

History and Policy Debrief

70 Years since Bandung:
Non-Alignment, Multi-Alignment, and
the Role of Emerging Middle Powers

Global History and Politics Dialogue
15–17 April 2025, Indonesia

Key Takeaways

- **A middle-power alliance across the Global North and South can help reform the global order.** Like in the post-Bandung era, cross-regional coalitions are key: only they can defend norms and deliver global public goods when the great powers abstain – from climate to health to peacebuilding.
- **Bandung offers a method, not a model.** Its success lays less in a fixed blueprint than in the confidence of post-colonial states to champion common principles and speak with one voice. Today's middle powers can replicate that method to articulate a normative agenda that resonates beyond the West.
- **Turn strategic neutrality and multi-alignment into proactive mediation capacity.** As past non-aligned movements revealed, hedging between great powers buys room for manoeuvre, but it does not in itself reshape international norms. Middle powers can convert neutrality into tangible contributions that raise their profile and set precedents for cooperative security in a fragmented world.

Overview

The Global History & Politics Dialogue commemorated the 70th anniversary of the first Asian-African Conference in Bandung by examining its relevance to today's global geopolitical strategies as well as its historical influence on the countries in the Global South. Held from 15–17 April 2025, the Dialogue brought together around 30 participants – including policymakers, historians, diplomats and media representatives. It was organised by Körber-Stiftung in cooperation with partner institutions.

The Global History and Politics Dialogue in Bandung took place in cooperation with:



From Bandung to Middle Power Internationalism: How to Remake the World

The contemporary global order is fraught with an interconnected set of crises. It suffers from a normative crisis alongside crises of efficiency, legitimacy and representation. This generates widespread discontent with the order, which prompts the search for alternative visions in history and in the narratives and perspectives of middle powers, especially those in the Global South.

The 70th anniversary of the Bandung Conference presents an opportunity to reflect on its legacy, the movements that emerged from it and how it compares to the internationalism of middle powers today. Exploring this requires unpacking certain concepts, especially the quest for agency, neutrality and non-alignment.

The Bandung Conference: An Experience, Not a Prescription

The Asian-African Conference at Bandung, Indonesia in 1955 represents the historical crystallisation of the Global South's vision of the global order. It was one among several conferences from the 1940s to the 1960s that produced and popularised new concepts and language that are still relevant today. Terms like non-alignment or the Non-Aligned Movement, the Third World or the Global South are all products of Bandung and similar platforms, and they partly inform contemporary narratives of discontent with the global order. Bandung and its likes presented the Global South's version of norms-based multilateralism and alternative visions of political agency.

The Bandung Conference, however, should not be seen as having provided an overarching and consistent vision of global order. It did not. The conference and the Non-Aligned Movement that emerged from it contained inconsistencies, conflicts of interest and different priorities from the outset. Therefore, it does not represent the golden moment for the Global South's normative multilateralism.

The second conference that was to be organised a decade later never took place, in great part due to the internal instability of the political regimes

of participant countries and their diverging foreign-policy interests. This arguably illustrates that the demand for a legitimate, representative and inclusive international system would be more powerful and sustainable coming from countries that have legitimate and sustainable domestic political orders.

Despite this, the power of the Bandung Conference stemmed from the sense of active agency that its participants possessed – their championing of a set of principles, popularising of lasting concepts and putting collective advocacy at the heart of their idea of the international order. The ten Bandung Principles, commonly referred to as the “Bandung spirit” and reflecting the norms and values that underpinned the post-colonial states' vision of global order, are as relevant today as they were then. Bandung does not provide a blueprint for reforming and remaking the contemporary global order; rather, it offers a powerful historical experience and process to learn from while reflecting on how to do so. Thus, it is more a lesson or experience than a prescription.

Political Agency in Transition

Given that the vast majority of the states that gathered in Bandung were post-colonial ones, their quest for agency manifested itself in their pursuit of independence and autonomy as well as in the search for how to remake the world. This was reflected in the fact that this and similar conferences took place outside Europe, that their discussions focused on a critique of the prevailing global order rather than merely on the particular issues facing participating countries and that collective advocacy was central to them. Each of these factors reinforced the others; for example, collective advocacy was necessary for advancing a global vision and narrative as well as for strengthening participants' agency.

