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Building Asia-Africa Cooperation: *Analysing the relevance of the New Asia-Africa Strategic Partnership (NAASP)*

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Introduction

In 2005 during the 50th Asia-Africa anniversary summit in Indonesia, the Heads of State and Government committed to the establishment of the New Asia-Africa Strategic Partnership (NAASP) with the hope of reinvigorating the 'Spirit of Bandung' and to continue the legacy and vision of Asian and African leaders of the 1955 Bandung Conference. Despite the long-standing rhetoric of solidarity between Asia and Africa, in reality there are no formal institutional links at the continental level. The establishment of NAASP promised to formalise and strengthen regional cooperation between Asia and Africa, and to open more channels for economic, social and cultural relations. However, the purpose of NAASP has yet to be realised as a multilateral framework to coordinate relations between the two continents.

The following analysis examines the progress of NAASP, and whether it is still relevant to become an interregional vehicle for Asia-Africa relations as outlined in 2005. This analysis further looks at the possibility of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) becoming a leading actor to formally institutionalize NAASP. The first section provides a background from the 1955 Bandung Conference to the establishment of NAASP. The Bandung Conference heralded the beginning of Asia-Africa formal cooperation, which led to the rise of the Third World countries in world politics, and most importantly the establishment of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM). The second section provides an analysis on whether it is still relevant to formalise NAASP as a framework to build a bridge between Asia and Africa. This section also discusses why it is necessary for ASEAN to take a leading role in formalising NAASP as a multilateral framework.

From 1955 Bandung Conference to the evolution of NAASP

In 1955, the historic Asian-African Conference was held in Bandung, Indonesia and became famously known as the '1955 Bandung Conference'. The conference gave birth to the establishment of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM); it was also "pivotal in bringing the 'Third World' into being as a self-conscious category of actors in world politics, to promote international peace and cooperation" (Phillips 2016). The Bandung conference was considered to be a "turning point in world history where for the first time representatives of the former colonised nations united their forces and proposed alternatives to the world order dominated by the superpowers" (Khudori 2014).

It had further made possible for African and Asian countries to be represented in the United Nations (UN) and for the voices of the colonised people to be recognised in the world order (Khudori 2014). At that time there were concerns



especially from the Western powers that the Bandung Conference will inaugurate a new era of Afro-Asian unity to rival the United Nations. This was because the founders of the UN “were not committed to a world order predicated on the universal spread of ideas of national self-determination, but to a world in which European empires would ideally continue to play a pivotal role in securing international order” (Phillips 2016). In essence, the 1955 Bandung conference resulted in the first wave of the rise of developing countries around the principles of South-South Cooperation.

Initially the conference was a proposal from the Prime Minister of Indonesia Dr Ali Sastroamidjojo in January 1954, influenced by Asian sentiment that Asia must have its rightful place in the consideration of world problems (Appadoria 1955). The Asian sentiment can be traced back to 1926 “when the Asian delegations to the non-official International Conference for Peace held in Bierville declared in a memorandum Asia’s place in the world” (Appadoria 1955). The second significant landmark leading to the 1955 Bandung Conference was the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi 1947. Attended by almost all Asian countries excluding Korea and Japan, though it was non-political, no resolutions were passed and no attempt was made to put pressure on governments (McCallum, 1947), the conference did strengthen the idea that Asia must have a place in the world.

In support of Prime Minister Sastroamidjojo’s proposal, the decision to convene the 1955 Bandung Conference was finally made in the Bogor Conference of December 1954. Before this decision, Indonesia had contact with 17 Asian-African states and all agreed to convene the Asian-African Conference except the Philippines and Thailand. However this agreement came with concerns and different views regarding the invitation of China to attend the Asia-Africa Conference. Certain countries such as Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) expressed their concerns of China attending the conference and Burma’s concerns were apparent regarding the nomination of Taiwan to attend the conference. After the Bogor Conference, the participation of China in the Asia-Africa Conference was passed as it was finally agreed that nothing can be settled without China’s participation.

