
UNIT 13 ANTI-COLONIAL MOVEMENTS AND DECOLONISATION*

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13.0 OBJECTIVES

As the Second World War ended it gave rise to a new world order which was characterised by the process of decolonisation. Myriad Asian and African countries that had been living under the rule of imperialist European nations were now free actors in the world. The process and implications of decolonisation help one understand global politics better. After reading this unit you should be able to:

- Explain the reasons for decolonisation
- Discuss the impact of the Cold War on the process of decolonisation
- Identify important aspects of how newly independent nations navigated the Cold War; and
- Explain how the anti-imperialist movement in India helps it in shaping its foreign policy eventually.

13.1 INTRODUCTION

From the 15th century onwards, large parts of Asia, Africa and South America experienced a systematic violation of dignity and human rights. They were to become colonies for the imperialistic ambitions of European countries. In most places, this process typically started with a European country sending traders, and then slowly gaining political control of the territory. The result was that

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most non-European countries were governed by European countries either directly or indirectly. Strong colonial empires were built by British, French, Portuguese, Dutch and Spanish invaders. Japan was the only Asian country to become a coloniser during this phase.

Broadly speaking, decolonisation can be understood as the process of transferring “of sovereignty from the imperial powers to their former colonies after 1945. Overall, the process of decolonisation took decades to unfold completely. It was not an easy process and had myriad, often long-lasting consequences for world politics. Where this process led to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement, on the one hand, on the other, it often resulted in long intractable conflicts and enduring rivalries. Many of these rivalries still exist, and world politics cannot be understood without first understanding them.

13.1.1 Understanding Anti-Colonial Movements in a Global Context

Typically, a European empire was built by not only establishing a political hold over a country but also by maintaining a direct or indirect influence on all the strategic places in the neighbourhood of that colony, to forestall any threats to the colony from their European rivals. The British in India make for a classic example. Their primary objective was to secure all land and sea routes to India, to maintain a hold on their most precious colony.

Every colony had its own unique experience with Imperialism, however, most of these narratives were similar in their tragic experience of plunder, loot, exploitation and misgovernance. In most countries, many local movements to gain independence from European colonisers began to take root (Bradley, 2010). However, this process was never going to be easy, given the vastly superior material might of the colonising nations. Consequently, it often took decades to achieve independence.

Most anticolonial movements in the world gained momentum post-1919 even if in their respective countries they would have started even before 1919. Certain global events contributed to it. Woodrow Wilson’s promotion of self-determination post First World War and the setting up of the League of Nations provided a platform for many anti-colonial leaders to come to Paris in the hopes of pushing for greater autonomy. The League itself proved to be a failed enterprise for several reasons, however, this momentum of building solidarities between native leaders fighting for independence in various countries didn’t abate. This was further helped by solidarities built between leaders who gravitated towards the socialist way or the path of the Bolshevik Revolution. These conferences were often organised by different Communist platforms of Europe. Apart from this, there was an effort to build pan-Asian and pan-African solidarities based on the shared experience of trauma and oppression. These solidarities played a crucial role for decades to come. These “transnational currents of anticolonial thought” deepened in the interwar years and its unpleasant vagaries like the Great Depression (Bradley 2010, p 468). With mass leaders, M.K Gandhi, Ho Chi Minh and Nehru to name a few, giving direction to mass movements in their respective countries, this trickle of global anti-colonial resistance, soon became a flood.

13.2 DECOLONISATION IN THE BACKDROP OF THE COLD WAR

Irrespective of when the anticolonial movement started in a country, it was mostly in the late 1940s and 1950s-60s that bulk of the Asian, African and Latin American countries gained independence. The scale of the number of such independent countries can be gauged from the fact that in 1945, the UN had 51 states as their member. By 1965, this number had jumped to 117 as the number of states that gained independence increased (Bradley, 2010: 464).

As might be evident, this was the time immediately after the Second World War and at the onset of the Cold War. Hence, the process of decolonisation had to also navigate the increasingly tricky waters of Cold War politics. This is not to say that the Cold War started this process, only that it added to the complexities of the decolonisation process.

The process of decolonisation was catalysed by major events elsewhere. Firstly, erstwhile colonisers like Britain and France were rendered catastrophically weak after fighting two gruesome world wars. The Second World War was particularly damaging in terms of the massive loss of life and overall destruction to property that it caused. The War was not only fought on battlegrounds, but also in towns and cities. Waves of armies moved through densely populated urban regions, either to defend them or capture them. Heavy bombardment and regular airstrikes meant that most of Europe were reduced to rubble. Everything had to be built afresh, and ensuring the security of their own country took priority. Europe was forced to look inwards. It simply did not have the material strength left to govern her colonies and fiercely stomp out the ever-increasing dissent and turmoil in their colonies.

