



### **Chinese Consolidation in Tibet**

*Its Impact on India's security*

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### **The Triangle of India, Tibet and China**

The geographical situation of Tibet, 'buffered' between the two Asian giants: India and China, has made the recent history of the Roof of the World a tumultuous one. It was not always so.

For centuries, India and Tibet have shared a common spiritual search. During the seventh century AD, Tibet discovered Buddha's teachings. This is undoubtedly the most significant turning point in the history of Tibet.

The following period saw a constant flow of Tibetan lamas, pandits and yogis visiting the great Indian *viharas* of Nalanda, Odantapuri or Vikramasila. Once Tibet converted to the doctrine of non-violence, it was transfigured. It could live only for the Dharma and by the Dharma of Buddha. It is fascinating to look at the changes wrought by the Buddhist faith on the people of Tibet who were among the most

belligerent on earth. After adopting the new religion, their powerful Empire which had spread far and wide suddenly turned pacifist. As a result it would never recover its past military glory but it would start another kind of conquest, the conquest of self, and begin to spread its cultural influence over Central Asia and Mongolia.

The disappearance of Buddhism from India around the XIIth-XIIIth century had grave consequences for the subcontinent and Central Asian politics. The Buddha dharma continued to flourish on the Roof of the World, but the interest of Lamas in what they still considered as *Aryabhumi* rapidly declined.<sup>1</sup>

Tibet's conversion had another consequence on its geo-political history: a non-violent Tibet could no longer defend itself. It had to look outside for military support to safeguard its frontiers and for the protection for its Dharma. This help came first from the Mongol Khans and later the Manchu Emperors who had become followers of the Buddha's doctrine.

For centuries, the relation with China was termed as 'choe-yon' (or priest-patron). The Dalai Lamas (or some other Lamas at times) were gurus of the Chinese Emperors who in turn offered military protection, when needed. This was not a very sustainable relation as often the Lamas died very young and could not fulfill their duties or at times the Emperors were weak. With the British took control over the subcontinent another era began. India's relation with Tibet which had always been spiritual became strategic and economic.

The Crown's officials saw the Land of Snows as an opportunity to open new markets and create a convenient buffer zone between India and the Russian Empire. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, China was too

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<sup>1</sup> It remained mostly a place of pilgrimage for the Tibetans.

weak to react meaningfully but continued to pretend to be the suzerain of Tibet.

For the three nations, the ball started rolling in July 1904 when a young British Colonel, Francis Younghusband entered the holy city of Lhasa. Today it is fashionable to speak of 'clash of civilisations' but in this case, it was truly two different worlds meeting for the first time.

At the end of his stay in the Tibetan capital, Younghusband forces upon the Tibetans their first Agreement with the mighty British Empire. In signing this treaty with the Crown Representative, Tibet was 'acknowledged' by London as a separate nation. However political deals were never simple; Tibet's Western neighbour, China, was extremely unhappy not to be a party to the accord.

Ten years later (March 1914), wanting to show fairness, London called for a tripartite Conference in Simla to settle the issue: the three main protagonists sat together for several months at a negotiation table for the first time. The result was not fully satisfactory as the Chinese only initialized the main document and did not ratify it. The British and Tibetans however agreed on a common border which they demarcated on a map: the famous McMahon Line was born. This treaty was still in force when India became independent in August 1947.

When independent India was just two years old, a new dynasty took the power in China: the Communists. Many intellectuals in India believed that the future of both nations should be linked because of their common colonial ordeal, but the history and tendencies of India and China have always been radically different. India has never had an expansionist propensity.

Despite the often proclaimed 2000 year-old friendship between India and China, the two nations had hardly any contact except through foolhardy monks such as the pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang who, fourteen

centuries ago crisscrossed North India in search of the places where his master, the Buddha had lived and preached a thousand years earlier. An interesting aspect of the Sino-Indian relations is that these pilgrims left a detailed description of the Indian subcontinent, while Indian records seldom exist. Indian monks and scholars also traveled to China to teach the message of the Buddha. However, in general, relations were very limited in scope.

### **The 'Liberation' of Tibet**

It began on New Year's day of 1950 or rather on New Year's eve, when the Government of India decided to hurry through the recognition of the Communist regime in Beijing.

Was it a coincidence that the next morning a warning note was heard on the New China News Agency's broadcast? It proclaimed, *"The tasks for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for 1950 are to liberate Taiwan, Hainan and Tibet... Tibet is an integral part of China. Tibet has fallen under the influence of the imperialists."*

The next day, the green light to attack Tibet was given to Deng Xiaoping by Mao Zedong from Moscow; all preparations were left to Deng who in 1949/50 was posted as the Political Commissioner for the Western Region in Sichuan. As such, he was responsible for the Second Field Army with his old companion, Liu Bocheng, the 'one eyed' veteran General. He had been a leading advocate of an early start to 'democratic reforms' in some Tibetan areas of Kham and Amdo provinces, which had already been incorporated in Qinghai and Sichuan provinces of China. Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping had long been comrades. During the war against the Japanese both were leaders of the 128<sup>th</sup> Division, the elite formation of the PLA.

The legend said that One-eyed Liu could not understand why Deng, who was not a professional soldier, and had never graduated from any military schools, was so quick to grasp any situation and could even build a strategy faster than Liu himself. *“Was he not reading the same intelligence files, the same report as Liu?”* But Deng was *“familiar with every detail of the enemy situation, he knew the enemy commanders at every level, he was a quick reader and his mind retained what he read.”* Thirty years later he would be adulated by the West as the Great Reformer.

