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THE ASIAN-AFRICAN CONFERENCE 1955

Jamie Mackie
The 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung was a landmark event of great symbolic significance for the newly independent countries of the world. “This is the first intercontinental conference of coloured peoples in the history of mankind,” declared Indonesian President Soekarno in his opening address. The Conference symbolised the end to more than four centuries of Western colonial dominance over Asia and Africa through superior sea power—the ‘Vasco da Gama epoch’ as Panikkar called it—lasting from 1498, when Portuguese explorers first reached India to start creating the first of the European colonial empires, until 1945, when they all began to crumble under imperial Japan’s assaults. It was also the first meeting ever of the leaders of the newly independent nations of Asia and Africa (although only six nations from the latter continent had achieved independence by 1955), amongst them such illustrious names as Jawaharlal Nehru, Soekarno, Zhou En-lai, Nasser, U Nu, Sihanouk and Pham Van Dong. The Indonesians who played prominent roles at the conference included Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo, Foreign Minister Sunario, Conference Secretary Roeslan Abdulgani, and Mohammad Yamin and Ahmad Subardjo.

But the Bandung Conference represented far more than merely symbolic importance. Political consequences of great significance also flowed from it, as we shall see. The Conference marked the “political emergence of over half the world’s population,” as India’s Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru put it. It gave rise to the idea of Afro-Asian solidarity and unity, or ‘the Bandung Spirit’, and also to the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961-63, an organisation that endured to become far larger since its inception. The contrasting trajectories of these two principal ideas that arose out of the Conference
“The most important decision of the Conference is the declaration on world peace and cooperation. The nations assembled set out the principles which should govern relations between them and indeed the countries of the world as a whole...it would be a misreading of history to regard Bandung as an isolated occurrence and not part of a great movement of human history.” NEHRU
"... and Bandung has been the focal centre—perhaps I might even say the capital of Asia and Africa during this period." NEHRU
need to be understood, for the former soon declined in influence whereas the NAM has flourished ever since as the main voice of the Third World. Yet non-alignment was not in fact a subject of formal debate at Bandung. It was advocated openly by only three countries: India, Burma and Indonesia, as opposed to a far larger number of strongly aligned pro-US and anti-communist ones. But non-alignment gained much wider support in the years after Bandung, and is generally regarded as having had its origins there.

The ‘Bandung Spirit’ has remained a source of inspiration amongst most newly independent nations of Asia and Africa ever since 1955, even though no second such conference was held until the 2005 Asian-African Summit, which attempted to revive and reinvigorate it 50 years later. But we must note also that there were fierce disagreements between the anti-communist and non-aligned nations throughout the Conference, right up to the last moment. These disputes were over various Cold War issues, even though there was consensus on the issues of opposition to colonialism and recognition of the equality of all races and nations. These disagreements nearly scuppered the achievement of consensus around the Dasa Sila Bandung, the Ten Principles, which represented an important “declaration on world peace and cooperation,” as Nehru described it. But the fact that consensus could be finally achieved at all on these principles, as an expression of Asian-African unity on such a historic occasion, meant that the Bandung Conference ended as a triumphant success instead of an ignominious failure.

The Cold War was at its height when the Conference took place, as we shall now see, with the world sharply divided between the communist bloc and the US-led ‘free world’. This international background must be recalled in any assessment of the significance of Bandung, since it helps to explain why and how it came about, as well as the consequences that flowed from it.

SOEKARNO (1901 – 1970)

President of Indonesia 1945-67, Soekarno was a nationalist in heart and soul, as well as an inspiring orator. Since 1927, Soekarno led the campaign against Dutch colonialism and oppression in the country. On 17 August 1945 together with Mohammad Hatta, Soekarno proclaimed Indonesia’s independence. Under his leadership he welded the large and diverse population of this huge archipelago into one sovereign Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. His spirit and ideology suffused the entire Asian-African Conference that established the Ten Principles of Asia and Africa, better known as the Bandung Spirit.

Opposite page: The gathering of a plenary session in the Asian-African Conference, 1955. Serious about the future of their nations, leaders at the Conference heralded the creation of a third international force.
ZHOU EN-LAI (1898 – 1976)

Premier of China 1949-76 and Foreign Minister 1949-58. An early and close associate of Mao Tse-tung since 1922 when he joined the Chinese Communist Party. He won a reputation at the Geneva Conference on Vietnam and later at Bandung as ‘one of the most brilliant diplomats of the century’. At Bandung his conciliatory approach succeeded in allaying the suspicion and hostility even of anti-communist delegations, opening the way for China’s later diplomatic drive to build closer relations with various newly independent Asian and African nations.

