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# ‘With a minimum of bitterness’: decolonization, the right to self-determination, and the Arab-Asian group

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## Abstract

In the late 1940s, postcolonial elites expanded the activities of the United Nations (UN) by using it as a platform to advance decolonization and foster Third World solidarity. The Arab-Asian group was the earliest manifestation of institutional cooperation among postcolonial nations after 1945. Initially comprised of twelve Arab and Asian UN member-states, the Arab-Asian group coordinated their diplomatic activities as part of an effort to bring national self-determination to the forefront of international debate. However, the emergence of the Arab-Asian group at the UN revealed a confluence of different political ideologies and approaches to decolonization in the early postwar era. Forging a network of postcolonial elites brought out divergent visions for the postwar international order, illustrated by the frictions within the Arab-Asian group even as it played key roles in the UN debates on the questions of Indonesia, the former Italian colonies in Africa, and the Korean War. The Arab-Asian group, an important antecedent to Afro-Asianism, Third Worldism, and non-alignment, encountered challenges over parallel projects pursued by its members, such as Carlos Romulo’s campaign for a Pacific Pact among non-communist Asian states or Jawaharlal Nehru’s articulation of neutralism. Therefore, while postwar international organizations were a formative setting for the emergence of postcolonial internationalism and South-South solidarity, the common goals pursued by these states did not always translate into uniformity or consensus on decolonization.

**Keywords:** Decolonization; self-determination; postcolonial internationalism; United Nations; Arab-Asian Group

Since its founding in 1945, the United Nations has served as a platform for anti-imperialism and anti-racism even as it sustained empire and the interests of colonial powers. The emergence of a postcolonial presence at the UN transformed the international organization early in its history. Strenuous efforts by a wide range of actors from the global South, state and non-state, tested and re-worked the inner procedures of UN commissions and agencies, while fostering Third World solidarities around a shared opposition to imperialism. In particular, the permanent representatives of non-Western UN member-states from Arab and Asian countries promoted a vision for decolonization that entwined the global struggle for independence with the structures of the postwar international order. Through an activist programme of working within the confines of the UN, such postcolonial elites re-defined global understandings of decolonization, and in turn, fundamentally changed the UN’s role in the process of decolonization. This article examines how the earliest anti-imperial collective at the UN, the Arab-Asian group, shifted the identity, composition, and operation of international organizations toward universal decolonization.

Endemic to the creation of the UN in 1945 was the reality of its structural inequality, despite a profession of sovereign equality for all states. The two founding UN member-states from Asia, the Philippines and India, promoted an anticolonial vision of international politics that placed the UN squarely at the centre of its international relations. Rather than rejecting international rules and

institutions, the delegations from the Philippines and India supported transnational struggles for independence while developing and coordinating a postcolonial and internationalist grouping within the UN General Assembly. As the first nations to gain independence after the Second World War, the two delegations became foundational pillars of postcolonial internationalism and promoted anticolonial causes from within the structure of the UN. As shown by Giorgio Poti, Bogdan Iacob, and Disha Jani in this special issue, the struggle for representation by non-Western nations in opposition to empire preceded the founding of the UN. After 1945, such postcolonial elites benefitted from, and continued, the work of anticolonial nationalists in the early twentieth century through their engagement with the UN in successive decades.

In the late 1940s, a group of independent Arab and Asian states began to coordinate their activities at the UN, which enabled a global campaign for decolonization at the levels of international law and institutions. Representing a majority of the world's population, these postcolonial elites came to the UN with varying interests, priorities, and goals, conditioned by starkly different resources for participating in diplomatic initiatives. Over time, these postcolonial elites increased their cooperation on a wide range of issues across the UN system, having to overcome internal disputes in order to present a united front. As an informal coalition, the Arab-Asian group constituted the earliest example of postcolonial international and institutional cooperation in the post-1945 era.

This nascent postcolonial internationalism emerged most clearly at the UN and remade the internal dynamics of the international organization from within. Diplomats, political leaders, intellectuals, writers, jurists, and activists from the global South promoted specific understandings of decolonization even as they grappled with the complex meanings of statehood codified by post-war international regimes. As Elisabeth Leake demonstrates in this special issue through the Afghan experience, the UN had a 'fraught relationship with decolonization' that did not resolve questions of statehood or even establish uniform definitions of self-determination.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, international organizations such as the UN comprised both a site of global decolonization and a platform to negotiate and then advocate for full autonomy, constituting one nodal point in the development of transnational connections across the global South.<sup>2</sup> While the struggle for liberation entailed contesting power hierarchies at multiple scales of the postwar international order, it also became a project of remaking order itself, by foregrounding the regions of Asia and Africa in the development of international organizations.

### The emergence of the Arab-Asian group

In 1949, the Philippine permanent representative Carlos Peña Romulo was elected president of the UN General Assembly, marking a moment of new visibility for postcolonial elites from the global South. Even as a symbolic gesture, having Romulo in the president's chair empowered non-Western and postcolonial states, many of which expressed concerns with the disparity of power and wealth on display at the UN along a North-South axis. The attention that postcolonial elites gave to their participation at the UN across its many agencies also contributed to the transformation of the international organization into a new and equally important arena of anticolonial struggle. As an early manifestation of transnational political cooperation, the Arab-Asian group helped remake the UN into an institution that gave recognition to postcolonial nations and eventually provided a legal framework for achieving self-government and independence. In the midst of global decolonization, admission to the UN became a regular goal of newly independent nations as a sign of their international legitimacy and as evidence of their engaged multilateralism.

<sup>1</sup>Elisabeth Leake, 'States, Nations, and Self-Determination: Afghanistan and Decolonization at the United Nations', in this issue.

<sup>2</sup>As one dimension of the global history of decolonization, activism at the UN did not displace the labour of anticolonial struggle within the nation but rather supported it. See Richard Drayton and David Motadel, 'Discussion: the Futures of Global History', *Journal of Global History* 13 (2018): 1–21.

In the 1949–1950 session, the delegations of twelve non-Western states began to work together as a group, comprising the UN member-states of Afghanistan, Iran, the Arab League states of Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, and the Asian member-states of Burma, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Together, these twelve states formed a new non-Western core that they called the Arab-Asian group; it quickly became an indomitable force at the UN by raising new colonial questions for debate, tabling resolutions to break emerging Cold War lines, and promoting alternative visions of global cooperation. The Arab-Asian group embodied the emergent postcolonial internationalism of the postwar era; their solidarity presaged the later transnational movements of non-alignment, neutralism, Afro-Asianism, and Third Worldism. However, this new state of affairs also exposed the complexity of their solidarity – tenuous bonds linking Arab and Asian nations as they strove to achieve their common goals through co-sponsored UN resolutions. That they would find areas of cooperation was hardly given. Their unity required a deliberate and flexible approach to the ways in which they could work alongside one another on specific agenda items while balancing ongoing regional projects and variable instructions from their home governments. For example, the Arab League, an important partner to the mostly neutralist Asian member-states, confronted its own internal divisions as it attempted to balance its participation in international organizations with a focus on regional solidarity.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the Arab-Asian group, as a result of its expansion in influence and numbers, presaged the intensification of conflict within Romulo’s self-appointed ‘peace assembly’, not only along Cold War lines but also in the making of international law.<sup>4</sup>

The Arab-Asian group, through which postcolonial states organized at least one key facet of their public international diplomacy, has not drawn significant attention in recent scholarly works of international and global history. Instead, historians tend to locate histories of Afro-Asia in a later period beginning with the Bandung Conference of 1955 or employ the geographic shorthand of the ‘Third World in the Cold War’ without deeper investigation into its historical genealogy.<sup>5</sup> Scholars who acknowledge the existence of the Arab-Asian group sometimes attribute its origins to the Korean War in 1950 and trace its rise in the context of wartime multilateralism, even though the group began to work together earlier over questions of colonial status, at least as early as the third General Assembly session in 1948 that made Romulo’s election possible.<sup>6</sup> The Arab-Asian group’s evident focus on colonial questions prior to the Korean War suggests anti-imperial origins to the later development of non-alignment and Afro-Asianism, closely linked but distinct political ideologies forged in an environment of Cold War alliances.<sup>7</sup>

As the twelve Arab and Asian states drafted resolutions and coordinated their votes at the General Assembly, they had to fend off accusations by other member-states that they were

<sup>3</sup>Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, ‘Arab Agency and the UN Project: the League of Arab States between Universality and Regionalism’, *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 7 (2016): 1220.

