

The Spirit of Bandung

by Michael Billington

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In the first war-time meeting between U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in August, 1941, Roosevelt famously told Churchill that the U.S. was not fighting the Second World War to preserve the British Empire, or any other European colonial domains, but would develop those former colonies with American System methods. Unfortunately, Roosevelt died before the end of the war, and his successor, Harry Truman, proved to be a tool of Wall Street and the British Empire. U.S. ships were provided to the British, the Dutch and the French to help return their armies to their former colonies in Asia.

Anti-colonial wars ensued, in Indochina against the French, and in Indonesia against the Dutch. Indonesia had declared its independence, led by their nationalist leader Sukarno as President, two days after the Japanese surrender to the United States on August 15, 1945. The Dutch, however, with direct military support from the British, reoccupied the main cities. They fought a bloody war against the forces of the new republic, finally giving up in 1949. In Indochina, the French refused to give up Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos, and fought another bloody war against the nationalist forces under Ho Chi Minh. As they were unable to defeat the nationalists, and as the U.S. under President Dwight D. Eisenhower was not willing to continue supporting the colonial war, they agreed to a peace conference in Geneva in April 1954, with representatives from France, Britain, U.S., USSR, China, and Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh.



Delegates at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, April 1955.

The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence

Just before the Geneva Conference in April 1954, China's Premier Zhou Enlai initiated bilateral agreements with India and Burma which established the first expression of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. The Five Principles declared mutual respect for sovereignty; territorial integrity; equality of nations; non-interference in internal affairs; and peaceful coexistence. This initiative by Zhou, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and Burmese Prime Minister U Nu, would become a central concept motivating the Spirit of Bandung in the famous 1955 Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung, Indonesia.

The day before the opening of the Geneva Conference, the Vietnamese Army under General Vo Nguyen Giap overran the crucial French position at Dien Bien Phu, marking the defeat of the French on the battlefield. Zhou Enlai, rather than gloating, used his influence to persuade Ho Chi Minh to accept a compromise, allowing a temporary division of Vietnam with a continued French presence in the South, pending a national election within 24 months.

Zhou believed that any more militant stance would push the United States toward the policy advocated by Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to continue supporting the French, and U.S. forces would

simply move in to replace the French. He hoped that a temporary peace based on a divided Vietnam and neutrality in Cambodia and Laos, as was established at Geneva, would allow time for broader agreements on regional and international development, even though the Vietnam settlement itself was full of loopholes and uncertainties, and wasn't even signed by most of the participants. The stage was set for Bandung.

The original idea for an Asian-African meeting came from Indonesian Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo at a meeting of the Colombo group, comprising India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Burma, and Indonesia—an alliance of formerly colonized nations. The proposed conference was to be the first time that nations of the Third World had met together, without the Western powers present. Sukarno described it in his opening speech as “the first international conference of colored peoples in the history of mankind.”

The Bandung Conference of 1955

The unifying principles were anti-colonialism and the commitment to peace and development in nations



Some of the leaders at the Bandung conference in 1955. From left: Indonesian President Sukarno and his wife; Indonesian Vice President Hatta and his wife; Prime Minister U Nu of Burma and his wife; and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In his opening speech, Sukarno described the conference as “the first international conference of colored peoples in the history of mankind.”

which had won their independence. But the most crucial strategic issue in the minds of the conference initiators was the threat of a U.S.-China war. The initial statement calling for the conference to be held in Bandung in April 1955, included a reference to “the desire of the five sponsors to lay a firmer foundation for China’s peaceful relations with the rest of the world, not only with the West, but equally with themselves and other areas of Southeast Asia peripheral to China.”

George Kahin, an American scholar who attended Bandung and interviewed many of the leading participants, said that the conference initiators were concerned both with war avoidance, especially in regard to U.S.-China relations, and the curtailment of Chinese and Vietnamese military and political sponsorship of subversive activities in Southeast Asia. This was hardly a “pro-communist China” grouping, but, as Nehru told his Congress Party after the 1954 China-India agreement on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, China should have a chance to prove itself.

The twenty-nine nations from Asia, the Arab world, and sub-Saharan Africa who attended the conference had many serious differences, especially in regard to alliances with either the West or with the Soviet bloc, which



Museum KAA Bandung

At the Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955. Left to right: Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai; Indonesian President Sukarno; and Egyptian Prime Minister and Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council Gamal Abdel Nasser.

threatened to disrupt their unity of purpose. These conflicts resulted in an extraordinary process of constructive dialogue and diplomacy, with Zhou Enlai, the head of China's delegation, exerting exceptional leadership.

