

Chinese Strategic Thinking on Tibet and the Himalayan Region

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Tibet has been of crucial importance to the dominant powers of South and East Asia in their respective strategic calculations in the past, just as it is now. The domination of the region by either power, directly or indirectly, has been an accurate indication of one power's supremacy over the other. At the turn of the century, it was the arena of the "Great Game" between Great Britain, Tsarist Russia and China. And by 1950, when two nationalist regimes had emerged in China and India, Tibet again became a matter of acute contention between the two nations. The critical question was: who should occupy the strategic frontier region between the two giants? Nehru submitted to Chinese demands by 1954, hoping that both parties would respect the Himalayas as the limit of each others's political influence and defence perimeters. Since then, much has happened in Sino-Indian relations.

India's Dual Policy Towards Tibet

The strategic importance of Tibet is lost neither to China nor to India. The seeming lack of interest that New Delhi now shows in the Tibetan question should not be misconstrued as lack of strategic appreciation of Tibet; it is more a diplomatic posture of accepting the Chinese reality in Tibet in the face of Chinese military might. Indeed, there had been certain degree of helplessness in the Indian attitude with regard to the Chinese takeover of Tibet. Given the chance, and in the absence of Chinese military might, to reassert its political power in Tibet, even Nehruvian India would have prepared to pursue essentially the same policy as the British did in the past. As Nehru stated in December, 1950, "From time immemorial, the Himalayas have provided us with magnificent frontiers . . . We cannot allow that barrier to be penetrated because it is also the principal barrier to India."¹ That policy was designed to make Tibet a buffer state among the three great imperial powers that

surround the Himalayan piedmont—India, China and Russia. The wisdom of such a policy in geopolitical terms can hardly be challenged even from a late twentieth century perspective, regardless of the imperialist origins of the conception. It, of course, assumes necessary capability of the concerned balance of power, which the British possessed as the then greatest empire in the world. But as capitalist imperialists, the British policy-planners were most concerned with the economics of imperial defence, and the buffer theory was the most economical means of securing imperial security along a 5000-mile long Himalayan boundary.

We know that both Nehru and Indira Gandhi used to scoff at the ideas of buffer zone and balance of power as outdated imperialist scheming. But I repeat, given the chance and in the absence of Chinese military might, Nehru would have pursued a modified, if necessary, policy of the buffer zone towards Tibet. After all, such a conception is not only dictated by such geopolitics but is also the most economical way of security. There is some evidence for this line of thinking. In 1947, the Tibetan delegation was invited to participate at the Asian Relations Conference. Immediately after independence, New Delhi wrote to Lhasa stating that all the past treaty commitments would be respected.² Nor did India show any hasty willingness to relinquish any of the privileges in Tibet inherited from the British; these privileges were withdrawn in the early 1950s when the Chinese military occupation of Tibet became an undeniable reality. Finally, when Mao's China declared in 1950 its intention of "liberating" Tibet, India, including Nehru, did not remain silent; Indians vociferously protested against the entry of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) into Tibet. Such protests were obviously dictated more by common Indian concern for national security than moral sympathy for unarmed Tibetans.

But once the 40,000 strong PLA troops were in control of the situation in Tibet by 1954, Nehru completely changed his policy tactics. There was practically nothing, he concluded, that India could militarily do to dislodge the PLA, situated quite firmly in the Himalayan piedmont. Thus, instead of fruitlessly antagonising China, New Delhi sought by all means to befriend China and thereby reduce the security threat from China, the threat that directly resulted from the Chinese military occupation of Tibet. The Panch-sheel (1954) by which Tibet was virtually sacrificed at the altar of

Sino-Indian friendship, and the subsequent euphoria of *Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai* should be seen from this perspective. Now whether Nehru succeeded in maintaining Indian national security vis-a-vis China through Sino-Indian friendship is difficult to say. The 1962 border war might suggest that Nehru's friendship policy was ill-conceived. But before that, his policy forced three fundamental problems which tended to undermine Sino-Indian friendship: first, mounting opposition throughout the 1950s from the Indian public and right wing political parties to his China policy; second, increasing border tension by the late 1950s; third, the growing Indian involvement with the Tibetan question and the Dalai Lama's asylum in India in 1959. These problems acted as contradictions in India's China policy which inevitably led to the Sino-Indian war in 1962. On the whole such contradictions might indicate that the Indian elite was, and still is, not quite reconciled to China's capture of the Himalayan piedmont which used to be the British Raj's exclusive sphere of influence. In March 1969, a group of Indian Parliament members led by Jayaprakash Narayan urged their government to make a fresh appraisal of its policy toward Tibet. They cited Tibet's strategic importance to the national security of several Asian countries, including India, in these terms; "Independent Tibet is vital, not only to the national interest of India but also that of the Soviet Republics of Central Asia, of Mongolia, of Pakistan, of Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and of Burma."³

At any rate, after the 1962 war, Nehru's friendship policy toward China began to undergo some inevitable changes. The attack was viewed as the height of Chinese ingratitude for what India had done for China at Bandung and the United Nations. A deep sense of betrayal pervaded the Indian attitude towards China. The modified policy which still seems operative might be called a double-tracked one. It maintains officially that Tibet is a part of China but clandestinely it aids the Dalai Lama and his government-in-exile to an extent that annoys China and hinders any prospects for improvement of Sino-Indian relations. As far as India is concerned, the second aspect of its dual policy is dictated by continuing Chinese involvement in internal Indian affairs. China supports Pakistan's stand on the Kashmir dispute; it still refuses to recognise Sikkim's merger with the Indian Union; it has aided Naga insurgency for decades; it was involved with the Naxalite movement, etc. Allega-

tions have also been made that there might be a Chinese hand behind the Punjab and Gorkhaland problems. Whatever may be the veracity of such allegations, the point is sufficiently clear; the dualism in India's China policy is, to a large extent, dictated by Chinese involvement in India's internal affairs. This is a game two can play, and it will continue. It might be a sad pointer to an unfortunate fact: the two Asian giants are objectively positioned in the international system as rivals not as cooperative partners. Such rivalry is not conducive to mutual friendship.

