



The Orientation in the Orient (1949–1952)

Divergences between United States and Indian views toward China and Indochina are serious foreign policy conflicts blocking closer understanding with India.

—Department of State policy statement, December 1, 1950¹

On October 11, 1949, at 4:40 p.m., Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru stepped off US president Harry Truman's plane *Independence* onto the tarmac at Washington's National Airport. *Time* called it "one of the century's most important visits of state."² It was Nehru's first visit to the United States and the first summit level meeting between the American and Indian heads of government. Truman, along with three cabinet ministers and a 19-gun salute, greeted Nehru at the airport. The skies were cloudless; from Truman's perspective, however, the state of the world was not. Just ten days earlier, Chinese Communist Party chairman Mao Zedong had announced the establishment of the People's Republic of China. This "loss" of China shaped the welcome Nehru received in the US, put the subject on the Truman-Nehru agenda and affected how India and her prime minister were seen in the US.

Despite the sunny beginning that day, China cast a dark shadow on the US-India relationship in the few years after the Truman-Nehru meeting. From 1949 to 1956, American and Indian policymakers differed over the nature of the China threat, its urgency, and how to deal with it—and this posed a major challenge for US-India relations. American officials saw China as hostile and sought to contain it. The dominant view in India, however, was that China did not pose an external threat in the short to medium term; Delhi consequently sought to engage Beijing.

This US-India difference had an impact on their bilateral relationship because each country came to see the other's China stance as, at best, hindering or, at worst, harming its own strategic priorities. Moreover, as the US focused more on Asia, and India played a larger role on the global—and especially Asian—stage, the two countries crossed paths frequently on the China

question. Simultaneously, however, each country's strategic framework, including vis-à-vis China, envisioned a role for the other. This perception prevented a complete US-India breakdown.

From the American perspective, China had two key effects on the US-India relationship. On the one hand, communist China's emergence made India a bigger blip on Washington's radar—one that stood out because of its size and potential as well as its noncommunist and democratic character. On the other hand, Delhi's disagreement with American perception of and policy on China contributed significantly to tensions in the US-India relationship and, especially, the negativity or indifference India faced in the US Congress between 1949 and 1956.

China also shaped the US-India relationship in two key ways from India's perspective. Differences on China led key Indian policymakers to see the US more as part of the problem in Asia than as part of the solution. Nehru thought the American attitude and actions toward China were destabilizing Asia. The resultant insecurity would require higher Indian defense expenditures and disrupt development, which was a key priority for his fledgling government. Simultaneously, however, Delhi saw the US as indispensable to facilitating Indian economic development—which Nehru believed was essential for India's long-term security, including against China.

This chapter looks at the first phase of this period of divergence, that is, until 1952. It briefly considers how Washington viewed China and India in the period between the latter's independence in 1947 and the communist takeover of China in 1949, and it outlines the link between those perceptions. It then considers Delhi's views of a transitioning China and the US in the same period. The next section explores the differences that developed between the US and India on China after Mao came to power. Subsections consider India's unwillingness to serve as a bulwark against China, US-India disagreement about recognizing communist China in 1949, their differences on the Chinese role in the onset of the Korean War in 1950, Beijing's takeover of Tibet, American and Indian reactions to direct Chinese intervention in the Korean War, and the frustrations that developed as India served as an intermediary between China and the US during that war. The chapter ends with a look at how the differences that had developed on China affected American perceptions of—and willingness to aid—India.

China and India: The View from Washington (1947–1949)

In 1947, while the elements of containment were falling into place in the US, the Truman administration was preoccupied with Europe. Asia was generally

an afterthought. The idea of strongpoint defense—“concentration on the defense of particular regions and means of access to them”—prevailed. Most policymakers did not believe that the loss of Asian territory to communism would make the US insecure. Besides, as Under Secretary of State Robert Lovett argued, the US did not have the means available to “underwrit[e] the security of the whole world.”³

Officials such as George Kennan, director of policy planning in the State Department, stressed the need for the US to distinguish between vital and peripheral interests. Kennan and Secretary of State Dean Acheson judged a country’s value in terms of possession of “skilled manpower and industrial potential capable of significantly altering the balance of world power.” If the Soviet Union directly or indirectly took over countries that were valuable according to these criteria, it would adversely affect US interests. In Asia, Japan met these criteria; China and India did not.⁴

The administration considered India to be even less vital than China. A CIA report in September 1947 placed it among the least important countries for the US. India had neither industrial-military capacity nor skilled manpower, and its resources were not indispensable. The State Department’s Policy Planning Staff agreed.

Given the looming Soviet threat, military and intelligence assessments identified neighboring Pakistan as the South Asian country with more apparent value. It was also nearer to the critical oil-rich Middle East. Therefore, American and British diplomats sought stability in the region. But the belief that a Kashmir settlement was necessary to achieve that objective would cause serious differences with India.⁵

At that stage, India’s fledgling democratic experiment gave it only minimal symbolic value in the US strategic framework. The nature of a country’s government was not on the list of characteristics that made a country important to the US. Officials such as Kennan believed that the type of government within states was not necessarily relevant in determining the US relationship with them. It was in American interests to have at least some nations remain democratic, but the US itself could serve to demonstrate the benefits of democracy. Economic recovery in the democratic countries of Western Europe could further serve to prove that democracy and economic progress could coexist.⁶

The lack of interest in India came with a relative lack of concern about its foreign policy, even what George Marshall, secretary of state in 1947, called its “intention to pursue an independent but cooperative policy.” There was also little apprehension that communists would gain much ground within India. Thus most American policymakers, lacking the time, expertise, and interest,

were satisfied with Britain taking the lead in shaping Anglo-American policy toward India.⁷

Developments in 1949, however, would bring Asia, in general, and India, in particular, to Washington's attention. Two events—the Soviet nuclear test in August and the Chinese Communist Party's establishment of the People's Republic in October—shook the faith that strongpoint defense would be sufficient to ensure American security. The weakening of the American nuclear deterrent and China going communist would make not just Europe but also Asia seem more vulnerable. And with the perception of a shift in the power balance, Kennan's view that China was not vital would become less resonant.

Initially in 1949, as the Guomindang (GMD) regime in China, led by Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek), was collapsing under the weight of the Chinese Communist Party's onslaught, Truman and Acheson perceived no good options. They supported Jieshi's regime, but they believed it was partly responsible for the situation and the GMD's imminent collapse. And they had no desire to increase aid that was unlikely to help. In July 1949, summarizing the administration's China White Paper, Acheson asserted, "It is abundantly clear that we must face the situation as it exists in fact. We will not help the Chinese or ourselves by basing our policy on wishful thinking."⁸ While there was public opposition to recognizing the communists as China's leaders, there was little pushback to this cautious policy.⁹ That also gave Acheson the space to consider fostering a wedge between Moscow and the Chinese communists, including by continuing contacts with the latter.¹⁰

This approach was complicated, however, by growing congressional opposition to the administration's China policy in the summer and fall of 1949. Members of the China bloc in Congress, part of a China lobby consisting of academics, businesspersons, diplomats, labor, media persons, and military officials, strongly advocated for support and aid to the GMD, and even direct US military intervention. Their views, however, did not gain traction at that stage.¹¹

But India did gain traction as China seemed to be "falling" to communism. Rhetoric from both conservatives and liberals linked China and India. GMD supporters, including Senator William Knowland (R-CA), Representative Walter Judd (R-MN), former diplomat William Bullitt, and retired general Claire Lee Chennault, who had served in the China-Burma-India theater, warned that if China fell, then all of Asia, even India, would fall to communism.¹² Among others, the idea of India as part of the solution to the Asia problem took hold, with some suggesting that the US not only increase aid to the GMD but also offer military assistance to countries like Burma and India.

Yet others argued that rather than providing more aid to the GMD, the administration should consider other approaches in Asia that included India, such as a Pacific Pact, or increased economic assistance to India, where communists were “pressing hard.”¹³ Senator Hubert Humphrey (D-MN) noted that democratic India was “the logical choice” for a “new start” in Asia.¹⁴ Some advocates of economic aid to India also used the fall of China to push their cause.¹⁵ *Life* magazine hailed Nehru as “Asia’s greatest statesman. . . . If we can find the right formula for joining our strength with his, the future of Asia and the world will become much brighter.”¹⁶ By September, *The Economist* was commenting on the increased American commentary about “India as a bulwark against Asiatic Communism.”¹⁷

There was also a change in attitude toward India within the administration, which was reluctant to prop up Jiang, whose loss seemed imminent. At the end of August, Truman noted that India had now become “key to the whole Asian situation.” Two years after the CIA report had put India in the least-important category, reports in September 1949 from the agency and State Department intelligence highlighted India’s importance as the only potential competitor to China in Southeast Asia.¹⁸ A State Department consultative committee on Asia advocated American support for potentially stable, independent governments and noted that “India and particularly Nehru” were “the most solid element with which the United States can associate itself.”¹⁹ The US ambassador to Moscow added that instead of wasting resources trying to take on the communists in China, the US should build up countries like India and Japan “where we still have [a] good chance [to] stem [the] Communist tide.”²⁰

Thus, by the time Nehru landed in Washington in October 1949, India had been assigned a role in the US strategic framework—a role that was highly derivative of that of China. This came with benefits. The press declared Nehru to be the “number one man in Asia” and the “strongest figure in a troubled continent.” India was “potentially a great counterweight to China.”²¹ *Time* put Nehru on its cover and declared India the “anchor for Asia.”²² Along with public adulation, Robert J. McMahon has argued that India’s new value also “led a growing number of administration strategists to accept India’s intransigence [on issues like Kashmir] with equanimity.”²³

The “fall” of China also ensured that Indian economic aid requests were given “a more thorough hearing” in Washington. In the early years of Indian independence, the US had either ignored or rejected most aid requests from Delhi because policymakers had not seen assistance to India as “significantly advancing]” American interests. But by early October 1949, US ambassador

to India and committed cold warrior Loy Henderson was proposing a five-year, \$500 million economic assistance package for the country. The basis that he laid out for Washington was that India could become “a stalwart and worthy champion in Asia.”²⁴

Not everyone in the Truman administration shared this enthusiasm. For example, Raymond Hare, the deputy assistant secretary of state for the Near East and South Asia, was skeptical about India’s ability to play the role envisioned. Others, such as the Far Eastern Affairs director, W. W. Butterworth, had a more fundamental question: Was it willing?²⁵ The US awaited Nehru’s visit in October 1949 to find out.

