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Shaping the Future of Asia

**Chiang Kai-shek, Nehru and
China–India Relations During the
Second World War Period**

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Abstract

During the late Thirties and the early Forties, the political and military situation in the Far East was both characterized by the rapid progress of the Japanese military advance and by the serious deterioration of the Allied military position in the area.

In such a context, China made various efforts, particularly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and the fall of Hong Kong and Singapore, in order to defuse the tension that had grown between Indian nationalists and the British administration in India. Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) thought that if India were to succumb to Japanese pressures the Allies' strategic situation in Asia might become extremely difficult.

For this reasons, Chiang and other Chinese nationalist personalities (for example, Dai Jitao) intensified in those years their contacts with India. They made visits to India and met with leaders like Gandhi and Nehru in order to convince them to give firm support to the Allied cause.

The aim of the paper is to undertake a preliminary analysis of these very important contacts between China and India during those years, in the general context of the Second World War period.

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Introduction

Generally speaking, studies on nationalist strategies, trends and movements in East (here included Northeast and South-East) Asian countries during the interwar and the war (Second World War) periods have usually focused on their bilateral relations with the colonizers (or in some specific cases, like that of Siam/Thailand, with the hegemonic powers in the area) or on their multilateral relations with the major powers (European powers like Britain and France, the USA, Soviet Union and, in the case of intra-Asian relations, with Japan). Such relations have been usually framed within a larger context made of dependence and assimilation but also of co-optation and collaboration among the colonial/imperial power and the colony, semi-colony or protectorate.¹

Very limited attention, on the contrary, has been devoted to the efforts by the Asians to find a common path and to design a common strategy with the aim to fight more effectively the foreign oppression and encroachment and, in perspective, set quite a solid base for future co-operation in the postwar period. Examples of such efforts toward a better and deeper interaction among Asian nations and leaderships are more than we may expect: Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionaries during the early years of the 20th century (Sun Yat-sen and Phan Boi-chau) or again during the interwar period (Guomindang and Vietnamese nationalist movements) and Chinese interest in the late Twenties in Kemal Atatürk's modernization in Turkey, etc.

Here I will try to offer a possible contribution to such a field of studies by giving an assessment, however preliminary, to the political and diplomatic relations between Nationalist China and the Indian National Congress from 1937 to 1942. That is, in the period that goes from the break of the war in China (July 1937) to the Congress's approval of the "Quit India Resolution" (August 1942) and the arrest of the main leaders of the Indian National Congress.

I will therefore provide first an historical sketch about the main trends in Sino-Indian relations before the break of the Second World War; then I will offer a general overview of the international situation in those years with particular reference to the Asian area; and in the third and fourth part of my paper I will then discuss the political importance and significance of the co-operation between China and India after 1937 with particular reference to

¹ Bickers and Henriot, 2000; Chow, Doak and Fu, 2001; Barrett and Shyu, 2001; Goto, 2003; Samarani, 2004.

Nehru's visit to China in 1939 and Chiang Kai-shek's visit to India in 1942.

The Interwar Period

After the end of the First World War, the emergence of mass political organizations both in China (the Chinese Nationalist Party or Guomindang, GMD) and in India (the Indian National Congress, INC) paved a way for a possible bilateral cooperation in name of a common anti-imperialist drive and struggle. Particularly important was the meeting in Bruxelles in 1927 of various representatives of colonies and semi-colonies: during such meeting, Jawaharlal Nehru and the Chinese delegates met in order to discuss possible co-operation and some preliminary points were negotiated and agreed upon: Nationalist China should open an Information Bureau in India in order to organize a regular service of informations between China and India, representatives of both the GMD and the INC and of trade unions movements should attend meetings respectively in India and China, the INC will continue to press British authorities so that they will withdraw Indian forces from China and not to use them against the Chinese people. At the end a joint manifesto was issued stressing the importance of mutual cooperation in the anti-imperialist struggle and a joint declaration signed by both parties was passed by the meeting.²

On this basis, later on GMD representatives were invited to visit India. China planned to send Song Qingling, the widow of Sun Yat-sen: however, British authorities strongly opposed at the end to such a visit which did not materialize. Similar difficulties occurred when again Song Qingling was invited, in 1928, to the INC's annual session in Calcutta and when a Indian delegation to a Labour Conference to be held in China was denied the permission to travel to China.

