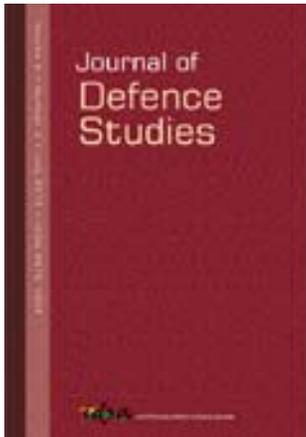


# Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg  
Delhi Cantonment, New Delhi-110010



## Journal of Defence Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.idsa.in/journalofdefencestudies>

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Bhavna Tripathy

To cite this article: Bhavna Tripathy (2012): The Tibetan Uprising and Indian Opinion of the Chinese, Journal of Defence Studies, Vol-6, Issue-4, pp- 27-54

URL: [http://www.idsa.in/jds/6\\_4\\_2012\\_TheTibetanUprisingandIndianOpinionoftheChinese\\_BhavnaTripathy](http://www.idsa.in/jds/6_4_2012_TheTibetanUprisingandIndianOpinionoftheChinese_BhavnaTripathy)

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# The Tibetan Uprising and Indian Opinion of the Chinese<sup>1</sup>

## An Analysis of the 'Tibet Factor' in Sino-Indian Relations, 1947–59

*Bhavna Tripathy\**

*China's cruel repression of the revolt which broke out on 10 March 1959 in Lhasa provoked sharp reactions in India. The mood of agitation that captured the country found expression in the form of a flood of articles, editorials and vivid political caricatures in national newspapers, noted for creating a powerful case in support of the Tibetans and forcefully condemning the Chinese for their imperialistic adventures in Tibet. By engaging with articles published in two Indian national dailies, *The Hindu* and *Hindustan Times*, and other relevant bilateral notes, exchanges and agreements, the article attempts to capture public opinion in India in the wake of the Tibetan revolt, primarily working in the direction of bringing out its distinct difference from Nehru's approach to the question of Tibet. Finer aspects of the disharmony between views held by Nehru and the Indian public on Chinese activities in Tibet are studied in the broader context of Nehru's highly personalized China policy.*

### INTRODUCTION

The 1959 Tibetan revolt is one of the most important landmarks in the realm of Sino-Indian relations, not only for the manner in which it marred long-term relations between the two Asian giants but also the intensity and rapidity with which it severed the policy of friendship between the two nations. The event moulded relations in a way that the Tibet

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\* The author is a Project Assistant with the IDSA-DRDO ST2050 Project at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

ISSN 0976-1004 print

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*Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4, October 2012, pp. 27–54



factor became the lens through which each country perceived the foreign policy and national character of the other. China's cruel repression of the revolt which broke out on 10 March 1959 in Lhasa provoked sharp reactions in India. The mood of agitation that captured the country found expression in the form of polemic articles and editorials in national newspapers, noted for creating a powerful case in support of the Tibetans and forcefully condemning the Chinese for their imperialistic adventures in Tibet.

The broader aspect of China–India–Tibet relations has benefited from extensive scholarly scrutiny. However, as is typical with the historiography of wars, the concentration in most cases has been 'on the question of which nation bears responsibility and thus the implicit moral onus for initiating the war'.<sup>2</sup> The historiography of the Tibet factor in Sino-Indian relations has, so far, mostly concentrated on two broad areas of classical favourites: first, the legitimacy of Chinese ownership of Tibet and the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's policy in this context; and second, the run up to the 1962 war and China's territorial ambitions. For an aspect which has been accredited with causing irreparable damage to Sino-Indian relations, public opinion in India vis-à-vis Chinese actions in Tibet is a distressfully under-represented theme in the existing body of literature, often buried under the vicious circle of fixing blames. Public opinion and its role in the larger domain of Sino-Indian relations have been largely reduced to an allusion or a passing reference in the existing body of literature.

What is remarkable about analysing the Tibetan uprising and the public sentiments it evoked in India is the ability of national emotions to critically question some of Nehru's previous foreign policy decisions in connection with Tibet, and point an accusing finger at the cornerstone of Nehru's foreign policy: *Hindi–Chini bhai-bhai*.<sup>3</sup> In many ways, Indian public opinion impressed upon Nehru that there is something fundamentally erroneous in the government's perception of China as a friend. There is no denying that a study of public opinion on Tibet without an analysis of Nehru's China policy is incomplete. Nehru carries an awkward legacy of lack of foresightedness and naivety in dealing with the Chinese, and responsibility for the loss of Tibetan independence. Ajay Agrawal makes the double accusation popularly associated with Nehru when he says that India 'developed cold feet and not only did they not help Tibet, but behaved like an agent of the Chinese'<sup>4</sup> and 'by accepting Tibet as part of China, India was foolish enough to give

[China] legitimacy to be on India's border for the first time in history and allow it to grab areas which India claimed as its own'.<sup>5</sup> While such a point of view, based on India playing a meek and subservient role before the Chinese, is echoed by much of the existing literature, others like Frank Moraes have suggested that Nehru principally followed a policy of 'appeasing China while respecting Tibetan autonomy'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, thoughts ranging from a calculative Nehru who 'allowed China to grab Tibet and also did whatever he could to befriend China'<sup>7</sup> to an old and confused Nehru who failed to be forewarned about 'Chinese irredentism and Communist imperialism'<sup>8</sup> pervade the literature. In short, Nehru bungled over Tibet.

