



70 YEARS OF “PANCHSHEEL”: CHINA’S (UN)PEACEFUL BETRAYAL

by
Jagannath Panda

This April, India and China commemorate the 70th anniversary of the “Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence,” or commonly known in India as the “Panchsheel Agreement,” being first formally articulated in the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the “Tibet region of China” and India. But amid the great din of hostilities, there is more than a little doubt that the two sides will pause to recalibrate their downward spiraling bilateral trajectory based on the noble, and perhaps even naive, principles of Panchsheel.

For China, the Xi Jinping “new era” certainly expounds on values through the lenses of aggression, militarization, expansionism, securitization, and the like. China has in the last decade, increased its ambit of “[core interests](#)” – from considering only Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang as internal matters to now also including the East and South China Sea and the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as part of its territorial quest. Vis-à-vis India, its expansionist ambitions are as clear in the Himalayas, as they are in the Indian Ocean region where China’s clout is ever-growing. In such a scenario, could “Peaceful Co-existence” ever make the cut? It is unfortunately only a rhetorical question, and the answer is a resounding no.

Little wonder then, that India has no reason to mull over whether China could be trusted as an Asian partner. Historically and even today, China has continued to betray India’s trust by seemingly reaching out for “win-win” cooperation and the spirit of neighborliness to create a “community of shared future,” without intending to resolve the border question – the root cause of such mistrust. The Himalayan incursions (or transgressions); repeated clashes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC); massive border infrastructure build-up; establishment

of military-civil village settlements along the border; and lawfare such as redrawing of maps or enacting controversial laws, among other such actions, convey the true story of China’s empty “[neighborhood diplomacy](#)” rhetoric.

History Comes Calling

Undoubtedly, the Panchsheel Agreement in its essence represents a noble and ideal framework to create an international order that in actuality strives for peace and stability. It was in such a [spirit](#) that Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru included their vision of Panchsheel in their 1954 joint statement. It is important to [note](#) that while Premier Zhou is generally credited as the first to put forward the “Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence” – the term “Panchsheel” also has a contested origin story, with experts widely believing it to be derived from the “[five precepts](#)” of the ancient Buddhist texts, and not from Sanskrit as is sometimes held – it was Prime Minister Nehru and his gigantic stature as a statesman leader who was responsible for propagating the ideals globally.

The five principles that were [proclaimed](#) as the basis of the 1954 India-China agreement are mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful co-existence. The overarching moral significance of the tenets notwithstanding, the joint proclamation also had other geopolitical truths for India: To win the larger acceptance of China in the hope of [countering](#) China’s possible subversive actions in the Himalayan region, particularly in Bhutan and Nepal, (and also in Sikkim), and destabilizing the hard-won Indian independence. Moreover, the idea was also to create an Asian solidarity, perhaps a new non-Western “[axis in world politics](#).” It could also be seen as a precursor to the “Asian century” narrative propounded in strategic circles in the recent past, which has since fizzled out given the abiding growing China threat.

Keeping aside the optimism inherent in the larger geopolitical aim, China’s invasion of Tibet in 1950 should have created more of a concern in India about China’s not-so-chaste intentions, especially as

Tibet ceased to be a buffer zone. In 1959, China's [brutal suppression](#) of the Tibetan resistance; India's provision of asylum to the Dalai Lama; and China's subsequent stoking of anti-India sentiment and intimidation including of Indian traders in Tibet foreshadowed China's true intentions toward India. This was proven right a few years later in 1962 when China waged an "[unprovoked and unexpected](#)" war against India, betraying the core principles of trust, even as India's "[Forward Policy](#)" of 1961 has often been blamed for triggering the war. It certainly laid the foundation for the long-standing hostilities between India and China, which have been crystallized after the bloodshed in the Galwan Valley in 2020.

Arunachal as a Linchpin for India's China Woes

The North East Frontier Agency (now the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh) was a prime focus in the 1962 War – the other being Ladakh – where India faced a crushing defeat. In March 2024 as China released the fourth list of "[standardized](#)" names in what China calls "Zangnan (the southern part of Southwest China's Xizang Autonomous Region," or simply south Tibet), Arunachal Pradesh as a continuing core target for Chinese Himalayan expansionism was reiterated. China released the first list in 2017 – the year of the [Doklam stand-off](#) when India eked out a psychological victory due to its firm military response and deft diplomacy. India has [outright](#) rejected the Chinese intent to redraw international boundaries by "assigning invented" names as "senseless attempts."

Moreover, Xi Jinping's aggressive new era policies, including renaming places, inventing new maps, and enacting laws like the Land Borders Law, as well as China's objections to Indian and Tibetan leaders visiting India's own state of Arunachal Pradesh as a new "red line" highlight the insidious impact of its expanding "core interests." Xi is also in a militaristic zeal to expand Himalayan territories via massive infrastructure build-up, including "[Xiaokang](#)" ([well-off](#)) [border defense villages](#) along India's border with the Tibet Autonomous Region, as well as in disputed [China-Bhutan territory](#).

