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# A Political Ceiling on Escalation: Peace Governance and Non-Aligned Mediation in the 1962 India–China Crisis

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**Abstract**

This article examines the Colombo Conference Proposals of December 1962 as an instance of non-aligned mediation in the aftermath of the India–China border war. Based on a close reading of the Proposals and related diplomatic materials, it argues that the initiative did not seek to resolve the dispute but to structure restraint through ceasefire consolidation, disengagement, and demilitarized arrangements. In doing so, it conceptualized peace as a form of procedural governance—a political ceiling on escalation rather than a comprehensive settlement. Situating the case within existing scholarship on mediation, failed peace processes, and middle-power diplomacy, this article shows how non-aligned states contributed to conflict management through appeal, regional legitimacy, and sovereign consent. The Colombo episode illustrates both the possibilities and limits of such mediation: it could shape conduct and contain escalation, but it remained dependent on voluntary compliance and shared interpretation.

**Keywords:** India–China border conflict; Colombo conference; non-aligned movement; Asian internationalism; peace governance

## 1. Introduction

The India–China border remains one of the longest and most persistently contested territorial frontiers in Asia (Lamb, 1964, 1966; Sali, 1998; Lal, 2008; Noorani, 2010; Orton, 2010; Raghvan, 2010). Scholarly and policy-oriented explanations for its volatility have tended to emphasize the fragile geopolitics of the Tibetan and Himalayan region, security anxieties, colonial-era cartographic errors, and the evolving strategic calculations of two rising powers as some of the key reasons (Garver, 2006; J. Chen, 2006; Noorani, 2010; Sharma, 2017a; Badatya, 2018; Chouhan, 2020; Vengasseri, 2021). Within this literature, the 1962 India–China border war occupies a foundational place, especially, through the numerous studies of border dispute from different perspectives written in different periods (Sali, 1998; Garver, 2006; Lal, 2008; Orton, 2010; Noorani, 2010; Raghavan, 2012; Sharma, 2017b; Vengasseri, 2021). It is frequently treated as the moment that irreversibly ruptured bilateral relations, transformed mutual perceptions, and set the temporal point for subsequent mistrust and militarization (Garver, 2001, 2006; Raghvan, 2010; Raghavan, 2012; Sharma, 2017b; Vengasseri, 2021). The war is also often thought of in terms of an inevitable outcome of incompatible territorial claims, strategic mistrust, failure of the 1950s policies of peaceful coexistence, or as an early manifestation of great-power rivalry in postcolonial Asia.

In the decade following Indian independence in 1947 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, bilateral relations were initially framed through the language of Asian solidarity and peaceful coexistence. The Panchasheel Agreement of 1954

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symbolized this moment of diplomatic optimism. However, tensions gradually emerged over the status of Tibet, differing perceptions of frontier alignment, and the legacy of colonial cartography, particularly the McMahon Line in the eastern sector and undefined boundaries in the western sector (Lamb, 1964, 1966; Garver, 2001). These disputes intensified through the late 1950s, culminating in forward military deployments and escalating border incidents. More broadly, the dispute must be situated within the wider challenge faced by newly established states in Asia. The consolidation of territorial sovereignty required the demarcation of borders that had often been ambiguously defined under colonial rule. China, for instance, faced numerous boundary disputes with its neighbours during the 1950s and 1960s. The persistence of the India–China dispute is therefore striking not because border disagreements were unusual, but because this particular case proved exceptionally resistant to resolution (Garver, 2006). Such accounts, while illuminating different aspects of the conflict, tend to privilege escalation over restraint and conflict over peace in their assessment, retrospectively representing the brief conflict in 1962 as a determinant for the times to come.

Some of the studies that focus on possibilities and processes of peace negotiation privilege questions such as why negotiations failed, why war occurred, and why rivalry persists post-1962, and the dynamics of further conflict in changing global alignments, to name a few (J. Chen, 2006; Raghavan, 2012; Sharma, 2017b; Badatya, 2018; Chouhan, 2020; Vengasseri, 2021). Far less attention has been paid to how peace was imagined and pursued in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, particularly by actors outside of the conflict (Jansen, 1966, pp. 330–351; Kodikara, 1973; Dhanpala, 1985, pp. 67–80; Upadhyaya, 1992; Sharma, 2017a; Badatya, 2018, pp. 74–75). This article shifts the analytical focus away from the causes of conflict or explaining their persistence toward the multiple practices through which peace was articulated, negotiated, and governed in a moment of a globally important crisis. Rather than treating peace as the mere absence of armed conflict or as the successful resolution of territorial disputes, it asks whether peace was understood as a political condition sustained through regional governance, diplomatic responsibility, and moral commitment to the idea of the third world and the global South. This article shows that in the early 1960s, peace was not universally conceived as an outcome of deterrence, military balance, or great-power arbitration; rather, a political alternative can be observed. Within the broader context of Asian internationalism and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), many postcolonial states articulated an alternative understanding of international order, one grounded in political negotiation, mutual restraint, and regional legitimacy.

These approaches did not undermine the salience of sovereignty or territorial claims, but they sought to manage conflict through mediation rather than coercion, through political engagement rather than military escalation, and through a regional framework. Peace, in this sense, was imagined not as a final settlement but as an ongoing practice of governing disagreement. This article situates the post-1962 India–China moment within this regional diplomatic landscape. It argues that the period immediately following the border war offers a valuable, yet understudied, window into how peace was conceived as a regional political project rather than a great-power imposition. Central to this effort were mediation initiatives led by smaller postcolonial states, most notably Sri Lanka under the leadership of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Acting within the framework of non-alignment and Asian internationalism, Sri Lanka sought to convene other actors from the non-aligned movement and articulate proposals aimed at preventing further escalation between India and China (Jansen, 1966; Kodikara, 1973; Dhanpala, 1985; Upadhyaya, 1992). The invocation of non-alignment and Asian internationalism in the Colombo initiative did not emerge in isolation; it took shape at a moment when the bilateral normative frameworks articulated by Nehru in India and by Mao and Zhou Enlai in China, each grounded in its

own vision of postcolonial order and peaceful coexistence, proved insufficient to prevent escalation (Garver, 2001).

The brief but intense war of October–November 1962 resulted in a decisive Chinese military victory, with advances in both the eastern and western sectors before a unilateral ceasefire was declared by Beijing. The conflict was widely perceived in India as a major strategic and political setback, reshaping domestic and international perceptions of the bilateral relationship. Two states that had previously articulated a shared postcolonial vision in the 1950s now entered a period of sustained mistrust and hostility. The Colombo proposals that emerged within this context represented an attempt to reframe the border conflict as a regional political problem rather than a site of Cold War rivalry or civilizational antagonism. Although these proposals did not resolve the underlying territorial dispute, they played a significant role in shaping the diplomatic environment of the post-war period. They provided a vocabulary for ceasefire, disengagement, and restraint, shaping the diplomatic environment within which further escalation was constrained. In doing so, they illustrate how peacebuilding can operate even in the absence of definitive conflict resolution and without the great power politics that shaped the Cold War. By focusing on Sri Lanka's mediation efforts, this article makes two interrelated interventions in peace studies. First, within the limited context, it contributes to an established body of scholarship that has questioned the centrality of great powers and formal institutions in peacebuilding, particularly by highlighting the role of non-aligned and middle-power mediation in a specific historical context. The Colombo Proposal demonstrates how small postcolonial states could exercise diplomatic influence by mobilizing regional legitimacy, shared historical experience, and non-aligned authority to shape the terms of regional conflict management. Second, the article builds on existing scholarship on failed and incomplete peace processes as a practice that need not culminate in successful settlement to be analytically significant. Even when mediation fails to resolve disputes, it can function as a political ceiling on escalation, shaping how conflicts are contained and governed and a basis for how regional actors could step in to intervene and assert their voices in the international political system.

