



ARTICLE

# Three meanings of colonialism: Nehru, Sukarno, and Kotelawala debate the future of the Third World Movement (1954-61)

Sandeep Bhardwaj

Doctoral Candidate, History Department, Ashoka University, Sonapat, Haryana, India  
Email: [sandeep.bhardwaj\\_phd18@ashoka.edu.in](mailto:sandeep.bhardwaj_phd18@ashoka.edu.in)

## Abstract

As the post-colonial Global South was weaving together the Third World Movement in the 1950s, it was also struggling to arrive at a common definition of colonialism. Since the movement was primarily premised on anti-colonial sentiments, redefining the term ‘colonialism’ could change its parameters. This article examines debates between three Asian leaders – Jawaharlal Nehru, Sukarno, and Sir John Kotelawala – who proposed three different meanings of colonialism. These definitions were informed by distinct ways that the colonial experience was remembered in their respective countries. Each definition was meant to redirect the energies of the Third World Movement towards a different vision of a post-colonial global order. The three leaders debated this question in major Afro-Asian conferences of the mid-twentieth century. Their disagreements represented a foundational fissure in the movement. Relying on primary sources from multiple countries, this article recovers a political dialogue within the Global South unmediated by the West, which is often ignored by the scholarship.

**Keywords:** Afro-Asian Politics; Anti-Colonialism; Non-Aligned Movement; Third-Worldism; Bandung; Cold War

What is colonialism? Does it end at the moment of transfer of power or does it persist afterwards? Are Europeans its only perpetrators or can anyone exercise colonial control? Is it just political control or can it take other forms such as economic or intellectual domination? Where does colonialism end and the Cold War begin? The two decades after the Second World War were the era of decolonization in Asia and, later, Africa. They were also an era of deep uncertainty and disagreement among the leaders of recently decolonized nations over what colonialism meant.<sup>1</sup> This is striking given that the leaders engaged in this debate had spent most of their adult lives fighting against colonialism. They all understood what was ‘old colonialism’ – ‘the imposition of white rule on alien peoples inhabiting lands separated by salt water from the imperial centre’, as the political scientist Rupert Emerson had articulated.<sup>2</sup> However, almost none of them were satisfied with limiting the concept to such a narrow meaning. They argued amongst themselves over how to expand the definition of this word. In the 1950s and the 1960s, as they were constructing the Third

---

The author is grateful for helpful comments from Srinath Raghavan, David Engerman, Sunil Khilnani, Rudra Chaudhuri, Gaurav Garg and Frances O’Morchoe and the two anonymous reviewers. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Global Political Thought Conference, Harvard University in April 2022.

<sup>1</sup>For instance, see: Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Legacies of Bandung’, in *Making World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives*, ed. Christopher Lee (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 45–68.

<sup>2</sup>Rupert Emerson, ‘Colonialism’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 4, no. 1 (Jan., 1969): 3–16.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the same Creative Commons licence is used to distribute the re-used or adapted article and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained prior to any commercial use.

World Movement based on the shared experience of colonialism, they kept returning to this highly contentious debate. It represented a foundational fracture within the anti-colonial solidarity upon which the movement was built. The scholarship of the movement, which often prefers to highlight solidarity and cooperation within the Global South rather than disputes, has missed this debate.

The underlying purpose of this struggle to define colonialism was to determine the future of the Third World Movement. Agreeing on a common definition of colonialism was crucial for both practical and ideological reasons. The shared trauma of colonialism was foundational to Third World identity. The project of Afro-Asian solidarity and its later incarnation the Non-Aligned Movement were weaved around this communal experience. Failure to agree on a common understanding of the phenomenon risked fracturing this commonality and the unity built upon it. Moreover, most post-colonial nations had adopted anti-colonialism as the guiding principle of their foreign policy. They could be mobilized easily and quickly against any instance of colonialism across the world. Redefining the term could be thus translated into political power to rally Asia and Africa under or in opposition to any particular banner.

This article captures aspects of this debate by examining the role of three Asian leaders who participated in it – India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the third Prime Minister of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) Sir John Kotelawala, and Indonesia's first President Sukarno.<sup>3</sup> These three men started out as political partners but found themselves on different sides of this argument leading to public clashes and bitter falling out. Kotelawala argued that Western imperialism was just one form of colonialism, which he defined as an act of political domination of one country by another. Sukarno asserted that Western attempts to maintain intellectual, economic and cultural domination of its former colonies were continuation of colonialism by other means. In opposition to both, Nehru sought to limit the definition of colonialism to the conventional understanding of European political rule over Asian and African nations that was now coming to an end. Their different approaches to this question were informed by their respective memory of colonialism. Even though the literature sometimes tends to paint the colonial experience of the Global South with a broad brush, its memory across Asia and Africa varied considerably. Three main ways to remember colonialism was with continued resentment, with a degree of nostalgia or a sense of closure. Sukarno, Kotelawala, and Nehru, each representing a different category, tried to project their respective colonial memory onto the wider Third World Movement. Nehru and Sukarno have long been regarded as key figures in the movement. Although Kotelawala appeared on the scene only briefly in the mid-1950s, he played a pivotal role in the movement by organizing the Colombo Powers Conference and paving the way for the Bandung Conference. Highlighting his role also serves as a reminder that leaders of smaller Asian and African nations, although sometimes ignored, had important contributions to make to the movement. This article examines three major international conferences held at Colombo (1954), Bandung (1955) and Belgrade (1961) where they debated with each other. Their disagreements which contemporary observers, modern scholarship, and even the leaders themselves tended to sweep under the rug, represented one of the central fractures within the movement.

Much has been written about the emergence of the Third World Movement in the post-war era and its interaction with colonialism.<sup>4</sup> However, this particular debate about the definition of colonialism remains relatively unexplored. Whenever scholarship has engaged with some facets of

<sup>3</sup>This article uses 'Ceylon', the name in use at the time, instead of 'Sri Lanka' which was adopted in 1972.

<sup>4</sup>For instance, see: Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds., *The Expansion of International Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Lee, ed., *Making World After Empire*; Natasa Miskovic, Harald Fischer-Tiné, and Nada Boskovska, eds., *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold war: Delhi-Bandung-Belgrade* (London: Routledge, 2014); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2007); Prasenjit Duara, ed., *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Wars: Freedom and Revolution in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007); G.H. Jansen, *Afro-Asia and Non-Alignment* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966).

this debate, it has often seen them through the lens of the Cold War – Kotelawala’s arguments have been reduced to an anti-communist tirade and Sukarno’s ideas have been attributed to his anti-Westernism.<sup>5</sup> The intellectual content of their positions has been largely missed. Moreover, although there has been a lot of work on the political thought of these leaders, they have rarely been placed in conversation with each other.<sup>6</sup> This is indicative of the larger lack of scholarly focus on South-South political dialogue unmediated by the West. Using official archival records and memoirs from several countries including India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the US, and the UK, as well as contemporary public writings, this article seeks to reconstruct the debate of defining colonialism and present it within a wider political context of the movement at the time. Such an exercise can help us in deepening our understanding of post-colonial political thought in the Global South. It can also offer clues for understanding the causes of the eventual demise of Third World solidarity.

