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The Bandung spirit: Connecting with the future

Abstract

The Bandung Conference of 1955 – also known as the Asian-African Conference (Konferensi Asia-Afrika in Indonesian) – has acquired a legendary aura in international relations history. Its spirit of solidarity among newly independent nations in Asia and Africa was breathtaking: never before had non-Western nations come together to seek a voice in world politics.

Keywords

conference, world, politics, Global South, Indonesia

The Bandung Spirit: Connecting with the Future¹

By Rosita Dellios²

The Bandung Conference of 1955 – also known as the Asian-African Conference (Konferensi Asia-Afrika in Indonesian) – has acquired a legendary aura in international relations history. Its spirit of solidarity among newly independent nations in Asia and Africa was breathtaking: never before had non-Western nations come together to seek a voice in world politics.



Bandung: A Thriving City Surrounded by Mountains and Volcanoes in West Java³

Convened in Bandung, Indonesia, in April 1955, the conference was co-sponsored by Burma, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and attracted another 24 nations of what was to become the Third World, now often referred to as the Global South. As conference chairman, Indonesia's President Sukarno (Soekarno), said in his opening speech:

If this Conference succeeds in making the peoples of the East whose representatives are gathered here understand each other a little more, appreciate each other a little more, sympathise with each other's problems a little more – if those things happen, then this Conference, of course, will have been worthwhile, whatever else it may achieve. But I hope that this Conference will give more than understanding only and goodwill only – I hope that it will falsify and give the lie to the saying of one diplomat from far abroad: "We will turn this Asian-African Conference into an afternoon-tea meeting."

¹ The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*. Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors publish diverse, critical and dissenting views so long as these meet academic criteria.

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³ Unless otherwise accredited, photos are by Rosita Dellios and R. James Ferguson.

I hope that it will give evidence of the fact that we Asian and African leaders understand that Asia and Africa can prosper only when they are united, and that even the safety of the World at large cannot be safeguarded without a united Asia-Africa. I hope that this Conference will give guidance to mankind, will point out to mankind the way which it must take to attain safety and peace. I hope that it will give evidence that Asia and Africa have been reborn, nay, that a New Asia and a New Africa have been born!⁴

The conference concluded with a ten-point communiqué on the ‘declaration on promoting world peace and cooperation’:

1. Respect for fundamental human rights and for the purposes and 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. (a) Abstention from the use of arrangements of collective defence to serve any particular interests of the big powers.
(b) 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 obligations.⁵

These points when viewed in their historic context go beyond the soothing rhetoric of diplomacy. They addressed the vulnerability of newly independent nations as well as their hopes for a world in which they could be full and respected participants. They did not want to be part of the Cold War between the American and Soviet superpowers, nor did they want to be dependent on their former colonial masters for their development. Hence a primary aim was to promote mutual help or what has become known as ‘South-South cooperation’.

The ten-point declaration was built not only on the on principles of the United Nations Charter but the ‘five principles of peaceful coexistence’ were first articulated by Chinese premier Zhou Enlai during Sino-Indian negotiations over Tibet in 1953. The ‘five principles’ entailed mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in each other’s internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. They represent China’s foundational foreign policy and manifest to this day in various formulations such as ‘peaceful development’ and ‘win-win cooperation’. For example, China’s 2014 white paper on foreign aid opens with the statement:

When providing foreign assistance, China adheres to the principles of not imposing any political conditions, not interfering in the internal affairs of the recipient countries and fully respecting their right to independently choosing their own paths and models of development.

