

The Evolution of Nehru's Policy on Tibet: 1947-1954

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Introduction

In 1947, India became independent. At that time most of Asian nations which have been struggling against colonialism saw their dream come true. They could finally stand on their own feet and look into the future as self-determined nations able to manage their own affairs. It was also the case of China which soon was taken over by the Communists. Everywhere there was jubilation, but not on high plateau of Tibet which remained as isolated as ever of all the great world movements. Nehru, the first Prime Minister of free India constantly encouraged the Asian nations to free themselves from the yoke of the colonial powers, but his attitude towards Tibet would be different and somehow not in consonance with its proclaimed policy. In fact, this policy evolved from the days of the interim government to the time of the signature of the Panchsheel agreement in April 1954. This paper will try to study the evolution of Nehru policy and his political beliefs and actions during these seven crucial years which saw Tibet passing from an "autonomous state verging independence" to a province of Communist China. We should not forget that in the early forties, when most the Asian states were under foreign yoke, Tibet was the only nation enjoying a de facto independence. We shall distinguish two phases in the evolution of the Nehru's Policy towards Tibet between 1947 and 1954.

1. From 1947 to November 1950: Tibet is more or less an independent entity. However by the end of 1949-beginning of 1950 the status of Tibet became progressively vaguer, though still treated as an independent entity.
2. From 1951 to April 1954: this phase saw the birth of the newly found

'eternal' brotherhood and the predominance of Panikkar doctrine.

Phase 1: 1947-1950

The first period began in March 1947, a few months before India's independence. The interim government of Nehru decided to organise an Asian Relations Conference. An official document published during the Conference states that one of the purposes of the Conference was for the Asian nations to see: *"How to terminate foreign dominion, direct or indirect, and to achieve freedom to direct their affairs in accordance with the will of the people concerned."*

Before the Conference, Nehru informed Gandhi that almost every country of Asia, including the Arab countries, Tibet, Mongolia and the countries of South-East Asia as well as the Asian Republics of the Soviet Union will be represented. He called it a unique event in history. It was the first time that Tibet was invited to an international Conference. Of course, it did not please the Nationalist Government of Chiang Kaishek, but it was clear that Tibet was a separate nation at that time. The presence of the Tibetan delegates had been discussed at the highest level of the Indian Government and Prime Minister Nehru had pointed out to the Foreign Secretary, K.P.S. Menon that he was unable to understand the Chinese attitude to the Asian Conference. In his inaugural speech, Nehru said that he was welcoming the delegates and representatives from *"distant Asian countries and from our neighbours, Afghanistan, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Burma and Ceylon to whom we look especially for co-operation and close and friendly intercourse."* China was not yet a neighbour. The Tibetan delegate in his speech explained that Tibet was a country administering its subjects on the basis of religious aspirations. He further emphasised Tibet's friendly relations with India from ancient times.

Our main interest in the Asian Relations Conference is to note that early 1947, Nehru and the other Indian leaders of the interim Government of India recognized Tibet as a separate entity. A few months later, Nehru responded to a telegram of congratulations from the Tibetan Government on the occasion of the formation of the Interim Government by saying:

“My colleagues and I are most grateful for your kind message. We look forward with confidence to the continuance and strengthening of the close and cordial relations which have existed between our two countries since ancient times.”

Tibet was still free and living in peace in its splendid isolation, but not for long!

15 August 1947: India is Independent

In 1947, life in Lhasa was going on as usual while the world over people were talking about Revolution, Independence or the end of Imperialism. These notions meant very little in Tibet. Only the very few who had gone to Darjeeling, Kalimpong or Nanking to study could understand the meaning of these words. However the Kashag understood that the withdrawal of British ‘protection’ was not a positive development for the Land of Snows. The Tibetans were quite alarmed when they first heard of the departure of the British from India. Would the new Indian Government be willing to play the same role as the British had played? Will they be able to play it?

The British Position in 1947

At the time of India’s independence, Tibet was considered a more or less independent state by the British government. The position of the British government was made clear in a note from Anthony Eden to Dr. T. V. Soong in August 1943.¹ Since the Chinese Revolution of 1911, when Chinese forces were withdrawn from Tibet, Tibet has enjoyed de facto independence. She has ever since regarded herself as in practice completely autonomous and has opposed Chinese attempts to reassert control.

Since 1911, repeated attempts have been made to bring about an accord between China and Tibet. It seemed likely that agreement could be found on the basis that Tibet should be autonomous under the nominal suzerainty of China, and this was the basis of the draft tripartite (Chinese-Tibetan-British) convention of 1914 which was initialled by the Chinese representative but was not ratified by the Chinese Government. The new Indian Government followed, for some time, the same policy. The first communication of the Government of independent India to the Foreign Office of the Tibetan Government was to request the latter to

ratify the Simla Convention. This formal request from the Government of India to the Foreign Office of Tibet is itself the best proof of Tibet's independent status in 1947. The Government of India would be glad to have an assurance that it is the intention of the Government of Tibet to continue relations on the existing basis until new arrangements are reached on matters that either party may wish to take up. This is the procedure adopted by all other countries with which India has inherited treaty relations from His Majesty's Government.² Here the Tibetans committed one of the greatest blunders in their history. They refused to ratify the Convention and began claiming the 'lost' territories of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Arunachal Pradesh and certain parts of Ladakh before ratifying any treaty. Richardson, the Indian Representative, diplomatically said that the Tibetan Government acknowledged the message but did not make any immediate reply. This blunder would have incalculable consequences for Tibet and for India. The Chinese would later use this Tibetan claim to claim in turn all these areas as part of the People's Republic. The conflict of 1962 was born out of these claims. This was in fact one of the most preposterous actions of the Tibetan Government. It was not without reason that Jawaharlal Nehru and other Indian officials were very displeased with the Tibetans. This certainly marks a decisive turn in Nehru's view on Tibet.

