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China, India, Ideas for Regional Economic Recovery, and Asianism in Early Post-Second World War Asia

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Abstract

Asianism, the idea that Asian nations should unite and overcome Western imperialism, was thought to have faded as the Second World War ended. At that point, China appeared embroiled in a civil war, India in Partition. Yet their visions for Asia's future have been overlooked. This article examines how they envisioned Asia's economic revival through the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE). It argues that the Chinese diplomat P. C. Chang, frustrated with a Eurocentric UN, led UN members in the Global South to advocate an institution that supported Asia's developmental aims. Although China and India believed that ECAFE should help Asian economies surpass their pre-war levels, they disagreed on how to achieve that object. ECAFE was not simply an example of the neglected post-war Asianism and non-Japanese Asianism. Chinese and Indian ideas about ECAFE helped redefine Asia's self-identity: from a shared cultural heritage to prosperity and 'modernity'. However, despite the rhetoric of unity, the disagreements between China and India over ECAFE indicate that Asia in the late 1940s lacked international solidarity. As Nationalist China declined, India supplanted its leadership of Asianism. The *competition* between different strands of Asianism helped lead to alternative post-war visions, such as Afro-Asian internationalism.

This article examines two strands of post-Second World War Asianism in the same arena: how China and India in the late 1940s shaped the ideas of Asia's economic revival through the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE). ECAFE was a regional commission established by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in March 1947, a body whose purpose was promoting 'economic and social progress and development'.¹ Initially, ECAFE mainly facilitated post-war Asia's reconstruction through collecting economic data and disseminating its findings.² Soon, it provided advice and assistance to the region's member states, often in the form of technical aid. ECAFE would initially run for three years; a review in 1951 recommended that its work continue indefinitely. From the 1950s, its main task shifted

¹UN Charter, 1945, articles 55 and 60.

²Initially, ECAFE encompassed most of East, South, and Southeast Asia, with the important exceptions of Japan and Korea.

from facilitating Asia's reconstruction to development. In 1974 it adopted its present name, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

ECAFE has been overlooked in scholarship.³ This might be because its achievements were limited, but also because it was deemed insignificant when post-war Asian history was dominated by several narratives. One overarching narrative deals with the global Cold War between Washington and Moscow that divided Asia.⁴ Another focuses on the decolonization of Asian colonies and on Afro-Asian internationalism in the 1950s and 1960s (which peaked at the Bandung Conference in 1955).⁵ Afro-Asian internationalism challenged imperialism and colonialism, and promoted solidarity among its participants – the newly decolonized nations in Asia and Africa.⁶ Still another narrative considers the rise of developmental states in East and Southeast Asia, notably South Korea and Taiwan.⁷

However, the revisionist literature on international organizations has demonstrated that these bodies were important as platforms and actors in, for example, challenging the legitimacy of colonial rule and rethinking the basis of the global economy.⁸ This article builds on these works to consider what two emerging, non-Western countries thought an international organization should do for Asia.⁹ The ascent of development was seen as originating from 'the efforts of the European imperial powers to maintain their colonies, and the emergence of the United

³The standard work on ECAFE in its early years remains David Wightman, *Toward economic cooperation in Asia: the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East* (New Haven, CT, 1963). More recently, see Leelananda de Silva, 'From ECAFE to ESCAP: pioneering a regional perspective', in Yves Berthelot, ed., *Unity and diversity in development ideas: perspectives from the UN regional commissions* (Bloomington, IN, 2004), pp. 132–67; Ikuto Yamaguchi, 'The development and activities of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), 1947–65', in Shigeru Akita, Gerold Krozewski, and Shoichi Watanabe, eds., *The transformation of the international order of Asia: decolonization, the Cold War, and the Colombo Plan* (London, 2015), pp. 91–109.

⁴Odd Arne Westad, *The global Cold War: Third World interventions and the making of our times* (New York, NY, 2005); Lorenz M. Luthi, *Cold wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe* (Cambridge, 2020).

⁵For the decolonization of Asian colonies, see Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten wars: the end of Britain's Asian empire* (London, 2007). One point of entry to the growing scholarship on Bandung is Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making a world after empire: the Bandung moment and its political afterlives* (Athens, OH, 2010).

⁶For Afro-Asian internationalism and non-alignment (which emphasized independence from Cold War blocs), see Lorenz M. Luthi, 'Non-alignment, 1946–1965: its establishment and struggle against Afro-Asianism', *Humanity*, 7 (2016), pp. 201–23. Cindy Ewing, "'With a minimum of bitterness": decolonization, the right to self-determination, and the Arab-Asian group', *Journal of Global History*, 17 (2022), pp. 254–71, refers to Luthi's article. For an emphasis on transnational activism, see Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte, eds., 'Other Bandungs: Afro-Asian internationalisms in the early Cold War', special issue, *Journal of World History*, 30 (2019), pp. 1–246.

⁷Rana Mitter, 'State-building after disaster: Jiang Tingfu and the reconstruction of post-World War II China, 1943–1949', *Comparative Studies on Society and History*, 61 (2019), pp. 176–206, at p. 178.

⁸For example, Patricia Clavin, *Securing the world economy: the reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (Oxford, 2013); Susan Pedersen, *The guardians: the League of Nations and the crisis of empire* (New York, NY, 2015).

⁹In particular, Manu Bhagavan, *India and the quest for one world: the peacemakers* (London, 2013); Eric Helleiner, *Forgotten foundations of Bretton Woods: international development and the making of the postwar order* (Ithaca, NY, 2014).

States'.¹⁰ But ECAFE demonstrates that countries in the Global South also proactively promoted developmental projects rather than merely being aid recipients. Highlighting China's ideas on *regional* reconstruction through ECAFE complements a growing literature that recasts late 1940s China as a period of post-war reconstruction rather than the prelude to Communist China (in a similar manner to the long-standing interest in India's post-colonial planning).¹¹

ECAFE deserves more attention, because it was a concrete (albeit small) platform where countries like China and India, fresh from recovering or attaining sovereignty, could try to turn their ideas of Asia into reality. The organization's establishment and work demonstrate that multiple futures were at play in Asia in the late 1940s.¹² Asian countries acted with some optimism for the future and without hindsight: a trial-and-error process to remake Asia and the world despite the odds. As Asian countries were not powerful enough, they tried to co-operate to make their voice count. ECAFE was one such attempt to shape a new Asia. (Other attempts included several trans-Asian conferences discussing Asia's future, not least the Asian Relations Conference held by Indian nationalists in March–April 1947.¹³) ECAFE was a trailblazer as one of the very first official Asian organizations, two decades older than the more famous Association of Southeast Asian Nations (which aimed to foster economic, social, and cultural development but had a much smaller geographical scope).

These attempts to shape Asia's future have been overlooked examples of Asianism. Asianism was the idea that Asian nations should unite, often because of the threat of Western imperialism, and with the aim of overcoming that imperialism.¹⁴ It assumed that there was one Asia despite internal differences.¹⁵ Asianism was often an anti-imperial idea, but it was also used to justify leadership or even domination in Asia. The idea that Japan should lead Asia in defeating the West resulted in its invasion of China and Southeast Asia in the 1930s and early 1940s.¹⁶

In existing literature, several threads are significant. First, a well-known body of scholarship examines how Asian thinkers promoted Asia's cultural heritage and civilizational strength, focusing on the ideas of intellectuals such as Rabindranath Tagore from India and Okakura Tenshin from Japan, as a counterbalance to the

¹⁰Corinna R. Unger, *International development: a postwar history* (London, 2018), p. 49.

¹¹Mitter, 'State-building'; Toby Lincoln, 'Out of the rubble of the Second World War: post-war reconstruction in China', *Past & Present* (2025), pp. 1–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtaf007>. For India, see Nikhil Menon, 'Developing histories of Indian development', *History Compass*, 19 (2021), pp. 1–14.

¹²Inspired by Hans van de Ven, *China at war: triumph and tragedy in the emergence of the new China, 1937–1952* (London, 2017), pp. 264–5.

¹³This conference has recently regained attention. See, for example, Vineet Thakur, 'An Asian drama: the Asian Relations Conference, 1947', *International History Review*, 41 (2018), pp. 673–95.

