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

Nirupama Rao

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When speaking of the politics of history involving the relationship between India and China in the period before the conflict of 1962, it is essential that we should have a sense of proportion about that history, distilling the meaning of the events that transpired and the key determinants in the evolving relationship between these two Asian powers in mid-century. How does that history connect to us, and how we shape our future? While there can be infinite meanings attached to what caused the war between India and China, what lessons are to be learnt about leadership, about public opinion, about logistical and military preparedness, about narrowing differences, and about negotiation?

The India-China relationship in its early mid-20<sup>th</sup> century phase is a history of politics, of ideologies, of the disposition of leaders, and a history of war, the study of whose conclusions reminds us that it is we, us, as the historian Barbara Tuchman once said in a different context, who are exactly mirrored in those events and decisions, for we have not as yet, distilled the import of those events. That history has confined us in many ways, and if we are to build a secure future, we must untie our minds about it.

Let us begin at the beginning. Where does the curtain rise on our contemporary relationship with China? India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a prominent leader of the Congress Party in the front ranks of India's freedom movement when he visited China briefly in August 1939. His trip had to be cut short because of the outbreak of World War II in September that year. History may have been different if he had met China's Communist leaders like Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in their Yen-an fastness during that visit.

India's freedom struggle and the Chinese struggle against Japanese invasion helped the flowering of a mutual empathy between the nationalist leaders of the two countries. Indian interest in China particularly, was growing significantly. Edgar Snow, writing in 1942, spoke of the "broadening" of the foundations of Indian nationalism with increasing admiration and esteem being expressed by Indians for the Chinese people in

their struggle against foreign invasion. The Burma-Assam-China frontier, “so long a barrier to intercourse”, had “become a gateway, a center of struggle”, with Indians now feeling politically and spiritually wedded to China and being aware of “the mutual interdependence of their destiny”.<sup>1</sup> It is significant also that Nehru’s trip to Chungking was his first to the Far East.

Jawaharlal Nehru’s attraction towards China drew comment from Mahatma Gandhi who wrote: “Jawaharlal Nehru, whose love of China is only excelled, if at all, by his love of his own country, has kept us in intimate touch with the developments of the Chinese struggle..”<sup>2</sup>. In Edgar Snow’s words about Nehru: “China has no more devoted friend alive – and hence neither has the cause of world freedom and brotherhood.”<sup>3</sup>

In the tumultuous days of 1942 when the Congress Party launched its “Quit India” movement against British rule, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek took the line that the British authorities should find a modus vivendi with the Congress rather than arrest and come down heavily on its cadres, because there was a need for all resources and focus to be given to the allied war effort against Germany and Japan. The British contradicted the Generalissimo in their view that the Congress was not representative of India’s vast diversity and should not be accorded special status by the Kuomintang leadership. Internal British despatches meanwhile, spoke of how Chiang’s real intention was to see the British dispatched from India quickly and a not-as-powerful Congress-led government established in their place so that China could proceed with its basic strategy of essentially, dominating Asia. A “strong” India (as the Chinese saw a British-led India) did not fit in with these Chinese calculations.

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar Snow: Foreword to D. F. Karaka’s “Chungking Diary”, Bombay, 1942]

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Nehru's interest in China never flagged, however. Strategic analyst, K. Subrahmanyam) notes<sup>4</sup> that by 1946, "Nehru had very correctly assessed that in the post-war world there would be only four great powers: the United States, the Soviet Union, China and India. India's Ambassador to the Kuomintang in Nanjing, K.P.S. Menon told the historian B.R. Nanda of a meeting with Nehru in 1946 when Menon was proceeding to China: "He had so many questions to ask about the Chiang Kai-shek regime. ..He knew Chiang Kai-shek..All the same, Panditji did realize that the Kuomintang regime was a corrupt regime, and worse than corrupt and it did not live up to the ideals of Dr. Sun Yat-sen..I must say, I was amazed at Panditji's intuition, and knowledge as to what was happening in China. In fact, he made a rather strange suggestion to me. He said that if I got a chance, I should get in touch with Mao Tse-tung or Chou En-lai or this group in Yen-an".<sup>5</sup>

