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Towards a New Strategic Partnership between Asia and Africa

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ALMOST exactly 50 years ago, in April 1955, in the Indonesian city of Bandung, the leaders of 29 Asian and African nations, comprising those newly independent and those still struggling to break free from colonialism, convened the Asian-African Conference.

The conference was a watershed in interstate relations as it enunciated a vision of a new world order of independence and peace, justice and equitably shared prosperity. The Asian and African leaders crafted a new ethos to govern the relationship among nations, large and small, rich and poor, in terms of principles that have since been handed down to succeeding generations as the *Dasa Sila* or Ten Principles of Bandung.

Thus began an enduring tradition of friendship, solidarity and cooperation among the countries of Asia and Africa, which came to be known as "the Bandung Spirit". Today, half a century later, practically all countries on these two continents have attained sovereignty and political independence. One exception, however, is the fact that the Palestinian people are still deprived of their right to independence.

Most Asian and African countries however are still struggling against the formidable challenges of their national development agenda including poverty, backwardness, ignorance, diseases and the degradation of the environment. Many are also struggling against debilitating debt burdens and their inability to access the markets of the developed countries.

These problems are caused not only by national factors, but in most cases also by the imbalances and inequities of contemporary international economic relations, the sidelining of developing countries in international economic decision-making processes and the application of new, insidious forms of protectionism by certain developed countries.

Apart from these long-standing problems, there has recently also been a profound transformation of the world economic situation as a result of globalisation, coupled with increasing liberalisation. Globalisation has indeed opened up vast opportunities for accelerated economic growth and greater productivity, but only to the developed economies and those capable of seizing the opportunities offered. But to the developing economies that are still vulnerable, globalisation poses severe risks of economic and even political upheavals.

In fact, globalisation has resulted in the further marginalisation of many countries of Asia and Africa. This shows that political independence without economic independence can in no way free the teeming millions of the developing world from the dire straits they are in.

In the face of these multi-faceted challenges and problems, it would indeed be timely and

relevant for the 106 countries of Asia and Africa, with a combined population of some 4.6 billion and aggregate GDP of around US\$9 trillion, to come together and to reactivate what they launched 50 years ago as the guiding light of their political solidarity and economic cooperation -- the “Spirit of Bandung”.

It was on the basis of these considerations that Indonesia’s former President, Megawati Sukarnoputri, came to the idea of resuscitating and revitalising Asian-African cooperation in a concrete fashion rather than simply commemorating the historic Bandung Conference every five or ten years or so.

An opportunity to present the idea came at the Eighth ASEAN Summit in Pnom Penh, Cambodia in November 2002, which President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa attended as a guest. On that occasion, he apprised the ASEAN leaders on recent developments in Africa, particularly the formation of the African Union and the launching of the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD). He also invited ASEAN to forge closer cooperation with Africa on the basis of NEPAD.

In response, President Megawati offered to convene in 2003 a conference of existing Asian and African sub-regional organisations, such as ASEAN, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to be followed by a similar conference in South Africa in 2004. Both would serve as preparatory conferences to a substantive Asian African Summit, scheduled to be held in Indonesia in 2005 in conjunction with the Golden Jubilee Commemoration of the 1955 Asian-African Conference. South Africa was invited to co-host and co-chair these conferences together with Indonesia, an invitation that was readily accepted by President Mbeki.

Thus, the first Asian-African Sub-Regional Conference (AASROC I) was convened in Bandung in July 2003, co-chaired by the foreign ministers of Indonesia and South Africa. It was followed by AASROC II in Durban, South Africa, while in between a Ministerial Working Group Meeting was held in March 2004, also in Durban. These preparatory conferences came up with a number of decisions and recommendations that would serve as substantive inputs for the forthcoming Asian-African Summit scheduled to take place in Jakarta on 22-23 April.

From the outset it was recognised that to be viable and effective, a revitalised Asian- African interaction should be focused on concrete, practical and achievable areas and forms of cooperation. To be sustainable, Asian-African cooperation should also be structured and whenever necessary institutionalised, as earlier efforts at reviving such cooperation had failed because they were conceived in an ad-hoc manner. It was also deemed desirable to complement and build upon existing initiatives and programmes such as the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), the China-Africa Forum, the India-Africa Cooperation and the Indonesia/Brunei Darussalam-sponsored South-South Technical Cooperation, instead of launching new but similar initiatives. Costly duplication would thereby be avoided.

That is how the idea of establishing a New Asian-African Strategic Partnership (NAASP) was born. The term “New” signifies an innovative approach in tackling the challenges faced by the two continents in the present world situation, as well as the persistent problems from

the past, such as poverty and instability. The word “Strategic” denotes a comprehensive, sustained and sustainable programme of cooperation. “Partnership” means an interaction in which all participants stand on equal footing, since it is based on common interest, mutual benefit and common ownership.

The NAASP will serve as a bridge over the Indian Ocean, spanning the two continents and covering three broad areas of partnership, namely political solidarity, economic cooperation and socio-cultural relations.

The preparatory conferences agreed on a number of principles on which to develop the NAASP. Among others: the *Dasa Sila* of the 1955 Bandung Conference; recognition of diversity between and within the regions; commitment to open dialogue based on mutual respect and benefit; promotion of practical and sustainable cooperation based on, among other things, equal partnership and common ownership; promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development; promotion of collective and unified efforts in multilateral forums.

The NAASP will be conducted on three tiers of interaction: an inter-governmental forum; cooperation through sub-regional organisations; and people-to-people interaction, particularly among business sectors, the academic communities and civil societies.

It was also proposed that the NAASP be institutionalised as a process through a Summit of Heads of State/Government every four years; a Foreign Ministers Meeting every two years; and Sectoral Ministerial and other Technical Meetings when necessary. A Business Summit is also contemplated in conjunction with each Heads of State/Government Summit.

The preparatory conferences discussed possible areas of cooperation and issues of strategic importance that are of interest to both regions. These include strengthening South-South cooperation; increasing intra-regional and inter-regional cooperation on trade, industry, investment, finance and tourism and collective efforts to attain more open and just international trading and financial systems. The NAASP will also address political issues of common concern such as the prevention and peaceful resolution of armed conflicts, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and other transnational crimes and non-conventional threats to security; human rights, good governance, and democratization.

The Asian-African Summit scheduled to be held in Jakarta this week will formally launch the NAASP. It will have the theme of “*Reinvigorating the Bandung Spirit: Working Towards a New Asian-African Strategic Partnership*”. The Commemoration of the Golden Jubilee of the 1955 Asian African Conference will be held on Sunday, April 24, in its birthplace, Bandung.

The Summit has been preceded by a Foreign Ministers Meeting on 20 April, 2005 and a Senior Officials Meeting on 19 April, 2005. Additionally, Indonesia will also host a number of events and meetings coinciding with the Golden Jubilee Commemoration, including the Asian-African Business Summit and Trade Fair, the Symposium on Renewable Energy and the Workshop on the Role of Women and Youth in furthering Asian African cooperation.

Indonesia hopes that the launching of the NAASP will constitute another watershed in the history of Asian-African friendship, solidarity and cooperation – this time, one that will make a difference in the quality of life of future generations of Asians and Africans.

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