

Article Review 497- "Two Roads to Belgrade: The United States, Great Britain, and the first nonaligned conference"

Discussion published by [George Fujii](#) on Thursday, November 13, 2014
[0 Replies](#)

H-Diplo Article Reviews

h-diplo.org/reviews/

No. 497

Published on 13 November 2014

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse
Web and Production Editor: George Fujii
Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Robert B. Rakove. "Two Roads to Belgrade: The United States, Great Britain, and the first nonaligned conference." *Cold War History* 14:3 (2014): 337–57. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2013.871528. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2013.871528>

URL: <http://tiny.cc/AR497>

Reviewed by **Frank Gerits**, New York University

The formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the Belgrade Conference in September 1961, and the reactions in Washington, London, and Paris are topics that are remarkably under-researched. Much of what we know of the conference stems from work that was written in the late 1960s and 1970s. Political scientists in particular attempted to uncover what the Non-Aligned project wanted to achieve in geopolitical terms, what distinguished it from traditional neutralism, and how nonalignment transformed from the Bandung Conference of 1955, through Belgrade in 1961, to the Cairo Conference of 1965.^[1] Recently, historians have chosen to restore the role of race and the symbolism of the NAM in their analyses through discourse-centered work that presents Belgrade as a key moment when international relations became overlaid with racial meaning.^[2]

Robert Rakove connects to more recent work by comparing the American and British response to the Belgrade meeting and reaches some surprising conclusions. He argues that the American response to Belgrade suffered from bureaucratic factionalism. By building on the insights from his excellent book, *Kennedy, Johnson and the Nonaligned World*, Rakove maintains that the State Department was pessimistic about the Belgrade Conference while the White House staff, particularly National Security Council staffer Robert W. Komer, emerged as a critic of a hands-off policy.^[3] Komer wanted to encourage moderate countries to attend. Only at the very last moment were liberals within the administration such as Chester Bowles and Adlai Stevenson able to change the official American response to Belgrade, when they convinced Kennedy to send a message with well wishes.

The complex British foreign policy structure – with the Foreign Office, the Commonwealth Relations Office, and the Colonial Office – in contrast, responded in a more coherent fashion.

In Rakove's estimation, the Harold Macmillan government, "had none of the handicaps of a newly inaugurated president" (355). Since much of its policy on decolonization was already in place by 1961, and Macmillan had delivered his pathbreaking 'Wind of Change' speech which acknowledged the power of African nationalism, officials at Whitehall thought more constructively about the conference. The author claims they immediately decided to encourage the attendance of more moderate states. In Rakove's view, the long and sometimes messy history of British imperialism, in places such as Kenya and India, hardly shaped the British response. Moreover, he departs from the conventional image of a British foreign policy structure in which different offices tried to gain the upper hand.

In short, Rakove's article is a complex and thought provoking piece of writing that raises important questions. Should we understand the Anglo-American response to the first meeting of the NAM as a "lost opportunity," considering the fact that the agenda and the closing communiqué of the meeting remained vague? (355). When the delegates of nineteen nonaligned countries gathered to determine how they could politically harness a shared anti-colonial sentiment, internal divisions among the participants bubbled to the surface. As Rakove writes, a moderate Asian group that wanted to include European neutrals confronted the more militant African Casablanca group, consisting of Ghana, Guinea, and Mali. At the same time another, often overlooked, split emerged. Realists, particularly those in the Algerian delegation, saw the NAM as a lever to acquire financial and technical aid from the Cold War powers.^[4] Leaders such as Sudan's Ibrahim Abboud and Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, alternatively, wanted to construct an "ideal international society" geared towards world peace, an argument that emerges from the speeches they gave at Belgrade.^[5] For the latter group, I would argue, the NAM was a means to prevent Cold War intrusion and a way to give substance to anti-colonial internationalism. In other words, were NAM leaders still interested in making the international system more equal, or did they want to get more out of the existing structure in terms of political influence and economic aid? Those questions were debated but remained ultimately unanswered. Belgrade not only institutionalized anti-colonial internationalism, but also made it more complex, making it more difficult for Western observers to understand what they faced. The published proceedings of the NAM meeting did not give a clear picture of the project, let alone create an opportunity for the West to come to terms with this new phenomenon.

Furthermore, Belgrade can only be considered a missed opportunity if Western actors were able to conceive of nonaligned leaders as independent actors on the international stage with serious grievances. Rakove's analysis suggests the opposite: "It was difficult in the late summer of 1961 to view the Belgrade Conference in its own right" (357). In the eyes of American diplomats, Belgrade participants were potential proxies in the Cold War game. The White House initiated its own campaign to promote a positive attitude among confirmed attendees of the meeting only after the Berlin crisis reached its peak in July 1961. Concerns about the possibility that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev might convince the Non-Aligned Movement to support his peace plan for Berlin ultimately compelled the Kennedy administration to act. Furthermore, American policymakers found it difficult to take the grievances of the Non-Aligned nations seriously. George Kennan, the U.S. Ambassador to Yugoslavia, did not simply channel his own "anger" over the "rambling" of delegates in his diplomatic cables, as Rakove writes (351-352). The fact that Kennan was able to substantially shape the assessment of Belgrade in Washington indicates that he tapped into a sentiment

within American policy circles about the perceived emotionalism and irrationality of the conference participants.

