

33RD JAWAHARLAL NEHRU MEMORIAL LECTURE 2012

Sponsored by India Advisory Partners & Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Trust

**MAKING ASIA: INDIA, CHINA & THE STRUGGLE FOR AN IDEA**

Sunil Khilnani

Avantha Professor & Director, King's India Institute, King's College London

33rd Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture 2012
November 21: 6.30pm

MAKING ASIA: INDIA, CHINA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR AN IDEA

Thank you very much Professor Bayly, Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Ambassador Prasad, Lord Brabourne, Principal Sir Rick Trainor, Distinguished guests, colleagues, and friends:

I feel very privileged to be standing here this evening - and I thank my fellow Governors of the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Trust for entrusting me to deliver this 33rd Nehru Memorial Lecture. I feel doubly privileged, indeed almost spoilt, since I've already once before had the opportunity to deliver the Nehru Memorial Lecture - ten years ago, in New Delhi. My theme at that time was Nehru's complicated relationship to religion - and my choice of subject was very much shaped by the inward political climate in India during those years. A decade later, India is looking more outwards, as it seeks to define its place in the world. And so my subject this evening: I hope to offer some historical reflections on how India has sought to make its way in the world: reflections about a moment, Nehru's, that seems long gone, but which I think may have some interesting resonances with ours today.

**

On the 19th of November 1962 the Indian state came as near as it has ever done to collapse. As evening closed on the Indian capital, New Delhi, news reached that Indian Army units in the north east of the country had been routed by Chinese troops, leaving open the route across the northern plains to Delhi. The government was in disarray: India's military commander had resigned earlier in the day, and the newly installed defence minister by his own admission knew nothing about matters of defence. On the frontlines, the chain of command had crumbled, civilian administration fell apart, and citizens fled en masse, the journalists fleeing right behind them. That night, Prime Minister Nehru, working in secret and with the knowledge of only his Foreign Secretary wrote to US President Kennedy, pleading for immediate despatch of US airplanes and equipment to rescue his country; in fact he wrote twice in the space of two hours. That night, and those letters, are now seen as marking the nadir of Nehru's career. Just a few hours later, the Chinese, having asserted their superior strength, declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew from Indian territory. To the Kennedy Administration,

preoccupied with the Cuban Missile crisis, the Indian defeat and Nehru's desperate turn to the US for military assistance signified the collapse of his international policy – a view that has now come to be generally held.

I

The defeat of 1962 has shaped India's history and self-understanding in various ways, and one striking aspect of its narrative power is how it's functioned as a historiographic eraser– not just casting a great retrospective shadow over Nehru's political career, but also blanking out a crucial, earlier period of India's actions on the global stage. My intention this evening isn't to offer a vindication of Nehru, let alone of his role in the 1962 crisis, though I do believe we now have available more nuanced accounts of the 1962 War which go deeper into the historical record and illuminate the context of his actions–from the tactical failures of military leadership, intelligence, and government ministries to the complicated turns in China's domestic politics that made war on India opportune. These new, more convincing interpretations are the work of my colleagues here at King's College London and at the India Institute – Srinath Raghavan, Rudra Chaudhuri, and now also appearing in the work of our excellent cohort of graduate students at the India Institute, including Zorawar Daulet Singh and others. I am not therefore going to tread on territory that they have so skilfully opened up for us.

Instead, I'd like this evening to examine a different sliver of historical time: the moment between 1951 and 1954 -- to look again at the early, now lost, years of India's international actions as an independent state, some of her very first initiatives, and as such concrete demonstrations of Nehru's judgment. As the leader of a big state without inherited patterns of how to act in the world, Nehru faced a challenge different from that faced by most leaders, concerned as they are with the routine exercise of already constituted state power, along broadly articulated policy lines. Nehru had to *create* an international identity and modes of practical action for India, more or less from scratch.

In the years after independence in 1947, Nehru was leading in circumstances that were greatly constrained: economic shortages, the aftershocks of religious conflict from Partition, the weak integration of India's regions, and tensions with the new neighbour, Pakistan. He was trying to coalesce a bewildering array of interests, on a vast scale, into a form of legitimate political agency. He was struggling to make the idea of India. But simultaneously he was engaged in a still more ambitious struggle: the struggle to make Asia, a continent that had experienced centuries of European colonial rule, and decades of war, and was now agitated by new ideas of freedom, equality, solidarity, and political power.