Chinese Strategic Perception of Tibet

Just as the Indian elite seems to perceive Tibet primarily in strategic terms, the Chinese counterpart does so even more. The difference in the intensity of perception has to do with different historical experiences. For the British, Tibet was a second or outer rampart of a grand imperial strategy, born out of the luxury of imperial power; the bogey of Russian intrigue in Tibet does not have much historical basis⁴. The British attempt to make Tibet a buffer state among the rival imperial powers is now interpreted by Chinese Communists as a diabolical imperialist scheme to separate Tibet from China and open the latter's backdoor to the influence, of and attack by, imperialism. If China's backdoor is open, then China is not safe and secure; all sorts of foreign influences and interventions would penetrate China. Although there has been no attack against China proper using Tibet as a military base, the East India Company did try to open up China for trade via Tibet. And the British Raj's influence in Lhasa up to 1947 was popularly perceived by Chinese not only as gross interference in Chinese internal affairs but also as an imperialist strategy of encircling China. Thus, Republican China perceived Tibet as its backdoor which must be shut if China were to achieve national security. "Tibet again is the door that shuts off Yunnan and Szechuan, and should we prove remiss, the teeth will feel cold when the lips have gone."⁵ Once the backdoor region was occupied, Communist China began to perceive Tibet, especially during the 1970s as China's "south-west outpost against imperialism, revisionism and reaction⁶," terms that are specific references to countries considered hostile to China then—the Soviet Union and India.

In fact, one of the main reasons for the Communist takeover of Tibet is strategic, rather than historical claims or ideological motives. Historically, Tibet's relations with China in terms of the tribute-paying system are not much different from Korea's or Mongolia's relations with the Middle Kingdom. If, however, Chinese frequent military intervention in Lhasa especially during the Yuan and Ching dynasties renders Sino-Tibetan relations somewhat different from other cases, we must remember that we find a similar pattern of Chinese intervention in Vietnamese affairs for centuries. In other words, if we continue to believe in Chinese historical claims over Tibet, we have to explain why other similar dependencies like Korea or Vietnam were not "liberated" on the same historical ground.

We, therefore, suggest that the Chinese Communists who were strategists *par excellence* through their lifelong guerrilla warfare, realised early the strategic importance of Tibet and decided to shut China's backdoor in 1950. As the years rolled by, and events proved, Chinese strategic appreciation of Tibet deepened. The Tibetan Rebellion of 1959 and the Sino-Indian border war of 1962 tended to strengthen Chinese belief in the strategic importance of Tibet. No sooner had the PLA troops entered Eastern Tibet than they began building roads. Strategic development continued in Tibet for more than two decades, and certainly the most spectacular aspect of the overall development in Tibet from 1950 till 1976 has been strategic or military-oriented. This is not to deny the economic aspect which is secondary; it is merely to point out a simple fact, often concealed and ignored, that strategic development overshadows all other aspects of the exported revolution in Tibet. Most of the economic assistance that China claims to have rendered Tibet has actually gone into strategic road building. This is not surprising when we keep in mind that China usually spends 10-11% of its GNP on national defence and that next to the borders facing the Soviet Union, Tibet is probably one of the most strategic and vulnerable regions in the whole of China.

While it is difficult to know exactly how much China spent on these strategic development projects, we can get a rough idea if we piece together the shreds of available evidence. During the First Five-Year Plan (1953-1957) when China poured millions of silver dollars into Tibet, Beijing spent \$4,232 million on "transportation

and communication," supposedly for the whole country. The amount constituted 11.7% of the total development expenditure.⁷ There is evidence to suggest that most of that total amount went for road-building projects in Tibet. In his book on national minorities, Chang Chih-I, deputy director of the United Front Work Department of the CCP, wrote:

With respect to communication and transportation, the greater part of the new highway construction throughout the country since Liberation has been located in the frontier regions of the motherland and in areas inhabited by national minorities. . . The highway routes involving major engineering were, among others, the following: Kangting-Tibet, Tsinghai-Tibet, Tsinghai-Sinkiang, Chengtu-Apa, Lanchow-Langmuszu, Kunming-Talo, Lhasa-Shigatse, Shigatse-Gyantse, and Phari-Yatung."⁸

It should be noted that most of the highways listed above are in Tibet proper and the rest in the Sinkiang-Tibet border regions. In other words, the Chinese Communists rightly realised that the first task of liberation was not social reform or economic development; it is strategic development that received the first priority. Prior to 1950, the lack of communications, especially motorable roads frustrated repeated Chinese attempts, both Imperial and Republican, to gain effective control over Tibet. Even the tottering Manchu dynasty tried at the turn of the century to build roads in Khan (Eastern Tibet) but did not make much progress. With such precedence, the history-conscious Chinese Communists realised right from the start that without modern communications, the enormous physical barriers would make any attempt at liberation of Tibet meaningless. Thus, almost immediately after the conquest of Tibet in 1951, the Chinese began constructing highways that would link Tibet with China for the first time in history. Such strategic developments in Tibet in the 1950s largely enabled the PLA to be militarily ready for the 1962 border war. By 1965, two highways effectively linked Tibet with interior China. And by 1975, China had completed 91 highways totalling 15,800 km with 300 permanent bridges in Outer Tibet alone, by which 97% of the region's counties were connected by motorable roads.⁹ Thus, it appears that China had completed its vital strategic preparations in Tibet by 1975. This is indicated not only by the Chinese announcement

about the completion of 97% of strategic requirement in that year. From October 1975, China allowed a number of select foreign visitors to visit Tibet, and in 1980, the region was declared open to tourists. All these actions indicate growing Chinese confidence, backed by the enormous strategic build-up, in a region that had rendered the PRC the biggest propaganda defeat ever since its founding in 1949.

