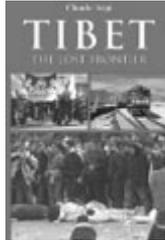


India sentimental, China pragmatic



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This has resulted in the loss of Tibet, a buffer state between India and China, says NS Rajaram

Tibet: The Lost Frontier

Author: Claude Arpi

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Claude Arpi is an Auroville-based French scholar with an abiding interest in Tibetan history and culture. His knowledge of source materials combined with his extensive contacts with high Tibetan officials including the Dalai Lama allow him to write on Tibet and the India-China relations from a perspective that is not available in other works. *Tibet: The Lost Frontier* is an invaluable work on Tibet and its role in India-China relations. It supplements and extends his earlier work *The Fate of Tibet* published in 1999.

At the very outset it must be recognised that any scholar researching the vital area of India-China-Tibet relations has to work under a severe handicap: access to these vital records, even in India's National

Archives requires approval by Jawaharlal Nehru's heirs, meaning the present occupants of 10, Janpath. Successive Indian Governments have done nothing to correct this scandalous situation. The author discovered however that some of the same records are available at the India Office in London. These allow him to shed valuable light on the policy blunders and incompetence on the part of Nehru and his favourites that led to the humiliation of 1962 and beyond.

Two factors contributed to the loss of Tibetan independence and India's still unresolved border with its giant neighbor -- Tibetan insularity and Nehru's obsession with world peace. The first resulted in Indo-Tibetan relations getting off on the wrong foot immediately after Indian Independence; this was a minor irritant that might soon have been corrected. But the second, far greater in its impact led to Nehru abandoning India's vital interests in Tibet in pursuit of international glory in Korea, soon followed by a mirage called Panchasheel.

In addition to his utopian dreams, Nehru showed singularly poor judgement in his choice of advisers during this vital period. Of these Krishna Menon, now consigned to the dustbin of history is justly infamous. Equally pernicious was the influence of KM Panikkar, India's Ambassador to China. A confirmed Marxist, he seemed more interested in polishing up Communist China's international image in the aftermath of its invasion of Tibet than safeguarding Indian interests.

Noting this, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the one leader who shines like a beacon in this sordid saga of folly and betrayal, observed that Panikkar "has been at great pains to find an explanation or justification for Chinese policy and actions." This was to lead eventually to India repudiating its right to have a diplomatic mission in Lhasa on the ground that it was an 'imperialist legacy'. This was only one of several

concessions made by Nehru -- a list that includes giving up the Indian mission in Gyantse as well as a pilgrimage centre in the Mount Kailash-Manasarovar area.

There were fundamental policy errors at the conceptual level as well. It was a common belief among English-educated Indian officials that they were superior to and more sophisticated than Chinese officials most of whom did not speak English. They had only outfoxed themselves.

Later, when India did raise the border question, the Chinese blithely asked, why did the Indians not bring up the border in 1954 if it was so important?

The problem was that Indian officials, led by Nehru, were living in a world of make-believe. S Gopal has observed in his biography of Nehru: "By asserting that not only questions ripe for settlement but 'all outstanding questions' were being settled, the Indian side sought to score a debating point of no value. Semantics cannot guarantee an international frontier."

The tragedy as the author observes is: "Fifty years later, the border tangle remains unresolved." Worse, for all the hopeful noises made by Indian politicians and diplomats, it appears more intractable today than it was 50 years ago. "Beijing still claims 90,000 sq km of Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh and occupies 38,000 sq km more in Ladakh (Aksai Chin)."

The author seems to see the Chinese posture in Arunachal Pradesh as a pressure tactic meant to force India to acquiesce to Chinese control of Aksai Chin, which is far more vital to China. As he sees it, it basically boils down to: "Is India ready to give away Aksai Chin in exchange for something it already possesses -- Arunachal Pradesh? (Perhaps with free access to Kailash and Manasarovar added to sweeten the pill?) Is any other solution feasible?"

In the final analysis, as the author observes: "Today, like yesterday, the main problem is that while the Chinese remain pragmatic, most Indian leaders are sentimental." Most except Sardar Patel that is, who shortly before his death in 1950 memorably wrote: "Even though we regard ourselves as friends of China, the Chinese do not regard us as friends." Has India learnt the lesson?