One particular important issue which was often raised during the late Twenties was, as we did already stress, that of the use of Indian troops in China. Nehru remarked many times how Indian troops had been used in China for many decades since the Opium War and how they were still used despite the strong opposition by the INC.³

One of the more active and vehement opposition to the use of Indian troops in China was organized by the so called Ghadar (Revolt) Movement

² Addy, 1994.

³ Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, 1972-; Jawaharlal Nehru. A Biography, vol. one, 1975.

or Party, a movement founded in the USA with the aim of throwing out the British rule from India. According to some sources, such a movement was largely – even if not uniquely – composed by Sikhs and had its social bases also in people serving the British armed forces abroad, here included in China. The movement did particularly intensify its activities in China after the involvement of Indian troops in repression against the Chinese in Hankou, Shanghai and Shaji (Canton) in 1925. Actually it was during the period from 1919 to 1930 that Ghadar activities flourished in Chinese cities like Shanghai, Nanjing, Hankou, Canton, even if the lack of detailed and solid documentation still represent a substantial obstacle to the understanding of the historical significance of such a movement in the broader context of Sino-Indian relations.⁴

It was also during those years that was established the China-India Association (in Chinese Zhong-Yin xuehui) in Nanjing on the initiative of Dai Jitao, one of the most brilliant theoreticians of the Guomindang who was also president of the Examination Yuan; and that Nehru's cultural interest in and sensibility for China's philosophical and literary tradition grew up, as can be evinced also from the reading of some chapters in his *The Discovery of India* of 1942. As we will see, Dai will later visit India, officially for private reasons (his recent interest in Buddhist philosophy and his desire to meet Rabindranath Tagore, with whom he had been corresponding for some time), but also for obvious political reasons (the will to meet with Nehru and Gandhi).⁵

A further important aspect we may emphasise during the interwar period was China's view and appreciation of Gandhi and the Gandhian movement. According to some important Chinese journals of the period (like the Eastern Miscellany, *Dongfang zazhi*), the Chinese press covered rather largely the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement which developed in India during the twenties and the thirties.

About the Non Cooperation Movement, Chinese approaches differed in some way: some commentators stressed the differences existing between China and India and thus emphasised the need that in China an armed revolution should occur, as advocated by the same Sun Yat-sen, while others seemed to be more deeply influenced by Gandhian thought, stressing how Gandhi's emergence was a matter of great interest as he advocates the

⁴Deol, 1969

⁵ Nanjing Second Historical Archives of China, Dai Chuanxian (Jitao) files; *Dai Jitao yu xiandai Zhongguo*, 1989.

liberation of India and how his rise was of great importance for the Chinese people, who was at that time under the suppression of domestic as well foreign forces.

Other comments again tended to compare the Gandhian revolution with the October Revolution of 1917, stressing how the main difference between the two was in the fact that the October Revolution was the expression, with its use of violence to solve social problems, of a thought of social transformation radicated in western societies and basically different from that existing in eastern societies

In the early Thirties, less than a decade after the Non Cooperation Movement had been suppressed, the Civil Disobedience Movement was started in India and again followed with attention in China. It was particularly stressed that the Civil Disobedience Movement was based, too, on the principles of non-violence but that it also represented a further step in the realization of Gandhian principles with the call for a defiance of the salt law and other laws and taxes. The arrest of Gandhi, Nehru and other leaders of the movement arouse strong criticism in China against the British government.⁶

In particular, a quite vivid account of the Indian freedom movement was given by Mr. Tan Yunshan, a scholar who had been one of the founders with Tagore⁷ of a Sino-Indian Cultural Society in Calcutta and who lived in India and thus was a witness to the developments of the movement. Prof. Tan did particularly stress the importance of women's participation into the movement.⁸

The Gandhian movement however received also negative comments and critics during the Thirties in China by radical and communist interpreters. They usually regarded Gandhi's policy of non-violence as a "rightist movement" and the INC as representing the interests of the "bourgeois class, the landlords and the capitalists", in fact putting on the same foot the INC and the GMD. Gandhi himself was regarded by some of these radical critics as a man of high moral integrity but lacking the caliber of a statesman and some others, while approving the non-violence movement, also expressed their doubts that when becoming a mass phenomena it would be rather difficult to the nonviolence movement not turning to violence.

⁶ *Dongfang zazhi*, selected volumes; Wang, 1930; Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 1962-.