During the following months China asserted again and again that Tibet was a part of China's territory. On January 22, an interesting conversation took place in Moscow between Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin:

*Mao Zedong: I would like to note that the air regiment that you sent to China was very helpful. Let me thank you Comrade Stalin, for the help, and ask you to allow it to stay a little longer so it could help transport provisions to (Chinese Communist Central Party Committee member and commander of the PLA's Second Field Army) Liu Bocheng's troops, currently preparing for an attack on Tibet.*

*Joseph Stalin: It's good that you are preparing the attack. The Tibetans need to be subdued. As for the air regiment, we shall talk this over with the military personnel and give you an answer.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> *Cold War International History Project Bulletin: (Winter 95/96).* Website: [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.links&group\\_id=158198](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.links&group_id=158198)

Earlier on 10 January 1950, in a telegram addressed to the Central Committee, Mao Zedong Mao: *“I fully agree to the plan to dispatch troops into Xizang [Tibet] contained in Liu [Bocheng]'s and Deng [Xiaoping]'s telegram of 7 January. 1 Now Britain, India, and Pakistan have all recognized us, which is favorable to [our]*

During the first half of 1950, the only thing which was not known to the Chinese was the degree of resistance by the Tibetans: would the Second Army march triumphantly into Tibet as 'liberators', or would the Roof of the World have to be 'liberated' by force?

On the front in Eastern Tibet, preparations were progressing smoothly, the detailed plans of Mao Zedong and his Political Commissioner for the final 'liberation' of Tibet had begun to be implemented.

in his *Tibetan Nation*<sup>3</sup>, Warren Smith quotes a Scottish missionary, Beatty working in eastern Tibet. He was told by a PLA officer that *"large numbers of yak, wild and domestic animals would be needed to feed the PLA troops [in Tibet]. The PLA officers and men talked of going on to India once Tibet was in their hands."*

It was certainly Mao's plan, but first he had to achieve: *"the task of marching into Tibet to liberate the Tibetan people, to complete the important mission of unifying the motherland, to prevent imperialism from encroaching on even one inch of our sovereign territory and to protect and build the frontiers of Motherland"*<sup>4</sup>.

### **The Invasion of Eastern Tibet**

The attack occurred on October 7, 1950.

The main border post at Gamto Druga in Kham province was overrun by the Chinese who used the same strategy as in Korea. Wave after

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*dispatching troops into Xizang."*

Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping had reported that they planned to dispatch the 18th Army to Tibet by the summer and fall of 1950. On 24 January 1950, the CCP Central Committee formally issued the order to dispatch the 18th Army to enter Tibet.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Warren W., *Tibetan Nation* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 273 quoted from *Invasion of Tibet by Chinese's Liberation Army*, US National Archives, (793B.00/8-2150).

<sup>4</sup> Xinhua Communiqué, November 1, 1950, Peking.

wave of soldiers overpowered the Tibetan defenders; they fought well but were finally massacred.

In the meantime another Chinese regiment crossed the Yangtse above Dengo and advanced rapidly towards Dartsedo (Kanting), marching day and night.

In the South, the 157<sup>th</sup> PLA Regiment crossed the Yangtse and attacked the Tibetan troops near Markhan. When they reached Markhan, the local Tibetan Commander, Derge Se, surrounded by the Chinese troops, surrendered his force of 400 men.

The net was slowly closing on Tibet.

The northern front lost ground day by day and the headquarters of the central zone was soon submerged by the waves of young Chinese soldiers. They caught the fleeing Tibetans at night in a place called Kyuhung where the Tibetans were decimated. The road to Chamdo, Kham's capital was open.

Lhasa was finally informed on October 12 that the Yangtse had been crossed and that the Chinese had began to 'fulfill' their promise to 'liberate' the Roof of the World.

On October 25, a brief communiqué of the New China News Agency (Xinhua) announced to the world that Tibet was 'liberated': *"People's army units have been ordered to advance into Tibet to free three million Tibetans."*

A couple of weeks later, when Lhasa appealed to the United Nations against China's invasion, India which had always acknowledged Tibet's autonomy ('verging on independence' as per Nehru's words) began to vacillate; it did not stand up to defend its militarily-weak neighbour.

## **A Letter of Sardar Patel**

Many in India were shocked by the Chinese invasion. The person who expressed it in the most articulate manner was Sardar Patel, the Deputy Prime Minister. But by mid-November Patel was a sick man and too weak to oppose the Indian Prime Minister on serious matters, he however found the energy to write to Jawaharlal Nehru.

The clarity of Patel's perception<sup>5</sup> on the strategic implications for India's foreign policy were masterfully summed up in following lines:

My dear Jawaharlal,

...I have carefully gone through the correspondence between the External Affairs Ministry and our Ambassador in Peking and through him the Chinese Government. I have tried to peruse this correspondence as favourably to our Ambassador and the Chinese Government as possible, but I regret to say that neither of them comes out well as the result of this study.

The Chinese Government has tried to delude us by professions of peaceful intentions. ...There can be no doubt that, during the period covered by this correspondence, the Chinese must have been concentrating for an onslaught on Tibet. The final action of the Chinese, in my judgement, is little short of perfidy.

Recent Russian declassified documents have proved beyond doubt that Mao had planned and prepared the invasion of Tibet for months in advance. The letter goes on:

*I have doubt if we can go any further than we have done already to convince China of our good intentions, friendliness and good will. In Peking we have an Ambassador who is eminently suitable for putting across the friendly point of view. Even he seems to*

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<sup>5</sup> The letter has been published by *The Indian Monitor*, Bombay, November 2, 1968; also Durga Das, *Sardar Patel's Correspondence 1945-50*, Vol. 10 (Ahmedabad, 1974), p. 337.

*have failed to convert Chinese. ...It looks as though it is not a friend speaking in that language, but a potential enemy.*

Twelve years later this last sentence would resound in the Indian mind. But was the China of 1950 so very different from the China of 1962?

Foremost in Patel's mind was the future of India and he tried to look towards this future as objectively as possible.

In the background of this, we have to consider what new situation faces us as a result of the disappearance of Tibet, as we know it, and the expansion of China almost up to our gates. Throughout history, we have seldom been worried about our northern frontier. The significance of this letter lies in the fact that the Tibetan issue was not seen from an ideological point of view, but from a very practical angle; Patel had only Indian and not Tibetan or Chinese or Western interests in mind.<sup>6</sup>

The letter continues by analysing with great lucidity all the defence and other problems facing India. Patel wanted immediately to have discussion on the following points:

- a military and intelligence appreciation of the Chinese threat to India both on the frontier and the internal security.
- An examination of our military position and such redispotion of our forces as might be necessary, particularly with the idea of guarding important routes or areas which are likely to be subject to dispute.
- An appraisalment of the strength of our forces...
- A long-term consideration of our defence needs...
- The question of Chinese entry into the UNO...