Sukarno's Opening Speech

But before examining that dialogue, a review of the opening speech by President Sukarno, the host, will demonstrate the level of consciousness of the world historic nature of the undertaking by the participants themselves.

Sukarno, speaking in the city where he had been introduced to the struggle against colonialism, called on the nations of Asia and Africa to take world leadership to project reason and moral strength into a world of chaos:

Great chasms yawn between nations and groups of nations. Our unhappy world is torn and tortured, and the peoples of all countries walk in fear lest, through no fault of their own, the dogs of war are unchained once again.... The nations of Asia and Africa cannot, even if they wish to, avoid their part in finding solutions to these problems.... We have heavy responsibilities to ourselves, and to the world, and to the yet unborn generations.

The peoples of Asia and Africa wield little physical power.... What can we do? We can do much! We can inject the voice of reason into world affairs. We can mobilize all the spiritual, all the moral, all the political strength of Asia and Africa on the side of peace. Yes, we! We the peoples of Asia and Africa, 1.4 billion strong, far more than half the human population of the world, we can mobilize what I have called the Moral Violence of Nations in favor of peace.

He referenced Franklin Delano Roosevelt, without needing to speak his name:

We are living in a world of fear.... Perhaps this



Official portrait, 1949

In his opening speech as host of the Bandung Conference, Sukarno, first President of Indonesia, called on the nations of Asia and Africa to take world leadership, to project reason and moral strength into a world of chaos.

fear is a greater danger than the danger itself.

Sukarno's tribute to the American Revolution was a stirring call to arms:

Today is a famous anniversary in that battle [against colonialism]. On the 18th of April 1775, just 180 years ago, Paul Revere rode at midnight through the New England countryside, warning of the approach of the British troops and of the opening of the American War of Independence, the first successful anti-colonialist war in history. About this midnight ride the poet Longfellow wrote:

“A cry of defiance and not of fear,
A voice in the darkness, a knock at the door,

And a word that shall echo for evermore!”

Yes, it shall echo forevermore. That battle which began 180 years ago is not yet completely won.

He identified neo-colonialism at its roots—the free trade dogma of the British colonial system:

Colonialism has also its modern dress, in the form of economic control, intellectual control, actual physical control by a small but alien community within a nation.... It behooves us to take particular care to ensure that the principle which is usually called the “live and let live principle”—mark, I do not say the principle of *laissez-faire*, *laissez-passer*; of Liberalism, which is obsolete—is first of all applied by us most completely within our own Asian and African frontiers.

As with Roosevelt, Sukarno knew that China's Republican hero Sun Yat-sen would be recognized by his words alone:

Bear in mind the words of one of Asia's greatest sons: To speak is easy. To act is hard. To under-

stand is hardest. Once one understands, action is easy.

Sukarno concluded with an appeal to the liberation of the human spirit, applying his *Panca Sila* (Five Principles) to the universal family of mankind:

The highest purpose of man is the liberation of man from his bonds of fear, his bonds of human degradation, his bonds of poverty—the liberation of man from the physical, spiritual, and intellectual bonds which have for too long stunted the development of humanity’s majority. And let us remember, Sisters and Brothers, that for the sake of all that, we Asians and Africans must be united.

Aligned or Non-Aligned?

Although Bandung is generally considered to be the beginning of what came to be called the Non-Aligned Movement, the question of non-alignment was actually the most contentious issue at the conference. Prime Minister Nehru was the most passionate advocate of non-alignment, arguing that picking sides in the Cold War would prevent economic development and inevitably lead to World War III:

If all the world were to be divided up between these two big power blocs ... the inevitable result would be war. Therefore, every step that takes place in reducing that area in the world which may be called the unaligned area is a dangerous step and leads to war.

Contrary to most Soviet historical accounts of Nehru’s position at Bandung, he did not single out the Western military blocs as the only problem. NATO, said Nehru, “is one of the most powerful protectors of colonialism.” But he believed that it was equally true that the “Cominform”—the bloc of communist nations formed in 1947—“cannot in the nature of things fit in with peaceful coexistence.” Nehru told the Bandung delegates:

I belong to neither [bloc], and I propose to belong to neither whatever happens in the world.... India



“NATO is one of the most powerful protectors of colonialism.” “The Cominform cannot fit in with peaceful coexistence” —Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, advocating non-alignment at Bandung.

has stood alone without any aid against a mighty empire, the British Empire, and we propose to face all consequences....

