



Research Paper

Revisiting the Panchsheel: Nehru's Idealism or Realism?

Sreeparna Dasgupta
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Loreto College, Kolkata.

Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the popular belief that it was Nehru's naïve and idealistic foreign policy from the late forties to the sixties that placed India on the back foot in her relation with China. It might be stated that Panchsheel is an ideal for international relations between countries. It was accepted by the Afro-Asian countries attending the Bandung Conference in 1955. Thus India and China in their Panchsheel agreement were trying to settle their relationship according to this ideal. Nehru was in effect using the agreement to buy time, avoiding to raise contentious issues like frontier alignments with China. So was Nehru's China Policy, guided by the ideals of Panchsheel, believed that a benevolent China would do the right thing or was it pragmatic and realistic? The paper attempts to critically assess these issues.

Key words: China Policy, idealistic, frontier, pragmatic.

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It has been argued that it was Nehru's naïve idealistic foreign policy from late forties to the sixties, that placed India on the back foot in her relation with China. Do the facts substantiate this charge of Nehru being an idealist unable to cope with the real world? More pertinently was Nehru's China policy based on his perception of a benevolent China doing the right thing? Fact is Nehru was alarmed by Communist success in China. He told the Indian army officers in Srinagar shortly after communist takeover that the Chinese revolution has upset the balance of power and the centre of gravity has shifted from Europe to Asia thereby affecting India directly. He also advised the Director of Intelligence Bureau to strengthen intelligence gathering on Pakistan & China. China, Nehru argued that in her struggle for supremacy in Asia the biggest obstacle in her way would be India. This was in early 1952.²

Further, Nehru believed that international communism was only a cloak for furthering China's own national interests.³

Thus Nehru did not have a rosy eyed view of communist China. In fact, even though India was the second country after Burma to recognize the communist Government in China on December, 1949⁴, Chinese official and unofficial sources heaped abuse on India and Nehru.

On May, 1950 Peking Radio accused the American and Indian Government of planning intrusion into Tibet⁵. Jain rightly points out these hysterical tirades were a prelude to China's own incursion into Tibet. On 10th October, 1950 Chinese troops entered Tibet. India protested against this 'deplorable' action. In reply China retorted that Tibet was an integral part of China and so was China's own business.

China's aggression against Tibet in October, 1950 perhaps is related to the international geo-strategic situation in the Korean peninsula. The Korean war started in June, 1950 when N.Korea invaded South Korea. On 17th October 1950, US forces crossed into North Korea. The military involvement of USA under UN auspices in Korea, threatened China specially because of the unsettled issue of Formosa. Thus China might have moved into Tibet to secure its southern borders. Nehru realized the geostrategic compulsion of Chinese attempts to secure its rear. Nehru held that there were three world powers, Soviet Union, U.S.A. and China. While Soviet Union and China were allied and dominated continental Asia, U.S.A. for all its action in the Far East was separated from China by the Pacific Ocean and so there was no threat to her from China's land army. This left India with 2000 miles of land frontier with China. Thus it was India's national interest to avoid war with China and develop friendly relation with her⁶.

Moreover, against the background clamour for military action by India to deter China in Tibet an official assessment of India's military capability at this time, revealed, given the operational needs in Jammu and Kashmir, only two battalions could be spared for the China front.⁷

In May 1951, China coerced the Tibetan Government' to conclude an agreement which on paper ensured autonomy to Tibet while China took over Tibet. Commenting on this Sino-Tibet agreement, India Foreign Secretary G.S. Bajpai said "It was inevitable that the present Chinese Government would gain control of Tibet and there was nothing that the Government of India could do about it."⁸

Broadly speaking the Indian Policy towards China enunciated several times by Nehru was the preservation of the security and integrity of India, to maintain friendly relation with China and a deep sympathy for the people of Tibet.⁹ The security of her border, given India's limited military capacity, required friendly relation with China and in this policy the interests of Tibet were fobbed off by mere platitude. That is Indian Policy was based solely on national interest although she lacked sufficient power to support it, thus she would have to rely on diplomacy. Moreover, the acceptance of China's occupation of Tibet, basically eliminated idealism or a crusading spirit from the policy parameter.¹⁰

It has been empirically established that alliance between a weak state and a strong state usually put the stronger state at the disposal of the weaker state once the strong state has adopted the interest of the weaker state as its own; in this case the foreign policy of the strong state is dictated by the weaker state, and so is poor foreign policy. Thus Nehru abandoning Tibet in realistic terms was 'good' policy although it might not have been morally correct.¹¹