Their shared history as post-colonial states that had experienced injustices, inequalities, domination and racial and civilizational hierarchies made it relatively easy for them to coalesce around certain principles, values and priorities in their alternative

vision of the global order to the prevailing one informed by the then bipolarity of the international politics. As reflected in the ten principles, the world-making vision that was advanced at Bandung was more normative than geopolitical, more political than economic and more principle-driven than interest-driven.

Middle power agency today

Similarly, today's middle powers are striving for greater agency and assuming increasingly important roles in regional and global politics. They pursue active diplomacy on major crises and wars. The Ukraine and Gaza Wars are two cases in point. Non-Western middle powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates have played different roles with regard to the Ukraine War, be it through engaging in diplomacy and hosting talks, or by facilitating a grain deal or prisoner exchanges. South Africa's genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice has redefined the global narrative of the Gaza War.

These wars have also generated contestations over values and principles, and brought the categories of Global South and Global West under the spotlight. The nexus of hypocrisy, double standards and values has turned into a narrative battleground between the West and non-Western actors. The West framed Russia's aggression against Ukraine as neo-imperial and called upon the non-Western world to reject this as a matter of moral consistency. Regarding Gaza, many in the non-Western world but also in the West called upon the latter to uphold the principles of international law and values that underpin the liberal international order or rules-based global order by opposing Israel's war.

Bandung Versus BRICS: Limits of Today's Multilateralism

It is not only global crises that generate interest in the middle powers' vision of internationalism; their approach to multilateralism also attracts attention, especially at a time when the global order is under

assault from China, Russia and the United States. However, despite their activism, their internationalism suffers from a lack of collective advocacy and of a shared vision of global order based on common principles and values. They are more driven by policy issues, especially economic and security concerns, than by overarching narratives and political visions. This is evident in the different platforms bringing together middle powers, such as BRICS, and in their narratives.

The West views BRICS and similar bodies, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, through China and Russia lenses, perceiving them as institutional embodiments of discontent with a Western-centric global order. However, BRICS should not be regarded as a modern iteration of the Non-Aligned Movement. It is centred more on economics than politics or norms, exhibiting a more transactional nature rather than a value-driven approach.

The element of collective advocacy is largely absent in BRICS, given that its members pursue conflicting interests and priorities. Unlike the Non-Aligned Movement's outright rejection of both poles in the then bipolar world, BRICS increasingly risks becoming a China-centric platform. Therefore, it does not embody a normative world-making scheme akin to that of Bandung.

Nevertheless, BRICS has the potential to evolve into a powerful narrative and vehicle of discontent with the prevailing international system. It can lend a strong voice to the quest for reforming the global order, assist in crystallising and formulating the content of this reform, and showcase the Global South's version of multilateralism – provided that its members can agree on shared values, principles and priorities.

The shared history of the post-colonial states at the Bandung Conference enabled them to unite around certain principles and values. In contrast, the conflicting interests of the BRICS members and their different positions in the international system – with two being members of the UN Security Council (China and Russia) and others aspiring to this status (such as Brazil and India) – mean that it is unlikely they will coalesce around a shared normative platform or that they will agree

upon an expansive reform agenda for the global order.

This inconsistency within BRICS does not call for its dismissal but for a more realistic contextualisation and expectation of its role. Not only is the global order fragmenting and falling apart, but the narrative and politics of discontent towards it are also fragmented. This is highly detrimental to norm-based multilateralism and the advancement and upholding of universal values.

Neutrality, Non-alignment and Multi-alignment

Neutrality and non-alignment were central to the internationalist vision manifested at Bandung. The systemic features of the period heavily informed these principles. The decolonisation process, shaped by shared history, enabled the states that gathered at the conference to agree upon a common vision of the international order and to embrace principles of equality, law and justice.

The bipolarity of the Cold War motivated them to chart a third way as an alternative to bandwagoning with the internationalism of either pole. Non-alignment was not a passive position: it was an active rejection of the worldviews presented by the United States/the West and the Soviet Union. More than a mere stance, it was about values and principles. It embodied collective abstention. This partly limited the expansion of the Cold War and of the bipolar logic of international politics: joining either bloc would have meant further globalisation of the Cold War and bipolarity, and thus diminished alternative visions of internationalism.

