

The Five Principles

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“Born in Sin”: These were the words used by Acharya Kripalani to describe the famous Panchsheel Agreement when it was presented to the Indian Parliament by India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in May 1954. Although the preamble was couched in highly idealistic terms such as "mutual non-aggression", "mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs" or "peaceful co-existence", in actual fact the Agreement was the death warrant of a peaceful and independent nation: Tibet.

The Prime Minister could only answer the Sindhi leader with a joke: "Born in Sind?" But history shows, indeed, that it resulted in the death of more than one million Tibetans and in India losing a friendly neighbour, a peaceful frontier, and an important buffer. The consequence was the Sino-Indian border war of 1962.

One of the most shocking outcomes of the Prime Minister's recent visit to China is the decision to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Panchsheel Agreement in 2004. A communiqué issued in Beijing during the visit asserted: "Efforts to inject some warmth into Indo-China ties seems to be bearing fruit as both countries agreed to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Panchsheel, the five principles of peaceful coexistence, with 'great élan'... The respective foreign offices would work out a detailed plan."

It is well-known that the babus in the MEA have no interest in history. Like their colleagues of the 1950, they just dream to leave their names for posterity for having worked towards the supreme Nirvana for a diplomat: An eternal friendship between India and China. While there is nothing wrong with friendship, it cannot be regardless of the cost.

The old generation was in a way wiser; it had only given the Panchsheel Agreement a lifetime of eight years; mercifully, it lapsed in April 1962. By that time Nehru had learnt the lessons the hard way. But today, South Block seems ready for another round of selling India's interests and celebrating the genocide of a nation.

Let us take a close look at historical facts. The ferment began soon after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. In September 1951, exactly two weeks after the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had entered Lhasa, KM Panikkar, India's Ambassador to Beijing, was told by

Premier Zhou Enlai: "There was no difference of point of view in regard to Tibet between India and China." Zhou added that he was "particularly anxious to safeguard in every way Indian interests in Tibet". However, he did not say a word about the border between India and Tibet.

During the following weeks, Panikkar and Zhou met several times, but nothing was said on the frontier. In the meantime, the machiavellian Premier Zhou managed to convince the gullible Indian Ambassador that it was in the interest of both countries to downgrade the Indian Mission in Lhasa to the level of a Consulate General and to close the Indian Consulate in Kashgar (Xinjiang). The Ambassador readily agreed and in turn convinced Prime Minister Nehru. Was it not worth relinquishing India's century-old rights, for a newly-found friendship and brotherhood? The Gujral Doctrine, which came into vogue 40 years later, is only a pale copy of the Panikkar Doctrine: "The more we offer to China, the greater will be the friendship."

When Panikkar left Beijing in 1952, he boasted there were no outstanding issues between the two countries: He had just forgotten the border. Zhou had already started claiming that the treaty with Tibet (defining the McMahon Line amongst other things) was imperialist in nature. "I presumed that India had no intention of claiming special rights arising from the unequal treaties of the past," he told Panikkar. Falling for Zhou's bait, Nehru never realised that he was losing an agreed border.

For two more years, the MEA waited for Zhou to bring the frontier issue up for discussions. With nothing forthcoming from Beijing, Delhi deduced that the McMahon line was an accepted fact. India's logic was that if China had a problem with the border, Beijing would mention it.

However, with passing years, Nehru grew progressively nervous: Why was Zhou always avoiding the border issue? Finally, he asked Beijing for an over-all package deal with China. This was to become the Panchsheel Agreement. In mid-1953, Nehru briefed the MEA: "For the present, we need not raise the question of the frontier, but this will have to be brought in a larger settlement. In that settlement, I should like to make clear our special position in the border states."

The talks began in December; they were expected to last six weeks, but went on for six months. The Indian Parliament made enquiries several times. What was going on? The Chinese were asking for more and more facilities, but were silent on the issue of border. Finally, the Panchsheel Agreement (known as Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India) was signed in April 1954. Nothing was said on

the frontier demarcation. In its foolishness, the MEA thought that to designate a few passes for trade was sufficient to demarcate a border. (Is it different today with naming Nathu-la in Sikkim a border post?)

The machiavellian Zhou waited till the end of the 1950s to finally broach the topic of the border. By that time it was too late for India as Aksai Chin was fully in possession of the Peoples Liberation Army. Beijing could then safely raise its claims: "We have never accepted the imperialist McMahon line and the NEFA and the Aksai Chin belong to us." At the time of signing the Agreement, the MEA believed that it was a win-win situation. In fact, it marked Nehru's total capitulation to China. India paid a heavy price eight years later, when the PLA crossed a border which Delhi had not dared to talk about. At least Pandit Nehru had an excuse: In his naivete, he could not believe he would be betrayed by a "Chini Bhai". However, today there are no more excuses. Does India need to celebrate Nehru's Waterloo?