

Coexistence Not Co-Destruction: Remembering Bandung 70 Years On

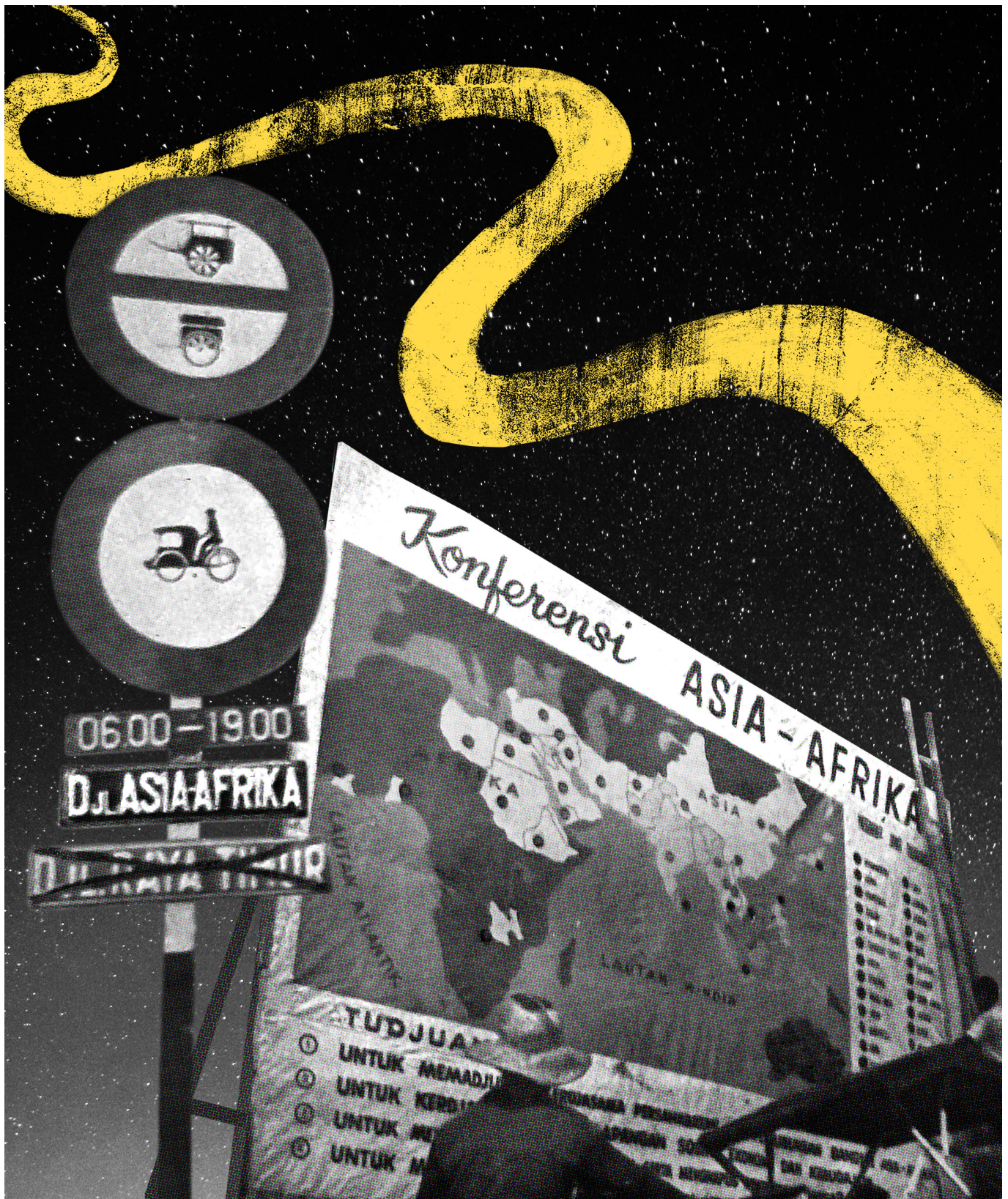


Image credit: Dossier no. 87 'The Bandung Spirit', Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, 2025.

