

Letter from Renaud Sivan to Antoine Pinay on the Bandung Conference (Jakarta, 27 April 1955)

Caption: On 27 April 1955, Renaud Sivan, French Ambassador in Jakarta, writes a letter to Antoine Pinay, French Foreign Minister, in which he sets out the highlights of the Bandung Conference.

Source: Ministère des Affaires étrangères; Commission de publication des DDF (sous la dir.). Documents diplomatiques français. Volume I: 1955, 1er janvier-30 juin. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1987. 849 p. p. 519-523.

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Last updated: 01/03/2017

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T. No 226. Private.

Jakarta, 27 April 1955.

It is still too early to try to produce a final assessment of the Bandung Conference. The atmosphere here has been very much one of 'segregation', but inverted, and I have tried to keep the Department up to date with what was happening from day to day as far as I myself was able to secure information, which was not always easy. Even normally friendly and confiding colleagues like the Indian and Egyptian Ambassadors and the Burmese Chargé d'Affaires were more often than not distant and tried to avoid me. Only the Thai Minister behaved as usual, but I did not get much out of him. As for the Indonesians, they were always friendly, but extremely discreet.

To go back to the outcome of the Conference itself, the main facts that seem to have emerged are as follows:

I. From the point of view of Indonesia's domestic politics, the meeting was a success for the present government and the INP party that is currently in power.

As I said after the Bogor Conference, the opposition parties and the Western diplomatic corps harboured doubts, which I myself shared at one stage, about whether there was any point in organising such a meeting, supposedly fearing that, if it took place, it would leave an impression of discord and would bring insuperable contradictions to light.

Although such contradictions did indeed emerge, I have to admit that, despite the differences that sometimes flared up (of which I gave you a flavour), and despite the theoretical and vague nature of most of the recommendations and hopes that the Conference formulated, except on certain specific points — including those that concern us, unfortunately — it has left one lasting impression: that a force has awoken in Asia and Africa, and particularly Asia for the moment. Perhaps this feeling seemed clearer and, I think, more definite than it really is in this very special microcosm here at Bandung, where the representatives of the European powers, while not excluded, at least from the public sittings and mass receptions, nevertheless felt unwanted. Nor were any pains spared to bring this home to them: despite the position of principle taken by most speakers against racial discrimination, the white countries actually felt the full force of it, and it was quite strange to see, at least in this light, the Russian Ambassador among those criticised ... We know that Mr Nehru and Mr Sastroamidjojo had to put their foot down very firmly to prevent the final communiqué from referring, as Turkey and Iraq wanted, to 'subversion' and 'infiltration' as expressions of a certain type of colonialism, and many speakers were heavily critical of Moscow and Communism.

II. China played a leading role as befits its sheer size, its recent successes and its traditions. Mr Chou En-lai easily took star billing, and Mr Nehru does not appear to have stolen the show from him, despite his efforts to charm everyone and his undeniable experience at this sort of event. His charm does not seem to have worked with Egypt: I heard that some members of the Egyptian delegation said that Colonel Nasser was very disappointed at the Indian Prime Minister's reluctance to get involved in quarrels between Arab countries, and particularly in the Palestinian question, on which he was in favour of adopting an extremely moderate motion, or in any event one that was much too moderate for their liking.

III. The 'associated' States, which were making their debut, played a subdued role. I have already drawn attention to the virulent and deceitful statements made by Mr Nguyen Van Thoai and General Trinh Minh The 1.

These are, I fear, probably not just a tactical ploy forced on them by circumstances and the desire to chime in with the anti-colonialist and anti-Western chorus. I have said that, despite my best efforts, I failed to establish any real contact with any of the three delegations. When the delegate from Laos, who was considered to be particularly affable, was asked by Mr Compain, the head of the Saigon Press Service, whether he would see me when he was sitting at a table next to mine, he simply replied 'I have already seen

him'. All I had done was to congratulate him on his speech — a very moderate one, incidentally — at a public meeting. He had thanked me very coldly.

It seems that the former King of Cambodia has secured verbal assurances from Mr Chou En-lai concerning China's respect for his country's integrity and sovereignty. As for Laos, Mr Pham Van Dong is reported to have told Mr Thai, in the presence of Mr Nehru, that he was no longer interested in the Pathet Lao.

In comparison with the coldness and total indifference of these delegations — there is little to choose between the attitudes of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia — we found Mr Pham Van Dong and his colleagues almost friendly, perhaps because we were not expecting much. They were extremely cautious in what they said and in the conversations which they had with certain French journalists. When with them, they stressed the prospects for economic and cultural cooperation between France and their countries.

