The room that Ceylon helped to build

How five Asian governments convened twenty-nine nations at Bandung in 1955, and what a declaration without machinery could carry

Country decision study | MacroLens Research | Independent desk research - not peer reviewed - not investment advice

Abstract

In April 1955, twenty-nine Asian and African governments met at Bandung, Indonesia, representing 1.5 billion people, over half of humanity. The sponsors were the five Colombo Powers (Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia and Pakistan), none of them a great power, carried into the project by Ceylon's Sir John Kotelawala, host of their founding 1954 meeting. The week survived a crisis he created by naming Soviet rule in Eastern Europe a new colonialism, later defused in private talks with Zhou Enlai, and closed with a unanimous ten-point declaration built on the UN Charter and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Bandung built no alliance and no secretariat, but it seeded the Non-Aligned Movement of 1961, which Ceylon joined at Belgrade and later chaired from Colombo in 1976. This case examines convening power: what states outside the great-power clubs can set in motion, and what a declaration without machinery can and cannot carry.

Why this case for Sri Lanka

Most case studies cast Sri Lanka as the country that might copy someone else's policy. This one reverses the direction: in 1954-55 Ceylon was the co-author, not the student. The five sponsors of the Bandung Conference - Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia and Pakistan - were known as the Colombo Powers because their founding meeting happened in Colombo in April-May 1954, hosted by Prime Minister Sir John Kotelawala. When they reconvened at Bogor in late December 1954, they wrote the invitation list themselves, deciding that Communist China would be invited as the de facto government of its country, that Nationalist China, Israel and the two Koreas would not, and that the Gold Coast, not yet fully independent, would. Twenty-nine governments came. Ceylon's own later dividend was real: a founding seat at the Non-Aligned Movement's Belgrade summit in 1961 and the movement's chairmanship, exercised from Colombo in 1976-79. A country that today navigates between larger powers once helped to convene twenty-nine governments - 1.5 billion people, over half of humanity in 1955 - in a single week. The question is what made that possible, and what its limits were.

The starting point: new states, old empires, one Cold War

By the early 1950s the postwar map was filling with governments that were young, poor and courted. Decolonization was incomplete - much of Africa remained under colonial rule - and the Cold War was sorting the world into blocs: the Western alliance system had added SEATO in September 1954, and the Warsaw Pact followed in May 1955. The United States viewed neutralism with suspicion; on the Office of the Historian's account, American observers worried that an Asian-African gathering signaled a leftward shift among the newly independent nations, while Washington's own support for decolonization was compromised by its reliance on the European colonial powers as allies. The five future sponsors were not a natural bloc either: Pakistan joined SEATO in 1954, and India was building a doctrine of non-alignment. Ceylon, independent only since 4 February 1948, had already shown it would deal across the line, signing the Rubber-Rice barter with China in December 1952. What the five shared was the conviction that the newest states should not have their agendas written in Washington or Moscow.

The decisions: convene, hold the room, close with a text

The first decision was to convene at all. Indonesian Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo proposed an Asian-African conference at the Colombo meeting in 1954; the five Prime Ministers asked him to sound out the prospective guests, and the response, on Kotelawala's memoir account, was eager. At Bogor on 28-29 December 1954 the sponsors settled the purposes and the list - twenty-five invited governments plus the five sponsors, with the hard calls made by the hosts themselves: China in as a de facto government, the rival Chinese and Korean claims out, Israel out because its inclusion would cost every Arab delegation, the nearly independent Gold Coast in. Convening, in other words, was already governing: the guest list was the first act of policy.

The second decision was to hold the room together when it nearly broke. Two moments define the week. In his supplementary speech of 19 April, recorded by the Indonesian hosts, Zhou Enlai set the conciliatory register: the Chinese delegation, he said, had come "to seek unity and not to quarrel," and the conference should "seek the common ground among us, while keeping our differences." The week's crisis was an intervention whose date the surviving accounts do not pin down: in a closed session, Kotelawala - by his own later account an "uncompromising opponent of Communism" - asked aloud whether the satellite states of Central and Eastern Europe were not colonies too, and whether the conference should oppose "Soviet colonialism as much as Western imperialism." He finished, he wrote, amid silence; Zhou rose in agitation and reserved the right to reply; Nehru demanded to know why the speech had not been shown to him in advance. The rupture was then managed the way such ruptures usually are: privately - Zhou and Kotelawala met, and the week held.

The third decision was to end with a unanimous text rather than a negotiated treaty. The final communique of 24 April 1955 carried economic and cultural cooperation, human rights and self-determination, and - as its item G - a ten-point declaration on the promotion of world peace and cooperation, the Dasasila Bandung, built on the UN Charter and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence that India and China had agreed in 1954. It was adopted unanimously. Unanimity was achievable because the asks were general; the conference bound no one to anything specific, which was at once its strength and its ceiling.

