

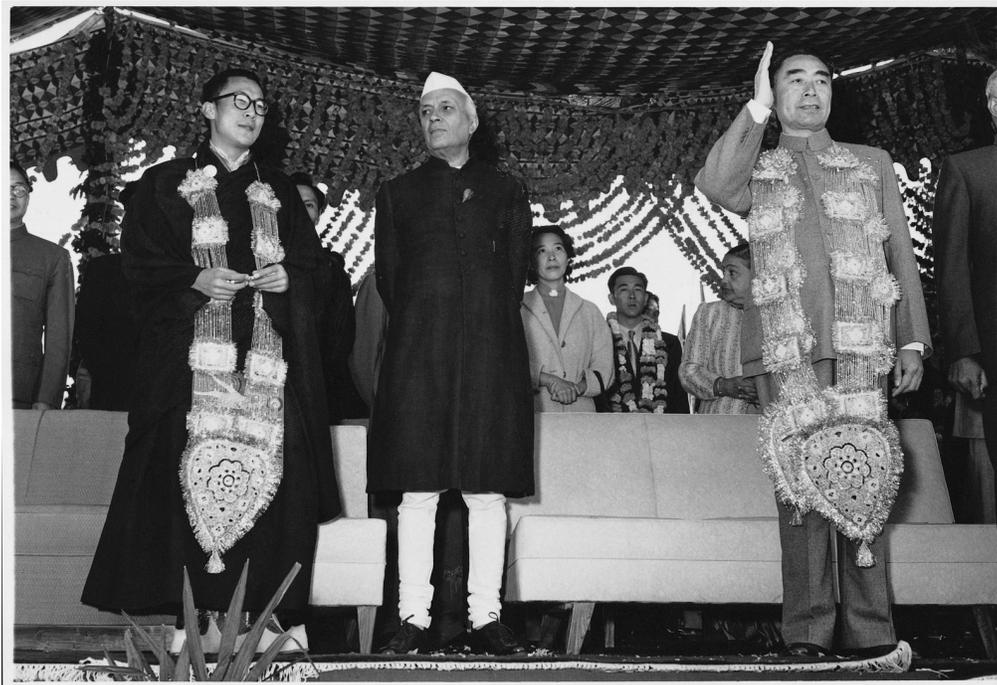
THIRD DR S GOPAL ANNUAL MEMORIAL LECTURE

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The Politics of History: India and China, 1949-1962

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HH The Dalai Lama, Jawaharlal Nehru and Zhou Enlai, 1950s

Photograph by Homai Vyrawalla

History, Howard Zinn once said, is an empty vessel and you can fill it in whatever way you can. My view is that we should have a sense of proportion about history, what is significant, and what not so significant. When we study the history of our relations with China in the decade until 1962, the debate often fixes on causation, the contributory and decisive causes leading to our defeat or, humiliation. But, of these, what is relevant to the living, and not the dead? What does that history teach us about today? How does it connect to us, today, and how we shape our future? There can be infinite meanings attached to what caused the war between India and China, but, what is the purpose for which we seek that meaning, or understand the cause of what happened? The purpose of asking this should be to seek answers that are relevant to us, today. What lessons are to be learnt about leadership, about public opinion, about logistical and military preparedness, about narrowing differences, and about negotiation? How can we deduce a new history for the future?

The historian, David Stevenson recently drew our attention [*Learning from the Past: the Relevance of International History*], *International Affairs 90: 1 (2014) 5-22*], to an interesting anecdote concerning Boswell and Johnson. In that story, we are transported to the rain-soaked, desolate moorland of the Hebrides, in which these two eminent persons are travelling. Boswell is peevish, imagining that Macbeth's three witches would emerge from the murky surroundings. Monboddo House, their destination is a tumbledown 'wild and naked place'. But the conviviality of their Hebridian host, Lord Monboddo, provides comfort to these tired travellers, and the evening conversation turns to history. Says Monboddo: "The history of manners is the most valuable. I never set a high value on any other history." To this, Johnson says, "Nor I, and therefore I esteem biography, as giving us what comes near to ourselves, what we can turn to use". Boswell meanwhile, interjects to say, "But in the course of general history we find manners. In wars we see the disposition of people, their degrees of humanity and other particulars." Johnson is still skeptical, saying "Yes, but then you must take all the facts to get this, and it is but a little you get." And then, Lord Monboddo, the host has the final say, "And it is that little which makes history valuable". History, any history, is about the book of life, as Samuel Eliot Morison once said. It is a jungle and a jumble of facts and impressions, and the history of the India-China relationship, is no exception.