Our findings suggest that for almost 25 years (1951-75) China concentrated on strategic development in Tibet, which overshadows any other enterprise including social reform or economic development. Certain objective factors tended to dictate the military oriented development: (1) the strategic vulnerability of Tibet where China confronted India and the Soviet Union who had been, in Maoist eyes allied since the early 1960s in their shared hostility towards China; (2) persistent Tibetan resistance, which by itself may not pose any real danger to the well-entrenched PLA in Tibet but always has the dangerous potential of inviting foreign intervention in the strategic region that could transform it into another "Vietnam"; (3) the silent but continuing arms race between India and China has the tendency to determine a military-oriented development in Tibet.

I have described in detail elsewhere the Chinese strategic activities in Tibet during the past 25 years.¹⁰ Here it is sufficient to summarise the highlights of the projects. Some highways connect China with Tibet. The Szechuan-Tibet Highway (South Military Road) is 1413 miles long. With an average height of 13,000 feet, the highway crosses fourteen high mountain ranges and twelve major rivers. It passes through most of the important places in Eastern Tibet and finally reaches Lhasa. From there the highway—under a new name, the Sinkiang-Tibet Highway, passes through most strategic places in Western Tibet. The third trunk road, the Chinghai-Tibet Highway (the Northern Military Road) starts from Sining and passes through Amdo and Naghukha and reaches Lhasa. The fourth highway is called the Yunnan-Tibet Highway which passes through Chamdo and connects with the Szechuan Tibet Highway at Lhasa.

While these four highways link Tibet with the neighbouring Chinese province, there are even more complex and more useful networks of highways connecting all the strategic and sensitive

points on the international borders along the Himalayas. The Szechuan-Tibet Highway has several branches which reach out to south and south-western Tibet facing the eastern sector of the Sino-Indian borders. The same highway also has other branches passing through Shigatse reaching out to the central and western sectors of the Himalayan boundary. One branch connects Sinkiang with Tibet, and the second offshoot leads to the Sikkim-Tibet borders. The third offshoot of the Szechuan-Tibet Highway leads to the Nepal-Tibet borders.

In short, the four highways not only link Tibet with China but, in particular, the Northern Road and the Western Road complexes cut across the continental Tibetan plateau, running almost parallel to the Himalayan borderland at an average distance of 35 miles from the international borders in the eastern, middle and western sectors of the Sino-Indian boundary.

In organisational terms, the basic line of communications is roads, supported, however, by the Chinese Air Force. So far, aircraft have been used primarily to carry important military personnel and supplies. At any rate the importance of landing facilities in Tibet cannot be under-estimated; it still takes nearly two weeks by road to go from Beijing to Lhasa. The first airfield was built in 1955-56. By 1963, twelve airfields were completed, most of which were located near the frontiers of India, Nepal and Bhutan. There are now 23 airfields, located mostly near military and administrative quarters. They are located at the following places: Kartse, Kantse, North Koko Nor, Lithang Jekondo, Tachienlu, Nakchukha, Chamdo, Drachi-Dranang, Nyathang in Eastern Tibet; Lhoka, Lhasa, Gyantse, Stigatse, Ghonkhor Dzong in Central Tibet; in Phari, Chusul, Tram, Gartok, Kassu and Thingri in Western Tibet. It should be noted that most of the airfields in Central and Western Tibet are located close to the Sino-Indian borders.

Since Chinese military preparations for the past 25 years have been quite overwhelming, we may well ask: what is the strength of the PLA in Tibet? Tibetan sources estimate 300,000 Chinese solidiers while the Indian defence minister's annual reports estimate a range of 130,000 to 180,000. Whatever the size of the Chinese Army, there is little doubt about the preponderance of the PLA in the administration of Tibet. More than anywhere else in

China, the PLA shared, and in practice, dominated, local power and politics in Tibet until the Cultural Revolution (1966-68). The PLA rule in Tibet can be understood largely in terms of the region's strategic importance and China's experience with the Tibetan resistance movement throughout the 1950s. The Cultural Revolution, which created so much chaos in such a sensitive region, drove home the truth of the matter: of all the nascent Chinese institutions in Tibet, it was the PLA that remained intact and firm, capable of maintaining law and order in the chaotic situation.

Thus, from 1951 to 1966, for all practical purposes Tibet had been ruled by the PLA. Such a military rule, which accomplished Chinese strategic requirements in Inner Asia during the first 25 years, might indicate the way in which the Chinese viewed Tibet—as a national security issue. It is generally true that in pre-1979 Chinese political practice, the line between the “civilian” and “military” is rather blurred. However, in the case of Tibet, the PLA's pre-eminent position had been too conspicuous and too consistent to miss the point that this is not a simple case of military usurpation of civilian authority; it is a definite design on the part of the Chinese government to ensure a quasi-martial law in Tibet. This remained so at least from 1959 to 1966. Since 1951, and especially after 1959, it was the Army generals who ruled. Chang Kuo-hua was the commander of Tibet Military Region and concurrently first secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in Tibet until he was transferred to Szechuan in 1967. Tan Kuan-san, political commissar of the Tibet Military Region and also secretary of the Secretariat of the CCP Tibet Region Committee, was another powerful personality in Tibetan politics for many years until he was transferred to Beijing and appointed in July 1967 as vice-president of the Supreme People's Court. Even after the Cultural Revolution, the PLA continued to predominate Tibetan politics. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the commander of the PLA in Tibet was Jen Jung, also a general. Like his predecessors, he was the first secretary of the CCP in Tibet. Tien Pao was the political commissar of the PLA in Tibet. He was a vice-chairman of the Revolutionary Committee of in 1968. We need not labour any further; the point is clear. Beijing put PLA generals in power in Lhasa during the first 25 years (1950-1976) of its rule not only to simply rule the region but also to supervise its military preparations

throughout Inner and Outer Tibet. With such military men in power, China was able to ensure that national security received the first priority in Tibet. This overriding priority on strategic development was necessary for two main reasons, at least during the 1950s. First, as we have noted earlier, the past Chinese attempts to dominate Tibet during the Imperial and Republican periods were frustrated by the absence of modern communications in Inner Asia. Only strategic and military preparations by the Communists made the liberation of Tibet a reality which several past Chinese rulers had dreamt of. Second, the general strategic vulnerability of Tibet reinforced by the Tibetan revolt since mid-1959 which had the potentiality of involving foreign intervention, necessitated that Tibet be treated for the time being as a national security issue. This remained so until 1976 when China had completed 97% of its strategic requirement in Tibet.

