

The British Policy towards Tibet after World War II

The first months of 1945 saw the end of World War II's hostilities in Europe. The War with its 60 million dead had come to an end.

From February 4 to 11, a Conference was held at Yalta in Crimea between the heads of the government of the United States, United Kingdom, and Soviet Union, respectively represented by President Franklin Roosevelt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and General Secretary Joseph Stalin. The objective was to discuss Europe's post-war reorganization.

In Asia the war was still raging and one would have to wait till August 15 to see Japan's surrender.

In China, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Nationalist Government¹ was the supreme commander for the China Theatre.

Already in 1936, Chiang had made a temporary arrangement with the Communists to form a united front against Japan.

It is in these circumstance that on February 5, 1945 (on the second day of the Yalta Conference), the Secretary in the External Department of the India Office in London wrote to the Secretary to the Government of India² in the External Affairs Department³ in Delhi asking Delhi's opinion about what should be the British Government's policies on Tibet.

The India Office had 3 questions in mind:

1. The degree and nature of the autonomy which Tibet is considered to enjoy and the significance to be attached to the conception of Chinese suzerainty;

¹ The Republic of China.

² Documents from: *Status of Tibet: British government policy, Oct 1945-Feb 1946*. Original file no: L/P&S/12/4195A Pol Ext Coll 36 File 26 (1A), 66ff.

³ As known as the Foreign Secretary.

2. How far His Majesty's Government and the Government of India should be prepared to go in support of Tibetan autonomy;
3. The line to be adopted in any international discussion on this subject and whether the initiative should be taken to encourage such international discussion.

London requested New Delhi to send its views on the matter, "particularly from the point of view of defense, on the importance to India of the maintenance of [the] Tibetan buffer".

A couple of years earlier, Anthony Eden⁴, then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs had clarified the British position in general terms. On August 5, 1943, Eden wrote to Dr. T. V. Soong⁵, China's Foreign Minister: "When you visited me on 26th July, you spoke of Tibet and enquired as to our attitude. I have pleasure in sending you the accompanying informal memorandum which I trust will serve to clear this matter up".

The Memorandum is well-known as it represented the British policy towards Tibet for several decades.

It starts thus: "Since the Chinese Revolution of 1911, when Chinese forces were withdrawn from Tibet, Tibet has enjoyed de facto independence. She has ever since regarded herself as in practice completely autonomous and has opposed Chinese attempts to reassert control. Since 1911, repeated attempts have been made to bring about an accord between China and Tibet. It seemed likely that agreement could be found on the basis that Tibet

⁴ Robert Anthony Eden, (12 June 1897 – 14 January 1977) was a British politician belonging to the Conservative Party. He was Prime Minister from 1955 to 1957, Earlier he had been Foreign Secretary thrice between 1935 and 1955, including during the Second World War.

⁵ Though born in Shanghai, Dr. T.V. Soong received his education at Harvard University. He served as Governor of the Central Bank of China and Finance Minister (1928–1931, 1932–1933). He was Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1942 and 1945 and later became President of the Executive Yuan, the Chinese Parliament (1945–1947). He was also associated with the San Francisco Charter and the founding of the United Nations.

should be autonomous under the nominal suzerainty of China, and this was the basis of the draft tripartite (Chinese-Tibetan-British) convention of 1914 which was initialled by the Chinese representative but was not ratified later by the Chinese Government. The rock on which the convention and subsequent attempts to reach an understanding were wrecked was not the question of autonomy (which was expressly admitted by China) but was the question of the boundary between China and Tibet, since the Chinese Government claimed sovereignty over areas which the Tibetan Government claimed belonged exclusively to their autonomous jurisdiction.⁶"

Sir Olaf Caroe,⁷ Secretary to the Government of India in the External Affairs Department in 1945 answered the Foreign Secretary's queries on September 19, 1945.

Reviewing a book on this distinguished Civil Servant⁸, A.G. Noorani wrote in 2006 in *Frontline*: "His futurology reflected a paternalistic romanticism. But there was a kernel of sound sense in his assessments, which have stood the test of time. He dared to think and thought creatively, though he was alarmist at times."

Olaf Caroe is one of the foremost British strategic thinkers as far as Middle

⁶ The entire text of the Memorandum is available on this writer's site:
http://www.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/lettertoSoong.pdf

⁷ Sir Olaf Kirkpatrick Kruuse Caroe (1892–1981) was Secretary to the Government of India in the External Affairs Department in 1945. Later he became the Governor of the North-West Frontier Province. After retirement, he became one of the foremost strategist thinkers, especially on the Middle East and Asia. His expertise was geopolitics (he divided the world into "Seven Theatres of Power"). He wrote three books - *Wells of Power* (on the importance of the Gulf for the British Empire), *The Pathans*, and *Soviet Empire* (on Stalin's policies in Central Asia).

⁸ <http://www.frontline.in/fl2309/stories/20060519001908300.htm>.

East and Tibet and China are concerned⁹.

In his reply¹⁰, he quotes London's February letter "in which the Government of India were asked to state their considered views on the whole question of policy towards Tibet".

The Memorandum to T.V. Soong

At the outset, the Secretary of the External Affairs Department states its "full agreement with the views expressed by Mr. Amery¹¹ that there is no occasion for revising the general policy of support for Tibetan autonomy." Referring to the Memorandum of Sir Anthony Eden, Olaf Caroe continues: "Not only is this policy well established, but it has been authoritatively reaffirmed to the Tibetans as recently as 1944 and to abandon it now would be an unthinkable breach of faith. It was also clearly stated by Mr. Eden, then Foreign Secretary, to Mr T.V. Soong, in August 1943. In fact present conditions would seem to require rather an increase of pressure on the Chinese Government to accept the autonomous status of Tibet as understood by His Majesty's Government and the Government of India rather than to justify any relaxation of effort.¹²"

⁹ One could also mention Sardar Patel for his for-sighted letter to Nehru on Tibet (November 7, 1950), but it is possible that Patel drew his inspiration from one of Caroe's disciples such as Sir G.S. Bajpai, first Indian Foreign Secretary.

¹⁰ No.F.183-C.A./45.

¹¹ Leopold Charles Maurice Stennett Amery (22 November 1873 – 16 September 1955), usually known as Leo Amery or L. S. Amery, was a British Conservative Party politician and journalist, noted for his interest in military preparedness, India, and the British Empire. He was Secretary of State for India and Burma between 13 May 1940 and 26 July 1945.

