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## BRICS's Bandung Moment

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*As a rush of countries seek to join BRICS, can it become the voice of the Global South by rediscovering the spirit of Bandung 1955? And can and will India lead the Global South in BRICS by reinventing Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of an alternate just and equitable world order?*

Last year, the ghosts of the long-interred Asian–African Conference in Bandung in 1955 and its offspring, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), appeared in pages of the media around the world and, to a lesser extent, in India. This was in the reporting and analyses of the BRICS summit in Johannesburg last August. The unprecedented coverage in the world media was triggered by a substantial number of major developing countries queuing up to join BRICS as well as the proposal to develop a BRICS currency as an alternative to the US dollar. At the summit itself, six important countries were admitted. Western commentators, surprisingly, saw the summit as a potentially seminal moment in global affairs. Indian commentators, on the other hand, did not think that it was such a big deal, for India at least.

At this critical juncture in world affairs, can India recover and reinvent Jawaharlal Nehru's earlier vision of an alternate just and equitable world order to lead the countries of the Global South in their collective common interest?

### Contrasting commentaries

Some leading Indian commentators with diverse perspectives such as [Pratap Bhanu Mehta](#), [Swaminathan Aiyar](#), [C. Rajamohan](#) and [Shekar Gupta](#) did make the BRICS Bandung-NAM-G77 connection. They did not see as a positive development an expanded BRICS trying to take over the mantle of those movements, which had attempted to promote the solidarity of and fight for the interests of newly independent countries of Asia and Africa and, more generally, of the developing countries in the context of Cold War rivalry between the two dominant global alliances. In fact, the Government of India's positioning itself over the last year as “the Voice of the Global South” to rebalance the global political and economic order in favour of the developing countries barely found mention in their articles. The commentators were more concerned that the new BRICS might be taken over by China to promote its own influence in the developing world at the expense of India's.

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Senior retired foreign service officers [writing](#) on the summit did not mention Bandung-NAM-G77 at all and only a couple mentioned the Global South in passing. (That is most probably because of the unstated feeling that the nation was ill-served by that earlier policy which may have had some relevance in a bygone era but is now better forgotten and abandoned.) They were more focused on not allowing China to use BRICS to promote its anti-US and anti-Western agenda that might adversely affect India's interests which they saw as linked to its growing economic and security relationship with those nations of the West. BJP-RSS ideologues [Ram Madhav](#) and [Seshadri Chari](#) saw the division between the developing and developed countries blurring, economically, if not culturally, and stressed the need to keep out of as well as balance any antagonisms within and outside BRICS.

The Western media coverage and analyses could not have been more different. One example: In the first of a [five-part series](#) ahead of the summit titled, “[The à la carte world: our new geopolitical order](#),” Financial Times saw the BRICS summit as part of “the seismic changes reshaping the global order,” and that “Symbolically at least ... [the summit] has the potential for being seen as the 21st-century equivalent of the Bandung conference of 1955, which launched the non-aligned movement.”

It saw this situation as arising from “the stand-off between Washington and Beijing ... [which was] presenting an opportunity for much of the world: not just to be wooed but also to play one off against the other — and many are doing this with alacrity and increasing skill.” Calling this “the multi-aligned movement,” it continued, “This new less regimented landscape most obviously benefits the global south...Their heightened ambitions will be on display in South Africa in mid-August at the summit of the BRICS nations.” Then it makes a key point: “The signal moment for them (many middle powers who are wary of China) in the past 18 months...was the freezing (by the US) of Russian central bank reserves, which dramatically underlined once again the power of the US dollar.” (This

move was part of the sanctions imposed by the US and its allies to punish Russia for its invasion of Ukraine.) Clearly, something quite different from than the space created by US-China global rivalry is at work here.

### Rationale for a new approach

The alienation of the Global South from the US-led West had been noticed even earlier. In April 2022, in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine the American policy analyst Trita Parsi in an article published in the American news channel MSNBC titled “[Why non-Western countries tend to see Russia's war very, very differently,](#)” wrote: “But therein lies the disconnect with much of the Global South .... Western demands that they make costly sacrifices by cutting off economic ties with Russia to uphold a ‘rules-based order’ have begotten an allergic reaction. That order hasn’t been rules-based; instead, it has allowed the U.S. to violate international law with impunity. The West’s messaging on Ukraine ... is unlikely to win over the support of countries that have often experienced the worse sides of the international order.”

