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April 21, 1960
Record of Conversation between R.K. Nehru and Zhou Enlai

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Summary:

PM Nehru first asked Premier Zhou regarding the political situation in Middle East, paticularly U.A.E, Syria and Egypt. Then, Nehru expressed his concern on the revolt in Tibet 1959. Zhou addressed the Tibet incident was China's domestic affairs.

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English

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On 21.4.60, Ambassador R.K.Nehru and Shrimati R.K.Nehru called on Prime Minister Chou En-lai at Rashtrapati Bhavan at 1030 p.m. Also present at the meeting were Marshal Chen Yi, Vice Premier of the State Council and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Mr.Chang Han-Fu, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, one Chinese Interpreter, one Chinese Recorder and myself.

The meeting lasted two hours and fifteen minutes. Ambassador Nehru told the Prime Minister that he and his wife were grateful to Mr. Chou En-lai for having given them this opportunity to call on the Prime Minister and Marshal Chen Yi. Mr. Chou En-lai said that Marshal Chen Yi and he were happy to see Mr. and Mrs. R.K.Nehru and were sorry that they were not able to accept Chairman Mao's invitation to go to China in October 1959. Mr. Nehru said that, apart from other considerations, the invitation had arrived at short notice. Moreover, events in the Arab world would not permit him to leave his post. Ambassador Nehru asked Mr. Chou En-lai for his views on the situation in Arab world.

Mr. Chou En-lai said that Marshal Chen Yi would answer the question since he was the Foreign Minister. Marshal Chen Yi said that the main feature was the continuing dispute between President Nasser and General Kassem. The other interesting point was that there were unresolved contradictions on the Arab question between the United States and the United Kingdom. United States was supporting Israel, whilst Britain was not willing to yield any ground to the Americans in Aden, Yemen, Omman etc. Marshal Chen Yi asked the Ambassador about the relations between the U.A.R. and the British Government. He wanted to know if there have been any improvements in the relations. The Ambassador replied that relations on the economic and financial points have certainly

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improved. Britain supports Kassem and because Britain is in control in Aden, Kuwait, etc and also has relations with Israel, a complete rapproachment has not taken place. However, President Nasser is desirous of normalizing the relations between Arab countries and countries both in the east and west. He is naturally facing some difficulties in the way of bringing about this normalization. The U.A.R. has big economic problems, growing population and limited resources. Nevertheless, the emphasis is on internal development. Marshal Chen Yi agreed with this appraisal and he wanted to know if the livelihood of the people and the standard of living had improved or not. The Ambassador replied that in the last two years, particularly, there has been a considerable improvement in the life of the people. But there are no statistics available and it was not possible to give any definite information about this.

Mr. Chou En-lai asked the Ambassador about conditions in Damascus. The Ambassador said that in the Syrian region of the U.A.R. economic conditions during the last few years were not too good due to failure of rains. Syrian commerce has suffered because trade with Iraq had almost come to a standstill. President Nasser is aware of this and he has adopted a more liberal economic policy in Syria than in Egypt. Prime Minister Chou En-lai asked as to how the merger of Syria and Egypt had worked? The Ambassador said that there was a certain amount of discontent in Syria but the movement against the union was not very strong and the union had been accepted by the vast majority of the people. No Arab, not even communists, were against Arab unity. Opposition there is, but it is only confined to President Nasser's internal policies. All progressive elements in the Arab world even Mr. Baghdash, want Arab unity. Marshal Chen Yi said that they were of the view that each Arab country could have its own, democratic and united front

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and above this should be an overall democratic organization to fight oppressors and colonialists. President Nasser wants to be the head of the Arab world but other Arab leaders opposed this. Last year, China had irritated Egypt. But, now things are better. Ambassador Nehru said that India wanted solidarity and closer co-operation amongst Arab nations. After Syria, President Nasser is reluctant to accept merger with other Arab countries at present. He wants to consolidate the union and to promote solidarity and cooperation among the Arab States.

Mr. Chou En-lai asked the Ambassador the way in which this solidarity would come about. Ambassador Nehru said that one way would be to have common or similar policies, both internal and external. Mr. Chou En-lai said that on the whole the experience of Syria had not been very good and to this the Ambassador agreed.

