

Bandung Conference

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Description Held between 18 and 24 April 1955, the Asia-Africa Conference was a watershed event in anti-colonial politics and modern international relations. Twenty-nine heads of state and government mainly from newly independent Asian and African nations, as well as representatives of national liberation movements and civil rights organizations, were present at this gathering. Also known as the Bandung Conference, leaders in attendance included Indonesia's Sukarno, India's Nehru and a representative from the People's Republic of China (PRC), Zhou Enlai. Participants advocated self-determination and autonomous government for peoples in the Asian-African region, and sought for the first time to build a collective voice that would command respect amongst the former colonial powers and within the United Nations organization.

In a spirit of cooperation and respect for national sovereignty, participants debated the issue of alignment with either of the Cold War blocs. Although states such as the PRC, Turkey, Pakistan, and the Philippines were aligned, many in attendance took up Nehru's call to move beyond defense arrangements that he viewed as only furthering the interests of the two superpowers. The Conference's final communiqué reflected Nehru's push insofar as it declared universal disarmament to be an absolute necessity for the preservation of peace, and affirmed the principle of "abstention from the use of arrangements of collective self defense to further the interests of the big powers."

Conferees condemned colonialism in all its forms, including Soviet policies in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. To improve their relative position in the world economy, Asian and African nations noted their desire to develop economic links within the region and obtain additional financing from international organizations. Participants also used the language of human rights to draw attention to racialism and cultural suppression. The necessity of tolerance and cultural cooperation in the region to overcome these colonial legacies was underscored.

The final communiqué indicated that the nations of Asia and Africa were capable of articulating their desire for more autonomy collectively and in a manner that was consistent with international diplomatic norms. Western policy-makers were apprehensive about this organized appeal to fully extend established principles of international relations such as non-intervention, and uneasy about new principles such as the equality of races. They questioned the PRC's involvement and feared that policies of non-alignment could become a front for Communist influence. Worries

about an organized push for decolonization and the formation of a "non-white" bloc were also expressed.

While no formal organization was established to implement Bandung's objectives, after the Conference the pace of decolonization increased and Third World solidarity grew. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was established in 1961 to challenge Cold War spheres of influence, and the Joint Declaration of the 77 countries articulated in 1963 at the United Nations fuelled North-South debate about the ways and means to a more equitable world economy. Many Southern leaders appealed to the legacy of collective autonomy when then met in Bandung in April 2005 to mark the Asia-Africa Conference's Golden Jubilee.

Suggested
Reading:

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