<sup>4</sup>Romulo Is Elected UN Assembly Head at Opening Meeting’, *The New York Times*, September 21, 1949.

<sup>5</sup>Historical scholarship on decolonization and the Cold War tends to treat the United Nations as a secondary arena for Third World activism. See Robert J. McMahon, ed., *The Cold War in the Third World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Arne Westad briefly mentions that the ‘UN was an anticolonial battlefield’, but highlights the role of the Third World at the UN as emerging only in the 1960s. See Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 136. Some studies that focus on the foreign policies of specific postcolonial nations recognize how the United Nations gave an international platform to new nations but do not address in any meaningful way how such new nations shaped the development of the UN itself. See Leslie James and Elisabeth Leake, eds., *Decolonization and the Cold War: Negotiating Independence* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Vrushali Patil, *Negotiating Decolonization at the United Nations: Politics of Space, Identity, and International Community* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>6</sup>Yassin El-Ayouty, *The United Nations and Decolonization: The Role of Afro-Asia* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971); Evan Luard, *A History of the United Nations: The Age of Decolonization, 1955–1965* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>7</sup>For more on the distinction between non-alignment and Afro-Asianism, see Lorenz M. Lüthi, ‘Non-Alignment, 1946–1965: Its Establishment and Struggle Against Afro-Asianism’, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 7, no. 2 (2016): 201–23. Also see Lorenz M. Lüthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 266–86.

forming a bloc that might rival Anglo-American or Soviet dominance. Though such Cold War language made up a common refrain of regional summits in Asia, diplomats from postcolonial nations did little to conceal the pride with which they progressed towards a new kind of international diplomacy and asserted their independence from power blocs and the wider Cold War landscape. One of the leaders of India's delegation, Benegal Rau, spoke often about the solidarity of independent non-Western nations. He called the election of Carlos Romulo 'a matter of special gratification to all Asian delegations' to remind the General Assembly of the Arab-Asian group's recent victories.<sup>8</sup> Rau also tied Romulo's election to the Arab-Asian group's campaign for Indonesia's independence earlier that year, when the Arab-Asian group devised a united campaign to support Indonesia and its pursuit of recognition at the UN. This campaign developed through direct consultations both at the UN and outside of the international organization, including a conference hosted in New Delhi in January 1949 to foster Asian relations around the cause of supporting the Indonesian republican cabinet. Through collective action, Rau explained that the Asian Relations Conference 'was momentous and the resolutions passed at the Conference had materially influenced the subsequent course of events'.<sup>9</sup> Its importance, however, lay not only 'the fact that such a conference was held' but that 'it was the first time Asian Governments had come together for a political purpose'.<sup>10</sup> Such collective action, often led by the Indian delegation, built on its activism at the UN across other issues, such as its protest of the treatment of Indians in South Africa before the UN General Assembly in 1946.<sup>11</sup>

The other diplomats at the plenary would have been familiar with Arab-Asian coordination and the New Delhi conference earlier that year. The Asian Relations Conference in 1949 was the second iteration of the first Asian Relations Conference in 1947. Tracing its history and linking both events to the General Assembly session, Rau added, 'If the cultural Asian Conference of March 1947 had been a symbol of Asia's awakening to a new life, the political Conference of January 1949 might be said to mark the coming of age of Asia and the beginning of a process of active cooperation among the countries in that region of the world'.<sup>12</sup> This alternative sensibility about international diplomacy, located in a longer historical trajectory marking the end of the empire, was taken to the UN by these postcolonial elites.

## Defining decolonization

The Arab-Asian group advocated for decolonization across the UN's organs and regularly pushed for recognition of self-government and sovereign rights at the General Assembly. Throughout the late 1940s, Asian and Arab states at the UN played a direct role in promoting and negotiating Indonesia's independence, transforming the UN into a necessary mediatory space for advancing decolonization. Their collective support for the Indonesian representative, Nico Palar, amplified his protest against the Dutch government while convincing the US that it should support the Indonesian cause. At the UN Security Council, Benegal Rau spoke in support of Indonesia not only as India's representative but also as the spokesperson for the Arab-Asian group. Upon becoming the official representative of the Indonesian Republic, Nico Palar stood before the General Assembly and thanked the Asian and Arab nations for 'defending Indonesia's sovereign rights'.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup>General Assembly Official Records, 4th Session, 222nd Plenary Meeting, September 21, 1949 (Lake Success, 1949), 10.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>Alanna O'Malley, 'India, Apartheid and the New World Order at the UN, 1946–1962', *Journal of World History* 31, no. 1 (March 2020), 207.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>Nico Palar, 'Statement at UN General Assembly, September 28, 1950', Indonesian Mission to the United Nations File, Inventaris Arsip Lambertus Nicodemus Palar, No.123, National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia.

In the same session, the Arab and Asian states focused their attention on another colonial question: the disposition of the former Italian colonies in Africa. The Paris Peace Treaties of 1947 obliged Italy to relinquish its former territories in Libya, Eritrea, and Somaliland and to accede to the Four Power settlement arranged by the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and France. The Libyan provinces of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania were being administered by the British while Fezzan was held by the French, who were keen on retaining military control over the area for as long as possible. However, the Four Powers were unable to reach an agreement on the proposed settlement and placed the issue on the agenda of the third General Assembly session. As the General Assembly in Paris stalled and failed to complete its programme, it decided to meet in the spring of 1949 and deliberate on the outstanding agenda items such as the question of the Italian colonies.

During the fourth General Assembly session, the Arab and Asian states held closed-door meetings to coordinate their actions. U Ba Maung, who represented Burma at the Third Committee of the General Assembly, described their coordination with elation in his regular reports to Rangoon: 'The Asian countries are constantly meeting to discuss informally over dinners, receptions, and luncheons on Indonesian matters and trusteeship over the former Italian colonies'.<sup>14</sup> In particular, they were planning a direct response to the formula devised by British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin and Italian Foreign Minister Count Sforza to divide Libya into three trusts under British, French, and Italian administration, a manoeuvre that would swiftly undercut decolonization. The British briefly toyed with a trusteeship for Libya administered by Egypt or the Arab League, but instead sought to retain direct administrative control. The Italian delegation also lobbied for gaining administrative control of Somaliland from Britain and France while proposing the division of Eritrea. British diplomats noted that such proposals only further fanned the outrage of the Asian and Arab states.<sup>15</sup>

In North Africa, news of the controversial British plan incited mass protests in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, though to little effect at the UN itself where the First Committee of the General Assembly still approved the Bevin-Sforza Plan to establish British and Italian trusteeships.<sup>16</sup> At the General Assembly, the Indian, Pakistani, and Burmese delegations presented an alternative plan for international trusteeship for Eritrea and Somaliland to be administered by the UN while calling for Libya's immediate independence. To this point, Asian delegations had expressed measured support for international trusteeship so long as it paved a path toward complete independence and facilitated quicker withdrawal of European military administrations. The delegates of India and the Philippines preferred trusteeship directly administered by the UN, arguing that it would induce an explicit time frame for granting independence. Supporting their position, Burma's own policy was 'to oppose colonialism in any form' and to advocate for 'self-determination earned in these international trusteeships', though its delegation tended to defer to India and the Philippines when drawing up resolutions.<sup>17</sup>

While statehood for all colonial peoples remained a key objective of Arab-Asian group diplomacy, its members did not always agree on the best method to achieve it, with some Arab delegations agitating for immediate independence and the Asian delegations advising a more gradual approach to achieving self-government. At the third General Assembly session, for example, the Indian delegation attempted to pave a middle path between disagreeing factions by suggesting the creation of new measures of accountability that would attend to the welfare of the inhabitants of trust territories. While the Indian delegation called attention to the problem of racial

<sup>14</sup>U Ba Maung, 'Third Report of the Third Session (United Nations)', May 1, 1949, Acc. No. 39, National Archives of Myanmar (NAM); U Nu, *Toward Peace and Democracy* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, Government of the Union of Burma, 1949), 201.