If Tibet would have replied positively to the Indian request, India would automatically have assumed the legal rights and obligations of the British. It appears that in 1947-48, Nehru was still willing to assume the 'imperial' mantle of the British. Richardson wrote about the Indian rights inherited from the Simla Convention: *"it appeared at that time [in 1947] that the rights were of value to the Indian Government to the same extent as they had been to its predecessor and that the Indian Government was anxious to secure Tibetan consent to the transfer of the whole of the British heritage."*³

On August 15, the British Mission in Lhasa became officially the Indian Mission. Hugh Richardson, the last British Representative was nominated the first Indian Head of Mission. Soon the Tibetans discovered that tremendous changes were shaking Asia and they could not remain forever in their isolation. The first to discover this was Tsepon Shakabpa who was heading a Trade Mission to Delhi in January 1948. The Government of India and the Prime Minister gave them to understand that the immediate need was for *"Tibetan and Indian relations to be*

put on some official basis." The Indian government refused to talk about the trade matters unless the Tibetans recognized that the Indian government was *"the legal inheritor of the treaties, rights and obligations of British India."*

Things had gone too fast for the Tibetans. The Trade Mission informed Lhasa about the stalemate, but since no decision was forthcoming from Lhasa, Shakabpa had no alternative but to continue on their journey to China.

B.N. Mallick, the Director of the Indian Intelligence Bureau, summed up Nehru's feeling when he wrote *'this ill-advised claim [to lost Tibetan territories], made by the Tibetan Government resulted in the temporary loss of a certain amount of Indian sympathy for Tibet.'*⁴

It would take another six months⁵ for Lhasa to announce that Tibet had accepted India as the successor of British India. In a meantime a lot of harm had been done.

A few years later, Nehru would refuse the same rights and term them as 'imperialist' rights inherited from a colonial empire. Shakabpa returned to Delhi for talks with the Indian Prime Minister in early 1949. At that time, Nehru still believed that Tibet was a separate entity with a separate government and that the Indian and Tibetan people had distinct relations, but he would soon become shaky in this belief.

The expulsions of the Chinese from Lhasa

In July 1949, the Tibetan government expelled all the Chinese from Lhasa. The cable Nehru sent to the Political Officer in Sikkim on this occasion shows the position of the Government of India vis-à-vis Tibet in 1949 and makes interesting reading: Nehru told the Political Officer in Sikkim that *"there are many difficulties in the way of the Government of India receiving and looking after these suspects. Nevertheless, in view of our friendly relations with the Tibetan Government, we are considering the possibility of giving them passage. We would be gravely embarrassed if they stayed in India."* He concluded by suggesting: *"The Tibetan Government are the best judges of their own interests but to us it would seem unwise on their part to take any steps which in effect mean the forced discontinuance of the Chinese Mission in Lhasa."*

It is clear that a few months before the Chinese invasion, the Government of India, was ready to help Lhasa with its security concerns. Not only did Delhi treat

Tibet as an independent entity, but the Government of India accepted that the Tibetan Government was the best judge of their problems. We have to point out that even Panikkar, who was posted in Nanking wrote in 1948, a note to his Government terming the Chinese suzerainty over Tibet as 'hazy' and advocated a recognition of Tibet's independence by the Government of India.

1949: The Last Independent Year: Mao takes over China.

Year 1949 can be considered as a year of transition. We shall see that during this year Indian policy would become vaguer and vaguer. With the progression of the Communists in China, things began deteriorate for the Tibetans. In one of his letters to the Premiers⁶ of the Indian provinces, Nehru wrote that he felt that within a few months the Chinese would occupy the whole of China. He felt that India should keep in close touch with Chinese actions in Tibet and the Government should think of the policy they wanted to pursue in Tibet. In the first months of 1949 Nehru's position can be summed up by a letter he wrote to a Chief Minister: Recent developments in China and Tibet indicate that Chinese Communists are likely to invade Tibet sometime or other. This will not be very soon. But it may well take place within a year. The Government structure of Tibet is feeble. A Lama hierarchy controls the whole country, the majority of whose population is very poor. Any effective attempt by the Chinese Communists can hardly be resisted, more especially as the greater part of the population is likely to remain passive and some may even help the Communists. The result of all this is that we may have the Chinese or Tibetan Communists right up on our Assam, Bhutan and Sikkim border. That fact by itself does not frighten me.⁷ Three important points have to be noted here; they would remain the corner-stones of the Indian Government's policy on Tibet. First, Nehru had accepted that Tibet would be invaded; second, for Nehru and his advisors Tibet was a rather primitive country and social reforms were long overdue. The third point is that Nehru 'was not frightened' at the idea of having a new neighbour on his northern border. It would be a major point of difference with Sardar Patel, the Deputy Prime Minister. The British on their part were clear about their position, the Government of India was "the heir of British policy of preserving integrity of Tibet." They would not take any initiative. But, in India, the policy of Nehru was slowly changing: it became vaguer.