If 1962 is typically seen as the low point of Nehru's engagement with Asia, the Bandung Conference in 1955 is the usual high point: a brief, euphoric political festival of Asian fraternity. But the four years *before* Bandung were critical both for the creation of Asia and for determining India's place within it. The Second World War in Asia had been officially brought to an end, but a new cycle of war and conflict had been inaugurated across the continent --beginning in the Korean peninsula and spreading to Indo-China. These were years when Asia's postwar map was made--its contours largely determined by states far more powerful than Nehru's.

So as one starts to trace Nehru's international choices between 1951 and 1954, one can't but be struck by his audacity. At the head of a very large nation with no developed visions of the international sphere, and with virtually no strategic assets, he managed to stay focused on the future of Asia, and on India's interests within it. Unlike his mentor Gandhi, and more than any other leader of a newly decolonized, poor nation, Nehru tried to think strategically--setting the long-term direction of India's international presence. His intellectual logic is best understood not through his often high-blown rhetoric, but through the positions he tried to secure in these early years.

He lost more than he gained in those years; and some of his efforts did not endure. But his approaches were not, as some cynics would argue, incompetent or airily idealistic. Rather, they represent a form of political understanding, improvisational creativity and calculated restraint that is worth recovering, not just for the historical record, but in the context of today's Asia--a region at once vigorous in growth and riven by tensions rooted in long-suppressed conflicts.

In these November days, as Aung San Suu Kyi visits New Delhi, as President Obama moves from Thailand to Burma and Cambodia, as China's new leadership is installed in its palaces of power, Asia's political future is hazier than usual. Will democracy or authoritarianism win out? How will the open economies of Asia deal with the volatilities of globalization, and can regional associations bring stability? How will Asian states deal with their internal diversities, and the lack of fit between their territorial maps and the distribution of ethnic and religious communities across Asia? Can the remarkable deepening of economic interdependencies across Asia and between it and the rest of world durably pacify the tensions and conflicts that also animate the region? Above all, what does Asia's rapid militarization mean for itself - and for the world?

Nehru was no prophet, but he recognized a truth that transcends his own lifetime: that the threats that defined politics, in his new country, as well as across Asia, could not be pacified by resort to ideological certainties, to technocratic economics, or to reliance upon military superiority. Looking back at the early years of his practice, we can see him thinking politically about India's options, case by case, context by context, as he tried grasp the complexities of the modern world.

*

Imperial Britain's foreign policy for India had been defined by Britain's global ambitions, with little reference to the interests of Indians themselves. Unlike China, India had no available modern tradition of its own on how to act and pursue its interests in the world. When it came to Asia, what Nehru inherited as a leader was a jumble of Indian ideas, few of them distinguished by their utility for a fledgling Indian state.

In the decades before independence, apart from Tagore's ideas on Pan-Asianism, which gave India a messianic role in Asia's future, India's intellectual and political engagements with Asia were fairly limited. There was Subhas Chandra Bose, all trussed khaki and polished jackboots, enthused over Asia's military and political power as his Japanese hosts declaimed the virtues of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. Hindu nationalists and hopeful folkloric scholars advocated an idea of "Greater India", a supposed space of civilizational connections that extended from Bamiyan via Bodhgaya to Borubadur. These were slim resources for an incoming leader of a new, poor, state to draw on. Nor was the international climate propitious for trying to create a connected Asia: a world sharply divided between powerful and less powerful, increasingly enmeshed in a web of dependencies and security alliances.

To Nehru, notions of Asian solidarity and of pan-Asianism--a legacy of the earlier decades and founded on opposition to the West and on legends of civilizational solidarities--were rhetorically potent but unstable and probably unsustainable in practice. From the late 1940s he was searching for a different understanding of an Asia that was rapidly becoming a continent of new states, where notions of civilizational self-esteem and historical injury allied with the new instrumentalities of state power, in potentially ominous ways. So, it was not to philosophers and poets that Nehru turned to discuss Asia and India's place within it in these first years of independence, but to scientists and strategists. He had extensive conversations on questions of defense and atomic security with the physicist Patrick Blackett, inviting him to advise on India's defense needs. Meeting the military strategist Basil Liddell Hart, he told him that in the long term, as China became more 'Chinese' and nationalist, it would pose a threat to