Dear all,

Greetings from Tricontinental Asia!

Seventy years ago this month, leaders of twenty-nine newly or nearly independent Asian and African nations inaugurated the historic Bandung Conference, embarking on the 'Freedom Walk' along Asia-Africa Road to the conference's Freedom Building (Gedung Merdeka) in Bandung, Indonesia. As a diplomatic performance and collective political action, these leaders walked among the teeming crowds to announce that the peoples of the Third World had stood up after centuries of colonialism.

There was, however, no consensus on the future towards which these countries were marching. Participating nations ranged from those in US military alliances (Turkey, the Philippines) to non-aligned states (Indonesia, Egypt, India), and included ideologically distinct regimes – from newly communist nations (North Vietnam and China) to those accusing Soviet communism of being 'another form of colonialism' (Ceylon, now Sri Lanka). In other words, it was unclear how unity could be built from such diversity.

In his opening speech, Indonesian President Sukarno emphasised that 'colonialism is not dead' and that it persists in new forms. He declared:

Colonialism also has its modern dress, in the form of economic control, intellectual control, and actual physical control by a small alien community within a nation.

Now these nations were united in their opposition to colonialism – 'the lifeline of imperialism' – to defend their hard-won independence. As former colonies:

This line [that] runs from the Straits of Gibraltar, through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Sea of Japan. For most of that enormous distance, the territories on both sides of this lifeline were colonies; the peoples were unfree, their futures mortgaged to an alien system.

'We have so much in common', he added, 'and yet we know so little of each other'.

Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai played a pivotal role by raising the banner of 'seek[ing] common ground while reserving differences', as part of the young communist country's debut on the international diplomatic stage. One of the conference's major achievements was the unanimous adoption of a ten-point 'Declaration on the Promotion of World Peace and Cooperation'. These principles – including sovereign equality, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence – have since become the cornerstone of Global South diplomacy.



Itji Tarmizi (Indonesia), Bandung Lautan Api, 1972.

The Bandung Spirit, as an assertion of the historical agency of the formerly colonised world, rejected the Cold War logic of military blocs and great-power domination. It offered an alternative vision: That these countries could establish a set of universal norms to ensure their own survival and sovereignty. The conference also served as a testing ground in diplomacy for nascent nations, allowing them to ‘localise’ diplomatic norms and push for regionalism – seen as a powerful instrument for defending national independence.

Yet the Bandung moment was hard-won and immediately contested. Western imperialist powers viewed the awakening of the Third World with alarm. US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles saw the conference’s Afro-Asian solidarity as ‘by its very nature and concept anti-Western’ and feared that inviting the People’s Republic of China (PRC) would give Zhou Enlai a platform to broadcast communist ideology to what he called the ‘naïve audience of anti-colonialists’. In the following years, the West retaliated violently against the emerging Third World project that Bandung helped propel – most notably through a wave of CIA-backed coups in countries such as Indonesia that deposed Sukarno a decade later. Despite these efforts, the ideals of Bandung have endured in the political imagination of the Global South.

A New Mood: The Rise of China and the Global South

Seventy years on, a new world order is slowly emerging, aspiring towards one of Bandung’s core ideas: that international affairs need not be dominated by Western powers. The rise of the Global South has generated

new multilateral institutions embedded with the principles of equality and mutual benefit in international relations.

Notably, BRICS has grown in prominence as a platform for the Global South to cooperate – both economically and politically. It has expanded to include five new members – Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the UAE – along several partner states. This new mood is backed by material changes. The centre of gravity of the world economy has shifted eastward, with China and other Asian countries becoming engines of global growth.

By 2023, China was the largest global economy in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) and 47% of its foreign trade was with countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative – a figure that rose to 50% in 2024, reflecting a deliberate diversification away from Western markets. Likewise, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a multilateral trade pact spanning Asia and the Pacific, has strengthened regional trade ties, with intra-RCEP trade growing by 12% year-on-year. These developments signal a major shift: China is now the largest trading partner for over 120 countries in the world.