Making history valuable: relating it to the "book of life", is then the challenge and, defining the historian's essential vocation the even greater one. How do we extract that "little" that makes history valuable and relevant to our present and future lives, from the passage of relations between two large Asian nations in the last mid-century? The India-China relationship in its early mid-20th century phase is a history of politics, of ideologies, of the disposition of leaders, and a history of war, the study of whose conclusions reminds us that it is we, us, who are exactly mirrored in those events and decisions, for we have not as yet, distilled the import of those events. That history has confined us in many ways, and if we are to build a secure future, we must untie our minds about it.

I am indeed honored to deliver the third S. Gopal Memorial Lecture at King's College, today. The topic I have chosen, elicits more emotion than reason, especially in India. In S. Gopal's own post-1962 writing, there is no personal account of his own role in those crucial years leading up to the war. In the service of the Indian Constitution and his government, he strengthened the policy brief on our border with China. It may, as some have argued, been a maximalist stand, but in consonance with his acknowledged reputation as a good historian, it was impeccably researched, a focused marshaling of fact, and imbued with certitude. It was a task, as Srinath Raghavan puts it, that stood at the intersection between history and foreign policy-making – where frontier history met foreign policy. Under Gopal's stewardship, the Historical Division of the Ministry of External Affairs, which did the research for the Officials Talks of 1960 with China, rose "to the peak of its performance and influence". [*Raghavan: "Imperialists, Nationalists, Democrats: The Collected Essays of Sarvepalli Gopal, 2013: 21*]

I never had the privilege of meeting Gopal. In the South Block of the eighties and nineties, Gopal's was an invisible but constant, presence, hovering over the voluminous records of the 1960 talks between the officials of India and China. There is that Christmas 1960 photograph of the Indian delegation of officials with Prime Minister Nehru, a thirty seven year-old Gopal directly behind the Prime Minister, smiling and civilized. His contributions on the historical inputs provided on the boundary question with China, as his colleague in the Ministry of External Affairs, Jagat Mehta noted, "throughout remained crucial". [*"S. Gopal and the Sino-Indian Boundary Question", Jagat S. Mehta, China Report 39:1 (2003)*] This required a mastery of fact and argument, and Mehta acknowledged Gopal's indisputable command of his subject. Mehta adds how this scholarship was the progenitor of an academic industry of sorts, globally, on the Sino-Indian boundary question in the years that followed.

Writing in 1961, on "the immense document of 555 closely printed pages, packed with comment upon comment, as Pelion piled on Ossa and Ossa on Olympus" which was the Report of the Officials authored essentially on the Indian side by Gopal, Olaf Caroe highlighted the contrasting intellectual approach to a dispute by representatives of "the two maturest civilizations in the world, each in the bloom of a renaissance." The Chinese argument, he said, was "shot through with a sly mockery" of the Indian evidence, while the Indian argument in Caroe's words, was marshaled with a lucid clarity and respect for logic worthy of any Oxford cloister. "Save perhaps on the ground of prolixity, a Socrates could hardly fault it." And, concluding with a statement that the true boundary of the Indian world is on the crest of the northernmost crinkle of the Himalaya where it overlooks and falls to the Tibetan plateau, Caroe noted the lack of common ground in the two reports, Indian and Chinese. China, he said was seeking to assert a claim, never made before, to the Indian Olympus. [*"The Indian-Chinese Boundary Dispute": Review by Olaf Caroe of the Report of the Officials, The Geographical Journal, Vol. 127, No. 3 (Sep., 1961), pp. 345-346*]

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Jagat Mehta, whose own role in the evolution of this history also stands out, spoke in later years of the intellectual pleasure of working with Gopal. When the draft summary of the Officials Report was shown to Prime Minister Nehru by Mehta and Gopal, the former's recollection runs thus: "Sitting next to the original Tang horse (presented by Zhou Enlai during his visit in 1956), in the upstairs sitting room of Teen Murti house, the Prime Ministerial residence at that time, Panditji (Nehru) took nearly two hours to read it. He asked some questions, but raised no objection." Mehta adds that "the credit for refining the punchline of (the) conclusion goes to Gopal. It summarises India's case and is worth repeating: 'The facts therefore demand respect for this boundary, defined by nature, confirmed by history and sanctified by "the laws of nations".'

