

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

The Asia-Africa Conference at 70: Reviving the Bandung Spirit of 1955

By Angguntari C. Sari and Idil Syawfi

SYNOPSIS

The Asia-Africa Conference, also known as the Bandung Conference, held seventy years ago, was transformative and historic. Some policymakers in Indonesia long for a similar conference today. However, the proliferation of inter-governmental groupings to safeguard economic and political interests, and the waging of open conflicts and wars have complicated the efforts of Indonesia and the Asian-African countries from repeating the success of 1955.

COMMENTARY

Seventy years have passed since the Asia-Africa Conference (AAC) was held in Bandung, Indonesia, on April 18, 1955. This historic conference represented a significant attempt by many newly independent countries, in what is now known as the Global South, to claim and demonstrate agency in creating a post-war international order.

The [last major](#) conference commemorating the AAC took place 10 years ago, also in Bandung. It produced [three](#) important documents: the Bandung Message 2015, the Declaration on Strategic Partnership Strengthening Asia and Africa, and the Declaration Regarding Palestine.

The 70th anniversary of the AAC this year did not generate much buzz in the media, so it is safe to say that the festivity celebrated 10 years ago will [not be repeated](#).

Despite the muted celebration, discussions about the relevance of the AAC and challenges in reviving it are alive among some foreign [policymakers](#) and policy [observers](#). Indonesian government officials, such as the former Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa and the current Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Arief H. Oegresono,

speak [favourably](#) about its significance, and cite the Bandung Conference's forward-looking *Dasa Sila*, a set of ten principles promoting world peace and cooperation. The question is, what are the key challenges Indonesia faces in reviving the AAC?

Early Successes of the Asia-Africa Conference

Indonesia [played a pivotal](#) role in the AAC, having co-sponsored and co-organised the Bandung Conference in 1955. The AAC represented an important step towards forming a common Global South position against the prevailing colonial order. Historically, the concept of the [Global South](#) has been used in parallel with that of the Asian-African countries.

The term is used broadly and does not differentiate between states within it, whether regarding political systems, economic circumstances, aspirations, identities, or strategic needs. It has been used as a mobilising tool by the governments and citizens of low- and middle-income countries which share a common experience of political and economic subjugation by the wealthier countries of the "North".

Natalegawa credited the AAC with an almost two-fold increase in independent states from 1955 to 1975. Amitav Acharya, a professor of international relations, called it the first significant instance of the post-colonial countries' collective resistance to Western dominance despite differences among the conference participants.

The AAC gave birth to or inspired several intergovernmental groupings, such as the Non-Aligned Movement, the Group of 77, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Afro-Asian–Latin American Solidarity Conference, and the Indonesia-Africa Forum. However, this meant that the forum for conveying the aspirations and discontentment of the Global South is no longer confined to a single forum such as the AAC.

The Challenge to the Asia-Africa Conference

The proliferation of intergovernmental groupings in the Global South can make it challenging for the AAC to stay relevant. Smaller diplomatic channels are often preferred over a big forum as they offer a quicker, more flexible, and concrete approach to collaboration and involve smaller groups of countries with shared concerns and interests.

Global South countries face international [challenges](#) from [economic protectionism](#), interstate wars, great power competition, climate change, and a lack of clout in global institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations Security Council. They are now coming together to provide a collective response to such challenges. For example, in light of the current threat from economic protectionism started by the United States, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries prefer to work with the [ASEAN](#) and [BRICS](#) countries to build a united front against Trump's tariff threats.

Some ASEAN countries prefer the ASEAN+3 (China, Japan and South Korea) to ensure free, fair, and open trading in Asia. The [ASEAN+3 countries](#) have also

committed to utilising the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which promises to eliminate 90 per cent of tariffs among its member states.

The successor to the AAC, the New Asia Africa Strategic Partnership, is underutilised. Launched 20 years ago in Jakarta, the NAASP was an attempt to institutionalise the interregional cooperation that had been absent following the 1955 AAC. Under this framework, the heads of states/governments were supposed to meet every four years, and the foreign ministers were supposed to meet every two years to bring the rhetoric of Asian-African solidarity to reality. Unfortunately, these meetings never took place. The [NAASP](#) has the potential to address current global challenges such as economic protectionism, but its members prefer to rely on other diplomatic channels.

In addition to the multilateral diplomatic channels, Asian and African countries have negotiated [bilaterally](#) with the US to find agreeable solutions to their trade differences. The reliance on bilateral negotiations stems from the different tariff rates the US imposes on these countries and the concessions each country is willing to make.

Fragmentation Among the Asian-African Countries?

The other challenge facing Asian and African countries is navigating major international conflicts. Two major wars are ongoing in Europe, between Russia and Ukraine, and in the Middle East, between Israel and Hamas. These wars suggest that international peace remains elusive.

On the Palestinian issue, countries of the Global South have addressed this through the NAASP, voicing their support for the Palestinian cause and the urgency of implementing the two-state solution. They have assisted the Palestinians by engaging in various capacity-building programmes through the NAASP framework, such as diplomatic training, construction, women's empowerment, business training, etc.

As for the Russia-Ukraine War, unified condemnation against the Russian invasion of Ukraine by the members of the AAC is lacking. Some Asian countries are [reluctant](#) to condemn Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories it captured. [India](#) and China are among those that abstained from condemning Russia at the [UN General Assembly](#). Indonesia voted to support the resolution but refused to call Russia the aggressor publicly.

The Russia-Ukraine war has put many countries, including Indonesia, in a difficult position. Indonesia's ambiguity might be tied to its dependence on essential commodities from Russia. Indonesia's policy has raised the question of the extent to which countries prioritise material needs over values such as sovereignty. Furthermore, the internal divisions amongst Asian and African countries might hinder them from reviving the AAC and its Bandung principles, the *Dasa Sila*.

Looking Ahead

Asian and-African countries can contribute to solving this conundrum by mobilising the moral and political strength of Asia, Africa, and the rest of the world and highlighting the widening divergence between the Bandung Principles and the current practice of

international relations. Indeed, policymakers from Asian and African countries have argued that the Bandung spirit represents the Global South's normative resilience.

Should the Indonesian government, or any of the Asian-African countries, wish to reignite the Ten Principles laid down in the [final Communiqué](#) of the first AAC, they need to address the internal divisions within the grouping. Addressing the fragmentation within the AAC is as important as bridging the divide between the more industrialised, affluent, and dominant countries of the North and the less wealthy and underdeveloped countries of the South.

Angguntari C. Sari and Idil Syawfi are assistant professors at the International Relations Department at Universitas Katolik Parahyangan, Bandung, Indonesia.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798