

Himalayan Task

February, 6, 2004

On April 29, 2004, India and China will "celebrate" the 50th anniversary of signing the "Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India". Known as the "Panchsheel", this agreement reduced Tibet to a mere "Region of China" for the first time in modern history. An autonomous buffer zone ("verging on independence" in Nehru's words) between India and China disappeared. India had a new neighbour: China. India paid dearly and is still paying for the policy of its first Prime Minister.

During preliminary talks with Beijing between 1951 and '54, Indian diplomats avoided bringing up the border question. Their contention was that if the Chinese did not consider the border to be an agreed upon issue, they would themselves bring it for discussion. The Indian "cleverness" backfired, ending in a disaster. India gave away Tibet and did not even get a confirmation of its shared borders with the new neighbour.

In his speech after the signature of the Agreement, Zhou Enlai congratulated the negotiators for having solved all the matters "ripe for settlement". Fifty years later, the folly of this policy still haunts an India unable to sort out its border tangle with China. In June 2003, the Indian Prime Minister took the bold initiative to nominate Mr Brajesh Mishra, his National Security Advisor, as a special envoy for "fast track" parleys on the issue with Beijing.

The first round of talks between Mr Mishra and his Chinese counterpart, Mr Dai Bingguo, the Vice-foreign Minister, was held in Delhi on October 23 and 24, 2003. The envoys met again in Beijing on January 12 and 13. Though the two parties agreed not to publicise the outcome of the talks, Mr Kong Quan, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, declared that the second "ministerial -level discussions" were "positive" and the atmosphere was "constructive". He added: "Such complicated issues cannot achieve rapid progress through only one or two rounds of talks." Today, the question remains: Is there a creative but yet feasible solution to solve the border issue between India and China?

The central problem is that since the 1950s, China is "in possession" of the Aksai Chin region of Ladakh. Soon after the PLA entered Tibet in 1950, the People's Liberation Army

began the construction of a network of roads on the high plateau. Mao Zedong had ordered to "consolidate the borders". BN Mullik, the then Intelligence Bureau Director, claimed that he had reported the road building activity in the Aksai Chin as early as November 1952. According to him, the Indian trade agent in Gartok also informed Delhi about it in July and September 1955. Instead of alarming Nehru, these disturbing reports reinforced his determination to bolster friendship with China.

Finally, in October 1957, a Chinese newspaper reported: "The Sinkiang -Tibet - the highest highway in the world - has been completed - 915 km are 4,000 meters above sea level - with the highest point being 5,500 metres." A circle was closed: Sinkiang and Tibet, the two newly -acquired western provinces of Communist China, were linked. It took nearly two more years for the news to become public in India. Only in August 1959, did Nehru drop the bombshell in the Lok Sabha: The road cut through Indian territory. The Prime Minister had kept the information secret for more than five years! Today, 50 years after signing the Panchsheel, what can be done about it? Will the Chinese ever relinquish this strategic artery? The answer is no. For India: Is it conceivable that any Government (especially during an election year) could "gift" away such a large chunk of Indian territory? Besides, what could India receive from Beijing in return for such a "gift"? The recognition of Arunachal Pradesh as being a part of India has been mentioned as a possible compensation. But this does not make any sense as the Chinese claim on Arunachal is legally and historically empty of any substance.

Moreover, the new leadership in Beijing knows very well that ultimately it is in China's interest to settle this long -standing issue with India and put the relationship between the two nations on sounder tracks. But with both parties firm on their respective stands since the last 50 years, is there a possible solution where no party would lose face? An innovative solution could be to create a condominium for the Aksai -Chin area. The region could be jointly administrated by Beijing and New Delhi through two appointed commissioners (or whatever other designation may be agreed upon).

The fact that very little development is possible (apart from a road) in the region due to a lack of water, high salinity (a part is known as the Soda Plain), as well as the high altitude would make the condominium solution not too difficult to implement. Such a condominium would not face many of the challenges that other such arrangements have usually to confront. First and foremost, nobody lives permanently on the high plateau. Therefore, there is no question of stakeholders other than the two states: India and China. Second,

no natural resources such as oil and minerals have been discovered so far. Therefore, there is no need for a complicated sharing mechanism.

The trickiest issue to solve would be the right to transit across the region. Obviously, China would continue to have the same facilities that it is presently enjoying. India in the future might want to reopen the trade route to Kashgar through the Karakoram Pass. Though technically this route is not cutting through the disputed area, this provision could be included in a general settlement. A few days ago, the China Daily mentioned that a similar solution was thought of by Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s for the disputed Diaoyu Islands between Japan and China, "to promote friendly relations and pursue a win-win compromise with Japan, late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping proposed the two countries seek common exploitation of the islands while shelving disputes over the ownership of them."

With the Aksai Chin issue resolved, many other issues would fall into place. The others sectors of the border would be comparatively easier to sort out. The question remains: Is the time ripe for settlement?