China and the US: The View from Delhi (1947–1949)

Nehru’s assessment of the consequences of the Second World War would partly shape his answer to that question. For many American policymakers, a key lesson had been that aggressors should be confronted, not appeased. For Nehru, who dominated Indian foreign policymaking as prime minister and foreign minister, other aspects resonated more, including the way India had become entangled in a war not of its choosing and the war’s adverse impact on the economies of India and other countries. Furthermore, he believed that the World Wars had not resolved the global situation and indeed had generated some new problems.²⁶

Focused on nation building, India’s newly independent leaders did not need more problems—they needed peace. As tensions rose globally in the late 1940s, G. S. Bajpai, foreign ministry secretary-general and the former Indian agent-general in the US, expressed concern that “some stray spark may ignite the gunpowder that is lying about.”²⁷ Nehru and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit believed that any major conflict would inevitably entangle India, or at the very least affect the country, given its integration with the world and its potential power and influence. And if war broke out again, Indian plans for progress would be significantly set back.²⁸

This framework linking India’s external objectives with its domestic imperatives also shaped India’s perception of and policy toward China. Near the end of 1948, officials expected China to split up. Nehru did not think a communist victory in China would have an immediate impact on Asia.²⁹ Indian deputy prime minister Vallabhbhai Patel was more concerned, lamenting that “the only bastions of security” left were India and Japan.³⁰ However, as the Chinese communists consolidated their gains, the Indian prime minister reassessed the consequences. A communist Chinese victory, he believed,

would have “far-reaching results all over South East Asia and ultimately in the world. India will naturally be affected by it, though there is no reason to fear any direct conflict. The future of Tibet may become a subject for argument.”³¹ As the GMD’s collapse became imminent, Nehru argued that India could not continue with the status quo merely because of his friendship with GMD leader Jiang Jieshi. His diagnosis of the GMD’s failure echoed that of Acheson, and at least the overall prescription seemed to match as well: “We have to take facts as they are.”³²

The Indian prime minister believed Delhi had to deal with the government in Beijing that existed, not the one it wished existed. In addition, if the Indian government “stood up for the bankrupt government in China now . . . this would give a fillip to communism in India.”³³ He also believed that rather than isolating communist China, it was important to integrate and bind it with the international community.

Nehru’s view of China flowed to a degree from mirror imaging, which would continue to affect his perception of China over the next half-decade. He and officials like Bajpai believed nationalism was the key driving force in China, as it was for India.³⁴ Nehru asserted that, much like his own government, a communist Chinese government would focus on internal issues—and it would do so in a pragmatic, rather than an ideological, way. Therefore, it would seek peace in its periphery. The Indian premier would consistently underestimate the effect of ideology on Chinese policymakers, despite the contention of Kavalam Madhava (K. M.) Panikkar, India’s representative in China, that the Chinese Communist Party leadership was “fanatically imbued with a sense of mission to refashion society.”³⁵

India’s limited defense capabilities also shaped the prime minister’s view of China and policy options toward it. Nehru did not appear open to contemplating contingencies like a military threat to India if China took over Tibet because it would “affect the balance we are trying to create in India.” That balance was in terms of both the defense-development balance and the civil-military balance.³⁶

While Nehru was uncertain about China’s external intentions, he was certain that India could not afford to provoke its northern neighbor. Thus it was the premier’s view that “our general attitude to the new China should be a friendly expectation and waiting to see what happens.”³⁷ Nehru’s concern about provoking Beijing showed in his furious reaction to an article that led to Chinese communist press criticism of Indian interest in Tibet.³⁸ It was also evident in his negative reaction to discussions about a US-sponsored Pacific Pact, which envisioned including India, to counter China’s potential “loss.”

Nehru saw pacts as provocative. He believed that the World Wars had demonstrated that pacts did more to exacerbate conflict than to prevent it. Furthermore, entangling alliances restricted freedom of action. Not everyone shared this perspective. His sister, Pandit, believed that at the very least, “inevitably one finds oneself aligned on one side or the other.”³⁹ Nehru had expressed interest in developing a “regional understanding *on a broad basis*” with Australia, New Zealand, and Southeast Asia.⁴⁰ But he had no desire to include India in any grouping *based on anticommunism*. It was important for India to leave the door open to “normal friendly relations” with the Chinese communists. And any suggestion of Indian participation in an anticommunist grouping could “only rouse suspicion and hostility of new China.”⁴¹ Panikkar encouraged this approach, noting that Nehru’s refusal to join the pact had somewhat reduced hostility against India among the communist Chinese, who had been accusing Nehru of being complicit in US policy toward Asia.⁴²

Nehru had no interest in a pact, but he welcomed the other option American policymakers were considering to support India vis-à-vis China: economic assistance. He perceived India’s main vulnerability as internal, its primary challenge as economic.⁴³ If his government did not solve this problem “effectively and fairly rapidly,” it would threaten both India’s stability and its political system.⁴⁴

Developments in China had been instructive; they did not leave Nehru unaffected as some have argued.⁴⁵ He felt that, “in Asia at any rate, communism flourished only where the economic standards of the people were indefensibly low”⁴⁶ and where governments “could not deliver the goods.”⁴⁷ In China, the GMD had failed to deliver and lost the faith of the people.⁴⁸ There were communists in India too, who were susceptible to external influence and seeking to “create trouble in every direction.”⁴⁹ The crackdown Nehru approved against them was only part of the solution; his government had to show results. Patel, too, stressed the importance of India preventing its own China-like situation from developing.⁵⁰

Nehru and Patel realized that their government could not deliver alone. Rapid and efficient development required foreign assistance, which the government welcomed despite some domestic opposition.⁵¹ For this, Patel thought one country was key, saying to Nehru, “we have to depend on the USA for our progress.” The prime minister thought developments vis-à-vis Britain, the Soviet Union, and the US would be crucial. He agreed that the latter was “of course, most important.” India needed to “take full advantage of [its] friendship” with the US both for economic assistance and to develop

India's military-industrial base.⁵² Given global uncertainty, he told Pandit that India needed this base and military equipment, and therefore needed cooperation with others to ensure that India did not “remain weak.” And the only countries that could help at the time were the US and UK.⁵³ Close confidant V. K. Krishna Menon later recalled him saying, “Why not align with the United States *somewhat* and build up our economic and military strength?”⁵⁴

In 1948, Indian policymakers used China to elicit support for aid to India. Chaos in China had created an opportunity. Nehru told Patel that because China would be unlikely to “play an effective part for a long time,” many countries would recognize that India was “the only other country” in Asia able to do so, and they would thus want to cultivate a relationship with it.⁵⁵ An Indian diplomat, Rajeshwar Dayal, outlined for Delhi a way to capitalize on developments in China: “The China situation will alter the balance in Asia and it seems to me that this is a good time to take up seriously the question of opening trade talks with the USSR. One result will be to stir up the Anglo-Americans who have been treating our requests for capital goods rather cavalierly.”⁵⁶

The use of this tactic could be quite blatant. For example, in a pitch to Secretary of State George Marshall, Nehru noted that “in working for itself India was working for all of Asia, especially in view of the tragic course in China.” India's UN representative implied to Commerce Secretary Charles Sawyer that developments in China had increased concerns about the potential spread of communism in India, and only economic development could stem its appeal. Bajpai indicated to American interlocutors that “following the collapse of China,” US aid was indispensable to maintain India as the “chief stabilizing influence in Asia.” Using similar logic, he had also broached the subject of military assistance with the acting secretary of state Robert Lovett.⁵⁷

American aid was crucial both because the US had the technical and financial ability to help India's development plans and because the Soviet Union was not an available source.⁵⁸ In the initial years of Indian independence, Nehru had reached out to Moscow, seeking to diversify India's relationships—and thus any potential dependence—and maximize the country's aid options.⁵⁹ But, although there was a debate in Moscow about India policy, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin saw India as an Anglo-American stooge, which Nehru resented. There were other irritants as well. The Indian prime minister believed Moscow was guiding the Indian communist party's increasingly hostile approach.⁶⁰ Nehru was also critical of “Russia's active expansionism” and “apparent lack of any sense of ethics in international affairs.”⁶¹ In addition, Soviet offers and terms of assistance had fallen short.⁶² It was also harder to deal with differences since Indian policymakers had few avenues to

communicate with officials from the Soviet Union or its satellites.⁶³ It was in this context that Delhi looked to Washington, and Nehru traveled to the US in October 1949.

