

The Lost Soul of Bandung in Indonesia's Foreign Policy

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This article explores Indonesia's evolving role in global diplomacy, focusing on its historical leadership in the Bandung Conference and the subsequent challenges it has faced in maintaining that influence. The study examines two central questions: why the appeal of the Bandung Conference had not elevated Indonesia into prominence, and what challenges and opportunities ahead that should be considered to resolve the issue. Through a qualitative approach, the research analyses the transformation of Indonesian foreign policy, examining the shift from Sukarno's commitment to Bandung's principles to the pragmatic diplomacy of Suharto and beyond. The study draws on the concept of normative power to explain how Indonesia's diplomatic aspirations have often lacked clarity and coherence. The findings highlight the continued relevance of Bandung's vision in challenging neo-colonial structures, but also underscore the obstacles Indonesia faces, including domestic political instability and inconsistent foreign policy. While cautiously optimistic about Indonesia's potential to revitalize Bandung's legacy, the article concludes that achieving this requires clear leadership and alignment with contemporary global issues. Ultimately, this paper contributes to understanding the complexities of postcolonial diplomacy and the future of middle power states, with practical implications for Indonesia's role in a multipolar world.

Keywords: Indonesia, Bandung Conference, middle power, normative power, foreign policy

Introduction

The global order has undergone a thorough transformation since the mid-20th century. The Cold War era was marked by a rigid bipolar order, dominated by two superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. Nations across the world were often compelled to take sides with one of these blocs, with little room for other voices to be heard. Following the end of the Cold War, this dichotomous framework was replaced by a more fluid and nuanced multipolar world, where power was diffused and scat-

tered among a variety of state and non-state actors.

However, behind this apparent diversity, a longstanding imbalance persists—most notably illustrated by the Brandt Line—which continues to underscore the divide between the Global North and South in terms of economic development, political representation, and participation in global decision-making forums (Lees, 2021). In response to this inequity, a number of countries—particularly from the Global South—have begun to pursue alternative approaches

to global governance and diplomacy, seeking to influence the international order from the margins. These states, increasingly recognized for their bridging roles between core and periphery, are often referred as middle powers.

According to Robertson (2017), Jordaan (2017), and Teo (in Ardhani et al. 2023), the definitive understanding of middle power is debatable between whether the country possesses medium material capability or country which demonstrates specific diplomatic behaviours such as multilateralism of soft power. In general, middle power is those states with middling material capability which practice persuasive diplomatic strategies in their foreign affairs (Ardhani, et.al., 2023). These countries, rather than employing coercive power, leave their imprint through activist diplomacy, multilateral involvement, and normative leadership. Rather than hegemonic aspirations, middle powers tend to be the stabilizers during times of global uncertainty, particularly in multilateral forums such as the United Nations, the G20, or in other regional organizations.

This bridging function becomes especially relevant in a multipolar world, where no single actor holds uncontested authority. In such a landscape, middle powers have the opportunity to carve out diplomatic space for themselves, particularly by amplifying the interests of the Global South and advocating for a more equitable international order. Their relatively flexible positioning allows them to engage with both developed and developing states, offering platforms for dialogue and cooperation. As the global system

continues to grapple with enduring inequalities and fragmented alliances, middle powers can play a critical role in filling leadership gaps left by major powers focused on strategic rivalry. In this context, middle powers are not only diplomatic actors but also normative carriers—capable of reintroducing principles of justice, equality, and solidarity into a global order.

According to Ardhani et al. (2023) and Teo (2021), Indonesia qualifies as a middle power by occupying a position beneath great powers in material capabilities, employing middle power diplomatic strategies, and explicitly identifying itself as such. This classification aligns with Indonesia's long-standing commitment to international cooperation and its advocacy for the interests of developing nations. Such commitment was evident in the 1955 Bandung Conference, where Indonesia brought together leaders from 29 Asian and African countries to promote Afro-Asian solidarity, resist colonialism and neocolonialism, and challenge Cold War hegemonies (Chakrabarty, 2005). The conference fostered unity among newly decolonized states and significantly contributed to global anti-imperialist movements. For Indonesia, Bandung was not merely a diplomatic success but the crystallization of its identity as a moral leader of the Global South (Acharya, 2016; Vickers, 2013). In the current multipolar world, Indonesia has the opportunity to operationalize the Bandung Spirit to reinforce its middle power status by upholding multilateralism and non-alignment while balancing strategic relations with major powers such as China and the Unit-

ed States and advancing the interests of the Global South.

