

**From British Archives**

**The Policy towards Tibet**

*(A Note from Sir Olaf Caroe,  
Foreign Secretary to the Government of India)*

No.F.183-C.A./45.

From: The Secretary to the Government of India in the External Affairs  
Department,

To: The Secretary, External Department, India Office, LONDON.

Dated New Delhi, the 191 September 1945.

**Policy towards Tibet**

Sir,

POINTS AT ISSUE.

I am directed to refer to your letter No. Ext.38/45, dated the 5th February 1945, in which the Government of India were asked to state their considered views on the whole question of policy towards Tibet, and in particular on the following points,

- (1) the degree and nature of the autonomy which it is considered Tibet should enjoy and the significance to be attached to the conception of Chinese suzerainty;
- (2) How far His Majesty's Government and the Government of India should be prepared to go in support of Tibetan autonomy;
- (3) The line to be adopted in any international discussion on of this subject and whether the initiative should be taken to encourage such international discussion.

The Government of India's views were also sought, particularly from the point of view of defense, on the importance to India of the maintenance of Tibetan buffer.

#### PRESENT POLICY:

2. I am to state at the outset that the Government of India are in full agreement with the views expressed by Mr. Amery that there is no occasion for revising the general policy of support for Tibetan autonomy. Not only is this policy well established, but it has been authoritatively reaffirmed to the Tibetans as recently as 1944 and to abandon it now would be an unthinkable breach of faith. It was also clearly stated by Mr. Eden, then Foreign Secretary, to Mr T.V. Soong, in August 1943<sup>1</sup>. In fact present conditions would seem to require rather an increase of pressure on the Chinese Government to accept the autonomous status of Tibet as understood by His Majesty's Government and the Government of India rather than to justify any relaxation of effort.

An attempt is made in the following paragraphs to review the forces operating in this part of Asia at the close of the Japanese war as these affect Tibet, and against that background to consider what the Tibetan State's real position and interests are, what are the points of contact and friction between India and China, and how far it is practical politics to continue the present policy of a real Tibetan autonomy in return for recognition of a nominal Chinese suzerainty.

#### (a) RUSSIA

3. Russia does not constitute an immediate factor in the situation in Tibet, but if there is any uncertainty in our attitude, or any return of Russian influence in Sinkiang the Soviet might be tempted either to support Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded\\_pics/lettertoSoong.pdf](http://www.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/lettertoSoong.pdf)

policy in Tibet or even develop an interest there herself which would constitute a more formidable threat than anything else could do. The terms of the Russo-Chinese 30-years Treaty which have just been announced do not suggest that the Soviet has really revised her expansionist policies in areas claimed by China, although Russia may aim at maintaining her influence through the goodwill of the Chinese Government rather than by more direct methods. A further reason for Russia to support Chinese claims in Tibet might be to distract attention from the problems of Manchuria and Outer Mongolia.

(b) CHINA:

On the other hand present internal conditions in China, economic and political, are in a state of something like chaos. China has marked the end of the war, a little unexpectedly, by reaffirming sympathy with a measure of Tibetan autonomy. But Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek's speech to the National Defense Council and Central Executive Committee of August 24th, in which this announcement was made, is a subtle piece of propaganda for the Chinese view of Tibet's position, suggesting as it does the possible relation of a control over Tibet which in fact the Chinese Government does not possess. This speech was no doubt designed to save face abroad, while preparing the ground for a greater recognition in China of the real facts of Chinese present relationship with Tibet.

(c) TIBET.

Lastly, as regards Tibet itself, it must be re called that the measure taken during the last two years in the Tribal Areas of Assam to establish the treaty position of the Government of India up to the Indo-Tibetan frontier on the McMahon Line have touched the susceptibilities of the Tibetan Government.

Mr. Hopkinson, having assumed charge from Sir Basil Gould (for the last ten years responsible for our excellent relations with Tibet) is now on his way to Lhasa with authority to reply to their protest and to reassure them as to our intentions, and he will be able to judge further the tone and depth of their feelings. But it is possible that this development may incline an important section of opinion in Tibet (possibly monastic) to look less towards India and more to China than it has done in the past.