Mr. Chou En-lai said that they have some contact with the people in the Arab world and they have the feeling that the solidarity of the type wanted by the U.A.R. was not universally popular. President Nasser had succeeded in educating the people and a feeling of solidarity and unity came about specially when there was fear of foreign intervention. The background and history of these Arab countries with their local problems is coming in the way of this solidarity. For example, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria were all French but they have different problems and the differences are to a large extent a hang-over of the imperialist days. The Ambassador said that not only old history but recent history played a part in this. Marshal Chen Yi said that the problem for these countries was to first solve the internal problems and then cope with the external ones. If internally there was dis-unity, then foreign interventions were bound to take place. Ambassador Nehru asked as to what these internal

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difficulties were in the opinion of the Marshal. Marshal Chen Yi said that owing to different beliefs; different nationalities; party disputes and the petroleum still in the imperialist hands, there was no significant land reform. In 1958, a danger was created by the imperialists and they wanted to interfere in the internal affairs of Iraq. But due to influence of India, China, Russia etc the situation was saved. Now the imperialists are picking up internal problems. We have an Ambassador in Iraq but we have instructed him not to get involved in the internal affairs of Iraq. Ambassador Nehru asked the manner in which other countries were interfering in Iraq. Marshal Chen Yi said that they got different kinds of reports from the newspapers but now the situation was that there was general support for President Kassem. When Mr. Chou En-lai asked about the relations of Arab countries with Israel, the Ambassador said that the relations were, of course, tense, but this tension was sometimes aggravated by differences among Arab States which led one State to follow a more extreme line than the other.

The Ambassador then asked Mr. Chou En-lai to give his views on the upsurge in Africa. Mr. Chou En-lai said: this was the epoch of anti-colonialism and nationalism was the main event. Ambassador said that there were certain peculiar facets of the upsurge taking place in Africa e.g. nationalist upsurge; upsurge for independence; upsurge for racial equlity. There was one such upsurge for unity and there were also certain factors which encouraged separatist tendencies and Prime Minister Chou En-lai said that they were independent movements but the imperialists left this legacy; they planted bad factors; encouraged separatism and conservatism. This has been so for over 100 years. This was also the case of nationalist movements of India and China. There was partition in India; imperialists left

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legacy in China - Taiwan. We have a similar problem in Tibet - the serf owners and serfs. In Indonesia there are still national rebels. Same is the case in Malaya and Singapore. Yet in spite of this Asians have become independent and nothing can stop this and these countries must improve their lot.

Ambassador Nehru said that some of the small African countries do not seem to have the same kind of national background as the larger Asian countries etc. Countries like Nigeria, Togoland etc have a tribal background and this may be coming in the way of greater national cohesion. One of the dangers which some of these small countries seem to be facing is that external influences may seep in through the backdoor after independence. It is what the African nationalists call neo-colonialism. We in India have always felt that Asian-African understanding and co-operation was important and this we mentioned in our Joint Communique when President Nasser was here.

Mr. Chou En-lai thought Ambassador was quite correct. We must help these nations. On the other hand these nations have to gain their own experience. Imperialism united these nations internally and their phase of nationalism has got to go through fire - the most precious experience is that which you gain yourself. India and China are examples of this. Through long process our nations have been steeled through experience and become free. In the next 40 years of the 20th century imperialism will totally disappear although colonialists will try to hold out. But they are bound to fail particularly in context of world politics and the development of science and technology which all help nationalism.

The Ambassador said that because of this India, China and other countries must remain friends and nothing should be done to undermine this friendship.

To this Prime Minister Chou En-lai replied: in the

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past year unfortunate events, some differences and misunderstandings had occurred between India and China. We must exert our joint efforts to dispel this dark cloud and it was now the great moment to do so. You have not been in China at this time and it is unfortunate that all this should have occurred when the new Ambassador took over. We maintain that all that has happened is not what we expected. But it was a logical outcome of the revolt in Tibet and the coming of the Dalai Lama into India.

Ambassador Nehru said that he was out of touch with the events in China and Tibet but since his return to India, he had become aware of the deep shock which the people of India had experienced. The vast majority of the people wanted friendship with China, but friendship was only possible if each country respected the vital interests and rights and the national dignity of the other. The shock to Indian opinion was very great and Prime Minister Nehru had expressed it in moderate terms. Ambassador Nehru said he did not wish to go into details but he was expressing the general feelings of people of India.

