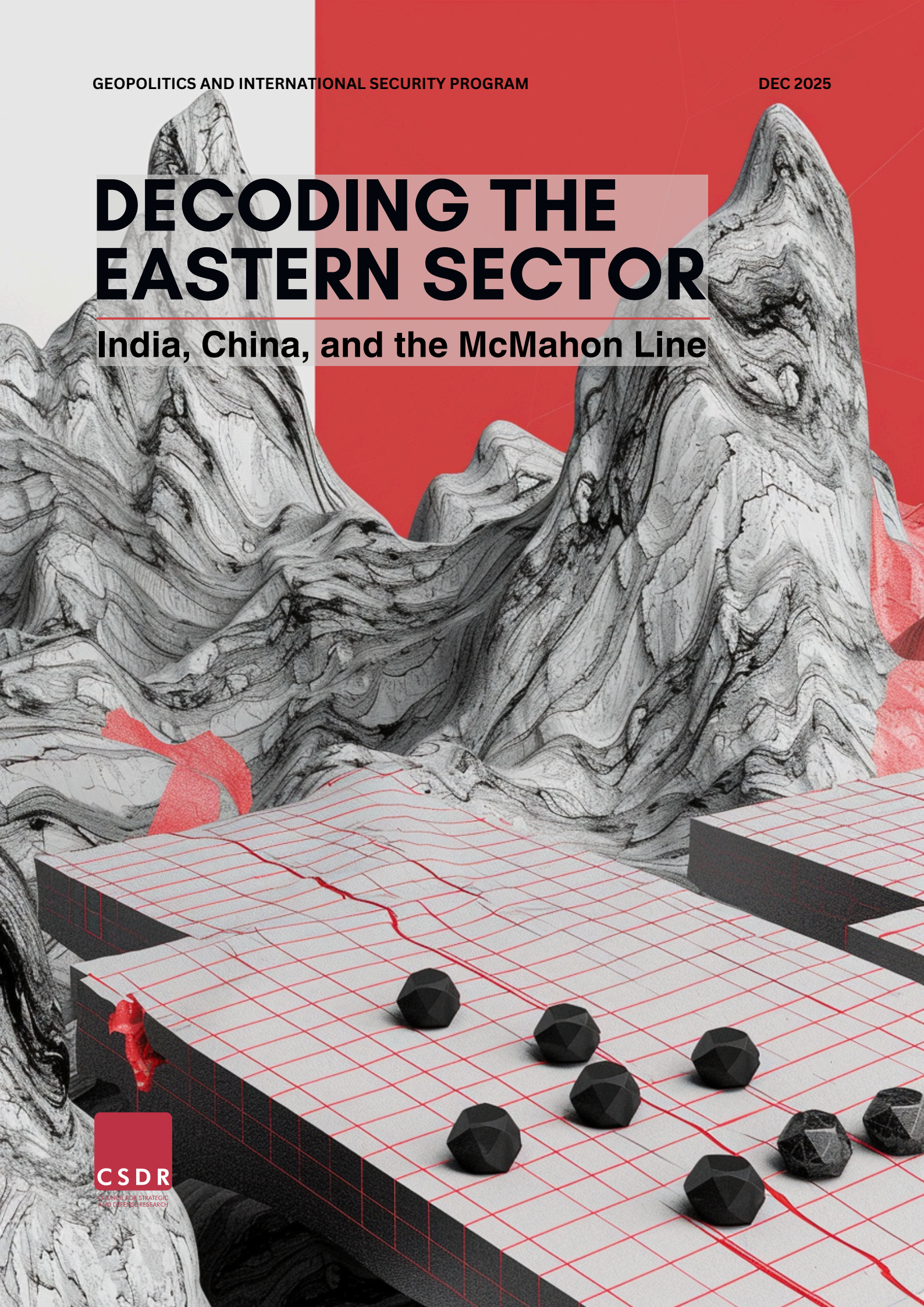
GEOPOLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM

DEC 2025

DECODING THE EASTERN SECTOR

India, China, and the McMahon Line



CSDR
COUNCIL FOR STRATEGIC AND DEFENSE RESEARCH

Recommended citation:
Raimedhi, Sidharth (2025). Decoding the Eastern Sector: India, China, and the McMahon Line. New Delhi: Council for Strategic and Defense Research.

The Council for Strategic and Defense Research (CSDR) does not take institutional positions on any issue.

C-21, 3rd Floor, Qutub Institutional Area, New Delhi, India - 110016.
Phone: 011-43104566 | Email: office@csdronline.org | Web: www.csdronline.org | Twitter:@CSDR_India

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the India-China boundary dispute, focusing specifically on the dynamic Eastern Sector (Arunachal Pradesh). It traces the historical and legal origins of the conflict, from the 1914 Simla Convention and the establishment of the McMahon Line to the complex diplomatic negotiations of the post-independence era. The study argues that China's maximalist claims in the East are less about genuine historical sovereignty and more about strategic leverage—aimed primarily at compelling India to recognize the status quo in Aksai Chin.

By examining key turning points—including the 1962 war, the stalled border talks of the 1980s, and the aggressive shift in Chinese posture since 2017—the report decodes the current phase of "grey-zone" contestation. It assesses the implications of new infrastructure races, the "Tibet Question," and the strategic role of border populations, offering a forward-looking framework for understanding the future stability of the Eastern Himalayas.

ABOUT CSDR'S GEOPOLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM

The Geopolitics and International Security Program explores and analyzes India's foreign policy decisions by conducting in-depth research and analysis. The program monitors India's engagement with a rising China and the evolving dynamics in regions like the Himalayas and South Asia. It also studies the complex geopolitics involving great powers and its impact on India's strategic interests.

ABOUT COUNCIL FOR STRATEGIC AND DEFENSE RESEARCH

Founded in January 2020 by Lt. Gen. D.S. Hooda (Retd.) and Dr. Happymon Jacob, CSDR is an innovative think tank and consultancy specializing in foreign policy, geopolitical risk, connectivity, and critical areas of defense and aerospace. With a focus on the Indian subcontinent, Eurasia, and the Indo-Pacific, CSDR is committed to generating strategic insights that drive meaningful change. Read more at www.csdronline.com

AUTHOR

Dr. Sidharth Raimedhi, Fellow, CSDR

Executive Summary

The India-China boundary dispute stretches nearly 4,000 kilometers and is generally divided into three parts: the Western, Central, and Eastern Sectors. This report focuses on the Eastern Sector (mainly the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh), which has seen increasing attempts by the PRC to assert claims over. It primarily consists of the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as the tribal areas and the Northeast Frontier Agency Region, or NEFA. Even as evolving border management arrangements have led to a relatively predictable strategic environment in the Western Sector (Ladakh), the Arunachal Pradesh front remains dynamic, making it more conducive to grey-zone operations and claim expansions. This makes a reckoning with the history of the 'dispute' all the more salient.

The report explores the nature of the 'dispute' between India and China over this territory by examining the broader historical record, including matters related to customs, cultural connections, administrative markers, maps, treaties, and arguments presented during the exchange of letters and official negotiations.

The report argues that China's claim to the state is less than absolute, truncated, and significantly driven by its negotiating strategy regarding the overall boundary; that is, it aims to compel India to legally recognize China's hold and control over Aksai Chin. However, outside this bargaining strategy, the sincerity of China's claims appears limited to only a few small areas of the region.

Notably, China's claim on the area is also politically related to the CCP's rejection of both the Simla Convention and the McMahon Line that resulted from it. This is based on the idea that accepting both implies that China acknowledged Tibet's status as an independent entity in the recent past. Secondarily, China views both as outcomes of imperial plots by the British Indian government at a time of acute Chinese weakness, lending the conference and treaty a perceived unfairness that renders them unequal and illegitimate.

India's claim (and related control) over the region is based on principles of geography (the watershed principle), historical linkages, established administration/jurisdiction, and international treaties (the Simla Convention).

Moreover, India's stance is that China has produced very little evidence of Tibetan administration or control over this region, and where such information is available, it relates only to very minor, limited areas. Additionally, the actions of the border state and the clear sentiments and patriotism of its people since 1947 compellingly support the view that Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of India and should not be regarded as 'disputed.' India's primary basis of claim, however, continues to be the finality and validity of the Simla Convention and the Anglo-Tibetan agreement that had acknowledged the McMahon Line as the official boundary between Tibet and British India.

However, when it comes to Tawang, there exist certain historical nuances. The region's inhabitants, the Monpas, considered themselves subjects of Lhasa, albeit somewhat vaguely and resentfully, until the 1940s and arguably until 1951. Tibetan rule and influence were arguably strongest in this region, a point often admitted by British officials at the time. Britain also failed to expel Tibetan officials from Tawang after the Simla Convention. Similarly, Britain also failed to meaningfully expand its administrative writ throughout the region in the period 1914-1935.

Nevertheless, since 1935-36, Britain made significant efforts to strengthen its claim through expeditions, communications, and the establishment of new facts on the ground, often overlooking Lhasa's interests

and sensibilities. Independent India extended this British policy to its logical conclusion, marking Tawang on its maps and through administrative outreach and enforcement. This period of ambiguity (1914-1950) enabled both Indian and Chinese negotiators to present maps, records, and communications that supported their respective positions. The Indian stance relied heavily on the claim that Tibetan influence in the region was primarily monastic and private and did not extend to political or administrative authority.

In the 1950s, China proposed to India that it would be ready to accept the McMahon line if India were to also recognize China's claim and control similarly over Aksai Chin in the Western sector. Although the Indian government initially considered such a bargain, growing political mistrust and violent clashes at various points along the undemarcated border hardened India's position against it. Regarding the McMahon Line, China's position evolved in response to geopolitical contingencies.

China has its own reasons for its maximalist position. By claiming the entire region, as it did in 2006, Beijing aims to enhance its negotiating leverage against India. From this perspective, the main issue is India's ongoing refusal to recognize Aksai Chin. Without seeming to offer a grand bargain in which both sides accept territorial losses, Beijing understands that Indian acknowledgment of Aksai Chin will be nearly impossible, as it would be perceived as Indian acquiescence to China's unilateral and unlawful use of force. At the same time, as India increasingly integrates Arunachal Pradesh into mainstream Indian political and social life, it unintentionally undermines China's claim over the region, thereby reducing its bargaining advantage.

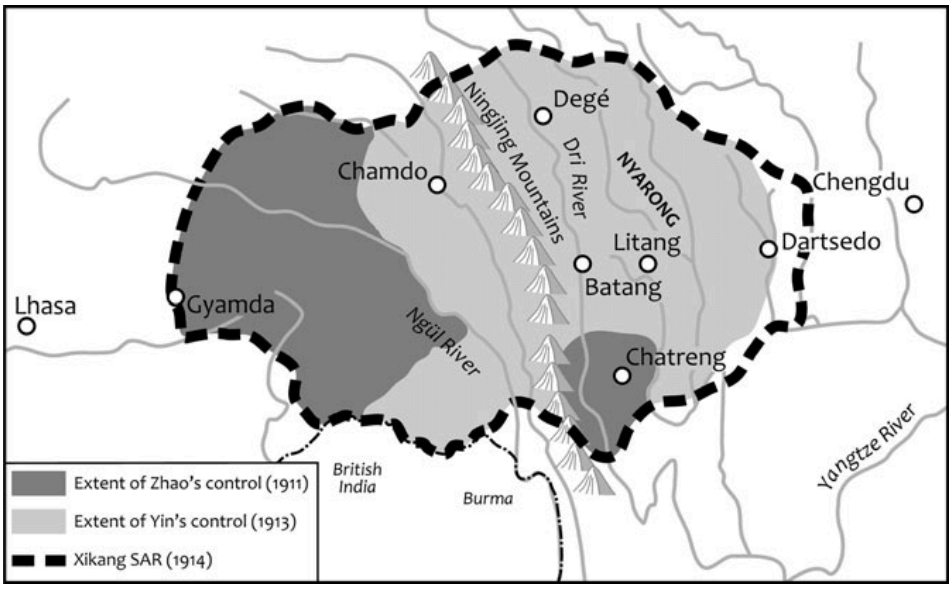
Thus, China's expansion of claims and increasing vocalization is both reactive and unprecedented. This explains China's strong responses to signs of international recognition of the region as an integral part of India, as this weakens its leverage. Therefore, China's claim, at least the maximalist version, is motivated by its strategic imperative rather than a genuinely held belief that the region rightfully belongs to Tibet and, consequently, to China.

Diplomatic History and Evolution of Claims

The Simla Convention – A disputed legacy and its resultant legal basis

The Simla Convention was a tripartite agreement among the representatives (or plenipotentiaries) of Britain, Tibet, and China, held in India in two phases between 1913 and 1914. The main agenda of the conference, as highlighted by the letters exchanged beforehand, was to determine Tibet's status as an autonomous political entity under China's suzerainty. China agreed to participate in the conference under significant duress, as Britain threatened to disrupt communication lines between China and Tibet through India, as well as withhold recognition of the nascent Chinese Republican regime.

The immediate trigger for the strategy and objectives underpinning the Simla Convention in 1913 was China's campaign during the final years of the Manchu empire (1910-1911). Driven by insecurities pertaining to its hold over Tibet, the Manchu Empire launched a violent forward policy towards Tibet, aiming to transform the semi-autonomous protectorate into a full province of the empire. Foreshadowing future Chinese Communist Party (CCP) intentions and strategies, Manchu China sought to diminish the importance of the Dalai Lama and the monastic orders while imposing a more direct form of control over the region. Crucially, China also aimed to counter British influence within Tibet and along the frontier. General Zhao Erfeng, through his military-administrative campaign, sought to establish a new province of Sikang and thus moved his army towards the northern Zayul Valley (not beyond Rima), Pomed (north of the great bend of the Tsangpo), Takpo, Kongbo, and parts of northern Burma.[1]



Geographic extent of Zhao Erfeng's frontier army and policies through 1911 and the 1914 border of the Xikang Special Administrative Region. [Cartography: Debbie Newell.]

