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Telling it on the Mountain
**India and China and the Politics of History:
1949–1962**

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Telling it on the Mountain

India and China and the Politics of History: 1949–1962

Nirupama Rao

History can never be written backwards. It must begin where it began, rooted in the time and space of its beginning and, as is often said, it is about the book of life. Between India and China, and in speaking of their complex, involute relationship, history is often refracted through the prism of the conflict of 1962 and permeated with judgments in India that are emotionally burdened with bitter memories of shock and humiliation. In China, the war is scarcely mentioned, but not forgotten. Moreover, there is limited understanding in the public domain about what transpired in those fateful months of 1962.

The India–China relationship in its mid-20th century phase is a history of politics, of ideologies, of the disposition of leaders, and a history of war. This history has confined the relationship in many ways, and if a secure future is to be built for it, both countries must un-tie their minds about those early years in their post-independence/liberation relationship. The politics of history involving the relationship between India and China in the period before the conflict of 1962, must therefore, ensure a sense of proportion about that history, distilling the meaning of the events that transpired and the key determinants in the evolving

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relationship between these two Asian powers in mid-twentieth century. How does that history connect to us, and how do we shape our future? That history cannot be for the dead even as we enshrine their memories, but should be relevant to us, the living. While there can be infinite meanings attached to what caused the war between India and China, what lessons are to be learnt about leadership, about public opinion, about logistical and military preparedness, about narrowing differences, and about negotiation?

Let us raise the curtain on India's modern-era relationship with China. As war clouds gathered over Europe in August 1939, Jawaharlal Nehru as a prominent leader of the Indian National Congress and one who was in the forefront of India's freedom struggle made his first trip to the Far East. His destination was Chongqing or Chungking as it was popularly called in those days, where he arrived on 23rd August and was accorded an impressive welcome as recorded in a despatch to the British Foreign Office by the country's mission in Chungking. On the day of his arrival, the Japanese "perpetrated an air attack on Chungking ... an occurrence which was, in a sense not unfitting, since Mr. Nehru had made the long journey from India in order to show sympathy with China in her war of resistance". The trip itself, had to be curtailed because of the outbreak of World War II in September and Nehru left Chungking after meeting Generalissimo Chiang Kai shek but without meeting Chinese Communist leaders Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Before he left China, in a radio message to the Chinese people—to "...this mighty land and the great people who inhabit it...", he said: "I saw myself as one of the long succession of pilgrims who had traveled to and from between India and China from ages past and who had forged so many golden links of faith and art and culture and civilization between them. Perhaps, I thought, that even I, small as I am, a soldier in India's cause, might be an agent of historic destiny." Praising the spirit and the struggle of the Chinese people against foreign aggression, he was effusive, referring to the New China, vital and vibrant, that he had seen, and saying, "Who can crush this spirit or stop China from treading the path of her destiny?" He saw China and India as young and vital nations who had been



“...countries of yesterday, but the future beckons to them, and tomorrow is theirs...”¹

India’s freedom struggle and the Chinese struggle against Japanese invasion helped the flowering of a mutual empathy between the nationalist leaders of the two countries. Writing in 1942, Edgar Snow spoke of the “broadening” of the foundations of Indian nationalism with increasing admiration and esteem being expressed by the Indians for the Chinese people in their struggle against foreign 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”.²

Nehru’s interest in China never flagged. Strategic analyst, K. Subrahmanyam notes³ that by 1946, “...Nehru had very correctly assessed that in the post-war world there would be only four great powers: the United States, the Soviet Union, China and India...”. But, to call Nehru blind to the threat to India from China would be misplaced. The late Frank Moraes, one of India’s leading journalists in the 1950s and the 1960s, who went as a member of India’s first cultural delegation to the People’s Republic in 1952, wrote in his diary on 25 April 1952—after a briefing of the delegation by Nehru, that an animated Prime Minister said, “...we must not let China have the upper hand. Else we start on the slippery path...”⁴ In his later book, *Witness to an Era*, Moraes also wrote that Nehru told the same delegation, “...never forget the basic challenge in Southeast Asia is between India and China. That challenge runs across the spine of Asia...”⁵ In 1959, Nehru drew reference to having visualized, since 1950,

¹ British Foreign Office Archives; File FO 371/23535.

² Edgar Snow, Foreword to “Chungking Diary” by D.F. Karaka, Bombay, 1942.

³ K. Subrahmanyam: “Nehru and the India-China Conflict of 1962”, in *Indian Foreign Policy, the Nehru Years*, edited by B.R. Nanda, New Delhi, 1976.