India's Eastern frontiers, and that while India needed to develop arms and military capabilities, for the foreseeable future it would have to defend its interests and maximize its bargaining positions through policy - a policy of what Liddell Hart noted as 'semi-neutrality' and 'nonalignment'. To a German American naval theorist, Herbert Rosinski, Nehru offered his own view of Asia's future. Asia contained at least four powerful blocs: the Chinese, the Indian, the Near East, Soviet Asia. Presently united by common opposition to Europe, they remained alien to one another. When the external influence that brought them together should cease to operate, the conflicts between them - already visible - would break out openly. Deeper understanding between these Asian worlds was something to hope for; but it would take time, and meanwhile catastrophes threatened. "What, then", Nehru asked his interlocutor, "should the statesman do, practically, to resolve the problem?"

Nehru's international policies through the 1950s were in large part an effort to answer that blunt question. Unlike Gandhi, Nehru was never a pacifist, and he willingly acknowledged the utility of force and violence, when calibrated with care. But his thinking was driven by the goal of keeping Asia at peace after decades of conflict. Avoiding war was essential for India's internal development, and to keep Asia disentangled from security alliances. But above all, for Nehru, wars and the escalation they entailed had to be avoided so as to avert thermonuclear catastrophe. In his view, the thermonuclear age that dawned in the mid-twentieth century fundamentally changed the nature of war. If previously war could be seen as an instrument of policy and politics, now it made politics impossible, literally obliterating it. And politics was for him the only way to manage the instabilities of power--a belief demonstrated by his judgments and actions in independent India's early years. So let me turn to my first example, the forgotten case of the Japanese Peace Treaty in 1951.

II

i

A Conference was held at San Francisco in the summer of 1951 to agree a treaty with Japan to formally end the Second World War in Asia, and to restore sovereignty to the country. India had itself been at war with Japan, and many Indian troops had died in stiff battles to beat off the threat of a Japanese invasion of India. Nehru had been suspicious of Japanese militarism from the 1920s onwards, when other Indians - and some of his colleagues - had a more favorable view. At San Francisco, 51 nations, mainly Western were represented, though only 48 signed the Treaty - Russia being the main power to refuse. China was not invited, and among the few Asian signatories were Ceylon and Pakistan (neither of whom had been at war with Japan). India decided to keep away from the conference and the treaty, preferring to negotiate a separate bilateral treaty

that it signed with Japan the following year.

India's refusal to sign the Japan Peace Treaty provoked anger in the US. President Truman, according to John Foster Dulles, upon reading India's note on the draft Treaty provisions, "spent a sleepless night pacing his room, and filled the margins with indignant comments: "So what" and "Oh Yeah." In fact the record shows he was even less diplomatic, scribbling, "Evidently the Govt of India has consulted Uncle Joe and Mousie Dung of China!" [*FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VI, Part 1, pp. 1288-1291; Note by VLP of conversation with Dulles, October 1951]. Dulles conveyed to Nehru via the Indian Ambassador in Washington, Nehru's sister, that the US was "deeply hurt," and feared that "India subscribes to the Chinese slogan of Asia for the Asians and desires to end American influence in Asia."

Nehru wasn't trying to create a new Asian bloc, though. In fact, India's views on how Japan should be treated differed from that of other Asian countries such as China, Indonesia and Burma – as well as from Soviet Russia. Whereas China and Russia wished for a punitive peace that would extract significant reparations from Japan, India in fact agreed with the US that such harsh conditions should not be imposed [Bajpai to VLP Sept 22 1951].

So what was Nehru's reasoning in choosing to keep India out - despite opposition from his own colleagues in government? [SW16:457-65]. For Nehru, no Treaty concerning Japan which excluded China and which Russia refused to be party to could be stable over time. He was uneasy too at the Treaty's provisions regarding islands such as Formosa, the Kuriles & Sakhalin, and the Senkaku and Ryukyu islands, including Okinawa. By leaving unsettled issues of sovereignty and actual control and occupancy of these territories, Nehru suspected the likelihood of future conflicts. Most important, he opposed an agreement joined to the Treaty that would allow US military bases on Japanese territory, and set Japan in a subordinate military alliance with the US. Such a pact should only be agreed, he believed, after Japan had regained sovereignty, not prior to regaining that status. For Nehru, a military alliance between the US, Japan and nationalist Taiwan was bound to keep Asia unstable and, he told his sister in Washington, could "only mean a big conflict in the East", [to VLP May 16 1951: SW16:I: 458-59]. For such reasons, the Treaty had to be seen in terms of its future effects on Asia: "One has to judge it", he wrote to her, "from the point of view of its effects on this situation. Does it tend to peace or war?" [June 12 & 23, 1951; SW16:I: 463-5].