Second, two new superpowers were now calling the shots around the world - USA and USSR. They strove to increase their respective influence in the world; however, in a sharp departure from earlier trends, they often did so indirectly. Hence, they tried to have only those governments in place that would be within their security umbrella or be an alliance partner and do their bidding. However, although this was complicated in its way, it did mark a departure from previous practices of physically ruling or governing that country. Both the USA and USSR maintained strong anti-imperialistic rhetoric and often criticised Britain and France for such tendencies. The process of decolonisation served their interests because it meant that more countries were now free of their traditional colonisers and this would, in turn, offer the Superpowers opportunities to increase their influence in these regions, especially regions that were strategically or economically important. Having strategically important military bases throughout the world was a major foreign policy objective for both sides.

13.2.1 USA and Decolonisation

As Westad (2017) shows us, the United States of America offers a rather curious case in terms of its role and reaction with respect to decolonisation. As a rule, most Americans are opposed to the concept of colonisation. After all, they also won their freedom from the British and prided themselves on the importance that they gave to values like liberty, freedom and democracy. The American opposition to Communism as an ideology was also largely based on the fact that

they saw Communism as the antithesis of many of these values that they cherished. Somewhat hypocritically, USA always feared that people in the Third World might not know what's best for them and get swayed by Communism. It is this fear that guided American actions to interfere in a country's internal affairs. As a result, American anti-colonial instincts were often overshadowed by their fear of Communism and their desire to win the Cold War.

13.2.2 USSR and Decolonisation

Westad (2017) also shows us the fascinating role that USSR played in the decolonization process. The Soviet Union was formed on the principles of fighting Capitalism around the world. In this understanding, capitalism and imperialism had an intricate link as one enabled the other and hence both had to be fought. They saw the revolution as an inevitability and set about enabling this process by organising training institutes in the USSR for communists from all over the world.

In 1921, the Communist University of the Toilers of the East was set up in Moscow. It had branches in Baku, Irkutsk and even Tashkent. It trained a significant list of leaders, which included names like Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam and Deng Xiaoping of China amongst others. Besides, given the rather public anti-imperialist stance advocated by the USSR, many students from Asia and Africa chose to study in Soviet universities – irrespective of whether they were communists or not. For the USSR, nurturing such a network made strategic sense and might have later helped in supporting an anti-colonial revolution which would have hit directly at the imperial centres of Europe like London and Paris (Westad 2017). Conferences like the first International Congress against Imperialism and Colonialism which was held in Brussels in 1927 went a long way in forging international solidarities between the leaders of various countries fighting colonialism. This conference was attended by participants from different nations of the world, including Jawaharlal Nehru, Sun Yat-Sen and Albert Einstein. Such conferences provided precious networking opportunities for many activists looking for support and ideas to fight imperialism in their respective countries.

As the Cold War progressed it could be seen that many newly independent countries were attracted towards the Soviet-style of planned economies, even if they weren't communist countries e.g. India. As the Cold War unfurled it could be seen that many countries who had openly pledged support to the non-aligned cause still relied on Soviet help to navigate world politics especially where the USA was involved. Again, India's closeness to the USSR without being formally aligned with it is well-known. Pakistan, India's principal adversary in South Asia, was formally aligned with the USA under CENTO, and by the 1960s India had an additional adversary on its borders in the form of China. Under such adverse circumstances, Indian closeness to the USSR made strategic sense, considering that USSR was America's principal opponent and also had strained relations with China.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What were the reasons for decolonisation to occur?

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2) What was the American attitude towards decolonisation?
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3) What was the attitude of USSR towards decolonisation?
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13.3 EFFECTS OF DECOLONISATION ON WORLD POLITICS

The goal of the newly independent nations, particularly in Asia and Africa, was to not only become politically independent but also to be recognised in the world as an entity in their own right, with equal rights to have their say in world affairs. From the perspective of many Asian and African countries, the control exerted over them by USA and USSR during the Cold War were, in essence, no different from the control exerted over them by their formal colonisers. As far as they were concerned, the two situations didn't look very different. Not wanting to get involved in alliances headed by USA or USSR, most newly independent nations joined the Non-Aligned Movement in a bid to stay neutral. They knew that being part of such military or political alliances would mean that already scarce resources would go in maintaining Cold War objectives, and would not be used in much-needed development work. However, not every newly-created or newly independent country felt this way: Pakistan for example officially aligned with the US by joining the Central Treaty Organization or CENTO.