⁴ Soekarno’s Opening Speech, 18 April 1955, ‘Bandung Spirit’ Archives, http://www.bandungspirit.org/IMG/pdf/anri-bandung_conference-soekarno_s_opening_speech.pdf

⁵ From the Final Communiqué of the Asian-African conference of Bandung (24 April 1955), in ‘Revisiting the 1955 Bandung Asian-African Conference and Its legacy’, *South Bulletin* 85, 15 May 2015, <https://www.southcentre.int/question/revisiting-the-1955-bandung-asian-african-conference-and-its-legacy/>

The basic principles China upholds in providing foreign assistance are mutual respect, equality, keeping promise, mutual benefits and win-win.⁶



Outside the Bandung Conference venue, Gedung Merdeka (Independence Building), 1955.
Source: wikimedia commons (public domain)

The ‘spirit of Bandung’ came to represent Afro-Asian solidarity, first as a world of independent and equal nations promoting peace and cooperation, then as a non-aligned body of nations that did not want to take sides in the Cold War. Now, with the emergence of various ‘new silk roads’ and economic belts – the maritime one having been announced by China’s president Xi Jinping in Jakarta in 2013 – the time has come for further renewal of the Bandung spirit of “solidarity, friendship and cooperation”.⁷

Whereas the original Bandung conference of 1955 saw the gathering of such historical figures as Zhou Enlai, Jawaharlal Nehru, Ho Chi Minh, and Gamal Abdel Nasser, its 50-year anniversary in 2005 brought together such memorable leaders as Manmohan Singh of India, China’s Hu Jintao, Japan’s Junichiro Koizumi, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, and the well-regarded UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. He called for the UN Security Council to be more representative of developing countries, rather than reflect a world order of a distant era – that of post-war 1945.⁸

On the 60th anniversary of the Bandung Conference in 2015, leaders of more than 70 countries attended. Indonesian President Joko Widodo called on the Bandung Spirit of mutual help in alleviating poverty, saying Indonesia was still suffering in this respect, adding: “This problem is also faced by friends in Asia and Africa.”⁹ Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe noted that Asia and Africa were still inadequately represented in the multilateral international

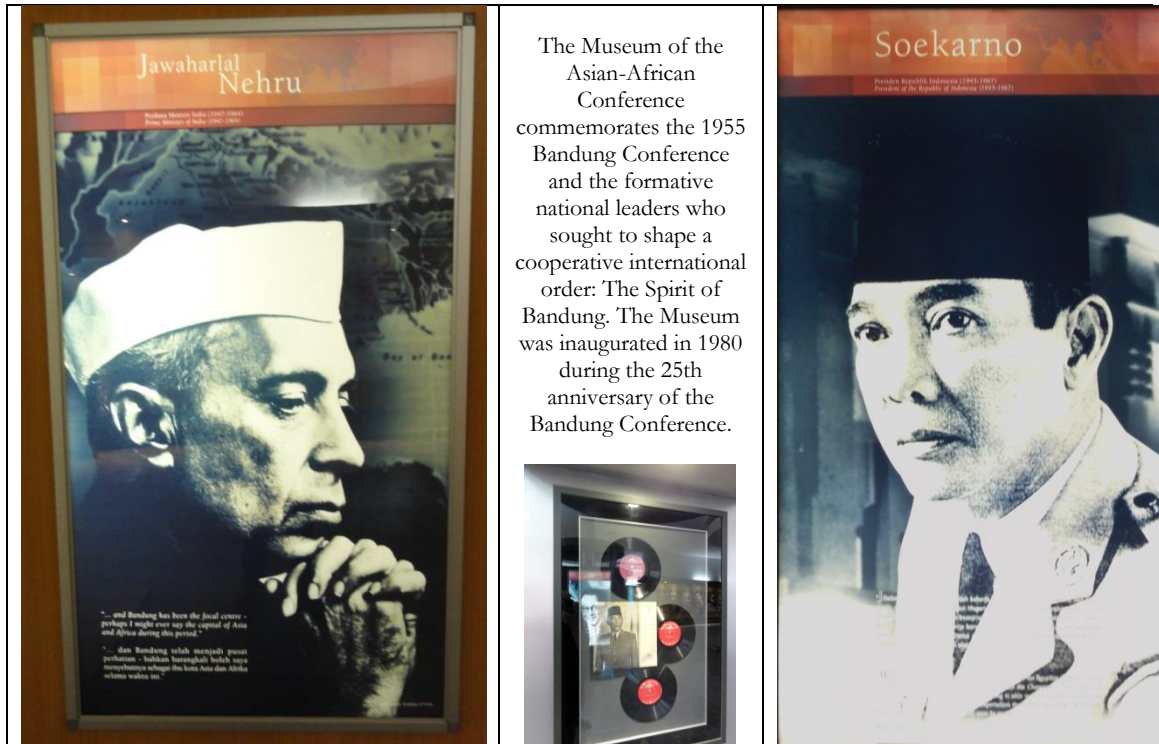
⁶ State Council Information Office, PRC, *China’s Foreign Aid*, July 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-07/10/c_133474011.htm

⁷ ‘Xi raises three-point proposal on carrying forward Bandung Spirit’, *Xinhua*, 22 April 2015.