<sup>15</sup>Ernest Bevin to Foreign Office, Memorandum, April 18, 1946, CAB 129/9, National Archives of the UK (TNA).

<sup>16</sup>Pamela Ballinger, 'Colonial Twilight: Italian Settlers and the Long Decolonization of Libya', *Journal of Contemporary History* 51, no. 4 (2016): 813–38.

<sup>17</sup>U Ba Maung, Report, April 18, 1949, Acc. No. 38, 15/3(30), NAM.

discrimination, it also sought to mollify discord by suggesting that the issue be discussed separately as its own agenda item.<sup>18</sup> This revised motion effectively severed the anti-discrimination campaign from the colonial question. Presented as a conciliatory and pragmatic gesture, this posture set the tone for the other Arab-Asian member-states as a tentative step forward.

This more conciliatory approach was shared by other members of the Arab-Asian group. At the Third Committee of the General Assembly, the Burmese representative U Ba Maung campaigned for the Indian plan that Libya and Somaliland should be transferred to a UN-administered trusteeship so that 'after a period of not less than 10 and not more than 20 years, these territories shall be independent or join with adjacent territories according to the wishes of the inhabitants as expressed by the plebiscites'.<sup>19</sup> Pakistani Foreign Minister Zafarullah Khan also stressed the importance of UN administration if trusteeships were created. U Ba Maung reported, 'The last item had to be left unresolved due to a rejection by the combined forces of Arab, Asiatic, Soviet, and Latin American blocs . . . needless to say, Burma voted against'.<sup>20</sup> The Somali delegate leader sent a letter of thanks to Burmese Prime Minister U Nu for 'the keen interest voiced by the new State of Burma and other Asiatic Powers in defence and protection of the rights of the subject, weak, and poor people like ourselves'.<sup>21</sup> In the final vote, the Arab and Asian nations registered their collective dissent and managed to defeat the British-Italian proposal in the vote on 11 May 1949. The Libyan political leader, Mansour Kadadoran, sent letters to the Asian member-states thanking them for their 'inspired and courageous opposition'.<sup>22</sup> However, unwilling to allow the decision to move forward, the UN postponed further action on the item until the fourth full General Assembly session.<sup>23</sup>

Upon defeat of their trusteeship proposal, the US and Great Britain yielded on the question of Libya's independence and presented a different plan containing a limited preparatory period for self-government, bringing the terms closer to the gradual approach advocated by the Arab-Asian proposal submitted by India, Burma, and Pakistan. The Soviet Union, attempting to appeal to the postcolonial nations, echoed calls for immediate independence while other smaller nations such as Haiti insisted on the need to solicit the opinions of the inhabitants. When opinion in the assembly swayed toward recognizing Libya's independence, Benegal Rau stated that the General Assembly was 'acting for the first time like a world parliament'.<sup>24</sup> Ever the lawyer, Rau, added that 'the best way of safeguarding that independence would be to allow the populations concerned to draw up their own constitution'.<sup>25</sup> Rau offered new language in a draft resolution that included a ten-year trusteeship, a commission of inquiry for Eritrea, and the establishment of judicial and legislative authorities through local councils. These terms were widely supported by the Asian and Arab states. By heavily lobbying other member-states, these terms became incorporated into the final resolution. As a member of both the Italian Colonies sub-committee and the International Law Commission, Rau gave his recommendation that a constitution be drawn up for Somaliland as well.<sup>26</sup> The Trusteeship Council accepted the suggestion, and on November 21, the General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for Libya's wholesale independence as a sovereign state by 1 January 1952.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>18</sup>General Assembly Official Records, 3<sup>rd</sup> Session, 1<sup>st</sup> Part, 4<sup>th</sup> Committee, 61<sup>st</sup> meeting, October 19, 1949 (Lake Success, 1949), 100.

<sup>19</sup>U Ba Maung, Report, April 18, 1949, Acc. No. 38, 15/3(30), NAM.

<sup>20</sup>U Ba Maung, Report, May 1, 1949, Acc. No. 39, 15/3(30), NAM.

<sup>21</sup>Abdullahi Issa to U Nu, March 8, 1949, Acc. No. 321, NAM.

<sup>22</sup>Mansour Kadadoran to U So Nyun, May 25, 1949, Acc. No. 39, NAM.

<sup>23</sup>General Assembly Resolution 287(III), May 18, 1949, A/RES/287.

<sup>24</sup>General Assembly Official Records, 280<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting, October 3, 1949 (Lake Success, 1949), 29.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>'Propose Trusteeship for Italy's African Territory', *New Journal and Guide*, October 22, 1949.

<sup>27</sup>General Assembly Resolution 289(IV), November 21, 1949, A/RES/289.

This further victory suggested a sharpening of tactics by the Arab and Asian states in the course of their deliberations on North and East Africa. Rather than merely forcing the issue by calling for new votes, the group defeated proposals it believed were untenable and, in turn, prepared alternate proposals with concrete suggestions that they believed would satisfy both the assembly and the Trusteeship Council. With Benegal Rau as the intellectual heart of the group, the postcolonial nations represented by the Arab-Asian group developed an increasingly unified collective voice at the UN aimed not only at responding to crisis but also toward creating rules and procedure within the UN that would formalize decolonization. In addition to enlarging the role of the UN, postcolonial states also insisted on transparent and explicit steps towards devolution, including the UN's support for public elections, petition rights, and constitution-making by indigenous populations.

### The pacific pact and other internationalisms

As a platform for postcolonial internationalism, the UN provided a public venue for the promotion of different political projects. In the face of the Arab-Asian group's victories on select resolutions, Romulo remained concerned about the integrity of the General Assembly. Romulo made an appeal to Western states, calling upon them to 'ally themselves with the movement toward native self-government and independence'.<sup>28</sup> While Romulo espoused postcolonial internationalism and supported increased recognition for non-Western and postcolonial states, he did not use his platform to promote the emerging ideology of neutralism associated with the Indian and Burmese delegations and avoided Cold War language in his role as assembly president. Romulo's resistance to inflammatory rhetoric put him at odds with the opinions voiced by Indian and Burmese delegates, illustrating a difference in tenor and approach within the Arab-Asian group members. State-centric concerns for security and territorial integrity continually tested the unity of postcolonial nations. Romulo and other leaders within the group recognized that their cohesion depended on constant communication and delicate negotiation of potentially controversial positions or commitments. It remained an unstated convention that the group did not intervene on the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan. Similarly, the Arab and Asian states voted in concert on the Palestine question, even as individual member-states within the group continued diplomatic relations with Israel.

The existence of divergent perspectives did not necessarily indicate fracturing within the Arab-Asian group. However, they suggest that the loose coalition it represented accommodated a wide range of individual objectives and projects, and perhaps a multiplicity to the ways postcolonial internationalism became manifest even at a single site such as the UN. Postcolonial solidarity fostered unity over certain issues, but in many instances, the members of the group lobbied one another to support their respective regional goals. During the fourth General Assembly session, Romulo saw the opportunity afforded by Nehru's North American good will tour to lend additional moral weight to his government's proposals to address the security of Southeast Asia. At the previous General Assembly session, Nehru told the plenary, 'We in Asia . . . have committed ourselves inevitably to the freedom of every other colonial country'.<sup>29</sup> Throughout his tour, Nehru reiterated this anticolonial and internationalist message in his public statements. Outside the assembly hall, Romulo met with Nehru to welcome him to the UN, but also to raise a proposal he first introduced at the January 1949 conference.<sup>30</sup> Speaking as an emissary of the Philippine government rather than as a UN official, Romulo sought Nehru's support for a 'Pacific Pact' or

<sup>28</sup>Romulo Bids Nations of West Help Asians', *The New York Times*, September 25, 1949.

