took neutral positions while Malaya denied formal support to the organization.<sup>8</sup> The Geneva Agreement on Indochina, as mentioned above, already warded off the newly independent French colonies from taking part in the alliance.

At the country level, Thailand had formulated its special position as the US's closest ally in the region after World War II, following the collaboration between the Allies and the Free Thai Resistance Movement to repudiate the allegedly forced military alliance with Imperial Japan

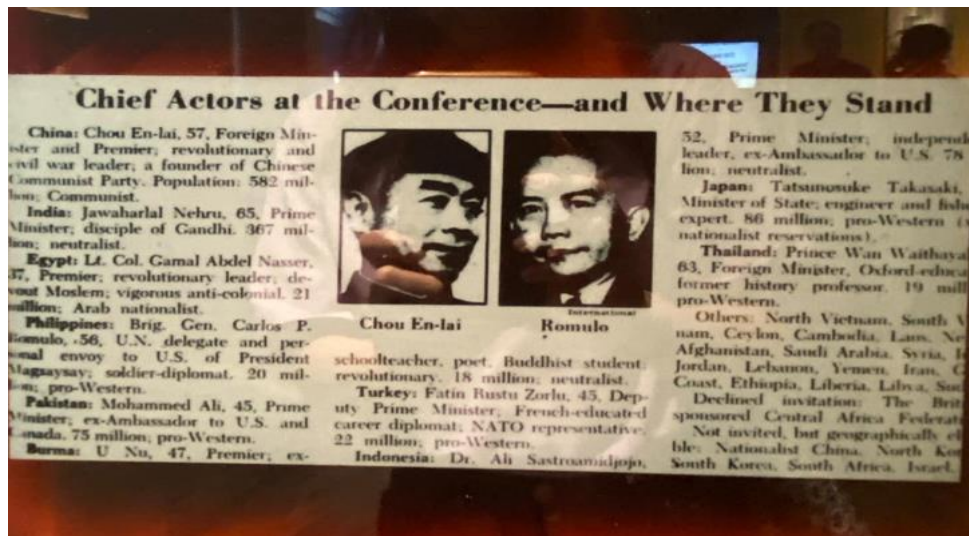
in December 1941. From 1938-1944, Thailand's wartime leadership was provided by a fascist military dictator – Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram.



*The "Triumvirate" of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, and Police Chief Phao Siyanon in Thailand post-1947 coup d'etat. Photo: Wikipedia.*

The immediate post-war period was marked by a succession of short-lived civilian governments from the Free Thai Movement. From 1947 - 1958, Field Marshal Phibun returned to his second premiership via a coup d'etat, but then claimed he was bringing about the characteristics of his era of democracy and publicly announced his siding with the anti-communist camp. It is argued that Phibun's strategy stemmed from power politics within the Triumvirate - Field Marshal Phibun, alongside Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, and Police General Phao Siyanon – who were competing for political dominance amidst the US intensifying its intervention in Thailand's security strategy and her economy.<sup>9 10</sup> With Phibun losing to his rivals, the US divided its support between Sarit and Phao, the Royal Thai Army's Commander-in-chief and the Royal Thai Police's Director-General respectively. Both men fought to open their business, establish state-controlled enterprises, or provide safeguards for private companies' benefits and business opportunities while operating in Thailand. In this power struggle, Sarit was supported by the US's Ministry of Defense, the CIA was on the side of Phao Siyanon, with both trying to corner military and development aid flowing into the country.<sup>11</sup>

## Tactical Diplomacy: Thai Foreign Policy Making in Uncertain Times



News Article 'Chief Actors at the Conference – and Where They Stand' showcased in Asia-Afrika Museum in Bandung. Photo: Kheetanat Wannaboworn (October 2024)

Though it was identified with the western camp, Thailand nevertheless sent a delegation to the Bandung Conference in April 1955 –a decision arrived at a consultation with the US embassy in Bangkok. From historical records, the invitation to Thailand was delivered when the Colombo Powers – India, Burma, and Pakistan, visited Bangkok after the Bogor Meeting in late 1954.<sup>12</sup> In February 1955, Thailand hosted the SEATO Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok, and the headquarters of the institution operated in this country's capital thereafter until 1977.

At the Bandung Conference, Prince Wan Waithayakorn was the key personality to represent Thailand at one of the critical times for the country's foreign policies. Being a top-tier and experienced career diplomat, one of the Prince's missions at the Bandung Conference was crafted to explain the rationale of the country's joining SEATO. The threat of communist expansion, as mentioned earlier, was the major concern for Premier Phibunsongkhram. Prince Wan Waithayakorn emphasized this in his speech on what he perceived as the PRC's support of efforts to organize training of Thai-speaking Chinese and persons of Thai ethnicity in Yunnan for infiltration and subversion domestically.<sup>1314</sup> It was also in this speech that Thailand stated its positive reception of Zhou Enlai's Principles on Peaceful Coexistence and proposal for creation of Area of Peace. Prince Wan pointed out that Thailand joined SEATO to protect itself from external threats and 'preserve peace.'<sup>15</sup>

*"We intended to cooperate with all sides in building world peace"*

*Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram on the reason for Prince Wan Waithayakorn's attendance at the Bandung Conference<sup>16</sup>*

The PRC's intentions towards Thailand was another objective of Phibun. Historians were uncertain whether the Premier had a plan in mind for the Thai representative to meet with Zhou Enlai.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, Prince Wan Waithayakorn and Zhou Enlai met at a dinner in Bandung.<sup>18</sup> The meeting not only opened up security matters in mind of the Thai side but also

went beyond to discuss the establishment of Sino-Thai diplomatic relations, to which Zhou Enlai said, “the PRC can wait.”<sup>19</sup> The reconciliation with PRC was assessed to stem from the détente between the Communist and the Free World after the PRC’s shift in its foreign policies; prior to Bandung Thailand feared of being isolated, if the US and PRC were to pacify their competition.

For Thailand, the Bandung Conference became the stage to calibrate its diplomatic prowess. Prince Wan Waithayakorn who was first assigned as an observer, eventually became the rapporteur of the conference. He resorted to the debate oftentimes with reference to the Principle of the United Nations.<sup>20</sup> Reported back to the US, Prince Wan was suspicious for his diplomacy in Bandung but continued to be a trusted figure for the West throughout his career.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Age of Anxiety and Fear of a Small Nation: Thailand and the aftermath of Bandung Conference**

Thailand was worried that the PRC’s shift towards neutralism from the exporting revolution, which found a positive reception in both Bandung and Geneva, would result in Thailand being excluded from the Bandung Club.<sup>22</sup>

For this reason, Thailand felt the immediate need to rebalance its relations with the Great Powers. For US-Thai relations, Premier Phibun embarked on an official visit to the US in June 1955. It was said that the visit left him with a strongly positive impression of the Free World. Upon his return, Phibun allowed registration of political parties, free speech, revoked control on newspapers, and promoted weekly press conferences from the Cabinet meeting.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned, the leaning towards liberal democracy was politically driven to build Phibun’s popularity from the ‘power politics’ within the Triumvirate. However, the emergence of freedom of the press in Thailand allowed criticism of the US’s military aid and a call for neutralism which was quite worrisome for the US.<sup>24</sup>

The Sino-Thai relations was another pillar in the rebalancing policy. The most significant move from Thailand during the Spirit of Bandung that lasted between 1955-1957 was from the Thai contacts with the PRC either in secret, openly, or from people’s diplomacy.<sup>25</sup> The last category, people’s diplomacy, consisted of exchanges of progressive MPs and journalists, trade unionists, cultural troupes, and athletic teams. These trips also included trade missions, including those designed to break the trade embargo imposed by the West. There were also trips sponsored by the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs, with receptions from high-ranking officials, including Zhou Enlai and Mao Tse-Tung.<sup>26</sup> The Thai Government also arranged secret diplomatic delegations to China, some argued, which were said to be supported by Premier Phibun or Police General Phao Siyanon.<sup>27</sup>

“You must depend on yourself...You cannot find markets for your rice and rubber in South Asia. We want trade with you. If we had diplomatic relations and if you wanted any kind of industry, such as glass, paper or textiles, we would help.”

