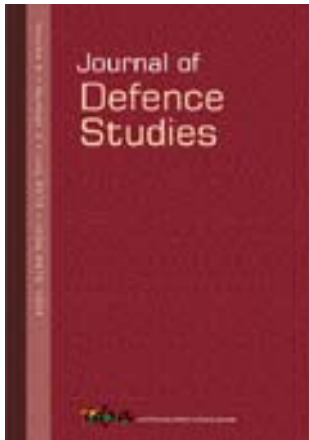


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Tibet as a Factor in Sino-Indian Relations Past and Present

*R.S. Kalha**

Tibet has always been the core issue in Sino-Indian relations. Even during the 1962 conflict, Chinese leaders, including Mao, acknowledged that the conflict was not about the boundary or territory but about Tibet. The revolt in Tibet leading to the flight of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959 came as a rude shock to the Indian leadership. After the 1962 conflict, the issue of Tibet went on the back burner. The revival of negotiations in 1981 brought the issue back into focus. The Chinese consistently tried to obtain reassurance from India that the Indian position on Tibet remained as before, and that India would not 'meddle' in Tibetan affairs and would control the activities of the Dalai Lama in India. Yet, boundary infringements by the Chinese continued. Sino-Indian border negotiations are stalemated and progress, if any, is at a snail's pace. Thus, Tibet still remains the core issue.

Soon after the conclusion of the brief Sino-Indian border conflict in 1962, Chairman Mao received a Nepalese delegation in Beijing. While discussing relations between India and China and the border conflict, Mao told the Nepalese that the McMahon Line was not the cause of the conflict, but that Tibet was. Mao added for emphasis that 'in their opinion [India's] Tibet was theirs!'¹ Similarly, the then Chairman of the Chinese People's Republic, Liu Shaoqi, told the Sri Lankan leader, Felix Bandaranaike, that the conflict was undertaken to 'demolish India's arrogance and illusions of grandeur. China *had taught India a lesson* and would do so again and again!' (emphasis added).² Liu repeated the same

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line to the then Swedish Ambassador to China. Even today, Chinese analysts quote Mao's belief that the 'real target' was not Nehru, *but the United States (US) and the Soviets that had been plotting behind the scenes against China*.³ It was the Chinese conviction that this knock-out punch would keep the Sino-Indian frontier quiet for a considerable length of time to China's immense advantage, discourage any Indian 'meddling' in Tibet and enable China to 'strike peace with its neighbour'.⁴ In the process, it was hoped that Tibet would thus be completely settled and pacified as a Chinese province. Mao also told the then Soviet *Chargé d'Affaires* (CDA) in Beijing, Antonov, 'We never, under any circumstances, will move beyond the Himalayas. That is completely ruled out. This is an argument over inconsequential pieces of territory' (emphasis added).⁵ So, if what Mao told the Nepalese and Antonov and what Liu Shaoqi told Bandaranaike are correct, then the whole conflict was not about the boundary or about territory, but about something else. Quite clearly, it was the issue of Tibet.

To expand the Chinese state to incorporate Tibet has had great prestige value in China. In addition, the Chinese were aware of the immense influence that successive Dalai Lamas have had over the Mongols and other peoples inhabiting Inner Asia and this, in turn, has added political value to its possession. For the Chinese, the ownership of the Tibetan landmass was crucial and a strategic necessity, and for without Tibet, the essential unity of the 'new' China could not be realized. The occupation and incorporation of Tibet would firmly establish, in the eyes of the Chinese people, the nationalist credentials of the new communist regime. The Chinese considered Tibet as a bulwark against outside powers that might use Tibet to mount incursions from south of the Himalayas to destabilize the Chinese state. The population of non-Han minorities in China is about one hundred million, but crucially, they occupy almost half the land area. In other words, although Han Chinese population constitutes nearly 90 per cent of the total, they occupy less than half the Chinese landmass! Not unsurprisingly, therefore, the Chinese have claimed and insisted that Tibet has always been a Chinese province; whose land area was about 25 per cent the size of Western Europe, where no one spoke any Chinese, where no Chinese taxes were ever collected, where there were no Han Chinese and where there were no Chinese administrators or soldiers. As the Dalai Lama was to rightly proclaim, 'the Tibetans are certainly not Chinese'.⁶ There were also no direct communication links between Lhasa and China and messages had to be passed through India. In July 1952, after the occupation of Tibet, the first Chinese military and

civil Commissar of Tibet, Zhang Qingwu, arrived in Lhasa to take up his post, via India!