⁴ Frank Moraes papers: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

⁵ Frank Moraes, *Witness to an Era: India 1920 to the Present Day*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1973.

two powerful states coming face to face with each other on a “tremendous border”. His biographer, Michael Brecher, noted in 1958 that Nehru was not “...oblivious to the inevitable long-run rivalry between Democratic India and Communist China for the leadership of Asia. He knows full well, but never admits in public that the ideologically uncommitted countries of the area are watching the contest between Delhi and Peking, particularly in the economic realm, to see which system can deliver the goods...”⁶

The advent of a Communist-led government in China with the establishment of the People’s Republic in October 1949, signalled a fundamental change in the geopolitical landscape of Asia. For Nehru, “the fact of the change in China” had to be recognized. China could not be left on the margins of the global stage if peace had to be secured in a lasting manner and another global war prevented. 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. In the words of the historian Sarvepalli Gopal, “Without necessarily agreeing with or supporting China in everything, (Nehru) 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”.⁷ In the years after 1947 and India’s independence, 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 mock his dreams.

Tibet, that high altitude, wide expanse, natural buffer between India and China triggered the first stress test in the relationship between the two countries. In 1947, the Tibetan government in Lhasa, “contrary to precedent and custom” as reported by the Political Officer in Sikkim, “went out of its way to send greetings

⁶ Michael Brecher, *Nehru, A Political Biography*, Oxford University Press, 1959.

⁷ Sarvepalli Gopal, “India, China and the Soviet Union”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 12, 1966.

to the newly installed Indian Government in Delhi”.⁸ In October 1947, the Indian Ambassador to the Chinese Guomintang in Nanjing, K.M. Panikkar, reminded the Chinese Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs—in connection with the negotiations for a Commercial Treaty between India and China—that though the Government of India recognized Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, it regarded Tibet as an autonomous territory. As the British despatches termed it, this was the first occasion on which the new India’s attitude toward the Sino–Tibetan problem was made apparent to the Chinese. However, the same communications also acknowledged that for a young Indian nation to prejudice her relations with so important a Power as China by aggressive support of unqualified Tibetan independence was (also) therefore a policy with few attractions. It was noted that while on Tibet, the Indian government’s attitude could best be described as that of a benevolent spectator, in regard to the Indo-Tibetan boundary and the stand on the McMahon Line, the approach was to adhere to the boundary line as drawn in 1914 in the talks between Sir Henry McMahon and his Tibetan interlocutor Lonchen Shatra. All this while being also prepared to discuss in a friendly way with China and Tibet any rectification of the frontier that might be urged on reasonable grounds. Interestingly, Ambassador Panikkar also circulated a memorandum in November 1948, where he predicted the strong direction in which a Communist government in “Peking” would move—the McMahon Line, and “the entire boundary from Ladakh to Burma may become a new area of trouble.” He was of the view that the Tibetan government in Lhasa was likely to proclaim independence after the fall of the Guomintang in China and that if such a move received the support of India, Britain, and the United States, “there may be hope of keeping the new Chinese Communist state away from the Indian border”.⁹ History, of course, unfolded quite differently as far as the international response to Tibet’s status was concerned.

⁸ However, in this period, the Tibetans while expressing their intention to abide by existing Treaties with India, concerning Tibet, took advantage to raise fairly considerable territorial claims in areas south of the McMahon Line.

⁹ “When China goes Communist”, Memorandum by K.M. Panikkar, Nanjing, November, 1948 (British Foreign Office Archives, FO371/75798).

In late 1950, the People's Liberation Army was overrunning the Tibetan marches and knocking at the doors of Lhasa. With her independence in 1947, India had assumed the treaty obligations of Britain regarding her frontiers, and in relations with Tibet. In September 1949, the British High Commission reported to the Foreign Office in London that in light of the Communist advances in China, Prime Minister Nehru "had discussed the Tibetan problem with Secretary General G.S. Bajpai¹⁰ of the Ministry of External Affairs and that the Government of India were as anxious as any (British Indian) government in the past, to retain Tibet as a buffer between them and China. At the same time it was felt in New Delhi that the regime in Tibet was completely out of date and that "the Lamas" could not in the long run resist Chinese infiltration. India doubted the wisdom of any attempt to bolster the "lama" regime, and did not feel that she had the military resources to effectively defend Tibet against Chinese encroachment. Nor (was it) assumed could the UK or the USA give much practical assistance in Tibet. London acknowledged that the Indian approach was not out of place. Reporting from Nanjing, the British diplomats based there were of the view that the Indian Ambassador, K.M. Panikkar (contrary to views expressed in the Memorandum of November 1948) was partly responsible for this misgiving as to whether there was very much India could do about Tibet. Panikkar told the British in Nanjing that even a small expedition could dispose of the regime in Lhasa, citing the example of the Younghusband expedition.