Mao Tse-Tung’s interview to the MP Thep Chotinuchit’s delegation visit in the Autumn of 1955, on the General

Principle of peaceful co-existence and Asian Solidarity  
against Imperialism<sup>28</sup>

This chapter on the relations between the PRC and Thailand closed when Field Marshal Sarit staged the second coup d'état in October 1958. More than 100 people, especially leftist politicians and newspaper crews, were detained. There were also orders to close down a number of Chinese schools and Chinese newspapers. These activities cited the security threat in Thailand from communist infiltration. On January 17, 1959, the import of all products from mainland China was banned.<sup>29</sup>

“China is always willing to develop equal and mutual beneficial trade relations with Thailand on the basis of peaceful co-existence. Sino-Thai trade was suggested by the Thai side, and it is now being destroyed by the Thai Government; it therefore has no influence whatever on China. On the contrary, this action of the Thai Government of returning evil for good will only harm its own interest.”

The China Council for the Promotion of  
International Trade's response to the Thai  
Government's ban

In contrast, Thailand's special relations with the US escalated very quickly after 1959 when anticommunism became the hegemonic discourse of Thai diplomacy. At the peak of the Cold War, Thai foreign policies were highly unbalanced and antagonized China and the USSR. As a close ally, Thailand was engaged in escalating conflicts in the region, including in Vietnam. It was not until the American retrenchment from the region after the Vietnam War that the process to normalize relationships with the Communist Powers restarted. In 1975, Thailand and China established diplomatic relations, leading up to the unusual alliance with China and the US to support Khmer Rouge-dominated Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea in the United Nations, as a counter strategy against Vietnam and the USSR's growing interest in the region.<sup>30</sup>

### **From Bandung to BRICS**

The state of Thai foreign policy at present is reminiscent of the age of anxiety. While not entirely similar, 21<sup>st</sup> century geopolitics and the US-China Trade War play key roles in creating tensions for this small, yet geographically strategic country in Asia Pacific, pushing her to define her position and alliance in the polarized world. If Thailand's diplomacy and statecraft at the Bandung Conference could teach us anything, it should be to remind us of the Bandung Spirit: that free nations can collectively aspire to be independent in their statecraft and diplomacy from colonialism in all its forms and can collectively adhere to the concept of peaceful coexistence and collaboration, as opposed to the normalization of militarism that is heightening in our world today.

“All that I need is that for peace  
You fight today, you fight today  
So that the children of this world  
Can live and grow and laugh and play.”



'Hiroshima Child' written by Nazim Hikmet in 1956. The quote was selected by Tricontinental's 'The Bandung Spirit Dossier' as the essence of the Spirit of Bandung.<sup>31</sup>

## Endnotes

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# Reawakening the Spirit of Bandung: Intensifying a Storm of Resistance for Palestine

Published on 24 April 2025



V0025029 Geography: water spouts at sea, with rain. Coloured wood engraving by Charles H. Whymper. Wellcome Library, London. Creative Commons Attribution, [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

by Galileo de Guzman Castillo

I hadn't known that under our skins  
There is a birth of a storm  
And a wedding of rivulets

—Mahmoud Darwish, “The Reaction”

(translated by Sulafa Hijjawi, in *Poetry of Resistance in Occupied Palestine*, 1968)

The Asian-African Conference of 1955 in Bandung has often been cited as a watershed moment in global history as it facilitated the convergence of peoples united against colonialism and imperialism. The formative gathering in the provincial capital of West Java in Indonesia served as a cornerstone of Global South cooperation and solidarity that brought together representatives of colonized nations as they collectively sought ways to deal with a broad range of world problems. While the Bandung Conference itself only constituted a brief moment, it helped galvanize broad and rainbow movements for peace, non-alignment, and decolonization, riding along new waves of South-South solidarity.

The Bandung Spirit of anti-imperialism and post-colonial unity lives on, 70 years hence, and it is as important as ever to reignite and reimagine this Spirit in the current context.

Notwithstanding its shortcomings and imperfect outcomes, a revisit of the Bandung Conference confirms its significance and enduring legacy in demonstrating a counter against the hegemony of the imperial powers that still permeates across the globe in the present era. The principles that emerged in Bandung at the 'end of the age of empire' remain relevant in addressing global challenges, including when applied to the continuing struggles for peace, justice, self-determination, and liberation for Palestine and beyond.

### **The Bandung Conference and the Palestinian Question**

There were already strong decolonizing and anti-imperialist impulses since the end of World War II and the unfolding of a geopolitical rivalry between the United States, the Soviet Union, and their respective allies. Asian and African nations had sought alternative ways of just global governance to achieve justice and development for their peoples shackled by colonialism for decades—even centuries for some.

Sovereign states that had been released from the fetters of imperialist colonialism and had gained their independence continued to fight for their rights to self-determination and sovereignty in various spaces, including in the then newly established United Nations (UN). Professor of Modern Arab Politics and Intellectual History Joseph Massad (2024) traced the debates on these questions that raged in the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly, with the colonizing countries led by the US insisting that self-determination pertained only to the 'political' while refusing to recognize economic self-determination of former colonized peoples.<sup>1</sup> Securing this legal right involves economic decolonization and achieving genuine national and economic sovereignty by charting their own paths to development based on their particular conditions.

In the middle of the Cold War tensions, more than 2,000 delegates from 29 countries—bound by their commonalities as recently decolonized nation-states within an international order shaped by the bi-polarized logic of the Cold War—gathered in Bandung in 1955. The gathering, spearheaded by the leaders of the five Asian states of Burma (Myanmar), Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka), Indonesia, India, and Pakistan tackled several issues, on the top of which were peace, economic cooperation, human rights, and the self-determination of colonized peoples. The delegates, representing almost two-thirds of the population of the world, affirmed in their Declaration the centrality of self-determination to the post-war order as the "pre-requisite of the full enjoyment of all fundamental human rights."<sup>2</sup>

Professor of Asia and Africa Studies Kweku Ampiah (1997) notes, "The one underlying theme that ran through the economic, cultural, and political objectives of the conference was a sense among the members, irrespective of their ideological orientation, that they would not be trapped with their experiences as 'dependents' or appendages of colonialism (...) Essentially, the spirit of the conference hinged on the determination of the member states to preserve their newly won freedoms and to reach out for more through their persistent opposition to colonialism and imperialism."<sup>3</sup>

The Bandung Conference, despite having a limited number of delegates from a handful of African countries—Egypt, Ethiopia, Gold Coast (now known as Ghana), Liberia, Libya, and Sudan—tackled and denounced the system of apartheid in South Africa and the persisting colonial rule by France in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. However, absent an official envoy from Palestine, it fell short on the Palestinian question.

