



## **Where's the spirit of Bandung?**

*April 28, 2005*

On April 18, 1955, the Bandung Conference opened with fanfare. This was the beginning of a new era: The non-aligned movement was born and communist China made its first step into world affairs. Fifty years later, many things have changed: China is on the centre stage of world affairs and the non-aligned movement is obsolete.

The conference happened a few months after Nehru's visit to Beijing which was the culmination of the Hindi-Chini honeymoon. A few months earlier, Tibet, a nation "verging on independence" (to quote Nehru) had been sacrificed on the altar of the Five Principles.

At the beginning of 1955, the Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa after having spent several months in China to discuss his country's fate with Mao and his comrades. He had received definite assurances from the Great Helmsman that "communist reforms" would not be immediately forced on the Tibetan people.

A few days before the conference, the world media was full of the mishap of the "Kashmir Princess", an Air India Constellation aircraft which crashed in the Indian Ocean on April 1. The plane was on a chartered flight from Hong Kong to Djakarta carrying an advance party of the Chinese delegation to the conference. Eyes turned immediately towards Formosa which was accused of having sabotaged the aircraft. The Cold War was at its peak.

For Nehru, the conference was the culmination of his personal

ambition. He had always wanted to be at the centre of the newly decolonised nations. On his return to India, he conveyed his excitement about the "historic event" to his old friend Edwina Mountbatten: "My dear Edwina, Bandung has been so full of impressions that I have to write at great length about it. It was an exciting conference. The variety of human beings represented there was itself rather fascinating. We had practically every country in Asia represented, and then there were people from the Gold Coast, Sudan, Libya, Liberia and Ethiopia, in addition to Egypt. Merely to see this motley gathering, all assembled there with a semblance of common purposes, was rather a moving sight."

The Indian Prime Minister had nevertheless to admit that everything had not been "shining" at the Indonesian beach resort: "Then, there was the political interplay and backstage intrigues. Quite a number of people there were permanent performers of the UN and they functioned with all due pomposity. A tightly knit group represented, if I may say so, the United States policy. This consisted chiefly of Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq and Lebanon. Also, of course, the Philippines and Thailand. A threat was made out that the conference would be broken up if their viewpoint was not adopted."

The Indian Prime Minister was able to introduce his "friend" Zhou Enlai to the other Asian and African leaders. Later, he declared with false modesty: "At the Bandung Conference, it was not India's purpose... to seek the limelight. Some newspapers, especially in India, naturally played up India's role. We felt, however, that it was better for us to work quietly."

For Nehru, Zhou Enlai was the star performer: "He was the mysterious figure representing a country which was playing an important and perhaps dangerous part in the world, and both, those who were

favourably inclined to him and those who were bitterly opposed, were anxious to see him and measure him." Nehru found him "quiet and restrained" but determined: "Altogether he created a very good impression. Even his opponents melted somewhat and agreed that he was an attractive person."

Though Nehru thought that the conference was a great success, it was not everybody's opinion. It is worth quoting from the minutes of a meeting between Zhou, Nehru and U Nu, the Burmese President : "The Chinese Prime Minister... asked me about the next session of the Asian-African Conference. There was talk of this being held in Egypt. What did I think about it? He also asked me about a proposal to have a liaison office. He thought that some such liaison office might be desirable."

U Nu who was not considered to be in the US camp, immediately retorted that "his mind was quite clear that there should be no kind of organisation or liaison office. Further that if another session of this Conference was held, he had decided not to send any representative of Burma to it... He was firm about it." For Nehru, despite the difficulties and differences of opinion, the net result of this conference was excellent, though according to the minutes "U Nu refused to agree and said that the conference only brought out differences of opinion and even the resolutions passed indicated that." U Nu even remarked: "What was the good of repeating platitudes?"

Though the purpose of the conference was not to discuss "small matters", Tibet was mentioned a couple of times by the Chinese Premier. Once during a conversation with the prime ministers of then Ceylon, Pakistan, Indonesia and Burma, Zhou was asked if it was his intention to push communism into Tibet. Zhou laughed and explained: "There could be no such question as Tibet was very far indeed from

communism. It would be thoroughly impracticable to try to establish a communist regime in Tibet and the Chinese Government had no such wish." He added: "Tibet is an autonomous region of China and Beijing has no desire whatever to interfere with its customs or ways of life. They (the Chinese) have gone to Tibet because it was an integral part of the Chinese state and because it had been used for imperialist intrigues!"

On another occasion, Zhou told his interlocutors: "You cannot introduce socialism or communism into Tibet, you just cannot do it; maybe 50 years, 100 years later they may do it, I do not know." The years following the conference, the Chinese Liberation Army remained busy consolidating its strategic occupation of Tibet, building several roads (one of them is the Aksai Chin road) and airstrips. Obviously, 'reforms' could be postponed for a few years!

Fifty years later, while the Dalai Lama is ready to accept to settle for a "genuine autonomy" within China, "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (or in others words 'capitalism') is forced on the Tibetans. They have say anymore in their own affairs. Zhou's promises and Nehru's ideals today seem dead and gone. "The Wretched of the Earth" are no longer at the center stage - business is!

Apart from the non-aligned movement, the Bandung Conference had many other avatars. In the West, particularly in France and the US, governments were very suspicious of the outcome of "the Third Estate of the World". But the "Bandung Spirit" spread amongst the Leftist intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre or Franz Fanon who believed in the utopian concept of absolute freedom requiring total revolution. Fortunately, most of these violent offshoots died with Mao and his Great Proletarian Revolution.

Fifty years after Bandung, old colonialism has disappeared, but the

disparities remain. In many cases, new tyrants or dictators have replaced the old colonial powers. For millions of people, the hope for a better world still has to materialise, particularly in Africa. Le Monde wrote recently: "Everybody is satisfied with this situation: The local despots who are left alone with their 'deals' and the ex-colonisers happy to take revenge on Bandung and preserve their influence on Africa."

In the meantime the drifting apart of the Asian and African continents accelerates. The 1980s saw the beginning of Asia's resurgence, while Africa continued to sink deeper into poverty and corruption. Where is the Afro-Asiatic solidarity today? A tsunami seems to have washed away Bandung.