The Chinese critique of the Indian arguments contained in the Report are well documented. The charge was that these were shot through the prism of imperialism. Gopal disputed this, firmly. Here are his words, "We hold, as we have again repeatedly stated, no brief for imperialism....in considering the boundary alignment it is not necessary to consider or analyse the motive of the past unless of course there is definite evidence to prove that it has a bearing on the alignment under consideration...we...have always tried to concentrate on the facts and to deal with them objectively even when they concern the period of British imperialism in India." And, directing himself towards his Chinese counterpart at the talks, Yang Gongsu, he has these words to say, "I am glad that Director Yang agrees with me that not every Englishman is an imperialist. This only proves my point that it is not sufficient to state or to prove a general motivation of British imperialism. What is necessary for our purpose is to show that every particular individual who has been cited has been describing the alignment in a particular manner because he was motivated by imperialist intentions. ..To rebut our evidence it would be necessary to prove what the Chinese side said that every Englishman who confirmed the traditional Indian alignment was therefore an imperialist.." [*Discussions, Report of the Officials, 1960, www.claudearpi.net*] In other words, through that argument worthy of an Oxford cloister, what Gopal maintained that India's boundary alignment was not an imperialist product, it was a naturally defined boundary, sanctified by tradition, and later, confirmed by history. In fact, in the description of the idea of India and its frontiers in the note on the "Historical Background of the Himalayan Frontiers of India" which can be seen in the Indian government's White Papers on the boundary question with China, written in Gopal's perfectly pitched English prose, there is this elegant salvo: "India's northern frontier is a traditional one, in the sense that it has lain approximately where it now runs for nearly three thousand years". In this description that then unfolds, the contemporary idea of India finds sanction in the triangulations of India's spiritual, strategic and civilizational identity. In this same echo chamber, I recall the words of the early twentieth century British explorer, Thomas Holdich speaking before the Royal Geographical Society (he had spent thirty-three years of his life surveying the Indian frontier) describing the Himalayas as "The finest combination of boundary and barrier that exists in the world; never was such a God-given boundary set to such a vast, impressive and stupendous frontier". And, let me revert to the words in the note by the Ministry of External Affairs in the White Papers, bearing the unmistakable signature of Gopal's style: "The Himalayas have always dominated Indian life as

they have dominated the Indian landscape. The stirring of the Indian spirit was directed towards these fastnesses, Shiva was the blue-necked, snow-crowned mountain God; Parvati was the spring-maiden, daughter of the Himalaya; Ganga was her elder sister; and Meru, Vishnu's mountain, was the pivot of the universe. The Himalayan shrines are still the goal of every Hindu pilgrim."

Where does the curtain rise on our contemporary relationship with China? One is aware of the trope upon trope about Jawaharlal Nehru's affair of the head and heart with China. Nehru made his first trip to China in August 1939, a trip that had to be cut short before a planned meeting with Mao Zedong in Yen-an, because of the outbreak of World War II in September that year. It is one of the "what ifs" of the history of the India-China relationship as to what the trajectory of subsequent events might have been if Nehru had met Mao at that stage. Be that as it may, Indian interest in China was growing significantly. Edgar Snow, writing in 1942, spoke of the "broadening" of the foundations of Indian nationalism with increasing admiration and esteem being expressed by Indians for the Chinese people in their struggle against Japanese invasion. The Burma-Assam-China frontier, "so long a barrier to intercourse", had "become a gateway, a center of struggle", with Indians now feeling politically and spiritually wedded to China and being aware of "the mutual interdependence of their destiny". It is significant also that Nehru's trip to Chungking was his first to the Far East. Mahatma Gandhi said of this new phenomenon of Indian interest in China, "Jawaharlal Nehru, whose love of China is only excelled, if at all, by his love of his own country, has kept us in intimate touch with the developments of the Chinese struggle..". Edgar Snow believed that "China has no more devoted friend alive – and hence neither has the cause of world freedom and brotherhood." [*Foreword by Edgar Snow in D. F. Karaka's "Chungking Diary", Bombay, 1942*]