The British, in their turn, were also unable to understand the position anti-colonial leaders were taking. Rakove credits the Macmillan government for a more coherent policy and argues that the British better understood “the gathering force of anti-colonial sentiment” (355). It is important, however, not to overstate his conclusion. The fact that the British ambassador to Belgrade, Michael Creswell, castigated as “‘misconceived’ the view that ‘the Conference was faced with a choice between East and West’” does not necessarily mean the United Kingdom had a better understanding of the events in Belgrade. Officials such as Creswell believed that the British were better placed to solve problems in the area of decolonization and therefore reflected that confidence in their diplomatic correspondence. The ‘Wind of Change’ speech has to be seen in a similar light. As Joanna Lewis has argued, the hastily decided on speech had to restore Britain’s liberal image in the world. Moreover, by acknowledging African nationalism, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan avoided the racial problems of South Africa and Rhodesia.^[6]

By meticulously reconstructing the bureaucratic decision making process in Whitehall and the White House, Rakove fills a major gap in the literature. At the same time, his narrative makes clear that policy makers in the Western world were thinking about strategies to manage the Non-Aligned Movement. His article offers historians a starting point to think about the wider significance of NAM in the international history of the twentieth century. The conference not only presented the world with anti-colonial leaders who worked to harness the Cold War to maximize potential benefits. I would argue that the meeting also forced diplomats and policymakers in the Global North to think about ways in which the other international reality of their age, decolonization, could be exploited. Washington and London wanted to understand and transform anti-colonial nationalism and nonaligned internationalism into something that was less threatening and more in line with their own plans for the postcolonial world.

Rakove’s concise narrative, eye for detail, comparative focus, and exhaustive use of the sources will make the article a much cited contribution to the history of nonalignment and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Frank Gerits completed his dissertation at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, entitled, *The Ideological Scramble for Africa: The US, Ghanaian, French and British Ideological Competition for Africa’s Future, 1953-1963*. He will be a post-doctoral fellow at the Center for the United States and the Cold War, at New York University in the Spring of 2015.

© 2014 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

[1] G. H Jansen, *Nonalignment and the Afro-Asian States* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 18; Itty Abraham, “From Bandung to NAM: Non-Alignment and Indian Foreign Policy, 1947-65,” *Commonwealth and Comparative Studies* 46, no. 2 (2009): 195–219; Robert A. Mortimer, *The Third World Coalition in International Politics* (New York NY: Westview Press, 1980); A. W. Singham and Shirley Hune, *Non-Alignment in an Age of Alignments* (London: Lawrence Hill, 1986); Archibald Wickeramaraja Singham, *The Nonaligned Movement in World Politics* (Westport, Conn: Hill, 1978); Peter Willetts, *The Non-Aligned Movement: The Origins of a Third World Alliance* (London: Pinter, 1978).

[2] Jason Parker, “Ideology, Race and Nonalignment in US Cold War Foreign Relations: Or, How the Cold War Racialized Neutralism Without Neutralizing Race,” in *Challenging US Foreign Policy: America and the World in the Long Twentieth Century*, ed. Bevan Sewell and Scott Lucas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 77; Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 95–104.

[3] For another recent example, see Mark Atwood Lawrence, “The Rise and Fall of Nonalignment,” in *The Cold War in the Third World*, ed. Robert J. McMahon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 139–55; Robert B. Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[4] Jeffrey Byrne makes this argument on Algeria in: Jeffrey Byrne, “Beyond Continents, Colours, and Cold War: Yugoslavia, Algeria and the Struggle for Non-Alignment, 1955-1965,” Conference Paper presented at the “Role of the Neutrals and Non-Aligned in the Global Cold War, 1949-1989” in Lausanne, 13-15 March 2014, used with permission of the author.

[5] Quoted in: The National Archives of the United Kingdom, FO 371/161222, Speech transcript, H.E. El Ferik Ibrahim Abboud, 2 September 1961; also see: The National Archives of the United Kingdom, FO 371/161222, Speech transcript, Nkrumah, 2 September 1961, 1-11, 2.

[6] Joanna E. Lewis, “White Man in a Wood Pile: Race and the Limits of Macmillan’s Great ‘Wind of Change’ in Africa,” in *The Wind of Change: Harold Macmillan and British Decolonization*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series 18 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 70–95.