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From Bandung (1955) to 2015: Old and New Challenges for the States, the Nations and the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America

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Third World Forum, Dakar, Senegal

This paper reminds us what was really Bandung and non-alignment, which the author understands as having been in its time “non-alignment on the imperialist pattern of globalisation” of the time. Today, again, states and societies of the global South are the victims of the pattern of imperialist unipolar globalisation of our time. Therefore, the challenge is again to construct a South solidarity against globalisation, creating the conditions for a polycentric world order. This is “reviving the spirit of Bandung.”

Keywords: globalisation; multipolar global system; non-alignment; spirit of Bandung

1. Bandung and the Movement of Non-aligned Countries (NAM)

The Conference of Bandung declared the will of the Asian and African nations to reconquer their sovereignty and complete their independence through a process of authentic independent consistent development to the benefit of all labouring classes. In 1955, most of the Asian and Middle East countries had reconquered their sovereignty in the aftermath of World War II, while movements of liberation were in struggle elsewhere, in Africa in particular to achieve that goal.

As recalled by the leaders of Bandung, the conference was the first international meeting of “non-European” (so called “coloured”) nations whose rights had been denied by the historical colonialism/imperialism of Europe, the United States and Japan. In spite of the differences in size, cultural and religious backgrounds and historical trajectories, these nations rejected together the pattern of colonial and semi-colonial globalisation that the Western powers had built to their exclusive benefit. But Bandung also declared the will of Asian and African nations to complete the reconquest of their sovereignty by moving into a process of authentic and accelerated inward looking development which is the condition for their participating to the shaping of the world system on equal footing with the states of the historic imperialist centres.

As President Soekarno said in his address, the conference associated countries, which had made different choices with respect to the ways and means to achieve their developmental targets. Some (China, North Vietnam, North Korea) had chosen what they named “the socialist road” inspired by Marxism. Others conceived national and popular specific ways combined with social progressive reforms (what could be named “national/popular” projects; Soekarno’s Indonesia, Nehru’s India, Nasser’s Egypt and later many other countries are examples). All these countries gave priority to the diversification and industrialisation of their economies, moving out of their confinement to remain producers/exporters of agricultural and mining commodities. All of them considered that the state had to assume a major responsibility in the control

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of the process. They also considered that their targets (in particular their moving into the industrial era) could eventually conflict with the dominant logics of the global system; but they were in a position that allowed them to successfully compel the global system to adjust to their demands. Yet a number of countries that joined NAM did not adopt a definite position with respect to that matter, and considered the possible pursuing of development in the frame of the deployment of the global system.

What ought to be recalled here is that all the countries of Asia and Africa benefited from the very existence of NAM, whatever had been their choices. Political solidarity initiated by Bandung paid off in economic terms. A country like Gabon, for instance, would not have been able to capture a good part of the oil rent if not for OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) and NAM which made it possible. The stress was therefore put on that political solidarity, and NAM countries supported unanimously the struggles (including armed struggles) of the peoples of remaining colonies (Portuguese colonies, Zimbabwe), and against apartheid in South Africa and occupied Palestine.

The history of NAM until the 1980s has been the history of internal political and social struggles within each country precisely around the axis as defined above: what is an alternative efficient strategy for political, social and economic meaningful development? These struggles combined with the conflicts operating in the international arena, mainly the East/West conflict. Yet in no way should the initiatives taken in Bandung and their deployment by NAM be considered as a misadventure of the Cold War, as presented by the Western media, yesterday and today. The Soviet Union sided with NAM and to various degrees supported the struggles conducted in Asia and Africa, particularly in response to the Western economic and sometimes military aggressions. The reason for that is simply that the Soviet Union and China were also excluded from the eventual benefit of participating in a truly balanced pluricentric pattern of global system. On the contrary, the Western powers fought NAM by all means. Therefore, the view expressed by the Western media that NAM has lost its meaning with the end of the Cold War, the breakdown of Soviet Union in 1990 and the move of China out of the Maoist road, is meaningless: the challenge that unequal globalisation represents remains. Bandung and NAM were fought by the imperialist countries. Coups d'état were organised by local reactionary forces, supported by foreign interventions that put an end to a number of Bandung inspired state systems and national popular experiences (in Indonesia, Egypt, Mali, Ghana and many other countries). The growing internal contradictions specific to the concept of historical Soviet and Maoist socialisms, as well as the contradictions specific to each of the various national popular experiences prepared the ground for the counter offensive of the imperialist triad (the United States, Europe, Japan).