India's Ambassador to the Chinese Nationalists in Nanjing, K.P.S. Menon told the historian B.R. Nanda of a meeting with Nehru in 1946 when Menon was proceeding to China as India's Ambassador in Nanjing: "He had so many questions to ask about the Chiang Kai-shek regime. ..He knew Chiang Kai-shek" (who had visited India with his wife in 1942 much to the irritation of Winston Churchill who did not want the Generalissimo to meet Gandhi and Nehru "and spread the pan Asian malaise through the bazaars of India", in his words). To continue with K.P.S. Menon's observations: "All the same, Panditji did realize that the Kuomintang regime was a corrupt regime, and worse than corrupt and it did not live up to the ideals of Dr. Sun Yat-sen..I must say, I was amazed at Panditji's intuition, and knowledge as to what was happening in China. In fact, he made a rather strange suggestion to me. He said that if I got a chance, I should get in touch with Mao Tse-tung or Chou En-lai or this group in Yen-an".

In the years after 1947, friendship with China was one of the cornerstones of Nehruvian India's foreign policy. It was only years later that China was to shake Nehru's confidence and as one writer put it, "mock his own dreams".

Let us hear Gopal on this, and I quote: “Nehru’s policy was founded on friendship with China, but China made clear, ‘when the time was ripe’, that there was no room in her outlook for friendship; and India was obliged to reformulate her policy.” The Government of India was among the first (second only to Burma) non-Communist nations to recognize the Government of the People’s Republic of China in December 1949. Gopal notes how this was despite the fact that Chinese media mouthpieces described Nehru as an imperialist quisling. Nehru was determined to ignore this brusqueness and to befriend China. “Without necessarily agreeing with or supporting China in everything, he refused to line up against her in any way”. Suggestions that India should replace China in the United Nations Security Council were rejected because India, “whatever her intrinsic claims to membership, had no wish to secure a seat at China’s expense”. [*India, China and the Soviet Union: S. Gopal, Australian Journal of Politics and History, Vol. 12, 1966, pp. 241-257*] When Chinese armies marched into Tibet in 1950, fragmenting historical geographies, and fracturing people-to-people contact in the India-China borderlands, the Indian government while stressing they had no political or territorial ambitions in Tibet urged that relations between China and Tibet should be “adjusted” through peaceful negotiations. The Chinese response was accusatory and in Gopal’s words, “unwarranted and impertinent”. Nehru was realist enough not to be sanguine about these Chinese moves. Administrative steps were taken, for instance, to extend Indian administration in NEFA – now Arunachal Pradesh, particularly in the Tawang tract and, to properly structure and formulate India’s relations with Bhutan and Nepal, and to consolidate interests in Sikkim.

In Gopal’s analysis, in the early years after 1950, as China was consolidating her ascendancy in Tibet, she wished to strengthen her hand by securing India’s acceptance of her position. This led to the April 1954 Agreement on trade and intercourse between Tibet and India where India gave up all rights that “savored” of extra-territoriality and recognized Tibet as a region of China. The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence were enshrined in the Preamble to this Agreement.

Was it a folly, as many have suggested, for the Government of India not to secure from China a formal recognition of the India-China boundary in return for recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet in 1954? Gopal thought otherwise. In his view, “there seemed at the time no reason to insist on such an explicit assurance.” The boundary between Kashmir and Xinjiang and Tibet was traditional, had been shown on official Indian maps and the Chinese, in his estimation, were obviously aware that this was regarded by India as a firm boundary. Similarly in regard to the Middle and the Eastern Sectors there should have been no doubt, as in the Middle Sector, the 1954 Agreement had specified as border passes six passes that “lay on the traditional watershed boundary”. And, in regard to the Eastern Sector, or the boundary between Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet, as far back as 20 November 1950, Nehru had stated in Parliament that the McMahon Line “is our boundary – map or no map. That fact remains and we stand by that boundary and we will not allow anybody to come across that boundary”. As India saw it, the Chinese had raised no claim in regard to the Indian depictions of the boundary, and “far from doing so”, as Gopal observed, “had affirmed their respect for the territorial integrity of India”.

But the historian in Gopal also understood China's silence. Qing dynasty claims had been embraced by the People's Government of China. Gopal saw the People's Republic "as intensely expansionist as any other in Chinese history; they only differed from their predecessors in bringing a new vigour to their policy and harnessing a new ideology in their service". When Nehru brought up the issue of an incorrect boundary alignment concerning India in Chinese maps with his Chinese hosts in October 1954 when visiting China, Premier Zhou Enlai said these maps were of little significance being reproductions of old maps and that the People's government had had no time to revise them.