¹² It has to be noted that On December 14, 1949, during a debate on Tibet in the British Parliament, the British Government was again asked to clarify its position. When a member "asked the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs if he will publish in the Official Report [of the house] the terms of the Letter and the accompanying Memorandum, sent in 1943 by His Majesty's Government to the Chinese Government on the subject of Chinese suzerainty over

Olaf Caroe begins by explaining: "An attempt is made in the following paragraphs to review the forces operating in this part of Asia at the close of the Japanese war as these affect Tibet, and against that background to consider what the Tibetan State's real position and interests are, what are the points of contact and friction between India and China, and how far it is practical politics to continue the present policy of a real Tibetan autonomy in return for recognition of a nominal Chinese suzerainty."

This Note is quite remarkable in many ways and we shall go through the different points made by the Foreign Secretary.

The Russian Threat

Olaf Caroe first looked at the Russian threat. It had been a major concern since the time when Lord Curzon was posted as the Viceroy at the beginning of the 20th century.

The 'Russian threat' has been an important element which played a major role in the Britain's foreign policy towards Tibet.

One of the origins of this myth - or reality - was an information passed by a Japanese monk called Ekai Kawaguchi to Sarat Chandra Das, the most famous of the Indian Pundits¹³. Kawaguchi had spotted guns with Russian markings in Tibet.

Historians have often compared the moves of the Great Powers in Asia to a chess game, but a truer comparison might be a poker game, as most of the players were adventurers.

Tibet", the Secretary of State replied in the affirmative. It was therefore the official position of the British Government after the foundation of the People's Republic of China.

¹³ The Indian Pundits were sent by the Government of British India to survey unknown Himalayan areas including Tibet and to gather intelligence reports. Most of the times the British chose natives from the border regions and gave them training near Dehra Dun.

Ultimately, it was Lord Curzon and his associate Colonel Younghusband who emerged as the best players, although soon after an initial win,¹⁴ they lost their stakes again.¹⁵

The only perennial losers in all the deals were the Tibetans. The moral of the story is that only the rich can play this rich man's game.

The famous statement of the Viceroy dates from that time: "In our view, the attempt to come to terms with Tibet through the agency of China has invariably proved, a failure in the past, because of the intervention of this third party between Tibet and ourselves. **We regard the so-called suzerainty of China over Tibet as a constitutional fiction, a political affectation which has been maintained because of its convenience to both parties.**"

Lord Curzon had concluded his note to London: "In our view, any country or Government, or Empire has a right to protect its own interests and if those interests are seriously imperiled, as we hold ours to be in Tibet, we hold that the first law of national existence, which is self-preservation, compels us to take such steps as will avert these dangers and place our security upon an assured and impregnable footing."

The Crown, like any colonial empire was first looking after its own interest. Forty years later, Caroe analyses thus the 'Russian threat':

Russia does not constitute an immediate factor in the situation in Tibet, but if there is any uncertainty in our attitude, or any return of Russian influence in Sinkiang the Soviet might be tempted either to support Chinese policy in Tibet or even develop an interest there herself which would constitute a more formidable threat than anything else could do. The terms of the Russo-Chinese 30-years Treaty which have just been announced do not suggest that the Soviet has really

¹⁴ The entry of the British troops in Lhasa.

¹⁵ They were rebuked by London for signing the Lhasa Convention.

revised her expansionist policies in areas claimed by China, although Russia may aim at maintaining her influence through the goodwill of the Chinese Government rather than by more direct methods. A further reason for Russia to support Chinese claims in Tibet might be to distract attention from the problems of Manchuria and Outer Mongolia.

However, in a short term, Stalin had other more pressing issues to tackle, particularly the reconstruction of the Soviet Union.

The Communist regime nevertheless supported the Second East Turkestan Republic in the 1940's (November 12, 1944 - October 20, 1949) in three northern districts (Ili, Tarbagatai, Altai) of today's the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, but it was still far-away from Tibet.

But as a strategic thinker, Caroe had to take options into consideration.

The Problem of China

The second issue on which Caroe turns his insight is the more worrying for London and Delhi, the designs of China. The Foreign Secretary writes:

On the other hand present internal conditions in China, economic and political, are in a state of something like chaos. China has marked the end of the war, a little unexpectedly, by reaffirming sympathy with a measure of Tibetan autonomy. But Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek's speech to the National Defense Council and Central Executive Committee of August 24th, in which this announcement was made, is a subtle piece of propaganda for the Chinese view of Tibet's position, suggesting as it does the possible relation of a control over Tibet which in fact the Chinese Government does not possess. This speech was no doubt designed to save face abroad, while preparing the ground for a

greater recognition in China of the real facts of Chinese present relationship with Tibet.

The speech quoted above Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek mentions 'independence of Tibet'. At first sight, it seems a change in the Chinese Government's Tibet policy. Chiang says that China desires to allow the 'frontier racial groups' to attain independence, if capable of doing so. He also affirmed: "I solemnly declare that if the Tibetans should at this time express a wish for self-government our Government would, in conformity with our sincere traditions, accord it a very high degree of autonomy. If in the future, they fulfill economic requirement of independence, the nation's Government will, as in the case of Outer Mongolia, help them to attain this status".

Around the same time, another British Memo noted: "There would seem to be nothing irreconcilable between this offer of 'a very high degree of autonomy' and the attitude of His Majesty's Government. It is clear however, from conversations which took place between British and Chinese representatives in Lhasa in 1944 that with regard to Tibet, there is a considerable difference between the British and the Chinese conceptions of the word autonomy."

There is no doubt that Chiang was playing to the gallery and was not sincere in offering to grant independence to Tibet. The trick, according to British officials, was to show that China was in control of Tibet (it was not the case). Only a sovereign in full control can generously offer 'autonomy' to his 'subjects'. But in the Tibetan case, Lhasa was for all purpose already de facto independent, therefore there was no question to 'offer' what it already possessed.

Great Britain and Tibet

Finally, Caroe comes to the most serious issue: the relations between the British Crown and Tibet.

To understand the issues at stake, one needs to go back to 1914. On the side of the Simla Conference, the British and Tibetan plenipotentiaries had agreed to a common border (known as the McMahon Line). For different reasons, the Government of British India had never taken the physical and administrative control of some of the areas south of the Red Line. As the result, Caroe and some of his colleagues had decided in the early 1940's to 'advance' the British Administration till the border.

In his letter to the Secretary of State, Caroe writes:

...it must be recalled that the measure taken during the last two years in the Tribal Areas of Assam to establish the [1914] treaty position of the Government of India up to the Indo-Tibetan frontier on the McMahon Line have touched the susceptibilities of the Tibetan Government. Mr. Hopkinson¹⁶, having assumed charge from Sir Basil Gould (for the last ten years responsible for our excellent relations with Tibet) is now on his way to Lhasa with authority to reply to their protest and to reassure them as to our intentions, and he will be able to judge further the tone and depth of their feelings. But it is possible that this development may incline an important section of opinion in Tibet (possibly monastic) to look less towards India and more to China than it has done in the past.