But to call Nehru blind to the threat to India from China would be misplaced. The late Frank Moraes, one of India's leading journalists in the fifties and sixties, recalled in his book, "Witness to an Era", how when he went to China as a member of India's first cultural delegation to the People's Republic in 1952, Nehru in briefing the delegation had said: "Never forget the basic challenge in South-East Asia is between India and China. That challenge runs along the spine of Asia"<sup>6</sup>. Speaking in 1959, Nehru drew reference to having visualized, since 1950, the picture of two powerful states coming face to face with each other on a "tremendous border". His biographer, Michael Brecher, noted in 1958 that Nehru was not "oblivious to the inevitable long-run rivalry between Democratic India and Communist China for the leadership of Asia. He knows full well, but never admits in public that the ideologically uncommitted countries of the area are watching the contest between Delhi

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<sup>4</sup> K.Subrahmanyam: "Nehru and the India-China Conflict of 1962" in "Indian Foreign Policy, the Nehru Years", Edited by B.R. Nanda, New Delhi, 1976

<sup>5</sup> K.P.S. Menon in conversation with B.R. Nanda, November 1976, Oral History Transcripts, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library

<sup>6</sup> Frank Moraes: Witness to an Era: India 1920 to the Present Day, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973

and Peking, particularly in the economic realm, to see with system can 'deliver the goods'."

The advent of a Communist-led government in China with the establishment of the People's Republic in October 1949, marked a significant change in the geopolitical landscape of Asia. For Nehru, "the fact of the change in China" had to be recognized. China could not be left on the margins of the global stage if peace had to be secured in a lasting manner and another global war prevented. The Government of India was among the first (second only to Burma) non-Communist nations to recognize the Government of the People's Republic of China in December 1949. This was despite the fact that Chinese media mouthpieces described Nehru as an imperialist quisling. Nehru was determined to ignore this brusqueness: in the words of the historian, S. Gopal, "Without necessarily agreeing with or supporting China in everything, he refused to line up against her in any way". Suggestions that India should replace China in the United Nations Security Council were rejected because India, "whatever her intrinsic claims to membership, had no wish to secure a seat at China's expense"<sup>7</sup>.

The first stress test in the relationship between the two countries came with the Chinese invasion of Tibet in late 1950. The new Chinese government, already doctrinaire in their attitude to non-Communist countries, was deeply suspicious of India's relations with Tibet. With her independence in 1947, India had assumed the treaty obligations of Britain regarding her frontiers and in relations with Tibet. When Chinese armies marched into Tibet in 1950, the Indian government while stressing they had no political or territorial ambitions in Tibet urged that relations between China and Tibet should be "adjusted" through peaceful negotiations. The Government of India were under no illusions about the fact that despite any talk of Tibetan autonomy in the 17-Point Agreement between China and Tibet of 1951, Tibet would be reduced, as the

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<sup>7</sup> Sarvepalli Gopal: India, China and the Soviet Union: Australian Journal of Politics and History, Vol. 12, 1966

Secretary General of the Ministry of External Affairs, G.S. Bajpai told the British High Commissioner in New Delhi in June 1951, to a mere dependency “and the Chinese troops would be on the Indian frontier”. India felt it was not in a position to affect the course of events in Tibet but would take active steps to watch her frontier with China and “not allow any incursions of Chinese troops on any pretext whatsoever”. Nehru was realist enough not to be sanguine about these Chinese moves. Administrative steps were taken, for instance, to extend Indian administration in NEFA - now Arunachal Pradesh, particularly in the Tawang tract - to properly structure and formulate India’s relations with Bhutan and Nepal, and to consolidate interests in Sikkim. This is especially relevant in the context of the apparent and much-vaunted differences between Nehru and Sardar Patel, his Home Minister, and also other important colleagues, like C. Rajagopalachari and K. M. Munshi, on how to deal with the change brought about by the Chinese presence in Tibet. (Those differences were, as it has been noted, reflective of the deep divide in the Indian foreign policy establishment on the nature of the Communist threat). However, Nehru was also clear that India could not wrest Tibet from Chinese control; speaking to the Dalai Lama in April 1959, he said: “Let us face facts. One cannot bring heaven to the people of India even if I wish it. The whole world cannot bring freedom to Tibet unless the whole fabric of the Chinese state is destroyed.”<sup>8</sup>

There are many voices in India that heap blame on Nehru for allegedly ignoring the implications of the Chinese entry into Tibet and that this, in turn, led to the debacle with China in 1962. Even before the establishment of the Communist government in China, in September 1949, Nehru was speaking to Cabinet colleagues like John Mathai, his Finance Minister, about the likelihood of Chinese troops entering Tibet and the resultant implications for India’s national security. R. K. Nehru, Foreign Secretary during the fifties, and also Ambassador to China, had this to say in an interview recorded in 1972:

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<sup>8</sup> Subimal Dutt Papers: Subject File No. 9, April 1959: Record of the Prime Minister’s Talk with the Dalai Lama (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library)

“But Nehru, although there was considerable opposition in the Cabinet, I think, took a sound and correct view of our relations with China. There was a demand from a section of the leadership of the Congress party that because of this new threat based on the assumption that the Soviet Union and China were close allies, that should be met by our drawing closer to the United States. That is, taking part, in effect, in its anti-Communist crusade which the Americans were organizing. Nehru’s assessment of the situation was different. First of all, he did not regard China as a natural ally of the Soviet Union and, secondly, he realized that any close alliance with the U.S. would have an adverse effect on our interests for three reasons. First of all, China and the Soviet Union, would draw closer together and, after all, they were next door neighbours to us. Their capacity to cause damage to our interest was much greater than any other country. Secondly, the United States would have asked for a price and the price would have been pressure on us to yield to Pakistan on Kashmir.. and thirdly, our main concern was to consolidated our independence... it was a very sophisticated approach”.<sup>9</sup> Nehru obviously recognized the huge change wrought by the establishment of the People’s Republic and the implications of this for Asia and the world. He was conscious of the historic perspective of the resurgence of an old power, while also taking a very realistic view.

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

Was it a folly, as many have suggested, for the Government of India not to secure from China a formal recognition of the India-

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<sup>9</sup> R.K. Nehru recorded by B.R. Nanda, April 8, 1972: Oral History Transcript, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library



China boundary in return for endorsement of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet in 1954? With the benefit of hindsight, while the Chinese did not, at that stage, give India any explicit reason to suspect their intentions regarding the location of the frontier, the non-affirmation by China of a boundary based on the McMahon Line, agreed between Britain and Tibet in 1914, came at significant future cost for India. While as far back as 20 November 1950, Nehru had stated in Parliament that the McMahon Line “is our boundary – map or no map. That fact remains and we stand by that boundary and we will not allow anybody to come across that boundary”, the Chinese, given their declared opposition to any legacies of an imperialist nature concerning Tibet, had already begun to speak of the “illegal” McMahon Line from early on in the relationship with India and despite the reiteration of respect for territorial integrity in the Five Principles contained in the 1954 Agreement, had not explicitly affirmed their respect for India’s borders as they stood defined in the maps published post-Independence.

China’s silence spoke volumes. Qing dynasty claims over Indian territory had been largely embraced by the People’s Government of China. Again, in the words of S. Gopal, the People’s Republic was “as intensely expansionist as any other in Chinese history; they only differed from their predecessors in bringing a new vigor to their policy and harnessing a new ideology in their service”<sup>10</sup>. When Nehru brought up the issue of an incorrect boundary alignment concerning India in Chinese maps with his Chinese hosts in October 1954 when visiting China, Premier Zhou Enlai said these maps were of little significance being reproductions of old maps and that the People’s government had had no time to revise them.

By 1959, with the unfolding of the revolt in Tibet, the flight of the Dalai Lama to India and the proclamation of China’s territorial claims in Premier Zhou’s letter to the Prime Minister of 23 January 1959, the Rubicon had been crossed. Gopal defined it thus: “To China, India was no longer a useful friend in the Afro-Asian world but a rival; and, in addition, relations with

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<sup>10</sup> Gopal, op.cit

India were entangled with China's insecure position in Tibet and her differences with the Soviet Union"<sup>11</sup>. The border clashes at Longju and the ambushing of an Indian police party at Kongka Pass followed. In former Indian Foreign Secretary Jagat Mehta's words, Nehru was now "caught between the outrage of Indian public opinion and serious damage to his hope that the India-China friendship would validate his confidence in different social systems coexisting peacefully."<sup>12</sup> The high noon of those years of "Indians and Chinese are brothers" and the "friendship of one billion" had been consigned to history.