Notwithstanding the absence of Palestinian voices in Bandung, the Palestinian cause was championed by the representatives from Syria, China, and Egypt, among others. Palestinian nationalist Ahmed Shukairy, who joined the Syrian delegation as its deputy head, made sure that his people's case was properly represented in Bandung. At the same time, Egyptian

President Gamal Abdul-Nasser underscored in his speech the injustice and aggression wreaked upon the Palestinian people who “were uprooted from their fatherland, to be replaced by a completely imported populace.”<sup>4</sup>

The grave structural injustices inflicted against the Palestinians included the adoption of the British Mandate for Palestine by the Council of the League of Nations in 1922, the stamping of approval by the UN of the partition plan that divided historic Palestine in 1947, and the subsequent en masse expulsion of the Palestinian peoples from their homeland. Under the eyes of the international community, all of these arbitrary decisions made by colonial powers on the lives and territories of an entire people continue to have lasting impacts on generations upon generations of Palestinians.

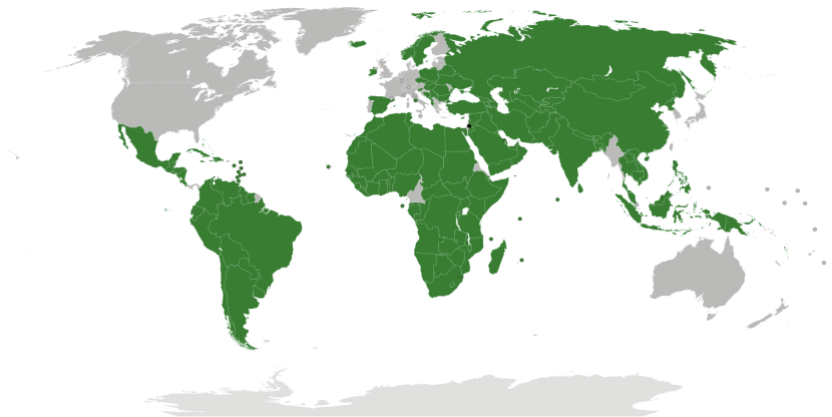
While the Bandung Conference explicitly declared “its support of the rights of the Arab people of Palestine” and called for “the implementation of the United Nations Resolutions on Palestine and the achievement of the peaceful settlement of the Palestine question,”<sup>5</sup> the limitations of the gathering was made evident with the tensions, disagreements, and constrained bases of unity among the delegates. Notwithstanding the difficulties with how the Bandung Principles were framed, they have come to serve as a critical benchmark on political self-determination, non-interference, national sovereignty, and peaceful coexistence. As Indian historian and journalist Vijay Prashad (2007) notes, despite “the infighting, debates, strategic postures, and sighs of annoyance, Bandung produced something: a belief that two-thirds of the world’s people had the right to return to their own burned cities, cherish them, and rebuild them in their own image.”<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, the Bandung Conference laid the necessary groundwork for political, economic, cultural, and legal transformations for the Global South, and contributed, however limited, to the consolidation of a global decolonization movement with the advent of newly independent countries across the Global South shaping international law, institutions, and their futures.

### **Palestine in the Third World**

The Conference of 1955 sparked the emergence of a “Spirit of Bandung,” an incipient force that facilitated the resurgence of a Third World awakening. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961 and the subsequent 1962 Conference on the Problems of Economic Development in Cairo became offshoots of Bandung, which eventually moved to include Latin America in the mid-1960s, embodied by initiatives like the Tricontinental Congress of 1966 in Havana, led by the Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro. The Tricontinental Gathering saw the convergence of roughly 500 representatives from 82 countries and went on to form a movement that aimed to unite liberation struggles in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which in many ways superseded the NAM set up at Bandung in the previous decade.

Diverse peoples espousing an anti-imperialist ideology came together within the Tricontinental framework that offered a critical analysis of global capitalism and racism, alongside a much more action-oriented focus than the preceding Bandung Conference. The Tricontinental also supported the Palestinian struggle from the outset, placed the Palestine issue to the forefront of the global political agenda, and allowed the Palestinians themselves to represent their own national cause in the process. Scholar and writer Suleiman Hodali (2024) chronicles how the “the anti-colonial struggle for Palestinian liberation became infused with a markedly global character, and the question of Palestine was reified as a definitive cause for an emergent Third World consciousness” and how “Palestine’s gradual entrenchment as a vanguard of Third World struggles also reveals how the lineages of Bandung endured and matured.”<sup>7</sup>



International recognition of the State of Palestine: Three-quarters of the United Nations (147 of the 193 UN member states) recognize Palestine as a sovereign state as of March 2025. Photo by Night\_w, Wikimedia Commons, marked as public domain.

In 2005, in commemoration of the 50th year of the Bandung Conference, representatives of 89 countries gathered at the Asian-African Summit in the Indonesian cities of Jakarta and Bandung, where they drafted the Declaration of the New Asian-African Strategic Partnership. Unfortunately, the 2005 Declaration was merely a hollow echo of the Bandung Principles in 1955, without much refining, and therefore did not spark any fervor similar to the original Bandung that engendered a sense of collective strength—of peoples deciding their own destiny in the international order. Relatively speaking, the meeting also did not gain much visibility, nor was it given attention by the international community compared to the 1955 edition.

Ten years later, another Asian-African Summit was held again in Bandung, as a *habba* (surge) of resistance, violence, and protests engulfed Palestine and Israel. In their 2015 Declaration, the delegations deplored the fact that “sixty years since the Bandung Conference, the Palestinian people remain deprived of their rights, freedom and independence, and that millions of Palestinians are still living under occupation and as refugees, and that this historic injustice continues.”<sup>8</sup>

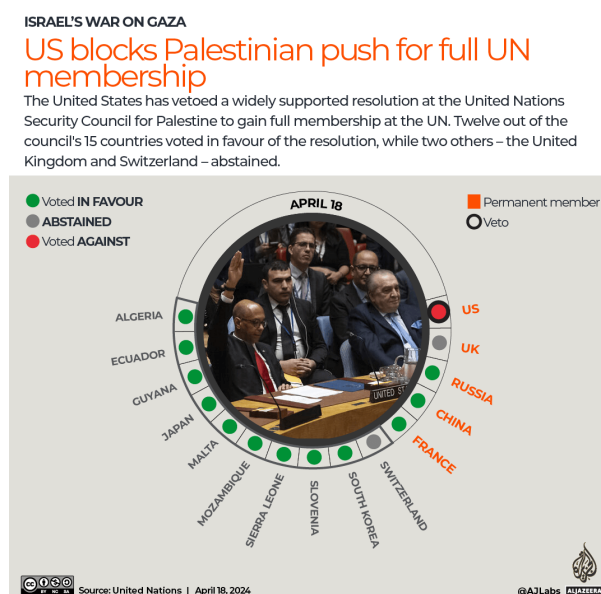
Arguably, the Bandung Conference and the subsequent Asian-African summits did not do much to advance their stated aims—for a myriad of reasons—including those that were already beyond the gatherings themselves. International lawyer Sahed Samour (2017) argues that as a conference, “Bandung entailed too many tensions and contradictions, leaving it almost inconsequential. The later emerging spirit of Bandung starting in the 1960s outshined the Final Communiqué of the conference. That spirit was materialized by a confident Palestinian leadership emerging in the 1964 Palestine Liberation Organization and by a radicalization of the Third World movement formed by dramatic struggles (...)”<sup>9</sup>

### **Palestine, Today**

The global political, economic, social, and cultural context has changed dramatically since the Bandung Conference of 1955. The era of national liberation and Third-Worldism has waned. Much worse, the world is now plagued by the rise of populist authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, trampling of human rights and international law, erosion and collapse of institutions, greater concentration of corporate power, the crisis of multilateralism, and the climate emergency.