#### THE TIBETAN BUFFER.

4. It is against this background that the value to India of the Tibetan buffer is to be assessed. It will be convenient to deal first with the general question before considering the more detailed points raised. In the past while China was content with a nominal suzerainty over Tibet, and for so long as the Tibetans themselves have been responsible for their relations with India, it has been possible to maintain at very small expense and with the minimum of trouble a frontier of about one thousand miles exclusive of the frontier of about one thousand miles exclusive of the frontier with Nepal. During the brief period of Chinese resurgence from 1906 to 1911, India became acutely aware of the dangers implicit in Chinese designs of extending their influence north of the Himalayan barrier. In those years Chinese troops were established near the borders of Bhutan and in the tribal areas of north-east Assam. Both Nepal and Bhutan were claimed as vassals of China, and even after the collapse of the Manchu Empire in 1911-12, sporadic examples of Chinese interest in these two countries have occurred. Chinese ambitions in the tribal areas of Assam are revealed by their maps which claim as 'China' — not as Tibet — territory stretching almost as far as the Brahmaputra in the plain of Assam. But for the Tibetan buffer, therefore, it would be necessary for the Government of India greatly to increase its commitments

on its northern frontier both in men and in money and to introduce an extensive and costly system of watch and ward along this frontier.

## TIBET AND DEFENCE

5. From the point of view of defence therefore the maintenance of the autonomous position of Tibet with its vast desert areas and great altitudes, is no less important now than it has been in the past in spite of modern military and scientific developments. We agree with Mr. Amery<sup>2</sup> that the possibility of direct military assistance in support of Tibet should not be ruled out on political grounds now that the war is ended. There remains, however, the question whether such military support is practicable. The result of a preliminary consideration of the question by General Staff and A.H.Q. (I) is contained in the enclosed copy of a War Department memorandum. This was prepared before the fall of Japan and it is now proposed to review the question further in the light of present circumstances. In particular the problems of administration and transportation both by land and air will require careful consideration. Something can no doubt be done by the provision of arms and ammunition to the Tibetans, if only because such supply would be taken by the Tibetans as an earnest of our intention to support them effectively and so stiffen their will to resist encroachment. But, however inefficient the Chinese or other potential aggressors taking the field may be, it would be wrong to place all reliance on such measures, for Tibetans seem to have an inherent incapacity in the care of modern weapons and in the administration of military forces. The chief reliance, as always, must be on the immense and inhospitable wastes which surround Lhasa on

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<sup>2</sup> Leopold Charles Maurice Stennett Amery (22 November 1873 – 16 September 1955), usually known as Leo Amery or L. S. Amery, was a British Conservative Party politician and journalist, noted for his interest in military preparedness, India, and the British Empire. He was Secretary of State for India and Burma between 13 May 1940 and 26 July 1945.

all sides save that towards India, and in the absence of communications, assisted by moral and material backing from His Majesty's Government and the Government of India.

There is an opposite passage in Sir Charles Bell's Book "Tibet Past and Present" written in 1924 which still sums up admirably the essence of British Indian policy in this country. It runs as follows.

"We want Tibet as a buffer to India on the north. Now there are buffers and buffers; and some of them are of very little use. But Tibet is ideal in this respect. With the large desolate area of the Northern plains controlled by the Lhasa Government, central and southern Tibet government by the same authority, and the Himalayan border States guided by, or in close alliance with, the Indian Government, Tibet forms a barrier equal, or superior, to anything that the world can show elsewhere."

How little China's persistent and prolonged efforts to assimilate Eastern Tibet which is outside Lhasa's control have succeeded even to this day is brought out clearly in Part II of the interesting report on his recent journey into Sikang Province by Mr. Tingle, Acting Consul at Chengtu, which was forwarded to the Foreign Office with dispatch NO.922(51/11/45) of the 24th August 1944 from His Majesty's Ambassador, Chungking. Neither in the construction of communications other than on paper, nor in other forms of penetration, are the Chinese able to show a record of substantial progress even in that part of eastern Tibet subject to their nominal control.

