

India's China Policy

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The foreign policy of any country is the product of a complex interplay of history, geography, past experience, present requirements, perceptions of the ruling elite of national interests and ideological consensus. It is also shaped and moulded by the domestic balance of forces; and the regional and international balance of forces. The ongoing changes in the international scene have prompted the Indian government and Foreign Ministry to have a rethinking on the ethos of foreign policy objectives and also to reassess the dimension of its relations with a number of countries, notable among them being China. This paper proposes to review the gamut of India's relations with China, in the light of Premier Li Peng's visit to India.

Ever since the disruption of Sino-Indian friendship in the Fifties, barring a spell of lull in the Sixties in the aftermath of the armed conflict in 1962, normalisation of relations with China has constantly figured as the primary concern of India's foreign policy.

India's relations with China can be categorised into different phases:

- (i) From 1949 to 1954, a period of limited relations, with numerous gestures of friendship on India's part and considerable response on China's part;
- (ii) From 1954 to 1959, the Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai period when on the surface Sino-Indian relations were remarkably good, whereas beneath the surface there were numerous points of friction and conflicting purposes and aims; and,
- (iii) The period from 1959 to 1970, with a sharp turn for the worse in their relations in 1957, open armed conflict in late 1962 and limited relations until 1971, rather 1976, with China assuming a distinctly hostile posture.

The year 1976 marked the restoration of diplomatic relations followed by relaxation of tensions between the two countries. Rajiv

Gandhi's visit to China in 1988 and the reciprocal visit by Peng in 1991, ushered in an era of attempts to build cordial relations between the two countries.

It would be prudent to acknowledge that three major issues have played a significant role in India's relations with China, viz.:

- (i) Sino-Indian border question.
- (ii) China's support to its neighbours.
- (iii) China's support to insurgents in north-east India.

We, in this paper, in our analysis of India's China policy, would be focussing on the border issue. The border issue has often been viewed as a vexed problem in the normalisation of India-China relations. Critics tend to analyse any improvement in Sino-Indian relations in the light of progress made in the resolution of the border issue; for it is over the border problem that the armed conflict in 1962 erupted. It would be appropriate at this juncture to dwell on the background of the issue.

Reviewing the literature on India's boundary dispute with China, one finds that a large number of writers have expressed the view that India under Nehru failed to perceive the threat that China posed to India, and according to some of them, the military debacle of India in 1962 was due to the failure of the non-alignment policy.

We will attempt to analyse the manner in which the Chinese threat was perceived and responded to by India's policy makers. It needs to be emphasised that the general and broader nature of the Chinese challenge was well perceived by Nehru. It can be seen that the foremost objective of India's China policy was to have a friendly and peaceful relationship with that country.

It may be noted that though Nehru was striving hard to have peaceful relations with China, he was not oblivious of the threat posed by China. This can be substantiated by the statements made by Nehru himself. While briefing D.R. Manekar before his visit to China in 1954, Nehru said: "Some day or the other, these two Asian giants are bound to tread on each other and come into conflict and that would be a calamity for Asia. This is an eventuality we should strive hard to avert".¹

In view of the steps taken by Nehru himself in 1950, it seems to be a fallacy to state that the Indian government or Nehru ignored

, the threat that China posed to India. The setting up of a committee, headed by Himmat Singh, to recommend steps for the defence of the north and north-east border was a recognition of the threat that might develop in the frontier areas.²

On 27 November, 1950, Nehru disclosed in the Parliament that "ever since the Chinese revolution...we naturally had to think of what the new China was likely to be. We realised that this revolution was going to be a very big factor in Asia, in the world and in regard to us...Taken also with the fact of China's somewhat inherent tendency to be expansive when she is strong, we realised the danger to India. As the years have gone by, this fact has become more and more apparent and obvious. If any person imagines that we have followed our China policy without realising the consequences, he is mistaken."³

It is amply evident from these statements that Nehru was able to perceive the Chinese threat to India's national security right at the initial stages.

