



‘Panchsheel: Principles and National Interests in Foreign Policy’

Speaker: Amb. Chandrashekhara Dasgupta

Chair: Ashok K. Kantha

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The idea of Panchsheel and how it became an instrument of national interest and foreign policy for India and China after the inception of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 was the subject of discussion for the seminar. One thing that the speaker established right from the beginning of the talk was that Panchsheel had its genesis not in the minds of Indian statesmen but rather its base lay in Chinese foreign policy and was formulated by Chinese officials such as Zhou Enlai. Premier Zhou apparently proposed Panchsheel and its ideas to a meeting of Indian delegates back in 1953. Panchsheel was then modified to become Panch Shila, which were five pillars for peace and for peaceful coexistence. Even as early as 1949 Premier Zhou floated a similar idea for cultivating diplomatic ties with India in a letter to PM Nehru with included concepts like ‘equality’, ‘mutual benefit’ and ‘respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.’ The speaker likened it to the Chinese Hallstein Doctrine.

The speaker noted that there were, however, several pre-conditions attached to this like ties with Taiwan and India’s explanation for its abstention from voting in the UN ECOSOC regarding China’s UN membership. The speaker said that Chinese foreign policy took a turn during the closing months of the 1950-53 Korean War when Premier Zhou said that the Korean War was not an inevitable thing and that China needed time to recover from it in peace so it advocated a policy of non-aggression and peaceful coexistence with its neighbors. Regarding the US and the West, China saw that there were two ‘intermediate zones’ for peace: access to the Chinese markets and reconstruction of Western Europe. There was also an image makeover that China

wanted to pursue to establish its place in the world and propagated the idea that American belligerence would isolate the US. There was this notion that the US wanted to contain China and other countries like the USSR (with which there was a debate on parallel coexistence) using a network of allies as part of its Rimland strategy.

The speaker then spoke on how the Tibetan issue affected Sino-Indian relations and that initially Panchsheel was talked about to keep boundary tensions out of negotiations even though some experts in their respective countries were privately aware of it. Following this the speaker highlighted the shadowy role of the US in sabotaging China and India's attempt at extending the Panchsheel principles to South East Asia. The Bandung Principles that would be established did not contain any ideas from Panchsheel but rather had ideas taken from the UN Charter about living together in peace. Interestingly, there would be further complications when US officials like Secretary of State, Dulles and others painted Panchsheel as a communist propaganda during its 1955 SEATO meet. Despite all these, the speaker elaborated that China's ties with US allies like Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines etc. did not deteriorate as expected because of Premier Zhou's decision to ally with them to keep the US at bay.

The next segment was about China and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence from 1954-57. The Tibet Agreement led to Premier Zhou advocating the Five Principles in Asia within a fortnight of its signing. The speaker said that the Chinese policy of non-interference was violated when the Hungarian Revolution happened in 1956 and China wanted the USSR to suppress it. Following this observation the speaker once again talked about the role of Panchsheel in the Tibet negotiations in which both India and China had different ideas of handling it thus leading to a compromise where Panchsheel would be included in the communique on Tibet but only in the Preamble. US military pacts like CENTO and SEATO led China buttressing non-alignment and the zone of peace and PM Nehru was concerned about the situation in Laos and Myanmar due to unrest created by communist factions. During Premier Zhou's visit to India in 1954 it was decided to broaden the scope of Panchsheel and to bring Myanmar onboard.

In the mid-1960s Panchsheel in PRC-USSR relations led to a clash between the détente policy the USSR was pursuing and the solidarity and the Sino-Soviet mutual defense treaty that the PRC was following. Since the early 1960s Panchsheel had hit a sort of a recession due to many conflicts and clashes that China had in its vicinity especially after the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis

and clashes on the Sino-Indian border in the 1960s. The speaker said that come 1972 Panchsheel again came full circle to mend ties with the US and that realities of power were recognized. In the present day PM Modi has been talking about a 'New Panchsheel' but what it actually means remains to be seen. The speaker concluded by saying that Panchsheel was always based on transient national interests and interests converged between China and India due to the US-Pakistan alliance and fear of containment. The speaker hinted that PM Nehru had his suspicions about China's intentions but did not do much to address them and there was a need to better understand China's use and understanding of Panchsheel.

The chair, Director Kantha, then opened the floor to questions and comments from the audience. An audience member asked if Panchsheel could be used in the present day to make China pressurize Pakistan in curbing its activities on the LOC which elicited an answer from speaker who said that he does not believe that would happen unless it was in China's national interest. Another question was if border issues in Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh factored into China's calculations and if Nehru did enough to counter them to which the speaker replied that there was no protest as such from China initially but that they still carried out fortifications along the border and he said that India lacked sophistication to handle the matter diplomatically at that time. On the question of Panchsheel's serving only Chinese interests when it suited them and not India's the speaker explained that initially it served India's interests as well from 1954-55 when interests with China converged. A final query was about the speaker's view on China's so called 'Community of Shared Destiny' advocated by Xi Jinping to which he said that there is a need to approach it with caution as this was only the second time a doctrine has emerged from the Far East.

About the Speaker

Chandrashekhar Dasgupta is a retired IFS officer, who has served as ambassador to China. He is currently a member of the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change and also a member of the Geneva-based UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. A student of India's diplomatic history, he is the author of War and Diplomacy in Kashmir 1947-48.

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