¹⁴Craig A. Smith, *Chinese Asianism, 1894–1945* (Cambridge, MA, 2021), p. 1; Sven Saaler and Christopher W. A. Szpilman, 'Introduction: the emergence of Pan-Asianism as an ideal of Asian identity and solidarity, 1850–2008', in Sven Saaler and Christopher W. A. Szpilman, eds., *Pan-Asianism: a documentary history* (2 vols., Lanham, MD, 2011), I, p. 2.

¹⁵Saaler and Szpilman, 'Introduction', p. 34.

¹⁶Eri Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's war, 1931–1945* (Basingstoke, 2007); Torsten Weber, *Embracing 'Asia' in China and Japan: Asianism discourse and the contest for hegemony, 1912–1933* (Cham, 2018).

West's perceived superiority.¹⁷ Second, Asianism was usually thought to have faded away by 1945, when Japan surrendered to the Allies at the end of the war.¹⁸ There was once little discussion on how Asianism related to the subsequent rise of Afro-Asian internationalism. The budding scholarship on Afro-Asian internationalism contends that the spirit of Asianism inspired and evolved into it.¹⁹ Third, discussions of Asianism emphasize how different individuals, groups, or nations attempted to reach unity (with some coverage of their quarrels).²⁰ Fourth, most studies have privileged Japanese versions of Asianism; studies of Chinese Asianism often detail its interaction with Japanese Asianism.²¹

Notions about ECAFE's aims and work were part of Asianist ideas. For Asian policymakers, the region's economic difficulties had much to do with Western empires, and they became urgent after 1945. Most Asian nations suffered from poor economic growth because of the impediment of empire and war devastation. In addition, Asia's economic troubles were overlooked by the early UN, which still focused on Europe. China and India therefore demanded co-ordinated solutions to tackle Asia's economic ills, partly through ECAFE, and that Asia's voices be respected in ECAFE.

This article makes three arguments. First, it argues that China and India pushed back against the Eurocentric ECOSOC in order to have ECAFE founded. Second, it demonstrates that China and India disagreed on what they thought ECAFE's work should be. India demanded that the body tackle development issues quickly and achieve real progress. In contrast, China wanted to build upon ECAFE's moderate remit and expected it to help Asian countries rehabilitate their economies. Yet Chinese and Indian leaders believed that ECAFE should help Asia 'construct' to a level much higher than before the war – even if results emerged slowly.

Third, the article will argue that the differing Chinese and Indian ideas on Asia's economic recovery (combined with their separate intentions to lead the region) constitute two strands of post-war Asianism. Viewed together, however, they gave Asianist ideas a new focus – not just cultural unity but also economic development. Most Asian societies faced Western imperialism's onslaught – political, economic, and cultural-racial – in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many Asian

¹⁷Prasenjit Duara, 'The discourse of civilization and Pan-Asianism', *Journal of World History*, 12 (2001), pp. 99–130; Sugata Bose, *Asia after Europe: imagining a continent in the long twentieth century* (Cambridge, MA, 2024).

¹⁸Saaler and Szpilman, 'Introduction', pp. 27–8. Works of Asianism which end by 1945 include Smith, *Chinese Asianism*; Hotta, *Pan-Asianism*; Weber, *Embracing 'Asia'*; Cemil Aydin, *The politics of anti-Westernism in Asia: visions of world order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian thought* (New York, NY, 2007); Carolien Stolte and Harald Fischer-Tine, 'Imagining Asia in India: nationalism and internationalism (ca. 1905–1940)', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54 (2012), pp. 65–92. Exceptions include Bose, *Asia after Europe*; Viren Murthy, *Pan-Asianism and the legacy of the Chinese revolution* (Chicago, IL, 2023).

¹⁹Carolien Stolte, 'Towards Afro-Asia? Continuities and change in Indian anti-imperialist regionalism, 1927–1957', in Michele Louro, Carolien Stolte, Heather Streets-Salter, and Sana Tannoury-Karam, eds., *The League against Imperialism: lives and afterlives* (Leiden, 2020), pp. 347–70; Cindy Ewing, 'The Third World before Afro-Asia', in Gyan Prakash and Jeremy Adelman, eds., *Inventing the Third World: in search of freedom for the postwar Global South* (London, 2023), pp. 29–45; Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Post-imperial possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafica, Afroasia* (Princeton, NJ, 2023).

²⁰A recent, compelling example is Bose, *Asia after Europe*.

²¹Weber, *Embracing 'Asia'*; Hotta, *Pan-Asianism*; Aydin, *Politics of anti-Westernism*; and Murthy, *Pan-Asianism*, all covered Japanese Asianism in detail. For China, see Smith, *Chinese Asianism*.

thinkers, like Tagore and Liang Qichao from China, regarded 'Western' materialism as arguably the key threat to Asian or 'Eastern' civilization. In response, they celebrated Asia's shared cultural heritage or religious universalisms, which were partly inspired by Buddhism or Islam. By contrast, Asian nations gained or were fighting for independence in the late 1940s. Desiring economic and political freedom, their policymakers considered concrete ways to transform their countries from relative poverty to prosperity.

It is important to bring Asianism back into the early post-war period for two main reasons. First, it shows that the path from Asianism to Afro-Asian internationalism was less smooth than once thought. Multiple strands of Asianism continued into the late 1940s, rather than fading in 1945. Yet, despite the intention of unity, differences appeared when Asian representatives debated their Asianist ideas at ECAFE. Asia in the late 1940s was characterized by a *lack* of international solidarity. Afro-Asian internationalism arguably emerged from Asianism's difficulties as much as its success. The possibility of co-operation in ECAFE foreshadowed Afro-Asian internationalism, while the disagreements within that body perhaps pushed India towards finding like-minded partners in Asia and the Arab world, rather than sticking only with fellow Asian nations. It is this trial-and-error process – both the possibilities and the limits of ECAFE – that indirectly helped turn Asianism into Afro-Asian internationalism.

Second, incorporating Asianism into the post-war era challenges the conventional wisdom that Nationalist China was simply a collapsing regime in the Chinese Civil War and beholden to American interests.²² Except, perhaps, for the regime's downfall and the ensuing refugee crisis, Nationalist China in 1947–9 has been severely understudied – and its efforts to spearhead its Asianism even more so.²³ Admittedly, the Americans had a strong presence in China. The US helped transport Nationalist troops to recapture Manchuria and major cities in east China after the Second World War ended, and some 900 US army and navy officers worked to 'strengthen Nationalist military efficiency'.²⁴ The basis of Nationalist China's post-war diplomacy had some of its roots in US support. China became a permanent member of the UN Security Council partly because of its contributions to the Allies' victory and partly from being named one of the 'four policemen' in the post-war world – alongside the US, the Soviet Union, and Britain – by the then US President Franklin D. Roosevelt. (Yet, post-war Chinese–American relations were poisoned by the conflict between the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek and his American chief of staff, Joseph Stilwell, which led to Stilwell's recall in 1944. The US was disappointed by the Nationalist government's failings in the latter stage of the war with Japan; it therefore became reluctant to support the Nationalists in the civil war.)

However, Nationalist China was far from simply America's subordinate. Moving away from Japanese Asianism reveals that Nationalist China had its own ambition

²²The standard work on the civil war was Odd Arne Westad, *Decisive encounters: the Chinese Civil War, 1946–1950* (Stanford, CA, 2003).

²³For the collapse, see Parks M. Coble, *The collapse of Nationalist China: how Chiang Kai-shek lost China's civil war* (Cambridge, 2023). For the refugee crisis, see Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang, *The great exodus from China: trauma, memory, and identity in modern Taiwan* (Cambridge, 2020).

²⁴Van de Ven, *China at war*, p. 234.

of leading post-war Asia;²⁵ ECAFE was precisely a means to achieve this ambition. This article shows how China sought to lead Asia through ECAFE, and how China was challenged by India. By 1949, as Nationalist China lost the civil war, India supplanted Chinese leadership of Asianism. India drew on the non-Western network that China had helped build at the founding of ECAFE and became perhaps the leading actor in Afro-Asian internationalism. Put another way, the rise of India and Afro-Asian internationalism was facilitated by the rapid decline of Nationalist China. Early ECAFE symbolizes Nationalist China's broader influence in post-war Asia: it tried to lead but faded away.

