



## **Continuity and Change in India's Early Tibet Policy: 1947 to 1960<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

India's sovereignty and membership of the international system in 1947 was preceded by at least three decades of vigorous participation in various international fora, both as a movement for independence and as a colony. An 'anomalous international person' (Poulose 1970) from before independence, it followed that the postcolonial Indian state's stands on anticolonialism, decolonisation and self-determination of peoples' was a central plank of its foreign policy. Apart from its obvious moral legitimacy amidst the rhetorical force of the self-determination popularised by Woodrow Wilson (Manela 2005), such strategy was also soundly in tune with third world solidarity, a force bearing influence much beyond its means in the international arena.

Such solidarity, however, was categorical that decolonisation was to be achieved from the first world, or the west. It lacked a consensual frame of reference to deal with those instances of national self-determination that emerged against postcolonial states themselves. Impelled by the anxieties over territorial sovereignty of other newly-independent members, such solidarity required that postcolonial states affirm a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of one another.

Tibet, agitating to self-determine against a Republican and later Communist China, typifies in the words of Fred Halliday (2008) 'postcolonial sequestration',



and for this reason is an especially potent site to understand the underlying characteristics of India's foreign policy. Tibet tests the tension between anticolonialism and non-interference in Indian foreign policy over and beyond many other cases of such sequestration because of its geographic, cultural, economic, and British-led strategic links with the Indian sub-continent.

The Indian state's dealing of the Tibet question can be understood through various conceptual and historical silos spanning at least over a century and is intimately related to the unresolved border question and overall Sino-Indian relations. The article, however, concentrates on the early years of India's foreign policy up to 1960 in order to delineate the formative tenets of Indian foreign policy vis-à-vis Tibet. Specifically, it examines the extent of continuity and change between the British Indian Empire and the early Indian state's dealing with Tibet. The nature of Indian foreign policy of this period, it is argued, is crucial to understanding how the trajectory of the Sino-Indian-Tibetan triangle played out over the next half century.

The article navigates the readers through five sections. First, it considers the period of British involvement in Tibet and with China. It visits the consolidation of the British Indian Empire's strategic and economic interests in Tibet from the Lhasa Convention of 1904 up to the semi-aborted Simla Convention of 1914. Tracing the nature of British involvement in the interwar period followed by the outbreak of the second world war, the consolidation of the Republican Chinese Government and the looming shadow of Communism over China, it examines the confusion among British ranks regarding the nature of British interests and thus the appropriate nature of British policy towards Tibet. Second, it focuses on this increasingly fluid nature of British Indian strategic interests, which along with four decades of exclusive economic access, unique customary relations and a dubiously demarcated Indo-Tibetan border, along the McMahon line, are bequeathed to the newly formed Indian state.

Against the few outstanding aspects of early Indian Tibet policy identified above, the article thirdly traces the Indian response to the Communist 'liberation' or takeover of Tibet. Further, it visits the various factors involved in India's first decisive action towards Tibet and China, in the form of the Panch-sheel Agreement of 1954. Fourth, it interrogates the Indian state's behaviour between 1954 and 1959, when the flight of the Dalai Lama, the consequent internationalisation of the Tibet question and the exacerbation of the border dispute were anticipated and finally confronted. India's stand on the representation of the Tibet question at the United Nations between 1956 and 1960 brings out the tension between non-interference and anticolonialism in Indian foreign policy, while being heavily influenced by the legacy of the erstwhile Empire. Visiting the dynamics, circumstances, and consequences of the



Sino-Indian war of 1962 fought over the Tibetan border is beyond the scope of this article, concerned as it is specifically with the relationship between British Indian and postcolonial foreign policy of the early years. Fifth and last, the article concludes with an analysis of the extent and nature of continuity and change in Indian foreign policy and its centrality to the overall nature of the India-Tibet-China conundrum.

### **Consolidation of British Indian interests in Tibet**

The Chinese and Tibetan Empires have historically been linked to each other through ties of patrimony, trade, conquest, and ecclesiastical politics. Both Chinese and Tibetan historiography note the ad hoc nature of the influence each has had on the other through millennia. It is interestingly noted by Sardar Panikkar, postcolonial India's ambassador first to Nationalist and then Communist China, that for at least seven decades preceding the twentieth century, Chinese political influence in, and power over, Tibet was negligible. After the earliest British trade inquiries to Tibet commissioned by Warren Hastings in 1774 came to naught, the British signed a treaty with the Chinese Manchu Emperor at Chefoo in 1885-86, securing rights to travel to Tibet by way of China. That this did not yield the Tibetan government's cooperation and Tibet remained closed to foreigners for the next three decades, was further proof of the absence of Chinese writ over Tibet. This was echoed by Lord Curzon while commissioning the Younghusband expedition that reached Lhasa through a long and violent incursion in 1904. He held that '[...] China's sovereignty over Tibet is a constitutional fiction, a political affectation maintained because of its convenience to both parties' (in Arpi 1999: 129).

Younghusband's departure was followed by the signing of the Lhasa Convention in 1905, whereby British secured exclusive trading and transit rights to and from Tibet by way of British India. The 13th Dalai Lama closely followed the gradual swallowing up of Central Asia into British and Russian spheres of influence in pursuit of the 'Great Game' and had already explored an opening with Russia. Now that the British had secured a foothold, the Lama had to contend with China bent upon consolidating its influence over Tibet. Even as the Tibetan military and the Khampa warriors fought off Chinese incursions, in 1906 the British signed a convention with China over Tibet, followed by another one with Russia in 1907. The Anglo-Chinese convention was designed to exclude China from the strict trade conditionalities imposed upon Tibet in the Lhasa Convention. The Convention with Russia was further designed to secure a stalemate in the Great Game, wherein both parties, in a 'self-denying ordinance'<sup>2</sup> agreed not to hold direct political negotiations with Tibet by bypassing China. In this way, the first international treaties involving Tibet did



not recognise any existing Chinese claims over it; instead by legalising exclusive Chinese influence over Tibet they created an incentive for China to make good such claims on the ground (Lamb 1989:9f.; Kadian 1999: 57).