Mr. Chou En-lai said, in China the Chinese had received just as much a shock as the Indian people. But the Chinese Government and the Communist Party have always restrained their resentment. China and Chinese people have true friendship for India and our solidarity is very vital not only for ourselves but for the world. The revolt in Tibet was very serious and a said affair and Dalai Lama's carrying out his revolt gave a great jolt to our people. Because of his religious belief we had respected Dalai Lama and therefore we had postponed the reforms in Tibet. I had mentioned this to Prime Minister Nehru in 1957. But that same year some Tibetans in India, particularly in Kalimpong, put pressure on Dalai Lama and carried out anti-Chinese propaganda and this assistance and encouragement from outside encouraged the Dalai Lama to oppose the reforms and instigated

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the revolt. He wanted to do away with the nationalist people's liberation, army and also to throw out the Han people. All this happened before the actual revolt. Ambassador Nehru will recollect that the Chairman Mao Tse Tung himself told him that the Chinese Government had postponed reforms in Tibet and reduced the size of their army from 50,000 to 20,000 and also withdrawn some of the cadres. In 1957 January I had spoken to Dalai Lama about this when he was in India in 1957. In spite of all this the revolt was started in Tibet. We had the power to imprison and arrest the Dalai Lama but the three letters that he wrote to us deceived us and he succeeded in escaping to India. We have no objection to the Indian Government granting political asylum to the Dalai Lama. All countries have a right to do so. But the Dalai Lama is today carrying out anti-Chinese activities and encouraging the movement for an independent Tibet. This is beyond the definition of political asylum. Very recently, Tibetans in India celebrated the first anniversary of the revolt in Tibet at Kalimpong. This was naturally not liked by our people. Some people in India, and they are responsible people, say that we are suppressing the Tibetans. But we are liberating them by changing their lives by removing serfdom. But certain people in the upper strata of public opinion in India, although small they are, say that we are suppressing the Tibetans. We are shocked by this attitude and the developments in Tibet have a direct bearing to the border problem.

Ambassador Nehru said that every country had its own way of functioning and in a democratic set up of life like ours, it is only natural that people should give vent to their resentment publicly and there is no way by which a democratic government can prevent them from doing so. But this should not undermine our friendship.

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Mr. Chou En-lai said that for a long time last year, on the Tibet question, there was violent anti-Chinese propaganda carried out. It was continued from January to June 1959 but this anti-Chinese propaganda had started several months before the reforms in Tibet and this propaganda was carried out not by few/by but responsible political parties, members of the Parliament and other responsible people in India. But all that is over now.

Yet the Dalai Lama and his group continue to carry out anti-Chinese activities and let me assure you that his activities are not going to have any affect on Tibetans. Although we are distressed at the attitude of the Indian Government towards the Dalai Lama, we did not mention this for a long time, though our people were shocked and pained.

On this question, there are other reasons on our side and Marshal Chen Yi has mentioned these to Sardar Swaran Singh and I mentioned to Mr. Krishna Menon. It is beyond our comprehension as to how a country like India can support the tyrannical serf-holders of Tibet.

Ambassador ~~XXX~~.Nehru asked has the revolt in Tibet any direct bearing on the border question? To this the Prime Minister Chou En-lai said, Yes. He said that we were aware of the fact that there existed a dispute between our two countries about eastern border. I have told Prime Minister Nehru that this question could be solved by peaceful means. We are, of course, not willing to agree to the Mac Mahon Line but we assure you that we will not cross Mac Mahon Line and enter Indian territory. This has been our understanding all along but at the time of the Tibet revolt, India mentioned the Simla Convention and asked us to accept the Mac Mahon Line and also 1842 Treaty. We are not willing to accept either of them and we resent this new development. The Simla Convention of 1913 was imposed on

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on Tibet by the Imperialists and the Central Government of China did not recognise it. Both of us are new countries and we can solve the border question in the same way as we have solved the disputes with Nepal but in no circumstances are we going to accept or recognise the secret convention singed by Imperialists. Even Chiang Kai Shek did not accept the Simla Convention. How can Independent India and independent China be a party to this Convention? For us, it is absolutely impossible to do so. But some responsible people in India want to impose this upon us. I want to again repeat that both these treaties were mentioned for the first time to us at the time of the Tibet Revolt.

Mr. Chou En-lai continued as for the western sector what you call Ladakh and what we call Aksaichin, has always been ours and certainly for the last 200 years. All our old maps show this. Of course, there are certain minor discrepancies in some of our maps but there is no doubt that the Central Government of China for the last 200 years has exercised jurisdiction in that area. In 1950 we sent troops to Tibet from this territory and also to Sinkiang. Then we built a road there. We get supplies from this area. To all this India has never objected. It was only in 1958 that an Indian patrol party was sent to this area and this party we disarmed and sent back to India. In 1959, India raised a point that the border question in the west should follow the 1842 Treaty. We have seen this Treaty and are convinced that there is nothing in the Treaty which says that this region belongs to India. To us, this Indian demand is both new and shocking and has irritated our people very much. I have given all these details and background of this in my letter of the 26th December, 1959. But, in spite of that letter we were willing to consider settling the eastern border, accept the Indian jurisdiction upto the McMahon Line and assure that we will not cross it.