In total twenty-nine governmentsⁱ of Asian and African nations attended the 1955 Bandung conference. The outcome of the Bandung Conference included the urgent need to promote economic development and cultural cooperation between the two regions, most significantly agreeing on core principles of self-determination; mutual respect for sovereignty; non-aggression; non-interference in internal affairs; and equality. Moreover, the conference brought a “sense of kinship and solidarity between African and Asian nations, an underlying inspiration



for these new nations to continue to strive towards the attainment of a just, peaceful, progressive and prosperous world order” (Dirco, 2006). These core principles laid the foundation for cooperation between countries of the South.

The establishment of NAASP

In 2005, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the 1955 Bandung Conference, an Asian-African summit took place in Indonesia where the NAASP was established. This was the first Asian-Africa Conference Summit since the 1955 Bandung Conference. The aim of the establishment of NAASP was to “reinvigorate the spirit of Bandung and paving the way for Asian-African cooperation to prosper in the new millennium” (Ntsaluba 2006). It was envisioned that NAASP will focus on three broad pillars of partnership; political solidarity, economic cooperation and socio-cultural cooperation. Before the 2005 conference, relations between Asia and Africa mostly drifted away from the principles of cooperation stipulated in the 1955 conference as no strong institutional linkages at the interregional level were established. Furthermore, the ambitions and interest of the Asian and African leaders for bottom-up growth and development that was supposed to be based on unity and social solidarity had faded and largely replaced by development paradigms reinforced by Western rhetoric and supported by the global capitalist market system.

To preserve the legacy of the 1955 Bandung conference, the 2005 summit pledged to develop an institutionalized process of the NAASP through convening: a summit of Heads of state/government every four years; a ministerial meeting of foreign ministers every two years; and sectorial ministerial and other technical meetings when deemed necessary (Declaration on the New Asian-African Strategic Partnership). These included an agreement that interaction will be sustained through three tiers; an intergovernmental forum; sub-regional organizations; and people-to-people interaction in particular business, academia and civil society. However, these aspirations are yet to be strategically implemented through the NAASP initiative. One of the most challenging factors in realising the NAASP objectives is the decline in optimism and interest from states in both continents apart from Indonesia, which continues to be the driving force of this multilateral forum, and South Africa, which co-chaired the first ten years of NAASP with Indonesia. However, it is no longer clear whether South Africa’s commitment to NAASP is as strong as it was before.

More than a decade since the 2005 conference, the same challenge continues to confront the operationalization of NAASP, as it is yet to be formally launched and officially recognised as a multilateral framework for the two continents. This is despite the agreements made in 2005 meeting to fast track the formalisation of



NAASP as an institutionalised formation. From the African perspective, some of the reasons behind the delays are attributed to the fact that NAASP does not fall under the overall framework on multilateral cooperation with the African Union (Dirco 2013). According to DIRCO, South Africa submitted a proposal to the AU for the integration of NAASP into the AU multilateral partnerships. This was cited as one of the reasons that led to the postponement of the second summit in 2013. In that period, the AU Heads of States had requested the Commission to take the necessary steps towards the integration of NAASP into the AU structures and processes and the status and progress regarding this process remains unclear.

Is NAASP still a practical mechanism for the Asia-Africa partnership?

Sixty years after the historic Bandung Conference, another commemoration conference was hosted by Indonesia in 2015, again with intentions to revive cooperation between African and Asian nations under the theme “Strengthening South-South Cooperation to Promote World Peace and Prosperity”. Taking stock of the progress of NAASP, the message from the 2015 conference noted, “Asian-African intra-regional trade and investment has yet to reach its full potential” (Parameswaran 2015). However while repetitive commitments were made during the commemorative 2015 summit, the persisting challenges that hinder the progress of NAASP continue to be the lack of formal institutional links despite the long-standing rhetoric of Asia-Africa solidarity.

The current existing Asia-Africa relations are more prominent between country to country bilateral relations, where “individual Asian powers see Africa as an enormous economic opportunity and approach Africa within their own national frameworks such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), India-Africa Forum Summit, and the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD)” (Santikajaya and Abdurrohman 2015). Despite several projects and programs undertaken from 2005 under the NAASP banner, from diplomatic training and technical cooperation to business forums, there is little or no evidence which shows an appetite from the Asian and African nations to elevate NAASP as an interregional cooperation platform. Furthermore, the slow moving pace from the AU to ingrate NAASP into its multilateral partnerships, continues to cast doubt on the seriousness of Africa in elevating this partnership.

