PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE: FROM PANCH SHILA TO FULBRIGHT

The Useful Example of a Successful Failure

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When Senator J. William Fulbright recently called for an end to certain myths in American foreign policy he provoked, not unexpectedly, a debate over basic issues. Some of these are issues that Prime Minister Nehru grappled with in his long political career, issues that are neatly summed up in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence found in the preamble of the Sino-Indian Agreement on Tibet, signed April 29, 1954.

Although the Tibetan treaty expired in 1962, the norms in the preamble continue to play a vital role in world affairs. Indeed, they contributed substantially to some of the ideas Fulbright expressed about United States diplomacy in a changing world. These standards are mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual nonaggression; mutual non-interference in internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and most important and controversial of all, peaceful coexistence. The history of these norms over the past decade reveals the contortions ideals sometimes undergo in world affairs, but it also reveals the persistence of values which do not easily succumb to the manipulations and illusions of policy makers.

K. M. Panikkar, the Indian diplomat and historian, may have been the first commentator to place the Five Principles into a specific, Indian context. He called them “Panch Shila,” Sanskrit for the five foundations of righteous living for individuals which have been developed in Buddhism. Prime Minister Nehru often referred to the Buddhist source of the term and further commented that at the level of statecraft the great ruler Asoka exemplified Panch Shila when, following the slaughter of the Kalingas in the third century, B.C., he turned from war to peace.

Last December the Peking Review claimed, without mentioning India, that the New China “initiated” the Five Principles. It is true that the first four of the Five Principles have roots in the program of the People’s Republic and behind it in Chinese nationalism dating at least to Sun Yat Sen and his demands for genuine sovereign power and respectful, non-imperialist treatment by the Occident. Ultimately, however, these four standards flow from Western international law, a source Communist China prefers to overlook. Because of the importance communism attaches to the fifth norm, Peking stresses its origin in Marxism’s Leninism as if the beginnings of all of the Five Principles were explained in the process. The term “peaceful coexistence” may well have come from Stalin who used it as early as 1925; he had derived the expression from Lenin’s ideas on short-run relations with capitalist states within the continuing struggle for Communist objectives.

If we are aware of Panch Shila’s diverse sources we can better understand what it meant to the original parties. It is well also to recall the setting for Sino-Indian relations as of April 1954. From the standpoint of Nehru’s government, the Five Principles reflected India’s independent policy about the ideological disputes, military alignments and political maneuvering of the cold war. This policy began with Indian freedom, but it assumed dynamic qualities, and to some, anti-Western implications. These qualities prevailed to about 1957. Then, owing to increasing Western aid and understanding, domestic problems, difficulties with Peking, and competition from other neutralists, India’s militant neutralism began to ebb. But in the spring of 1954 when American military assistance to Pakistan angered India, and Nehru led the nonaligned world in a time of heightened anti-imperialism and nuclear pacifism, India trusted the good faith of Communist China and tried to protect her already curtailed economic and cultural stakes in Tibet through the April agreement.

Previously, by promptly recognizing the Mao regime in Peking and by opposing the Chinese Nationalists as China’s representative in the United Nations, India had made considerable efforts to win
the good will of her neighbor, downgrading the implications of the Communist penetrations into Tibet. But obedient to the “two-camp” teaching of Lenin, the New China had considered neutralism a mirage and the Indian Congress government a mortgagee of capitalism. Subsequent developments in Communist doctrine, and Peking’s 1954 turn to diplomacy in order to end the struggle against French colonialism in Southeast Asia, permitted the Mao regime to recognize India’s unrequited love. The bargaining advantage of Peking emerged in the uneven Tibetan treaty whereby India acknowledged China’s sovereignty over Tibet without attempting to secure Chinese agreement to India’s understanding of the frontier in the Northeast.

To Nehru, however, the treaty represented a triumph for his efforts to enlarge the arena of peace. In the Lok Sabha on May 15, 1951, he emphasized that the significance of the agreement flowed from the “wholesome” ideals of the preamble. “By this agreement,” he said, “we ensure peace to a very large extent in a certain area of Asia.” “Peace” and “Asia” are the key concepts from the Indian government’s viewpoint; they probably were and are more significant to the Indian perception of the Five Principles than legalistic and nationalistic interpretations. Gandhi and Nehru spoke eloquently of “peace” and “Asia” at the First Asian Relations Conference, held in Delhi in 1947. “Peace” is the gift of “Asia” to the world, they said, a thought repeated in the Prime Minister’s later comment in September of 1955 that although India had yet to make a major contribution to world affairs, she had made a difference for the better, summed up in Panch Shila. In this speech he indicated the ends-in-view approach he took to the Five Principles. They mean, he said, “different ways of progress, possibly different outlooks, but that broadly the ultimate objectives may be the same.”

