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(Mis)remembering Bandung at 70: why today's invocations of Bandung reveal more about the present than the past

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(Mis)remembering Bandung at 70

Why today's invocations of Bandung reveal more about the present than the past.

The memory of the Bandung Conference in 1955 still provides inspiration to politicians, diplomats, scholars, journalists and artists alike. This year's many commemorations across the globe attest to that. Given the shifting contours of international forums today, and the formation of new groups and the expansion of old ones, it is no surprise that many of them should seek to lay claim to the legacy of the Bandung Spirit. But as Indian journalist Godfrey Jansen famously remarked in his 1966 magnum opus on Afro-Asianism: 'two conferences were held at Bandung in April 1955. One was the real conference, about which not very much is known. The other was quite a different conference, a crystallisation of what people had wanted to believe had happened which, as a myth, took on reality in the Bandung Principles and, later, in the Bandung Spirit.'¹ To Jansen, writing ten years after the conference and months after the attempt to convene a second one in Algiers had been called off, the Bandung Spirit had taken on a life of its own – one that was pushing the 'real' Bandung out of memory.

No straight lines can be drawn from the configuration of Asian and African states that gathered in 1955 to any international institutions past, present or emerging. Imagined lines – the one that runs from Bandung to Belgrade and the Non-Aligned Movement chief among them – do more than misrepresent the world leaders that convened in the Gedung Merdeka² 70 years ago. They risk eclipsing some of the lessons that can be drawn from the actual Bandung Conference. This invites the question of whether the world this year is commemorating the conference or its spirit.

The two are not as easily separated as one might think, not even for Jansen as a contemporary observer. Ironically, Jansen's career trajectory reads as emblematic of the Bandung era: he attended most of the Afro-Asian conferences of which he wrote, either as a journalist or as part of India's formal delegation, and he was eventually posted to Cairo, the United Nations, Jakarta, Istanbul and Beirut as correspondent for India's *National Herald*, a newspaper founded by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1938. Political



Indonesia's President Sukarno in Belgrade at the 1961 Non-Aligned Conference.

journalism from those locations was highly sought after in India at the time because the Bandung Conference had recalibrated diplomatic tradition to fit a decolonising world. It caused a proliferation of conferences and collaborations across Afro-Asia, connecting not only state leaders but also intellectuals, artists, peace workers and many others.

Upon his return to Delhi from Bandung, Nehru told the Lok Sabha (the lower house of India's parliament) that the conference had 'proclaimed to the world the capacity of the new nations of Asia and Africa for practical idealism' and was 'part of a great movement of human history.'³ Thus, the conference's own participants immediately placed the focus on its symbolic value rather than on its direct outcomes. Even Jansen, otherwise quick to draw attention to the political fault lines in Afro-Asian collaboration, grudgingly admitted Bandung's significance in that sense. So, perhaps the real question we should ask is: where do the legacies of the Bandung Conference and the Bandung Spirit converge in a way that is meaningful for the world, today?

Somewhat counterintuitively, Bandung was already being commemorated before it was held. Eleven days before it opened, another massive conference convened in New Delhi that saw itself as an expression of the Bandung Spirit, before the Bandung Conference had even had a chance to live up to that expectation. The world press shortened its rather convoluted title of Conference of Asian Countries on the Relaxation of International Tensions to the Conference of Asian Countries, which brought it closer to the billing of the Bandung Conference as the Asian-African Conference. The *Bombay Chronicle* called the Delhi conference an ‘eve-of-Bandung meeting.’ On that occasion, Maulana Bhashani of the Awami League⁴ in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) said that he expected Bandung to deliver a ‘united declaration of the countries of Asia and Africa’, and that it could ‘become a very valuable contribution to the advance of civilization in the whole world.’⁵

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Given these high expectations, it is also worth looking at the political lineages in which the convenors of the Bandung Conference placed themselves. For this, one must shift the focus from the often-invoked Bandung Principles to the beginning of the conference, when the conveners’ vision for the event was still unmarred by the realities of reconciling the different interests of a diverse group of nation-states. When Indonesia’s President Sukarno took to the stage on 18 April 1955 to deliver the opening address of the conference, he started with a commemoration. He recalled the 1927 Conference of the League Against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression in Brussels, which some of the Bandung delegates had attended, most notably Nehru and Indonesia’s Vice-President Mohammed Hatta. Sukarno said he considered the Brussels conference an important predecessor to Bandung, but he highlighted a key difference: ‘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.’⁶ That necessity was the fact that colonial authorities would not allow a conference that intended to connect anticolonial movements from around the world to be held within their jurisdictions. Belgium, notwithstanding the fact that it too was a colonial power, allowed the conference to take place in Brussels on the condition that it would not discuss Congo.