In Parliament too, as he tried to define India's position, he worried that securing Asia's peace by means of a Treaty that created new military and security alliances would only

serve to militarize Asia's states and societies. Such militarization would do more than just encourage conflict between Asian states; it would also affect the internal balance of civil-military relations within Asian states. "This strange thing is happening in the Far East," he noted in Parliament, "that policy-making statements of great significance are issued sometimes by the commander in the field...whose incursions into politics may not be so happy" [speech in Parliament, March 28 1951; SW16:I: 512]. Nehru, then, judged India's interests to coincide in part with the US, in part with China and Russia - a difficult position to keep in a polarized international order.

The Treaty Nehru resisted established what subsequent historians have called the "San Francisco System," an enduring and complex network of bilateral military treaties and administrative agreements [Iriye: 1974; Calder: 2004]. This system brought prosperity to East Asia, and also succeeded it into an 'Arc of Crisis' – as Nehru believed Dulles had willed. By keeping the status of islands like the Kuriles, Sakhalin and others undecided, conflicts were kept alive in ways that enhanced America's geopolitical leverage, thereby fulfilling Dulles geostrategic purposes [Calder 2004]. Japan was spared reparations - but as John Dower, the great historian of Japan's defeat and postwar reconstruction has put it "the exact price Japan would be called on to pay for incorporation into a Pax Americana became apparent only bit by bit" [Dower: Embracing Defeat]. The island of Okinawa became a major US nuclear base, effectively a military colony, and Japan was required by the US to recognize the Nationalist Chinese in Taiwan and to sign a parallel Treaty with it. In Dower's assessment, the Treaty and its accompanying agreements "turned out to be more inequitable than any other bilateral arrangement the United States entered into in the post-war period" [552-53].

Nehru's understanding of the long-range effects of the Treaty proved to be right. The Japan Peace Treaty did not bring peace to Asia, but kept it encoiled in tensions. Over the next decades the continent would also be a theatre of conflict in which some ten million people were killed in wars.

ii

Even before the Japan Peace Treaty brought a formal close to well over a decade of war in Asia, new conflicts had erupted – this time in the Korean peninsula, involving America in a bitter, ultimately stalemated, war against Communist opponents supported by China and Russia. From the war's very beginning in the summer of 1950 Nehru engaged in rapid-fire correspondence with the US, British, Russian and Chinese leaderships, urging a peaceful settlement. Though initially disinclined to involve himself in the crisis, in the latter half of 1951 he suggested various formulations to try to resolve

the main sticking point - the terms of repatriation for prisoners of war -and to bring the conflict to an end. Nehru's ideas were met with obstructionist responses by the Chinese and Russians, and Nehru's diplomacy was further handicapped by circumstances on his own side: India's team of senior officials in Delhi, at the U.N. in New York, in Washington, Peking and Moscow were prima donnas who squabbled with one another as they vied for their own advancement.

Nehru started to think the effort to end the war was hopeless. He had once placed great faith in institutions like the U.N. but now felt them disintegrating in the face of Cold War politicking. And in November 1952, when the U.S. tested a Hydrogen bomb, he was nearing despair. Days after the bomb test, he wrote to his sister: "it seems now that almost any step was foredoomed to failure. The world is determined to commit suicide" [Nov. 25 1952]. Yet very soon after, the threat of nuclear war had galvanized Nehru to extraordinary action, a brief and furious period of international diplomacy that saw India engaged in trying to unravel the crises first in Korea and then in Indo-China, and also to pursue a more secure relationship with China.