Today, while most of the world has been freed of direct colonial control, the legacy of settler-colonialism continues to impact the Global South and shape their political, economic, and social systems in profound ways. The merciless oppression of an entire population in Palestine and the Occupied Palestinian Territories remains unabated. The world order in which the Occupying Power Israel and its backers from the Global North are granted impunity for their war crimes endures. The international community has failed Palestine.

The trauma of genocide against the entire Palestinian people by Israel has reached new depths, and the root causes of the decades-long conflict and oppression: illegal occupation, apartheid, and the unchecked impunity of a settler-colonial state remain untouched. Human Rights and Social Justice Lecturer Ihab Shalbak (2023) describes this as the “project of worldmaking by dispossession of land and sovereignty. It is conceptualised as an embodiment and extension of the rule of law in a lawless world.”<sup>10</sup>



The US, sitting as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), uses its veto power against a resolution that would have paved the way for full UN membership for Palestine. 2024 April 18. Photo by Al Jazeera. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/18/palestinian-bid-for-un-membership-set-for-security-council-vote>, Creative Commons Attribution, [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

It must be underscored that the dangers facing Palestine have intensified to unprecedented levels amidst the ongoing genocide: a brutal convergence of authoritarianism, corporate profiteering, and unbridled imperialist arrogance emboldened by the failure and explicit complicity of the international community. Legal scholars Noura Erakat and John Reynolds (2023) posit, “While processes of formal decolonization have since played out across most of the Global South — notwithstanding the inequalities and violence of the postcolonial state and the neocolonial order — Palestine remains a quintessential site of ongoing settler colonialism and apartheid.”<sup>11</sup>

At the time of writing, the Occupying Power Israel has waged a relentless genocidal and barbaric war on Palestine and the Occupied Palestinian Territories for 566 days. The UN Secretary-General António Guterres described the conditions for Palestinians in Gaza as ‘appalling and apocalyptic’ and repeatedly remarked how the situation in Palestine and the Occupied Palestinian Territories is growing more perilous by the day: “[I]n the occupied West



Bank, including East Jerusalem, militarized Israeli security operations, settlement-expansion, evictions, demolitions, violence and threats of annexation are inflicting further pain and injustice.”<sup>12</sup>

Combined figures from the Ministry of Health (MoH) in Gaza and the Israeli authorities reveal the staggering human toll since October 7, 2023: at least 51,266 Palestinians and 1,608 Israelis—15,646 of whom were children—have been killed, and over 116,991 Palestinians and 8,012 Israelis injured as of April 22, 2025.<sup>13</sup> Thousands more remain buried beneath the rubble of their destroyed homes and temporary shelters.

The level of destruction is immense as reported in various reports by the UN Office for the Coordinated Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and related agencies: 1.95 million people have been projected to face high levels of acute food insecurity; 91% of households have experienced water insecurity; 92% of housing units have been destroyed. Israel has also used an inhumane and internationally prohibited method of warfare, described by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (UNSR on the RTF) Michael Fakhri as a “deliberate, international, structural, and long-lasting starvation campaign”—the fastest in modern history—waged against the Palestinian people.

While the scale of Israel's ongoing violence is unprecedented, it must be understood as part of Israel's broader settler-colonial project, its destruction of all means of life for the Palestinians, and the inherent logics of ‘erasure from the face of the earth’ that underpin it. In the words of Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh, member of the South African legal team at the International Court of Justice (ICJ): “This is the first genocide in history where its victims are broadcasting their own destruction in the desperate, so far, vain hope that the world might do something.”<sup>14</sup>

To capture the enormity of destruction and death Israel has inflicted against the Palestinian people, several words have been used: *urbicide* (killing of a city), *scholasticide* (total annihilation of education systems), *domicide* (widespread and systematic destruction of homes), *ecocide* (severe harm to nature), and *holocide* (the annihilation of an entire social and ecological fabric).

It must be emphasized that what the Occupying Power Israel is doing now did not happen in a vacuum and has its seeds in history.<sup>15</sup> The ongoing genocidal war against the entire Palestinian population—with massive and unqualified support from the United States, Germany, and former colonial powers France and Britain—must be contextualized against the historical backdrop of a decades-long regime of settler-colonialism, apartheid, dispossession, and ethnic cleansing.

And yet, even more important perhaps to combat the sense of collective numbness and despair, as well as the mainstream Western media's systematic bias against Palestinians in their coverage of Palestine and Israel—the peoples' struggles, solidarity, and resistance must be placed at the center of the counternarratives as springwells of hope.

### **Waves of Global South Solidarity**

Despite the continuing legacy of depredations spawned by the economic and political domination by the Global North, the realities of the current world configuration, and the

unabated genocide in Palestine and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, nothing has been able to stop the wave of anti-colonial solidarity with the Palestinian people. This solidarity involves actively opposing systems that enable violence against Palestinians, questioning political agendas, resisting colonial narratives, and prioritizing justice over other interests.

Collective actions and multi-pronged strategies by peoples' organizations and movements from the Global South have been done. In 2024, the global petition, "From Bandung to Gaza" was launched with the view of building a united front against Israel's regime of genocide and apartheid to "honor our shared past, empower our intersectional struggles in the present, and pave the way for a future rooted in freedom, justice, equality and dignity for all."<sup>16</sup> It heeds the call of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Movement on state and corporate perpetrators and colluders, which remains an essential tactic, drawing lessons from the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

Similarly, several waves of solidarity actions swept across continents: from the massive student encampments protesting their university's complicity with Israel, the refusal of dock workers to offload ships carrying military cargo, coal, and fuel bound for Israel, to the principled actions taken by Global South states, cutting their diplomatic ties with Israel. South Africa, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Comoros, Djibouti, Chile, and Mexico have called on the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate war crimes committed by Israel in Gaza. This has led to the issuance of arrest warrants by the ICC against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. South Africa brought before the ICJ a genocide case against Israel, supported by several countries in the Global South.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 1. Actions taken by Global South states against Israel following 2023 October 7, from various sources including news reports, official decrees, public statements, and declarations by heads of state, government, and foreign ministers.**

States	Actions Taken
Bahrain	Recalled its ambassador to Israel and suspended economic relations with Israel, citing a "solid and historical stance that supports the Palestinian cause and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people."
Belize	Suspended diplomatic ties with Israel and renewed its call for "an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, unimpeded access to humanitarian supplies into Gaza and the release of all hostages."
Bolivia	Severed all diplomatic ties with Israel (previously cut in 2009 and reestablished in 2020) in response to Israel's "aggressive and disproportionate" attacks on Gaza.
Brazil	Recalled its ambassador to Israel, with President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva publicly declaring: "What's happening in the Gaza Strip isn't a war, it's a genocide."
Chad	Recalled its chargé d'affaires to Israel and condemned "the loss of human lives of many innocent civilians" and called for a "ceasefire leading to a lasting solution to the Palestinian question."
Chile	Recalled its ambassador to Israel for the "unacceptable violations of International Humanitarian Law that Israel has incurred in the Gaza Strip" and Israel's "collective punishment of the Palestinian civilian population."