⁷ On Tagore and China, see for instance Hay, 1970

⁸ Tan's articles in *Dongfang zazhi*, especially volumes 26 and 29; see also Tan Yunshan, 1944

Other commentators in China also tried to correlate the anti-imperialist nature of the various ongoing freedom movement during that historical period against colonialism and imperialism in some Asian countries. They pointed out that the most basic requirement for any self-expression lays in progressive forces of all these countries coming together to create a mutual understanding and support amidst the struggle. They stressed that if similar movements in India were successful and enable India to attain independence from the British oppression, that would prove the success of the revolution, of the capacity to resist to evil forces and maybe also the fact that not necessarily use of violent means will be necessary.⁹

As for Gandhi himself, after the Japanese deepened their offensive and aggression against China during the Thirties, he seemed rather aware that the Chinese would not be really ready to accept and take up the method of non-violence and that China was already in arms and thus the Chinese were surely not ready at all to give up arms and accept non violence as a weapon.¹⁰

The International Context¹¹

Great Britain's declaration of war on Germany on September 3rd, 1939, only two days after Nazi Germany had invaded Poland, could not but provoke the Congress's harsh reaction. In fact India, as can be seen from the Resolution of the Working Committee of the Congress on September 14th, was vehemently opposed to the Fascist and Nazi powers; however, its autonomous participation in the war alongside the Allied forces could be decided by India itself, and certainly not by a foreign power. The solution was obviously Nehru's doing (Nehru, as we will see later, had rushed back from China), and was approved after days of discussions during which Gandhi repeatedly called for the Congress to give unconditional moral support to Great Britain, justifying his position by underlining the gravity of the situation in Europe.

The trial of strength between the Congress and Great Britain developed over the end of 1939 and the first half of 1940, within a European scenario that had been made all the bleaker by the virulent nature of the Nazi

⁹*Dongfang zazhi*, selected articles.

¹⁰Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 1962-.

¹¹ The part which follows is largely based on the following sources: *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 13, Part 2; Bose and Jalal, 2004; Ennio Di Nolfo, *Storia delle relazioni internazionali 1918-1992*, Roma-Bari, 1994, *Indian Views of China...*, 1955; Singh, 1992; Lamb, 1989; Great Britain, Foreign Office, Correspondence.

aggression and the contradictions and uncertainties within the anti-fascist front. It was quite clear, as the Indian Viceroy Lord Linlithgow had often declared, that London was firm in its decision not to embark on any constitutional modifications during the war, and that any decision that might penalise minorities (read “Muslims”) was out of the question. It was equally evident, though, that the credibility of Chamberlain’s government within the Congress had been greatly compromised by his ambiguous and hesitant attitude to the Spanish Civil War and appeasement policy in reference to Germany. Nehru, in particular, considered that London was mainly responsible for the fall of the Spanish Republic and the destruction of Czechoslovakia, as can be gleaned from his articles published in the *National Herald* in those years.¹²

Some glimmer of hope began to make itself felt within this tense and uncertain context towards the second half of 1940. The formation of a coalition government led by Winston Churchill and the end of the so-called “drole de guerre” (that is of a de facto truce) on the Western front, with the military collapse of France in June and the ensuing distinct possibility of a German attack on Great Britain, led the Congress (or at least most of the Congress) to resume talks. The proposals put forward by the Congress in July and the following British counter-proposals nonetheless led to an effective deadlock. On September 10th, 1940, the Congress decided to begin a civil disobedience campaign (*satyagraha*) led by Gandhi, who had now assumed radical and intransigent positions. He was of the opinion that any solution to the “Indian problem” had to be preceded by immediate British withdrawal. The campaign, which was gradually implemented and was much more limited in its breadth than the preceding ones, was followed by the arrest of many Indian nationalist leaders, including Nehru himself (he was to be released in late 1941).

The break between the Congress and Great Britain took place, what’s more, during a phase in which another thorny problem, involving both China and India, was being resolved. In October, 1940, in fact, following continual requests coming from Chiang Kai-shek firmly backed by the USA, London decided to reopen the Burma Road, which had been closed some months before under Japanese pressure. The Burma Road, which linked Lashio in southern Burma with Kunming, and therefore the nationalist capital of Chongqing, was then one of the few routes through which Chiang could

¹²Jawaharlal. Nehru, *China, Spain and the War, 1940*; *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, 1972-*, in particular vols 8 and 9.

receive foreign aid after the devastating Japanese advance of 1937-1939 had created the conditions for a blockade of China. This blockade was to be substantially completed with Pearl Harbour, with the fall of Hong Kong in December 1941 and the conquest of Burma (and therefore the definitive closure of the Burma Road) in the first few months of 1942, thus allowing China to receive foreign supplies only via the aerial trans-Himalayan route or the lengthy and exacting caravan route that linked China and the USSR via Xinjiang and Gansu.