The article intends to undertake a novel approach of analysing events through Nehru's actions and decisions in response to what was happening in Tibet. In this case, Nehru's foreign policy manoeuvres become a prism for examining Indian postures vis-à-vis Tibet and China. It is of paramount importance to stress that an understanding of the crucial role played by Nehru in the India–China–Tibet triangle is the linchpin to further understand what this article has termed as the 'policy of creation of parallel histories', a deliberate attempt by Nehru to steer the course of Sino-Indian relations away from developments in Tibet. Attempts will be geared towards unravelling the strategic device behind this policy of keeping the Tibet factor away from the purview of Sino-Indian relations. While Nehru is either deeply eulogized or strongly criticized for his China policy, scholarly attempts dedicated towards spelling out his policy in explicit terms are lacking. The article seeks to fill this gap by giving a personality to Nehru's foreign policy approach towards Tibet and China.

By closely studying the dynamics of Indian public opinion in the next section and Nehru's approach to the entire question in the following two sections, the article seeks to establish a clear meeting point of two distinct sentiments voiced by the public and the leader of the same nation. Analysing finer aspects of the divergent views held by Nehru and the Indian public is the purpose of the section after that. The period under study is a crowded space and the event being examined extensively interacted with conditions prevalent in the broader international space. However, on the whole, the article has chosen to answer two questions in substantially clear terms. What was the Indian perception of the Chinese in the wake of the Tibetan revolt? How and why was it different from Nehru's approach to the entire question? For the purpose of research, the

article engages with relevant bilateral notes, exchanges, agreements and Indian national newspapers.

#### IMMEDIATE REACTIONS IN INDIA

This section aims at assessing the mood of the nation in the face of the 1959 Tibetan uprising. For this purpose, the article engages with articles published in two national dailies, *The Hindu* and *Hindustan Times*.<sup>9</sup> News of disturbances in Tibet first reached India through the Bhutanese head of state, Jigmi Dorji Wangchuck, who noted on his visit to New Delhi that 'trouble was brewing in Eastern Tibet, but it was difficult to estimate its dimensions and the precise aims'.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, travellers and traders from Tibet, arriving at Kalimpong,<sup>11</sup> reported that a situation with explosive possibilities was developing in Lhasa as people openly demonstrated against the Chinese authorities, adding to the existing atmosphere of tension and anxiety.<sup>12</sup> Even before the Government of India confirmed reports of the revolt in Tibet and broadly saw it as 'more a clash of wills than, at present, a clash of arms',<sup>13</sup> there were repeated appeals from the public for the Chinese to treat the Tibetans gently.<sup>14</sup> There was large-scale speculation about the subservient role the peace-loving Tibetans were being forced to play under the Chinese who interfered with Tibetan autonomy and systematically proceeded to uproot Tibet from its age-old traditions.<sup>15</sup>

While the Indian public opinion was adequately sympathetic towards the Tibetans, it was neither excessively charged nor hypersensitive to the happenings in Tibet at this stage. It strongly appears as if the national mood, owing to the immense prestige of Nehru, was waiting for a sense of direction, an explanation from him about the reasons for sudden deterioration of conditions in Tibet. In this context, Nehru's 17 March Lok Sabha<sup>16</sup> speech was of immense strategic importance as it had the potential to wield great influence in leading public opinion in one particular direction or the other. However, Nehru clearly failed to satisfy the public as he demonstrated his unwillingness to speak about the issue and dismissed the entire affair as 'rather embarrassing to discuss events happening in a neighbouring country'.<sup>17</sup> It can be observed that such an account by Nehru, underlined by the highly obscure quality of his statements such as 'there have been difficulties and conflicts.... I do not know that it will help at all for me to go into the details',<sup>18</sup> added a certain amount of confusion to the already anxious public opinion.

Subsequently, there was a marked shift in public appeals that attempted to leverage India's good relations with China to influence Chinese actions in Tibet. The previous sentiments of friendship and respect<sup>19</sup> were replaced by a lingering doubt over Chinese manoeuvres in Tibet:

The Dalai Lama continues to enjoy the unquestioned support and loyalty of the Tibetans and a peaceful solution is possible only if the Chinese came to terms with him. Some years ago, when the Dalai Lama visited India...the Chinese Premier, Chou En-lai,<sup>20</sup> who was in Delhi at that time, handled the situation tactfully and the Dalai Lama returned home.<sup>21</sup>

It can be seen that Nehru's hesitation to give a solid account of events or in the event of incomplete knowledge, a candid account in the least, made Indian public opinion, already wary of Chinese activities in Tibet, immediately suspicious of Chinese intentions. The reference to Dalai Lama's hesitation to return to Lhasa in 1956 shows that the public was not so certain about Chinese activities in Tibet and was inclined to believe that Zhou Enlai was reneging on his promises made to Tibet in 1951. It is clear as to which view the Indian public subscribed to at this juncture.

Nehru's statement in the Lok Sabha on 23 March 1959 that 'it appears that various rumours in regard to the Dalai Lama caused excitement in Lhasa',<sup>22</sup> towards giving 'fuller information'<sup>23</sup> to the country about the fighting between the Chinese and the Tibetans, showcased his tight-lipped policy against condemning the Chinese and did not seem to carry a lot of weight with the public. This fact is demonstrated by a news piece carried by *The Hindu* two days before Nehru's official statement which placed the blame with a strange and suspicious demand by the Chinese that the Dalai Lama should report to the Chinese authority in Lhasa alone without his bodyguards.<sup>24</sup> Though Chinese authority had always faced stiff resistance in Tibet, demonstrations in Lhasa followed after news of this demand leaked out, and Tibetans anxious about Chinese motives behind such a strange request surrounded the Potala Palace<sup>25</sup> and prevented the Dalai Lama from leaving.<sup>26</sup> Nehru, perhaps, deliberately maintained a confused Indian attitude vis-à-vis Tibet, for destabilizing the situation by interfering in the internal affairs of a friendly country<sup>27</sup> seemed like a weak reason to prevent him from allowing the Tibetan issue to be discussed in the Parliament. Moreover, the Parliament members had made the extent of their concern and uncertainty explicitly clear

by bringing into question the legality of China's suzerainty over Tibet<sup>28</sup> and demanding a response from the Indian government on the issue of whether communist terror would prevent India from giving asylum to Tibetan refugees.<sup>29</sup>

