

Matthies, Volker

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GROUP OF 77

The “Spirit of Bandung” 1955-1985: Thirty Years since the Bandung Conference

by Volker Matthies, Hamburg*

On 24th and 25th April, 1985, delegates from more than 80 Asian and African countries gathered in the Indonesian city of Bandung at the “Gedung Merdeka”, or “House of Freedom”, to commemorate the famous Bandung Asian-African Conference held thirty years previously. What, in retrospect, has been the historical and political significance of Bandung? What have been the achievements of its heirs so far?

On Indonesia's initiative, representatives from 23 Asian and 6 African countries had assembled in April 1955 for the first great conference to further Afro-Asian solidarity. The conference tackled the question of the Asian and African countries' relations among one another, examined colonialism in a critical light (the great wave of decolonisation was yet to take place), discussed the problems surrounding world peace (the Cold War, confrontation between Eastern and Western blocs), and appealed to all participating nations to intensify economic and cultural cooperation amongst themselves, and also economic cooperation with industrialised countries, all in the interests of their own self-determined development. Above all, though, the conference made a declaration, as part of its final communiqué, comprising ten principles of peaceful coexistence on which countries' behaviour towards one another was to be based (in other words, a form of “code of conduct” for inter-country relations). These principles, embodying what has been called the “Spirit of Bandung”, included, among other points, respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations, recognition of the equality of all races and of all nations large and small, as well as abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country and the acceptance that all international disputes should be settled by peaceful means.

How, then, should the Bandung Conference be viewed in terms of its historical and political significance? The conference represented the first major gathering of young and newly independent countries from Asia and Africa, and as such symbolised the idea of Afro-Asian solidarity and unity. It was remarkable in that it brought together a great many

participants for those days (29 nations took part at a time when the UN had just 59 member countries) and in that quite a number of the statesmen attending were of great political stature (charismatic leaders such as Nehru, Nasser, Chou En-Lai and Sukarno). Bandung was an expression of anti-colonial Afro-Asian nationalism, and of protest at the persisting predominance of the white race and the subordinate position new nations had to take in the world economy and international politics. Bandung also anticipated important developments in international relations (decolonisation, the emergence of the “Third World”) and stimulated the desire for freedom among the peoples of Asia and Africa who were still subject to colonial power. On the other hand, though, the conference did not create any lasting structures for cooperation and communication among the newly-formed countries. Nevertheless the “Spirit of Bandung” lived on, and this was later given concrete shape in new organisational forms (the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77).

The Bandung solidarity formula (the relevant criteria were geographical location in the Afro-Asian region and political independence) proved to be inadequate as a comprehensive and lasting way of organising the Third World nations. By the same token, the conflict between the participants' will to establish solidarity on the one hand and their political and economic heterogeneity in the real world on the other were simply too great to allow the conference to put down a sufficiently solid foundation for continuing cooperation. Some countries which strictly belong to Afro-Asia, for example, were not invited to the conference in the first place on political grounds (e.g. South Africa, Israel, North and South Korea and Taiwan). Among those nations which did attend, the most varied foreign policy orientations were

* Institut für Allgemeine Überseeforschung.

assembled: there were countries who had close political and also military relations with the West (Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Thailand, the Philippines), there was North Vietnam with its alliance to the Eastern bloc, and there were neutralistic countries such as India, Indonesia and Egypt. The People's Republic of China, Turkey and Japan can all be regarded as "special cases" amongst the participating nations: given the size of its population and its potential national power, China would itself have been more at home in the category of the great powers, Turkey was a member of NATO and oriented towards Europe, and Japan, being a highly industrialised country, hardly still suffered from the "development problems" typical among the younger nations of the emerging Third World.

Historical Stepping-stone

In the light of its agenda and the debates which took place there, the Bandung Conference can be regarded as an important historical stepping-stone on the way to establishing the Non-Aligned Movement. This applies in no small way to the dispute fought out between the participants over the legitimacy, form and extent of any military cooperation with the major power blocs. Representatives from the nations which were obviously committed to a particular bloc (e.g. Turkey and the Philippines) were unreservedly in favour of such cooperation, whereas representatives of the non-aligned nations (notably Nehru of India and Sukarno of Indonesia) saw this as a serious constraint on their independence and as a threat to world peace. Both Nehru and Sukarno advocated that the "moral strength" of Asia and Africa should be ranged against the military force represented by the blocs in both East and West. The non-aligned position did eventually assert itself in

the ten principles of Bandung: Principle 6(a) was a written commitment to abstain from entering into collective defence agreements intended to serve the particular defence interests of any of the big powers.