On November 16th, the Indian Prime Minister was asked in a press conference about the position of Tibet in relation to India, he declared: About the position of Tibet, I may say that for the last 40 years or so, that is to say, during the regime of the British in India, a certain autonomy of Tibet was recognised by the then Government of India and there were direct relations between Tibet and India. As regards China's position in Tibet, a vague kind of suzerainty was recognised. All these things were never clearly defined as to what the position was, matters remained vague and they have remained vague in that way. We have a representative in Lhasa. We trade with them directly but in a vague sense we have accepted the fact of China's suzerainty. How far it goes, one does not know.⁸ The word 'vague' was used four times in a few sentences. How to better define the position of Nehru's Government vis-à-vis Tibet at the end of 1949? The Government of India wanted as much as possible to keep the status quo: they wanted to continue to recognise Chinese suzerainty over Tibet but provided that the autonomous status of Tibet should be recognised. However, some Indian leaders had a clearer idea of the danger, for example Sardar Patel wrote to Nehru in June: *"Tibet has long been detached from China. I anticipate that as soon as the Communists have established themselves in the rest of China, they will try to destroy its autonomous existence. You have to consider carefully your policy towards Tibet in such a circumstance and prepare from now for that eventuality."* In the summer of 1949, the Indian Chief of Army Staff sent a young intelligence officer to survey the eventual routes that could be used for troops and ammunition in the event of a 'political' decision to defend Tibet. The fact that this covert mission took place and this with the knowledge of K.P.S. Menon is proof that in the summer of 1949, the Government of India was still keeping all its options open. In Tibet, the Kashag had begun to assert itself: on November 3, a message was sent to the American Secretary of State, asking to support Tibet's admission to the UN.

The Government of India rejected the request on the ground that in the Security Council, the Soviet Union would use its veto and it would therefore be a waste of time and energy for everyone concerned. Further it would unnecessarily infuriate the Chinese. We have to point out that in 1949-50, India had the monopoly over not only the foreign policy of Tibet, but also its communications.

The Harishwar Dayal Mission

Harishwar Dayal, the Political Officer in Sikkim visited Tibet for two months in September-October 1949. He returned to Delhi early in December. During his stay in the Tibetan capital he had a wide range of discussions with the Tibetan Kashag. The talks centred mainly on the supply of arms and ammunition to the Tibetan Army and the revival of a Regiment known as the 'Better Family' Regiment. The main role that Dayal saw for the Indian government, was to give training to Tibetan troops. The Kashag gave Dayal a list of required arms and ammunitions. Eventually an agreement was reached and the entire supply was delivered during the next couple of months. Only the request for anti-aircraft guns was turned down. Dayal also discussed the recruitment problems of the Tibetan army. It is clear that the Government of India or at least the Ministry of External Affairs was in favour of a real autonomy for Tibet. Nehru's Government was also quite clear about the military help for Tibet: they will continued to supply arms and ammunition to the Tibetan Government, however they would not render active military assistance in form of dispatch troops to Lhasa. This is confirmed by B.N. Mallik, the IB Director who recorded in his book *My Years with — China's Betrayal* an account of a meeting with K.P.S. Menon, Panikkar and General Cariappa, the Indian Chief of the Army Staff.⁹ As the end of 1949 neared, certain conclusions can be drawn.

- 1 India recognized Tibet more or less as an independent country. The Political Officer in Sikkim was dealing directly with the Tibetan Foreign Bureau in Lhasa (rather than through Beijing) for all political, trade and diplomatic matters.
- 2 Another proof of Tibet's status is that New Delhi was supplying arms and ammunition directly to Lhasa. Though these arms were for defence purpose, they were for all practical purposes to be used against an eventual Chinese attack.
- 3 The Government of India was not ready to get involved in a full-fledged war on the Tibetan High Plateau, but had toyed with the possibility.
- 4 Another factor which would play an important role in the following months was the over-importance that Nehru wanted to give India in world affairs and his own role in the matter.

Phase 2: November 1950-April 1954

At the end of 1950, two factors provoked the change in India's Tibet policy. First

and foremost, the invasion of Tibet. In October 1950, the Chinese troops crossed the Upper Yangtse and took over Chamdo and the Kham province of Eastern Tibet. The other factor which influenced the Tibet policy of the Government of India was the disappearance of Sardar Patel from the Indian political stage. After having written on November 7 a prophetic letter to the Prime Minister about the strategic implications of the invasion of Tibet, he withdrew in his native Gujarat and passed away on December 15.

A New Turn in Tibet Policy: a Note of Nehru

On November 18, 1950 Nehru dictated a Note which would become the corner stone of the China Policy until the Prime Minister's death. We shall study in detail this Note to try to understand Nehru's fears and motivations. What prompted the drafting of a new Tibet policy was the Tibetan Appeal to the UN. Nehru felt that the China policy had to be decided keeping in mind the short term as well the longer term view of the problem. For him it was a *fait accompli* that "*China is going to be our close neighbour for a long time to come. We are going to have a tremendously long common frontier.*"

This was a surprising statement as the Chinese troops had not gone further than Chamdo at that time and were still several weeks away from Lhasa, and several months away from the McMahon Line. But, he admitted that for the Tibetan people the "*autonomy can obviously not be anything like the autonomy, verging on independence, which Tibet has enjoyed during the last forty years or so.*"

Another point made by Nehru was that he thought that China would not take the risk to have many new enemies at the same time. He was wrong.

