The Indo-Chinese Relations

“When the Panchsheel will shine like a sun over the universe” thus spoke Zhou Enlai a couple of months after signing the "Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India”, remembered as the Panchsheel Agreement.

In 2004 India and China will ‘celebrate’ the 50th anniversary of this accord. Fifty years later, ‘shining’ is again a fashionable word, but the question remains: is there something to celebrate?

For 2000 years, India had a peaceful neighbour and an unguarded border. After the signing of the Panchsheel which for the first time recognized Tibet as a mere “Region of China”, a new neighbour (with an aggressive ideology) settled along India’s 2500 miles-long Himalayan frontier.

The time has perhaps come to look into the history of those troubled years, introspect to analyze past mistakes and see if old knots can be untied.

The Triangle of India, Tibet and China

These three nations are old civilizations. In the course of their history, each one has developed its own characteristics; each has also gone through different phases, though 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 rapidly declined.\(^1\)

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 the Peninsula. 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. Today it is fashionable to speak of the ‘clash of civilisations’ but in this case, it was truly two different worlds meeting for the first time.

An amusing anecdote illustrates how far apart the two cultures were. July 1904: Younghusband enters the Tibetan capital in ‘full-dress uniform’ with 300 men riding beside him. “Preceded by a sort of a band from the Gorkhas, we marched right through the city of Lhasa making all the noise we could” wrote a participant. The young Colonel feels that the local population is most impressed by the ‘Grand

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\(^1\) It remained more a place of pilgrimage for the Tibetans.
Show’, clapping loudly as the soldiers parade by. He did not know of the Tibetan tradition to clap and shout to repulse bad spirits.

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. The British and Tibetans however agreed on a common border which they demarcated on a map: the famous McMahon Line was born.

This treaty was still in force when India became independent in August 1947. 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. To quote from Sri Aurobindo, the great Indian sage and nationalist leader:

At no time does India seem to have been moved towards an aggressive military and political expansion beyond her own borders, no epic of world dominion, no great tale of far-borne invasion or expanding colonial empire has ever been written in the tale of Indian achievement. The sole great endeavour of expansion, of conquest, of invasion she attempted was the expansion of her culture, the invasion and conquest of the eastern world by the Buddhistic idea and the penetration of her spirituality, art and thought-forces. And this was an invasion of peace and not of war, for to spread a spiritual civilisation by force and physical conquest, the vaunt or the excuse of modern imperialism, would have been uncongenial to the ancient cast of her mind and temperament and the idea underlying her Dharma.
Despite the often proclaimed 2000 year-old friendship between India and China, the two nations little any contact except through foolhardy monks such as the pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang who, fourteen centuries ago crisscrossed North India in search of the places where his master, the Buddha had lived and preached the Dharma a thousand years earlier. An interesting aspect of the Sino-Indian relations is that these pilgrims left a detailed description of the Indian subcontinent, while Indian records seldom exist. Indian monks and scholars also traveled to China to teach the message of the Buddha. It is said that a monk from Kerala, introduced martial arts to the Middle Kingdom. He had acquired these techniques to protect himself against the marauders roaming along the Central Asian tracks. However, 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 autonomy (‘verging on independence’ as per Nehru’s words) began to vacillate; it did not stand up to defend its militarily-weak neighbour.

In May 1951, some of the Dalai Lama’s representatives signed ‘under duress’ a 17-Point Agreement with Communist China. For the first time in its 2000-year history, Lhasa had no choice but to accept to be a part of the ‘Motherland’, China. 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 have diplomatic relations with Lhasa. The signature of the Panchsheel Agreement between India and China marked the tail-end of the events set in motion by Younghusband’s entry into Tibet. While the British expedition officialised Tibet as a separate entity, the Agreement put an end to 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 and Ladakh.

Nehru and his advisors progressively fell 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 after the Agreement (which lapsed in June 1962) 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 acceptance of Tibet being a part of the People’s Republic of China (as per the title of the Agreement) remains a fact. It has directly caused the destruction of an ancient way of life (backward in one sense though much more advanced at an inner level).