From this perspective there are different paths on the way to a common destiny; this goal is the thing, not the spokes. The influence of modern syncretic Hinduism, in which all paths to truth are equally good, may have produced this vision of Panch Shila. The Indian and Western critics of Panch Shila, who focus on the means used to implement it, for instance the Sino-Indian cultural exchange programs which reached their height in the 1954–59 period, may be right about the resulting disservice to Indian interests; but often the critics overlook the eschatological nature of the Five Principles. It is now difficult for Indians and their friends to criticize Panch Shila as a doctrine of ends; the Sino-Indian frontier disputes have understandably caused the Indian government to construct a wall around the Five Principles. To attack them as ends is to attack what Prime Minister Nehru called “truth.” “A good ideal,” he observed as early as August 1955, “does not become a bad ideal because the man who proclaimed it has not acted up to it.”

What can be done with profit for the study of Panch Shila in world politics is to examine its record after April 1954. Two months later in New Delhi, Nehru and Chou En-lai reaffirmed the Five Principles. Influenced by the new current, Burma, Cambodia, North Vietnam and Yugoslavia quickly adopted them. On October 11, 1954, Soviet Russia and Communist China jointly declared that they would observe the norms in relations with other states. The spirit of the Five Principles pervaded the Asian-African Conference at Bandung in April 1955. However, some changes occurred there which are important in the history of Panch Shila.

The final communique of Bandung did not contain the words “peaceful coexistence,” principally because pro-Western delegates objected to them. Instead, at the suggestion of Chou En-lai, then as now a skillful diplomat, “live together in peace” was adopted. The Bandung meeting produced the Ten Principles which include respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations; recognition of the equality of races and of the equality of nations; noninterference in the internal affairs of other states; nonaggression in word and deed; respect for fundamental human rights and the ideals of the United Nations; the settlement of disputes by pacific means; the promotion of mutual interest and cooperation; and respect for justice and international obligations.

All of these principles have the ring of Panch Shila. But one of the Ten Principles acknowledges the right of individual or collective self-defense in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations. Another two-part norm qualifies the self-defense principle, calling for abstention from the use of collective defense measures “to serve the particular interests of any of the big powers.” This norm also asks that external pressure should not be applied to other countries. Nonetheless, the recognition of the right of collective defense was a set-back to New Delhi and other Panch Shila neutralists and to Communist manipulation of the term to condemn Western collective security efforts.

Immediately after the Bandung Conference, Nehru explained to the lower house of the Indian Parliament that the collective defense norm refers to self-defense as guaranteed by Article 51 of the UN
Charter, and that the Ten Principles provide safeguards for weaker states against big power abuse of this right. The Indian leader’s defensive explanation, and behind it the absence of a full victory for Panch Shila, stemmed from the successful efforts of Asian states aligned with the West—Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Thailand, and the Philippines—to have the Ten Principles justify collective security. Unaligned Ceylon, then under a pro-Western government, contributed to this position by broadening the discussion of anti-colonialism at Bandung to include Soviet expansion. These states prevented the Panch Shila mood from becoming imbedded in a major statement of principles in a manner to discredit anti-Communist security activities.

This achievement did not, of course, keep several emerging states, particularly India, Indonesia and Ghana, from subsequently attacking NATO, CENTO and SEATO, though seldom Communist pacts. India also ignored the Bandung agreement by signing with Russia a Panch Shila declaration in the year before the Hungarian uprising. To India’s credit, the statement of Nehru and Bulganin on June 22, 1955, showed a new Indian sophistication when the principle of “non-interference in each other’s internal affairs” became “non-interference in each other’s internal affairs for any reasons of economic, political or ideological character.”

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Within the rich history of Panch Shila over the past decade, three developments have special meaning for the current world scene. The first was the Indian confusion about Soviet manipulation of post-Stalin “peaceful coexistence.” The second was Communist China’s use of Panch Shila to try to attract members of the third world. The third was the transmission of Panch Shila idealism into international opinion and even into Western policy.

Russia’s conduct, in the first development, is to be understood chiefly as an opportunistic move related to two significant changes in Soviet ideology: 1) the rejection of the doctrine about the inevitability of war for fear of nuclear conflict, and 2) the shift from the “two-camps” view to recognize a certain legitimacy of the in-between zone. Russia took full ideological advantage of Panch Shila, but it takes two to dance. The Nehru government never clearly distinguished between Panch Shila and the Russian concept of “peaceful coexistence,” which latter refers to a coexistence of states, not of ideologies and class interests.

The basic Indian understanding of the last of the Five Principles is that ideologies and classes as well as states ought to declare a truce. Nehru led the Congress party to adopt socialism, but no international struggle was thereby intended. The Indian interpretation of “peaceful coexistence” is not fundamentally compatible with the Soviet view, nor, of course, with Peking’s. Unfortunately, Prime Minister Nehru’s conduct of Indian foreign policy failed to show this. The Indian leader illustrated his government’s confusion when, in the autumn of 1955, he permitted Bulganin and Khrushchev to identify Russian ideology and interests with the ideology and interests of India. Nehru did so although he had only recently expanded “noninterference” to include political and ideological factors. The crucial identification was that of Soviet “peaceful coexistence” with the “peaceful coexistence” of Panch Shila. From the Indian side the basic reason for the identification rested with the influence of Marxism on Nehru’s political ideas so that he thought the best of Marxist states and the converse of capitalist nations in world affairs. This influence reached its height back in the Popular Front days. Yet it left its mark on his world view. Despite a reappraisal brought on by doubts and age and despite the 1959 and 1962 shocks from the north and Nehru’s illness early in 1964, a nostalgia lingered on in his foreign policy and with it an Indo-Soviet bond. The Russian response to the Sino-Indian dispute neither broke this chain nor added additional links.