K.M. Panikkar, a close associate of Nehru, writing about his assignment in Communist China as India's first Ambassador there, admitted that he: "knew like everyone else, that with a Communist China, cordial and ultimate relations were out of the question" but that he was optimistic about working out an area of cooperation by eliminating causes of misunderstanding, rivalry, etc.⁴

It is evident that considerable optimism prevailed till the end in spite of the clear understanding and assessment of the Chinese attitude and also recognition of the consequences of a possible Chinese military intervention. The policy makers were certainly not basking in the euphoria of Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai but were hoping that the threat posed by China could be prevented from materialising.

Hence, it is an obliterated view to say that Nehru was unaware of the increasing hostility towards India on the part of China or that he was oblivious of the possibility of war between China and India.

† The trouble started brewing as early as 1950 and it was clearly perceived by India's policy makers. However, they were constrained by the inability of India to maintain a credible defence posture against both China and Pakistan simultaneously. Nehru, therefore, decided to launch a diplomatic offensive and tried to delay the potential conflict to the extent possible. √

India's strategy was to consolidate her relationship with her Himalayan neighbours—Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal—through a network of diplomatic security agreements to counter the possible Chinese aggression and its implications on security in the Himalayan frontiers.

On 5 December, 1950, India concluded a protectorate treaty with Sikkim whereby India assumed responsibilities for Sikkim's defence,⁵ foreign relations and communications. India was further permitted to station troops in the state, build airfields and roads and engage in such things and activities which would give her effective control in a national emergency. This clearly underlined the strategic importance of the area, the principal routes to Tibet all being through Sikkim. On 31 July, 1950, India signed a treaty with Nepal⁶ stipulating, among other things, that it would be obligatory on the parties to inform each other of any serious friction with any neighbouring country that might affect friendly relations between India and Nepal. India had already signed a treaty with Bhutan⁷ on 8 August, 1949, whereby Bhutan⁷ agreed to be guided by India's advice in foreign relations.

India's approach concerning her security in the Himalayan perimeter appears to have been motivated by the view often expressed by Panikkar that like any big power, India had its own area of primary and strategic importance around her, an intrusion into which by any foreign power would be considered by India as a threat to her security.

Nehru's response to the Himalayan challenge posed by China was cautious. He adopted a two-fold policy. He demanded withdrawal of Chinese troops from Indian territory and an end to further intrusion and simultaneously sought a settlement of the issue by conference. The dual policy was in fact an extension of the policy adopted in 1950-51, with the exception that military preparedness on India's part to counter Chinese designs was rather more conspicuous.

Although the policy towards both China and Pakistan was under review, the new posture was consistent with past policies. Steps were taken to strengthen the administration in the strategic border areas and improve communication facilities.⁸

Administrative Steps

Six border districts modelled more or less on the pattern of the political divisions in NEFA, were established in 1960. In early 1960, NEFA Hills and Thensang area were united under a single administration.

Policy Measures

The Indo-Tibet Border Police was placed under the control of the Indian military in 1959 and the constabulary was strengthened with new strength infused into it. In 1960, the government extended the Punjab Security of the State Act, 1954, to include Himachal Pradesh.⁹

The effective countering of the Chinese threat did not call for the acquisition of very sophisticated weapons and equipment. On the other hand, preparedness against the Chinese called for the development of an adequate and effective road network all along the borders.

India had already commenced working on the development of roads and creating a communication network on the insurmountable terrain of Arunachal Pradesh. When the Military Engineering Services seemed unable to undertake the task of constructing roads expeditiously, the Border Roads Development Board (BRDB) was created in 1960 for this purpose.¹⁰ From its inception, upto 1963, the BRDB, carried out the cutting of nearly 1,600 miles of road, developed land communications over 600 miles of roads and surveyed and made a complete reconnaissance of about 2,700 miles for possible later roads.

It is not surprising that the very critics who pointed fingers at Nehru for not being prudent, blamed him for his forward policy, which according to them provoked the Chinese attack.

The Chinese who were constantly moving forward during the years 1959-61 put forth a second claim towards the end of the period.¹¹ This time, claiming more areas than the first and crossing some of the rivers valley of the Indus basin into the trans-Karakoram area. It was at this juncture that a line of check-posts was set up, that fell between the two-claim line, with the intention to monitor and study the Chinese movements.

