

## **Towards a New Democratic Multilateralism**

### **Bandung Day Symposium**

Council for Social Development (CSD), South Solidarity Initiative (SSI), and India International Centre (IIC) organized a symposium on 24 April, 2017, on the theme “Towards a New Democratic Multilateralism” to commemorate the Asian-African Conference of 1955 and the adoption of the Bandung Declaration of ten principles. The event evoked the Bandung spirit which embodies solidarity, friendship, and cooperation among countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and denoted a new chapter in the history of these nations.

Prof. Apoorvananad, Department of Hindi, Delhi University (DU) welcomed the panelists and guests, and introduced the programme. He said that the Ten Principles of Bandung and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence have symbolized relations among southern countries for the past generations. But it seems that in today’s popular deliberations on international relations, the essence of these principles is being undermined. It is the duty of academics and the larger civil society therefore, to not let this spirit fade away, especially now when these principles are being challenged the most.

IIC Director Air Marshall Naresh Verma made the inaugural address. He recalled that the stated aims of the Bandung conference were to oppose colonialism and neo-colonialism, and to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation. The conference was an important step towards building the Non-aligned Movement (NAM). Another important outcome of the conference was the Bandung declaration which incorporated the principles of the United Nations (UN) charter and the Panchsheel treaty. The declaration can be summarized as a call for peaceful co-existence between nations, for liberation from colonialism, imperialism, or any kind of domination of one country by another. It exhorted countries to build solidarity towards the poor, the exploited, the colonized, and the weak and to work for their development.

Air Marshall Verma noted that although the Bandung conference was a watershed moment for the evolution of international relations, there is a need to analyse its long term legacy and contemporary significance- while some refer to it as a post -colonial ideological reaction to the passing of the age of the Empire, others term it as an innovative effort to promote regionalism. There also exist detractors who have dismissed the principles of peaceful co-existence as rhetorical and doubted its substance as a policy initiative. These conflicting positions raise important questions regarding the conference’s role in defining North-South relations, and its contribution to the regional order of present-day Asia. He added that there is a need to study the internal failures as well as the external pressures such as the G7, Bretton Woods Institutions, and emergence of a new globalized capitalism which have led to the diminishing importance of the Bandung principles.

H.E. Augusto Montiel, Ambassador of Venezuela said that third world solidarity as captured in Bandung is the only platform other than the UN that commits to a dignified existence for all, free of the interference, imposition, and violation of sovereignty by big powers. Therefore, there should be an emphasis on revitalizing the principles of Bandung.

The ambassador read from the Declaration of the 17th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the NAM which was organized in Venezuela in September 2016 under the theme of Peace, Sovereignty, and Solidarity for Development. The declaration says that *“mindful of the fact that the history and reality of the world in which we live today demonstrates that it is the developing countries of the world who suffer more intensely from the disregard of international law, from invasions, from ravages of war and conflict caused mostly by geopolitical interests of great centres of power as well as from protracted conflicts inherited from colonialism and neo-colonialism. Many of these crises are being triggered by the violation of the principles and the purposes enshrined in the charter of the UN. Recognizing that solidarity, the highest expression of respect, friendship, and peace among states is a broad concept encompassing the sustainability of international relations, the peaceful coexistence and the transformative object of equity and empowerment of developing countries, whose ultimate goal is to achieve full economic and social development of their people.”* The member countries reaffirmed their commitment to achieving a world of peace, justice, respect, fraternal friendship, solidarity, cooperation, and development, guided by the principles and purposes of the NAM enshrined in Bandung (1955) and Belgrade (1961).

He also cautioned that in the absence of multilateralism, there is no mechanism to negotiate on just, equal, transparent, and effective terms.

Prof. Muchkund Dubey, President CSD then spoke on the vision of Democratic Multilateralism: Then and Now. He said that the world order is under severe strain as the values that underpinned it have been fast eroded. In the past few years, this erosion has become far more drastic and dramatic, and the institutional structure that sustained it in the form of the United Nations (UN) has been enfeebled, threatening it with the prospect of collapse. We are thus headed towards chaos in international affairs.

Reflecting on the past, Prof. Dubey said that before the establishment of the UN, the world was characterized by plurilateralism i.e. arbitrary actions by big powers to serve their national interests, bilateral arrangements among more powerful countries to impose their interests on the rest of the world, and a small degree of cooperation on a wider basis through organisations such as the League of Nations, International Labour Organisation (ILO) etc. The UN was an attempt at bringing these disparate mechanisms together on the basis of the twin pillars of agreed values of conducting international relations and governing societies such as peace, cooperation, coexistence, tolerance, and freedom, and the latest body of international law.

The UN was intended as a form of world government. In the first few decades of its formation, this vision seemed to be close to realization, especially in the fields of social and economic development, even though the UN's record in the political arena was not encouraging. But this collapsed by the 1970s and today, the UN is a pale shadow of what was envisaged; it no longer negotiates serious matters nor sets norms. Instead, its powers have been transferred to other institutions such as the G20.

Prof. Dubey said that multilateralism represents the evolution of a lower order of existence of nations to a higher order and therefore, it is too important a value to be allowed to fall by the wayside. He suggested that: -

- The functions that the UN has lost since the mid-1970s should be restored to it.
- The mandate of the UN should be expanded to bring in new subjects including natural resources, and global commons.
- The values of the UN system should be preserved.