New Buffer Zone

During the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese strategic intentions were misread and ill-understood. Although the comprehensive strategic development such as we have briefly surveyed was not reported even in the 1960s, the very Chinese occupation of Tibet was viewed with serious strategic implications to the cis-Himalayan kingdoms and South Asia as whole. Several commentators concluded that after the occupation of Tibet, China would take over the Himalayan states as Mao had once claimed.¹¹ George Ginsburg and Michael Mathos, who made the first study of Communist China and Tibet, were typical. They wrote, "He who holds Tibet dominates the Himalayan piedmont; he who dominates the Himalayan piedmont threatens the Indian subcontinent; and he who threatens the Indian subcontinent may well have all of South Asia within his reach, and with that, all of Asia."¹²

In retrospect, it can be stated that such speculations were fuelled by the Cold War atmosphere, which began to penetrate even Sino-Indian relations, especially after 1962. Communist China was then projected as an ever-expansionist power, who after occupying Tibet, would continue to swallow up the small Himalayan states. Such speculations during the Cold War failed to understand the true intentions of Chinese strategic thinking on Central Asia. It is true

that Mao was once on record as having claimed the Himalayan kingdoms as being part of the Chinese Empire. But at any rate, after the occupation of Tibet, there has been no evidence of such claims; there must have been a serious rethinking on the strategic issues. Tibet was taken over not just on a historical pretext but primarily on strategic grounds constituting the backdoor to China in the Chinese scheme of national security system. Once this strategic ground was gained by 1951, the Chinese intention appeared to have been not to expand further into the cis-Himalayan region as was widely speculated then; it was to make the cis-Himalayan region a new buffer zone between China and India. It made no strategic or military sense to the Chinese to "liberate" the Himalayan states which are geopolitically within the Indian subcontinent. Such an eventuality would put China face to face with India. Moreover, it appears that Beijing did not and does not still want any kind of conflict for some time anywhere near Tibet that might internationalise the Tibet situation and the Tibetan question. These geopolitical factors limited the Chinese imperial claims over the cis-Himalayan region; it was not, we must note, lack of flimsy imperial evidence from history which could easily be ransacked, as Mao once did, to make taller claims.

The post 1950 Chinese aim as manifested in their diplomatic effort and clandestine activities in the cis-Himalayan region has been to transfer Tibet's former buffer functions to Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. The implication is that even though China recognised Tibet as the "natural," geographical limit of its power, it feels that the Himalayas alone in this nuclear age are not enough to guarantee its national security, especially in view of Tibet's strategic location. China, therefore, ideally wants a chain of small, preferably pro-Chinese, neighbours on the cis-Himalayan region separating the two Asian giants. Such a buffer seems to be the Chinese aim, not war. This is clear not only from the official Chinese attitude toward Nepal and Bhutan but also from its consistent support of insurgencies in the Indian Union situated along the frontier region. On the Kashmir dispute, Beijing supports the Pakistani stand and calls for national self-determination there. China still refuses to recognise Sikkim's merger with the Indian Union as is evident from all its publications on the subject. When Arunachal Pradesh was conferred statehood, China protested strongly, and continues to regard the

disputed area as an integral part of China. China has been training, arming and aiding the Nagz rebels since the early 1960s. Behind such disparate involvement is a clear strategic vision that runs right across the Himalayan region. In view of such a vision, we should not lightly dismiss the recent allegation that sees the Chinese hand behind the Gorkhaland movement also. Darjeeling is situated strategically at the tri-junction of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan.

Chinese support for disputed insurgency areas in or near the northern Indian frontier regions might remain part of a long-term strategy. A more immediate Chinese goal to be realised by less illegitimate means has been to encourage anti-Indian nationalism in the Himalayan states. Whether in a birthday greeting or a congratulatory message, Beijing's message to its Himalayan neighbours is essentially the same: safeguard national independence and territorial integrity. Any problem in the bilateral relations between India and the Himalayan kingdoms used to be interpreted by Chinese publicists and political leaders as a veritable case of "a big nation bullying small nations." In other words, the Chinese have succeeded in persuading the Himalayan kingdoms—Nepal in particular—that danger to their independence is not from the Chinese side but from their southern neighbour. This is undoubtedly a great diplomatic achievement on the part of China, and we must explore briefly how the Himalayan attitude was transformed from an anti-Chinese one in the 1950s to a pro-Chinese one by the early 1970s.

When the PLA troops invaded Tibet in October 1950, the Himalayan states' reaction was one of fear and suspicion. What next? they asked themselves. There existed some sort of ties between such states and the Ching dynasty via Tibet, and it can be argued that they formed part of the ancient Chinese world order called the tribute-paying system. It was probably on such grounds that Mao made his claims over the Himalayan states in the 1930s. Since such historical claims were used to justify the Chinese liberation of Tibet, the Himalayan states naturally became fearfully apprehensive of Chinese intentions towards them. That after the takeover of Tibet, the PLA might move to the cis-Himalayan region was very much in the minds of the Himalayan states. Thus, the political climate on the Himalayas throughout the 1950s and well into the late 1960s was definitely anti-Chinese and pro-Indian.

