

Saying that Nehru was naive on China is wrong

Our first PM viewed China with suspicion and called it an arrogant, hegemonistic and imperialist nation

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It has become fashionable for analysts, diplomats and politicians to question our first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's policies and strategies with regard to China. Such views are, however, incorrect.

Let me recount the brief that Nehru gave to my late father, the diplomat and public figure, G Parthasarathi, when he went to see Nehru before leaving for Peking (as Beijing was then called) to take up the position of India's ambassador to China.

The date of the Nehru-Parthasarathi meeting was March 18, 1958, and the venue was Nehru's grand office at his residence, Teen Murti Bhavan, New Delhi.

When GP (as he was widely known) entered the room, Nehru was going through some files. It was almost 11 pm. He asked GP what the Foreign Office had told him. Is it Hindi Chini, bhai, bhai? (Indians and Chinese are brothers?) asked Nehru. The PM then went on to say that he did not trust the Chinese one bit. He suggested that they were an arrogant, hegemonistic and imperialist nation which had, throughout its long history, been characterised by perfidy towards all external powers. So he advised GP that eternal vigilance should be his watchword...

I recall my father quoting Nehru as saying, "If you feel that a particular telegram of yours to Delhi should, because of its extreme sensitivity, be seen only by me, do so. There is no need to bring the whole of the Foreign Office into the picture. You need to be particularly careful to see that Krishna [VK Krishna Menon] does not see any of your telegrams. Why do I say so? Because Krishna, you and I share a common world view that is broadly left of centre, strongly nationalistic and zealous of our nation's freedom of action both at home and internationally." Then Nehru talked about how Krishna Menon was wrong in believing that Communist China would not attack a non-aligned country such as India.

Nehru concluded the fact that they could, and might very well do so, is the reality India had to contend with. It was a highly reflective GP that went home at 12.30 am.

To understand Jawaharlal Nehru's approach to foreign and security policy, one has to go back to 1949-50. In June 1949, the then United States President, Harry Truman, sent Dean Acheson, the then United States Secretary of State, on a special assignment to New Delhi. He said that the United States wanted to enter into a very special, one of its kind, bilateral security agreement with India.

IN JUNE 1951, JAWAHARLAL NEHRU MADE HIS FIRST VISIT TO MOSCOW AFTER BECOMING PRIME MINISTER. JOSEPH STALIN TOLD NEHRU IN GREAT DETAIL ABOUT HIS OWN DEEP SUSPICIONS OF MAO'S CHINA

Acheson emphasised that Truman and he were acutely conscious that the agreement should not in any manner impinge on India's commitment to an independent foreign policy and that the character and orientation of the proposed agreement should be left for Nehru to decide. The interest of the United States was only to ensure that democratic India, and not communist China, emerged as the dominant power in Asia.

Nehru said that the United States President should recognise and appreciate the fact that India had won independence barely two years ago, after a long struggle to throw the colonial British out. So, the people of India were very wary of exchanging any other country for Britain. However, Nehru told Acheson that India would readily agree to a top secret India-US agreement on sharing intelligence that related to China.

Acheson jumped at the idea and so, over the next two days, after some discussions that involved Acheson and our then intelligence czar, BM Mullick, chief of the Intelligence Bureau, such an agreement was signed.

After further discussion with G Parthasarathi, Nehru wrote a letter to Truman saying: Let the intelligence-sharing begin and grow. Depending on how it develops, he [Nehru] would come back to Truman about widening its scope, and deepening it to a possible military cooperation agreement.

In September 1950 Mao Zedong invaded Tibet. This development had a profound effect on Jawaharlal Nehru. Subsequently in June 1951, he made his first visit to Moscow after becoming prime minister.

Joseph Stalin told Nehru in great detail about his own deep suspicions of Mao's China. Stalin also offered Nehru a comprehensive and strictly bilateral military and intelligence cooperation agreement. Nehru's response was on similar lines as it was to Acheson and so such a top-secret intelligence-sharing agreement with particular reference to China was signed.

After his interactions with both the superpowers, and even after signing the 1954 "Panchsheel" agreement—five principles of peaceful coexistence agreement with China—Nehru was continuously getting adverse intelligence from the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) regarding Chinese intentions, completely opposite of what the Chinese were feeding India. Simply put, Nehru was in a great dilemma. He concluded that India had no alternative but to adopt a "balancing act" with China.

He believed that the political, ideological and sovereignty costs of deepening relations with either USA or USSR into a formal military cooperation agreement would deal such a mortal blow to the true independence of the nation, that they could not be paid.

He finally decided to do what his critics erroneously call "muddling along" with his policy regarding China. Sad as it may have been, all three of us—Indira, GP and I—believe, even in hindsight, that Nehru's decision was correct.

There are few instances in the world where such important matters of a country are amenable to a "neat" and logical solution. To misunderstand Nehru's policy, either genuinely or maliciously, as naiveté, is completely incorrect.

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The views expressed are personal*