Colliding Positions (1949–1952)

The Indian prime minister's visit would reveal crucial differences between India and the US on communism, the Soviet Union, and China. These disagreements would only intensify, with crucial implications for US-India relations over the rest of Truman's term and even beyond it.

Red China or New China? Comparing Notes (1949–1950)

China was a key subject of discussion between American and Indian policymakers during Nehru's visit. He outlined both his perception of and his preferred policy toward China. He felt Guomindang mismanagement had created the space for the communists. Communism, he believed, was "alien to the Chinese mind." "Foreign domination" would be disliked, and nationalism, growing everywhere in Asia, would eventually return as the "governing force" in China—and, meanwhile, serve to limit Sino-Soviet cooperation. Nehru gave Acheson the impression that India was "leaning toward early recognition," explaining that "India's proximity to China" made it view this issue differently.⁶⁴ Acheson did not believe that early recognition would give India any advantage. Moreover, it was not clear that the communists controlled all of China or that they had the backing of the Chinese people—both necessary elements before the US would even consider recognition. Furthermore, he worried about the impact of recognition on those still resisting the communists. Finally, he felt the Chinese government needed to outline its "international obligations" before expecting recognition.⁶⁵

American policymakers had been aware of Nehru's attitude toward China and the gap between US and Indian perceptions. Even before the visit, some voices within the administration had noted, "There is little hope that Nehru will dramatically announce that he has seen the light."⁶⁶ Henderson had noted that a survey of elite Indian opinion on China had shown that the majority of the leadership shared the prime minister's views.⁶⁷ Furthermore, reports from American diplomats in Delhi and Nanking had made evident that American and Indian attitudes toward the Chinese communists did not fully overlap.⁶⁸

Nehru's visit, with public hints that Delhi was close to recognizing the communist regime in China,⁶⁹ made clear to the American public what had been apparent to some observers within the administration: the US might have assigned India a role in its strategic script, but India was not willing to

play that role in the way the US wanted.⁷⁰ As the British ambassador in Washington noted, the visit “made abundantly clear to the American public that they could not look to India as a ready-made replacement for China [in] the cold war against Communism.”⁷¹ Speaking to the US Congress, Nehru had asserted, “Where freedom is menaced . . . or where aggression takes place, we cannot and shall not be neutral.”⁷² But as the *New York Times* lamented, Nehru “declined to encourage the slightest hope” that the US would have an ally in India.⁷³ The “fall” of China had created a constituency for India in Washington among the public and Congress; Nehru’s visit limited its hopes and size.

Within the administration, the visit cemented the view that India was not necessarily the answer to its China problem—certainly not one that would justify half a billion dollars of aid at a time when resources were limited, congressional support was uncertain, and the Truman administration’s focus and the public’s attention remained on Europe.⁷⁴ There was also a developing change in emphasis in US policy from economic to military assistance. Thus, in the week after Nehru’s visit, Henderson’s proposal for a large aid package to India was set aside.⁷⁵

Overall, Nehru’s visit limited the US view of India’s importance. The shift in the administration’s attitude was evident in the National Security Council staff’s December 1949 draft position paper on Asia policy (NSC 48/1). It stressed that since communism was global, rather than regional or local, the solution was not necessarily regional or local. Thus it would be “unwise” for the US to look toward India as a bulwark against communism in Asia.⁷⁶ At a meeting of US chiefs of mission in East Asia, officials also expressed doubts about the desirability and feasibility of building up Japan or India as dominant powers to counter China and the Soviet Union. India had not shown “constructive leadership,” and it was preoccupied with internal matters. Moreover, any such assigned leadership would stir up countries like Pakistan or Sri Lanka.⁷⁷

The evolving American strategic framework did, nonetheless, have a place for South Asia more broadly. This affected US policy in two ways that led to disagreements with Delhi. First, American policymakers put an even higher premium on stability in South Asia. While Indian policymakers would not have argued with this objective, the American assessment that the Kashmir dispute was one of the key threats to that stability—and required greater US involvement—came to be a major source of tension between the US and India.⁷⁸ Second, even though India was the bigger prize in most American policymakers’ eyes, as NSC 48 outlined, it also became important to prevent Pakistan from falling to communism. And, in spring 1950, Pakistani prime minister Liaquat Ali Khan made clear that, while India might resist playing a role in the American script for Asia, his country was ready for a role.⁷⁹

There was one area of US-India agreement on China, but it did not lead to convergence because of differences over means. The *New York Times* reported that one aspect of Nehru's prescription—pursuing a wedge strategy—had impressed the State Department.⁸⁰ Even before his visit, China watchers at State had argued against assuming Soviet control of the Chinese communists and stressed that Mao could act independently. Like Nehru, the American embassy in Moscow thought that US recognition of the communist Chinese government could help create a wedge between Beijing and Moscow. Acheson, in turn, believed that attempting to detach China from the Soviet Union would not constitute appeasement.

By the end of 1949, NSC 48/2 endorsed the idea of exploiting “rifts” between the communist giants.⁸¹ But, while this US objective was defined, the means to achieve it were not as clear. Kennan recommended a hands-off American policy. Truman and Acheson, on the other hand, contemplated cautiously detaching Beijing from Moscow, but not until the Chinese communists stopped “active abuse of us.”⁸²

This question of whether China or the US should take the first step would become a continuing point of difference with India. Furthermore, the Truman administration publicly continued to treat and condemn international communism as a monolith. To Nehru, as he had told the American leadership, this approach was counterproductive to the objective of facilitating a Sino-Soviet split.

To Recognize or Not to Recognize

Nehru was willing to take the first step with China by offering to recognize the People's Republic in late December 1949. Through most of that year, the Indian prime minister had been in “no hurry” to recognize communist China.⁸³ He had wanted to “wait and watch developments” in China before India took such a step.⁸⁴ Nehru had also not wanted “too abrupt a break” with Jiang.⁸⁵ The communist Chinese had not been friendly, and throughout that year, their news outlets had continued to condemn his government as being a “lackey” of Western “imperialists.”⁸⁶ He also wanted to communicate and coordinate with other countries like Britain and the US, though Indian representative in China K. M. Panikkar advised against this.⁸⁷ Finally, there was no consensus in India about recognition.

There had been a lively debate in India among the press and politicians of all stripes about whether to recognize communist China. Some supported recognition on idealistic or pragmatic bases; some opposed it as disloyal to Jiang or on the grounds that it would divide the US and India. Yet others called for conditional recognition, seeking guarantees from China in return. Within

the government, Panikkar, foreign secretary Kumara Padma Sivasankara (K. P. S.) Menon (former Indian agent general in China), and high commissioner in London Krishna Menon argued in favor of recognition. Others such as Governor-General Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, Deputy Prime Minister Patel, and some diplomats advocated a “go slow” approach.⁸⁸ Some, like the political officer in Sikkim, suggested that India should state that any recognition was “without prejudice” to India’s rights and commitments vis-à-vis Tibet. Bajpai, who did not believe India could help Tibet militarily, similarly argued for using the recognition negotiations to protect India’s rights there.⁸⁹

Washington followed this debate closely. Other countries, including American allies like Britain, had made clear that they would soon recognize the communist Chinese government. But US policymakers and legislators watched India’s decision closely because Nehru was thought to have broader influence, especially among other developing countries and with the Commonwealth.⁹⁰ Chairman Tom Connally’s first question to Acheson at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing ahead of the Indian prime minister’s visit to Washington had been whether India was favoring recognition.⁹¹

Administration officials were aware that Nehru’s government was leaning toward recognition. In May 1949, the US ambassador to China had conveyed rumors that India would recognize the communist government “fairly promptly after [a] ‘decent interval.’”⁹² American officials had subsequently sought assurances from the Indian government that it would coordinate or at least consult with the US or Commonwealth states on the matter of recognition.⁹³ By September, it had been evident that it was just a matter of time before India recognized Mao’s regime.⁹⁴ In Delhi, the Indian foreign secretary had remarked to the US chargé that, while there was “no reason for haste,” recognition was “inevitable.”⁹⁵

Nehru had not decided on the how and when of recognition on the eve of his visit to the US.⁹⁶ In public in the US, he avoided direct answers but made clear that recognition was in the offing.⁹⁷ The prime minister subscribed to scholar-diplomat Panikkar’s view that recognition would put India in a “better position to protect [its] interests” vis-à-vis China than isolating it.⁹⁸ He wanted to discuss Indian interests in Tibet, which Chinese premier Zhou Enlai had told Panikkar would be safeguarded, and the India-Tibet boundary with Chinese officials.⁹⁹ Moreover, he believed that indefinite delay or conditional recognition would likely push China and the Soviet Union together and strengthen the hands of those in Beijing pushing for such a communist alliance.¹⁰⁰ Bajpai outlined another reason to Henderson: India’s role in Asia would be adversely affected if other Asian countries recognized China and Delhi did not.¹⁰¹

Patel would later tell the American ambassador that Nehru's decision was also hurried along by indications that Britain and the US were just waiting for a good time to recognize China. Nehru wanted to pre-empt them so that Beijing would see him as a leader rather than a follower.¹⁰² The deputy prime minister had conversely suggested to Nehru that there was little benefit to being in the lead, and it would be better if India were "somewhat late in the company of others."¹⁰³ But even he thought that recognition was inevitable.¹⁰⁴

American officials in Britain, China, India, and the US tried to delay Indian recognition.¹⁰⁵ London persuaded Delhi to delay by two weeks, but on December 10, K. P. S. Menon informed Henderson that Delhi was likely to recognize the communist regime toward the end of the month. On December 19, mentioning the British intention to recognize, he confirmed that India would recognize Mao's government on December 30.¹⁰⁶ On that day, India made a public announcement that it would be willing to recognize the communist Chinese government.