Colombia	Recalled its ambassador to Israel, with President Gustavo Petro publicly declaring: “If Israel does not stop the massacre of the Palestinian people, we cannot be there.” Subsequently cut all its diplomatic ties with Israel, imposed a military embargo, and banned all coal exports to Israel.
Honduras	Recalled its ambassador to Israel in light of “the serious humanitarian situation the civilian Palestinian population is suffering in the Gaza Strip.”
Jordan	Recalled its ambassador to Israel for threatening regional security and the “unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe” created by Israel.
Malaysia	Banned Israel-flagged and Israel-bound cargo ships from docking at its ports for Israel’s continued violation of “international law through the ongoing massacre and brutality against Palestinians.”
Namibia	Denied port access to a German-owned vessel carrying military equipment to Israel, stating its “obligation not to support or be complicit in Israeli war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, as well as its unlawful occupation of Palestine.”
South Africa	Recalled its entire diplomatic mission in Israel for the “refusal of the Israeli government to respect international law” and its “genocidal airstrikes” against Palestinians; filed a genocide case against Israel at the ICJ.
Turkey	Recalled its ambassador to Israel citing its refusal to heed calls for a “ceasefire and continuous and unhindered flow of humanitarian aid,” suspended all trade with Israel, and initiated a joint letter to the UNSC—backed by 51 other states— “calling on all countries to stop the sale of arms and ammunition to Israel.”

All of these actions have clearly demarcated the line on the question of Palestine between the Global North and the Global South.

The ICJ ruling, while non-self-executing, has provided crucial tools for organizing and mobilizing people—whether in national courts, in congressional halls, or on the streets—to further isolate Israel and actively pressure states to act decisively on their obligations, and hold them accountable for the double standards inherent in the positions they have taken.<sup>18</sup> With the ICJ case, South Africa, together with its Global South allies, has not only challenged the West’s moral high ground but also pushed debates on the legacy, sentiments, and politics of postcoloniality to a new scale and scope.

Anthropologists Julie Billaud and Antonio De Lauri (2024) emphasized not only the symbolic importance of the South Africa’s case but also the historic coming together of the Global South against settler colonialism, oppression, and apartheid, as what was envisioned in Bandung: “It is simultaneously exposing the historical roots that define the West’s unfailing support to Israel as an outpost serving the double objective of guaranteeing privileged access to natural resources in the Middle East while holding off ‘barbarians at the gate,’ to use a classic colonial trope.”<sup>19</sup> For its continued support and defense of Israel’s genocide of the Palestinian people, Germany received a strong rebuke from its former colony, Namibia, where it waged a colonial genocidal war against the Herero and Namaqua Indigenous peoples from 1904 to 1908.

While the ICJ case is symbolically powerful, international law—whose foundations are deeply intertwined with the legacy of colonialism—remains a site of complicity and contestation. It is only through grassroots pressure and actions that such victories can be translated into

meaningful and tangible change for the Palestinian people. In the words of the South African BDS Coalition, following the ICJ ruling: “International law alone cannot bring us justice. Only our relentless mobilisation to build people power can ultimately end international state, corporate and institutional complicity in Israel’s 75-year-old regime of settler-colonialism and apartheid and thus support Palestinian liberation.”<sup>20</sup>

On January 31, 2025, various states signed on to the Hague Group convened by the international political organization, Progressive International (PI).<sup>21</sup> The Global South is spearheading this coordinated push for collective action through international law to ensure that Israel and its complicit backers from Europe and the US will be brought to justice.<sup>22</sup> With the twin imperatives of exposing the hypocrisy of the West, their lack of moral clarity, and double-standard use of human rights, alongside ending Israeli exceptionalism, settler-colonialism, and systemic impunity, the Global South takes on a critical role in the international arena for Palestine.

The formation of the Hague Group is not a guarantee that justice will be delivered. However, it provides an opening to galvanize international solidarity and political will to impose military and economic sanctions against Israel to end its genocide, apartheid system, and illegal occupation of Palestine. As the Algerian political writer and activist Hamza Hamouchene (2024) notes, “These developments strengthen the trend of a move towards a multi-polar world where the South asserts itself politically and economically. We are not yet in a new Bandung phase, but this historical juncture will accelerate the decline (at least ideologically) of the US-led empire and will intensify its contradictions.”<sup>23</sup>

All of the above marks a renewed spirit of unified defiance among peoples in the Global South, a spirit that is vital in the universal struggle to oppose the devastation wreaked on humanity by imperialism, colonialism, and their legacies.

### **Advancing the Spirit of Bandung and Beyond for Palestine**

Bandung arose at a moment of anti-colonial consciousness and great Global South awakening. It provided an avenue to discuss and untangle the varied structural and systemic problems of the world, as well as possible political reconfigurations and alternative futures. It gave hope through cooperation, solidarity, and collective struggles against all forms of oppression and colonial violence.

However, it failed to adequately address the critical questions of varying political structures and diverse ideologies of the African and Asian states and their relations to the international political economy. As Political Science and International Relations Professor Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo posits, “Thus, although the symptoms of the problems were well defined, it did not sufficiently clarify what kinds of political societies to be created, based on what kinds of national ideologies, as a result of the declarations and final resolutions of the conference.”<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, to actualize the Bandung resolutions into the policy arena, the state system was firmly valorized, even as regional cooperation was encouraged and supported, and the principles articulating human dignity were promoted. Filipino scholar-activist Walden Bello (2025) argues that “Bandung, for all the positive contributions it made to decolonization, had the one questionable legacy of legitimizing the nation-state as the principal, if not the only,

vehicle for developing relations among the post-colonial societies, to the detriment of other relations of South-South solidarity.”<sup>25</sup>

It has embraced a state-centric approach to the Palestinian question, accompanied by universalist legal rhetoric, with the UN and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)—limiting as they are—as the main points of reference, even as these emerged from the legal and political genealogies of the colonial powers. Thus, advancing the Spirit of Bandung involves democratizing the international political and legal system, including multilateral spaces such as the UN, and going beyond statist notions of politics, power, and social organization that only serve to maintain the status quo.



The world demands an end to Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestine, in a landslide UN vote. 2024 September 19. Photo by Ben Norton, Geopolitical Economy Report, retrieved from <https://geopoliticaconomy.com/2024/09/19/end-israel-occupation-palestine-un-vote/>

Israel’s genocide in Gaza has ushered in a new age, at a moment where the world is confronting an era of multi-layered, interlocking, and deepening crises—of climate breakdown, wars and regional conflicts, economic instabilities and inequalities, geopolitical upheavals, democratic backsliding, and the rise of fascist and authoritarian regimes—all of which stand to reconfigure the future. At the same time, what is happening now in Palestine offers insight into how there remains an imperative to dismantle colonialism, and, concomitantly, into the inadequacy of the statist vocabularies of resistance inherited from the birth of the ‘anti-colonial storm’ that emerged in Bandung.

Indian historian and journalist Vijay Prashad (2007) chronicles how “Bandung is best remembered, among those who have any memory of it, as one of the milestones of the peace movement. Whatever the orientation of the states, they agreed that world peace required disarmament (...) The racist disregard for human life occasioned a long discussion at Bandung on disarmament. In the conference communique, the delegates argued that the Third World had to seize the reins of the horses of the apocalypse.”<sup>26</sup> This disarmament call needs to be reverberated ever strongly to present-day Palestine.