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<sup>6</sup> While Panikkar and sometimes Nehru saw it from the Chinese or anti-western point of view.

- The future of our mission in Lhasa and trade posts at Gyanste and Yatung
- The policy in regard to the McMahon line...

The Prime Minister was not ready to listen to any dissent or even discuss these matters of crucial interest for India's security. The 'Iron Man' passed away on December 15, just five weeks after having written the letter.

### **Strengthening the Empire's Borders: the Consolidation**

*"The Chinese people have stood up, long live the Chinese Communist Party",* Mao had told a million Chinese assembled at Tiananmen Square on October 1, 1949. On that day, he proclaimed the People's Republic of China. Under his Chairmanship, the Communists proceeded to consolidate the Middle Kingdom.

Dr. Li Zhisui, Mao's future doctor who had just returned to China after completing his studies abroad wrote: *"I was so full of joy my heart nearly burst out of my throat, and tears welled up in my eyes. I was so proud of China, so full of hope, so happy that the exploitation and suffering, the aggression from foreigners, would be gone forever."*<sup>7</sup>

China's leaders, like in India's wanted to break from the past. But for India, there was no plan for territorial expansion unlike for her newly-acquired neighbour.

In May 1951, some of the Dalai Lama's representatives signed 'under duress' a 17-Point Agreement with Communist China. For the first time in its 2000-year history, Lhasa had no choice but to accept to be a part of the 'Motherland', China. Thereafter, the defence of the 'local' government of Tibet would rest with the 'central' government in Beijing. The incorporation of the Tibetan nation into China's fold was

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<sup>7</sup> Zhisui Li Dr, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (London: Arrow Books, 1996), p. 15.

not immediately acknowledged by Delhi which continued for a couple of years to maintain a full-fledged mission in the Tibetan capital and have diplomatic relations with Lhasa.

### **The New Roads**

Just five months after the signature of the 17-Point agreement, the PLA entered Lhasa. Improvement of communications was taken on a war-footing.<sup>8</sup> The only way to consolidate and 'unify' the Empire was to construct a large network of roads. The work began immediately. Priority was given to motorable roads: the Chamdo-Lhasa<sup>9</sup>, the Qinghai-Lhasa and the Tibet-Xinjiang Highway (later known as the Aksai Chin) in the western Tibet. The first surveys were done at the end of 1951 and construction began in 1952.<sup>10</sup>

The construction of one of the feeder roads leading to Nathu-la, the border pass between Sikkim and Tibet had some strange consequences. India began feeding the Chinese road workers in Tibet,

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<sup>8</sup> One should not forget that in 1950 (when Eastern Tibet was invaded), a caravan took two months from the Chinese border to reach Lhasa, the Tibetan capital.

<sup>9</sup> The Sikang-Tibet Highway of the Chinese.

<sup>10</sup> Xinhua News Agency reported on 29 November 1954: "The two large armies of road builders from the eastern and western section of the Sikang-Tibet Highway joined hands on November 27. Sikang-Tibet Highway from Ya-an [capital of the now defunct province of Sikang] to Lhasa is now basically completed." The communiqué further mentions that "gang builders and workers, including about 20,000 Tibetans, covered over 31,000 li on foot in the summer of 1953 and began construction of the 328 km of highway eastwards from Lhasa."

Three weeks later, another report stated: "The Qinghai-Tibet Highway is now open to traffic. The first vehicles reached Lhasa on the afternoon of December 15. Over 2000 km long, the highway passes through Mongol, Tibetan, Hui and Khazak brother nationality districts, traverses 15 large mountains... crosses 25 rivers, grasslands and basins at an average elevation of over 4,000 meters above sea level."

sending tons of rice through this route. John Lall, posted in Gangtok, witnessed long caravans of mules leaving for Tibet.

The official report of the 1962 China War prepared by the Indian Ministry of Defense<sup>11</sup> gives a few examples showing that the construction of the road cutting across Indian soil on the Aksai Chin plateau of Ladakh was known to the Indian ministries of Defense and External Affairs long before it was made public.

To quote the Report: *"B.N. Mullik, who was then Director, Intelligence Bureau, has, however, claimed that he had been reporting about the road building activity of the Chinese in the area since as early as November 1952. According to B.N. Mullik the Indian Trade Agent in Gartok also reported about it in July and September 1955, and August 1957."*<sup>12</sup>

Different incidents which occurred in the early fifties should have awakened the Government of India from its soporific *Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai* dream-like world. It was not to be so.

One was the harassment of the Indian Trade Agent in Western Tibet was without doubt linked with the work which had started on the Tibet-Xinjiang highway. Rudok, located midway between Lhasa and Kashgar is the last small town before entering the Aksai Chin. The presence of an Indian official there was embarrassing for the Chinese as they had started building a road on Indian soil.

The Official report also mentions S.S. Khera, a Cabinet Secretary in 1962, who later wrote that *"information about activities of the Chinese*

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<sup>11</sup> A document still marked 'restricted' today, but fortunately available on Internet.

<sup>12</sup> Mullik B.M., *My Years with Nehru — The Chinese Betrayal* (Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1971), pp. 196-97.

*on the Indo-Tibetan border particularly in the Aksai Chin area had begun to come in by 1952 or earlier.*"<sup>13</sup>

If the Indian government had been ready to read beyond the Chinese rhetoric and Zhou's assurance of friendship, it would have seen many more ominous signs. One of them was the closure of the Indian Consulate in Kashgar.

Here again, as in several other cases, Nehru justified the Chinese actions without taking any retaliatory measures or even protesting. He declared in the Parliament that 'revolutionary changes' happening in China and this could explain the closure of the Consulate. But India's interests were lost in the process.

India had been trading with Central Asia and more particularly Kashgar and Yarkand for millennia. Just because 'revolutionary changes' had occurred, the Government of India accepted the closure of its trade with Sinkiang as a *fait accompli*. The reference to Kashmir is not relevant. Since the winter of 1948, India controlled the Zoji-la pass<sup>14</sup> as well as Ladakh. At that time, the Karakoram Pass was still open to the caravans.