The so-called forward policy was quite simply patrolling of

the borders necessitated by the situation. One could say that the movement on the part of China was a tightly calculated step dating back to the early Fifties and not in response to, or provoked by, the steps taken by India.

Given the economic burden and with the imperativeness of socio-economic development, India had a reasonably good defence budget which rose from 1.7 per cent in 1949-50 to 1.9 per cent in 1956-57. It started moving upto a little over 2 per cent from 1957-58 onwards. The strength of the Indian armed forces which was 2.8 lakhs in 1949-50 went upto 5.5 lakhs by 1962.

Research and development efforts in defence were initiated and built up from 1958 onwards. Efforts were made to develop an indigenous self-loading rifle, an indigenous mountain-gun, a whole series of wireless equipment and supersonic aircraft.¹² The outline for the entire defence production base that exists in this country was developed during the stewardship of Prime Minister Nehru and Defence Minister Krishna Menon.

Some scholars, academicians and writers argue that the 1962 debacle marks a failure of the non-alignment policy and in support of their contention, they cite the following statement of Pandit Nehru: "The invasion had made India realize that she had been out of touch with reality and had shocked her out of the artificial atmosphere of our own creation."¹³

Some may take recourse to the statement made by Nehru on 8 November, 1962, and argue that the government (and he himself) was not prepared for such an eventuality. On this day, in his speech in the Lok Sabha, Nehru said:

"We had taken it for granted that despite some lapses in recent years we had taken it for granted that this type of aggression was almost a thing of the past. Even the Chinese aggression on our borders during the last five years, bad as it was, and indicative of an expansionist tendency, though it troubled us greatly, hardly led us to the conclusion that China would indulge in a massive invasion of India."¹⁴

Nehru's statement signified that he did not anticipate the massive onslaught by the Chinese. This, however, does not signify a lack of preparedness or shortsightedness to the threat posed by China.

In one of his speeches Nehru observed : "After the Chinese

started nibbling at our territory in Ladakh a couple of years ago, we considered the question of what we should do if they would attack. We expected that they would not attack in such large numbers as to bring about a regular invasion with several divisions, as they did. Nevertheless, we did consider what should be done if they did so."¹⁵

While trying to cultivate the friendliest relations with her, Nehru was also keen to avoid giving China any reasons to think of combat. "The measures actually undertaken by India in the Himalayan region, therefore," writes Kavic, "were diplomatic, administrative and police measures, anything which could be construed by Peking as concrete defence preparation."

Though Nehru was apprehensive of the threat posed by China, he was not in favour of showing signs of alarm. In a speech in the Lok Sabha on 28 August, 1959, Nehru said:

"While I do not wish to take an alarmist view of the situation...We shall naturally be prepared for any eventuality and without fuss or showing, keep vigilant."¹⁶

While evaluating India's China policy one should note that the major plank of India's policy lay in the foreign policy posture of *Panchsheela* or peaceful coexistence. It was not just a matter of believing that China would abide by the Five Principles which she had accepted. The idea was to create an environment in which China would find it difficult to break her word. Nehru, in fact, never dispelled from his mind the possible threat posed by China. Even after having inaugurated jointly with Chou En-Lai, the era of Sino-Indian brotherhood in the summer of 1954, Nehru advised his colleagues to avoid complacency because in "international affairs one can never be dead certain and the friends of today might be the enemies of tomorrow."

India's China policy was framed on the basis of the five principles of coexistence viz. *Panchsheela*. Neither the military debacle of 1962 nor the statement of Nehru signify the collapse of India's non-alignment policy. It signified only the failure of India's China policy in 1962. India, by laying emphasis on peaceful settlement of disputes believed that the confrontation with China could be averted by peaceful means. Though the *Panchsheela* principles failed in 1962 with regard to China, the Indian government and Nehru did not abandon their faith in the peaceful settlement of disputes.