On the occasion of the temporary re-opening of Burma Road in 1940, Chiang Kai-shek did personally thank Churchill for his decision. And British diplomacy immediately took advantage of the occasion offered by this "cordial entente" to raise the question of a possible moderating influence that China might have on the Congress's positions regarding Great Britain in a phase in which (October, 1940) the two sides had broken off relations.¹³

The Japanese conquest of Hong Kong and Burma, as well as that of Singapore in 1941, and the subsequent possibility of a Japanese threat to India led to important political and diplomatic developments. First of all, London's prestige suffered yet another hefty blow and the idea that the British Empire was on the wane became all the more entrenched in Indian public opinion. Secondly, the presumed Japanese threat created new divisions within the Congress: a majority within the Congress (which included Nehru), struggling to maintain the strategy of anti-Japanese resistance, albeit autonomously from Great Britain, was opposed by a minority (consolidated around the figure of Gandhi) which, based on the principles of non-violence, proposed a politics of non-resistance to any possible invasion. Thirdly, the new military situation in Asia probably forced Churchill to re-evaluate the strategic importance of India and to reassess the possibilities of an agreement with the Congress. It was by no means accidental that, from 1942, India logistically assumed a position behind the lines which was essential for the Allied Forces campaign against Japan. What's more, it housed numerous military bases and Indian and English aviation bases, as well as an important American contingent and Chinese detachments.

On March 11th, 1942, significantly enough only four days after the fall of Rangoon, the British Prime Minister decided to send a special mission to India, led by Sir Stafford Cripps.

¹³Great Britain, Foreign Office, FO 371/24670-24671-24704.

His mission lasted until approximately the end of April. After a series of meetings, on March 29th Britain's proposals were made public. Amongst other things, these proposals included the transformation of India into a self-governing dominion at the end of the War and a clause, clearly to be utilised by the Muslim League, giving single provinces the possibility of opting out of the new state.

Cripps' mission was, substantially, a failure. He could not manage to obtain a solid accord with the League, nor with the Congress, despite the fact that Nehru had demonstrated some interest. The rift within the Congress, and in particular between Gandhi and Nehru, were to heal a few months later following huge popular malcontent with the English and when the United States failed to mediate. On August 8th, 1942, the All-India Congress Committee, ratifying a decision which the Working Committee had already assumed some weeks before, approved the famous "Quit India Resolution", which intimated that Great Britain abandon the country or face a widespread non-violent resistance campaign, and at the same time it proposed that Allied troops remain in India as a bulwark against Japanese aggression and to flank the Chinese forces.

On August 9th, all the leading Congress members were arrested. Gandhi was released in 1944, while Nehru was to remain in prison until June 15th, 1945.

No further serious attempt at dialogue was made for the remainder of the war.

The break of the war (July 1937) and Nehru's Visit to China (August-September, 1939)

Between the last years of the '30s and the early '40s, when the war had already assumed world-wide characteristics, moving from China (July 1937) to Europe (in September 1939 the Germans invaded Poland), and then spreading to the Pacific (in December 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour), an intense political, diplomatic and cultural activity began with the aim of setting up a co-operation and a concerted interrelation between nationalist China and Gandhi and Nehru's India, which was then under British rule.

The articles and speeches of that period, the meetings and talks between Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) and some of the most important figures in the Guomintang and Nationalist China and Jawaharlal. Nehru, Gandhi and

other Congress leaders aimed above all to individuate the existence of common interests and goals within both the national and international context.

On this basis, it was hoped that a common strategy, as unitary as possible, could be found, and that it would be continued in the post-War period.

As is well known, and for reasons that go beyond the scope this article, the positive premises made in that period were to be ignored in the new, post-War reality and would lead to a “small cold war” between the two countries.

Certainly, the frenzied political activism of those years did not originate solely in a disinterested and internationalist vision of the role the two countries might have played in the future. This activism, in fact, also derived from obvious nationalistic reasons and the desire to become hegemonic in the region, such as Chiang Kai-shek’s evident ambition to become the leader of the “new post-War Asia” and Nehru’s “old dream” of an “Asian Federation” or “Eastern Federation”, where India was to play a central role.