It was under such circumstances that Nehru was able to forge a common defence system embracing the Himalayan states. It was designed and directed against a probable Chinese threat emanating from the Communist takeover of Tibet. New Delhi apparently "decided that it was essential to reach an agreement with the Ranas before the Chinese had established themselves in Tibet."¹³ India and Nepal signed treaties of peace and friendship, and of trade and commerce in July 1950. Although the treaties did not have a specific defence clause, they were accompanied by exchange of letters which stipulated: "Neither government shall tolerate any threat to the security of the other by a foreign aggressor. To deal with any such threat, the two governments shall consult with each other and devise effective counter-measures."¹⁴ Article 5 of the treaty granted the Nepal government the right to import "arms, ammunition or warlike materials and equipment necessary for the security of Nepal" through India, a right which the British Indian government had denied Kathmandu. Thus, Nehru declared in March 1950, that "we cannot tolerate any foreign invasion from any foreign country in any part of the Indian subcontinent. Any possible invasion of Nepal would inevitably involve the safety of India."¹⁵

In 1951, New Delhi signed a treaty with the Maharaja of Sikkim retaining that state as a protectorate, whose defence and foreign affairs came to be handled strictly by India. In 1958, Nehru made a personal visit to Bhutan to discuss with the Bhutanese king the common policies to be pursued by their respective governments. He suggested that Thimphu accept Indian aid and, among other things, start constructing a road connecting India with central and western Bhutan which would have strategic and economic significance. "By and large, the Bhutanese shared the Indian prime minister's concern over the strategic and security implications of a Chinese-controlled Tibet."¹⁶

After their initial shock from China's absorption of Tibet which necessitated the proceeding defence arrangements with India, the Himalayan states gradually realised that the Chinese presence was limited to the trans-Himalayan region, as indicated by the Sino-Tibetan Agreement of 1951 and Sino-Indian Treaty of 1954 (on Tibet). Such trends were most assuring to the Nepali elite in particular who were the first to comprehend the Chinese limited

intentions in Central Asia. Once they realised that the Chinese had no intention of exporting liberation beyond Tibet and that instead they sought to make the Himalayan states strong, independent, nationalist states, acting as a new buffer zone between New China and India, the Himalayan states—Nepal in particular—began to enjoy the Chinese conferred position. They learned from history that when Tibet was made the buffer zone, all the Himalayan states became subordinated to the British imperial system in South Asia; they did not enjoy much autonomy in external and defence matters. The new role envisaged by Chinese Communists promised full independence vis-a-vis the dominant South Asian power. This pleased the Himalayan states, who were tied with India in various ways not only during the British Raj but to independent India since the Communist takeover of Tibet. They began to cash in on their newly acquired strategic importance with varying degrees of success. Nepal has had some success in gaining a greater degree of independence from India by exploiting the Sino-Indian rift and by occasionally playing the two giants against each other. The late Chogyal of Sikkim tried to emulate the Nepali pioneering example in the late 1960s and early 1970s and got nabbed in the process. Bhutan, however, seems to be more cautious, being aware of the risks involved in the delicate balancing game. But if Thimphu moved from isolation to dependency on India after 1960, there is no guarantee that this position will continue in the face of Chinese encouragement to play a more autonomous role. In this respect we should note that the Chinese delegates to the Sino-Indian boundary talks in 1960 refused to deal with Bhutan-Tibet borders when the Indian side raised the issue, thereby questioning New Delhi's "special relationship" with Bhutan. Beijing preferred to discuss the Sino-Bhutanese border issue directly with Thimphu, and, lately, several rounds of such talks have been held in their respective capitals. Such actions are calculated to encourage more autonomous actors in the cis-Himalayan region. Hence, the Bhutanese elite began to give a new interpretation to the Indo-Bhutanese Treaty of 1950: Bhutan can consult New Delhi on external matters but is not obliged to implement such guidance.

In other words, to Nepal and Bhutan, situated as they are now between China (not Tibet any longer) and India, the advantage from the Chinese occupation of Tibet has been contrary to their

expectations. For the first time in their modern history, Nepal and to a less extent Bhutan, are able to assert their independence and increase their political and economic options, which are the index to the independence of any landlocked country. As we shall see shortly, Chinese policy towards the Himalayan states is designed for such developments as we are witnessing now. From their sides, the Himalayan states had learned from Tibet's tragic fate that the nineteenth century political arrangement of a vague, ill-defined half-way house in which all the states lying between China and India were placed prior to 1949, would not do in the changed circumstances, and that the only guarantee for survival as independent entities is the global recognition of their international states as independent nation-states by the comity of nations, as signified by the UN membership.

Although there has been a surprising degree of convergence of political interest between the Himalayan states and China, the transformation of popular anti-Chinese attitude in the Himalayas prevalent during the 1950s and 1960s into friendly postures, owes in no small measure to the Chinese diplomatic effort in the region. Chinese policy has been intensive and persuasive. It has three essential components designed specifically for the Himalayan situation. First, the Chinese made it clear on numerous occasions and in various indirect ways that the People's Republic of China had no intention of extending its power beyond Tibet. The Himalayan states have nothing to fear from New China; instead—and this is the second aspect of their policy—beware of their southern neighbour; thereby, India's special relationship with the Himalayan states was indirectly criticised. Recall the numerous Chinese exhortations to Nepal to safeguard its independence. Third, Chinese Communists never allowed their ideology to interfere in their relations with the Himalayan states. They hardly showed any inclination to export revolution to the Himalayan states, even though the latter are as feudal as Tibet and, therefore, in need of liberation. This ideological non-interference contrasts sharply with democratic Indian's support of the Nepali Congress, which constitutes an interference in Nepal's domestic affairs. Lastly, we may mention China's aid diplomacy, of which Nepal has been the major recipient.²⁷