Moreover, neutrality and non-alignment, at least theoretically, enabled these countries to assume diplomatic or mediating roles during the major crises of the period. A nuance must be emphasised: non-alignment as a principle was prominent at Bandung but the Non-Aligned Movement was born later. Some actors at the conference expressed reservations about non-alignment evolving from a principle into a movement because they did not

aim to create a third pole in international politics. Non-alignment as a principle and value entailed not only a rejection of the bipolarity of the Cold War but also of viewing international politics through the lens of polarity. It represented a more fundamental rejection of power politics as a matter of principle.

In contrast, the Non-Aligned Movement signified an acceptance of power politics as the overarching framework of international politics, creating a third pole in a world then defined by the two Cold War poles. The Non-Aligned Movement and the Third World were a product of Cold War bipolarity but neutrality and non-alignment were not necessarily products of the Cold War's systemic conditions. Undoubtedly, non-alignment as a principle gained prominence during the Cold War, yet its existence is not confined to that period.

Strategic neutrality in a fragmented world

Despite some countries – such as Egypt, India and Singapore – entertaining the idea of non-alignment 2.0 in their foreign policy, what characterises the internationalism of middle powers today is their adoption of neutrality regarding some of the major crises in global politics, particularly the Ukraine War, and their adoption of multi-alignment as a key feature of their approach to the different centres of power. They view multi-alignment as a natural outcome of an emerging multipolar world. This appears to be more of an adaptive strategy than an attempt at providing an alternative vision of global order.

Indeed, their multi-alignment is largely driven by policy considerations rather than underlying values; it is marked by a focus on specific issues and a pragmatic approach. This prioritises hedging strategies over promoting a comprehensive alternative vision for the international order. In fact, it is an adaptation to a world that is, presumably, multipolar and in which norms, rules, values and universalism are in decline. However, as each major international crisis illustrates, multipolarity is more aspirational than a reality.

Middle Powers in the Global South and the Global North: A Call for a Common Agenda

The discussion of middle powers focuses strongly on the non-Western ones. However, many states in Europe and the geopolitical West fall within this category. Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea and the United Kingdom are also middle powers. At a time when the gap between the two sides of the Atlantic is widening and the geopolitical West is in decline as a result of US President Donald Trump's aversion to it (particularly NATO), many Western states have to rediscover their identity as middle powers.

This presents an opportunity for middle powers in the Global South and the Global North to make common cause for a norm-based international order. Such a global partnership can provide more legitimacy for an agenda that they agree upon for reforming and remaking the global order. When the spotlight is exclusively on the vision of global order held by the Global South's middle powers, a form of oppositional, if not antagonistic, relationship emerges between the Global South and the Global North. However, a comprehensive reform of the global order necessitates an alliance between both sets of middle powers.

Norm-based partnership for global reform

The lowest common denominator of such a partnership should be the defence of international law and norms, along with the provision of global common goods, such as combating climate change and promoting global health. In this context, more than the great powers, the middle powers require laws, rules and norms. Unlike superpowers, their agency within the international system will be considerably limited without these. Therefore, their defence of international law and norms will also be defence of an international system in which they possess greater agency.

Furthermore, despite their diplomatic activism regarding pressing global crises and conflicts, the middle powers of the Global South are unlikely to be able to provide global public goods on their own. At a time when the great powers are not only uninterested in supplying such goods and in promoting norms but also actively undermining them, a global partnership of middle powers can help fill the void. ↩

This text was informed by the Global History and Politics Dialogue, which took place in Bandung, Indonesia, from 15 to 17 April 2025. It is partly an expanded and altered version of an article written for Foreign Policy magazine.

Edited by **Florian Bigge**, Programme Director Körber History Forum;
Julia Ganter, Programme Director Körber Emerging Middle Powers Initiative

The Bandung Conference

The first large-scale *Asian-African* or *Afro-Asian* Conference was held on 18th–24th April, 1955. It is popularly known as the *Bandung Conference* (taking on the name of the City where it was held – Bandung, Indonesia). The Conference was attended by delegations from 29 governments.