Conscious of their limitations, the Chinese were indeed very wary of India's reaction when they decided to intervene in 1950 and establish their rule in Tibet. Nehru, on the other hand, signalled very early on and quite conclusively to the Chinese leadership that India was not inclined to thwart or hinder the establishment of Chinese rule in Tibet. Just a few months prior to independence in 1947, the Foreign Department of the interim Government of India, in which Nehru held the External Affairs portfolio, laid down India's policy towards Tibet in the following terms:

To prejudice her relations with so important a power as China by aggressive support of unqualified Tibetan independence is therefore a policy with few attractions... while GOI are glad to recognize and wish to see Tibetan autonomy maintained, they are not prepared to do more than encourage this and certainly not disposed to take any initiative which might bring India into conflict with China on this issue.⁷

As it became apparent that the communists would win the civil war in China, it was obvious that, for India, a potentially new and dangerous situation was developing on its northern borders. None was so prescient to predict the outcome as Nehru was. In a letter to Finance Minister John Mathai, on 10 September 1949, Nehru predicted that: 'Recent developments indicate that Chinese Communists are likely to invade Tibet sometime or the other. This will not be soon. But it may take place within a year.'

Although Nehru was spot on in his prediction, the policy that he set for India following the Chinese occupation of Tibet was based on three principles. These were: first, to ensure the safety and security of India; second, to accept Chinese suzerainty/sovereignty over Tibet; and third, to advance friendship with China as an 'expression' of Asian solidarity. It was Nehru's belief that once friendly relations were established with China, the right atmosphere would be created for the settlement of the border and other questions. Nehru, as a realist and conscious of India's inferior military power, had to acquiesce in Tibet's occupation by China.⁸ Nehru publicly confirmed India's inferior military position when he told a *Reuters* correspondent in Srinagar on 29 October 1950 that: 'India has neither the resources nor the inclination to send armed assistance to Tibet' and that 'one hundred and fifty years ago an Indian Army invaded and subdued

a part of Tibet considered then and even since a remarkable military feat in that unfriendly terrain. But the end result was that in the following winter the Indian Army froze to death!’ Was Nehru hinting at the fate that awaited the Chinese *People’s Liberation Army* (PLA)? Nevertheless, realism also dictated that it was more important that India, subjected to years of colonial rule, should first develop its economy while maintaining friendly relations with China. It was imperative also to go about this urgent task quietly and at the same time, strengthen India’s defences on the border with Tibet. Nehru did this by renegotiating treaties with Nepal, Bhutan and making arrangements with Sikkim. Nehru also brought the *North-East Frontier Agency* (NEFA; present-day Arunachal Pradesh) under central government administrative control and Indian officials took over Tawang in 1951.

At this point in time, Nehru was clearly enamoured of China. Nehru felt that the establishment of the new communist regime at Beijing was the ‘culminating act of a century old process of revolution *and as a manifestation of Asia’s political renaissance*’⁹ (emphasis added) and that it was not a question of ‘approving or disapproving’, but recognizing a ‘major event of history, of appreciating it and dealing with it’.¹⁰ Nehru felt that the politics of Asia would depend upon the relations between India and China,¹¹ since China had become a great power—both united and strong. Nehru felt that the birth of new China was a victory of nationalism rather than communism and that nationalism would play a far more profound and powerful role in the making of Chinese policies. As such, China was India’s natural friend and ally in the construction of the post-colonial world and the emergence of Asia as a strong influence in the new international order that might emerge. It was this vision of China’s role that blinded Nehru to the fact that China might have a completely different set of priorities.¹² Nehru did not believe that China had the ability to threaten India, for China’s first priority, in Nehru’s assessment, would be the resolution of its immense domestic problems, rather than to indulge in foreign military adventures.

The Chinese view of Nehru, on the other hand, as a leader of India at this point in time was rather unflattering. The Chinese felt that he was too tightly enmeshed with the West to be classified as an independent leader in his own right. The Chinese leadership, with little or no contact with the outside world, was clearly a baffled lot and questioned how ‘a man like Nehru should be friendly, even grateful, to his late oppressors suggests nothing but a despicable lack of national self respect’.¹³ The Chinese had

little understanding of how a democratic country like India functioned. The Chinese always considered Nehru as a bourgeois nationalist leader and despite following left-leaning policies, never considered him as a socialist. Nehru is the 'running dog of imperialism', proclaimed the *Shijie Zhishi*.¹⁴ A few days later, on 16 September 1949, the same magazine belittled Nehru and said: 'Nehru riding behind the imperialists whose stooge he is, actually considers himself the leader of the Asian people... as a rebel against the movement for national independence, as a blackguard... as a loyal slave of imperialism, Nehru has already been made the substitute of Chiang Kaishek by the imperialists.'

There could not have been a worse abuse or insult in the political lexicon of communist China. And a few days before Nehru's state visit to the US in 1949, *Shijie Zhishi*, on 28 October 1949, blasted Nehru in a commentary entitled, 'American Imperialism Lays Hands on a New Slave'. Nehru was described as 'masquerading as a nationalist and that the most important objective of Truman's current summons is the desire to lay hands on a new stooge to replace Chiang Kaishek'. Quite gracelessly, Nehru's efforts to get the US to recognize communist China were dubbed by the Chinese as 'only a gesture to raise his own stature'!