The competition between the two nations brings us to the emerging scholarship on connections between China and India.²⁶ This literature suggests that, in the 1940s, the two countries wished to join forces to reshape Asia's future, but that that intention was derailed by their border disputes and conflicting views of Tibet's status. This article suggests a new perspective for considering the China-India conflict in the mid-twentieth century: it was a conflict of ideas as much as of borders or geopolitics. ECAFE shows that China and India already disagreed on how to rebuild Asia's post-war economy.

The article will start with examining pre-1945 attitudes of China and India towards international organizations, and how China led the efforts that founded ECAFE. Next, it will delve into how China and India attempted to influence ECAFE's overall goals, followed by the organization's specific tasks. Finally, it will briefly discuss how Chinese and Indian officials assessed ECAFE's performance.

I
To understand ECAFE's birth, it is necessary to discuss how China (and India) pressed the UN to pay more attention to Asia's post-war needs. Chinese and Indian policymakers had not been natural bedfellows with international organizations. The head of Nationalist China, Chiang Kai-shek, along with Chiang's close friend Dai Jitao (a theorist in the ruling Nationalist Party) and many members of the educated Chinese public, thought that the League of Nations was impotent to confront wartime aggressors. When Japan occupied Manchuria in 1931, Dai lamented that, because the League's member states hoped to avoid war with Japan at almost any cost, it 'cannot apply any effective sanctions'.²⁷ Likewise, the future first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, wrote in 1933 that the League was a 'tool' of great

²⁵See also Rana Mitter, 'Identities and alliances: China's place in the world after Pearl Harbor, 1941-1945', in Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds., *Beyond Pearl Harbor: a Pacific history* (Lawrence, KS, 2019), pp. 104-10.

²⁶Tansen Sen and Brian Tsui, eds., *Beyond Pan-Asianism: connecting China and India, 1840s-1960s* (New Delhi, 2021); Tansen Sen, *India, China, and the world: a connected history* (Lanham, MD, 2017); Brian Tsui, *China's conservative revolution: the quest for a new order, 1927-1949* (Cambridge, 2018); Arunabh Ghosh, *Making it count: statistics and statecraft in the early People's Republic of China* (Princeton, NJ, 2020); Yin Cao, *Chinese sojourners in wartime Raj, 1942-45* (Oxford, 2022).

²⁷Rana Mitter, 'An uneasy engagement: Chinese ideas of global order and justice in historical perspective', in Rosemary Foot, John Lewis Gaddis, and Andrew Hurrell, eds., *Order and justice in international relations* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 214-16.

powers like Britain and France. It ‘failed completely’ in preserving peace or reducing the chances of war.²⁸

Given such resentment, one might wonder why China and India would support the UN, which was remarkably similar to the League.²⁹ One reason was the lack of choice: an imperfect UN seemed better than no international organization at all. In addition, China would become a permanent member of the Security Council and therefore have veto power. And Chinese and Indian policymakers had come to appreciate that the League had achieved something small but potentially valuable. The policy plan of China’s foreign ministry in 1943 observed that, while the League failed to maintain peace, ‘the technical co-operation under the auspices of the League offers many benefits’.³⁰ Preceding his harsh verdict on the League, Nehru wrote that it produced ‘good work in various byways of modern life’, perhaps referring to its attempts to provide economic and technical assistance.³¹

That said, senior Chinese officials expected more from a new world organization. At the Bretton Woods conference in July 1944 that laid the foundation of the post-war international economic order, China (and India) strongly supported the idea that this order should offer international support for the development of developing countries.³² Also in 1944, the US invited the Soviet Union, Britain, and China to meet at Dumbarton Oaks to discuss plans for a post-war international organization. Although the Big Three planned much of the blueprint of the UN, Chinese officials hastily drew up proposals.³³ At the time, Japan was tearing through Chinese territories with its Operation Ichigo, so Chinese plans unsurprisingly focused on how to sanction aggressors. Still, international economic co-operation was seen as crucial in maintaining peace. China’s foreign ministry proposed that, as a basis of the new organization, opportunities should be ‘equal’, promoting economic development. International trade should ‘not hinder the industrial construction of industrially backward countries’.³⁴ This demonstrates the belief that dealing with issues globally could tackle problems plaguing smaller regions.

Nor did Indian nationalist leaders neglect socio-economic progress. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, who would head India’s UN delegation in the late 1940s, championed a post-war international organization, especially when her brother Jawaharlal Nehru was imprisoned between 1942 and 1945. In January 1945, the Institute of Pacific Relations, a multi-national thinktank, held a conference on the post-war order. Leading the Indian delegation to the conference, Pandit argued that economic development was a cornerstone of peace; India ‘wishes to have the peace proposals placed on a sound economic basis. ... We agreed that economic expansion and full

²⁸Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of world history* (London, 1949; orig. edn 1934), p. 683.

²⁹Mark Mazower, *Governing the world: the history of an idea* (London, 2012), pp. 211–13.

³⁰‘Waijiaobu sanshier niandu shizheng jihua’ (‘Policy plan of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1943’), Taipei, Academia Historica (AH), 020-019903-0002.

³¹Nehru, *Glimpses*, p. 683.

³²Helleiner, *Forgotten foundations*, p. 2.

³³Robert C. Hilderbrand, *Dumbarton Oaks: the origins of the United Nations and the search for postwar security* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1990).

³⁴Soong to Chiang, 17 July 1944, in Ye Huifen, ed., *Zhonghua Minguo yu Lianheguo shiliao huibian: choushe pian* (Documentary collection on the R.O.C. and the United Nations: origin) (Taipei, 2001), p. 143.

employment should be the goal of all peoples. India and China are anxious to create conditions for such an expansion.³⁵ However, the lack of attention on economic issues outside Europe compelled China and other Asian countries to push for a new UN body that became ECAFE.

The Second World War devastated much of East and Southeast Asia. The war claimed the lives of some 24 million people in Japanese-occupied territories and 3 million Japanese. Rubber estates in Malaya and rice fields in Burma were largely destroyed; the loss of rice supply from Burma caused food shortage and disease in Southeast Asia. Blunders of the Chinese Nationalist and British Indian governments in maintaining food supply led to the respective famines in Henan and Bengal in 1943.³⁶ The standards of social services in China and some Southeast Asian regions – already poor before 1937 – worsened. Shortly before and after 1945, the main organization to offer aid such as healthcare and food in parts of Asia was the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), part of the Allies effort and largely funded by the US. Yet UNRRA's work in China ended in 1947, and elsewhere a year later. Asia needed something else to fill the void.

China's ECOSOC delegate, P. C. Chang, was central to ECAFE's birth. Chang was a philosopher and playwright with a PhD from Columbia University who later served the Nationalist government. He was China's ambassador to Turkey and Chile during the war. He became an ECOSOC delegate likely because of his 'deep engagement in social policy and welfare issues'. He was also the vice-chairman of ECOSOC's Human Rights Commission and a leading contributor to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights promulgated in 1948.³⁷ Yet China could not have established ECAFE alone. It needed the votes from Asian and other developing countries, indicating the budding Global South ties that would come of age in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, officials of China's foreign ministry believed that China 'initiated' the idea that Asian representatives to the UN 'maintain close contact'.³⁸ Nationalist China's leadership of Asia and potentially the non-Western world was another pillar of its post-war foreign policy, as important as its new-found status as a great power.

In June 1946, ECOSOC established the Temporary Sub-Commission on the Economic Reconstruction of Devastated Areas to deal with post-war rehabilitation. The sub-commission focused on reconstruction in Europe. Of its twenty members, eleven were European countries, with France chairing.³⁹ The US and Canada, likely to sympathize with western Europe, were also members. Most of them felt that

³⁵Institute of Pacific Relations, *Security in the Pacific: a preliminary report of the ninth conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations, Hot Springs, Virginia, January 6-17, 1945* (New York, NY, 1945), p. 11.

