

From Bandung to BRICS: two styles one objective

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"The despised, the insulted, the hurt, the dispossessed—in short, the underdogs of the human race were meeting. Here were class and racial and religious consciousness on a global scale. Who had thought of organizing such a meeting? And what had these nations in common? Nothing, it seemed to me, but what their past relationship to the Western world had made them feel. This meeting of the rejected was in itself a kind of judgment upon the Western world!"

Richard Wright -- *The Color Curtain. A report on the Bandung Conference*. The World Publishing Company, Cleveland and New York, 1956.

The Conference that took place in Bandung, Indonesia, from April 18 to 24, 1955, brought together leaders from some thirty Asian and African nations, responsible for the destiny of 1.350 million human beings. Sixty years later, in 2015, many of the problems that were analyzed and debated in that pioneer conference continue to challenge a huge part of humanity. This observation justifies a reflection on the meaning and the projections of Bandung and invites us to think about the relevance today of some of the assessments and proposals made at that event, that constituted a landmark in the history of twentieth-century international relations.

By consecrating the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement and the concept of the Third World, the Bandung meeting represented, symbolically, the moment in which a significant sector of Humanity assumed consciousness of their role and made their voice heard. The "spirit of Bandung" marked the process of liberation of the colonial world and defined the path for the international insertion of those countries that formed the Non-Aligned Movement, with an explicit condemnation of racism, colonialism and imperialism.

Guided by the ideal of creating a space of their own - an imagined community? - in the bipolar world of the period, this group of nations defined ten principles that directed their action in favour of the promotion of peaceful co-existence. In the explosive scenario of the Cold War, the ten principles of Bandung laid out the rejection of participation in any kind of military pact and the defence of non-intervention and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, based on respect for the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of all nations, and with respect for fundamental human rights at the top of the list. They recognize equality of all races, the right of any nation to defend itself individually or collectively, in the framework of the definitions of

the United Nations Charter; they rejected arrangements for collective defence destined “to serve any particular interests of the big powers”, and they defended the solution of all conflicts through pacific means, with respect for justice and international obligations.

In the 1970s, when their level of intervention was rising, the Non Aligned countries adopted two new areas of struggle: the implementation of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) and a New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO). This latter claim was incorporated by UNESCO, which in 1977 set up an international commission to study the problems of information flow. Three years later, this commission released a document known as the MacBride Report (Sean MacBride was the president of the Commission) with concrete proposals seeking balance in the production and access of information between the developed countries and the Third World, together with a condemnation of the huge international information monopolies. The reaction of the United States and the UK was drastic: both countries abandoned UNESCO and cut off their funding for this UN agency, which faced years of crisis and was finally forced to put aside any discussion of the issue.

Directly related to the proposal for a profound change in the rules of the game in the economy, and in the production and distribution of information at a world level, the Non Aligned group questioned the division of the world according to the Cold War logic, based on ideological options, and they identified the real division as that based on the unequal capacity of nations to dispose of their own natural resources. That is to say, the real division was not between East and West, but between North and South. Therefore, for the Non Aligned countries, the economy and communications were strategic areas for achieving the most central goal of their action: the full development of every country. Ambitious goals of development were seen as the only way to eliminate every kind of exploitation and domination.

Although the diagnosis of the Non Aligned Movement was correct, the power balance at that historical moment did not allow for the implementation of this alternative, either in economics or in communications. The movement itself lost momentum in the face of economic and political impasses and took on a lower profile on the international scene. Nevertheless, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, in a world marked by globalization and therefore very different from the scenario of the decades from 1950 to 1990 of the last century, a new reality is emerging. Some countries of what was known as the Third World - a designation that has been gradually replaced by that of Global South - have now become leaders in their respective regions, due to relative advances acquired in recent years that have transformed them into powers of medium importance. They began to be designated in the media as “emerging” countries, and they have come to identify common interests in their international action.

The process that emerged from this situation is well known: in September of 2006, the foreign ministers of Brazil, Russia, India and China met during the sixty-first General Assembly of the United Nations and defined their own agenda, which aspired to be amplified and consolidated in years to come. In 2011, South Africa was formally incorporated into this dialogue mechanism, which came to be known as BRICS.