The journalist Dorothy Woodman once remarked that "Nehru 'died' at the Kongka Pass, because after that time, he.. realized that they (the Chinese) were not honest about the maps...Nehru began to mistrust the Chinese more and more and more. Then it seems to me Indian public opinion became hysterical about China. So that Nehru was himself under the pressure of public opinion; and then, he was a very tired man. I do not think ...he was ever himself again, not completely. He was a very disillusioned man".<sup>13</sup>

To attribute to Nehru a failure of statecraft is perhaps, misplaced. As part of his vision of exercising leadership in the comity of nations, Nehru had made the bringing of the PRC into an international arena dominated by U.S. and the Western powers a central plank of his global strategy. The tragedy was that this strategy was not destined to succeed. It became a victim of the clash of perceptions regarding their common frontier as well as the tragic and twisted fate of Tibet.

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

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<sup>11</sup> Gopal, op.cit

<sup>12</sup> Jagat Mehta, 6 December 1989 (unpublished paper): "Nehru's Failure with China",

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Woodman and Kingsley Martin, Oral History Transcript of conversation with B.R. Nanda, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library

the definition of its “lost” territories. These lofty views rested on rather shaky foundations. Most of the Himalayan region, including Tibet, had been part of one vast buffer zone in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If China was seen as justified in acquiring a buffer in Tibet through an assertion of sovereignty, then India was equally acting within its rights when it moved after independence to consolidate its interests in the Himalayan buffer states of Nepal and Bhutan, ensuring that Sikkim was in its orbit, and consolidating its presence and sovereignty over areas like Tawang. And, as noted by scholars, for India, the claim often heard from the Chinese, that Nehru’s government was appropriating the fruits of British imperialism seemed difficult to accept, considering that while the Qing or Manchu empire, seen by the Chinese as proto-nationalist, was regarded by the republican revolutionaries in 1911, as alien and aggrandizing, yet, the Qing frontier policy shared common ground with that adopted by the People’s government after it consolidated power.

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

In retrospect, it is also clear that China misconstrued the depth of spontaneous reverence for the Dalai Lama in India. There was something peculiarly Indian, spiritual and religious in the Indian reaction. In fact, besides sheltering the Dalai Lama and refugees from Tibet, credit must also be given to India for the special efforts, initiated by Prime Minister Nehru, to preserve the artefacts, treasures, manuscripts and paintings – all the precious heritage – of a Tibetan culture and civilization outside the Tibetan homeland. The despatches of Apa Pant, India’s Political Officer in Sikkim during the fifties describe how Nehru

was reverentially called “Chogyal and Dharma Raja”<sup>14</sup> by the Tibetans inside Tibet for his love and sentimental attachment to them and to their culture. They saw him as their Protector.

The politics of history between India and China in those early years is also revealing in terms of the contrasts between their leaders, particularly Nehru and Zhou: The latter were products of two different revolutions, enmeshed in their respective definitions of nationhood, and key players in the determination of the course of the dispute . The decade-and-a half period after India’s independence, was “The Age of Nehru”, particularly in Indian foreign policy. Nehru enjoyed an almost “magical” prestige with the Indian people.<sup>15</sup> He was acclaimed as Bharat Bhushan, India’s jewel. In words of one of his biographers, the Australian diplomat, Walter Crocker: “It was based in part upon the fact that the people believed that he had been chosen by Gandhi as his political heir; in part upon the charm and aliveness of his mere presence; in part upon his devotion to the national interest as he saw it, so self-evident and so marking him off from the run of Indian politicians..”<sup>16</sup> Again, Gopal, also Nehru’s acclaimed biographer, charts the evolution of Nehru’s personality over the years. As he evolved as a person and intellectual, Nehru “discerned the common element in the struggles against imperialism, of whatever shade, in various parts of the world, and awakened to a sympathy with China which was to be, for the rest of his life, the core of his pan-Asian feeling.”<sup>17</sup> As a young, emotional romantic particularly, the frontiers of India’s national movement for Nehru, lay in Spain and China, “for freedom, like peace, was indivisible, and in the final analysis it did not matter much where fate had pitched one’s tent”<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Apa B. Pant, Political Officer in Sikkim, Papers (1<sup>st</sup> Instalment), Subject File No. 4, 1956-57. Nehru Memorial Museum and Libraryh

<sup>15</sup> Walter Crocker: “Nehru, A Contemporary’s Estimate”, London, 1966

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Gopal, op.cit

<sup>18</sup> Gopal, op.cit

The fifties were the heyday of Indian foreign policy, where Nehru succeeded admirably in creating a credible image of what Kingsley Martin once called, “a third force, as if he could act as a peacemaker”. This was particularly evident during the Korean War and in Indo-China. To his international admirers, Martin being one of them, “he seemed..above all things, to be a man struggling with immense difficulties and doing his best in impossible circumstances..”<sup>19</sup>