³⁶Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten wars*, pp. 7–12; Sugata Bose, 'Starvation amidst plenty: the making of famine in Bengal, Honan and Tonkin, 1942–45', *Modern Asian Studies*, 24 (1990), pp. 699–727. The famine in Bengal, unoccupied by Japan, killed another 3.5 million people.

³⁷See Hans Ingvar Roth, *P. C. Chang and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Philadelphia, PA, 2018), p. 84; Pinghua Sun, *Historic achievement of a common standard: Pengchun Chang and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Singapore, 2018).

³⁸Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Chinese embassy to India, 22 Feb. 1949, Taipei, Institute of Modern History Archives (IMHA), Academia Sinica, 11-11-22-01-025.

³⁹ECOSOC, 'Temporary Sub-Commission on the Economic Reconstruction of Devastated Areas', 21 June 1946, Resolutions adopted by the Economic and Social Council during its second session, 25 May–21 June 1946, United Nations Digital Library (UNDL), ECOSOC, E/RES/6(II), pp. 514–15.

Europe's problems were 'more urgent' than Asia's.⁴⁰ Only three members were from Asia: China (vice-chair of the sub-commission), India, and the Philippines. The sub-commission set up two working groups, one for Europe and Africa, and one for Asia and the Far East. However, since it felt that the amount of work on Europe would already be significant, it decided that the working group for Asia and the Far East should only conduct 'a preliminary discussion' on how to produce a survey on Asia.⁴¹

Chang and India's delegate, B. P. Adarkar, a professor in economics who had been a councillor of British India, made little headway at the sub-commission or ECOSOC because they were in the minority.⁴² Instead, Chang found greater support at the General Assembly's Second Committee (known as the Economic and Financial Committee), where developing countries had a majority – thirty-two members out of fifty-four.⁴³ This turned the tide and challenged the 'effective built-in American majority'.⁴⁴

When the Second Committee met in November 1946, the Philippines delegate Pedro Hernáez suggested that 'an economic commission for Asia and the Far East should be established on the lines of the economic commission for Europe', which the Ethiopian delegation supported. Immediately following Hernáez, Chang proposed an amendment to Norway's draft resolution, asking ECOSOC to 'give careful consideration' to 'an economic commission for Asia' as well as one for Europe. Poland and Norway feared that this would hugely delay the establishment of the commission for Europe. By contrast, Hernáez and Fausto Soto, a Chilean delegate, defended Chang. Hernáez asked whether it was better to add 'Far East' after 'Asia' to clarify the geographical scope. Personal connections may have mattered: Soto noted that he worked with Chang at ECOSOC and, as a former ambassador to Chile, Chang was probably acquainted with the Chilean delegates.⁴⁵ Backed by other developing countries, Chang's amendment carried the day. The Second Committee asked the General Assembly to recommend that ECOSOC consider establishing an economic commission for Europe and another for Asia and the Far East.⁴⁶ The General Assembly duly passed a resolution on it.

Before ECOSOC formally established ECAFE, the working group for Asia and the Far East under the temporary sub-commission finally met in February 1947. Chang chaired the working group, while Adarkar represented India. Its report likewise recommended setting up an economic commission for Asia and the Far East.⁴⁷ The new commission would 'make recommendations' to UN bodies, the UN's specialized

⁴⁰Wightman, *Economic cooperation*, p. 13.

⁴¹'Economic and employment commission: consideration of the future work in the field of reconstruction of devastated areas', ECOSOC, 15 Jan. 1947, UNDL, E/CN.1/10.

⁴²Department of Public Information, *Yearbook of the United Nations, 1946-47* (New York, NY, 1947), p. 468.

⁴³Wightman, *Economic cooperation*, p. 13.

⁴⁴Mazower, *Governing the world*, p. 245.

⁴⁵UN General Assembly, Second Committee, economic and financial questions, summary records of meetings, twenty-third meeting, 30 Nov. 1946, UNDL, A/C.2/SR.23, pp. 107, 108, 109-10, 112.

⁴⁶'Economic reconstruction of devastated areas: report of the 2nd committee', UN General Assembly, 9 Dec. 1946, UNDL, A/233, p. 4.

⁴⁷Report of the Working Group for Asia and the Far East of the Temporary Sub-Commission on Economic Reconstruction of Devastated Areas', 1 Mar. 1947, ECOSOC Official Records, 2nd year, 4th session, supplement no. 8, UNDL, E/307/Rev.1.

agencies, and the relevant governments, and set up 'subsidiary machinery' to carry out its functions.⁴⁸ It would even be permanent.⁴⁹ However, ECAFE, with a fixed term of three years, was initially confined to being an investigative body. Many working group members sat on ECOSOC as well, and they may have concealed their reservations in the working group, only revealing them when ECOSOC had to decide ECAFE's remit. The early UN was still dominated by concerns over Europe, not least fuelled by the Cold War.

As ECAFE materialized, then, many of its details remained contentious. One example was its headquarters' location. This demonstrates the competition between China and India (and sometimes with other Asian countries) for leadership in Asia, a factor leading to their mistrust in the early post-war period.⁵⁰ In early March 1947, Chang asked China's foreign ministry whether ECAFE should be based in Shanghai.⁵¹ The ministry agreed: China was one of the Big Five, 'the only great country in the Far East', and 'the most devastated by the war'.⁵² When Chang proposed Shanghai, Britain opposed it because this might favour Shanghai to be the future Far Eastern UN headquarters. The US nominated New York. Other countries hesitated because of the British and American stances.⁵³ The Chinese delegation negotiated with its counterparts, won the support of Latin America, and convinced the Netherlands and France not to oppose China's suggestion. Eventually it was decided that Shanghai would host ECAFE's temporary headquarters.⁵⁴ This incident, though minor, is symbolic: China wanted to lead the region and not necessarily follow the US in international affairs.

Shanghai fought off other Asian competitors. When hosting the second ECAFE session in Baguio in November–December 1947, the Philippines suggested that the organization's headquarters should be based in that country.⁵⁵ Likewise, India extended an invitation when hosting the third session in Ootacamund in June 1948.⁵⁶ Pakistan nominated Karachi; Malaya proposed Singapore.⁵⁷ The race to host ECAFE suggests that international solidarity in the region was limited because different Asian nations held their own post-war visions, which were not always compatible. Shanghai was confirmed as the temporary headquarters in the third session, pending the decision on a permanent location. Intriguingly, ECAFE's executive secretary P. S. Lokanathan, an Indian economist, also preferred Shanghai. Having hosted the temporary offices, and its diplomatic connections with other ECAFE members, helped the city's case.⁵⁸ However, the stay in Shanghai was short-lived. Because

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 79–80.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 3.

⁵⁰Sen, *Connected history*, pp. 337–68.

⁵¹Chang to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8 Mar. 1947, IMHA, 11-11-05-04-391.

⁵²Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Chang, 13 Mar. 1947, IMHA, 11-11-05-04-391.

⁵³Chang to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 31 Mar. 1947, IMHA, 11-11-05-04-478.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Victor Purcell, 'The Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East', *International Affairs*, 24 (1948), pp. 181–95, at p. 194.

⁵⁶Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's foreign policy: selected speeches, September 1946–April 1961* (New Delhi, 1961), pp. 260–1.

⁵⁷Summary record of forty-first meeting', 11 June 1948, ECAFE, E/CN.11/SR.41, in AH, 003-020100-0118.

⁵⁸Ibid.

of the communist advance in China, ECAFE's secretariat was forced to relocate in December 1948: first briefly to Singapore, then in 1949 to Bangkok, where it has since remained.⁵⁹

II

Having reconstructed ECAFE's birth, the article now turns to showing how Chinese and Indian diplomats disagreed on ECAFE's overall aims. Why is ECAFE's work relevant to Asianism? If we accept that Asian ideas on creating an economically more equal world and making Asia's voices more audible are part of Asianism, then ECAFE's goals and its specific tasks (discussed in the next section) would be a means to achieving these ends.