Should ASEAN take the lead in NAASP?


The possibility of ASEAN leading the NAASP initiative may be another option. An article by Santikajaya and Abdurrohman (2015) on strengthening the Asia-Africa partnership made a suggestion that “if interregional cooperation between Asia and



Africa is too complex, then they could begin with ASEAN, because it is the only coherent regional community within Asia with a profile to set a Pan-Asian agenda for engaging Africa”. It further explains the potential of establishing a closer economic engagement between ASEAN and three African regional organisations; the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the East African Community (EAC) to help solidify relations between the continents (Santikajava and Abdurrohman 2015).

ASEAN and the AU or African regional communities have great potential for cooperation through various South-South cooperation mechanisms. This was echoed by the former Secretary-General of ASEAN, H.E. Dr. Surin Pitsuwan in 2012 during an AU Commission delegation visit to the ASEAN Secretariat. This includes an exchange of experiences and best practices on many areas such as political and security cooperation, development cooperation and addressing challenges faced by each region; also promoting practical cooperation in areas such as trade, industry, investment finance, tourism, information and communication technology, energy health, transportation, agriculture, water resources and fisheries. (Pitsuwan 2012). On the economic aspects, Africa is the second largest regional trade partner for ASEAN. Since 1989 ASEAN –Africa trade has been growing at a phenomenal rate of 15%, growing from \$2.8 billion in 1990 to \$42.5 billion in 2012 (Omarjee 2016). The first Africa-ASEAN Business Expo (AABE) inaugurated in 2017 is a positive example as a strategic platform to link businesses between ASEAN and African countries. It is estimated that there are “more than 300 companies from ASEAN operating in Africa, predominantly involved in agribusiness, manufacturing, oil and urban development (Africa Business).

Taking into consideration the slow progress of NAASP since 2005, one can argue that there is a need for ASEAN to play a central role in promoting NAASP. This can be done through the ASEAN external relations platform with African counterparts beyond the NAASP ceremonial summits. Currently there is no representation of Africa or an African nation as a dialogue partner in ASEAN external relations and this presents an opportunity for ASEAN to break new ground by conferring the formal status of a ‘Dialogue Partner, Sectoral Dialogue Partner or Development Partner’ to an African regional community, even possibly the AU based on its external relations platform. However, for ASEAN to take up the leading role in NAASP, Diaz (2017) argues that “ASEAN must first overcome the road blocks in the development of its relations with African countries, and must be backed by political will and engagement before anything can move forward with the relations”. Some of these road blocks include ‘information as the missing link in the blossoming of ASEAN-AU interregional cooperation’ (Diaz 2017), and this calls for comprehensive studies about the



opportunities and long-term benefits of political and economic cooperation between ASEAN and Africa, especially to strengthen the NAASP initiative for future cooperation. Furthermore, instead of seeking to institutionalize NAASP, the focus should be on evolving it into a coordinating structure for Asia-Africa cooperation, to form an overall umbrella structure for Asia-Africa relations that meets every few years with reduced expectations of institutionalisation, but rather encourages better coordination between the various Asia-Africa structures such as FOCAC, India-Africa, and TICAD, and also the formation of ASEAN-Africa cooperation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if NAASP is to reach the level of a 'strategic partnership' envisioned in 2005 and 2015, it is very significant to stress that the rejuvenation of interest from both continents or their nation states needs to be more on how to best formalise this cooperation as a starting point, and how to link the already existing partnerships with the NAASP framework. Both Asian and African countries must put their weight behind the operationalisation process of NAASP from low to high level of interaction. Presently there is a lack of urgency from the nation-states and regional communities to champion the strengthening of NAASP as a vehicle of cooperation between the two continents. The focus on continent-country cooperation continues to hinder the long-standing rhetoric of formalising NAASP, presenting a risk that it exists in name only instead of at the operational interregional level.

i Afghanistan, Burma (Myanmar) Cambodia, Sri Lanka, People's Republic of China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gold Coast (Ghana), India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Laos, Lebanon, Liberia, Libya, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam, State of Viet-Nam and Yemen



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