This paper builds upon and extends the work of Nabbs-Keller (2020), which examines Indonesia's leadership role in the contested Indo-Pacific order, by offering a broader analysis of Indonesia's legitimacy and its efforts to establish itself as a global middle power. While Nabbs-Keller's study focused on Indonesia's position as ASEAN's '*primus inter pares actor*' and its diplomatic leadership within the Indo-Pacific, this paper shifts the focus to Indonesia's diplomatic significance within the Global South. Specifically, it explores how Indonesia navigates its role and asserts its influence in global middle power governance, emphasizing its broader international engagement beyond the Indo-Pacific region.

Contrary to other studies, this paper argues that Indonesia's current foreign policy increasingly departs from the foundational principles articulated at the Bandung Conference. While Bandung 1955 emphasized non-alignment and anti-colonial internationalism, contemporary foreign policy approaches reveal a growing tendency to align, either explicitly or implicitly, with major powers. More importantly, Indonesia's strategic direction appears increasingly inconclusive and lacks a clear ideological foundation. This shift not only diminishes the normative legacy of Bandung but also weakens Indonesia's opportunity to position itself as a prominent middle power in today's global order. This analysis highlights the disparity between Indonesia's diplomatic actions and the Bandung Spirit, advocating for a realign-

ment of foreign policy to its original tenets.

Methodology

This article is qualitative in character, attempting to collect available written and oral documents such as speeches and commentaries from the Conference and its commemorations, which are complemented by a vast source of scholarly articles that are relevant to picture the inability of Indonesia to assert its normative power from its once-prominent role in the Bandung Conference. The focus is to show how political transformation in and around Indonesia has significantly altered its conception of Bandung Conference itself, which in turn fostered the perception of obsolescence should Indonesia wills to propagate Bandung Conference in present times. In describing transformation, this article intends to pinpoint the development of Indonesian foreign policy, especially with regards to how the ideals of Bandung Conference came about under Sukarno's presidency, and the subsequent events that shifted Indonesia's worldview that played a pivotal role in the future.

This article understands normative power in accordance with Ardhani et al. (2023) that stipulates persuasive capabilities, particularly regarding middle-power states, to influence other states in the international system. The applicability of norms is certainly complicated, requiring masterful assessment in its design to effectively project and translate it to practical consequences (Goddard & Krebs, 2015). It is a useful tool, especially for states that do not possess as much economic and military power, be-

cause their preferences could be shared by other parties—sometimes under the narrative of a “greater good” (Ardhani et al. 2023). In line with those considerations, this article is concerned with Indonesia’s failure to engage the international community despite Indonesia’s significant role in the conception of the Bandung Conference, which is continuously echoed and celebrated in the international forums. It demonstrates how Indonesia’s attempts of leading the middle-power states lack clarity and fruitful strategy.

The Rise and Fall of Bandung in the 20th Century Indonesia

Having held the conference itself, Indonesia was certainly respected amongst the collective. Those within the nationalists’ spectrum, including Sukarno and Hatta, were prominent figures in advocating the common struggle in international forums, such as League Against Imperialism (Prashad, 2007). Similar affinity for international engagement can also be attributed to other political spectrums like the Communists and Islamists, who were involved in a vast network of alliances against colonial and imperial regimes (Hasyim, 2020; Louro et al., 2020). Semaun, an established member of *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (Indonesian Communist Party) (PKI), was also present in the League Against Imperialism congress in Brussels (1929). The dimension of plurality and commonality, a spirit that would then be instrumental in the encapsulation of Bandung Conference as the soul for anticolonial struggle, is embodied well in Indonesia.