<sup>29</sup>General Assembly Official Records, 3<sup>rd</sup> Session, 155<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting, November 3, 1948, 394.

<sup>30</sup>Meeting Set to Form Asian Anti-Red Union', *The New York Times*, October 30, 1949.

'Pacific Union' to unite the independent states of Asia in a military alliance.<sup>31</sup> In correspondence, the proposal was also sometimes referred to the Asian Union or Southeast Asia Union. Romulo framed the Pacific Pact as serving common goals: encouraging the political and economic cooperation of Asian states while fighting European imperialism and foreign interference in the region.

In March 1949, shortly after the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Philippine President Elpidio Quirino announced his intention to establish the Pacific Pact. He specified that the new pact would have a military and anti-communist character and instructed Romulo to present the plan in diplomatic circles as a 'parallel safeguard for Asia' on the model of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.<sup>32</sup> From one perspective, the creation of a new security framework in Asia would support American interests and align its states more closely with the US. However, such a posture would defy neutrality and therefore risked creating a wedge among the independent Asian states, which had maintained since 1947 that Asia as a region ought to pursue an independent stance and not join military alliances. In one sharp rebuke, a memo produced in the Indian External Affairs Ministry dismissed the pact proposal as a 'stunt'.<sup>33</sup> However, with Mao Tse Tung's forces close to overtaking mainland China, even the Burmese government wavered on neutrality, instead of expressing concern for Asia's stability. Attempting to allay U Nu's concerns, Nehru wrote, 'Your proposal that India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma should come together for defence and economic purposes seems to me a little premature at the present moment'.<sup>34</sup> He also wrote, 'I am quite convinced that if we stood up for the bankrupt Government in China now, we would be condemned in India'.<sup>35</sup> Nehru expected a communist victory in China and thought it would not help India to oppose Mao with a new alliance on its shared border.

Throughout the summer of 1949, Quirino and Romulo pressed ahead with promoting the Pacific Pact. In July 1949, Quirino invited Chinese Nationalist General Chiang Kai-shek and South Korean President Syngman Rhee to the Philippines, where they agreed upon the need for a security architecture in Asia on the model of NATO.<sup>36</sup> The main obstacle to its creation was Nehru, whose support they would need to make such a pact representative of the most powerful and visible states in Asia. When Romulo met with Nehru in the fall, he asked if India would agree to attending a conference in Manila with the other Asian nations to discuss the union proposal. Romulo had softened his earlier tone on the Pacific Pact and removed all references to military and defence issues from the plans. By doing so, Romulo revealed the Philippines' abiding and competing ambition to mediate between the East and the West, but also its willingness to alter concrete objectives in order to remain a leader in Asia's evolving regional cooperation. With the military dimension removed, Nehru tentatively agreed to the conference, now renamed the Southeast Asia Union, for the following year.

The proposed Southeast Asia Union had a chilling effect on the Arab-Asian group's activities, diminishing the collective moral standing promoted by the neutralist stalwarts of India, Burma, and Indonesia. Questions floated around the UN as to whether the Asian states were now forming an alliance or bloc without the Arab League. News of the conference was already undermining the internationalist front that the Indian government in particular had encouraged. In public, Nehru sought to underscore India's position and defended his foreign policy in the legislature, 'We have

<sup>31</sup>Romulo planned for the Baguio Conference to take place in 1949, though Quirino changed the location from Manila to Baguio. See Rahul Mukherji, 'Appraising the Legacy of Bandung', *Bandung Revisited*, 167.

<sup>32</sup>Elpidio Quirino, *Letter of Instruction of His Excellency Elpidio Quirino, President of the Philippines, to Hon. Carlos Romulo*, Ministry of Information, 1949, National Archives of the Philippines.

<sup>33</sup>Minute by I.J. Bahadur Singh, September 12, 1949, UN-1 Branch, Ministry of External Affairs, F.No.9(55), National Archives of India (NAI).

<sup>34</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru to Thakin Nu, May 10, 1949, SWJN 2, Vol. 11, 372.

<sup>35</sup>Quoted in B.N. Pandey, *Nehru* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2001), 326.

<sup>36</sup>'Chiang-Quirino Proposal for a Pacific Union', Policy Information Officer of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs (Fisher) to the Director of the Office (Butterworth), July 15, 1949, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1949, Vol. VII, Part 2, Doc. 338.



stated repeatedly that our foreign policy is one to keep apart from big blocs of nations – rival blocs – and to be friendly to all countries and not become entangled in any alliances, military or other that might drag us into any possible conflict.<sup>37</sup> Indian leaders were so opposed to any commitments that might infringe upon its sovereignty that in November 1950, and the Indian delegation was the lone voice opposed to the anti-Soviet ‘Uniting for Peace’ resolution drafted by the US, thus breaking from the Arab-Asian group by abstaining at the General Assembly.<sup>38</sup>

Maintaining a sense of cooperation required constant compromise and setting aside of bilateral disputes within the Arab-Asian group, between specific member-states such as India and Pakistan or within the Arab League itself. Reflecting the informality of their coalition, when postcolonial leaders met outside of the UN, they did not attempt to establish institutions such as a secretariat or permanent offices to coordinate their work on an official and regular basis, embodying respect for their individual state sovereignty and the commitment not to interfere in one another’s domestic affairs. Their solidarity was delicately engineered by regional summits such as the Asian Relations Conferences of 1947 and 1949 and through diplomatic correspondence on an issue-by-issue basis. Therefore, the Arab-Asian group that emerged at the General Assembly was still aspirational and the Asian Relations Organization that emerged out of the 1947 conference was limited in its activities and reach.<sup>39</sup> While the group’s activities fostered solidarity among elites from the global South, the core purpose of the Arab-Asian group was never formalized by a charter or a declaration, remaining informal and ad hoc. Following the New Delhi conference in January 1949, attendees circulated a memorandum with guidelines stressing the importance of consultation ‘within the framework of the UN’.<sup>40</sup> In the context of the Cold War, the loyalties of these states remained an open question, inducing concern among the great powers that the Arab and Asian states were secretly allied with either bloc.

Each state’s willingness to cooperate with Arab-Asian group decisions varied by issue. The Arab League promoted a distinct agenda at the UN that was centred on Palestine and its conflict with Israel. While the Arab League supported the Arab-Asian group and often voted alongside the independent Asian states, it operated as an independent regional organization within the UN General Assembly and maintained its secretariat in Cairo. The Arab states, therefore, while cooperative and open to engaging with its allies in the Arab-Asian group, were not unconditionally committed to the cosmopolitan vision espoused by Indian leaders such as Nehru, Pandit, and Rau, who sought to develop and encourage multilateral cooperation to turn the UN into a world parliament. Rather, the internationalism that emerged out of the collaboration of a wide range of postcolonial elites tied together a broad-based anticolonial nationalism with a growing willingness to support particular cases of decolonization through consensus-based decisions. Therefore, while the Arab-Asian group called for immediate Libyan independence, they always sought to create practical solutions through group decisions and by working within the UN framework. After much deliberation, the group as a whole ultimately favoured the gradualist proposal that a UN-administered trusteeship would be better for Eritrea and Somaliland rather than immediate independence.

For postcolonial nations, defending state sovereignty was paramount to their international activities. The statehood they promoted in their international diplomacy aided their common pursuit of political legitimacy but did not always prioritize the total emancipation of dependencies and colonies. To leaders such as Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, this emerging international agenda necessarily meant that new nations such as India and the other states of the Arab-Asian Group had to remain free of alliances with either bloc. During his North America tour,

<sup>37</sup>Constituent Assembly Legislative Debates II, 4<sup>th</sup> Session, SWJN 2, Vol. 10, 452.