Another indication came during the negotiations for the Panchsheel Agreement (or *Agreement between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India*). Instead of the planned three or four weeks, the talks went on for four months. One of the objections by the Chinese was the mention of Demchok as the border pass for traders between Ladakh and Western Tibet. Very cleverly, Chen, the main Chinese negotiator 'privately' told T.N. Kaul, his Indian counterpart, that he was objecting because they were not keen to mention the

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<sup>13</sup> Khera, S.S. *India's Defense Problem*, p. 157.

<sup>14</sup> Between Ladakh and the Kashmir Valley.

name 'Kashmir' as they did not wish to take sides between India and Pakistan. This argument is very strange and though Kaul could see through the game, the Indian side gave in once again. Later Kaul wrote:

*However, their real objection was, I believe, to strengthening [their] claim to Aksai Chin (in the Ladakh province of Kashmir) which they needed for linking Sinkiang with Western Tibet. An agreed formula "the customary route leading to Tashigong along the valley of the Indus river may continue to be traversed in accordance with custom was worked out and Delhi approved it."<sup>15</sup>*

This formulation would have very serious consequences, instead of using the opportunity to clarify the already contentious border issue, the Chinese were allowed to walk away with a vague statement which was open to future dispute. It was indeed a great victory for Beijing while they were building the road in the Aksai Chin.

Other authors have also mentioned the building of the Aksai Chin road and the fact that it was known during the mid-fifties. In his book *The Saga of Ladakh*<sup>16</sup> Maj. Gen Jagjit Singh mentions that in 1956, the Indian Military Attaché in Beijing, Brig Mallik received information that China had started building a highway through Indian territory in the Aksai Chin area. Mallik had reported the matter to Army Headquarters in New Delhi and a similar report was sent by the Indian Embassy to the Foreign Ministry.

D.R. Mankekar<sup>17</sup> gave similar information in his study of the 1962 war.

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<sup>15</sup> Kaul, *Diplomacy in Peace and War*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1979), p. 102.

<sup>16</sup> Jagjit Singh, Maj. Gen., *The Saga of Ladakh*, (New Delhi: Vanity Books, 1983), p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> Mankekar, D.R., *The Guilty Men of 1962* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1968), p. 27

The Official Report of 1962 War states: *"The Preliminary survey work on the planned Tibet-Sinkiang road having been completed by the mid-1950's, China started constructing motorable road in summer 1955. The highway ran over 160 km across the Aksai Chin region of north-east Ladakh. It was completed in the second half of 1957.*

*On 6 October 1957, the Sinkiang-Tibet road was formally opened.*

The Government of India has never acknowledged that it had information about the Aksai Chin road as early as 1954-55.

The loop was closed. The two newly-acquired western provinces of Communist China were linked. It took nearly two more years for the news to become public. In August 1959 Nehru dropped the bombshell in Parliament: what the Chinese called the 'Tibet-Sinkiang highway' was built through the Indian territory.

It appears that one cause for the delay to make the news public was that for a few years, New Delhi did not know how to react.

An *Informal Note* given by the Foreign Secretary to the Chinese Ambassador on October 18, 1958 stated: *"the Government of India are anxious to settle these petty frontier disputes so that the friendly relations between the two countries may not suffer. The Government of India would therefore be glad for an early reply from the Chinese Government<sup>18</sup>."*

The 'petty dispute' is still not solved today and the issue has become even knottier.<sup>19</sup>

At the end of the letter, another issue was raised: for some time an Indian patrol had been reported missing. Delhi wanted to know if the

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<sup>18</sup> White Paper No. 1, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Soon after Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee returned from China in June 2003, a Chinese patrol was caught trespassing on Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh. Similar incidents have been reported on the U.P.-Tibet border a couple of years ago. As long as there is no agreed border these incidents will continue to occur.

Chinese had seen *“an Indian party consisting of three Military Officers and four soldiers together with one guide, one porter, six pony owners and thirty-four ponies ... out on a normal patrol in this area near Shinglung in Indian territory.”*

Indeed, they had been seen and captured by the Chinese border guards on Indian soil. Beijing admitted immediately that they were in their custody, but according to the local Chinese commanders the Indian jawans had trespassed on Chinese side of the frontier at the time of their arrest<sup>20</sup>.

This was the first of a long series of incidents. Hundred of letters and notes would be exchanged on similar issues.

### **The political consolidation: the Panchsheel Agreement**

We have to go back a few years earlier to see how after taking over the Tibetan plateau, and while developing the road network, Beijing manage to ‘stabilise’ their occupation by signing an Agreement with India.

In many ways, the Panchsheel Agreement between India and China marked the tail-end of the events set in motion by Younghusband’s entry into Tibet. While the British expedition officialised Tibet as a separate entity, the Agreement put an end to Tibet’s existence as a distinct nation. The Land of Snows became ‘Tibet’s Region of China’. The circle was closed with incalculable consequences for India and the entire Himalayan region. Ironically, the Tibetans themselves were not informed of the negotiations.

The preamble of the Agreement contains the Five Principles which formed the main pillar of India’s foreign policy for the next five years.

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<sup>20</sup> They would eventually be released a few months later.

They heralded the beginning of the *Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai* policy and the 'non-aligned' position of India.

The Agreement opened the door to the Chinese military control of the Roof of the World by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). This translated into completing on a war-footing the building the network of roads and airstrips heading towards the Indian frontiers in NEFA and Ladakh.

India never got any benefit out of her 'generosity'. On the contrary, she lost a peaceful and friendly neighbour. By 1962, the Principles had evaporated so much that the two Asian giants fought a war in the Himalayas.

The title of the Agreement itself, "*Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India*" was the most important victory for Beijing. India officially accepted that Tibet was only a 'Region of China'.

Though neither the Preamble (the Five Principles), nor the provisions of the Agreement (about the trade relations between India and Tibet) are in force today, the acceptance of Tibet as a part of the People's Republic of China (as per the title of the Agreement) remains a fact. It has directly caused the destruction of an ancient way of life (backward in one sense though much more advanced at an inner level).