Sure enough, it does not mean the division between different ideologies are absent within the nation. Far from it, constant—and sometimes bloody—back and forth occurred. However, as noted by Aspinall & Berger (2001), the conflicts between 1945–1965 were “mostly about the composition of the national government or the philosophical foundations of the nation-state, not about its national borders.” The 1948 Madiun Conflict, perhaps a notable example of the bloody side of the conflict, was due to the dissatisfaction from PKI supporters—many belonged to the decommissioned troops—towards Hatta’s policy to restructure the military (ReRa) (Bourchier, 2015). Meanwhile, the establishment of liberal democracy in 1949 sprouted a battleground in the *Konstituante* (Constitutional Assembly). Political parties were in a continuous deadlock, as everyone was unable to convince others to submit towards their vision of the new constitution (Bourchier, 2015).

In navigating the difficult tide of international politics, the formulation of *politik bebas-aktif* (Independent and Active Policy) encapsulated Indonesia’s position in foreign policy of that particular time. It dealt with the brewing domestic elites’ rivalry, as well as the interweaving webs of Western v Communist bloc (Sukma, 1995). Hatta, its primary interlocutor, acknowledged the necessity to engage in international cooperation to realize the advancement of the nation and the world, while remaining cautious from aligning and creating problems against the two blocs (Hatta, 1953). Later, in his paper after the Bandung Conference, he echoed the spir-

it of Bandung towards Asia-African states “as ‘a moral union’ which can influence, in the interest of peace, those states which are banded into blocs” (Hatta, 1958). It was deemed important to achieve the goals of safeguarding economic and political matters (Sukma, 1995). Throughout the era of liberal democracy, the value had been consistently adhered, rendering a pragmatist, but principled position to the outside world (Sukma, 1995).

This interpretation changed after Sukarno decided to disband the parliament and established *demokrasi terpimpin* (Guided Democracy) in 1959. Already a prominent face to the international anticolonial movement, Sukarno had radicalized the *bebas-aktif* towards a terrain of confrontation. Bandung was used in pointing out differences between the “old powers” and “new emerging powers,” emanated in the foundations of NAM in 1961 (McGregor & Hearman, 2017). Indonesia had declared itself out from the United Nations. The “rejuvenated” anticolonial solidarity became more explicit, as states from Latin America, Caribbean, and Europe hopped in. There was no more holding back in conjuring a third bloc. In the fifth anniversary of the Bandung Conference, deliberations about “going beyond formal independence” were rapid, a further leap from the previously agreed upon point from Bandung (McGregor & Hearman, 2017). Indonesia, which was at the time embroiled in a controversial *Konfrontasi* (confrontation) towards Malaysia—a “puppet” of British imperium—was adamant to rally the support of its action, signalled by the manoeuvres to ally with

communist states, creating a Jakarta-Phnom Penh-Hanoi-Peking-Pyongyang axis (Weinstein, 2007; Zhou, 2015). Nevertheless, it must be noted that NAM states were mixed in response to Sukarno’s call for “militant solidarity,” with Yugoslavia’s Joseph Broz Tito holding the 1965 NAM Ambassadorial Meetings in Belgrade that resulted in “Seventeen Nations Appeal” to urge restraint for the conflicting nations (Rakove, 2015).

The confrontative narrative did not last longer as General Suharto took over the executive role amid the political tumult of 1965. Indonesia experienced a phase of total restart; an erasure of the communists through nationwide condemnation and killings of suspected communists (Roosa, 2006), as well as the establishment of New Order—a military-controlled order. The implication looms larger than that, however, as it marks the complete departure from ideologically driven politics. Pancasila was determined to be the *only* ideology, which laid out a red carpet for legitimizing political subordination. In the context of foreign policy, the New Order reversed the switch, instead projecting Indonesia as a “good neighbour” that seeks to make friends with neighbouring states (Weinstein, 2007). Indonesia geared much of its attention towards securing financial aid from Western bloc and maintaining its domestic and regional political stability—as visible in the founding of ASEAN. Despite Indonesia still making some international initiatives, especially in the context of NAM during the New Order, the initiatives rarely panned out more than symbolic significance, highlighting the stark contrast to the previous

governments (Weinstein, 2007). The “de-Sukarno-ization”, a term coined to fracture the influence of Sukarno in Indonesian society, was also apparent in foreign policy.

