Belgrade, The 1961 Non-Aligned Conference

By Ivana Ancic | August 17, 2017

The 1961 Non-Aligned Conference in Belgrade was the first official summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, orchestrated by three key figures: Josip Broz Tito, the president of Yugoslavia; Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of Egypt; and Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India. An earlier meeting of the three leaders in Brijuni to establish the grounds for the Belgrade Conference has been called the "Third World's Yalta", establishing a parallel to the Yalta Conference that brought together Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin (Prashad 2007, 95). This is meant to highlight the view of the Non-Aligned Conference and Movement as a direct response to the division of the "spheres of influence" settled between the major world forces after WWII and the ensuing formation of the two blocks during the Cold War (Prashad 2007, 95).



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Concerning the aims of the three leaders in organizing the conference, India's and Egypt's interests are often examined in terms of their alienation by the West, while Yugoslavia's involvement is usually discussed in the context of its fallout with the USSR and its resulting vulnerability to U.S. influence, both of which pushed it "to the new postcolonial states for ideological and material help" (Prashad 2007, 98). Alvin Z. Rubinstein provides a more nuanced analysis of Yugoslavian objectives, both in terms of establishing bargaining power with both Cold War blocks, as well as creating the possibility for economic expansion in the Third World (Rubinstein 1970, 98-99). Rubinstein's analysis points to a gap in the scholarship

on the Belgrade Conference in terms of its focus on political motivations of those involved, and a failure to consider the interdependence of political and economic principles at stake.

In a broader context, the major factor contributing to the organization of the conference was the impact of decolonization, and the founding of a great number of newly independent African states on the world stage in the 1960s. The crucial moment in the context of shaping the Non-Aligned Conference and Movement was the division of the newly independent governments around the two opposed factions established in the wake of the government breakdown in Congo, which, according to Peter Willets, threatened to "bring the Cold War into the heart of Africa" (Willets 1978, 11). The rift led to the formation of the more conservative and anti-radical Brazzaville Group, which supported President Kasavubu in Congo, and the radical nationalist Casablanca Group, which supported Prime Minister Lumumba against Kasavubu. All members of the Casablanca Group would appear at the conference in Belgrade, including Algeria, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Morocco and the United Arab Republic, while none of the Brazzaville Group would be present. The conference represented a key moment by showing that the Pan-African summit desired by Nkrumah or another Afro-Asian Conference in the vein of Bandung desired by Sukarno were no longer effective for their goals, on the one hand because they would exclude states such as Yugoslavia, and on the other hand because the rift between the Brazzaville and Casablanca Group meant that such a meeting could no longer produce a united group of African states and would make the radical nationalists a minority (Willets 1978, 11).

Nevertheless, the conference itself was burdened with different and sometimes opposed objectives of the state leaders involved. Nehru's desire to distance the conference "from a traditional gathering of the ex-colonial nations into one perhaps primarily devoted to reducing world tensions", prompted him to deemphasize the priority of issues of colonialism, imperialism and racism in favor of discussing war and peace in the context of Cold War tensions (Jack, 1961, 28). As a result, what would otherwise have been a coherent group focused on questions of colonialism and radical nationalism was forced to open its membership in order to achieve the more global appeal that Nehru advocated. The final list of countries invited represented a compromise between the opposed factions at the conference, adding Cyprus, Lebanon, Nigeria, Togo, Upper Volta, Brazil, Ecuador and Bolivia to the list of those present at earlier summits in Cairo and New York, although only the first two would agree to full participation in Belgrade. The list would become complete by including the newly nationalist Tunisia, the coalition government of Congo, and Egypt's partner Yemen (Willets 1978, 13).

What held this diverse group of countries together was their agreement on important issues of foreign policy, primarily in the form of a Third World response to the Cold War blocs and nuclear threats with a call for non-alignment. Rubinstein provides a useful summary of the main elements of this foreign policy as "nonmembership in any military or ideological bloc dominated by one of the Great Powers; a commitment to equality in relations between nations, large and small, powerful and weak; the right of every country to self-determination; and avoidance of force as a method of settling international disputes" (Rubinstein 1970, 80). Furthermore, the participants of the conference were also united in terms of their focus on economic development and their condemnation of colonialism (Rubinstein 1970, 80-84). Homer A. Jack, an independent observer at the conference, also noted the general agreement

on the subject of economic subjection beyond the framework of colonization, whether in discussion of states which were never formally colonized, such as Afghanistan, or those crippled by economic aid as a neocolonial practice (Jack 1961, 29).

Opinions differ on the subject of the conference's ability to formulate a unified ideological stance and effective policies. Prashad holds that the political diversity of the states involved made such a stance impossible, and transformed the Conference into a "sub-United Nations" which limited the scope of its action to two broad issues: championing global nuclear disarmament and democratizing the United Nations (Prashad 2007, 101). The conference did issue letters to the presidents of the United States and the USSR, which were followed by meetings and state visits between the Non-Aligned and Cold War Bloc leaders. Nevertheless, the inability to intervene in Cold War tensions beyond appealing to the moral force of its non-aligned stance was underlined and even derided by the Soviets' decision to resume nuclear testing on the first day of the conference. The failure to respond to the testing, and the refusal to denounce Soviet and Chinese colonialism and imperialism in Tibet and Eastern Europe were considered the major disappointments with the conference in the West (Jack 1961, 35). On the other hand, the conference was most effective in terms of raising the status of the Non-Aligned Movement itself, and extending the possibilities created by Bandung Asian-African solidarity to universal solidarity through its inclusion of countries such as Yugoslavia, Cuba and Cyprus (Jack 1961, 34).

In terms of its impact on the United Nations, the conference did call attention to the structural disadvantages that the Third World countries faced within this institution, which ultimately led to an expansion of the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council. The Non-Aligned Movement has also been described as a framework necessary for the founding of the Group of 77 as an integral part of UNCTAD, and as "the Third World's principal organ for the articulation and aggregation of its collective economic interest and for its representation in the negotiations with the developed countries" (Sauvant 2014, 27-33). The conference's call to democratize the UN focused on this institution's failure to represent appropriately the diversity of state representatives from the newly independent Asian and African states in its major policy-and regulation-making bodies. While it did ensure the recognition of key issues and better representation for these states, the Conference also revealed the limitations of Non-Aligned strategies due to its failure to secure a real change of power, vested in the veto power over the General Assembly granted only to the permanent members of the Council (the US, UK, France, the USSR and the Republic of China).

Prefiguring future forms of global solidarity and expressing for the first time the recognition of the mutual interests of the "Third World" expanded beyond the context of Asia and Africa, the conference also points to the fragility of the connections established by the Non-Aligned Movement as well as the limitations of its capacity to effect change. Its focus on the shared condition of suffering the effects of colonialism, imperialism and racism, and its acknowledgment of their lasting legacy in the form of neocolonial practices, incursion of national debt and economically-crippling forms of economic aid speak to contemporary concerns within the framework of the Global South. Nevertheless, the unequal distribution of power among the participating countries, the tension between the opposed aims of the organizers, and the inability to formulate a plan of political action that would be able to contend with the two Cold War blocs circumscribed the ability of the conference to provide a

coherent path for the future of the Non-Aligned Movement, foreclosing some of the possibilities generated by the conference.

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