At the same time, the intention of the British government was to "...fade quickly out of the Tibetan picture..."; neither the US nor the UK was prepared to recognize Tibetan independence; the responsibility for this was designated as primarily Indian; moreover, these countries wanted India to promote passive resistance by Tibetans to Chinese rule. When the Chinese armies marched into Tibet in 1950, the Indian government, while stressing that they had no political or territorial ambitions in Tibet, urged that relations between China and Tibet should be "adjusted"

¹⁰ "Knight and Administrator" as he was referred to in British despatches.

through peaceful negotiations. The Government of India were under no illusions about the fact that despite any talk of Tibetan autonomy in the 17-Point Agreement between China and Tibet of 1951, Tibet would be reduced—as Secretary-General Bajpai told the British High Commissioner in New Delhi in June 1951—to a mere dependency and that the Chinese troops would be on the Indian frontier. India felt it was not in a position to affect the course of events in Tibet but would take active steps to watch her frontier with China and not allow any incursions of Chinese troops on any pretext.

From the early years after independence, in the Indian government's viewpoint, the inaccessibility of Tibet was a myth, and it was inevitable (as a completion of the last unfinished step of the Chinese civil war) that the Communist government in Beijing would intervene and overrun Tibet easily. In a telegram sent to Hugh Richardson, the newly appointed Government of India's representative in Lhasa, the Ministry of External Affairs, (paraphrasing Ambassador Panikkar's views concerning Tibet), said in November 1949: "It has never been our point of view that Tibet is an independent country; we have in fact upheld the theory of Chinese suzerainty ... If China decides to make her suzerainty effective we have hardly any right to intervene so long as our Treaty interests are safeguarded. The only definable interests we have are trade rights and recognized boundary".¹¹ (As events transpired, neither of these last two factors was treated with any sense of affirmation by the Chinese.) Chinese Foreign Ministry archives in fact, reveal a discussion between Ambassador Panikkar and Vice-Minister Zhang Hanfu of the Chinese Foreign Ministry in which the former is believed to have, according to the Chinese, acknowledged China's sovereignty over Tibet.¹²

¹¹ Telegram to Lhasa, November 11, 1949; J.N. (S.G.) Papers (Ist Part) File no. 31 (part 1), Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

¹² "Discussion on Tibetan Problems During Vice Minister Zhang's Reception of Ambassador Panikkar" in "Record on India's Interference of our Liberation of Tibet and our Replying Documents", 15 August 1950, Archive no. 105-00010-01(1), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China quoted in Lezlee Brown Halper & Stefan Halper, *Tibet An Unfinished Story*, USA: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 103 and 288.

Nehru was realist enough however, to be less positive about the 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, while consolidating interests in Sikkim. This is especially relevant in the context of the apparent and much-vaunted differences between Nehru and Sardar Patel,¹³ his Home Minister and also other important colleagues like C. Rajagopalachari and K.M. Munshi over how to deal with the change brought about by the Chinese presence in Tibet. (Those differences were, as it has been noted elsewhere, reflective of the deep divide in the Indian foreign policy establishment on the nature of the Communist threat.) However, Nehru was also clear that India could not wrest Tibet from Chinese control, a view he maintained throughout; speaking to the Dalai Lama in April 1959, he said, “Let us face facts. One cannot bring heaven to the people of India even if I wish it. The whole world cannot bring freedom to Tibet unless the whole fabric of the Chinese state is destroyed.”¹⁴

There are many voices in India that target Nehru for allegedly ignoring the implications of the Chinese entry into Tibet and through this fundamental “flaw” in judgement, involuntarily enabling the slide into the chasm of conflict with China in 1962. But, reality unlike this subjective rendition of events past, is more nuanced. Even before the establishment of the Communist government in China, in September 1949, Nehru was speaking to his Cabinet colleagues such as John Mathai, Finance Minister, on the likelihood of Chinese troops entering Tibet and the resultant implications for India’s national security. R.K. Nehru, Foreign Secretary during the 1950s, and also Ambassador to China, had this to say in an interview recorded in 1972:

¹³ Brought out in Sardar Patel’s letter to Prime Minister Nehru of 7 November 1950. For an annotation of the issues brought out by Patel, see K.S. Bajpai, “Weightlifting” column in *Outlook: www.outlookindia.com*, 16 November 2009.

¹⁴ Subimal Dutt Papers, Subject File No. 9, April 1959: Record of the Prime Minister’s Talk with the Dalai Lama (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library).