<sup>38</sup>General Assembly Official Records, 302<sup>nd</sup> Plenary Meeting, 5<sup>th</sup> Session, November 3, 1950, 347.

<sup>39</sup>For more on the Asian Relations Conference, see Vineet Thakur, ‘An Asian Drama: The Asian Relations Conference, 1947’, *International History Review* 41, no. 3 (2019): 673–95.

<sup>40</sup>Aide Memoire, Ministry of External Affairs, PD18-4/Cor., 98.No.5(6)/C7, F.No.9(55), NAI.

Nehru used his speech before the U.S. Congress to assert, 'Where freedom is menaced, or justice threatened, or where aggression takes place, we cannot and shall not be neutral'.<sup>41</sup>

The neutralism espoused by India, Burma, and Indonesia did not mean they would abstain from international politics. Instead, they engaged actively in world affairs and upheld their independent position as a sign of moral authority. This delicate balance between independence and engagement defined postcolonial internationalism.

### Self-determination and human rights

As the Cold War sharpened political rhetoric along bipolar lines, it became more difficult for the Arab-Asian states to maintain its posture of independence. In a conciliatory tone, Romulo set out to explain the priorities of the new nations to the West, acknowledging what 'a baffling picture' it must seem that certain member-states were grouping themselves together as if to form a bloc.<sup>42</sup> 'With no military power to speak of', he wrote, Asia 'is gradually assuming the role of a Third Force interposed between the two great powers, the US and the Soviet Union'.<sup>43</sup> Even still, this 'peace assembly' that Romulo envisioned still appeared to fracture the UN General Assembly along Cold War divisions. For example, an explosive proposal by the representative from nationalist China accused the Soviet Union of fostering communist insurrection in Manchuria, thus threatening its territorial integrity and violating the 1945 Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty.<sup>44</sup> The tensions of the previous session were also exemplified by the standoff between Romulo's deputy in the Philippine delegation, Salvador Lopez, and Soviet delegates, as 'the resolution of [Andrey] Vishinsky seemed to imply that the Big Five alone carried the responsibility for peace and it treated the small countries as spectators or kibitzers in a struggle among champions'.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Romulo's ongoing campaign for a NATO-style pacific pact remained a controversial issue among the Arab-Asian states. On the one hand, Romulo's presidency of the General Assembly showed that non-Western nations exercised greater growing influence at the UN. However, it also reflected the increasingly difficult position of such nations when confronted with competing interests.

Less visible though equally important was the role that Benegal Rau played in the Arab-Asian group to focus its cooperation around specific agenda items. As one of the main drafters of India's constitution, Rau was also personally invested in the creation of human rights instruments and an international declaration on the rights and duties of states. Despite his failing health, Rau lobbied other delegations to support the resolution calling upon the International Law Commission to prepare such a declaration. Amounting to the first global effort to define statehood, the 1949 draft declaration was ultimately not adopted.<sup>46</sup> Although Rau was a passionate jurist and firm believer in the power of law, his counterparts from Burma retained their scepticism toward international law. Burma's constitutional advisor Chan Htoon, with whom Rau worked closely on drafting Burma's independence constitution, called the articles of the draft declaration 'pious expressions of hope'.<sup>47</sup> Another Burmese jurist, E. Maung, submitted comments to Burma's Foreign Office sharply criticizing the articles on the equality of states and on human rights. He wrote, 'What are human rights and fundamental freedoms? Till [sic] these are uniformly defined and accepted,

<sup>41</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru, Statement before United States Congress, October 13, 1949, *SWJN* 2, Vol. 13, 304.

<sup>42</sup>Carlos P. Romulo, 'The Crucial Battle for Asia', *The New York Times*, September 11, 1949.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>China in the UN', *The New York Times*, September 30, 1949.

<sup>45</sup>Asserts Small Nations Not Kibitzers of Big 5', *The Globe and Mail*, November 18, 1949.

<sup>46</sup>General Assembly Resolution 375(IV), December 6, 1949.

<sup>47</sup>Chan Htoon and E. Maung, Ministry of Judicial Affairs to Foreign Office, Memorandum No. 210 JC 49(2201), October 14, 1949, Acc. No. 14\_15/3, NAM.

the Article has no real meaning. ‘Human rights and fundamental freedoms’ are very attractive catchwords but at present they are as mirages receding from grasp’.<sup>48</sup>

Chan Htoon agreed that the International Law Commission should further define human rights in relation to the state before proceeding with an international instrument on the duties of states. Both Chan Htoon and E. Maung were not willing pledge Burmese commitment without more discussion. This unusual disagreement between the Indian and Burmese delegates pointed to an emerging intellectual rift on the scope of human rights and state sovereignty, but not necessarily a diplomatic one that would disengage their cooperation. While jurists from the two countries shared many common views on national law, the Burmese delegates were less enthusiastic about the expansion of international law compared to the Indian delegation. Rather than defeating Rau’s proposal, Chan Htoon’s comments reflected a posture of measured reluctance that the Burmese delegation would adopt in later instances of expanded international activity.

Such fine distinctions in the viewpoints of postcolonial representatives made all the more crucial and revealing their moments of cooperation. This first generation of postcolonial elites in the postwar era faced the challenge of protecting their own newfound statehood on an international stage in which they had to work out the terms of decolonization for themselves and for other nations in the global South. Differences in perspective did not always undermine their common objectives, but it foregrounded the effort to cultivate South-South solidarity by requiring gradual and deliberate steps to work together, perhaps at the expense of other initiatives and projects that the group chose not to defend. Initial divisions over Palestine in 1947, for example, pointed to the complexities of uniting the Arab and Asian states, resulting in the group’s passivity compared to the questions of Indonesia or the former Italian colonies in East Africa. By voting in concert and sponsoring resolutions that they believed would be successful, the Arab-Asian group began to establish a space for a neutral, non-Western, and non-Soviet solidarity within the General Assembly.

Overall, the fourth session of the UN General Assembly marked a change in the atmosphere of international diplomacy. In the concluding session, Romulo adopted Rau’s language to encapsulate the assembly’s accomplishments. From the chair he declared, ‘The General Assembly, acting for the first time as a world parliament with legislative powers, has reached a decision on the disposal of the former Italian colonies’.<sup>49</sup> Romulo also cited the resolution on the Balkans, the commission in Korea, and the negotiations on Indonesia as ‘proof of the growing moral power of the General Assembly’.<sup>50</sup> These resolutions showed that ‘no single power or group of powers can be said to dominate’ while affirming ‘the great charter principles of self-determination and independence for all peoples’.<sup>51</sup> Behind the scenes, Romulo also sought to mediate disputes between the Anglo-American and Soviet blocs, such as over disarmament and atomic control. Illustrative of the Arab-Asian group’s working method, Rau also assisted Romulo in this effort to mediate the international dispute and drafted a plan for an international declaration on atomic control.<sup>52</sup> With this proposal, the Arab and Asian states collectively voiced their support for disarmament, which became a signature issue throughout the 1950s.