The first major step towards building solidarity between the newly-independent nations of Asia and Africa was the Bandung Conference of 1955. This was then followed up by the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, which sought to solidify Third World solidarity to stem the tide in a world that was increasingly divided between USA and USSR. NAM aimed to be the third power bloc by not being aligned to either superpower.

13.3.1 Redrawing Borders and the Creation of New States

One very important legacy of the process of decolonisation is the redrawing of international boundaries between states or the creation of new states, e.g. Pakistan and Israel. Sadly, this political shock often leads to intractable conflicts or enduring rivalries that become a sustained feature of regional or world politics (Bradley 2010). Research has shown that most enduring rivalries often tend to originate over the question of territory (Licklider, 2005). Considering the importance of defining territory for a nation in terms of its security or prestige, these conflicts prove very difficult to solve in the long run. There are two issues at work here that often feed off each other.

Firstly, many boundaries in Asia and Africa were drawn by the European powers while they were ruling. The rationale for drawing these boundaries had more to do with the balance of power considerations in Europe, and less to do with the actual religious or ethnic realities on the ground. It is these boundaries that remained after European nation left the colony. Secondly, the boundaries were maintained only as long as the European colonisers employed their material might on the ground. However, as soon as they left, large-scale religious or ethnic violence often broke out. In many cases, this led to a redrawing of the political map. This meant that, more often than not, a long-standing boundary dispute was a legacy of decolonisation. In many cases, these nascent boundary disputes got embroiled in the complications of the Cold War, which further rendered them intractable. Prominent examples like the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Indo-Pak conflict - especially over Kashmir - are categorised as enduring rivalries, and have been an enduring feature of world politics.

13.4 ANTICOLONIAL MOVEMENT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FOREIGN POLICY: THE INDIAN CASE

There are many ways in which the colonial experience of a country continues to influence its decisions even as a post-colonial state. Independence from colonisers is never a clean break. Legacies of the colony remain and can be seen in various fields. To truly understand the politics of a nation, the continued reflection of the colonial experience needs to also be studied. One such arena where this can be studied is the foreign policy of a Nation. In the following section, we will see how the anti-colonial movement in India under the Indian National Congress came to hold relevance for Indian Foreign Policy post-independence. Linkages can also be seen in terms of INC's pre-independence ideas of being neutral and what Nehru later converted into the Non-Aligned Movement.

13.4.1 Colonial Past and its Relevance

Heimsath and Mansingh (1971) argue that Indian foreign policy shows a lot of continuity and consistency after Independence even though India had a choice of breaking free completely from its colonial past in this regard. The reason for such a step, Mansingh and Heimsath argue, is that India had achieved a quasi-independent status in world affairs after the First World War. Formally, Indian leaders were subservient to the British Crown and could not advocate a distinct foreign policy of their own, but the end of the First World War saw dramatic

changes in world politics. Myriad international platforms like the League of Nations began to materialise and India was an enthusiastic member and participant in many of them. Indian leaders were constantly in touch with other world leaders. In essence, through all this India got a head start of almost 30 years before its independence to interact and engage actively with the rest of the world and obtain a very clear idea about the kind of foreign policy it would later want. Articulating similar ideas in an attempt to understand the pre-independence origins of Indian diplomacy Keenleyside (1992, p 42) writes “.... India emerged from colonial rule with both a reservoir of diplomatic talent and an incipient orientation for its diplomacy, including a range of general foreign policy goals.” At this juncture, Mansingh and Heimsath (1971) distinguish foreign relations and foreign policy. Hence, according to their understanding, the Indian National Congress’ foreign relations became foreign policy after independence.

13.4.2 Indian National Congress and Foreign Relations before Independence

There are two ways in which the pre-independence foreign policy activities of the Indian National Congress can be categorised. The first would be the manner of interaction between Congress leaders and the international community. The second would be the ideological direction that Congress leaders thought that an independent India should have. Different phases can be discerned in terms of the level of involvement with the outside world, and the growing ideological conceptions about foreign policy.

According to Bipan Chandra (1989), three trends can be discerned in the nationalist foreign policy before the First World War. The first was: support and solidarity with other nations fighting for their independence. The second was the rise of Asian consciousness and a realisation of a common Asian identity. The third trend dealt with the growing understanding of the economic rationale behind the growth of imperialism. Post-1914, the nationalist foreign policy shifted towards opposing political and economic imperialism, and cooperation between all nations for world peace. Nehru (1927) himself writes about how, in the face of a larger goal like world peace, India would not mind giving up elements of its sovereignty, to a just international body, provided other countries also did it.