More broadly, it can be argued that the countries of the Global South are turning to BRICS now to enable them to stand up against an international order sought to be imposed by the West. That order includes the West’s interpretation of and actions on human rights, financial conditionalities, free trade agreements, bilateral investment treaties, sanctions, climate change and environmental protection, international criminal court, democracy, regime change, etc. Those interpretations have increasingly been seen as being in the interests of the developed countries and against those of the developing countries. This, even while acknowledging that the developed nations’ offering of market access, investment and development funds, etc. have helped growth in developing nations. It is in this context that the search for an alternative should be seen. And by its focus on issues like a BRICS currency, South-South non-dollar trade and economic cooperation, the BRICS development bank, Contingent Reserve Arrangement, etc, BRICS has tried to provide that alternative.

However, the roots of this phenomenon go even further back. They have been described well by the American analyst Fareed Zakaria, who in a well-known 2008 article “[The Rise of the Rest,](#)” wrote, “The most immediate effect of global growth is the appearance of new economic powerhouses on the scene... Imagine that your country has been poor and marginal for centuries. Finally, things turn around...You would be proud, and anxious that your people win recognition and respect throughout the world... In many countries such nationalism arises from a pent-up frustration over having to accept an entirely Western, or American, narrative of world history—one in which they are miscast or remain bit players... The fact that newly rising nations are more strongly asserting their ideas and interests is inevitable...”

These attempts by Western writers to arrive at an empathic understanding of countries of the Global South do give some idea of the forces at work leading up to the first BRIC summit of 2009. In fact, the link between Bandung-NAM and BRICS has been there all along. In an article in 2021 “[Has BRICS lost its appeal? The foreign policy value added of the group,](#)” the academic Malte Brosig noted, “Historically, the BRICS group has its normative and conceptual roots in the non-alignment movement and the Bandung Conference. The BRICS narrative, which cross-cuts its summit meetings and declaration, is the critique issued against a Western-dominated global order resembling the Bandung principles.”

At this point, a short digression to recall what Bandung and NAM were might not be out of place since they have been almost completely absent in the public discussion in India over the last three decades and more. This is all the more surprising since India and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, in particular, played a leading role in both those initiatives (as well as in their forerunner, the Asian Relations Conference held before Independence on 23 March 1947 in New Delhi). This [brief paragraph](#) in the current official US government website gives a fair description:

At the close of the Bandung Conference attendees signed a communique that included a range of concrete objectives...[including] the promotion of economic and cultural cooperation, protection of human rights and the principle of self-determination, a call for an end to racial discrimination wherever it occurred, and a reiteration of the importance of peaceful coexistence. The leaders hoped to focus on the potential for collaboration among the nations of the third world, promoting efforts to reduce their reliance on Europe and North America. The Bandung Conference and its final resolution laid the foundation for the nonaligned movement during the Cold War... In the end, however, the Bandung Conference did not lead to a general denunciation of the West as U.S. observers had feared...Nevertheless, Bandung gave a voice to emerging nations and demonstrated that they could be a force in future world politics, inside or outside the Cold War framework.

Subsequently, the Group of 77 or G77 was formed to articulate the interests of the developing countries in global trade negotiations and the New International Economic Order or NIEO formulated to achieve a more just and equitable world order.

### India's rediscovery of Bandung?

It was probably in the context the growing dissatisfaction of the developing countries with the West that External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar after his visit to the 77th United Nations General Assembly in September 2022, [told the media](#) that, “We are today perceived very widely as the voice of the Global South. There is great frustration that these issues are not being heard.” On being asked whether India's focus on Global South or South-South was returning in some ways to an earlier Indian foreign policy, Jaishankar asserted, “Global South solidarity has always been with us, it's part of our DNA.”

Soon after, longtime New Delhi insider Sanjaya Baru in article titled “[G-20 presidency is an opportunity to position India as the voice of the Global South](#)”, wrote, “India has wisely rediscovered the South.” He continued, “The fact, however, is that over the past two decades India has been busy claiming...major power status, with its impressive economic rise between the mid-1990s and the mid-2010s...Consider the fact that India has been largely inactive in what many in the Indian foreign policy commentariat regard as a moribund organisation, the Group of 77...India, on the other hand, was busy hobnobbing with the big guys.”