As in 1955, China today occupies a central position in this unfolding Global South project –serving as both a target of imperialist aggression and a torchbearer of an alternative path. Nowhere is this dual role clearer than in the global trade war unleashed by the United States, particularly under Donald Trump’s administration. In a throwback to Cold War hostility – employing tariffs instead of troops – Trump began his series of offensives by signing an executive order placing a blanket 10% tariff on all imports into the United States in February. Then, on April 2 – labelled by Trump as ‘Liberation Day’, the US President unleashed a series of punitive ‘reciprocal’ tariffs on 57 countries. These were ostensibly to correct trade imbalances and hit friends and foes alike. A week later, Trump grandiosely announced, via social media, a ninety-day tariff reprieve for countries that ‘have not...retaliated in any way’, while doubling down on China as the primary target with a 145% tariff on all goods.



Amrus Natsya, Mereka Yang Terusir Dari Tanahnya (Indonesia), Those Chased Away from Their Land, 1960.

Much like Dulles in 1955, the US establishment today fears China’s emergence, which in the past served as

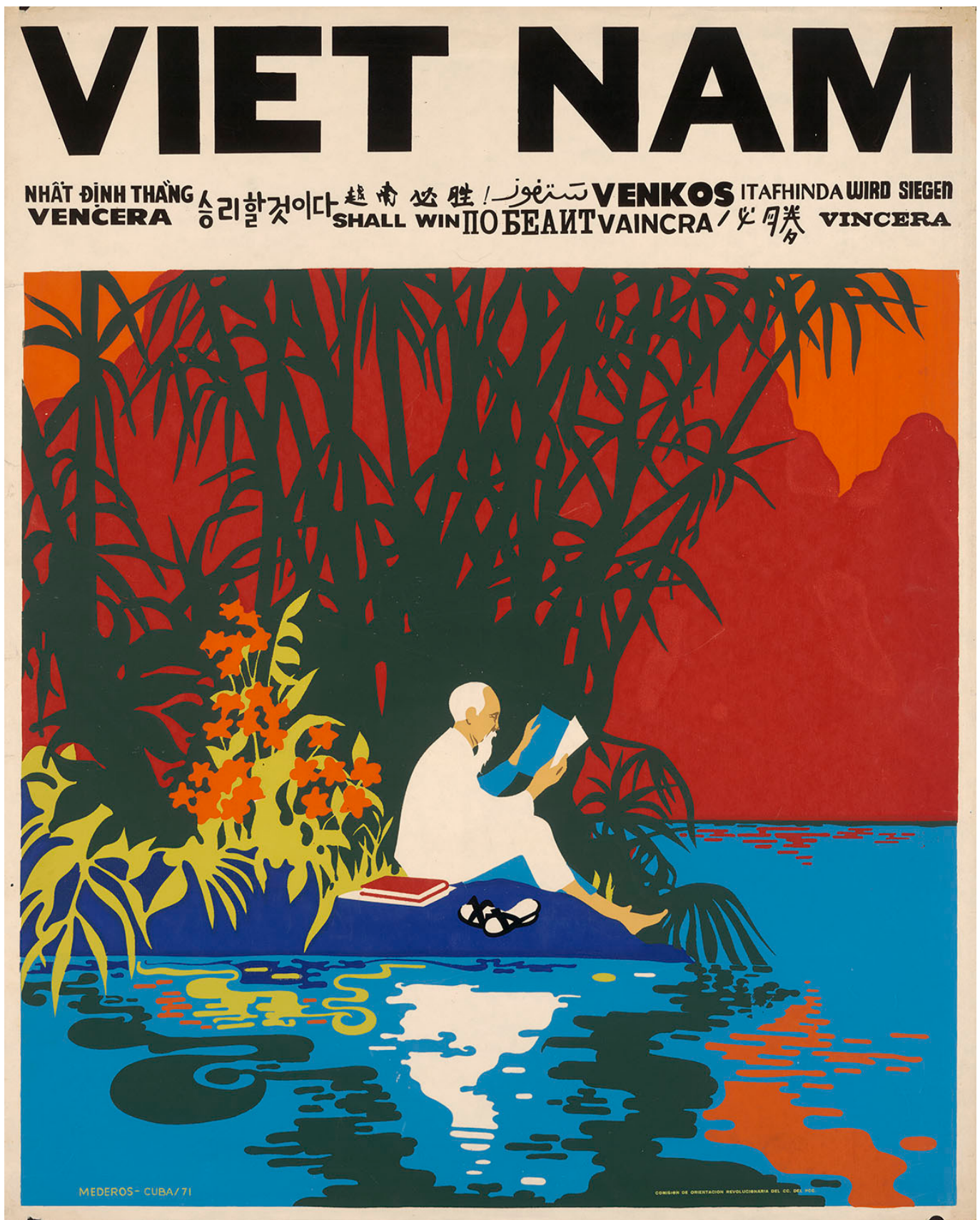
an ideological threat as the world's largest communist Third World nation and is today seen as an economic and existential threat. The tariff onslaught has injected instability into the global economy and further eroded the norms of multilateral trade – ironically undermining the very international trading system that the US helped build in its own favour.