Gopal's view was that at the heart of the failure to disclose Chinese claims on Indian-claimed territory at this juncture was evidence of China's having "no desire for long-term friendship" with India. By 1959, with the unfolding of the revolt in Tibet, the flight of the Dalai Lama to India and the proclamation of China's territorial claims in Premier Zhou's letter to the Prime Minister of 23 January 1959, the Rubicon had been crossed. Gopal defined it thus: "To China, India was no longer a useful friend in the Afro-Asian world but a rival; and, in addition, relations with India were entangled with China's insecure position in Tibet and her differences with the Soviet Union". The border clashes at Longju and the ambushing of an Indian police party at Kongka Pass followed. In Jagat Mehta's words, Nehru was now "caught between the outrage of Indian public opinion and serious damage to his hope that the India-China friendship would validate his confidence in different social systems coexisting peacefully." [*"Nehru's Failure with China"*, Jagat Mehta, 6 December 1989] The high noon of those years of "Indians and Chinese are brothers" and the "friendship of one billion" had been consigned to history.

Dorothy Woodman once remarked that "Nehru 'died' at the Kongka Pass, because after that time, he.. realized that they (the Chinese) were not honest about the maps. He knew about the road over the Aksai Chin. He...had discussed the boundary question and the McMahon Line [with Zhou Enlai], and Chou En-lai had really given Nehru to believe that they would accept the McMahon Line.. I think after the Kongka Pass incident ..Nehru began to mistrust the Chinese more and more and more. Then it seems to me Indian public opinion became hysterical about China. So that Nehru was himself under the pressure of public opinion; and then, he was a very tired man. I do not think ...he was ever himself again, not completely. He was a very disillusioned man".

I agree with scholars like Prasenjit Duara [*India China. Neighbours Strangers: Ira Pande, Ed., 2010*] who have said it would be unfair to castigate Nehru for a failure of statecraft. As part of his vision of exercising leadership in the comity of nations, Nehru had made the bringing of the PRC into an international arena dominated by U.S. and the Western powers a central plank of his strategy. The tragedy was that this strategy was not destined to succeed.

China's strategy on the other hand, in the years after the Panchsheel agreement of 1954 was to claim that it was acting on the basis of the Five Principles. Its refrain was to state that it was the

victim of illegal and unequal treaties when it came to the definition of its “lost” territories. These lofty views rested on rather shaky foundations. Most of the Himalayan region, including Tibet, had been part of one vast buffer zone in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If China was seen as justified in acquiring a buffer in Tibet through an assertion of sovereignty, then India was equally acting within its rights when it moved after independence to consolidate its interests in the Himalayan buffer states of Nepal and Bhutan, ensuring that Sikkim was secure, and consolidating its presence and sovereignty over areas like Tawang. And, as Duara notes, for India, the claim often heard from the Chinese, that Nehru’s government was appropriating the fruits of British imperialism seemed asymmetrical, considering that the Qing or Manchu empire, seen by the Chinese as proto-nationalist, was regarded by the republican revolutionaries in 1911, as alien and aggrandizing (read imperialist).

It can be justifiably argued that Zhou Enlai minimized the incipient territorial dispute with India, for, it is conceivable that if the Chinese leader had spoken with greater transparency about Chinese claims in Ladakh during his talks with Nehru in 1956, at the height of a period of bilateral friendship and goodwill, and before the “discovery” of the Aksai Chin road, and the revolt in Tibet, the trajectory of the dispute may have been different and the scope for a negotiated settlement based on accommodation and adjustment by each side could have been more feasible.

Nehru and Zhou: two products of different revolutions, involved in their respective definitions of nationhood, were key players in the determination of the course of the dispute. The decade-and-a-half period after India’s independence, had been “The Age of Nehru”, particularly in Indian foreign policy. Nehru enjoyed an almost “magical” prestige with the Indian people. [*Nehru, A Contemporary’s Estimate by Walter Crocker, 1966*] He was acclaimed as Bharat Bhushan, India’s jewel. In words of one of his biographers, the Australian diplomat, Walter Crocker: “It was based in part upon the fact that the people believed that he had been chosen by Gandhi as his political heir; in part upon the charm and aliveness of his mere presence; in part upon his devotion to the national interest as he saw it, so self-evident and so marking him off from the run of Indian politicians..”

