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The ghost of Bandung past

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IN April 1955, in the pleasant Indonesian hill town of Bandung, 180km south of Jakarta, 29 new nations gathered to consider their positions, roles and fates in a post-imperial world.

A half-century later, the Bandung Conference is remembered (if it is remembered at all) for having not met its initial promise.

Perhaps the most frequently cited of these apparent failures has been the idea of "non-alignment", born in Bandung in 1955 and formalised in 1961 as the Non-Aligned Movement.

The very notion of non-alignment now seems almost painfully naive, after five decades in which the newly emerging nations of the post-war, post-colonial world have either jockeyed for superpower favour or been regarded as prizes for the super-powers to fight over.

From decolonisation, through modernisation, industrialisation and now globalisation, the cynics have all along maintained, not entirely without basis, that it's all been some form of Westernisation - if not outright neo-colonisation.

So too with the South-South framework; the nexus between Latin America, Africa and Asia that was once touted as a counterbalance to the so-called North.

It's deeply ironic that Malaysia was recently compelled to impose stringent entry restrictions on certain African nationals who were proving entirely too willing to regard South-South co-operation in terms of bilking gullible and greedy Malaysians with magic ink capable of changing newsprint into money.

Nonetheless, the Bandung Conference and its handicapped offspring, the Non-Aligned Movement, did give rise to the Group of 77, which continues to wield a certain heft among the world's associations of nations. In this, the key to progress is patience - always a virtue when youth is folly.

Like any living organism, these things grow, change and evolve in time, and at their own pace. The changes set in train by one generation may take unexpected directions for their descendants, but that is no reason not to initiate them.

Something else has to be seen in the clarity of hindsight. Fifty years ago, it could be said that there were but half-a-dozen or so "national entities" in the world, in the form of the global empires that spent the first half of the 20th century collapsing. By the advent of the 21st, there were some 200 nations sharing this planet.

Add up all the separatist, secessionist and independence movements from Azeri to Zulu, and it would seem the United Nations Plaza in New York City would need to extend all the way to Battery Park to accommodate the 3,000 or so national flags dreaming of flapping in the Manhattan wind.

The impulse of nationalism has been the great driving force of our time. To re-call the Bandung Conference of 1955 should be to recognise and honour the founding eminences of our nationhood for what they set out to achieve, even if it was left to subsequent generations actually to achieve it.

Whether we have succeeded or failed cannot be blamed entirely on how our nations set forth into the Brave New World back then. Consider the Bandung Conference's famous Five Principles:

- \* Non-aggression;
- \* Respect for sovereignty;

- \* Non-interference in each others' internal affairs;
- \* Equality; and,
- \* Peaceful coexistence.

All five points now seem obviously rooted in the fears of fragile new nations stepping out into an embattled, deconstructed world, fully aware of the many pitfalls lurking ahead on their uncertain paths towards establishing their national identities while maintaining their sovereignties.

In essence, the 29 Asian and African nations that met in Bandung in April 1955 agreed to let each other be.

To remain at arm's length, with good-will towards and best wishes for each other, but with all respect for each individual nation's choices in constructing their sovereign and independent identities as they wished.

A dozen years later, in 1967, these Five Principles had remained firm enough to underpin the formation of our own Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Today, however, Asean is literally twice what it was at its founding in 1967. From five founding nations, Asean now encompasses 10.

Over the past 30 years or so, the "Spirit of Bandung" has come to be overtaken by a new and indeed more urgent impulse. Having won and established their individual sovereignties, often at great cost, there now exists a real desire among these nations to re-assemble in greater unity.

Confronting the new challenges of the 21st century, they see a globalising world of supranational economies in which trade occurs at the speed of light, not at the stately pace of cargo ships.

Cross-border migration and the mass movement of peoples have transformed their demographics and social structures, in many ways for the better, in other ways perhaps not.

The full and free flow of information has generated a level of global inter-connectedness that would have seemed fantastic three generations ago, but with it have come unexpected pressures on ancient cultures and ways of life. Money has become a commodity in itself as much as a means of trade.

All this amounts to a modern world just as challenging as that into which our founding fathers stepped out half-a-century ago, but the challenges are very different.

The Asean Ten are vigorously constructing multilateral frameworks that will enable them to work together in mutual defence, human resources and environmental management as well as trade and commerce. In three years' time, the Asean Free Trade Area is scheduled to come into being.

Concurrently, we are also progressing towards a wider regional comity of nations in Apec (despite "Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation" having once been derisively dismissed as "four adjectives in search of a noun") and the East Asian Economic Group - an idea criticised by the West (basically for excluding it) since it was first mooted by Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad more than a decade ago.

New mechanisms have been instituted for cultural co-operation, partnerships in disaster reduction, "growth triangles" of cross-border development among South-east Asia's archipelagic nations, and incomparably expanded "people-to-people" interaction.

Where the participants of the Bandung Conference sought to attend to their individual sovereignties, their legatees today are contemplating new unities.

But even this fond hope is not that new. In 1989, when Pakistan and India happened to be led by the children of earlier leaders, both Benazir Bhutto and Rajiv Gandhi regarded each other, in Rajiv's words, as "Children of a New Age".

He was expressing the hope that as members of a new generation, sharing a common philosophical background and a more modern and progressive outlook, the son of Indira Gandhi and the daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto might lead their people away from the old quarrels they had inherited with their respective Independences.

As history turned out, that was over-optimistic of both of them.

Yet, just as for the leaders who met at Bandung 47 years ago, theirs was a worthy optimism. It's all right to be ahead of one's time, as long as that time eventually arrives.

Might we be at the threshold of that time, when ancestral feuds are finally abandoned? Contemplating the bloody skirmishes and sabre-rattling of the moment, it hardly seems so. But perhaps, for India and Pakistan, China and Taiwan and the Koreas, as indeed for Israel and Palestine, the troubles of the present stem more from an impatience to resolve long-standing conflicts of the past than a bloodlust to perpetuate them into the future.

If this were as easily done as said, of course, it would have been done long ago. But what is important is that the intention be renewed, the collective will fortified, and the "Spirit of Bandung" be resurrected even as the ghosts of the past are laid, in achieving the productive peace with security everyone wants and needs if we are to fulfil the destinies our founding fathers dared to dream.