In Korea, Nehru acted boldly and with indifference to offending either side in the conflict – and indeed the Chinese took as much offense as earlier the Americans had done. Nehru made clear that India upheld the principle of free choice for prisoners to decide whether or not they wanted to be repatriated - a principle to which the Americans were committed. Nehru's plan along these lines, put forward by India in late 1952, was initially rejected by Russia and China. But Nehru persisted. And in June 1953-- substantially aided by a greater willingness for a peace agreement by the Chinese and the Russians in the wake of Stalin's death three months before – Nehru was able to help ease the deadlock and achieve a resolution that earlier looked impossible. The agreement created a Five Nation Commission, chaired by India, to oversee the POW repatriation. Six thousand Indian troops were committed to Korea as a custodial force. In difficult circumstances (exacerbated by the actions of the South Korean leader), and under sharp criticism from China, India brought to a successful end the POW crisis. Yet, at the subsequent international conference called on Korea's future, India was kept out by the US, who bowed to South Korean wishes.

Despite the initial hostility it prompted from the US, Russia and China, India's role in Korea established the international credibility of India's stance of "positive neutrality" or nonalignment, as Nehru sometimes called it. It underlined Nehru's efforts to pursue a consistent political liberalism: his commitment to principles of choice which he was willing to uphold against both Communist and Western powers - in ways that invariably irritated both (an irritation heightened by Nehru's own difficulties in living up

to his declared principles, especially when it came to issues closer to home). Though excluded from the international negotiations on Korea, Nehru was emboldened to take further steps in hopes of making Asia safer against war – a risk posed as much by Chinese and Russian actions as by those of America and the Western powers.

America's 1954 military pact with Pakistan had transported the Cold War to India's doorstep - bringing NATO's fingertips to the subcontinent, as Churchill told Eisenhower - while France's colonial war in Indo-China threatened Nehru's ambition to keep Asia free of great power entanglements. And, he remained suspicious of Chinese intentions in Tibet as well as in other smaller Asian states. Then, on March 1 1954, America exploded the first in a series of Hydrogen bomb tests at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific-- weapons vastly more lethal than any previously seen. The impact of these tests, coming less than a decade after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and with geopolitical tensions on a knife-edge, should not be underestimated.

Within days of the tests, Nehru called in the Indian parliament for a "Standstill Agreement", which was as he put it to Churchill "much like a ceasefire in an armed conflict". Nehru was the first statesman in the world to call for such a moratorium, and it was to be a concern for the rest of his life.

This was the context in which now, in 1954, Nehru intensified India's diplomatic engagement with Asia, and with China. Nehru's belief in a nonaligned India, and Asia, drew criticism, not just from the major powers but from his own countrymen too. The writer Nirad Chaudhuri was among those critics. Chaudhuri argued that Soviet Russia posed the main threat to India, and that India should therefore welcome the Western presence in Asia – even to the extent of approving the recently signed American military pact with Pakistan, which was more likely to dissuade Soviet ambitions toward the subcontinent than to threaten India. Chaudhuri's article provoked Nehru to write a confidential Memo explaining his approach (to his Deputy Foreign Minister June 23 1954). With the stalemate in Korea and the collapse of French military power in Indo-China, the US was now contemplating war which could escalate to a world scale, and was "likely to be governed very much by atomic and hydrogen bombs". Since it appeared now that Russia's nuclear armoury could match America's, the implications were catastrophic - and made it all the more important that India pursue an independent line.

As he told his Chief Ministers, the US was embarked on a big gamble that could precipitate war, in a context where "Asia has been and will continue to be the scene of hydrogen bomb experiments and of war in which Asians are made to fight Asians"

[Letters to CMs, April 14 1954]. India therefore had to stick to its policy of trying to de-escalate moves to war. “Naturally” he wrote, “India cannot do much in this respect, but when the scales are balanced, even a little makes a difference”.

This belief, that small actions in the right direction mattered, led Nehru that same Spring to intervene in the Indo-China conflict. Originating as a struggle against French colonialism, the conflict had become by 1954 a site of the global Cold War – with Vietnam the ‘domino,’ as Eisenhower put it, whose fall might spread communism. In early 1954, amidst high tension, a conference was called at Geneva in order to negotiate peace in Indo-China - a prospect that motivated the Vietminh to a big military push, hoping thus to secure better bargaining terms, and which resulted in a comprehensive French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. Days later at Geneva, the major four powers convened – America, Russia, Britain and France, as well as China, and the three parties to the conflict in Indo-China.