To start with, ECOSOC assigned a limited remit to ECAFE. ECAFE would:

- (a) Initiate and participate in measures for facilitating concerted action for the economic reconstruction of Asia and the Far East ...
- (b) Make or sponsor such investigations and studies of economic and technological problems and developments ...
- (c) Undertake or sponsor the collection, evaluation and dissemination of such economic, technological and statistical information.⁶⁰

Immediately before the first ECAFE session was held in Shanghai in June 1947, Jiang Tingfu, China's head delegate at the first two sessions, doubted its capacity. A historian with, like P. C. Chiang, a PhD from Columbia, Jiang became China's ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1936–8, served in senior positions of the Nationalist government during the war, and was director of the Chinese National Relief and Rehabilitation Organization, the Chinese partner to UNRRA. Anti-imperialist and a liberal, he became increasingly anti-communist and appreciated democratic politics in the US and Britain.⁶¹

In May 1947, Jiang was told by Wu Daye, professor of economics at Zhongshan University, who worked for P. C. Chang in fighting for ECAFE, that ECAFE stemmed from 'a desire to have Far East on an equity with Europe and to have China on the map'. Tellingly, neither Chang nor the foreign ministry expected to gain any specific advantage. Jiang then noted that ECAFE was, for China, 'a good case of diplomatic infantilism'.⁶² He thought poorly of ECAFE, but attempted to make it useful for Asian economies.

Chinese delegates stressed that an important goal of ECAFE was to save ordinary people from basic livelihood problems. Jiang suggested at its first session that the

⁵⁹Wightman, *Economic cooperation*, pp. 62–3.

⁶⁰'Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East', 28 Mar. 1947, Resolutions adopted by the Economic and Social Council during its 4th session, 28 Feb.–29 Mar. 1947, UNDL, E/RES/37(IV).

⁶¹Mitter, 'State-building', p. 181.

⁶²Jiang Tingfu, *Jiang Tingfu riji* (Jiang Tingfu diaries), 31 May 1947, <https://taco.ith.sinica.edu.tw/tdk/%E8%94%A3%E5%BB%B7%E9%BB%BB%E6%97%A5%E8%A8%98/1947-05-31> (sign-up to a free account is required for access).

cause of political conflicts was economic difficulties.⁶³ This remark was undoubtedly informed by the fact that the communists had capitalized on poverty and war destruction to expand their territories in the Chinese Civil War. Jiang claimed that ‘ordinary Asians were not much concerned about political thoughts and ideologies’; their ‘main real-life problem was “clothes, food, housing”’.⁶⁴ Li Gan, Jiang’s deputy, who became head delegate when Jiang was elected chair of the session, said that the Chinese (and Asians more generally) expected ECAFE to help them more efficiently organize ‘productive activities and better distribution’.⁶⁵

Jiang noted that China ‘refrain[ed] from asking anything impractical’, ‘winning the confidence’ of Western delegates, and demonstrated ‘considerateness to everybody’.⁶⁶ This pragmatism avoided the hardline attitude that Indian delegates at times displayed. Jiang’s and Li’s avoidance of politics drew on the technocratic approach championed by the League of Nations and inherited by the UN and UNRRA, with which Jiang was familiar. What he and Li did not articulate, but was likely a major motivation for both of them, was the urgent need to achieve economic reconstruction to resist the communist advance in China and Asia, in a similar vein to Nehru’s rationale when he helped initiate the Colombo Plan in January 1950.⁶⁷ Yet this might have downplayed Asians’ aspirations in forming their own national governments.

To their credit, the Nationalists recognized that solving only basic livelihood problems was inadequate. They believed that ECAFE should assist Asia’s ‘industrial revolution’ and promote ‘modernized production methods’. Asian economies could not merely stay at the pre-war level. Although national governments could promote industrial progress in their countries, ECAFE’s assistance would ‘accelerate’ it.⁶⁸ At the second session, Li Gan argued that ECAFE should immediately draft recommendations on economic development and establish a ‘construction committee’.⁶⁹ This indicates China’s desire for more substantial growth.

If China attempted to balance reconstruction and development, India emphasized development and downplayed the problem of war devastation. In Shanghai, India’s delegate R. K. Nehru argued that reconstruction must be geared towards ‘vital long-term objectives’.⁷⁰ Nehru was the chairman of India’s Central Board of Revenue and the son of Jawaharlal Nehru’s cousin Mohanlal Nehru. He stressed that ECAFE must

⁶³‘jingji wenti bu jie jue zhengzhi kunnan bi zengjia’ (‘If economic problems are not solved, political difficulties must increase’), *Shen Bao*, 17 June 1947, p. 2.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵‘Initial general statement of Dr. Kan Lee, delegate of China’, 17 June 1947, ECAFE, E/CN.11/13, in AH, 003-020200-0441.

⁶⁶Jiang, *Jiang Tingfu riji*, 24 June 1947, <https://taco.ith.sinica.edu.tw/tdk/%E8%94%A3%E5%BB%B7%E9%BB%BB%E6%97%A5%E8%A8%98/1947-06-24>.

⁶⁷When the Colombo Plan commenced in 1951, developed countries of the Commonwealth and the US provided aid to Commonwealth members in South and Southeast Asia, such as India and Ceylon. David Lowe, *The Colombo Plan: development internationalism in Cold War Asia* (Cambridge, 2025).

⁶⁸‘jingji wenti bu jie jue zhengzhi kunnan bi zengjia’.

⁶⁹‘Yuanjinghui wo daibiao fabiao zhongyao shengming’ (‘Our country’s delegate publishes an important statement at ECAFE’), *Shen Bao*, 1 Dec. 1947, p. 1.

⁷⁰‘Address of Mr. R.K. Nehru, delegate of India’, 17 June 1947, ECAFE, E/CN.11/9, in AH, 003-020200-0441.

promote measures specific to Asian countries. In Asia, 'where grinding poverty, disease and ignorance are the general rule', it was necessary to take 'a larger view and a longer view' and foster long-term development while offering immediate aid.⁷¹ The insistence of R. K. Nehru on economic development reflects the fact that, although India was almost stretched to the limit in its enforced war mobilization for the British empire, little of the war was fought on Indian soil.⁷² His point of departure was Asia's low productivity, which preceded the war. Yet India's neglect of war destruction irritated Chinese delegates. The Chinese delegation responded bluntly that Nehru 'was "contemptuous" of China's sufferings'.⁷³

On the other hand, the US and Britain believed that Asian countries should simply focus on the early stages of industrialization such as investigations. This again shows that Nationalist China did not necessarily follow the US on international issues. Only at the Committee of the Whole meeting in Bangkok in early 1949 did they accept a committee on industry and trade and a subcommittee on iron and steel, a small first step towards meeting China's and India's wishes. Lokanathan recommended the creation of the Committee on Industry and Trade. This had strong Asian backing, forcing the Western economies to accept that opposition would only backfire.⁷⁴ Ironically for the Nationalists, their loss in the civil war probably made the US and Britain realize that communism would march on 'unless the economic problems of this region were satisfactorily resolved'. The Western powers therefore became much more anxious to contribute to Asia's economic progress.⁷⁵

The disagreement between China and India on ECAFE's aims demonstrates their divergent views on post-war Asia's economic future. To explain why the Chinese-Indian relations deteriorated, the border conflicts and Tibet were commonly mentioned.⁷⁶ A significant portion of the Chinese-Indian borders had been ill-defined since the late eighteenth century, when the Qing and British empires encountered one another along the Himalayas. Along the western sector of the borders, by the early twentieth century the Raj claimed Ladakh and Aksai Chin as its land, but the Chinese states claimed that Aksai Chin was Chinese territory. On the eastern sector, Henry McMahon, foreign secretary of British India, concluded a set of notes in 1914 with the Tibetan representative Lonchen Shatra. This defined the eastern sector by what would be called the McMahon Line and put today's Arunachal Pradesh – which China has claimed as its own – under India.⁷⁷ Such disputes were sidestepped when China and Britain were allies in the Second World War, but re-emerged after the war.

Meanwhile, before the Qing collapsed in 1912, the British empire had already encouraged Tibet to be autonomous, so that Tibet could be India's buffer against

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Srinath Raghavan, *India's war: the making of modern South Asia, 1939-1945* (London, 2016).