Beijing, however, has refused to bow to this economic aggression. China responded swiftly and resolutely to Trump's tariff barrage. Within days, the Chinese government announced reciprocal tariffs, zeroing in on sensitive sectors to maximise pressure. 'We have abundant means to retaliate and will by no means sit by if our interests are harmed', Chinese officials declared, denouncing Washington's economic coercion and asserting China's right to defend its national sovereignty. This stance was met with an outpouring of public support inside China: Patriotic sentiment surged on social media, with the hashtag 'China's countermeasures are here' with 180 million engagements in a week. As one Chinese netizen highlighted, 'Patriotism is not just a feeling – it is an action'. That China and the Chinese people have stood united against US' bully tactics carries symbolic significance for the Global South.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Mao Ning, invoking President Xi Jinping's words from 2018, summed up this spirit of resistance on April 8: 'A storm may churn a pond, but it cannot rattle the ocean. The ocean has weathered countless tempests – this time is no different'. Two weeks after Trump unleashed tariffs on the world, hitting Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia (49%) and Vietnam (46%) the hardest, Xi toured the region, signing 31 and 37 agreements spanning various sectors in Malaysia and Cambodia, respectively. In Vietnam, where Xi called on deeper bilateral ties to resist 'unilateral bullying', 45 agreements were signed while party-to-party exchanges underscored the alignment between the countries' communist parties.

Trump's strongarm tactics and economic warfare dressed as 'reciprocity' is the antithesis of the Bandung principles of non-interference and equality. Within this context, South-South cooperation frameworks are receiving increased attention, together with renewed calls to strengthen cooperation and unity within the BRICS, RCEP, and other Global South multilateral platforms. Finding unity among the extreme diversity of the Global South is a tall order. This unity, however, cannot rely solely at the level of states and their leaders, but it must also come from below, from the energy of peoples' movements and progressive forces across Africa, Asia, and Latin America to revive a true Bandung Spirit against US imperialism and unilateralism. As Zhou Enlai evoked at the Bandung Conference, the hand of imperialism has five fingers – political, military, cultural, social, and economic spheres – which can only be overcome through the unity of the Global South and its peoples.

As Sukarno wrote in 'Towards Indonesian Independence' (1933): 'If the Banteng (bull) of Indonesia can work together with the Sphinx of Egypt, with the Nandi Ox of the country of India, with the Dragon of the country of China, with the champions of independence of other countries – if the Banteng of Indonesia can work together with all the enemies of international capitalism and imperialism around the world – O, surely the end of international imperialism is coming fairly soon!' One of the major blows against US imperialism was the victory of the Vietnamese people, celebrated fifty years ago today.



René Mederos (Cuba), Viet Nam Shall Win, 1971. (courtesy: Center for the Study of Political Graphics)

For more about the Bandung Spirit, read our Institute's latest **dossier**.

– Tings Chak, Tricontinental Asia