The rest of this article is divided into eight sections. The first section offers a brief history of the uncertainty and contestation around the concept of colonialism within the Third World Movement since its inception. The second section discusses how different ways of remembering colonialism led to different definitions of the concept and different prescriptions for the post-colonial Third World Movement. Sections three to five offer brief portraits of the three Asian leaders – Kotelawala, Sukarno, and Nehru – and their relationship with the memory of colonialism. The sixth section chronicles the debate between Kotelawala and Nehru carried out during the Colombo Powers Conference in 1954 and the Bandung Conference in 1955. The seventh section tells the story of the arguments between Sukarno and Nehru in Bandung in 1955 and Belgrade in 1961. Finally, the article presents its conclusions.

### Shifting the meaning of colonialism in the Third World Movement

The Third World Movement was premised on the shared colonial experience of its members. Yet the meaning of colonialism had been up for debate from the very beginning. In fact, beneath almost all the major milestones of the Movement’s history lay a hidden undercurrent of contestation and disagreement over this question, starting with the 1927 League Against Imperialism Conference (LAI). Held in Brussels, LAI conference is widely considered as one of the major founding moments of the Third World Movement.<sup>7</sup> Its participants represented communist parties as well as radical nationalist movements from across the world, including Jawaharlal Nehru from India, Mohammad Hatta from Indonesia, Liao Hansin from China, Sen

<sup>5</sup>Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, (London: Dobson, 1956); Umut Özü, ‘Let Us First of All Have Unity among Us’, in *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Past and Pending Futures*, ed. Luis Eslava et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 293-308; Ida Anak Agung Gde Agung, *Twenty Years of Indonesian Foreign Policy 1945- 1965* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973); Frederick P. Bunnell, ‘Guided Democracy Foreign Policy: 1960-1965 President Sukarno Moves from Non-Alignment to Confrontation’, *Indonesia* 2 (Oct., 1966), 37-76.

<sup>6</sup>The best source on Kotelawala’s life and thought is his memoir *An Asian Prime Minister’s Story* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1956). For Sukarno see: Sukarno, *Sukarno: An Autobiography as Told to Cindy Adams* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965); J.D. Legge, *Sukarno: A Political Biography* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 2003); James Rush, ‘Sukarno: Anticipating an Asian Century’, in *Makers of Modern Asia*, ed. Ramachandra Guha (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 172-98; Peter Hastings, ‘The Guide in Profile’, in *Sukarno’s Guided Indonesia*, ed. T.K. Tan (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1967), 7-15; Rex Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism Under Sukarno: Ideology and Politics, 1959-1965*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1974). For Nehru see: Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Michael Brecher, *Nehru: A Political Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); B. R. Nanda, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Rebel and a Statesman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Judith Brown, *Nehru: A Political Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); and Benjamin Zachariah, *Nehru* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>7</sup>For history of the LAI see: Frederik Petersson, ‘“We Are Neither Visionaries nor Utopian Dreamers”: Willi Münzenberg, the League Against Imperialism, and the Comintern, 1925–1933’ (PhD diss., Åbo Akademi University, 2013); Michele Louro, *Comrades Against Imperialism: Nehru, India, and Interwar Internationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Michael Luoro et al, eds., *The League Against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020).

Katayama from Japan and Lamine Senghor from Senegal. Although the conference ended with establishment of the LAI and was hailed as successful, it carried within it the seeds of disagreements about the meaning of colonialism which would ultimately doom it. At the behest of the conference organizer Willi Münzenberg, a Comintern member, ‘anti-imperialism’ was adopted as the LAI’s primary goal rather than ‘anti-colonialism’ which had been the avowed aim of its predecessor the League Against Colonial Oppression (LACO). Münzenberg and the Comintern argued that while anti-colonialism focused on the ‘periphery’ (the colonial and semi-colonial countries), anti-imperialism would aim at the ‘centre’ (the European metropolises).<sup>8</sup> Although a subtle shift in terminology, the change moved the focus away from the practice of colonialism to the ‘real roots’ of colonialism in Marxist understanding i.e. capitalism. On the other hand, the nationalists saw the goal of dismantling colonial rule in the Global South as the most pressing challenge. Although the 1927 Brussels Conference managed to paper over these differences, they surfaced in the subsequent Frankfurt Conference in 1929 which resulted in vitriolic recriminations and the eventual expulsion of most nationalists from the league.

As the Third World solidarity project began to gain momentum in the post-war period, the impulse to challenge and alter the meaning of colonialism continued. International gatherings of major political figures of the Global South began almost immediately after the war, starting with the 1945 Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester. In March 1947, over 400 delegates from across Asia gathered in New Delhi to attend the Asian Relations Conference, a key milestone for the Third World Movement. Invariably, colonialism was a major theme in the deliberations. Conference hosts were taken by surprise when the discussion veered off after a Burmese delegate expressed fears that ‘British imperialism may be substituted either by an Indian or by a Chinese imperialism’ via economic pressures or diaspora.<sup>9</sup> This accusation of inter-Asian colonialism appeared to the Indians as a gross misuse of the concept. Some discussions in the United Nations (UN) were similarly characterized by the confusion over what counted as colonialism. In the late 1940s, the UN General Assembly had established a minor committee to collect and collate information on ‘non-self-governing territories’, i.e. nations under the colonial rule. The committee immediately became embroiled in a contentious debate over what counted as a non-self-governing territory. The debate raged on for seven years until the committee finally agreed upon a complicated list of factors to determine if a territory was self-governing or not.<sup>10</sup> The list was ignored by most countries involved in the committee.

The Third World Movement represented an unrealized but potentially enormous force within global politics. Commitment to anti-colonialism was at its heart. So to define colonialism was to wield this latent power. This impulse was present since the very inception of the movement, although this question was of relatively minor importance during the inter-war period since most members of the movement were still colonized and preoccupied with greater challenges. After the war, as decolonization swept through Asia and Africa, stakes of this debate became much higher.

### Looking to the past to imagine the future

In the 1950s, this debate took a new turn. Although the process of decolonization was to go on for a couple of decades, by the mid-1950s some of the key actors in the Third World Movement such as India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Egypt had achieved political independence. For their leaders, the question arose ‘what next’? What should be the purpose the movement after the end of

<sup>8</sup>See discussion in Petersson, “‘We Are Neither Visionaries’”, 43–4, 144–6.

<sup>9</sup>*Asian Relations: Being a report of the proceedings and documentation of the First Asian Relations Conference, March–April 1947* (New Delhi: Asian Relations Organisation, 1948), 96; Vineet Thakur, ‘An Asian Drama: The Asian Relations Conference, 1947’, *The International History Review* 41, no. 3 (2019): 673–95.

<sup>10</sup>Lakshmi Menon, ‘International Responsibility for Dependent Areas’, *India Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (July–September 1955): 248–61; ‘Factors which should be taken into account in deciding whether a territory is or is not a territory whose people have not yet attained a full measure of Self-government’, UN General Assembly, *Eighth Session*, 4 August 1953, A/2428.

colonialism? Having navigated colonialism together, could the Global South navigate post-coloniality together? Redefining colonialism was a way to recast the Third World Movement into something new. Nehru, Sukarno, and Kotelawala had different conceptions of what colonialism meant and how that meaning determined the future of the movement. Each was informed by a complex combination of international, domestic, and personal factors. A key driver was the way they remembered their colonial experience and employed it within their respective national political projects. There were three main responses to the colonial experience: nostalgia, resentment, and closure. Each led to a different answer to the question of the future of the movement.