⁷³Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East. First session, Shanghai, June 1947. Report of the delegates', 10 July 1947, London, British Library (BL), IOR/M/4/964, p. 14.

⁷⁴Wightman, *Economic cooperation*, pp. 43-6, 287-8.

⁷⁵B. P. Adarkar, 'Report of the Indian delegation to the fifth session of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East', 25 Jan. 1950, New Delhi, National Archives of India (NAI), 12/5/50-Public, p. 5.

⁷⁶Sen, *Connected history*, pp. 337-8. On these conflicts after 1949, see John W. Garver, *Protracted contest: Sino-Indian rivalry in the twentieth century* (Seattle, WA, 2001).

⁷⁷Srinath Raghavan, *War and peace in modern India* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 227-9.

the Russian empire. The British recognized only Chinese suzerainty (short of sovereignty) over Tibet. This meant that the British had direct diplomatic relations with the Tibetans and acquired special trading rights in Tibet. Yet the Qing and successive Chinese governments claimed Tibet to be part of China. Officials from post-colonial India and Nationalist China each suspected the other side of their intentions on Tibet and the borders.⁷⁸

However, Chinese and Indian ideas for post-war Asia in general had already diverged, beyond the conflicts on borders and Tibet. The fault lines between Chinese and Indian visions went deeper than simply geopolitical concerns. Ruptures emerged in ECAFE between its major players: between China and India on the body's overall directions and specific tasks, and between India and the US on providing funds to aid Asia's economic development. This does not mean that the conflicting Chinese and Indian ideas predetermined a war in 1962, but it does indicate the immense difficulty of bridging the gap between the two powers, and the limits of cultural exchanges in the early post-war period.⁷⁹

III

This section examines how Indian diplomats proposed a wider to-do list for ECAFE than China did, showing that their ideas of Asia diverged in the finer details as well as broader aims. It also considers some of the obstacles against ECAFE's work from the Western powers and the organization's own structural limits.

The 'lack of basic data' was one of Asia's major challenges at the time.⁸⁰ The key task of ECAFE's first session, set by ECOSOC, was therefore to devise an urgent investigation scheme.⁸¹ To meet this framework, Chinese officials focused on specific surveys. This was also because Li Gan agreed with David Owen, the UN assistant general-secretary, that the UN could allocate few resources to ECAFE.⁸² Li suggested that ECAFE study:

- (1) Possibility in increase in agricultural, especially food, production...
- (2) Promotion of a better balanced economy through industrialization [*sic*];
- (3) Improvement in transportation; and
- (4) Promotion of inter- and intra-regional trade.⁸³

⁷⁸Sen, *Connected history*, pp. 362–3.

⁷⁹Recent studies on such exchanges include, for example, Arunabh Ghosh, 'Before 1962: the case for 1950s China–India history', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 76 (2017), pp. 697–727; Arunabh Ghosh, 'Trans-Himalayan science in mid-twentieth century China and India: Birbal Sahni, Hsü Jen, and a Pan-Asian paleobotany', *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 19 (2022), pp. 239–61.

⁸⁰P. S. Lokanathan, 'The task before the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East', *India Quarterly*, 3 (1947), pp. 333–40, at p. 334.

⁸¹Report to the Economic and Social Council on the first session of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East held at Shanghai from 16 to 25 June 1947', UNDL, E/452, p. 6. This report was part I of ECOSOC Official Records, 2nd year, 5th session, supplement no. 6, 'Report of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East and Report of the Committee of the Whole', 1947, UNDL.

⁸²'Kan Lee', E/CN.11/13, in AH, 003-020200-0441.

⁸³*Ibid.*

This view echoed that of the British and American delegations.⁸⁴ Li and Owen's stance was probably influenced by the practice of the League of Nations: 'a pattern of Secretariat studies, an annual economic survey, and, as the big occasion, a formal Commission session'.⁸⁵

By contrast, the Indian delegation demanded a wide-ranging investigation. R. K. Nehru insisted that ECAFE conduct a 'comprehensive enquiry' and asked that the UN provide enough staff to its secretariat.⁸⁶ ECAFE plans should proceed 'on the broadest basis' and not avoid the problems that Asia faced.⁸⁷ This reflects the Indian government's desire to produce speedy, substantial development in the region.

As delegates ran into a deadlock, Nehru, a British delegate, and an American delegate had a 'long private discussion'. At the next meeting, Nehru softened his stance.⁸⁸ Choosing between the British and the Indian draft resolutions on the investigation programme, delegates voted for the Indian draft. The investigation would range quite widely – roughly along the lines that Nehru had proposed – but other delegates managed to highlight 'topics of primary importance', for example food, fuel, and equipment.⁸⁹ Unfortunately, the limits on resources hampered the survey work. The first annual Economic Survey of Asia and the Far East was 'rushed out' just before the third session because of a sore lack of data and personnel.⁹⁰

Beyond producing economic surveys, what was ECAFE expected to do? Nehru criticized the body's terms of reference for being too narrow. He asked the secretariat to model ECAFE upon the Economic Commission for Europe, which had the authority to make recommendations and set up subsidiary bodies.⁹¹ Meeting India's requests, in July 1947 ECOSOC permitted ECAFE to expand its power. Now it could make recommendations to its full or associate members and to UN specialized agencies. Moreover, after consulting other specialized agencies, and with ECOSOC's approval, it could establish subsidiary institutions to implement its work.⁹²

What Nehru wanted from ECAFE was real and fast progress. Investigations 'should be carried out as quickly as possible' in order to initiate rehabilitation schemes.⁹³ Similarly, the Chinese wanted ECAFE to promote new measures and offer assistance. Li Gan urged that it must not become only a 'research organization'. ECAFE's recommendations to ECOSOC, other UN agencies, and UN member states could help tackle Asia's economic needs as a priority.⁹⁴ Other Asian delegates shared this view; the Philippines delegate Miguel Guarderno called on ECAFE to act immediately.⁹⁵

Lokanathan used his position to push ECAFE beyond research work. He urged member states to outline their specific difficulties and seek advice, while ECAFE

⁸⁴Report of the delegates', BL, IOR/M/4/964, p. 8.

⁸⁵Wightman, *Economic cooperation*, pp. 285–6.

⁸⁶Report of the delegates', BL, IOR/M/4/964, p. 8.

⁸⁷Purcell, 'Economic Commission', p. 183.

⁸⁸Report of the delegates', BL, IOR/M/4/964, p. 8.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰H. D. Fong, *Reminiscences of a Chinese economist at 70* (Singapore, 1975), pp. 93–4, 103.

⁹¹'R.K. Nehru', E/CN.11/9, in AH, 003-020200-0441.

⁹²Permanent UK Representative to the UN to Foreign Office, 17 July 1947, BL, IOR/M/4/964.

⁹³'R.K. Nehru', E/CN.11/9, in AH, 003-020200-0441.

⁹⁴'Yuanjinghui wo daibiao fabiao zhongyao shengming'.

⁹⁵'Far East economic commission: speedy relief for Asia urged', *Times of India*, 20 June 1947, p. 5.

would help resolve these problems on a regional scale.⁹⁶ At around the start of 1949, he observed that ECAFE's priority should be in this order: '(i) Economic Survey; (ii) Industrial Development; (iii) Trade Promotion; (iv) Technical Assistance; and (v) Agricultural Requisites'.⁹⁷ Surveys still took priority, but practical work was not far behind.

ECAFE's discussions on industrialization illustrate the visions for the body and its difficulties. The second ECAFE session passed a resolution to establish the Working Party on Industrial Development. Chaired by China and composed of India, Thailand, and the Philippines, the working party produced an interim report, observing that the most crucial need of the region was the import of 'capital goods and basic materials' from more developed countries. This interim report formed the basis of a resolution on industrial development.⁹⁸ India and China were in effect calling for an Asian Marshall Plan, hoping that the US would aid Asia on a scale similar to that in Europe.