Non-alignment was Nehru’s diplomatic challenge, as some have called it, to the Cold War system. It was his attempt to remake the world, of questioning assumptions about East and West, North and South. It was his way, as is said, of “shoving back” at international structures that “shaped and shoved”.<sup>20</sup> He was ambitious about his foreign policy, and India’s role in the world, navigating between two opposing blocs, confronting issues of war and peace, and leaving an indelible global imprint in a way India has not been able to do, since.

Nehru’s view of the world was based on a deep sense of morality. It stemmed from the zeitgeist – the yugadharma - of India’s freedom movement, the record of having toppled the British Raj through non-violent resistance. A recent work by Andrew Bingham Kennedy<sup>21</sup> terms it as Nehru’s imbued conviction of “moral efficacy” as opposed to confidence in the military sphere, an area where the contrast with China’s early Communist leadership is apparent.

Kennedy’s work compares Nehru not with Zhou Enlai but with Mao Zedong. In many ways this is apposite since Nehru was India’s paramount leader in his heyday in a way that Zhou was not, because the latter constantly deferred to Mao. Zhou is not known to have ever questioned Mao’s judgement, and it is reasonably clear that all the decisions about the 1962 war with India emanated from Mao himself. Zhou never seemed to

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<sup>19</sup> Martin, Goodman, op.cit

<sup>20</sup> See Andrew Bingham Kennedy: “The International Ambitions of Mao and Nehru”, National Efficacy Beliefs and the Making of Foreign Policy, Cambridge, 2012

<sup>21</sup> See above

question the veracity or the substance of the Chairman's directives. In this, Zhou was a contrast to Liu Shaoqi who was willing to question Mao's judgement on some major issues: in many ways reminding one of Sardar Patel<sup>22</sup>, although it must be stressed that Patel deferred to Nehru on questions of foreign policy.

Where, in contrast to Nehru and his admiration of China, were the Chinese, especially their new leadership after 1949? When Sardar K.M. Panikkar, India's first Ambassador to the People's Republic, arrived in Beijing in May 1950, the British Foreign Office had this to say "...it is worth keeping in mind that the Chinese on the whole have a profound contempt for the Indians.. and also a sense of very considerable superiority towards them...While the Indian on occasion may be sentimental, the Chinese is essentially a realist.. on the personality side, while the Indians are frequently superior, the present Chinese Communist leaders are physically and morally of an altogether tougher breed and fibre. Of the physical toughness of the Chinese Communist, the "Long March" is the classic, heroic symbol. ..There is no doubt whatsoever that in the technique of political organization, hardheadedness and ruthless determination and above all in realism, the Chinese Communists win hands down..."<sup>23</sup>.

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

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<sup>22</sup> A point made by Kennedy, op.cit

<sup>23</sup> Note by A.A.E. Franklin, 26<sup>th</sup> May 1950, FO 371/83558, British Foreign Office Archives

Zhou's biographer, Gao Wenqian shows Zhou as far from perfect, often fallible, but with a "deft talent for finding some tiny crack in the wall that would allow him to appear even-keeled in his judgements".<sup>24</sup> Throughout, he was eternally deferent to Mao, an executioner for Mao. Here was a man in whom "Taoist-like concealment and endurance were combined with obedience and strategic defense."<sup>25</sup> While both Nehru and Zhou were men of great charm, tenacity and intelligence, Zhou displayed a ruthlessness and cunning spawned on the battlefield of armed revolution.

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

*"Although the Indian mind is often convoluted and sometimes enigmatic, it lacks the curious combination of realism and elusiveness that distinguishes the Chinese mind. The Chinese mind is more nimble than the Indian's, gayer, less sensitive but more practical. Without being fanciful, it likes to express itself in imagery and illustration, and the habit of building up an argument through suggestion rather than statement gives conversation with a cultivated Chinese a curiously evanescent, will-o'-the-wisp quality. It is like Huang Chuan who painted in the "boneless way," disdaining to imprison his landscapes, flowers and birds within a drawn outline"*<sup>26</sup>.