The main issue for the Government of British India was the confirmation of its border with Tibet, in other words, the McMahon Line. As the area had not been administratively and militarily secured by the Government of British India since 1914, London decided in the early 1940's, that something had to be done urgently to get Lhasa's confirmation of the 1914's agreement.

¹⁶ Between 1928 and 1944. Arthur Hopkinson spent his career in the North West Frontier Province, East and West Kathiawar States and Baluchistan in a variety of official positions. In 1944 Arthur Hopkinson was posted in Gangtok as Political Officer of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet. He was in this post at the time of India's Independence from Great Britain in 1947; he remained in Gangtok for a couple of years after Independence as Indian Political Officer.

The 1945 visit of Hopkinson to Tibet should be seen in this perspective. It has to be noted that at the time of independence the issue was still not be solved¹⁷.

Then, Caroe, the Strategist brings the concept of the much-decried 'buffer zone' between British India and Tibet. It has been described by many historians and politicians as an 'imperialist' invention, but it is a fact that, for centuries, it allowed Tibet to remain fully autonomous and it help secure peace between India and China.

Caroe then mentions the historical background of the Tibeto-Indian buffer:

It is against this background that the value to India of the Tibetan buffer is to be assessed. It will be convenient to deal first with the general question before considering the more detailed points raised. In the past while China was content with a nominal suzerainty over Tibet, and for so long as the Tibetans themselves have been responsible for their relations with India, it has been possible to maintain at very small expense and with the minimum of trouble a frontier of about one thousand miles exclusive of the frontier of about one thousand miles exclusive of the frontier with Nepal. During the brief period of Chinese resurgence from 1906 to 1911¹⁸, India became acutely aware of the dangers implicit in Chinese designs of extending their influence north of the Himalayan barrier. In those years Chinese troops were

¹⁷ In July 1947, Delhi wrote to the Tibetan Government: "The Government of India would be glad to have an assurance that it is the intention of the Government of Tibet to continue relations on the existing basis until new arrangements are reached on matters that either party may wish to take up. This is the procedure adopted by all other countries with which India has inherited treaty relations from His Majesty's Government". (*Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged and Agreements Signed by the Government of India and China*, Delhi: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 2, 1959), p. 39).

¹⁸ The author of the Note refers to Zhao Erfeng's intrusions in Tibet and his occupation of Lhasa in 1909/10.

established near the borders of Bhutan and in the tribal areas of north-east Assam. Both Nepal and Bhutan were claimed as vassals of China, and even after the collapse of the Manchu Empire in 1911-12, sporadic examples of Chinese interest in these two countries have occurred. Chinese ambitions in the tribal areas of Assam are revealed by their maps which claim as 'China' — not as Tibet — territory stretching almost as far as the Brahmaputra in the plain of Assam. But for the Tibetan buffer, therefore, it would be necessary for the Government of India greatly to increase its commitments on its northern frontier both in men and in money and to introduce an extensive and costly system of watch and ward along this frontier.

Ironically, this increase of commitment is what is being done today, nearly 70 years later. The Government of India has decided to extensively invest in the development of the North Eastern States and more particularly the State of Arunachal and the Tawang district.¹⁹

Caroe had the foresight to see that it is not the Tibetans who would one day create a problem for India, but the Chinese who already at the beginning of the 20th century had began to include tribal areas of NEFA in their maps of China. Though they never set a foot in these areas, except for a sporadic

¹⁹ The Special Accelerated Road Development Programme for North-East Region (SARDP-NE) scheme will be taken up in phases. Phase A of the programme approved by the Union Government envisages improvement of about 4,099 km of roads (2,041 km of National Highways and 2,058 km of State roads) and is expected to be completed by March 2017. Phase B, covering 3,723 km (1,285 km of National Highways and 2,438 km of State roads) has been approved for preparation of a detailed project report only, and so far reports for about 450 km have been completed. The special package for Arunachal Pradesh involves development of about 2,319 km of roads (1,472 km of National Highways and 847 km of State/general staff/strategic roads). The scheme for the entire Arunachal should be completed by June 2015.

incursion near Walong sector (today Eastern Arunachal) in 1911, Beijing had already began to claim the entire region, north of Assam as theirs.

In an additional Memorandum written in March 1945, the War Department gives its opinion on the importance of Tibet as buffer for India.

From the point of view of defense in consultation with the General Staff and Air Headquarters, it rightly analyses the technological changes which have dramatically altered the geo-strategy of the 20th century; mountains are not barriers anymore. The War Department comments:

In the past the physical difficulties of Tibet's mountains and high altitude plateau have given INDIA a valuable buffer against aggression. This however cannot be regarded as immutable. In the present war, the jungles on the N.E. Frontier²⁰ and the deserts of Libya, previously considered to be military barriers have been overcome by modern equipment and modern inventions. We are faced with the increasingly rapid development of inventions such as rockets and jet-propelled bombs and also of rapid methods of road construction, air transportation and so on. These may reduce the value of the physical buffer: and make it all the more important to maintain as far as possible a political buffer. We do not think, therefore, that this is the moment to suggest giving up a hitherto useful barrier, still less let it fall into the hands or another nation capable or developing it into an off give base in its own time.

This brings the issue of the importance of the Tibetan buffer for the defence of the Subcontinent. The Government of India (in fact, Caroe) is quite clear on the issue: it is crucial for India to keep the Tibetan plateau autonomous. On January 1, 1950, hardly three months after Mao and the Communists took over China, the New China News Agency (Xinhua) proclaimed: "the task for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for 1950 are to liberate Taiwan,

²⁰ NEFA

Hainan and Tibet... Tibet is an integral part of China. Tibet has fallen under the influence of the imperialist."

The Communist regime brushed aside India's interests in Tibet and took the initiative. During the following months, China never missed a chance to assert again and again that Tibet was part of China's territory and it was "China's sacred duty to liberate Tibet."

Mao knew perfectly the importance of Tibet in strategic and military terms.

It is what Caroe probably foresees when he writes:

From the point of view of defence therefore the maintenance of the autonomous position of Tibet with its vast desert areas and great altitudes, is no less important now than it has been in the past in spite of modern military and scientific developments. We agree with Mr. Amery that the possibility of direct military assistance in support of Tibet should not be ruled out on political grounds now that the war is ended.