Gopal, as Nehru’s acclaimed biographer, charted the evolution of Nehru’s personality over the years. Here again, China is present as that familiar compound ghost, for as he evolved as a person and intellectual, Nehru “discerned the common element in the struggles against imperialism, of whatever shade, in various parts of the world, and awakened to a sympathy with China which was to be, for the rest of his life, the core of his pan-Asian feeling.” As a young, emotional romantic particularly, the frontiers of India’s national movement for Nehru, lay in Spain and China, “for freedom, like peace, was indivisible, and in the final analysis it did not matter much where fate had pitched one’s tent”. This, then, was his formative ideology, maintaining through his life, “a half-liberal, half-Marxist position”, experimenting with democratic socialism, a superhuman experiment in itself.

During the mid-twentieth century heyday of Indian foreign policy, Nehru succeeded admirably in creating a credible image of what Kingsley Martin once called, “a third force, as if he could act as a peacemaker”. This was particularly evident during the Korean War and in Indo-China. To his international admirers, Martin being one of them, “he seemed..above all things, to be a man struggling with immense difficulties and doing his best in impossible circumstances..”

Non-alignment was Nehru’s diplomatic challenge, as some have called it, to the Cold War system. It was his attempt to remake the world, of questioning assumptions about East and West, North and South. It was his way, as is said, of “shoving back” at international structures that “shaped and shoved”. He was ambitious about his foreign policy, and India’s role in the world, navigating between two opposing blocs, confronting issues of war and peace, and leaving an indelible global imprint in a way India has not been able to do, since.

But Nehru’s view of the world was also based on a deep sense of morality. It stemmed from the zeitgeist – the yugadharma - of India’s freedom movement, the record of having toppled the British Raj through non-violent resistance. A recent work by Andrew Bingham Kennedy [THE INTERNATIONAL AMBITIONS OF MAO AND NEHRU: Andrew Bingham Kennedy; Cambridge University Press] terms it as Nehru’s imbued conviction of “moral efficacy” as opposed to confidence in the military sphere, an area where the contrast with China’s early Communist leadership is apparent.

Kennedy’s work compares Nehru not with Zhou Enlai but with Mao Zedong. In many ways this is apposite since Nehru was India’s paramount leader in his heyday in a way that Zhou was not, because the latter constantly deferred to Mao. Zhou is not known to have ever questioned Mao’s judgement, and it is assumed that all the decisions about the 1962 war with India emanated from Mao himself. Roderick Macfarquhar notes how “Mao always felt able to count on [Zhou’s] obedient acceptance of his directives, even when they went against the grain”. In this, Zhou was a contrast to Liu Shaoqi who was willing to question Mao’s judgement on some major issues: in many ways reminding one of Sardar Patel, although it must be stressed that Patel deferred to Nehru on questions of foreign policy.

Where, in contrast to Nehru and his admiration of China, were the Chinese, especially their new leadership after 1949? When Sardar K.M. Panikkar, India’s first Ambassador to the People’s Republic, arrived in Beijing in May 1950, the British Foreign Office had this to say “..it is worth keeping in mind that the Chinese on the whole have a profound contempt for the Indians.. and also a sense of very considerable superiority towards them...While the Indian on occasion may be sentimental, the Chinese is essentially a realist.. on the personality side, while the Indians are frequently superior, the present Chinese Communist leaders are physically and morally of an altogether tougher breed and fibre. Of the physical toughness of the Chinese Communist, the “Long March” is the classic, heroic symbol. ..There is no doubt whatsoever that in the technique of political organization, hardheadedness and ruthless determination and above all in realism, the Chinese Communists win hands down...”. [A.A.E. Franklin, 26th May 1950, FO 371/83558]

It follows that Nehru's main Chinese interlocutor, Zhou Enlai did not bring to the ambit of the Sino-Indian equation any special, emotional attachment. Zhou was adept in the ways of diplomacy, he adapted himself to different audiences, a study in ambivalence and seeming sincerity. At the Bandung Conference, he was the talk of the town, the object of almost forensic attention, widely seen as "the shrewdest Asian diplomat of his time" according to the Western media, and even capable of manipulating his attire to suit different political audiences!