Nostalgic actors, represented by the figure of Kotelawala, could view the experience of European colonialism with some level of appreciation. While recognizing its ills, they also saw it as a force for good which brought modernity, stability, and democratic values to the Global South. 'I must admit that some of us went too far in condemning the old [British] colonialism', wrote Kotelawala in his autobiography. 'British rule conferred many benefits on the people, and taught us to appreciate the democratic way of life and to fight for our freedom on constitutional lines.'<sup>11</sup> To them, the post-colonial era brought far more menacing threats and challenges, such as communism and aggressive neighbours.

Kotelawala sought to recast these new mid-twentieth-century threats as a form of 'new colonialism' – the phenomenon of the old colonial masters being replaced by new powers seeking to subjugate Asian and African people. He was particularly concerned about communist infiltration. He also warned of the belligerence of Asian and African powers towards their smaller neighbours. To him, these threats appeared much more dangerous than colonialism of the past. Kotelawala tried to introduce this concept in lexicon of the Third World Movement during the Colombo Powers Conference of 1954 and the Bandung Conference of 1955, so that the movement could be repurposed to combat these new challenges collectively.

Resentful actors, symbolized by Sukarno, saw colonialism as an open wound. To them, European colonialism did not end with the transfer of power but merely reconfigured itself stealthily into a new version. 'Colonialism has also its modern dress, in the form of economic control, intellectual control, actual physical control by a small but alien community within a nation', Sukarno declared at Bandung.<sup>12</sup> Keeping the spectre of colonialism alive was also a tool for nation-building and maintaining political unity. To such actors, the future of the Third World Movement was the same as its past, an anti-colonial crusade to dismantle European control from the Global South. This required expanding the meaning of colonialism from just political control to a far more overarching and multi-dimensional definition. In the late 1950s, Sukarno grew alarmed over 'neo-colonialism' or NEKOLIM – the phenomenon of the old colonial powers seeking to hold onto their control over the Global South through various coercive and subversive means. In many ways, his ideas were precursors to the discourse around 'neo-colonialism' put forward by African leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah in the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> He saw colonialism as not merely control of one nation by another but a world order designed to uphold an international hierarchy. To destroy this order, the Third World Movement needed to become a world revolutionary force single-mindedly focused on this goal.

The final group of actors, represented here by Nehru, were those who had achieved some sort of closure with colonialism and wished to move on. To these actors, the transfer of power represented a sharp break in the political timeline of their nation, ushering in an entirely new era. Although not appreciative of the colonial past, they also did not wish to resent it to the point where it would interfere with the post-colonial future. Tellingly, shortly after Indian independence, Nehru declared in the Indian Parliament that 'I can quite conceive of our siding even with an

<sup>11</sup>Kotelawala, *An Asian PM's Story*, 31.

<sup>12</sup>*Asia-Africa speak from Bandung* (Jakarta: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 1955), 19-29.

<sup>13</sup>Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965).

imperialist power—I do not mind saying that; in a certain set of circumstances that may be the lesser of the two evils.<sup>14</sup> Nehru saw post-colonial challenges as fundamentally distinct from the colonial experience and requiring entirely new approaches and modes of thinking. He wanted the Third World Movement to leave behind its obsession with colonialism – a term which he defined conservatively to mean European political rule over Asian and African nations – and reinvent itself as something new entirely. Nehru saw the Cold War as the most pressing challenge for the post-colonial world. Accordingly, he advocated that the Third World Movement should move on from anti-colonialism to non-alignment. Although historians often tend to conflate the two, these were two different and sometimes contradictory ideological prescriptions, as demonstrated by Lorenz M. Lüthi.<sup>15</sup> Anti-colonialism called for agitational, partisan politics that sympathized with oppressed nations and set itself against the colonial powers. It demanded radical transformation of the international system. In contrast, non-alignment stressed neutralism and helping to maintain stability in the geopolitical system. It prized freedom to manoeuvre and cautioned against committing oneself to permanent hostility against any group of nations. Nehru saw a sharp break between the anti-colonial Afro-Asianism that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and the Non-Alignment Movement that began in the late 1950s. To understand these three radically different ways of thinking about colonialism, it is important to understand the three distinct personal and national contexts of the leaders articulating them. It will be beneficial to juxtapose and contrast these ideas against each other to tease out their full complexity. The next three sections focus on each leader individually to flesh out their ideas.

### Kotelawala: the brown Sahib

Sir John Kotelawala was born into an extremely wealthy and one of the most politically powerful families of Ceylon. He became a minister in the colonial government in 1936 and continued to hold government positions uninterrupted for the next twenty years. As the leader of the United National Party (UNP), he was sworn in as the third Prime Minister of independent Ceylon in 1953 and served until 1956. He was often depicted as an elite and out-of-touch ‘brown *Sahib*’.<sup>16</sup> He entertained far less antipathy for the British colonialism than many of his other Asian counterparts, as we have already seen. This is even evident in his title for the act of accepting and retaining knighthood was a rarity among the anti-colonial nationalist leaders of the Empire. He wasn’t alone in his admiration. ‘I, for one, can assure you that if we are to be the puppets of any nation or to be associated with any nation, there is no greater nation than the British nation’, freely admitted D.S. Senanayake, his uncle and the first Prime Minister of the country.<sup>17</sup>

Kotelawala’s relative lack of resentment towards the British rule was a reflection of his country’s decolonization process which had been far less rancorous than what most other Asian nations experienced.<sup>18</sup> The British rule in Ceylon had always been an appendage to the Raj. Once London had decided to leave India, its withdrawal from the island nation was inevitable. The British negotiated their exit from Ceylon in 1948 with relative ease within a political landscape devoid of any great nationalist agitation or ethnic strife. The bond between the metropole and the colony remained strong even after the transfer of power. Ceylon chose to remain a Dominion with the

<sup>14</sup>‘India’s Foreign Policy’, 8 March 1948, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Series 2, Vol 5 (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1987) [henceforth SWJN Series#-Volume#], 495-507.

<sup>15</sup>Lorenz M. Lüthi, ‘Non-Alignment, 1946-1965: Its Formation and Struggle against Afro-Asianism’, *Humanity*, 7, no. 2 (2016): 201–23.

<sup>16</sup>Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 230.

<sup>17</sup>Lucy Jacob, *Sri Lanka from Dominion to Republic: A Study of Changing Relations with the United Kingdom* (New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1973), 36-7.

<sup>18</sup>K.M. De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); K.M. De Silva, ed., *Towards Independence: 1945–1948, Part II*, British Documents on the End of Empire Series, (London: HMSO, 1997).

British monarch serving as its head of state. It also signed a defence agreement with the departing colonial power granting it military bases on the island.<sup>19</sup>

UNP government's approach to its colonial history and continued dependence on the British was also informed by the change in Ceylon's international position brought on by its decolonization. Whereas the Empire had offered Ceylon a measure of protection and stability as a sleepy corner of a globe-spanning security system, independence thrust it into a highly complex and dangerous world. On one hand, the small island nation felt threatened by India, its much larger neighbour. Not only were the Ceylonese leaders uncertain of Indian intentions, the situation was further complicated by the presence of a very large Indian Tamil population on the island. 'The day Ceylon did away with England it would go under India', Kotelawala once noted.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, Colombo also feared Soviet-backed communist infiltration or 'the plague spreading all over the world from Russia'.<sup>21</sup> These new uncertainties and challenges made many Ceylonese to look back to the colonial era with a certain degree of appreciation.

