Chapter 2

Bandung 1955 – a Moment of Transformation

1 The Asian-African Conference in Bandung

On 18 April 1955, the eyes of the world were on Bandung. In the closing stages of the colonial era and in the early days of the East-West conflict, the heads of state and government of twenty-nine Asian and African countries or colonies met in this Indonesian city, a former Dutch resort, for the Asian-African conference. For the hundreds of Western journalists who made the journey there, the conference presented a colourful spectacle and they constantly emphasized its special atmosphere in their reports. A characteristic example is an article by Margret Boveri in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung:

All of them had “coloured” skin, but the Turks and the Japanese came in European suits, the Arabs in burnouses, the Chinese in Sun Yat Sen uniforms, the Negroes of the Gold Coast in gloriously colourful garments. General Romulo wore a “barong tagalog”, the untucked tropical shirt of the Philippines. Nehru wore the familiar close-fitting white trousers and the long achkan jacket, while the mufti of Jerusalem came in flowing black priestly robes. [...] The diversity and difference [...] in Bandung, however, pertained not just to race, history, customs and religions, with the latter playing a major role in some speeches and in the general atmosphere, whether in relation to Buddha, Allah or Christ. Just as different, but a source of much greater pain, was the state of independence achieved. Some territories were represented solely by refugees or exiles.¹

In political terms, another observer added, communists, anti-communists and neutralists were in attendance.²

At this point in time the People’s Republic of China and North Vietnam were still members of the Soviet camp. Conversely, in the shape of Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, South Vietnam, Ceylon, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Liberia and Japan, a number of participants maintained a pro-Western foreign policy. Some of the countries attending (such as the

Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan) were even members of Western military pacts that non-aligned governments had rejected out of hand, such as SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) or CENTO (Central Treaty Organization). At the time of the conference just a few of the governments that had sent delegates, such as the new Egyptian regime under Gamal Abdel Nasser, had yet to adopt a clear position within the East-West conflict. Another small group of participants, centred on India, Indonesia, Nepal and Burma (Myanmar), had made it clear before the conference that they were unwilling to take sides in the Cold War and wished to remain independent of both the Eastern and Western blocs.

Against this background, a second point constantly highlighted in the reportage on the Bandung conference was that – despite the political and cultural differences underlined in every report – 340 delegates from 29 different countries or colonies had managed to get together and confer collectively. Never before in history, observers emphasized, had the peoples of Asia and Africa attempted to give expression to their common interests in a united way. When the meeting began, however, the participants had not pinned down – and the numerous political observers could not predict – just what this united front might entail or what the consequences of the conference would be. The politicians’ and journalists’ lack of experience with international political conferences of Asian and African states opened up much room for speculation, which both groups filled with a diverse array of interpretations. For example, on 20 April 1955 in the New York Times, Time Magazine advertised its latest issue with a detailed report on the conference, emphasizing its political significance and declaring its intention to put the event into perspective:

Chou En-Lai, U Nu, Jawaharlal Nehru, Charles Malik, Pham Van Dong, Prince Wan Waithayakon, Carlos Romulo, Fatin Rustu Zorlu, Mohammed Ali, Gamal Abdel Nasser. This may well be a list your grandchildren will have to learn by heart. Let time tell you what’s behind and what may grow out of the Afro-Asian conference at Bandung, Indonesia.

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