This study is centred on a close discourse analysis of the Colombo Conference Proposals (December 1962) read alongside parliamentary debates, official statements, White Papers, correspondence, and contemporary reportage. Through a close discourse-analytical reading of these materials, it reconstructs the language, assumptions, and political logics that structured the mediation effort and framed peace as a problem of governance rather than settlement. Rather than evaluating the Colombo Plan against normative benchmarks of success or failure, the article treats them as an instance of peace governance; an effort to manage conflict through evoking regional political practice and shared commitments rather than military or material force. In recovering this episode, the article does not seek to offer a blueprint for contemporary conflict resolution or to romanticize postcolonial diplomacy. Instead, it aims to illuminate a historically plausible alternative that has been overshadowed by militarized, great-power-centric narratives and institutional explanations that define the India–China relationship. By foregrounding the role of regional actors and the limits of their interventions, the article contributes to ongoing debates in peace studies about mediation, restraint, and the conditions under which peace can be governed rather than imposed.

This argument is situated within a broader body of scholarship on mediation that has increasingly emphasized the role of local agency, middle powers, and non-aligned actors, as well as the analytical importance of incomplete or failed peace processes (Barak, 2005; Rakove, 2015; Westendorf, 2015; Azou-Passonda et al., 2019; Clayton & Dorussen, 2021; Brenner & Ben-Shmuel, 2026; Süsler & Alden, 2026). Across diverse contexts—from the breakdown of the Israeli–Palestinian peace process during the Oslo period, to mediation

efforts within the Non-Aligned Movement, and more recent cases such as the Central African Republic and post-Oslo peacebuilding trajectories—this literature demonstrates that peace processes frequently operate under conditions of partial success, breakdown, or managed instability rather than definitive settlement (Barak, 2005; Westendorf, 2015; Azou-Passonda et al., 2019; Brenner & Ben-Shmuel, 2026). At the same time, the India–China case examined here presents a distinct configuration. Unlike asymmetric or occupation-based conflicts such as Israel–Palestine, or civil war contexts such as the Central African Republic, the 1962 crisis involved two postcolonial states with comparable claims to sovereignty engaging within a shared, though fragile, framework of Afro-Asian internationalism. Their interaction unfolded within a specific historical conjuncture shaped by the normative language of Bandung-era diplomacy and the political authority of leaders such as Nehru and Mao, rather than within conditions of internal fragmentation or externally mediated enforcement. Rather than proposing a wholly novel framework, this article contributes to these debates by offering a close textual reconstruction of how such mediation was articulated in this specific postcolonial setting. While a comparative analysis of multiple mediation efforts would further illuminate differences between non-aligned and great-power approaches, this study adopts a single-case design to prioritize conceptual and textual depth. The emphasis, therefore, is on clarifying a broader modality of peace governance through detailed analysis of one historically situated episode, which may be explored comparatively in future research.

## 2. Peace as Governance: Conceptual, Historical, and Methodological Groundings

### *2.1. The India–China Boundary Dispute as an Analytical Problem*

The India–China boundary dispute emerged from the intersection of unresolved colonial-era cartographies, competing postcolonial sovereignty claims over the bordering regions, and the broader reconfiguration of Asian politics after the Second World War and colonialism (Lamb, 1964, 1966; Sali, 1998; Garver, 2006; J. Chen, 2006; Lal, 2008; Noorani, 2010). Rather than a single, clearly demarcated frontier, the boundary consisted of multiple contested sectors, most notably in the eastern sector corresponding to present-day Arunachal Pradesh and the western region of Ladakh, where differing historical records, administrative practices, and political interpretations produced overlapping claims. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, these disagreements had intensified, shaped by mutual suspicions, domestic political pressures, and the deteriorating political relationship between New Delhi and Beijing. For the purposes of this article, the boundary dispute is not treated primarily as a military or legal problem, but as an analytical site through which to examine how peace was imagined and governed under conditions of deep disagreement by postcolonial states. Prior to the outbreak of war in 1962, India and China engaged in prolonged diplomatic exchanges, negotiations, and correspondence that reflected an effort, however strained, to manage the dispute politically. Even after the war, the question confronting regional actors was not simply how to assign blame or enforce territorial outcomes, but how to prevent further escalation between two large postcolonial states whose conflict threatened wider regional instability within the fragile Cold War era dynamic.

This framing is important because it reveals that the boundary dispute generated not only antagonism and prolonged conditions of conflict but also opportunities for mediation, conflict resolution, and creating prolonged peace. Moreover, the absence of formal alliance structures, the shared experience of decolonization, albeit with different outcomes, and the broader ethos of non-alignment created a diplomatic environment in which regional actors could plausibly claim a role in managing the conflict. Within this contested diplomatic landscape, peace operated less as a final settlement than as an ongoing political practice sustained through dialogue, restraint, and institutional mediation. The role played by

the United States and the Soviet Union in influencing the 'outcome' of the war has been a subject of the existing scholarship (McMahon, 1996; Rotter, 2000; Garver, 2001; Lüthi, 2008; Radchenko, 2009; Raghvan, 2010). Moreover, the 1962 war has also been analytically subjected to the broader configurations of global politics of the early 1960s, such as the ensuing Cold War between the US and the USSR, the Sino-Soviet split, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and emerging post-Bandung politics (McMahon, 1996; Fursenko & Naftali, 1997; Garver, 2001; Lüthi, 2008; Radchenko, 2009; Raghvan, 2010; Benevuti, 2024).

Such analyses are meaningful and important for setting the boundary for this study, which focuses on a particular issue within these broader configurations, and rather than providing an alternative explanation, aims to put forward another missing piece in the puzzle. Within this context, and partially against the backdrop of these larger events, the effort of mediation known as the Colombo Plan—formally known as the Colombo Conference Plan—convened and led by Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranayake, becomes an effective case of Asian internationalism and peace as governance. The Colombo Plan, which will be analyzed shortly, and its relevance to the India–China boundary dispute should also be read against the before and after of the conflict itself; the frameworks of resolution, maintaining sovereign claims, offered by Nehru and Mao. In this context, the following questions emerge that this article aims to answer: What conception of peace does the Colombo Plan advance? To what extent can we understand the impact of this plan, morally and politically, on the belligerent actors? What is the language in which peace and conflict are articulated and framed in this plan? What does it tell us about the peace as a "condition" of regional existence? Moreover, what does it tell us about the region itself?

### *2.2. Asian Internationalism and Peace as Governance*

The mediation efforts examined in this article were embedded within a broader landscape of Asian internationalism that shaped postcolonial diplomacy in the early Cold War period. Asian internationalism, as used here, does not refer to a coherent ideology or a doctrinal project modelled on Marxist or socialist theories of internationalism. Nor does it refer to civilizational Asianism grounded in anti-Western unity. Rather, it refers to a set of diplomatic practices and normative assumptions shared among newly independent states regarding regional identity, autonomy, and responsibility. As Lüthi (2020) has shown in their account of Asian–African internationalism, postcolonial governments sought to articulate forms of cooperation distinct from both U.S. and Soviet bloc alignments, positioning Afro-Asian solidarity as an alternative diplomatic space during the early Cold War (Lüthi, 2020). Early conferences such as the Asian Relations Conference of 1947 further illustrate attempts to construct regional solidarities and shared political agendas beyond Cold War bipolarity (H. Chen, 2022).