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The second development relates to Communist China’s use of Panch Shila in Afro-Asia. Peking’s approach to Panch Shila has been that of a great civilization with a pride which runs deeper than politics. This cultural superiority is accompanied by a revolutionary utopianism in which peace-loving is more pronounced than peace-making. In a supremely righteous but unembarrassed way, Communist China has employed the Five Principles to find grave defects in Indian behavior and motives. Peking not only accused Nehru’s government of selling out to the capitalist West and of instigating the Sino-Indian frontier disputes but of harboring imperialist ambitions in Asia at the expense of China and Southeast Asia. Moreover, the Chinese Communist regime has shown evidence that it believes these absurdities. Looking beyond India, Peking has presented herself to the Afro-Asian world as the guardian of the new nations against the martial camp of imperialism and the retrogrades in Belgrade, Moscow and New Delhi who do not know the road to peace. Communist
China’s efforts to convince Afro-Asians of her genuine belief in Panch Shila is impeded because she rejects the test-ban treaty, although her adamant support of national liberation is a crosscurrent some of them welcome.

The third development with meaning for world politics today was the eventual diffusion of Panch Shila’s symbolic value into world opinion and Western policy, a process illustrated by the Fulbright Senate address on March 25 of this year. As I have noted, the immediate expansion of Panch Shila after 1954, apart from the influence on the Bandung principles, appeared in treaties or joint declarations between India and other nonaligned states, and between them and Communist states. Western states and those associated with them were restrained in their enthusiasm for Panch Shila, but especially for the words “peaceful coexistence” which the American State Department considered “artful” since they seemed to bear an Amstorg label. Consequently, the West and its clients have not joined in agreements or declarations which reproduce the Five Principles. Nonetheless, the confluence of the Indian Panch Shila with Sino-Soviet versions of “peaceful coexistence” lessened Western suspicions of the expression without eliminating them.

The coming of the Kennedy Administration, welcomed in India as a sign of moderation in the cold war, brought a further adjustment in Washington’s over-all thinking about the notion of “peaceful coexistence.” This adjustment took place despite the crises in Berlin, Cuba and Southeast Asia, and the Soviet Union’s resumption of thermonuclear testing. The response of Nehru and other nonaligned leaders to these events disappointed the New Frontier, which took exception to the third world’s anti-Western or asymmetrical interpretations of the two great power blocs.

Yet the United States continued to move toward implicit acceptance of “peaceful coexistence” of the Indian kind, which suggests an ideological truce the Communist varieties deny. Developments within the Communist community, but especially the Sino-Soviet dispute after mid-1959, and the necessity for the United States to catch up in the peace race aided this movement. Graphic evidence of the trend came in John F. Kennedy’s “Strategy of Peace” address at American University on June 10 of last year, in the achievement of the test-ban treaty, and emerged directly in Senator Fulbright’s speech on March 25. The Senator said that Russian withdrawal from extremely hostile policies, the implicit American and Russian repudiation of the total victory doctrine— together with American strategic superiority which Russia seems to have accepted—have the effect of committing the United States to a policy of “peaceful coexistence.”

Senator Fulbright was the first to say that it is not prudent to describe American policy as endorsing “peaceful coexistence.” Conservative opinion will not soon allow national leaders to openly adopt the term, but apart from the important problem of domestic conservatism and American external policy, there are other reasons of some weight for avoiding endorsement. Communist China and Russia are now debating who correctly interprets Marxist-Leninist “peaceful coexistence.” The United States cannot endorse this idea without risking involvement in metasemantics which cloak a struggle with unknown challenges to the West. There is also the possibility of propaganda entrapment to which the Nehru government fell victim in its China policy.

We have Senator Fulbright and others like him to thank for attempting to correct an overreliance on military power without turning aside from it, as the Panch Shila school tends to do when states adopt it operationally. There are troublesome positions taken in Fulbright’s Senate speech, particularly his de-emphasis on the role of ideology in world politics, but the net balance of his address was to moderate the nuclear side of the cold war without adopting neo-pacifism.

As prescriptive rules for nations the Five Principles have had a salutary impact on world politics during the last decade to the extent that they helped the American and Russian governments to shift away from nuclear foreign policies and to increase the area of peace as Nehru had asked. It is tragic that the compass of peace did not turn to his own country. Because Nehru applied Panch Shila as an operational strategy, serious damage was done to Indian interests in the Himalayan zone and New Delhi encouraged illusions about Communist intentions and activities in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Apart from these important errors, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence have been, as John Kenneth Galbraith, former United States ambassador to India, said about Indian foreign policy during the frontier crisis of 1962, a “successful failure.” They are reminders to the West, whatever they are to the Communist world, of the need to hold power accountable to something external to itself.