His only conclusion on the subject was that possible 'gradual infiltration' should be checked and 'necessary precautions' should be taken to prevent this.

Nehru's Note concluded that he wanted to "seek some kind of understanding of China" and he added, "China desires this too for obvious reasons."

"We cannot save Tibet", was the final conclusion.

The strange argument popped up again: if we do anything to help Tibet, it will upset the Chinese and the fate of Tibet would be worse than it is now. This argument would be repeated again and again during the following

decades.

About the Tibetan Appeal to the UN, Nehru said: *"it will not take us or Tibet very far. It will only hasten the downfall of Tibet."*

Though it was India's moral duty to defend a smaller nation, under the pretext that it would not 'take us very far', the moral stand was dropped. His conclusion was: *"Therefore, it will be better not to discuss Tibet's appeal in the UN."*

The fact remains that ten months before Chinese troops entered Lhasa, Nehru had already accepted that Tibet could not be saved and that what was formerly the Indo-Tibetan border had already become the Indo-Chinese border.

The Debate in Parliament

On November 1, Nehru announced for the first time in Parliament that Chinese troops had entered Tibet and captured Chamdo, the capital of Kham. The next debate on Tibet occurred in mid-November, after the Presidential address. The debate opened with a apologetic statement by the Prime Minister who stated that that India *"had no territorial or political ambitions in regard to Tibet and that our relations were cultural and commercial."* He added India did not challenge or deny the suzerainty of China over Tibet, but it was anxious that *"Tibet should maintain the autonomy it has had for at least the last forty years"* and later pronounced the famous sentence: *"From whom they were going to liberate Tibet is, however, not quite clear."* He concluded that he believed that the matter could be settled by peaceful negotiations. The debate that followed was very heated. Congressmen as well as Opposition leaders, except the Communists, expressed their anguish at the happenings on the Roof of the World. Nehru closed that debate with reassuring words: ...since Tibet is not the same as China, it should ultimately be the wishes of the people of Tibet that should prevail and not any legal or constitutional arguments. That, I think is a valid point. Whether the people of Tibet are strong enough or any other country is strong enough to see that this is done is also another matter. But it is a right and proper thing to say and I see no difficulty in saying to the Chinese Government that whether they have suzerainty over Tibet or sovereignty over Tibet, surely, according to any principles they proclaim and the principles I uphold, the last voice in regard to

Tibet should be the voice of the people of Tibet and of nobody else. Two weeks earlier he had written in an internal Note: *"We cannot save Tibet."* When he spoke in the Parliament, he already knew that the Tibetans would never have the 'last voice' any more with regard to Tibet. With the invasion of Tibet and the refusal of India to stand by her weak neighbour, a new phase had started. It would be a phase of compromise dominated by the great influence of Panikkar on the Prime Minister.

The Downgrading of the Mission in Lhasa

A few months after the signature of the 17-Agreement in Beijing in May 1951. Panikkar came to India in October 1951 for consultation with his government. By that time he was already fully in love with the Communist regime. Nehru was keen to know more about the new China and he would start relying more and more on his Ambassador. A few months later on 28 February 1952 at a press conference¹⁰, when asked about the Indian Mission in Lhasa, Nehru said that it is exactly the same as it was: "It dealt with certain trade and cultural matters more or less. Of course there is not too much trade and it continues to be there." He added that technically it never had any diplomatic status. This was not completely true as the British and then Indian Representative definitively had a diplomatic status in 1950/51. In June 1952, the situation had further evolved with the Chinese taking physical control of most parts of Tibet. The Tibetans had begun discovering the hardships caused by an invading army.¹¹ During a press conference¹², Nehru admitted for the first time that the status of Tibet was changing: Nothing very definite has taken place yet. ...Obviously once it is accepted and admitted that the Chinese Government is not only the suzerain power in Tibet but is exercising the suzerainty, then something will flow from it. Then you cannot treat Tibet as an independent country with an independent representation from us. Though our Representative remains, this changes his character somewhat. ...I do not think there is any difficulty about it. It has to be negotiated with China and Tibet both. For Nehru accepted that the circumstances had changed and from an independent country Tibet has become a country under effective occupation. We shall see that during the following months, the question of involving the Tibetans in negotiations would completely be forgotten and this in direct contradiction with the Simla Convention which had been ratified by the Government of India and the

Tibetan Government. India was ready, like the British at the beginning of the century, to negotiate an agreement on Tibet without any reference to the Tibetan authorities. Though a few months earlier Nehru had declared that the Mission in Tibet had never had a diplomatic status, now he more prudently admitted, "the fact of the matter is that the status of the Representative in Lhasa has never been defined for the last thirty years." In June 1952, the clever Zhou Enlai told the Indian Ambassador that *"he presumed that India had no intention of claiming special rights arising from the unequal treaties of the past and was prepared to negotiate a new and permanent relationship safeguarding legitimate interests."* Panikkar informed Nehru that Zhou Enlai clearly wanted to convey the impression that the only issue was the one related to the "transformation of the Indian Mission in Lhasa into a proper Consulate-General. Nehru replied the following day to Panikkar that he had no objection to convert the Mission in Lhasa into a Consulate-General and also opening a Chinese Consulate in Bombay. He however was doubtful about the desirability to have piecemeal arrangements. The next month Zhou Enlai wrote to Nehru officially requesting the "regularisation" of the Indian Mission in Lhasa. In a cable to the Indian Mission in Lhasa on 6 September 1952, Nehru clarified the policy of the Government of India vis-à-vis the Mission in Lhasa. At that time, the Indian Representative had thought a loan of Rs 2 lakhs to help the forces which wanted to continue the fight for Tibetan independence: We have already agreed to convert our representative in Tibet into a Consul General. That itself indicates what future position is going to be. It would be improper and unwise for our representative to get involved in Tibetan domestic affairs or intrigues. We are naturally friendly towards Tibetans, as we have been in the past, but we must not give them any impression of possibility of interference or help. ...We have to judge these matters from larger world point of view which probably our Tibetan friends have no means of appreciating. The Tibetan friends could understand less and less what was happening to them or perhaps had they begin to understand the prophetic words of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama "and long and dark shall be the night."