This was attempted by Zhao Ehrfeng, the decaying Qing Dynasty's appointee to Tibet as Amban, or diplomatic representative. Intermittently through the years 1905 to 1911 he led a violent and genocidal military campaign to reduce Eastern Tibet to a Manchu province and directly challenged the political legitimacy of the Dalai Lama, who was forced to oversee a military counter-campaign from exile in Darjeeling. Captured and killed by the Republican revolutionaries in 1911 during the overthrow of the Manchu regime, this occasioned the Dalai Lama to declare Independence from China in 1913. The new Republican regime responded by inviting the Tibetan sovereign back to Lhasa, promising to restore all past offices and titles, with the express aim of maintaining the suzerainty of China over Tibet as had been secured in 1906. The Dalai Lama's reply indicated a fundamental shift in dynamics,

[...] it is not possible for China and Tibet to have the same relationship as before. In order for us to negotiate, a third party is necessary. Therefore, we should both request the British Government to act as intermediary. Our future policy will be based on the outcome of discussions between ourselves, the Chinese and the British. (in Dhondup 1986: 25)

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The Lama's long stay in British India and hospitality by Viceroy Lord Minto no doubt influenced his position, but it was also a pragmatic move, taking cognisance that Tibet's feudal and religiously occupied social system could not militarily sustain the proclamation of independence (Goldstein 1993: 68). The Simla Conferences were then convened through 1913 and 1914, wherein, for the three parties, Tibet, China and Britain to participate as political equals, Republican China was forced by the British to revoke a decree declaring Tibet to be a Chinese province. In return, Britain accorded international recognition to the Republican regime (Lin 2004: 27).

Simla held differing priorities for each of the three actors. A greatly war weakened China reluctantly participated, in order to once more have their suzerainty over Tibet recognised internationally. The Lamaist Tibetan Government sought to protect its and exemplary degree of autonomy by using Britain as leverage against China. Britain was keen to freeze a status quo along the northeastern border of its empire that would keep the Chinese at bay, and Russians out (Raghavan 2010: 228). It was decided to carve Tibet into spheres of influence. China would have direct influence over Inner Tibet, and de jure influence over Outer Tibet, and in return would have to recognise political autonomy of the entire Tibetan plateau. The British state offered to police this guarantee whereby British recognition of Chinese suzerainty would be



conditional on Chinese recognition of Tibetan autonomy. In return, Tibet tacitly allowed Britain to usurp some of its traditional territory to the south and conceded to the McMahon line.<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese finally initialled but refused to sign the document, ostensibly objecting to the boundaries between inner and outer Tibet and between inner Tibet and China. On the insistence of British political officers Charles Bell and Henry McMahon, in 1914 the tripartite conferences resulted in a bipartite Convention, with Tibet and Britain declaring that, 'so long as the Government of China withholds signature to the aforesaid Convention, she will be debarred from the enjoyment of all privileges accruing there-from' (in Lamb 1966: 624).

The British Government realised that its representatives in India, by concluding a bipartite agreement with Tibet had violated the 1906 Anglo-Chinese, but more importantly the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, given that the First World War was already underway. Immediately, it put the Simla Convention, maps and all, on the backburner. Nor did Britain move to capture all territories south of the vaguely drawn McMahon line. China and Tibet returned to claiming control and legitimacy on the ground, inch by inch through force. In 1916, on Chinese and Tibetan request, the British volunteered to have their representative Eric Teichman negotiate a boundary between inner and outer Tibet, without any reference to the Simla Convention. In 1919, the British attempted reminding China of the Convention and the necessity of the three parties dealing with each other on its basis, but China stalled further discussions (Lin 2004: 29).

In this way, Britain perfected a delicate hands-on, hands-off strategy for the next two decades, interested in the final instance, only in maintaining a buffer over its northeastern frontier. Economic assistance to Tibet began in 1921, military assistance, conditional upon use for self-defence began in 1932, a British Mission was opened in Lhasa in 1936, Britain was represented at the passing of the 13th Dalai Lama in 1933, and at the installation of the 14th in 1940. However, Britain often wriggled out of Tibetan requests for negotiating with the Republican Chinese Government claiming that, 'further pressure on the Chinese to accept mediation would be unlikely to bear fruit'.<sup>4</sup>

The Simla Convention however, along with the McMahon line map was brought out from oblivion in 1937, with British political officer Olaf Caroe noticing the discrepancy between the maps printed in the Gazette and that contained in the Convention. He pulled back all copies from circulation, inserted the Simla maps, and backdated the copies to 1929. This was done not so much to ascertain full territorial control along the McMahon border, but to forestall the occasion for China and a marauding Japan to march upon the northeast frontier,



as the League of Nations failed, and the world marched on to another all-consuming war (Gupta 1974: 770).

Even as the Convention was dusted off the shelves, through the years 1935-47 there was much internal discussion and dissent between British representatives in Lhasa, Delhi, and the Foreign Office in London as to the nature of British interests vis-à-vis Tibet, and thus the appropriate policy. Discussions ranged over the meaning of suzerainty—it was variously described as recognising a minimum degree of Chinese overlordship and 'saving China's face', as a, 'conveniently vague word which should satisfy all,'<sup>5</sup> and akin to the relations Britain had with its Commonwealth, or the status of self-governing dominions.<sup>6</sup> This much was ascertained and backed by Prime Minister Anthony Eden's communication to the Chinese Foreign Minister TV Soong in 1943, that Britain's recognition of Chinese suzerainty was conditional to the Chinese observance of Tibetan autonomy.<sup>7</sup> Those stationed in Lhasa and Delhi urged for a more adventurous course of action. Peel, for instance, suggests in a letter for Olaf Caroe in the External Affairs Department in 1943:

[...] if it becomes clear that the Chinese contemplate encroaching on Tibetan autonomy we should warn them that H.M.G. and the Government of India would in those circumstances have to ask themselves whether in the changed conditions of today it would be right for them to continue to recognise even a theoretical status of subservience for a people who desire to be free and have in fact maintained their freedom for more than thirty years.<sup>8</sup>

However, as the second world war drew down, Britain's military and economic strength, and its priorities vis-à-vis its colonial possessions were drastically reformulated and its Tibetan policy suitably put in quagmire. Lhasa and the British Indian Government still toyed with the idea of involving the US government in the future of Tibet,<sup>9</sup> while the British government satisfied itself by the declaration made by Chiang Kai Shek of the Nationalist Chinese Government in 1945, whereby he sought to apply the spirit of the Atlantic Charter to the racial problems of Asia. While promising a very high degree of autonomy, he pledged to consider sovereign independence for Tibet provided the latter proved, 'it could consolidate its independent position and protect its continuity so as not to become another Korea.'<sup>10</sup>