Comparing the 1955 Bandung Conference with the anniversary meeting in 1985, the latter must be seen much more as a commemorative event than as a political occasion. Even the – largely second-rank – status of the majority of the delegates bears this out: only the People's Republic of China and the ASEAN countries sent their foreign ministers, and the only presiding head of state to take part in the anniversary celebration was President Suharto of Indonesia! As in 1955, the fact that Indonesia called the meeting in 1985 can also be interpreted as a sign of the country's desire to adopt a more active international role.

The conference's closing communiqué, drafted by Indonesia, included a reaffirmation of the ten principles of 1955, an invocation of the "spirit of Bandung" and an appeal to participating countries to cooperate more closely with one another. In addition, Suharto clearly indicated in his welcoming address that the 1985 meeting should not simply be a glorification of the past. Given the continuing rift between North and South (world economic problems, the debt situation) and the intensified conflict between East and West (the arms race and the threat of war), President Suharto noted, the principles of peaceful coexistence and of constructive cooperation in development – in other words, of the "spirit of Bandung" – were still as relevant as ever. However, the crucial point was that, rather than always paying lip service to this "spirit", it needed to be translated in practical and political terms into deeds!

Demonstrations of the "spirit of Bandung" at the 1985 conference included the revitalisation of relations

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between Indonesia and China which had been on ice since the mid-1960s, and the fact that the two Koreas took part in harmony for the first time ever at an international gathering. The 1985 anniversary ought also to occasion us not only to contemplate on the political significance of the 1955 Bandung Conference in historical terms but also to examine its long-term effects, to examine the lasting vitality of the "spirit of Bandung", and the extent to which the programme set out by the conference has been realised in practical, political terms.

Heirs of Bandung

The Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 can be considered the Bandung Conference's true successors, each of them in its specific organisational form and field of activity building upon the legacy of Bandung. The Non-Aligned Movement was born in 1961 as an exclusive grouping of (primarily Third World) nations outside the UN system; the movement concerned itself with political and military questions relating to the East-West conflict and to international security (the peace question) as well as with problems of economic development and cooperation on a North-South basis (the development question). The Group of 77, on the other hand, was not formed until 1964 within the UN system following the formation of UNCTAD with its group system; this group specialised in the economic, trade and development policy aspects of North-South cooperation. Later, in the 1970s, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 got together in a kind of informal division of labour, to form a "Third World coalition" (or a "trade union of the poor"), dedicated to the struggle for a New International Economic Order and for collective self-reliance among developing countries. Totally in the spirit of the Bandung Conference, the two groups together set themselves the goal of establishing a qualitatively new system of international relations, within whose framework there appeared to be a better chance of solving the great problems of peace and development on the principles of peaceful coexistence and the participation of all countries on the basis of equal rights, than within the system of alliance, bloc and power politics which had been handed down over the years. What shape, then, should a critical assessment of the influence of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 take?

One quite basic achievement of the Third World coalition was that it organised a large number of developing countries on a permanent basis. Thus the coalition, and in particular the Non-Aligned Movement, allowed these countries for the first time to combine in a

comprehensive, exclusive organisation of their own, outside of existing power blocs and international organisations, with universal membership, thus creating the necessary organisational conditions for Third World countries to adopt a common, self-determined and self-confident stance in international politics. Moreover, and especially in the 1970s, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 both built up structures for communication and cooperation between countries and regions which had hardly had any previous contact with each other as a result of colonial centre-periphery relationships, hence contributing to a strengthening of new horizontal South-South relationships which at least had a tendency to weaken the vertical, North-South relationships that had been inherited. In the context of the UN system, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 have succeeded in establishing themselves as a Third World interest group and lobby, have given their members the chance to take an active part in the international system, and have helped to make the international organisation both more democratic and more universal in nature. As a corollary they have also – at least as a general trend – broken the exclusive position of the great powers, allowing the voices of the smaller nations to be heard in world politics.

The Peace Question

As far as the peace question is concerned, the thesis of the "peace function" of the non-aligned nations within the international system has to be regarded as exaggerated, given that these nations' concrete contributions to international crisis management, disarmament and the easing of tensions in East-West relations have, all in all, been very modest indeed. Even so, it is possible – from a historical point of view – that the mere existence of the Non-Aligned Movement has contributed to a greater flexibility in the international system, and has helped to loosen rigid bloc structures and encourage multi-directional influences. Hence the Movement may have forestalled the expansion and hardening of bloc structures and made the superpowers aware that there were certain barriers facing the extent to which they could further develop their power.

