

## Can Tibet Play the Role of a Buffer State Again?

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*“Tibet is the roof of the world. If we build rocket launching sites there and install missiles, does it not mean that we can easily strike where they point? Control over Tibet enables us to gain the strategic initiative.”*

*People Liberation Army Officer*

*“Since Tibet is not the same as China, it should ultimately be the wishes of the people of Tibet that should prevail and not any legal or constitutional arguments. That, I think, is a valid point. Whether the people of Tibet are strong enough to assert their rights or not is another matter. Whether we are strong enough to see that is done is also another matter. But it is a right and proper thing to say and I see no difficulty in saying to the Chinese government that whether they have suzerainty or sovereignty over Tibet, surely, according to any principles, the principle they proclaim and the principles I uphold, the last voice in regard to Tibet should be the voice of the people of Tibet and nobody else.”*

*Jawaharlal Nehru, 7 December, 1950, Lok Sabha*

### Introduction

The establishment of the British Empire in India in 1757 and economic penetration of China by the Western Powers from 1839 fundamentally altered the traditional balance of power on the Asian continent. British policy towards Tibet was characterized by two conflicting imperatives which, throughout their rule in India, they sought to reconcile. From early on, the British rulers realized the importance of Tibet as a buffer between India and any other external power on the north, be it France, Russia or China. However, to support or even encourage a completely independent Tibet was to damage a much larger commercial interest in China. Thus, they sought to limit Chinese power in Tibet and encourage Tibetan autonomy. In short, the British Government recognized what they called Chinese “suzerainty” but not sovereignty in Lhasa. The British rulers were unsuccessful in establishing contact with Lhasa until 1904.

There were various options before the British Empire in India with regard to Tibet. Though they could have colonized Tibet with much difficulty and at high cost, they ruled out this option as early as 1775, because it was then not a viable economic proposition. They could have easily extended their protectorate as the Tibetan authorities including the XIII Dalai Lama and his ministers repeatedly requested this, but the British ruled out this option too because it would be a costly affair. They could have granted an independent status to Tibet as they tentatively tried to do after 1912 until 1947. This option was not officially sanctioned, because it would damage their much larger commercial interest in China. Under the circumstances, the only viable option they considered seriously was that China had suzerainty over Tibet but on understanding that

Tibet was autonomous. Such a conditional policy safeguards British economic interest in China as well as national security of the Indian Empire.

The primary consideration in British policy towards Tibet was how to ensure the security of the 2000 mile long Himalayan frontier that India shares with Tibet. This could be ensured if Tibet remained autonomous in the British sense and as long as China remained weak as a nominal suzerain authority in Tibet. This formula worked up to 1949 because China remained weak and divided until 1949. The other equally important factor was British power acting as deterrent against any Chinese armed intervention in Tibet. The British strategy was to allow Tibet to continue with the fiction of Chinese suzerainty over her. This concession to Beijing was not out of any British love for the Manchu Rule but for their understanding that Tibet under the suzerainty to the weak Chinese would not be a source of danger to the safety of British India. This could be ensured if Tibet remained free from direct Chinese control or sovereignty.

The British were interested in a relatively stable government in Tibet because the “theory of the buffer state has never worked properly except where the buffer state was strong enough to keep up an efficient government and administration and to make encroachment by either neighbour a risk.” The British further clarified that they, “wished to avoid interference in Tibet, Tibet ought to remain an autonomous state between India and China, at the same time we agree that they recognized Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, and this view we should press diplomatically in Peking as strongly as need be.”

However, one should also keep in mind that if Tibet was strategically important to British India, it was no less so to the Chinese Empire. China became strong and united under the communist leadership, ready to take over Tibet by 1949-50. The power that had the effect of deterrence to China from revoking the autonomous status of Tibet had departed from South Asia by 1947.