Since at least the duration of the Second World War, Tibet had been attempting to prove such capacity, and thus performed sovereignty through various means. Having violently evicted a Chinese road survey group from Inner Tibet, in 1943, the Lhasa Government opened a Bureau of Foreign Affairs, asking the Chinese to deal with this office and not the Cabinet. It sought British help in mobilising a voice in the post-war peace conferences, securing only a vague



assurance of 'diplomatic support' (Shakya 1999: 7). Through 1947 and 1948, it despatched a trade mission, to India, US, and Britain, ostensibly to bring back currency in exchange for Tibetan wool, and to back up Tibetan currency by purchasing gold in the international market. The thrust however, was to present credentials of sovereignty to the world at large.

### **Transfer of power, reformulation of priorities**

It was in these circumstances that the transfer of power in India took place, first to an interim, then a sovereign government. There was some discussion in British circles, now that India was to bequeath all treaty rights and obligations, over what Lhasa could expect from Delhi. It was agreed between the interim Indian Government and London that under international law, India was obliged to respect only those aspects of the treaties that had a local and territorial aspect, the rest it would inherit, but could do with them as it pleased.<sup>11</sup>

Nehru, in his capacity as the head of the interim Indian Government, did invite Tibet alongside China to the Asian Relations Conference [ARC] in March, and April 1947. However, the shadow of the Indian and Chinese giants loomed over and intimidated smaller Asian powers, and vague assurances of support to liberation movements 'wherever possible' did not assuage Tibet (Sharma 2004: 54). Tibetan estimation is further confirmed in a note sent by the Deputy Secretary to the Government of India in the Ministry of External Affairs, to the Political Officer in Sikkim, immediately after the ARC detailing India's categorical take on the matter of Tibetan sovereignty vis-à-vis China:

The conditions in which India's well-being may be secured and the full evolution be achieved of her inherent capacity to emerge as a potent but benevolent force in world affairs, particularly in Asia, demands not merely the development of international unity and strength but also the maintenance of friendly relations with her neighbours. To prejudice her relations with so important a Power as China by aggressive support of unqualified Tibetan independence (for which, whatever may have been the situation earlier, there has in the past year or two been little positive sign of ardour in Lhasa) is therefore a policy with few attractions. It follows that while the Government of India are glad to recognise and wish to see Tibetan autonomy maintained, they are not prepared to do more than encourage this in a friendly manner and are certainly not disposed to take any initiative which might bring India into conflict with China on this issue. The attitude which they propose to adopt may be described as that of a benevolent spectator, ready at all times - should the opportunity occur- to use their good offices to further a mutually satisfactory settlement between China and Tibet [...] In regard to the Indo-Tibetan boundary, the Government of India stand by McMahon line and will not tolerate incursions into India such as that which recently occurred in the Siang valley. They would however at all times be prepared to discuss in a friendly way with



China and Tibet any rectification of the frontier urged on reasonable grounds by any parties to the abortive Simla Conference of 1914.<sup>12</sup>

Several aspects in this note by the fledgling and scarcely experienced interim government stand out for their clarity and resolve, which, walking in the footsteps of the long and convoluted nature of British involvement in Tibet, the postcolonial Indian state would subsequently dilute and obscure. First, paramount importance is attached to India's anticipated role in world affairs; being militarily weak, such 'potency' and 'benevolence' would necessarily be normative in nature. Second, the appreciation of Tibet being a potential deal-breaker in relations with China is already forcefully present. Third, the conditional nature of the recognition of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, in return for Chinese recognition of Tibetan autonomy is no longer the case. Unlike what was conveyed by London to Nanking as late as 1943, India would not venture beyond being a 'benevolent spectator', at most rendering its 'good offices' for Tibet and China to strike a deal between themselves. Fourth and last is the curious case of forcefully asserting territorial rights accruing to India from the McMahon line drawn up at the Simla Conference, even as the Conference itself is recognised as 'abortive'!

That early relations between the Tibetan and Indian Governments were anything but cordial is revealed in the stream of correspondence addressed by Lhasa to the British asking nervously whether it could not just keep corresponding with Great Britain instead.<sup>13</sup> One of the first correspondences between Lhasa and New Delhi revolved around the former demanding the return of those territories south of the McMahon line that were occupied 'under the former Government of India', as a preliminary to a new treaty.<sup>14</sup> The areas demanded included Sikkim, Bhutan, the Ladakh region and the entire district of Darjeeling, claims beyond that of the Chinese as well (Patterson 1963: 94). India would respond by remonstrating that Tibet continue its extant relations with India if it desired that trade and commerce continue (Jingwu 1953). It renegotiated treaty arrangements with Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim (Kalha 2012: 10) and in early 1951 physically 'occupied' Tawang and adjacent areas (Anand 2012).

The Tibetan trade delegation of Cabinet members, traveling on Lhasa issued travel documents, arrived in India towards the end of 1947. In light of growing Chinese military presence at the borders of inner Tibet, it tried to broker a deal with the Chinese representative in New Delhi but was unsuccessful. Nehru, too directed the delegation back to Peking, insisting that, 'we cannot give any help in the event of an invasion. Nor can any other country' (in Kalha 2012: 11).

The policy of friendly mediation and benevolent spectatorship was however upheld by India's ambassador to Nationalist China, KM Panikkar. He officially asked the Chinese to not adopt a bellicose attitude and to respect Tibetan





'sovereignty' (Adel 1984: 100), while privately assuring that India would not make much of Chinese actions in Tibet (in Kalha 2012: 11). Panikkar held that, owing to the peculiarly volatile situation in China, 'the British policy of looking upon Tibet as an area in which we had special political interests could not be maintained' (Panikkar 1955: 102). On the other hand, until at least the first few months of its independent existence, India did, in line with its British predecessor, and contrary to the stated position of Nehru, and privately held position by Panikkar, continue to offer help to Lhasa, in the form of the sale of arms. (Shakya 1999: 12f.). According to Garver, China was greatly weakened by the civil war, and in a state of unrest during the Communist Revolution, it was assumed in India that moral and diplomatic support, along with a small amount of military assistance would be sufficient for Tibet to maintain her autonomy and continue to function as a buffer (Garver 2001: 49f.). This was unsurprising given that India continued to retain, in the first few years the services of Hugh Richardson, the head the British Mission in Lhasa, the solitary case where a colonial officer was retained by the postcolonial state after independence (Pardesi 2011: 98).