It is unfortunate that this possibility was to be immediately ruled out by Jawaharlal Nehru on the pretext of a utopic Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai policy. However, the letter written by the Deputy Prime Minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel to Jawaharlal Nehru on November 7, 1950 demonstrates that some Indian leaders realized the importance of this buffer zone²¹.

Caroe continues:

There remains, however, the question whether such military support is practicable. The result of a preliminary consideration of the question by General Staff and Army H.Q. is contained in the enclosed copy of a War Department memorandum²². This was prepared before the fall of Japan and it is now proposed to review the question further in the light

²¹ To read the letter, visit:

http://www.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/19501107PateltoNehruonTibet.pdf

²² As mentioned earlier.

of present circumstances. In particular the problems of administration and transportation both by land and air will require careful consideration. Something can no doubt be done by the provision of arms and ammunition to the Tibetans, if only because such supply would be taken by the Tibetans as an earnest of our intention to support them effectively and so stiffen their will to resist encroachment.

This supply of small armament continued during the following years; even after India's Independence; though arms and ammunitions were supplied to Tibet 'for defensive purpose' only. Olaf Caroe adds:

But, however inefficient the Chinese or other potential aggressors taking the field may be, it would be wrong to place all reliance on such measures, for Tibetans seem to have an inherent incapacity in the care of modern weapons and in the administration of military forces. The chief reliance, as always, must be on the immense and inhospitable wastes which surround Lhasa on all sides save that towards India, and in the absence of communications, assisted by moral and material backing from His Majesty's Government and the Government of India.

It is here that one realizes the depth of Caroe's strategic foresight. Nothing could let a watcher think of the 'imperialist' impulses of the Communist leadership at the end of the War, except for someone who knew the propensity of the Middle Kingdom to extend its territory whenever the opportunity comes.

British India's Foreign Secretary then quotes from a book from Sir Charles Bell who in the 1920's, was instrumental to establish the British policy on Tibet. According to Caroe, Bell's *Tibet Past and Present*, written in 1924, sums up the essence of British Indian policy in Tibet: "We want Tibet as a buffer to India on the north. Now there are buffers and buffers; and some of them are of very little use. But Tibet is ideal in this respect. With the large

desolate area of the Northern plains controlled by the Lhasa Government, central and southern Tibet government by the same authority, and the Himalayan border States guided by, or in close alliance with, the Indian Government, Tibet forms a barrier equal, or superior, to anything that the world can show elsewhere."

This formidable barrier was not going to stay forever and the British Army knew it, but till the beginning of the 1950's, it was still a material factor. Caroe rightly points out that till recently: "How little China's persistent and prolonged efforts to assimilate Eastern Tibet which is outside Lhasa's control have succeeded even to this day". He then quotes from a letter from the Acting British Consul at Chengdu (Sichuan): "Neither in the construction of communications other than on paper, nor in other forms of penetration, are the Chinese able to show a record of substantial progress even in that part of eastern Tibet subject to their nominal control".

It was not going to last long, soon some two-third of ethnic Tibet will be incorporated in the provinces of Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai and Yunnan. It is however true that these areas kept for centuries their autonomy not only vis-à-vis the mainland, but from the Lhasa authorities also.

The recent unrest in these areas however demonstrates that it has been more a forced 'incorporation' inside the People's Republic of China than a true integration.

The Situation in Nepal

Olaf Caroe then takes a look at the situation in Nepal from the point of view of an autonomous/independent Tibet.

Any change in the status of Tibet would moreover gravely affect conditions in Nepal, as pointed out in the War Department memorandum enclosed. The Nepal Government maintain direct relations with the Tibetan Government and have a representative

resident in Lhasa. They have also from time to time been at war or on the verge of war with Tibet. It is the business and interest of the Government of India to maintain stable and peaceful relations between these neighbours on their border and that can be effectively done only if Tibet maintains her autonomy.

This seems more obvious today than 65 years ago. The case of Nepal and the Chinese slow take-over of the former Himalayan Kingdom is a telling example is Olaf Caroe's strategic vision.

Very few analysts realized the importance of Nepal in the 1950's though in November 1950, one of the most remarkable (and rather unknown) Indian political thinkers, K.D. Sethna wrote in an Editorial of *Mother India*, a Mumbai Weekly: "Let us not blink the fact that Tibet is useful to China principally as a gate of entry to India. Sooner or later the attempt will be made to threaten us. What exactly along the 1300 miles of the new frontier the thrust will come it is too early to say. But Nepal, with sixteen railroads leading directly into India from her borders, appears to be the most likely objective. There may not be direct attack at first, for the Gurkhas are great fighters though their fighting abilities may not weigh against overwhelming number and better equipment. What is more likely is a Communist penetration of the existing popular movements a further working up of internal disturbances dividing the political structure as well the soldiery, and then the call by one party to China for aid."

It is unfortunate that the depth such analysis was never noticed in India. Would it be noticed today?

Caroe continues in the same vein. He tells London that the more substantial the buffer between India and China is, the better for future bilateral relations of the two countries. How true! It is unfortunate that the Indian leaders did not realize this basic truth before it was too late.

Olaf Caroe believes that:

From the point of view of India's internal economy and administration the maintenance of this buffer between the frontiers of India and China is of great advantage. Recent wartime conditions have shown that China is a difficult neighbor. The Chinese in India, as elsewhere, tend to form inassimilable enclaves within which they aim at a practical extra territoriality. Living their own lives regardless of the laws or interests of the country which harbours them. All departments of the Government of India concerned with wartime regulation of commodities and trade, as well as those responsible for security and law and order, are unanimous in deprecating a closer approach by the Chinese to India such as would be possible if they had the control which they have been seeking in Tibet. The more substantial the buffer that can be maintained between India and China, the better for future relations. As things are at present, there is no point in the N.E. where China marches with India, India being shielded throughout by Tibet. The only direct territorial contact between India and China is in the far north on the Gilgit-Kashgar boundary. This position the Government of India would wish to maintain.

Caroe knew well the Western Frontiers of the Subcontinent²³; though when he speaks of the Gilgit-Kashgar boundary, being the only territorial contact between India and China, he probably did not foresee the present Chinese penetration in the provinces of Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. According to a report published by an Urdu-language newspaper, Pakistan is considering a proposal to lease the strategic region of Gilgit Baltistan to China. Apparently the objective would be to 'fortify' Pakistan's strategic relations with China.

The fact that the Chinese presence has tremendously increased in the disputed region, has been a source of worry for India.

²³ A few months later he will be posted as a Governor.

After World War II, Delhi was probably keen to keep this link between India and China open. Unfortunately after the Partition, these areas became part of Pakistan, thereby changing the stakes.