It was when Chinese forces reached Rima (near the frontier) and ordered the construction of a road through the tribal belt (present-day Arunachal Pradesh) toward the Brahmaputra Valley (Assam) that key officials in British India and the press became alarmed by the prospect of a 'Great Empire' arriving 'at the gates of India.'[2] This concern, abruptly dissipated by the Republican Revolution of 1911 and the resulting expulsion of Chinese forces from Tibet, prompted Henry McMahon to pursue the triple objectives of establishing de facto Tibetan independence from China (under Chinese suzerainty), defining a boundary between China

and Tibet, and setting a formal boundary between Tibet and British India.

Based on surveys, British thinking at the time was strongly influenced by defensive and strategic considerations, most clearly reflected in the decision to include the Tawang tract ('a dangerous wedge') on the Indian side in any future boundary agreement with Tibet or China. Allowing this strategic tract to remain under Tibetan control would have indefinitely left open the possibility of Tibetan or Chinese military pressure on the foothills and the populated Assam Valley.[3]

As noted earlier, Republican China was in a very weak position to decline the British invitation outright. As the Chinese official record noted, "It was precisely due to such interference and under such threats and pressure that the Chinese Government could not but agree to the convocation of the Simla Conference."[4] Tibet sought British assistance to secure its independence from China. Some Tibetans now contend that Tibet conceded to the McMahon Line and the explicit grant of Tawang to British India, with the expectation of receiving broader British diplomatic support and commitment.[5] Thus, it is sometimes argued that the McMahon line and the treaty existed merely on paper, given that the underlying promise was not fulfilled. Nevertheless, the current position of the Tibetan government in exile and the Dalai Lama acknowledges the validity of both the McMahon line and the Simla Convention.

Tibetan, British, and Chinese participants and plenipotentiaries to the Simla Treaty in 1914.
In the back, standing to his left, Archibald Rose, and to his right, Charles Bell. Seated, from left to right: Wangchuk Tsering, the Chinese delegates B. D. Bruce, Ivan Chen, Sir Henry McMahon, the Tibetan delegates Lonchen Shatra, Trimon, and Tenpa Dhargay (Dronyer Chenmo).
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Furthermore, Henry McMahon granted the Tibetans certain concessions and assurances during negotiations. This included the continuation of Tibet's right to collect 'dues' from the region, the maintenance of private estates in the Tawang tract (Monyul), modifications to the watershed principle in the region of the Tsari pilgrimage in deference to Tibetan religious sentiments, and the assurance that the line may be revisited and adjusted at a later date based on additional information.[6] These concessions are significant to note, as they play a prominent role in future disputes and in Chinese claims and policies.

The Chinese plenipotentiary, Ivan Chen, refused to sign the final treaty due to his government's objection to Tibet's status within China, which was underscored in the understanding and the proposed boundary between Tibet and China. This non-ratification, as well as non-recognition, is alluded to by Chinese negotiators in rebuffing India's claim on the region based on the Simla convention. The Chinese side also describes the agreement between Tibet and British India over the McMahon line as 'secretive' as well as 'surreptitious'.[7]

"The Chinese plenipotentiary, Ivan Chen, refused to sign the final treaty due to his government's objection to Tibet's status within China, which was underscored in the understanding and the proposed boundary between Tibet and China. This non-ratification, as well as non-recognition, is alluded to by Chinese negotiators in rebuffing India's claim on the region based on the Simla convention.

Furthermore, India argues that China's refusal to sign does not undermine the bilateral agreement between Tibet and British India.[8] Indeed, Chinese participation in a 'tripartite' convention itself reinforces the idea of Tibet's treaty-making rights, even under some form of Chinese suzerainty. Notably, Tibet had previously signed similar treaties with Nepal in 1856, which China later recognized in subsequent agreements with Nepal.[9]

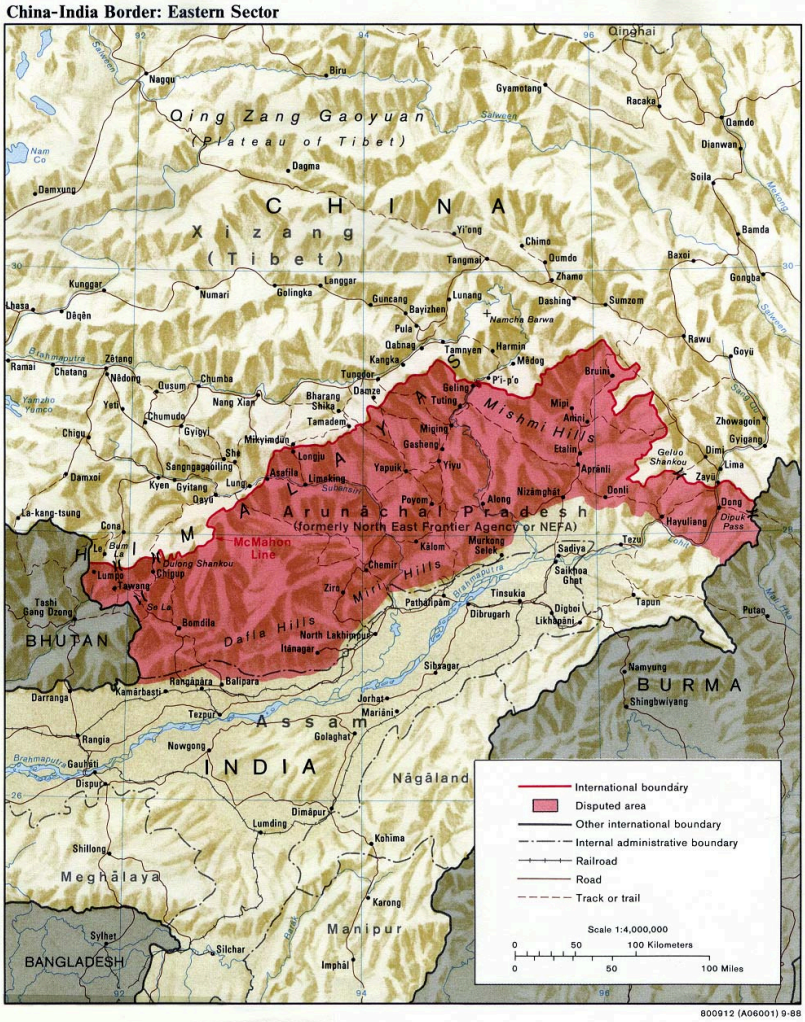
Furthermore, Indian officials emphasized that the 'delimitation' was not a 'secret,' since the map submitted by the British representative at the conference showed the McMahon Line, known as the red line, which delineates the boundary between Tibet and British India. This map was also initialed by the Chinese plenipotentiary. At that time, the Chinese delegation raised objections to the blue line (which marked the boundary between Tibet and China) but did not object to the red line. Chinese officials reject the claim that such a significant deduction (and therefore territorial concession) can be made on this basis, questioning, "How can the Sino-Indian boundary be considered delimited without any explanation or discussion, but merely based on a proposed line?"[10]

The Chinese position also contests the suggestion that China's participation in the conference alongside the Tibetan representative on an 'equal footing' validates the latter's independent status. This is founded upon both the imperialist pressure from Britain and the objections raised by China concerning Tibet's assumed status as an 'independent entity' during the conference.[11]

Consequently, the Simla Convention took place under circumstances unfavorable to China, given its weakened position following the fall of the Manchu Empire. China has neither accepted nor signed the final tripartite agreement that demarcates the borders between the three parties and determines the status of Tibet. Nevertheless, the bilateral treaty between Tibet and British India, along with China's participation in a trilateral convention with Tibet on an 'equal footing', has provided grounds for British India in the 1930s, as well as independent India since 1947, to establish a legal basis for its expansion into and control over modern-day Arunachal Pradesh.

The map of Tibet in the *Atlas of the Chinese Empire*, published by the China Inland Mission (1908), shows the whole Indian boundary more or less in consonance with the traditional boundary.

China-India Border: Eastern Sector



The ambiguous period (1936-1947): The neglect and resurrection of the McMahon Line

Despite Tibet's explicit acceptance of the McMahon Line in 1914, Britain refrained from establishing formal administrative control over the Tawang tract in the years following the Simla Convention, primarily due to shifting priorities arising from the outbreak of the First World War. For all intents and purposes, the status quo regarding Tawang (the main prize of the bilateral Anglo-Tibetan agreement) remained largely unchanged, and the region continued to be lightly administered by Lhasa.[12]

The unfavorable status quo was described by the Governor of Assam (then responsible for the tribal areas north of Assam) in May 1937 as, "Tawang was undoubtedly Tibetan up to 1914, when it was ceded to India, but although it is undoubtedly British, it has been controlled by Tibet, and none of the inhabitants have any idea that they are not Tibetan subjects."[13] The renowned explorer Kingdon-Ward's travels in the region also revealed that not only did Tibet control Tawang, but its influence extended south of the Sela Pass (some 60 km south of Tawang and the site of a recent tunnel inaugurated by the PM in May 2024).[14]

British India recognized this unfavorable situation on the ground in the mid-1930s and initiated a corrective policy aimed at tactfully establishing new realities that reflected India's post-Simla sovereignty over the region and contested Tibetan claims to sovereignty.[15]

> British India recognized this unfavorable situation on the ground in the mid-1930s and initiated a corrective policy aimed at tactfully establishing new realities that reflected India's post-Simla sovereignty over the region and contested Tibetan claims to sovereignty.

This included various expeditions, most notably the Lightfoot expedition of 1938, a joint survey to demarcate the boundary in Bhutan in 1938, the replacement of Tibetan monastery leaders with Monpas,[16] the publication and republication of maps (including the New Map of India in January 1939), the gradual introduction of British taxation and legal systems while selectively allowing Tibetan tax-collecting activities, the creation of the North East Frontier Agency in 1943, and military outposts along the McMahon Line. However, during this period, Tibetan rule, or state-like influence over Tawang, was not entirely eliminated, and the region and its people existed amid competing powers and forms of governance.

Meanwhile, the Kuomintang's (KMT) growing domestic strength in China in the 1920s led to a renewed drive to reabsorb 'lost territories'. This led to the creation of a Xikang province that included NEFA despite the absence of actual Chinese knowledge of the area and control.[17] In the 1930s, China approved and published new maps to assert its position. The Chinese Postal Atlas (1933) and the Shenbao Atlas (1934) depicted the NEFA area as part of China and divided it roughly into three parts: Monyul (West), Loyul (Central), and Lower Zayul (East).[18] Incidentally, despite war-related objectives (against Japan), the KMT failed to exert control over NEFA even during the Second World War.

Importantly, in 1944, after the establishment of military outposts in the Tawang tract and the formation of the NEFA in 1943, British India, through its Political Officer in Sikkim (Basil Gould), chose to present the McMahon Line to the Tibetan authorities in Lhasa. In doing this, Britain aimed to reassure Tibet that the

recent changes should not be seen as a territorial intrusion into Tibetan land and that the Indian government would compensate for any revenue loss resulting from the new circumstances. However, the Tibetan authorities refused to relinquish any tax-collection or administrative control over certain areas of the region.[19]

At the same time, the KMT-led government in China grew increasingly concerned about reports of British expansion into Tibetan and Chinese territory. However, it could not reliably confirm the nature, extent, or exact location of the alleged 'encroachments.' To worsen the situation, the Tibetan government rejected Chinese offers of mediation and assistance. After all, Tibetan border guards had only recently forcefully resisted a Chinese expedition into the Lower Zayul area, harboring suspicions about Chinese attempts to take over Tibetan territory.

The disagreement between China and British India over Lower Zayul continued after the end of the Second World War. In 1946, for example, the Chinese Foreign Ministry provided Britain with detailed maps featuring Chinese place names along the Lohit Valley below Rima and extending up to Sadiya. This was done to express Chinese concerns over British India's 'illegal' activities in the region and to assert the right to claim compensation.[20] Perhaps even more frustrating and embarrassing for Chiang Kai-shek and his 'central regime' was the fact that, when confronted with the contentious territorial issue, the Tibetan government stubbornly refused to accept any Chinese offer of mediation on the Indo-Tibetan border disputes.

In summary, the Simla Convention and the treaty strongly favor India's position. The rationale for the same had been laid down by the British traveler Kingdon Ward succinctly, "What claim Tibet had to Monyul in the first instance is immaterial. The hard facts of the situation are: (i) that she was in effective possession of the country politically, socially, and economically. (ii) that she ceded it to India in 1914."[21]

> The Simla Convention and the treaty strongly favor India's position. The rationale for the same had been laid down by the British traveler Kingdon Ward succinctly, "What claim Tibet had to Monyul in the first instance is immaterial. The hard facts of the situation are: (i) that she was in effective possession of the country politically, socially, and economically. (ii) that she ceded it to India in 1914."

However, the same position is somewhat weakened by the lack of change on the ground in the years following the convention. This occasionally led Tibetan authorities to doubt the continued relevance of the 1914 agreement. The insufficient publicity surrounding the line and the new map meant that regional Tibetan authorities (Dzongpons) largely remained unaware of the demarcation. At the same time, the absence of British assertion removed strong reasons for them to consider the new status quo.[22] Such oversights also allowed Beijing to question the agreement's legitimacy and to present evidence of Tibetan administrative authority in the region after the agreement. The government of India itself internally doubted the validity of the Simla Convention as early as 1915 and the line it established, stating, "The Simla Convention has not been signed by the Chinese Government or accepted by the Russian Government and is, therefore, for the present invalid." However, the same note would make a distinction between the convention itself (left unsigned) and the adjacent bilateral agreements between Britain and Tibet, "It is true that by the secret Anglo-Tibetan Declaration, which recognized the Convention as binding on Great Britain and Tibet, certain advantages under the Convention have been obtained by both parties" [23]

However, both Britain's corrective policy since 1936 (ensuring that facts on the ground reflect the sanctity of the agreement) and independent India's approach to the region have strongly compensated for the earlier lapse. What remains of the Chinese position, then, is its continued non-recognition of the Simla convention and its resulting line, along with the claim that the Tawang region had been under Tibetan rule until it was encroached upon by India as recently as 1950-51.

In essence, while British India risked losing the advantages gained in 1914, the claim was materially and politically reconstituted starting in the late 1930s. This process culminated in 1951, when the Republic of India presented China with a fait accompli: the physical and unambiguous assumption of control over Tawang via the Khating mission.

It is somewhat untenable for China to maintain its claims in the Walong region based on one particularly inhumane and aggressive expedition (and against Tibetans) in the year 1910, and ignore British and Independent India's much larger and sustained (and more humane) administrative expansion into the region.