However, despite such unflattering references by the Chinese, it was amply clear from the earliest that Nehru was not going to intervene militarily in Tibet. The British also advised Nehru not to do so. Nehru made this obvious on numerous occasions, even before Chinese troops attacked Tibet. In various public speeches that he delivered, Nehru began to speak openly about Chinese suzerainty over Tibet being a fact. On 17 December 1949, speaking at a meeting of the Standing Committee on External Affairs, Nehru clarified that 'no one knows what will happen in Tibet. *If the Chinese wish to enter Tibet there is none to hold them back except, perhaps, the climate*' (emphasis added).¹⁵ On 8 September 1950, speaking to a Tibetan delegation led by Finance Minister Shakabpa, Nehru put it very bluntly when he told the stunned Tibetans that '*we cannot give any help in the event of an invasion. Nor can any other country*'. On 6 December 1950, speaking in the Parliament, Nehru confirmed that 'we did not challenge or deny the suzerainty of China over Tibet' and that India had 'no political or territorial ambitions' in Tibet. Reflecting Nehru's views, the Indian Ambassador to China, Panikkar, told the British CDA in Beijing that 'the liberation of Tibet by the Chinese government *would not be treated by the Indian government as a very serious development*' (emphasis added).¹⁶ Even if the British did not convey Panikkar's thinking

to the Chinese officials, the Chinese could not have missed the clear signals emanating from New Delhi that their invasion of Tibet would be unopposed!

In line with Nehru's thinking on China, India's policy towards Tibet began to unfold. All the signals were unambiguous. India would not allow the Tibetan issue to become a factor in the burgeoning friendship between the two countries. When the Tibetans wished to approach the United Nations (UN) and sought Nehru's help, he declined. So did the British government. It was left to little San Salvador to sponsor Tibet's case. In line with Nehru's thinking on the policy to be followed, the instructions from Delhi to the Indian Permanent Representative (PR) at the UN were unambiguous:

1. India did not like the El Salvador resolution and the PR was not to support it.
2. The timing of the Tibetan appeal needed careful consideration. *Korea was obviously of first importance... nothing should be done which was likely to embitter relations with China at a critical state... therefore no action be taken on the Tibetan appeal (emphasis added).*¹⁷

From the instructions received from New Delhi, it was clear that Indian policy was to 'sacrifice' Tibet in exchange for playing a role on the Korean Peninsula and on the world stage. Not unsurprisingly therefore, the Indian PR to the UN, Sir B.N. Rau, 'advised' the Western powers that if a debate took place, India would perforce have to criticize the Chinese action. Rau queried, 'how then could it [India] play a mediatory role in Korea?'¹⁸ The British government, who were already privy to Nehru's thinking as reported by their High Commissioner at Delhi, understood the significant import of what the Indian delegate conveyed. It was on this basis that the British government advised the US that the Tibetan problem was '*subordinate to larger issues and should not be raised at the moment*' (emphasis added).¹⁹ On reconsideration, the US thereafter also concurred with this assessment. The British PR to the UN, Sir Gladwyn Jebb, opined that 'whatever opinion one might hold about Chinese aggression, *the reality was that no one could give effective aid to Tibet*' (emphasis added).²⁰ The Foreign Office in London ruefully confirmed to the United Kingdom (UK) High Commissioner in Delhi that 'neither we, nor we assume India or anyone else e.g. the US would be prepared to take armed action. It was best to let the matter rest.'²¹ Thus, all of the three

powers that could have helped the Tibetans, for reasons of their own, declined to respond to Tibet's agonizing appeals.

On 24 November 1950, the UN General Assembly postponed, indefinitely, the consideration of the Tibetan appeal after the Indian delegate stated that 'India *was certain* that the Tibetan question could still be settled by peaceful means and that such a settlement would safeguard the autonomy that Tibet had enjoyed for several decades while maintaining its historical links with China and *that Tibet's status was wrapped in "legal obscurity!"*' (emphasis added).²² Britain too endorsed the Indian position. It was obvious that India had decided that friendship with China far outweighed the obligations that it had inherited from Britain regarding Tibet.

From this point onwards, a series of steps followed that confirmed Nehru's policy. During the negotiations between the Chinese and the Dalai Lama leading to the 17-point agreement between China and Tibet, the Indian leadership actively encouraged the Dalai Lama to return to Lhasa, despite the US entreaties to the Dalai Lama that he should denounce the agreement and go into exile. On 15 June 1952, the Indian Ambassador to China, Panikkar, informed Nehru by cable that Chinese Prime Minister (PM) Zhou Enlai, in a meeting with him, presumed 'that India had no intention of claiming special rights arising from the unequal treaties of the past and was prepared for the transformation of the Indian Mission in Lhasa into a proper Consulate-General as an immediate practical step'. The Chinese PM Zhou knew the political implications of his suggestion. This suggestion was made to Panikkar despite Indian irritation at the way Chinese troops were behaving on the Tibet-Sikkim border. The Chinese refused to let Indian diplomatic bags for its Mission in Lhasa pass without opening them. Nehru could not have consulted the Cabinet on Zhou's suggestion, for as events show, he immediately replied by cable on 16 June 1952 that 'as for our Mission in Lhasa being converted into a Consulate-General we have no objection'. An official announcement was made by the Ministry of External Affairs on 16 September 1952 that the Indian Mission at Lhasa would be 'wound up' and replaced by a 'Consulate-General' that would 'report to the Indian Ambassador at Beijing'. In other words, India had de facto recognized that Tibet was a part of China. It was another 'friendly gesture' from Nehru with the intent to emphasize that India had no political interest in Tibet.²³