In September, the Indian Political Officer was demoted to Consul General and Panikkar could be transferred to Cairo. His job was done. In changing the status of the Mission in Lhasa, the status of Tibet as an autonomous nation was changed, it was now merely a province of China. Panikkar could bragged: *"The main issue of our representation at Lhasa was thus satisfactorily settled and I*

was happy to feel that there was no outstanding issue between us and the Chinese at the time of my departure". At that time it was understood from the talks between Panikkar and Zhou Enlai that the 'regularisation' of the Mission in Lhasa would be the first step to pave the way to negotiations for all the so-called outstanding problems. An attitude of appeasement and backward bending will mark the following months, but the Chinese were not in a hurry, they had first to consolidate their position in Tibet, built strategic roads, and bring more Liberation forces. One year later, in September 1953, Nehru had write to the Chinese Premier that he was surprised that no further steps have been taken since then to negotiate a settlement. China was not in a hurry, they had started to build a road on India's territory and India was providing the rice for the PLA involved in the job. Everything was fine for them.

Border issues: The Panikkar Doctrine

Here again like in the case of the Indian Mission in Lhasa, things took a new turn soon after the signing the 17 Point Agreement. On September 21, exactly two weeks after the PLA had entered the Tibetan capital, Panikkar had a meeting with Zhou Enlai who told the Indian Ambassador that *"there was no difference of point of view in regard to Tibet between India and China"*. He even added that Zhou *"was particularly anxious to safeguard in every way Indian interests in Tibet."* At that time he spoke of *"the stabilisation of the Tibetan frontier [which] was a matter of common interest to India, Nepal and China; it could best be done by discussions among the three countries."*¹³

When Zhou Enlai spoke of stabilisation of the Indo-Tibetan border, Panikkar understood that there was no difference of opinion on the border and both India and China agreed to the McMahon Line and the western sector in UP and Ladakh. At that time, Nehru was yet not over-worried that the subject of Tibet's boundary. However, he was thought that a proper discussion should place in the future between China and India about India's interests in Tibet and the 'common boundary between Tibet and India'. It was still called it the boundary between India and Tibet. Dr S. Gopal noted in his biography of Nehru that *"this shrouded sentence [about the stabilisation of the border] was not an explicit recognition of the frontier"*.

The officials of the Ministry of External Affairs, did not agree with Panikkar optimistic views, but Nehru, their Minister had already a tendency to believe his Ambassador. Panikkar arrived in Delhi for consultations on October 16, 1951. The China-Tibet policy was discussed at a high level meeting and later Bajpai gave a written brief to Panikkar for future talks with the Chinese government. The instructions were clear: the recognition of the border had to be part of a general settlement. There was no question of surrendering the advantages accrued from the Simla Convention without getting a firm assurance from the Chinese on the McMahon Line and the other sectors. There was also no question of withdrawing the garrisons in Gyantse and Yatung without securing such an assurance.¹⁴

Instructions signed by the Prime Minister were given to Panikkar.¹⁵ It is true that in India there was a very poor awareness of the border. Around that time, at a Press Conference, a journalist pointed out that to Nehru there were certain tracts in north-west, which were undefined and that even on the maps there were shown as undefined -- Nehru answered that he did not know about it and added that *'all these are high mountains. Nobody lives there. It is not very necessary to define these things.'*

When Panikkar returned to Beijing, he, of course forgot the instructions, though he knew that they had the sanction of the Prime Minister. During his next meeting with Zhou Enlai he did not take up the border issue as instructed since he felt that the Chinese Premier was not inclined to speak about "larger issues".¹⁶ A few weeks later, a note on India's interests in Tibet was presented by the Indian Ambassador to the Chinese Foreign Office, at that time again there was no mention of the frontier problems. During the following meetings with Zhou Enlai, both sides remained silent on the border. There was no border between friends! Not only, could Panikkar escape not following the instructions of the Prime Minister, but he could at the same time remain his favourite. Panikkar was an establishment in himself! John Lall, a former Diwan of Sikkim who was serving at that time in Gangtok wrote: *"Very few people in Delhi other than Nehru had any illusions about Panikkar. N.R. Pillai, Bajpai's successor told someone in Delhi that Panikkar 'had the reputation as an historian mixing fiction and fact and in his reporting from Peking he had the tendency to believe what he wanted to believe."*

On 14 June 1952, Panikkar met again with Zhou [this time on the Korea

settlement]. During this meeting Panikkar said that he expected the Chinese Premier to raise the border question with Tibet, but the shrewd Zhou remained silent. The Indian Ambassador concluded again that "India's position on the frontier with Tibet was well known to China". This time Nehru was quite upset, he wrote to Panikkar: *"We think it is rather odd that, in discussing Tibet with you, Chou- En-lai did not refer at all to our frontier. For our part, we attach more importance to this than to any other matters. I do not quite like Chou En-lai's silence about it when discussing even minor matters."*¹⁷