Isolation of Tibet

Now comes a trickier question, should Tibet remains isolated.

It is a historical fact that in London or in Delhi decisions were always taken in the interests of the Empire. The concerns of the local populations and of Tibet, in this particular case Tibet, were not even considered. In some instances, the interests of both side (London and Lhasa) may have coincided, but often, they did not. This is true for the forced isolation of the Land of Snows.

Caroe analyzes:

The Foreign Office letter suggests also an examination whether it is desirable and practicable for Tibet to remain indefinitely in its present state of seclusion. If it is accepted that Tibet is an invaluable buffer to India, the answer is that it is most desirable for Tibet to remain as it is. To the Tibetans their isolation is almost an article of faith, the strength of which is seen from the fate of those few innovations, such as military training and English education, which have been introduced from time to time, with our help at the request of the Tibetans themselves. The existence of the Government of Tibet in fact depends on the preservation of its seclusion and there is little sign of any stirring of the people by a desire for change, or of an organization which could take the place of the present government. If we were to force the pace or proceed otherwise than at the request of the Tibetan Government, we should have to do so against opposition and either throw Tibet into the arms of China, so defeating our own ends, or break down the

governmental organization, which is built upon the present conservative monastic regime, and invent something to put in its place.

The assumption that the "existence of the Government of Tibet depends on the preservation of its seclusion" is absolutely wrong, though it may have served the interests of the Empire. That the people did not want any change is absolutely incorrect, but the status quo perfectly suited the British Government. The reforms undertaken first by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama at the beginning of the 20th century and then the present Fourteenth is the proof to the contrary.

The exile of the Tibetan Diaspora has also shown that the Tibetan people could quickly adapt to changes and even aspire for change²⁴.

Caroe then quotes Sir Charles Bell, for whom he has obviously a lot of admiration, again: "Any nation having dealings with Tibet must watch the priests, and watch them carefully. We should remember what the Tibetan priesthood stands to lose in modern conditions. The advance of western thought undermines the foundations of their temples and creeds."

Nobody can dispute that the large monasteries around Lhasa had a very powerful voice (often too powerful) especially in the National Assembly²⁵ and their conservatism was partly responsible for policy of isolation which plagued Tibet at a time Lhasa needed 'contacts' to safeguard its independence (or autonomy).

Caroe justifies his opinion by saying: "We cannot reverse the pledge to avoid interference in Tibetan internal affairs. It is true that Tibetan seclusion is gradually lessening and that since 1921, we have had increasing contact with Lhasa, culminating in the establishment and retention over a decade of a Mission which may become a permanent institution."

²⁴ The democratic changes recently introduced by the Dalai Lama is a good proof of this.

²⁵ The Tsongdu.

After the expulsion of all the Chinese from Tibet in 1912, the only 'foreigners' remaining were the British, the Nepalis and the Bhutanese. One can regret that deeper contacts could not be established with the United States and other European countries during these decades of peace.

The US tried to establish a relation with Tibet by sending Capt. I. Tolstoy and Lieut. Brooke Dolan, but it was too little, too late²⁶. It is certainly not correct to say that it is the Tibetans who did not want to have contact with foreign countries; the letter of the Dalai Lama to President Roosevelt shows the contrary. Caroe however admits that the Tibetan aristocracy is in fact quite keen to see the world.

Tibetan officials are becoming used to visiting India and some have sent their sons to school there. There have been occasional visits even to Lhasa by American citizens. But these small developments do not indicate any desire for radical change. A slow process of evolution is suited to Tibetan mentality and to our interests.

²⁶ On the 19th Day of the 1st Tibetan Month, Water Sheep Year, (February 24, 1943), the Dalai Lama wrote to President Roosevelt: "We received with the greatest gratification your letter and the tokens of goodwill (your autographed photo and an exquisite gold watch showing phases of the moon and the days of the week) through your Envoys, Capt. I. Tolstoy and Lieut. Brooke Dolan, who arrived here safely for the purpose of visiting the Pontificate and the city of Lhasa.

We are happy to learn that you and the people of the United States of America take great interest in our country and it is of special significance that the people of the United States of America, in association with those of 27 other countries, are now engaged in a war for the preservation of freedom, which has been thrust upon them by nations bent on conquest who are intent upon destroying freedom of thought, of religion, and of action everywhere. Tibet also values her freedom and independence enjoyed from time immemorial and being the great seat of the Buddhist religion I am endeavoring, in spite of my tender age, to uphold and propagate our religious precepts and thereby emulate the pious work of my predecessors. I earnestly hope and pray for a speedy termination of hostilities so that the nations of the world may enjoy a lasting and righteous peace, based on the principles of freedom and goodwill... Sd. Dalai Lama

The question whether it is practicable to preserve the present Tibetan seclusion depends largely on the extent to which His Majesty's Government are prepared to go in exerting pressure to keep Chinese hands off Tibet. For geographical reasons Tibet is in an advantageous position to remain as it is and as its people and rulers want it to remain. Apart from the danger of absorption by China, which is the root of the Tibetan problem, there is no reason to consider a continuation of Tibetan isolation impracticable.

The reason for keeping Tibet secluded is clearly expounded: "the danger of absorption by China, which is the root of the Tibetan problem". One would have wait only five years to see China 'absorb' Tibet. In a way, the words of Caroe are prophetic. Less than two years after sending his Memo to London, India will be independent; the main objective of the new rulers "to keep Chinese hands off Tibet" will be forgotten. India's is still suffering from this short-sightedness, more than 60 years later.

The Economy of Tibet

The Foreign Secretary then turns to the economy of Tibet which is directly linked with the 'exclusion' policy. Soon after India's independence, Lhasa realized that the time had come for Tibet to reach out to the world. It was the idea behind the Congratulation Mission in India and China and later on Tsigon Shakabpa's Trade Mission to the United States and Europe.

Olaf Caroe explains to London:

The justification given above for the preservation of Tibetan seclusion makes it unnecessary to examine in detail the undeveloped economic potentialities of the economy. There is known to be gold in Western Tibet and gold and silver in Eastern Tibet. There may also be other metals and perhaps oil; but any display or interest in these potentialities would only arouse suspicion. At present Tibetan economy depends upon

the export via India of wool and to a lesser extent of skins and musk. Nothing approaching industrialization of Tibet or the extensive working of minerals would be possible except over the prostrate body of the present Government. Our interest in Tibetan economy should be to draw Tibet's trade as far as possible into the Indian orbit and do all that we can to bolster up Tibetan economy. This involves no unnatural diversion of effort. Owing to distances Tibet's trade is in any case principally bound up with India; even the Chinese go through India to get to Lhasa. Cultural affinities also are strong with India; Tibetan writing is not in ideograms but uses an alphabet based directly on Sanskrit, while the Tibetan version of Buddhism, unlike that of Burma and Ceylon, shows many affinities with Tantric Hinduism.