On 1 September 1953, Nehru took a further initiative by writing a letter to PM Zhou, offering to discuss with the Chinese issues that still

remained unresolved. In his letter, Nehru said that 'the government of India feel that it would be advantageous to both [India and China] to deal *with ALL remaining problems together. Piecemeal consideration of each problem does not lead to satisfactory solutions*' (emphasis added). And yet, exactly the opposite was eventually done. For, while settling the status of Tibet, the Sino-Indian boundary question was left completely open. In his letter, Nehru also seems to have hinted to the Chinese that he was prepared to write off India's interests when he informed Zhou that 'we have recognized this situation and are fully prepared to adapt ourselves to it'.²⁴ Thus, even before actual negotiations had commenced on 31 December 1953, Nehru had given more than ample hints that India would surrender all its rights inherited from the British in Tibet! The hapless Tibetans did not even figure in the correspondence.

Nehru was concerned that the situation on India's borders was far from satisfactory. Yet in a move that can only be described as incomprehensible, Nehru issued a directive on 3 December 1953, through the Secretary-General of the Ministry of External Affairs, to the Indian negotiators that 'we should not raise this question [boundary]. If the Chinese raise it we should express our surprise and point out *that this is a settled issue. Our delegation cannot discuss it*' (emphasis added). There seemed to Nehru to be no reason to depart from the policy formulated that the Sino-Indian boundary alignment was a settled fact, except for a few minor tracts, and that it need not be raised with China.

Nehru was exasperated over the slow progress being made in the negotiations with the Chinese over Tibet. He cabled Ambassador Raghvan in China on 16 April 1954 that:

...a very grave situation had arisen because of the new policy enunciated by Dulles. We are much concerned with this.... If the India-China agreement on Tibet is signed and announced soon it will have a salutary effect. If however this is postponed indefinitely it will have a contrary effect.

To say the least, these negotiating tactics with the Chinese were rather strange, incomprehensible and poorly thought through. First, India's position in Tibet was written off *in advance of the negotiations* and officially hinted as such to the Chinese. Second, it is almost a given that never negotiate with the Chinese if time is of the essence. They will see through it and take maximum advantage. And never leave anything open ended, as the Chinese will take further advantage and squeeze even more

concessions. Unfortunately, this is precisely what happened. Anyone can be forgiven for thinking that India's attitude amounted to dumping the Tibetans at any cost and as quickly as possible.

The US decision to arm Pakistan seriously worried India. Nehru felt that Pakistan's inveterate hatred towards India was too deep rooted and that there was no other alternative but to meet this threat other than by a force of arms. If India wished to give priority to its economic development, it could not simultaneously have two live frontiers to protect. With the Chinese already well entrenched in Tibet, there was no way they could be dislodged. On the other hand, the Chinese were well aware of the difficult situation faced by India with the US decision to arm Pakistan, ostensibly for combating communist 'advances'. The Chinese also knew that Pakistan had no such intentions of opposing them and that these newly acquired sophisticated US weapons, such as Patton tanks, could only be used in the plains and that too against India. The Pakistani PM, Suhrawardy, on a visit to China had already assured them that this was indeed so. The Chinese correctly surmised that the Indo-Pak cleavage was far too wide and deep for it to be ever bridged. Thus, the room available for bargaining that India had vis-à-vis China, and Chinese control over Tibet, had indeed significantly shrunk by this thoughtless act (the US-Pak Mutual Defence Agreement) on the part of the US. Nehru was in danger of being outmanoeuvred and squeezed from both the sides.

The outcome embodied in the 1954 India-China Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between India and the 'Tibet region of China' was an attempt by Nehru to insulate at least one frontier and to avoid being squeezed simultaneously both from the north and the west. Uncertain of the US intentions, Nehru wanted to avoid trouble with both large neighbours at the same time.²⁵ Nehru's thinking was that 'our one major possible enemy is Pakistan... if we begin to think of and prepare for China's aggression in the same way, we would considerably weaken on the Pakistan side.'²⁶ Nehru made a strategic decision which was to continue to confront Pakistan militarily, but to deal with China diplomatically. By incorporating the 'five principles of peaceful coexistence', Nehru hoped to hedge China in, so that it could be induced to adopt 'peaceful methods' in solving the boundary issue as and when it was raised.