Public opinion in the country could be seen to have escalated to a feverish pitch almost immediately after news of disturbances in Tibet reached India due to the long tradition of cultural and religious links between India and Tibet. There was a general understanding that Tibetan culture shared a spiritual commonality with India due to the Buddhist connection.<sup>30</sup> Not only were Tibetans viewed as neighbours by Indians, but there also existed a strong emotional bond which made it quite disturbing for Indians to stay quiet over the happenings in Tibet. This matter was further complicated by the fact that Tibetans, in turn, viewed India as a friendly nation to turn to in times of need. That an element of natural trust ran between Tibetans and Indians due to cultural ties was demonstrated by the fact that a few days after the revolt broke out, many Tibetans organized a meeting in the Town Hall in Kalimpong where a resolution was passed urging the Government of India to intervene in the Tibetan situation.<sup>31</sup> The resolution further stated that the Tibetans felt they were most closely linked with Indians than anybody else and serious repercussions would follow in case India decided against immediate intervention.<sup>32</sup> In a memorandum to Nehru, a Tibetan delegation headed by Mr Lukhangwa, former Tibetan Premier, sought India's sponsorship in helping the Tibetans represent their case in the United Nations (UN) condemning the Chinese.<sup>33</sup> On the other side of the Himalayas, Buddhists from all over India, Ladakh, Ceylon, Burma and Mongolia requested the Government of India to rescue the Tibetans from the predicament unleashed by the Chinese. The Mahabodhi Society, the largest society of Buddhist consciousness in India, further appealed to the government not to view the Tibetan affair as an internal matter of China.<sup>34</sup>

Though the country was pulsating with calls for an admission of greater solidarity towards Tibet by the government and formal recognition that 'the revolt that has broken out in Tibet is a genuine people's revolt against the policy of the Communist rulers of China to destroy the autonomy of that country and impose an alien way of life on its people',<sup>35</sup> Nehru found it plausible to detach himself from the massive outpour of sentiments, turned his back on the natural affinity between Tibetans and Indians and declared: 'We talk about Tibet, and we have friendly relations with the people of Tibet, and we want them to progress in freedom and all that. At

the same time, it is important for us to have friendly relations with this great country China.<sup>36</sup>

It can therefore be seen that Nehru, in this case, choosing to remain silent over an issue the country had almost completely personalized, was not the genuine representative of national aspirations. At this point, it is important to ask the question: how solid was the degree of national cohesiveness and public confidence backing the popular policy of Hindi–Chini bhai-bhai that the Indian public were quick to tag Chinese actions in Tibet as the ‘beginning of an expansionist policy’?<sup>37</sup> The mood of the public clearly hinted at a policy manufactured solely at the government level.

Suspicion of the Chinese was central in Indian minds. However, while Indian assessment of Chinese activities in Tibet was critical, it cannot be dismissed as irrational and propagandist as it first sought the counsel of Nehru. For example, Nehru was asked in a press conference whether ‘the Government of India [has] any information that China has started socialisation of schools in Tibet?’<sup>38</sup> To this, Nehru supplied a rather vague reply:

‘Well, I do not know now, but my information was that their first effort... was to establish many schools there—no question of socialisation; but later they closed many of those schools... and rather toned down their activities there. I cannot say what is happening now.’<sup>39</sup>

It is, however, not to say that the prime minister should be accused of not having complete information. Nehru stands to be excused in case he could not provide full and complete information sought by his countrymen. However, the country in this case was not any country; it was China, India’s partner in spearheading the ‘five principles of peaceful coexistence’<sup>40</sup> and the country to which India made several ‘concessions in 1954 of various political and commercial rights in Tibet’.<sup>41</sup> It would logically have added to the discomfiture of the public, already sceptical of the Chinese, if their prime minister demonstrated his uncertainty about happenings in Tibet; on being questioned about the correctness of Chinese claim of sovereignty over Tibet as against its suzerainty, the prime minister exhibited confusion and replied that ‘I am afraid it requires a jurist to do that’,<sup>42</sup> but maintained that the Parliament should not discuss Tibet even as the public strongly called for a scrutiny of the ‘professions and practice of the Chinese’.<sup>43</sup>

Public opinion, in the absence of an official government-level condemnation of the Chinese, can be seen as the method resorted to by the Indians to persuade the Chinese, perhaps in the hope that owing to Sino-Indian friendship 'the Chinese would give due consideration to the widespread feelings of dismay and indignation felt in India',<sup>44</sup> and understand that neither has 'force succeeded in bringing about ideological conversion of the Tibetans even in ten long years'<sup>45</sup> nor will it now. While Nehru continued to supply politically correct answers, and in the process came dangerously very near to treading the line beyond which silence amounts to tacit agreement, the public realized that 'the only weapon India possesses is public opinion'.<sup>46</sup>

At the same time, it is an extremely dangerous task to criticize Nehru. Although his policies have been severely lambasted in scholarly debates, especially centred on his handling of the Chinese situation, he commands immense respect as the first Prime Minister of a fledgling India. Why was Nehru so palpably removed from national aspirations to openly denounce the Chinese? A historical analysis aimed at collecting evidence to effectively answer this question is the purpose of the next section.