The Chinese will be quick to discover not only the wealth of minerals in the Tibetan soil, but something the British did not think of, the hydropower potential of the Tibetan plateau, as most of the important rivers of Tibet originate from the Roof of the World. In the 21st century, it has become one of the most serious threats for lower riparian States such India and South-Asian countries. This issue completely escaped the British strategic thinkers including Olaf Caroe.

The close cultural connections between India and Tibet were entirely cut after the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict, though they have remained alive through the presence of the Tibetan Diaspora in India.

Having given this detailed background, Caroe then turns his attention to the question raised by the Foreign Office in London: "the degree and nature of the autonomy which it considered Tibet should enjoy and the significance to be attached to the conception of Chinese suzerainty".

Caroe again quotes the Eden Memorandum of 1943:

Only one attempt seems to have been made to indicate clearly the degree and nature of the autonomy which we consider that Tibet should

enjoy, while a definition of the significance to be attached to the conception of Chinese suzerainty has apparently never been attempted. In an aide-memoire dated April 1943, His Majesty's Embassy in Washington informed the State Department of the U.S. Government that the Government of India always held that Tibet is a separate country in full enjoyment of local autonomy entitled to exchange diplomatic representatives with other powers. The State Department in their reply declined to discuss the status of Tibet²⁷.

Interestingly, it was not all branches of the US Administration which thought this way and preferred to look the other side as far as the US relations with China, their War ally, was concerned.

General Donovan, the Director of the Office of Strategic Services²⁸ was keen to directly supply wireless sets to Lhasa.

But when permission was requested from the State Department, Adolf Berle, the Assistant Secretary of State answered: "Tibet is, as you know, regarded by the Chinese as a dependency of China, and the Government of the United States has never taken action in contravention or disregard of that Chinese view. The susceptibilities of the Chinese Government are of importance to this country and to the United Nations in connection with the war effort as a whole."

²⁷ On May 15, 1943, the US State Department replied through an aide-memoire: "With regard to the position of Tibet in Asia, the British Government has been so good as to give an account of its historical attitude. For its part, the Government of the United States has borne in mind the fact that the Chinese Government has long claimed suzerainty over Tibet and that the Chinese constitution lists Tibet among areas constituting the territory of the Republic of China. This Government has at no time raised a question regarding either of these claims. The Government of the United States does not believe that a useful purpose would be served by opening at this time a detailed discussion of the status of Tibet."

²⁸ Later CIA.

At the same time, China's suzerainty was purely fictitious as the Americans would soon realize. At the end of WW II, the US Charge d'Affaires in India informed the Secretary of State that Tibet has agreed to transportation through its territory of non-military supplies for China and as usual "Chinese representatives here were not aware that these arrangements had been concluded until press article appeared, and they believe Chungking was similarly uninformed."

The Foreign Secretary admits that limitation of the foreign relations of Tibet could be detrimental to the British Government and the Tibetans.

In practice, London, or in fact Gangtok, the seat of the Political Officer overseeing the relations between British India and Tibet, tended to have a sort of monopoly in the foreign relations with Lhasa, always trying to keep the US's and Chinese hands off the Tibetan issue.

Caroe thus describes the official view of the Government of India:

The foreign relations of Tibet have naturally been circumscribed owing to the inaccessibility of that country and the seclusion of its people.

Tibet has, however a direct treaty with Nepal in addition to those with His Majesty's Government and the Government of India and in recent years there have been instances of direct contact between the Government of Tibet and that of the United States of America through personal letters from the late President Roosevelt and from the U.S. Representative in India. Moreover since 1912 Tibet has been in fact independent and has conducted such relations as it has had with foreign countries without the mediation of the Chinese Government. Any limitation therefore of Tibetan autonomy to the maintenance of direct relations with His Majesty's Government and the Government of India and perhaps Nepal would be illogical, and by setting up a special position unknown to international practice would provide occasion for

further Chinese pressure and would be unlikely to make for stability in the relations between Tibet and China or between China and India.

Caroe understood that the de facto 'monopoly' enjoyed by Gangtok²⁹ in the long run did not serve the British interests. A diversification of the contacts could only help Lhasa to get a greater recognition. Very few in Lhasa could grasp this basic truth³⁰.

What is Suzerainty?

It is an important question. Olaf Caroe tries to provide a balanced answer to the question raised by the India Office for the Government of India:

Suzerainty is hard to define. The dictionary definition would exclude the right of representation abroad, but the concept must be interpreted with regard to the factual position in any circumstances. On this criterion, Chinese suzerainty over Tibet since 1912 has been nominal since it has involved the exercise by the Chinese Government of no control over either the internal affairs or the external relations of Tibet. It is not admitted by the Tibetans themselves on the ground that China, by declining to ratify the 1914 convention (which allowed for Chinese Suzerainty), had forgone the rights which would have accrued to her under it. The exchange of representatives between China and Lhasa has been effected but all the efforts to maintain Chinese face (amounting often to deliberate misrepresentation of fact e.g. the false Chinese account of the present Dalai Lama's inauguration) have not sufficed to break down the independence which Lhasa has enjoyed over more than 30 years. Chinese suzerainty in fact is a relic to be recognized by no more than the observance of ceremonial formalities, if the Chinese

²⁹ The telegraphic lines from Sikkim to Lhasa belonged to British India.

³⁰ Tsipon Shakabpa was certainly one of the younger generation officials who understood the importance to establish diplomatic contacts with as many countries as possible,

Government can be persuaded to agree to leave to the Tibetan Government practical autonomy in their internal administration and freedom to conduct foreign relations at least on the present scale in return for an acknowledgment to Tibet and recognition by His Majesty's Government of Chinese suzerainty, it would be unnecessary to define in detail the exact significance to be attributed to that term.

The fact that Lhasa had its own dealing with foreign nations through the Foreign Affairs Bureau is the best proof of the autonomous (if not independent) status of Tibet in the 1940's. The Bureau had been created in July 1942. The British, Chinese and Nepalese Missions in Lhasa had been requested to stop dealing directly with the Cabinet (Kashag)³¹. The conduct of its own foreign policy is considered in International law as the convincing sign of independence.

Should Great Britain support Tibet's Independence?

