

Status Report from Bandung (April 22, 1955)

Abstract

The Bandung Conference, or the Asian-Africa or Afro-Asian Conference, was a meeting of African and Asian states, many of which had become independent very recently. 29 countries took part in the conference; the total population of the countries, 1.5 billion people, was equal to 54% of the world's population. The purpose of the conference was to encourage Afro-Asian cooperation on economic and cultural issues, and to stand against colonialism or neocolonialism by any nation. The conference was a key building block in the eventual formation of the Non-Aligned Movement, which originated in an effort to avoid the polarization of the Cold War world and eschew becoming a part of either the Soviet Union or the United States' sphere of influence. This article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* presents Nehru as the hero of the conference, though in reality he received a generally negative reception. The article does concede that Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier, was instrumental in holding the conference together by stressing his government's conciliatory intentions and displaying an overall moderate and restrained attitude.

Source

The Bandung Conference has reached its approximate middle point, and we can only tentatively trace the contours of this structure novel in world history, born with considerable pain at this mighty meeting of the leaders of 1.4 billion non-whites. Even from afar, the political picture has proved more absorbing than expected. The mere announcement of this conference already awakened the notion of such a powerful anti-colonialist will that one is astonished to realize how those people whom one nowadays hesitates to refer to as colored are no exception to the rule, so familiar to us in the West, that unity demands that we first overcome the fissures, and commonality that we abandon divisions, selfish conflicts of interest and ideological excitements. Neither the biological fact of non-white skin nor the shared experiences of suffering from the long-gone heyday of white colonial rule could conceal the extensive local discord between individual conference states that broke out in Bandung or the fact that, despite racial animosity towards the West, the international political battle lines threatened to expand here and split the Afro-Asian community.

After the opening address by the Indonesian head of state Sukarno, whose entire tenor was the moral and historical condemnation of colonialism, it soon became clear that finding a common denominator for Asian-African consensus would be no easy task. The tense atmosphere between the supporters of neutrality and the Asian coalition partners of the West emerged first in the Egyptian and Iraqi delegations. An attack on Israel could have distracted from this tension, but Nehru averted it in the plenary session. This task was left to the committees, where the stance of Turkey in particular hits the Jewish state, which had not been invited, hard. India took it upon itself to express its bitterness against the racial policies of the South African Union, whose government was also not invited, although it is certainly "African," albeit white. The dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir emerged in shrouded form, in that the two powers stand on different sides of the conflict between Western partners and neutral states. The vehemently anti-Communist speakers from Iraq, Thailand, the Philippines, Persia and Turkey directed their remarks less against absent Russia than against the Chinese prime minister, who was sitting before them.

Thus, the specter of failure lay over the conference, threatening to drown the enthusiasm, the momentum, the sense of a new era of the first day in Bandung—a mood that reminded observers like the

Englishman Vernon Bartlett of the early days of the League of Nations— in differences of opinion of varying origin. Had the conference been transformed into an ideological battlefield, a weaker reflex of the struggles among the white powers, to some degree into the theater of a second-hand Cold War, this would have been a terrible blow to the prestige of the non-white international community, a missed opportunity of perhaps world-historical importance. The Western nations would scarcely have reason for joy to find themselves with company in the invisible prisoner's dock at the conference, but the Asians have set up a series of additional docks in which they accuse each other as well as Russian "Communist colonialism." It is certainly pleasant for the West to see the elan with which their allies support the politics of anti-Communist pacts, how they oppose "reverse racial policy" against whites, but it would also be fateful for the West were this to lead to a collapse of the great efforts at Bandung to create something like an Asian-African factor in world politics.

In that case, the strongest among the assembled powers, the gigantic Chinese Communist empire, would gain total political free rein. The eloquence of the Orientals allied with the West does not always correspond to the inner solidity of their systems of government or their military achievements; if their overzealousness were to awaken even the appearance of Chou En-lai's isolation at the conference, Peking would scarcely take account in future of their fellow Asians' need for peace. A moderating force that could keep others in line would disappear. The West should fear nothing more than a situation in which the greater part of humanity, the Asian-African world, is faced with the exclusive alternative between American-European democracy and Communism. No expert on Asia can doubt the outcome of such a decision if a third way is obstructed. The respect that China enjoys nowadays among the masses in Asia was expressed not in the conference hall but in the ovations with which the Indonesians greeted Chou En-lai, more than any other statesman, wherever he appeared. As we know, it is not the ideology of Soviet Communism that attracts the masses, but the technological and social means with which Maoism seeks to tackle the greatest concerns of Asia—poverty, underdevelopment and the terribly low standard of living. Not through military pacts, but only if the peoples of Asia can develop their own equally effective but peaceful forms will they manage to avoid Communism on the Chinese model in the long term. No one is more keenly aware of this than Nehru.

If the crisis inherent in the Bandung conference has not yet proved deadly, we have Nehru to thank for it. The points of order already ensured that dividing factors asserted themselves less than unifying ones. He suppressed the opportunities for agitation and propaganda, although the price has been—except in the economic consultations—to dispense with constructive solutions. Nehru could not have played his role as mediator in the background had Chou En-lai not come to his aid. Whatever the motivations behind the Chinese stance, at least thus far Peking's representative has sought to present himself in the light of a bringer of peace soliciting trust. He has only responded to the attacks of Western-oriented speakers in order to stress his government's conciliatory intentions, even making offers in the explosive matter of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia; he has suggested to all sides the coexistence of the Sino-Indian charta and avoided sharp anti-American attacks. He has not, however, thus far discussed the possibilities of resolving the Formosa question without war. It is still unclear why the announced confidential eight-powers meeting has not taken place, which Nehru, not without good reason, left it up to Ceylonese Prime Minister Kotelawala to suggest. Nehru will have his doubts about whether Asian cohesion is already so strong that Chou will reveal the greatest secret that currently preoccupies the world, namely whether and when the Chinese will attack in the Formosa Strait. The effect of Bandung on this decision can scarcely be anything but indirect. There will perhaps be more to say about this matter once the conference ends.

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