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So, in the east a settlement can be found. We have never made any territorial claims but India says we have. Our people resent this and this has made this problem very difficult. But the responsibility is not ours. What has happened is very unexpected from our friends. I am placing before you the actual position. Our aim is still to explore ways to settlement. As I have told you, we do not stress in public but I want to tell you all the facts. Only in the past two years things have become very complicated and we know that non-settlement of this problem will harm us both. That is why, we have come to Delhi to try and reach some sort of a settlement and not to emphasise our differences Whether we succeed or not, is to be seen. But our friendship is the most important thing. If we cannot settle now, we can find other and gradual ways and means to solve this problem. You, Mr. Ambassador are deeply interested in India-China friendship and you know the background of our Tibet policy. Chairman Mao Tse Tung had himself told you about this policy several times. You would recollect that Chairman Mao Tse Tung told you about this when you were leaving China and when he saw you at Canton. So whenever there are any differences, we think of you and that is why we invited you again because you understand our position. Because we are friends, that is why I have told you all this.

The Ambassador said that he agreed with the Prime Minister that friendship was essential betwsen India and China not only in the interest of the two countries, but of Asia and the world. However, he would repeat that a friendly settlement was only possible if the vital interests, national dignity and rights of both the countries were respected. We all hope that step by step, these difficulties will be solved and friendship will be restored. I am grateful to you for your invitation to come

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to China and I hope some time or other I will be able to come again. Marshal Chen Yi then said that he hoped that a settlement could be reached on the basis of mutual respect and mutual accommodation. Our friendship is the greatest thing; the border question is subsidiary. To this Ambassador Nehru replied that for India the border question was not a subsidiary matter. It was of vital importance. He would like to draw the attention of the Vice Premier to the fact that the border from Peking was 3,000 miles away, but from Delhi it was only a few hundred miles and that made a tremendous difference and effected our security.

Mr. Chou En-lai said in regard to security, we treat our southern boundary as boundary of peace. Chairman Mao Tse Tung has said that our enemy lies in the east and will come from the sea. We take India as a friendly country and we cannot turn our southern border into a national front. Mr. Ambassador, you have mentioned security, dignity and friendship. Between us, there can be no other way and it is impossible for us to show weapons to each other and even to mention them.

Marshal Chen Yi again emphasised that war between India and China was inconceivable. Prime Minister Nehru had said so in the Parliament. We must solve this problem in a friendly way. Ambassador Nehru said that war between two countries like India and China could not be a small affair. It would involve the whole world.

Mr. Chou En-lai said that war between us was out of question and when we refer to friendly settlement of the border question, we do so in all sincerity and we are not thinking of taking any precautions against each other but our endeavour should be to put each other at ease, especially India. You know how high the plateau of Tibet is and we cannot help placing our troops there and as I have said earlier, we had reduced our army there from 50,000 to 20,000. But events in Tibet last year, upset this.

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Ambassador Nehru said that apart from the border question, there are reports of a great concentration of troops on the Indian borders. Naturally, this had a strong reaction in India. Why have these troops been sent there? We also have reports of building of airfields.

Mr. Chou En-lai said that there were more aerodromes on the Indian side than on the Chinese side of the border. There was only one aerodrome in Tibet.

Ambassador Nehru said that the Himalayas are vital for India and we have to defend them. In so many other ways, they are part of India's history, culture and religion. We want our border to be a peaceful border and not a military one. Your Excellency will recollect that I had suggested when I was in China that we should have free and peaceful inter-course between India and the Tibetan region. We should have a peaceful and model border. I had also suggested that there should be an air service between Lhasa and India so that people could move freely between the two countries. I earnestly hope that your talks will succeed, but I cannot minimise the deep concern of our people about recent events. Even those elements in India who are extremely friendly to China, have been upset by Chinese activities on the border.

Mr. Chou En-lai said that Himalayas mean much to them also. We have the same sentiments for them as you have. However, our endeavour should be to settle this question peacefully and as quickly as possible and this is why we are here. He again repeated that as a result of his visit some solution would be found which would help to "bring about step by step settlement".

At about 1 a.m. the Ambassador said that he had taken too much of Chinese Prime Minister's time and he thanked him for meeting him.