...but Nehru, although there was considerable opposition in the Cabinet, I think, took a sound and correct view of our relations with China. There was a demand from a section of the leadership of the Congress party that because of this new threat based on the assumption that the Soviet Union and China were close allies, that should be met by our drawing closer to the United States. That is, taking part in effect, in its anti-Communist crusade which the Americans were organizing. Nehru's assessment of the situation was different. First of all, he did not regard China as a natural ally of the Soviet Union and, secondly, he realized that any close alliance with the U.S. would have an adverse effect on our interests for three reasons. China and the Soviet Union would draw closer together and, after all, they were next door neighbours to us. Their capacity to cause damage to our interest was much greater than any other country. Secondly, the United States would have asked for a price and the price would have been pressure on us to yield to Pakistan on Kashmir ... and thirdly, our main concern was to consolidate our independence ... it was a very sophisticated approach....¹⁵

Nehru obviously recognized the momentous change wrought by the establishment of the People's Republic and the implications of this for Asia and the world. He saw the resurgence of China's power as inspirational for oppressed peoples, but was not oblivious to the resultant consequences for India which embodied a form of government and democratic choice antithetical to what the new government in Beijing represented.

In the early years after 1950, as China was consolidating her ascendancy in Tibet, she wished, as the historian Gopal noted, 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 "savoured" of extra-territoriality and recognized Tibet as a

¹⁵ R.K. Nehru recorded by B.R. Nanda, 8 April 1972: Oral History Transcript, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

region of China. The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence were enshrined in the Preamble to this Agreement.¹⁶

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 endorsement of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet in 1954?¹⁷ With the benefit of hindsight, while the Chinese did not, at that stage, give India any explicit reason to suspect their intentions regarding the location of the frontier, the non-affirmation by China of a boundary based on the McMahon Line—agreed between Britain and Tibet in 1914—came at significant future cost for India. 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...”. The Chinese however, given their declared opposition to any legacies of an imperialist nature concerning Tibet, had already begun to speak of the “illegal” McMahon Line from early on in the relationship with India and despite the reiteration of respect for territorial integrity in the Five Principles contained in the 1954 Agreement had not explicitly affirmed their respect for India’s borders as they stood defined in the maps published post-Independence.¹⁸

¹⁶ Nehru expressed the view after his visit to China in 1954 that the wider application in Asia and the world of the principles underlying the preamble to the Tibet Agreement would contribute to international peace and cooperation.

¹⁷ Nehru’s view at that time was that as regards Tibet, there were no territorial issues outstanding with India, only a number of relatively minor problems arising after the Chinese entry into Tibet, relating to cultural interests, trade, pilgrim traffic, posts and telegraphs ... his view was that India did not claim any position in Tibet which questioned the full sovereignty of China.

¹⁸ It was on the eve of the discussions leading to the Tibet Agreement between India and China that a dispatch in the “Scotsman” newspaper of 23rd February 1953 spoke of motor roads being built by the Chinese in Tibet. One such artery was the building “at top speed a motor road from Sinkiang province, in the heart of Chinese Asia, through Western Tibet, to Lhasa.” This was the famous Aksai Chin road but the newspaper report of its construction does not seem to have been noticed by policy makers in Delhi at that time.



China's silence spoke volumes. The Qing dynasty claims over Indian territory had been largely embraced by the People's Government of China. Again, in the words of S. Gopal, the People's Republic was "...as intensely expansionist as any other in Chinese history; they only differed from their predecessors in bringing a new vigor to their policy and harnessing a new ideology in their service".¹⁹ When Nehru, while visiting China, brought up the issue of an incorrect boundary alignment concerning India in Chinese maps with his Chinese hosts in October 1954, Premier Zhou Enlai was obfuscatory. He said these maps were of little significance—being reproductions of old maps and that the Chinese People's government had had no time to revise them.

All this formed a backdrop to an era when the slogan "Indians and Chinese are brothers" (*Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai*) echoed in the public spaces in both countries. With the unfolding of the Khampa 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 Indian Prime Minister of 23 January 1959, the rubicon had been crossed. Historian 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...".²⁰ The border clashes at Longju were followed by the ambushing of an Indian police party at Kongka Pass. In the words of former Indian Foreign Secretary Jagat Mehta, 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...".²¹ The high noon of those years of "Indians and Chinese are brothers" and the "friendship of one billion" had been consigned to history. As part of his vision of exercising leadership

¹⁹ Gopal, *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, op. cit.

²⁰ Gopal, op. cit.

²¹ Jagat Mehta, 6 December 1989 (unpublished paper): "Nehru's Failure with China".

in the comity of nations, Nehru had made the bringing of the People's Republic into an international arena dominated by U.S. and the Western powers, a central plank of his global strategy. The tragedy was that this strategy was incapable of fulfillment. It became a victim of the clash of perceptions between India and China regarding their common frontier as well as the tragic and twisted fate of Tibet.

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. Yet, 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 too was acting within its rights when it moved to consolidate its interests in the Himalayan buffer states of Nepal and Bhutan after independence, making it clear that Sikkim's status was not questioned, while consolidating its presence and sovereignty over areas like Tawang. It seemed difficult to accept the charge often made by the Chinese that Nehru's government was appropriating the fruits of British imperialism, coming as it did from a government that saw no contradiction in asserting its own claim over all the territory originally absorbed into China during the expansionist phase of the Qing Empire. It was the same empire that had been called alien and aggrandizing at the outset of the Chinese Revolution.