### The Chinese Takeover of Tibet in 1951

Jawaharlal Nehru and K.M. Panikkar shaped India’s Tibet policy shortly after independence. From 1946 to 1951, the Tibet policy of Nehru and his associates reflected that of the British: treating Tibet as an autonomous buffer state between India and China, recognizing Chinese suzerainty but not sovereignty over Tibet, and protecting Tibet’s autonomy by recognizing its treat making powers, especially in relation to India.

Jawaharlal Nehru in 1950 tried his best, mainly through diplomacy, to prevent a Chinese military occupation of Tibet, and strongly advocated a peaceful resolution of Sino-Tibetan tension. Though the situation changed quite fast as the Chinese Communists neared their revolutionary victory, Nehru was rushing through a series of Defence Treaties with Bhutan (8 August, 1949), Nepal (31 July, 1950) and Sikkim (15 December, 1950). These countries constituted Nehru’s definition of a security zone in which India would tolerate no foreign interference. These treaties demonstrated India’s strategic response to the Communist takeover of Tibet.

Once the PLA was in full command of Tibet – which Beijing sought to legitimate through a “treaty” with the Dalai Lama’s government in May 1951 – Nehru completely changed his policy towards the PRC. There was virtually nothing, he and Panikkar concluded, that India could militarily do to dislodge the PLA from Tibet. Therefore, rather than fruitlessly antagonize Beijing by maintaining the old British policy; New Delhi should befriend New China. This friendship policy was expected to reduce or neutralize the security threat from the PLA stationed in Tibet, as well as enhance Asian solidarity. The Panchsheel Agreement sacrificed Tibet’s historical status of a tributary state with full autonomy in its domestic matters at the altar of the Sino-Indian friendship (Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai).

The PRC’s policies towards independent India can be seen as a judicious combination of deep strategy and surface diplomacy. The PRC could establish its full legal claims over Tibet only after Nehru recognized Tibet as a part of China in 1954. Once this occurred, China then began officially to claim territory along the Indo-Tibetan border using the provisions of the 1954 treaty as its rationale. In fact, China’s claims are primarily based on Tibetan and not Chinese documents which could only be valid if India recognized Tibet as part of China.

The Communists focused on India because it was the power which was most intimately connected with Tibet through ancient culture, recent history and also in geo-strategic terms. On 30 December, 1949, the Indian Government recognized PRC, two days later Beijing announced the “liberation” of Tibet. On 30 April, 1954, China and India signed the much publicized Panchsheel Agreement, only a few weeks after that, Chinese patrols began a series of intrusions into arrears claimed by Beijing to be an integral part of China. The following year, China began to compete with India for a sphere of influence in Nepal. And when, in 1960, officials presented India’s formal claims on Indo-Tibetan borders as being based on treaty, custom and usage, their Chinese counterparts reportedly invoked the Nehruvian ideology of anti-imperialism.

## Post 1962 Developments

There had been a warm hearted and widespread Indian public support for the Tibetan cause throughout the 1950s. With the deterioration of the Sino-Indian Relations after the War, the Indian Government radically revised its stance on Tibet. It supported the Tibetan cause in the 1960s both openly and clandestinely, in 1963 the Special Frontier Code named 22, was established to train able-bodied young Tibetan refugees, in 1965 the Indian delegate openly supported the UN Resolution on Tibet for the first time since 1950, and in the same year Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri was expected to recognize the Tibetan Government in exile, but he died suddenly and the Indian Politics took another twist of its own.

The Pro-Tibetan stance continued until the Bangladesh War Liberation in 1970-71. This turn of events compelled New Delhi to forestall any possibility of Chinese intervention either along the Himalayan border or in the Bangladesh war itself by sending reassuring

messages to China. India had no more handy instrument to sacrifice before Beijing than the Tibetan Card.

During the 1980s, New Delhi can be said to have achieved a balance in its stand on Tibet. Since the 80s, India has been most anxious to resolve the boundary dispute using the improved atmosphere of the Sino-Indian Relations. Fourteen Rounds of Talks have taken place but no concrete solution has been reached yet. There has been a definite increase in economic cooperation and trade and thus, the question of Tibet has taken a back seat. This should also be seen in the backdrop of both India and China becoming 'Nuclear Powers' during this time period.