Prof. Sunanda Sen, former professor of Economics, JNU and ICSSR National Fellow, talked about the trade and finance organisations that came up under the aegis of the UN. Although these institutions were meant to be equitable, the power accorded to individual member nations was not equal. Therefore, by the mid-1950s, countries of the South decided to work together to undo the impacts of the unequal North-South relations. From 1955 to 1964, this group of countries churned out various ideas and finally formed a very effective grouping called the Group of 77 (G77).

This entire process was informed and enabled by the Bandung principles, particularly the goal of self-determination which entailed that nations should have the ability to determine their own economic and political policies. Many developing countries subsequently adopted the goal of industrialization, with protectionist measures such as tariffs and quotas. However, there have been many changes since the 1990s which were elicited by Prof. Sen: -

- Globalisation- this period has seen greater integration in terms of trade, finance, and technology. But with virtually no barriers to the entry of capital and technology, unequal relations between nations have been further entrenched and transnational companies have gained tremendous power to influence national policies of states.
- Regional agreements- many developing countries entered regional agreements in order to manipulate and benefit from favourable trade and finance relations. But, the relations amongst member countries of agreements such as ASEAN, NAFTA, and East African Community etc. remain very unequal.
- BRICS has emerged as a dynamic grouping which has established the New Development Bank (NDB). The NDB along with the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are outside the umbrella of the Washington Consensus which is immensely significant.

- The world seems to be in reverse gear when it comes to globalization, with events such as Brexit (Britain's withdrawal from the European Union) marking the order of the day. But in these circumstances, China is set to play a major role in the global political economy.

In the end, Prof. Sen said that while multilateralism seems to be in decline, various Southern "regionalisms" are gaining in strength.

Prof. B.S. Chimni, professor of International Law, JNU remarked that the essence of Bandung was anti-imperialism and that needs to be sustained today. He reflected on the international legal order in three distinct periods; in the first phase (1955-1985), there was an attempt to transform colonial international law into a post-colonial democratic international legal order; during the second phase (1985-2015), there was an embedding of the neo-colonial international legal order which can also be described as a rule oriented imperial order; in the third phase, there has been a turn towards unilateralism, although the contours of this new international legal order are hazy at the moment.

In the first phase, the post-colonial nations left an indelible mark on the body of international law with a two-fold objective- to strengthen multilateralism and the UN system, and to strengthen the independence and autonomy of the newly independent states. Towards this end, some landmark resolutions were passed such as the 1960 UN General Assembly (GA) resolution on decolonization, the 1962 UNGA resolution on permanent sovereignty over natural resources without intervention, and the 1965 resolution on the principle of non-interference in the affairs of states. These resolutions contained a vision of an alternative world order in which all peoples and nations could live with dignity.

But by the 1970s, a compromise is discernible among the ruling social forces, which halts and eventually reverses the democratizing international legal order. This process was catalyzed by trade negotiations, starting with the Uruguay round in 1986. Thereafter, imperial nations succeeded in the creation of a multilateral system which primarily served their interests, but also benefitted the global South in a minimal way.

Thus, exclusionary multilateralism in this second phase was essentially disguised to convey that the laws that were being put in place were promoting the global common good. The ruling classes of the global South, who play a major role in external policymaking, agreed to this new legal order because it was being driven by a transnational capitalist class which gains from an unequal globalisation process. This has pushed the world to its current state, divided into those who have benefitted from globalisation and those who have been left behind.

In the third and present phase, the ruling elite have realized that globalization is no longer working in its current form. In these circumstances, they are trying to co-opt the pro-poor agenda and lash out against multilateralism. But progressive civil society needs to rise above this debate of unilateralism vs. multilateralism, and demand a re-negotiation of multilateralism to safeguard the interests of the poor and marginalised.

Prof. Manoranjan Mohanty, former professor of Political Science, DU and Vice-President CSD, spoke about the haunting message from Bandung- unless the world order embraces a multilateralism which is universal, pro-poor, and that addresses the causes of the serious issues of present times, there will be unpredictable and dangerous times ahead. He enlisted the three most pressing problems of today-

- Increasing violence- in the form of terrorism, counter-terrorism etc.
- Increasing inequalities
- Climate change and environmental degradation

These three issues have various manifestations together and can only be addressed by genuinely democratic multilateralism. Prof. Mohanty talked about the misappropriation of the concept of multilateralism by the North- Northern forums have used their military might and new technologies to protect the neo-liberal economic system, even as the UN system has been derided.

He also mentioned newer multilateral forums such as the BRICS. Currently, the philosophy guiding BRICS is to not offend the global north and restructure the global political economy, but only to rebalance it through soft interventions. In this scenario, third world people's movements need to come together to impress upon their leaders to use the BRICS and other Southern forums to recall the Bandung spirit and reconnect with the post-colonial agenda. He concluded that this can be the only effective counter the current wave of alienation and violence.

Prof. Dubey presented the closing remarks. He said that the constituency for democratic multilateralism in its current and corrupted form has greatly weakened. At a policymaking level, there seems to be no appetite for it as countries are more intent on bilateral dealings.

Therefore, the revival of this constituency is a quest. But the fact that economic balance of power has shifted to the developing world in recent years is promising. There is a need for developing countries to make a coalition to work for universalism and a global consensus on a new, dynamic multilateralism.