But should India have given in on almost all points even before the negotiations began? Was Nehru chasing rainbows? Not only was Tibet recognized as a 'region of China', but all of India's rights in Tibet, so painstakingly acquired over the years, were unilaterally given up in one

clean sweep. Nothing tangible was asked for from China in return. Under Article 1 (2) of the Agreement, India was allowed to set up a trade agency at Gartok (western Tibet). But the Chinese, sensing that an Indian presence in western Tibet might possibly detect Chinese road-building activities in Aksai Chin, never allowed it to function on one pretext or the other. The only saving grace was that six passes in the middle sector were specified as points through which traders and pilgrims could pass. Interestingly, the Chinese refused to specify them as 'border passes'. And they pointedly refused to name Demchok in Ladakh as a pass through which trade could take place. Instead, the 1954 Agreement has the following obscure formulation: 'the customary route leading to Tashigong along the valley of the Indus river may continue to be traversed'. The excuse put forward, informally by the Chinese, was that Demchok (Ladakh) was in Kashmir, and that they did not wish to be 'involved' in India–Pakistan disputes! This, too, was swallowed by the hapless Indian negotiators.²⁷

In another inexplicable act, the Indian negotiators sold the entire network of postal, telegraph system, public telephone services and equipment and rest houses inherited by India in Tibet from the British for a paltry sum of ₹ 3,16,828.²⁸ The Chinese, probably astonished at the naivety or misplaced generosity of the Indian negotiators, promptly paid the amount by 31 March 1955.

The signing of the 1954 Agreement with China meant the formalization of all developments since the invasion of Tibet by China and the total elimination of Indian political influence in Tibet. For the first time ever, India, in a formal document, recognized Tibet as an integral part of China. In international legal terms, it signalled the fact that the only country that had special relations with Tibet had now agreed to relinquish these, and did so without any reference or consultation with the Dalai Lama or even with the Tibetan government.²⁹ For the Tibetans, it can be said that the final curtain was drawn on Tibet's aspirations to be an independent state or even an autonomous one.

The years following the 1954 Agreement were the best in Sino-Indian relations. The border was peaceful, high-level visits were exchanged and Sino-Indian cooperation in several fields became the hallmark of good relations. It seemed that the two most populist and important countries of Asia had settled their differences peacefully and had settled down to maintain warm and friendly relations. But perhaps, unanticipated by both countries, storm clouds in the shape of Tibet were rapidly gathering on the horizon. These would rock the Sino-Indian relationship to its core.

Although outward calm prevailed in Tibet, Chinese high-handedness with local Tibetans soon reached a point of open resistance. Tibetan resistance was also no doubt fuelled by soaring inflation, particularly of foodgrains. By April 1953, food inflation had risen by 50 per cent over the previous month and obtaining foodgrains was beyond the reach of the common man.³⁰ Chinese officials were fixed, dogmatic and inflexible in their dealings with Tibetans. Resistance against the Chinese first started in eastern Tibet where the Khampas organized as guerrilla bands started attacking roads and bridges and isolated Chinese convoys. According to the Dalai Lama, the main reason for the revolt was the introduction of agrarian reforms by the Chinese and their interference with the social and economic life of the people.³¹ The Khampas are a tough, touchy and flamboyant people who had never been under the sway of the Chinese or the Tibetan government in Lhasa. At best, they only owed nominal loyalty to the Lhasa authorities. When the Chinese initiated military action against them, a large number of fighters gravitated towards Lhasa, further escalating the situation. When combined with the disaffected people in Lhasa, the combination became truly volatile.

Few Chinese officials could travel inside Tibet unless accompanied by military escort and that too in large convoys. Apart from Lhasa, Shigatse and the main highways, the rebels controlled most of the countryside. The Chinese estimated the strength of the rebels somewhere between 23,000–85,000 fighters.³² The reaction of the Chinese authorities to the revolt was swift as it was brutal. They not only used harsh repressive measures, but bombed the historic monasteries of Changtreng, Litang and Batang.³³ Chinese fighter aircraft flattened many towns and villages with savage air action. There were huge casualties. By this time, the Chinese were also aware of the 'foreign hand' in propelling the Khampa rebellion. Since the beginning of 1956, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had initiated covert action to stoke the Khampa rebellion. The CIA programme was based on the US government's 'commitments to the Dalai Lama in 1951 and 1956'. (These were understandings allegedly reached between the Dalai Lama and US officials.) It consisted of political action, paramilitary and intelligence operations towards 'lessening the influence and capabilities of the Chinese regime' and towards the creation of capability of resistance against the Chinese 'in line with US policy objectives as per directives contained in document NSC 5913/1'.³⁴ In December 1956, Khampas trained by the US at Saipan were parachuted into Tibet with limited supplies of arms, and some of them were captured.