Though many other officers of the Ministry of External Affairs, particularly G.S. Bajpai and K.P.S. Menon did not agree with Panikkar's doctrine; for the Ambassador, the fact that the Chinese did not raise the issue was a sign that there was no problem. Ultimately, Panikkar's advice prevailed and July Nehru accepted again Panikkar's advice. However there was still some doubt in Nehru's mind, he mentioned to the Foreign Secretary a few days later: ***"But I am beginning to feel that our attempt at being clever might overreach itself. I think it is better to be absolutely straight and frank."***

The same policy will continue till 1954 and even later. In a note dated 30 August 1953, Nehru wrote: *"For the present, we need not raise the question of the frontier, but this will have to be brought in a larger settlement."* He hoped that an occasion might arise before a general settlement", but it was only wishful thinking. The Government of India was still trying to be clever! But the old fox Zhou Enlai was more clever, as it would take a few more years for Nehru to discover. Finally, India took the initiative and proposed negotiations in Beijing to resolve all outstanding issues, but the border problem was not to be discussed. The discussion was only to be about problems of Trade and Pilgrimage in Tibet. The Secretary General put up a Note in which he defined the main points for discussions at the Beijing Conference. Out of seven points to be discussed the first one was "the question of India's frontier with Tibet." On 3 December 1953, Nehru commented by defining the framework for negotiations to be held in Beijing. Though Nehru agreed 'generally' with the points made by the Secretary General, Panikkar's doctrine on the border prevailed again. *"We should not say anything about the border"* wrote Nehru. Panikkar who had been transferred more than a year earlier to Cairo, had been consulted and had advised the Prime Minister. The Panch-Agreement was signed in April 1954 without reference to the border. To have a better understanding of the situation,

we should have a look at the Indo-Tibetan border problems between 1951 and 1954.

Border in UP and NEFA

From 1951, disturbing rumours of Tibetan and Chinese infiltration through the UP border had been circulating in the press and some government circles. In October 1951, Sampuranand, a Minister in the U.P. Government, wrote to the Prime Minister pointing out that some areas adjoining Tibet had become vulnerable "because of Tibetan activities supported by China." He asked the Government to take necessary precautions by laying strategic roads, constructing barracks for soldiers and establishing army outposts on the Indian side. Nehru replied a few days later that the Government of India had not been negligent about the borders. It is true that a border defence Committee under Lt Gen. Kulwant Singh had been set up earlier and recommendations given. We shall see that very little was to be achieved till the early 60's in terms of intelligence gathering and manning the border. Anyhow, Nehru optimistically concluded *"I do not think that we need take too gloomy a view of the situation."*

On September 1952, Dr K.M. Munshi the Governor of Uttar Pradesh pointed out to Nehru that the boundary between Tehri and Tibet was not clearly defined and that there was some infiltration. The fact that revenue was collected by the Tibetan authorities till 1951-52, would have very serious repercussions on the future of the border areas particularly in the North-east and UP/Ladakh sectors. The Chinese would soon claim as part of the People's Republic of China, all the areas where the Tibetans had earlier collected revenue. In the central and eastern sectors, the situation was even more complicated because as admitted by Dr Munshi the frontier was not delimited. Obviously as long as a friendly and peaceful state was on the other side of the border, it was not so important to have a proper delimitation. Tibet and India had lived for millennia as neighbors and friends without problems, but in the early fifties the situation had changed. The correspondence about what to do to protect the border continued during the following months. The UP Government was ready to keep some armed police on the border provided that the Centre accepted to put up some barracks. Unfortunately for India's defence, the buck was passed from one ministry to another and from the State to the Centre. Finally bureaucracy prevailed and nothing happened for many years. But the Prime Minister saw things from a

different angle. For him the most important task was to develop the border areas. He believed that the people of the border areas, if provided with better opportunities would be the first to defend the borders of India. At that time, he repeated that "one of the foremost interests of India is cultivation of friendly relations with her neighbours, especially China and Tibet." The manning of the border posts remained the responsibility of the Ministry of External Affairs and when all kinds of rumours began pouring about infiltration of Chinese soldiers, Nehru had to take a renewed interest about possible infiltration and the steps to be taken to control them. The first surveys by the Chinese of the Sinkiang-Tibet highway cutting through the Aksai Chin most probably occurred in 1952/53, though this border was still shown as 'undefined' in the Indian maps. Nehru regretted the slow progress: "Nothing is moving, we must get this moving... I am particularly interested in the roads, because without the roads nothing else can really be done." The matter came to the Parliament several times for discussion: and many leaders such as Dr. Shyam Prasad Mookerjee complained that there is no reference in the Report [Annual Report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs] as to what steps the Government is taking for the purpose of securing the borders. In March 1954, Nehru tried to pacify the members. Asking the Members to be patient, he said that the negotiations would soon be concluded in Beijing and all the problems solved. Yesterday some of our friends here raised the subject of our borders, particularly on the Tibet side, what is known as the McMahon Line. I do not know why they had this sudden doubt. As far as we are concerned it is our border and will continue to be so. There is no dispute with any other country over this, nor are we about to raise any problem. Therefore it makes no sense for these doubts to be voiced. During the course of the debate Lanka Sundaram (Independent) spoke about the "percolation" of the Chinese troops across various passes. He claimed that 60,000 to 100,000 Chinese troops were poised across the Himalayan border,. He also referred to the existence of a note in the External Affairs Ministry in which it was mentioned that China was disinclined to accept the McMahon Line. It was denied by Nehru who said that he was "*in intimate touch this way and that way on the border, on both sides.*"

Unfortunately the information of Dr Lanka Sundaram were not so wrong and before the end of the year, the infiltration would start increasing. The negotiations began on December 1953 and they would last till April 1954. They were to take only six weeks, but lasted five months! The Government of India

accepted to remove all the contentious issues in particular the Indo-Tibet border issue.

