



“The Strength of Our Weakness”: Bandung at 70

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ABSTRACT

The year 2025 marked many well-known anniversaries of the nuclear age. Unbeknownst to many, it also marked the 70th anniversary of the 1955 Bandung Conference, when delegates and heads of state from twenty-nine Asian and African countries, representing more than half of the world's population, convened in Bandung, Indonesia. This unprecedented gathering of newly independent states defied contemporary expectations by identifying the nuclear-armed Cold War as the greatest threat to their political, economic and cultural development, claiming the cause of nuclear disarmament as a matter of shared concern for all countries. This commentary recounts the significance of the Bandung meeting for subsequent developments in multilateral nuclear diplomacy, including the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961, whose members proved central to securing the inclusion of Article VI disarmament commitments in the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the negotiations that led to the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). As of November 2025, the TPNW has been signed by ninety-five countries and acceded to by another four countries, constituting a global majority whose stance reflects the long legacy of non-aligned nuclear multilateralism inaugurated at Bandung.

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Introduction

The world in 2025 was given no shortage of opportunities to reflect on the history of the atomic age. This year marked the 80th anniversary of the first test of a nuclear weapon, the 80th anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the first threats to use nuclear weapons, and the 80th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. Many people know enough of these events to accept them as being of world historical significance. Fewer are aware that 2025 also marks the 70th anniversary of the Bandung Conference of Asian and African States, an event seldom recognized for its importance in world history and the course of nuclear diplomacy.

When leaders and representatives of twenty-nine Asian and African states convened in Bandung, Indonesia, on 18 April 1955, it was a gathering unique in the history of world affairs. Hosted by the five-nation grouping known as the Colombo Powers – Burma, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – the newly independent countries represented at the Asian-African Conference sought to put forward a new vision for the role of the postcolonial world in international politics, at a time when the overriding pressures of the Cold War threatened to make of no effect the hard-fought independence of the recently decolonized nations.

The host of the conference, President Sukarno of Indonesia, who had led his country to independence from 350 years of Dutch colonial rule, welcomed delegates by marking the meeting's unprecedented nature, saying: “This is the first intercontinental conference of colored peoples in the history of mankind . . . It is a new departure in the history of the world that leaders of Asian and African peoples can meet together in their own countries to discuss and deliberate upon matters of common concern . . . Our nations and countries are no longer colonies. Now we are free, sovereign and independent. We are again masters in our own house”.¹

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¹Text of the Speech by President Soekarno of the Republic of Indonesia at the Opening of the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, on April 18, 1955 (Asian-African Conference 1955, 1).

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The national delegations that participated at Bandung represented a total of 1.5 billion people, more than half of the world's population in 1955. Their governments, numbering well over a third of the seventy-six existing member states of the United Nations, were as diverse with respect to their political systems as their societies were with respect to race, religion, creed and class. The famed American author Richard Wright, who attended the conference as a reporter, described it in his book *The Color Curtain* as “a meeting of almost all of the human race living in the main geopolitical center of gravity of the earth” and noted that those in attendance included “princes and paupers, Communists and Christians, Leftists and Rightists, Buddhists and Democrats, in short just anybody and everybody who lived in Asia and Africa” (Wright 1994, 12).

The Bomb as a Matter of Common Concern

Uniting the sprawling crop of new nation-states gathered at Bandung was their experience of colonialism and their desire to chart an autonomous course of economic, political and cultural development. The nuclear-armed Cold War was also prominent among the “matters of common concern” laid out by Sukarno in his opening remarks. For Sukarno, the intensifying confrontation between the rival blocs signified that “Man today is corroded and made bitter by fear. Fear of the future, fear of the hydrogen bomb, fear of ideologies . . . The political skill of man has been far outstripped by his technical skill, and what he has made he cannot be sure of controlling” (Asian-African Conference 1955, 2).

Despite the daunting problems they faced, Sukarno exhorted those present at Bandung not to approach their work in a spirit of fear or discouragement, but with confidence that “We can inject the voice of reason into world affairs and mobilize all the spiritual, all the moral, all the political strength of Asia and Africa on the side of peace” (Asian-African Conference 1955, 3).

Still, the sense of looming crisis was palpable. Less than a month before delegates arrived at Bandung, the New York Times reported on the willingness of the Eisenhower administration to use atomic weapons even in a limited war against the communist-led People's Republic of China (Levier 1955). The president's top military advisors reportedly felt confident that the Chinese regime would launch an invasion of the islands of Quemoy and Matsu during or immediately after the proceedings of the Afro-Asian Conference. Ultimately, no such invasion materialized, and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai instead used his platform at Bandung to propose direct talks with the United States for the peaceful settlement of the Taiwan Straits conflict. The United States eventually accepted the offer.²