Undoubtedly, the whole enterprise was by now known to the Chinese. This US-instigated effort, poorly funded and ill-planned, lasted till 1971. It was totally abandoned when Sino-US reconciliation took place that year.

It would be naïve to imagine that the Chinese did not suspect an Indian hand *in collusion* with the CIA. By 1956–7, the Chinese had become highly suspicious of India and the Indian Ambassador to China was reporting ‘certain coolness’ in their attitude towards India. The Chinese felt that Nehru was indulging in ‘bad faith’ and surreptitiously meddling in Tibet.³⁵ The Chinese hinted as such when they officially protested to India on 10 July 1958 by alleging that Kalimpong was being used by ‘Tibetan reactionaries, Americans... as a base to actively incite a handful of reactionaries hidden in Tibet for an armed revolt there.’ Much later, PM Zhou confirmed Chinese suspicions of Nehru’s involvement when he told Neville Maxwell in an interview published on 19 December 1971 that ‘Nehru had been intriguing with the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama *since 1956* with big power backing and encouraging them to rebellion’. As the situation in Tibet worsened, it was obvious that Tibet was destined to become the central issue between India and China, but it was equally obvious to any impartial observer that India had very little to do with the revolt in Tibet. To ascribe the revolt to machinations of Indian intelligence agencies is to give them far more credit than is due.

By now, for the Chinese, the usefulness of Nehru was over. On 2 September 1957, the *People’s Daily* published a small map (2 ¼” × ¾”) showing a road linking Sinkiang with Tibet. On the same day, the India Embassy in Beijing reported to Delhi that: ‘Chinese have announced today that motor able road from Yeh near Yarkhand across Karakoram to Ladakh and Gartok has been built and will be open to traffic in October. Road appears to pass through Aksai plain which is Kashmir territory.’³⁶

To remind the Indians just in case they had missed the *People’s Daily* article, *China Pictorial*, once again, published the map, this time with greater clarity.³⁷ The Chinese for reasons that are moot had decided to bring the Sino-Indian border dispute out into the open. Meanwhile, the situation in Tibet further deteriorated leading to open revolt in Lhasa and the eventual escape of the Dalai Lama to India. In retaliation, the Chinese crackdown started on 23 March 1959. Thereafter followed a wave of severe Chinese repressive measures in which thousands of Tibetans were brutally gunned down and a large number were deported from Tibet. A captured PLA document states that between March 1959 and September

1960, nearly 87,000 Tibetans died through military action.³⁸ The Chinese abolished any vestige of Tibetan political autonomy and utilized the Tibetan revolt to impose their complete political and military control over Tibet. The revolt was easily put down.

Chinese brutality in Tibet aroused strong anti-Chinese feelings in India. In the Parliament, in the press and elsewhere there was near unanimous support for the Tibetan cause. Nehru rejected President Prasad's suggestion that the actions of the Chinese be denounced as 'new colonialism'.³⁹ Would the Chinese attitude towards India have been any different if India had refused asylum to the Dalai Lama? Would they have been more forthcoming over the boundary question? There was never any doubt in Nehru's mind that he did the right thing in offering asylum to the Dalai Lama. Nehru, a freedom fighter and a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, knew of the natural reverence and respect that the people of India have for 'godliness'. Had Nehru not consented to give asylum to the Dalai Lama, considered holy and revered by millions of Indians, his own political future would have been in jeopardy.

The Chinese also knew that it is the inherent right of a country to offer asylum. They themselves had done so in the case of K.I. Singh, a Nepalese dissident. In 1955, PM Zhou had admitted to the Burmese leader, U. Nu, that they had granted asylum in Yunan to the Kachin rebel Naw Seng and 200 of his followers. And as Khrushchev reminded the Chinese leaders, they had North Koreans dissidents too living in China and whom they had not returned to Kim Il-sung. When Desai, the then Finance Minister, reminded PM Zhou that Karl Marx himself had lived in exile in Britain and that there had been no restrictions placed his political activities, there was no response from PM Zhou. There is no doubt that had India not granted asylum to the Dalai Lama, the Chinese would have surmised that their pressure on India was working and they would have further increased such pressure to gain even more concessions from India.