Even at that point, Delhi and Washington were not on entirely different pages when it came to China. Like Indian officials, Acheson believed that the communists controlled the mainland and that Mao was not a "true satellite" of the Soviets. Meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff in late December, he questioned whether the effort to delay the fall of Taiwan was worth it. He said the US should instead focus on strengthening China's neighbors by building their stability and prosperity, and on supporting nationalist movements in the region—a strategy with which Nehru would have concurred.¹⁰⁷

But there was no concurrence on recognition. Acheson told his British and French counterparts that recognition would serve no purpose and would only worry American partners in Asia. Many US allies leaned toward recognition, but the administration agreed with members of Congress that the US should not recognize Mao's regime. Chinese mistreatment of US nationals, including diplomats,¹⁰⁸ reinforced this view.¹⁰⁹ From Delhi, Henderson, while noting that the Indian leadership would vociferously criticize the US for not recognizing China, asserted that the US should not do so. He believed it would adversely affect American credibility because countries in the region would see it as a sign of weakness.¹¹⁰

China hawks in the US gave the administration little credit for not recognizing the Chinese communist regime. Senator Knowland moreover criticized it for not doing enough to stop or at least delay Indian recognition.¹¹¹ China bloc criticism only increased when Truman and Acheson stated publicly in early January 1950 that the US would neither defend Taiwan militarily nor significantly increase aid to Jiang's regime. In a speech on Asia, the secretary of state also laid out a "defensive perimeter" that omitted Taiwan and Korea.

That speech also contained themes about the problems and solutions in Asia that Indian officials would have found familiar. It identified “revulsion” against poverty and foreign domination as the primary factors driving Asians. Furthermore, Acheson emphasized vulnerability to communist subversion as a key threat and the need to look beyond military means as a solution.¹¹²

In testimony on Capitol Hill, Acheson also stressed that there was “no easy or early solution” to the China situation—and definitely not a military one. The “real center” of American interest in Asia, he emphasized, must lie in the “crescent of countries” around China, with Japan and India at its crucial ends. He acknowledged, however, that these two “major anchors” were facing significant problems at that stage.¹¹³

Both within and outside Congress, there was criticism that the administration did not then seem to have a plan to strengthen countries like India. The administration had not outlined how it was going to contain communism in Asia—nothing “bold,” like a “Marshall Plan for Asia,” was on the table. Senator Styles Bridges (R-NH) said the situation begged the question of whether Americans were “men in Europe and mice in Asia.”¹¹⁴

There was also criticism of India. Nehru had conveyed the hope via K. P. S. Menon that the US “would not take amiss” India’s early recognition.¹¹⁵ But this was wishful thinking. Recognition reinforced the growing sense in Washington that India might not be the hoped-for solution to the China conundrum. Before Indian recognition, a map of Asia in the *New York Times* outlining the spread and threat of communism had highlighted India as a “non-communist strong point,” with a label that read “West counts on Nehru for support in long run.”¹¹⁶ A month later, postrecognition, in a similar map that statement had become a question: “Will India supply effective anti-communist leadership?”¹¹⁷ Commentators lamented that India “h[eld] the key” to any defense of Asia and yet its attitude was “dangerous.”¹¹⁸

Other episodes in early 1950 only exacerbated the negative feelings toward India in the US. Nehru publicly criticized the American attitude toward China as unnecessarily confrontational.¹¹⁹ At the UN Security Council, where it was then a nonpermanent member, India took the position that the communist regime should hold the Chinese seat.¹²⁰ It also declined to recognize the Paris and Washington-backed Bao Dai regime in Vietnam (the communists were backing Ho Chi Minh). These developments particularly grated because Delhi’s voice was considered influential with other Asian states. They left the *New York Times* commenting that Nehru’s views on developments in Asia were “less than wise.”¹²¹

Indian policymakers were aware of the consequences of the shift in mood in the US toward India because of Delhi’s China policy. Bajpai tried to assure

American officials that India was not appeasing China.¹²² Privately, he and Pandit, who had moved from Moscow to Washington, discussed the need “to correct the misrepresentation to which India is being subjected.”¹²³ Pandit told Nehru this was critical because India wanted “a charge account” from the US (i.e., aid).¹²⁴

But Acheson was blunt; aid could only be “forthcoming when there is Indian receptivity and our own ability, and constructive purpose to be served.”¹²⁵ With the administration’s ability limited and motivation lacking because of India’s unwillingness to play a role in its Asia policy, there was little appetite for aiding India. Pandit conveyed her concern to Bajpai that this American attitude toward assistance and its Asia policy, in turn, were the reasons for growing criticism of the US in India.¹²⁶

The bigger China-related stumbling block in US-India relations, however, was yet to come. After all, other American friends and even allies such as Britain had also recognized communist China. It was US-India interactions over the Korean War, which intensified the Cold War, that drove home the disconnect between US and Indian perceptions of China, as well as their preferred method of dealing with that country.

The Korean War: Seeing Each Other as Spoilers (1950)

Initially, the Korean War increased India’s importance in the US. This was partly a result of the strategic reconsideration evident in NSC-68. The document represented a more comprehensive view of US strategy, blurring the line between vital and peripheral interests. Drafted in the first half of 1950, it asserted that “a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere.” This turned Lovett’s assertion on its head: the US was now opening the door to underwriting the security of the whole world. Threats were now both physical and psychological. A country’s importance flowed not just from its military potential, economic capacity, and geographical position but also from how its loss could affect perceptions of US credibility and prestige, and thus the balance of power.¹²⁷

At the time that NSC-68 was being drafted, Europe remained the Truman administration’s primary area of focus. Policymakers accepted the potential loss of certain areas outside Europe—indeed Acheson said as much in his January speech. The Soviet Union remained the main threat; China was a secondary one. Fostering a Sino-Soviet split was still under consideration. But NSC-68 envisioned international communism rather than the Soviet Union as the threat, with no short-term possibility of “fragmentation.” Earlier

reluctance to oppose a communist takeover of Taiwan (for fear that doing so would push China closer to the Soviet Union) was also revisited. A State Department reassessment of China policy in spring 1950 instead called for estimating the impact of such a takeover on perceptions of the global balance of power.

As John Lewis Gaddis has noted, NSC-68 might have had little impact had it not been for the Korean War. But the outbreak of the war, which eventually involved millions of soldiers and resulted in over 30,000 US combat deaths, “validate[d] several of NSC-68’s most important conclusions.”¹²⁸ It also turned the spotlight on Asia, including China and India.

Initially, in the aftermath of the North Korean invasion of South Korea on June 25, 1950, the US and India were on the same page. India voted for the US-sponsored UN Security Council resolution demanding the withdrawal of North Korean troops from the south. Two days later, the Indian abstention on a resolution that asked UN members to provide assistance to South Korea did cause consternation in Washington. But Nehru noted publicly that India supported the second resolution;¹²⁹ Delhi had just not had time to relay instructions to the Indian delegation at the UN.¹³⁰

Differences between India and the US, however, soon emerged, and they often revolved around China. Washington saw Beijing as hostile; it needed to be confronted. Perhaps influenced by Panikkar’s reporting from China,¹³¹ Nehru, however, believed China to be motivated by insecurity—and Washington needed to reassure it, not isolate or provoke it. Fearing an expanded war, he argued that China and the Soviet Union could be—indeed had to be—part of the solution. Indian officials suggested this could be facilitated if the People’s Republic of China got the Chinese seat at the UN, where the issue could be resolved through diplomacy rather than force. American officials, however, thought Beijing was part of the problem and should not be rewarded with a UN seat for its part in the invasion. They resented Delhi’s support for Moscow’s efforts to get Beijing seated at the UN. Moreover, American officials saw this as distracting from the aggression in Korea,¹³² and they criticized India for linking the latter and Chinese UN representation issues.¹³³

India, in turn, disagreed with the Truman administration’s linkage of Taiwan and Indochina-related issues with the Korean situation. Following the outbreak of the war, despite internal disagreements, the administration had announced an increase in aid to anticommunist forces in Indochina and its intention to defend Taiwan in the event of a communist attack. Indian policymakers thought the Korean War had already disturbed the stability in Asia; linking the additional issues would further destabilize the region. This

mattered because they needed time for nation building and, as Nehru had asserted when he had been in Washington, “If there is war in any part of Asia it has some close effect on India.”¹³⁴ Rudra Chaudhuri has suggested that this linkage, moreover, contributed to Indian hesitation about getting involved militarily in the US-led UN effort because it would “drag India into a US-led war against China.”¹³⁵