The idea of holding an Asian-African conference of the leaders of the newly independent nations of those two continents was first put forward in early 1954 by Indonesian Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo, who had previously been Indonesia’s Ambassador to the United Nations. He proposed the idea officially to his fellow Prime Ministers of India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma (later called Sri Lanka and Myanmar, respectively) at a meeting in Colombo in April to May 1954, convened by Sir John Kotelawala of Ceylon. (The proposal had been carefully formulated at a meeting of Indonesian Heads of Mission in Asia and Africa at Tugu in March 1954, chaired by Foreign Minister Mr. Sunario, in preparation for the Colombo Conference.) Sir John’s aim was, amongst other things, “to make the voice of Asia heard” in world affairs at a time of an intense Cold-War crisis over Vietnam that could have led to atomic war. To which Ali posed the question: “Where do we stand now, we the peoples of Asia, in this world of ours today?” Replying to his own question, he retorted: “We have indeed arrived at the crossroads in the history of mankind ... we prime ministers of five Asian countries are therefore meeting here to discuss those crucial problems of the peoples we represent. These are the very problems which urge Indonesia to propose that another conference be convened, wider in scope, between the African and Asian nations,”

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU (1889 – 1964)

Prime Minister of India 1947-64 and a leading figure in the Congress party (and close colleague of Mahatma Gandhi) since the early 1930s. A complex and outstandingly able man, from a Kashmiri Brahmin family, with a top-class education in England, who had plunged into nationalist politics behind Gandhi and developed a wide appeal to and empathy with the Indian masses. Widely regarded in the 1950s as the foremost of Asian national leaders and first exponent of the non-alignment principle.
SIR JOHN KOTELAWALA (1897 – 1980)

Prime Minister of Ceylon 1953-56. Very British in style and outlook, and strongly anti-communist although also a nationalist. Notable as the man who summoned the Colombo Conference of leaders of five newly independent Asian nations at which the idea of an Asian-African conference was first put forward. Caused mild sensation at Bandung by his strong attack on communism as ‘a new form of colonialism’, which led to a heated exchange with Zhou En-lai.

The ceremonial welcome for the five Prime Ministers at Kandy.
since the problems were world-wide, he said, and faced by
the peoples of Africa, as well as the peoples of Asia. That
statement contained the germ of the idea that would later
become the Asian-African Conference.

There was only lukewarm support for Ali’s idea at
first, however, since Nehru, the most influential of the
‘Colombo Five’, was dubious about the practicability of
a large, unwieldy conference at a time of such serious
international tension and sharp divisions even amongst the
Asian nations. For the Colombo Conference took place at
the same time as the much larger, more crucial Geneva
Conference, which coincided with the French defeat at
the battle of Dien Bien Phu and the consequent collapse
of French colonial rule in Vietnam. The prospect of the
impending French collapse had very nearly given rise to
US military intervention there in support of the French,
possibly with the use of nuclear weapons. It had also led to
a push by John Foster Dulles, the rigidly uncompromising
US Secretary of State (of ‘neutralism is immoral’ fame), to
mobilise all non-communist nations of Asia into ‘united
action’ to resist any further spread of communism in Asia.
That was the origin of the SEATO security treaty, which
included Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines (but no
other Asian states) and the Baghdad Pact, involving most of
the Middle-Eastern anti-communist states. The pressures
these developments created for India and Indonesia were
a cause for great concern to them. Soon after, a serious
crisis arose over China’s threats to attack (or ‘liberate’)
Taiwan, challenging the US naval forces deployed in the
Taiwan Straits to resist them—a crisis that persisted well
into early 1955.

All this gradually led Nehru to become more
sympathetic to the idea of an Asian-African gathering.
He started to see the possibility of using the meeting as
a means of bringing the hitherto isolated government
of communist China into the community of Asian
nations—and into the United Nations (where the rump
of the Kuomintang (KMT) regime in Taiwan occupied
the China seat on the Security Council, with strong US
backing)—thereby drawing her away from her close
alliance with the Soviet Union. Premier and Foreign
Minister Zhou En-lai of China (under President Mao Tse-
tung) visited India in mid-1954, after having taken part
in the negotiations at Geneva that had brought an end to
the French war in Vietnam. He and Nehru then drafted
the Five Principles of Coexistence (Panch Shila) as a basis
for friendly relations between their two countries. Nehru
now swung his weight in favour of Ali’s proposal. But the
‘Colombo Five’ Prime Ministers had first to meet again in
Bogor in late December 1955 to settle the arrangements
for the Conference and decide upon who should or should
not be invited.
Twice Prime Minister of Indonesia and Chairman of the Asian-African Conference, Ali Sastroamidjojo was formerly Indonesian Ambassador to Washington and the United Nations. In the 1920s he had studied law in the Netherlands and was one of the founders of the PPI, the first Indonesian nationalist organisation established there.
A quiet and unassuming personality and a devout Buddhist, U Nu was Prime Minister of Burma for 14 years from 1947, after the assassination of the country’s first national leader, Aung San. He remained Prime Minister until 1962 when the army under General Ne Win seized power. Under his leadership Burma prospered moderately well, backed by buoyant rice exports, on the basis of his “Burmese Way to Socialism”, an eclectic amalgam of Buddhist and Marxist doctrines aimed at avoiding the evils of colonial capitalism.