At the same time, Asian internationalism was never ideologically uniform. As Amrith (2005) argues in analyzing the Bandung Conference's afterlives, competing discourses of internationalism coexisted uneasily in the 1950s: one invoking global citizenship and anti-colonial solidarity, another reinforcing state sovereignty and developmental discipline (Amrith, 2005). The tensions between cosmopolitan aspirations and national consolidation were constitutive rather than incidental. Similarly, Nakano (2013) distinguishes between "Asianism" and "internationalism," demonstrating that appeals to Asian unity could take exclusionary or civilizational forms that differed significantly from institutional or rule-based international cooperation (Nakano, 2013). Asian internationalism, therefore, must be understood as a contested diplomatic vocabulary rather than a settled ideological programme. In the Indian intellectual context, the imagination of Asia as a moral and political community preceded independence itself. As Stolte and Fischer-Tiné (2012) demonstrate, early twentieth-century Indian nationalism intertwined visions of Asian solidarity with

broader internationalist commitments, developing and varying with the ideas of nation and nationalism through the early parts of the twentieth century (Stolte & Fischer-Tiné, 2012). Yet the fragility of such formations is equally evident. As Goscha (2006) notes in his discussion of the later "meltdown" of Asian internationalism, revolutionary solidarities proved vulnerable to shifting geopolitical interests and competing national priorities (Goscha, 2006). Internationalist constructions could fracture under pressure.

The Indian articulation of internationalism in the Nehru years must be situated within this broader landscape. As Lobo (2010) shows, Indian foreign policy was explicitly framed around anti-colonialism, non-alignment, prevention of internationalization of conflict, disarmament, and peaceful coexistence embodied in Panchasheel (Lobo, 2010). These elements were presented as components of a larger vision of "One World" centred on the United Nations. Importantly, this conception sought to preserve Asia as an "area of peace" while maintaining sovereign autonomy (Lobo, 2010). This logic extended to Nehru's refusal to accept a permanent seat on the UN Security Council at the expense of the People's Republic of China, as documented in correspondence examined (Harder, 2015). Nehru's rejection of American proposals to replace China demonstrates that institutional legitimacy and regional stability were prioritized over immediate national advancement (Harder, 2015). Integrating China into the international system was seen as essential to preventing systemic fracture. However, the outbreak of the 1962 war exposed the limits of this bilateral moral architecture.

Panchasheel, Bandung Conference, and Asian internationalism in its varying understanding did not prevent armed confrontation between India and China. In this sense, the Colombo Conference did not emerge from idealist confidence but from crisis-induced recalibration. It represented a shift from bilateral coexistence to multilateral containment. The Colombo Conference of December 1962 represented what Upadhyaya (1992) describes as "...the first institutionalized attempt by nonaligned states to defuse an interstate conflict outside the East–West framework..." through collective diplomatic action (Upadhyaya, 1992, p. 469). Upadhyaya (1992) underscores both the initiative's peacekeeping ambition and its limitations in the face of regional conflict dynamics (Upadhyaya, 1992, pp. 470–471). This duality is analytically significant. The Colombo initiative was not merely an expression of Asian–African normative solidarity; it was an attempt to translate nonalignment into procedural mediation. Domestic political structures also shaped the space within which mediation unfolded.

On this front, early studies, such as Jetly (1976), demonstrate that India's China policy during this period remained heavily executive-driven, with Parliament playing a limited role and secrecy restricting open debate (Jetly, 1976, p. 230). The management of the conflict thus operated within a centralized institutional framework. At the same time, Sri Lanka's intervention must be understood in light of its own nonalignment trajectory. As Kodikara (1973) shows, Sri Lanka's non-alignment was not passive neutrality but a gradual development of its foreign policy from an initial involvement "...through its senior Commonwealth partner in the system of alliances of the western bloc..." to an active diplomatic positioning within regional and international forums (Kodikara, 1973, pp. 1121–1123). This opportunity of mediation, therefore, reflected both normative commitment and strategic calculation. It is within this contested and institutionally constrained diplomatic landscape that peace must be understood not as a permanent condition secured through hierarchy or enforcement, but as an ongoing political practice sustained through dialogue, restraint, and institutional mediation.

Conceiving peace as a form of governance shifts analytical attention from resolution to management. Rather than eliminating disagreement or adjudicating sovereignty conclusively, governance-oriented peace practices seek to limit escalation, structure interaction,

and contain the political effects of armed confrontation. Through tertiary intervention in a bilateral conflict, the Colombo Conference attempted to create what may be described as a 'political ceiling on escalation.' Peace governance in this instance did not require harmonization of interests or abandonment of sovereign claims. Rather, it sought procedural restraint, demilitarized zones, phased disengagement, and negotiated consultation without juridical settlement. This procedural orientation differs from forms of mediation associated with great-power or institutionally anchored processes, like the UN-led peace operations—whether peacekeeping or mediations or both—where enforcement mechanisms, guarantees, or coercive leverage often underpin ceasefire arrangements (Clayton & Dorussen, 2021). Such procedures are often, as Clayton and Dorussen (2021) note, deployed together from the early 1980s onward, with a stronger emphasis on peacekeeping (Clayton & Dorussen, 2021, p. 151). In contrast, the Colombo framework operated through appeal and consent without external enforcement, thus emphasizing the potential of mediation.

This ceiling on escalation functioned as a method of maintaining regional order without external intervention, drawing on the available political resources of postcolonial non-aligned states. Its significance lies less in resolving the dispute than in demonstrating how peace may be governed through procedural containment. This article, therefore, conceptualizes peace not as resolution, but as governance. If Asian internationalism constituted a contested diplomatic vocabulary rather than a unified doctrine, what did it mean to operationalize it in a moment of interstate war? Can peace be understood not as the resolution of territorial disagreement but as the management of escalation through regional political mechanisms? And how did non-aligned actors translate normative commitments into procedural instruments capable of structuring restraint?

### *2.3. Studying Peace Through Discourse: Sources and Method*

This study employs qualitative discourse analysis to examine how peace was articulated, structured, and operationalized in the Colombo Conference Proposals and related diplomatic texts. Discourse analysis is particularly suited to this case because the Colombo initiative operated without enforcement mechanisms, making the formulation of language itself central to how restraint was proposed, communicated, and rendered politically actionable. Rather than treating language as secondary to material power, this approach examines how diplomatic formulations—such as "appeal," "without prejudice," and "ceasefire line"—substituted for coercive authority by structuring the terms of acceptable conduct and delimiting the scope of escalation. This approach draws on insights from critical discourse analysis (CDA), which examines how language constitutes social and political realities. In this context, CDA is used here to analyze how diplomatic language performs regulatory functions by organizing political expectations, stabilizing interaction, and shaping the limits of escalation. The Colombo proposals are, therefore, treated as a political text that does not merely describe peace but actively constitutes its procedural form. This is particularly important in a context where mediation lacked material enforcement capacity, and where the effectiveness of the initiative depended on the persuasive and regulatory force of its diplomatic language.