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

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

Fifty years later, the folly of this policy still haunts an India unable to sort out her border tangle. In June 2003, the Indian Prime Minister took the bold initiative to nominate his National Security Advisor as a Special Envoy for ‘fast track’ parleys with Beijing. Does it mean that the border tangle is ‘ripe for settlement’?

Recently an Indian Weekly wrote about the new bonhomie in the Sino-Indian relations: “Indian mangoes are set to flood the Chinese market this summer while the Chinese Government is sending a minister to India to select a few Hindi films. It is time for the next big step”. The media has been almost unanimous to rejoice the new thaw. Indeed, nobody can object to the beginning of a strategic dialogue proposed by Jia Qinglin, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference when he visited Delhi last November. One can also only be happy that India and China have begun exploring the possibility of a free-trade area.

A factor which certainly influenced South Block is that these advances in the bilateral relations with China are not appreciated in Pakistan. A similar motive partly shaped the Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai policy fifty years ago. However, one can only hope that a rapprochement with Beijing is not just a ploy to counter Islamabad. Recently, Yashwant Sinha, the Indian Minister of External Affairs confidently declared: “While it is undeniable that China and India are competitors it is also clear that we can be partners”. He added: “In India as in China a need is felt to improve relations. This has much to do with the changing perceptions about India, her achievements and global reach”.

6
However in their feel-good mood, Panikkar’s children in the corridors of South Block should not repeat the mistakes committed 50 years ago and only deal with the questions ripe for settlement.

In my opinion, two questions should be tackled on a priority basis. If successfully resolved, mangoes (and with Indian sweets) could be sent to Beijing for celebrations. First, is there a way for India to undo the wrong committed vis-à-vis the Land of Snows in the fifties? And second: is there a creative yet feasible solution to solve the border issue between India and China?

**The Question of Tibet**

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, Prime Minister Vajpayee thus commented on 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?

Probably Prime Minister Vajpayee would not give the same speech today.

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.

This peace plan contains five basic components:

1. **Transformation of the whole of Tibet into a zone of peace;**
2. **Abandonment of China’s population transfer policy which threatens the very existence of the Tibetans as a people;**
3. Respect for the Tibetan people’s fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms;
4. Restoration and protection of Tibet’s natural environment and the abandonment of China’s use of Tibet for the production of nuclear weapons and dumping of nuclear waste;
5. Commencement of earnest negotiations on the future status of Tibet and of relations between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples.

Nevertheless, 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 south-western border. In fact the present status quo does not really benefit anybody.

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 Strasbourg Proposal made it clear:

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 more. 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”.

After more than 10 years, 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.
The Dalai Lama consoled himself by saying that the fact that both parties meet and exchange views can only generate good will. In a recent interview, he told this writer: “We had a good start. We are determined to continue to carry on these contacts. At this moment, we are trying to build up confidence, because there is still a lot of suspicion from the Chinese side. I feel that if there is more contact, there will be more confidence and then more serious discussions can take place. That is the only way. We have to accept this even if it is not easy. We shall see.”
This is perhaps where India could help.
Many observers believe that if the Dalai Lama could have personal contact with Hu Jintao or any other senior Chinese leaders and if, with his personal warmth, he could express his desire to find a 'genuine' solution, old rancour and many misunderstandings would evaporate.
Could not Delhi be a discreet mediator between the Dalai Lama and the new leadership in Beijing?
In his 1993 speech quoted earlier, Prime Minister Vajpayee declared:

… There has been a change in the point of view of the Dalai Lama. Beijing should have welcomed this change. The Tibetans fight for their recognition, for their honour… China should also rectify the mistakes that were committed in the foreign affairs. We should encourage them on this. But if we remain silent about Tibet, we will neither do justice to Tibet nor to ourselves.