> "It is somewhat untenable for China to maintain its claims in the Walong region based on one particularly inhumane and aggressive expedition (and against Tibetans) in the year 1910, and ignore British and Independent India's much larger and sustained (and more humane) administrative expansion into the region.

Tibet-NEFA link regions

Besides Tawang, China raises relatively more serious claims based on historical Tibetan/Chinese influence/presence in Lower Zayul. Incidentally, the Chinese campaign of 1910-11 also pressed upon this region, and the PRC military offensive against NEFA was also directed towards the Tawang tract and Lower Zayul. In such recurrences, we see an overlap between the Manchu expedition of 1910-11, the PRC's claims in the 1950s, and the PLA's area of operations in 1962. Newer claims since 2006-7 and 2017 represent both a continuation of and an innovation upon this historical trajectory.

In most reliable historical accounts, this region had remained outside the control of both KMT-led China and British India throughout history until the early 1940s, when the establishment of the Walong post by British India in 1944 initiated administrative expansion and control. This, in turn, was a delayed British response to the perfunctory Chinese expeditions of 1910-11. Britain was aware of China's claims to the region. Still, it considered them negligible because they existed only on paper and lacked historical grounding. This, in turn, created an opportunity to assert control on the ground while avoiding formal disagreement with China. Given that there existed a stretch of territory between British India and Tibet that neither held nor controlled, it stood to reason that state expansion would play a key role in determining its future status.

As Dr Xuecheng Liu of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences had described in his 1994 book on Sino-Indian dispute, "Before 1914, although the Chinese-Tibetan authorities had claimed the tribal areas beyond the British Outer Line within the Tibetan jurisdiction, the Chinese-Tibetan administrative jurisdiction actually covered only the Tawang tract, the Walong area along the Lohit valley, and some other scattered enclaves in the tribal areas".[24]

Map of Tibet in the *New Atlas and Commercial Gazetteer of China* published in Shanghai some time after 1917 on the basis of authoritative surveys. It shows the boundary in the Ladakh area more or less similar to the present Indian alignment and a boundary east of Bhutan which approximates to the present boundary.

A British expedition to the region in 1939, culminating at Rima, discovered that Tibetans considered the village of Menikrai (south of the Walong region) to be the Indo-Tibetan boundary.[25] In Lower Zayul, the villages of Walong and Tinai (on the right and left banks of the Lohit River, respectively) were populated by Tibetans. Notably, Britain opted for a proactive approach by establishing military outposts in this area (Karko and Riga) simultaneously with the erection of similar outposts in the Monyul region, such as in Rupa (which was strengthened) and at Dirangdzong. However, Britain exercised caution in establishing such posts north of Sela, specifically in the Tawang tract.[26]

Therefore, the 1939 British expedition considered the area between Walong and Rima to be the boundary and an ideal location for a permanent British outpost.[27] These unilateral advancements were what independent India aimed to pursue in certain regions near the McMahon line to establish a more favorable alignment, which in turn led to Chinese accusations of Indian expansionism at the expense of Tibet and China. By the end of the Second World War, driven by concerns about long-term threats from the North (China or Japan), the British Indian administration had established a rudimentary frontier governance structure that included permanent outposts, airfields, and a road connecting Sadiya to Walong.[28]

Tibet's rejection of Basil Gould's flexible offer was, in character, not very different from the strategic calculation that drove Lonchen Shatra (the Tibetan Plenipotentiary at the Simla Convention) to affirm the Simla agreement and the McMahon line. As Tony Huber describes the Tibetan approach, "The Tibetans were playing a game of higher stakes over the McMahon Line right from the outset, one that continued to catch them in a double bind over the agreement. While they initially hoped that acquiescing to McMahon's border might ensure positive British pressure on China to accept the Simla Convention as well, and later that not protesting its actual implementation might ensure British support in dealing with China, at the same time, they remained unhappy about it, as the documents of 1945 Anglo-Tibetan negotiations show."[29]

By leveraging the strategic significance of the Tawang tract in exchange for British diplomatic support regarding China, Lhasa had chosen to take a risk. Therefore, it could be argued that Tibet's diplomacy and approach eventually undermined its claims to the territories. During the official negotiations in 1960 with China, the Indian side was able to present documents quoting the Tibetan Foreign Office conveying to Basil Gould that they "did not wish in any way to dispute the validity of the McMahon Line as determining the limits of the territory (subject to minor adjustments contemplated in 1914) where India and Tibet are entitled to exercise authority."[30] According to the Indian argument presented in 1960, the Tibetans also assured Gould that Chiang Kai-shek's KMT was pressuring Lhasa to acknowledge differences with the British Government, but they had refused.[31]

> During the official negotiations in 1960 with China, the Indian side was able to present documents quoting the Tibetan Foreign Office conveying to Basil Gould that they "did not wish in any way to dispute the validity of the McMahon Line as determining the limits of the territory (subject to minor adjustments contemplated in 1914) where India and Tibet are entitled to exercise authority."

As we will see in the next section, through diplomacy and later conflict, China's more specific and serious claims pertained to regions overlapping with Tibetan/Buddhist influence and to areas it considered north of the McMahon line. The first category is a claim rooted in cultural and political history, but not without its infirmities. The second category aims to prevent India from unilaterally modifying the McMahon line and based on its interpretation of the watershed principle as envisioned by Henry McMahon. During official negotiations with India in 1960, the amount of evidence China presented also focused on the same regions. The PRC's military campaign in 1962 was largely confined to these areas. These regions are:

- The Dirang, Rupa, and Kalaktang circles of the Sadar Subdivision and the Tawang Subdivision of the Kameng Frontier District
- The Tsari pilgrimage area of the Naba Subdivision of the Daporijo District
- The Mechuka Circle (and sometimes parts of the Tuting Circle) of the Syang District;
- The Kibithoo Circle of the Hayuliang Subdivision of the Lohit District

Based on our interviews with Tibetan scholars and experts on Tibet, only the Monyul (Tawang) region can be reasonably described as Tibetan in governance and character. In contrast, the Lower Zayul (Walong circle) region was only partially settled by Tibetan agriculturalists and did not establish any significant presence of Tibetan administration. Therefore, any claims regarding this area are primarily rooted in Zhao Erfeng's campaign during 1911-12 and are unlikely to carry substantial weight.[32] A British intelligence report by Captain F.M. Bailey, who traveled from Beijing to Kahap through Rima and Mishmi country, stated, "The Chinese have been attempting to enter into relations with the Mishmis, but so far, they have not succeeded."[33]

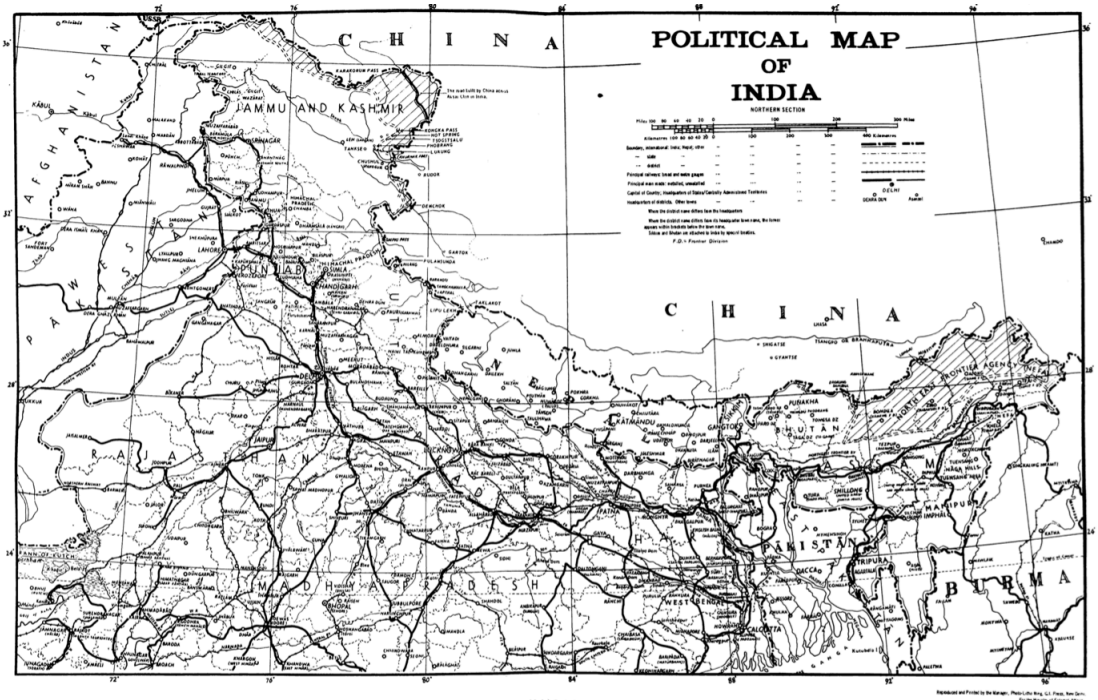
In addition to the claim based on Tibetan and Chinese rule or influence, China also disputes certain areas by asserting that they lie north of the McMahon line. This cluster of disputes concerns the interpretation of the McMahon Line, even as Beijing refuses to recognize it in a de jure sense. Notable areas included in this

category are Kenzemane, Thagla Ridge, Bumla, and Longju.

According to T.S. Murty, a lead Indian negotiator during the official talks in 1960, if India and China were to both agree that the line needed to be drawn along the main Himalayan range, then the differences would be limited to the following areas:

- The Droksar-Tsangdur/Namkhachu Valley (Kechilang), including Dhola (Chedong), or the land lying between the Thagla and Hathongla ridges in the Tawang Subdivision area of approximately 2-3 square miles, as part of which Kenzemane also may be regarded as falling:
- The Bumla area, again in the Tawang Subdivision, where the disputed area comprises approximately half an acre; The Asafila area in the Taksing Circle of the Naba Subdivision; the Balija and Pindigo valleys, through which the Tsari pilgrimage route passes and where the 1914 Agreement itself envisaged adjustments; and the Nalago Valley, of which Longju is a part; and
- The area lying between Sama and Walong in the Hayuliang Subdivision of the Lohit District.

As Tibet itself came to be invaded and controlled by the PRC, its accentuated dependence on India had also led it to temper (if not abandon) its historical claims on parts of the region.



The people inhabiting the region have traditionally been mobile, with strong migratory tendencies. Driven by climate, trade opportunities, and the need for protection and safety, various tribes moved around and settled across modern-day borders, spanning Bhutan, Tibet, the tribal areas, Burma, and Assam. For British and Indian officials, these trade and migration interconnections often raised concerns, and sometimes alarm, about Tibetan influence in the region.

In the present context, the migratory aspect at times generates concerns that local tribes near the border could be swayed by the dazzling infrastructure and well-organized villages across the LAC (or the McMahon line), thereby gradually shifting their loyalties. After all, historically, many Tibetans settled in various parts of the region to avoid high taxation, oppression, or to achieve a better life.[34] Hence, the region's history (NEFA) has seen ample inflows of Tibetans seeking refuge from Lhasa. Regions such as Pome (north of Pomeko) were semi-independent entities that can be considered 'Tibetanized' yet are outside the secular and political influence of Lhasa.[35] Thus, even state-centered Chinese arguments that emphasize the Tibetan-ness of certain sub-regions as a basis for advancing claims are ahistorical and run counter to what is known about past Tibetan migratory patterns. The last significant migration, after all, occurred in 1959 as a consequence of the Tibetan rebellion against Chinese rule and the brutal crackdown that followed.

> Regions such as Pome (north of Pomeko) were semi-independent entities that can be considered 'Tibetanized' yet are outside the secular and political influence of Lhasa...Even state-centered Chinese arguments that emphasize the Tibetan-ness of certain sub-regions as a basis for advancing claims are ahistorical and run counter to what is known about past Tibetan migratory patterns. The last significant migration, after all, occurred in 1959 as a consequence of the Tibetan rebellion against Chinese rule and the brutal crackdown that followed.

The question of Tibet and International Law

Given that India's position on the boundary dispute is based on its support for the McMahon line, the disagreement is logically tied to the complex question of Tibet's status as an independent actor (de jure or de facto) before 1950, especially in 1913-14. Much has been written about the complex history of Tibet's relations with mainland China, particularly under Mongol, Manchu, and Nationalist rule. A comprehensive assessment of the question is beyond the scope of this report. As such, this section engages with only those aspects of the larger Tibet question relevant to understanding the nature of the 'dispute' between India and China over modern-day Arunachal Pradesh.

To summarize, the Indian perspective is that Tibet was, for all intents and purposes, an independent entity in 1914 – clearly evidenced by the fact that the Simla Convention was a tripartite conference among three independent parties, recognized as such by nationalist China at the time. Additionally, the violent expulsion of Chinese forces from Tibet in 1911-12 and Tibet's subsequent declaration of independence established its independence as both substantial and a fact on the ground. The Tibetan government's self-rule, as demonstrated by the issuance of a national currency, national passports, and a national army, further supports this assertion.[36]

Generous references are also made to other treaties that Tibet had signed in earlier centuries, including treaties with Ladakh in 1684 and 1842, and with Nepal in 1856. The MEA's Official Report on the 1960 negotiations with China noted that China acknowledged the treaty's validity when it was deemed "necessary to abrogate it in their treaty, signed exactly a hundred years later, in 1956, with the Nepal Government."