On October 16, 2023, Palestinian trade unions and professional associations issued a powerful call to international unions, urging them to ‘Stop Arming Israel’—characterizing the struggle for Palestinian justice and liberation as “a lever for the liberation of all dispossessed

and exploited people of the world.”<sup>27</sup> This global appeal highlighted the vast scale of military and diplomatic support provided to Israel, particularly by the EU and the US, with the latter’s spending on Israel’s military operations in the region totaling at least a conservative estimate of \$22.76 billion for just a year, according to the report, “Costs of War” by scholars from Brown University.<sup>28</sup>

Palestinian-American writer Tariq Kenney-Shawa (2025) asserts: “The rest of the world has an opportunity to fill the void left open by Washington’s abandonment of even the pretense of upholding international law. If the rules-based order is to mean anything — or perhaps if it is to finally mean something — other states must hold Israel accountable. This means fulfilling their obligations under international law, imposing economic sanctions, and enacting arms embargoes against Israel. Countries that have long deferred to U.S. leadership now have an opportunity to uphold the principles they claim to champion. Failing to do so will have consequences that no one is immune from.”<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the anti-colonial and right to self-determination and sovereignty mission of Bandung is unfinished. And it should apply as much to nation-states as to peoples and communities. There remains a need for radical analysis, community organizing, and collective visioning that centers convergences of anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, decolonizing, feminist, and ecological resistances with a view to collectively (re)imagining and materializing emancipatory and radical futures—one that transcends the Spirit of Bandung for Palestine, and captures and redefines this Spirit towards genuine self-determination and transformations for all.

As former South African minister Ronnie Kasrils (2025) argues, “We need to rebuild something of the spirit of the time when the Third World was not just a geographical or economic category, but a political project rooted in anti-colonial struggles, aimed at creating a unified global bloc to challenge imperialism.”<sup>30</sup> Ending colonialism, in its modern dress, “wherever, whenever, however it appears” as declared by Sukarno in Bandung still rings true today. This would involve the dismantling of the neocolonial economic structure that remains deeply entrenched in Palestine and across the world.

Professor of Political Economy and Global Development Adam Hanieh (2024) adds how the question of Palestine must be located within the intersecting history of fossil capitalism in West Asia and the contemporary struggles for climate justice: “The extraordinary battle for survival waged by Palestinians today in the Gaza Strip represents the leading edge of the fight for the future of the planet.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, advancing the Bandung Spirit in the present context would also entail the dismantling of the apartheid war machine, the disruption of fossil fuel flows, and the undermining of the structures underpinning these two. It would also necessitate the centering of decolonization and self-determination struggles that confront the violence wrought by Israel upon Palestinians, not only with its ongoing genocide, but also with its decades-long illegal occupation of Palestine—violence manifesting in different forms, perpetrated by systems and structures of oppression.

As the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research asserts, “Until the peoples of the Global South are able to overcome some of these (and more) challenges, it is unlikely that the Bandung Spirit will be part of the actual movement of history. We are emerging slowly out of



a defunct epoch of history, the epoch of imperialism. But we have not yet emerged into a new period that is beyond imperialism – the hardest of all structures from which to break.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Whither flow the rivulets?**

Seventy years ago, Sukarno declared in Bandung, “Irresistible forces have swept the two continents. The mental, spiritual, and political face of the whole world has been changed, and the process is still not complete. There are new conditions, new concepts, new problems, new ideals abroad in the world. Hurricanes of national awakening and reawakening have swept over the land, shaking it, changing it, changing it for the better.”<sup>33</sup> Today, amidst the heightening contradictions of capitalism and imperialism in their contemporary guise, dismantling the political, economic, social, and cultural systems that continue to promote wretched hierarchies based on dispossession and domination of peoples and nature remains critical.

Therein lies the refusal to play by the rules set by the very powers that sustain and perpetrate such systems of oppression and violence, including the system that has allowed the genocide of Palestinians by the Occupying Power Israel to continue. In this extremely dangerous time, of a complex and turbulent world in which the old certainties no longer apply, communities and societies of mutual understanding and international solidarity must be strengthened, and one that is decolonial and whose spirit of resistance remains unyielding, no matter what, no matter how.

From Bandung to Palestine, countercurrent waves of unprecedented numbers converge across the world, in all continents, and continue to go against the vestiges of imperialism and the continued encroachments, extraction, exploitation, and occupation by colonial powers in Palestine and the rest of the Global South. As the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish imparts: “Each river has its own. Our land is not barren. Each land has its own rebirth. Each dawn has a date with revolution.”<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the birth and rebirths of Bandung and beyond, and its resolute, enduring Spirit for rights, justice, self-determination, liberation, and peace flow ever onward.

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# The Bandung Spirit and UNDROP

*Published on 29 April 2025*



*Asian–African Conference at Bandung April 1955. [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

*by Shalmali Guttal*

*Presentation at the Public Discussion: Commemorating 70 years of the Asia-Africa Conference*

Good afternoon everyone. I am Shalmali Guttal. I am a member of the Working Group (WG) on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP). I am joining you from India.

UNDROP was adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2018. The WG for its implementation was established in April 2024.

For me, it is a double honour to be invited to speak at this commemoration event in Indonesia, whose leaders birthed and enabled the Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung in 1955, and UNDROP several decades later. There are some important parallels between the two that I would like to highlight.

It was an Indonesian leader, Ali Sastroamidjojo, who proposed a conference of leaders from newly decolonized countries in Asia and Africa, which, after a planning meeting in Bogor in

December 1954, resulted in the Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung from 18-24 April 1955. The Bandung conference led to the Non-Aligned Movement, the creation of the G77, and new sensibilities of South-South solidarity and cooperation across all the regions of the Global South.

And it was an Indonesian leader, Henry Saragih, from the Federation of Indonesian Peasants, who launched discussions in the early 1990-s with social movements and civil society organisations on the importance of articulating, realizing and defending the rights of peasants. These discussions intensified in La Via Campesina (LVC) in the following years and resulted in a charter on peasant rights drafted by SPI in 2002, and then a broader declaration on peasant rights collectively drafted by other LVC member organisations, which was presented by LVC in the UN Human Rights Council in August 2008.

From 2008 onwards, SPI and LVC built alliances with and won the support of numerous other social movements, CSOs, human rights experts and UN member states from the South. After a period of intense negotiations in the UN Human Rights Council from 2013-2018, UNDROP was adopted by the HRC and UNGA in 2018.

UNDROP is regarded as a “United Nations Declaration” after having been endorsed by the United Nations, but it remains first and foremost a “peasants’ bill of rights.” It was not States who launched the process, but peasants themselves, with the support of their representative organisations. And it was not States who shaped its content, but peasants, based on their knowledge and first-hand experience of the discrimination, oppression and social exclusion they have been subject to. This is evident in the inclusion in UNDROP of food sovereignty; agroecology; regulation of markets; rights of rural women; rights to seeds and biodiversity; rights to land, water and natural resources; protection of rural and migrant workers regardless of their status; right to participation; rights to justice; and numerous other civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights.

The UNDROP WG pays tribute to all social movements who have been involved in the negotiating process of the Declaration for their resolve and clear-sightedness. The Declaration would not have seen the light of day without their unwavering commitment to the equal and effective realisation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all individuals and groups who live and work in rural areas. In keeping with this spirit, the WG elected as our first Chair-Rapporteur, Ms. Genevieve Savigny, who is a peasant herself, and was closely involved in the negotiations that resulted in the adoption of UNDROP.