Moreover, the idealistic Five Principles were never followed either in letter or in spirit by China. Non-interference in the other's affairs and respect for the neighbour's territorial integrity were two of the Five Principles, but Chinese intrusions into Indian territory began hardly 3 months after the signature of the treaty.

Another tragic outcome of the signing of the Agreement is the refusal by some of Nehru's advisors to bargain for a proper delimitation of the border between Tibet and India, against the relinquishment of India's

rights in Tibet (accrued from the Simla Convention). The officials considered these advantages an imperialist heritage to be spurned by a newly independent India.

During the talks with Beijing between 1951 and 54, the Indian Ambassador K.M. Panikkar and his colleagues 'cleverly' tried to avoid bringing the border question on the table. Their contention was that if the Chinese did not consider the border to be an accepted upon issue, they would themselves bring it for discussion. The Indian cleverness back fired and ended in a disaster for India. In his speech after the signature of the Agreement, Zhou Enlai congratulated the negotiators for having solved on all the matters 'ripe for settlement'.

### **The India-China Boundary Question**

Soon after this ominous remark of the Chinese Prime Minister, the situation began to deteriorate. Intrusions occurred first on the Tibet-UP border, (in a place called Barahoti in 1954, then near the Shipki-la two years later). As earlier mentioned, Delhi did not know how to react. In the first days of September 1956, Nehru wrote a Note to the Foreign Secretary: *"I agree with the suggestion made in the office memorandum sent by the Ministry of External Affairs to the effect that it would not be desirable for this question to be raised in the Lok Sabha at the present stage<sup>21</sup>. We have informally mentioned this matter to the Chinese Government previously and we have at the same time made it perfectly clear that, so far as we are concerned, there is no boundary question.*

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<sup>21</sup> Note, 7 September 1956. JN Collection. Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Series II, Volume 35.

Strangely he added: *"I think that if this question is raised in our Parliament at this stage, this might prove embarrassing from the point of view of the negotiations between Burma and China."*

It is difficult to see the connection between the Chinese intrusions and Beijing's negotiations with Burma, but government's logic is often different from human logic!

On 21 September 1956, the Inspector General of Police, Himachal Pradesh informed Delhi that a party of 20 Chinese had crossed over Shipki-la (the border pass) into India's territory. A 27-member BSF party met the Chinese the same day. The BSF were told by a Chinese officer that he was instructed to patrol right up to Hupsang Khad (4 miles within Indian territory). Let us not forget that Shipki La was the border pass recognized under the Sino-Indian 'Panchsheel' Agreement of 1954. The BSF were however advised *"to avoid an armed clash but not yield to the Chinese troops."* The next day, Nehru told the Foreign Secretary: *"This is a serious matter and we cannot accept this [Chinese] position. We should, of course, protest in emphatic language... But I do not think this is quite enough ...I think instructions should be sent to our force near the Shipki La Pass that they must on no account withdraw from their present position. They must remain there even at the cost of conflict. For the present, they should not force their way beyond this place, as this would presumably mean a conflict with the Chinese. But it must be made clear that they must remain where they are and if the Chinese advance further, they should be checked. ...We would not permit them to go any further and if they did not go back, we would have to take further steps in the matter."<sup>22</sup>*

Finally, the MEA took the matter with their counterparts in Beijing: *"The Government of India are pained and surprised at this conduct of the Chinese Commanding Officer. It is not difficult to visualise that the*

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<sup>22</sup> Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Series II, Volume 35.

*natural and direct result of such attitudes, if continued in, may be one of clash of arms."*

This note is one of the first of hundreds of Notes, Memoranda and Letters exchanged by the two governments. This copious correspondence did not stop the Chinese to maintain their claims. During the following years, the relations between the two nations were like a table-tennis match; Delhi pointing the finger at Beijing and Beijing throwing counter-accusations. Perhaps the time was not ripe as Zhou Enlai had stated, but 50 years later, the matter is still not settled.

A Note sent to the Chinese Government on September 24, 1956 stated: *"the Government of India consider any crossing of this border pass by armed personnel as aggression which they will resist. Government of India have ordered their Border Security Force not to take any action for the present in repulsing this aggression and to await instructions which they hope the Central People's Government will issue immediately. Government of India have however directed their Border Security Force on no account to retire from their position or to permit Chinese personnel to go beyond where they are even if this involves a clash."*<sup>23</sup>

The Chinese probably knew that it would not go further than 'regret notes'. The note/memoranda war continue thus till the fateful day of October 1962.

On the occasion of the 2500<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of the Buddha (November 1956), important diplomatic activities took place first with the visit of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama to India followed by

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<sup>23</sup> Notes, Memoranda and letters Exchanged and Agreements signed between The Governments of India and China 1954 –1959 - White Paper No. 1 (1954-1959). Aide mémoire given to the Chinese Chargé d'Affaires in India, 24 September 1956.

State visits of Zhou Enlai, the Chinese Premier. This should undoubtedly be entered in the Guinness Book of Records, Zhou came to India thrice in less than 2 months; first from November 28 to December 10, 1956, then from December 30 to January 3, 1957 and again from January 24 to 26. His purpose was certainly not to enter a new record, but it just shows how nervous was the Chinese government about the Dalai Lama's Indian tour.

Nehru had the occasion to have long talks with Zhou on diverse topics such the policies of the Roosevelt Administration or the happenings in Hungary. Though the situation in Tibet was discussed, the border issue was not taken up except when the Chinese Premier made some stray remarks which are worth noting: *"That Tibet is part of China is a fact, but it as never an administrative province of China but kept an autonomous character. Therefore, when we started negotiations for peaceful liberation of Tibet, we from the first recognised the autonomous character of the region. When I said that India knew more about Tibet, I meant about the past history. For example, I knew nothing about McMahon Line until recently when we came to study the border problem after [the] liberation of China."*<sup>24</sup>

Is it not rather strange that he himself admits that he did not know about the McMahon line? It also means that in the fifties Zhou had no problem to grant a real autonomy to the Tibetan people.