In understanding Indonesia's retreat from the international stage, the transition to the New Order is an important turn of events since it was within this stage that Indonesia forgo its fervour in promoting non-cooperation with major powers. The changing character of Indonesia's foreign policy is also reflected in its reluctance to engage with NAM—and G77—in the issue of New International Economic Order, in which Indonesia tended to be pragmatic about the prospect of such conjecture (Arndt, 1981; Weinstein, 2007). Indonesia had instead optioned to receive consultation and aid through its links with the Intergovernmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI) that consisted of Western-allied states. While there had been several states already signed up for either Western or Soviet's aid even in 1955 (Prashad, 2007), Indonesia's case is particularly striking since the shift would preface the twilight of the Third World Movement. The movement lost fire in the 1970s–1980s due to its members experiencing a variety of political and economic backlashes, which in interim provided an ample rationale for forging an alliance with the existing blocs, rather than persisting with the nonpartisan stance (Prashad, 2007). Thus, by the time Indonesia rekindles its former glory of Bandung, the essence has gone past them.

Bandung Spirit amidst The Complex Contemporary International Order

In retrospect, the Bandung Conference is a powerful legacy for the Global South and Indonesia. *Dasasila Bandung* is known as the embodiment of Indonesia's early post-colonial aspirations: sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, non-aggression towards one another, and solidarity among nations rising from the shadow of expanding imperialism (Suryadinata, 2022). These values were in line with Mohammad Hatta's “free and independent” (*bebas aktif*) foreign policy doctrine, which was free from great power politics but affirmative in its attitude towards international relations (Hatta, 1953). In the early Cold War period of bipolarity, this policy provided Indonesia with a moral and strategic stance that was anti-colonial and assertive diplomatically. The Bandung Conference was therefore not symbolic but one of the first articulations of a foreign policy identity which struggled to contain geopolitical tensions and diplomacy in the service of Global South rights.

However, the extent to which *Dasasila Bandung* continues to influence Indonesia's foreign policy remains a subject of ongoing critical debate, particularly in today's post-cold-war era. Although successive governments often refer to the Bandung Spirit, especially in multilateral forums or commemorative events, its practical role in policymaking has been inconsistent and largely symbolic (Weber & Winanti, 2016). The normative principles of *Dasasila* are frequently set aside in favour of pragmatic political or economic interests, many of which are shaped by domestic concerns—particu-

larly during 10 years of Joko Widodo's tenure (Aryani, 2019). As global politics shifted from Cold War bipolarity to a more fluid multipolar system, the space for ideologically driven foreign policy has narrowed. As a result, *Dasasila Bandung* currently functions more as a soft-power narrative rather than a consistently applied policy doctrine. This situation raises important questions about the continued relevance of the Bandung framework in shaping Indonesia's foreign policy, especially at a time when economic pragmatism has become a dominant force over ideological or moral considerations.

The Habibie and Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) administrations showed a shift away from the moral values of the Bandung Spirit. Instead, their foreign policy was more opportunistic and focused on trying different approaches. At the time, the main priority was rebuilding domestic stability after the fall of Suharto, rather than promoting strong ideals on the global stage (Anwar, 2020). During Megawati's presidency, Indonesia became even less involved in international affairs. Foreign policy during this period was mostly limited and reactive (Hamilton-Hart & McRae, 2015). In contrast, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) worked to improve Indonesia's image in the world. His administration promoted active diplomacy, strengthened ASEAN, and introduced the "thousand friends, zero enemies" policy. Although this partly brought back the spirit of Bandung, this effort fell short of fully reviving and realizing the spirit of Bandung, as Indonesia struggled to adapt to the complexities of a multipolar world order and

various global dynamics (Umar, 2023).

