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Why remember Panchsheel?

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Madhuri Santanam Sondhi

Who remembers the Panchsheel Agreement? Some might imagine some lofty dharmic principles enunciated by Nehru and the Chinese, who later in 1962 treacherously "stabbed us in the back." A few might recall that the Agreement itself was substantively about consulates, trade and pilgrimages between India and the "Tibet region of China" and had nothing at all to do with Buddhism or Vedanta. It was only the preamble, to which the Chinese reluctantly agreed, that contained Five Principles of Co-Existence; general rules of mutual respect and non-interference which govern the conduct of normal diplomatic relations. The Agreement for the Chinese signified India's acknowledgement of Tibet as a "region of China." Starry-eyed Nehruvians who had substantially given away more than they got, celebrated the inauguration of a paradigm for constructing Asian if not world peace.

Claude Arpi, a French journalist settled in India, with a special interest in Tibetan affairs, published a study of the Agreement in 2004 on the fiftieth anniversary of its conclusion (*Born in Sin: The Panchsheel Agreement*, Mittal Publications). It contains some lesser known background material such as prescient telegrams warning of Chinese intentions from Shumul Sinha, Indian consul-general in Lhasa and General Thimmaya's information about Chinese road-building in Aksai Chin in 1954, both of which were ignored; the farcical episode of

feeding the PLA in Tibet with Indian rice while they were building border roads adjoining and within Indian territory; and the government's intention to recognise the Tibetan government-in-exile after Shastri's return from Tashkent. The book is specially valuable as a case-study in Indian foreign-policy making.

The negotiations leading up to Panchsheel were mainly about giving up Indian rights and obligations in Tibet while assuming, without probing, that China accepted the MacMahon Line. With her self-imposed isolation from the world, Tibet was a virtual political non-entity, and lost to Chinese diplomatic skills when she belatedly sought international recognition.

As Arpi points out, the Indian attitude was not solely determined by Nehru: there was a whole body of bureaucratic and political opinion that was sympathetic to China and approved of throwing Tibet into its maw. The Chinese Communist revolution was admired in secular circles as a model for India, as unifying and modernising China through uprooting "the four olds" i.e., its culture and traditions. They found it so suitable for Tibet that they welcomed her

loss of independence as many were to later welcome the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan. It was a hubristic article of faith that "feudal" societies (which threatened no one militarily) needed regime change through external coercion. This went hand in hand with a profound distrust of America, which overshadowed any doubts about China.

But there was also significant opposition to this point of view. Eminent dissenters included the President, Rajendra Prasad, home minister Vallabhbhai Patel whose analysis of the northern situation has stood the test of time, G.S. Bajpai in the foreign office who disagreed with K.M. Pannikar and Krishna Menon, parliamentarians Acharya Kripalani (whose phrase "born in sin" titles the book) and

S.P. Mookerjee, apart from numbers of leading politicians, editors and intellectuals across the political spectrum. But Nehru's answer was: "We cannot support feudal elements in Tibet, indeed we cannot interfere in Tibet ... we should not pine for a different policy, which anyhow is totally outside our reach."

With relevant files still classified in the MEA, analysis remains at the level of public statements and actions. Apparently, the military had been consulted but declared its inability to fight in the Tibetan plateau (outside our reach), although the Chinese soldiers were equally at a disadvantage, more so with a hostile local population. Diplomatically, accepting China's claims to Tibet and refusing to interfere were bruited as India's grand renunciation of "colonial" rights, although similar renunciation did not occur in the case of Bhutan and Sikkim, whose external affairs and defence India willingly inherited from the Raj.

Euphoria also flowed from the idea of a newly resurgent Asia "on the march," and the dream of a third bloc of nations, non-militarised and committed to peace, with China and India in the lead. The Panchsheel preamble was naively taken as confirmation of China's assent for this project, and it took time to realise that China was not on board, her attitude conditioned more by her historical baggage of imperial domination and Sun Tzu-type military and diplomatic tactics: indeed, she has displayed a brilliant mastery of tenacity, patience and deceit in pursuing her long-term goals. In time, she laid claims to territory India regarded as her own, and that in the name of undoing imperialistic map-making. India was to be hoist on her own petard.

Given the decision to leave Tibet to her fate, India's simultaneous throwing away of her own rights in Tibet while humbly accepting a few reconfirmed as new, her refusal to accept a Security Council seat and

lobby instead for China, her timidity in raising the border issue with China and other glaring lapses in defending her national interest, still demand explanation. Scholars point to the influence of Gandhism or Indian dharma on decision-makers, but Gandhi was no advocate of appeasement, and he actively though non-violently challenged injustices. Hindu dharma moreover always had a robust appreciation of the role of the Kshatriya. George Tanham's thesis that India has historically lacked a strategic doctrine, certainly seems to fit this case. Arpi points to the heavy costs, both military and ecological, which we have paid for this lapse. Today mega-projects for diverting rivers in Tibet threaten our riparian systems through flooding and drought.

Does Panchsheel hold any lessons for us today? China is now an emergent economic giant with growing military muscle: India has also changed economically and militarily, but not as dramatically as China. Border problems remain with India's vulnerable northern defences lacking comparable infrastructure to the elaborate roadways and developing railway system in Tibet. China's pursuit of oil and power has extended her strategic reach into the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Despite this, India under successive Prime Ministers from Indira Gandhi to Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, has, like Japan and Taiwan, shown a readiness to engage and trade with China, while searching for optimal strategic accommodation. As for the Tibetan case, although it appears increasingly difficult, and the restraints of Buddhist non-violence prevent it from receiving the same world attention as the bloody Palestinian struggle, it has not disappeared.

The Asian balancing act finds echoes in the American policy debate as China seeks to become an Asian hegemon. Will she aggressively tangle with America (See Brzezinski and Mearsheimer in *Foreign Policy* January/February 2005) and other regional powers like India or rest

content with downsizing them? Optimists hope for a graduated democratic evolution, but a militaristic fascistic future cannot be ruled out.

In India serious rethinking about China and the US began after the collapse of the Soviet system and Pokharan II had significantly altered the Asian strategic environment. Recently, American and Indian experts recommended a new orientation away from the "cobwebs" of the Cold War era in both countries, which would enable them to enter into a strategic relationship to compete with an "aggressive competitor like China." Indeed, there has always been a case for a partnership between America and the Asian democracies, and China's hegemonism may well accelerate this outcome. Although history is said to repeat itself, and Indian responses at times seem confused, there is some evidence that a second Panchsheel is not in the offing.

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