This became explicit in the fourth session (held in Lapstone, Australia, in November–December 1948), when the working party's full report introduced a five-year plan for Asia's reconstruction, billed at 13.6 billion US dollars. Of this, \$6.4 billion would be raised in Asia, while the other \$7.2 billion would come from non-Asian countries, chiefly the US. The US, however, was uninterested.⁹⁹ At the 1949 Bangkok meeting, India again proposed that Asian countries took loans to finance their industrial sector.¹⁰⁰ Only then did the Western powers agree to the Committee on Industry and Trade as a compromise.

Though it is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate the Indian–American relations in this period, the ECAFE discussions highlight from a new angle that India and the US had drastically different views on the post-war world order, even if their actual connections remained strong. Conventional wisdom argues that India and the US were no friends in the Cold War.¹⁰¹ This fits the usual understanding that early post-colonial India's foreign policy was guided by non-alignment, which kept both the US and the Soviet Union at arm's length. Yet a growing revisionist scholarship contends that India was much closer with the US than with the Soviet Union in the first two decades after 1947. For example, the US provided \$6.3 billion of aid to India between 1947 and 1965, some six times higher than the Soviet figure (just above \$1 billion).¹⁰² Jawaharlal Nehru privately reassured American and British diplomats

⁹⁶Statement of the executive secretary at the first plenary meeting of the second session', 25 Nov. 1947, ECAFE, E/CN.11/45, in AH, 003-020200-0166.

⁹⁷Wu to Caustin, 2 Jan. 1949, New York, UN Archives, S-0932-0010-0007-00006.

⁹⁸'Resolution on industrial development', E/CN.11/114, in ECAFE, 'Report of the third session of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East', 1 July 1948, UNDL, E/839, p. 37.

⁹⁹'"Master Plan" for Asia: U.N. economic body discussion', *Times of India*, 2 Dec. 1948, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰Chen Guangfu, *Chen Guangfu riji (Chen Guangfu diaries)* (Shanghai, 2002), p. 217.

¹⁰¹Francine Frankel, *When Nehru looked east: origins of India-US suspicion and India-China rivalry* (Oxford, 2020).

¹⁰²Taylor C. Sherman, *Nehru's India: a history in seven myths* (Princeton, NJ, 2022), pp. 21–30. See also Rudra Chaudhuri, *Forged in crisis: India and the United States since 1947* (Oxford, 2014).

that, should a general war broke out between the West and the Soviet Union, India would side with the West.¹⁰³

However, India's economic visions on ECAFE were overlooked by the US, which did not prioritize Asia in its Cold War conceptions. Indian elites advocated a different position from the US on the post-war order, fighting for a more equal world. International organizations like ECAFE were for India a key platform for making its case. While Indian elites largely retained an amicable relationship with the British as India declared independence, they redirected their criticism of Western imperialism towards the US.¹⁰⁴

Chinese and especially Indian ideas on economic development through ECAFE came to little by the end of the decade; they were well ahead of their time. At ECAFE's request, specifically from Lokanathan, ECOSOC modified its terms of reference in 1951 to substitute rehabilitation for development.¹⁰⁵ ECAFE fell under the radar but recorded small progress, starting in the 1950s. On iron and steel, for example, it organized study tours of Asian experts to Japan, France, and Germany to learn new production techniques, and it arranged tests and research capacity for countries that could not afford an investigation of their raw materials.¹⁰⁶ ECAFE listed a range of its activities on its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1972; these included the Asian Industrial Development Council and the Asian Development Bank.¹⁰⁷

Low-key and non-headline-stealing, ECAFE stood in stark contrast with its famous sibling born in 1948, the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL in Spanish or Portuguese acronyms; now the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean). The economist Raúl Prebisch, executive secretary of CEPAL from 1950 to 1963, was prominent in leading a group of economists known as *cepalinos* to promote an economic theory of 'centre' and 'periphery'. Chiefly the producer of primary goods, Latin America (and the world's other 'peripheries') suffered from those goods' low and volatile prices relative to manufactured goods produced in 'centres' such as the US and western Europe. The 'periphery' countries lagged further behind, unable to accumulate their own wealth. To combat this problem, *cepalinos* argued for regional co-operation, foreign aid, and fairer terms of international trade, alongside national industrialization, and for integrating Global South countries into the global economy more equally.¹⁰⁸

Why did ECAFE and CEPAL fare so differently? First, CEPAL's terms of reference include a distinct instruction absent in ECAFE's: studying the solutions of 'problems arising in Latin America from world economic maladjustment and towards other problems connected with the world economy'.¹⁰⁹ This gave Prebisch and *cepalinos* the

¹⁰³Paul M. McGarr, *The Cold War in South Asia: Britain, the United States and the Indian subcontinent, 1945–1965* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 45.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁵T. F. Brenchley, 'The work of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East of the United Nations', *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, 40 (1953), pp. 59–69, at p. 62.

¹⁰⁶Wightman, *Economic cooperation*, pp. 116–17.

¹⁰⁷Fong, *Reminiscences*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁸Margarita Fajardo, *the world that Latin America created: the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America in the development era* (Cambridge, MA, 2022), pp. 2–3.

¹⁰⁹ECOSOC, 'Report of the *ad hoc* committee on the proposal for an economic commission for Latin America', 5 Mar. 1948, UNDA, E/RES/106(VI).

licence to theorize the economic ills of Latin America and offer solutions in grand, global terms.

Second, Latin America emerged from the Second World War relatively intact. The attention of *cepalinos* was more ‘post-colonial’: they challenged the informal imperialism of Western countries (especially America). By contrast, ECAFE had to tackle both war devastation and (often empire-induced) low productivity. Tellingly, Lokanathan argued in late 1947 that the key to reconstructing Asian economies was political and economic stability. Thereafter, Asian economies should focus on ‘removing bottlenecks that impeded production’, not least through modernizing agricultural and industrial production. Asia could enlist technical support from American experts, which Lokanathan believed would cost the US little and be effective.¹¹⁰

Third, Presbich towered over other delegates at CEPAL, and four-fifths of CEPAL’s founding members were Latin American countries, ensuring a unity of purpose.¹¹¹ By contrast, ECAFE’s member states were far from united and the organization had no one like Presbich. Asian economies had their own national priorities and economic plans, reflected in various ECAFE committees that catered to different needs. That the US and Britain led the efforts in denting Asian members’ developmental aspirations did not help.¹¹²

That said, like Presbich’s ideas in CEPAL, India (and China) aimed to not only carve out a limited space for Asia or the Global South but also change the global order from within.¹¹³ ECAFE was a means for Asian nations to attain economic modernity on their own terms, and major roles in world affairs. This would make the world economy more equal. India’s participation in ECAFE was thus part of its broader efforts to ‘champion new principles of international justice and global governance’, so that all states would thrive economically and politically.¹¹⁴ In this process, India was more assertive than China, which preferred a slow evolution to a quiet revolution.

IV

How did Chinese and Indian policymakers evaluate ECAFE? Publicly, Chinese officials were satisfied. At the General Assembly in 1948, China’s foreign minister, Wang Shijie, said that in the past year problems in Asia had ‘received a fair amount of attention’ from the UN. One of the three examples Wang cited was ECAFE, in which ‘good work has been done’.¹¹⁵ His words should be read with a pinch of salt: he was speaking at a major public event, and in 1948 the other two examples he cited – Korea’s

¹¹⁰P. S. Lokanathan, ‘Yazhou yu Yuandong zhi jingji fuxing’ (‘The economic revival of Asia and the Far East’), *Jingji Pinglun*, 2 (1947), pp. 3–5, at p. 5.

¹¹¹‘Date of admission of member States (46) and associate members (13) of ECLAC’, https://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/static/files/fecha_de_incorporacion_de_los_estados_miembros_de_la_cepal_eng_0.pdf.

¹¹²In 1951, ECAFE, with an Asian majority, agreed that non-Asian members would respect the decision of Asian ones.

¹¹³Mark Mazower, *No enchanted palace: the end of empire and the ideological origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ, 2009).

¹¹⁴Jan C. Jansen and Jurgen Osterhammel, *Decolonization: a short history* (Princeton, NJ, 2017), p. 143.