#### TIBET AND NEPAL:

6. Any change in the status of Tibet would moreover gravely affect conditions in Nepal, as pointed out in the War Department memorandum enclosed. The Nepal Government maintain direct relations with the Tibetan Government and have a representative resident in Lhasa. They have also

from time to time been at war or on the verge of war with Tibet. It is the business and interest of the Government of India to maintain stable and peaceful relations between these neighbours on their border and that can be effectively done only if Tibet maintains her autonomy.

7. From the point of view of India's internal economy and administration the maintenance of this buffer between the frontiers of India and China is of great advantage. Recent wartime conditions have shown that China is a difficult neighbor. The Chinese in India, as elsewhere, tend to form unassimilable enclaves within which they aim at a practical extra territoriality. Living their own lives regardless of the laws or interests of the country which harbours them. All departments of the Government of India concerned with wartime regulation of commodities and trade, as well as those responsible for security and law and order, are unanimous in deprecating a closer approach by the Chinese to India such as would be possible if they had the control which they have been seeking in Tibet. The more substantial the buffer that can be maintained between India and China, the better for future relations. As things are at present, there is no point in the N.E. where China marches with India, India being shielded throughout by Tibet. The only direct territorial contact between India and China is in the far north on the Gilgit-Kashgar boundary. This position the Government of India would wish to maintain.

8. The Foreign Office letter suggests also an examination whether it is desirable and practicable for Tibet to remain indefinitely in its present state of seclusion. If it is accepted that Tibet is an invaluable buffer to India, the answer is that it is most desirable for Tibet to remain as it is. To the Tibetans their isolation is almost an article of faith, the strength of which is seen from the fate of those few innovations, such as military training and English

education, which have been introduced from time to time, with our help at the request of the Tibetans themselves. The existence of the Government of Tibet in fact depends on the preservation of its seclusion and there is little sign of any stirring of the people by a desire for change, or of an organization which could take the place of the present government. If we were to force the pace or proceed otherwise than at the request of the Tibetan Government, we should have to do so against opposition and wither throw Tibet into the arms of China, so defeating our own ends, or break down the governmental organization, which is built upon the present conservative monastic regime, and invent something to put in its place. Sir Charles Bell wrote, "Any nation having dealings with Tibet must watch the priests, and watch them carefully. We should remember what the Tibetan priesthood stands to lose in modern conditions. The advance of western thought undermines the foundations of their temples and creeds. We cannot reverse the pledge to avoid interference in Tibetan internal affairs. It is true that Tibetan seclusion is gradually lessening and that since 1921 we have had increasing contact with Lhasa, culminating in the establishment and retention over a decade of a Mission which may become a permanent institution. Tibetan officials are becoming used to visiting India and some have sent their sons to school there. There have been occasional visits even to Lhasa by American citizens. But these small developments do not indicate any desire for radical change. A slow process of evolution is suited to Tibetan mentality and to our interests.

The question whether it is practicable to preserve the present Tibetan seclusion depends largely on the extent to which His Majesty's Government are prepared to go in exerting pressure to keep Chinese hands off Tibet. For geographical reasons Tibet is in an advantages position to remain as it is and as its people and rulers want it to remain. Apart from the danger of

absorption by China, which is the root of the Tibetan problem, there is no reason to consider a continuation of Tibetan isolation impracticable.

9. The justification given above for the preservation of Tibetan seclusion makes it unnecessary to examine in detail the undeveloped economic potentialities of the economy. There is known to be gold in Western Tibet and gold and silver in Eastern Tibet. There may also be other metals and perhaps oil; but any display or interest in these potentialities would only arouse suspicion. At present Tibetan economy depends upon the export via India of wool and to a lesser extent of skins and musk. Nothing approaching industrialization of Tibet or the extensive working of minerals would be possible except over the prostrate body of the present Government. Our interest in Tibetan economy should be to draw Tibet's trade as far as possible into the Indian orbit and do all that we can to bolster up Tibetan economy. This involves no unnatural diversion of effort. Owing to distances Tibet's trade is in any case principally bound up with India; even the Chinese go through India to get to Lhasa. Cultural affinities also are strong with India; Tibetan writing is not in ideograms but uses an alphabet based directly on Sanskrit, while the Tibetan version of Buddhism, unlike that of Burma and Ceylon, shows many affinities with Tantric Hinduism.