This was one of the questions put to the Government of India by London. Once again, Caroe had a very clear perception; China should be pressed to accept Tibet's autonomy:

In the opinion of the Government of India, diplomatic pressure on the Chinese Government to admit Tibetan autonomy should be increased rather than relaxed at the present time when the Government of India are asserting their own rights in the McMahon Line areas and in the circumstances prevailing in Asia.

³¹ The three Missions received a similar letter: "At the suggestion of the National Assembly of Tibet and with the sanction of His Holiness the Regent of Tibet, it has been decided to open a new office to deal with Foreign affairs. Dzasa Surkhang Surpa and Ta Lama Kunchog Jungne (Yongon Dzasa) together with a few assistants have been appointed as Officers in charge of the said office, and the office will function with effect from the 23rd day of the 5th Tibetan month (corresponding to 6th July 1942). In future all matters both big and small, between the British and Tibetan Governments should be discussed with this office."

If the facts were known it is probable that the weight of world opinion would be heavily against the Chinese Government's claims over Tibet. In saying this it must be admitted that publicity for the Tibetan view has not been as effective as for that of the Chinese which is widely accepted, particularly in America, owing to misunderstanding of the real facts of the situation. Judicious publicity abroad for the history and present facts of this case would be of assistance. The Tibetan Government have neither the means nor the experience to obtain this for themselves, but there would seem to be no reason why His Majesty's Government and the Government of India should not assist them.

Caroe then raises an interesting issue that, the world opinion is not aware of the status of Tibet. He affirms: "If the facts were known it is probable that the weight of world opinion would be heavily against the Chinese Government's claims over Tibet."

The blame should squarely put on the British Government for not 'publicizing' the Tibetan issue in a more affirmative way.

London definitely knew (and this is admitted by Caroe) about the constitutional fiction, propagated by the different Chinese regimes. It is why the present Dalai Lama once mentioned during a visit to UK, "Great Britain knew".

It is however true that at the end of 1945, it was already late in the day, less than a year later, British politicians began the process to hand-over the Jewel of the Crown to the Government of India³². In the correspondence regarding the Tibet issue, one realizes that London will be more and more reluctant to take decisions on behalf of the government of Independent India.

³² In July 1946, a Viceroy's Executive Council was created with representatives of the Indian National Congress and Muslim League and Jawaharlal Nehru as the Executive Vice-President.

Olaf Caroe nevertheless advocates a stronger engagement, mainly vis-à-vis the United States; to make known 'the facts'.

Efforts have already been made to secure presentation in America of a true picture of the state of affairs in Lhasa, but so persistent and wide spread has been the dissemination of Chinese claims that it will be no easy matter to convince the world of their slender basis in reality. The Government of India's answer therefore to this second question is that greater diplomatic pressure should be exerted now than in the past on the Chinese Government to recognize full Tibetan autonomy, and that publicity should be given to the Tibetan case. The military aspect of the problem must await the result of the enquiry mentioned [earlier].

This will never be implemented.

Should London encourage discussions on Tibet's Independence?

Now comes the third and last point raised by London in February: 'the extent to which international discussion of the position of Tibet should be encouraged and the line to be taken by London in these discussions".

Caroe first gives the historical background:

History shows that attempts to secure a settlement between Tibet and China since 1914 either directly or through British mediation have failed. If the Generalissimo's book *China's Destiny* is to be taken as the text, there can be little doubt that Chinese imperialist and irredentist sentiment has hardened, and it is early to read his more recent expression of sympathy with the ideals of Tibetan autonomy as an exception to this impression.

As we have already seen, it was probably a propaganda exercise from the Generalissimo's part, but there was a more serious problem for London, as Washington's position on Tibet remained vague.

Take the question of map, a Memo from the Director of Military Operations in the Army Head Quarters in Delhi states: "By the draft agreement, the object of which us to ensure economy in war-time mapping effort, the American sphere of mapping responsibility is extended to the whole of China (including Tibet) and Indo-China, although production of 1/250,000 and larger scale maps for the latter area is carried out by India. India' pre-war mapping responsibilities which covered the whole South of Lat 40° between Long 44° E and 120° E are thus overlapped. We considered that this agreement may give rise to certain embarrassment diplomatically as the American practice is to show Tibet as part of China and not as we show it, as a separate entity. This runs counter to our present policy of supporting the autonomy of Tibet."

It was therefore suggested that the best solution to resolve the issue was that both the US and the UK prepare their own maps to ensure amongst other things, that there is no official recognition of the Chinese claims in the disputed areas of China and Tibet.

This was farsighted as China still today uses old maps claiming NEFA (today Arunachal Pradesh). The External Affairs Department in Delhi stated in its correspondence to London that the division of responsibility leaving China (including Tibet and Xinjiang) to the US would have "a number of undesirable results". One was that "American cartographers would tend to adopt frontiers as the Chinese claim them and not as we assert them to be." It is what China has been doing since 1960 when the Officials of India and China for the first time met to sort out the border 'dispute'.

Caroe sees very clearly the Chinese tactics and though China's presence in Tibet at the end of War World II was minimal, Beijing continued to work on the theoretical map argument to support its 'fiction'.

According to Caroe, there is even worse to follow:

Chinese maneuvers last year seemed to be designed to persuade the Government of India to negotiate directly with China over the head of the Tibetans, and the Chinese have always refused to recognize or have any dealings with the Tibetan Foreign Bureau. It is perhaps unlikely that progress towards the recognition of real Tibetan autonomy will be made unless the matter can be brought before an international body. This is an event which the Chinese appear to fear and which their publicity seems to have been carefully designed to preclude, if possible. In *China's Destiny*, the author has revised Dr. Sun Yat Sen's racial theory in such a way as to seek to represent the Tibetans as springing from common stock with the Chinese, and the problem of Tibetan autonomy as a domestic matter for the Chinese themselves and no one else to settle.

Caroe then mentions the San Francisco Charter, the founding document of the United Nations³³. The Foreign Secretary raises an important question: should the issue of Tibet come up in the United Nations?

Assuming that the San Francisco Charter is to be a living instrument, the question is whether it would be expedient or effective to bring the case of Tibet to the arbitrement of the United Nations organization. The Chinese would no doubt claim that the dispute was one of domestic jurisdiction and therefore excluded from the purview of the Charter. China also, as one of the Powers with a permanent seat on

³³ Though signed on June 26, 1945, it entered into force on 24 October 1945, after being ratified by the five permanent members of the Security Council—the Republic of China, France, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom, and the United States—and a majority of the other signatories. Today, 193 countries are the members of the United Nations.