This examination of the fluid years immediately following the Second World War, when the fate of all players—Britain, India, China, and Tibet—hung in perilous balance with each other, reveals the peculiar foundations of the Indian state's Tibet policy. On the one hand it was a clear rhetorical effort to distance India, its international destiny, and its larger strategic concerns from that of Britain in light of the anticolonial sentiment and the decolonising world order. On the other hand, colonial customary and geostrategic concerns demanded that India play the parts both of itself, and its predecessor when it came to Tibet. Indian analysts have interpreted this to mean that in the early years after independence, the Indian state internalised the British line of maintaining its recognition of Chinese suzerainty as *conditional* upon the Chinese recognition of Tibetan autonomy (Chakravarty 1968: 450; Kalha 2012 et al.). However, by 1949, this was a line that was neither pursued in India, nor in Britain itself (Goldstein 2007: 67). It is important to appreciate this in order to accurately place India's subsequent reactions to the Communist take-over/liberation of Tibet in 1950.

### **The liberation of Tibet and the Panchsheel Agreement**

To rid ordinary Tibetans of religiously justified feudalism and oppression was the stated Marxist line, and to bring Tibet back into the nation's fold the Chinese line. Post the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China, Mao's army entered Tibet in 1950 to realise both these aims. With the certainty of now facing a formidable revolutionary war machinery along its ill-defined border,



Nehru's first response was, '[f]rom whom they are going to liberate Tibet is not quite clear' (India, Lok Sabha Debates, vol. VI. Part II: 1257). The Government's press statement further stated, '[i]n the present context of world events, the invasion of Chinese troops cannot but be regarded as deplorable and, in the considered judgement of the Indian Government, not in the interest of China or of peace' (in Panikkar 1955: 105). Home Minister Sardar Patel sounded the ominous warning: '[...] for the first time, after centuries, India's defence has to concentrate on two fronts simultaneously' (Patel 1950 in SPC 171: 335-42). Nehru confided similar sentiments to his non-aligned ally, Nasser of Egypt (in Abraham 2015: 10) and ordered the consolidation of India's meagre coffers to improve roads and communications in the North Eastern Frontier Province [NEFA] (SWJN SS, vol. 13 2005: 260). The Presidential statement was blunt as well: '[...] India must [...] necessarily concern herself with what happened in Tibet, and hope that the autonomy of this peaceful country will be preserved' (Parliamentary Debates: 1950 in Jetley 1968: 565).

Given the Indian Government's previous reluctance to involve itself in Tibetan attempts to maintain its de-facto independence or negotiate a more stringent autonomy, it can only be surmised that Indian lamentations over the loss of Tibetan agency was not so much motivated by humanitarian considerations but by strategic ones. And yet the language employed was the one then in vogue—that of self-determination. Responding to the Chinese Government's accusations that India, by vocally protesting the liberation, obstructed, 'the exercise of its sovereign rights in Tibet' (Goldstein 2007: 74), Nehru retorted:

I see no difficulty in saying to the Chinese Government that whether you have suzerainty over Tibet or sovereignty over Tibet, surely, according to any principles [...] the last voice in regard to Tibet should be the voice of the people of Tibet and of nobody else. (Parliamentary Debates 1950 in TPPRC 2006: 8)

This knee-jerk reaction to a strategic and security challenge was quickly overcome by more sober assessments of the Indian state's options. There was considerable difference of opinion with the Cabinet and the Foreign Office on how the Chinese must be dealt with, and on no other issue did Nehru consult as many persons before coming to a policy decision (Sen 1968: 527; Raghavan 2010: 233-7). Primary consideration was the remoteness of Tibet and the Indian state's inability to mount a military challenge to renegotiate the buffer (Panikkar 1955: 67f.). According to Topgyal, at stake was also 'Nehru's dream of a Sino-Indian, anti-imperialist, non-aligned Asian alternative to Soviet and American superpowers' (2009: 224). In this pursuit Nehru had relinquished a seat in the United Nation's Security Council, he had also rejected Patel's advice of making a clean break with China and aligning with the United States instead (SWJN SS,



vol. 29 Part 1 2005: 231). Nehru had confided to VP Menon and Panikkar that Indian mitigation of China's international pariah status would buy it the right to speak with China 'frankly' about its 'internal' issues (SWJN SS, vol. 15 Part 1 2005: 429, 443). It was concluded therefore that the real protection India could seek along the border was, 'some kind of understanding with China,' comprising of conciliation and appeasement (SWJN SS-, vol. 15, Part 2, 2005: 342-7; Pardesi 2011: 114).

Appeasement ironically took the form of the Indian Government retracting from all its commitments, whether customary, or following from treaty obligations, towards Tibet. The India-China Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India was signed in April 1954, the preamble of which elucidated the five principles of peaceful coexistence, lending it the moniker the Panchsheel Agreement. Referencing Tibet as a 'region of China' in a new international order that recognised only sovereignty and not suzerainty, the former autonomy of Tibet, whether rhetoric or substantive, was finally put to rest by the Indian Government. It was claimed that the 17 Point Agreement signed by the representatives of the 14th Dalai Lama, and Beijing in 1951 made it possible for India to close such a deal with China. The Trade Agreement also demanded that India withdraw from all trade privileges that Britain had secured during the 1904 Lhasa Convention, and which were reiterated in the 1914 Simla Convention. As late as 1948, India had maintained that these were 'natural rights' that grew out of usage with neighbours. These rights were now declared to be relics of British imperialism, that India must give up as a matter of principle (Thorpe 1962: 37; TPPRC 2006: 31).