#### NEHRU'S STRATEGY: CREATION OF PARALLEL HISTORIES

Though a vast amount of research exists in the sphere of Nehruvian Chinese and Tibetan foreign policy, an overarching approach to understand Nehru's perception of the Chinese, which in turn affected his foreign policy decisions, is fairly unexplored. This section has worked in the direction of developing a foreign policy strategy for Nehru, called the 'policy of creation of parallel histories', which emphasizes that Nehru understood Chinese ambitions in Tibet and foresaw the repercussions of having China at India's doors. Nehru's stand vis-à-vis Chinese claim over Tibet and his subsequent China policy, including the signing of the *Panchsheel* Agreement, were part of a broader strategy engineered to strategically distance India away from Tibet in Chinese imagination. Simply put, Chinese designs in Tibet would not interfere with India's efforts to unilaterally accept the McMahon Line. According to Nehru's plan, they were parallel histories, never meant to converge, and in the process, Nehru would brush the issue of the unresolved border under the rug. Seen in this light, Nehru's foreign policy decisions reflect a keen awareness of the Chinese and the attempt,

from the start, not to entangle the Sino-Indian identity with the fate of Tibet.

The official condemnation of the Chinese in a Government of India note dated 26 October 1950 is usually recognized<sup>47</sup> as the starting point of India's policy towards Tibet. This note, addressed to the Foreign Minister of China, states that: 'In the present context of world events, the invasion of Chinese troops in Tibet cannot but be regarded as deplorable and in the considered judgement of the Indian Government, not in the interest of China or of peace.'<sup>48</sup> The unequivocal and unhesitant tone employed in accusing China of invading Tibet symbolizes a clear and strong policy of treating Tibet as an independent country. This policy was echoed by a telegram from the Government of India to the Tibetan government soon after independence. The tone of address used in the telegram is important as by '[putting] the Government of India and Government of Tibet on an equal footing',<sup>49</sup> it asserts the policy of refusing to treat Tibet as an integral part of China: 'The Government of India would be glad to have an assurance that it is the intention of the Tibetan government to continue relations on the existing basis until new arrangements are reached that either party may wish to take up.'<sup>50</sup>

Mehrotra has rightly argued about the 'political import of this message'.<sup>51</sup> One thing is clear: India viewed Tibet as a separate entity from the Chinese in 1947. However transparent and clear the policy of the Indian government towards Tibet might seem at this juncture, let us look at another representation made by the Government of India to the Government of China on 13 August 1950, before the formal condemnation of the Chinese in the 26 October note: 'The Government of India represented to the Government of China that they were concerned about the possibility of unsettled conditions across the border. They, therefore, strongly urged that Sino-Tibetan relations should be adjusted through peaceful negotiations.'<sup>52</sup>

It is clear that the possibility of a Chinese claim over Tibet was prominent in Indian minds. However, in order to perceive the full import of this representation and to understand the difficult character of the unresolved borders that India inherited from the British, it is important to briefly turn attention to the Simla Conference held in the autumn of 1913. The conference resulted in drawing of a Convention between Great Britain, China and Tibet in 1914, which the Chinese government refused to ratify due to a Sino-Tibetan 'controversy regarding the precise

alignments to be adopted for Inner and Outer Tibet'.<sup>53</sup> Thus, they deprived themselves of the benefits that could have potentially accrued to them under the Convention, including the recognition guaranteed by Article 2 of the Convention 'that Tibet is under the suzerainty of China'.<sup>54</sup> In the event of Chinese repudiation of the Convention, the British plenipotentiary, Sir Arthur Henry McMahon, hammered out an Indo-Tibetan border in the eastern sector that was neither negotiated with the Chinese nor recognized by them. This came to be known as the McMahon Line.

Alastair Lamb, an authority on the Sino-Indian border issue, maintains that as the McMahon Line was 'never discussed by the Chinese at the conference...they maintained that the negotiating of the McMahon Line was a British trick'.<sup>55</sup> Thus, for the Chinese, the Indo-Tibetan boundary was 'illegal'<sup>56</sup> and 'Tibet had no international identity, her independence was shadowy and tenuous'.<sup>57</sup> China would impose its authority on Tibet when it had a strong central government, while at other times, Tibet might find itself functioning as a wholly independent territory. Such was China's understanding, and this was known to Nehru. The illegality of the McMahon Line, as perceived by the Chinese, was rudely thrown into limelight when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was proclaimed on 1 October 1949. Nehru's subsequent decisions are a crystal clear reflection of his deep understanding of the repercussions of a strong China.

Seen in this light, the Indian representation to China is of a rather curious nature as, although India clearly states its concerns about the means which China might use in order to settle its unresolved issues with Tibet, it however maintains a conspicuous silence over the legitimacy of the McMahon Line as perceived by China. Of even more significance is the memorandum delivered by the Indian Ambassador to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Peking on 21 October 1950 which, in the context of Chinese military action in Tibet, states:

...[that] when the international situation is so delicate, any move that is likely to be interpreted as a disturbance of peace may prejudice the position of China in the eyes of the world. The Government of India's firm conviction is...recognition of the position of the People's Republic of China, and its association with the work of the United Nations. They feel that an incautious move at the present time even in a matter which is within its own sphere will be used by those

who are unfriendly to China to prejudice China's case in the United Nations.<sup>58</sup>

Too many elements in this memorandum jump out as extremely contradictory and confusing when compared with India's stand on Tibet at the time of Indian independence in 1947. It is extremely surprising that far from expressing the view that India does not consider Tibet an integral part of China and that during Indian independence, 'Tibet's independence was a fact, Chinese suzerainty over it fiction',<sup>59</sup> India seems to be solely absorbed in the issue of China's eventual entry into the UN. What happened between 1947 and 1950 to bring about such a drastic shift in India's policy towards Tibet that not only did it cease to exist on an equal footing with India, but was also referred to as being 'a matter which is within its [China's] own sphere'?<sup>60</sup>