The US saw little benefit in India’s involvement at Geneva. Meanwhile, Soviet Russia, and China actively wanted to keep India out. As documents from Russian and Chinese archives have revealed, the two countries were working closely together to expand their influence and to establish China’s rank as a negotiating power in the international arena. Geneva would be a platform for establishing China’s international status, and as Chinese officials in Moscow reported to Zhou en-Lai, the Soviets believed “India’s participation may weaken the role played by China” [March 6 1954: CWIHP.16: 13 Doc3]. Though Nehru did not know of these conversations, he knew India’s interest lay in prising distance between Russia and China. And he pursued these interests even as Indian critics decried his rush into the Indo-China crisis as misjudged idealism, involving a distant conflict irrelevant to immediate Indian concerns.

What did India –itself barely seven years independent, beset with domestic problems and with limited military resources – hope to achieve by getting involved in a conference where its presence was seen as an irritant? As Nehru put it to the Indian parliament, the developments in Indo-China “cast a deep shadow on our hopes; they impinge on our basic policies and they seek to contain us in alignments” [SW.25: 442]. Nehru understood the stakes of the conference, and the likely consequences for Asia. What happened in Indo-China would play a role in defining not just the future of European colonial power in Asia, but also the nature of American and Russian power, and Chinese power there too. Nehru was searching for ways to contain and limit the presence of the two superpowers as well as of China – and to safeguard Asia from becoming entangled in security treaties based on military alliances between large powers and small states. So India virtually invited itself to the Geneva conference.

Nehru's envoy, Krishna Menon turned up and plunged into a hectic schedule of diplomatic parleying, not unlike speed-dating – working the corridors and rooms, holding some 200 interviews with the heads of the assembled delegations, in a manner that proved himself to be something of a foreign policy LBJ.

For Nehru, the urgency of playing a role in the Indo-China negotiations had little to do with ideological struggles about the spread of Communism or the advance of democracy. It was rooted in an assessment of threat, and of how that might define the Asian landscape. If the discussions failed, the conflict - involving as it did major powers - might escalate uncontrollably. The US - as Dulles had explicitly stated at the time - might retaliate in a big way if China became directly involved in the Indo-China war. With France militarily defeated, and the U.S.'s conventional military resources already stretched by its commitments in Korea, America's active consideration of deploying nuclear weapons was a threat that could not be ignored.

Further, while Nehru resisted the creation of a US-dominated security organization across Asia, which would further undermine his hope for Asia remaining outside the alliance gridmaps of the Cold War, he was equally concerned that any escalation in the war would increase China's influence across Asia, expanding it into areas much closer to India than the Korean peninsula. It was in India's interests to find a way to keep China from extending its sway over Asia's smaller, weaker states, and to get it to respect the identities of new, small sovereign states. To attempt this by means of military alliances designed to contain China was a counter-productive strategy. China had to be induced in other ways. Since it remained outside the U.N. and loosely integrated into what it saw as an imperialist-made system of international law, its commitment to liberal principles of state sovereignty had to be encouraged by other means.

India's efforts at bringing peace to Indo-China were limited in their long-term success. But Nehru's actions did help to maintain an uneasy armistice for almost a decade - until the attack by the North that ultimately brought America into the war. For his own part, Nehru after Geneva considered resigning his Prime Ministership - he felt he had been more effective that he ever would be again.

The problem with which Nehru struggled across his entire career remains as real in our times as it was in his: how to re-arrange the massive asymmetry in power embodied in a world order defined by the West? But his critique of this international order was

never simply an anti-Western critique, made from a culturalist or counter-ideological position. It was a critique that accepted professed Western principles (such as inclusion, sovereignty, liberty, and equality), and sought to hold the actions of every state to those principles. If he had been critical of American ambitions towards Asia in his rejection of the Japan Peace Treaty, he was critical too of Communist actions in Korea: and he rejected the ideological internationalism of Russian Communism, as also Chinese notions of Asian unity based upon a sense of common victimhood, on imagined civilizational bonds, or on notions of a Sino-centric Asia joined by a tribute-system.