Anticolonial rhetoric aside, the Nehru Government's motivations to enter into such an agreement stemmed from its efforts to remove any cause for friction along the Indian version of the Indo-Tibetan border, which was the McMahon line. It was hoped that one of the five Panchsheel principles, 'mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity', would subtly but decisively achieve Indian aims. Controversially, Nehru disregarded all advice on raising the boundary question formally during the Panchsheel negotiations, insisting to his interlocutors that should the issue be raised by the Chinese, 'we should express our surprise and point out that it is a settled issue' (SWJN SS, vol. 24, 2005: 598f.). Contrary to Indian calculations, Norbu argues that China saw India's acceptance of its claims to Tibet as a strengthening of its own boundary claims vis-à-vis India (Norbu 2001: 286).

Moreover, the Indian and Chinese Governments both obscured the fact that the 1954 Trade Agreement was in fact one of the clauses of the 'abortive' Simla Convention. Michael van Walt van Praag points out that the denial of the legality of the Simla Convention, not only negates India's claims to the legality of the



McMahon line, but it renders null and void the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement as well (van Praag 2014). Through this tenuous link between the Agreements of 1904, 1906, 1914, and 1954 the Indian state sought to replicate in postcolonial conditions the buffer function of Tibet between India and China.

The Government's domestic detractors however, were not convinced. The Praja Socialist Party mouthpiece observed that, 'it is rather an irony that a treaty that guarantees between India and China peaceful co-existence and mutual respect for each other's territory should be the first international document to set the seal on the abolition of Tibet's autonomy' (in Ekka 1994: 45). The Pioneer held that 'the five high sounding principles might be scattered to the high Tibetan winds' (The Pioneer 1954 in Jetley 1968: 570).

Considerations of military capability and territorial security, and the practical imperatives of the non-aligned policy explain compellingly India's handling of Tibet as of 1954. There were however, less-visible, but considerably significant additional factors that went into India's calculations. Externally, it was tied up with the Nehruvian Government's desire to extend its influence in world affairs, most immediately by mediating in the Korean War, in which India argued on behalf of China. According to Kalha, not only did Nehru seek to prevent the Tibetan issue from getting mixed up in the Cold War, he was also prepared to 'sacrifice' Tibet in exchange for his shot at successful mediation (in Kalha 2012: 12). This, according to Earl Thorpe, '[...] introduced a false commitment into India's policy' (Thorp 1962: 40).

Furthermore, the way the Indian Government handled China's contested claim for Tibet would have direct repercussions for the fate of contested territories within India's own borders. These were most visible in the case of the Naga national movement in northeast India and in the question of Kashmir. In the words of Chanakya Sen, 'The moral indignation of India at the Chinese threat to move the PLA into Tibet, was [...] somewhat overdone because India had itself already used force against the Nagas and in Kashmir' (Sen 1968: 527). Unlike the Naga national movement which the Assam Police, and then the Indian Army, Government and Intelligence suppressed with an iron hand, Kashmir was already internationalised and thus became an especially raw nerve. The United Nations, in the 1950's, was overwhelmingly in favour of the Pakistani Government's line on Kashmir, and Nehru was already agonised by Zhou Enlai's non-committal views on the matter, including hints that China could broker a deal with Pakistan over Kashmir. Post facto, by relinquishing Tibet in 1954, Nehru obtained Chinese cooperation on Kashmir till at least 1962 (Garver 2002: 129).

An examination of India's handling of the Tibet issue post the Communist takeover of Tibet reveals that India's primary considerations were the maintenance of its strategic and security interests. Additional factors were India's



agenda of international non-aligned leadership, its own contested legitimacy in northeast and in Kashmir and its intimate links with the contested sovereignties in the entire South Asian neighbourhood. The former concerns were common to its British predecessors, the latter were peculiarly postcolonial.

However, the means the Indian Government employed to justify its ends were remarkably similar to that of the British. Refusing Tibet in 1950 from bringing up their case at the UN, Nehru insisted that any Indian involvement was likely to irk China and be counterproductive for Tibetans themselves. Refusing to back El Salvador's raising of the Tibet question at the UN [a country that usually acted as proxy for the US] in 1951, Indian representatives sought to stall any discussion in the General Assembly, insisting it would get in the way of achieving a bilateral agreement through peaceful means (Bhatnagar 1983: 20f.). The old British ploy of localising Tibetan politics and confining it to buffer status was at play here, only this time couched in anticolonial sentiment. 'The House will remember', remonstrated Nehru in early 1951 in the Parliament, '[...], that we were grieved at a certain turn of events in Tibet but we did not allow that to affect our policy or our desire to maintain friendly relations with China' (India, Parliamentary Debates 1951: col 2701). The strategic expectation of such moves according to Garver, was the expectation that, 'Beijing could be induced to repay Indian friendship by abstaining from a military build-up in Tibet' (Garver 2011: 104). The flight of the Dalai Lama from Tibet half a decade later would upset all such calculations.

### **Flight of the Tibetan sovereign and internationalisation of the Tibet question**

The 14th Dalai Lama's first visit to India was scheduled in 1956, for a landmark Buddhist Conference, and the invitation was backed by the Indian Government. Given that the 17 Point Agreement of 1951 was increasingly in shambles, and there was a growing nationalist resurgence in Tibet that could not be fully contained by the religious clergy, the Chinese Government was extremely wary of the India visit. Zhou Enlai feared that the Lama would heed the advice of his deposed council of ministers and seek asylum in India, like his predecessor had successfully done in 1910. Nehru disabused the Dalai Lama of any such expectation, insisting he, 'would not like to take any step that might aggravate the situation' (New York Times 1 April 1959 cited in Yadav 1979: 49) and advised him to head back to Tibet.

While this was markedly different from how the British would have reacted half a century earlier, Nehru simultaneously undertook two other measures that were imitative of British policy. Firstly, he secured an assurance from Zhou Enlai that the reforms [which were causing the repression and consequent resistance



in Tibet] would be delayed for a decade more if necessary (Shakya 1999: 148-59). Secondly, and in contravention to all fears of 'taking any step that might aggravate the situation', Nehru oversaw the build-up of a small but determined effort by the exiled Tibetan Chushi Gandruk group to keep up the armed resistance inside Tibet from Kalimpong, immediately south of the McMahon line. While Nehru refuted in Parliament all allegations of harbouring anti-China activities from Indian territory, he did not seek to curb these diaspora activities as long as they did not act too openly (Hoffman 2006: 179). According to BN Mullik, the Intelligence Bureau Chief and Nehru's confidant, the latter continued to hold out the hope, like the British, that the Chinese had been unable to completely subdue Tibetans for the past 1000 years and would still not be able to do so. Thus, apart from pursuing a policy of conciliation, appeasement, benevolent spectatorship and occasional mediation, the Indian Government also kept open the option of strategic destabilisation of Chinese efforts at political and military consolidation of Tibet (Mullik 1971: 180).