The Chinese knew that to defend their record in Tibet, they had to find a scapegoat. Therefore, their charges against India, and in particular against Nehru, had to be consistent, pointed and sharp. On 17 March 1959, PM Zhou claimed in a politburo meeting that the rebellion was 'connected with the Indian government'. He speculated that both Britain and the US had provided active support to the rebels behind the scenes and had worked with India as a frontline state. According to Zhou, 'this is why the commanding centre of the rebellion has been established in Kalimpong on Indian Territory'.⁴⁰ Prime Minister Zhou's conclusion

was that 'without external encouragement and incitement, this kind of rebellion would not have erupted'.⁴¹

Chinese suspicions of Nehru were further fuelled when they received his letter of 23 March 1959, just a few days after the revolt erupted at Lhasa, giving in detail India's territorial claims both in the eastern and western sectors. The Chinese suspected that Nehru was trying to compromise their hold over Tibet at this critical juncture by questioning China's control of the Xinjiang (Sinkiang)—Tibet road link through the Aksai Chin. It was also at about this time that India took the step of banning the export of foodgrains to Tibet. This was to have far-reaching consequences, for the Chinese surmised that this was yet another attempt to undermine their control over Tibet. Chinese conclusions were further reinforced when India, in September 1959, banned the export of steel products and, in October 1959, banned fuel oil, auto parts, and clothing, tea, sugar and hand tools. The Chinese sensed that India was 'in league' with Tibetan rebels, colluding with the Western powers and wished to help Tibetan rebels by instituting an economic blockade of Chinese-controlled Tibet.

Earlier, at a meeting on 25 March 1959, Deng Xiaoping asserted that the Indian government, and Nehru in particular, had been deeply involved in the rebellion in Lhasa. Nonetheless, Deng argued that the time had not yet come for Beijing to voice public criticism of India and 'settle accounts' with it. This was not because he believed that the Indian government's actions were acceptable. On the contrary, Deng insisted that several of Nehru's speeches about the Tibetan situation, together with the fact that the headquarters of the rebellion was located in Kalimpong, 'left no doubt that the Indian government was behind the rebellion... *and, when the time comes, we certainly will settle accounts with them*' (emphasis added).⁴² Deng's threat was no empty threat.

As Chinese troops fanned out to contain the Tibetan rebellion, they came close to the Sino-Indian border and tried to secure the border passes in order to prevent Tibetan fighters from crossing the border and returning to fight again. As could be expected, two serious clashes took place towards the end of 1959 with Indian troops at Longju (eastern sector) and Kongka La Pass (western sector). Indian blood was spilt for the first time, and this enraged Indian public opinion against the Chinese. Whatever little room for manoeuvre that Nehru had had disappeared. From this point on, compromise with the Chinese was beyond Nehru's political reach. Thus, when PM Zhou arrived in Delhi for border negotiations in

1960, there was little chance that Indian public opinion could ever have countenanced a compromise. Events inexorably led to a showdown which culminated in the 1962 conflict that ended with India's military defeat. From 1962 onwards till 1981, Sino-Indian relations were in limbo and the issue of Tibet had faded into the background.

When India and China decided to resume boundary negotiations in 1981, the issue of Tibet remained in the background. The Chinese appreciated that despite major convulsions in relations, India had not changed its position on Tibet, even after the events of 1962. Thus, at the conclusion of PM Rajiv Gandhi's path-breaking visit to China in 1988, in the joint communiqué issued, it was recognized by India that 'Tibet was an autonomous region of China' and that 'anti-Chinese' political activities would not be permitted on Indian soil. Chinese concern over Tibet remained, for a not inconsiderable time during PM Rajiv Gandhi's visit was spent on discussing this issue at the highest levels. The agreements of 1993 and 1996 that followed were designed essentially to ensure that peace and tranquillity were maintained all along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the Sino-Indian border.

Despite these arrangements, Chinese anxiety over Tibet remained, and particularly over the activities of the Dalai Lama in India and during his visits abroad, for despite their best efforts, Tibetans remained unreconciled to Chinese rule. The reverence for the Dalai Lama increased, which forced the Chinese leadership to initiate talks with him. It was conveyed to the Chinese by the representatives of the Dalai Lama that they were not seeking 'independence', but genuine autonomy. Despite this offer, there was very little progress in resolving the problem, for the Chinese had decided to 'solve' the issue by an accelerated programme of economic development and by settling even more Han Chinese in Tibet. In 1999, China launched its 'western development' strategy, basically a political ploy, and indicated an allocation to Tibet alone of US\$ 54 million. However, economic development and integration of Tibet with China are two separate matters. Unfortunately for the Chinese, Tibet remains one of the poorer regions with an annual per capita income of less than US\$ 100.

The next major development took place during PM Vajpayee's visit to China in June 2003. In a signed 'declaration' (Vajpayee-Wen Joint statement), both sides emphasized that '*their common interests outweigh their differences*' (emphasis added) and that neither side would 'use or threaten to use force against the other'. The latter, in fact, was a reiteration

of the 1996 agreement. On an issue that was sensitive for China, India conceded (recognized) *that the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was a part of the territory of the People's Republic of China (PRC)*. There was extensive and substantial criticism on the use of such terminology, for it was felt that India had conceded too much. The earlier formulation was that India considered Tibet to be 'an autonomous region of China'. By stating that India now considered TAR to be a part of the PRC had certain distinct implications. First, it was now understood to mean that India conceded that there was no 'invasion' of Tibet by China in 1950, since Tibet was a part of PRC, which was founded in 1949. Second, China had lopped off considerable parts of erstwhile Tibetan territory and incorporated it into other Chinese provinces. Thus, by recognizing TAR, as opposed to Tibet earlier, India also recognized its new territorial limits and the incorporation of parts of Tibetan territory into other Chinese provinces; contrary to the position of the Dalai Lama.