Joko Widodo's administration has continued this practical approach by focusing on building economic partnerships and promoting infrastructure through diplomacy. Even though Indonesia has hosted major events like the G20 Summit, ASEAN Chairmanship, and gained seats on the UN Security Council and Human Rights Council, the main goals have been more about economic benefits than promoting strong values (Poole, 2015). Rizal Sukma (2011) describes this as "post-normative pragmatism," where economic interests are more important than ideals. This situation brings up an important question: if Indonesia's current foreign policy is mostly shaped by liberal economic goals, can *Dasasila Bandung* still be seen as its main principle?

Since its inception, *Dasasila Bandung* has faced a very different global environment. The Cold War era, which once supported Indonesia's choice to stay non-aligned, has been replaced by a more multipolar and fragmented international system. New global powers, especially China, have changed the way international politics works. At the same time, regional institutions and non-state actors have become more important in global diplomacy. Traditional multilateral institutions have become weaker, and foreign policy is now more often shaped by economic interests (Kharas, 2017). Indonesia, like many other countries, has shifted towards more transactional diplomacy and careful balancing acts, rather than following fixed ideologies (Poole, 2015). Because of these changes, there is less room to apply *Dasasila Bandung*

in the same way as it was used in the past.

Even with these changes, the Bandung Spirit still holds some value, mostly as a soft-power message rather than a clear policy guide. It remains a symbol, especially in Global South forums, where messages of solidarity, mutual respect, and anti-colonial history are still meaningful. However, its role in shaping Indonesia's actual foreign policy has become more limited and occasional. Today, the principles of *Dasasila* are mostly used in speeches to show moral leadership or to connect with Indonesia's diplomatic history. In practice, contemporary foreign policy is now more influenced by economic interests, regional strategies, and practical goals. Hence, the Legacies of Bandung may still be relevant for today, but more as a flexible reference than a strict set of rules.

The Future of Bandung: Challenges and Opportunities

This part explores the relevance of the Bandung Conference in the modern era by assessing both the challenges that hinder its revival and the opportunities that could bring its principles back to the forefront of global diplomacy. Originally, the Bandung Conference provided postcolonial nations with a platform to assert their independence in a global system dominated by Cold War rivalries. The conference reframed the concept of the "Third World" from a marginal category to a collective force advocating for decolonization, equality, and non-alignment (Acharya, 2014). However, the world today operates within a vastly different geopolitical and economic landscape. The Cold War's

bipolar structure has given way to a multipolar order, where power is distributed among various state and non-state actors. Economic pragmatism, strategic competition, and regionalism now shape global interactions, raising questions about Bandung's viability as a guiding framework for contemporary diplomacy.

To make a fair assessment, this section compares Bandung's original context with today's international realities. It examines whether Bandung's core principles—such as South-South cooperation and anti-imperialism—still hold practical value in a world dominated by trade agreements, digital globalization, and shifting power centres. It also evaluates how Indonesia's own domestic and foreign policy priorities have evolved, affecting its ability to champion Bandung's vision.

Challenges: Bandung in a Fragmented World

Despite its historical significance, Bandung's ideals face substantial challenges in today's global order. One major obstacle is the structural imbalance of international institutions. Organizations such as the UN, IMF, and World Bank continue to reflect the interests of wealthier nations, making meaningful reforms difficult (Phillips, 2016). During the Cold War, Bandung positioned itself as a counterweight to superpower dominance, but in the modern era, economic dependencies make it harder for nations like Indonesia to maintain true non-alignment.