Therefore, the Indian argument holds that "the present status and powers of Tibet could obviously not be projected backward or allowed to influence one's understanding of the nature of the relations subsisting between China and Tibet in 1914."[37]

From the Chinese perspective, Tibet has been a part of China since the Mongol invasion, with varying degrees of control. Therefore, Tibet has never had (especially since the 17th century) the right or ability to sign bilateral or international treaties with foreign powers. According to this view, China's sovereignty over Tibet is confirmed because the Fifth Dalai Lama accepted various titles from the Chinese Emperor. Additionally, Tibetans repeatedly called upon the Manchu empire for military assistance, such as during the 18th-century Gurkha (Nepal) threat.[38]

Instances cited by the Indian side, such as the treaties with Ladakh, were implemented with substantial Chinese assistance.[39] However, the Chinese claim that Tibet has historically been an 'integral' part of China is mainly modern and consolidated primarily in the mid-20th century. Elliot Sperling places these Chinese arguments in context, stating, "Thus, China's contention that Tibet has been an 'integral' part of China since the thirteenth century only took shape in the twentieth century. Moreover, as late as the 1950s, Chinese writers typically described Tibet's status in imperial China as a subordinate vassal state, not an integral part of China, as current Chinese materials suggest."[40]

Indian scholars interviewed suggest that China has a more legitimate claim over Korea or Vietnam than over Tibet. This Chinese view of Tibet as 'historically' an 'integral' part of China carries significant implications. For example, this foundational perspective compels China to firmly reject the Dalai Lama's acknowledgment that Tibet presently is part of China, as he remains unwilling to accept Tibet as having been an integral part of China for centuries. Indian scholars and officials also reference the 2003 agreement, which recognized the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) as part of the PRC, as a purely political statement reflecting current realities. In their opinion, such an admission does not diminish the broader notion of Tibet's effective independence from China before 1950-51.[41] The Chinese view, in turn, leads to a strong dismissal of the Simla Convention in its entirety, as it was convened on the 'false premise' of Tibetan independence.

> "The Chinese claim that Tibet has historically been an 'integral' part of China is mainly modern and consolidated primarily in the mid-20th century. Elliot Sperling places these Chinese arguments in context, stating, "Thus, China's contention that Tibet has been an 'integral' part of China since the thirteenth century only took shape in the twentieth century. Moreover, as late as the 1950s, Chinese writers typically described Tibet's status in imperial China as a subordinate vassal state, not an integral part of China, as current Chinese materials suggest."

Regarding China's recognition of the validity of past Tibetan treaties through abrogation (with Nepal in 1956 and Britain in 1906), the Chinese argument emphasizes the continued applicability of some treaty provisions while revising the format, protocols, and signatories. Thus, China abrogated previous treaties signed by Tibet to re-establish its sovereignty over Tibet. Furthermore, the Chinese side notes that "The 1856 Tibet-Nepal treaty was also handled by the Amban in Tibet (representative of the Central Government) under authorization." [42]

It is important to note that India's stance on the issue was arguably weakened by the British government's actions before India's independence in August 1947. This is because India accepted Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, influenced by historical factors, and limited its diplomatic efforts to convince China to respect some degree of autonomy for Tibet.[43] This approach culminated in the signing of the first-ever India-China agreement regarding Tibet in 1954. By signing that agreement, India gave up its inherited rights to maintain telegraph posts and customs offices within Tibet. This agreement was later reaffirmed in 2003 during Indian Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee's visit to China, when India explicitly and officially recognized Tibet as an autonomous part of China.

Notably, Indian policy until 1950, through supplying arms, ammunition, and training to Tibetans, operated on the premise that Tibet was a de facto independent country. However, this dual position weakened after 1950 in favor of a policy of greater restraint. In fact, during a conversation with a Tibetan delegation in September 1950, PM Nehru rejected Tibetan requests for mediation between them and China in the following way:

"The Government of India will continue the policy of the British period in considering Tibet outwardly a part of China but internally independent. We will request the Chinese not to send their troops into Tibet, but if the Tibetan representatives say that Tibet is completely independent, it will be very difficult to reach an agreement. And as to India acting as a witness to any agreement, that is talk of thirty years ago and is not acceptable in this day and age".

Following the rebuke, PM Nehru would both reject the thesis of Tibetan independence, stating, "such status had to be proved according to the law," and deny the validity of the Simla agreement, given that "China never accepted the Simla Convention".[44] Notably, following the breakdown of talks between China and Tibet and the former's commencement of the annexation of Tibet, PM Nehru stated in Parliament on 20 November 1950 that the McMahon Line defined by the Simla convention of 1914 "is our boundary and that is our boundary–map or no map".

In 1960, Chinese negotiators sought to put Indian negotiators on the defensive during discussions on the Simla Agreement by questioning whether India considered Tibet part of China. In response, India has maintained that it acknowledges the legitimacy of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet while simultaneously affirming Tibet's de facto and de jure right to enter into international treaties. As Sujit Dutta explains, "However, the 1951 occupation and subsequent Chinese assertion of sovereignty did not erase Tibet's past status and its treaty-making powers, as underscored by India and the Tibetan Government in exile."[45]

Summarizing the Indian perspective on the coexistence of both Chinese suzerainty and Tibet's 'international personality,' T.S. Murty states,

"Given China's rightful status in Tibet in 1914, Tibet was still capable of signing such an agreement, as it held an international personality and had previously signed various other international agreements that remained

in effect. India sees no contradiction in this view with its acknowledgment of People Republic of China's legitimate and dominant interest in the Tibet region."[46]

In summary, the question of Tibet's status as an independent entity remains unresolved due to its intersections with geopolitics, international law, Chinese nationalism, British imperialism, and the shifting balance of power between Tibet and Beijing over the decades and centuries. Neither India's position of Tibet's de jure independence based on de facto conditions nor China's assertion of absolute suzerainty over Tibet is uncontested. To the extent that India's claim of sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh (including Tawang) is based on the McMahon Line, it will remain somewhat susceptible to the complex nuances surrounding Tibet's status as an independent entity. Recognizing this, the Dalai Lama, in 1959, after he escaped to India, emphasized the importance of Tibetan independence to Indian interests, stating, "If you deny sovereign status to Tibet, you deny the validity of the Simla Convention and therefore deny the validity of the McMahon Line."[47]

> "In summary, the question of Tibet's status as an independent entity remains unresolved due to its intersections with geopolitics, international law, Chinese nationalism, British imperialism, and the shifting balance of power between Tibet and Beijing over the decades and centuries. Neither India's position of Tibet's de jure independence based on de facto conditions nor China's assertion of absolute suzerainty over Tibet is uncontested. To the extent that India's claim of sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh (including Tawang) is based on the McMahon Line, it will remain somewhat susceptible to the complex nuances surrounding Tibet's status as an independent entity.

Furthermore, there is an additional concern expressed by some Indian scholars and analysts regarding the acceptance of both the thesis of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and the Chinese claim to Tawang based on Tibet's substantial control over the area. Accepting such a rationale would logically enable the PRC to make new claims on Sikkim and Darjeeling, considering that Sikkim was a vassal of Tibet until the 19th century and that Darjeeling was forcibly taken from Tibet by the British.[48] The expulsion of Tibetan troops from Sikkim occurred in 1888, after all. Therefore, the dispute over Arunachal Pradesh is inconveniently tied to the Tibet question, leading to inflexible positions on both sides. A concession by China in this regard, as well as toward India's stance, will confound China's decadal argument about Tibet's place within China and Chinese history. Similarly, a concession by India regarding the Chinese position threatens to significantly expand Chinese claims across the Himalayan frontier, from Ladakh to Walong, via Bhutan and Sikkim, and into parts of northern West Bengal. Thus, it is not entirely surprising that Chinese efforts to rename various places in Arunachal Pradesh and establish dual-use Xiaokang villages throughout the state closely followed the Dalai Lama's 2017 visit to the region.[49]

Watershed principle

The Indian position also strongly emphasizes the watershed principle, which has been widely used to settle international boundaries throughout history and more recently. After all, even Henry McMahon sought to establish the line based on this well-known principle. Indian modifications of the line on the ground in certain

areas (such as Thag La and Fishtail 1 and 2) are based on the belief that McMahon only had a superficial understanding of the region's geography and that these modifications, informed by more detailed knowledge, represent a more accurate interpretation of McMahon's true intent – to create a boundary based on the watershed principle. However, there are still some weaknesses associated with this principle in the related case. It has been pointed out that the watershed principle was not applied to the Lohit Valley, an area that had been surveyed with relatively greater care. Moreover, insufficient attention was given to more precise cartographic guidelines to help determine the exact location points of the boundary.[50] The McMahon line, for the most part, aligns faithfully with the watershed principle, though there may be room for greater clarity and precision in some minor areas.

One Indian argument portrays China's disregard for this principle in the Eastern Himalayas as an odd anomaly, especially given that China has established boundaries with other countries based on the same principle, including India in the middle sector. As Sujit Dutta explains, this argument is "curious because the southern boundary of Tibet lies along the watershed of the Himalayas in the Central Sector with India, as well as with Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan; this same continuing watershed of the Himalayas forms the boundary between Burma and China."[51] The Chinese claim that the boundary should be drawn at the foothills of the Himalayas contrasts sharply with such general geographic principles. It seems based on the idea that Ahom/British influence in this region extended only to the foothills of the tribal areas.

The Chinese explanation for rejecting the principle in the Eastern sector during negotiations in 1960 was twofold. First, the Chinese argue that, unlike in other areas, people who inhabit the mountains do not view the watershed as a barrier, especially when rivers or passes cross the ridges. Secondly, mountain ridges should not limit a country's administrative jurisdiction. After citing the example of Tibetan jurisdiction extending to the southern side of the Himalayas in various areas, the Chinese argued, "Therefore, the formation of a traditional customary line must also be through a process of change and could not have been predestined or mechanically determined by a certain geographical feature." [52]

Notably, the Sino-Burmese agreement of 1960 closely followed the watershed line from the Diphu Pass to the Izu Razi Pass, in accordance with the map presented at the Simla Conference. This anomaly stands out and somewhat undermines China's position. Interestingly, in a situation reminiscent of Doklam at the India-China-Bhutan trijunction, the Chinese side attempted to alter the boundary line with Burma near the India-

"Notably, the Sino-Burmese agreement of 1960 closely followed the watershed line from the Diphu Pass to the Izu Razi Pass, in accordance with the map presented at the Simla Conference. This anomaly stands out and somewhat undermines China's position. Interestingly, in a situation reminiscent of Doklam at the India-China-Bhutan trijunction, the Chinese side attempted to alter the boundary line with Burma near the India-Burma-China trijunction, just 5 miles south of the watershed, to acquire the Diphu Pass (now part of Arunachal Pradesh), an area that would have granted China easy access to the Assam plains. However, Burmese negotiators thwarted these efforts out of respect for India's interests.

Burma-China trijunction, just 5 miles south of the watershed, to acquire the Diphu Pass (now part of Arunachal Pradesh), an area that would have granted China easy access to the Assam plains. However, Burmese negotiators thwarted these efforts out of respect for India's interests. These endeavors by China also strongly indicate that Beijing's interest in the Eastern sector has consistently been driven by its strategic objective of threatening the Brahmaputra valley. This was also evident when Zhao Erfeng ordered the construction of a road leading into the valley in 1910. The main axis of invasion in 1962 also ran through passes and tracts that naturally culminated in the valley, with relatively few geographic barriers. China's assertion that the correct boundary lies at the foothills facing the valley perhaps emphasizes this point in the strongest terms.

Estoppel

The Indian argument also seeks to invoke the international legal principle of estoppel. As Surya Sharma explains, "Long acquiescence in boundaries, as defined by published maps or determined by official surveys, estops one nation from subsequently making a different claim against another. This has been emphasized in the decisions of international courts and tribunals."[53] From this viewpoint, China failed to object when the Tawang tract was surveyed between 1936 and 1938 and was finalized by a joint Bhutan-Indian commission. It also raised no objections when the Northeast Frontier Agency was recognized as part of India and a Union Territory under the Constitution in 1950.[54]

China's lack of stated objection or protest regarding the Khating mission to Tawang in 1951, or a formal protest against the inclusion of the McMahon Line on Indian maps over an extended period, legally prevents it from raising new objections, according to the principle. Chinese officials, for their part, dismissed such characterizations, arguing that China was still surveying its frontier territories and required time to prepare before addressing disagreements and disputes regarding the shared border. Indian references to the 1954 India-China agreement, which aimed to "settle all outstanding issues," and to the Nehru-Zhou talks, in which the latter failed to mention the territorial dispute, were similarly dismissed.

Indian scholars have cited the case of Eastern Greenland, in which the Permanent Court of International Justice held an oral agreement by Norway to be legally valid in resolving the arbitration between Denmark and Norway. Therefore, the fact that Premier Zhou Enlai did not raise the issue of the McMahon Line in various discussions with PM Nehru, despite being aware of published Indian maps and claims, significantly undermines the legitimacy of China's new claims in 1959. Another similar example is the dispute over Preah Vihear, in which the Permanent Court of Justice ruled against Thailand for failing to lodge protests.[55]

> "China failed to object when the Tawang tract was surveyed between 1936 and 1938 and was finalized by a joint Bhutan-Indian commission. It also raised no objections when the NEFA was recognized as part of India...in 1950...China's lack of stated objection or protest regarding the Khating mission to Tawang in 1951, or a formal protest against the inclusion of the McMahon Line on Indian maps over an extended period, legally prevents it from raising new objections, according to the principle.

The Bomdila administrative headquarters, c. 1959
Source Arunachal Pradesh DIPR

Lessons from History

The debates surrounding treaties, their interpretation, international law, and judgments were prominent in both the official reports of the 1960 talks and the public diplomacy strategies employed by both parties. However, given the strong bilateral nature of the dispute and both sides' desire to reach a mutual agreement based on goodwill and friendly relations, these discussions had little impact. The Chinese side largely dismissed the validity of the Indian position regarding estoppel, acquiescence, and the watershed principle. This was the case even though China's justifications for its claims in the Western Sector (Aksai Chin or East Ladakh) were based on acquiescence, specifically, India's failure to acknowledge China's construction of a highway through that area connecting Xinjiang and Tibet.[56] India's position also rested on the argument that the boundary had been historically delineated by custom and usage rather than formal agreements. This stance posed understandable challenges for the Chinese side, which believed that India had taken the prerogative to interpret and define such custom-based boundaries unilaterally.

India's arguments based on the Simla Convention were also challenging for the Chinese side to accept. They regarded the Simla Convention as an instance of British exploitation of China's temporary weakness, which arose from the chaos following the Republican revolution, aimed at separating Tibet from China. Acknowledging the convention's validity would mean that China admitted that Tibet was independent of China at that time, thereby undermining its then-ongoing political objective of annexing and absorbing Tibet into China proper. Even in the present context, China would demur on the grounds of its objective of suppressing any possibility of 'secessionism'. From this fundamental issue regarding the axiom of Tibetan independence, all disagreements regarding the interpretation of previous treaties, such as the Nepal-Tibet agreement, and their relevance to the Simla Convention emerged.