### Strategic Importance of Tibet

Several strategic analysts, both in the East and the West have commented in the past on the strategic suitability of the Tibetan Plateau for nuclear experimenting and testing. This has unfortunately come true. China's first attempt at nuclear research was made in 1958 at Amdo (Haibei) on the Tibetan Plateau and armed in 1971 when Beijing perceived a serious threat from the Soviet Union and India. By the early 1970s China had brought South Asia and the former Soviet Union within their effective nuclear range and reach. The fact that the Maoist strategists had chosen Amdo and Kham (near the Sino-Tibetan border) for their nuclear sites might have other implications and motives, besides geographical suitability and nuclear safety. By this mighty nuclear act, they might have cemented and concretized their claims over Inner Tibet.

During the 1950s and 1960s several observers viewed the Chinese occupation of Tibet and subsequent strategic developments there as a threat to South Asia, implying Chinese expansionism. This view, of course, fitted with the Cold War image of the type of Communist China that most people had at the time. George Gindsburg and Michael Mathos were typical: "He also holds Tibet, dominates the Himalayan piedmont threatens the Indian subcontinent, may well have all the South Asia within his reach, and with it all of Asia."

China backed by its great military strength in strategy appeared more interested in competing against India for "spheres of friendship" in the Himalayan states. The Chinese aim seems to have been to transfer Tibet's former buffer functions to Nepal and if possible to Bhutan. The implication is that even if China recognized Tibet as the "natural" and geographical limit of its power, it felt that the Himalayas alone were not enough to guarantee its national security in the modern age, especially given Tibet's strategic location. China ideally wants a chain of small friendly neighbors, friendlier to it, on the cis-Himalayan region separating the two Asian giants. It makes no strategic and military sense to the Chinese to "liberate" the Himalayan states which are geographically within the Indian subcontinent. Such an eventuality would bring China face to face with India. China has thus, encouraged strong nationalist regimes in the countries that lie between Tibet and India. Such nationalist regimes functioning as buffer zones are in the interest of Chinese national security. The aim is to prevent the possibility of the

Himalayan states becoming forward bases for any attacks against “China’s Tibet”, like Nepal Mustang.

Another aspect of the Tibetan issue is that China supports Pakistan’s stand in the Kashmir issue, there is evidence of Chinese involvement in the Naga insurgency and the Naxalite movement, and the extension of Chinese influence in Myanmar, and the only way in which India can play in this game of mutual interference is by taking benefit of the Tibetan issue.

### Implications of a Nuclear Tibet

The ‘nuclearization’ of Tibet and South Asia is sure to increase tensions along the Sino-Indian border. What makes the nuclear arms race in Asia so dangerous is the sheer proximity of the Chinese and the Indian nuclear sites. When nuclear weapons were placed in the former Soviet Union and the USA, geographically long distance from each other, it had a different implication, as compared to when they were placed in Cuba. At present the Chinese nuclear sites in Tibet are roughly 2000 kms from New Delhi. And if India decides to deploy its nuclear weapons along the Himalayan Border, there appears a serious face to face situation. This will allow no peace of mind to either the Chinese or the Indian or the Tibetans. Therefore there is an urgent need to increase the buffer space between the two nuclear states.

### Can Tibet Play the Role of a Buffer State in a “Nuclear Age”?

It is extremely interconnected, interwoven and complex situation. Both India and China, today, consider Tibet vital for their national security. To aim for a Tibet which will serve the role of a “buffer zone” as it did before the liberation in 1951 seems far-fetched. No doubt, Tibet is today an integral part of China and to argue or even talk about its complete autonomous status appears to be an impossible and bizarre proposition. Even the Dalai Lama today is negotiating on the grounds of an autonomous Tibet with regards to the “Domestic Matters – religion, culture and society”. Defence and the Foreign Relations will remain in the hands of the Chinese Central Government.