Such destabilisation quickly resulted in the complete inability of the Dalai Lama led Preparatory Committee for the Autonomous Region of Tibet [PCART], that had succeeded the 17 Point Agreement, from being able to control either the Khampa warriors, the laymen of Lhasa or their own armed entourage from openly rebelling against the Communist Government. With the turmoil reaching a boiling point, the Dalai Lama secretly fled the Norbulingka Palace on 17 March 1959. On 30 March, the Dalai Lama's entourage was received at Chuthangmu by the Indian army and government representatives. The Lama then formally repudiated the 17 Point Agreement. Stating that the Agreement was, 'imposed by the Chinese in accordance with their own desires and has been violated [...] by themselves, thus giving rise to a contradiction', (Shakya 1999: 223) he soon went on to declare that, 'Wherever I am, accompanied by my Government, the Tibetan people recognise us as the Government by law' (Moraes 1960: 30).

Such a turn of events landed India's policy calculations in a soup. Nehru assumed he could pull off aiding resistance inside Tibet but did not savour either the externalisation of the movement or India's overt involvement in it. While receiving the Dalai Lama as a 'very important religious dignitary', the Indian Government was quick to clarify that it did not recognise any such Tibetan-Government-in-Exile. The Chinese however, launched a volley of no-holds barred accusations against India. For Mao, India wanted to turn Tibet into a protectorate or a buffer state, completely under Indian influence. Therefore, India and Nehru personally were to blame for the Tibet uprising (Garver 2011: 104f.). Deng Xiaoping claimed that India continued to supply Tibet with arms via Nepal and that the, 'Indian consulate in Lhasa took a direct part in organising the revolt' (in Andropov 1959). Zhou Enlai, even before the Dalai Lama had arrived, accused India of masterminding the revolt from Kalimpong (in Thorp 1962: 63).



On the other hand, the humanitarian dimension of the crisis had become too great for the Indian state to ignore. According to Chinese accounts, while some 80,000 people managed to cross over into India following the exit of the Dalai Lama, approximately 87,000 Tibetans were killed in the resistance with the Chinese PLA over the next few months.<sup>15</sup> This caused a furore among Indian masses, the Parliament, and the media. Against popular calls in the Parliament, that the ending of the 17 Point Agreement meant the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement could be disposed with as well, and India must confront China head-on, Nehru insisted that the trade agreement was 'based not so much on what the other country does, but on its inherent rightness [...] it would be harmful from every point of view to change that policy' (Lok Sabha Debates in TPPRC 2006: 74).

Walking the tightrope between India's geostrategic and territorial imperatives, the stated commitment to humanitarianism, anticolonialism, but also non-interference, and the centrality of China to its non-aligned politics, brought forth the latent contradictions in India's foreign policy. Nehru further attempted conciliation by censuring the Parliament from discussing Tibet altogether: '[...] a general discussion of events which are happening in another country would be a bad precedent which may have far reaching consequences' (Lok Sabha Debates in TPPRC 2006: 18). On the other hand, Nehru himself was forced to set such a precedent! Responding to a Parliamentary discussion of Chinese press statements, Nehru responded decisively—

To say that a number of "upper strata reactionaries" in Tibet were solely responsible for this appears to be an extraordinary simplification of a complicated situation. Even according to the accounts received through Chinese sources, the revolt in Tibet was of considerable magnitude and the basis of its must have been a strong feeling of nationalism which affects not only upper-class people but others also. (Lok Sabha Debates in TPPRC 2006: 49)

Soon thereafter, reacting to continuous Chinese warnings against bringing up Tibet in the Indian Parliament, Nehru retorted that, 'This Parliament is not going to be limited in the exercise of its right of discussion, saying, action, or anything, by any external or internal authority, whoever it may be' (Lok Sabha Debates 1959 in TPPRC 2006: 26). This however, did not stop the domestic constituency from demanding that India break with China. As the Hindustan Times eloquently put it—'After Tibet they are bound to ask if there was wisdom in our counsel. It is a fair question and we shall not retain many friends by shrinking from an answer. We need a realistic assessment of the basis of our foreign policy' (Hindustan Times 1959, March 30 in Thorp 1962: 64).



Nehru finally explained that India's policy was governed by three factors. These were the preservation of the security and integrity of India, the desire to maintain friendly relations with China, and deep sympathy for the people of Tibet. Accepting that it, 'may appear to be something contradictory and it does in the present context slightly contradict each other', he pleaded, 'that is the difficulty of the situation [...] but that does not get away from our basic approach' (Lok Sabha Debates 1959 in TPPRC 2006: 103). He insisted that, 'We shall continue to follow that policy because we think that is a correct policy not only for the present but even more so for the future' (Lok Sabha Debates 1959 in TPPRC 2006: 49).

While acting with extreme caution, the Government did not bar other Indian actors from persisting with the cause of Tibet. Parliamentarians like JB Kriplani of the Praja Socialist Party co-ordinated the Central Relief Committee for Tibetan Refugees, and Jayprakash Narayan convened an Afro-Asian Convention on Tibet wherein representatives from 19 countries condemned the violation of the 17 Point Agreement, affirmed Tibetan right to self-determination and termed the killings in Tibet a genocide (Jetley 1968: 83f.). Prominent lawyer, Purshottam Trikamdas rallied the International Commission of Jurists to report to the world that not only was Tibet independent between 1912 and 1951 but also that the Chinese State was guilty of genocide in Tibet (Chakravarti 1968: 460).

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The Dalai Lama meanwhile appealed directly to the UN Secretary General. There was intense pressure on Nehru in the Parliament to back Tibet's case at the UN, to make good its mistake from 1950. The Parliament reminded that India was the architect of the original UN resolution of the right to self-determination in 1948, when Nehru himself had waxed eloquent at the UN General Assembly—

[...] It was an astonishing thing that any country could still venture to cling to that doctrine of colonialism, whether by direct or indirect rule. After all that happened there will be not mere objection to that situation but an active struggle against *any and every* form of colonialism in any part of the world (PK Deo to Nehru, Lok Sabha Debates 1959 in TPPRC 2006: 89f., emphasis added).