¹¹⁵Wang Shijie, ‘Statement to the plenary session of the United Nations General Assembly’, 24 Sept. 1948, IMHA, 302-01-02-03-005, p. 1.

and Indonesia's independence – showed little progress. Wang did cite an initial if small achievement of ECAFE: it established a Bureau of Flood Control in mid-1948 on a resolution drafted by China, India, and France.¹¹⁶

Privately, Chinese delegates doubted ECAFE's effectiveness. Jiang Tingfu wrote after the first session that China achieved what it wanted, but 'one wondered what it was about: much ado about nothing!'¹¹⁷ Chen Guangfu, an industrialist and a member of China's delegation at the Bangkok meeting, noted that many ECAFE members discussed industrialization without their own capital. He bemoaned that ECAFE was only a discussion forum and where 'ordinary international civil servants' could 'receive salaries'.¹¹⁸ This negative feeling is unsurprising. ECAFE was largely an advisory body with limited operational functions. Its resolutions were non-binding, and it could not offer capital in the way that the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, founded at Bretton Woods, did. Moreover, it took time for ECAFE to organize the commission, staff it, and gather the information on rehabilitation.¹¹⁹

On India's side, some disappointment with ECAFE can be detected. Jawaharlal Nehru asked shortly after opening the third session whether ECAFE would 'lead to tangible results'.¹²⁰ Judging by this criterion, the early ECAFE would have likely disappointed him and those who shared his expectations. Perhaps this helped explain why Nehru did not fully rely on the UN system in his search for a more equal post-colonial world: he organized an Arab-Asian conference in January 1949 supporting Indonesia's independence and was a proponent of the Colombo Plan.

Despite its shortcomings, ECAFE was able to continue its work. Its potential was appreciated outside the ranks of top leaders – for instance, by some Indian officials. The Indian delegation's report on the fifth session (held in Singapore in October 1949) acknowledged that the impact of ECAFE was 'seriously circumscribed'. However, it observed that Asia was 'overladen with age-long difficulties', which ECAFE could not do much about in a few short years.¹²¹ Even when ECAFE's budget rose significantly between 1950 and 1951, as its secretariat hired more staff,¹²² it took up a mere 2 per cent of the whole UN budget.¹²³ Unsurprisingly, in the late 1940s ECAFE could go little further than producing surveys.

The Indian delegation's report briefly noted what ECAFE had achieved, claiming that the fifth session was better than previous sessions as it got down to 'concrete work'.¹²⁴ This probably referred to the establishment of the Industry and Trade Committee. One brief encounter in this committee shows that India defended the case of Asian countries. Britain and the US announced that, because they would

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

¹¹⁷Jiang, *Jiang Tingfu riji*, 24 June 1947, <https://taco.ith.sinica.edu.tw/tdk/%E8%94%A3%E5%BB%B7%E9%BB%BB%E6%97%A5%E8%A8%98/1947-06-24>.

¹¹⁸Chen, *Chen Guangfu riji*, p. 218.

¹¹⁹Brenchley, 'Work of the Economic Commission', p. 62.

¹²⁰Nehru to chief ministers, 5 June 1948, in Sarvepalli Gopal et al., eds., *Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru* (2nd ser., 85 vols., New Delhi, 1984–2020), VI, pp. 270–1.

¹²¹NAI, 12/5/50-Public, p. 3.

¹²²Wightman, *Economic cooperation*, p. 65.

¹²³C. Hart Schaaf, 'The United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East', *International Organization*, 7 (1953), pp. 463–81, at p. 478.

¹²⁴NAI, 12/5/50-Public, p. 5.

soon have ‘considerable’ amounts of exportable surplus steel, Asian countries need not expand their steel industry. India challenged this, arguing that Asian countries wanted to be ‘self sufficient [sic] as soon as possible’. Britain and the US ‘immediately corrected their position’.¹²⁵ Moreover, the report noted that ECAFE had even greater political value. It was ‘the only platform available for ventilating the political and economic grievances of the Asian countries’.¹²⁶ These small strengths perhaps explain why ECAFE had its term extended indefinitely in 1951. An ECAFE with limited power was still better than no ECAFE at all.

V

ECAFE was a forum in which Chinese and Indian ideas on post-war economic Asianism competed with one another, though there was also some agreement. Both countries intended to lead the region. P. C. Chang’s crucial role in establishing ECAFE signalled Nationalist China’s potential for shaping UN proceedings. That Shanghai hosted ECAFE’s headquarters (not without competition from Indian and other contenders) was also supposed to demonstrate China’s prime position in Asia. But once ECAFE was founded, China and India switched positions. Now Indian delegates took the lead, pressing to expand the organization’s remit and focusing on development. By contrast, Chinese delegates accepted that, with limited resources, ECAFE would proceed slowly and cater to both reconstruction and development. China and India agreed that post-war Asia should ultimately be independent and economically developed, but India’s approach was tougher and more radical than China’s. India was relatively less troubled by war devastation and could focus more on long-term development. Moreover, it had suffered more directly from colonial rule than China had. Therefore, Indian elites were keener to challenge the economic imbalance between Asia and the West, which was considered part of the Western imperial hierarchy. But Nationalist China, officially allied with the US and Britain in the war after Pearl Harbor, became both a beneficiary (if uncertain) and a victim of that hierarchy, thus finding it more difficult to mount a full-throttled challenge against it.

ECAFE was part of a much longer arc in which non-Western countries used international organizations to promote economic development for Asia and make the world economy more equitable. This makes it comparable with more prominent bodies such as the World Health Organization (which Nationalist China also helped establish).¹²⁷ Yet ECAFE’s immediate results were limited because of a lack of resources, and disagreements among its members. Chinese and Indian desires for a developmental agenda materialized slowly, too late to save the Nationalist regime in China.

Chinese and Indian contributions to ECAFE helped widen the spectrum of Asianism after the war. As Asian activists became powerholders, dealing with regional economic ills that stemmed at least partly from Western imperialism became a major theme of Asianism. China and India disagreed with one another in ECAFE, but their strands of Asianism were not simply anti-Western. They worked

¹²⁵Annexure II. Report on the work of the Committee on Industry and Trade’, NAI, 12/5/50-Public.

¹²⁶NAI, 12/5/50-Public, p. 4.

¹²⁷Sunil Amrith, *Decolonizing international health: India and Southeast Asia, 1930–65* (Basingstoke, 2006).

with non-Asian developing countries such as those from Latin America, and even with some Western economies selectively (though the latter were indifferent). This suggests an Asianism open to broader internationalism and to some co-operation with the West. This openness contrasted with the exclusivity and aggression of wartime Japanese Asianism. But the competing strands of post-war Asianism were also a reason for its decline: Asian nations themselves could not agree on how the region should move forward after war and empire. In response, some Asian countries like India and Indonesia looked for like-minded partners in the Global South, resulting in broader initiatives such as Afro-Asian internationalism.

Disagreements between China and India at ECAFE indicate a deeper rift between these two powers than once thought, spanning not only the disputes on the borders and Tibet but also conflicting visions for a post-war, post-colonial world. Furthermore, once New Delhi decided to recognize the People's Republic of China led by Mao Zedong, any remaining sense of affinity between Indian and Nationalist Chinese officials (who had retreated to Taiwan in 1949) faded away.

In the context of the history of world governance, the fact that China led the establishment of ECAFE, only for India to surpass it in initiating radical proposals, symbolizes the ebb and flow of China's and India's influences in international organizations in the post-war decades. China was the leading Asian country after 1945. P. C. Chang's advocacy for ECAFE symbolized a moment when China was garnering support from the wider non-Western world to assert its own interests and what it saw as Asia's – a theme that has had much resonance in recent decades. But as the Nationalist government lost the civil war, China was quickly overshadowed at the UN by India. While in the 1950s Nationalist China aligned more closely with the US, India was a leading member of the Afro-Asian group that sought to 'promote anticolonial causes from within' the UN.¹²⁸ Indian diplomats built on the loose network of Asian UN members that Nationalist China had helped initiate.

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¹²⁸Ewing, "“With a minimum of bitterness”", p. 255.