Although independent India and Tibet were not allied as such but taking up the cause of Tibet's independence by India could have complicated India's position. Thus Bandopadhyaya in his definitive study of Indian Foreign Policy acknowledged that there was long term realism in Nehru's China policy.¹²

In June 1950 the Korean War started. India antagonized China by supporting a UN resolution for armed U.N. intervention to oust North Korean from South Korea. However, India later realized that the Korean War was not isolated from the geo-political issues in East Asia. Issues like Chinese representations in the UN, the status of Formosa were all related to the Korean situation. So India shifted its stance and tried to mediate between US and China. After many ups & down, India's effort specially with regard to repatriation of POWs, was accepted by China and an agreement was reached between her and USA.¹³ China by 1953 moved closer to India over its role in the Korean crisis. Specially important to China was India's refusal to be a signatory to the Japanese Peace Treaty because China was not invited. India also tried to replace Nationalist China by the Peoples Republic of China in the UN, but was unsuccessful because of US opposition.

In 1953, Nehru became aware of the impending US – Pakistan military alliance. This triggered Nehru's move for an agreement with China. There was intense debate within the Indian government whether the border question should be raised with China during discussion on the agreement.¹⁴ Finally it was decided that the question of the frontier would not be allowed to be raised, as in India's view this was well settled by custom, tradition and usage. If the Chinese raised it, India would refuse to discuss it.¹⁵ The Chinese also did not raise the border issue at the meeting. Even before the conference Chou-En-Lai had, studiously avoided discussing the border issue in discussion with Panikkar, India's Ambassador in Beijing. At the opening of the Conference it was decided by both sides to agree on the five principles of co-existence (Panchsheel). Chou-En-Lai on opening the conference opined that all issues 'ripe for settlement' would be discussed. As the Chinese side did not raise the border issue., it was ominous indication that the border issue was not yet ripe for discussion. Even so the acceptance of the Panchsheel which entailed 1. Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity & sovereignty, 2. Mutual non-aggression, 3. Mutual non interference in each others internal affairs, 4. Equality and mutual benefit and, 5) peaceful co-existence by both sides imputed indirectly the sanctity of the existing frontier. However the agreement was only for eight years, China not agreeing to India's proposal for a tenure of 25 years for the agreement. This raised certain misgivings in Nehru's mind.¹⁶

The Agreement, apart from the 'Panchsheel' principles was confined mainly to trade issues although India gave up all its extra-territorial rights in Tibet. Commenting on this agreement Nehru stated in Lok Sabha (after enunciating the five principles of co-existence). '.....By this agreement, we ensure peace to a very large extent in a certain area of Asia.'¹⁷ He further hoped that China on its part would restrain its expansion drive in the Himalayas..... in defence to the accord.'¹⁸ The Panchsheel agreement was not merely proclamatory of 'area of peace' but was also intended to be inhibiting.¹⁸ Karnad draws attention to similar principles that US set for the agreement with Japan in 1941. Karnad states that even military leaders endorsed 'the principles.'¹⁹ Thus Karand concludes '.....(the principles of co-existence) was far from untested diplomatic tool.'¹⁹ Criticism of Nehru began almost immediately after signing of the agreement as there occurred a number of incursions by the Chinese along the frontier. This also is not unprecedented. Again there are historical precedents to this. In 1907, for instance the Russia – Britain convention on Persia, Tibet and Afghanistan was signed. It was an act of faith for the British hoping that it would stop Russian advance towards India.

Immediately after signing the accord Russia increased its presence in Persia extending its area of influence. However, the British Foreign Office aware of British military weakness engaged Russia in dialogue and a bit of bluster to keep Russia in check.²⁰

Another issue related to the Panchsheel Agreement that was being criticized was India not raising the border issue during discussion on the agreement.²¹ Nehru explained, China was sitting in Tibet, India's raising of the border issue would not have made a difference. But 'the trouble on the frontier would have come immediately not now but years back we would have to face it.'²²

It might be stated that Panchsheel is an ideal for international relations between countries. It was accepted by the Afro-Asian countries attending the Bandung Conference in 1955. Thus India and China in their Panchsheel agreement were trying to settle their relationship according to this ideal. Nehru as we saw earlier was using the agreement to buy time, avoiding to raise contentious issues like frontier alignments. On hindsight it would seem China was also buying time. In the final analysis it is the material strength of the countries that count. In this context, a somewhat pertinent criticism of Nehru's policy towards China is the timing of the agreement India was the weaker state, it is a time honoured precept of international relations that negotiation should always be backed with force. Bismarckian dictum 'settle everything by discussion, but keep a million bayonets behind'²³, still holds. Nearer to our times, President Reagan had stated, 'The only way to negotiate for peace is from a position of strength', and US Defence Secretary, Casper Weinberger, stated, "we must be strong before we begin any negotiation."²⁴ Nehru was aware of this precept. Mullick states that Nehru had explained that a country which had no military might was always at a disadvantage at the conference table.²⁵ Thus Nehru's rush to the negotiation table in 1953-54 could be because he panicked. The US-Pakistan military alliance threatened India's western front, thus he might have felt that securing peace on her northern border was strategically necessary.