10. I turn to the first point mentioned at the head of this letter. Only one attempt seems to have been made to indicate clearly the degree and nature of the autonomy which we consider that Tibet should enjoy, while a definition of the significance to be attached to the conception of Chinese suzerainty has apparently never been attempted. In an aide-memoire dated April 1943, His Majesty's Embassy in Washington informed the State Department of the U.S. Government that the Government of India always held that Tibet is a separate country in full enjoyment of local autonomy

entitled to exchange diplomatic representatives with other powers. The State Department in their reply declined to discuss the status of Tibet. The foreign relations of Tibet have naturally been circumscribed owing to the inaccessibility of that country and the seclusion of its people. Tibet has, however a direct treaty with Nepal in addition to those with His Majesty's Government and the Government of India and in recent years there have been instances of direct contact between the Government of Tibet and that of the United States of America through personal letters from the late President Roosevelt and from the U.S. Representative in India. Moreover since 1912 Tibet has been in fact independent and has conducted such relations as it has had with foreign countries without the mediation of the Chinese Government. Any limitation therefore of Tibetan autonomy to the maintenance of direct relations with His Majesty's Government and the Government of India and perhaps Nepal would be illogical, and by setting up a special position unknown to international practice would provided occasion for further Chinese pressure and would be unlikely to make for stability in the relations between Tibet and China or between China and India.

Suzerainty is hard to define. The dictionary definition would exclude the right of representation abroad, but the concept must be interpreted with regard to the factual position in any of circumstances. On this criterion, Chinese suzerainty over Tibet since 1912 has been nominal since it has involved the exercise by the Chinese Government of no control over either the internal affairs or the external relations of Tibet. It is not admitted by the Tibetans themselves on the ground that china, by declining to ratify the 1914 convention (which allowed for Chinese Suzerainty), had forgone the rights which would have accrued to her under it. The exchange of representatives between China and Lhasa has been effected but all the efforts to maintain Chinese face (amounting often to deliberates misrepresentation of fact e.g. the false Chinese account of the present Dalai Lama's inauguration) have not

sufficed to break down the independence which Lhasa has enjoyed over more than 30 years. Chinese suzerainty in fact is a relic to be recognized by no more than the observance of ceremonial formalities, if the Chinese Government can be persuaded to agree to leave to the Tibetan Government practical autonomy in their internal administration and freedom to conduct foreign relations at least on the present scale in return for an acknowledgment to Tibet and recognition by His Majesty's Government of Chinese suzerainty, it would be unnecessary to define in detail the exact significance to be attributed to that term.

11. The second point for consideration is how for His Majesty's Government and the Government of India should be prepared to go in support of Tibetan autonomy. In the opinion of the Government of India diplomatic pressure on the Chinese Government to admit Tibetan autonomy should be increased rather than relaxed at the present time when the Government of India are asserting their own rights in the McMahon areas and in the circumstances prevailing in Asia.

If the facts were known it is probable that the weight of world opinion would be heavily against the Chinese Government's claims over Tibet. In saying this it must be admitted that publicity for the Tibetan view has not been as effective as for that of the Chinese which is widely accepted, particularly in America, owing to misunderstanding of the real facts of the situation.

Judicious publicity abroad for the history and present facts of this case would be of assistance. The Tibetan Government have neither the means nor the experience to obtain this for themselves, but there would seem to be no reason why His Majesty's Government and the Government of India should not assist them. Efforts have already been made to secure presentation in America of a true picture of the state of affairs in Lhasa, but so persistent and wide spread has been the dissemination of Chinese claims that it will be

no easy matter to convince the world or their slender basis in reality. The Government of India's answer therefore to this second question is that greater diplomatic pressure should be exerted now than in the past on the Chinese Government to recognize full Tibetan autonomy, and that publicity should be given to the Tibetan case. The military aspect of the problem must await the result of the enquiry mentioned in paragraph 5.