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To be sure, in his 2020 book, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar wrote , “India must be a just and fair power as well, consolidating its position as a standard bearer of the global South.” And earlier, “in fact, the coming together at the BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is very reminiscent of this period [that is, of the 1950s to 70s, Bandung, NAM, the Third World, etc].” It should, however, be noted that, despite these brief remarks, there is no reference to the G77 or NIEO in the book. And that the Global South does not have the salience in it that it has acquired over the last year.

### Uncertain and reactive response

As a follow-up to the UNGA meeting, the Indian Government hosted the virtual [Voice of Global South Summit](#) in January last year. And it has taken up issues of interest to the Global South like development and widening the membership in the G20.

In fact, the Indian response to the groundswell of support over the last couple of years in the Global South for BRICS has been uncertain and reactive. There is, of course, the need to balance support for the Global South with burgeoning friendship and ties with the US and the West, which has many economic and security benefits. There is also the need to manage a more developed, flush-with-money and militarily strong China, especially after the deadly Galwan clash and intrusion into Indian territory. This at present can probably be done effectively only with US and Western economic and security cooperation.

On the other hand, India has some advantages and China some weaknesses in the current situation, especially in relation to the Global South. India may not have the financial resources at this time to match Chinese initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and the more recent ones like the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilisation Initiative. But it has considerable experience in working collectively more or less as equals with other countries of the Global South in organisations like the NAM and G77 which China, traditionally focused on bilateral diplomacy, does not have. Also, China tends to view multilateralism and relations with the Global South through the narrow lens of its own interests and hegemony, which is resented by many developing countries.

Further, China has land and maritime border disputes with almost all its East Asian and Southeast Asian neighbours, and now probably even with Russia. Chinese economic growth seems to be faltering. Tensions with the US and its Western allies may be harming its economic and political prospects. It is most unlikely that the most of the new BRICS entrants, like its old members, would be mere pawns of China. Finally, as China is well aware, largesse alone cannot win influence and leadership of the Global South. Hence it has laid out a broad vision and blueprint for an alternative world order favouring the Global South.

If India is going to recover its leadership of the Global South, it has first and foremost to go beyond seeing BRICS through the prism of the Chinese challenge. It has to take into account the vast changes that have made the world today a very different place from that of the 1950s and 60s. Recent decades have seen substantial growth and prosperity in the developing countries, partly as the result of the Bandung-NAM-G77 agenda. Further, the corporate giants of the advanced world have discovered manufacturing, software and

services outsourcing, which while reaping super profits for them have also benefitted the developed countries to some extent.

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Globalisation has not only integrated countries economically, but also through informational technology-based financial networks, which has made the weaponisation of the US dollar vastly more potent. It may be that the BRICS currency, pushed by China, is a long shot as Western experts have argued, but it is crucial for the non-Western countries to maintain their strategic autonomy and independence. More South-South trade in their own currencies can only go so far. Additionally, participation in BRICS and other Global South forums gives developing countries leverage in their negotiations with the advanced Western countries. Finally, taking up Global South issues only by mediating within the framework of the G20 and under the umbrella of the US-led West has limited effectiveness. Hence the need for an alternative vision and forum.

Despite all the efforts to make us forget Bandung and NAM, they still have a deep resonance in the Indian national consciousness. One can see more than a glimmer of reference to Jawaharlal Nehru's speech to the Asian Relations Conference in External Affairs Minister Jaishankar's [surprising remarks in August 2022](#) that "It is said that the pre-requisite for [the 21st Century to be] an Asian Century is an India and China coming together." As also in Prime Minister Modi's [speech to the ASEAN summit in 2023](#), where he said, "The 21st century is Asia's century. It is a century of all of us."

## Conclusions

The current situation has been described as "fluid." Global relations are at an inflection point. India needs to present a bolder, more imaginative vision and strategy for the Global South. It needs to take a more proactive and decisive approach. Most importantly, it needs a coherent ideological perspective to guide strategy to lead the Global South with a common agenda and for mutual benefit in a world dominated by the US-led developed West. It could do worse than starting with recovering the spirit and commitment of Jawaharlal Nehru and revitalise and reinvent it to meet the challenges of the new situation, even while avoiding his mistakes in dealing with China. Not seizing the moment might well mean ceding the leadership of the Global South to its rival, China, for decades to come.