Indian officials believed that American actions such as the dispatch of the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait in June—even if intended as a defensive measure—would unnecessarily provoke China. Panikkar reported that the Chinese leadership differentiated between Korea, where Beijing did not want to get involved in the fighting, and Taiwan, where it would not back down. He suggested that the American approach would only push Beijing toward Moscow—a view shared by Kennan and others in the US.¹³⁶ Even China skeptics like Bajpai, who believed that Beijing saw India as a “potential rival,”¹³⁷ thought the American approach was counterproductive.¹³⁸ He also had a parochial concern about the escalating crisis: it might mean little potential economic or military assistance “left over in the USA for us.”¹³⁹

Indian officials took on what became a recurring role, urging China and the US to reassure each other. Speaking to Henderson, Bajpai conveyed Panikkar’s view that while Beijing’s fear of a US attack on the mainland might be groundless, it nonetheless saw signs of hostility: the US defense relationship with Thailand, American involvement in Indochina, UN Command chief and Supreme Allied Commander General MacArthur’s visit to Taiwan in July 1950, and the US stance at the UN. Bajpai hoped Washington would ratchet down its rhetoric and suggested ways it could alleviate Chinese concerns about its intentions, especially vis-à-vis Taiwan.¹⁴⁰

American officials generally dismissed the Indian recommendations. Henderson told Bajpai no assurances would be forthcoming as long as China or the Soviet Union posed a threat; Beijing should already know that the US would not attack the mainland as long as China did not attack Taiwan or elsewhere in Asia.¹⁴¹ MacArthur stressed that Nehru would achieve nothing with “appeasement.” He dismissed Truman’s special assistant Averell Harriman’s caution about Jiang leading the US to a position on Taiwan that could cause a split with Britain and India.¹⁴² Acheson, in turn, warned London and Delhi that they would create “sharp differences” if they pushed Washington on Taiwan.¹⁴³ He told Delhi that occasional statements that China wanted peace were not borne out by Chinese behavior. Its hostile words and actions toward a number of countries were driving the American attitude toward Beijing and keeping it out of the UN. Acheson asserted that Beijing, not Washington, needed to reassure others if it wanted to change perceptions of China.¹⁴⁴

Throughout summer and fall 1950, India indeed had simultaneously urged China to temper its actions in order to reassure the US. Nehru had instructed Panikkar to inform Chinese officials that, even if India sympathized with their claims, Delhi would not support or ignore any Chinese attempt to take Taiwan by force. Indeed, it (and others) would judge China's intentions from the way it behaved vis-à-vis Taiwan. The Indian government urged Beijing to stop threatening to use force against Taiwan and Tibet, and decrease or cease its anti-American activities. This would make it more likely that China would receive a fairer hearing at the UN. The Chinese retort to these Indian calls for restraint, however, was that the US was to blame.¹⁴⁵

The Indian leadership did not always give China the benefit of the doubt at US expense, even though Washington might not have seen it that way. Bajpai, for instance, acknowledged conciliatory American steps. The government also recognized that Beijing could be difficult—one reason Delhi, for example, asked its representative not to vote to include it in UN talks on Korea.¹⁴⁶ And then there was the Chinese action that raised doubts in—and had serious implications for—Delhi: its move into Tibet in October 1950.

Tibet: Lost by Default? (1950–1951)

While there had been debate in India about the timing and nature of a Chinese takeover of Tibet,¹⁴⁷ the invasion itself was not unexpected. A year before, in September 1949, Nehru had predicted that China would invade Tibet, possibly within the year, bringing it to India's doorstep.¹⁴⁸ Many were aware of the consequences. Even Panikkar noted it would bring unprecedented “pressures” on India, though he did not think China would have the ability to intervene directly in India for another decade.¹⁴⁹ Over the next year, Indian officials had continued to expect matters to “come to a head” in Tibet.¹⁵⁰ They tried to delay this eventuality to “gain time for India” and keep the Chinese and communist influence at bay.¹⁵¹

Indian policymakers had crystallized their Tibet policy and conveyed it to American officials by January 1950. It basically involved “leav[ing] the matter alone.” K. P. S. Menon worried about China exporting communism via Tibet when they took over and about the status of the India-Tibet boundary.¹⁵² But he told the American political counselor that India would not take the initiative on Tibet with China. If Beijing accepted Tibetan autonomy, Delhi would recognize Chinese authority over Tibet. In the meantime, India would continue and possibly expedite its sale of small arms to Tibet and even train Tibetan officers, but it would not welcome the establishment of a Tibetan liaison office in India. Menon also emphasized that India would not take military action if China attacked Tibet.¹⁵³ Delhi also resisted Anglo-American pressure

to increase aid to Tibet. Finally, Menon discouraged American involvement—and particularly any discussions in Delhi—on the grounds that it would convince Beijing of a US-India anti-China conspiracy. This could expedite a Chinese takeover of Tibet.¹⁵⁴

The US was not particularly eager to spring to Tibet's defense. Acheson had wanted to use the threat to Tibet to convince India to move away from its "unrealism [and] semi-detached attitude" toward the Chinese challenge.¹⁵⁵ But the US had had no desire to become embroiled alone (i.e., without India and/or the UK) by holding out the prospect of aid to Tibet. Henderson had clarified to K. P. S. Menon that the US did not want to provoke a Chinese invasion or make it harder for the Indian government to persuade Tibetan officials to accept autonomy.¹⁵⁶ Subsequently, Washington had looked for signs of change in India's attitude and solicited Delhi's views on potential US-UK-Indian coordination to meet Tibet's defense requirements. But for Acheson, ideally India had to "bear primary responsibility."¹⁵⁷

Delhi, on its part, had continued to eschew any covert or overt actions that Beijing might see as provocative or as part of a joint US-India effort to counter China.¹⁵⁸ Officials did not believe that India could offer effective resistance because of Tibet's inaccessibility and Delhi's limited resources. There were also serious doubts about Tibetan willingness to resist. Thus the Indian government had encouraged Tibetan officials to negotiate with China.¹⁵⁹

The outbreak of the war in Korea had increased American interest in supporting Tibet. While clarifying that assistance would not extend to direct involvement if China invaded Tibet, US officials had suggested that Tibetan officials ask India to facilitate American aid.¹⁶⁰ But the war had not made India any more likely to help. Nehru did not think it could deter a Chinese invasion of Tibet, though officials had tried to delay it.¹⁶¹ They had pursued the issue on "firm [but] friendly lines" in Beijing. Bajpai had given the British high commissioner and Henderson the gist of India's message to China: that India had gone out of its way to establish friendly relations with China even though this had been detrimental to its other bilateral relations; a Chinese invasion of Tibet might make India reassess its view of Chinese intentions, as well as its support for Beijing's entry into the UN.¹⁶²

After the invasion in October 1950, Henderson blamed India, believing that Tibet had "lost heart" because of Delhi's reticence.¹⁶³ Nonetheless, while urging India to do more and offering to be helpful, Acheson did not want to pressure India lest Delhi blame Washington for any consequent Sino-Indian complications. He did hope that, along with Chinese "duplicity in dealing with GOI [the government of India] re Korea," developments in Tibet would make India "reassess its views re character" of the regime in Beijing.¹⁶⁴

Henderson warned Washington against giving the impression that it was trying to use the Tibet situation to sell India on alignment with the US. He further asserted, “If [a] rift should come [between China and India] . . . it should clearly come through force of events and not with help of outside powers.”¹⁶⁵ Acheson subsequently instructed American officials not to appear to be trying to create a wedge between China and India.¹⁶⁶

The Chinese invasion might not have caused a Sino-Indian split, but it did have an impact within India. A diplomat later noted the “deep anger” it generated.¹⁶⁷ In parliament, there was also anxiety about Chinese intentions and Indian preparedness on both the opposition and treasury benches.¹⁶⁸ Even some socialist politicians became disillusioned with China.¹⁶⁹ Within the government, officials like Bajpai altered their assessments—the invasion of Tibet showed that China did not really care about India’s sensitivities. With Nehru’s approval, Bajpai instructed Panikkar to tell Beijing that its use of force was harmful for Sino-Indian relations, as well as China’s international position. Suggesting that China had misled it, India also sent an official note calling the Chinese action “deplorable.”¹⁷⁰ After India received an accusatory response from China, Delhi responded defensively, denying that it had any ambitions in Tibet, but asserting that it had certain rights there.¹⁷¹

The invasion further fueled the Indian government’s internal debate about China. The different perceptions of and proposed strategies toward that country were evident in a letter from Patel to Nehru and in the latter’s subsequent note on Tibet. In Patel’s view, which was closer to the dominant assessment in the US, the invasion showed that China represented both an internal and external threat to India. He asserted that Beijing was hoodwinking Delhi. Furthermore, China did not see India as a friend despite Delhi’s recognition of the communist regime and its efforts to facilitate Beijing’s seating at the UN. Patel argued that nothing India did to convince China of its good intentions would change the Chinese leadership’s hostility toward India. Finally, he viewed China’s behavior as that of a “potential enemy,” one that was no longer separated by a Tibetan buffer and that in fact had territorial ambitions that included parts of India’s northeast and Burma.