One does not have to look far for the answer. India's Tibet policy was not only influenced but it drastically changed its shape after the proclamation of the PRC. It was soon after this historical event that Nehru revised India's Tibet policy and adopted his strategy of keeping the issue of Tibet as far away from the fate of Sino-Indian relations as possible; parallel histories which will never cross paths. What was the logic behind this strategy of Nehru's? Panikkar<sup>61</sup> has dropped significant hints in his memoir towards answering this question. Panikkar writes:

...with a communist China cordial and intimate relations were out of the question, but I was fairly optimistic about working out an area of co-operation by eliminating causes of misunderstanding, rivalry, etc. The only area where our interests overlapped was in Tibet, and knowing [that]...I had...come to the conclusion that the British policy of looking upon Tibet as an area in which we had special political interests could not be maintained.<sup>62</sup>

Further, Panikkar also discusses that the Chinese recognized India as a friendly nation but, because of political and ideological differences, imagined that India belongs to the enemy camp.<sup>63</sup> That Panikkar's impression of the Chinese was transferred onto Nehru has been hinted at by Sarvepalli Gopal who notes that Nehru decided in 1950–51 not to pressurize China on Tibet.<sup>64</sup> It can therefore be observed that Nehru followed a conscious policy of non-interference in the Chinese invasion of Tibet, a step which was construed as the government's 'lack of interest in their small and weak neighbour which was invaded by China'.<sup>65</sup>

What was the long-term purpose of Nehru's policy? Freed from an unpleasant entanglement over Tibet with China, Nehru had other plans for India. He aimed to kill two birds with the same stone. First, Nehru believed that by following a policy of increasing cooperation between India and China, especially in the realm of international affairs, the two giants of Asia will set an example of a 'strong pillar for peace in Asia and the world'.<sup>66</sup> This was consistent with a foreign policy ambition dearly close to Nehru's heart: to carve out a niche for India 'in this growing structure of a World Order',<sup>67</sup> while '[keeping] apart from big blocs of nations—rival blocs'.<sup>68</sup> Most importantly, it can be said that Nehru perhaps believed that caught up in the fervour of Asian resurgence, PRC will eventually let go of the pending issue of the McMahon Line. Thus, Nehru did not deliberately sacrifice Tibet to befriend China; he merely set it aside in order to attend to India's need to attach itself to a partner from which she can derive 'weight and influence'<sup>69</sup> on the international stage. Claude Arpi suggests that Nehru was on to the project of creating a third space and was 'dreaming about a brotherhood... a kind of third bloc balancing the Western and the communist bloc'.<sup>70</sup> Nehru's dual expectation from India's friendship with China was voiced in his note to Madame Sun Yat-sen, Vice Chairman of the Central People's Government Council:

Our two great countries have played important roles throughout the course of history, and I have no doubt that in the future they will also have to face great responsibilities. During this long past of thousands of years, it is a curious and significant fact that these two great and dynamic countries have never come into violent conflict with each other.<sup>71</sup>

While the note is quite emphatic about the greatness of both the countries, there is a gentle stress on the fact that the greatness can be enhanced if the two countries work together and in case, like in the past, future conflicts are avoided, clearly referring to the only possible hurdle that might come in the way of establishing strong Sino-Indian relations—territorial disputes arising from China's repudiation of the McMahon Line. Thus, Nehru laid down the rudiments of a twofold strategy for conducting Sino-Indian relations: cultivation of friendly relations with the Chinese, while hoping that closer relations will persuade China to approve the McMahon Line. For Nehru, this was possible only in the absence of the Tibet factor between India and China.

Nehru consistently followed this policy in his interactions with China. India dropped the Tibetan issue in the UN. The slew of notes being exchanged between India and China on the situation in Tibet stopped on 16 November 1950, and India's Tibet policy took the form of shedding the vestiges of British imperialism in Tibet<sup>72</sup> based on the realization that 'unless India acquiesced in this process of liberation, it would be considered to be a country hostile to China'.<sup>73</sup> Ensuing negotiations between the Tibetan delegation to Peking and the Chinese, which resulted in Tibet losing its de facto independence following its 'return to the big family of the Motherland—the People's Republic of China',<sup>74</sup> has popularly earned the imagery of a tiger being asked to treat a lamb mercifully.<sup>75</sup>

Though Nehru can be given prizes for masterminding a strategic platform for India from which to deal with China, his policy suffered from a major shortcoming. The strategy drew its inspiration solely from Nehru's understanding of China and relatively less energy was channelled by Nehru to integrate the Chinese perception of India into his policy. This almost one-way street nature of Nehru's China policy is explored in the next section.

#### **POLICY PERSONALIZATION BY NEHRU**

India was quick to forget the diplomatic insolence demonstrated by China in Sino-Indian exchanges over Tibet, suggesting that India, in voicing its concern over Chinese methods used to adjust Sino-Tibetan relations, has 'been affected by foreign influences hostile to China'.<sup>76</sup> After successfully evading a situation where Sino-Indian relations had the risk of running into a quagmire over the Roof of the World, Nehru continued his friendly overtures towards China while systematically following a policy of giving up India's continuing rights in Tibet, one of the firsts of which came in the form of converting the Indian Mission in Lhasa into a Consulate-General. This occurrence, hailed by Panikkar as the satisfactory settlement of the last outstanding issue between India and China,<sup>77</sup> was seen by Hugh Richardson, independent India's first diplomatic representative in Lhasa, as the first 'practical dimension'<sup>78</sup> of India's acceptance that Tibet has lost its independence and its rights to enter into agreements with foreign powers.<sup>79</sup> This should have served as the first solid notice to India that the Sino-Tibetan boundary, an agreement between itself and a Tibet free to conduct its foreign affairs, will soon be questioned. This incident, pregnant with explosive possibilities, accentuated by the fact that the

McMahon Line never enjoyed China's ratification, however failed to disturb Nehru who was bent on rupturing all tendons of association with Tibet that might potentially create the image of an India under imperialist influence in Chinese minds.