IV. The African countries, at least those that had sent delegates, played a more secondary role, yet the 'liberation' of some of the countries with which we are closely concerned was the subject of much of the discussions and found unanimous support, as evidenced by the show-of-hands approval of the final communiqué. There is no disguising the fact that we were unable to find any delegation to defend us, and we were roundly condemned by everyone. Apart from Egypt, Liberia, Ethiopia and the Gold Coast played no part. What is interesting, however, is the role which certain Asian countries seemed to feel that they should play (to Asia's benefit) in the development, growth and success of the African continent, as if Europe's role there was now a thing of the past. There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip, obviously.

V. You may wonder whether certain Western countries were able to exert any real influence through third parties.

There is no doubt that, as usual, the United Kingdom found natural allies in its former dominions and in Iraq and Jordan. Although the case of Aden and the 'protectorates' was raised, albeit without reference to England, no-one said anything at all about the fate of the Mau-Mau in Kenya. Likewise, not a word was said in the communiqué or even in speeches about Borneo, British Malaya or the Australian part of New Guinea. What stood out here was the appeal made to Australia and New Zealand to seek closer ties with Asia: in his closing address, Mr Nehru reminded these countries that they were geographically near to Asia and that they had nothing to do with Europe.

VI. As far as I am aware, there was no reference to SEATO, nor was any reference made in the communiqué of the issue of elections in Indo-China, which, as I reported, was supposed to have led to an altercation in committee between Mr Nehru and the South Vietnamese delegate. It is interesting to note that the communiqué refers to a 'united Vietnam' as one of the countries that might be given a seat at the United Nations, which obviously implies that the authors of the document regard the current state of affairs as provisional. We may assume that they expect North Vietnam to win sooner or later. If we leave aside the wishes expressed about disarmament, a ban on nuclear weapons, and economic cooperation, if necessary, with the Western powers (still useful after all, if you can get something out of them) and the international organisations (so generous and so naïve), there is actually fairly little that is positive or of any substance in the final communiqué. Apart from the above, it says nothing about what was, right up until the very end, the main focus of the specifically Asian concerns and discussions: the issue of Formosa and the condemnation of colonialism 'in all its manifestations'.

On the first point, Sir John Kotelawala's initiatives were perhaps premature and, in any event, too widely broadcast, and came to nothing (see my communication of 23 April); we got no further than Mr Chou En-lai's proposal, and everyone was visibly sorry to see the Americans in such a hurry to respond, even before the meeting broke up, by turning it down point-blank. From a tactical point of view, it would probably have been cleverer, for the sake of the neutrals, to have waited forty-eight hours and not to have given quite such a definite impression of being immovable, particularly on the subject of Chang Kai-shek, about whom all the countries involved have an opinion very different from those of the State Department and the China lobby ...

On the other hand, the American-sponsored attack on Communist neo-colonialism by not just the Philippines, but also Iraq and Pakistan, won the day in terms of propaganda. It is a slogan which appears to be gaining ground, even though no one dared to include it in the final communiqué. However, it was above all the attitude of the Turkish delegate which seems to have made the greatest impression, because he courageously, if unsuccessfully, reported the experiences of a neighbouring country of the USSR, at a time when Turkey was not yet a member of NATO. However, despite his insistence, which he maintained until the bitter end, and that of Mr Mohammed Ali, following the intervention of Mr Nehru, Mr Sastroamidjojo and, above all, Mr Chou En-lai, the communiqué was more than cautious and did not use any wording that might have appeared to be directed against Russia and China. Although it does not share a border with the USSR, India is not far away and has only Tibet between it and China. As for Indonesia, it has to deal with a potential fifth column of two million Chinese and a small Communist party which is already formidable in that it controls the trade unions and the government depends on the seven votes of the Communist MPs for its majority.

On the subject of Formosa, Mr Chou En-lai made it clear — this was my impression, at least — that this was a problem affecting only China and the United States, to which he has made the offer of which we are all aware; this would seem to rule out, at least for the time being, any thought of mediation.

At the public session of the Conference, Mr Nguyen Van Thoai, South Vietnam's Minister for Reconstruction, gave a speech on 19 April in which, after referring to almost a century of foreign oppression, to the country's recently recovered independence and to the countless efforts and sacrifices of its people, he stressed the anti-international nature of the Geneva agreements, which, he claimed, violated the United Nations Charter and the recommendations of the Colombo powers (direct negotiations between the parties concerned). He then outlined the problems created by the evacuation of peoples from the North, fleeing the dictatorship of a so-called national government that was in fact a slave to a foreign ideology and nation.