Nowhere were these contrasting styles and differences in substance more evident than in the Report emanating from the Officials Talks of 1960 between the two sides. Olaf Caroe writing in 1961 on "the immense document of 555 closely printed pages, packed with comment upon comment, as Pelion piled on Ossa and Ossa on Olympus" highlighted the contrast in intellectual approach to the dispute by representatives of "the

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<sup>24</sup> Jonathan D. Spence: "The Mystery of Zhou Enlai", New York Review of Books, May 28, 2009

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Frank Moraes, "India and China", The American Scholar, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Summer 1963), pp. 445-450

two maturest civilizations in the world, each in the bloom of renaissance". The Chinese argument, he said, was "shot through with a sly mockery" of the Indian evidence, while the Indian argument was marshaled with a lucid clarity and respect for logic worthy of any Oxford cloister. "Save perhaps on the grounds of prolixity, a Socrates could hardly fault it." And, concluding with a statement that the true boundary of the Indian world is on the crest of the northernmost crinkle of the Himalaya where it overlooks and falls to the Tibetan plateau, Caroe noted the lack of common ground in the two sides of the Report. China, in his words, "was seeking to assert a claim, never made before, to the Indian Olympus".<sup>27</sup>

China's leadership, Mao down, attributed their travails in Tibet post-1959 to India. This was a fundamental error in calculation. PLA and official Chinese histories of the 1962 war see Nehru as a successor to British imperialist policy on Tibet, seeking to turn Tibet into a "buffer zone". The argument is that India raised claims on Chinese territory as an adjunct to its "avarice" regarding Tibet. The line of argument propelled by Mao and which blamed Nehru for fomenting the revolt in Tibet was fully reflected in the People's Daily broadside of 6 May 1959 entitled "The Revolution in Tibet and Nehru's Philosophy". Remonstrations by the Soviet leadership and Khrushchev that the troubles in Tibet, including the flight of the Dalai Lama, were the fault of China were roundly rejected by Mao, who proclaimed, "The Hindus acted in Tibet as if it belonged to them".<sup>28</sup>

Nehru had never at any stage sought independence for Tibet. In fact, he had, in the early fifties conceded Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, only seeking respect in China for Tibetan autonomy, or, as John Garver put it: "In terms of Tibet, Nehru hoped that China would repay India's friendship and consolidate the Sino-

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<sup>27</sup> Olaf Caroe: "The Indian-Chinese Boundary Dispute", The Geographical Journal, Vol. 127, No. 3 (Sept. 1961), pp. 345-346

<sup>28</sup> John Garver: <http://indianstrategicknowledgeonline.com/China's> Decision for War with India in 1962



Indian partnership by granting Tibet a significant degree of autonomy.”<sup>29</sup> Early on, Nehru knew that there was not much any country, leave alone India, could do to prevent China’s assertion of sovereignty over Tibet. However, it would have been impossible for Nehru, given the overriding sentiment of the Indian people, to have refused asylum to the Dalai Lama. In 1956, as the Chinese records show, Chinese angst about India’s so-called “unfriendly” activities during the Dalai Lama’s visit to India in 1956 (when Zhou Enlai was also present) was palpable; not accidentally, the Chinese Premier at that time, “signaled a linkage of the McMahon Line and India’s attitude toward Tibet”<sup>30</sup>.

Zhou Enlai on his 1960 visit to India maintained the Chinese perspective on Tibet. In a conversation with Ambassador R.K. Nehru on 21 April 1960, he attributed the differences and misunderstandings that had occurred between India and China to the revolt in Tibet and the coming of the Dalai Lama to India. He told Ambassador Nehru that “the developments in Tibet had a direct bearing on the border problem”.<sup>31</sup> Zhou went on to say: “at the time of the Tibet Revolt, India mentioned the Simla Convention (of 1914) and asked us to accept the McMahon Line and also the 1842 Treaty (regarding Ladakh). We are not willing to accept either of them and we resent this new development.”<sup>32</sup>

While some attempts to dissect the causes of the conflict between India and China have famously sought to attribute culpability to India, I believe that the views expressed by the late K. Subrahmanyam<sup>33</sup> in 1970, refuting such arguments, are still very valid. When Zhou Enlai spoke in Bandung of reasonableness and restraint in dealing with “undetermined”

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<sup>29</sup> Garver, *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Dr. Cheng Xiaohe, “From Ally to Partner: the Evolution of Sino-Pakistan Relations”, *Journal of Renmin University of China*, Vol. 2, Spring 2007, pp.61-81