⁸ Richel Dursin, ‘Annan Calls on Asian-African Leaders to Back U.N. Reforms’, *Other News*, 22 April 2005, <http://www.other-news.info/2005/04/annan-calls-on-asian-african-leaders-to-back-un-reforms/>

⁹ Lu Juan, Zhang Chunxiao, Tai Beiping, ‘Asian, African leaders commemorate 60th anniversary of Bandung conference, sign Bandung Message’, *Xinhua*, 24 April 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-04/24/c_134181967.htm

system, and that the “time has come for us to revive the Spirit of Bandung” in order to advance the cause of development. To this end, he praised the China-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). On matters of trade, Mugabe noted an imbalance between Africa and Asia, with Africa relying on the export of raw materials in exchange for manufactured products. But this is being remedied, he said, through the development of value-adding industries.¹⁰



China’s President Xi Jinping called for carrying forward the Bandung Spirit by deepening Asian-African cooperation, expanding South-South cooperation, and advancing North-South cooperation:

First, we should deepen Asian-African cooperation. As important cradles of human civilization, the two continents are home to three quarters of the world population, and boast more than half of the UN member states . . . Asian-African cooperation is not a closed and exclusive pursuit, but an open and win-win endeavor. We therefore welcome active participation and constructive contribution by countries from other regions.

Second, we should expand South-South cooperation. . . . Indeed, developing countries in their large numbers are all faced with the common mission of accelerating development and improving people's lives. . . . Enhanced South-South cooperation calls for more effective institutions and mechanisms. It is important to make good use of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Group of 77 and other groupings, strengthen cooperation platforms such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and BRICS, encourage dialogue and exchanges among regional organizations of developing countries and explore new frameworks for South-South cooperation. In this connection, China supports

¹⁰ Ibid.

Indonesia's initiative of establishing an Asia-Africa Center. It is necessary to increase the representation and voice of the developing countries . . .

Third, we should advance North-South cooperation. The Bandung Spirit is not only relevant to Asian-African cooperation and South-South cooperation, it also provides important inspiration and useful reference for greater North-South cooperation. Balanced global development will remain elusive if a group of countries is allowed to get richer and richer while another group gets trapped in prolonged poverty and backwardness. From the strategic perspective of building a community of common destiny for mankind, North-South relations are not merely an economic and development issue but one that bears on the whole picture of world peace and stability.¹¹

In a bid to inspire the next generation with the Bandung Spirit, President Xi also proposed holding an Asian-African youth festival. This was held in Beijing in July 2016, with Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao welcoming some 600 youth delegates from 36 Asian and African countries. In his keynote speech, “Li expressed the hope that young people from Asian and African countries would become a new force for Asian-African friendship and cooperation, and jointly create a bright future for the two continents.” Moreover, he said the new silk roads or ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ would help young people participate in innovation and start-up businesses.¹²



Today the venue is a museum commemorating the 1955 Bandung Conference, located in busy central Bandung. Its spirit is not forgotten in modern Indonesia. Along with the principles of religious and social tolerance (Pancasila), the ideas of Bandung are still taught, and form part of Indonesia's regional and global policies.

¹¹ Xi Jinping, ‘Carry Forward the Bandung Spirit for Win-win Cooperation’, Asian-African Summit, Jakarta, 22 April 2015, *Theory China*, http://en.theorychina.org/xsqy_2477/201505/t20150511_322108.shtml

¹² ‘China launches Asian-African Youth Festival to promote Bandung Spirit’, *Xinhua*, 29 July 2016, <http://english.cri.cn/12394/2016/07/29/3742s935901.htm>