In this light, to say that Tibet after it gains autonomy will be able to play active role as a buffer state appears unrealistic. Today, the Tibetan question in any bilateral Chinese Talks appears only when the relations between China and the other country are going through a ‘bad’ phase. The example is that of Sino-US relations. Every time there is some problem between the two the issue of Tibet is brought to the forefront.

The second question to be answered is that the fact of the presence of nuclear bases in the Tibetan plateau. Will China be ready to close or shift these bases to the Mainland? The answer again is in the negative. The move to establish nuclear bases in Tibet was a result of the strategic security consideration as the Tibetan Plateau appears to be more ‘safe’ for nuclear research.

One also needs to look into the question of the viability of a “buffer zone” in the nuclear world. Does the concept of a “buffer zone” work in the above condition? The answer will be a firm ‘no’. In the highly nuclearized world today when there are three strong nuclear powers in the same region (India-China-Pakistan), the concept of a buffer state does not appear to be applicable. If we look logically into this there is no buffer zone between India and Pakistan – even when both the countries are on unfriendly terms. No doubt that China is trying to help Pakistan, but that appears to be more of an attempt towards maintaining the balance of power politics in the region.

Undoubtedly, the de-nuclearization of the region would be favourable to both the sides but it appears to be unlikely, even though the border region has had no major violent uprisings and both the countries are on the road to economic cooperation. The opening of the Nathu La Pass clearly highlights this trend in the relations.

Support for the Tibetan cause is strong in India. Moreover since the ‘Tibetan Government in exile’ and the Dalai Lama are in Dharamsala this emphasis is strengthened. On the other hand, close Buddhist ties also make the Indians support the Tibetan cause. The same holds true even in the case of the American Public opinion. However, in spite of the fact that the US is the sole ‘super-power’ of the world today, it is unable to bring the issue to its right conclusion. India though more closely involved, is in no position to solve the ‘problem’.

Chinese have accepted that Sikkim is a part of the Indian Territory after the visit of Prime Minister Vajpayee to China. Though they have asserted their stance on Arunachal Pradesh and have claimed that it is the part of the Chinese territory. The economic tie between the countries is on a constant rise.

In such a scenario, the realist approach would be to sue the benefits of good relations rather than to be ‘stuck’ with the Tibetan cause. India will have to play a crucial role in the conclusion of the negotiation between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government though this will not be a welcome thing by the latter. Given its closeness to the issue it is the only country which can play a meaning full role. However, militarily speaking it is incapable of doing so.

Thus, we can conclude by saying that no doubt a de-militarized and de-nuclearized Tibet would be a boon for India; it appears to be more of a dream than a reality. Undoubtedly a favorable domestic, regional government in Tibet definitely will be more beneficial than Nepal as we have seen that the latter began to cash upon its acquired strategic importance by playing the two countries against each other to get the maximum benefits it could acquire by doing this.

The economic dependence of Tibet on China also ends the question of the independence of the Tibet. Tibet today is more integrated with China than it was in the past. Thus, to assume that the past status of Tibet can be re-established is an unrealistic dream. The situation is irreversible.

## Conclusion

The obvious answer to the question, can Tibet play the role of a Buffer State Again? Is that the whole idea today appears to be irrelevant to any kind of discourse. What Tibet was earlier is not what Tibet is today. Tibet was maintained as a buffer zone by the British because they had the capabilities to do so. But when China (PRC) liberated Tibet in 1951, India was not in a condition to play a strong military role. Tibet was an autonomous region earlier but today it is an integral part of China and this fact is recognized by almost all the countries of the world. And if this is an accepted fact to talk about it as an 'autonomous buffer region' is not a logical thing to do. And the nuclearization of the world has made the idea of a buffer zone obsolete and inapplicable. The only problem or issue left in the case is the reaching an agreeable negotiation between the Dalai Lama and the PRC.

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