



Time to Debate the Principles of Panchsheel

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The three-day state visit by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to India from 19 to 22 May 2013, on his first overseas tour, marked a step forward in India's political, economic and cultural dialogue with China. Significantly, both countries decided inter alia to mark the 60th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Panchsheel) in 2014, thereby reinforcing their commitment to those principles as a basis of bilateral interaction. Premier Li underlined the significance of these principles while addressing a civil society gathering in New Delhi organized by the ICWA. In six decades since its formulation, Panchsheel has been a frame of reference in India-China ties. This underscores both the need to evaluate the evolution of the Principles and debate their relevance in the present circumstances.

The principles of Panchsheel were first formally enunciated in the Preamble to the *Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India*, which was signed on 29 April 1954. The Five Principles are: (a) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; (b) mutual non-aggression; (c) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; (d) equality and mutual benefit; and (e) peaceful coexistence. Premier Zhou Enlai and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru elaborated their vision of Panchsheel in June 1954 as a framework not only for relations between their countries, but also for their relations with other countries.

Panchsheel provided a suitable framework to China for breaking its isolation and playing a meaningful role in international affairs. Consequently, it also envisioned the shift of Chinese policy toward non-socialist states. Further, People's Republic of China was not a member of the UN in the first two decades of its existence. Thus, the principles of Panchsheel also worked as a means to enunciate its foreign policy across the world.

From the Indian perspective, the Panchsheel was considered a moral obligation and a projection of the Indian idea of peaceful coexistence. However, Nehru's visualization of the Panchsheel as laying the foundation for peace along the border proved mistaken. Panchsheel became an inevitable casualty of the India-China conflict in 1962. It led to disenchantment with the significance of Panchsheel in India while in China, Panchsheel was forgotten during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in 1988 was historic and provided the occasion to revisit Panchsheel in the bilateral context. In a speech on 19 December 1988, the Prime Minister reiterated the relevance of Panchsheel by noting that 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence provide the best way to handle relations between nations'. During his address at Qinghua University in Beijing on 21 December 1988, he acknowledged that although India and China were the architects of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, India-China relations have not always conformed to these principles.

It is noteworthy that India and China have entered into the important border agreements in accordance with Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. This includes: *Agreement between India and China on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas* (1993), *Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas* (1996) and *Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question* (2005). The principles of Panchsheel has also got significant place in most of the joint communiqué/ statements signed between India and China at highest level from 1954 till date. The sixty year journey of the Panchsheel highlights that conflicts were the result of a failure to

convert the principles of the Panchsheel into practice. On many occasions, the application of the Panchsheel has been a matter of convenience.

The context of Panchsheel in the 21st century is different from 1954 when the principles were first formulated by India and China. It is worthwhile to survey contemporary debate in India and China about the principles of Panchsheel. Former Chinese Vice Premier Qian Qichen, called for adding new dimensions to the Five Principles by adding multilateralism in the principles.

The first principle of Panchsheel is mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. India has accepted the 'one-China policy' without any reservation while China has disputed India's territorial claims since 1954. China's policy should be sensitive towards India's core interests and major concerns. In the absence of such policy, the application of the first principle of Panchsheel in India-China bilateral context might not be appropriate.

The second principle of Panchsheel is mutual non-aggression. Renowned Indian strategist K. Subrahmanyam had even proposed a formal non-aggression pact. To make the principle genuinely effective, both India and China may explore the possibility of signing a formal Non-aggression Pact. Mr Subrahmanyam noted that the pact should also include the commitment to no first use of nuclear weapons.

What is necessary now is to formulate a mechanism which ensures mutual respect for the Line of Actual Control in the India-China border areas while both countries are in the process of border negotiation to reach a mutually acceptable settlement. Another important idea could be including strategic partnership as an additional principle and joint commitment to fight against terrorism and security related issues.

Thus, it is imperative that the principles of Panchsheel should be reviewed to meet the contemporary challenges in India-China bilateral relations as well as changing regional and global dynamics.

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