Just as the 29 independent nations represented at the Bandung Conference in 1955 constituted more than half the world’s population. UNDROP’s rights holders also constitute more than half the world’s population: they include peasants, fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, forest peoples, herders, nomadic rural peoples, rural and migrant workers in agricultural and food systems, rural women, and their families. Article 1 of UNDROP lays out the breadth and diversity of UNDROP’s rights holders. Rural women are highlighted as those facing persistent, intersectional discrimination and rights violations.

The “Bandung Spirit” became—and remains to this day—a banner for the ideals of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, peace, sovereignty, self-determination, solidarity, and South -

South cooperation to build robust domestic economies based on equality, justice and dignity of all peoples.

These ideals were not dreamed up by the state leaders who participated in the Bandung conference; they emerged from and were shaped by the struggles of the peoples in Asia and Africa, who were at the forefront of struggles for liberation from colonialism and resistance to imperialism, who gave their lives for liberty. These included peasants, Indigenous Peoples, fishers, workers and working classes, intelligentsia, women from numerous classes and backgrounds, local merchants, lawyers and many more.

The heroes of the Bandung Spirit were, very regrettably, not at the Bandung conference in 1955. Women were noticeably absent even among the leaders, although so many were at the forefront of freedom struggles back home. Even more regrettably, the decades after Bandung did not bring peace, liberation from settler colonialism and self determination to everyone. In many countries, the benefits of liberation and independence were enjoyed by particular classes, castes, races, ethnicities and religions, with women usually at the end of the line.

As former colonizing powers regrouped in the subsequent decades, the Bandung spirit was undermined by political demonization and persecution, criminalization of liberation ideologies, and the weaponization of debt, trade, and other economic and financial policies that recreated global structures of colonialism, imperialism and slavery.

The Bandung ideals of Asia -African cooperation on agriculture, rural development, technology sharing, and industrialization fell off the table. National development models were subverted by neoliberalism, and the expansion of corporate power in the economy, finance and governance. Countries of the South have grouped again through BRICS and regional formations, but competition has replaced cooperation and solidarity. The ten Bandung principles have been captured and reinterpreted on the basis of geopolitical and geoeconomic interests.

Reviving the spirit of Bandung in the present context demands urgent attention to long standing priorities: agrarian reform and rights of rural working classes to land, water and territories; food sovereignty and the right to food and nutrition; stable, secure employment and workers' rights; social protection, and secure access to essential goods and services; economic and political systems that serve and respond to the needs of vulnerable peoples, and address the structural conditions of vulnerability to prevent vicious cycles of poverty and deprivation from recurring; protecting environments, eco systems and biodiversity; tackling debt and climate change through the principles of justice and historical responsibility; dismantling structures of historical discrimination among races, genders, ethnicities; and ending settler colonialism and extractivism that continue to dispossess people.

UNDROP and other international human rights instruments are important tools in rebuilding the spirit of Bandung in the present political, economic and environmental context. As multilateralism itself is faltering under the pressures of multistakeholderism, unilateral actions by a powerful few and cynical alliances among some countries, the international human rights architecture offers people all over the world a strategic tool to rebuild peoples' multilateralism based on justice, equality, non-discrimination, peace, dignity and self-determination. UNDROP and other human rights instruments can serve as ethical benchmarks and criteria



for assessing national, regional and international laws, policies, agreements, institutions and actions.

In the present context, those at the forefront of struggles for liberation from the multiple, cascading and inter-meshed crises of our times—hunger, poverty, inequality, climate change, biodiversity loss, authoritarianism, military occupation and conflicts, gender based and other social-cultural violence and injustice, and extractivism—have been working classes, peasants and small-scale food providers, workers, Indigenous Peoples, women, students, journalists, lawyers, academics, parliamentarians and civil society organisations.

Despite facing persecution from authoritarian, fascist, patriarchal and oligarchic regimes, today's heroes—like the heroes who fought for our liberation from colonial subjugation and rule—are not abandoning the terrains of struggle. UNDROP and other human rights instruments make these heroes visible, offer ways to protect their lives and efforts, and provide a basis for reviving the spirit of Bandung.

For us in the WG, UNDROP constitutes a new starting point, a paradigm shift towards a more inclusive society that recognises and values the essential contribution of peasants and people working in rural areas in the fight against poverty, hunger, exploitation and persecution in all their forms and dimensions; to the protection of the natural environment from pollution and degradation; to the nurturing and regeneration of biodiversity crucial for sustaining life; to the economic and social progress of our societies; and to the realisation of peaceful, just and inclusive societies where everyone's rights are equally protected.

On behalf of the UNDROP WG, I urge governments, social movements, civil society, academics, parliamentarians and all those committed to equality, justice, peace, dignity, human rights and self-determination, to join us in implementing UNDROP. Thank you.

## Affirming the Spirit of Bandung Today

Published on 6 May 2025



Conference poster of the Bandung Conference. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

*By Walden Bello and Shalmali Guttal*

To celebrate the spirit of Bandung is not simply to mark 70 years since the Asia-Africa Conference, but to affirm what being faithful to its principles and ideals means today.

The Bandung document was primarily an anti-colonial document, and it is heartening to note that so many governments and peoples in the Global South have rallied behind the people of Palestine as they fight genocide and settler-colonialism in Gaza and the West Bank. The role of South Africa in lodging and pursuing the charge of genocide against Israel in the International Court of Justice, with the formal support of 31 other governments, is exemplary in this regard.

### **Bandung and Vietnam**

April 2025, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bandung, is also the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reunification of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The celebrations over the last few days in Ho Chi Minh City brought back images of that decisive defeat of the American empire—the iconic photos of a

tank of the People's Army smashing through the gate of the presidential palace in Saigon and the frenzied evacuation by helicopter of collaborators from the rooftop of the US Embassy. In retrospect, the defeat in Vietnam was the decisive blow dealt to American arms in the last century, one from which it never really recovered. True, the empire appeared to have a second wind in 2001 and 2003, with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively, but that illusion was shattered with the panicked, shameful exit of the US and its Afghan subordinates from Kabul in 2021, the images of which evoked the memories of the debacle in Saigon decades earlier.

The defeats in Vietnam and Afghanistan were the dramatic bookends of the military debacle of the empire, which had massive repercussions both globally and in the imperial heartland. Bandung underlined as key principles "Respect of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations" and "Non-intervention or non-interference into the internal affairs of another country." It took unwavering resistance from the peoples of Vietnam, the Middle East, and other parts of the world to force the US and its allies to learn the consequences of violating these principles, but it was at the cost of millions of lives in the Global South. And it is by no means certain that the era of aggressive western interventionism has come to an end.

### **Ascent and Counterrevolution**

The economic dimension of the struggle between the Global South and the Global North since Bandung might have been less dramatic but it was no less consequential. And it was equally tortuous. Bandung was followed by the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961, the formation of the Group of 77, and the establishment of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). This upward arc in this struggle of the Global South for structural change in the global economy climaxed with the call for the New International Economic Order (NIEO) in 1974.

Then the counterrevolution began. Taking advantage of the Third World debt crisis in the early 1980's, structural adjustment was foisted on the Global South via the World Bank (Bank) and the International Monetary Fund (Fund), United Nations agencies like the UN Center for Transnational Corporations were either abolished or defanged, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) supplanted the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and sidelined UNCTAD. The so-called "jewel in the crown of multilateralism," the WTO was meant to discipline the Global South not only with trade rules benefiting the Global North but also with anti-development regimes in intellectual property rights, investment, competition, and government procurement.