UNP's relative comfort with its colonial legacy and its proximity to the British made it vulnerable to accusations of collaboration. Leftist parties questioned the legitimacy of Ceylon's independence. A powerful political force in the country, the Marxists agitated for 'real independence' which would have included severing all links with Britain and dismantling capitalist structures on the island.<sup>22</sup> Rumours that the government had signed a secret treaty with the British at the time of independence to give away the country's sovereignty circulated for years afterwards.<sup>23</sup> UNP's response to such criticisms was to take a hard line against communism. The party accused the Leftists as agents of 'Soviet imperialism'.<sup>24</sup> It was noteworthy that UNP defended itself against the charge of collaborating with colonialism by essentially labelling its opponents as supporters of a much worse form of colonialism. Explaining his campaign strategy during the 1952 national elections, Kotelawala said: 'we did our best to convince the voters that, if we were defeated, the political freedom we had won would be destroyed, and the country would be exposed to a much more tyrannical domination than the old colonialism at its worst'.<sup>25</sup> He soon adopted similar ideas when discussing colonialism in international context:

I am particularly anxious to make it perfectly clear that the colonialism from which we have progressively escaped was in no sense worse than the new colonialism which has emerged in the form of aggressive and subversive Communist expansion . . . I see no reason why this new colonialism should not be uncompromisingly and fearlessly condemned.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to note that the UNP government was not staunchly anti-communist or part of the Western bloc. It had established trade links with Beijing after the communist victory in China, to Washington's chagrin. It was also one of the first proponents of a foreign policy based on non-alignment.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>19</sup>A.J. Wilson, 'Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy-Change and Continuity', *The Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies* 4, no. 1 & 2 (1974), 52-61.

<sup>20</sup>Jacob, *Sri Lanka from Dominion to Republic*, 27.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>22</sup>W.H. Wriggins, *Ceylon: Dilemmas of a New Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 140-2, 394-5.

<sup>23</sup>De Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*.

<sup>24</sup>The Chargé in Ceylon (Gulfur) to the Department of State', 1 June 1952, Document# 928, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, Volume XI Part 2* [henceforth FRUS <year>, <volume>].

<sup>25</sup>Kotelawala, *An Asian PM's Story*, 82-3.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>27</sup>Wilson, 'Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy'.

## Sukarno: the revolutionary

Born in a poor family, Sukarno joined the Indonesian anti-colonial movement at an early age. He quickly became one of its key figures, holding together various nationalist factions.<sup>28</sup> During the War of Independence with the Dutch, Sukarno assumed the presidency of the incipient Indonesian state. After independence in 1950, he retained this title overseeing the country's highly fractious liberal democracy but removed from the day-to-day maelstrom of governance and politics. This marked the first phase of his presidency which lasted until about 1956. In 1957, he set about establishing 'Guided Democracy' in Indonesia by assuming personal control of the executive and banning many political parties and press outlets. With the support from the army and the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), he exercised absolute power. He encouraged a cult of personality built around not just his political doctrines but also myths about his superhuman strength, magical powers, and sexual prowess.<sup>29</sup> Propaganda was used to inundate national life with revolutionary fervour based on the ideology of NASAKOM – Nationalism, Religion and Communism. After surviving seven assassination attempts, he was finally removed from power through a coup in 1966.

In the 1950s, the memory of imperial subjugation laid heavier on Indonesia than most other post-colonial countries. A sense of unfinished revolution persisted within the country's political discourse as remnants of Dutch colonialism were treated like open wounds. The continued presence of Dutch capital in the country was blamed for its economic woes.<sup>30</sup> The continued Dutch possession of the territory of West Irian (Western New Guinea) was seen as an affront to national honour. In the late 1950s, growing proliferation of American culture and increased meddling by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) fueled fears of US imperialism as well.<sup>31</sup> The Indonesians also saw Malaysia as a British puppet aimed at perpetuating colonial rule in Southeast Asia. Although all Indonesian political parties dabbled in such anti-colonial politics, PKI offered the strongest articulation of this thought.<sup>32</sup> As the communist leader D.N. Aidit put it in 1959:

No one can say that Indonesia is still a colonized country. But how far does our independence go? . . . Are we politically really independent? Are we economically independent? How about our national culture in present-day independent Indonesia?<sup>33</sup>

During the Guided Democracy phase, Sukarno embraced this idea and took it to its logical conclusion. He fashioned a political ideology built around the idea of that colonialism never ended but continued in new guises:

Colonialism and imperialism are living realities in our world. Their sentiment of superiority, of arrogance towards us who were once their colonial subjects is thrust down our throats by their press, by their politicians, by their very tourists who only reflect attitudes inculcated in them by the forces in their own societies. Their political, economic or military interference is always with us, sometimes subtly, often insultingly. At every move we make for economic reconstruction and up-building, we find that they exploit the technological superiority to manipulate conditions in order that our nations can be kept eternally subservient to their selfish interests.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Sukarno, *Sukarno: An Autobiography*, 23.

<sup>29</sup>Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>30</sup>Herbert Feith, 'Politics of Economic Decline', in *Sukarno's Guided Indonesia*, ed. T.K. Tan (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1967), 46–57.

<sup>31</sup>Audrey Kahin and George Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

<sup>32</sup>Herbert Feith, *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962).

<sup>33</sup>Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism Under Sukarno*, 165.

<sup>34</sup>Legge, *Sukarno*, 387.



He saw Indonesia surrounded by the forces of NEKOLIM (neocolonialism-imperialism) which were using a variety of subversive and coercive tactics to maintain Western influence in the country. It was not enough for Indonesia to have merely achieved independence. True freedom, he argued, required three elements – the Trisakti – political sovereignty, economic self-reliance and separate cultural identity. Indonesia's confrontation with the Dutch over West Irian in the early 1960s became a centrepiece of his revolution. In 1963, he declared creation of Malaysia as another illustration of NEKOLIM and mobilized Indonesian people for a confrontation with British imperialism.<sup>35</sup>

Sukarno also internationalized his ideas and made them central to his foreign policy. In a famous speech that he delivered to the UN General Assembly in September 1960, he blamed colonialism for all of the world ills.<sup>36</sup> Wherever there is tension or conflict in the world, 'imperialism and colonialism in one of their many manifestations is at the root of the tension', he declared. Since the international order propped up by the West sustained colonialism, it had to be destroyed. Inviting all Third World nations to his revolution, he declared: 'we do not seek to defend the world we know: we seek to build a new, a better world'. In succeeding years, he put forward a more complex theory of the world which divided it into two categories of nations: Old Established Forces (OLDEFOS) and New Emerging Forces (NEFOS). OLDEFOS were committed to maintaining the old imperial order and profited by exploiting the Third World while NEFOS had recently emerged from subjugation and sought to create a new world order. The conflict between OLDEFOS and NEFOS, inherently a struggle between colonialism and freedom, was irreconcilable. Strikingly, not all post-colonial nations were NEFOS. Some could be OLDEFOS if deemed complicit in perpetuating the old colonial order. In fact, Sukarno eventually declared India to be just such an OLDEFOS.