However, not wishing to under-estimate the biased ambitions underlying contacts between Chinese and Indian nationalists, it must be recognised that they were to a quite large extent motivated by a real desire to strengthen bilateral collaboration and by a realistic vision of the substantially weak international conditions in which Asia might well find itself after the War in the absence of any form of regional entente or co-operation.

And the harsh reality of dependency and war seemed cruelly to indicate that there were no other options.

The leaders of the INC quite immediately expressed their sympathy to China after the war broke out during summer 1937 and decided to observe many China Days against Japanese aggression and to boycott Japanese goods. They also started a campaign for financial assistance for medical relief. In November 1937, Zhu De – Commander in chief of the eight route army – wrote to Nehru: he did not only express the gratitude of the Chinese people to India for its support and sympathy, but also clearly exposed his ideas that if the Japanese were successful in subjugating China none of the people in Asia could gain their liberation for many years.¹⁴

In early September 1938 a medical mission, composed by a team of five doctors, left Bombay to China carrying with them aids to the Chinese people. It reached China (Guangdong province, in the south) in mid-September and then moved to Wuhan, which was at that time the centre of Chinese military operations led by Chiang Kai-shek after the fall of the

¹⁴ A Bunch of Old Letters, 1960, pp. 261-263

capital of Nanjing in early 1938: soon however, at the end of 1938, the Chinese had to relinquish also Wuhan and moved to Chongqing, in Sichuan province, which served as the wartime capital of the Chinese government.

After a period in Chongqing, the Indian medical mission was allowed at the end to go to Yan'an, the "red capital" as it was called since it had become the base-area of the CCP from 1935. The mission reached Yan'an in early 1939 and met with Mao Zedong and other CCP leaders and was quickly assigned to their jobs in different hospitals. For different reasons during year 1940 three of the five doctors had to leave Yan'an: Dr. Kotnis was able to continue his mission and became head of the Bethune (the Canadian doctor famous in China still today) International Peace Hospital in the area of the Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei military region while Dr. Basu remained in the Yan'an area. Kotnis will die in late 1942 when he was only 32 years old and Basu will return to India in 1943.¹⁵

It was within such a complex political and human context and reality that Nehru's visit to China took place in 1939, soon after – as already said – the German invasion of Poland.

Nehru had left Calcutta on August 21st, but was forced to rush back to India on September 9th, interrupting his visit which, according to some letters, should have lasted some more weeks.¹⁶

The idea of the trip to China had probably come to Nehru when he had visited Europe in 1938. From his articles of that time, and particularly the ones published in the *National Herald*, from his speeches at Trafalgar Square and the China Association in London and from his interviews in Paris in the summer of 1938 (most of which were published in 1940 in his *China, Spain and the War*), we can detect his anguish and worries for the future of China (as well as Spain and Abyssinia, which were often linked in his thoughts) and the firm resolve to do his utmost to back the resistance against aggression.

Not by chance it was during these months that the Congress decided to send medical aid not only to China but also to Spain and to boycott Japanese goods.

However, significant traces of Nehru's desire to go to China can be found in a brief exchange of letters with Mao Zedong during the months of May-July, 1939, and in the copious letters he wrote in the same period to his

¹⁵Selected Works of Jawaharlal. Nehru, 1972-, in particular vol. 8; A Bunch of Old Letters, 1960; Jawaharlal Nehru Correspondence, 1985 (copy of letters exchanged between Mao Zedong and Zhu De, confirming the positive evaluation of the Indian medical mission); Sheng, 1983.

¹⁶Freedom's Daughter, 1989; Singh, 1992; Jawaharlal Nehru. A Biography, vol. one, 1975.

daughter Indira, who was in Europe at the time. In particular, in a reply to Mao, who had written from Yan'an to thank him for the medical aid to China, Nehru hoped to meet with Mao and the combatants of the 8th Route Army, and recalled how the Congress had been since long following with admiration Mao's career and the fortunes of the 8th Route Army.¹⁷

It is doubtless that many in India were perplexed by Nehru's decision to leave for China, considering the delicate international situation. His own daughter, Indira, writing to him from England, explicitly voiced her concern for such a decision.¹⁸