The BRICS have brought together the five largest emerging economies - with great disparities among them, of course, considering the Chinese economy represents the second GDP in the world (rapidly approaching that of the US), with India the third and Brazil and South Africa well behind. These countries represent 40% of the world population, approximately three billion people. Having for some time remained informal, the mechanism, originally established to promote cooperation in specific sectors, is consolidating through its successive meetings and has established important steps towards its institutionalization.

The fourth meeting at the presidential level took place in the city of Fortaleza, Brazil in July 2014. There, an important economic agreement was ratified, the principal result of which was the founding of a new Development Bank, with its head office in Shanghai and India occupying the presidency. The initial capital authorized for the bank is 100 billion dollars. There will also be a Fund of Mutual Guarantees, with another 100 billion dollars. The objective of the new bank is to provide a source of funding for emerging and developing economies. Among its goals is the creation of conditions that will allow for overcoming the present dependence on the dollar as the principal global reserve currency (the agreement foresees a system of convertibility between the Brazilian real, the Russian ruble, the Indian rupee, the Chinese renminbi and the South African rand).

These projects of the BRICS group tally with the (frustrated) goals of the Non Aligned Movement. The proposal of the 1970s for a New International Economic Order depended, to great extent, on agreements that could have been made with some powers of the developed world, since the Third World countries did not have the political force to impose changes in the world economy by themselves. The only exception was perhaps the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, OPEC, that in 1973, a few days after the conference of the Non Aligned Movement in Algiers and the Yom Kippur war, determined an increase of up to 300% in the price of crude oil and the imposition of embargos on sales for western countries allied with Israel, resulting in the so-called "oil shock".

Today, the BRICS are beginning to modify the rules of the world macroeconomic game simply by using their own resources and acting with a clear political will. Not having an appropriate space for dialogue or negotiation under the structures of Bretton Woods, in particular in the IMF and the World Bank, the emerging powers have opted to use their weight to create alternatives that do not involve an open dispute with the hegemonic powers and that will allow them to create more inclusive conditions for global growth.

The presence of China and Russia in BRICS, in alliance with India, Brazil and South Africa explains, in part, the difference in the specific clout in the world scene between the BRICS group and the Non Aligned Movement. The proximity of China and Russia with the Non Aligned was already present at the time of the Cold War but the logic of that movement made coordinated action difficult. It is easy to understand that non-alignment did not imply, on the part of its members, an equidistant relation to one or another block. With the exception of one or another country that for historical reasons openly or implicitly defended a priority alliance with the West, the greater part of the Non Aligned Countries were fully aware that their potential allies were in the

socialist camp and that they could not expect anything similar from the capitalist block, which included the old colonial powers. But in the bipolar context, they could not advance much more.

For this reason it is important to situate the BRICS alliance in the context of a historical process that calls into question the rules of the game that emerged from the Second World War. The BRICS today can move forward with a project of gradual substitution of the architecture of Bretton Woods due to their own weight in the world economy. This was the essence of the project of the Non Aligned in looking for a new international economic order. The difference is in the concrete possibilities of these parties to achieve the goals of yesterday and today. As for communications, the BRICS block does not seek to challenge the large media conglomerates. This is not the terrain for their struggle. What they propose is to change the rules of the game in cyberspace: the BRICS have outlined a project to guarantee access to Internet, in confrontation with US hegemony in the network. At present, the Internet system is connected through centres situated in Europe and the United States. The project defined by BRICS - called BRICS Cable - foresees the creation of an alternative infrastructure: an interoceanic system of 34 thousand kilometres of fiber-optic cables, with a capacity of 12.8 terabits per second, beginning in the Russian city of Vladivostok, passing through Shantou, Singapore, Cape Town and Fortaleza, connecting Russia, China, India, South Africa and Brazil before reaching the United States. The main objective of the project - in addition to reducing costs - is to ensure the autonomy of Internet communications of the BRICS in relation to the United States.

Non Aligned / BRICS: their diagnoses coincide. Their actions and, above all, the results do not. The international balance of power from the Bandung Conference to the golden years of the Non Aligned Movement did not allow either for achieving the goal of the New Economic Order, nor for changing the rules in the terrain of communications.

The BRICS have not raised any major banners; they began with modest movements, but they are advancing towards the adoption of strategic measures that bring them closer to the definitions of the Non Aligned Movement. We are talking of two moments, two styles and the same objective: a less unequal world, with opportunities for development, prosperity and social justice for the great majorities, in a climate of cooperation and peace.

(Translated by Jordan Bishop for ALAI).

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