By introducing the idea of NEKOLIM and emphasizing the continued threat of colonialism, Sukarno was calling for an expansion of the definition of colonialism. However, his approach was fundamentally distinct from that of Kotelawala. The Ceylonese Prime Minister was primarily concerned with international communism or inter-Asian colonialism, in other words, new colonial powers predating upon recently independent nations. Sukarno, on the other hand, warned of the attempts of old colonial powers to retain their power in the Third World through various techniques. As he said in one of his speeches:

It is common knowledge to us all that old colonial powers, in having to leave their colonial territories, want to preserve as much as possible of their economic – and sometimes also their political and military – interests. This is carried out in various ways: by creating strife amongst all layers of the local people; by provoking the secession of one part of the old colonial territory from the rest under the pretext of self-determination; creating chaos through military provocation or – and this is also common – by fortifying their economic interests at the last moment, using even the most unscrupulous means.<sup>37</sup>

### Nehru: the nationalist

Scion of a prominent upper-caste family from North India, Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the most popular leaders of the Indian National Congress party and became the first Prime Minister of independent India. Under his administration, India adopted a relatively moderate attitude towards its colonial past. Although New Delhi sought to establish itself as an independent actor

<sup>35</sup>For in-depth analyses of Sukarno's ideology see: Donald Weatherbee, *Ideology in Indonesia: Sukarno's Indonesian Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University: 1969); Mortimer, *Indonesia Communism*; Bunnell, 'Guided Democracy Foreign Policy'.

<sup>36</sup>For Sukarno's speech: Paul Power, ed., *Neutralism and Disengagement* (New York: Scribner, 1964), 19-22.

<sup>37</sup>Weatherbee, *Ideology in Indonesia*, 60.

from London in foreign affairs from the start, it also retained the Commonwealth membership. Nehru was careful not to allow memory of colonialism turn into national resentment:

[I]f we constantly think in terms of the past, that is also not good. We never catch up with the present and never prepare for the future. If we are continuously thinking, let us say, what the British did in India was bad, it will produce complex in us and produce complex in other countries. Fortunately, I think it is an extraordinary thing that we have more or less got over that complex in India because of the manner of solving this problem with England. Of course, memories may remain, but it has been a major event for ages that this problem has been solved so as not to leave any complex behind.<sup>38</sup>

Nehru understood that the concept of colonialism was mutable in the international discourse. But he embraced a very circumspect and conventional definition of the term. For him, the phenomenon was largely limited to the European empires that had existed in Asia and Africa. Colonialism was ‘the development in the last two hundred years of domination of large parts of Asia and Africa by certain countries, mostly of Europe’.<sup>39</sup> In its essence, it was ‘one country ruling over an empire from a long distance’.<sup>40</sup> Although Nehru would sometimes use the spectre of colonialism to make a rhetorical point, he was by and large reluctant to label other forms of political or economic domination of one nation by another as colonialism.<sup>41</sup> The only exception was the emerging apartheid regimes of South Africa, Rhodesia and Kenya which Nehru was comfortable as identifying as a new variant of colonialism. ‘[W]e are afraid of a new type of colonialism in Africa . . . Not colonialism of a metropolitan country having a colony but the colonialism of a small dominant group controlling the country and calling it self-government.’<sup>42</sup> This was the only extension of the definition of colonialism that he consistently allowed.

Nehru saw a clear delineation between the colonial and the post-colonial era. ‘Within a year or two of [Indian independence] most traces of colonialism were wiped out and India became independent in the true sense of the word’, he said in 1952. ‘India has embarked upon a new era.’<sup>43</sup> By the end of the 1940s, he had come to believe that colonialism was a spent force not just in India and but the entire Global South. ‘I know and have stated frequently that the old-style colonialism is dead; I have no doubt about it’, he declared in the Indian Parliament in 1950. ‘They [the empires] may carry on for a number of years but I know that they lost their basic strength and cannot revive.’<sup>44</sup> Having thus effectively put the question of colonialism to bed in his mind, his focus was turned to other issues. In fact, he viewed attainment of political freedom from the Raj as merely the first step of the nation-building project, to be followed by economic development and social reform. This post-colonial agenda wasn’t threatened by colonialism but by new international challenges, particularly the Cold War which could jeopardize world peace. As he told Parliament in 1952:

Let us certainly by all means help in putting an end to the remaining elements of colonialism in Asia, in Africa, wherever it is. [But] [l]et us understand what the real conflict is about today . . . Let us understand that if the conflict once takes place, then the whole world will be

<sup>38</sup>‘Unanimity on Basic Principles’, 17 September 1953, *SWJN* 2-23, 407-21.

<sup>39</sup>‘Algeria’s quest for Freedom’, 21 June 1956, *SWJN* 2-34, 404-6.

<sup>40</sup>‘Peaceful Path to Progress’, 27 August 1955, *SWJN* 2-29, 55.

<sup>41</sup>For instance, in an uncharacteristic move, Nehru denounced the US-Pakistan alliance in 1953 by claiming that it might revive ‘the colonial spirit in Asia’. Robert Trumbull, ‘Nehru denounces US-Pakistan Tie’, *The New York Times*, 24 December 1953.

<sup>42</sup>‘Fourth Session’, 9 January 1956, *SWJN* 2-31, 512.

<sup>43</sup>‘The Zamindari System and Beyond’, 1 July 1952, *SWJN* 2-18, 9.

<sup>44</sup>‘India’s Korean Policy’, 3 August 1950, *SWJN* 2-15-Part 2, 346.

mightily changed, and whatever the change may be, the change will not be for the good because of the uttermost destruction and the rest of it.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, the central thrust of Indian foreign policy, and by extension the Third World Movement, should be non-alignment rather than anti-colonialism. This meant avoiding either of the two power blocs and working towards lowering geopolitical tensions in the world.

A combination of other practical and ideological concerns also likely informed Nehru's reluctance to expand the definition of colonialism. On the foreign policy front, there were good reasons to maintain a circumspect approach. He had made anti-colonialism a central plank of his foreign policy.<sup>46</sup> In an interview in August 1946, he declared that one of the objectives of independent India's foreign policy shall be to help 'insofar as possible, in the attainment of freedom by subject countries of Asia and Africa'.<sup>47</sup> However, to pour national energies into crusades to decolonize other nations required a clear definition of colonialism. It was important for India to narrow the definition of colonialism so as to not get dragged into every controversy and political conflict. Moreover, an expansive definition of colonialism opened the door to the accusation of 'Indian imperialism'. As we have already seen, the fear of 'brown exploitation' was widely expressed during the Asian Relations Conference. The Indians were particularly sensitive to such accusations. They also felt vulnerable to the accusation of Indian imperialism in Kashmir. Pakistani propaganda had labelled Indian position in the disputed territory an 'imperialist adventure' as early as 1950.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, limiting the meaning of colonialism was also important for Nehru's secularist agenda. The country had a long history of foreign invasions, particularly, Muslim conquests of the subcontinent between the thirteenth and the sixteenth century. The emerging right-wing *Hindutva* ideology in the country tended to view the British Raj in conjunction with these conquests as a millennia-long narrative of 'foreign domination' of Hindus.<sup>49</sup> As M.S. Gowalkar, the second chief of Hindu right-wing organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), had argued, since Muslims were as 'foreign' to India as the British, so the Hindus were 'at war at once with the Moslems on the one hand and the British on the other'.<sup>50</sup> Aware of this communal reading of colonialism, Nehru was careful to distinguish between Muslim conquests of the medieval period and the British rule. According to him, while the former was an instance of foreigners merging into the melting pot of India as many had done before them, the latter was an instance of colonialism. In this way, he further narrowed the definition of the word:

There were often foreign invasions and India was ruled by outsiders for long periods of time. But the important thing is that India's capital, the centre of its governance remained within the country. The foreign invaders soon settled down and, in a couple of generations, were absorbed in India's melting pot. India was never subjected to control from some other country. For the first time in the history of India, when the British conquered the country, its destinies were controlled from London . . . This is in essence what is known as colonialism, of one country ruling over an empire from a long distance.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup>'Non-Alignment and a Changing World', 12 June 1952, *SWJN* 2-18, 445.