For instance, Indonesia's reliance on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for infrastructure development has deepened its

economic interdependence. In 2022, Chinese direct investment in Indonesia reached \$4.55 billion, more than double the \$2.2 billion recorded in 2021 (Kurmala, 2024). Similarly, trade with the United States remains significant, totalling nearly \$31 billion annually (Mada, 2023). These dependencies create tensions between Bandung's vision of independent development and the realities of global economic integration. Unlike during the 1950s, when developing nations sought unity against external domination, today's priorities revolve around economic competitiveness and access to global markets.

Domestically, Indonesia's political landscape has also shifted away from Bandung's legacy. Sukarno's commitment to anti-imperialist leadership faded under Suharto's pro-Western pragmatism, and subsequent administrations have largely prioritized economic growth over ideological foreign policy goals (Parameswaran, 2015). President Joko Widodo, for example, has focused on infrastructure development and investment-friendly policies rather than reviving Bandung's diplomatic agenda. Additionally, alternative frameworks such as BRICS, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Indo-Pacific strategies of major powers have provided developing nations with more immediate economic benefits than the broader ideals of Bandung.

In this fragmented global order, Bandung's vision faces competition from these newer economic and geopolitical alliances. Many developing nations now prioritize practical partnerships over

ideological solidarity, making the prospect of a Bandung revival increasingly challenging.

Opportunities: Revitalizing Bandung in a Multipolar Era

Despite these challenges, Bandung's principles still hold potential in addressing global inequalities. As the world grapples with issues such as climate change, economic injustice, and migration crises, the need for collective action among Global South nations remains strong. Bandung's legacy can be adapted to these contemporary issues, emphasizing fair trade, climate justice, and technology-sharing as new pillars of South-South cooperation.

For instance, Indonesia has an opportunity to lead in global climate negotiations by leveraging its environmental assets. The country's carbon credit potential, estimated at Rp8,000 trillion, spans sectors such as forestry, land use, and energy (BSN, 2024). By aligning Bandung's principles with sustainability efforts, Indonesia could position itself as a champion of equitable climate policies that benefit developing nations. Similarly, initiatives like fair digital trade agreements and technology partnerships within the Global South could modernize Bandung's economic agenda, ensuring that developing countries have greater agency in shaping global norms.

Multilaterally, Indonesia can use platforms like the G20 to advocate for fair economic policies that align with Bandung's original vision. For example, promoting climate financing mechanisms that prioritize developing nations could challenge existing

global inequalities in sustainability policies. Similarly, advocating for trade policies that improve market access for Global South economies aligns with Bandung's push for economic self-determination. These efforts would allow Indonesia to integrate Bandung's ideals into the structures of modern global governance rather than treating them as historical rhetoric.

Regionally, ASEAN presents another avenue for Bandung's renewal. While ASEAN's principle of non-interference makes it difficult to pursue collective political agendas, economic and environmental cooperation remains viable. Indonesia can leverage its regional influence to promote fair trade practices, climate adaptation programs, and technology-sharing partnerships, reinforcing Bandung's vision of mutual development. Additionally, strengthening ties between ASEAN, African, and Latin American nations through diplomatic and economic collaborations could extend Bandung's legacy into contemporary South-South relations.

Beyond diplomacy, cultural and educational initiatives can help sustain Bandung's relevance. Indonesia can integrate Bandung's history and values into school curricula, ensuring future generations understand its significance. International forums, youth summits, and academic exchanges focused on Global South cooperation could serve as modern interpretations of Bandung's ideals. Even symbolic actions, such as hosting commemorative events or launching new Bandung-themed international initiatives, could renew interest in its message.

Conclusion

The Bandung Conference will always be remembered as a defining moment in postcolonial history, but its future depends on Indonesia's ability to adapt its principles to modern realities. While economic dependencies and shifting global alliances present significant challenges, new opportunities exist for Bandung's revival in the areas of climate diplomacy, economic justice, and South-South cooperation. If Indonesia is willing to update Bandung's ideals and align them with contemporary global issues, it can reclaim its role as a leader of the Global South. The question is no longer whether Bandung's vision is outdated, but whether Indonesia and like-minded nations are prepared to transform it into a practical framework for today's world.

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