By proceeding in this way, this article does not claim that language alone determined political outcomes. Diplomatic discourse is treated as one dimension of governance interacting with material constraints, military realities, domestic pressures, and Cold War geopolitics. The aim is to reconstruct the political grammar through which regional actors attempted to regulate escalation and to assess how that grammar shaped post-war interaction even in the absence of settlement. This methodological stance allows the article to move beyond binary evaluations of success or failure. Rather than measuring the Colombo initiative solely by whether it resolved the boundary dispute, the analysis examines how

discursive structuring contributed to imposing a ceiling on escalation and to re-situating the conflict within a regional, non-aligned framework. In doing so, the article advances an understanding of peace as governance: a political practice capable of generating stabilizing effects without producing a final resolution.

If mediation is understood as a political practice rather than merely a diplomatic outcome, how does the language of the Colombo proposals structure the possibilities of peace and conflict? What assumptions about sovereignty, restraint, and regional responsibility are embedded in the text? And how does the grammar of disengagement differ from juridical or military frameworks of resolution? This article, therefore, brackets retrospective judgments about whether the Colombo initiative succeeded or failed and instead, asks how peace was linguistically constructed, politically positioned, and diplomatically operationalized at the moment of crisis.[1] In doing so, it treats the proposals not as a failed settlement but as a political text.

## 3. The Colombo Conference and the Grammar of Containment

Convened in December 1962 at the initiative of Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the Colombo Conference brought together a group of non-aligned states—Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma, Cambodia, Ghana, Indonesia, and the United Arab Republic—to formulate proposals aimed at de-escalating the India–China border crisis in the immediate aftermath of the war (Balachandran, 2020). The resulting proposals, commonly referred to as the Colombo Plan or Colombo Conference Proposals, did not seek to adjudicate territorial sovereignty, determine historical legitimacy, or assign responsibility for the conflict. Instead, they articulated a series of procedural recommendations: ceasefire stabilization, phased disengagement, demilitarized arrangements, and political consultation, designed to prevent renewed hostilities and reduce the risk of further escalation. This section offers a close reading of these proposals as a diplomatic text.

### *3.1. The Proposal and Governing Peace*

Rather than evaluating them in terms of success or failure, it examines the language through which peace was framed, the assumptions embedded in its recommendations, and the political logic that structured its call for restraint. Read in this way, the Colombo proposals can be understood as an attempt to institutionalize a ceiling on escalation through regional mediation, a logic that becomes visible from the very first clause of the document, which opens without accusation, adjudication, or attribution of responsibility, and instead with a temporal framing that clearly concedes both the limits and the opportunity of the moment. The document states that the Conference "...considers that the existing de facto ceasefire period is a good starting point for a peaceful settlement of the Indian Chinese conflict (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963)." The phrase "...de facto ceasefire period..." is diplomatically significant, for it neither declares peace as an imposition nor characterizes the ceasefire as a resolution of the conflict; rather, it recognizes a factual condition—de facto—and converts it into political opportunity, namely "...a good starting point (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963)." Peace, in this formulation, is not imagined as an achieved outcome but as an entry into process, contingent upon continued restraint, and deliberately unaccompanied by moral judgement regarding aggression or defence. The ceasefire is therefore treated not as closure but as a platform, and from the outset, the document privileges stabilization over adjudication, a priority that becomes clearer in paragraph 2(a):

> The Conference would like to make an appeal to the Chinese Government to carry out their 20 kilometres withdrawal of their military posts as has been proposed in the letter of Prime Minister Chou En-lai to Prime Minister Nehru of November 21 and November 28, 1962. (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963, p. 227)

The formulation "…would like to make an appeal…" is diplomatically revealing. The Conference does not 'direct,' 'require,' or 'mandate,' as might be expected in the language of United Nations resolutions or sanction regimes; it appeals. The choice of verb signals the absence of coercive authority and reflects the structural limits of non-aligned mediation, where authority is horizontal rather than hierarchical, and where persuasion replaces enforcement. Unlike United Nations-mediated or great-power-brokered settlements, where language often carries implicit or explicit enforcement authority, the Colombo text deliberately avoids directive formulations. Its reliance on "appeal" reflects a horizontal diplomatic grammar characteristic of non-aligned mediation. At the same time, the appeal is not abstract but specific; "…20 km withdrawal…" and anchors itself in prior Chinese correspondence, thereby grounding mediation in continuity with already articulated commitments rather than introducing an externally imposed baseline. Peace, in this sense, is framed as structured adjustment, as the operationalization of previously expressed positions, rather than as imposed settlement, and the logic of non-aligned diplomacy here rests not on moral condemnation but on procedural facilitation. The absence of accusation and the reliance on appeal rather than enforcement reflect the diplomatic grammar cultivated within Asian–African forums of the 1950s, where legitimacy was grounded in moral persuasion and shared postcolonial experience rather than institutional coercion.

A similar logic governs paragraph 2(b), which introduces a complementary appeal "…to the Indian Government to keep their existing military position (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963, p. 227)." The asymmetry of the formulation is evident: China is asked to withdraw; India is asked to maintain its position. Yet the document does not justify, contextualize, or polemicize this arrangement, nor does it narrate the pre-war or post-war sequence in moral terms; instead, it presents disengagement as practical stabilization. The absence of rhetorical explanation is deliberate. The aim is not symmetrical justice but symmetrical restraint, not equilibrium of claims but equilibrium of conduct. Peace is thus constructed not as the balancing of historical grievances but as the regulation of present behaviour, and disengagement becomes the first stage of containment without adjudicating the legitimacy of territorial assertions. Paragraph 2(c) deepens this procedural logic:

> Pending a final solution of the border dispute, the area vacated by the Chinese military withdrawal will be demilitarized zone to be administered by civilian posts of both sides to be agreed upon, without prejudice to the rights of the previous presence of both India and China in that area. (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963, p. 227)

The clause "…pending a final solution…" explicitly suspends adjudication and defers the ultimate settlement of the dispute to bilateral negotiations between New Delhi and Beijing. The Conference does not attempt to resolve sovereignty; it attempts to regulate conduct. The proposal for a "demilitarized zone" reframes the contested space not as a battlefield but as administratively managed terrain, where military presence is replaced by "…civilian posts of both sides," thereby transforming confrontation into co-presence without prejudice to claims (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963). The "without prejudice" clause functions as an institutional safeguard: participation in demilitarization does not entail abandonment of territorial claims but entails temporary military disengagement while preserving juridical positions. Sovereignty remains intact even as escalation is bounded. Peace, therefore, is neither surrender nor compromise in the sense of settled concession; it is

procedural containment under conditions of unresolved sovereignty, where administration replaces confrontation and the management of conduct precedes the settlement of claims.

A comparable logic appears in paragraph 3, where the document proposes that "...the line of actual control in the areas recognised by both the Governments could serve as a ceasefire line to their respective positions (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963)." The formulation—"could serve"—is deliberately tentative. The Conference does not elevate the "line of actual control" into a juridical frontier nor does it validate one cartographic claim over another; rather, it treats the line as an operational mechanism, a ceasefire instrument necessary for mutual restraint and demilitarization. The line becomes functional rather than legal, procedural rather than definitive. Ultimate boundary alignment remains open, but escalation is spatially bounded. The fourth paragraph reinforces this negative conception of peace, stating that issues in the Middle Sector "...will be solved by peaceful means, without resorting to force (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963)." The economy of language is deliberate. No elaborate institutional machinery is specified, and no enforcement mechanism is described. Instead, the withholding of force becomes the substantive political commitment. Peace is defined negatively—not as settlement achieved but as violence restrained. The vocabulary echoes the earlier language of peaceful coexistence associated with Panchasheel, yet here peaceful conduct is reframed within a multilateral procedural architecture rather than bilateral moral doctrine. What emerges across these clauses is a conception of peace as governance: a method of regulating interaction, structuring disengagement, and imposing restraint without adjudicating sovereignty or assigning blame.