In a historic sense, by 1950, India had lost the ideological and

strategic battle to China in Inner Asia, a continental area where Buddhism had reigned supreme for centuries and which used to be the British Raj's exclusive sphere of influence. With Tibet under its complete domination, China now finds itself militarily in a stronger and more strategic position vis-a-vis India; diplomatically, too, it is in a favourable environment with considerable scope for diplomatic manoeuvring to its advantage. In such a situation, the major "peaceful" function of the Tibet-based Chinese Army is to support Chinese diplomatic initiatives in the Himalayan region. Thus, under the constant shadow of a well-entrenched and well-disciplined Army in Tibet, China pursues confidently and adroitly its competitive diplomacy and tries to build its own "spheres of friendship" in the cis-Himalayan region. Its ideal and, therefore, long-term goal appears to be this: to encourage actively the emergence of independent buffer states in the cis-Himalayan region between itself and India, with the hope that they will be more friendly to it than to its adversary, India. Such a hope may indeed be a political illusion because it is a game that two can play. What seems to be China's aim, in more immediate and concrete terms, is to combat the Indian influence in the region and prevent the possibility of the Himalayan states becoming forward bases for any attacks against "China's Tibet", like Nepal's Mustang.¹⁸

What accentuates the Sino-Indian rivalry along the cis-Himalayan region, however, is the Soviet influence in the sub-continent; and in this sense, the rivalry may be viewed as one of the functions of the Sino-Soviet dispute. In such a context, it is instructive to recall the "Great Game" played between Tsarist Russia and Great Britain in the same region at the turn of the century.

Although it is difficult not to view the Soviet concern in the Himalayas as an extension of the Sino-Soviet dispute, Russian interest in Central Asia seems to run deeper than mere exercises in a new Cold War. Specifically, Soviet interest in Tibet seems to be three-fold. On a propaganda plane, Moscow finds the question of Tibet an outstanding example of how Chinese "chauvinists" maltreat small nationalities, thereby proving that Maoists have deviated from the Leninist principles of nationalities. But what adds weight to this battle of words is Russian national interest. As one of the principal countries neighbouring Sinkiang, the Soviet

Union has national interests and high strategic stakes in Inner Asia, which is now dominated by China. And what lends credibility to all this, in Chinese eyes, is the close Indo-Soviet cooperation and friendship, since both powers have vested interests in an independent Tibet. It should be noted that China saw the Soviet Union behind the Indian initiatives and actions, both in Bangladesh and Sikkim. On the other hand, the Soviet Union sees the Chinese moves on the eastern border with India as a plot to create an independent Nagaland that would include parts of India and Burma, both close to the Tibetan borders. As far as the continued occupation of Tibet is concerned, the Chinese fear of India does not stem so much from New Delhi as from Moscow, and the Soviet mass media during the past few years has given Beijing enough cause for apprehension. Russian reports on Tibet, both in broadcasts and the press, have characterised Chinese rule in Tibet as "colonial" and "Han-chauvinistic." The *Literaturnaya Gazeta* even characterised the Tibetan resistance movement as the Tibetan "people's national liberation struggle."¹⁹

Despite the normalisation of Sino-Indian relations symbolised by the two countries' exchange of ambassadors in 1976, China is unlikely to relax its vigilance in Tibet. As long as the Soviet influence in the subcontinent is not diminished and as long as the Sino-Soviet dispute remains frozen, Tibet will constitute China's "fortress" on the south-west facing its enemies. Indo-Soviet friendship and cooperation, especially when both powers have vested interests in Tibet, constitutes a definite danger to the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Thus, Tibet is likely to remain a major Chinese military base for many years to come. As an American visitor to Tibet in 1977 had observed, "But clearly the Chinese do not feel secure in Tibet. We saw large Army camps just outside Lhasa, uniforms were conspicuous in its street life, and most telling of all were Chinese soldiers who guard each compound armed with assault rifles."²⁰

Prospects for War and Peace

However, the likelihood of China attacking India in the near future, though widely speculated in the summer of 1987, seems remote for a number of reasons. Firstly, with the improvement in Sino-Soviet

relations, Beijing does not perceive any danger from India. This assessment is very different from that of the early 1970s when India, backed by the Soviet Union, engaged herself with the liberation of Bangladesh and the merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union. Such concerted Indo-Soviet cooperation constitutes, according to Chinese perception, a probable danger to the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Now the international situation has perceptibly changed in China's favour; not only has she improved her relations with the Soviet Union but, India with her seething domestic problems, seems most unlikely to indulge in any adventure with China in the foreseeable future.

The sense of security that China now feels is not confined only with her southern neighbour; it is reflected in the overall Chinese position in the world as a whole. This in no small measure due to China's improved relations with the two superpowers. Thus, since 1980, China's announced defence budget dropped from over 6% of her GNP to less than 3%. Other measures include the reduction of the People's Liberation Army by one million, the General Staff Department by one half and the elimination of four Military Regional Headquarters.²¹ There is, however, no evidence of any reduction of Chinese armed forces in Tibet, which may be more to suppress possible domestic rebellion than to anticipate external dangers.

Secondly, as long as the Tibetan people are not reconciled with Chinese rule in Tibet and continue to remain resentful of Chinese presence on the plateau, it is not prudent for China to get involved in a border war with India because such a war in the context of a resentful Tibetan population might prove like fighting two wars simultaneously. That is partly why China quickly withdrew and declared a ceasefire in 1962 after two weeks' fighting. As long as the Tibetan population remains uncooperative with the People's Liberation Army in Tibet, China cannot rationally afford to engage in any protracted war with India.