His engagement with China is widely seen as having been distorted by illusory feelings of fellowship. His 1954 talks with Mao and Zhou en-Lai, his visit to China and the popular reception he was accorded (heavily orchestrated, of course, as even he recognized) went to his head, so it is said. Perhaps: certainly he spoke fulsomely of India and China's friendship, and he missed cues that ran in the other direction - in part because he couldn't afford confrontation and could only play for time. It's also true that his Peking visit in 1954 achieved little that lasted. But as with the Japanese Peace Treaty, Korea, and Geneva, there was more logic and wariness to Nehru's approach than is generally allowed. His logic in regard to China was propelled by the desire not just to reassure it, but to restrain it. He believed that in the long term, India would have to find ways to bind China to accepted norms and principles. An improbable goal under Mao but, given the stakes, and India's lack of alternatives, worth pressing.

In Europe, the idea of the sovereign state had been realized through a long and painful history of war and conflict. Nehru hoped Asia might avoid that process, not least because it would leave a poor India the resources to develop. Thus his practice in the early years of independence was aimed at creating an Asia of sovereign states, achieved not through war, nor defined by spheres of influence or military alliances guaranteed by larger powers. Such a system was justified on the grounds of self-determination. And it was also the most effective way to ensure India's own interests, given Nehru's uncertainties about China's search for ideological influence, and its historical tendencies towards expansion.

The need to address those uncertainties--and not a giddy, unguarded idealism -- shaped Nehru's engagement with China in 1954. In April of that year, India signed an agreement with China over Tibet – significantly, it was an agreement about trade and trading relations between Tibet and India, apparently rather narrow in scope. But it was prefaced by five principles intended to define relations between states: respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-intervention, mutual non-aggression, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. These came to be known as the

Panchsheel - principles later derided as vague and ineffectual, Nehru saw them as key to maintaining Asia as a “zone of peace”.

For him, apart from structuring the relationship between China and India, the Five Principles provided a template by which large states could be convinced to recognize the sovereignty of new and smaller states in Asia – particularly those that China was accustomed to thinking of as part of its own ‘Sinocentric’ sphere of influence (as was the case with Tibet and the states of Indo-China).

When Zhou en-Lai travelled to Delhi immediately after the Geneva conference to meet Nehru in June 1954, Nehru coaxed him to commit to extending the Panchsheel more widely - to Burma, the new states of Indo-China, and other Asian countries as well. Their conversations were terse. The Acting British High Commissioner in Delhi, George Middleton, a tough Cold Warrior himself and never soft on Nehru, observed in a perceptive despatch the “relative wariness” between the two Premiers (in contrast to the more “emotional atmosphere” when the Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers had met a few months before). In his speeches during Zhou en-Lai’s visit, Nehru stressed “freedom” (a theme quite absent in the Chinese leaders remarks) and dwelt on the differences between the political methods of India and China. He prompted Zhou En-Lai to say in public “that revolution cannot be exported”, and made clear India’s distance from the communist world. “India”, Middleton suggested, “may be moving towards something more like a policy of balance of power” [1 July 1954 TNA FO 371/110226].

In October that same year, Nehru travelled to China to meet Mao, and stuck to his message. He ignored Mao’s narrative of Asia’s historical victimhood at the hands of imperialist powers, and opposed Mao’s views on war.

For Mao, war was an opportunity, a tool of policy -- and China’s vast human numbers a military boon. The Korean War had shown Mao’s willingness to use his own people as cannon fodder, and in the atomic age, China was well endowed to absorb huge casualties and still survive. War had enabled the Chinese people to stand up, and it was through war that Mao believed one could destroy the “old world” that had humiliated China and spread “continuous revolution” across the world.

But as Nehru tried to tell Mao, nuclear weapons had fundamentally changed the nature of war, not just in the scale of their decimation. In the nuclear age, war was “no longer a usable instrument for achieving policy goals”, because it risked obliterating the entire machinery of government and political decision making: leaving behind “extreme chaos”

from which there was no possibility of a return to peace.

In fact, Nehru told Mao, China and India's huge human scale gave them power of a different kind, that distinguished them from the West. It was their scale that filled the smaller countries of Asia with apprehension and encouraged them to look to others powers for protection. That unprecedented scale, Nehru saw, was enabling a shift in global power towards the states of China and India: and that was inducing anxiety also in the world's more powerful states. European power had weakened significantly, and even the US - with all its extraordinary military and financial might - feared losing its preeminence. To Nehru, a state acting in the grip of fear was more likely to act imprudently--action that might lead to war.