In China, Nehru visited cities like Kunming, Chongqing and Chengdu and met quite often with Chiang and his wife, with the President of the Executive Yuan, Kong Xiangxi, with the Foreign Minister Wang Chonghui as well as important nationalist leaders such as General Chen Cheng, Chen Lifu and Zhu Jiahua. He was, however, not able to travel to the north west to meet with Mao and other Communist leaders, but he did have meetings with top leaders of the CCP which were in Chongqing on the basis of the agreement reached during 1937 on the formation of an anti-japanese "united front": leaders like Ye Jianying, Qin Bangxian and Wang Ming.¹⁹

The "dream" of a visit to Yan'an remained unfortunately unfulfilled because he was summoned back to India after the outbreak of the war in Europe. The reason why Nehru wanted to go personally to Yan'an was manifold: first, he wished to see the Indian medical mission there; second, he wanted to meet personally Mao and other important communist leaders and, above all, he was aware that he will not be able to understand completely the situation in China unless he went to Yan'an.

In his writings of the period, and in particular in his *Diary of a Journey* (later to be included in his *China, Spain and the War*), Nehru recalls the negative reaction he had on seeing that "whenever the name of the Generalissimo [Chiang Kai-shek] is mentioned the audience stands up in respect". Nehru, however, was favourably impressed with the development of the industrial co-operative movement, so much so in fact that he hypothesised possible contacts with similar associations in India. Nehru was also considering forms of further co-operation between the Guomindang and

¹⁷ A Bunch of Old Letters, 1960, p. 390; Jawaharlal Nehru Correspondence, 1985; Freedom's Daughter, 1989.

¹⁸ Freedom's Daughter, 1989

¹⁹ Singh, 1992; Jawaharlal Nehru. A Biography, vol. one, 1975.

the Congress, which included not only an exchange of information but also the presence of Chinese representatives at the Congress's annual sessions.

What's more, this collaboration was, as has already been said, part of a broader plan which also included an entente between Nationalist China and the Indian National Congress on the more important international question with the hope of finding a common policy in reference to the major powers.

In his "A Note on the Development of Contacts between China and India" drafted in late August 1939 during his visit to China²⁰, Nehru made some suggestions in order to enhance the contacts and the cooperation between China and India and in particular:

- a) the need to organize an efficient system and regulate service of information;
- b) an exchange of experts for studying the development of cooperative industries and agricultural problems, here included direct contacts between China and the All India Village Industries Associations;
- c) the draft of a common outlook and policy on some major international issues.

The acute nature of the international crisis in the second half of 1939 and the accentuation of the contrasts between the Congress and London in the period that went from 1939-1941 made these measures very difficult to put into practice, even though they were substantially shared by Chinese authorities.

Despite this, the hypothesis of a political co-ordination between China and India was still an important issue, so much so that Nehru re-presented some of his "old ideas" during the non-official visit to India in late 1940 by Dai Jitao, President of the Examination Yuan and one of the major theoretician of the Guomindang.²¹

It is also significant that during Nehru's spell in prison the epistolary exchange between the two leaders continued, albeit in a rather limited way, and that, as can be evinced from Foreign Office documents, Chiang's wife officially approached Sir Cripps, the then British Ambassador to Moscow, on the question of Nehru's release from prison.²²

²⁰ Chungking, 29 August 1939, later in Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, 1972-, vol. 10

²¹ *Dai Jitao yu xiandai Zhongguo*, 1989, in particular pp. 430-432

²² Great Britain, Foreign Office, FO 371/27746.

Chiang Kai-shek's visit to India (February, 1942)²³

It was by no means accidental that, more than two years after Nehru's trip to China, Chiang Kai-shek chose the early stages of 1942 to repay the Indian leader's visit. A few weeks earlier, in fact, Nehru had been released after his lengthy prison sentence; moreover, some months before, in mid 1941, Germany had attacked the Soviet Union, and then in late 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour and quickly overran large parts of Southeast Asia. In January 1942, after the fall of Manila, the Japanese offensive had already reached Malacca, Sumatra, Borneo and above all Burma, signifying a greater threat to India.

Faced with this threat, China was extremely worried about the profound rift within the Congress (in particular between Nehru and Gandhi) as well as the continuing deadlock in the talks between London and the Congress.