From a geopolitical perspective, the administrative expansion and consolidation of British India into NEFA took place during a period when China was arguably facing civil strife, conflict with Japan, and a weak central government. By the time the revolutionary Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao, came to power in 1949, it sought to revise all previous agreements on the grounds that they were unequal, insisting they be reassessed on a case-by-case basis. From the Indian standpoint, this position contradicted the fundamental principles of international law regarding the rights and obligations of states in succession.

In revising several unequal treaties, China was willing to consider existing boundaries and prior agreements. However, these aspects (existing boundaries and agreements) were expected to be factored in fresh negotiations for a new boundary rather than serve as fait accompli that China needed to accept. From the Indian perspective, any insistence on discarding established treaties or agreed-upon boundaries risked undermining Indian claims and opening the entire frontier to expanding Chinese claims. Chinese diplomatic practices did little to reassure Indian leaders that the Chinese side would not exploit a conciliatory approach toward the boundary issue in the future.

Despite some inherent weaknesses, the Indian side has stronger reasons and incentives to resolve the dispute in accordance with international law than the Chinese side. The frequent shifts in Chinese claims, the failure to formally challenge the McMahon Line until 1959, and the lack of administrative influence in any areas south of the McMahon Line (except possibly Tawang through its claim to Tibet) all undermine the Chinese position under international law.

> “The Indian side has stronger reasons and incentives to resolve the dispute in accordance with international law than the Chinese side. The frequent shifts in Chinese claims, the failure to formally challenge the McMahon Line until 1959, and the lack of administrative influence in any areas south of the McMahon Line (except possibly Tawang through its claim to Tibet) all undermine the Chinese position under international law.

Consequently, after the 1962 war, India proposed to China on March 5, 1963, that the fundamental dispute over border claims be submitted to an international body, such as the International Court of Justice. In response, the Chinese argued that complex questions involving sovereignty could only be resolved through direct negotiations between the two concerned parties.[57] Observers of the negotiations noted a significant disparity between the two sides in the amount of evidence prepared and presented. The Chinese side appeared less prepared and had access to less information and knowledge about the disputed areas, tribes, and geographic features. Therefore, one of the Indian negotiators later stated, “If the 1960 discussions are resumed now, China may, therefore, perform better at the conference table than it did in 1960.”[58]

The ‘Dispute’ after Independence and Unity – 1947 and after

By the time Indian and Chinese officials examined the shared but differently perceived border in the 1950s, both nations were immersed in nation-building, social integration, and regional conflicts along their borders. Amid the Korean War and China's efforts to integrate Tibet through ‘liberation,’ India successfully completed tasks initiated by the British in NEFA during much of the first half of the 20th century, following the Simla Convention. India annexed the Tawang tract and established control up to the ridgeline, while also enacting administrative measures for the region's tribal populations. The diplomatic history of India and China during this period (1947-1962) has been extensively documented and discussed. This report will briefly summarize the events and decisions of this time, focusing on their relevance to the diplomatic aspects of the boundary ‘dispute’ in the Eastern Sector.

In this regard, it should be noted that both the Tibetan government and the Republic of China successfully registered their protests against British India’s activities and ‘expansion’ in this sector until 1947.[59] However, both Lhasa and the ROC were significantly distracted and lacked the necessary resources to effectively counter or raise the costs for British India’s advance in NEFA. As a result, their protests were relatively weak, sometimes delayed, and often hindered by insufficient information. Consequently, when the PRC was established in 1949, it decided to evaluate and then counter such ‘encroachments’ on Tibet and China. However, in the early years, the PRC was not necessarily better equipped than either Lhasa or Chiang Kai-shek to respond to these ‘advancements.’ The clearest illustration of this is the PRC’s puzzling failure to lodge a protest against the Khating mission in Tawang in 1951.

> “Driven by imperatives related to the Korean War, its unfavorable position in international politics, and the annexation of Tibet, the PRC effectively adopted a strategy of avoiding and downplaying territorial disputes with India until conditions improved and a stronger stance would enable it to address the matter more effectively. This approach left the Indian government uncertain...China’s choice not to raise the issue...was taken to imply that the PRC did not strongly oppose the McMahon Line and was leaning toward tacit acceptance.

Driven by imperatives related to the Korean War, its unfavorable position in international politics, and the annexation of Tibet, the PRC effectively adopted a strategy of avoiding and downplaying territorial disputes with India until conditions improved and a stronger stance would enable it to address the matter more effectively. This approach left the Indian government uncertain. Meanwhile, in Delhi, China’s choice not to raise the issue created a significant temptation. At best, it was taken to imply that the PRC did not strongly oppose the boundary unilaterally established by India (especially the McMahon Line) and was leaning toward tacit acceptance. India also felt somewhat reassured, perhaps, because in September 1951, PM Zhou En-Lai suggested to the Indian ambassador in Beijing that “the question of stabilizing the Tibetan frontier should be addressed as early as possible and proposed that it should be done through discussions among India, China, and Nepal." Zhou further stated in the Indian record of the conversation that “there was no territorial dispute or controversy between India and China."[60]

At that time, India's ambassador to Beijing, K.M. Pannikar, managed to persuade Prime Minister Nehru that it was in India's best interest not to raise the issue with the Chinese, as doing so would only allow them to voice their differences. Instead, it was more advantageous for India to postpone any serious boundary discussions, as this could allow the country to argue from the status quo (or the estoppel principle and norm). However, there were also more skeptical voices, such as Secretary Girja Bajpai and K.P.S. Menon, who contended that China was merely biding its time until better chances emerged. Therefore, it was in India's interest to encourage China to negotiate and possibly accept the existing boundary (as defined by India), allowing for some minor adjustments. This was especially significant before the negotiations for the 1954 agreement on Tibet.

As a former Ambassador to Beijing, K P S Menon recalled in 1952,

"Seeing, on the walls of the Military Academy in Chengtu, a map, showing China as it was and ought to be, and including large portions of Kashmir and areas to the south of the McMahon Line. This is perhaps the real reason for the Chinese reluctance to discuss the problem of Tibet with us".[61]

This ambiguity persisted even as the two sides negotiated their first bilateral agreement regarding Tibet over three months in 1954. The impetus for initiating negotiations was the increasing pressure on Indian officials who remained in Tibet after 1949, under imperial-era arrangements made between British India, China, and Tibet. According to PM Nehru, the time had come to seek clarity on the matter. It was determined that if the continuation of such extraterritorial privileges adversely affected the 'dignity' of the Chinese state, then they could be annulled.

On September 1, 1953, PM Nehru sent a note to Zhou Enlai seeking cooperation to resolve pending issues that could cause mistrust and friction. He offered to modify certain practices in Tibet if they were perceived as affecting China's dignity. The seven issues outlined in the note sent to the Chinese foreign office on August 2 and referenced by Nehru included:

- Status of the Indian mission in Lhasa
- Trade agencies at Gyantse and Yatung
- Seasonal trade agency at Gartok
- The right of Indians to trade in Tibet
- Post and telegraph offices
- Military escort at Gyantse
- Pilgrimage

After the PM proposed discussions on Tibet in 1952, China conducted high-level talks with Tibetan officials in Lhasa and reviewed records of the India-Tibet boundary to prepare for the proposed border discussions. A.K. Sen, India's consul-general, informed the GOI that the Chinese had communicated to the Tibetans their intention to reject the 1914 Simla Convention.[62]

The Indian government was also tempted to pursue a quid pro quo. It was reasoned that, in exchange for India annulling its official and extraterritorial presence and activities in Tibet—thereby officially recognizing Tibet as part of China—India could secure (albeit semi-explicitly) China's acceptance of the boundary as conceived and declared by India. Consequently, the official exchange included the phrase, "India and China seek to resolve all outstanding issues." Beijing, on the other hand, made it clear that the talks, which began

on January 2, 1954, and lasted for 120 days, were aimed at resolving all issues that were "ripe for settlement" —creating enough leeway to maintain the right to bring India's attention to new and other issues in the future.[63]

Thus, it was reasoned that India could secure China's acceptance of the boundary through the back door and in a way subtle enough for China to find tolerable. If China chose not to raise boundary-related issues during negotiations, it could later be interpreted as suggesting that China had acquiesced to the status quo. A. S. Bhasin points out that even during negotiations, the two sides occasionally stumbled into the boundary 'dispute' inexorably. However, the Indian side aimed to circumvent the underlying issue. Following the treaty's conclusion, the Indian press celebrated the agreement as a significant advancement in India-China ties and as Nehru's success in persuading the Chinese to accept the established boundaries.[64]

PM Nehru himself may not have been as confident, however. Alternatively, he might have felt encouraged to issue more definitive and precise maps. After the talks and the agreement, he issued a directive requiring officials to discern better where India's boundaries lay and to display the preferred alignments on maps. Notably, maps published up to that point depicted the McMahon Line as the boundary but drew it with a broken line to indicate that it was undemarcated. The subsequent map illustrated the McMahon Line as an international boundary without earlier referencing its status as 'un-demarcated.'[65]

> "Zhou Enlai aimed to create the impression in PM Nehru's mind that the PRC was prepared to accept and recognize the 'illegal' McMahon Line for pragmatic reasons, provided that India similarly acknowledged Aksai Chin in the Western sector as belonging to China. PM Nehru was indeed tempted by this offer and briefly sought to build a national consensus in support of such a possibility.

China's calculations at this time were most evident during a conversation between Premier Zhou Enlai and Prime Minister Nehru. The latter raised the issue of Chinese maps that displayed an 'incorrect borderline.' Rather than defending these maps, Zhou Enlai sidestepped the issue by stating that they were reproductions of older maps that the Chinese side had not yet revised.[66] Prime Minister Nehru, in turn, felt somewhat reassured by this response, as a more optimistic interpretation could suggest that the Chinese Premier implicitly promised Nehru that the new maps would reflect the new boundary established by India. However, when the Premier declared, in a sudden reversal, that the old maps would be retained because they had been validated through surveys and research, Nehru felt personally affronted at being 'deceived' by Zhou Enlai. This lingering ambiguity gave rise to strong mistrust on the Indian side, as Nehru subsequently came to believe that Chinese words and assurances could no longer be trusted.[67]

During these discussions, Zhou Enlai aimed to create the impression in PM Nehru's mind that the PRC was prepared to accept and recognize the 'illegal' McMahon Line for pragmatic reasons, provided that India similarly acknowledged Aksai Chin in the Western sector as belonging to China. PM Nehru was indeed tempted by this offer and briefly sought to build a national consensus in support of such a possibility.[68]

The ‘discovery’ of a Chinese road traversing Indian-claimed Aksai Chin (linking Xinjiang and Tibet) in 1957 resulted in a significant downturn in bilateral relations, as it shocked the Indian polity, its citizens, and the press. However, the Government of India still maintained a somewhat flexible stance.

November 28, 1956: Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru receiving Prime Minister Zhou Enlai (fourth from left), at Palam Airport, New Delhi, on his arrival for a 12-day tour of India. Also in the picture are (left to right) Panchen Lama, the Dalai Lama, Chinese Vice-Premier Ho Lung, Indira Gandhi and Mrs R.K. Nehru, wife of the Indian Ambassador to China. Nehru took up the issue of the McMohan Line with Zhou during this visit, having raised the issue of China's maps in 1954 in Beijing. Source: Frontline

However, border skirmishes in 1959 in the eastern sector (Longju, August 1959) and eastern Ladakh (the Kongka Pass incident of October 1959, which resulted in the deaths of ten police officers) tainted this prospect, as Prime Minister Nehru believed that India’s acceptance of China’s authority over Aksai Chin following the use of force would lead to a loss of reputation for both India and its Prime Minister. Thus, the possibility that Prime Minister Nehru considered until 1958-59 appeared to vanish. The sudden outburst of parliamentary and public anger at the Chinese use of force and tactics of ‘deceit’ after 1959 further weakened the chances for a compromise solution. What could have been quiet exchanges of territory (joint delimitation and demarcation) by seemingly friendly countries had now turned into a scramble to secure positions unilaterally at the border and into a proxy for national honour and strength. Notably, a month after the Kongka Pass incident, Sarvapalli Gopal (the head of the MEA’s history division) returned from a research trip to London and convinced Prime Minister Nehru that India’s claims to the Aksai Chin region were as strong as its claim to the McMahon Line. Given the timing, such a revelation only solidified India’s stance in the Western sector, significantly diminishing the likelihood of a ‘package deal’ or swap arrangement.

What is important to this report and the questions it addresses is the impression the Chinese side conveys regarding its willingness to accept the McMahon line as a fact on the ground. Apologists for the Indian position would later argue that, from an international law perspective, such correspondences constituted strong evidence that China had acquiesced to the said line, and its later hardening of position (essentially

walking away from previous statements) signaled that its claims were motivated by less than genuine or political reasons.[69]

There are three points to note regarding this matter. First, the clearest indication of China's willingness to accept the McMahon Line came in 1956, when an anxious Zhou Enlai visited India and urged Prime Minister Nehru to persuade the Dalai Lama (then in India) to return to Tibet. In hindsight, the Premier apparently chose a conciliatory approach to the territorial issue to achieve the key objective of gaining Nehru's support on the Tibet question. Therefore, it is worthwhile to quote extensively what Prime Minister Zhou stated during his conversation with Prime Minister Nehru in 1956:

"What I meant was that people like me never knew about it (the McMahon line) till recently. The then Chinese Government, namely, the warlords in Peking and the KMT naturally knew about it. Perhaps U Nu might have told Your Excellency that we studied this question and although this Line was never recognized by us, still apparently there was a secret pact between Britain and Tibet and it was announced at the time of the Simla Conference. And now that it is an accomplished fact, we should accept it. But we have not consulted Tibet so far. In the last agreement which we signed about Tibet, the Tibetans wanted us to reject this Line; but we told them that the question should be temporarily put aside. I believe immediately after India's independence, the Tibetan Government had also written to the Government of India about this matter. But now we think that we should try to persuade and convince Tibetans to accept it. This question also is connected with Sino-Burmese border and the question will be decided after Dalai Lama's return to Lhasa. So, although the question is still undecided and it is unfair to us, we still feel that there is no better way than to recognize this Line".[70]

This is indeed a rare concession, as PM Zhou states that China should accept the line, since it was established by a secret pact between Britain and Tibet. After all, the PM merely characterized the pact as 'secret' rather than dismissing it as 'illegal' or 'invalid'. Additionally, Zhou strategically hedges this concession by noting that Tibetans oppose it, while subtly trying to persuade PM Nehru to nudge them toward a more favorable view – thereby creating both an incentive (for cooperation on the Tibet issue) and leverage at that moment.

