

The Road from Bandung: India and Africa in the Evolving Global Order



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Must Past Be Prologue?

The beginning of independent India's engagement with continental Africa – two regions bound by centuries of shared cultures and aspirations – can be ascribed a specific origin in time and space: April 18, 1955 in the Indonesian city of Bandung. The First Afro-Asian Conference there was modern India's first major international outreach activity.

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's initiative and articulation of India's global goals in Bandung left an indelible imprint on how India chose to engage the rest of the world for the first fifty years as an independent state. Indeed, much of India's foreign policy between 1947 to 1989 ("The First Republic," in C. Raja Mohan's terminology¹) germinated at the Bandung Conference:

¹ C. Raja Mohan, *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence* (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2015), 2

non-alignment, an aversion to Great Powers politics, and internationalist-activist positions driven by a putative ‘moral force’ India sought to leverage based on its unique history of mass non-violent political struggles. Nehru at Bandung succinctly summarized what would become India’s reflexive foreign policy position for the next forty years when he said: “If I join any of these big groups I lose my identity”.²

Nehru’s identity-based non-alignment and a concomitant distrust of security pacts (“I submit to you, every pact has brought insecurity and not security to the countries which have entered into them”³) would dominate Indian international relations discourse for much of its modern history. And yet, a fraught domestic economy and polity would do little to lend substance to the rhetoric of international solidarity. While this rhetoric did help India win friends at an ideological level, in Africa and elsewhere, “there was little material substance in India’s bilateral relations with these countries”⁴, and certainly not to the extent expectations would bely. Bilateral relations between India and Africa – with some notable exceptions – would continue to be driven by optics and rhetoric till about seven years ago with an economic renaissance in both regions. A signal era of cooperation would dawn in 2008 with the first India-Africa Summit in New Delhi, followed by another successful second Summit in Addis Ababa in 2011. The third Summit this month would be the largest of its kind, with 42 African heads of state convening again in New Delhi.

Autonomously interdependent

It is important to situate the emerging India-Africa partnership in the interlinked contexts of a faltering global economy and a significant shift in the international governance order. It can be argued that the global economic crisis of 2008 exposed deep structural problems with Western economies – excessive financialization and regulatory gaps – and the toothlessness of Bretton Woods financial institutions in dealing with the same. While OECD economies have registered uninspiring output growth over the last decade, India and African economies has registered annual GDP growth upward of 6 percent. China’s spectacular rise, the emergence of BRICS, and creation of new – and focussed – multilateral establishments like Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) points to a geoeconomic order very different from the Western liberal-internationalist one that has dominated the global multilateral discourse over the last seventy years.

The writing on the wall has never been clearer. While the political and economic order fostered by the US and European powers continue to hobble, a resurgent Asia and Africa has the potential to significantly shape ideas around how nations can cooperate without sacrificing their autonomy; how

2 Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s Speech to Bandung Conference Political Committee, 1955. Reprinted in G. M. Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference* (Cornell University Press, 1956), pp. 64-72.

3 *ibid.*

4 Raja Mohan, *Modi’s World*, 5

nations can ensure their self-interest without sacrificing their sovereignty; how nations can pursue their commercial interests worldwide without dictating terms. Most importantly, it is up to India and Africa to conceptualize a world order which is driven by the logic of cooperation going beyond the optics of token gestures and the empty internationalist rhetoric of solidarity.

How might this emerging world order contribute to the mitigation of common challenges faced by both regions? And how might the two regions – in turn – mould the discourse around global governance in the 21st century? Consider development finance as a case-in-point. In 1955, development cooperation was driven by the paradigm of international aid. Redolent of patronage, the notion of aid – in almost all cases, from a Western power to an African or Asian nation – would dominate how western economies chose to interact with the “Third World”. It is safe to say that this problematic paradigm has played itself out. Not only does most Western economies find themselves not able – due to their own domestic economic compulsions and increasing populism in their local polity – to “aid” other states, but the notable rise of the global South obviates any obvious need for handouts from the outside.

In big-ticket areas like infrastructure finance, the West finds itself increasingly irrelevant, more unable than unwilling to meaningfully contribute and lead. Emerging institutions like AIIB and the NDB – working in tandem with other Southern multilaterals like the African Development Bank – have the financial wherewithal and the political muscle to fill in gaps institutions like the IMF have not been able to fill in the past seventy years. Parenthetically, to be fair to institutions like the IMF, they were created to support a very specific set of needs post Second World War; the necessity for large scale investments to support burgeoning economies in the global South was certainly not one of them.