12. The third point is the extent to which international discussion of the position of Tibet should be encouraged and the line to be taken by His Majesty's Government in any such discussion. History shows that attempts to secure a settlement between Tibet and China since 1914 either directly or through British mediation have failed. If the Generalissimo's book "China's Destiny" is to be taken as the text, there can be little doubt that Chinese imperialist and irredentist sentiment has hardened, and it is early to read his more recent expression of sympathy with the ideals of Tibetan autonomy as an exception to this impression. Chinese maneuvers last year seemed to be designed to persuade the Government of India to negotiate directly with China over the head of the Tibetans, and the Chinese have always refused to recognize or have any dealings with the Tibetan Foreign Bureau. It is perhaps unlikely that progress towards the recognition of real Tibetan autonomy will be made unless the matter can be brought before an international body. This is an event which the Chinese appear to fear and which their publicity seems to have been carefully designed to preclude, if possible. In 'China's Destiny' the author has revised Dr. Sun Yat Sen's racial theory in such a way as to seek to represent the Tibetans as springing from common stock with the Chinese, and the problem of Tibetan autonomy as a domestic matter for the Chinese themselves and no one else to settle. Assuming that the San Francisco Charter is to be a living instrument, the question is whether it would be expedient or effective to bring the case of

Tibet to the arbitrement of the United Nations organization. The Chinese would no doubt claim that the dispute was one of domestic jurisdiction and therefore excluded from the purview of the Charter. China also, as one of the Powers with a permanent seat on the Security Council, will be in a position to prevent any effective action being taken in the matter. On the other hand public ventilation of the whole case would give an opportunity of bringing the realities of the situation to light and should be of corresponding advantage to Tibet. The question is one on which the Government of India would wish to have His Majesty's Government's considered opinion in the light of the international situation as it develops in Asia and of the prospects of international discussion within the sphere of the San Francisco Charter. The ground might be cleared if His Majesty's Government could see their way to make an open declaration to the powers (possibly in response to the Generalissimo's speech of August 24<sup>th</sup> 1945) stating that it was their definite policy as well as that of the Government of India to maintain Tibetan autonomy and that they intended to do all in their power to do so. If such a declaration is to be made the sooner it is done the better, to counter the Chinese claim (implicit even in Chiang Kai Shek's declaration in favour of autonomy) that Tibet is part of China. Unless His Majesty's Government can make clear what the Tibetan Government's attitude is and how far they support it, there will be little hope of securing international co-operation in support of this policy.

13. To sum up, the views of the Government of India are as follows:

(1) The maintenance of the Tibetan buffer is a matter of the utmost importance for India both from the point of view of defense and in the interests of India's internal administration.

(2) Tibet should enjoy internal autonomy and the right to conduct direct foreign relations, recognizing Chinese suzerainty by more or less ceremonial formalities.

(3) Support for Tibetan autonomy should be by the strongest and most outspoken diplomatic pressure to be by increased at the present time (apart from other advantages, this would satisfy Tibet that our action in the McMahon area is only our assertion of our own treaty rights and in no way designed to break up the State of Tibet), by publicity for the realities of Tibet's position over the last 33 years, and by the supply of munitions and equipment if sought by the Tibetan Government.

(4) There may be advantage in bringing the position of Tibet before the United Nations, but it is realized that the Chinese may be able to render such a course ineffective. This matter, and the possibility of an open declaration by His Majesty's Government of their attitude in the Tibetan question, must be left to His Majesty's Government to determine.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your most obedient servant,

Olaf Caroe<sup>3</sup>

Secretary to the Government of India

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Olaf Caroe, ICS (Indian Civil Service) was Secretary in the External Affairs Department in 1945. Later, he became Governor of the North-West Frontier Province (from 1946 till before the Partition of India).

**Copy of Memorandum No.6904/I/MDI, dater the 18<sup>th</sup> May 1945 from  
the Joint Secretary to the Government of Department to the external  
Affairs department**

POLICY TOWARDS TIBET.

Reference E.A. Dept's u.o. no.961 CA/45 dated the 7<sup>th</sup> March 1945.

War department have reviewed the interests of the Government of India in TIBET from the point of view of defense in consultation with the General Staff and Air HQ., and have the following comments.