Asia Afrika Monument, Bandung, Indonesia.

In 1955, Sukarno said: ‘our nations are colonies no more ... we are again masters in our own house. We do not need to go to other continents to confer.’ At Bandung, the fact that the independent powers of Asia and Africa were conferring without the mediation of others was key. This was not just a point of pride for the leaders of these recently decolonised nations; it was also a point of concern for Britain and the United States: media and intelligence records attest to nervousness at their lack of control over the proceedings in Bandung.

Those who had gathered in the Gedung Merdeka soon found that they themselves had little control over who got to claim the Bandung Spirit. The conference’s legacy became increasingly contested in subsequent years. When the first Afro-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Conference was convened in Cairo in 1957 with the support of the Egyptian government of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, these tensions came to a head. There was more overlap of the organising committees of the 1955 Delhi conference with the conference in Cairo, than with

anyone involved in Bandung, but Nasser's highly visible participation in the latter two events blurred the lines. As Egypt's Minister of State Anwar Sadat declared: 'this peoples' conference of ours meets partly in honour of the spirit of Bandung, and as a reminder of the principles and ideals it stands for, and partly to push it a step forward.'⁷ That step forward included a much more militant stance on anti-imperialism and a broader definition of what imperialism entailed. This caused some to speak of a 'distortion' or even 'exploitation' of the Bandung Spirit.⁸

None of these contestations diminishes the significance of the Bandung Conference. If anything, they confirm it. But the impulse to define new international institutions in reference to Bandung did cause distortions in the memory of the actual Bandung. As the conference receded further into the past and its half-century came into view, commemorations placed in Bandung world leaders who had been nowhere near it. Also, and directly in conflict with the intentions of the conveners of the conference, they placed statesmen at Bandung who hailed from countries outside Africa and Asia. Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah is an oft-cited example of the former; Cuba's Fidel Castro and Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito are examples of the latter. This has much to do with the 'imagined line' between Bandung and the Non-Aligned Movement (although it should be noted that Castro did not attend the 1961 Belgrade conference either). American political scientist Robert Vitalis has called these distortions 'the Paul Revere's ride of our postcolonial age' – a romanticised retelling that gradually eclipsed knowledge of an historical event.⁹

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In short, the Bandung Conference has become a Rorschach test. The ways in which it has been commemorated in decades past is more indicative of trends in foreign policy at the time of commemoration than of the conference itself. As shown above, this was already the case in Bandung's immediate aftermath. As the Non-Aligned Movement crested in the 1970s, non-alignment was read back into Bandung. At 50, new stress was placed on Bandung as a precedent for economic and diplomatic cooperation across the Global South. And, as new movements wrestled with the more enduring and under-recognised consequences of colonialism in the 21st century, Bandung's emancipatory potential moved to the forefront. This is not without basis in historical reality. Non-alignment was discussed at Bandung (and advocated by, among others,

Nehru), even if many of the countries represented were resolutely aligned. And Bandung's emancipatory significance as the first official gathering of the leaders of decolonised African and Asian States extended far beyond the Gedung Merdeka and captured the heart of many, from ordinary citizens in the streets of Java to public figures like the novelist Richard Wright and the singer Paul Robeson in the United States.¹⁰

These two lines – Bandung's emancipatory value and its insistence on Africa and Asia conducting their affairs autonomously, especially the preservation of peace – do intersect. Returning one final time to Godfrey Jansen: his assertion that 'Bandung's greatest significance is to be found in the fact that it was held at all' is far too limited and deserving of further qualification.

As noted, Sukarno placed the Bandung Conference in a longer tradition of anticolonial organising. In his opening address, he also begged the delegates to 'not think of colonialism only in the classic form ... colonialism also has its modern dress.' He urged them to 'keep our eyes firmly on the future.'¹¹ That future included cases of unfulfilled self-determination. This was clear not just in the formulation of the Bandung Principles but also in the way the conference was embedded in the city of Bandung. While the conference was purely official and nationalist movements were not formally invited, representatives from, among others, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and the African National Congress in South Africa, were provided with accommodation during the conference and were able to confer with their counterparts outside of the formal proceedings.¹²

Many possible futures convened in Bandung, united by a desire for the Afro-Asian region to meet autonomously and conduct its own affairs. Bandung's symbolic value in that regard was not a Bandung Spirit that took on a life of its own outside the control of the conference participants. Quite the opposite: the Bandung Spirit was intentionally encouraged and materially supported by those who gathered in the Gedung Merdeka in 1955. In that sense, at least, the Bandung Conference and the Bandung Spirit converge. ▀



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