There are basically two ways in which a relatively weak state can overcome its weakness –

1. By developing internal resources or
2. Forming an alliance with a relatively strong state.

Nehru given his aversion to power blocs settled for the 1st option. However, as the Panchsheel agreement was for only eight years, he should have realized that India would not have attained military parity with China in such a short time. The need therefore was an alliance with a strong state to tide over the interim period. At that point of time (1953-54) the Soviet Union and China seemed to be a monolithic bloc. US with all its protestations of friendship was concentrating on its own strategic requirement which involved. US-Pakistan alliance to cover the Middle-East and Central Asia. Therefore, the choice was difficult and required adroit diplomacy to foster a viable foreign relation to thwart China. One might recall that near the end of the 19th century, Britain concerned about her relative naval weakness in the Mediterranean, 'leaned' towards the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria and Italy) to forestall French-Russian designs in this area. Further, Britain realizing its inability to cope with Russian advance in the Far East, allied with Japan in 1902 specifically strengthening its position not only in the Far East but also in the Mediterranean by allowing it to strengthen its Mediterranean fleet.

Admittedly the choice facing Nehru was difficult but his realism should have dictated his choice and such choice would not have been too difficult.

Nehru was not averse to at least covert alliance or 'leaning' towards powerful states if it served national interests. In 1952, criticized in Parliament for promoting political non-alignment with apparent dependence on the west (UK mainly) in military matters, Nehru replied that inclining towards the Anglo-US bloc was at once a 'inherited' trait and means of ending India's international 'isolation'. "I see no reason at all", Nehru replied in Parliament on June 12, 1952, "why we should break any bond which is of advantage to us."²⁶ As such what prevented Nehru from fostering a more robust 'leaning' on the West or even a covert alliance with it to break out of 'isolation' fostered by its non-alignment policy. Most South-East Asian countries opted for the US led SEATO to nullify the Chinese threat. While India might have shunned a formal alliance, informal linkage could have been equally effective in countering China. Recall Great Britain's leaning towards the Triple Alliance. Nehru's reluctance on this regard could be explained by his perception of the geo-strategic environment in Asia – two huge continental allied powers (China & Russia) to India's north, a hostile Pakistan allied with the US – prompted Nehru to believe that the best option for India would be to cultivate friendly relation with China. Nehru was skeptical about how far he could rely on the West. In August 31st, 1959 while noting the futility of raising the Tibet issue in the UN, Nehru stated, "Obviously, nobody is going to send an army to Tibet or China for that was not done in the case of Hungary which is part of Europe and which is more allied to European nations. It is fantastic to think they will move in that way in Tibet, obviously not."²⁷

The ambivalence in India's China policy ultimately led to the 1962 war with China. Now the 1962 India-China War was an obvious and evident Indian foreign policy failure and more importantly, it was perceived as the failure of the Panchsheel as a diplomatic tool to achieve its objective i.e. establish peaceful relations between India and China. But the 1962 war, should not lead one to conclude that Panchsheel was an

amateurish attempt by Nehru to establish peace. Peaceful co-existence which lies at the core of Panchsheel, its roots can be traced to the Treaty of Westphalia. Further, what is interesting is that the US Secretary of State, Cordell Hull's "4-point" programme on the basis of which the US sought to make an agreement with Japan in 1941, is surprisingly similar in spirit to the 5 principles of the Panchsheel. However, the point that needs to be noted is Hull's "4-point" could not prevent the Pearl Harbour attack in Dec 1941, just as the Panchsheel could not prevent the 1962 war. But what needs to be emphasized in that:

1. Panchsheel was not an untested tool of diplomacy and
2. Given India's circumstances at that time, Panchsheel was not Nehru's idealism but rather his realism.

ENDNOTES & REFERENCES

¹Quoted in S. Mahmud Ali, 'Cold War in the High Himalays. The USA, China and South Asia in the 1950s'. Curzon Press, Great Britain, 1999.

² See B.N. Mullick 'My Years with Nehru, The Chinese Betrayal.' Allied Publishers, New Delhi 1971.

