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Politicians and eminent historians have certain things in common; both particularly love to indulge looking at historical events out of their context. The latest example is the hubbub about Panchsheel. The magnificent Five Principles have to be seen in the historical background of the Geneva Conference on Indochina, the role that Jawaharlal Nehru wanted to play as a mediator and a peace-keeper and Zhou Enlai's need to get some international recognition for communist China. One should not forget that, for the first time in 1954, Beijing staged an entry on the world scene.

Nehru's motivation was to replace the Simla Convention signed in 1914 between British India and Tibet with a less "imperialist" treaty. The 1954 Panchsheel Agreement was essentially an accord to update India's trade regulations with Tibet. Ironically, during the same period, Delhi displayed some weird double standards: While doubting the validity of the Simla Convention, it strangely used the Treaty of Paris signed in 1814 between France and Great Britain to protest against the landing of 50 French gendarmes in Pondicherry.

In June 1954, Delhi considered that the Treaty of Paris signed soon after Napoleon was defeated by the British, was still in force. According to one of the treaty's articles, "armed forces" were not allowed to protect the French Establishments. The situation was farcical: Fifty armed police to defend a parcel of French territory on Indian soil. Fortunately, a month later, the French Government agreed to leave India in a more dignified manner. Friends often tell me that one should not live in the past; one should look to the future, especially in our relations with China. The present Government's motto (which, by the way, loves to live in bygone times of "non-alignment" or total support to the Palestinian cause, without even considering the complexity of the situation in West Asia), is "engagement". In many ways, it was also the policy of the previous regime and the message which came out of Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to China in June 2003.

This is fine - China can be "engaged" and should be "engaged", but India should do it as China's equal partner, and not by running after Beijing or begging China's authoritarian regime for favours. When China fixes its own date to celebrate the Panchsheel Agreement, and sets aside the content of the Agreement and India meekly accepts, it can not be called "engagement". It is simply kowtowing.

The 1954 Agreement was about the regulation of trade and pilgrimage between India and Tibet. It lapsed in June 1962; this means that today, according to international law, the only "legally" valid accord for regulating "trade and intercourse" with Tibet is the Trade Regulations appended to the Simla Convention of 1914.

As this is not being acknowledged by China, it creates a vacuum which is bound to lead to serious difficulties. The first one is linked to the opening of Nathu-la pass between Sikkim and Chumbi Valley. It was broadcasted amid much fanfare after Mr Vajpayee's visit to China. But the issuing of visas to local (or other) traders, the opening of the route to tourism and several other matters cannot be sorted out until proper regulations are in place. Gangtok or Kalimpong will probably have to wait to become the hub of Himalayan trade again.

Another issue is the pilgrimage to Kailash. Recently, several articles have appeared in the foreign press about the high pollution resulting from the Chinese Government "development" policies. Kailash is a sacred mountain, both for Hindus and Buddhists, but its ecosystem is very fragile. Let us not forget that the Brahmaputra, the Sutlej, the Indus and the Ganga originate from this region.

Today the Kailash environment is under threat from the Chinese atheist regime which plans to develop "spiritual" tourism. The local Tibetan government is said to have prepared an "eco-tourism" plan for the area (2002 -2012), which includes the upgrading and construction of new roads and other infrastructure such as airports to encourage larger scale tourism. But, strangely, Tibetans living in the Kailash area were warned by officials to not speak about the new proposals.

The Australian paper, The Age, recently published a long piece on the deteriorating situation. It particularly mentioned a "*village of mud brick houses (close to the parikrama) which, is no advertisement for environmental care. Waste water streams across the main street and its 1634 people have to use a central patch of rubbish-strewn open ground,*

complete with scavenging dogs, as their toilet." The village's waste flows into the holy Manasarovar Lake.

The article further states: "*Moreover, environmentalists and religious figures around the world are increasingly alarmed more by the possibility of ill-judged efforts by Chinese authorities to 'develop' the tourist potential of the area, considering the garishly inappropriate buildings already popping up in Tibet's bigger cities and towns.*"

Another Westerner who has frequently been visiting the area wrote: "*Tibetans described this road to me as a 'catastrophe'.*" This is without mentioning the flourishing prostitution trade in Taklakot (Purang), the border town with India and Nepal.

Before the Panchsheel Agreement was signed, there was a small village named Minsar in the vicinity of the Kailash. Though located in Tibet, this village belonged to the Jammu & Kashmir State; its inhabitants were responsible for preserving the sanctity and purity of the place. This village was eventually returned to China in the early 1950s, but the idea of sharing the responsibility of the sacred mountain was an excellent one.

If the Five Principles are to be implemented, the first gesture of goodwill (or good neighbourliness) one could expect from China would be for Beijing to let Delhi know the development plans for the holy pilgrimage area. Beijing should ensure that unsustainable development which would hurt the sentiments of both the Hindus and the Buddhists and change the atmosphere of the place do not occur.

If China does not possess a Jagmohan who could, in one stroke, take care of the religious sentiments of the pilgrims and provide them with the most modern facilities, India, I am sure, would be ready to offer expertise. To take up this matter could certainly be a first step to "positively" engage Beijing and create the necessary atmosphere for thornier issues, such as the border, to be discussed. After all, is it not more important today to look into the nitty-gritty of these "small" matters than start grand celebrations? Principles are fine, but their spirit will show only in tiny concrete details.