Defying expectations was a theme of Bandung. The Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Sir John Kotelawala, one of the chief architects of the conference, in his welcome address took on the issue of nuclear weapons directly. He declared “A critical juncture has arrived not only in the history of the Afro-Asian region but the history of mankind. Not merely those nations now menaced by the immediate threat of war, but with them, and because of them, the entire human race stands on the brink of chaos, ready at the least miscalculation or lapse of vigilance to plunge forever into [the] abyss”.³

Since the arsenals and policies of the existing nuclear-armed states (the United States, the Soviet Union and Britain) threatened not only themselves but all countries and people, Kotelawala, as the leader of one of the smallest states present at the conference, called on the assembled delegations to regard the task of universal disarmament as a necessary priority, even and especially, for the “unarmed”. The nuclear-weapon states and their allies, he said, were imprisoned by “The old heresy . . . that if you want peace you must prepare for war”. They had institutionalized their suspicions of each other's power to such a degree that “Today, the nations are indeed prepared for war – and further than ever from the prospect of peace. Their strength brings no security, their armaments no defence”.⁴

Kotelawala turned the reigning logic of the arms race on its head, making the case that the unarmed had the ability to make themselves heard on the subject of peace in the nuclear age, asserting that “We have . . . something which the great and mighty lack. That something is the strength of our weakness – the ability which our very defencelessness confers to offer ourselves as mediators in the dispute between the giants . . .

²Sino-U.S. Ambassadorial Talks, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjls/3604_665547/202405/t20240531_11367579.html.

³Opening Speech by Sir John Kotelawala, Prime Minister of Ceylon, on April 18, 1955 (Asian-African Conference 1955, 7).

⁴Opening Speech by Sir John Kotelawala, Prime Minister of Ceylon, on April 18, 1955 (Asian-African Conference 1955, 7).

which, if fought out to an end, will deluge the world in blood and leave the world infected with atomic radiation for generations yet unborn or never to be born”.⁵

While American press coverage at the time of the conference was relatively sparse, this statement by Kotelawala made its way into a June 1955 article published by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Written by the prominent American pacifist, civil rights activist and anti-nuclear campaigner Homer Jack, who attended Bandung as an observer, the essay reported on the “keen interest” of one of the journal’s co-founders, the late Albert Einstein, in the Bandung Conference, about which the famous physicist was reported to have sent suggestions to Prime Minister Nehru of India (Einstein passed on the opening day of the conference, and news of his death arrived at Bandung the following morning, drawing expressions of tribute from both Nehru and Zhou Enlai). Jack further detailed some of the most ambitious proposals by Bandung delegates for technical cooperation on nuclear energy and means of studying the large-scale environmental effects of nuclear testing (Jack 1955).

For the Colombo Powers, the Cold War nuclear arms race was the ultimate engine of crisis, and only those who lacked the power to feed this engine could hope to act as brakes before it was too late. The host countries set out a core goal of the conference to be the achievement of a consensus position among Asian and African states on the question of nuclear disarmament. In this, they succeeded. The Bandung Conference’s Final Communiqué “viewed with deep concern the present state of international tension with its danger of an atomic world war” (Asian-African Conference 1955, 34). To address this threat, the twenty-nine countries made the following unequivocal call for a global ban on nuclear weapons:

The conference considered that disarmament and the prohibition of production, experimentation and use of nuclear and thermonuclear weapons of war are imperative to save mankind and civilization from the fear and prospect of wholesale destruction. It considered that the nations of Asia and Africa assembled here have a duty toward humanity and civilization to proclaim their support for the prohibition of these weapons and to appeal to nations principally concerned and to world opinion to bring about such disarmament and prohibition. (Asian-African Conference 1955, 34)

Alongside this declaration, the conference’s Final Communiqué expressed the commitment of participating states to deepening their cooperation along a broad front of economic, cultural and diplomatic engagement, while maintaining their rejection of bloc politics.

From Bandung to Belgrade

The political principles and understandings forged at the Bandung Conference led in 1961 to the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), established on the occasion of its first summit in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. The twenty-five countries that attended the First Non-Aligned Summit were: Afghanistan, Algeria, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cuba, Cyprus, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Mali, Morocco, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, Yemen and Yugoslavia. Today, the NAM includes 120 member states out of the 193 member states of the United Nations, and notes that its work continues to draw on the “Bandung Principles” of 1955 (Non-Aligned Movement 2024).

An early example of Bandung’s ambitious program for disarmament advocacy came in the form of a November 1961 UN General Assembly resolution (1653, XVI) declaring the use of nuclear weapons to be contrary to existing international law. Sponsored by Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Indonesia, among others in the NAM, the resolution echoed the view expressed at Bandung, declaring that “The use of nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons is a war directed not against an enemy or enemies alone but also against mankind in general, since the peoples of the world not involved in such a war will be subjected to all the evils generated by the use of such weapons”.⁶

The Non-Aligned Movement continued to press for progress on nuclear disarmament throughout the 1960s, including through the negotiations that would lead to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). As Mohamed Shaker notes in his three-volume negotiating history of the NPT, pressure from non-aligned countries was instrumental in compelling the nuclear-weapon states to include in the Treaty a nuclear

⁵Opening Speech by Sir John Kotelawala, Prime Minister of Ceylon, on April 18, 1955 (Asian-African Conference 1955, 8).