During the following talk, he clarified his position about the Line: *"What I meant was that people like me never knew about it till recently. The then Chinese Government, namely, the warlords in Peking and the KMT [Kuomintang] naturally knew about it."*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Series II, Volume 36.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

He adds something which can appear bizarre fifty years later (when the question of recognition of the Line is still pending): *“we studied this question and although this Line was never recognised by us, still apparently there was a secret pact between Britain and Tibet and it was announced at the time of the Simla Conference. And now that it is an accomplished fact, we should accept it. But we have not consulted Tibet so far.”*

Let us not forget that in 1914 in Simla the Chinese Plenipotentiary participated for several months to the discussions on the ‘secret pact’. He even initialed it, though it was later not ratified by the Nationalist government.<sup>26</sup>

Regarding the recognition of the McMahon Line, Zhou Enlai conveniently put it on the Tibetans. According to the Chinese Premier the Tibetans: *“wanted us to reject this Line; but we told them that the question should be temporarily put aside. I believe immediately after India's independence, the Tibetan Government had also written to the Government of India about this matter. But now we think that we should try to persuade and convince Tibetans to accept it. ...the question will be decided after Dalai Lama's return to Lhasa. So, although the question is still undecided and it is unfair to us, still we feel that there is no better way than to recognise this Line.”*<sup>27</sup>

Nehru did not take this opportunity to forcefully denounce the Chinese intrusions across the Indian border; he remained rather vague: *“The border is a high mountain border and sparsely populated. Apart from the major question, there are also small questions about two miles here and two miles there. But if we agree on some principle, namely,*

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<sup>26</sup> See Claude Arpi, *The Simla Convention: Ninety-two Years Later*, (Colonial India, Ed Prof Surendra Gopal, Veer Kunwar Singh University, Arrah, 2006), p. 140.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

*the principle of previous normal practice or the principle of watershed, we can also settle these other small points."*

Once again it was 'small' or 'petty' issues, Zhou on his part remained hopeful: *"the question can be solved and we think it should be settled early."*

A few days later, the Indian Prime Minister wrote to the Foreign Secretary: *"Although [Zhou] thought that this line, established by British imperialists, was not fair, nevertheless, because it was an accomplished fact and because of the friendly relations which existed between China and the countries concerned, namely, India and Burma, the Chinese Government were of the opinion that they should give recognition to this McMahon Line."*<sup>28</sup>

For the next 2 years, the situation remained the same; the exchange of notes continued. But, in March 1959, events took a turn for the worse. The situation in Tibet deteriorated after an uprising of the entire population of Lhasa against the Chinese occupants; the Dalai Lama had no alternative, but to flee his homeland. As this part of the story has been well documented, we need not spend more time on it. Over the next forty years, more than 100,000 refugees would be forced to leave the Roof of the World and take refuge in India, Nepal or in the West.

In April 1960, following a new visit of Zhou Enlai to India, Delhi and Beijing had one more chance to sort out the border tangle: five rounds of high-level and detailed discussions were held between June and December. While India presented detailed maps and documents proving its claims, the Chinese hardly gave any evidence of their 'possessions.' This was irrelevant for them as they were already

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<sup>28</sup> Fifty years later, Beijing still does not recognize the McMahon and claims Arunachal as part of China.

occupying the ground in the Aksai Chin area. Who was to dislodge them? And for India there was question to exchange NEFA (today Arunachal) against Aksai Chin.

### **The Blow**

The last straw for India and the first one to open Nehru's eyes, was China's invasion of India in October-November 1962. The blow has been well described by many knowledgeable authors<sup>29</sup>, and we shall not go into the details of the operations, however a few points should be made.

Some have argued that the forward policy of the Government of India during the summer of 1962 provoked the Chinese attack on the Indian border, but this argument cannot withstand closer scrutiny. The Chinese leadership had decided many years earlier 'to teach India a lesson' for giving refuge to the Dalai Lama and his people. The fact that the 1962 Chinese border attack occurred at the same place where the Dalai Lama had crossed over to India was an indication showing that the two events were directly related. The Chinese are attached to this sort of details.

Moreover it took years for the PLA to consolidate their position in Tibet and get ready for the onslaught on the McMahon line while the Forward Policy of Krishna Menon began in 1962 only.

Another aspect which has not been well studied is that Mao faced a lot of internal problems after the three/four years of implementation of

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<sup>29</sup> One of the remarkable books is by Dalvi, Brig J.P., *The Himalayan Blunder* (Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1964); another interesting one from the point of view of military operations is by Palit, Maj. Gen. D.K., *War in High Himalaya* (London: Lancer International, 1991); see also by Tewari, Maj. Gen., K.K., *A Soldier's Voyage to Self Discovery* (Auroville: Tewari, 1992).

the Great Leap Forward during which more than thirty millions of Chinese are said to have been starved to death by the Chairman's agricultural policies. There were a lot of questioning in the Party and Mao was under attack by a new generation of leaders such Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. The war with India was certainly an 'adventure' which distracted the cadres of the Party from challenging Mao's leadership.<sup>30</sup> We should not forget that Lin Biao, his protégé at that time was also the Defence Minister and nothing is good as a short war to divert the people's attention.

Mao also knew that India was not prepared. In any case, China could not have sustained a long war with the coming winter and the lines of supply passing through an 'occupied' territory. The short 'blow' was definitively the best strategic and political solution for Mao and it was perfectly executed by his faithful lieutenants.

After the war, Nehru was physically and psychologically a broken man; he suddenly realized that he had been taken for a ride by Mao and Zhou, his Machiavellian Premier.

After this shock treatment of 1962, it took many years before India could sit with China at the negotiating table.

In the beginning of the seventies, the then Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi took the initiative but China was still in the throes of turmoil following the Great Proletarian Revolution.

We have to briefly mention the incidents of September 1967 when Indian troops near Nathu La came under fire. September 10 had witnessed a minor incident between some Sikh sentries and their Chinese counterparts on a flat patch of icy land of about 5 meters on the unmarked boundary. Using the watershed principle, a boulder

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<sup>30</sup> It came two years later and Mao responded by initiating the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution which left more than 10 millions of death in China.

about 30 cm in height marked the center of the narrow crest of the dividing line. Three Indians and three Chinese jawans were positioned on either side of the boulder, hardly 2 metres from each other. When fisticuffs erupted, a Chinese sentry was roughed up and he lost a tunic button. For the Chinese, it was a lost of face, though the provocation was no doubt a planned strategy.