The Bogor Conference was an important forerunner to Bandung, since the agenda and purpose of the Bandung Conference were decided there, as well as the list of invitees, the timing (in April 1955) and the administrative arrangements. The ‘Colombo Five’ were to act as its sponsors, while Indonesia would organise the administrative arrangements (with help from a committee of the Five) and issue the invitations. Ali Sastroamidjojo was designated as the Conference Chairman and Roeslan Abdulgani its Secretary.
The choice of Bandung was made by Ali in consultation with President Soekarno, Bandung being ‘the coolest and nicest spot in Java’, with suitable conference halls and accommodation for the 29 delegations. They were housed in the Savoy Homann and Preanger hotels, close to the main conference building, the Gedung Merdeka, and in bungalows in the northern suburbs of Bandung. The bungalows were rented from their owners (mostly Dutch) for the use of some delegations and accompanying officials, who numbered several hundred in total. In addition, more than 700 members of the press, both Indonesian and international, covered the event, together with a large number of ambassadors and eminent foreign guests. The transport, accommodation and security problems were formidable, but were successfully resolved. Altogether, Bandung experienced a transformation for the Conference and the attention of much of the world was focused on the city over the week between Monday 18 and Sunday 24 April.

Above: Prime Ministers of the five sponsoring countries on the verandah of Bogor Palace in April 1954. From left to right: U Nu (Burma), Mohammed Ali (Pakistan), Ali Satroamidjojo (Indonesia), Sir John Kotelawala (Ceylon) and Jawaharlal Nehru (India). Asia and Africa can prosper only when united.

MOHAMMED ALI BOGRA (1909 – 1963)

Prime Minister of Pakistan 1953-55, formerly a government official under the British and, after independence, Ambassador to Burma and Canada. As one of the five sponsors of the Asian-African Conference he was a prominent player there as a counterweight to Nehru and a strong defender of the rights of US-aligned nations to participate in collective security pacts such as SEATO, which were anathema to the non-aligned nations.
Above: Speeches of the five Prime Ministers on the verandah of Bogor Palace, April 1954. A show of appreciation for the support given by the public.
Dramas, disputes and decisions at Bandung

The Conference began in an almost euphoric mood of enthusiasm and goodwill amongst both guests and hosts. But the undercurrents of division and disagreement over Cold War issues soon became apparent. There had long been an edge of hostility between Prime Ministers Nehru of India and Mohammed Ali Bogra of Pakistan, stemming originally from their conflict over Kashmir and accentuated by Pakistan’s decision in 1954-55 to accept arms from the US and to join both SEATO and CENTO (the Baghdad Pact). And behind Pakistan stood nearly half the countries represented at Bandung, mostly from the Middle East, three from Southeast Asia, all strongly anti-communist and openly aligned with the US, far outnumbering the three non-aligned states and two communist states (China and North Vietnam). Their main concern was (at the specific behest of Washington in several cases) to attack communism as a new manifestation of colonialism and to assert the right to participate in US-sponsored collective security pacts.

Before the Conference opened, an informal meeting of many of the participants was held on the Sunday to simplify and hasten the discussion of a very crowded five-day agenda (much shorter than the ten days initially planned) and to discuss the most appropriate rules of procedure. Agreement was soon reached on decision-making by consensus rather than majority voting, and also on a proposal by Nehru that introductory speeches be merely tabled, not read in full. But some delegations, including Pakistan’s, had not yet arrived and were not present at that meeting. This led Mohammed Ali, as soon as he arrived, to protest strongly at his exclusion and at Nehru’s dominant role in the whole episode. Ali insisted on reading his speech, which meant that nearly
Above: Crowds waiting to greet Conference delegates outside the Savoy Homann Hotel.
PARTICIPATING NATIONS AT THE BANDUNG 1955 CONFERENCE

A total of 30 nations were invited to the Conference, of which the 29 nations listed below sent representatives.

THE FIVE SPONSORS
Burma
Ceylon
India
Indonesia
Pakistan

OTHER ASIAN NATIONS
Afghanistan
Cambodia
China
Iran
Iraq
Japan
Jordan
Laos
Lebanon
Nepal
Philippines, The
Saudi Arabia
Syria
Thailand
Turkey
Vietnam, North
Vietnam, South
Yemen

AFRICAN NATIONS
Egypt
Ethiopia
Gold Coast (later Ghana)
Liberia
Libya
Sudan