

From Bandung to Hindutva: How the Palestine Question Shows India's Alternative Foreign Policy Futures

By Dr. Arjun Shankar

On January 26, 2024, in the midst of ongoing global protest against Israel's siege of Gaza, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered that Israel must ["take all possible measures"](#) to prevent genocide against Palestinian people living in the Gaza Strip. Justice Dalveer Bhandari, the only Indian justice of the fifteen judges who overheard the case, concurred with the ruling, writing, ["It must, in this case, take into account the widespread destruction in Gaza and loss of life that the population of Gaza has thus far endured."](#)

Soon after, on February 21, 2024, the Water Transport Workers Federation (WTWF), representing fourteen thousand workers, including 3,500 stationed at eleven of India's twelve major ports, declared they would refuse to handle weaponry destined for Israel. The Indian port workers explained its action as an act of solidarity, condemning a war in which ["women and children have been blown to pieces. Parents were unable to recognize their children killed by bombs exploding everywhere."](#)

Such visible and striking examples of solidarity by an Indian justice, albeit at an international court, and Indian union workers might confuse foreign policy experts following India's current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) regime. India has increasingly put in place ethnonationalist policies that are exclusionary to its religious minorities, especially Muslims. For example, on March 14, 2024, the government operationalized the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), initially enacted in 2019. The CAA expedites the process for attaining Indian citizenship for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians from the neighboring countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who arrived in India on or before 31 December 2014. Critically and strikingly, the CAA does not include any Muslim minority communities in its mandate for expedited citizenship.

Simultaneously, India has increasingly been one of the strongest policy partners for right-wing coalitions within the Israeli government. Historically, India has been a strong supporter of Palestine, serving as one of the [first countries to recognize the State of Palestine in 1988](#). However, since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014, India has signed a number of well-documented arms deals with Israel. Currently, India is the largest arms purchaser from Israel, accounting for 46 percent of Israel's global sales. In addition, no prime minister of India had ever visited Israel until Modi's visit in 2017, which furthered a growing "strategic partnership" between the two countries despite the fact that there has yet to be an official policy change regarding Palestine.

These surprising and seeming contradictions are best understood by returning to India's postcolonial history; a moment when both global solidarity and ethnonationalism sprung to life concurrently.

On the one hand, in the wake of independence, India was navigating a new political and economic path that sought to challenge dependency on colonial powers in the West. This vision was an explicitly anti-colonial vision that placed post-colonial nation-states in a single struggle for self-determination and, therefore, produced the possibilities for a unique global bloc across the Global South.

Dr. Arjun Shankar, Assistant Professor of Culture and Politics in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, explains how India's ethnonational discourse and abiding commitment to Global South solidarity are both products of the country's anti-colonial struggle but are now clashing in India's approach to the Palestine question.

These principles would be enshrined in the Cold War-era Non-Aligned Movement, which emerged out of a growing number of anti-colonial forums, partnerships, and communiques, including the 1955 Asia-Africa (Bandung) Conference. The Bandung conference was a convening of the diplomats, officials, and heads of state of twenty-nine newly independent Asian and African states and marked an expanding Third World consciousness. Led by the leaders of India, Pakistan, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Myanmar/Burma, and Indonesia, the conference rested on the premise that these newly independent nation-states were united “by a common detestation of colonialism in whatever form it appears. We are united by a common detestation of racialism.” Out of this shared recognition, the countries passed a number of resolutions, including, famously, a resolution on Palestine which “declared its support of the rights of the Arab people of Palestine and called for the implementation of the United Nations Resolution on Palestine and the achievement of the peaceful settlement of the Palestine question.”

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In particular, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister and one of the primary conveners of Bandung, had held fast to a belief that the Palestine question was one aligned with the shared solidarity politics of anti-colonial struggle. In 1947, just after achieving its own independence, Nehru voted against the UN partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, instead calling for the creation of a single secular “one-state solution.” Nehru had seen firsthand the bloodshed that the partition of India and Pakistan had caused on the subcontinent after independence from the British and therefore understood that partitioning Palestine would result in similarly deadly results, especially because, unlike in the case of the subcontinent, the Zionist movement required displacing people from the land and moving a significant number of people who had never lived in Palestine to that land. This is why Nehru understood this project as an extension of British imperialism and a new form of colonialism.

At the same time, India's anti-colonial struggle also produced the seeds for the ethnonationalist, majoritarian politics we see today. The very partition of India and Pakistan was based on the idea that the land should be split based on “Hindu majority” and “Muslim majority” areas. The result was a self-fulfilling prophecy that created the conditions for monism. For example, Pakistan, which had a Muslim population of 77.3 percent in 1941, increased to 97.1 by 1951, while the Hindu population dropped to under 3% and has remained mostly constant ever since. While India's Muslim population has not seen the same shrinkage, growing from 10% in 1951 to 15% in 2011, the idea of India “as and for Hindus” had also begun to emerge before independence. Even while Nehru and the writer of the Indian constitution, B.R. Ambedkar, had sought to make India a secular state with protections for both religious minorities and caste-oppressed groups, other anti-colonial nationalist leaders had other ideas. Starting in the 1920s, the nationalist leader V.D. Savarkar argued that a new Indian state should be conceived as a Hindu *rashtra* (nation) for a common race (*jati*) and common “culture” or “civilization” (*sanskriti*). These ideas have been reinvigorated by Hindutva ideologues who both crave to cleanse the population of those who challenge the framework of “India for Hindus” and find alignment with Zionist demands for a Jewish state at the expense of Palestinians.

As such, India continues to witness the clash of these paths: one founded on an anti-colonial struggle that leads to solidarity with the oppressed of the world, and another founded on an anti-colonial struggle that leads towards homogenizing its population. While we await the upcoming elections in India over the next few months, reminding ourselves of this history can help us recognize what is at stake and what alternative paths might be possible if India were to again embrace its role as a leader of Third World solidarity. India's domestic politics will have a critical bearing on its foreign policy, including on the question of Palestine.

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