<sup>31</sup> Zhou Enlai to R.K. Nehru, 21 April 1960, P.N. Haksar papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> K. Subrahmanyam: Review article on “Neville Maxwell’s War”, *Journal of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses*, No. 3 (2), October-December 1970

borders, the Aksai Chin road was being constructed by Chinese crews. Indian patrols accessed the Lanak La pass in Ladakh in 1952 and 1954 and it was only in 1959 on their way to the same pass that an Indian patrol was ambushed at Kongka Pass. The Chinese claims in the Aksai Chin and Ladakh were being physically realized only from 1955 onwards and completely consolidated only with the conflict in 1962. Indian administration in the areas south of the McMahon Line was already a reality before 1947, except for Tawang which was well south of the boundary claimed by India but where administration was extended in 1951. Once the fact of contested territorial claims was in the open, and Chinese presence in the Aksai Chin became public knowledge in India, the national mood rallied around the need to protect national soil from what was seen as further Chinese ingress. The so-called “forward policy” was essentially aimed to “block lines of further Chinese advance”. The Chinese were crossing the Karakoram divide into the basin of the Indus, threatening the heart of Ladakh. The definition of the Chinese claim line in the Western Sector was a shifting line from 1956 to 1962. This was what exacerbated Indian concerns. Until a few months before the onset of conflict, it was assumed on the Indian side that these forward posts established would merely stop the Chinese advance and not provoke a Chinese attack. Tragically for India, the consequences were disastrous.

There were failures no doubt resting with the Indian side concerning the events of 1962. Did Indian officialdom render “less than their duty to their beloved Caesar”- Nehru - as a former Indian diplomat<sup>34</sup> once said? Was there a general surrender to the “hypnosis that Panditji knows best”? But culpability must be shared by both sides, India’s and China’s for the train of events that transpired. To heap reprobation on Nehru for India’s humiliation in 1962, does not do justice to the scale of his tremendous achievements in foreign policy and national rejuvenation, or to the fact that while he saw the inevitability of China consolidating sovereignty over Tibet after

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<sup>34</sup> Jagat Mehta, op. cit

1949, he did put in place a definition of Indian frontier policy based on tradition, custom, geography and history.

In retrospect, given the fact that the policy of setting up defensive posts in territory that India saw as its own, was not intended to dislodge the Chinese from the Aksai Chin road, but only to defend against what was seen as a steadily advancing Chinese claim line, and was not a declaration of war, and the fact that the Chinese vacated territory they overran in Arunachal Pradesh, the 1962 attack by China seems, in historical retrospect, to have achieved little except to hugely damage a friendship with India. The lessons that history impart are that conflict is a zero-sum, and that rebuilding the relationship, as a result, from the ashes of 1962, has been an arduous process.

No amnesia is called for about 1962, only the need to learn from experience. India's case on the boundary with China is a good one and pending a border settlement, taking all the measures necessary to safeguard her interest both on that high frontier and also in the realms of diplomacy is perfectly justifiable, even as we seek an avoidance of conflict.

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

For India, the political and military costs of the 1962 conflict were significantly high. They were high particularly in terms of a loss of international prestige and stature as also in the disappearance of that dynamism that had characterized Indian foreign policy in the fifties and, with profound consequences, the construction of a strategic alliance between China and Pakistan. On this last factor, the opening of the Chinese Foreign Ministry

archives in the last few years reveals the contiguity between the deterioration of India-China relations following the events in Tibet in 1959 together with the breakdown of mutual confidence in the wake of border-related incidents and the growth of Sino-Pakistani understanding.

With the benefit of hindsight, it would not be misplaced to deduce that an opportunity was missed during the early days of their diplomatic interaction in the early fifties, when as India consciously relinquished privileges inherited from the colonial era in regard to Tibet, it could have sought and obtained also mutual agreement with China about their shared borders. Once the situation in Tibet deteriorated with the revolt that led to the flight of the Dalai Lama to India, that window was essentially closed. On the Indian side, resentment at Chinese actions on the border, armed clashes, and the consolidation of a case, regarded by India as watertight, to support India's definition of where the border lay, with the increasingly narrowed ventricles for action for Prime Minister Nehru in the face of public and political opposition to negotiating a settlement with China, set the stage for conflict. The decisions to set up forward posts in disputed areas, perceived by India as sovereign territory, coupled with the conviction that the Chinese would not attack in strength or escalate tension indicated a profound misreading of the opponent's intentions.