For Nehru and his India, 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 perfectly pitched English prose, there is this opening salvo, probably drafted by Gopal, then Director of the Historical Division of the Ministry of External Affairs: "...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 the description that then unfolds, the contemporary idea of India finds sanction in the triangulations of India’s spiritual, strategic and civilizational identity. This is reminiscent of the words of 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...”.²²

Did Zhou Enlai minimize the incipient territorial dispute with India? 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 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. This was a period when bilateral friendship and goodwill was at its height, before the “discovery” of the Aksai Chin road linking Xinjiang and Tibet across Ladakh, and the revolt in Tibet.

In retrospect, it is also clear that China misconstrued the depth of spontaneous reverence for the Dalai Lama, who was granted refuge in India in March 1959. There was something peculiarly Indian, spiritual, and religious in the Indian reaction.²³ In fact,

²² Holdich quoted in James Marshall-Cornwall and Lord Birdwood, “The Geography and Ethnics of India’s Northern Frontiers”, *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 126, No. 3, Sept. 1960.

²³ In a personal interview with this author in April 2014, the Dalai Lama recounted his first meeting with Prime Minister Nehru in Beijing in October 1954. In the Dalai Lama’s words: “We were very much excited. Then, ... at the official dinner party, ... Nehru came together with Zhou. Zhou Enlai introduced me, saying this is the Dalai Lama. Pandit Nehru became motionless. Speechless. At least, I think fifteen, twenty seconds. I felt, oh ... I think Pandit Nehru was reflecting on past history and Sardar Patel’s prediction. Then, Zhou Enlai, very smart, immediately introduced the next person, I think, the Panchen Lama.”

besides sheltering the Dalai Lama and refugees from Tibet, credit must also be given to India for the special efforts to preserve the artefacts, treasures, manuscripts, and paintings—all the precious heritage—of a Tibetan culture and civilization, outside the Tibetan homeland. The despatches of Apa Pant, India's Political Officer in Sikkim during the 1950s describe how Nehru was reverentially called “Chogyal and Dharma Raja”²⁴ by the Tibetans inside Tibet for his love and sentimental attachment to them and to their culture. They saw him as their Protector although, such beliefs co-existed with despondency about independent India's policy positions on Tibet and Tibetan autonomy.

The politics of history between India and China in those early years is also revealing in terms of the contrasts between their leaders, particularly Nehru and Zhou: The latter were products of two different revolutions, enmeshed in their respective definitions of nationhood, and dominant role players in the determination of the course of the dispute. The decade-and-a-half period after India's independence was “The Age of Nehru”, particularly in Indian foreign policy. Nehru enjoyed an almost “magical” prestige with the Indian people.²⁵ Again, Gopal charts the evolution of Nehru's personality over the years. Nehru “discerned the common element in the struggles against imperialism, of whatever shade, in various parts of the world, and awakened to sympathy with China which was to be, for the rest of his life, the core of his pan-Asian feeling.”²⁶ As a young, emotional, particularly romantic, 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...”²⁷

²⁴ Apa B. Pant, Political Officer in Sikkim, Papers (1st Instalment), Subject File No. 4, 1956–57. Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

²⁵ Walter Crocker, *Nehru, A Contemporary's Estimate*, London, 1966.

²⁶ S. Gopal, “The Formative Ideology of Jawaharlal Nehru”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 11, No. 21, 22 May 1976.

²⁷ Gopal, op. cit.

The fifties were the heyday of Indian foreign policy, where 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. 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”.²⁸ 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 on the world situation of his time. This view of the world based on a deep sense of morality stemmed from the zeitgeist of India’s freedom movement, the achievement of having toppled the British Raj through non-violent resistance. Andrew Bingham Kennedy²⁹ terms this 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 reasonably clear that all the decisions about the 1962 war with India rested, ultimately, with Mao himself. Zhou never seemed to take issue with the veracity or the substance of the Chairman’s directives. Ultimately, the two, Zhou and Nehru do not exist on the same plane, although they were counterparts in dialogue on bilateral relations; Zhou was the diplomat Premier, but Nehru was the Prime Minister who was the prime mover.

²⁸ See Andrew Bingham Kennedy, *The International Ambitions of Mao and Nehru: National Efficacy Beliefs and the Making of Foreign Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

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 the May of 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 ...".³⁰ The Indians emerge from these archival histories as wide-eyed, subjective-minded spectators to the rise of China with little to match the hard-nosed and focused intentness and the cold realism of the post-liberation breed of Chinese policy and decision makers.