Zhou's biographer, Gao Wenqian shows Zhou as far from perfect, often fallible, but with a "deft talent for finding some tiny crack in the wall that would allow him to appear even-keeled in his judgements". [*"The Mystery of Zhou Enlai, Jonathan D. Spence, New York Review of Books, May 28, 2009*] Throughout, he was eternally deferent to Mao, and "forced to carry Mao's execution knife". Here was a man in whom "Taoist-like concealment and endurance were combined with obedience and strategic defense..". Both Nehru and Zhou were men of great charm, tenacity and intelligence, but Zhou displayed ruthlessness and a cunning spawned on the battlefield of armed revolution.

The veteran Indian journalist, Frank Moraes, writing in 1963, had this to say about the Indian and Chinese mind, and the words still carry meaning:

"Although the Indian mind is often convoluted and sometimes enigmatic, it lacks the curious combination of realism and elusiveness that distinguishes the Chinese mind. The Chinese mind is more nimble than the Indian's, gayer, less sensitive but more practical. Without being fanciful, it likes to express itself in imagery and illustration, and the habit of building up an argument through suggestion rather than statement gives conversation with a cultivated Chinese a curiously evanescent, will-o'-the-wisp quality. It is like Huang Chuan who painted in the "boneless way," disdaining to imprison his landscapes, flowers and birds within a drawn outline". [Frank Moraes: *India and China. The American Scholar, Summer 1963*]

China's leadership, Mao down, attributed their travails in Tibet post-1959 to India. PLA and official Chinese histories of the 1962 war see Nehru as a successor to British imperialist policy on Tibet, seeking to turn Tibet into a "buffer zone". The argument is that India raised claims on Chinese territory as an adjunct to its "avarice" regarding Tibet. The line of argument propelled by Mao and which blamed Nehru for fomenting the revolt in Tibet was fully reflected in the People's Daily broadside of 6 May 1959 entitled "The Revolution in Tibet and Nehru's Philosophy". When the Soviet leadership and Khrushchev remonstrated that the troubles in Tibet, including the flight of the Dalai Lama were the fault of China, this was roundly rejected by Mao. In his words, "The Hindus acted in Tibet as if it belonged to them".

Nehru had never at any stage sought independence for Tibet. In fact, he had, in the early fifties conceded Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, only seeking respect in China for Tibetan autonomy,

or, as John Garver put it: “In terms of Tibet, Nehru hoped that China would repay India’s friendship and consolidate the Sino-Indian partnership by granting Tibet a significant degree of autonomy.” Early on, Nehru knew that there was not much any country, leave alone India, could do to prevent China’s assertion of sovereignty over Tibet. However, it would have been impossible for Nehru, given the overriding sentiment of the Indian people, to have refused asylum to the Dalai Lama.

Zhou Enlai on his 1960 visit to India maintained the Chinese perspective on Tibet. In a conversation with Ambassador R.K. Nehru on 21 April 1960, he attributed the differences and misunderstandings that had occurred between India and China to the revolt in Tibet and the coming of the Dalai Lama to India. [*Zhou Enlai to R.K. Nehru, 21 April 1960, NMML, P.N. Haksar papers*] He told Ambassador Nehru that “the developments in Tibet had a direct bearing on the border problem”. Zhou went on to say: “at the time of the Tibet Revolt, India mentioned the Simla Convention (of 1914) and asked us to accept the McMahon Line and also the 1842 Treaty (regarding Ladakh). We are not willing to accept either of them and we resent this new development.”

In retrospect, it is also clear that China misconstrued the depth of spontaneous reverence for the Dalai Lama in India. There was something peculiarly Indian, spiritual and religious in the Indian reaction. In fact, besides sheltering the Dalai Lama and refugees from Tibet, credit must also be given to India for the special efforts, initiated by Prime Minister Nehru, to preserve the artefacts, treasures, manuscripts and paintings – all heirlooms – of a Tibetan culture and civilization outside the Tibetan homeland. The despatches of Apa Pant, our Political Officer in Sikkim during the fifties describe how Nehru was reverentially called “Chogyal and Dharma Raja” by the Tibetans inside Tibet for his love and sentimental attachment to them and to their culture. They saw him as their Protector.