<sup>46</sup>Richard Fontera, 'Anti-colonialism as Basic Indian Foreign Policy', *The Western Political Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (Jun., 1960), 421-32.

<sup>47</sup>'Objectives of India's Foreign Policy', 2 September 1946, *SWJN* 1-15, 569.

<sup>48</sup>'Pakistan Prime Minister's Statement in the Parliament on Kashmir Question', 13 October 1950, *Pakistan Affairs*, 4, no. 4, 5; See also: 'Propaganda & Publicity- Gleanings from the Pakistan Press and Radio', File No. M/52/5551/107, 1952, Ministry of External Affairs, National Archives of India, New Delhi, India [henceforth, MEA, NAI].

<sup>49</sup>See: Chetan Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths* (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>50</sup>Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 55.

<sup>51</sup>'Peaceful Path to Progress', 27 August 1955, *SWJN* 2-29, 55.

Nehru's circumspect definition of colonialism set him on the path of conflict with Kotelawala and Sukarno. As the Third World Movement began to galvanize in the mid-1950s, the latter two sought to wield the movement's anti-colonial agenda for their own political projects by expanding the definition. In both cases, Nehru successfully stymied these efforts. The next two sections tell the story of these confrontations, first, between Kotelawala and Nehru at Colombo and Bandung, and then, between Sukarno and Nehru at Belgrade.

### Colombo and Bandung: what is colonialism?

On 28 April 1954, Prime Ministers of India, Burma, Pakistan, Indonesia and Ceylon met in Colombo for what was dubbed as 'South-East Asian Prime Ministers' Conference' but soon gained the informal moniker of the 'Colombo Powers' meeting.<sup>52</sup> The conference had been organized by Kotelawala as a preliminary discussion to explore the possibilities of political, economic and cultural cooperation between Asian nations. The conference was also meant to signal the arrival of a 'resurgent Asia'. The agenda for the conference had been deliberately kept vague in order to foster freewheeling deliberations. Much of the conference focused on recent geopolitical developments such as the Indo-China conflict and the US testing of the hydrogen bomb.

Kotelawala complicated matters on the second day of the meeting by urging the group to draw an equivalence between colonialism and international communism. He moved a resolution denouncing Western colonialism as well as 'international Communism and its efforts of infiltration and subversion of the democratic countries'.<sup>53</sup> He had long planned to raise the issue of communism in the conference, having informed the US ambassador to Ceylon in January that the purpose of the meeting was to 'confer on methods of fighting communism'.<sup>54</sup> However, it appears that he had not warned his fellow Prime Ministers of his intentions. Overcoming his surprise, Nehru insisted on tackling issues of colonialism and communism separately. Repeating the definition of colonialism that he had always adhered to, he contended that there were only two kinds of colonialism – the traditional model of 'a foreign nation ruling over a subject people' and apartheid regimes being established in Central and East Africa. Although local communists were causing difficulties in many Asian countries, they did not represent colonialism. Colonialism was 'the physical conquest and occupation of one country by another' whereas international communism was an 'ideology'.<sup>55</sup> The former was a 'fact' while the latter an 'idea'.<sup>56</sup> Indonesia supported India's position while Pakistan and Burma sided with Ceylon. The resulting deadlock ensured that nothing concrete came out of the debate. While the final communique of the conference denounced colonialism, it carried only an anodyne statement on international communism.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>52</sup>For descriptions of the conference see: Kotelawala, *An Asian PM's Story*, 117-26; Cindy Ewing, 'The Colombo Powers: Crafting Diplomacy in the Third World and launching Afro-Asia at Bandung', *Cold War History* 19, no.1 (2019): 1-19; 'The Ambassador in Ceylon (Crowe) to the Department of State', 6 May 1954, Document #627, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, volume 11, part 2.

<sup>53</sup>'The Ambassador in Ceylon (Crowe) to the Department of State', 6 May 1954, Document #627, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, volume 11, part 2.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>'Hydrogen Bomb, Colonialism and Racialism', 29 April 1954, *SWJN* 2-25, 426-430

<sup>56</sup>'The Ambassador in Ceylon (Crowe) to the Department of State', 6 May 1954, Document #627, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, volume 11, part 2.

<sup>57</sup>On the topic of communism, the communique read: 'The subject of Communism in its national and international aspects was generally discussed and the Prime Ministers made known to each other their respective views'; see 'Determination to resist interference', *The Times of India*, 3 May 1954.

A year later, Kotelawala and Nehru locked horns again. This time the debate was more public. The setting was the famous Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia in April 1955.<sup>58</sup> Attended by twenty-nine countries from Asia and Africa, the conference was heralded as one of the greatest symbols of Third World solidarity, anti-colonialism, anti-racialism, and non-alignment. Yet it also laid bare the internal divisions within the emerging Global South. The crisis was precipitated on the third day of the conference by Kotelawala, who delivered a speech revisiting his arguments for equating international communism with colonialism.<sup>59</sup>

You may say that colonialism is a term generally understood, and capable of only one meaning. I cannot agree. . . . Think, for example, of those satellite States under Communist domination in Central and Eastern Europe—of Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Albania, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, Esthonia, and Poland. Are not these colonies as much as any of the colonial territories in Africa or Asia? And if we are united in our opposition to colonialism, should it not be our duty openly to declare our opposition to Soviet colonialism as much as to Western imperialism?

Many contemporaries read Kotelawala's speech through the lens of the Cold War as merely a call to condemn Soviet expansionism.<sup>60</sup> However, his arguments were more complex than that. Along with calling out Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, he also demanded that even the post-colonial Asian and African states pledge that 'we have no extra-territorial ambitions of our own'. In other words, colonialism was not merely a European remit. It could be exercised by anyone. Crucially, he also offered a definition of colonialism which went far beyond political control of one nation by another. A commitment to anti-colonialism, he argued, involved proving that 'we have no designs upon our neighbours and no intention or desire at any time to impose our own institutions and way of life upon peoples of a different language, or race, or religion'. Such an expansive reframing of the term colonialism was radical and carried potential to upend much of the carefully maintained bonhomie between the Afro-Asian group. After all, if colonialism could be practiced by anyone, even the post-colonial Third World states, and could include instances of imposing one group's way of life on another, then one would have found far too many instances of colonialism in the world.