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 adapting himself to different audiences, a study in ambivalence and seeming sincerity. At the Bandung Conference in 1955, essentially China's coming-out party, 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

³⁰ Note, 26 May 1950, FO 371/83558, British Foreign Office Archives.



in his judgements...”.³¹ Throughout, he was eternally deferent to Mao, carrying the “executioner’s knife” for Mao. Here was a man in whom “...Taoist-like concealment and endurance were combined with obedience and strategic defense...”.³² While both Nehru and Zhou were men of great charm, tenacity, and intelligence, Zhou displayed a strategic cold-bloodedness and cunning drawn directly from the battlefield of armed revolution.

Writing in 1963, Frank Moraes had this to say about the Indian and Chinese mind. 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.³³

Nowhere were these contrasting styles and differences in substance more evident than in the Report emanating from the Officials Talks of 1960 between the two sides. Olaf Caroe commented 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...” that highlighted the contrast in intellectual approach to the dispute by representatives of “...the two maturest civilizations in the world, each in the bloom of renaissance...”. The Chinese argument, he said, was “...shot through with a sly mockery...” while the Indian argument

³¹ Jonathan D. Spence: “The Mystery of Zhou Enlai”, *New York Review of Books*, 28 May 2009.

³² Ibid.

³³ Frank Moraes, “India and China”, *The American Scholar*, Vol. 32, No. 3, Summer 1963, pp. 445–450.

was marshaled with a lucid clarity and respect for logic worthy of any Oxford cloister. “Save perhaps on the grounds 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 sides of the Report. China, in his words, “...was seeking to assert a claim, never made before, to the Indian Olympus...”³⁴ The gulf between the two countries in regard to the positions elucidated in these talks between officials was never sought to be diminished through discussions at a higher political level after 1960 and before 1962, and the slide into conflict took an inexorable course thereafter.

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”. Remonstrations by the Soviet leadership and Khrushchev that the troubles in Tibet, including the flight of the Dalai Lama, were attributable to faulty Chinese policy were roundly rejected by Mao, who proclaimed, “The Hindus acted in Tibet as if it belonged to them...”³⁵

All this notwithstanding was the fact that Nehru had never at any stage sought independence for Tibet. By 1956, Chinese analysts were of the view that angst about India’s so-called “unfriendly” activities during the Dalai Lama’s visit to India (when Zhou Enlai was also present) was palpable; not

³⁴ Olaf Caroe: “The Indian-Chinese Boundary Dispute”, *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 127, No. 3, Sept. 1961, pp. 345–346.

³⁵ John Garver: <http://indianstrategicknowledgeonline.com/> China’s Decision for War with India in 1962.



accidentally, the Chinese Premier at that time, “signaled a linkage of the McMahon Line and India’s attitude toward Tibet”.³⁶

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. He told Ambassador Nehru “...the developments in Tibet had a direct bearing on the border problem...”.³⁷ 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.”³⁸

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 in 1970 by the late K. Subrahmanyam,³⁹ refuting such arguments, are still very valid. While 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 again in 1954 and it was in 1959 on their way to the same pass that an Indian patrol was ambushed at Kongka Pass. The Chinese claims on the Aksai Chin and Ladakh were being physically realized early from 1955 onwards and completely consolidated with the 1962 conflict. Indian administration in the areas south of the McMahon Line was already a reality before 1947, except for Tawang which was

³⁶ Dr. Cheng Xiaohe, “From Ally to Partner: the Evolution of Sino-Pakistan Relations”, *Journal of Renmin University of China*, Vol. 2, Spring 2007, pp. 61–81.

³⁷ Zhou Enlai to R.K. Nehru, 21 April 1960, P.N. Haksar papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ K. Subrahmanyam: Review article on “Neville Maxwell’s War”, *Journal of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses*, No. 3 (2), October–December 1970.

south of the boundary claimed by India but where administration was extended in 1951. Once the contested territorial claims were out in the open, 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 (wrongly named) “forward policy”⁴⁰ (flawed in its execution, as subsequently revealed official records have shown), was essentially aimed to “...block lines of further Chinese advance...”. The Chinese were crossing the Karakoram divide into the Indus basin, threatening the heart of Ladakh. The definition of the line that the Chinese claimed in the Western Sector had shifted from 1956 to 1962. This was what exacerbated Indian concerns. It was tragically assumed that these forward posts established would merely stop the Chinese advance and not provoke a retributational and massive Chinese attack. For India, the consequences were disastrous.

There were failures no doubt resting with the Indian side concerning the events of 1962. Did Indian officialdom render “...less than their duty to their beloved Caesar...”—Nehru—as a former Indian diplomat⁴¹ once said? Was there a general surrender to the “...hypnosis that Panditji knows best”? Was our intelligence adequate, and more importantly, was what available assessed properly by the departments concerned? Did the higher echelons of decision making in the Ministries of Defence (including Army Headquarters) and External Affairs, misread Chinese intentions and capabilities? The many historical accounts and memoirs post-conflict would suggest that these factors cannot be discounted.