While some attempts to dissect the causes of the conflict between India and China have famously sought to attribute culpability to India, the views expressed by the late K. Subrahmanyam in 1970, refuting such arguments, are still very valid. When Zhou Enlai spoke in Bandung of reasonableness and restraint in dealing with “undetermined” borders, the Aksai Chin road was being constructed by Chinese crews. Indian patrols had accessed the Lanak La pass in Ladakh, in 1952 and 1954 and it was only in 1959 on their way to the same pass that our patrol was ambushed at Kongka Pass. The Chinese claims in the Aksai Chin and Ladakh were being physically realized even as Premier Zhou spoke of restraint in the fifties and were completely consolidated with the conflict in 1962. Indian administration in the areas south of the McMahon Line was already a reality before 1947, except for Tawang which was well south of the boundary claimed by India but where administration was extended in 1951. Once the fact of contested territorial claims was in the open, when the cartographic claims and Chinese presence in the Aksai Chin became public knowledge in India, the national mood rallied around the need to protect national soil from what was seen as further Chinese ingress.

The so-called “forward policy” was essentially aimed to “block lines of further Chinese advance”. The Chinese were crossing the Karakoram divide into the basin of the Indus, threatening the heart of Ladakh. The definition of the Chinese claim line in the Western Sector was a shifting line from 1956 to 1962. This was what exacerbated the Indian concerns. It was assumed on the Indian side that these forward posts established would merely stop the Chinese advance and not provoke a Chinese attack.

There were failures no doubt resting with India’s decision-making, policy formulation, and military command and control, concerning the events of 1962. Did Indian officialdom render “less than their duty to their beloved Caesar” as a former Indian diplomat once said of how Nehru was served? Was there a general surrender to the “hypnosis that Panditji knows best”? Culpability, objectively put, must be shared by both sides, India’s and China’s for the train of events that transpired. And, to heap reprobation on Nehru for our humiliation in 1962, does not do justice to the scale of his achievements in our foreign policy and national rejuvenation, or to the fact that while he saw the inevitability of China consolidating sovereignty over Tibet after 1949, he did put in place a definition of our frontier policy based on tradition, custom, geography and history, that was aimed at protecting rather than rendering vulnerable, our sovereign territory and putting India first.

In retrospect, given the fact that the policy of setting up defensive posts in territory that India saw as its own, was no declaration of war, was not intended to dislodge the Chinese from the Aksai Chin road, but only aimed at defending against what was seen as a steadily advancing Chinese claim line, and the fact that the Chinese vacated territory they overran in Arunachal Pradesh, the 1962 attack by China seems, in historical retrospect, to have achieved little except to hugely damage trust and friendship with India. The lessons that history impart are that conflict is a zero-sum, and that rebuilding the relationship, as a result, from the ashes of 1962, has been an arduous process.

For both countries, no amnesia is called for about 1962, only the need to learn from experience. Gopal would not have wanted any airbrushing of the history of what transpired in our relations with China before 1962. I am sure that he would have been more than willing to subject his own role in the evolution of the dispute to objective scrutiny. I am convinced he was serving a national cause, as we would all have seen it, in that formative era of the relationship, and his task was logically aimed at formulating a case for India that would be unimpeachable. As Srinath Raghavan has noted, Gopal was not shy of revisiting his ideas and assumptions in the light of new information and developments. In the decades after the China war, his work in contemporary history, where he was a pioneer, saw him evolve into a public intellectual with a range of interests. He was one who felt deeply that the domain of ideas should be open to contestation. I believe he would have wanted that the history of the dispute and the war be examined so that we are able to extract value from it, value that will guide living and future generations of Indians. We must not, of course, be “archivally challenged”, as NSA Shivshankar

Menon recently put it, in this regard and present and future generations of scholars must be able to access the records of that era, in both countries in the interests of full disclosure and transparency.

The intersection of historical research with policy making which Gopal's work in the Ministry of External Affairs represented, was unique and not replicated since, and the Ministry is the poorer for it. At the same time, let us recognize that Gopal made a compelling case for India on the boundary question with China and that pending a border settlement, taking all the measures necessary to safeguard our interest both on that high frontier and also in our China policy is necessary and justifiable, even as we seek an avoidance of conflict.

China came into our territory in 1962 and called it self-defence, another name for war. Fifty years have not been enough to undo the damage of 1962. One can only hope that the next half-century will yield more positive dividends for peace and reconciliation between these two Asian giants, two neighbours who critically define the future of Asia, and bring a lasting, fair and most importantly, a peaceful settlement of their bilateral differences on the boundary.