Are we, the countries of Asia and Africa, devoid of any positive position except being pro-communist or anti-communist? It is most degrading and humiliating to any self-respecting people or nation. It is an intolerable thought to me that the great countries of Asia and Africa should come out of bondage into freedom only to degrade themselves or humiliate themselves in this way.

The resistance to non-alignment came primarily from the Asian members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). SEATO was put together by the British and John Foster Dulles immediately after the Geneva agreement on Vietnam, as an anti-communist bloc. It served to place the United States in a direct military alliance with the colonial powers in Asia—Britain and France—along with the Commonwealth countries Australia and New Zealand. The only Asian members were Thailand, Pakistan, and the Philippines.

The opposition to non-alignment by these three Asian nations was not, however, merely paying obeisance to their Western allies. Several smaller nations argued that India was a huge nation, with the capacity to defend itself against powerful enemies, but that smaller nations could not afford the luxury of non-alignment in the Cold War environment of the 1950s. Thailand, in



At Bandung, Zhou Enlai, Chinese Premier and Foreign Minister, pursued solutions based on the common interests of all nations—including those of the Western powers. Here, Zhou is seen at the Geneva Conference in 1954.

particular, was legitimately concerned about Chinese support for communist insurgency movements in the country and on its borders.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia had similar concerns. Prince Wan Waithayakon, representing Thailand, told the conference that the Viet Minh forces had militarily occupied portions of Laos in 1953 and 1954, and were only a few miles from the Thai border. They could not be disregarded as a threat, said the prince, of either subversion or even direct aggression. He protested the fact that Pridi Bhanomyong, the former Prime Minister and Free Thai leader, was in exile in China, and was reported to be organizing Chinese of Thai ethnicity for subversion against the government of Thailand.

The Diplomacy of China's Zhou Enlai for Peaceful Coexistence

Connected to the fear of Chinese-sponsored subversion across Southeast Asia was the question of the Chinese diaspora. Millions of ethnic Chinese lived throughout the region, and, although a minority, they played a disproportionately significant role in the business activities in each country. Under the Chinese Nationalist government, both on the mainland before 1949, and later in Taiwan, the overseas Chinese were recognized as citizens of China, regardless of their place of birth. This issue of “dual citizenship” posed a serious dilemma to Southeast Asia’s national leaders, who sometimes questioned the patriotism of the Chinese minority. The pos-

sibility that that minority might support communist insurgency, supported by the government in Beijing, was not paranoid or racist speculation. Forming a military alliance with the Western powers, it was argued, was the only defense available to small nations against such dangers from China or from “world communism.”

At Bandung, Zhou Enlai did not try to deny that such concerns were legitimate. His critical contribution to the conference was the pursuit of solutions to such problems based on the common interests of all nations—including the Western powers. He appealed directly to participants to “facilitate the settlement of disputes between the U.S. and China by peace-

ful means,” and insisted, “We have no bamboo curtain.” He said that China’s “struggle against colonialism lasted more than 100 years,” and he pledged that China would not do anything for the expansion of communist activities outside its territory. He quoted Confucius, who said, “Do not do unto others what you yourself do not desire.”

Zhou met privately with Prince Sihanouk and Prince Wan, as well as the delegates from Pakistan, the Philippines, and Laos, assuring them that China was anxious to reach agreements based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. He invited Prince Wan to visit China, and to inspect the newly established Thai ethnic autonomous region of Sipsongpanna in Yunnan Province, to confirm that there were no subversive activities or intentions.

He announced that China was prepared to solve the dual nationality problem, which he described as “something left behind by Old China.” Agreements were set in motion such that ethnic Chinese born in Southeast Asia would choose one or another nationality. (Such a choice was also complicated by the pretense of “two Chinas,” because the UN still followed the U.S. policy of recognizing the Nationalist government in Taiwan as the legitimate representative of all China.)

Historian Kahin’s appraisal at the conclusion of the Bandung Conference was that Zhou Enlai “had done much to convince previously skeptical delegates that Nehru’s thesis was plausible, and that peaceful coexistence with Communist China might be possible after all.”