

The Five Principles

How Asia Developed the Principles for a Peaceful Order in the World Community

by Stephan Ossenkopp

Largely unknown in the West, the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” are a central part of the Asian-African identity. On June 28, an international anniversary [conference](#) was held in Beijing to celebrate the 70th anniversary of these principles. Similar to the Charter of the United Nations, they emphasize sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, renunciation of aggression, and equality in international relations as the basis for any peaceful coexistence. Emerging from the anti-colonialist movements, they were first codified by China and India and later by the entire Non-Aligned Movement and beyond. They are more relevant today than ever and are echoed by the BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the entire Global South.

There was not a single line in the Western media about the celebrations in Beijing, despite their being held in the Great Hall of the People in the presence of numerous international delegations. In his speech, Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out that national independence movements had developed worldwide after the Second World War, and that the colonial system collapsed as a result. He recalled that in 1955, 29 Asian and African states met in Bandung, Indonesia, for a historic conference at which the Five Principles formed the basis for the final declaration. The principles were also declared a guideline in the movement of non-aligned states that formed in the early 1960s. The United Nations General Assembly also adopted a declaration on the establishment of a

new world economic order in 1970, which itself focused on the Five Principles.

To understand this, a retrospective view is certainly necessary. Almost two years after the surrender of Japan in the Second World War, the Asian Relations Conference took place in the Indian capital, Delhi, in early April 1947. The main topics discussed there were development and equality issues that were particularly



Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (center) at the historic 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia, where he introduced the five principles for peace in a joint statement with Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai.

pressing for the Asian countries. More than 190 delegates and 50 observers from various countries in South and Central Asia, as well as from England, Australia, the U.S.A., and the United Nations, took part in the event before thousands of spectators. Indian journalists spoke of a milestone in the history of Asia. Western observers, however, criticized the conference as being too anti-Western. What inspired most participants was that India had recently had its own provisional government, which was to lead the huge country to indepen-

dence after a long struggle against British colonial rule. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were the most important leaders in this process.

June 1954: The Birth of the Five Principles

Nehru, a key figure in the Indian independence movement and a close confidant of Gandhi, became the first Prime Minister of independent India, from 1947 to 1964. During Nehru's term in office, Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai visited India in 1954. Zhou and Nehru issued a joint statement on June 28, which would become the Five Principles (Panchsheel in Hindi). Zhou is said to have already formulated them during earlier negotiations on border disputes between the two newly independent Asian powers. In their declaration, they said that these principles were not only applicable to their two countries, but also to the relations between all other nations, as they represent a solid foundation for peace and security in the world. This was particularly true of all newly formed nations that wanted to secure their hard-won independence and advance their development. The principles were: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence—hence the name.

A few years later, in September 1961, the first summit of the non-aligned countries took place in Belgrade (then in Yugoslavia), on the initiative of Nehru, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the President of the United Arab Republic (a union of Egypt and Syria), and Josip Broz Tito, the President of Yugoslavia. Initially, 25 states participated. By the sixth summit in 1979 in Havana, Cuba, there were already 92, and today there are 120 states, most recently meeting in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, for their summit. From the outset, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence were also linked to the principle of non-alignment. Criteria were formulated for the invitation to the summit meetings: First, the country's policy must be independent and based on peaceful coexistence; second, the country must support national liberation movements; third, it must not belong to any military alliance that could involve it in the disputes which could draw in the great powers; fourth, the country must not have a bilateral alliance with a major power; fifth, there must not be any foreign military bases on the country's territory.

Of course, conflicts arose from time to time. In 1962, there were heavy fights on the border between



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In 1988, Chinese President Deng Xiaoping broke the stalemate with India by meeting with Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

China and India, but these ended after only one month. As a result, relations between China and India were rather frosty for 26 years. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi attempted to thaw Indian-Chinese relations with a secret mission in 1984. However, the negotiations were broken off at the end of October 1984 when Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated. It was not until her son and successor as Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, flew to Beijing in early 1988 and was received by the then 84-year-old President Deng Xiaoping that the ice was broken. The visit has since been viewed as a historic act and a new beginning.

To this day, Chinese commentators regularly write that India is one of the few countries that can mitigate misunderstandings and conflicts. The basic tenor: China and India have many common interests that outweigh their differences. Border disputes, which are essentially a problem and legacy of the colonial times, should not be an obstacle to advancing their partnership. Many commentators talk about how China and India could jointly usher in an Asian century—a vision that the pioneers of the Non-Aligned Movement already had in mind. If India's strategic independence can withstand external pressure, no wedge will be driven between the two Asian giants. A peacefully co-existing China-India tandem would guarantee stability throughout Asia.

Now an 'Asian Century'?

The expression "Asian Century" is said to have been used by the aforementioned Chinese President Deng Xiaoping in 1988 at his meeting with his In-

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Conference Marking the 70th Anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence

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Chinese President Xi Jinping addressed a June conference in Beijing marking the 70th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. They cohere with what he calls “the community with a shared future for mankind,” and respect the core interests and central concerns of all countries, he said.

dian counterpart, Rajiv Gandhi. Today, for example, the Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar is again using the term. India and China are both members of the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. When Chinese President Xi Jinping visited India in 2014 and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi reciprocated the visit the following year, a further step in the direction of harmonious coexistence became manifest. Building on this legacy, Xi Jinping said at the conference on the 70th anniversary of the Agreement on the Five Principles, that countries that differ from each other in their social systems, ideology, history, culture, beliefs, development, and size, can have a relationship of mutual trust, friendship, and cooperation, if they adhere to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.

The Five Principles are a way to peacefully resolve historical disputes and to overcome traditional, narrow-minded, antagonistic and confrontational attitudes, such as those found in bloc politics and the

politics of “spheres of influence.” China today offers a contemporary version of the Five Principles, namely the [community with a shared future for mankind](#) that, as Xi said, respects the core interests and central concerns of all countries, enabling an equal and orderly world in which each country can find its place in a multipolar system and play its role in accordance with international law.

To this end, the Chinese President offered concrete help in cooperation with the countries of the Global South. This included the establishment of a research center for the Global South, 1,000 scholarships, and 100,000 training opportunities for representatives of these countries. All problems—from the Ukraine crisis, to the Palestine-Israel conflict, to the tensions on the Korean Peninsula, to Myanmar and Afghanistan—could be resolved constructively, Xi said. The speech offered one of the few optimistic visions of the future at a time when some are still betting on escalation and superpower brinkmanship.