According to Wikipedia, "As a Charter, it is a constituent treaty, and all members are bound by its articles. Furthermore, the Charter states that obligations to the United Nations prevail over all other treaty obligations".

the Security Council, will be in a position to prevent any effective action being taken in the matter.

This explains why it was so important for Communist China to 'peacefully liberate' Tibet in 1950. A peaceful 'liberation' could prove Mao's point: the Tibet issue was only an internal matter of China and Chapter VI of the Charter did not apply to a dispute between China and Tibet³⁴.

Knowing the Chinese too well, Caroe proposes another solution:

On the other hand public ventilation of the whole case would give an opportunity of bringing the realities of the situation to light and should be of corresponding advantage to Tibet. The question is one on which the Government or India would wish to have His Majesty's Government's considered opinion in the light of the international situation as it develops in Asia and of the prospects of international discussion within the sphere of the San Francisco Charter.

The founding of the United Nations was perhaps a window of opportunity for Tibet to get an acknowledgement of its independence, but as the Tibetan Lamas would put it: the karma of Land of Snows was probably not ripe. The Foreign Secretary then suggests a declaration on the Status of Tibet.

The ground might be cleared if His Majesty's Government could see their way to make an open declaration to the powers (possibly in response to the Generalissimo's speech of August 24th 1945) stating that it was their definite policy as well as that of the Government of India to maintain Tibetan autonomy and that they intended to do all in their power to do so. If such a declaration is to be made the sooner it

³⁴ Chapter VI of the United Nations Charter deals with peaceful settlement of disputes. It requires countries with disputes that could lead to war to first of all try to seek solutions through peaceful methods such as negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice. If these methods of alternative dispute resolution fail, then they must refer it to the UN Security Council.

is done the better, to counter the Chinese claim (implicit even in Chiang Kai Shek's declaration in favour of autonomy) that Tibet is part of China. Unless His Majesty's Government can make clear what the Tibetan Government's attitude is and how far they support it, there will be little hope of securing international co-operation in support of this policy.

The Statement will eventually be issued on November 5, 1945 by the Far-Eastern Civil Planning Unit of the British Cabinet. It reiterated that: "The attitude of His Majesty's Government towards the Tibetan question defined in a memorandum by the Secretaries of State for Foreign Affairs and for India dated 23rd June, 1943."

It stated that 'in general', two factors governed the Tibetan question:

- Tibet has in practice regarded herself as autonomous and has maintained her autonomy for over 30 years;
- our attitude has always been to recognize China's suzerainty, but on the understanding that Tibet is regarded as autonomous by China.

Less than 5 years later, China invaded Tibet and even the autonomy promised in the 17-Point Agreement in May 1951 will never be respected by Beijing. This is the tragedy of a nation, once independent, today colonized.

Conclusions

The conclusions of this fascinating Note on the foreign policy of Great Britain with regard to Tibet were the following:

- (1) The maintenance of the Tibetan buffer is a matter of the utmost importance for India both from the point of view of defense and in the interests of India's internal administration.

- (2) Tibet should enjoy internal autonomy and the right to conduct direct foreign relations, recognizing Chinese suzerainty by more or less ceremonial formalities.
- (3) Support for Tibetan autonomy should be by the strongest and most outspoken diplomatic pressure to be increased at the present time (apart from other advantages, this would satisfy Tibet that our action in the McMahon area is only our assertion of our own treaty rights and in no way designed to break up the State of Tibet), by publicity for the realities of Tibet's position over the last 33 years, and by the supply of munitions and equipment if sought by the Tibetan Government. There may be advantage in bringing the position of Tibet before the United Nations, but it is realized that the Chinese may be able to render such a course ineffective. This matter, and the possibility of an open declaration by His Majesty's Government of their attitude in the Tibetan question, must be left to His Majesty's Government to determine.

It is unfortunate that this policy was not fully implemented due to the forthcoming transfer of power to Independent India.

About India's attitude during the first years after 1947, there would be a lot to say. We have looked at it in some details in our work: "Tibet: the lost Frontier".

One can only say that for Tibet and for India, an opportunity was lost.

Secret

Gen 77/50 26th October, 1945

Cabinet (Far-Eastern Civil Planning Unit)

The Status of Tibet

- 1- The attitude of His Majesty's Government towards the Tibetan question was defined in a memorandum by the Secretaries of State for Foreign Affairs and for India dated 23rd June, 1943
- 2- Until the Chinese Revolution of 1911, Tibet acknowledged the suzerainty of the Manchu Emperors and a measure of control from Peking which fluctuated from military occupation to a more nominal link. Since 1911 Tibet has enjoyed de facto independence.
- 3- His Majesty's Government made repeated attempts after 1911 to bring the Chinese Republic and the Tibetan Government together on the basis that Tibet should be autonomous under the nominal suzerainty of China, but these attempts always broke down on the question of the boundary between China and Tibet, and eventually in 1921. His Majesty's Government presented the Chinese Government with a declaration to that effect that they did not feel justified in withholding any longer their recognition of the status of Tibet as an autonomous State under the suzerainty of China, and that they intended dealing on that basis with Tibet in the future.
- 4- The Chinese Government have since 1921 attempted to an increasing extent to import some substance into their suzerainty over Tibet, while the Tibetans repudiate any measure of Chinese control. For our part, we have promised the Tibetan Government to support them in maintaining their practical autonomy which is important to the security of India and to the tranquility of India's north-eastern frontier. On the other hand, our alliance with China makes it difficult to give effective

material support to Tibet, and we have in fact informed the Tibetans that we would be prepared to give them only diplomatic support against China.

5- On August 24th, 1945 however Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek made a statement of policy concerning Tibet which appears to indicate a considerable change in the attitude of the Chinese Government. After declaring China's desire to allow the 'frontier racial groups' to attain independence if capable of doing so, he said: "I solemnly declare that if the Tibetans should at this time express a wish for self-government our Government would, in conformity with our sincere traditions, accord it a very high degree of autonomy. If in the future, they fulfill economic requirement of independence, the nation's Government will, as in the case of Outer Mongolia, help them to attain this status". There would seem to be nothing irreconcilable between this offer of "a very high degree of autonomy" and the attitude of His Majesty's Government. It is clear however, from conversations which took place between British and Chinese representatives in Lhasa in 1944 that with regard to Tibet, there is a considerable difference between the British and the Chinese conceptions of the word 'autonomy'.

6- In general, two factors governing the Tibetan question are that:

- Tibet has in practice regarded herself as autonomous and has maintained her autonomy for over 30 years;
- our attitude has always been to recognize China's suzerainty, but on the understanding that Tibet is regarded as autonomous by China.

Cabinet Office

5t November, 1945