It resulted in a full-fledged border conflict during which machine guns, mortars and heavy artillery were used. The Chinese attack was repulsed after a few days.

In the firing across the barbed wire fence, the Chinese had received a 'bloody nose', they said to have suffered at least twice as many casualties as the Indian side.

It was good for the moral of the Indian army who five years after the humiliation of 1962 had proved that they could 'manage' the PLA.

Beijing realized that it was out of question for the PLA to take Sikkim by force. They had to move to the 'diplomatic' battlefield; it probably explains why Beijing kept for years the issue of recognition of Sikkim as part of India, pending.

### **The Seventies**

In February 1972 President Nixon paid his historic visit to Beijing; a new era of détente between the United States and China had began. India had no place in the new scheme. Mao had no respect for a weak India.

In 1978, two years after Mao's death, Deng stepped in and replaced the Great Helmsman, but the diplomatic scene did not change much.

In 1979, the Janata government which had won the elections tried to reach out at Communist China. The Foreign Minister A.B Vajpayee was sent to Beijing. It is still not clear why the Chinese leaders chose to

time their invasion of Vietnam with Vajpayee's visit. Whatever might have been their reasons, Prime Minister Morarji Desai immediately recalled his Minister and contacts broke off.

When Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980, she was not ready to take any new initiatives: perhaps she was too involved with the internal politics of the Congress.

In July 1986, the People's Liberation Army once more intruded into Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh. They tried to occupy the Wangdung IB observation post used in summer as a yak grazing hamlet. Without waiting for orders from Delhi, the Indian army stood firm on the ground. As described by former Indian Army Chief, General V.N. Sharma, *"We were on our territory and any withdrawal orders by government or army headquarters would be considered illegal as the army was tasked to defend India's border."* And the former Chief added: *"It was with renewed confidence that Rajiv Gandhi could plan his visit to China."*<sup>31</sup>

After the 1967 Sikkim incident, it was the first time that India took a strong stand and showed the Chinese that they could not bluff their way into Indian territory.

It was another turning point: the Chinese leaders could not consider India as a weak nation anymore.

In 1988 Rajiv Gandhi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit China since his grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru had gone to Beijing in October 1954, at the peak of the Hindi Chini Bhai- Bhai relationship. Though Rajiv once again conceded that Tibet was considered by India as an autonomous region of China, his visit had the merit of reopening the dialogue at the highest level after decades of mistrust and hatred.

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<sup>31</sup> General V.N. Sharma, *India's Defence Forces: Building the Sinews of a Nation* (New Delhi: USI National Security Papers, 1994), p. 20.

Later on and in spite of a number of high level rounds of talks initiated during the visit, the litigious question of the border could not be resolved. Today India still acknowledges Tibet as an autonomous region of China and has not succumbed to Chinese pressures to take action against the Dalai Lama and his followers.

It would be too damaging for the image of India as 'a liberal democracy' committed to free expression if India were not to stand by the recognition of Tibet as 'an autonomous region'. What type of autonomy Beijing concede to the Tibetans is another problem!

As analyzed by Surjit Mansingh, a China watcher at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library: *"Tibet will always be of vital importance for India because of its location, and because of its historical role in creating the Himalayan border. Tibet may well take on greater international importance because of the unpredictable dynamics of change in Central Asia as a whole as well as the still growing prestige of the Dalai Lama. It would be well for the Indian Government to formulate a long range policy taking into accounts contingent factors."*<sup>32</sup>

After P V Narasimha Rao's visit to China in 1993, the border talks received a new impetus. But the famous exchange of maps was more for public consumption, I realize this when I was a day while traveling in a taxi in Paris, I saw the driver typing my destination onto his GPS (global positioning system) which immediately indicated the exact itinerary to follow. I thought to myself: *'How can it take so many years to know where the Line of Actual Control is when a taxi driver in Paris can know within a second where he is.'*

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<sup>32</sup> Surjit Mansingh, *An Overview of Indo-China Relations: From Where to Where?* (New Delhi: The Indian Defence Review, 1992), p. 70.

Though Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China was path breaking and Rao's trip had further relaxed the atmosphere, Delhi was not in a position to concede anything on the border issue; perhaps the time 'was not ripe for settlement'.

Seen from the Chinese angle, the major problem or irritant remained Tibet; the border dispute only being a collateral of the Tibetan issue.

Former Prime Minister Vajpayee explained in April 1989 in the Rajya Sabha: *'When the Prime Minister went to China and the leaders of China raised the question of Tibet, they had given us the opportunity to say something about Tibet. I am an admirer of Nehru but in accepting that Tibet is a part of China, he made a Himalayan blunder. I don't want to go into detail in the reason why he made that mistake. Tibet has also the right to be free. But the mistake was done. China had recognised Tibet as an 'autonomous region'. Today where is the autonomy? There is violation of human rights, martial law has been proclaimed, there is repression on a big scale, there is terror. Now the leaders of China raising the question of Tibet themselves had given us an opportunity to raise the issue of human rights, to draw the attention of the Chinese leaders on this, and to talk in an atmosphere of friendship. We did not seize this opportunity. ...if we remain silent about Tibet, we will neither do justice to Tibet nor to ourselves.'*

Though Vajpayee had many valid points, particularly on the importance for India of an autonomous Tibet, he did not do better when he himself visited Beijing as the Prime Minister in June 2003.

No progress towards a settlement of the border tangle has been made despite numerous rounds of talks and the appointment of two Special Representatives. Obviously, the Aksai Chin road is strategically too important for Beijing as it is the only link between its two western provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang. There is no question for China to

relinquish occupation of this 'soda plain' of the Aksai Chin area. And further among the Indian leadership there is a prevalent view that the Chinese can not be trusted.

### **The second consolidation: the train**

In the meantime, the Chinese government has undertaken a second consolidation of its western borders. The arrival of a railway track to Lhasa brings a tremendous change in the strategic and military balance of the region. Beijing is now be able to bring troops and medium range missiles to the Tibetan capital, located less than two days by road from both sectors of the Indian border (Arunachal or Ladakh). Further, the Chinese will certainly include a railway track from Lhasa to Shigatse in their 11th Five Year plan and why not one day, to Kashgar, cutting across Ladakh, thus closing the rail loop of western China. This is the most serious threat to India's security since the fifties.