The achievements during the Bandung and NAM era have been tremendous and historically positive, whatever have been their limits and shortcomings. The view that Bandung failed, as expressed in the Western media, is simply nonsense. Yet what ought to be said in this respect is that Bandung and NAM's systems, in spite of their achievements, were not able to move beyond their limits and therefore gradually lost breath, eroded and finally lost their content.

2. A World without Bandung and NAM (1980–2010)

In Algiers in 1974, NAM formulated a consistent and reasonable programme (the New International Economic Order) that invited the countries of the North to adjust to the needs requested for the pursuing of the development in the South. These proposals were entirely rejected by the Western powers. The targets of the counter offensive of the imperialist triad were formulated in 1981 at the Cancun G7 meeting, when Reagan declared that, "we know what they need better than they do themselves." He meant unilateral structural adjustments, dismantling of the national

productive systems, privatisations and opening to financial plunder and pillage of natural resources, i.e., the “Washington Consensus.”

No need to recall the tragic consequences associated to the deployment of the new imperialist global order for the societies of the three continents: on the one hand, the super exploitation of cheap labour in delocalised industries controlled by multinationals and sub-contracting locally owned industries and services, and on the other, the plunder of the local natural resources to the exclusive benefit of maintaining affluence and waste in the societies of the North. These resources do not consist only of oil, gas and minerals, but include growingly agricultural land (“land grabbing”), forest, water, atmosphere and sun. In that respect, the ecological dimension of the challenge has now come to the forefront. Such a pattern of “lumpen development” has generated a dramatic social disaster: growing poverty and exclusion, transfer of rural dispossessed to shanty towns and miserable informal survival activities, unemployment, particularly of youth, oppression of women, etc. National consistent productive systems, which had started to be constructed in the Bandung era, are systematically dismantled, and embryos of reasonable public services (health, education, housing, transport) destroyed.

Protest against these miseries is not enough. The processes that have created these regressions need to be understood, and no efficient response to the challenge can be formulated without a rigorous analysis of the transformations of capitalism in the centres of the system, i.e., the processes of concentration of capital and centralisation of its control, of financialisation. In such circumstances, the conventional means of measuring development have lost meaning: a society stricken by this pattern of lumpen development can still enjoy in some cases high rates of growth, based on the plunder of resources, associated to a trickle down effect restricted to the enrichment of a small minority. Simultaneously, the centralised control of the productive system by financialised monopoly capital has resulted in its control of political life by oligarchies, annihilating the meaning of representative democracy.

Yet, in the frame of that global disaster, some societies of the South have been able to take advantage of the new global order of deepened globalisation, and even seem to be “emerging” in that frame as successful exporters of manufactured goods. These successes feed in their turn the illusion that such a process, respectful of the fundamentals of capitalist accumulation and globalised markets, can be maintained. An analysis of the growing conflicts between these successful emerging economies and the imperialist triad (over the access to natural resources in particular) needs to be considered, as well as an analysis of the internal imbalances associated to these processes.

The social disaster produces a no less dramatic political disaster. NAM had succeeded in the past to maintain a degree of polycentrism in the management of international politics, which has been destroyed by globalised neoliberalism. The legitimacy of the international community represented by the UN (United Nations), NAM, G77 plus China, has been abolished to the benefit of a self appointed so called “international community” restricted to the G7 and a small number of selected “friends” (in particular Saudi Arabia and Qatar, not exactly models of democratic republics!). Financial, economic and eventually military interventions are orchestrated by this so-called “international community,” denying again the sovereign rights of all the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

3. Towards a Revival of the Bandung Spirit and Reconstruction of a Front of Countries Non-aligned on Current Globalisation

The first wave of revival of states and nations of Asia and Africa which shaped major changes in the history of humankind organised itself in the Bandung spirit in the frame of countries non-aligned on colonialism and neo-colonialism, the pattern of globalisation at that time. Now, the

same nations, as well as those of Latin America and the Caribbean, are challenged by neoliberal globalisation, which is no less imbalanced by nature. Therefore, they must unite to face the challenge successfully as they did in the past. They will, in that perspective, feed a new wave of revival and progress of the three continents.

