

The Statesman

Cosying up to China

Panchsheel was independent India's greatest moment of humiliation

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Each year produces a plethora of anniversaries. Not all, however, are observed. For history to be carried over into the present necessitates a high degree of contemporary relevance. Last month, when Britain and the United States of America celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Normandy landings and the opening of the second front against Hitler, the event was more than a mere gathering of ageing veterans. Built into the celebrations was a political message aimed at demonstrating the depth and resilience of the “special relationship” between London and Washington.

It can scarcely be otherwise. The Battle of Waterloo is still commemorated in many of the gentlemen’s clubs of London with a black-tie dinner. But it is a national occasion only in Britain. It would occasion consternation if the final defeat of Napoleon became an occasion for revelry in France. It would almost be akin to the notables of Bengal reliving the enthusiasm with which they greeted the news of Robert Clive’s painless triumph in Plassey.

Commemorative occasions and politics, it would seem, are inseparable. Even if history is not constantly re-written, as in India, the evaluation of anniversaries is the sole prerogative of the ruling dispensation. You would hardly expect, to take a random example, the governments of Germany and Britain to be overwhelmed by a fit of historical accuracy and commemorate the 66th anniversary of the Munich Pact between Hitler and Neville Chamberlain. Yet, it is undeniable that this agreement was widely lauded in 1938 as having brought "peace with honour" and Chamberlain returned home to a hero's welcome. Anniversaries that are deeply embarrassing are left quietly unobserved.

It is, therefore, more than just mystifying that this week witnessed the golden jubilee celebrations in New Delhi and Beijing of the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India, a document better known as Panchsheel. For the newly-elected United Progressive Alliance government, which produced a special stamp to mark the event, it was an occasion to proclaim the rehabilitation of the Nehruvian order in foreign policy. For China, the re-discovery of Panch-sheel became a euphemism for some free publicity to the new mantra of *heping jueqi* or "good neighbourliness and global responsibility".

Yet, no anniversary celebration could be more inappropriate. For a start, June 28 was not the 50th anniversary of Panchsheel. As the India-based China-watcher, Claude Arpi, has pointed out, the agreement was signed by Chang Han-Fu, China's vice-minister of foreign affairs, and the Indian ambassador, N. Raghavan, in Beijing on April 29, 1954, and came into effect on June 3 that year. On April 29, however, the National Democratic Alliance government was still in place, and despite the improvement in Sino-Indian relations, no one

really thought it necessary to commemorate an agreement that resulted in India abjuring the Shimla Convention of 1914 and surrendering its special diplomatic status in Tibet.

It is instructive to recall that Panchsheel was not universally welcomed in India. Speaking in the Lok Sabha in 1958, J.B. Kripalani was carping about India's abdication of its role in Tibet: "This great doctrine was born in sin because it was enunciated to put the seal of our approval upon the destruction of an ancient nation which was associated with us spiritually and culturally. It was a nation which wanted to live its own life and it ought to have been allowed to live it." Jawaharlal Nehru answered with a weak pun, "Born in Sindh?"

Unfortunately, Panchsheel proved to be no laughing matter. Regardless of the hype associated with democratic India, embrace of a totalitarian neighbour, Panchsheel was an ephemeral agreement. Initially valid for eight years, until April 1962, the "*Hindi-Chini bhai bhai*" euphoria was woefully one-sided and ended in tears for both Nehru and India. Within 26 days of Panchsheel coming into effect, the People's Liberation Army began its incursions into India, at Barahoti, north of Badrinath, in Uttaranchal. And by the time the agreement died a natural death, India had suffered a humiliating military debacle, with Nehru's heart going out to the people of Assam.

It speaks volumes for the self-esteem of the UPA government that it re-jigged the calendar of history and glossed over independent India's greatest moment of humiliation to celebrate a Congress prime minister's act of romantic folly. In sheer perversity, the grand *tamasha* in New Delhi last Monday was akin to the great and the good assembling in London's Guildhall to promote Anglo-German friendship by celebrating Chamberlain's gentlemanly capitulation in Munich in 1938.

It is tempting to dismiss the sudden re-discovery of Panchsheel as an unfortunate example of fawning and diplomatic buffoonery by India's influential band of Sinophiles. Tragically, the blunder is more serious and is symptomatic of the foreign policy regression that is taking place in Delhi.

It is not anyone's case that Sino-Indian relations must be held hostage to human rights in Tibet and the resolution of the border conflict. Since Rajiv Gandhi's landmark visit in 1987, both sides have shown considerable maturity in putting normalization of relations above conflict resolution. It is an approach that Natwar Singh was absolutely right in commending to the Pakistan government last month.

However, there are strong suggestions that the UPA government's desire to establish a special relationship with China goes well beyond the purview of bilateral relations. Implicit in the rekindling of the flawed Panchsheel agreement is a move towards a more profound strategic partnership with Beijing. This includes imbibing China's perceptions of the restructuring of the post-Cold War world order.

The roots of this Sinophilia can be located in a mixture of misplaced nostalgia and plain expediency. Since the Pokhran-II blasts of May 1998, China has combined its traditional relationship with India's communists with a special relationship with the Congress. Never shy of getting involved in domestic policy when necessary, Beijing has crafted a formidable lobby for itself in the present UPA, centred on a wariness of the Curzonian assumptions of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Grafted on to the traditional Third World-ism of those who see themselves as Nehru's disciples, this has involved the direct encouragement to anti-US tendencies within the Indian foreign policy establishment.

Beijing has never underestimated the potential danger of India positioning itself as a rival Asian power. With its open society, vibrant

democracy, cultural links and hostility to Islamism, India has always held out an attraction to a West that is deeply suspicious of China's hegemonic designs in Asia. For China, neutralizing India or bringing it under its strategic umbrella would constitute a monumental foreign-policy triumph. In simple terms, it would deny the West the natural alternative in Asia.

For India, however, the implications may not be all that wholesome. Apart from the economic implications of subordinating itself to the main competitor, excessive cosying up to China carries the danger of living with a permanent military handicap and being subjected to the threats of political blackmail, particularly in the North-east. It means abandoning all regional ambitions in favour of a spurious solidarity built on angst.

China and India have been geographical neighbours. This has, however, not been accompanied by either neighbourliness or an understanding of each other. In terms of both cultural assumptions and civil-society links, both countries remain separated by the formidable Himalayas. Regardless of the temporary irritation with the unilateralism of the Bush administration, India's natural gaze is Westwards. We are naturally at ease with the Anglo-Saxon world. The Middle Kingdom is both distant and incomprehensible. Panchsheel was just an early warning.