Kotelawala's speech was explosive. It immediately divided the conference. Taking cue from his speech, some countries moved a resolution condemning international communism. The next day Nehru offered his rebuttal.<sup>61</sup> He began by flat out refusing to apply the label of 'colonialism' to anything other than traditional European empires. '[H]owever much we may oppose what has happened to countries in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, it is not colonialism', he declared. 'It may be an objectionable thing, but the use of the word is incorrect.' Stretching the definition of the word in such a way could open a can of conceptual worms by complicating ideas of nation-states, sovereignty, and international law, he went on. Eastern European states had been diplomatically recognized by most other countries as sovereign, independent nations and held UN memberships.<sup>62</sup> Comparing them with colonial possessions undermined the very basis of the UN framework. Nehru also warned that Kotelawala's approach made most countries of the Global South vulnerable to the charge of colonialism. After all, most were multi-ethnic nation-states with

<sup>58</sup>For descriptions of Bandung Conference see: George M. Kahin, *The Asian-African Conference, Bandung, Indonesia, April 1955* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956); A. Appadorai, 'The Bandung Conference', *India Quarterly* 11, no.3 (1955): 207-35; Wright, *Color Curtain*.

<sup>59</sup>For Kotelawala's speech see: *An Asian PM's Story*, 189-94.

<sup>60</sup>For instance: Tillman Durdin, 'Bandung meeting asked to assail Red colonialism', *The New York Times*, 22 April 1955.

<sup>61</sup>For Nehru's speech see: 'Problems of Dependent Peoples', 22 April 1955, *SWJN* 2-28, 100-6.

<sup>62</sup>The argument that UN membership indicated sovereignty may not have carried as much weight with Kotelawala as Nehru might have hoped. After all, at the time of the Bandung conference, Ceylon had not yet been granted membership in the UN.

questionable records on democracy and minority rights. Many were accused of violating human rights or suppressing liberty. 'Because somebody whispers into our ears that his country is under subjugation, are we going to come to a decision and issue a paper on it that it is colonial territory?' Nehru asked sarcastically. Given these complexities, 'once you enter into these matters, you enter into a region of doubt, uncertainty, difficulty and international confusion about which you can argue day in and day out', he said. He urged the conference to abandon such debates and issue a resolution of condemnation that limited itself to only traditional European colonialism.

However, the conference appeared to be leaning towards Kotelawala. During the night before, Turkey and Iraq had lobbied to whip up support for the resolution denouncing 'new colonialism'. By morning, it seemed that they had managed to secure nineteen votes, giving them a clear majority. Since the resolution risked the whole conference imploding, Nehru's chief negotiator V.K. Krishna Menon worked behind the scenes to broker a compromise.<sup>63</sup> The result was a resolution condemning 'colonialism in all its manifestations', without specifying any particular instances. Kotelawala returned to Ceylon to face a no-confidence motion called by the Leftist opposition for his speech. He was accused of attempting to 'disrupt the unity of the participating countries at the Bandung Conference . . . and generally to bring discredit on and damage the interests of Ceylon'.<sup>64</sup> While he survived the motion, he stepped down from office next year after losing the general election.

### Bandung and Belgrade: is colonialism dead?

Although the conflict between Nehru and Sukarno on the issue of colonialism did not become public until the early 1960s, its portents began appearing as early as 1955. The trigger was Nehru's habit of declaring the demise of colonialism: '[C]olonialism might be considered a thing of past history, it may carry on, it may carry on as a hang-over but the age of that type of colonialism is past and cannot be revived.'<sup>65</sup> 'Colonialism is dead' was something of a mantra that he began reiterating as early as the late 1940s. Even during his 1950 visit to Malaya, at a time when the colony was in the throes of British crackdown, he made the same declaration. 'The Prime Minister said that colonialism in Asia was dead; and he continues to repeat this as a simple statement of historical fact', a contemporary publication noted with exasperation.<sup>66</sup>

It was a deliberate strategy. His pronouncements were meant to reinforce the idea that decolonization was not anomalous but an inevitable and irrevocable process.<sup>67</sup> The idea had been first mooted by Indian officials during the Asian Relations Conference: 'Asia as a whole should develop the attitude that imperialism could not effectively continue to dominate any part of Asia for any length of time.'<sup>68</sup> However, by the early 1950s Nehru had indeed begun to see colonialism as a problem of the past. 'It does not help in the slightest to repeat the slogans of yesterday', he admonished his fellow legislators when they tried to call for a more aggressive anti-colonial foreign policy for India in 1952.<sup>69</sup> In his estimation the Cold War had become a far more pressing problem. Events in the early 1950s such as the Korean War, the Formosa crisis, and the development of the hydrogen bomb served to underline the primacy of the Cold War as the

<sup>63</sup>Memorandum from the British Embassy in Djakarta on the Bandung Conference', 28 April 1955, CD 2231/319, Foreign Office, The National Archives, Kew [TNA].

<sup>64</sup>'Bandung Conference', 27 April 1955, Speeches of SWRD Bandaranaike available at: [http://www.swrdbandaranaike.lk/files/speeches/international-affairs/bandung\\_conference.pdf](http://www.swrdbandaranaike.lk/files/speeches/international-affairs/bandung_conference.pdf) [accessed on 17 January 2022].

<sup>65</sup>Resurgence of Asia and Africa', 25 June 1953, *SWJN* 2-22, 81.

<sup>66</sup>Colonialism – Old and New', *The Eastern Economist*, 21 July 1950.

<sup>67</sup>See the discussion on 'Naturalizing Decolonization' in Jan Jansen and Jurgen Osterhammel, *Decolonization: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2013), 159-160

<sup>68</sup>Proceedings of Asian Relations Conference', 80-1.

<sup>69</sup>Roots of India's Foreign Policy', 21 May 1952, *SWJN* 2-18, 442-56.

greatest challenge to world peace. The country needed to focus on non-alignment rather than anti-colonialism.

Not everyone agreed with Nehru's assessment that colonialism was dying. This was particularly true for the Indonesian politics where, as we have seen, imperialism was assumed to be a clear and present danger well into the early 1960s. Deeply suspicious of the West's intentions and fearful neo-colonialism, Sukarno refused to call a time of death on the era of European colonialism. During the Bandung conference, which is often hailed as the apogee of India-Indonesia partnership, Sukarno had in fact decided to publicly break with Nehru and criticize his thesis on colonialism's end. In his inaugural address, Sukarno said:

We are often told 'Colonialism is dead'. Let us not be deceived or even soothed by that. I say to you, colonialism is not yet dead. How can we say it is dead, so long as vast areas of Asia and Africa are unfree. And, I beg of you do not think of colonialism only in the classic form which we of Indonesia, and our brothers in different parts of Asia and Africa, knew. Colonialism has also its modern dress, in the form of economic control, intellectual control, actual physical control by a small but alien community within a nation. It is a skillful and determined enemy, and it appears in many guises. It does not give up its loot easily. Wherever, whenever and however it appears, colonialism is an evil thing, and one which must be eradicated from the earth.

Although most contemporary observers missed it, Sukarno's Bandung address was intended as a repudiation of Nehru's position, the Indonesian foreign minister Ide Anak Agung Gde Agung would explain years later.<sup>70</sup> In fact, Sukarno had asked the Government of India for inputs for his speech before the conference. The Indians had advised him to focus on post-colonial challenges such as secularism, democracy and economic development.<sup>71</sup> In a pointed signal to New Delhi, Sukarno chose to ignore all of the Indian recommendations.