At the same time, the fragility of this architecture is embedded within its very language. The repeated use of "appeal," the reliance on voluntary withdrawal, the absence of enforcement authority, and the dependence on bilateral agreement for the location and composition of civilian posts reveal the limits of non-aligned mediation. The Conference can recommend but not compel; it can structure proposals but cannot guarantee compliance. The authority of the text derives from regional legitimacy and moral persuasion rather than material enforcement. Peace, in this formulation, is therefore inherently contingent—dependent on the continued restraint of actors whose sovereign claims remain unresolved and whose military capacities remain intact. The Colombo proposals do not eliminate the structural causes of the conflict; they seek to prevent its expansion. The ceiling on escalation they construct is procedural rather than permanent, political rather than juridical, and sustained only so long as consent is maintained. It is precisely in this tension—between normative ambition and structural limitation—that the Colombo Conference reveals how peace, under conditions of postcolonial sovereignty and Cold War volatility, could be governed without being imposed.

These readings are validated by Paragraph 5 of the document, which reinforces the procedural orientation already evident in the earlier clauses. The proposal underlines that the stated steps, if taken, "...would help in consolidating the ceasefire, once implemented, should pave the way for discussions between representatives of both parties (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963)." The phrase "pave the way" is not incidental; it emphasizes continuity, temporality, and sequencing, and in doing so clarifies the nature of the document and the purpose of the Conference. The objective is not to secure a final resolution but to structure a path toward dialogue. Peace is therefore staged not as an achieved outcome—as conventionally sought through arbitration, mediation, or formal adjudication—but as de-escalation as the primary condition under which political discussion becomes possible. In this respect, the procedural staging of ceasefire before negotiation affirms one of the operative logics of Asian internationalism: a regionally situated effort to cease conflict through political engagement without undermining sovereign claims. Again,

this internationalism is not anti-sovereign, nor does it dissolve the nation-state; rather, it brackets sovereignty in order to regulate conduct. This sovereign bracketing becomes even more explicit in the sixth paragraph, which reiterates the sovereignty safeguard:

> The Conference would like to make it clear that a positive response for the proposed appeal will not prejudice the position of either of the two Governments as regards its conception of the final alignment of the boundaries. (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963)

This clause performs multiple political functions simultaneously. At the most immediate level, it anticipates domestic sensitivities and questions of legitimacy that the governments in New Delhi and Beijing might face with regard to any perceived concession. The Colombo Proposal therefore makes explicit that governments may engage in restraint without appearing to concede, capitulate, or dilute sovereign claims. At a deeper level, the clause reinforces the non-coercive character of the "appeal": demilitarization is framed as a procedural step that has no bearing—adverse or beneficial—on the juridical positions held by either side. Sovereignty is not negotiated here; conduct is. In this way, the document reaffirms its own "nature" as an appeal—not an award, not an arbitral judgement, not a mediated settlement—but a structured invitation to stabilize without adjudicating. Moreover, by underscoring the non-prejudicial character of the appeal, the document evokes an alternative method of dispute management: one that operates without great-power arbitration, without Cold War bloc sponsorship, and without juridical imposition. It emphasizes political negotiation while upholding the bilateral frameworks already established between India and China and presupposes that both belligerent parties remain capable of resolving the dispute as a political question. In this sense, the Colombo Conference Proposal is more than a diplomatic suggestion; it is a collective articulation by six non-aligned states seeking to uphold both the political grammar of Bandung-era Asian–African internationalism and the bilateral normativity of peaceful coexistence articulated in Panchasheel.

It is precisely this dual implicit nature that enables the document to perform two apparently contradictory but analytically complementary tasks. On the one hand, it draws legitimacy from a repertoire of Afro-Asian internationalism that is non-hierarchical, anti-bloc, and regionally grounded. On the other hand, it affirms sovereignty as bracketed rather than abandoned. Peace thus appears as a condition that must be governed rather than declared—borne out of mutually affirmed principles of coexistence, sustained through leadership in Beijing and New Delhi, and structured through appeal rather than enforcement. Demilitarization replaces confrontation; civilian administration replaces military presence; procedural governance replaces coercive settlement. Peace, in this formulation, is not transcendence of sovereignty but insulation of territorial claims from procedural compromise.

The subsequent clarifications intensify this procedural precision. They underline that the proposals are not abstract exhortations but are grounded in existing bilateral exchanges and previously articulated positions by Indian and Chinese leadership. This is analytically significant because it reframes the Colombo Conference not as an external mediation imposed upon unwilling parties, but as a structured restatement of bilateral norms under multilateral endorsement. The six non-aligned states do not present themselves as judges, arbitrators, or watchdogs; rather, they position themselves as collective interlocutors who reactivate existing diplomatic commitments as the conditions of peace. This emphasis on bilateral normativity is crucial because it presumes that both China and India remain willing to return to political engagement, that the conflict can be reduced from a military confrontation to a political dispute, and that resolution—however deferred—remains conceivable within sovereign frameworks. In doing so, the proposals quietly challenge the normativity of Cold War bloc politics by demonstrating that regional actors can broker procedural restraint without recourse to superpower enforcement.

The Colombo Conference proposals therefore do not merely "appeal" in an abstract or rhetorical sense, they display familiarity with conditions on the ground, draw legitimacy from documented exchanges, and simultaneously position themselves in a new zone of peace-making. Their concreteness becomes especially visible in the specification that, in the Western Sector, withdrawal is to be defined as withdrawing positions to ". . .20 kilometres. . . from the line of actual control between the two sides as of November 7, 1959, as defined in maps III and V circulated by the Government of China (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963)." The precision of reference—date, cartographic citation, and previously circulated maps—transforms the appeal into a technically grounded proposal. Peace governance here operates not through abstraction but through cartographic and temporal anchoring, demonstrating once again that the document's internationalism is procedural, neither utopian nor sheer ideological idealism.

The cartographic specificity also serves to replace and reject the chances of rhetorical accusation. Reference to maps and dates depersonalizes the dispute, allowing a 'national' or 'state' level discourse to replace the claims that are subject to national interests. Similarly to the Western Sector, in the Eastern Sector, the Conference document urges, "The Indian forces can. . . move right up to the south of the line of actual control. . . The Chinese forces similarly can move right up to the north. . . (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963)." The symmetry of phrasing in this 'appeal' to Delhi and Beijing, "Indian forces. . . Chinese forces similarly" creates textual reciprocity even where the cartographic, diplomatic, military, political, and territorial interpretations differ. Throughout the clarifications, arrangements are repeatedly described as matters "to be agreed upon" between the two governments (The Colombo Conference Proposal, 1963). Rather than reading these suggestions in terms of the "incapacity" of the Colombo Conference participants, it should be read—as the analysis above demonstrates in support—as a trust in the leadership of China and India to reach on the agreement bilaterally, giving an upper-hand to the language of bilateral language of the peaceful co-existence over legalistic debates and interpretations of the international law. The Colombo powers, in this scenario, do not arbitrate final outcomes; they facilitate structured restraint recognizing the bilateral constraints and conditions.