During the negotiations, China was keen to introduce two additional words into the text of the agreement: 'inalienable' and 'acknowledge'. The proposed Chinese sentence would have read thus: 'India *acknowledges* [instead of recognizes] TAR to be an *inalienable* [new word] part of the territory of the PRC'. India refused to do so. In international legal terminology, the word 'recognition' is a much milder form than the word 'acknowledge', although the Chinese word for both is the same (承认/*Chengren*). By insisting on the formulation as it stands, the Chinese may possibly have tied themselves up in legal knots. What if tomorrow the PRC collapses? And by refusing to add the word 'inalienable', India has limited its recognition of Tibet as a part of *China to the life of the PRC*! A far better course for the Chinese would have been to insist that India *acknowledge* Tibet to be a part of the Chinese state rather than the PRC; the latter being a term that, after all, refers only to a government or a political system.

There was considerable criticism that by agreeing to this formulation, India had forgone its position on the McMahon Line and thus eroded its claims to Arunachal Pradesh. This criticism was based on the assumption that the McMahon Line was a product of the Simla Agreement where Tibet had participated as an entity independent of China, on equal terms and on its own right. What should be noted is the fact that *TAR was recognized as a part of PRC that only came into existence in 1949*. Thus, Tibet's legal position in 1914, when the Simla Agreement was signed, remains unaltered and so does India's position.

During PM Wen's visit to India, an important agreement was signed on 11 April 2005—Manmohan Singh-Wen 'Guiding Principles'—setting out the political parameters and guiding principles based on which the boundary issue was to be settled. From India's perspective, the most important article was Article Seven (7) which states: 'In reaching a border settlement the two sides shall safeguard settled populations in border areas.' It was the understanding of Indian interlocutors that by agreeing to this formulation, the Chinese had indicated that in any eventual settlement of the boundary alignment in the eastern sector, no major changes would be made from the present LAC alignment that largely follows the McMahon Line. It was also the hope that the Chinese would thus not press their claims on Tawang. Yet, in a meeting with the Indian Foreign Minister in 2007, the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi completely refuted any such understanding and insisted that Chinese claims on Arunachal Pradesh (southern Tibet) remained intact. Earlier, the Chinese Ambassador to India, just prior to President Hu Jintao's visit in end 2006, publicly reaffirmed China's claim to Arunachal Pradesh. The Indian Foreign Minister publicly rebuffed Beijing stating that India would not part with populated portions of the state of Arunachal Pradesh and that any elected Government of India 'is not permitted by the Constitution to part with any part of our land that sends representatives to the Indian Parliament.'⁴³

This toughening of China's stance was in addition to its decision not to grant visas on Indian passports to residents of Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh, but on separate paper. Perhaps the Chinese were disturbed at what they perceived was the growing convergence of Indo-US strategic interests in containing China's rise. The Chinese watched with trepidation the finalization of the Indo-US nuclear deal, the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) waiver and the burgeoning Indo-US defence relationship. Between 2002 and 2008, India and the US carried out 50 joint military exercises and since 2008, India has signed defence deals with the US worth US\$ 2.8 billion.⁴⁴ The Chinese surmised that all this was directed at its soft underbelly—Tibet.

The Chinese apprehension grew to a point that they began to protest even PM Manmohan Singh's visits to Arunachal Pradesh. On 13 October 2009, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman characterized such visits as 'provocative and dangerous'. Perhaps what had riled the Chinese even more was the visit of the Dalai Lama to Tawang, where he publicly stated that Tawang belonged to India. The year 2009 also marked the fiftieth

anniversary of the Dalai Lama's escape from Lhasa into exile in India. Earlier, serious riots had broken out in Lhasa which led to harsh security measures and to the Chinese flooding Tibet with security personnel to dampen down the revolt with a strong hand.

Thus, with no solution in sight to the boundary issue, the question of Chinese success in pacifying and integrating Tibet remains as problematical as ever. The spread of the telecommunication revolution and the Internet has tended to band together diverse Tibetan communities all over the world, as also those in China, and this also helps to keep alive the Tibetan cause. About 120,000 Tibetans live in India. As the Chinese introduce even more harsh and repressive measures in Tibet to control the situation, the media revolution ensures that instant coverage is broadcast the world over to the detriment of the Chinese authorities. The recent spate of self-immolations by Tibetans in Tibet illustrates the point. The Indian leadership has made it clear, time and again, that Arunachal Pradesh belongs to India and that there is no scope for alteration of its status. All that India is perhaps agreeable to is for minor rectifications along the McMahon Line/LAC that forms the international border in this sector. The issue of Tibet, thus, still remains a factor in Sino-Indian relations.

NOTES

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