"The clearest indication of China's willingness to accept the McMahon Line came in 1956, when an anxious Zhou Enlai visited India and urged Prime Minister Nehru to persuade the Dalai Lama (then in India) to return to Tibet. In hindsight, the Premier apparently chose a conciliatory approach to the territorial issue to achieve the key objective of gaining Nehru's support on the Tibet question.

It is this 'generous' stance that would change significantly by the time of the 1960 talks—just four years later—along with Zhou's letter to Nehru in 1959, when China first claimed territory south of the McMahon line. For instance, after discussions with Indian leaders and cabinet members in 1960, Foreign Minister Chen Yi stated:

"After five days of our talks, my personal view is that the Indian friends and the Government still do not have a profound understanding of the point that the Chinese Government absolutely does not recognize the Simla

Convention and the McMahon Line. This has made us very unhappy".[71]

PM Zhou spelled out the new position in the following way:

" We cannot recognize the McMahon Line;
We will not cross that line since Indian troops have already reached it; and
As regards two or three points where Indians have exceeded the McMahon line, we are willing to maintain the status quo pending negotiations".[72]

The McMahon line as an obstacle to a compromise solution

Intense exchanges and negotiations between India and China coincided with discussions between China and Myanmar regarding their boundary dispute. Interestingly, this eastern boundary was also drawn and demarcated by Henry McMahon, forming part of the McMahon line. In this case, China accepted the same line (with minor concessions from Myanmar) and thus successfully concluded boundary talks with Myanmar. This development was received in Delhi with both hope and apprehension. The more optimistic view interpreted it as a positive sign, indicating that China was willing to accept boundaries established during the imperialist era.

Conversely, a more pessimistic assessment viewed China's rejection of the McMahon line in NEFA as stemming from its rivalry with India, rather than from any genuine grievance over imperialism. However, significant differences exist between the two cases. Firstly, in the case of Burma, the line was accepted after rebranding, suggesting that China was willing to make concessions on substance as long as the other party was open to concessions on symbolism. Secondly, the Burma-China line was not complicated by the Tibet question, as it was not established on the basis of Tibetan independence, unlike the McMahon line in NEFA. The third aspect is that the acceptance of the boundary involved a minor pragmatic exchange of territory.

"Intense exchanges and negotiations between India and China coincided with discussions between China and Myanmar regarding their boundary dispute. Interestingly, this eastern boundary was also drawn and demarcated by Henry McMahon, forming part of the McMahon line. In this case, China accepted the same line (with minor concessions from Myanmar) and thus successfully concluded boundary talks with Myanmar.

The challenge was that the symbolic concession China sought from India, recharacterizing the McMahon line, posed greater risks and costs to India, as it was closely tied to what India regarded as its most legitimate basis for boundary claims. India also could not engage in purely pragmatic territorial exchanges, since such actions could undermine its more 'valid' basis for claiming territory through de-sanctification. The possibility of 'pragmatic exchanges' resulting in expansion of claims and emergence of new 'disputes' (Sikkim, Kalimpong, Bhutan) was a very real prospect that weighed on the minds of Indian officials.

Finally, the China-Burma border negotiations required both sides to jointly neutralize Chinese nationalist forces that had concentrated in North Burma during the 1950s, peaking at a strength of 10,000 active

fighters. China's insistence on joint demarcation to determine the boundary provided justification and rationale for both sides to pursue active cooperation.[73]

Additionally, China's demand for joint demarcation with India coincided with concerns about Tibetan guerrillas infiltrating areas such as Longju and Tawang from Tibet to regroup and resupply their comrades across the border. In that regard, China may have sought Indian cooperation to neutralize this threat from Tibetan resistance groups, making its demands for joint demarcation an effective strategy toward that end. Consequently, driven by mistrust and anxiety, the Indian side found it difficult to renounce either the Simla Convention or the McMahon Line.

This aspect was prominently highlighted during the Chinese delegation's visit to India in 1960. For instance, during discussions between Swaran Singh and Foreign Minister Chen Yi, the latter was informed that India would not compromise its claims to Aksai Chin. In response, Chen Yi asserted that China would never accept the McMahon Line as the basis for any border settlement, stating, "If the Chinese recognized the Simla Convention and the McMahon Line, there would be an explosion in China. The Chinese people would not agree. Premier Zhou Enlai had no right to do so." When asked about China's position regarding the McMahon Line on the Burma side, Chen Yi replied, "The line was agreed upon as a result of joint surveys. An agreed line similarly reached with India would not necessarily imply that India would lose significant parts of its territory."[74]

He then compared Burma's 'reasonable and practical' approach, crediting it with achieving the boundary agreement. Crucially, and perhaps hinting at a way forward, Chen Yi further stated, "Neither party mentioned the McMahon Line. It was imposed by the imperialists. While drawing the boundary line, we base it on the actual jurisdiction of both parties, including the watershed and survey boundaries, among other factors. Non-recognition of the McMahon Line does not mean China is extending its claims over any territory."[75] In other words, Chen Yi suggested that India needs to reassess the basis of its claim and be less fearful of losing territory during any joint delineation process. India could instead base its claim on jurisdiction and the watershed principle.

> "China's demand for joint demarcation with India coincided with concerns about Tibetan guerrillas infiltrating areas such as Longju and Tawang from Tibet to regroup and resupply their comrades across the border...Consequently, driven by mistrust and anxiety, the Indian side found it difficult to renounce either the Simla Convention or the McMahon Line.

Arguing along similar lines, Zhou Enlai expressed regret that India had made the McMahon Line a "legal basis for its claim."[76] Even at this point, Premier Zhou aimed to convey to Indian Ambassador R. K. Nehru that despite India's unfortunate references to the Simla Convention and the Dalai Lama's propaganda from India, China was "willing to consider settling the eastern border, accepting Indian jurisdiction up to the McMahon Line and assuring that we will not cross it."[77]

Further explaining China's position on the McMahon Line, Chen Yi conveyed to Swaran Singh,

"If the so-called McMahon Line is recognized, it would imply that we are acknowledging McMahon's authority not only to delineate the boundary between China and India but also the boundary between Inner and Outer Tibet. We do not use the terms Inner and Outer Tibet, but instead refer to provincial boundaries between Sichuan, Tibet, Yunnan, Qinghai, and Xinjiang. The Tibetan separatists advocate for a concept of 'Greater Tibet.' [If this were to occur], about one-fourth of the total territory of China would be ceded to the Dalai Lama. Our refusal to recognize the Simla Convention and the McMahon Line should not be misunderstood as an intention to claim territory over India… This stance was reiterated by the Chinese to many of their Indian counterparts during the visit, including Finance Minister Morarji Desai. To the latter, Zhou stated: '(while not recognizing the McMahon Line) we accept your jurisdiction and have no territorial claims south of the Line (italics added)."[78]

Nehru, Zhou Enlai, Chen Yi, Swaran Singh (April 1960) Source: Claude Arpi's Blog

However, the matter may not have been as simple. After grasping the situation's essence, Swaran Singh stated, "I am not enamored with the name McMahon. You confirm it and call it the Chou Line." However, instead of an affirmative response, Mr. Chang Han-fu (Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister) reminded his Indian counterpart that the Burmese also returned three areas seized and controlled by Britain 40 years earlier.[79] With this reminder, the Chinese officials took away with one hand what they were offering with the other. After all, such diplomatic tactics have fostered strong mistrust on the Indian side since the mid-50s.

Bargaining and leverage

What has also emerged since the late 1950s is the development of a Chinese strategy to use its non-recognition of the McMahon Line as a bargaining chip to persuade India to acknowledge Chinese control and sovereignty over Aksai Chin. Therefore, the main objective of this thesis is to achieve Indian acceptance of Aksai Chin as part of China. If this interpretation holds, it somewhat undermines China's claim to NEFA/Arunachal Pradesh, as it seems to rest more on political and strategic motives than on genuine considerations such as history, jurisdiction, customs, and geographic features.

In this context, it is noteworthy that one can observe a hardening of China's position on the Eastern sector, almost parallel to a strengthening of India's stance on Aksai Chin during 1958-59. For instance, it was not until 1958 that India formally claimed Aksai Chin. Before this assertion, Neville Maxwell noted that "if the Chinese had consulted their Foreign Ministry's archives to see what the British concept of an Aksai Chin boundary had been, they would have found only the Macartney-MacDonald proposal of 1899, which would have placed the entire Aksai Chin road within Chinese territory."[80] The same notion was referenced by Prime Minister Nehru in 1959 when he sent a memorandum to key Indian ambassadors abroad following the Kongka Pass incident. In the letter, he expressed that China "throughout her history has never willingly surrendered any territory or abandoned any territorial claims" and that China's claims have been increasing rather than diminishing. He added that "there have been veiled threats that unless India made a territorial concession in the Ladakh sector, China would create trouble on the North East Frontier."[82] Indeed, following the Kongka Pass incident, the Chinese Defense Ministry stated that if India insisted on its right to patrol in Aksai Chin (based on its territorial claim), then China could likewise assert a right to patrol in the area south of the McMahon Line.[83]

This shift and connection are clear even in the famous letter from Zhou Enlai to Nehru in September 1959. Moving away from its earlier benign stance on the McMahon Line, which China was willing to accept, China now asserted that all the territory between the line and the foothills—an area of 56,000 square miles—had been Chinese and posed the question, "How could China agree to accept under coercion such an illegal line that would force it to relinquish its rights, thereby disgracing itself by sacrificing its territory—and such a large piece at that?"[84] Essentially, Zhou was echoing India's position that it had been pressured to accept a Chinese-created fait accompli in Aksai Chin. By drawing an analogy and thus establishing a connection, Zhou aimed to soften India's resistance to Chinese control of Aksai Chin. In Delhi, this letter was seen as a breach of trust and a subtle pressure on India to abandon its claim to Aksai Chin.

> "This shift and connection are clear even in the famous letter from Zhou Enlai to Nehru in September 1959. Moving away from its earlier benign stance on the McMahon Line, which China was willing to accept, China now asserted that all the territory between the line and the foothills—an area of 56,000 square miles—had been Chinese and posed the question, "How could China agree to accept under coercion such an illegal line that would force it to relinquish its rights, thereby disgracing itself by sacrificing its territory—and such a large piece at that?"

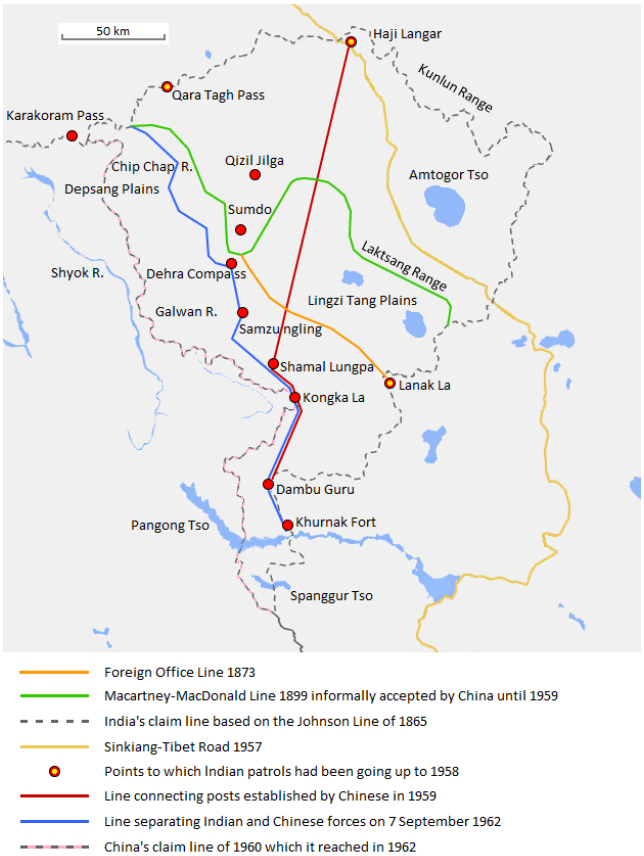
The 1962 War and its implications for the dispute

The immediate trigger of the 1962 India-China war was a breakdown in diplomatic talks and India's compensatory forward policy in the region of the Thag La ridge—an area that India claims should be on its side under the watershed principle. However, due to the inaccuracies of the McMahon Line, this area fell north of the line, placing it on the Tibetan side of the border. Essentially, this area was categorized similarly to other disputed regions near the McMahon line, such as Longju, Khinzenmane, Namkachu valley, and Sumdorongchu. Therefore, India established the Dhola Post just south of the Thagla ridge to assert its territorial claims.

However, reports from the Intelligence Bureau (IB) at that time indicated that China considered the area as its territory and was likely planning an attack on the post.[85] Notably, even high-ranking military officials responsible for the region were unsure whether the post fell within Indian-claimed territory.[86] The cycle of action and reaction surrounding the post, including the preemptive occupation of Thagla Ridge by Chinese forces and the incursion into Namka Chu Valley, ultimately escalated into full-blown conflict by late October. As a result, the location gave Beijing a well-suited casus belli to launch its well-prepared offensive operations along the India-China frontier.

The war was primarily fought on two fronts – the Western sector (East Ladakh) and the Eastern sector (NEFA). In the latter, China made significant advances through the Tawang tract region (culminating at Rupa and just 30 kilometers from the state of Assam) and the Walong/Kibithoo region in the far east of the sector. Three other axes of military incursions included Taksing-Limeking, Mechuka/Manigong-Tato, and Gelling Tuting. Interestingly, these areas all have historic ties to Tibetan Buddhist culture. It just so happens that they also serve as convenient axes of military advancement geographically as well as migratory routes in earlier times.