Patel was critical of the government’s response to the invasion, seeing it as too placatory and weak. The deputy prime minister thought that Beijing would see accommodation as a sign of weakness, and that complacency and vacillation would increase the threat from China. Instead, Patel advocated “enlightened firmness, strength and a clear line of policy.” He called for a threat assessment; analysis of India’s existing and required defense capabilities; reconsideration of Delhi’s support for Beijing at the UN; strengthening of India’s northeast and of Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim; internal security

measures in India's border states; improvement of transport and communication lines to the border; manning of key border posts; reassessment of India's Tibet presence and its position on the McMahon Line; and, finally, re-examination of India's external relations—including with the US.¹⁷²

Despite Patel's stature, Nehru was the ultimate decisionmaker on foreign policy. Initially after the invasion, a disappointed Nehru questioned broader Chinese intentions.¹⁷³ But, as Henderson had predicted,¹⁷⁴ the prime minister decided to stay the course after receiving what he interpreted as a less antagonistic note from China in mid-November. The missive, coupled with a Chinese military pause at the Xinjiang-Tibet border, seemed to leave the door open for Sino-Tibetan negotiations.¹⁷⁵

Nehru stressed the long-term perspective: India needed a working relationship with a Chinese communist regime that was here to stay. He believed that Beijing desired India's friendship and that Delhi should respond. This view was probably encouraged by Panikkar's report earlier that year that Mao had told him, "India and China cannot afford to have war." And the chairman's outline of the two Asian nations' similar problems would have done nothing to discourage the prime minister's mirror imaging.¹⁷⁶

In a November note, Nehru also interpreted the lack of a Chinese demand for complete withdrawal of Indian interests in Tibet as significant. He reiterated that India lacked the military capacity to prevent the takeover of Tibet. Any attempt at stopping the Chinese advance would likely fail and would lead to Chinese hostility toward India and constant insecurity at India's borders. Nehru instead sought Tibetan autonomy, arguing that the limited but more feasible goal would be harder to attain if Sino-Indian relations were bad.

Nehru did not think there would be any real Chinese military invasion of India in the "foreseeable future." For one, this would likely spark a world war. Also, Beijing needed to defend its other borders and would hardly be able to divert the troops required for a major attack on India. However, "gradual infiltration" across the border and Chinese occupation of disputed territory was possible—and indeed a risk. This required improving connectivity to India's tribal areas in the northeast, which were not well integrated with the country, and preparation to prevent any Chinese infiltration. Furthermore, India needed to tackle the other real threat from China—the "infiltration of . . . ideas"—with ideas of its own.

The Indian prime minister believed that visible military strengthening on the scale that Patel envisioned was neither desirable nor feasible. Any attempt to build up India's military on the Sino-Indian border would likely reinforce Chinese insecurity and be counterproductive—such preparation would serve as a provocation rather than a deterrent. Furthermore, Nehru

asserted that India did not have the financial and military resources to prepare for an unlikely attack. Diverting significant resources to the Sino-Indian border would also undermine Indian defence vis-à-vis Pakistan, which he saw as the major potential threat. He believed, additionally, that Pakistan would take political or military advantage of Sino-Indian tensions. Even if India enhanced its defense capabilities or looked abroad for military supplies, it would then be left in a strategically “unsound” position with two major enemies.

Nehru did not rule out the possibility that the Chinese communists would be expansionist, but he did not believe this was inevitable. It depended on a number of factors, including the development of both countries and the extent to which China adopted communist characteristics. Sino-Indian conflict would be mutually destructive and would allow external actors to take advantage. Given this assessment and the level of India’s capabilities, while Delhi should prepare for contingencies, Nehru continued to believe that the best approach was reaching “some kind of understanding” with China, as long as Beijing desired the same.¹⁷⁷ This belief underlay India’s subsequent Tibet and China policy.

Postinvasion, Acheson had hoped that, at the very least, India would participate in proposed UN action on Tibet—seen as having a propaganda purpose. The exercise might lead Delhi to realize how difficult it was to deal with Beijing and Moscow. This could make India “less neutral and more realistic about Communism,” facilitating better US-India relations.¹⁷⁸ But, despite indicating that it would participate,¹⁷⁹ India demurred after receiving the more conciliatory note from Beijing and interpreting other Chinese steps as friendlier (e.g., release of some American prisoners of war in North Korea).¹⁸⁰ Bajpai was “suspicious and cynical” about the note, but he agreed that a UN debate would not be helpful at that time.¹⁸¹ It would jeopardize simultaneous Indian efforts for a ceasefire in Korea.¹⁸² Patel’s death in December 1950 only made Nehru’s voice more dominant on Tibet. By January 1951, Bajpai was telling Henderson that with Tibet likely beyond saving and other issues intervening, India was “giving little thought to Tibet.”¹⁸³

Henderson, who had previously detected little Indian interest in the State Department idea of joint US-UK-India action to stall China in Tibet,¹⁸⁴ urged UN action that could highlight China’s “aggressive attitude.” But he found Indian assessments to be “wishfully warped” to fit their “inclination to do nothing which might offend China.”¹⁸⁵ While some US officials argued that such joint support would buoy Tibetan spirits, Indian officials made clear their belief that the Tibetans were merely trying to postpone—rather than resist—a Chinese takeover.

Indian officials were not disinterested, but they had different moves in mind. They were, in fact, chagrined about the idea of China taking over Tibetan border defense.¹⁸⁶ Bajpai acknowledged that the Sino-Tibetan agreement signed in May 1951 would affect India's position vis-à-vis Bhutan, Burma, Nepal, and even Korea. Delhi had already taken some steps to protect its interests. It had devised its own version of what came to be called *pactomania* in the Eisenhower administration in the US. It signed treaties with neighbors Bhutan (1949), Nepal (1950), and Sikkim (1950, making it a protectorate) that gave Delhi a crucial say in their foreign and security policies.

There was also an effort to strengthen and integrate India's northeast. After China's initial invasion of Tibet, a defense committee assessed the impact of losing the buffer state. It recommended strengthening border posts and infrastructure for transport and communications as well as alleviating the neglect of the area and its residents. But there were limits, Bajpai stressed to Henderson, to what India could do militarily.¹⁸⁷ Therefore, to key decision-makers in Delhi, the missing buffer made it more necessary to keep China in good humor.¹⁸⁸

The American embassy in Delhi remained concerned that Tibet would be "lost by default," and that China could "constantly menace" India from there.¹⁸⁹ The *chargé* argued that the US should convince India that the Sino-Tibetan treaty was not in its interests and that Delhi should encourage the Dalai Lama to reject it and flee to India.¹⁹⁰

But, while Washington was willing to encourage Tibet's leaders and its autonomy in spirit, it was unwilling to act alone to provide military or financial assistance or appoint official representatives to Tibet. Acheson maintained that India had the primary responsibility to help Tibet.¹⁹¹ In addition, the US had no desire to upset Jiang by announcing support for Tibetan sovereignty.¹⁹² Furthermore, like Britain and India, the US was concerned about any spill-over impact on the Korean situation—the reason why it would not promise a specific response to a potential Tibetan appeal to the UN.¹⁹³ Finally, any unilateral American action in Tibet would only serve to push India toward China; instead there was hope that Indian resentment would grow as the Chinese consolidated their hold over Tibet.¹⁹⁴

By the fall of 1951, the Truman administration accepted that Tibetan officials were unlikely to reject the Sino-Tibetan agreement. The Far East Asia desk at the State Department advocated using "Tibet as a weapon for alerting GOI to the danger of attempting to appease any Communist Govt and, specifically, for maneuvering GOI into a position where it will voluntarily adopt a policy of firmly resisting Chinese Communist pressure in south and east Asia."¹⁹⁵ There were still some attempts to get India to assure the Dalai Lama

that he would be given asylum. But with Delhi unwilling to take the initiative and a new US ambassador in Delhi—Chester Bowles—who was less enthusiastic about pressuring India on this issue, such efforts faded. So did hope that India would change its China policy.

Chinese Intervention in the Korean War: The Blame Game (1950–1951)

In the fall of 1950, Acheson had told members of Congress that the Chinese going into Tibet made Delhi realize that the “force that is loose in China is a pretty difficult one to handle.”¹⁹⁶ The American hope that India would recognize Mao’s aggressive intentions in Asia only escalated when the Chinese subsequently intervened in the Korean War.

Even though its efforts in summer and early fall 1950 had met with little success, the Indian role as intermediary between China and the US had continued. Washington usually considered India’s nonalignment and its relations with China a liability, but, along with Panikkar’s access to Chinese officials, these were seen as assets when the US needed a channel to China. Britain also had a presence in Beijing. But American officials thought Nehru and India had more credibility in Asia and the nonaligned world, and India had been willing to take on this role. From the start of the war, Indian officials had briefed American officials on the messages they received from Panikkar.¹⁹⁷ In turn, India had passed on American messages to China, including warnings intended to deter Beijing.¹⁹⁸ But some US policymakers doubted India’s role as an honest broker. India was not an ally, and it followed an independent China policy that they believed was primarily designed to avoid provoking Beijing. This added to the strain in the US-India relationship.