The main aim of the official visit by Chiang, his wife and the Chinese delegation was on the one hand to put pressure on the British so that they would accept the Congress's requests for self-determination, thus creating the best conditions for a full use of India in the anti-Japanese and anti-fascist war with beneficial effects on the war effort being undertaken by China in that period. On the other, Chiang aimed to have a moderating effect on the more radical positions within the Congress, thus, in the final analysis, appeasing British hopes and at the same time demonstrating to the international community his own prowess as leader and statesman.

Chiang Kai-shek thus received assurances from the Viceroy that he would indeed be able to meet his friend Nehru, even though his project to finally meet Gandhi was more difficult to realise. Chiang, in fact, had insistently asked, for reasons of etiquette and courtesy, to be allowed to go personally to Sevagram, near Wardha, where the Mahatma Gandhi resided, but he had run into strong resistance from the British authorities. Only a courteous yet firm message written by Churchill himself, which underlined the importance of avoiding any possible friction between the different parties in question during such a delicate phase, finally convinced the Chinese leader to abandon his plans.

Chiang finally met Gandhi in Calcutta on February 18th. The five or so hours of their meeting underlined, as was also made clear by the two men themselves, substantial political differences.

²³ The part which follows is largely based on the following sources: Crozier, 1976; Furuya, 1981; Huang, 1995-96; India Office Records...; *Jiang zongtong milu*, 1978-; Proceedings of Conference on Chiang Kai-shek and Modern China, vol. IV, 1987; The Collected Wartime Messages..., 1969; Wu, 1987; *Zhonghua Minguo wajiao shi cidian*, 1996

Gandhi illustrated his own strategy based on non-violence and non-co-operation, and Chiang Kai-shek underlined that this strategy was certainly appropriate within the Indian context, but not necessarily that of other countries. Chiang got the impression that Gandhi was too absorbed by the cause for his own country to have a sufficiently realistic vision of the international situation.

In his turn, a few days after the meeting, Gandhi wrote to Vallabhai Patel²⁴ a short but very meaningful message about his impression on Chiang Kai-shek. He wrote²⁵:

I would not say that I learnt anything, and there was nothing that we could teach him.

The meeting with Nehru, however, was much more politically productive. It reinforced in both leaders the conviction that only close co-operation would allow the two countries to play a significant and autonomous role in those years and in the post-War period that was to follow.

In a series of interviews and declarations made to the Indian and British press in the days following his meeting with Chiang Kai-shek and his wife (February 10th), Nehru often emphasised the great importance of the Chinese leader's visit in terms of the friendship and co-operation between the two countries. At the same time, however, he was determined to reject any interpretation according to which the visit might lead to a radical change in the Congress's policy towards Great Britain. As for Chiang, it seems significant that during the last day of his stay in India (February 21st) he wanted, in his "Message to the Indian People" (*Gao Yindu renmin shu*, later made public in its English version by Chiang's wife), on the one hand to make a strong appeal to Indians so that they might fully participate in the anti-fascist struggle and, on the other, give full Chinese support to the cause of Indian self-determination, provoking the Viceroy's and Foreign Office's irate reaction.

Chiang Kai-shek also had meeting with other Indian personalities like the Congress President, Azad and the President of the Muslim League, Jinnah. Later Jinnah seemed to express his dissatisfaction because of Chiang's pledge

²⁴A Gujarati lawyer who was one of Gandhi's followers and was to become one of the main leaders of the Congress as well as one of the main protagonists of India's struggle for independence

²⁵ Letter from Sevagram, February 25, 1942, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 75

for Indian freedom and criticized him for asking freedom for Hindu India only²⁶.

Chiang Kai-shek's visit to India was certainly unsuccessful in diplomatic terms if you consider that only a few months later (in August) the rift between the Congress and Great Britain was sanctioned with the approval of the "Quit India Resolution" (and despite the extreme attempt at mediation put forward by the Cripps mission, which arrived in India a few weeks after Chiang's visit).

It must however be underlined that Chiang's initiative took place during a period of great political turmoil, the main responsibilities for which (even though they weren't the only ones) must be ascribed to Britain's intransigence towards India's aspirations to freedom and self-determination. What's more, his visit certainly had the merit of further reinforcing Sino-Indian friendship and of bringing to the attention of the great powers the central question of the two countries' role in the future post-War scenario.

Whatever the outcome, however, Chiang Kai-shek's political and diplomatic activism did not come to a close with his visit to India, but was continued in the following months with new initiatives, addressed in particular to Washington and London.