This was perhaps the point where Nehru should have paused to analyse the signals all such Indian actions must be sending to China. Patterson, in speaking of a Chinese 'desire to test India',<sup>80</sup> gives a rather sinister picture of what India was eventually fated to meet if Nehru continued his policy. Patterson asserts that India's acceptance of Chinese policy in Tibet amounted to a signal for the Chinese that India was prepared to make unilateral concessions, an opportunity worth exploiting.<sup>81</sup> Nehru, by this time completely consumed by the glowing promises of his strategy, ignored any such possibilities and not only professed India's strong friendly feelings towards China but also became a champion of Peking's cause, almost taking up the role of a big brother in respect of China. This sentiment is revealed in Nehru's following remark: 'I could not imagine a great country like China being submerged in a way in the USSR.... I was anxious that China should have other openings and other contacts.... China was a great power and was bound to function as such.'<sup>82</sup>

Additionally, Nehru made it his duty to educate the West about China and brush up China's international image. The enthusiasm with which he sent Panikkar to Paris is a clear indication of this fact: 'China at present is cut off from news of the outside world...what has happened in China is of major consequence in world affairs...Panikkar's visit to the West may help somewhat in making people in the West realize the significance of what is happening in China.'<sup>83</sup>

It is not difficult to see that here, Nehru has congratulated himself on having an exclusive knowledge of China. However, this raises a rather intriguing question: given India's experience with the Chinese over Tibet in 1950–1 where Nehru felt that India was 'ill repaid for her diplomatic friendliness toward Peking',<sup>84</sup> when the Liberation Army advanced into Tibet—contrary to assurances of peaceful settlement given to India—what made Nehru confident that his understanding of China was exhaustive? Existing literature has placed much of the blame with Panikkar. His memoirs reveal the immense influence such incidents as Zhou Enlai's midnight invitation to discuss Korea and Mao Tse-tung speaking in 'warm terms' about Nehru and displaying his interest to see Indian films<sup>85</sup> had on him. While India launched an all-out campaign of

friendship with China, it is easy to see how Chinese leaders used finer aspects of soft diplomacy to impress upon India their desire for closer relationship.

At this point, it is also important to look at some personality traits and personal viewpoints of Nehru which perhaps worked in the direction of elevating his confidence with respect to China. One such study conducted by Claude Arpi suggests that because Nehru 'was a good man, he always wanted to see the good of others, too often ignoring the reality'.<sup>86</sup> Though this analysis runs the risk of being dismissed by the scholarly eye as a simplistic assumption, interestingly, there is much water in this analysis to the extent that it suggests that Nehru was a man given to making simple interpretations. This personality trait of Nehru heavily influenced his China policy. What is important to understand is that Nehru was convinced that India and China, though tilting to different strains of political ideologies, were connected by similar problems that new nations face. Seen in this light, it is interesting to note some elements of Nehru's press conference soon after his visit to China in 1954:

...their great country [China] which had been kicked and tossed about for generations has become unified.... I think we can learn a good deal too from Russia and China, and more particularly now from China... the nature of problems is similar between India and China.... I flew over the central China area and immediately I thought of my flying over the Bihar area<sup>87</sup> a few weeks earlier. It was the same picture-vast areas covered with water.... We all rely on some pictures or maps.... Not only the physical maps, but, what is much more important, the mental pictures.<sup>88</sup>

Three important cornerstones of Nehru's China policy can be drawn from this speech. First, his thinking that India and China were connected by their problems formed the logical basis of his policy that, owing to his neutralist view of the world, India and China must work together 'to allow Asian problems to be settled by Asians'.<sup>89</sup> Second, owing to the similarity of historical processes of struggle faced by both India and China,<sup>90</sup> Nehru believed that the fountainhead of Asian resurgence and peace was a role befitting for both countries. It is possible that this element of Nehru's thinking was most influenced by his recent experience of the Indian independence struggle which involved bringing together people from different strains of opinion, ideology, culture and ethnicity to fight for the cause of independence. Nehru extended the idea of this spirit

of togetherness to create an image of Sino-Indian friendship, despite all ideological differences. Third, and most important, Nehru's perception of China was an exercise in ideating an ideal situation completely based on his impression of China. In this context, the use of the word 'mental pictures' is not merely a figure of speech, but a literal interpretation used to seal Nehru's China policy. This element of Nehru's thinking of mostly disregarding facts and believing in his self-appointed assumptions was evident in the manner in which he dismissed solid proofs of Chinese aggression in Tibet by declaring that 'nobody need get upset over the recent developments in Tibet',<sup>91</sup> and confidently claimed that:

The possibility of a regular invasion of Nepal or India by Chinese forces through Tibet can be ruled out even as a remote contingency. In any event, in the present state of affairs, it is not a proposition which we need to consider. I need not go into the reasons for this, but it seems to me an obvious conclusion.<sup>92</sup>

What was so 'obvious' about the Chinese that made Nehru confident that they will respect territorial integrity? Clearly, Nehru had already designated China as India's co-partner for creating an 'area of peace'<sup>93</sup> in Asia, and all his conclusions flowed from this assumption. Thus, Nehru succeeded in assuring himself of an era of Sino-Indian brotherhood, cemented by the five principles of peaceful coexistence<sup>94</sup>, even when signs and signals replete with warnings against following such a perception-driven self-inspired policy towards the Chinese were staring him in the face. While this aspect will be dealt with in further detail in the concluding remarks of the article, the next section focuses on how such a degree of personalization of India's China policy by Nehru came into sharp conflict with national aspirations during the 1959 Tibetan uprising.