American doubts about the messenger were partly responsible for skepticism about Chinese signals via Delhi in September and October that it would intervene directly in the war if UN forces crossed the 38th parallel dividing North and South Korea.¹⁹⁹ Some policymakers saw the accompanying Indian warning as driven by Nehru wanting peace at any cost. Skepticism of Panikkar affected others’ views.²⁰⁰ American officials thought he was not objective about the Chinese—a concern that Indian officials like Bajpai and Pandit shared.²⁰¹ Yet others, including Truman, believed that China was trying to influence a vote pending at the UN, and that the messages were either just Chinese propaganda or “a bald attempt to blackmail the UN.” Moreover, MacArthur had assured the president that China was unlikely to intervene.²⁰²

Allies, as well as some in American military and political circles, worried about potential Chinese escalation if the 38th parallel was crossed. But Truman was even more concerned about global and domestic credibility, and military demands.²⁰³ Thus, despite India’s and others’ warnings, he did not

rescind his approval to cross the parallel. On October 7, US forces crossed the parallel. Twelve days later, Chinese troops started moving into Korea.

Expectations in Washington that the Chinese entry into the war would lead India to see the light assumed that Delhi would share Washington's interpretation of Chinese actions. Instead, it increased Nehru's frustration with the US rather than with China. Indian officials believed MacArthur's move had provoked China into retaliation. This heightened the prospect of a larger war, which Nehru—dreading that India would be dragged into war at a time when it needed peace—had been trying to prevent.²⁰⁴ To avert even further escalation, India sponsored a UN resolution in January 1951, backed by Britain, that called for a ceasefire and negotiations. The US grudgingly supported the resolution, with Acheson hoping that China would reject it.²⁰⁵

Beijing did exactly that, leading to criticism in Indian newspapers and disappointment in the government.²⁰⁶ An Indian diplomat in Moscow reported back that Chinese "intransigence" was following "the Soviet line," and Delhi should thus curtail hopes of an "Asiatic Tito" (i.e., a Mao willing to buck that line).²⁰⁷ But, publicly, the Indian government asserted that the Chinese reply was not an "outright rejection."²⁰⁸

Parallel American efforts toward a General Assembly resolution blaming China as the aggressor proved to be another source of tension between the US and India. Nehru vociferously criticized it as another example of the US not facing facts. He argued that rather than Chinese aggression being responsible, "All the troubles in the Far East arise from the failure of the rest of the world to adjust itself to the changes which have taken place in Asia."²⁰⁹ For Nehru, the US had erred in crossing the 38th parallel despite Chinese (and Indian) warnings, and "further complications ensued."²¹⁰ With the resolution, it was only shutting the door to negotiations and compounding its mistakes.²¹¹

Truman disagreed, and bluntly and publicly said, "I believe in calling an aggressor an aggressor."²¹² American commentators dismissed Nehru's assertion that the isolation of China, rather than Chinese aggression, had led to the situation in Korea. Worse, he was playing into Chinese hands by "sowing confusion and mistrust."²¹³ Beijing did not want a settlement, as Delhi and London believed. Rather, Chinese actions were designed to divide the non-communist countries.²¹⁴

Once again, the different lessons learned from the Second World War played a role in shaping US and Indian views of the best approach. Henderson told Bajpai that collective failure to combat aggression would only lead to more belligerence, eventually resulting in a larger war.²¹⁵ A frustrated Acheson could not understand "what means India would propose [to] use to check aggression" instead.²¹⁶ Bajpai contended that the means would "depend

upon form and character of aggression and upon effect which such means might have upon world peace.”²¹⁷

The differences over means, including the right balance between the use of force and diplomacy, were broader. NSC-68 and subsequent American policy reflected the belief that the need to counter an existential threat did not just make “all interests vital”; it also made “all means affordable, all methods justifiable.” But for Nehru, as the Australian high commissioner to India put it, “the end rarely justified the means.” In the US, moreover, the Korean War had only strengthened the view expressed in NSC-68 that active military resistance was more appropriate than passively waiting for the emergence of nationalist resistance—as Nehru seemed to prefer. These different views of the best means were perhaps partly influenced by the two countries’ capabilities. While there was a sense in the Truman administration that rather than divide the resource pie, one could expand it to justify larger defense spending, Indian policymakers, including Nehru, did not believe that was feasible for them given their limited resources.²¹⁸

Henderson hoped that differences over tactics would not overpower a common interest in peace and security.²¹⁹ But for Acheson, “it was not [Nehru’s] objectives so much as [the] way in which he said and did things which had caused us lots of trouble.”²²⁰ Nehru, too, subsequently acknowledged that the main difference between the US and India was “in the method of approach.”²²¹ For US policymakers “frustrating the Kremlin design” had become a goal in itself.²²² For Nehru, this blurring of means and ends—and the American emphasis on military instruments—made it harder to achieve the objective of peace.

The consequence of these differences, especially as the situation in Korea deteriorated after the Chinese intervention, was strain in the US-India relationship. Pandit expressed concern to Bajpai about the “considerable hostility” toward India in US government circles as a result of various China-related disagreements. Lamenting “the universality of the change in tone,” Bajpai felt as a consequence, “for the time being, at any rate, we are isolated, and that over Kashmir and other issues, Pakistan and our enemies will exploit our isolation to the full.”²²³

Beyond disillusionment, a more visible impact of the China-related friction was the reaction to India’s first major request for bilateral assistance from the US in December 1950. Delhi had asked for food aid. There was debate within the Truman administration—not so much on the desirability of aiding India economically, but on the feasibility given the cost and congressional attitude. While there were a number of US-India disagreements, Acheson told the Indian ambassador frankly that Congress would basically watch

India's approach on two matters: (1) Kashmir and (2) Korea, especially India's response to greater Chinese involvement.²²⁴

India's attitude toward the Korean War, where the US was directly involved, evoked a greater reaction in Congress than the subject of Kashmir. When Assistant Secretary of State George McGhee reached out to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair Tom Connally (D-TX) to facilitate passage of an aid bill in January 1951, the senator bluntly noted that sentiments toward India, greatly affected by its China policy, would make the task difficult.²²⁵ He refused to move quickly on Indian food assistance, referring the question to a subcommittee.²²⁶ There, McGhee tried to argue that the grant would have a "strong conditioning effect" on Nehru's policies and Indians' sentiments. If, however, the US did nothing despite its resources and large numbers of people died, the Indian people "will know at that time that Mr. Nehru and we were on the outs over the question of Communist China, and an inference will be very strong to them that we denied this request because we did not like the political attitude Mr. Nehru expressed."

But Connally retorted, "Nehru is out giving us hell at the time, working against us and voting against us" and was unlikely to change his approach. Senator Guy Gillette (D-IA) said he did not want to do anything to stabilize Nehru's position. And Senator J. William Fulbright (D-AK) said that India should pay for the food. He added that he did not like what appeared to be blackmail, with India arguing, "Give it to us or we will go Communist." McGhee argued that the US had already lost China and could not afford to lose India too, but when Fulbright asked if India, especially given its attitude, was "more important than the Ruhr and Japan," the assistant secretary had to admit "strategically, no."²²⁷

US officials told their Indian counterparts that their statements and actions, which were seen as defending the Chinese attack against UN forces, made the aid request harder to get through Congress.²²⁸ The *New York Times* predicted further delays, "probably . . . due to irritation caused by Mr. Nehru's refusal to go along with the United States and its policy toward Communist China."²²⁹ A former chairman of the Republican National Committee asserted that India's "cooperation with aggressors" weakened the case for aid.²³⁰

With support from a bipartisan coalition, however, Truman went ahead with a request to Congress that February. His message made anticommunist, humanitarian, and democracy promotion cases for aiding India. Many members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee agreed that it was important to aid India.²³¹ In the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to spur action, Acheson and Senator H. Alexander Smith (R-NJ) noted Chinese and Soviet offers of grain to India on a barter or sale basis.²³² The bill, however, stalled

in Congress for months as members debated whether to give India aid and whether to demand raw materials in return since Delhi was not going to support US foreign policy.²³³ The debate also gave members a forum to criticize India's China policy repeatedly and vociferously.

The India bashing in Congress and the media resulting from Delhi's China policy, and the linkage between Indian foreign policy and American food assistance, adversely affected Indian views of the US.²³⁴ As Nehru had noted, "We are a sensitive people and we react strongly to being cursed at and run down. . . . Our general reaction, whenever any pressure is sought to be applied upon us by any country, is to resent it and may be to go against it."²³⁵ Anti-India rhetoric in the US generated louder self-sufficiency rhetoric in India. Nehru insisted publicly that conditional aid would not be welcome. His reproach, in turn, sparked further criticism on Capitol Hill, finally leading the prime minister to state that India would prefer a loan rather than a grant.²³⁶ In June, months after India had requested aid, Truman signed a food assistance bill. Thus the US eventually helped fill Indian stomachs, but in the process did little to win the battle for Indian hearts and minds.²³⁷

India as a Channel to China: Only Hurting Itself? (1951–1952)

Feeling burned by the American attitude and recognizing the adverse impact on the aid debate in Congress, Delhi had limited its intermediary role in the Korean War in spring 1951. Bajpai told Pandit, "Both China and the USA are determined to fight it out, and any third party that tries to come between the two is likely only to hurt itself." There was criticism in parliament of such a role as well. Jivatram Bhagwandas (J. B.) Kripalani, whom Nehru had backed to be president of the Indian National Congress, said that thanks to India's positions, "[India had] no friend left in the world."²³⁸ Furthermore, the experience was frustrating. China and the US mistrusted each other's intentions. Each side told Indian officials they doubted the other's peaceful intentions and, therefore, insisted that the other provide reassurance first.²³⁹