The decision chain: dates

When	What happened
28 April - 2 May 1954	Colombo Conference of five Prime Ministers (Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, Pakistan); the idea of an Asian-African conference is aired
28-29 December 1954	Bogor Conference: the five sponsors decide to convene, set the purposes and write the invitation list
18 April 1955	Bandung opens in Indonesia: 29 governments, about 1.5 billion people, 54 percent of world population
19 April 1955	Zhou Enlai's supplementary speech: "seek unity and not to quarrel", common ground while keeping differences
During the week	Kotelawala's "Soviet colonialism" intervention in a closed session; a private meeting with Zhou defuses the rupture
24 April 1955	Final communique signed; ten-point Dasasila Bandung adopted unanimously as item G
September 1960	Seventeen new states join the United Nations, sixteen of them African, in the decolonization wave
14 December 1960	UN General Assembly Resolution 1514, the decolonization declaration, adopted with no dissenting vote and nine abstentions
1-6 September 1961	Non-Aligned Movement founded at Belgrade: 25 members including Ceylon
16-19 August 1976	Fifth NAM summit held in Colombo; Sri Lanka chairs the movement for three years
January 2024	Nineteenth NAM summit in Kampala; the movement counts 120 member states

Measured outcomes I: a table that stayed set

The conference's measurable product was institutional lineage. The Bandung principles fed directly into the Non-Aligned Movement founded at Belgrade on 1-6 September 1961 by twenty-five countries, Ceylon among them. The movement had no charter and no permanent secretariat - coordination still falls to whichever country holds the chair - yet it endured: by the 2020s it counted 120 member states, and its nineteenth summit met in Kampala in January 2024. Sri Lanka's own return was concrete: a founding member in 1961, it hosted the fifth summit in Colombo on 16-19 August 1976 and chaired the movement for the following three years - the period later described as a pinnacle of Sri Lankan foreign policy. The wider wave Bandung spoke for was measurable too: in September 1960 seventeen new states joined the United Nations, sixteen of them African, and that December the General Assembly adopted its decolonization declaration without a dissenting vote, the administering powers abstaining. Bandung caused none of that by itself; it gave the wave a vocabulary and a claim to speak for peoples still under rule (desk interpretation).

Measured outcomes II: what a declaration could not carry

The limits were structural. There was no machinery: no secretariat, no enforcement, no budget, nothing to convert a unanimous paragraph into a changed policy. The "spirit of Bandung" was personal - Nehru, Zhou, Sukarno, Nasser - and on the Office of the Historian's account it had weakened by the end of the 1960s, by which time most of the original participants were out of power. It did not keep the peace among its own: India and China, the two central delegations of 1955, were at war by 1962. The sponsor group itself was heterogeneous - Pakistan sat in SEATO while co-sponsoring a non-aligned conference - and the movement that followed grew more radical in the 1970s, drifting from the pragmatic register of the founding week. The honest summary is that Bandung produced a durable identity and a fragile solidarity: the ten principles are still cited, but no mechanism ever existed to make a member honor them (desk interpretation).

Transfer limits: what Bandung does not prove

First, convening power is not governing power: writing a guest list and a communique is a real act, but it sets agendas rather than implements them (desk interpretation). Second, the unanimity of 1955 was bought with generality; had the ten points carried obligations, the room that contained both Pakistan and India, both China and pro-Western Asian allies, would not have signed them (desk interpretation). Third, the week turned on personalities - on Zhou choosing conciliation and Kotelawala choosing to climb down - and personalities are not a reproducible institution (desk interpretation). Fourth, the sponsors' cohesion was brief: the Colombo Powers never acted as a bloc again, and Ceylon's convening role was a moment, not a permanent position (desk interpretation). Fifth, the record here leans on official retrospectives and one participant's proud memoir; Kotelawala's account is evidence of what he did and what he wanted remembered, not a neutral transcript, and Chinese and Indonesian archival accounts were less accessible.

Conditional lessons for Sri Lanka

These are design observations, not prescriptions.

1. Convening power does not require great-power weight. Five governments with no material power over the Cold War decided who would meet, where, and on what agenda - and the decisions embedded in an invitation list were themselves foreign policy. The replicable asset is convening credibility, not size (desk interpretation).

2. A declaration without machinery is a beginning, not a result. Bandung's ten points endured as identity precisely because they obliged nothing; a country that hosts or convenes should decide in advance whether it is building a symbol or an institution, because the two need different follow-through (desk interpretation).

3. The convener pays for candor. Kotelawala's Soviet-colonialism speech was true to his politics and nearly fatal to his own conference; what saved the week was a private meeting, not a better speech. Conveners should budget for the ruptures their own delegates cause (desk interpretation).

4. Unanimity has a price in specificity. If every member must sign, the text will be general; a smaller coalition can say more. Choosing the size of the room is choosing the depth of the text (desk interpretation).

5. Convening compounds if it is maintained. Ceylon's 1954-55 investment paid out for two decades - Belgrade in 1961, Colombo in 1976 - because successive governments kept showing up. A single conference is an event; a maintained presence is a position (desk interpretation).

The case's real claim is narrow: in 1954-55 five Asian governments outside the great-power clubs, Ceylon among the most active, put twenty-nine nations in one room and closed the week with a unanimous text - and the lineage of that week, the Non-Aligned Movement, still meets, with Sri Lanka still a member. What was built was not an institution but a standing invitation: proof that a small state can, on the right week, set the table for half the world. The harder question the case leaves open is what Sri Lanka would convene today, and with whom.

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