In the final communiqué of the conference, the following 10-point **“Declaration on Promotion of World Peace and Cooperation”** was adopted unanimously:

1. Respect for fundamental human rights and for the purposes and principles of the charter of the United Nations.
2. Respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations.
3. Recognition of the equality of all races and of the equality of all nations large and small.
4. Abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country.
5. Respect for the right of each nation to defend itself, singly or collectively, in conformity with the charter of the United Nations.
6. (a) Abstention from the use of arrangements of collective defence to serve any particular interests of any of the big powers.
(b) Abstention by any country from exerting pressures on other countries.
7. Refraining from acts or threats of aggression or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any country.
8. Settlement of all international disputes by peaceful means, such as negotiation, conciliation, arbitration or judicial settlement as well as other peaceful means of the parties' own choice, in conformity with the charter of the United Nations.
9. Promotion of mutual interests and cooperation.
10. Respect for justice and international obligations.

Participating Countries

Kingdom of Afghanistan	Indonesia	Pakistan
Burma	Imperial State of Iran	the Philippines
Kingdom of Cambodia	Kingdom of Iraq	Saudi Arabia
Ceylon	Japan	Sudan
People's Republic of China	Jordan	Syrian Republic
Cyprus (under colonial rule)	Kingdom of Laos	Thailand
Republic of Egypt	Lebanon	Turkey
Ethiopian Empire	Liberia	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
Gold Coast	Kingdom of Libya	State of Vietnam
India	Kingdom of Nepal	Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen

Körber History Forum

At the Körber History Forum, we connect policymakers, historians and experts to explore how history can inform today's global challenges. By engaging with historical contexts, we can better address contemporary crises and navigate shifting global power dynamics. We foster dialogue between representatives from the Global South and Europe to bridge perspectives and rethink foreign policy together.

The Global History and Politics Dialogue in Bandung was a joint initiative of the Körber History Forum, the Körber Emerging Middle Powers Initiative, Chatham House, and Oxford University. It brought together historians, policymakers, and experts from the Global South and North to rethink middle power diplomacy, challenge historical blind spots, and address the world's shifting order.

Scan the QR code
for more information.

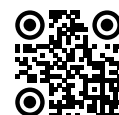


Körber Emerging Middle Powers Initiative (KEMP)

The aim of the Körber Emerging Middle Powers Initiative (KEMP) is to promote dialogue between Germany and emerging middle powers. By means of an annual survey, the initiative contributes to a deeper understanding of geopolitical perspectives in countries that belong to this grouping, such as Brazil, India, and South Africa.

In addition, KEMP brings together experts and decision makers from those countries and other emerging middle powers with their German counterparts to contribute to their active exchange. The cross-national study *“Emerging Middle Powers Report 2025 – Momentum for Middle Powers”* highlights foreign policy differences, similarities and opportunities for cooperation between Germany and the emerging middle powers Brazil, India and South Africa. It is based on an expert survey in the emerging middle powers and in Germany.

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Social development needs dialogue and understanding. Through our operational projects, in our networks and in conjunction with partners, we take on current social challenges in the areas of activities comprising ‘Knowledge for Tomorrow’, ‘International Dialogue’, ‘Vibrant Civil Society’, and ‘Cultural Impulses for Hamburg’.

Inaugurated in 1959 by the entrepreneur Kurt A. Körper, we conduct our own national and international projects and events. In particular, we feel a special bond to the city of Hamburg. We also maintain an office in Berlin.

International Dialogue

Conflicts arise in situations that are fraught with misunderstandings and lack debate. Moreover, such conflicts are often grounded in the past. This is why we champion international dialogue and foster a more profound understanding of history. We address political decisionmakers, civil society representatives and emerging leaders from the younger generations. Our geographic focus is on Europe, its eastern neighbours, the Middle East and Asia, especially China. We strengthen discussions about history at the local level in a manner that stretches beyond national borders and encourage people to share their experiences so that history is not forgotten. Our foreign and security policy formats provide safe spaces for confidential talks built on trust. However, we also employ formats that involve the public, such as publications, competitions and networks, to spur debate about common European values and inspire the greater development of international cooperation.

Körper-Stiftung

Kehrwieder 12
20457 Hamburg
Phone +49 40 80 81 92 180
E-Mail khf@koerber-stiftung.de
www.koerber-stiftung.de
[@koerberhistory.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/koerberhistory.bsky.social)

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