A few years ago, former Defense Minister George Fernandes is reported to have told a news agency: *"China has built roads up to the border, while there has been negligence on India's part."* He further lamented: *"China has even built roads in such areas where not a single human being lives or even a blade of grass grows"*.

The allusion was not lost. In 1959, while intervening in Parliament on the 'Aksai Chin' Nehru had declared: *"Nobody has been present there. It is a territory where not even a blade of grass grows."* Nehru had thus justified that his government had taken more than two years to inform the Indian Parliament about the road on the truly barren heights of the Aksai Chin

In 1950, Mao's China decided to take a great leap toward the West. In October of the same year, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered Tibet saying that the borders of China had to be 'consolidated'.

Today a new development has occurred, far more serious: a railway line has reached Lhasa.

In 1994, China's Vice Minister of Railways Sun Yongfu had announced that the train was a way to *"promote the economic development of the Tibet Autonomous Region and to strengthen national defense."* Although the 'strengthening of the borders' is listed second in the program, it is without doubt, the most crucial factor for the leadership in Beijing.

Sun Yongfu made the announcement in front of other Cabinet ministers and western executives. It was part of a grandiose Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001-2005), which besides the 'Tibetan dream', (since Sun Yat Sen regime, Chinese engineers had dreamt of a railway to Lhasa), has a proposal to 'boost the infrastructure of western China' by laying tracks along the ancient Silk Road from the Southern Xinjiang Railway to the former Soviet Central Asian States.

UPI had commented: *"Sun's mention of defense concerns is a reminder that China's borders with India, the former Soviet Union and Vietnam have been troubled by skirmishes and full-blown war over the past three decades. Better rail links will facilitate swifter access for military personnel and equipment, which may also be targeted against the country's occasionally restive minorities."*

In 1996, Xinhua News Agency had made public the project known as 'Third Railway Construction Boom', part of a 'Go West' campaign. The new railway construction drive was conceived to bring new hope to the *"economic development of land-locked southwest China"*. The news agency confirmed that Tibet would be the 'beneficiary'. The high plateau was to be linked with the mainland by a railway track: *"the economic potential of the region, with rich agricultural and mineral*

*resources is yet to be brought into full play due partly to inadequacy in railways."*

Since then the 'Go West' campaign has intensified.

Yet another plan is to open a rail link to Burma and Indo-China. One of the tracks would follow the Mekong River, from Kunming turn towards southern Yunnan to go into Indo-China. This would also be linked to the existing networks to create a 'pan-Asian' railway right down to Singapore.

The 1118-kilometer railway stretch from Golmud (in Qinghai province) to Lhasa was inaugurated in July 2006.

The Dalai Lama and Tibetans in exile see the opening of Lhasa to railway traffic as a Chinese plot to 'liberate' Tibet a second time. Bringing 'vast seas of Chinese colons' into their country would be the best way to demographically 'cleanse' the Land of Snows, a technique successfully implemented in Inner Mongolia.

The London-based Tibetan Information Network (TIN) had reported that that *"the construction of railways to Urumqi and Kashgar in the western-most Xinjiang Autonomous Region was accompanied by a significant influx of Han Chinese migrants, as was the establishment of a railway to Golmud in the 1960s."*

Apart from the flood of Han colons, the extraction and transport of minerals (like uranium) and precious metals out of Tibet by railway will also benefit the Chinese government which could thus quickly recover its investments. Even in Communist China, business is business and investments have to be recovered.

For India, the consequences are tremendous. Even if India would decide to build similar roads or railway tracks to protect her borders, it would take at least eight to ten years to begin the work and perhaps as many years to complete it.

During the course of a stay in Lhasa in 2001, President Hu declared: *"With the passage of 50 extraordinary years, Tibet of today presents a scene of vitality and prosperity with economic growth, social progress and stability, ethnic solidarity and solid border defense."*

It is important to note the emphasis on the 'solid border defense'.

For India, it indicates that for the next few years, China is bound to go for a *Chini-Hindi Bhai Bhai* policy the time to consolidate its position in Tibet; Beijing may further develop the concept of a strategic triangle between Russia, China and India or continue to celebrate new friendship years or speak of 'a peaceful rise of China'.

The Chinese leadership knows that preparations to 'strengthen the borders' take time. It took nearly ten years between the time they began the road construction in Tibet and the attack against India on Thagla ridge in the NEFA in October 1962. Chinese leaders, unlike their Indian counterparts, are in the habit of always planning their 'development' (and their 'border defenses') decades in advance.

In the meantime, India and China had in June 2006 their ritual border talks: it was the 8<sup>th</sup> round since the appointment of special representatives in 2003. National Security Adviser M. K. Narayanan and Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo met in a Beijing State Guest house.

Like for the preceding round, the talks were held in camera and details of what was discussed was not be made public. The public is told that *"the focus of the current round of talks is on devising an agreed framework for a settlement of the border issue on the basis of the political parameters and guiding principles"* finalised during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to India in 2005.

The Indian Envoy, is said to have declared that a 'package deal' on the boundary issue would be agreed upon within the next two or three

rounds of dialogue. Like in the fifties, it means: 'you give us Aksai Chin, we will recognize that Arunachal is part of India'. It was not a problem for Zhou Enlai already in 1956.

However, it is doubtful if the Indian side dared to broach the topic of the new railway lines pointing to India.

Today the stakes are clear, the border talks can continue, but if India gives in to the Chinese claims on Aksai Chin or elsewhere in UP or Arunachal, the Chinese planners will without doubt, include in their Eleventh Five-year plan, a railway track from Lhasa to Kashgar, cutting across Indian stones (if not grass) in Ladakh and closing the loop around India.

The opening of Nathu-la between India and Tibet does not change the situation: with the arrival of the train in Lhasa, China has tremendously consolidated its own presence in Tibet. Is the time not ripe for the mandarins in the South Block to wake up from their stupor and act?