What then is the value we draw from the politics of this history? The story is not complete till we study the complex calculus of Chinese decision-making leading up to the war. In June 2011, the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist establishment, the People's Daily in its online edition, published an article entitled "Why did Mao Zedong decide to start the India-China War?"<sup>35</sup> The key points made were that Nehru's biggest "card" was that China would not "dare to go to war with India". Secondly, the U.S. was "preparing for war with the USSR" (a reference to the Cuban Missile Crisis) and not in a position to help India. Thirdly, the border war was a political-military battle. Fourthly, that "India should not attempt to solve

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<sup>35</sup> People's Daily Online, June 3, 2011

the boundary issue through military means” and fifthly, that if it had not been for the war of 1962, peace and stability on the India-China border would not have been maintained for such a long time since then.

The key phrase that catches the eye from this Chinese analysis is that the 1962 war was a military-political battle from China’s point of view. It was a battle directed by the top leadership of China at that time, Mao Zedong, and including, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. The border war was engineered by China as being “in the nature of a warning and a punishment” because, in Mao’s view, Nehru and the Indian Government were trying to solve the boundary problem “through military means”. It was Mao who directed that meticulous preparations be made for battle against the Indians, since victory was not assured and since the “sacred territory” of Tibet was involved and also because there was no previous experience of waging war with India. At the meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee, Mao is believed to have stood before a large map and said “We will penetrate inside, not fight” and then, added, pointing at Indian strongholds, and saying in a loud voice: “Sweep them off”. The staff officer of the Tibet military region is reported to have read out the instructions of the Party leadership saying: “The leader considers that this war is of great significance. We need to be ruthless. If we kill them, still we have to tread on their two legs”. According to the instructions conveyed to the troops, the leadership in Beijing considered the issue as very important since “the impact will be very deep”. It was “the moment for the communist party cadres to display ourselves”; the Indian troops needed “to be attacked like a tiger; dealing with them was like dealing with a mid level Guomindang army.” No established practice would be followed in warfare with the Indians, for that was Mao’s preference. After the war, Mao is reported to have said, “this time, I took part in the war, and also Shaoqi, Premier (Zhou) and Xiaoping..”

What the Chinese archives reveal is that the approach to India while based on a neighborhood policy overtly cast in coexistence was essentially defined by the need to consolidate Chinese interests in Tibet and on China’s southwestern periphery. On

the regional and global stage, Nehruvian India's prominence and her advocacy of the need for the world, particularly the western world, to engage more constructively with China in order to ensure world peace and stability was seen as useful for China although the latter was also jockeying for a stronger and more prominent position in the Afro-Asian world. In the ultimate analysis, the relationship could not be rescued from factors relating to Tibetan security and stability, suspicions of Indian intentions in Tibet on the part of the Chinese, and the perception that the Indians having refused to accept negotiations for a mutually acceptable border settlement were militarily intent on stopping Chinese troops from building a presence in what they saw as their territories along the border.

On the Indian side, as tensions escalated before the war, Nehru believed that the Chinese had deceived him, personally. He believed that Zhou Enlai went back on what he saw as an assurance from China that the latter was prepared to accept Indian sovereignty in the areas south of the McMahon Line. The Chinese tendency to avoid being too explicit when it came to defining their bottom lines on a border settlement, to paint broad brush strokes rather than detailed, fine lines, provided scope for different assumptions and interpretations to the disadvantage of India. Nehru emerges from the pages of the history of that era as Lear-like figure, tragic, torn, in declining health, buffeted both by what was seen as Chinese deception as also by the slings and arrows of his political opponents who felt it expedient to take what some termed as a "heroic posture" that not an inch of Indian territory would be surrendered without considering whether India had the logistical and military preparedness to back up such a stand. Nehru's tragedy was that on the assumption that this was public opinion, he was unwilling to take a strong position against such political opposition to seek a fair solution to the boundary problems with China.

The two countries are still writing the second act in this story of the life of their relationship. Around them and within their own borders, worlds have changed unalterably. But a clear and rational reading of the history of the fifties and early sixties in their bilateral interaction yields useful pointers. Diplomacy as it

has been said is life without maps, but an understanding of history enables us to chart new paths and avoid the quick sand of times past.

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