When reading the conception of peace in the document, several discursive patterns recur, and they recur with deliberate insistence. First, the document repeatedly frames the Conference as making an appeal and a set of recommendations rather than issuing directives to the involved parties. The insistence on "appeal" is not stylistic but structural. By framing its intervention as an appeal, the document constructs a particular notion of peace as something that remains bilaterally achievable without arbitration, enforcement, or external imposition, and it does so by implicitly reactivating bilateral norms already articulated between India and China, most notably the Panchasheel principles. Peace, in this formulation, is not delivered by a third authority; it is invited back into the bilateral sphere. Second, the document emphasizes temporality rather than finality. Its language repeatedly orients the reader toward phrases such as "starting point," "pending a final solution," and "pave the way," producing a conception of peace that is processual rather than terminal. Peace is not imagined as an achieved state but as an unfolding sequence of governance practices. In this sense, the conflict is not subjected to the regime of international law or juridical adjudication; rather, it is repositioned within a temporally extended political process. The emphasis is not on settlement but on staging conditions under which settlement might eventually become conceivable.

Third, and closely related to this temporal framing, the document privileges demilitarization without adjudication. The shift from military posts to civilian administration, from forward presence to calibrated withdrawal, draws the conflict away from its militarized immediacy toward procedural containment. The text does not attempt to determine whose

historical claim is stronger, nor does it invoke cartographic legality or imperial treaties as decisive instruments. Instead, it regulates conduct. Demilitarization becomes the first order of political action, while sovereignty remains suspended rather than resolved. Fourth, as a proposal structured around non-prejudicial clauses, the document explicitly preserves the sovereign claims of India and China. The "without prejudice" formulation does more than reassure; it actively constructs a ground upon which restraint does not equate to concession. This preservation of sovereign position creates space for non-partisan and non-interventionist engagement to take hold. It allows both governments to participate in de-escalation without appearing to dilute territorial entitlement. In this way, sovereignty is bracketed but not dissolved; it is insulated from procedural compromise while conduct is simultaneously disciplined. This feature becomes particularly significant when one considers the asymmetry embedded within the proposals. Although the document maintains a symmetry of diplomatic language, it identifies the need for asymmetrical adjustments by India and China—withdrawal on one side, maintenance of position on the other. These asymmetrical adjustments should not be interpreted as partisan endorsements. Quite to the contrary, they reflect an attempt to read the material reality of positions on the ground while remaining within the normative framework of Panchasheel and the multilateral ethos of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Bandung spirit. The asymmetry is practical, not moral; it is calibrated toward stabilization rather than toward blame.

Finally, within the notion of peace advanced by the Conference, references to historical entitlement, international law, and Cold War alignments are notably absent. Yet this absence should not be mistaken for emptiness. The silence is instructive. The refusal to invoke imperial cartography, superpower alignment, or juridical verdict does not indicate analytical deficiency; rather, it signals a deliberate regional reframing. The document declines to globalize the dispute or moralize it within the language of aggression and victimhood. In other words, the Colombo proposal neither globalizes the dispute nor moralizes it; instead, it regionalizes and proceduralizes it—and in doing so reflects Sirimavo Bandaranaike's vision of regional security emerging from a small postcolonial state situated between two larger powers with whom it maintained economic and diplomatic ties. Yet while the proposal does not 'moralize' the conflict in the language of aggression or condemnation, it does not thereby undercut its persuasive force or legitimacy. On the contrary, it subtly reminds both New Delhi and Beijing that the proposals are not merely a marginal diplomatic note in their newly intensified rivalry but are entangled with their legitimacy as aspiring leaders of the Third World and, more specifically, as central actors within the Non-Aligned Movement.

The moral imperative embedded within the document does not operate through accusation; it operates through expectation. It presumes that India and China, having articulated visions of Asian solidarity and postcolonial internationalism, must act in ways that do not fracture that very claim. In this sense, the Conference aims to be influential without being coercive. This is a vital dimension of the internationalism at work here: it does not forego norms, nor does it submit to hierarchical enforcement, but imagines processes over finality and horizontal persuasion over vertical authority within global affairs. That this vocabulary of restraint and procedural containment emerged from a small postcolonial state rather than a superpower is analytically significant: it demonstrates that peace governance in this instance was not imposed from above but articulated laterally within a regional diplomatic community. Read in this way, the Colombo proposal does not articulate peace as reconciliation, victory, or juridical settlement, but as managed coexistence under unresolved disagreement. It does not redefine the boundary, nor does it claim to. Instead, it redefines behaviour around it. Peace emerges here as governance rather than settlement—a structured ceiling on escalation sustained through civilian administration, calibrated withdrawal, procedural restraint, and continued dialogue within a non-aligned

regional framework. This discursive orientation distinguishes the Colombo proposals from interpretations that evaluate them primarily through the lens of diplomatic success, compromise, or strategic failure.

### *3.2. Fragility, Divergence, and the Limits of Procedural Peace*

If the Colombo Proposals articulated a coherent procedural architecture of restraint, their reception by Delhi and Beijing revealed the structural fragility embedded within that architecture, for the very language that enabled mediation also exposed the limits of its authority. As Badatya (2018) documents, China did not reject ceasefire stabilization outright but refused acceptance of the clarifications sought by India, insisting that such additions were not part of the official Colombo report. The distinction between accepting the proposals "in principle" and refusing them "in toto" (Badatya, 2018, pp. 74–75) was not a semantic nuance but a political divergence, demonstrating that governance-oriented peace depends upon shared textual interpretation as much as shared strategic calculation. While the Conference relied upon diplomatic elasticity and appeal, the absence of enforcement authority meant that disagreement over wording became disagreement over obligation. India's reaction sharpened this divergence. While Delhi accepted the proposals in total, Nehru made clear that selective acceptance would not constitute a valid basis for negotiation (Badatya, 2018). The procedural framework, once accepted, became indivisible; selective compliance threatened to erode the integrity of the containment mechanism. Parliamentary debate and press commentary further complicated the diplomatic terrain (Indian Parliament Proceedings, 1963; Jetly, 1976). Sections of the Indian and global press initially criticized the proposals as favouring China, while subsequent commentary accused the Colombo powers of inconsistent interpretation (Badatya, 2018). For example, the Ottawa Citizen's contemporaneous reporting likewise reflected the perception that the proposals were delicate and politically charged rather than triumphant diplomatic breakthroughs (Jackson, 1963). Peace as governance, therefore, did not operate outside the political atmosphere; it was refracted through parliamentary contestation, public scepticism, and executive calculation.

China's critique further illuminates the limits of shared diplomatic grammar. Beijing objected to what it perceived as asymmetry, particularly the allowance for Indian forces to move up to the McMahon Line in the Eastern Sector, a line China had long rejected as illegitimate (Chouhan, 2020). In its January 1963 response, China argued that disengagement should apply uniformly across sectors and resisted arrangements that appeared to permit unilateral Indian positional advantage (Chouhan, 2020). Even the civilian-post mechanism within the demilitarized zone, intended as a transformation of military confrontation into administrative co-presence, became a site of renewed suspicion. What one side understood as operational stabilization could be interpreted by the other as incremental consolidation. The Colombo Proposals, thus, demonstrate that procedural containment regulates conduct but does not dissolve strategic mistrust; it redirects rivalry into textual and interpretive contestation. Some journalistic and retrospective interpretations have often framed the episode through the language of "compromise." Malhotra (2011) described the episode as a "Colombo compromise," implying negotiated mutual concession rather than structured restraint (Malhotra, 2011).