Notably, there was a crucial difference in how China retreated from the eastern sector compared to the west. In the latter, China maintained its hold over Aksai Chin, while in the eastern sector, the PLA withdrew 20 kilometers north of the McMahon Line—except for the area of Longju, which has been captured and controlled since 1959. This distinction can best be explained by China's position before the war, when it sought to convey to India that it would adhere to the McMahon Line despite its 'illegality.' This difference may also have been driven by Chinese hopes of seizing new diplomatic opportunities after the war. Retaining control over parts of NEFA, in this sense, would have complicated the pursuit of a package deal and a more conclusive settlement.



Indian and Chinese claims of the border in the Aksai Chin region, the Macartney-MacDonald line, the Foreign Office Line, as well as the progress of Chinese forces as they occupied areas during the Sino-Indian War.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Border talks in the 1980s

After the war, relations entered a period of stasis as both sides recalled their ambassadors. During this time, political and military tensions continued to manifest in various ways. Concerning the frontier, the India-Pakistan war in 1965 saw China attempting to marginally alter the status quo in the Sikkim region of the eastern sector.[86] In 1967, Indian and Chinese forces clashed at Nathu La in Sikkim, resulting in hundreds of casualties.[87] In 1975, a Chinese team allegedly ambushed personnel from the Assam Rifles in the Tulung La area (reported to be south of the McMahon line), leading to five deaths amid claims of torture as the cause of death.[88]

However, a thaw began to develop in the late 1970s, particularly after the visit of then External Affairs Minister A.B. Vajpayee to China in 1979. The Chinese side clearly initiated outreach to India in 1980, aiming to improve relations and resolve the boundary dispute. In this context, during an interview with the Indian magazine Vikrant, Chinese President Deng Xiaoping revived the package deal as an attractive and elegant solution to the boundary dispute. Such overtures and their relatively positive reception in Delhi under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi led to eight rounds of border talks during the 1980s.

Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in conversation with Indian External Affairs Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (L) in Beijing, February 1979. /Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

During the talks, the Chinese delegation presents the package deal. However, the Indian side, cautious about territorial concessions and providing strong leverage to the Chinese, insisted on a sector-by-sector approach. This approach would have allowed both sides to present their definitive claims, followed by discussions aimed at determining the validity of each side's claim in a spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding.

Although initially hesitant, the Chinese side ultimately agreed to this formula. During the discussions, they presented their long-standing claim regarding the traditional boundary line in the Eastern sector, which runs

well south of the McMahon Line and up to the Himalayan crest. Amid a deadlock in negotiations, the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister, who also led the delegation, asserted that the minimum requirement for a settlement was Indian concessions in the Eastern sector. He expressed his belief that this area represented the biggest dispute of all, considering that India occupied as much as 90,000 square kilometers of Chinese territory. Various Indian interpretations suggested that this shift indicated that China was broadening its claims to increase the costs of India's non-compromising stance. Consequently, during the talks, the Chinese side shifted from its previously more moderate position of a package deal to one in which it expanded its demands in the East while simultaneously seeking significant concessions in the same area.

During the initial rounds, however, the Indian side did adopt a somewhat pragmatic position. It appreciated China's legitimate defense interests in protecting the Xinjiang-Tibet road and thus maintaining control over the inner portion of Aksai Chin. However, such recognition also implied the implicit rejection of the Chinese occupation of the wider region. This could be one of the starting points for the talks, along with other elements such as:

- China is withdrawing from the Western sector, leaving the area to become a demilitarised zone pending a final resolution.
- In the eastern sector, India and China could position themselves along the McMahon Line, except for areas with differing interpretations, such as the Thagla Ridge and Longju, which could be settled through future negotiations.

Notably, China dismissed this approach as outdated (the Indian strategy closely followed the Colombo proposal of 1963), prompting India to adopt a sector-by-sector strategy.[89]

During intractable deadlocks in negotiations, Indian External Affairs Minister Narasimhan Rao stated in the Rajya Sabha (upper house) that the "resolution of the border problem was a prerequisite for the complete normalization of relations." Mr. Rao also dismissed the Chinese package proposal as a basis for resolution, contending that it equated the aggressor with the victim, denied the legality of the McMahon line, and did not alleviate India's 1962 humiliation.[90] Notably, a May 1986 Xinhua article claimed that "an actual line of control between the two sides has taken place on the Chinese side of the boundary" as a result of British and Indian forward policies.[91] Ironically, this was perceived at the time as a 'softening' of China's stance. However, a more accurate interpretation suggests a hardening of claims. Essentially, the description indicated that the then-existing military/administrative status quo in the Eastern sector constituted an ongoing violation of Chinese sovereignty, effectively reinforcing claims to territories south of the McMahon line.

In an interview with Indian journalists in mid-June 1986, the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister and head of the delegation to the border talks stated that no settlement could be achieved unless India made concessions in the east. He also mentioned that the eastern sector represented the largest dispute and indicated that, in his view, India occupied nearly 90,000 square miles of Chinese territory. This new position marked a notable shift from a previously held stance that emphasized Chinese claims in the Aksai Chin region to the West. Essentially, the Chinese seemed to signal that they would raise the costs of negotiations if the Indians maintained what was viewed as an uncompromising stance.

In retrospect, the talks of the 1980s yielded no outcomes, except for widening the divide regarding both claims and the principles through which the boundary dispute could be resolved. By 1986-87, bilateral relations deteriorated significantly as Chinese troops encroached upon the disputed region of

Sumdorongchu (which China claimed was north of the McMahon line), leading to a tense standoff that resulted in India taking de facto control of the Yangtse Valley and Chinese forces entering the Thagla Ridge area.[92] India's ability to rapidly mobilise and transport forces to far-flung locations by air led to de-escalation via enhanced deterrence. In the wake of the crisis, the Indian Parliament granted Arunachal Pradesh full statehood on February 20, 1987. From India's perspective, this was simply a logical evolution of the administrative process. China likely viewed it as India solidifying its claims and thus engaging in a legal erosion of the Chinese claim.

India's overall experience with border talks in the 1980s has been marked by disappointment and deep skepticism. Similar to the 1950s and 1960s, the pattern of being uplifted by selected Chinese 'conciliatory' statements, only to later realize that the Chinese position had only hardened, and earlier assurances were more ambiguous than they initially seemed, repeated itself.[93] While the talks in the 1960s focused on evidentiary and historical arguments, those in the 1980s were more political and pragmatic. However, even this approach did not necessarily help narrow the differences. Arguably, the failure led to the understanding that both sides could choose to improve bilateral relations while temporarily setting aside the boundary dispute.

> In retrospect, the talks of the 1980s yielded no outcomes, except for widening the divide regarding both claims and the principles through which the boundary dispute could be resolved. By 1986-87, bilateral relations deteriorated significantly as Chinese troops encroached upon the disputed region of Sumdorongchu, leading to a tense standoff that resulted in India taking de facto control of the Yangtse Valley and Chinese forces entering the Thagla Ridge area.

The breakdown of the official talks, combined with the Sumdorongchu crisis and rapidly changing geopolitical conditions, ultimately led to PM Rajiv Gandhi's official visit to Beijing—the first ever by an Indian PM since Jawaharlal Nehru. This significant trip, in turn, opened a new chapter in India-China relations, based on the agreement that both sides would enhance and expand ties without compromising either side's claims to the disputed border. Logically, this would also require both parties to develop mechanisms for joint border management to prevent conflict and instability. As a result, boundary-related issues were sidelined from the core agenda of the bilateral relationship until 2006, when the matter of China issuing stapled visas to officials from Arunachal Pradesh arose, along with the Chinese Ambassador's assertion that all of Arunachal Pradesh (south Tibet) belongs to China.

The Dispute re-emerges (2006-2020)

After a nearly two-decade hiatus, the 'dispute' over Arunachal Pradesh re-emerged in 2006. In November of that year, just days before Premier Hu Jintao's state visit to India, India's Ambassador to China, Sun Yuxi, stated that the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory. "In our perspective, the whole state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory. Tawang is just one of the places within it. We are asserting our claim over all of that. That is our position."[94] This new assertion was reinforced in May 2007 when China denied a visa to Ganesh Koyu, an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer from Arunachal Pradesh, who was scheduled to travel to Beijing as part of a 107-member IAS officer study visit delegation. China justified this

by stating that Koyu is a Chinese citizen, as he is a resident of Arunachal Pradesh and is therefore eligible to visit China without a visa.

In June 2009, China tried to block India's request for a $2.9 billion loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), as the request included $60 million for flood management, water supply, and sanitation projects in Arunachal Pradesh. This marked the first time China attempted to introduce the bilateral 'dispute' in a multilateral forum. In October of the same year, China strongly protested when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Arunachal Pradesh as part of an election campaign. The following month, China objected to the Dalai Lama's visit to the state. Perhaps as part of a pressure campaign, the nationalist party-affiliated Global Times conducted an online poll in 2009 assessing Chinese citizens' support for the "lost territory" argument regarding Arunachal Pradesh, finding that 96% of 6,000 respondents supported it. Participants also expressed being 'extremely agitated' by the frequent visits of Indian leaders to the 'so-called disputed territory'.[95]

Moreover, in June 2007, during a meeting with his Indian counterpart, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi officially claimed the entirety of Arunachal Pradesh. Notably, he also rejected the Indian view that Article 7 of a recently concluded bilateral agreement excludes Tawang from the scope of territorial exchanges that might be necessary to finalize a border agreement. This article states, "In reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall safeguard the due interests of their settled populations in the border areas."[96] It is essential to note that China's construction of Xiaokang border villages may aim to exploit the very provisions of the 2005 agreement.

"In June 2007, during a meeting with his Indian counterpart, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi officially claimed the entirety of Arunachal Pradesh. Notably, he also rejected the Indian view that Article 7 of a recently concluded bilateral agreement excludes Tawang from the scope of territorial exchanges that might be necessary to finalize a border agreement.

In response to China's new assertion on the issue, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reportedly conveyed to Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2009 that Tawang and other parts of Arunachal Pradesh cannot be considered for territory exchange to achieve a boundary settlement.[97] There is still no stable consensus on why China adopted a more assertive position on Arunachal Pradesh after 2006. However, possible explanations include growing insecurities amid increasing signs of protest (as well as self-immolation) in Tibet, a creeping (yet nascent) arms race between India and China in the Himalayas (especially in border infrastructure), and the strengthening strategic ties between the U.S. and India. It is also worth noting that the Dalai Lama began clarifying his positions on Arunachal Pradesh in 2007. Whereas in 2003 he stated that the state was actually part of Tibet, in 2007 he observed that both the Tibetan government and India recognized the McMahon line. In June 2008, he further declared that Tawang is also part of India.[98]

Notably, while China has made claims to the entire state on several occasions, it has also emphasized its claim on Tawang as particularly strong. This was evident during the 1980 talks and the Special Representative discussions between the two sides. Dai Bingguo, who served as China's boundary negotiator with India from 2003 to 2013, stated to Chinese media in 2017, "If the Indian side addresses China's concerns in the eastern sector of their border, the Chinese side will respond accordingly and

address India's concerns elsewhere." He elaborated further, "The disputed territory in the eastern sector of the China-India boundary, including Tawang, is inseparable from China's Tibet in terms of cultural background and administrative jurisdiction." He also claimed, "Even British colonialists who drew the illegal McMahon Line recognized China's jurisdiction over Tawang and acknowledged that Tawang was part of China's Tibet." Retaining ambiguity, Dai did not specify where in the western sector China was willing to make concessions.[99] This same point was emphasized by Zhou Gang in 2009, who was a former ambassador to India and also served as a special consultant to the Chinese foreign ministry at the time.[100]

Conclusion

Even as the dust seems to be settling somewhat in the Western sector (Eastern Ladakh) through newly constructed buffer zones and coordinated patrolling modalities, the Eastern sector remains dynamic, flexible, and increasingly contested (including grey-zone operations). Chinese claims to the region resurfaced strongly since 2005-6, but its present aggressive approach originated in 2017. The latter emerged from a combination of factors, including the Dalai Lama's visit to the state in 2017 and the Doklam crisis later that year. China has significantly expanded its claims, its patrolling activities, border-village constructions, military deployments, infrastructure, and outposts in the region since that year. India, in turn, maintains a well-equipped military force in the Tawang region, has launched a Vibrant villages programme of its own to stem out-migration from border areas, and has embarked on a potentially game-changing Frontier highway close to the border that will connect the state's five river valleys across an East-West axis for the first time in its history. India may have to match such road construction with greater alertness and troop deployments to deter unilateral Chinese action aimed at thwarting it. Such an oversight, after all, had contributed to the Galwan crisis of 2020. At the same time, the challenge of a succession transition or crisis resulting from the death of His Holiness the Dalai Lama also looms over the region.

In recent months, both India and China have indicated a cautious willingness to address the historic boundary issue along the LAC. Although such talks are not imminent, they may still appear sooner than generally anticipated. In such a context, Delhi and Beijing will have to end up revisiting the history of the dispute, the question of Tibet's place and role in history, the policies and outcomes of British India, the status and interpretation of bilateral and international treaties, the ambiguities and contestations of state-expansion in the region as well as a broad strategic understanding of the nature of the dispute. Both sides, logically speaking, will make arguments based on administrative realities, past treaties, moral claims based on nationalism and culture, as well as geographic and diplomatic historical 'truths'. This report can be seen as a first draft attempt at initiating such a discussion. Despite the rich

> In recent months, both India and China have indicated a cautious willingness to address the historic boundary issue along the LAC. Although such talks are not imminent, they may still appear sooner than generally anticipated...Delhi and Beijing will have to revisit the history of the dispute, the question of Tibet's place and role in history, the policies and outcomes of British India, the status and interpretation of bilateral and international treaties, and the ambiguities and contestations of state-expansion in the region.

epistemology involved in such an exercise, it is also worth noting that negotiations will be determined more by the operational balance of power and broader military realities.

Aug 31, 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Chinese President Xi Jinping during a meeting, in Tianjin, China. (PMO via PTI Photo)

The India-China boundary dispute over the state of Arunachal Pradesh has a complex history. However, at its core, it represents a story of each side extending its political, administrative, and military influence across a historic frontier that has always challenged Westphalian notions of absolute sovereignty and territoriality. Each side extended its presence across territory that was more accessible (proximate) and strategically significant than it was for the other side. Hence, securing a defensive position in the Tawang tract was salient for the defence of the Assam valley. By the same token, Aksai Chin was significant for China in securing communication lines between Tibet and Xinjiang. In both cases, advancing post-colonial states were able to serve fait accompli to the other and based on the other side's weaknesses – geographic or political. In the present strategic context, Indian defence interests are arguably stronger (vis-à-vis Tawang) than China's in Aksai Chin.