Nevertheless, the Movement was no more able to avoid a number of its members' growing entanglement in the East-West conflict in the course of the new Cold War than it was able to push through effective disarmament measures or successfully establish "peace zones". These developments led to the non-aligned countries' principled distancing from the blocs being called into question within the Movement so that both its unity and its ability to act were impaired. Also,

the increasing number of wars between non-aligned countries, which can be linked to the East-West conflict, to the increased armament of the Third World or to the emergence of socio-economic distinctions and a power-political hierarchy within the peripheral system of nations, represents a problem to which answers have so far only been broadly sketched out, but to which a lasting solution under the auspices of the Movement itself has yet to be delivered. These "fratricidal wars" are quite clearly in breach of the "spirit of Bandung" and not only threaten the Non-Aligned Movement's credibility but also its solidarity and unity. Finally, even "internal peace" could not be secured on a lasting basis in a whole number of non-aligned nations and members of the Group of 77. The fact that many governments lack democratic legitimation, the existence of blatant social injustice, disdain for human rights and discrimination against minorities have in many countries led to civil war, revolt and revolution and/or to intensified governmental repression.

Anticolonialism

It is perhaps in the sphere of anticolonialism that the Non-Aligned Movement has most obviously honoured the legacy of Bandung. The Movement played an important and constructive part in breaking up the colonial empires, helping to speed up the decolonisation process and ensure that it passed off relatively peaceably, even though major problems consequent on colonialism remain unresolved in the Middle East and Southern Africa. As far as the post-colonial North-South conflict is concerned, the Non-Aligned Movement and Group of 77 scored what was at least a spectacular political success in setting in motion the North-South dialogue on the establishment of a New International Economic Order. However, the negotiations which have ground on since 1974 have brought little in terms of material results. The most likely contributory factors include OPEC's weakened negotiating position, the lack of solidarity among the developing countries, the industrial nations' policy of divide-and-rule and their persistent and dogged resistance to the NIEO, the recent world economic crisis, and the reactivation of the East-West conflict. In consequence the Non-Aligned Movement and Group of 77 have been unable to go beyond normative approaches, the initiation of appeals, and new institutional and organisational ideas to achieve any substantial successes, whether in North-South relations (reform of the international economic order) or in the South-South relations already propagated at Bandung (collective self-reliance) which they themselves are largely able to shape and take responsibility for.

If we examine the Third World coalition's means of influence and its strategies against this background, they are shown to be effective only within limits. Given the coalition's general lack of military or economic power, it has to rely primarily upon diplomatic and political negotiation strategies and methods of exerting influence, the success of which depends to no small degree on the adversary's willingness to cooperate. The young nations' political and moral strength, invoked by Nehru and Sukarno at the 1955 Bandung Conference, has not so far sufficed to effectively help Third World interests achieve any breakthrough. Considering that most member countries in the Non-Aligned Movement or the Group of 77 are more or less tied into the international system on a materially dependent basis (dependent, peripheral states) but that they are also endeavouring, at least partly and by degrees, to free themselves from this system politically, militarily, economically and culturally, these countries are confronted with a historical dilemma. The essence of this dilemma is that for lack of sufficient resources and means of applying pressure they still rely on the help and support of precisely the countries which pose the greatest threat to their autonomy and independence.

To summarise, there is no doubt that, up to the present, the Third World coalition has been unable to prize apart the material structure of the international system; the most it can be said to have done is that it has made better use of, or even expanded, the leeway available to developing nations in a number of important fields of international politics and economics. Furthermore, it has now established itself as an autonomous group both in an East-West and in a North-South context, thus introducing a new factor into world politics which can no longer be ignored. Despite growing pressure from both internal and external problems (socio-economic differences between members, the international economic crisis, deterioration of East-West relations and the threat of war), one can presume that the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 will not break up, but will in fact consolidate themselves and develop further.

Bearing in mind the legacy of Bandung, the chief tasks in the years to come, apart from strengthening the Third World movement's unity by democratically airing grievances and peacefully solving conflicts, will include alleviating the effects of the revitalised East-West conflict on the Third World, pressing for genuine disarmament, breathing new life into the stagnating North-South dialogue, and making sure that collective self-reliance is consistently expanded.