Judging by the recent events, we can predict that the situation in Tibet (i.e., the Tibetan population, at large resentful of Chinese presence) is likely to remain unchanged for the next two decades at least. If this is so, then the likelihood of any protracted Sino-Indian war is ruled out for some time to come. This caculation is largely based on the current history of Tibetan resistance against Chinese

domination. Tibetan resentment sometimes dormant and sometimes surfacing, depending on the Chinese policy in Tibet—seems nevertheless persistent. The strange paradox of this popular resentment, which might perhaps explain its veracity, is that it expresses itself during a period of leniency and relative freedom. In the 1950s the Chinese rule was characterised by extremely liberal policy and yet resulted in the 1959 rebellion. Since 1980, the pragmatic Chinese leadership publicly acknowledged the Red Guard excesses in Tibet and introduced a liberal policy reminiscent of the honeymoon period in the 1950s. Again, the relative freedom was used to revolt against the Chinese rule in late September and early October, 1987. The manner and timing of such anti-Chinese revolts indicate that the Tibetan population at large is far from reconciled with the Chinese rule; no amount of appeasement on the part of the Chinese rulers so far satisfied the fundamental Tibetan resentment against unprecedented Chinese dominance in Tibet. Such a situation might remain unchanged until and unless a large section of the younger generation in Tibet become reconciled and integrated with China proper.

Thirdly, we must examine the argument often heard in Indian defence circles: "The India of the late 1980s is not the India of 1962." This is true for both sides. As we have seen, most of China's development projects during the past two decades which she projects in her propaganda as being for the Tibetan population's benefit are primarily defence and strategic oriented. Technically speaking, therefore, China in Tibet is much more prepared today it was in 1962. But because of the traumatic defeat in 1962, India has spared no effort and resources to modernise the Indian Army and build strategic roads all along the Himalayan region. The 1967 Nathula skirmish between India and China may be considered as a test for comparative defence preparedness under the Himalayan conditions. The Indian side firmly resisted and held their position. When they found that the Indian Army was quite prepared and demonstrated the will to resist, the PLA withdrew. Since then, (1967) there has been no border clash between China and India.

In this context, we should briefly review the comparative military performance records of the two Armies in their respective fields. Despite their great past reputation, the PLA had not done so well in the Korean war (1950) nor in their recent attack against Vietnam

(1979) as they did in the anti-Japanese war and the subsequent civil war in China. Particularly noteworthy is the PLA's poor performance in war against a small Vietnam. And if this can be taken as any indication, there may well be a slight decline in the PLA morale since their heroic days, as many observers suspect. On the other hand, the Indian Army has witnessed since 1962 more active service than the PLA. Though Pakistan cannot be compared with India in terms of size and resource-base, the Indian Army had done quite well in Bangladesh (1971-72) and the western front (1947/1965). However, in the event of any possible war under the Himalayan conditions, the Chinese with their occupation of Tibet as a military base are obviously in a much more logistically advantageous position. If this acts as a restraining factor against any Indian adventurism, the hostile Tibetan population performs the same objective function in the case of Chinese adventurism.

If any aggressive war is ruled out, what is the motivation of the unprecedented Chinese military build-up in Tibet? As it stands now, the motivation behind Chinese strategic development in Central Asia and the function of the PLA concentration in Tibet appear to be designed for a three-fold purpose: (1) to defend the Sino-Indian frontiers where, as Beijing used to see especially during the 1970s, China confronts not only India but Soviet power acting in concert; (2) to suppress any signs of the Tibetan nationalist movement which might invite foreign intervention; (3) to ensure and encourage the emergence of anti-Indian nationalist regimes in the cis-Himalayan region, acting hopefully more friendly to China than to its adversary. In short, the PLA is deeply entrenched and well-equipped for a conventional warfare to meet both external and internal challenges to meet Chinese supremacy in Inner Asia.

Apart from the controversial Sino-Indian border war of 1962, the political situation in the trans and cis-Himalayan region following the Communist takeover of Tibet in 1950 has been characterised by intense Sino-Indian rivalry in the remote region. If the Chinese Communists "liberated" Tibet, Sikkim "merged" with India in 1974. If Aksai Chin is under Chinese control, the disputed NEFA was transformed into Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. If Chinese influence is stronger in Nepal, Indian influence is stronger in Bhutan. Because of such intense rivalry in this vital

strategic region, the prospect for the final resolution of the Sino-Indian border dispute is rather remote; it might stalemate for some time to come.

The second aspect of Sino-Indian relations at least since the early 1960s has been characterised by mutual interference and involvement with each other's domestic problems. China supports the Pakistani stand on the Kashmir dispute. Although India recognises Tibet as part of China, Beijing still refuses to recognise Sikkim's merger with India. There is evidence of Chinese involvement in Naga insurgency, the Naxalite movement, the Punjab problem and the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling, etc. Because India is an open society and China a closed one, New Delhi has been in a comparatively weaker position in this respect. The only way in which India can play back in this game of mutual interference is the Tibetan question.

One of the conclusions that emerges out of our analysis is the fairly consistent Chinese strategic thinking that envisages a new buffer zone along the cis-Himalayan region. If this so, then it raises a more general question. Is the concept of buffer state still relevant in an age of de-colonisation and anti-imperialism? Ideologists in post-independent India dismissed the concept as an undesirable legacy left by British imperialism. On the other hand, the Chinese Communist strategists think, as our analysis demonstrates that a buffer zone between two great rival powers is strategically necessary, to the overall national security of China. In this sense the Marxist-Lenists have tended to show sharper perception of strategic thinking than others. Here we might recall how the nascent Soviet regime virtually created the People's Republic of Mongolia, whose historical relations with the Chinese Empire were in many respects similar to Tibet's, as a new buffer state between the Soviet Union and China. It is in this sense that India has suffered since 1950 the ultimate loss in the strategic game; the Chinese occupation of strategic Tibet. The British Raj used to have two layers of defence along the 5000-mile long northern frontier: the outer rampart (Tibet) and the inner rampart (the Himalayan states).²² With the capture of the outer rampart often described as the Himalayan piedmont, China, since 1955, has been attempting to create a new buffer zone along the inner rampart which is next to India's doorstep. Thus, we can conclude that

the concept of a buffer state is not culture-bound, in the sense confined to the era of imperialism; it is dictated by geopolitics and the near-symmetry of great powers which seek to create structures of peace in mutual interest. This is the basic strategic conflict between India and China. The Indian elite now feels that the necessary buffer ought to be Tibet; and China behaves, both in word and in deed, that the new buffer line should be the cis-Himalayan region. The Chinese drive to make a new buffer zone in the cis-Himalayan region where Chinese influence predominates that of India, seriously undermines the gentlemen's agreement reached between Nehru and Chou En-lai in the 1950s that the two sides would respect the Himalayas as their respective spheres of influence. The Indian defence system as envisaged by Nehru is obviously in jeopardy.