In spite of the failure of India's China policy in 1962, the Indian government continued to have faith in peaceful means for resolving conflicts. In the aftermath of the conflict in 1962, the relations remained frozen until 1968.

A new phase in Sino-Indian relations began on 1 January, 1969, when Mrs. Indira Gandhi, addressing a Press conference, indicated the desire to initiate a dialogue with China. India's effort at normalisation was overtaken by the turmoil during the Bangladesh crisis. Ambassadorial level relations were resumed in 1976. Since the restoration of relations between the two countries, there has been a certain relaxation in tension between the two countries.

When India and China initiated official level talks on the border issue in December 1981, the political climate within China was vastly different from that of the previous two decades which were marked by an abrupt turn in national policies. On 4 August, 1983, India's Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao, informed the Lok Sabha that as part of the package, China was willing to agree to the status quo in the eastern sector in exchange for India's agreement to status quo in the western sector.¹⁷ India insisted that a solution had to be found beyond the package. India repeatedly rejected the compromise solution offered by the post-Mao leadership.

By the late Eighties, the need to streamline the relationship was felt in India. The setback in the process of normalisation prompted the political leadership to assume a leading role in formulating new parameters to solve the border problem within the given constraints.

It may be recalled that in 1960 Chou En-lai had offered to settle the dispute by extending the watershed principle (on which the McMahon Line was based) to the Karakoram range in Ladakh which was unacceptable to India on the ground that the Kuenlun range and not the Karakoram should be deemed to be the dividing line.¹⁸ This seeming inflexibility was aptly described by another top bureaucrat in charge of India's foreign affairs in the sensitive period 1985/86 as an "irreversible force meeting an immovable object."¹⁹ In the light of the uncertain situation of 1987 and past inadequacies of approach, the need to review the policy was felt so that their rectification within a realistic time-frame could be planned.

Apparently, in anticipation of some sort of breakthrough, Rajiv

Gandhi had discussed the long-felt need to evolve a national consensus. The nation which by and large remained far from tolerant about freezing the status quo came to grips with the reality that the Chinese would not concede the McMahon line for nothing, that there was genuine confusion about the location of some areas and peace could not be ensured on a militarised border.²⁰ Slowly, opinion veered round to the viability of elevating the level of involvement in the dialogue and accelerating the scope of bilateral relations. In its November 1988 meeting, the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) adopted a resolution urging the government to reach a negotiated settlement based on "mutual interest and mutual benefit"²¹ acceptable to the peoples of both countries.

It was against this background, that one has to assess the outcome of Li Peng's visit and Sino-Indian relations. Li Peng's visit was not expected to lead to a breakthrough in the efforts to resolve the contentious border problem. The visit has succeeded in lending once again, the vitally necessary political support to the moves to settle the issue. It would be pertinent to have a brief recapitulation on the issue.

There has been a significant change in the Indian negotiating position on the border. China insisted on an overall settlement. India at the one stage insisted on a sector-wise settlement. Before Rajiv's visit, China had insisted that India should make some adjustments and concessions in the eastern sector to enable China to make a corresponding adjustment and concession in the western sector.

Rajiv Gandhi, during his visit China in 1988, chose to highlight the importance of his venture as a touchstone for building friendly relations with China. The border issue, did come up then for review. Li Peng, in his banquet speech, dealt with the boundary question by restating the Chinese position of seeking a fair and reasonable settlement in a spirit of mutual understanding and mutual accommodation.²² In reply, the then Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, observed that the boundary question needed an enduring solution based on understanding of each other's point of view which will be in our mutual interest and to the benefit of both our people.²³ Rajiv Gandhi stressed the need for peace and tranquillity on the border area and added that the border issue must be settled within a realistic time-frame. India is prepared to proceed accordingly, he announced. From the Indian side, the framework

and the parameters of a fresh approach to the dispute were publicly conveyed through the above formulation. The Indian initiative had finally surfaced indicating a major shift from its earlier position in a number of ways in order to work out an agreement with the Chinese. Apparently, India had decided to reconcile the conflicting demands on an equitable basis. The Chinese, in turn, gave up their insistence on India pulling back its troops from positions beyond the line of actual control as a precondition to agreeing on the modalities of settlement.²⁴