Ideology

To conclude, we should say a few words about the ideology which motivated Nehru to abandon Tibet in the early fifties. During the years following the signature of the 17 Point Agreement, the relations between India and Tibet were regulated by the Simla Convention and the Trade Agreement which was attached to it. This Agreement was confirmed as valid when the Government of India wrote to the Government of Tibet in 1947 asking Lhasa to ratify it. After the invasion of Tibet in 1950, the things changed for Tibet as the Chinese government made their 'hazy suzerainty', as Panikkar had put it in 1948, a full-fledged occupation. In these circumstances, Nehru and some of his close advisors (mainly Panikkar) felt new arrangements had to be made taking into account the latest developments in Tibet. But there was a quid-pro quo: the Government of India wanted to change the terms of the Treaty between India, Tibet and China, but at the same time was keen to stick to the some of the clauses of the Treaty, namely the demarcation of the McMahon Line. There was no logic in the Indian stand. In addition, Nehru had started dreaming about an eternal friendship between India and China which would propel the Asian continent as the future centre of power balancing the Western and communist blocks. The first consequence of this line of thought was that there could be no threat possible from India's new neighbour, China.

When in October 1951 Bajpai suggested the possibility of 'small forces dribbling in through the numerous passes and then combining to make trouble' for India, it was rejected by the Indian Prime Minister 'even as a remote contingency'. In any case, the Prime Minister thought that any large expenditure on the army would starve the development of the country and social progress. In July 1951, Nehru had already written off Tibet. He told the Foreign Secretary that *"so far as the Peking agreement is concerned, there is no question of our approval or disapproval. We have had nothing to do with it and we have not been consulted at any stage either by the Tibetans or the Chinese."*

He further advised the officials of the Ministry that it would not be proper for the Government of India to raise any hopes for help with the Tibetans, as India was not in a position to provide any help. The assumption that India had nothing to

do with the Agreement between Tibet and China was however totally wrong as India had in fact a Treaty with Tibet which stipulated that none of the parties should go into agreement without the previous agreement of the other party.¹⁸ But Nehru was influenced by Panikkar who believed that the Simla Convention was a colonial sequel and he did not want to have anything to do with it. Where logic failed is when he accepted that a nation 'on the verge of independence' could be swallowed up and colonized by a larger one, and this only for the sake of an elusive, hypothetical and one-sided friendship. In a speech at Kalimpong on 12 April 1952, he first explained his ideology of 'non-interference'. The first element of the Panch Sheel Agreement was slowly taking shape in his vision of an ideal world order: *"There will be no war in the world if every nation followed a policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sister countries."* He added *"Nobody need get upset over the recent developments in Tibet. I would like to repeat that one of the foremost interests of India is cultivation of friendly relations with her neighbours, especially China and Tibet."*

But soon there would be only one neighbour.

In September 1952 when S. Sinha, the Indian Representative in Lhasa wrote him a long report, Nehru was very upset and immediately answered his Representative in Tibet: Your telegram is rather disturbing as it indicates that our policy is not fully understood. That policy is to recognize that Tibet is under Chinese suzerainty and, subject to that, to protect our own interests in Tibet. Otherwise, we do not wish to interfere in internal affairs of Tibet and we can certainly be no party to any secret or other activities against the Chinese. That would be both practically and morally wrong. It is for Tibetans and Chinese to settle their problems. Nehru added: *"We are naturally friendly towards Tibetans, as we have been in the past."*

Nehru believed that he could be of greater assistance to Tibet if he could manage to maintain friendly relations with China. In internal correspondence and notes, the Government of India always showed a great determination and firmness, but when it came to discussions with Zhou Enlai, the 'Panikkar Doctrine' ultimately prevailed and the firmness evaporated. Panikkar never managed during his 'private' meeting with Zhou Enlai to make India's position clear, especially about the border. The occasion for Nehru to formulate his new Tibet (and China) policy came when in March 1953 S. Sinha wrote a note on the north-eastern Frontier Situation. The note drew the attention to various possible dangers on the border

areas. It greatly upset Nehru who concluded: *"It appears that Mr. Sinha does not appreciate our policy fully. He should be enlightened."*