It was not until September 1961 that the ideological differences between the two Asian premiers came to a head when the two met in Belgrade along with leaders from twenty-three other states for the first conference of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).<sup>72</sup> The meeting took place at a precarious moment of world geopolitics. A bloody encounter between France and Tunisia in July over the ongoing Algerian War of Independence had left hundreds dead. East Germany had started its construction of the infamous Wall in August 1961. The day before the Belgrade conference began, the Soviets tested a nuclear device. With both the decolonization process and the Cold War under such heightened strain, one of the key aspects of the conference was the inherent tension between anti-colonialism and non-alignment. Some countries of West Africa and Indonesia demanded the conference focus on colonialism by fixing a date for its termination, others such as India were far more concerned about the Cold War and advocated issuing an appeal for peace. The Nehru-Sukarno debate at the conference reflected this tension.

With the Indonesian Guided Democracy in full swing, Sukarno's ideas had developed and hardened by now. On the third day of the conference, he took the stage to lay them out for the assembly. He declared that the most pressing problem for the world peace and prosperity was the conflict 'between the new emergent forces and the old forces of domination'. The clash between these two groups (NEFOs and OLDEFOs) was a battle between those seeking to create a new

<sup>70</sup>Agung, *Twenty Years of Indonesian Foreign Policy*.

<sup>71</sup>'Some Thoughts on Asian-African Conference', Tyabji to Sukarno, 3 March 1955 in 'Asian African Conference - Question Regarding the setting of Working Group', 1(8)-AAC/55, 1955, MEA, NAI

<sup>72</sup>For the Belgrade conference see: G.H. Jansen, *Afro-Asia and Non-Alignment* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966); Homer A. Jack, *Belgrade: The Conference of Non-Aligned States* (New York: The National Committee for Sane Nuclear Policy, 1961). For the transcripts of speeches at the Belgrade Conference: 'Non-Aligned Nations Summit Meeting, Belgrade, 1 September 1961', File Folder: JFKPOF-104-004-p0001, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, President's Office Files, John F. Kennedy: Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, USA.

international order based on justice and freedom and those trying to uphold old system of exploitation of one nation by another. In the context of this titanic struggle, the Cold War was almost a sideshow. '[T]he ideological conflict [the Cold War] is not, I repeat not, the main problem of our time', he said. The real threat was the remnants of colonialism and attempts to prolong it. He drew a sharp distinction between the concept of 'new colonialism' which had been invoked by Kotelawala in 1955 and 'neo-colonialism'. The former, he argued, replacement of one colonial power by another and not to be particularly feared. 'Neocolonialism', on the other hand, were economic, political, and military means used by the old colonial powers to hold onto their influence. 'We shall deal as effectively with new colonialism as we have dealt with, and are dealing with, the old one. . . . On the other hand, beware of colonialism in a new cloak, the so-called 'neocolonialism' . . . because it is a real danger', he warned. Therefore, the most important task before the Non-Alignment Movement was to maintain and solidify the international alliance to eradicate colonialism. Once achieved, it would allow the NEFOs to create an international system built upon 'justice among nations'.

A day later, Nehru delivered his speech to repudiate Sukarno's arguments. Unlike his clash with Kotelawala at Bandung, this time he did not attempt to challenge the Indonesian President's thesis but instead decided to dismiss it as altogether irrelevant. He argued that the biggest threat to global stability at the time was heightened Cold War tensions leading to an actual war. Everything else was of secondary concern. '[O]f course we stand for anticolonialism, antiimperialism, antiracialism and all that . . . but the first thing today is this fear of war', he stated patronizingly. Given the inevitability of colonialism's decline – 'all your imperialism and all your old-style colonialism will vanish and will go, have no doubt' – anti-colonialism was something of an anachronism. The conference need not dwell on 'a world that is past and in slogans that no longer apply'. The focus of the group needed to be the Cold War. The Non-Aligned Movement needed to make a concerted effort to lower tensions and complete global disarmament.

Nehru's political stature ensured that his views carried the day and the final communique of the conference focused on 'the danger of war and an appeal for peace'. However, there were many at the conference who saw the appeal in emphasizing colonialism over the Cold War as Sukarno had done.<sup>73</sup> Nehru's flippant dismissal of Sukarno's thesis served to strain the relationship between the two leaders who were once close friends. Soon thereafter, India was declared an OLDEFO in the Indonesian political parlance. 'India is actually pro-Western but is not willing to admit to it . . . [it] is only superficially a non-aligned country and that it actually does not like peace and neutrality', the Indonesian foreign minister Subandrio told Chinese premier Mao Zedong in 1963.<sup>74</sup> For the next few years India and Indonesia found themselves locked in a diplomatic competition with Sukarno attempting to take ownership of the second Afro-Asian conference and New Delhi working to ensure that that doesn't happen.<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusion

Debating conceptual contours of colonialism wasn't a parlour game for Asian and African leaders. It had direct bearing on national memory, self-image, conceptions of justice, freedom, and the international order. Expanding the definition of the term allowed for stretching anti-colonialism in a way that it could plausibly remain an all-encompassing ideological framework for a nation or even the entire Third World long after the formal transfer of power had taken place. Given the

<sup>73</sup>Jansen, *Afro-Asia and Non-Alignment*, 296-7.

<sup>74</sup>Record of Conversation from Chairman Mao's Reception of Indonesian Deputy Chief Minister Suban Delhi', 5 January, 1963, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 105-01792-06, 76-84; translated by David Cowhig. See <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117919> [accessed on 16 January 2022].

<sup>75</sup>Agung, *Twenty Years of Indonesian Foreign Policy*, 507-41; L.P. Singh, 'Dynamics of India-Indonesia Relations', *Asian Survey* 7, no. 9 (1967): 655-66.



enormous power of this tool, Nehru's refusal to lean on it himself and his steadfast opposition to allow anyone else in the international discourse to appropriate it was remarkable. In each conference, it was his stature and political capital that stymied efforts of the others to enlarge the anti-colonial agenda for the Afro-Asian group. At the same time, these efforts – be it Kotelawala-inspired resolution to condemn communism and inter-Asian aggression in Bandung or Sukarno's call to turn the Non-Aligned Movement into a crusade against neo-colonialism – certainly carried appeal within the Global South. Their popularity likely indicated, in part, the sense of insecurity felt by the post-colonial states and, in part, their desire to go beyond transfer of power in their struggle for freedom and justice. The inability of the Afro-Asian solidarity project to harness these fears and desires created the foundational fractures which were to doom the project in the years to come.

A close examination of this debate not only fills an important gap in our historical understanding of an important phase of the Third World Movement, it also paves the way for a new approach to studying post-colonial Afro-Asian politics. Traditionally, the scholarship of this politics has largely focused on the Global South critiquing the West. However, it has often tended to brush aside the intellectual disagreements within the Global South itself. This article shifts the focus away from East-West conflicts. It approaches East-East dialogue as not just a vehicle for cooperation and unity but also a platform for disputes and conflicting ideas. Such an approach not only enriches our understanding of post-colonial political thought but also decentres the West which occupies a central location in this discourse both as a hegemonic presence but also as a subject of critique.

**Sandeep Bhardwaj** is a history PhD Scholar at the Ashoka University. He has a Masters in international relations from the University of Chicago. He is visiting Yale University as a Fulbright-Nehru Scholar for the academic year 2022-23. His thesis examines India's geopolitical and economic relationship with Asia in the mid-twentieth century.