³ Op cit. p.179

⁴ In Parliament Nehru justified this on the ground that 'it was not a question of approving or disapproving the change but the recognition of a major event in history and dealing with it. See B.N. Mullick 'My Years with Nehru.' p.62.

⁵ Girilal Jain, 'Panchsheel and After – A Reappraisal of Sino-Indian Relations in the Context of Tibetan Insurrection.' Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1960. See for China's tirades against India pp. 14- 18.

⁶See Mullick 'My Years with Nehru; p.177 for Nehru's appreciation of India strategic environment.

⁷ See S. Mahmud Ali "Cold War in the High Himalaya." p.23.

⁸ Quoted in S.Mahmud Ali 'Cold War in the High Himalayas.' p.37

⁹ See Prime Minister on Sino-Indian Relation in Parliament. Vol.1. Ministry of External Affairs, Gov. of India, 1961. p.35

¹⁰ See Hans J. Margenthau, 'Politics among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace.' Scientific Book Agency, Calcutta, 1969, for tenets of policies based on realism. For instance few of the tenets of realism are

1. Diplomacy must be divested of the crusading spirit;
2. The objective of foreign policy must be defined in terms of National interest and must be supported by sufficient power.
3. Nations must be willing to compromise on all issues that are not vital to them. A few points as a guideline for such compromise are: a) give up the shadow of worthless rights for the substance of real advantage a diplomat that thinks legalistically might lose sight of its implication for its own nation, b) Never allow a weak ally to make decision for you, etc. pp. 540-547

¹¹ Keith M. Wilson, 'Empire and Continent: Studies in British Foreign Policy from the 1880's to the First World War.' Aransell Publication, London, 1987, pp. 102-103. Wilson gives the example of Germany – Austria alliance which implied that in the event of Austria-Russian war, Germany would become involved..

¹² J.N. Bandopadhyaya 'Making of India's Foreign Policy.' Allied Publishers, Calcutta, 1970, p-249. Bandopadhyaya tries to make out a case that Nehru's short term China Policy was somewhat idealistic. However, he hedges this conclusion in the same paragraph.

¹³ For the Korean War analysis see S.Gopal Jawaharlal Nehru, A Biography 1947-1956 OUP, New Delhi 1984. Vol. 2, pp. 135-148. Also see B.V. Govinda Raj, 'India and Disputes in the United Nations'; Vora & Co. Bombay, 1959, specially Chapter VII.

¹⁴ For the debate see S.Gopal 'Jawaharlal Nehru' A Biography Vol. 2. pp 177-180.

¹⁵ B.N. Mullick 'My Years with Nehru,' p.150.

¹⁶ For discussion on the opening of the conference see op.cit pp 150-151. On India's proposal for 25years agreement see Karunakar Gupta 'The Hidden History of Sino-Indian Frontier,' Minerva Associates, Calcutta, 1974. p. 18.

¹⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru, 'India Foreign Policy', Selected Speeches, September 1946 to April, 1961, the Publicity Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India, New Delhi, 1961. p 303, in Lok Sabha May 15, 1954.

¹⁸ Heinsath, Charles and Mansingh, Surjit, A Diplomatic History of Modern India.' Allied Publishers, p 192. Nehru addressed a circular to Pradesh Congress Committees expressing doubt about China keeping to the tenets of the agreement. He stated inter alia, "Surely it is better..... to hope for and expect the best, but at the same time to be prepared for any eventuality," ibid.

¹⁹ Bharat Karnad 'Nuclear Weapons and Indian Security. The Realist Foundation of Security' Macmillan, New Delhi, 2002, p.107.

²⁰ Keith M. Wilson 'Empire and Continent' pp 150-152.

²¹ See for instance J. Bandopadhyaya 'The Making of India's Foreign Policy.' pp. 244-246.

²² Prime Minister on Sino-Indian Relation Vol. I p.251 statement by Nehru in Lok Sabha on November 17, 1959. In the same speech Nehru, confessed that on hindsight he has doubt about his decision p.249.

²³ The Bismarckian quote is from Mullik 'My Years with Nehru', p.82

²⁴ Both quotes are from P.N. haksar 'India's Foreign Policy and its Problems', Patriot Publishers, New Delhi, 1969, p.41.

²⁵ See Mullik 'My years with Nehru', p.84.

²⁶ Quoted in Bharat Karnad 'Nuclear Weapons and Indian Security' p.124.

²⁷ Prime Minister on Sino-Indian Relation, Vol I, in Rajya Sabha, 31st August 1959, p.121.