#### NEHRU VERSUS INDIA

A very interesting observation which can be made at this juncture is that India's China policy in the 1950s was dominated by Nehru's thinking to such an extent that it would seem fair to use the terms 'India's China policy' and 'Nehru's China policy' interchangeably. This aspect of personalization provides important pointers towards understanding the huge gulf between public reaction and Nehru's reaction to the 1959 Tibetan uprising. On the one hand, Nehru continued following his policy of distancing happenings in Tibet as much as he could from Sino-Indian relationship by chiding the public and the parliamentarians for 'an

exhibition of a certain lack of restraint<sup>95</sup> in condemning the Chinese. On the other hand, the public demanded a revision of India's China policy by taking into account what had happened in Tibet.<sup>96</sup> A disturbing rift began to emerge as the nation and its leader started speaking in two different voices on the same issue.

After being visibly disillusioned by Nehru who refused to act as an opinion maker for the public to the extent he failed to represent the national mood, it can be seen that Indian public opinion—disturbed by Nehru's apparent lack of desire to formulate a suitable government stand on the Chinese—was critical of three elements prominent in Nehru's China policy. First, a sense of *vagueness*<sup>97</sup> as Nehru failed to enunciate the reason for his appeal of restrained speech against the Chinese. Nehru was continually reminiscent of 'the cultural kinship between the people of India and the people of Tibet',<sup>98</sup> but when it came to establishing a firm attitude in respect of the Tibetan issue, Nehru prevaricated.

Such a lack of will on the part of the government, even when there were suggestive signs that the public was perhaps even in favour of use



**Figure 1** Zhou Enlai Watches from Over the Mountains as Tibet Appeals to India for Help; Nehru Looks Back at his Countrymen Shrugging his Shoulders in a Helpless Gesture

*Source: The Hindu*, 8 April 1959, p. 6.

of force (see Figure 1), essentially led the public to be more critical of the overall idea of Sino-Indian friendship. This is perhaps where they encountered the element of *contradiction* in Nehru's Hindi–Chini bhai-bhai policy, the centrepiece of the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India, popularly known as the Panchsheel Agreement. In this case, before attempting to analyse public opinion, it is important to understand how Nehru viewed this agreement. Nehru's views are best captured by his rather revealing description of the agreement in the Lok Sabha: 'The major thing about this agreement to which I would like again to draw the attention of the House is the preamble to the agreement.'<sup>99</sup>

Given the dual expectation of Nehru's policy of friendship with China, it is clear that for Nehru, the active part of the agreement was limited to its preamble which laid down the five principles governing mutual relations, namely, respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and peaceful coexistence.<sup>100</sup> This spoke directly to Nehru's aspirations about India's position in Asia and to a certain extent, also diminished his concern about Chinese territorial claims. The body of the agreement, dealing with Indian concessions in Tibet, though an operational part of Nehru's policy, was of a more passive kind when compared with the euphoria of Hindi–Chini bhai-bhai. With the signing of this agreement, 'India abandoned historical rights in Tibet, receiving in return nothing more substantial than Chinese promises of eternal friendship.'<sup>101</sup> Such a conceptualization of Panchsheel made the public uneasy and they criticized the agreement as 'ironical',<sup>102</sup> stressing that the unilateral practice of Panchsheel will 'receive appreciation only in democratic countries and not in propagandist dictatorships',<sup>103</sup> clearly in reference to China.

Finally, the public perceived an element of *helplessness* in India's stand towards Tibet. It was a matter of extreme grief to India who, under the guardianship of Nehru, had always fashioned itself as 'the champion of freedom and of suffering humanity',<sup>104</sup> that it was reduced to a dumb spectator while aggression was being committed in its neighbourhood. It all boiled down to one basic question: 'What can we do to help the Tibetans?'<sup>105</sup> The response, in the light of Nehru's ambiguous China policy, was a massive outpour of sympathy and open warnings to the government to be wary of China, while acknowledging the fact that 'We [Indians] are rightly linked with China by bonds of friendship...but friendship cannot mean abetment of crime.'<sup>106</sup>

That India's friendship with China was a relationship manufactured solely at the top is evident in the divergent manner in which Nehru and the public reacted soon after the Tibetan uprising broke out. The speed and intensity with which the revolt evoked an outpour of sympathy and call for support of the Tibetans in India accentuates the fact that the spirit of Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai policy was a mere shadow of Nehru's tunnel vision; a policy which failed to resonate with the sentiments of the Indian public that naturally identified itself with the Tibetans and their cause. Besides public perception of the vagueness and inherent contradictions embedded in Nehru's China policy, which put the government on the spot and made official policy in respect of Tibet fairly unrepresentative, presence of a certain amount of guilt in Indian sentiments can also be traced as the public condemned the cloak-and-dagger method used by the Chinese to eliminate Tibetan personality and sadly recalled the happenings of 1950–1: 'We [Indians] began by describing the Chinese advance on Tibet as aggression but immediately after recognized Chinese suzerainty over Tibet. Tibet has never been a part of China, except by conquest.'<sup>107</sup>