NAM united together nations of Asia and Africa only. States of Latin America, with the exception of Cuba, abstained from joining the organisation. Reasons for that failure have been recorded: 1) Latin American countries were formally independent since the beginning of the nineteenth century and did not share the struggles of Asian and African nations to reconquer their sovereignty; 2) the US domination of the continent through the Monroe doctrine was not challenged by any of the state powers in office (except Cuba); the Organisation of American States included the master (the United States) and was qualified for that reason by Cuba as “the Ministry of Colonies of the United States”; 3) the ruling classes, of “European extract,” looked at Europe and the United States as models to be copied. For those reasons, the attempt to build a “tricontinental” did not succeed: it was joined only by movements in struggle (often armed struggle), but rejected by all state powers on the continent at that time.

That has changed: 1) the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have recently established their own organisation (CELAC, Community of Latin American and Caribbean States), excluding the United States and Canada, and therefore formally rejected the Monroe doctrine; 2) the new popular movements have created a consciousness of the plurinational character of their societies (Indian American, European extract, African ancestors); 3) these movements have also initiated strategies of liberation from the yoke of neoliberalism, with some success that may surpass in some respects what has been achieved elsewhere in the South. Therefore the revival of NAM must now include them and become a tricontinental front.

The axis around which states and nations of the three continents should organise their solidarity in struggle can be formulated as building a common front against neoliberal unbalanced imperialist globalisation.

We have seen that the states which met in Bandung hold different views with respect to the ways and means to defeat imperialist domination and advance in the construction of their societies, yet they were able to overcome those differences in order to face successfully the common challenge. Same today. Ruling powers in the three continents as well as popular movements in struggle differ to a wide extent on the ways and means to face the renewed same challenge.

In some countries (China in particular), “sovereign” projects are developed which associate active state policies aiming at constructing systematically a national integrated, consistent, modern industrial productive system, supported by an aggressive export capacity. Views with respect to the degree, format and eventual regulation of opening to foreign capital and financial flows of all kinds (foreign direct investments, portfolio investments, speculative financial investments) differ from country to country and from time to time. Policies pursued with respect to the access to land and other natural resources also offer a wide spectrum of different choices and priorities.

We find similar differences in the programmes and actions of popular movements in the struggle against the power systems in office. Priorities cover a wide spectrum: democratic rights, social rights, ecological care, gender, economic policies, access of peasants to land, etc. In some few cases, attempts are made to bring together those different demands into a common strategic plan of action. In most cases, little has been achieved in that perspective.

Such a wide variety of situations and attitudes do create problems for all, and may even generate conflicts between states and/or between partners in struggle.

4. Advancing the Construction of Alternative Sovereign, Popular and Democratic Projects in the Three Continents

We should start by drawing lessons from the historical experiences of NAM countries, which attempted to build national/popular inward looking economies. The major shortcoming in all these experiences (as well as in the socialist experiences of the twentieth century) lies in their disregard for the fundamental importance of inventing ways of ensuring the progressive advance of higher forms of democracy, which condition in their turn any meaningful efficient management in both the economic and political fields. This shortcoming generated depoliticisation, which was engulfed by the rise of passeist illusions that constitute a major obstacle to the required alternative based on a renewed concept of a “sovereign project” in keeping with the challenges of our contemporary world.

The very notion of the “sovereign project” must be a subject for discussion. Given the level of penetration of transnational investments in all sectors and in all countries, one cannot avoid the question: what kind of sovereignty is being referred to?