Following Mao’s victory in October 1949, the idea of the Pacific Union began to gain support among the US and other Western states. On 26 May 1950, Quirino’s conference opened at Mansion House in Baguio, the former seat of the American colonial government and the president’s summer residence. In an idyllic setting, delegations arrived from Australia, Ceylon, India, Pakistan, and Thailand for meetings over four days. Contrary to the purpose of the conference, the

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>‘Steady UN Gains Cited by Romulo’, *Los Angeles Times*, December 11, 1949.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>‘2 Nations Ask End of Atomic Selfishness’, *The New York Times*, Nov. 8, 1949; ‘India Will Bid UN Shift Atomic Work’, *The New York Times*, September 26, 1949; Report on First Session of the International Law Commission, October 14, 1949, Acc. No. 14 15\_3(17), NAM.

discussions reflected the ambivalence of Asian leaders toward a collective security scheme for the region. Without Chiang Kai-shek or Syngman Rhee present, and all military questions off the table, any mention of alliances or collective security was met with studied equivocation. Quirino and Romulo revised their proposals toward establishing an economic and cultural union of non-communist Asian states, but the new proposal still displayed a Cold War veneer. Quirino invoked language also used by the US when promoting the Point Four Program describing such countries as a matter of 'technical assistance to under-developed countries'.<sup>53</sup> In light of the anti-communist position taken by the Philippines and the arrival of a new conservative government in Australia, the meetings dwelled on the problem of bipolar tensions among Asian states. Representing a diverging viewpoint, Nehru did not share a similar rhetoric of non-communism and instead emphasized the importance of keeping Asia out of superpower competition.<sup>54</sup> Nehru's insistence on this language had the effect of shifting the conference toward new resolution drafts that supported 'the principles of Asiatic self-determination and civilization' alone.<sup>55</sup> There were no statements asserting a commitment to fighting communism or promising support to Chiang and his nationalist forces, thereby dashing any hopes of international intervention in China. Undermining Quirino's aspirations, the Baguio conference did not produce closer political or diplomatic cooperation among the postcolonial nations. Rather, the discussions brought the postcolonial Asian states to the edge of disharmony, potentially inciting conflict between the neutralist and anti-communist states over topics that were intended to lie beyond the purview of the conference, such as the prospect of a regional military alliance or the status of the new Chinese government.

As a failed diplomatic summit, the Baguio conference does not earn significant scholarly attention since Quirino was unable to convince other Asian leaders to enter into an alliance with him. When the Baguio conference does appear in historical accounts, it is folded into the broader context of Asian regional politics.<sup>56</sup> In one of the few studies to focus on Arab-Asian cooperation, D.H. Sharma also designates the Baguio conference as merely a stepping stone in the long development of Asia's regional cooperation. Yet, the planning of the Baguio conference is notable, not for achieving new agreements, but for revealing the alternative internationalisms circulated by different Asian leaders brought out by their disagreements. While postcolonial elites in Asia broadly agreed on the necessity of their cooperation as a matter of rhetoric, in practice they held different views on the contours and commitments that would constitute those relationships. While scholars have described the 1950s as a golden age in the history of Third World, there were key areas of disagreement about the best way to foster their unity.<sup>57</sup>

The Baguio conference, taking place outside of formal international organizations like the UN, revealed an alternative project for development international and regional cooperation than that advanced by the Arab-Asian group. The union that Quirino, Rhee, and Chiang attempted to champion suggested an ideological alignment and anti-communist position that many other postcolonial states were not willing to endorse. The other leading lights of the Third World rejected a union on the NATO model even when the military commitment was abandoned. The conference drew a line between divergent postcolonial internationalisms and suggested an irreconcilable difference between viewpoints.

<sup>53</sup>Elpidio Quirino, 'Address of President Elpidio Quirino at the opening session of the Baguio Conference of 1950 Mansion House, Baguio, May 26, 1950', *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines* 46, no. 5 (1950): 2019–22, NAP.

<sup>54</sup>Kishore C. Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating Cooperation, Institutional Structures* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 80.

<sup>55</sup>'7 Asiatic Nations End Baguio Parley', *The New York Times*, May 31, 1950.

<sup>56</sup>For example, Amitav Acharya treats the Baguio conference as one event in a string of multilateral Asian conferences showing an increasing interest among Asian leaders in diplomacy. See Amitav Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter?: Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

<sup>57</sup>Craig Murphy, *Global Institutions, Marginalization, and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

Despite differing perspectives on the question of security alliances, the Arab-Asian group found unity in their response to the surprise outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950. On the day North Korea invaded the South, the Security Council condemned the 'breach of the peace' in a unanimous vote made possible by the absence of the Soviet Union, whose delegation walked out in January over the Council's refusal to admit the PRC into the UN.<sup>58</sup> At first, Indian diplomats supported this resolution to oppose North Korea's aggression, but soon asserted its independence against the use of force and opposed the resolution forming a unified command to aid the Republic of Korea. Throughout the three years of the Korean War, the Arab-Asian group asserted itself at key intervals to advance UN mediation and call for an end to hostilities, often coming in between the Anglo-American and Soviet blocs.

As one of the first nations to establish diplomatic relations with the new Chinese government, India provided a stream of information and communication through K.M. Panikkar, its ambassador in Peking. With the support of the other Asian states, India offered itself as a mediator but drew a line against interference. However, when the fifth session of the General Assembly opened in October 1950, the Western bloc gained a majority through the cooperation of the Latin American states and pressed for the assembly to pursue direct intervention.<sup>59</sup> Following the initial response by the Security Council, the General Assembly confronted the question of defining the objective of UN forces, with the US pushing for 'maximum flexibility for military command'.<sup>60</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru and the other Asian delegations adamantly opposed the use of force, especially without consultation of the other states in the region. Nehru instructed the Indian delegation to oppose any resolution that would give UN forces effective control over the entire peninsula.<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, only India and Indonesia abstained from authorizing UN forces across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. As a reflection of its neutralism, India refused to contribute military troops to the UN Command and sent medical units to Korea instead. Meanwhile, K.M. Panikkar sent warnings to the Indian delegation at the UN that China would send in troops; his pleas were erroneously dismissed by the Security Council. The Arab-Asian group instead sought an alternate channel outside of the stalled Security Council in order to mount a call for an end to hostilities.

To the UN's surprise, China entered the war on 12 October 1950, precipitating a three-month international crisis during which the Arab-Asian group tried to de-escalate and push through a ceasefire option at the UN. One of the Indian diplomats present, Rajeshwar Dayal, recalled that late into the night the British ambassador Gladwyn Jebb telephoned Rau at his apartment and 'pleaded with him that, as a leading Asian country with close relations with Peking, an appeal by India along with other Asian countries to Peking for a ceasefire would surely be heeded'.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Rau was 'anxious to leave nothing undone' and instructed Dayal to arrange an emergency meeting of the Asian and Arab ambassadors, after which 'a carefully drafted appeal was drawn up and duly cabled through the UN to Peking'.<sup>63</sup> The declaration clearly called on China and North Korea not to cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel now that Chinese forces had successfully regained control of North Korea.<sup>64</sup> Rau continued back-channel communications with the Chinese military while V.K. Krishna Menon, the Indian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, maintained contact

<sup>58</sup>Security Council Resolution 82, June 25, 1950, S/RES/82.

<sup>59</sup>At the General Assembly, the Latin American states were often represented by its members also on the Economic and Social Council, which were: Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Peru.

<sup>60</sup>Minutes of the Sixth Meeting of the United States Delegation to the United Nations General Assembly, September 25, 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1950, Korea, Vol. VII, 769.

<sup>61</sup>Commonwealth Relations Office Report, September 28, 1950, DO 35/2383, TNA.

<sup>62</sup>Rajeshwar Dayal, *A Life of Our Times* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1998), 175.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup>Memorandum for the Files by the Assistant Secretary of State for United Nations Affairs (Hickerson), December 5, 1950, FRUS, 1950, Korea, Vol. VII, Doc. 978.

with the British government to pass on that the Arab-Asian group would present a ceasefire plan.<sup>65</sup>

The General Assembly adopted the thirteen-nation resolution on December 14 and created a three-person ceasefire committee comprised of Rau, Nasrollah Entezam of Iran, and Lester Pearson of Canada. The Chinese firmly rejected the resolution as 'illegal and null and void' on account of it not being recognized by the UN.<sup>66</sup> Throughout the fifth session, the Arab-Asian group continued meeting to present resolution after resolution on further negotiations and an immediate ceasefire. By the end of the month, the Chinese army crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and compelled UN forces to retreat. Through informal communications with the Chinese representative in New York, General Wu Hsiu-Chuan, Rau attempted to negotiate ceasefire conditions on the basis of the Arab-Asian group's December 14 resolution. They were ultimately unsuccessful in bringing either to the table but prioritized maintaining open communication with them.<sup>67</sup> The Arab and Asian group continued its efforts to mediate in the Korean War behind the scenes while refusing to condemn China as an aggressor.<sup>68</sup> When the US Secretary of State Dean Acheson came to New York to lead the American delegation, he wrote to US President Harry Truman, 'The outstanding fact of the Assembly so far is its dominance by the Arab-Asian bloc'.<sup>69</sup>