Or through the controversial Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects with the Himalayan states of Pakistan

and Nepal. In this context, particularly, Pakistan is unlikely to reconfigure its ties with China, which exerts immense financial control over Pakistan with its BRI support centered around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), about which India has security concerns. Moreover, Pakistan's current political and economic instability will hardly impact its [strong military-economic ties](#) with China, constituting a potential double threat for India. On the other hand, Nepal exercises a balancing act between its super-neighbors China and India even as China looks to check India's traditional influence in Nepal through [investments and developmental assistance](#). Of late, New Delhi's diplomacy is turning the tide in India's favor by [strengthening](#) its outreach via new economic deals to counter China's clout.

China is also seeking to wrest control of the Himalayan natural resources, including neighbors' access to water, via building massive "[hydropower and water diversion](#)" projects, endangering the entire Himalayan ecosystem in the process. In this context, Arunachal Pradesh is significant for China to enhance [geographical, geostrategic, and geopolitical sway](#) in its race to become the Himalayan hegemon.

As the [2022 Tawang clash](#) highlighted, China's transgressions into Indian territories are unlikely to abate. Even as stale negotiations on the border continue in the wake of the deadly 2020 Galwan clash, China's claims to pursue "win-win" cooperation are entirely overshadowed by Xi's [security-obsessed](#) foreign policy endeavors. Against such a scenario, India must strengthen its borders and recalibrate its diplomatic channels to prepare for unexpected Chinese violations.

Regrouping with the West – Need for an Indo-Pacific Himalayan Solidarity?

China is being increasingly seen as a common threat for India and its Indo-Pacific partners: Australia's 2024 defense strategy has highlighted China's "[coercive tactics](#)" amid growing regional conflict. [Japan's 2022 defense strategy](#) focused on China as the primary threat. The Philippines has been strengthening its defense tie-ups, including with India, amid China's "[escalation of its harassment](#)" in the



South China Sea. The U.S. already [prioritizes](#) China as the biggest threat, a “pacing threat.” Moreover, even as the European Union (EU) only calls China a “systemic” challenge, it is clear that China’s coercive policies, including unfair trade practices and human rights violations in Tibet and Xinjiang, have compelled Europe to re-configure its China stance, especially in the wake of the Ukraine war and Russia’s “no limits” partnership with China. China has reacted sharply to such developments by calling them out as “[fanning](#)” or “[hyping](#)” the China threat.

The widespread coverage of the “new normal” in Taiwan and the continuing militarization of the Taiwan Strait during and after the Asia visit of former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August 2022 have further highlighted China’s dangerous intimidation of democracies in the region. The rather real possibilities of a Taiwan emergency arising out of Xi’s need for forced reunification and its claims over the entirety of the South China Sea have also alerted the Indo-Pacific partners to be prepared for a regional crisis in the near future.

Yet, somehow, Himalayan concerns have been overshadowed by China’s maritime threats and are often seen by the West as a result of the bilateral fight between India and China. It is this aspect that Indian diplomacy needs to course correct. The China-India boundary dispute is indeed a bilateral affair and the West should not interfere in the negotiation process or have a say. However, as the West is perturbed about China’s military adventurism in the South China Sea, it should also be concerned about China’s military adventurism in the Himalayan region, moreso maybe given its technological superiority here. The Himalayan region certainly needs greater international awareness and interest in both the public domain and among lawmakers/policymakers, in the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament (in the West) for instance.

India, on its part, needs to develop a parity of understanding with the West, and vice-versa, on how to question China internationally on its military activism across the Himalayan region that reiterates China’s image as a radical revisionist power with

unilateral hegemonic interest. The recent [recognition](#) of Arunachal Pradesh as an integral part of Indian territory by the United States has strengthened India’s and in turn the partners’ hand against China. The [bipartisan Senate resolution](#) has also condemned China’s unilateral attempts to change the status quo along the LAC. More such collaborative actions are the need of the hour. The EU needs to take strong note of such developments if it aims to find strategic compatibility with India, bilaterally and regionally, in the Indo-Pacific.

In short, through its aggressive economic, psychological, diplomatic, and military tactics across the region from the Himalayas to the Indo-Pacific maritime regions, China is only intent on upending the liberal global order with a Sino-centric model. China’s commitment to “peaceful co-existence” is empty rhetoric. Ironically, President Xi in 2014 [quoted](#) the great Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, “If you think friendship can be won through war, spring will fade away before your eyes.” China will do well to heed its own counsel.

Dr. Jagannath Panda is the Head of the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA) at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), Sweden, and a Professor at the Department of Regional and Global Affairs at the University of Warsaw. This article is part of SCSA-IPA’s research project on “Mapping China’s Himalayan Hustle”.