13.4.3 Reaching out to the World and Expressing Solidarity

In one of its early attempts to reach out to the world, the Congress set up the British Committee. The primary aim of this committee was to carry out propaganda in England to convince the British public of the righteousness of India’s cause. This, however, did not produce the desired result and the committee was wound up in 1920 by the Nagpur Congress. It was realised by the Congress leaders that effective action at home through the platform of the Non-Cooperation Movement was bringing them more publicity in England, and other parts of the world, even when they did not actively seek it like before. Hence, the resolve to spend their energy and resources at home was further strengthened. At the same time, Nehru was painfully aware of the fact that Indians were not liked in countries like China, Egypt, Burma, Afghanistan and many other regions of the Middle East, where the British took them as manpower in the British army or the police. Nehru thought that Congress should work towards removing these Indians soldiers

and policemen from foreign countries, and establish an environment of amity and friendship, as these nations, like India, suffered from colonial oppression.

Consequently, as Bipan Chandra (1989) points out, the Indian National Congress was extremely concerned about showing solidarity with overseas efforts to fight imperialism. Chandra (1989), further shows that Congress leaders in India publicly denounced and voiced their dissent of the British policy of waging wars with India's neighbouring regions and, in some cases annexing their territories. This was not a completely new practice. When Burma was annexed towards the end of 1885, Indian nationalists condemned this act as immoral and unjust, in unison. Surendranath Banerjea branded the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80) as a sheer act of aggression. Lord Curzon's attack on Tibet in 1903 met with similar outrage. However, such criticisms now took the shape of a coherent and clear-sighted policy.

13.4.4 Attempts at Conceptualising India's Foreign Policy

In November 1921, the Congress adopted the first formal declaration of independence from British foreign policy; through it, the Congress wanted to convey to other countries that the Government of India did not represent Indian opinion and that its policies were aimed at subjugating India rather than protecting its borders. India as a self-governing country did not have any designs on its neighbours or any other state. This was drafted by Gandhi who felt that India, as it matured for 'Swaraj' was bound to tell the world, the kind of relations that India wished to have with them (Prasad 1962). This book by Prasad, *The Origins of Indian Foreign Policy: The Indian National Congress and World Affairs*, discusses the Indian National Congress's role in world affairs from 1885 to 1947. The idea that the Congress leaders had, about the positive influence that independent India might have on the peace and security of the world, is further reiterated by Bal Gangadhar Tilak. In a memorandum to George Clemenceau, Tilak has highlighted that a strong and independent India would be a source of stability for the world. Tilak also envisaged strong ties with Britain in India's foreign and defence policies (Mehta, 2009, 213). Similar ideas were also echoed by Nehru when he claimed that India's resistance was against the British policies and domination of India; however, cooperation with the British people would be welcomed "on the basis of Indian independence" (Kapoor 2011, p 61).

The role that different Congress leaders played through their interactions with the international community, and the ideologies that governed such interactions, need to be further explored. India's policy towards West Asia, Israel and Palestine specifically, is an interesting case for exploring the influence that prominent leaders had in laying the foundations of bilateral relations. Kumaraswamy (2010) effectively shows the role that M.K. Gandhi played for a prolonged period, which later greatly influenced India's relations with Israel and West Asia. Gandhi's views on that region often reflected the same inconsistencies that India, at a later stage, showed in its relations with Israel. While being deeply understanding and sympathetic to the situation of the Jews, Gandhi never formally supported the Palestine partition plan for the creation of Israel and on occasions spoke against such a move. The subtleties and compulsions in Gandhi's views on the Middle East are described in detail in the work of Brick (2008).

As Indian National Congress leaders began to demand independence for India, they came to realise that a very large part of preparing for Independence was to conceptualise what kind of foreign policy Independent India would have. It was further realised that building connections with other world leaders and organisations - especially with nations that were also fighting colonialism - helped in creating a solidarity network, that could work together to fight colonialism. These associations went a long way in laying the foundations of India's diplomacy. Besides the personal bonds that were forged between different world leaders, what also emerged as a growing experience of interacting at myriad international platforms and forums (McQuade 2020). Thakur (2017) shows in detail the influence that Indian Liberals (often part of British India's diplomatic delegations) had on Foreign Policy in the nearly three decades preceding Independence and thereafter as well. This experience gave Indian leaders exposure to different worldviews and relevant global issues of that time. More importantly, it gave them much-needed time to understand the intricacies of world politics and get their chance at forming conceptions about a foreign policy for an independent India. The following section highlights a concrete example of how these thinking and conceptions took the form of concrete policy as well.