Instead of the promised "development decades" heralded by the rhetoric of the United Nations, Africa and Latin America experienced lost decades in the 1980's and 1990's, and in 1997, a massive regional financial crisis instigated by western speculative capital and austerity programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund ended the "Asian Economic Miracle."

While most governments submitted to Bank-Fund structural adjustment programmes, some, like Argentina, Venezuela, and Thailand resisted successfully, backed by their citizens. But the main area of economic war between North and South was the WTO. A partnership between southern governments and international civil society frustrated the adoption of the so-called Seattle Round during the Third Ministerial Conference of the WTO in Seattle. Then during the Fifth Ministerial Conference in Cancun in 2003, developing country governments

staged a dramatic walk out from which the WTO never recovered; indeed, it lost its usefulness as the North's principal agency of global trade and economic liberalization.

### **Rise of China and the BRICS**

It was the sense of common interest and working together to oppose northern initiatives at the WTO that formed the basis for the formation of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), which gradually emerged as an alternative pole to the US-dominated multilateral system in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The anchor of the BRICS was China. A country that had beaten imperialism over five decades of struggle in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the People's Republic confidently entered into a devil's bargain with the West: in return for offering cheap labor, it sought massive foreign investment and, most important, advanced technology. Western capital, seeking super profits by exploiting Chinese labor, agreed to the deal, but it was China that got the better end of the bargain, embarking on a crash industrialization process that made it the no 1 economy in the globe as of today (depending of course on which metric one uses). The Chinese ascent had major implications for the Global South. Not only did China provide massive resources for development, becoming, as one analyst put it, the "world's largest development bank"; by reducing dependence on the western-dominated financial agencies and western creditors, but it also provided policy space for southern actors to make strategic choices.

The obverse of China's super industrialization was deindustrialization in the US and Europe, and coupled with the global financial crisis of 2008, this led to a deep crisis of US hegemony, sparking the recent momentous developments, like Trump's trade war against friends and foes alike, his attacks on traditional US allies that he accused of taking advantage of the United States, his abandonment of the WTO and indeed, of the whole US-dominated multilateral system, and his ongoing retrenchment and refocusing of US economic and military assets in the western hemisphere.

All these developments have contributed to the current fluid moment, where the balance in the struggle between the North and South is tipping towards the latter.

### **Rhetoric and Reality in the Global South Today**

But living up to and promoting the spirit of Bandung involves more than tipping the geopolitical and geoeconomic balance towards the Global South. The very first principle of the Bandung Declaration urged "Respect for fundamental human rights and for the purposes and the principles of the Charter of the United Nations." Nehru, Nasser, and Zhou En Lai played stellar roles in Bandung, but can it be said that the governments they represented have remained faithful to this principle? India today is ruled by a Hindu nationalist government that considers Muslim second-class citizens, the military regime in Egypt has engaged in egregious violations of human rights, Beijing is carrying out the forcible cultural assimilation of the Uyghurs. It is difficult to see how such acts by these governments and others that initiated the historic conference, like Burma where a military junta is engaged in genocide, and Sri Lanka with decades of a violent civil war, can be seen as consistent with this principle.

Indeed, most states of the Global South are dominated by elites that, whether via authoritarian or liberal democratic regimes, keep their people down. The levels of poverty and inequality are shocking. The gini coefficient for Brazil is 0.53, making it one of the most unequal countries

in the world. That for China, 0.47, also reflects tremendous inequality, despite remarkable successes in poverty reduction. In South Africa, the gini coefficient is an astounding 0.63, and 55.5 percent of the people live under the poverty line. In India, incomes have been polarising over the past three decades with a significant increase in billionaires and other high net worth Individuals.

The vast masses of people throughout the Global South, including indigenous communities, workers, peasants, fisherfolk, nomadic communities and women are economically disenfranchised, and in liberal democracies, such as the Philippines, India, Thailand, Indonesia, South Africa and Kenya, their participation in democracy is often limited to casting votes in periodic, often meaningless, electoral exercises. South-South investment and cooperation models such as the Belt and Road Initiative and free trade agreements frequently entail the capture of land, forests, water and marine areas and extraction of natural wealth for the purposes of national development. Local populations – many of who are indigenous--are dispossessed from their livelihoods, territories and ancestral domains with scant legal recourse and access to justice, invoking the spectre of home grown colonialism and counterrevolutions.

Bandung, as noted in the essay that inaugurated this dossier, institutionalized the nation-state as the principal vehicle for cross-border relationships among countries. Had global movements like the Pan-African movement, the women's movement, the labour movement and the peasant movement been represented at the 1955 conference, the cross-border solidarities institutionalized in the post-Bandung world could perhaps have counteracted and mitigated, via lateral pressure, elite control of national governments. Those advocating for the self-determination of peoples, and for the redistribution of resources, opportunities and wealth within national boundaries, would perhaps not have been demonised and persecuted as subversives and threats to national interests.

During the time of global transition we are in now, as the old western-dominated multilateral system falls into irreversible decay, the new multipolar world will need new multilateral institutions. The challenge, especially for the big powers of the Global South, is not to create a replica of the old western-dominated system, where the dominant powers merely used the UN, WTO, and Bretton Woods institutions to indirectly impose their will and preferences on the vast majority of countries. Will the BRICS or any other alternative multilateral system be able to avoid replicating the old order of power and hierarchy? To be honest, the current political-economic regimes in the most powerful countries in the Global South do not inspire confidence.

### **Bandung and the Continuing Specter of Capitalism**

At the time of the Bandung Conference, the political economy of the globe was more diverse. There was the communist bloc headed by the Soviet Union. There was China, with its push to move from national democracy to socialism. There were the neutralist states like India that were seeking a third way between the communism and capitalism. With decades of neoliberal transformation of both the Global North and the Global South, that diversity has vanished. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to a new, equitable global order is the fact that all countries remain embedded in a system of global capitalism, where the pursuit of profits remains the engine of economic expansion, both creating great inequalities and posing a threat to the planet. The dynamic centers of global capitalism may have moved, over the last 500 years, from the Mediterranean to Holland to Britain to the United States and now to the Asia Pacific,

but capitalism continues to both penetrate the farthest reaches of the globe and deepen its entrenchment in areas it has subjugated. Capitalism continually melts all that is solid into thin air, to use an image from a famous manifesto, creating inequalities both within and among societies, and exacerbating the relationship between the planet and the human community.

Can we fulfill the aspirations of Bandung without bringing forth a post-capitalist system of economic, social, and political relations? A system where people in all their diversity and strengths can participate and benefit equally, free from the violence of bigotry, racism, patriarchy and authoritarianism? That is the question-- or rather that is the challenge. The ten principles that form the basis of the Bandung spirit are reflected in international human rights law, but have been cynically manipulated to serve particular geopolitical, geoeconomic, racialised and gendered interests. Being faithful to the spirit of Bandung in our era therefore, requires us to go beyond the limits of Bandung. "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake," declares a character in a famous novel. We may seem to be on the cusp of a new era, with its promise of a new global order, but the Global South still has to awaken from the nightmare of the last 500 years. It is not coincidental that the birth of capitalism also saw the beginning of the colonial subjugation of the Global South. Only with the coming of a post-capitalist global order will the nightmare truly end.