The global conflict for access to natural resources is one of the main determinants of the dynamics of contemporary capitalism. The dependence of the North for numerous resources and the growing demands of China constitute a challenge for South America, Africa and the Middle East, which are particularly well endowed with resources and shaped by the history of the pillage of those resources. Can we develop national and regional policies in these domains as the beginning of a rational and equitable global management of resources that would benefit all peoples? Can we develop new relations between China and the countries of the South that subscribe to such a perspective, linking access to these resources by China with support for the industrialisation of the countries concerned (that which the so-called “donors” of the OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development] refuse to do)?

An independent national policy remains fragile and vulnerable if it does not have real national and popular support, which requires it to be based on economic and social policies that ensure that the popular classes are beneficiaries of “development.” That is the condition of the social stability required for the success of the sovereign project against the political de-stabilization of the imperialist project. We must therefore examine the nature of relationships between existing or potential sovereign projects and the social bases of the system of power: a national, democratic and popular project, or an illusory project of national capitalism?

Can non-continental countries develop sovereign projects? What are their limits? What forms of regional coming together could facilitate such progress?

Preparations for the future, even if far away, begin today. What model of society do we want? Founded on what principles? The destructive competition between individuals or the affirmation of the advantages of solidarity? The liberty that gives legitimacy to inequality or the liberty associated with equality? The exploitation of the planet’s resources without regard for the future or by taking into consideration the precise measure of what is needed for the reproduction of the conditions of life on the planet? The future must be seen as the realization of a higher stage of universal human civilisation, not merely a more “fair” or more “efficient” model of civilisation as we know it (the “modern” civilisation of capitalism). In order to avoid the risk of staying on the ground of wishful thinking, a remake of the utopian socialism of the nineteenth century, we should ensure answers on the following topics: 1) What anthropological and sociological scientific knowledge today interrogates the “utopias” formulated in the past? 2) What is our new scientific knowledge about the conditions for the reproduction of life on the planet?

In summary: is the target catching up with the affluent societies as they are today, such as the United States, Germany, Japan, or even small European rich countries? Are such targets desirable

and possible? Or is the target more ambitious: create the conditions for our societies of the three continents to contribute to the invention of a higher stage of human civilisation?

5. Constructing the Political Solidarity between States, Nations and Peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean

History of NAM has proved that the political solidarity deployed by countries of the South had produced results. The colonial legacies denounced at Bandung have been cleared, except for Palestine. An effort is therefore required to reconstruct the front of solidarity with the Palestinian people.

The major challenge today is represented by the deployment of the USA/NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)/Japan strategy aiming at establishing their military control of the planet, the military menaces and interventions conducted to that effect, and the false “legitimacy” given to these interventions by the so-called “international community,” in fact restricted to the imperialist powers. Beyond the analysis of the disastrous results of these interventions, resulting into the destruction of whole societies (Iraq, Lybia, Syria are sad examples of such results), a debate should be conducted to assess the responses (or lack of response) that the community of states of the three continents have given to that central challenge. Defeating that strategy of military control of the planet conditions the success of an alternative reorganisation of the political world system, guaranteeing the rights of nations to choose freely their own path of development and ensuring peaceful coexistence among them. A number of problems relate to that central question, such as the struggle for the dismantling of the US military bases, an assessment of what is meant by “the struggle against terrorism,” state terrorism, etc.

NAM, along with the G77 plus China, had initiated successfully the adoption by the UN of charters formulating rights of peoples, as well as the right to development. Suggesting proposals aiming at reinforcing the ways and means to have those rights actually implemented is required.

NAM, along with the G77 plus China, should also consider deploying systematic efforts to re-establish the legitimacy of UN as representative of the international community.

NAM, G77 plus China, CELAC and the African Union, should coordinate their efforts. Proposals to institutionalise their cooperation (common secretariat? task forces?) are welcome.

Conflicts between countries of the three continents with respect to their continental and maritime boundaries cannot be ignored. Our debates should perhaps focus on proposals to create institutional frames offering ways and means to clear these conflicts and avoid their being manipulated by imperialist powers with a view to destroying the solidarity among us.

