India, Tibet and China are three old nations. In the course of their history, each one has developed its own characteristics; each has also gone through different phases, though there is no doubt that the current times may certainly be counted among the most tense and complex.

For centuries, India and Tibet have shared a common spiritual search. During the seventh century AD, the Roof of the World discovered Buddha’s teachings. This was the most important 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 very grave consequences on 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 (India) rapidly declined.

Tibet’s conversion had another consequence on its 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 when they became followers of the Buddha’s doctrine.

Another era began with the British took control over India: the relation with Tibet which had always been spiritual became colonial 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. China was too weak to react meaningfully but continued to pretend to be the suzerain of Tibet.

For the three nations, the ball started rolling a hundred years ago (in July 1904) when a young British Colonel, Francis Younghusband entered the holy city of Lhasa. 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 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. However, the British and Tibetans separately 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. While independent India was just two years old, a new empire was taking birth. China’s leaders, like India’s, wanted to break from the past. 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. *She never had a strong attachment to her territory and had no need for territorial expansion, unlike her newly-acquired neighbour.*
Despite the often proclaimed 2000 year-old friendship between India and China, the two nations had little contact except through foolhardy monks such as the pilgrim Huien Tsiang who, fourteen centuries ago crisscrossed North India in search of the places where his master, the Buddha. 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. In general, relations were very limited in scope.

The ‘Liberation’ of Tibet
In October 1950, an event changed the destiny of the Himalayan region as well as the relations between India and China: Mao’s troops marched into Tibet. When Lhasa appealed to the United Nations against China’s invasion of Tibet, India which had always acknowledged Tibet’s complete autonomy (‘verging on independence’ as per Nehru’s words) began to vacillate; it did not stand up to defend its militarily-weak neighbour: Nehru was too keen to play a ‘neutral’ role in the Korean conflict.

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, Tibet had no choice but to accept to be a part of the Chinese ‘Motherland’. The incorporation of the Tibetan nation into Beijing’s fold was not immediately acknowledged by Delhi which continued for a couple of years to maintain a full-fledged mission in the Tibetan capital and independent diplomatic relations with Lhasa.

The signature of the Panchsheel Agreement between India and China in April 1954 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 its 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. 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 building a network of roads and airstrips heading towards the Indian frontiers in NEFA (today Arunachal Pradesh) and Ladakh.

Nehru and his advisors had fallen in love with a ‘revolutionary’ China; Tibet was sacrificed for the sake of the newly-found brotherhood. But 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. India had to pay dearly and is still paying fifty years for the idealist policy of her first Prime Minister.

It was the title itself, “*Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India*” which was the most important victory for Beijing. India 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 Panchsheel Agreement lapsed in April 1954), the acceptance of Tibet being a part of the People’s Republic of China (as per the title of the Agreement) remains a reality. It has directly caused the destruction of an ancient way of life.

Moreover, the 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 of 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 1954, Delhi ‘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’.

Fifty years later, the folly of this policy still haunts an India unable to sort out her border tangle. For Delhi, two questions should be tackled. First, is there a creative yet feasible solution to solve the border issue between India and China? And second: is there a way for India to undo the wrong committed vis-à-vis the Land of Snows in the fifties?

**The Border Issue**

During his visit to Beijing in June 2003, the Indian Prime Minister suggested the nomination of Special Envoys for fast-track parleys with Beijing on the border issue. The first round of talks was held in Delhi on October 23 and 24, 2003. Since then, the Envoys have met several times.

The Indian Envoy does not have an easy task. Fifty years of Chinese ‘possession’ of the Aksai Chin, the remote region of Ladakh, makes the tangle even trickier to sort out. Time has not simplified the issue.

Let us take a moment to look back. Soon after the PLA entered Lhasa in 1951, the Chinese made plans to improve communications in Tibet. To ‘consolidate the borders’ as announced by Mao, Beijing began to construct a large network of roads on a war-footing. Priority was given to the western road known as the Tibet-Xinjiang Highway (or Aksai Chin road).

B.N. Mullik, the then Intelligence Bureau Director claimed that he had been reporting the road building activity of the Chinese in the Aksai Chin area since as early as November 1952. According to him, the Indian Trade Agent in Gartok also informed Delhi about it in July and September 1955, and August 1957.
Instead of alarming Nehru, these disturbing reports reinforced his determination to bolster the friendship with China.

Finally, in October 1957, a Chinese newspaper reported: "The Sinkiang-Tibet – the highest highway in the world – has been completed". The circle was closed. The two newly-acquired western provinces of Communist China (Sinkiang and Tibet) were linked.

The tragedy is that it took nearly two more years for the news to become public in India. Only in August 1959, did Nehru drop the bombshell in the Parliament: the ‘Tibet-Sinkiang highway’ was cutting through Indian territory. The Prime Minister had kept the information secret for more than 5 years! Today, fifty years later, what can be done about it? Will the Chinese ever relinquish this strategic artery? It is doubtful. As for India: is it conceivable that any government could ‘gift’ away such a large chunk of Indian territory?