India, in 1990, proposed that a settlement should not legitimise the gains of armed intervention and should be based on logical and administrative consideration.²⁵ China, in 1991, proposed that the two sides should work out a common set of guidelines that satisfy the Chinese and the Indian search of a just and reasonable solution.²⁶ The Karakoram watershed would support the Chinese claim in the central and western sectors. Logistical consideration would mean that India accept the highway to China and administrative consideration would mean that China do likewise with the case of Arunachal Pradesh. A settlement based on delegitimising the gains of armed intervention could mean India giving up a certain position in the eastern sector and the Chinese doing the same in the west.

Li Peng, in an interview before his visit to India, made two points on the border issue: (i) given sincerity and a spirit of accommodation on both sides, the border issue can be solved; (ii) meanwhile, both sides should stick to the line of actual control.²⁷

During the visit, each side summed up its known position. India did not mention the geographical factor or the watershed principle of a mountainous terrain. Mutual understanding and mutual accommodation was China's standard formulation showing its preference for give and take for concessions by India in the west and China in the east.

Though the two sides were not close to a solution of the substantive problem, there was a consensus on a related issue i.e. a new sense of urgency for a settlement and the resolve to maintain peace along the border.²⁸

As for the tangible result of the visit on the border, one could say the significant move was that the issue was discussed at length between the Prime Ministers of India and China, who for the first

time agreed to take personal interest to ensure that the wheels of the Joint Group move faster. The Joint Working Group (JWG) was set up in 1988 to work out the modalities to resolve all disputes. The JWG is entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining peace and tranquillity on the border. It met in July 1989, August 1990 and May 1991.

The Prime Minister's call to the JWG to redouble their efforts to find a reasonable solution to the border question is interpreted as a mandate.²⁹ It is, therefore, highly significant that the JWG on the border may have been given new political directions. It is slated to meet this year. According to reporters, the two leaders of the JWG (the Indian Foreign Secretary and the Chinese Vice -Minister) will have the power to review and initiate proposals for solving the border issue. This is a big step forward and one that can be taken only after a political decision has been reached.

Unlike in 1988, no time-frame has been set for resolving the most complex issue. To do so would be as unrealistic as it was in 1988. But the fact that the border trade agreement is valid only for two years may be taken as a clue. It suggests that there could be a two-year operational time-frame for considering any proposal in all its details and its acceptability to both sides.³⁰

Though both sides realise the importance and urgency to resolve the border question, neither would like the border issue to impede the expansion of cooperation in different areas. This is a positive attitude reflective of the development of a mature relationship. Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao indicated the serious commitment of his government to finding a peaceful resolution to the outstanding question. Indeed, he made what amounted to a firm promise to future Indian generations to do so.

The absence of any reference to the Pakistani interference in Kashmir in the joint communique has created a furore in the country. The joint communique on Kashmir and the nuclear issue, the two most serious issues of contention between India and Pakistan, does not mean that the Prime Minister did not discuss them. The fact is that the Indian concern on this score was conveyed in no uncertain terms.

The Foreign Minister of China told Indian Foreign Minister Solanki that Beijing wanted the Kashmir issue to be settled by India and Pakistan through bilateral negotiations and peacefully

within the framework of the Simla Agreement and the UN resolution.³¹ Besides, Chinese Ambassador Chen Ruishung, during his Press conference omitted any reference to the United Nations, implying that China wanted India and Pakistan to settle the Kashmir issue peacefully through bilateral negotiations in accordance with the Simla Agreement.³²

India has all along opposed any reference to Kashmir in any official communique with any country since it holds Kashmir to be an integral part of India and any such reference to Kashmir could be construed as acquiescence to the moves to internationalise the issue.

Looking back to the late Fifties and Sixties one may discern that Sino-Pakistani collusion vis-s-vis India was an outcome of Sino-Indian hostility on the border issue. Once the Sino-Indian relations show improvement, one could presume that Sino-Pakistani links would not be directed against India. It would, however, be immature to expect that improvement in Sino-Indian relations should entail an abandonment by China of its commitments in its relations with other countries, including Pakistan, which may be a matter of concern to India.