6. Return to the Agrarian Question, Facing the Challenge of Growing Inequality in the Access to Land

We consider that special attention must be given to the agrarian question in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The reason is that neoliberal globalisation pursues a massive attack on peasant agriculture on the three continents (the well known process of “land grabbing”). Complying with this major component of current globalisation leads nowhere, but simply to the massive pauperisation/exclusion/destitution of hundreds of millions of human beings across the three continents. That would therefore put an end to any attempt of our societies to move up in the global society of nations. Therefore, any meaningful alternative pattern of development must be based on the opposite principle, the right of access to land to all peasants, as equally (or at least as less unequally) as possible in order to be a component in building a consistent sovereign productive modern system, associating industrial growth and food sovereignty.

Modern capitalist agriculture, represented by rich family farming and/or by agribusiness corporations, is now looking forward to a massive attack on third world peasant production. Capitalist agriculture governed by the principle of return on capital, localised in North America, in Europe, in the South cone of Latin America and in Australia, employs only a few tens of millions of farmers, but their productivity is the highest recorded at global level. On the other hand, peasant-farming systems still constitute the occupation of nearly half of humanity, i.e., three billion human beings. What would happen should “agriculture and food production” be treated as any other form of production submitted to the rules of competition in an open-deregulated market? Would such principles foster the accelerating of production? Indeed, one can imagine some 50 million new additional modern farmers, producing whatever the three billion present peasants can offer on the market beyond ensuring their own (poor) self-subsistence. The conditions for the success of such an alternative would necessitate the transfer of important pieces of good land to the new agriculturalists (and these lands have to be taken out of the hands of present peasant societies), access to capital markets (to buy equipment) and access to the consumers markets. Such agriculturalists would indeed “compete” successfully with the billions of present peasants. But what would happen to those? Billions of “non-competitive” producers would be eliminated within the short historic time of a few decades.

The major argument presented to legitimate the “competition” doctrine alternative is that such development did happen in the nineteenth century Europe and finally produced a modern—wealthy urban-industrial—post industrial society, as well as a modern agriculture able to feed the nation and even to export. Why should not this pattern be repeated in the contemporary third world countries? The argument fails to consider two major factors, which make the reproduction of the pattern almost impossible now in third world countries. The first is that the European model developed throughout a century and a half along with industrial technologies, which were intensively labour using. Modern technologies are far less. And therefore, if the new comers of the third world have to be competitive on global markets for their industrial exports, they have to adopt them. The second is that Europe benefited during that long transition from the possibility of massive out migration of their “surplus” population to the Americas.

Can we imagine other alternatives based of the access to land for all peasants? In that frame it is implied that peasant agriculture should be maintained and simultaneously engaged in a process of continuous technological/social change and progress. At a rate which would allow a progressive transfer to non-rural employment in keeping with the gradual building of a consistent modern industrial productive system.

Such a strategic target implies policies protecting peasant food production from the unequal competition of modernised agriculturalists—local and international agro-business. It questions the patterns of industrial-urban development, which should be less based on export oriented priorities, themselves taking advantage of low wages (implying in their turn low prices for food), and be more attentive to a socially balanced internal market expansion. Simultaneously, such a choice of principle facilitates integrating in the overall scheme patterns of policies ensuring national food sovereignty, an indispensable condition for a country to be an active member of the global community, enjoying the indispensable margin of autonomy and negotiating capacity.

The record of the Bandung era in this respect offers a mixed picture. In China and Vietnam, access to land has been guaranteed to all peasants in that spirit. But that has not been the case elsewhere. Some more radical national/popular experiences have indeed implemented land reforms, which limited the processes of destruction of peasant agricultural systems. But in general, and more particularly in Latin America, this sad process continued.

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Notes on Contributor

Samir Amin has been Director of Third World Forum since 1980 and President of the World Forum for Alternatives since 1997. His major recent books published in English include *A Life Looking Forward: Memoirs of an Independent Marxist* (Zed, 2006), *From Capitalism to Civilisation: Reconstructing the Socialist Perspective* (Tulika Books, 2010), *Ending the Crisis of Capitalism or Ending Capitalism?* (Pambazuka, 2010), *Global History: A View from the South* (Pambazuka, 2010), and *The Law of Worldwide Value* (Monthly Review Press, 2010).