Culpability must be shared by both sides—India’s as well as China’s for the train of events that transpired. In retrospect, the Chinese attack in 1962 achieved little except to take away a long-

⁴⁰ It was more a surveillance policy; “forward” policy recalls the British empire’s moves to consolidate its reach and power in the frontier marches of the Raj.

⁴¹ Jagat Mehta, *op. cit.*



term, stable relationship. The Chinese, from all accounts, appear to have interpreted India's moves to set up a line of 'active' defence involving the creation of posts in territory seen as Indian in the Aksai Chin, as provocative. Nowhere did the Indians signal their intention to dislodge the Chinese from the Aksai Chin road but merely to prevent further what was seen as creeping Chinese ingress east of an increasingly fluid Line of Actual Control.⁴² The lessons that history imparts are that conflict is a zero-sum and that rebuilding the relationship from the ashes of 1962 has been an arduous process.

The fact is also that the Chinese withdrew from territory occupied south of the McMahon Line after the conflict. On this aspect, Chinese analysts express the view (see Jing Hui quoted by Shan Zhiqiang, *ibid.*) "...with regard to the border conflict of 1962 between India and China, it was very clear who was the victor and who was the loser. But looking back..., the person who was the winner was winner only in name, while the loser walked away with everything on the table". Today, while some people call the Chinese actions as "...the most virtuous move on the battlefield...", some others refer to it as the 'biggest blunder'.⁴³

The Benefit of Hindsight

It would not be misplaced to deduce that an opportunity was missed during the early days of their diplomatic interaction in the early fifties, when as India consciously relinquished privileges inherited from the colonial era in regard to Tibet, it could have

⁴² See Shan Zhiqiang, "Himalayas quiet for 50 years; why India and China cannot really be considered neighbours", in the *National Geographic* (Chinese edition), December 2012.

⁴³ The same article by Shan Zhiqiang concludes thus: "On the occasion of the commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Sino-Indian conflict, we have heard some weak noises that obstructing the process of 'historical strengthening' of India's claim in territory it illegally occupied from China would constitute the best gift we could give to the memory of these soldiers who remain buried in these snowcapped mountains and plateaus. But within my heart there is a deep sense of disappointment, for I believe that China has lost this territory for ever."

sought and also obtained mutual agreement with China about their shared borders. But once the situation in Tibet deteriorated with the revolt that led to the flight of the Dalai Lama to India that window was essentially closed. On the Indian side resentment at Chinese actions on the border, armed clashes, and the consolidation of a case regarded by India as watertight, to support India's definition of where the border lay—with the increasingly narrowed ventricles for action for Nehru in the face of public and political opposition to negotiating a settlement with China—set the stage for conflict. The decisions to set up advance posts in disputed areas, perceived by India as sovereign territory, coupled with the conviction that the Chinese would not attack in strength or escalate tension, indicated a profound misreading of the opponent's intentions.

In June 2011, the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist establishment, the *People's Daily* in its online edition, published an article titled “Why did Mao Zedong decide to start the India–China War?”⁴⁴ The key points made were that Nehru's biggest “card” was that China would not “...dare to go to war with India...”. Secondly, the US was “...preparing for war with the USSR...” (a reference to the Cuban Missile Crisis) and not in a position to help India. Thirdly, the border war was a political–military battle. Fourthly, that “...India should not attempt to solve the boundary issue through military means...” and fifthly, that if it had not been for the war of 1962, peace and stability on the India–China border would not have been maintained for such a long time since then.

The key phrase that catches the eye from this Chinese analysis is that the 1962 war was a military–political battle from China's point of view. It was a battle directed by the top leadership of China at that time—Mao Zedong, with Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, and Deng Xiaoping. The border war was engineered by China as being “...in the nature of a warning and a punishment...” because, in Mao's view, Nehru and the Indian Government were trying to

⁴⁴ *People's Daily Online*, 3 June 2011.



solve the boundary problem “...through military means...”. It was Mao who directed that meticulous preparations be made for battle against the Indians, since victory was not assured and since the “sacred territory” of Tibet was involved and also because there was no previous experience of waging war with India. At the meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee, Mao is believed to have stood before a large map and said “...we will penetrate inside, not fight...” and then, added, pointing at Indian strongholds, and saying in a loud voice: “Sweep them off.” The staff officer of the Tibet military region is reported to have read out the instructions of the Party leadership saying: “...The leader considers that this war is of great significance. We need to be ruthless. If we kill them, still we have to tread on their two legs...”. According to the instructions conveyed to the troops, the leadership in Beijing considered the issue as very important since “...the impact will be very deep...”. It was “...the moment for the communist party cadres to display ourselves...”; the Indian troops needed “...to be attacked like a tiger; dealing with them was like dealing with a mid-level Guomindang army.” No established practice would be followed in warfare with the Indians, for that was Mao’s preference. After the war, Mao is reported to have said, “...this time, I took part in the war, and also Shaoqi, Premier (Zhou) and Xiaoping...”

