



Nehru, China, and the Security Council seat

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Today's policymakers fail to understand Nehru's eminently sensible approach

- Finance Minister Arun Jaitley recently said that India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was the "original sinner" who favoured China over India for permanent membership in the UN Security Council.
- His assertion obviously refers to Washington's feeler sent to New Delhi in August 1950 through the Indian Ambassador in the U.S., mentioning the American desire to remove China from permanent membership of the UNSC and possibly replace it with India.
- The allegation that Nehru refused to take this suggestion seriously and thus abdicated India's opportunity to become a permanent member of the UNSC is the result of the critics' inability to comprehend the complexity of the international situation in the early 1950s and the very tentative nature of the inquiry.

The Asian landscape

- This episode took place in August 1950. The Cold War was in its early stages, with the two superpowers in eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation that threatened nuclear catastrophe.
- Nehru was trying to carve a policy that ensured India's security, strategic autonomy and state-led industrialisation in these very dangerous times.
- Nehru was well aware of the fact that pushing China out, as the U.S. wished to do, was a recipe for perpetual conflict that could engulf all of Asia.
- The U.S. had dropped nuclear bombs on Japan only five years ago and many observers believed it would not hesitate to do so again in an Asian conflict, especially since nuclear deterrence had not yet become a

recognised reality.

- Nehru did not want India to get embroiled in hazardous Cold War conflicts and become a pawn in the superpowers' great game risking its own security.
- Nehru's approach to China was dictated by realpolitik and not wishful thinking.
- Nehru understood that peace could not be assured in Asia without accommodating a potential great power like China and providing it with its proper place in the international system.
- Moreover, China was India's next-door neighbour and it was essential for New Delhi to keep relations with China on an even keel and not fall prey to the urgings of outside powers, the U.S. foremost among them, which were following their own agendas that had nothing to do with Indian security interests.

A combustible context

- The so-called American "offer" to India of a permanent seat in the Security Council replacing China was made in this combustible context.
- To be precise, it was not an offer but merely a vague feeler to explore Indian reactions to such a contingency.
- The U.S. intended it to be a bait to entice India into an alliance with the West against the Sino-Soviet bloc, as it was then known, and lure it into becoming a member of the "defence" organisations it was setting up in Asia to contain presumed "Communist expansionism".
- Nehru refused to consider the American feeler not because he was a wide-eyed Sinophile but because he was well aware that all Washington was interested in was to use India for its own ends.
- Had India accepted the American bait, it would have meant enduring enmity with China without the achievement of a permanent seat in the UNSC.
- The Soviet Union, then China's closest ally, would have vetoed any such move since it would have required amendment of the UN Charter that is subject to the veto of the permanent members.
- It would have also soured relations between India and the Soviet Union and made it impossible to establish the trust required to later build a close political and military relationship with Moscow that became necessary once the U.S. entered into an alliance relationship with Pakistan.
- The Indo-Soviet relationship paid immense dividends to India during the Bangladesh war of 1971.

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