They further raised instances wherein the Indian state had stood unequivocally behind the Indonesian freedom movement in 1949, behind Tunisia in 1954, Algeria in 1955, had taken a stand on the Suez crisis in 1956 and on the Moroccan and West Irian questions as well. In all such cases, India's championing of self-determination came at the expense of disrupting relations with the Dutch and the French, but that did not dissuade the state from persisting on anti-colonialism as a cornerstone of its foreign policy (in TPPRC 2006: 90). Moreover, Nehru was reminded that he had committed India to be a party to the





convention on genocide. RK Khadilkar of the Mazdoor Kisan Party asked, 'Are we not supposed to test events in Tibet with the same touchstone?' (Lok Sabha Debates in TPPRC 2006: 52).

The question of the same touchstone, however, lent itself to a contrary dynamic too. Those in the Parliament opposing India's involvement reminded of India's own excesses on its north-eastern periphery. Renu Chakravarty of the Communist Party of India insisted, '[...] they will turn around and say to you, what about Nagaland' (Lok Sabha Debates, vol. 27, 1959, Cols. 6457-60).<sup>16</sup> This was indeed being flagged by the Chinese Government also. In 1959, the People's Daily, a mouthpiece for the Government, argued that interference could be a double-edged weapon, and that if India interfered in the affairs of Tibet, China could also interfere in the affairs of Uttar Pradesh and Nagaland (People's Daily 1959). India was already by then facing the ire of both the Arab and Western world with regards to its actions in Kashmir. According to Chanakya Sen, the common challenge faced by both India and China was that neither's territorial integrity was smoothly recognised by the international comity of states. Therefore, India felt about Kashmir much the same way China felt about Tibet, in as much as they made clear that they would judge the outside world's attitudes towards their regimes by their attitude towards the basic question of territorial integrity (Sen 1968: 530).

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These then were the motivations that were couched once again in the language of trying best to help Tibet by conciliation, mediation, and benevolent spectatorship. Nehru vetoed the Parliamentary resolution on bringing Tibet up at the UN [the motion was subsequently defeated by a narrow voice vote as well]. At the UN General Assembly, India's representative VK Krishna Menon on being asked to contribute to the Tibet question that was raised anyway, held that, 'since nobody is going to send an army to Tibet,' it would, '[...] bring no relief to the Tibetan people but something the reverse of it' (in Bhatnagar 1983: 39f.). The first resolution on Tibet at the UNGA, 1353 (XIV) influenced by Indian and British diminutiveness merely called for the 'respect for the fundamental human rights of the Tibetan people.' The resolution 1723(XVI) of 1961 was more strongly worded, invoking the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and imploring all member countries to take steps to restore to Tibet these rights. The resolution was passed with a roll call of 56 to 11. India was among the 29 states that abstained (Bhatnagar 1983: 51). Krishna Menon's observation from 1959 was prescient here. He insisted then that, 'we cannot argue non-interference by interfering' (Menon 1959).



### **Conclusion: anxiety and prudence in India's Tibet policy**

This article has interrogated the extent of continuity and change between the Tibet policy of the British Indian Empire, and the early postcolonial Indian state, specifically from 1947 to 1960. In order to appreciate the extent of overlap or difference, it was essential to first lay out the history, dynamics and patterns of British policy.

It was seen that from the very beginning Tibet was important to Britain first as a strategic buffer, and then as a preferential trading partner. Manjeet Pardesi shows how British Indian strategic thought relied on a two-tiered system—an Inner Ring policy of absorption and strategic domination towards the political entities immediately adjoining it, like Sindh, Punjab and the smaller Himalayan states. At its Outer Ring, in Iran, Afghanistan, Thailand and Tibet, Britain sought to maintain a cordon sanitaire, keeping away all the big powers (Pardesi 2011: 95). Arguably, for this reason, Britain's policy focused on both—Tibetan autonomy, as well as Chinese overlordship. Apart from Mongolia and Russia, Britain was second only to China as a player of consequence on the Tibetan chessboard. After first violently forcing an opening with Tibet, the British made their services as mediator and political guarantor indispensable to the Tibetan elite. Britain can in fact be [dis?]credited with the Tibetan condition of post-colonial sequestration. It was British policy, apart from Chinese actions that was instrumental in Tibet not being able to convert its de-facto independence between 1912 and 1951 into de jure.<sup>17</sup>

The Indian national movement was forged in strong opposition to colonialism. This opposition was ostensibly not just to its material conduct, but also its philosophical and ethical basis. Therefore, anticolonialism against the west, and non-interference as a gesture of solidarity towards other postcolonial states, formed the twin pillars of its foreign policy. In the case of Tibet, the geostrategic imperative of tranquillity along its eastern borderlands stemmed not from the British great game mentality, but the volatile conditions of its partition, that kept its western front perennially at alert. An added difference was the ambition to work with the postcolonial and revolutionary Chinese state and the attempt to forge a different world order than what was scripted by the onset of the Cold War. If the British regarded Tibetan self-determination of only secondary importance to its maintenance as a buffer, the Indian state regarded Tibetan self-determination as completely subsidiary to its larger foreign policy objectives.

Tibet however, was too close to India for the contradiction between anticolonialism and non-interference to not affect the Indian state, both in terms of image-building [and thus-nation building], and from the security perspective. In relegating anticolonialism to the back burner and working mostly with non-interference in the Tibetan case, India paid the price for it militarily. It can be



argued, had the Indian Government not attempted to imitate the British policy of offering mediation, or conciliation, or acting loosely as a guarantor, that is, if it had made a cleaner break from colonial practices than it claimed, it would have embarked upon a more decisive policy. Either it would have left Tibet completely to its resources, or it would have arranged for decisive international support for Tibetan independence. While Nehru's decision to play stringently along non-aligned rules kept the US away from South Asia, the Indian Government itself sought US support in 1962, and the Chinese Government forged an opening with the US in 1970 as well. It can however safely be surmised that India's larger foreign policy objectives, both normative and strategic were moderation by a high degree of prudence when it came to Tibet.