Only a few days after his return to China, in fact, Chiang brought to Churchill's attention, via the Chinese ambassador to London Gu Weijun (Wellington Koo), his own impressions culled from his trip to India, as well as his own ideas on how to attempt to resolve the "Indian question". A few days later, a similar message was sent to Roosevelt, with the proposal that the USA and China co-operate in putting pressure on Great Britain. And according to Madame Chiang Kai-shek, Roosevelt did express clearly his sympathy to the Indian cause, suggesting however – always according to Madame Chiang – that a possible solution would be the partitioning of India in two parts, a proposal which Chiang Kai-shek would have surely contrasted in that context²⁷.

In any case, Chiang Kai-shek's initiatives were curtailed during the Cripps visit between March and April 1942, but then began again in June-July, when a new campaign of civil disobedience was being organised against Great Britain.

²⁶ See India. The Transfer of Power, 1970-, vol. 1

²⁷ Foreign Office, FO 371/31690.5436 and 5705; "Letters from Madame Chiang Kai-shek to Jawaharlal Nehru", March 13, 1942 and June 26, 1942, in A Bunch of Old Letters, 1960, pp. 476-478, pp. 494-496

In particular, Chiang wrote to Roosevelt underlining the serious damage a final show-down between the Congress and Great Britain would lead to, and the distinct possibility that the Congress itself might approve a policy of non-resistance to Japan. He therefore asked for American mediation, but unsuccessfully, certainly in part because Churchill, whom Roosevelt had consulted, was opposed to any outside forces interfering in the “Indian question”²⁸.

In the summer of 1942, at the same time as Chiang Kai-shek’s action, even Gandhi and Nehru seemed ready to take advantage of any last glimmers of hope in resuming talks with Britain. In a long letter addressed to Chiang, dated June 14th, the text of which had been draughted by Nehru, Gandhi on the one hand reiterated his own theses on the strategy that had to be deployed against the English, but on the other reassuringly underlined²⁹:

Those of us who would fight for a cause, for India and China, with armed forces or with non-violence, cannot, under the foreign heel, function as they want to. And yet our people know for certain that free India can play even a decisive part not only on her own behalf, but also on behalf of China and world peace [...]

I need hardly give you my assurance that, as the author of the new move in India, I shall take no hasty action. And whatever action I may recommend will be governed by the consideration that it should not injure China, or encourage Japanese aggression in India or China.

As for Nehru, after the failure of the Cripps mission, he wrote to Roosevelt in April 1942, hoping for United States intervention which, as we know, never eventuated³⁰.

Concluding Remarks

The arrest of the main Congress leaders on August 9th, 1942, and the international political and military developments led to a gradual but noticeable weakening of China’s diplomatic commitment to the “Indian

²⁸India Office, “Intervention by Chinese Government Regarding Indian Political Situation” and “Intervention by Chinese and United States Governments Regarding Indian Political Situation”;

²⁹Foreign Office, FO 371/21690.4892

³⁰ “Letter from Jawaharlal Nehru to Franklin D. Roosevelt”, April 12, 1942, in *A Bunch of Old Letters*, 1960, pp. 479-480

question”. However, despite the plethora of difficulties, the epistolary exchange between the Chinese and Indian leaders continued, as did the contacts between the two countries, almost as if they wanted desperately to keep that subtle thread from breaking. In fact, that same thread was to become reinforced in the post-War period, and was to lead, amongst other things, to the historical Bandung Conference in 1955, of which this year (2005) marks the 50th anniversary.

As we are all too aware, unfortunately the thread linking Indian and Chinese friendship and co-operation was to become continually weaker from the 1950s, after disagreements between New Delhi and Beijing firstly over the “Tibetan question” and then over the border dispute, which led to open conflict.

Perhaps, in those years of disagreement and contrasts, India and China might well have recalled what Nehru had written about the importance of Sino-Indian friendship, one day in 1942 after having read a few pages from the famous Chinese novel *Xiyou ji* (The Monkey), in Arthur Waley’s English translation. Nehru wrote about the importance of the friendship and cooperation between India and China³¹:

After being cut off from each other for many centuries [...] now the wheel of fate has turned full circle and again India and China look towards each other and past memories crowd in their minds; again pilgrims of a new kind cross or fly over the mountains that separate them, bringing their messages of cheer and goodwill and creating fresh bonds of a friendship that will endure.

³¹ Quoted in Singh, 1992, p. 153

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