Interestingly, new research from China indicates that from 1955 onwards, the Chinese government had resolved to introduce so-called “democratic reform” in Tibet, a move that elicited strong Tibetan resistance. When the Dalai Lama came to India in 1956 at the invitation of the Indian government for the 2500th birth anniversary celebrations of the Buddha’s *Parinirvana*, some Tibetan areas in Sichuan were already in revolt. The Dalai Lama had at that time, almost decided to stay on in India but was persuaded to return to Tibet by Zhou Enlai who had also come to India at the invitation of the government. Zhou told him that the bombing of monasteries (by the Chinese air force) was a mistake and that the reform would be delayed. Contrary to these assurances (Zhou told Nehru at the same time that the McMahon Line would not pose a problem , “...we don’t have any choice



but to accept it...”),⁴⁵ the military action in Tibet lasted six and a half years officially ending in the summer of 1962. By then the Chinese military personnel in Tibet were more than prepared to address the challenge from India on their borders.⁴⁶

What the Chinese archives reveal is that the approach to India while based on a neighborhood policy overtly cast in coexistence was essentially defined by the need to consolidate Chinese interests in Tibet and on China’s southwestern periphery.⁴⁷ In the ultimate analysis, the relationship could not be rescued from factors relating to Tibetan security and stability, suspicions of Indian intentions in Tibet on the part of the Chinese, and the perception that the Indians having refused to accept negotiations for a mutually acceptable border settlement were militarily intent on stopping Chinese troops from building a presence in what they saw as their territories along the border.

On the Indian side, as tensions escalated before the war, Nehru believed that the Chinese had deceived him, personally. The

⁴⁵ Conversation with a mainland Chinese scholar in Philadelphia, 26 December 2014. The scholar told me that the Tibet action by China in the 1950s leading up to 1962, was China’s “secret war” and cited three telegrams from Mao Zedong to force commanders in Tibet. In these, Mao welcomed the rebellion because it provided an opportunity to train the Chinese army. According to this source, the army involved was the 54th Army that had fought in Korea, and was sent to Lanzhou bordering Tibet and Xinjiang, in 1958. In 1959, these troops were despatched from Qinghai to central Tibet contiguous to the border with India. By the time the rebellion in Tibet was completely quelled in 1962, the army was fully trained, with high endurance levels and ability to withstand high altitude climate conditions. Guarding China’s “backdoor”—the border with India and testing how strong the Indian army was—became the next, important focus.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *The Statesman*, Kolkata was reported to have carried an article a few months after the 1954 Sino–Indian Agreement on Tibet had been signed on how Chinese officials in Lhasa were ferrying important historical documents from Tibet to Beijing for study. Obviously, starting from a point of relatively sparse knowledge about Tibet and its foreign boundaries, they were preparing to consolidate their “case” on the boundary with India. (Source: *Tibet, An Unfinished Story*, op. cit, p. 156.)



Chinese tendency to avoid being too explicit when it came to defining their bottom lines on a border settlement, to paint broad brush strokes rather than detailed, fine lines, provided scope for different assumptions and interpretations to the disadvantage of India. Nehru emerges from the pages of the history of that era as Lear-like figure, tragic, torn, in declining health, buffeted both by what was seen as Chinese deception as also by the slings and arrows of his political opponents who felt it expedient to take what some termed as a “heroic posture” that not an inch of Indian territory would be surrendered without considering either the scope for compromise or, whether India had the logistical and military preparedness to back up such a stand. Nehru’s tragedy was that on the questionable assumption that this was well-justified public opinion, he was unwilling to take a resolute position against such political opposition to seek a fair and equitable solution to the boundary problems with China.

The two countries are still writing the second act in this story of the life of their relationship. Around them and within their own borders, worlds have changed unalterably. But a clear and rational reading of the history of the fifties and early sixties in their bilateral interaction yields useful pointers. Diplomacy as it has been said is life without maps, but an understanding of history enables us to chart new paths and avoid the quicksand of times past. The period between 1949 and 1962 in India–China relations deserves study for the lessons it provides on the deepness of the complexities inherent in the boundary dispute between the two countries, and the realization that only a combination of hindsight about history and foresight can help infuse the pathways to an ultimate solution with rationality of approach, and long-range strategies for conflict management, de-escalation of tensions, and a final boundary settlement that is built on strategic defensibility, the interests of settled populations in the border areas, and connectivity that enhances the all-round economic development of these regions.