There was however, anxiety at play as well. This came from the Indian state's own problems in Kashmir, in the Naga areas, and in the Northeast as a whole.<sup>18</sup> While Kashmir had a complex international dimension that tied restricted the Indian state's options at the UN on Tibet in significant ways, the Naga national movement was a site where the PRC could, and in fact did, intervene by arming and training the Naga resistance movement (Nibedon 1978: 131). Contested sovereignties externally, and contested legitimacies internally, combined to drive a wedge in Nehru's lofty aspiration of forging a different world order together with China. Menon's argument, that one could argue non-interference by interfering did hold true as far as the overt commitment of postcolonial foreign policy was concerned. In practice, both the Indian and the Chinese governments regularly argued non-interference but continued to interfere. India's low-level flirtation with an armed Tibetan resistance movement in the late 1950's, its maintenance of a covert Tibetan armed force within its military ranks subsequently (Raman 2008) and its overseeing of the Tibetan-Government-in-Exile over half a century is testimony to this.

The article consciously stayed away from the dynamics and consequences of the 1962 Sino-Indian border war along Tibet. From the examination of the different periods undertaken above, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, as of 1960, it is seen that the British and Indian geostrategies towards Tibet are more similar than different. The difference stems primarily from the fact that the British Empire radiated outwards from London while the Indian state's writ radiated outward from New Delhi. Both were interested in the maintenance of Tibetan autonomy, though Britain involved the Chinese state in the game in order to keep Russia out, and the Indian state acquiesced to China out of its own regional and international foreign policy priorities.

Second, both spoke the language of mediation, conciliation, and benevolent spectatorship. Britain had perfected this practice from its extensive experience of colonial conquest, cultivation of native elites, and divide and rule. The Indian



Government, in the circumstance that its contradiction between anticolonialism and non-interference was severely exposed in the Tibetan case, spoke this language to preserve a vestige of normativity in the performance of its foreign policy, both to external and to internal audiences. This was especially important, given that for postcolonial states, in their desire to shape themselves as drastically different from their colonial masters, foreign policy formed a potent site of nation-building (Krishna 199: 14).

Third, in the Tibetan case, however, the nation-building challenge for the Indian state was to work with both prudence and anxiety, the substance of which have been outlined in the preceding paragraphs. India's burden with regard to its Tibet, and Sino-Tibet policy in the coming years would be how best to balance the imperatives of prudence and anxiety as it walked only a few steps apart from its colonial predecessor.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I am thankful to OP Jindal Global University for a generous grant that enabled me to undertake archival research at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library New Delhi, and the British Library, London in July 2018. This article has benefited from the suggestions of Professor Rajesh Rajagopalan at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Pallavi Raghavan at OP Jindal University and the students of Ashoka University, Sonipat, India where it was presented as a paper in November 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *Tibet and China*, Minute Paper, Political Department, India Office, August 8, 1939, India Office Records [hereafter IOR] L/P.S./12/4194, No 36, File 26, p. 298.

<sup>3</sup> Basil J Gould to EW Fletcher, *Tibet: Factors in Policy*, Copy of demi-official letter 7(2)-P/40, April 18, 1940, IOR/ L/P.S./12/4194, p. 220.

<sup>4</sup> *Tibet and China*, p. 300.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Peel to Sir Olaf Caroe, Draft Letter, Ext 245/44, IOR/L/P.S/4194, p. 300.

<sup>6</sup> HE Richardson to Basil J Gould, *Confidential Letter*, D.O. 7(4) – L/44. Ext 3566/1944, 6 July, 1944, L/P.S./12/4194, p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Eden to Seymour, *Status of Tibet*, Foreign Office, 22 July, 1943, FO. 436/16518, IOR/L/P.S./12/757.

<sup>8</sup> Peel to Caroe, Draft Letter, External Affairs Department, GOI, Ext 2679/43, 11 June, 1943, IOR, L/P.S./12/4194, p. 145.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Pres. Chiang Addresses Supreme National Defence Council*, F 6696/186/ 10, 25 August, 1945, IOR, L/P.S./12/4194, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Secretary of State for India to Viceroy, External Department, Ext 6949/47, 24 June, 1947, IOR/L/P.S./4210, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> LAC Fry to AJ Hopkinson, No. F.7-NEF/46, Ext 6243/ 1947, 8 April, 1947, IOR IOR/L/P.S./4210, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> HE Richardson to AJ Hopkinson, Copy of Demi Official Letter No. 3(3)-L/46, 7 June, 1946, IOR/M/2956.

<sup>14</sup> RW Selby to FAK Harisson, Ref: 48/CAD/9, Ext. 5907/1948, 12 April, 1948, IOR/L/P.LS/12/4198, p. 2.



<sup>15</sup> This number was ostensibly announced in the PRC run Radio Lhasa broadcast of 1st October 1960 (Ingram 1990: 356f., Samdup 1993).

<sup>16</sup> The late 1950s were the heydays of Indian Army's counter-insurgency campaign in the Naga Hills. There was a strong media black-out regarding the excesses committed by the Indian Armed Forces. It is interesting to note that, at around the same time, the Indian state was, paradoxically enough, trying to ward off charges of genocide committed by its Army on its own citizens in the Naga Hills District. Twice the representatives of the Naga National Council tried to appeal to the United Nations against the ongoing genocide, but its efforts were blocked by the Indian state (Lotha 2009: 322). According to Naga estimates, between 1956 and 1964, the Indian army directly killed or abetted the death of 100,000 Nagas (IWGIA 1986).

<sup>17</sup> The largest share of the blame certainly lay with the backward feudal and religiously motivated social system in Tibet itself. Occupied primarily with Buddhist inter-sectional feuding, the Lamaist Government could not modernise its society, polity and its military, or organise a people's movement in tandem with the fast-paced and revolutionary changes taking place all around it.

<sup>18</sup> Dibyesh Anand has explored the link between the control of contested peripheries and foreign policy in the workings of 'postcolonial informal empires', like India and China. He insists that for both the Indian and Chinese states, behaviour towards their territorial borders and towards the nationalities that inhabit such borders, is driven by a strong sense of victimhood vis-à-vis their own colonial pasts. Compromise of political control at the periphery, is perceived as a prelude to the break-up of their empires. The periphery is seen then, not as a domestic, but as a strategic concern, and 'foreign policy is, to a significant extent, a response to the domestic needs of the political regimes' (2012: 81).

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