**1. Strategic value of Tibet as a buffer.**

In the past the physical difficulties of Tibet's mountains and high altitude plateau have given INDIA a valuable buffer against aggression. This however cannot be regarded as immutable. In the present war, the jungles on the N.E. FRONTIER and the deserts of LIBYA, previously considered to be military barriers have been overcome by modern equipment and modern inventions. We are faced with the increasingly rapid development of inventions such as rockets and jet-propelled bombs and also of rapid methods of road construction, air transportation and so on. These may reduce the value of the physical buffer: and make it all the more important to maintain as far as possible a political buffer. We do not think, therefore, that this is the moment to suggest giving up a hitherto useful barrier, still less let it fall into the hands of another nation capable of developing it into an off give base in its own time.

An autonomous and backward Tibet will serve to keep potentially aggressors at a distance from a large part of India's northern frontier. If a hostile power invaded Tibet, the undeveloped nature of the country would impose delay upon the aggressor, and so give India valuable time in which to make dispositions to meet the threat.

## **2. Danger from Russia and China**

(a) RUSSIA may not be an immediate danger to the Northern borders of INDIA, but there are indications that her recession from SINKIANG is not so permanent as at first thought. If Russia gained control of Tibet, her great material development would enable her to take full advantage of modern inventions and this would create a serious potential threat to the security of India.

(b) There is ever indication that CHINA hopes to establish eventual control in Tibet, and although there is little likelihood of the Chinese attempting military operations at present, they may well embark upon some form of active penetration at the end of the war with Japan.

(c) CHINA constitutes the more immediate threat to the independence of Tibet, but the RUSSIAN threat is potentially a far greater one for India.

## **3. Effect on India's Defense Problem.**

While it is admitted that the terrain is such that a direct invasion of INDIA from TIBET is unlikely to present a real menace in the immediate future, it is clear that if Tibet lost her autonomy either to China or to Russia, India would have to keep adequate forces for "watch and ward" along her Northern frontier. This would be a new and possibly quite considerable military commitment, (particularly in the realm of air forces) which it is obviously desirable to avoid. It would moreover almost certainly become a growing commitment, especially if Russia were to be the power in control of Tibet. Approximately 500 miles of the Indo-Tibetan frontier is in fact, Nepalese territory. If NEPAL was to maintain regular troops on her Northern frontier it is possible that fewer Gurkhas would be available for service outside Nepal. This might seriously affect the economy of Nepal which, at present derives great benefit from the employment of its surplus manpower abroad.

#### **4. British Support to Tibet.**

We feel that Tibetan autonomy can best be maintained by strong diplomatic support, coupled with the provision of such arms and ammunition as the Tibetan may ask us to supply. During the past 30 years India has supplied Tibet with some 16000 rifles, 50 LMGs<sup>4</sup>, 19 mountain guns of various types, together with ammunition. Any further requests by the Tibetan Government should be sympathetically considered as a means of extending British influence, fostering good relations and encouraging the Tibetans to resist stoutly any experiments in penetration by another power.

It must be realized that we could do little militarily to help Tibet if she were seriously attacked. Tibet is a most unsuitable country in which to deploy a field army; hence any direct assistance would probably be confined to such Air support as could be given from bases in India.

#### **5. Conclusions.**

(a) Although it is admitted that there is no immediate threat of the invasion of India through Tibet, we are very strongly opposed on military grounds to allowing a natural defensive barrier to pass under the control of any potentially hostile power.

(b) If either China or Russia gained control of Tibet then India would immediately have to provide adequate forces to maintain "watch and ward" along her northern frontiers, with the prospect of these forces having to be substantially increased as time went on. It is therefore, most desirable from the military point of view that the autonomy of Tibet should be maintained and potential aggressors kept at a distance for as long as possible.

(c) Tibetan autonomy can harm no one; it has been in existence for the last 34 years and the Tibetan themselves, wish it to continue. We should support

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<sup>4</sup> Light Machine Guns

this desire for autonomy by diplomatic action and encourage Tibet to preserve her integrity by the supply of arms and ammunition.