It is currently fashionable – both on the Left and the Right – to blame globalization, understood in the sense of economic interdependence and cultural synthesis, for domestic ills. And yet, a globalized world bound by competitive trade and a plethora of international institutions led by established and emerging powers is the best guarantor of political autonomy for African states and India in the long run. How this configuration can be best leveraged by both regions to their individual advantage as well as bilaterally will become one of the defining questions of the India-Africa partnership.

Towards a “Common Concerns—Common Calls” paradigm

There are two immediate challenges both regions must confront: climate change and the rapidly deteriorating security condition in the Middle East. Both challenges must be situated in the context of the evolving global order. The fact that both regions must address climate change goes without saying. What is not obvious – and this holds for Africa as well as India -- is how to do so without making fundamental structural changes to economies in midst of modernization. Similarly, the deepening crisis in the Middle East is spilling off to North Africa and will almost surely – absent the situation there improving rapidly – impact India’s economy and security.

The crisis in the Middle East – whether it is the mega-insurgency called the Islamic State or Iraq and Syria – is a relic of a dysfunctional politico-economic order there. Similarly, the discourse around climate change has, traditionally, been shaped by Western powers. It is incumbent upon Africa and India to play a much larger role on both issues, commensurate to the impact of both on the respective regions.

The success of the Conference of Parties in Paris later this year depends on whether both regions can successfully articulate their economic aspirations within the framework of equity in common but differentiated responsibilities. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi has rightly pointed out, talk about climate change should also be about “climate justice”. This holds true as much for India as for Africa. The outcome of Paris must be shaped by both regions speaking in one voice, situating climate change within the broader matrix of social and economic goals.

The chaos in the Middle East – which is quickly turning into a Great Powers play – is another example of an area of common concern; a disruptive Middle East will add to the ongoing volatility in commodity markets, affect trade, and threaten to engulf the entire Indian Ocean Region. India’s and continental Africa’s shared concerns around transnational terrorism should go beyond sympathizing with concerns of Western powers and lead to an actionable strategy that seeks to protect Indo-African interests. India’s renewed UN peacekeeping commitments in Africa should be welcomed. In turn, African leaders should realize that an expanded UN Security Council with India as a permanent member paves the way for a greater Indian role and leadership which Africans, in turn, can leverage to their benefit. It is vital that both regions explicitly develop a “common concerns—common calls” paradigm that takes as a given the fairly obvious point that shared challenges should be met with actions in concert.

The Dragon in the Room

Where does China fit into all this? After all, if we speak of an emerging world order that transcends or co-opts Western leadership, we must keep in mind that this was largely due to a resurgent China asserting itself economically, diplomatically, and militarily. Indians and Chinese are active competitors when it comes to courting business in Africa. Would a greater African partnership with India mean antagonizing China? Would larger Chinese presence in Africa translate to a smaller Indian footprint there?

Not necessarily. The Indian economist and strategist Sanjay Baru makes an astute point when he says that while the logic of geopolitics is essentially zero-sum (one country’s gain is the other’s loss) this is not the case with geoeconomics which is, generally, a positive-sum activity. For one, India and China are not natural antagonists; to suggest otherwise in the context of a partnership with Africa is to paint both countries as neo-colonizers. A confident Africa could – and should – leverage the competition between India and China to its benefit. A concrete case-in-point is provided by the Chinese Maritime Silk Road Initiative which seeks to connect Africa, China, and India. A three-way partnership along these lines has the potential to vastly expand global value

chains and feed the most economically dynamic region of the world.

Making up for lost time

That Africa and India were natural partners and allies was well known to the founding fathers of the Indian Republic; the Bandung Conference sixty years ago was testament to Africa's place in the Indian worldview. The vagaries of the Cold War, a dismal economy, and a fragmented polity all translated into a situation where India's commitments to Africa didn't always translate to concrete improvements in bilateral ties. By and large, India is back on track sixty years later. An Africa whose time has come has also necessitated the much-needed mindset change in New Delhi. The Summit this month is a very significant message to the world that both regions, once united only in problems, can – and will – shape their destinies together. Perhaps more significantly, as some of the fastest growing economies of the world, they can also shape the global governance order. It, then, behoves both regions to stop the search for lost time and, instead, make up for it. The current volume lays out the promises for a renewed partnership and the challenges this partnership must address.