⁶United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Declaration on the Prohibition of the Use of Nuclear and Thermo-nuclear Weapons (1961) UN Doc A/RES/1653(XVI). [https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/1653%20\(XVI\)](https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/1653%20(XVI)).

disarmament obligation; under Article VI, all states commit themselves to “effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament” (Shaker 1980, 567).

In the immediate wake of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union appeared to herald the end of bloc rivalries in world politics and thus the obsolescence of a diplomacy of “non-alignment”. The NAM, however, continued to pursue its disarmament agenda. Throughout the 1990s, the movement increased its pressure on nuclear-weapon states to uphold their disarmament commitments, building international momentum for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Legal Milestones in Non-Aligned Disarmament Advocacy

In 1993, non-aligned countries led a successful initiative to secure a World Health Organization directive calling on the International Court of Justice to issue an advisory ruling on the legality of using a nuclear weapon in combat. Later that same year, the NAM fixed its sights on obtaining a General Assembly resolution intended to broaden the scope of the Court’s ruling to include the threat of nuclear use. The effort failed to come to a vote following fierce opposition from the United States, Britain and France.

The “Mutiny on the Nuclear Bounty”, as a December 1993 article in *The Nation* termed the episode, “detonate[d] a rethinking of the whole nuclear business, which in turn force[d] a rethinking of the whole cold war power structure”, according to Mexican Ambassador Miguel Marin-Bosch (Schapiro 1993). For his part, Australia’s ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Butler, observed that, even though the Cold War was nominally over, “There is no post-cold war order. The first step to getting there is the elimination of nuclear weapons” (Schapiro 1993).

The NAM effort succeeded a year later. In 1994, the UN General Assembly voted to ask the World Court for an advisory opinion on the question: “Is the threat or use of nuclear weapons in any circumstance permitted under international law?”⁷ The answer came on 8 July 1996, when the International Court of Justice ruled that the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons “would generally be contrary” to established international law and in particular to the “principles and rules of humanitarian law”.⁸ It also noted that “if the use of force itself in a given case was illegal – for whatever reason – the threat to use such force would likewise be illegal”.

The Court highlighted a legal gap, concluding that so far “There is in neither customary nor conventional international law any comprehensive and universal prohibition of the threat or use of nuclear weapons as such”.⁹ It also offered its opinion on Article VI of the NPT, namely that “There exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control”.¹⁰

The Court’s opinion reinforced a strategy of disarmament advocacy, shared among many NAM states and others, built around the humanitarian consequences of nuclear war and international law. In 2017, these efforts led to the UN General Assembly’s negotiation and adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).¹¹ The TPNW entered into force on 22 January 2021, and as of November 2025, has been signed by ninety-five countries and acceded to by an additional four countries (Kemelova 2025). This TPNW group of ninety-nine countries – already a global majority and likely to grow – is now ten times larger than the group of nine nuclear-armed states.

Overwhelmingly from the Global South’s non-aligned countries, TPNW states are working to put into practice one of the core aspirations that motivated the Bandung Conference: that countries that shared a common experience of the horrors of colonialism would use their independence to pursue peace on the international stage. This goal has now taken on greater urgency than ever before in the eyes of many countries, as the nuclear-armed states continue to modernize and expand their arsenals, while exchanging provocations over the conflicts in Ukraine, South Asia and the Middle East.

⁷UNGA General and Complete Disarmament (1994) UN Doc A/RES/49/75, 15–16. <https://docs.un.org/en/a/res/49/75>.

⁸*Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Advisory Opinion) [1996] ICJ Rep 226. <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/95/095-19960708-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf>.

⁹*Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Advisory Opinion) [1996] ICJ Rep 226, 266. <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/95/095-19960708-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf>.

¹⁰*Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Advisory Opinion) [1996] ICJ Rep 226, 267. [divhttps://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/95/095-19960708-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf](https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/95/095-19960708-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf).

¹¹Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (adopted 7 July 2017, entered into force 22 January 2021) 3370 UNTS. https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/2017/07/20170707%2003-42%20PM/Ch_XXVI_9.pdf.

The global majority's growing support for the TPNW can in no small part be traced to what happened 70 years ago at Bandung. The ensuing tradition of nonaligned multilateralism inaugurated during that short week in 1955 has been a persistent force shaping global nuclear diplomacy from the earliest years of the era of decolonization. Today, the memory of the Bandung Conference presents a needed corrective to mainstream recollections of the Cold War and its associated legacy of confrontation. As Homer Jack concluded in the pages of *the Bulletin* in 1955: "The very fact that these leaders met is of vast importance to their peoples and to all peoples. Conscious of history, the delegates adjourned hopeful that history will, in the end, become conscious of Bandung" (Jack 1955, 222).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

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