#### CONCLUSION—THE CONVERGENCE

Nehru's strategy of preserving Sino-Indian friendship by keeping it away from developments in Tibet was demolished as Indian public opinion came out strongly in favour of Tibetan freedom. It would, however, be wrong to say that it was public opinion alone that rendered Nehru's policy impotent. Had he still wanted to keep his strategy alive despite Indian public opinion forcing him to lean the other way, Nehru could have successfully orchestrated a level of detachment from the national opinion and maintained Sino-Indian friendship on the same platform as before. In fact, this thinking was prominent in Chinese minds who believed that 'Nehru is Nehru—i.e. his prestige is so great in India that the masses in crisis situations merely follow his lead.'<sup>108</sup> However, the matter was complicated by two crucial developments. First, the arrival of the Dalai Lama in Indian territory on 31 March 1959<sup>109</sup> and his subsequent 18 April Tezpur<sup>110</sup> press statement which confirmed Indian suspicion of persistent Chinese interference in Tibetan autonomy<sup>111</sup> and increased the pitch of public uproar. The symbolism of the Dalai Lama's flight from Lhasa and his hearty welcome in India was not lost on the Chinese<sup>112</sup> who were quick to interpret Nehru's welcome visit to the Dalai Lama as

'holding a meeting with the leader of a rebellion'<sup>113</sup> and pointed out that Nehru's contradictory approach to the question of Tibet is responsible for the anti-Chinese Indian public opinion. Second, and more importantly, it is evident that by early 1959, Chinese territorial violations in India, including the arrest of an Indian patrol party in an area of overlapping claim<sup>114</sup> and declaration by Zhou Enlai in his 23 January 1959 note that border disputes do exist between India and China,<sup>115</sup> had already made Nehru suspect if he would be able to bury the border issue unilaterally anyway.

Thus, the national mood unleashed by the Tibetan uprising was not so much the driving factor as the prime catalyst which caused Nehru to rethink his China policy by converging the Tibetan cause with Indian national sentiments, something that Nehru endeavoured to keep apart in order to prevent Sino-Indian relationship from complicating. As the centrepiece of Nehru's parallel history strategy came crumbling down and the public started demanding a firm national stand against China, Chinese reactions to Indian public opinion and subsequent accusation that India, in registering its concern for the respect of Tibetan autonomy by China, has inevitably interfered in China's internal matter<sup>116</sup> raised serious questions about the degree of mutuality present in the Panchsheel. Nehru's dream world of creating a new future for Asia perished and he was sceptical about his planned arrangement whereby border security can be ensured by a policy of brotherhood.<sup>117</sup> This realization was central to Nehru's thinking when he commented that: '...a doubt creeps into my mind as to whether the meaning I attach to it is the same as they [Chinese] attach to it. I do not think so...the ways of thinking have changed.'<sup>118</sup>

Though Nehru voiced this concern in the context of Tibetan autonomy, this can easily be extended to the general sphere of his thinking with respect to China. Thus, if not for the agitational tone of Indian public opinion, which played a pivotal role in creating the impression of an expansionist China and was instrumental in bringing into question Nehru's previous foreign policy decisions, Nehru's hands-off foreign policy, replete with contradictions, would have no doubt continued to dictate Sino-Indian relations for some more time to come. However, it would have come to grief very soon.

Arora, by asserting that the starting point of Sino-Indian friendship in itself contained 'seeds of a war of aims and attitudes',<sup>119</sup> goes the closest in specifically pointing out the reason why Nehru's China policy was

doomed to fail sooner or later. Arpi closely follows by suggesting that the Sino-Indian relationship was 'Born in Sin'.<sup>120</sup> This article suggests that the inevitability of a Sino-Indian clash was rooted in Indian misconception of the Chinese. Some pointers can be drawn from *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu's authoritative treatise on warfare, to prove this point:

Hold out baits to entice the enemy.<sup>121</sup>

The spot where we intend to fight must not be made known.<sup>122</sup>

If we wish to fight, the enemy can be forced to an engagement... All we need do is attack some other place that he will be obliged to relieve.<sup>123</sup>

Though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays.<sup>124</sup>

Chinese actions have an uncanny resemblance to the military strategies laid down by Sun Tzu. There is no doubt that the unresolved border issue was a decisive factor in designing India's China policy. Thus, China rightly held out the *bait*. China systematically maintained a silence over the border issue to the extent that Nehru almost interpreted Zhou Enlai's silence as tacit acquiescence.<sup>125</sup> Thus, the *spot* of dispute was never disclosed. China started a method of ruthless repression in Tibet, knowing well that because of strong cultural ties between India and Tibet, India will feel *obliged* to react in some way. Furthermore, soon after the Tibetan uprising, Zhou Enlai made it clear to Nehru in his 8 September 1959 letter that 'there is a fundamental difference between the positions of our two Governments on the Sino-Indian boundary question'.<sup>126</sup> Thus, after 'tarnishing the carefully cultivated image',<sup>127</sup> there were *no long delays* in informing India about the Chinese stand on the border issue. For China, not only was the issue of Tibet tied to its broader territorial ambitions, but Chinese activities in Tibet can be very much seen as a part of creating a platform from which to address the issue of the unresolved borders. Thus, while Nehru was concentrating on a diplomatic strategy to distance Tibet from the border issue and establish a quid pro quo arrangement whereby China, drawn along with India into the centre stage of Asian peace and solidarity, will eventually let go of the border issue, China was all the while following a military strategy to open the border question when the moment was ripe. India itself provided that ripe moment by failing to perceive Chinese intentions, in conformity with Sun Tzu's theory that 'the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself'.<sup>128</sup> As far as Nehru's policy thinking is concerned, not

only was it diametrically opposite to the Chinese approach but it was also based on a misconception of Chinese aspirations. Thus, it was bound to fail sooner or later.

#### NOTES

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