The Indian foreign policy has changed during the past 10 years, it has today found a new motto: ‘engagement’. The Government tries to apply this mantra to both the Pakistani and the Chinese front. Though there is nothing wrong in engaging the Chinese leaders in the fields of economy and trade, Beijing should also be ‘engaged’ in the other fields which have hindered the development of smooth relations between the two nations for the past fifty years.
It would be a tragedy if the National Democratic Alliance government follows Nehru’s policy in ‘engaging’ China only in the domains Beijing believes are ready for settlement. It would once again lead to nowhere, if not to disasters.
To mediate with Beijing and Dharamsala in a discreet manner would certainly do justice to the Tibetans and help build a durable friendship between China and India by removing one of the two main thorns in their relations.
The Border Issue
After the Indian Prime Minister nominated the National Security Advisor for parleys with Beijing on the border issue, the first round of talks between Brajesh Mishra and his Chinese counterpart, Dai Bingguo, the Vice-foreign Minister was held in Delhi on October 23 and 24, 2003.

The Envoys met again in Beijing on January 12 and 13. Though the two parties agreed not to publicized the outcome of the talks, Kong Quan, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman declared that the second ‘ministerial-level discussions’ were ‘positive’ and the atmosphere was ‘constructive’. He added: “Such complicated issues cannot achieve rapid progress through only one or two rounds of talks.”

Indeed Brajesh Mishra does not have an easy task in front of him. 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 Chamdo-Lhasa and Qinghai-Lhasa sectors linking the Tibetan capital with eastern Tibet as well as the western road known as the Tibet-Xinjiang Highway (or Aksai Chin road).

The construction of the feeder road leading to Nathu-la, the border pass between Sikkim and Tibet, had a weird consequence. India began providing food to the Chinese road workers in Tibet, sending tons of rice through this route. John Lall, a former Dewan of Sikkim, was posted in Gangtok at the time. He witnessed long caravans of mules leaving in the direction of Tibet. He recalled: “But suddenly all was sweetness and light. The reason became apparent when a request was made for shipment of Chinese rice through India and Sikkim to their troops in Tibet. This could, and indeed should, have been made the occasion for a settlement of the major problems with China.” It was not to be.

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 Sinkiang-Tibet Highway is 1179 km long, of which 915 km are more than 4,000 meters above sea level; 130 km of it over 5,000 meters above sea level, with the highest point being 5,500 meters.”

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 Lok Sabha: 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? Although during the 1960 negotiations on the border issue, Indian officials proved beyond doubt that the Aksai Chin was a part of Ladakh, the fact is that the Chinese have now occupied the area for half a century.

Will the Chinese ever relinquish this strategic artery? It is doubtful. As for India: is it conceivable that any government (especially during an election year) 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 new 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.

At one point in time, an idea was mooted to have an international board of ‘neutral’ historians who would ascertain both China and India’s claims. But one can doubt if Beijing would ever accept such an arbitration: their ‘historical’ case is too weak.
But with both parties firm on their respective stands, is there a possible solution where no party would lose face?

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

One small grace in this intractable problem is that 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. In this sense, Nehru was right when he said that not a blade of grass could grow there. This would make the condominium solution far easier to work out.

The concept of condominium was popularised in the 18th century, when hundreds of small principalities were in existence. Very often they were not self-sufficient and found it difficult to survive. In a few cases, they appealed to two princes for help and protection. Was it not safer to have two protectors instead of one? Things changed in the twentieth century with the birth of the League of Nations and, later the United Nations Organisation. From that time, only one ruler could be recognised for a given territory.

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. India in the future might want to reopen the trade route to Kashgar through the Karakoram Pass. Though technically this route is not cutting through the occupied area, this provision would have to be included in a general settlement.

Very recently, the *China Daily* mentioned that a similar solution 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. Further advantage for both India and ‘Tibet’s Region of China’ would be that the old trade route between Leh and Gartok could be immediately reopened and subsequently the pilgrimage road to Kailash-Mansarover. It would be a great boon for Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims who would be able to travel by car in two days from Leh to the sacred mountain.

The main question remains: is the time ripe for settlement?