Li Peng ended his visit on the reassuring note that China, a member of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) will not be exporting arms that might disturb existing military balances in the regions of the world. The Chinese claim that in addition to this, they also observe two other guidelines for their arms exports: Chinese arms are not to be exported to regions or countries engaged in conflict or war and Chinese arms supplies must not generate an arms race. If these three principles are scrupulously observed by China, India will have little to worry about Beijing's transfer of arms to Pakistan.³³

When Defence Minister Pawar raised the issue of the Indian armed forces facing problems because of Pakistan-trained ultras who possessed Chinese arms, Li Peng said the Chinese do not intend to fuel an arms race or cause any escalation or contribute to instability in the region.³⁴

The visiting Chinese delegation signed three agreements aimed at normalising relations. One among them was to reopen Consulates in Bombay and Shanghai.³⁵ The second was to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) allowing border trade between the two

countries. This is a significant step considering the hardship the people living in the border areas face because of the hostile terrain. Opening of a post at Kalimpong would facilitate more trade. The third relates to bilateral cooperation in the field of space and aeronautics among others.³⁶

It is through the process of building of comprehensive relations in trade, culture and personnel exchange that the peace dividend will begin to show.

Li Peng's visit witnessed no dramatic breakthrough in the resolution of bilateral problems nor was it expected to do so; for the ice was broken by Rajiv's trip and thereafter, it was a question of evolving further bricks on the foundation laid then. This visit being the second step can only be considered as having contributed the more solid brick to the edifice.

Rajiv's visit to Beijing in 1988 became a landmark, and the Chinese recognised it is a watershed of a new relationship with India. Li Peng's visit carried the process further to give India-China relations a global dimension.

The discussions between the leaders of the two countries have paved the way for closer Chinese interaction in the world fora including the UN. China looks to India's support in its desire to be associated with the Non-Aligned Movement and Group-15. Beijing's concern is to evolve a working economic relationship and hence the urge to be equated with the developing world. In this sense, Li Peng's visit does signify a turning point in the chequered history of Sino-Indian relations.

NOTES

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4. See A.R. Rana, *The Imperatives of Non-alignment: A Conceptual Study of India's Foreign Policy Strategy in the Nehru Period*, (Macmillan, New Delhi, 1971) p. 65.
5. *Foreign Policy of India: Text of Documents*, New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, December 1959, pp.37-40.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-33.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-19.
8. Kavic Lorne, *India's Quest for Security: Defence Policies 1947-65*, (EBD Publication, Dehradun, 1967) p. 91.

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11. K. Subramanyam, "Nehru and India-China conflict of 1962", in B.R. Nanda (ed.), *Indian Foreign Policy: The Nehru Years*, (Vikas, Delhi, 1976).
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13. Nehru's statement quoted in Van E. Ekelen, *India's Foreign Policy and the Border Dispute with China*, (Martinus Nijhoff, Hague 1964) p. 185.
14. *Lok Sabha Debates*, Vol. IX 8-20 November, 1962, cols. 153-54.
15. *Jawaharlal Nehru Speeches 1957-63*, Vol. IV, Delhi, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Publication Division, 1964, pp. 237-38.
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17. *Lok Sabha Debates*, Vol. XXXIX, 1983, cols. 29-30.
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19. See A.P. Venkateswaran's interview to *Frontline*, 16-29 May, 1989.
20. Karki Hussain, n. 18, p. 129.
21. Ibid.
22. *Times of India*, 20 December, 1988.
23. Ibid.
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25. Manoj Joshi, "Falling hurdles: Towards a solution to the border problem" *Frontline*, 3 January, 1992.
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29. Mira Sinha Bhattacharjee, "For a new future: Little froth, some substance", *Frontline*, 3 January, 1991.
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32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. See *Business and Political Observer*, 17 December, 1991.
35. See *Sunday*, 22-28 December, 1991, p. 13.
36. Ibid.