Besides, what could India receive from Beijing in return for such a ‘gift’? The recognition of Arunachal Pradesh as being a part of India has been mentioned as a possible compensation. But this makes no sense as the Chinese claim on Arunachal is legally and historically empty of any substance.

On the Chinese side, the leadership in Beijing knows very well that ultimately it is in China’s interest to settle this long outstanding issue with India and put the relationship between the two nations on sounder tracks.

An innovative solution could be to create a condominium for the Aksai-Chin area. The region could be jointly administrated by Beijing and New Delhi through two appointed Commissioners (or whatever other designation may be agreed upon).

Very little development is possible (apart from a road) in the region due to the lack of water, the high salinity (a part is known as the Soda Plain) as well as the high altitude. This would make the condominium solution far easier to work out. A condominium for Aksai Chin would not face many of the challenges that other condominiums had to confront. First and foremost, nobody lives permanently on the high plateau. Therefore, there is no question of stakeholders other than the two States: India and China. Secondly, no natural resources such oil, minerals
have been discovered so far, therefore there is no need for a complicated sharing mechanism.

Practical modalities would have to keep in view the fact that China needs the road to connect Tibet to Xinjiang. This is the trickiest issue to solve. China could continue to have the same facilities that she is presently enjoying.

A year ago, the *China Daily* mentioned that a solution on these lines was proposed by Deng Xiaoping in the seventies for the disputed Diaoyu Islands between Japan and China, “to promote friendly relations and pursue a win-win compromise with Japan, late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping proposed the two countries seek common exploitation of the islands while shelving disputes over the ownership of them.”

If the Aksai Chin issue were solved, many other issues would fall into place. The others sectors of the border would be comparatively easier to sort out.

But is the time ripe for settlement?

**The Question of Tibet**

Once the border issue with China solved, can India help Tibet to regain a genuine autonomy within the framework of the People’s Republic of China?

In April 1989 in the Rajya Sabha, Member of Parliament Vajpayee thus commented on 1988 Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China:

*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?*

Unfortunately, Vajpayee did not spoke with the same strength when he became Prime Minister. Nevertheless, the most reasonable first step for India would be to ensure that Tibet regains a ‘genuine’ autonomy. There would be nothing wrong and inimical to China in officially endorsing the Five-Point Peace Plan of the Dalai
Lama which asked for the creation of a zone of peace in the Himalayan region, the respect of Tibet's environment and a genuine autonomy for the region. Furthermore, it makes sense for India (as well as for China and Asia) to have a peaceful, stable and demilitarised Tibet; it can only greatly help to calm the tensions in the region. Beijing would directly and indirectly profit by a general relaxation of the atmosphere on its western border and provide the right environment for “the Peaceful Rise of China”.

Regarding Tibet’s status, the Dalai Lama made a proposal in 1988 in the European Parliament. Known as the “Strasbourg Proposal”, it is a continuation of his Five-Point Peace Plan presented a year earlier in Washington D.C.. For the first time in this proposal, the Dalai Lama renounced independence for his country: “The whole of Tibet known as Cholka-Sum [U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo provinces] should become a self-governing democratic political entity founded on law by agreement of the people for the common good and the protection of themselves and their environment, in association with the People’s Republic of China.”

Practically, it means that the Dalai Lama does not ask independence any longer. He agrees that Beijing could remain responsible for Tibet's foreign policy and defense. A future Tibetan Government would, however look after the fields of “religion, commerce, education, culture, tourism, science, sports and other non-political activities”.

The Dalai Lama’s Administration renewed its contacts with the Chinese government in September 2002. Though the first talks were not conclusive, they were followed by a second visit of the Dalai Lama’s Representatives in June 2003. A lack of confidence in each other is perhaps the main hurdle for quick progress. This is perhaps where India could help. Many observers believe that if the Dalai Lama could have personal contact with Hu Jintao and if, with his personal warmth, he could express his desire to find a 'genuine' solution, old rancour and many misunderstandings would evaporate. Let us not forget that when the young Dalai lama visited Beijing in 1954, Chairman
Mao Zedong used to visit him in his guest house to have long discussions on the future of Tibet.

Why can’t President Hu Jintao meet the Dalai Lama in the Chinese Embassy in Delhi or anywhere else in the world to freely discuss the Tibet issue?

With its good relations with Beijing, Delhi could be a discreet mediator between the two parties. Recently, Indian foreign policy has found a new motto: ‘engagement’. The Indian Government tries to apply this mantra to both the Pakistani and the Chinese front. Delhi’s engagement in the fields of economy and trade is appreciated by everyone, why can’t both it also engage China in areas which have hindered the development of smooth relations for the past fifty years?

For India to mediate between Beijing and Dharamsala in a discreet manner would certainly do justice to the Tibetans and help build a durable friendship with China by removing the only thorn in their relations.