As the Arab-Asian group continued to follow the conflict in Korea closely, it maintained its engagement across a range of UN activities. One of the highly anticipated issues before the fifth regular session of the General Assembly (1950–1951) was the draft Covenant on Human Rights. At the Third Committee, the Soviet delegation resurrected its proposal from the debates on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and again suggested a provision on self-determination, which was rejected by a majority.<sup>70</sup> Refusing to participate in Cold War infighting, the delegates from Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia submitted their own proposal on the right of peoples and nations to self-determination.<sup>71</sup> With the support of the Arab and Asian nations, this amendment was adopted by the General Assembly in a resolution instructing the Commission on Human Rights to 'study the ways and means which would ensure the right of peoples and nations to self-determination', thus transforming self-determination into an individual human right to be enshrined in the forthcoming human rights covenant.<sup>72</sup> The following day, on 5 December 1950, the now-thirteen member group (following Indonesia's admission to the UN) met again to discuss their collective appeal to China and North Korea. In the context of the group's regular communication, the international project to create binding human rights standards presented the postcolonial nations with another avenue for advancing the cause of worldwide decolonization. The momentum of the Arab-Asian group at this time made it possible for them to coordinate in a wide array of activities, not only with regard to the war in Korea but also more broadly across the activities of the UN system. It was in 1950 that the Arab and Asian nations collectively turned

<sup>65</sup>Record of Conversation between Krishna Menon and Gordon Walker, December 11, 1950, PREM 8/1405, TNA.

<sup>66</sup>Zhou En-Lai to Nasrollah Entezam, December 23, 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1950, Korea, Vol. VII, Doc. 1086.

<sup>67</sup>On the Chinese rejection of the cease-fire committee proposals, Chen Jian argued, 'this resolution might have offered Beijing a golden opportunity to end the war.' See Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 93.

<sup>68</sup>General Assembly Official Records, 5<sup>th</sup> Session, 1<sup>st</sup> Committee, 428<sup>th</sup> Meeting, January 20, 1951, A/C.1/SR.428.

<sup>69</sup>Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 699.

<sup>70</sup>The draft provision read, 'Every people and every nation shall have the right to national self-determination. States which have responsibilities for the administration of Non-Self-Governing territories shall promote the fulfilment of this right, guided by the aims and principles of the United Nations in relation to the peoples of such Territories. The State shall ensure to national minorities the right to use their native tongue and to possess their national schools, museums and other cultural and educational institutions.' See General Assembly, Summary Records of the Third Committee, Annex, November 6, 1950, A/C.3/L.96; General Assembly, Summary Records of the Third Committee, November 29, 1950, A/1559.

<sup>71</sup>General Assembly, Summary Records of the Third Committee, Draft Amendment, 311<sup>th</sup> meeting, November 9, 1950, A/C.3/L.88.

<sup>72</sup>General Assembly Resolution 421D(V), December 4, 1950, A/RES/421D(V).

toward international human rights and made human rights a key part of postcolonial internationalism. While some delegations such as those representing Afghanistan, India, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon had long been involved in the human rights system from the UN's founding, there had not been coordinated action as a collective until the fifth General Assembly session when the Arab-Asian group called for self-determination to be interpreted formally as a human rights question.

At the Human Rights Commission, Indian representative Hansa Mehta strove to broker the debate over what kinds of rights should be enshrined in the covenant. When deadlock risked failure to present any draft, Mehta initiated a motion to split the covenant into two documents, one on political and civil rights and the other on economic, social, and cultural rights, in order to allow consensus to move one of the texts forward. Concerned with implementation, Mehta deployed the reasoning first proposed by Benegal Rau at India's constituent assembly; she explained that 'economic, social, and cultural rights though equally fundamental and therefore important form a separate category of rights from that of civil and political rights in that they are not justiciable [*sic*] rights'.<sup>73</sup> In the same way that the Indian constitution separated its fundamental rights into two categories, Mehta recommended that the Human Rights Commission do the same in order to proceed with drafting and have a completed text to recommend to the Economic and Social Council, for fear that nothing would come out of the commission at all.

From 1951 to 1952, the General Assembly made decisions on a number of key human rights questions, accepting the proposal to consider two separate covenants and including an article on the right of peoples to self-determination.<sup>74</sup> Signalling continuity, it affirmed that 'the General Assembly at its fifth session recognized the right of peoples and nations to self-determination as a fundamental human right'.<sup>75</sup> The resolution noted that putting such a right into the proposed covenants aligned with 'the principle enunciated in the Charter of the UN'.<sup>76</sup> The General Assembly then also agreed to draft two separate covenants, one dedicated to political and civil rights and the other to economic, social, and cultural rights.<sup>77</sup> The right to self-determination would thus become the first article of both covenants.<sup>78</sup> The discussions at the sixth session ended on 5 February 1952 with a final discussion on the two agenda items of greatest importance to the Arab-Asian group: the draft international covenant and the Korean War.<sup>79</sup> By the end of the year, the thirteen states of the Arab-Asian group achieved important victories on both issues, having linked self-determination to human rights with the adoption of Resolution 637, which stated that 'the right of peoples and nations to self-determination is a prerequisite to the full enjoyment of all fundamental human rights'.<sup>80</sup> At the following session, the General Assembly elected Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit its president, the first woman to hold the position and a stalwart representative of the Arab-Asian group. An internationally respected and popular figure, Pandit, brought further strength to the cause of the postcolonial nations.

### Arab-Asian support for North Africa

The Arab-Asian group waged its moral struggle on multiple fronts at the UN. In 1952 and 1953, the Arab-Asian group held regular meetings to discuss the ongoing crises in Tunisia and Morocco,

<sup>73</sup>Human Rights Commission Draft Resolution 619, May 14, 1951, E/CN.4/619/Rev.1.

<sup>74</sup>The General Assembly considered the question of splitting the Covenant on Human Rights in 1950 but decided against two separate instruments. See General Assembly Resolution 421D(V), December 4, 1950, A/RES/421D(V).

<sup>75</sup>General Assembly Resolution 545(VI), February 5, 1952, A/RES/545.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup>General Assembly Resolution 543(VI), February 5, 1952, A/RES/543.

<sup>78</sup>The provision reads, 'All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right, they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.'

<sup>79</sup>General Assembly Official Records, 375<sup>th</sup> Meeting, February 5, 1952, A/PV.375, 513.

<sup>80</sup>General Assembly Resolution 637(VII), December 16, 1952, A/RES/637(VII).

where nationalists were clashing with the French authorities and fighting imposition of military control even after recognition for the Tunisian Bey.<sup>81</sup> The local Tunisian government attempted to draw international attention to its plight, resonant of the approach taken by the National Liberal Front in Algeria. When this colonial question came before the Security Council, its president was the Pakistani representative Ahmed Shah Bokhari, who was highly sympathetic to their cause but unable to sway votes to put the Tunisian situation on the official agenda.<sup>82</sup> Hearing the news, Nehru responded, 'If Asia and Africa cannot get a subject discussed in the Security Council because two or three great Powers object to it, then a time may come when the countries of Asia and Africa may feel that they are better off outside than at the UN'.<sup>83</sup>