Nonetheless, in summer 1951, Indian officials did become involved in efforts in Beijing and Delhi—quietly coordinating with British and Swiss representatives—to secure the release of American prisoners being held in China.²⁴⁰ India was reprising a role it had played in 1949 when it had tried to secure the release of American consul Angus Ward.²⁴¹ Differing US and Indian perceptions of China were again evident. In the early stages of talks on the prisoners, Panikkar felt Chinese premier Zhou Enlai's responses were positive. Washington, however, took more seriously the views of British

officials, who did not share the Indian ambassador's optimism.²⁴² There were also differences on tactics. American officials thought that Indian public representations on behalf of the US would convey to Beijing the widespread disapproval of its attitude toward foreign nationals. Indian officials, on the other hand, believed that explicit association with the US or others would reduce Indian influence in Beijing.²⁴³

Frustration with Washington deepened when India became involved as an intermediary on the Korean issue again, even as China and the US undertook armistice talks after summer 1951 in Kaesong and then Panmunjom. After China backtracked in July 1952 on its in-principle acceptance of an India-UK prisoner repatriation formula that could have led to a settlement, an exasperated Nehru said that both sides "express their desire for settlement, but neither is prepared to give in . . . and wants the other to do so." He was unhappy that Beijing had not been "straight" with India. But he found the American military approach—and continued bombing in the midst of peace efforts that only made Beijing more intransigent—to be "outrageous." On balance, he blamed American policy in the Far East, which had "come in the way of a peace effort."²⁴⁴

India was not, however, only frustrated with the US. Panikkar, for example, became so annoyed with the lack of Chinese action on American prisoners that he dropped his opposition to public pleas.²⁴⁵ Like their US counterparts, Bajpai and other Indian officials also questioned whether China was feeding India wrong or exaggerated information to pressure the US into negotiations on Chinese terms.²⁴⁶ Furthermore, China kept vacillating about its preferred policy options. After Beijing's July 1952 U-turn, Nehru expressed "extreme displeasure and embarrassment" internally.²⁴⁷ He lamented, "The situation at the China end is more difficult than we have imagined."²⁴⁸ Nehru insisted that any future Chinese proposals should be conveyed in writing rather than just verbally.²⁴⁹ He was again disappointed when Beijing rejected another Indian proposal in November 1952. Moreover, China criticized India's attempts to be the "voice of Asia" and dismissed it as a tool of the US. Nehru wondered if these rejections stemmed from Moscow's influence or a belief that India had leaned too much toward the UN/US side.²⁵⁰

Despite concerns, Delhi believed its mediatory role and neutrality made it somewhat useful—and therefore important—to Beijing. As long as this was the case, Bajpai noted that China would not trouble India. Rather, it had given India assurances regarding the Sino-Indian border, with Zhou indicating that China "had no intention [of] making claims to or raising questions about boundary" and asserting that China wanted "cultivation [of] friendship" with India and Burma.²⁵¹ Acheson, too, observed that China was not

taking military action against Burma since it would upset India at a time when it was important for Beijing to stay on Delhi's good side.²⁵² But in summer 1952, when China had reneged on commitments to India on Korea, Nehru's concern about broader implications was evident—against Panikkar's advice, he thought India should explicitly raise the boundary issue with China.²⁵³ Even beyond China, Krishna Menon believed that India's role as intermediary increased its global influence and importance.²⁵⁴

American officials had mixed feelings about the Indian role. Henderson, for example, believed India could be an "ameliorating influence" on Beijing.²⁵⁵ Bowles, his successor, believed that even if US messages via India were not passed on to—or heeded by—China, using the India channel would help convince Delhi that, unlike Beijing, Washington was doing its part to seek peace.²⁵⁶ Dean Rusk, assistant secretary of state for Far East Asian affairs, found Indian contacts with Chinese officials useful for conveying warnings of potential US retaliation if China escalated.²⁵⁷ For Acheson, as long as the US had multiple channels, India's good relations with China and its standing with other Asian countries made the continued use of this channel worthwhile.²⁵⁸

However, there were also serious doubts about India as a conduit.²⁵⁹ There were questions about India's reliability and its officials' judgment as to China's intentions. The US Army chief believed Beijing was manipulating India.²⁶⁰ In addition, there was unease that Panikkar was proposing ideas or interpretations to Chinese officials that the US had not approved, while suggesting to Beijing that the proposals had resulted from close contact with Washington.²⁶¹ There were also doubts about whether roving Indian envoys like Krishna Menon were even keeping Delhi in the loop on US views. Furthermore, there was concern that US officials did not know what Delhi was actually saying to Panikkar and what he was conveying to Chinese officials.²⁶²

Other officials worried that India would compromise principles and ignore US red lines in order to achieve any settlement.²⁶³ In Congress, Senator H. Alexander Smith (R-NJ)—usually a moderate on India—worried that Delhi would try to force the US to make concessions to China in order to enhance Nehru's image and influence in Asia.²⁶⁴ In discussions with Panikkar and Krishna Menon, American officials felt there was a lack of clarity about whether they were hearing those officials' personal views or Chinese ones, or Indian preferences rather than Chinese ones.²⁶⁵ There were only more doubts when Chinese actions did not reflect Beijing's apparent attitudes as assessed by Panikkar.²⁶⁶

These doubts about India as an intermediary led Washington to try to limit its role at times, which Indian officials resented. While Zhou indicated that China wanted India to be included in some negotiations, the US showed little

desire to include India in groups like the Good Offices Committee (India, on its part, showed little desire to serve on the latter).²⁶⁷ And despite British urging, the US resisted consulting India on a sixteen-nation statement on Korea.²⁶⁸ The US also opposed Indian involvement in any Korean armistice conference, despite British and Canadian recommendations.²⁶⁹ In the case of prisoner repatriation, the US turned to the Indian channel because there were few, if any, alternatives.²⁷⁰ But, even in this case, US officials continued to pursue other viable alternate channels.²⁷¹ They also tried to work around the Indian diplomats they neither liked nor trusted (Krishna Menon, Panikkar) and work with the ones they did (Narayanan Raghavan [N. R.] Pillai and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit).²⁷² These efforts to restrict India's role and influence would continue after the Truman administration.

What Have They Done for US Lately? (1951–1952)

In 1949, K. P. S. Menon had expressed the hope that “the differences in our approach to Communist China would not lead to mutual embarrassment.”²⁷³ A couple of years later, it was clear that his hopes had been misplaced. There were consequences beyond a reluctance to give India a seat at the table. India's China policy, for example, was a key reason for the limited appetite in Congress for aiding India. While many members of Congress publicly attacked foreign assistance broadly, India continued to present a particularly ripe target, especially for members of the China bloc.

Focused on aiding allies, particularly militarily, in their FY1952 aid request, Truman and Acheson halved the amount of aid an interagency assessment suggested for South Asia. Congress subsequently authorized only \$54 million of the \$65 million requested for India.²⁷⁴ The subsequent Indian refusal to sign the Japan Peace Treaty—primarily, the administration believed, on the grounds that China and the Soviet Union had not been part of the negotiations—did not win it any friends in Washington.²⁷⁵ John Foster Dulles, the US negotiator for the treaty, pointed to Nehru's belief in the communist propaganda line of “Asia for Asians” as the reason for Indian opposition.²⁷⁶ Even though Nehru publicly rejected this concept, the impression stuck.²⁷⁷ In 1952, Bowles's push for an expanded \$250 million FY1953 aid package for India faltered, in large part because the White House did not think it could get it through Congress.

Bowles unsuccessfully tried to convince administration officials and members of Congress that Nehru had lost any illusions about China and supported the US position on prisoner repatriation in Korea “100 percent.”²⁷⁸ He argued that losing India to communism would be worse than the loss of China, with global, regional, and political consequences.²⁷⁹ He had some support for his

advocacy from junior officials on the Near East and South Asia bureau, as well as liberal legislators like Representative John F. Kennedy (D-MA) and Senator Humphrey on the grounds that aid could ensure that India remained non-communist and secure. But in Congress there was continued criticism that India was not being helpful in Korea. Of the \$115 million of assistance the administration requested for India, Congress approved only \$45 million—a proportionally greater cut than to the overall aid request.

The apathy toward India was widespread in Congress—where India had not developed a major constituency—and among the public, as well as within much of the administration.²⁸⁰ In some sections, there was downright antipathy. Truman and Acheson understood the potential threat of the lack of economic development in India, but given the administration's other priorities (Korea, Europe), the lack of an imminent threat (of communists taking over in India) or opportunity (of winning India over), they had no stomach to take on the apathy or antipathy.

Thus Acheson and Mutual Security Agency director Averell Harriman also turned down Bowles's request in summer 1952 for a special appropriation for India. Given congressional views on India, they were concerned that such a request could adversely affect foreign assistance more broadly. The deputy director of the Mutual Security Agency furthermore asked, "Is it in our best interests to spend large sums to build strength in a neutral India which is thereby able to assume the leadership of the Asian countries?"²⁸¹

Concerns about communism spreading in India, an NSC-68 reappraisal, and cooperation with India at the UN eventually led the outgoing administration to suggest an increased FY1954 aid package for India to the incoming Eisenhower administration. But the proposal came in the lame duck period of the Truman presidency, and the chances of it getting through unscathed seemed slim.²⁸²