More recent commentary by Balachandran similarly emphasizes mitigation and tactical de-escalation aspects over other possible readings (Balachandran, 2020). Yet to describe the proposals primarily as compromise risks misrecognizing their discursive orientation. The Colombo text did not negotiate territorial equivalence; it bracketed territorial adjudication altogether. As Upadhyaya (1992) already observed, the initiative represented a collective non-aligned attempt to defuse an interstate conflict without subsuming it under

bloc arbitration, an experiment in procedural mediation rather than substantive settlement (Upadhyaya, 1992). The difference is not merely terminological. "Compromise" implies mutual concession on the object of dispute; Colombo structured restraint without redefining the object itself. Placed within the broader geopolitical atmosphere of 1962–1963, the distinctiveness of the Colombo moment becomes clearer.

The Cuban Missile Crisis had demonstrated how rapidly regional confrontation could escalate into nuclear brinkmanship structured by superpower bargaining (Trachtenburg, 1985; Fursenko & Naftali, 1997). The Korean War armistice and the division of Vietnam had been organized through bloc alignment, coercive leverage, and great-power sponsorship (Armstrong, 2003; Asselin, 2011). In each of those cases, containment rested upon material deterrence and hierarchical enforcement. By contrast, the Colombo Proposals operated without enforcement authority, without bloc alignment, and without superpower arbitration, relying instead upon appeal, consent, and regional legitimacy (Badatya, 2018; Chouhan, 2020). As Balachandran (2020) notes, the Colombo initiative emerged precisely from the fear that renewed hostilities might draw in external powers and widen the conflict; Sri Lanka's appeal explicitly invoked the danger of broader war (Balachandran, 2020). The proposals, therefore, functioned as a regional buffer against Cold War internationalization, structurally distinct from the Korean and Vietnamese precedents.

This episode also complicates any uncritical invocation of the Bandung spirit. The language of appeal, the avoidance of accusation, and the preservation of sovereign dignity clearly draw from the diplomatic grammar cultivated in Asian–African forums of the 1950s; yet the structural cohesion that made Bandung possible had already weakened by the early 1960s. Nehru himself acknowledged this fragmentation when he remarked that the first Bandung Conference had succeeded because of shared common ground, whereas "...now there are many controversies and conflicts between those countries, and therefore, meeting at the present moment would not be helpful (Nehru, 1962)." The Colombo moment, therefore, operated within fragmentation rather than unity. Where Bandung mobilized anti-colonial solidarity, Colombo confronted postcolonial rivalry. Shared vocabulary survived; shared strategic interpretation did not. Subsequent clashes at Nathu La and Cho La in 1967 further illustrate the provisional character of procedural containment. Tactical engagements resumed; casualties were sustained; fortifications were contested (Chouhan, 2020; Vengasseri, 2021). Yet the absence of immediate escalation into theatre-wide war suggests that the ceiling on escalation, once constructed, did not disappear entirely.

The Colombo Conference Proposals had not dismantled the security dilemma embedded in the boundary dispute, but they had established a precedent for structured restraint. Peace, in this formulation, was neither illusion nor settlement; it was a method of governing rivalry under conditions of unresolved sovereignty and persistent mistrust. The fragility of the Colombo framework does not negate its analytical significance; rather, it reveals the conditions under which peace as governance operates, such as textually negotiated, politically contingent, and structurally limited by sovereign interpretation. Its authority derived from consent rather than compulsion, and its endurance depended upon political will rather than institutional enforcement. The Colombo Conference of 1962, therefore, reveals both the possibility and the limitation of non-aligned mediation: escalation could be governed, but only provisionally, and only so long as sovereign actors remained willing to remain below the ceiling it constructed.

### *3.3. Theoretical Synthesis: Peace as Governance and the Afterlife of Asian Internationalism*

A discourse analysis of the Colombo Proposals and their reception invite a return to the central research questions of this article and clarifies what was at stake in conceptualizing peace as governance within the framework of Asian internationalism. What trajectory

of peace did the Proposals articulate? The close reading undertaken in Section 3.1 demonstrates that peace was framed not as adjudication of sovereignty nor as moral resolution of historical grievance, but as procedural stabilization grounded in ceasefire consolidation, calibrated disengagement, and regulated co-presence. The recurring emphasis on "de facto ceasefire," "appeal," "pending a final solution," and "without prejudice" reveals a trajectory that privileges containment over settlement and conduct over claim. In this scenario, peace is not a definitive outcome but a condition of structured interaction that reasserts and sustains bilateral terms of engagement. This orientation diverges in important respects from dominant approaches within peace studies. Classical peace research, following Galtung's distinction between negative and positive peace, conceptualizes peace either as the absence of violence or as the transformation of structural injustice (Galtung, 1969).

While this orientation may appear analogous to Galtung's notion of "negative peace" as the absence of direct violence, the Colombo framework differs in a crucial respect: it does not merely describe the suspension of violence, but constructs a structured mechanism for regulating military conduct, civilian administration, and political dialogue under conditions of acknowledged disagreement. Peace as governance therefore denotes not a passive absence, but an active procedural architecture designed to contain escalation without dissolving sovereignty. Conflict resolution literature, particularly on negotiation and mediation, emphasizes negotiated settlement under conditions of ripeness and mutually hurting stalemate (Zartman, 2000; Guo, 2012). Transformative and post-liberal frameworks foreground long-term reconciliation and social reconstruction (Lederach, 1997; Richmond, 2011; Richmond, 2024). Realist traditions treat peace as stability secured through deterrence and balance (Schelling, 1966; Jervis, 1978; Waltz, 1979), while liberal institutionalist approaches privilege regimes, interdependence, and institutional embedding (Keohane, 1984; Russett, 1993; Doyle, 2011). The Colombo Proposals align fully with none of these paradigms, though they intersect partially with several of them.

They do not pursue structural transformation, nor do they impose equilibrium through material leverage; they do not institutionalize binding settlement, nor do they rely on superpower guarantees. Instead, they operate in an intermediate register: peace as procedural governance; an effort to regulate escalation without resolving the underlying dispute or transforming its structural conditions. This intermediate positioning also aligns with a broader body of scholarship that has examined peace processes not in terms of definitive success or failure, but as sites of partial stabilization, breakdown, and managed instability. Studies of the Oslo peace process, mediation efforts in conflict-affected states such as the Central African Republic, and analyses of failed or incomplete peacebuilding trajectories have similarly emphasized that the absence of settlement does not preclude the presence of structured political effects. In this respect, the Colombo framework can be read not as an anomalous case, but as part of a wider pattern in which peace operates through provisional containment rather than resolution. This positioning also resonates with recent scholarship that has highlighted how peacebuilding, particularly in the context of shifting global power structures, increasingly operates through conflict management and containment rather than comprehensive resolution, even within institutional frameworks such as the United Nations (Badache et al., 2022).