The liberation wars in North Africa galvanized the Arab-Asian group. Following the imprisonment of several prominent Tunisian leaders including its Prime Minister, the Arab-Asian group prepared for action at the upcoming General Assembly session. Eleven of the Arab and Asian member-states met in New York and drafted a letter to the Secretary-General requesting a special session to consider the crisis in Tunisia.<sup>84</sup> The letter was mailed by courier to Washington to collect the signatures of the ambassadors of Burma and the Philippines and then circulated. At the General Assembly, Bokhari stood in as the representative of the group and explained the group's stance to the press. He stated that the 'failure of the French Government to negotiate with the Tunisian Nationalists' made the collective action of the Arab-Asian group necessary.<sup>85</sup> On 2 December 1952, the Arab-Asian group sponsored yet another joint resolution, recalling its letter to the Secretary-General from April and urging the creation of a commission to facilitate the negotiations.<sup>86</sup> This resolution failed in the First Committee of the General Assembly, and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit criticized France in particular and the UN in general for failing 'to ensure respect for the principle of the right of peoples to self-determination'.<sup>87</sup> The French delegation insisted that the matter lay within its domestic jurisdiction and could not be heard at the UN. Krishna Menon sharply accused France of 'abusing Tunisia's hospitality' and having 'subjected [it] to a tutelage from which today it must be set free'.<sup>88</sup>

Two weeks later, a resolution sponsored by the Latin American states used diluted language to express hope that negotiations between France and Tunisia would bring about eventual self-government.<sup>89</sup> The resolution effectively ended UN involvement in the Tunisia situation. The Arab-Asian group was also campaigning for Morocco's right to independence, having issued a separate letter urging intervention first by the great powers and then submitting another proposal to place Morocco on the General Assembly's agenda.<sup>90</sup> Their resolution was again defeated at the First Committee. On December 19, yet another Latin American resolution passed that was nearly identical in language to the Tunisian resolution on 'bringing about self-government for Moroccans' and 'developing the free political institutions of the people of Morocco', thus excusing the UN

<sup>81</sup>Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881–1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 17.

<sup>82</sup>Security Council Official Records, 576<sup>th</sup> Meeting, April 14, 1952, S/PV.576.

<sup>83</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru, *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, August 1949–February 1953*, Vol. 2 (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1954), 318.

<sup>84</sup>Representatives from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Thailand, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria participated in drafting.

<sup>85</sup>UN Session to Discuss Tunisia', *The Times of India*, June 21, 1952.

<sup>86</sup>This resolution was co-sponsored by the permanent representatives of Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Burma, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Pakistan, Philippines, Syria, and Yemen. General Assembly Draft Resolution, Seventh Session, First Committee, December 2, 1952, A/C.1/736.

<sup>87</sup>General Assembly Official Records, Seventh Session, First Committee, 540<sup>th</sup> Meeting, December 12, 1952 (New York, 1952), 213.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>89</sup>General Assembly, Draft Resolution, First Committee, December 17, 1952, A/2312; General Assembly Resolution 611(VII), December 17, 1952.

<sup>90</sup>General Assembly Draft Resolution 387(XV), November 10, 1951, A/RES/387(XV).



from any real action in Morocco.<sup>91</sup> During this time, the assembly also passed Resolution 637 calling on the 'States Members of the UN [to] uphold the principle of self-determination'.<sup>92</sup> Undeterred, the Arab-Asian group then went to the Security Council to continue advocating for Morocco and invoked the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Their appeal to have the item considered was unsuccessful, and France prevailed for the time being.

The Arab-Asian group continued raising the issue annually, most notably at the eighth session in 1953 and again at the ninth session in 1954, by which time the French government relented to international pressure and agreed to diplomatic negotiations.<sup>93</sup> The Arab League sustained its pressure by passing annual resolutions from Cairo, recommending in September 1953 that Arab League representatives should 'continue to meet with the other delegations of the Asian-African states in order to reach agreement on a plan for the Tunisian and Moroccan cases'.<sup>94</sup> Though protracted, the negotiations led to the eventual independence of both Tunisia and Morocco from France in 1956. Through their persistent diplomacy, the Arab and Asian states secured moral victories on the international stage and helped shift public attention and popular support within the General Assembly towards the transformations taking place in North Africa. Not only did the Arab-Asian group reshape the international understanding of self-determination, but it found diplomatic means to deploy the momentum of that legal campaign toward a concrete and negotiated settlement in other ongoing political struggles.<sup>95</sup> Through collective action at the General Assembly, the meaning of self-determination came closer to applying universally to all territories, not just those administered by the Trusteeship Council.

## Conclusion

In the early 1950s, postcolonial nations asserted themselves in successively effective public demonstrations of their independent and anti-imperialist diplomacy. The Arab-Asian group helped to reorient political discourse at the UN, bringing an anticolonial tenor to its daily activities, first beginning with Indonesia's dispute with the Netherlands to its international condemnation of Italy in East Africa and France in North Africa. The group established a pattern of collective action centred on managing the voting blocs of the UN General Assembly, moving the drafting of the human rights covenant toward the anticolonial cause of enshrining national self-determination, and pushing for greater confrontation with the colonial powers within the structure of the UN system. This South-South solidarity grew around the leadership of the neutralist nations of India, Burma, and Indonesia, though its members did not always agree in substance or tactics. The emergence of the Arab-Asian group at the UN revealed a confluence of different political ideologies and approaches to decolonization in the early postwar era. With their diversity of politics, ideology, and interests, the states that initially came together in the late 1940s needed to carefully construct and sustain their feelings of common cause. But forging a network of postcolonial elites brought out divergent visions for the postwar international order, illustrated by the frictions within the Arab-Asian group even as it played key roles in the UN debates on the questions of Indonesia, the former Italian colonies in Africa, and the Korean War. The Arab-Asian group, an important antecedent to Afro-Asianism and Third Worldism, encountered challenges over parallel projects pursued by its members, such as Carlos Romulo's campaign for a Pacific Pact among non-communist Asian states or Jawaharlal Nehru's articulation of neutralism. Therefore, while

<sup>91</sup>General Assembly Resolution 612(VII), December 19, 1952, A/RES/612(VII).

<sup>92</sup>General Assembly Resolution 637(VII), December 16, 1952, A/RES/637(VII).

<sup>93</sup>General Assembly Resolution 812(IX), December 15, 1954, A/RES/812(IX); General Assembly Resolution 813(IX), December 15, 1954, A/RES/813(IX).

<sup>94</sup>Council of the Arab League, Resolution 587, September 7, 1953, in *Jamiyah al-Miṣṣriyah lil-Qānūn al-Dawli* (1957), 139.

<sup>95</sup>Council of the Arab League, Resolution 605, January 21, 1954, in *Ibid.*

postwar international organizations were a formative setting for the emergence of postcolonial internationalism and South-South solidarity, the common goals pursued by these states did not always translate into uniformity or consensus on decolonization.

Because of the prominent roles played by Romulo, Rau, and other Asian delegates, the Arab-Asian group became defined by a practice of mediation, though not all of its members supported a neutral and cooperative middle path through crises. Through Rau, for example, the Arab-Asian group's proposals consistently referenced human rights instruments and promoted the right to national self-determination. Capturing the Arab-Asian approach, and postcolonial internationalism at the time, Prime Minister Nehru invoked a Gandhian vision for a non-Western diplomacy. In January 1953, he said, 'When the time comes to end the struggle, it can be ended graciously, gracefully and with a minimum of bitterness'.<sup>96</sup> However, that time remained distant in the horizon. As new states joined the UN, the Arab-Asian group expanded in size and gained an African contingent. Moreover, the ongoing wars in Korea and Indochina showed that a new and more radical approach was needed to advocate for an end to imperial wars. In the latter half of the 1950s, as postcolonial nations continued to use the UN as a political platform, they also sought ways to expand their influence beyond the UN and turned towards direct, subversive action within the region in defence of their sovereignty.<sup>97</sup> Early Arab-Asian cooperation had thus transformed how consensus was created at the UN, opening a new platform for Third World struggle against empire.

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<sup>96</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru, 'UNESCO Seminar on Gandhian Outlook', January 5, 1953, Part 3, Series 2, Box 098, Folder 0324, Chester Bowles Papers, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives.

<sup>97</sup>Eva-Maria Muschik, 'Managing the World: the United Nations, Decolonization, and the Strange Triumph of State Sovereignty in the 1950s and 1960s', *Journal of Global History* 13 (2018): 121–44; Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).