13.4.5 Non-Aligned Movement and 'One World'

In terms of the roots of the non-aligned movement, scholars like Willetts (1978) have noted that there are some arguments made about the ideological origins of the non-aligned movement being in the 1940s and not solely in 1961, though it was known by different names at different times. Even though Willetts, himself disregards such assertions, his reasons for doing so are not entirely convincing, and are open to debate, as in doing so, he tends to confuse non-alignment with neutrality which other scholars like Murty (1964) and even Raghavan (2010) have argued against. However, there might be some substance in the assertion that the ideas of non-alignment existed before Independence, because as Bimla Prasad (1962, p 28) shows, on 7th September 1946, Nehru declared that India had to keep as far away as possible from the power groups opposed to each other in the world. Hence, it was an attempt to have a friendly relationship with all, and hostility towards none. Considering that this was the crude ideology behind the Non-Aligned Movement later, the assertion that the roots of its ideology were present before 1947 can be seen and explored further. Manu Bhagavan (2012, p xi) argues that Non-alignment was "but one element of his [Nehru's] larger goal, which was One World". In this understanding, non-alignment didn't mean just being neutral but in a true Gandhian sense it was to equally engage with two warring factions. As the Second World War was ending, there was an attempt to set up an international organisation to promote world peace. Bhagavan (2012) shows that this was a chance that Nehru took to take Gandhi's message of non-violence to the world in the form of 'One World'. Madame Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was the most powerful proponent and advocate of this cause during the setting up of the United Nations. As shown by Manu Bhagavan this concept of 'One World' was influential in framing of global discourses on human rights

It can be seen from the discussion above that many basic tenets of India's international personality stemmed from its colonial experience. The act of being subjugated as a colony and how a nation decides to fight that subjugation helps in defining what that country comes to see itself as in the international arena.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) How did newly independent nations navigate the Cold War?

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2) Is there a link between decolonisation and intractable conflicts?

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3) How did anti-colonialism help shape India's foreign policy?

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13.5 LET US SUM UP

Many colonised countries got their independence between the late 1940s till about the late 1960s. This was precipitated by many factors; however, some key factors were weakening of Imperial European powers and the setting in of the Cold War. USA and USSR sought to dominate world politics and have a direct say in the politics of other nations, however, they both for their separate reasons had strong anti-imperialist rhetoric and hence did not seek to directly rule a country. Irrespective of this, however, they interfered extensively in the affairs of other nations if it suited their global agenda.

These newly independent nations took their place in the world and began actively shaping world affairs. A defining feature of their brand of politics was their advocacy of Non-alignment as an alternative to joining either power blocs. The division of the world into two hostile camps was not conducive to ensuring development for the newly independent nations and hence many nations chose not to formally align with any bloc. Another important feature of the process of

decolonisation was that it often gave rise to intractable conflicts and enduring rivalries. Often these would arise out of boundary disputes as a result of a complication of decolonisation, e.g., creation of a new state.

This unit further explored the influence of anti-imperialist movements over the foreign policy of a country by taking the Indian example. Decolonisation often does not and cannot result in a clean break from the past for countries. The result is that the experience of being colonised and fighting the coloniser helps shape that country's policy post its independence too. Hence, it's important to also look at how the pre-colonial past of a country relates to the post-colonial present of a nation.

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13.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) There were primarily three reasons for decolonisation to occur. First was the weakening of Imperial European states post-second world war. The second was the strong anti-colonial movements in many countries against foreign rule. Third, the onset of the Cold War, both the USA and USSR didn't consider ruling nations in their strategic interests, they instead wanted countries to remain within their respective zones of influence.
- 2) Most Americans didn't support colonisation, however, for them, it was very important to ensure that Communism didn't spread to the newly independent colonies either.
- 3) The understanding in USSR was that colonialism stemmed from Imperialism which was intricately linked to capitalism. Hence, they didn't support such an ideology. However, they felt it was important to facilitate a revolution in other places too and provided the means to enable it.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Newly independent states chose to navigate the Cold War by choosing to not join any power, bloc and by forming their own. This was known as the Non-Aligned Movement.
- 2) Yes, often the process of decolonisation leaves behind territorial disputes that often become intractable.
- 3) It was during the struggle for independence that Indian leaders woke up to the need for articulating a foreign policy for free India. There was a lot of emphasis on solidarity between newly independent nations and maintaining India's autonomy and independence in foreign policy choices.