What does this reveal about the political imagination of the region? The diplomatic grammar employed, horizontal appeal rather than hierarchical mandate, preservation of sovereign dignity, avoidance of accusation, and reliance on consent reflects the normative repertoire cultivated within Asian–African internationalist forums of the 1950s (Amrith, 2005; Lüthi, 2020). Yet the Colombo episode demonstrates that this internationalism had entered a different phase by the early 1960s. Rather than mobilizing unified anticolonial solidarity, it functioned as a pragmatic resource for crisis management under

conditions of fragmentation and postcolonial rivalry. The grammar survived; cohesion did not. Asian internationalism thus appears less as a stable ideological formation and more as a diplomatic vocabulary capable of adaptation under stress. The episode also clarifies the relationship between sovereignty and peace in a postcolonial regional order. The Colombo framework did not seek to transcend sovereignty but to bracket it. Through "without prejudice" clauses and calibrated disengagement mechanisms, it preserved territorial claims even as it regulated their militarized expression. Participation in demilitarization did not entail concession; it entailed restraint.

Peace as governance, therefore, emerges not as the negation of sovereignty but as its temporary domestication through procedure. As subsequent divergence between Indian and Chinese interpretations revealed (Badatya, 2018; Chouhan, 2020), this domestication remains reversible. Procedural containment depends upon shared interpretive commitment and political will rather than institutional enforcement. The broader contribution of this case to peace studies lies precisely in this intermediate character. The Colombo moment challenges the assumption, common across realist and liberal paradigms alike, that meaningful peacebuilding requires either material leverage or formalized institutional architecture. Unlike Cold War crisis settlements structured through superpower sponsorship or alliance systems, the Colombo Proposals operated without enforcement authority, alliance guarantees, or binding treaty mechanisms (Upadhyaya, 1992; Sharma, 2017b; Badatya, 2018; Balachandran, 2020; Chouhan, 2020). Their authority derived from regional legitimacy and moral pressure within a non-aligned framework. Their significance lies not in permanent resolution but in the imposition of a ceiling on escalation within a volatile global context.

The Colombo Conference did not eliminate hostility, nor did it reconcile competing historical narratives. What it produced was a structured pause; a regulated political space within which escalation could be bounded without surrendering sovereignty or inviting superpower arbitration. In doing so, it illustrates both the possibilities and the limits of Asian internationalism as a framework for governing conflict. Peace, in this formulation, is provisional, negotiated, and structurally fragile; but it is nonetheless politically real. It is governed rather than imposed, sustained rather than secured, and contingent upon the continued willingness of sovereign actors to remain within the bounds they have collectively articulated. The Colombo episode should not be read as universally replicable; rather, it illuminates a particular modality of regional peace governance that becomes visible under specific conditions: absence of formal alliance commitments, shared postcolonial legitimacy, and mutual reluctance to invite superpower arbitration.

## 4. Conclusions

This article set out to examine whether peace, in the aftermath of the 1962 India–China war, was conceived merely as the absence of renewed hostilities or as a condition of regional governance articulated through non-aligned diplomacy. Through a close reading of the Colombo Conference Proposals and their reception, it has been argued that the Colombo moment represents an attempt to govern escalation without adjudicating sovereignty, to structure restraint without enforcing hierarchy, and to translate Asian internationalism into procedural crisis management under conditions of fragmentation. The trajectory of peace articulated in the Colombo Proposals was neither a juridical settlement nor moral reconciliation. It was stabilization through calibrated withdrawal, demilitarized administration, and the preservation of sovereign dignity under a "without prejudice" framework. Peace was not framed as a resolution of historical claims but as regulated interaction—conduct managed in advance of settlement. The repeated emphasis on "appeal," "de facto ceasefire," and "pending a final solution" reveals a political imagination oriented toward temporality

and process rather than finality. In this formulation, peace is not achieved once and for all; it is sustained through governance.

The political language of the Proposals reflects the diplomatic grammar cultivated within Asian–African forums of the 1950s, horizontal appeal rather than mandate, consent rather than compulsion, legitimacy rather than enforcement. Yet the episode also reveals the limits of that grammar. The reception of the Proposals by India and China exposed the fragility of procedural containment in the absence of shared interpretive commitment. Where sovereignty is bracketed but not resolved, mistrust may re-enter through textual divergence, domestic politics, and strategic calculation. The Colombo framework, therefore, demonstrates both the possibility and the provisional character of non-aligned mediation: escalation can be bounded, but only so long as sovereign actors remain willing to remain within the bounds that they have collectively articulated. Placed against the broader Cold War landscape, the distinctiveness of this episode becomes clearer. Unlike crisis management structured through superpower enforcement or bloc alignment, the Colombo Proposals operated without coercive authority or formal treaty architecture. Their force lay in regional legitimacy and moral pressure rather than material leverage. This does not render them marginal; rather, it reveals an alternative modality of peace—one that functions as a political ceiling on escalation rather than as comprehensive settlement. Its significance lies less in resolving the dispute than in preventing its expansion within a volatile global context.

The Colombo moment, thus, complicates conventional assumptions within peace studies that equate meaningful peacebuilding with institutionalized regimes, structural transformation, or decisive settlement. It suggests that peace may also operate in an intermediate register: neither negative peace in the minimal sense of silence of guns, nor positive peace in the transformative sense of social reconstruction, but procedural peace—governed restraint under unresolved disagreement. Sovereignty is not dissolved; it is domesticated. Rivalry is not eliminated; it is redirected. Settlement is deferred; escalation is bounded. The persistence of the India–China boundary dispute, in contrast to the resolution of many other Chinese border conflicts, underscores the limits of procedural mediation. While the Colombo framework contributed to constraining escalation, it did not resolve the underlying drivers of disagreement: competing territorial imaginaries, strategic mistrust, and shifting geopolitical alignments. Unlike cases where boundary settlements were facilitated by clearer asymmetries of power or sustained bilateral negotiation, the India–China dispute remained embedded in broader questions of regional order and national identity. The Colombo moment, therefore, illustrates both the utility and the limits of governance-oriented peace: it can stabilize interaction, but it cannot substitute for political settlement. Compared to mediation efforts backed by great powers and/or formal institutions, the Colombo initiative highlights a distinct modality of conflict management: one that privileges legitimacy and consent over enforcement and guarantees. While this limits its capacity to produce a durable settlement, it underscores the role of regional actors in shaping the terms of de-escalation.

In this sense, the afterlife of Asian internationalism is neither triumph nor failure. The Bandung spirit did not survive intact into the 1960s, but fragments of its diplomatic vocabulary were repurposed into crisis governance. The Colombo Conference represents one such adaptation: an effort by smaller postcolonial states to assert regional responsibility in a moment when bilateral trust had collapsed and global escalation loomed. Peace here was not imposed from above nor secured through dominance; it was negotiated horizontally, sustained through appeal, and anchored in the legitimacy of non-aligned collective action. The India–China boundary dispute did not end in 1962, and hostility did not disappear. What the Colombo Proposals produced was a structured pause, a regulated

space within which violence could be contained without surrendering sovereignty or inviting superpower arbitration. The Colombo episode also suggests that regional actors can shape the trajectory of conflict not by resolving sovereignty disputes, but by attempting to govern their escalation. That achievement was provisional and fragile, but it was politically real. Peace, in this formulation, is not the opposite of conflict; it is the governance of it. And it is precisely in that modest but consequential sense that peace can be governed.

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## Note

[1] Retrospective assessments have variously characterized the Colombo proposals as mitigation efforts, flawed compromises, or episodes that failed to prevent enduring hostility. See, for example, Sharma (2017b) and (Sharma, 2017a, pp. 225–234) and (Badatya, 2018, pp. 74–75). For contemporary journalistic reflections framing the initiative as a "compromise" (Malhotra, 2011) or as "a non-aligned mediation attempt" (Balachandran, 2020).

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