It has to be noted that this comment of Nehru was passed after Panikkar had sent his comments on Sinha's assessment from Cairo. The future would show the correctness of Sinha's analysis and the foolishness of Panikkar, "the so-called China Expert". I find Mr. Sinha's approach to be coloured very much by certain ideas and conceptions which prevent him from taking an objective view of the situation. The note starts by reference to the lust for conquest of the Chinese and is throughout based on this. Mr. Sinha looks back with a certain nostalgia to the past when the British exercised a good deal of control over Tibet and he would have liked very much for India to take the place of the British of those days. As a matter of fact, the weakness of our position in Tibet has been that we are successors, to some extent, of an imperial power which had pushed its way into Tibet. When that imperial power has ceased to have any strength to function in the old way, it is patent that we cannot do so, even if we so wished. We do not, in fact, wish to do so in that particular way. What we are really interested in is our own security maintenance of our frontiers.To take up an attitude of resistance without the strength to follow it up would have been political folly of the first magnitude. Therefore, we had to accept the changes that took place. We shall have to accept any other changes internal to Tibet. But one thing we are not prepared to accept is any modification of or intrusion across our frontiers. Therefore, we must concentrate on that and not think vaguely of other matters. He concluded: While there is much in Mr. Sinha's report that has a basis of truth, this is put forward in such an exaggerated and emotional way that it loses force. I am sorry that a representative of ours should allow his objective analysis to be affected in this way. That does not help in understanding a situation. Now, the crux of the argument comes when the Indian Prime Minister states: *"We live in a revolutionary period when the whole of Asia is in a state of turmoil and change. We have to keep up with that change and not merely regret the days of pre-change."*

It is true that Tibet had not been able to keep up with the sudden revolutionary changes which were shaking the world. In many ways, Tibet was an island, not yet contaminated by the revolutionary fervour of the people of Asia and Africa. Nehru and his colleagues who had lived through the years of freedom struggle against the British colonialists were dreaming of the emancipation of the Asian

people. Asia could again be able to express its own genius. But there was a serious, and for Tibet, contradiction in Nehru's policy; while he encouraged the progressive forces in many countries such as Indonesia or Algeria to seek independence, he used different standards for India's closest neighbour, Tibet, an autonomous nation 'verging on independence' in his own words. The logical conclusion of Nehru's ideology would have been for India to help her younger brother and neighbour. India had a treaty agreement with Tibet, India could have sponsored Tibet's entry onto the stage of the newly free nations: but on the contrary Nehru preferred to sacrifice this peace-loving country for a sake a friendship that would never be. In the process, India lost its preponderant place in world affairs. Soon after Nehru wrote to the Secretary-General and the Foreign Secretary that he fully agreed with Panikkar's approach on the border issue. Another argument which would be used again and again and greatly influence Nehru's policy was the fact that he considered Tibet to be a socially and politically backward country. He most probably agreed with the Chinese leaders that Tibet needed to be 'liberated'. He concluded *"We cannot support feudal elements in Tibet, indeed we cannot interfere in Tibet. Having come to that conclusion, we should abide by it and not pine for a different policy, which anyhow is totally outside our reach."*

The Panch Sheel Agreement

The *"Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India"* was signed on 29th April 1954 in Beijing by the Indian Ambassador N. Raghavan and the Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister of China Nehru said that *"in my opinion, we have done no better thing than this since we became independent. I have no doubt about this... I think it is right for our country, for Asia and for the world."*

The historian Dr Gopal describes it in more realistic terms: This was clutching at straws after the main opportunity had been deliberately discarded. The only real gain India could show was a listing of six border passes in the middle sector, thereby defining, even indirectly, this stretch of the boundary. On the other hand the Chinese had secured

all they wanted and given away little.¹⁹ The Prime Minister was in his revolutionary mood when he presented the Agreement in the Parliament: *"Now we must realise*

that this revolution that came to China is the biggest thing that has taken place in the world at present, whether you like it or not."

In the same speech Nehru spoke about Panchsheel: "Live and let live, no one should invade the other, no one should fight the other... this is the basic principle which we have put in our treaty." But it was in fact the burial of old independent Tibet and it is ironic that the famous preamble was couched in Buddhist words of non-violence, peace, mutual understanding and non-aggression. But it was Tibet's post mortem sermon. The only grace was that it was only a 8-year agreement. It expired on 28th of April 1962. Since then it has never been extended. It legally means that it is no more binding on India and the only valid treaty existing today between India and Tibet is the Simla Convention ratified by the Government of India and Tibet in 1948. In June 1954, Zhou Enlai the Chinese Premier paid the first of a long series of visits to India. The friendship was at its zenith. The first 'official' Chinese incursion on Indian soil occurred during the same year in Bara Hoti.

Notes:

1 The British 'legal' position vis-à-vis Tibet will be the same in 1950 when the Chinese invaded Tibet.

2 Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged and Agreements Signed by the Government of India and China (Delhi: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 2, 1959), p. 39.

3 Richardson, op. cit., p. 176.

4 Mullick, op. cit., p. 54.

5 On June 11, 1948.

6 Later known as Chief Ministers.

7 SWJN, Series II, Vol. 13, p. 260, Letter to John Matthai.

8 SWJN, Series II, Vol. 14, p. 191.

9 Mallik, op. cit., p. 80.

10 Press conference. New Delhi, 28 February 1952. Press Information Bureau.

11 For the first time in centuries, Tibet faced food problems. The arrival of tens of thousands of new mouths to feed was a great disturbance on the balanced economic and environmental system of the Roof of the World.

12 Press conference, New Delhi, 21 June 1952. PIB. Extracts.

13 Cable from Panikkar to Nehru, 28 September 1951.

14 Note of G.S. Bajpai 21 November 1951 and K.P.S. Menon, 22 November 1951.

15 Instructions drawn up by K.P.S. Menon, 21 January 1952, shown to Panikkar and

approved the next day by the Prime Minister.

16 Panikkar's Cable to Nehru, 13 February 1952.

17 Nehru's Cable to Panikkar, 16 June 1952

18 Article V

19 S. Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vol. 2, p. 180.