But the main conclusion that emerges out of our essay is not an alarmist one, although the conflict potential cannot be ruled out due to the constant rivalry that characterises Sino-Indian relations. Our endeavour has been to do a comparative analysis of Chinese and Indian strategic thinking as manifested in their attitudes toward Tibet and the Himalayan states over a thirty-year period (1947-1987). And our findings tend to challenge conventional wisdom. The Chinese Communists who are supposed to be revolutionary are, surprisingly, found to have been practising strategic doctrines associated with imperialism. Their strategic doctrine is akin to that of the British imperialists, albeit suitably modified to enhance their national security vis-a-vis India. Today Beijing finds itself exactly in the same advantageous position that British India occupied vis-a-vis China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Since 1951, Tibet has become, for all practical purposes, the inner Chinese rampart where no external intervention is tolerated. And since 1956, China has been in the process of creating an outer rampart out of the Himalayan states.

Undoubtedly, the Chinese strategic thinking backed by unparalleled military might is much sounder than the Indian counterpart in terms of national security. As we have seen, the first generation of Indian leaders imbued with romantic idealism dismissed the notion of buffer zones as an undesirable legacy of imperialism. Instead, they sought to reduce the external threat to national security by friendly relations. This highly desirable but totally

Idealistic. The Indian experience since 1962 would suggest that national security cannot be purchased by friendship, no matter how desirable it is. The so-called security dilemma forces the arms race which goes on everywhere despite universal protest.

Chinese strategic thinking began right from the inception of the People's Republic of China in late 1949. Since then, there has been very little change in their strategic vision; over the subsequent years they have constantly rationalised their strategic means to enhance national security. We attribute such sound strategic thinking to the Marxist-Leninist tradition which is steeped in techniques of revolutionary strategy and tactics. Whereas in India strategic thinking is confined to a small professional elite like the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, in a Communist society like China, strategic thinking is inculcated in every sphere of life like a popular mode of socialisation. During the revolutionary struggle, especially guerrilla warfare, strategic thinking is called forth to calculate the forces for or against revolution. After revolution, a nascent Communist regime usually drew hostile international reaction which again called for strategic thinking. Above all, Leninism and Maoism have reduced the class struggle to strategic manipulation of subjective forces to achieve revolution. Thus, even to this day, every Communist Party Congress document, whether in China or the Soviet Union, begins with a strategic analysis of international forces and puts given national goals in such a strategic context.

It is clear then that strategic thinking is very much a part of Communist socialisation for which the non-Communists have no equivalent. How else can we explain the deep concern shown by Communist leaders for their states' national security from so early on, when they should have been imbued with revolutionary fervour? Finland was granted independence because it was conceived as a necessary buffer between Scandinavia and the Soviet Union. The People's Republic of Mongolia was carved out of the Chinese Empire as a necessary buffer between the Soviet Union and China. Similarly, after World War II, Stalin conceived Eastern Europe as the necessary buffer zone between the Soviet Union and Western powers. The same was with China's actions in Tibet and the Himalayan states.

We should not conceive of Communists as mad dogs running

around biting everybody. They are strategists *par excellence*. Moscow and Beijing might have verbally supported and aided national liberation movements in the Third World but their physical armed intervention is rare. The Soviet Union intervened in Eastern Europe and Afghanistan, areas considered vital to national security. China intervened in Tibet, Korea and Taiwan, again areas close to China and, therefore, perceived as vital to national security. The pattern of the Communist powers' armed intervention is motivated not so much by ideology as by national security.

NOTES

1. *Jawaharlal Nehru Speeches, 1949-1953* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 3rd ed, 1963), p. 252.
2. H. E. Richardson, *Tibet and Its History* (London: Oxford University Press), p. 173.
3. *Tibetan Review*, April, 1969, pp. 5-6.
4. See Parshottam Mehra, *The Young Husband Expedition* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1968), pp. 140-55.
5. Cited by Premen Addy, *Tibet on the Imperial Chessboard* (New Delhi: Academic Publishers, 1984), p. 156.
6. Remin Rebao, September 9, 1975, *Peking Review*, No. 28 (September 19, 1975).
7. C. F. Remer (ed.), *Three Essays on International Economics of Communist China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 49.
8. Translated by George Moselev as *The Party and the National Question in China* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1966), p. 107.
9. Radio Lhasa, September 9, 1975.
10. Dawa Norbu, "Strategic Development in Tibet" *Asian Survey* XIX: 3 (March, 1979), pp. 245-257.
11. In the early 1960s China published a new version of the Chinese map which included some parts of the Himalayan states. This occasioned further speculation that China might invade the Himalayan states.
12. *Ibid.*, *Communist China and Tibet: The First Dozen Years* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p. 210.
13. Leo E. Rose, *Nepal: Strategy for Survival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 185.
14. Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1961), p. 374.
15. *Parliamentary Debates*, Pt. 11, March 17, 1950, Col. 1697-98.
16. Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 74.

17. John Franklin Copper, *China's Foreign Aid* (Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1976), pp. 49-51.
18. The area was used by Tibetan Khampa guerrillas as the base of operations against Chinese troops in Tibet from 1960 to 1974.
19. *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, November, 1973 (Moscow).
20. Edward Luttwak, *Quest* 77, May-June, 1977.
21. Harlan W. Jencks, "Defending China", *Current History* 86 : 521, September, 1987, pp. 266, 269.
22. Sir Charles Bell, *Tibet Past and Present* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 190.