Nehru was indeed, I think, trying to devise something like his own conception of a balance of power, based not on European ideas of security alliances, but on a conception appropriate to India's interests and capacities. India had certainly to develop its conventional and military powers; but given the asymmetries of the international order, it had also to find new definitions of power. Historically, most neutral powers had been small (Sweden, Switzerland), and their neutrality had little or no international impact. Nehru's insight was to recognize that if India could combine its immense scale with a position of positive neutrality or non-alignment, this would actually maximize its international power. If a large state kept away from alignments, it could introduce and keep in play a beneficial uncertainty in the international system. It was a point that had been well grasped by one of Nehru's most trusted foreign policy officials, Giraja Shankar Bajpai, who had noted in an essay published two years previously that "an uncertain equipoise of power between political combatants can introduce a certain element of caution regarding the attitude of neutrals into [the] calculations [of the major powers] and thus prevent an outbreak of hostilities".

III

Nehru *did* create a beneficial uncertainty in the crucial years when the postwar map of Asia was being negotiated. His chief misjudgment was to underestimate Mao's ability to use a short war to strike home a political point. Statesmen and scholars have been trying to judge China's intentions and capacities accurately ever since - and it remains an open question if there has been any marked improvement in judgment between Nehru's time and ours.

India's defeat in 1962 delighted Nehru's enemies and critics, as well as his would-be great power allies. They believed the 1962 war had finally delivered to them the Nehru they had long wanted: a Nehru compelled to see the world in more simplified terms, a Nehru who accepted binaries and polarities; a Nehru who accepted the relative weakness of his country. The satisfaction that many took in Nehru's defeat stands as something of a tribute to his audacity in those early years.

In the aftermath of defeat, India began a prolonged disengagement with Asia, but Nehru had still managed to establish in those years of the early 1950s an enduring legacy. The voices of states like India, and of other new less powerful states, could no longer be dismissed. Though his record was hardly one of steady, unqualified success, he demonstrated that it was possible to struggle against the asymmetries of international power, to press for the expansion of rights and against exclusion, not through force or the threat of force- as so many in the Third World began to do, provoking the powerful to yet more force in response - but by argument and persuasion. As Nehru had put it, "when the scales are balanced, even a little makes a difference".

Asia today is in very many respects different from the one that Nehru and Mao debated. But, as Nehru anticipated, it is one whose greater weight and power continues to spread uncertainty and fear among the old powers of the West. It is an Asia that has not come together on the basis of civilizational bonds nor by means of the personalized diplomacy Nehru favoured. Asia's present power and interconnections have been secured by the impersonal bonds of trade.

What has made Asia today a more stable place than in Nehru's time, is the fact that its states are incomparably more prosperous, its economies more deeply interdependent. More than half of Asia's trade is with itself, part of the dynamism that enables Asia to produce a quarter of the world's GDP.

But Nehru's fears about the militarization of Asia, and about the enmeshing of Asian states in security alliances, have been realized. Economic growth has also made Asia the most rapidly militarizing region of the world. In the past 12 years, the defense spending of Asia's major military powers - China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan - has virtually doubled, with a marked increase over the past 6 years. And it is the world's most heavily nuclearized region - a fact that its leaders and people seem to have become insouciant about.

The prosperity that is today making Asia anew has not always meant political freedom; nor has the amassing of military power always brought greater security. Beyond the

smartphones and the smart drones, Asia's leaders and its people will need to manifest political skills if they are to create a continent that can bring to its peoples the liberty that its first generation of makers had promised.

A week ago, in New Delhi, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi delivered the Nehru Memorial Lecture. She spoke of how, under house arrest, she once copied out a long passage about political order based on coercion. Among the lines she wrote down were these: “.. Any achievement that is based on widespread fear can hardly be a desirable one, and an ‘order’ that has for its basis the coercive apparatus of the State, and cannot exist without it, is more like a military occupation than civil rule....How much more desirable is [the] idea of inculcating fearlessness than of enforcing ‘order’ on a frightened populace!”. She hung the page in the hallway of the house where she was held prisoner - a hallway through which at that time passed not world leaders and US Presidents, but members of the Burmese security and military intelligence. Even if these men didn't read the words, Aung San Suu Kyi wanted to be sure they would not miss the author's name. So at the bottom of the page, in large red letters she wrote: ‘Jawaharlal Nehru’. A name that stands for liberty over coercion: an idea Nehru struggled for - and that many across Asia struggle for still.