These two features (proximity and strategic significance) were shaped by geographic and political factors. Various studies by foreign offices in third countries, such as the U.S., UK, and Commonwealth countries, reached a consensus in the 1960s that China had a stronger historical basis for its claims to Aksai Chin than to NEFA, and a similar characterization can be made of India's claims to NEFA being stronger than its claims to Aksai Chin.[101]

China's primary objective vis-à-vis the McMahon line has been to soften India's resistance to a formal acceptance of Beijing's own territorial claims in Aksai Chin. With a more favorable balance of power, the Chinese's actual aims may have expanded to areas beyond Tawang within the state. Hence, China may amplify its claims over large swathes of the Lohit valley, foremost, and, in a secondary sense, over selective enclaves in the areas between Tawang and Rima. A future Tibetan leadership more amenable to reconciliation with Beijing could revive older Tibetan claims within the state. This will inevitably strengthen China's appeal before and during negotiations. India will have to devise a holistic negotiating strategy that considers its own objectives and is bolstered by diplomatic realities and the history of the dispute in all its dimensions. Beijing may choose to link the degree of claim expansion to signs of Delhi's cooperative attitude towards a more 'pragmatic' view of the 'dispute'. The GOI's position since 2008 has been that it will not

negotiate on the issue of Tawang, given that it has a settled population and is an integral part of India. India's core objective is to retain the present status quo through a comprehensive negotiating strategy and by addressing border governance and military gaps.

Until such talks are held, China will seek to build on the impression that Arunachal Pradesh is a 'disputed' territory, both bilaterally and internationally. After all, sustaining such a status would assist any future Indian leadership in presenting a final boundary settlement to its citizens as a fair agreement based on mutual understanding and compromise. This prospect appears to be sensitive to China. China recognizes that the passage of time not only strengthens its own claim to Aksai Chin but also India's claim to the entirety of Arunachal Pradesh (including Tawang). Furthermore, India has the added advantage of democratic consent supporting its claims to the state, as illustrated by the feelings of patriotism among the state's people and their enthusiastic participation in democratic elections. The greatest deterrent and dampener of Chinese claims remains the will of the people in the state. This has been demonstrated most illustratively in recent weeks when Chinese immigration officials detained and hindered the travel of an Arunachalese-born Indian citizen (Pema Wangjom Thongdok) on the grounds that she is a Chinese citizen. Her impassioned letter and appeal to the Indian government, asserting her identification with India and her offense at the Chinese rejection of the same, serves only as a small reminder of the greatest advantage India would enjoy in future negotiations. China's increasing assertiveness towards the state, thus, also has a reactionary basis. It is also, in part, driven by growing insecurities regarding Indian consolidation in the state.

> "Until such talks are held, China will seek to build on the impression that Arunachal Pradesh is a 'disputed' territory, both bilaterally and internationally. After all, sustaining such a status would assist any future Indian leadership in presenting a final boundary settlement to its citizens as a fair agreement based on mutual understanding and compromise. This prospect appears to be sensitive to China. China recognizes that the passage of time not only strengthens its own claim to Aksai Chin but also India's claim to the entirety of Arunachal Pradesh (including Tawang).

Endnotes

[1] Dorothy Woodman, Himalayan Frontiers, London: Barrie & Rockliff, The Cresset Press, 1969, pp. 130–31.
[2] Incidentally, Zhao Erfeng's troops planted Chinese flags at Menilkrai, a small habitation about 2 kilometres south of the junction of the rivers Yepauk and Lohit. These flags and other markers, in turn, were uprooted by British officials in the late 1930's when a new policy of reaffirmation of the Mcmahon line was adopted. Singh, J. J. The McMahon Line: A Century of Discord. HarperCollins India, 2019.
[3] Maxwell, 1997. Pg. 45. ; also see Alastair Lamb, Tibet, China, and India, 1914–1950: A History of Imperial Diplomacy (Hertfordshire, UK: Roxford Books, 1989), pp. 9–10.
[4] Arpi, Claude. Operational Research Conference, Part 1. 2021, www.archieve.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/ORC_01-32_Part1.pdf. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[5] Shakya, Tsering (1999), The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947, Columbia University Press, pp. 279–, ISBN 978-0-231-11814-9
[6] Incidentally, Basil Gould , the British Political Officer for Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet, also assured Tibetans in 1944 that the Tawang tract will be left on the Tibetan side in a future agreement – but provided that Lhasa was willing to reaffirm the rest of the Mcmahon line, including the continuation of British outposts at Kalaktang and Walong. Zhaodong Wang, Transformations of Modern China Sino-British Negotiations and the Search for a Post-War Settlement, 1942-1949: Treaties, Hong Kong, and Tibet, Book 3, (Hardcover)
[7] Interview with retired Indian diplomat who had participated in border negotiations with China. Also see, Neville Maxwell, India's China war.
[8] T S Murty
[9] However, it could also be theoretically argued that China recognized such past Tibetan treaties only in order to supplant them with new ones.
[10] Arpi, Claude. Operational Research Conference, Part 1. 2021, pp. 46-47, www.archieve.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/ORC_01-32_Part1.pdf. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[11] Arpi, Claude. Operational Research Conference, Part 1. 2021, pp. 46-47, www.archieve.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/ORC_01-32_Part1.pdf. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.; p. 46-47
[12] Hsiao-Ting Lin (2004): Boundary, sovereignty, and imagination: Reconsidering the frontier disputes between British India and Republican China, 1914–47, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 32:3, 25-47
[13] Arpi, Claude. The Balipara Frontier Tract: Towards Tawang. 2020, www.claudearpi.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/The-Balipara-Frontier-Tract-towards-Tawang.pdf. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[14] Shadow states, p. 59
[15] In 1939, the acting Governor of Assam H.K. Twynam stated, "the fact that the GOI had taken no step to affect to implement the Mcmahon Line from 1914 to 1938 must adversely affect its position both in equity and international law". Bhasin, pg 9 of negotiating..;
His Excellency recommends that this should be a tribute rather than a tax, for he considers that the area now under consideration must remain tribal territory and cannot form part of the Province of Assam even with the status only of an excluded area ...The inhabitants are for the most part Buddhists, with no affinities with the plainsmen of Assam. [Assam Governor, gilbert hogg letter to GOI forwarding Lightfoot's proposals on September 7, 1938]
[16] British policy also relied on the indigenous Monpa community's strong antipathy towards their Tibetan overlords. Monpas considered Tibetan rule to be oppressive, extractive, unjust and at time neglectful (specially when it came to defending the region from neighboring tribes). Hence, Monpas were favorably pre-disposed to the change of status quo from Tibetan rule to British Indian (and later, Indian) both during the time of the Lightfoot expeditions as well as in 1951 during Bob Khating's entry to Tawang. [Captain Lightfoot expedition. Arpi, Mcmahon Saga p. 136]
[17] Ding Wenjiang et al. (eds.), Zhonghua Minguo Xinditu (The new map of the Republic of China) (Shanghai, 1934), plate 50.
[18] Wang, Zhaodong. Sino-British Negotiations and the Search for a Post-War Settlement, 1942–1949: Treaties, Hong Kong, and Tibet. Volume 3, Transformations of Modern China, De Gruyter, 2021, , p. 174.
[19] Notably, Lhasa even rejected Britain's offer of leaving the Tawang tract within Tibet in exchange for renewed recognition and acceptance of the McMahon line. Hence, whereas the British offer (as part of signaling flexibility) itself

Endnotes

could be referenced in order to weaken the saliency of the Simla agreement as well as the inclusion of Tawang within British India, Tibet's refusal was also a missed opportunity in formally asserting rights over Tawang in exchange for accepting the rest of the Mcmahon line. (See, Rethinking the Linkage between Tibet and the China-India Border Conºict: A Realist Approach Steven A. Hoffmann). In undertaking this approach towards the Mcmahon line of neither abiding by it nor rejecting it outrightly, Tibetan authorities were still motivated by hopes of acquiring British diplomatic and military (more limitedly) assistance vis-à-vis China. See Goldstein, History of Modern Tibet, pp. 302–309, 413–417; and Lamb, Tibet, China, and India, pp. 465–471. Tibet's refusal to accept the British offer was also tied to its refusal to accept the British fait accompli in the form of new outposts in Lower Zayul area (Kalaktang and Walong) that had come up in the previous year. TBL, IOR/L/P&S/12/4223, telegram from Sir Basil Gould to Indian Government, June 19, 1945. Quoted in Lamb, Tibet, China & India, 1914–1950, 468.

[20] Hsiao-Ting Lin (2004): Boundary, sovereignty, and imagination: Reconsidering the frontier disputes between British India and Republican China, 1914–47, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 32:3, 25-47. P. 37-38

[21] Arpi, Claude. The Balipara Frontier Tract: Towards Tawang. 2020, www.claudearpi.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/The-Balipara-Frontier-Tract-towards-Tawang.pdf. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.

[22] The British government was also motivated by its concerns over Russia and China's responses in not publicizing the agreement. Shadow States, pg. 53. 2017

[23] IOR, L/PS/10/344, letter no. 448EB, from the foreign secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department to Bell, dated 3 September 1915. Or, Goldstein, 80-81. 1991

[24] XUECHENG LIU, The Sino-Indian Border Dispute and Sino-Indian Relations. The University Press of America, Lanham, MD. 1994 p. 47.

[25] Incidentally and reportedly, a group comprising of Chinese officials and soldiers did descend down from Rima to survey the area around Walong and planted flags at Menikrai. It appears they were also motivated by the defensive vantage point that the village provided. See J J Singh The Mcmahon line. 2019. Pg. 104.

[26] Wang, Zhaodong. Sino-British Negotiations and the Search for a Post-War Settlement, 1942–1949: Treaties, Hong Kong, and Tibet. Volume 3, Transformations of Modern China, De Gruyter, 2021, , p.177.

[27] Godfrey's travel report to Rima, 27 Feb. 1940, OIOC, L/P&S/12/4214; and Chowdhury, Arunachal Pradesh, 239–40.

[28] Guyot-Réchard, Bérénice. Shadow States: India, China, and the Himalayas, 1910-1962. Cambridge University Press, Nov. 2016, pg 78.

[29] Huber, Toni. The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage & Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet. Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 169.

[30] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Report of the Officials of the Governments of India and the People's Republic of China on the Boundary Question (Part 4). 2021, www.archieve.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/OR_Part_4.pdf. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024. Pg 47.

[31] ibid

[32] During the 1960 official talks the Chinese side claimed that during the last years of the Manchu dynasty , Chinese troops had "been stationed near Walong", an empricial description promptly rejected as "incorrect" by the Indian side.

[33] Woodman, 1969. 127; F.M. Bailey, China–Tibet–Assam: A journey, 1911 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1945)

[34] Ambika Aiyadurai, 'The Meyor: A least studied frontier tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, northeast India', Eastern Anthropologist, 64:4 (2011), 459–469

[35] Toni Huber,'Pushingsouth:Tibetaneconomicandpoliticalactivitiesinthefareastern Himalaya, ca. 1900–1950', in Sikkim Studies: Proceedings of the Namgyal Institute Jubilee Conference, 2008, ed. by Alex McKay and Anna Balikci (Gangtok: Namgyal Institute, 2011)

[36] Sikri, Rajiv. "THE TIBET FACTOR IN INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS." Journal of International Affairs 64, no. 2 (2011): 55–71. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24385534.

[37] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Report of the Officials of the Governments of India and the People's Republic of China on the Boundary Question (Part 4). 2021, www.archieve.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/OR_Part_4.pdf. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.. P. 76

[38] As one Chinese source describes this history, "In 1793, after dispelling Gurkha invaders, the Qing government restored order in Tibet and promulgated the Imperially Approved Ordinance for Better Governance of Tibet (the 29-

Endnotes

Article Ordinance), improving several of the systems by which the central government administered Tibet. The ordinance stipulated that the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama and other grand Living Buddhas had to follow the procedure of "drawing lots from the golden urn", and the selected candidate would be subject to approval by the central government of China. Observing the ordinance, three of the five Dalai Lamas in the Qing Dynasty were selected and approved in accordance with this procedure, and the other two were exempted from the procedure with special approval from the central government". Tibet Since 1951： Liberation, Development and Prosperity, China-Aibo, www.china-aibo.cn/en/info/1013/1169.htm. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.

[39] The Indian view on the mentioned treaty is that given it was a tripartite agreement, it proves the status of Tibet as a political entity capable of signing treaties.

[40] East-West Center, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20190203181941/https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/PS007.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=32008 p. 10

[41] Interview with Indian scholars and officials.

[42] Arpi, Claude. Operational Research Conference, Part 1. 2021, www.archieve.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/ORC_01-32_Part1.pdf. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.

[43] This was, in effect, a continuation of British policy whereby the term 'suzerainty' was put forward as a concession in exchange of China conceding to Tibetan effective independence. This balance between suzerainty and autonomy/independence could be maintained to some degree owing to China's weakness and disunity in the first half of the 20th century. This became much harder after the CCP takeover in 1949. Furthermore, the use of such terms is further complicated by the fact that Britain altered their meanings based on their geopolitical exigencies. For instance, whereas in 1904 Britain sought to establish Tibet as a British protectorate, the policy was reversed in 1906 when Britain acknowledged Chinese sovereignty over Tibet again. Such ebbs and flows were greatly determined by British views of the shifting Russian threat to British India through Tibet.

[44] Goldstein, Melvyn C., and Gelek Rimpoche. A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State.University of California Press, 1989. P 673-674.

[45] Dutta, Sujit. "Revisiting China's Territorial Claims on Arunachal." Strategic Analysis, vol. 32, no. 4, 2008, pp. 549-581, doi:10.1080/09700160802215562..

[46] Murty, T. S. "India's Himalayan Frontier." International Studies, vol. 10, no. 4, 1968. p 475

[47] Maxwell, Neville. India's China War. 1970, Hamish Hamilton. p, 99

[48] India-China Territorial Dispute: An Analytical Report." Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), www.archive.claws.in/images/events/pdf/708386108_ReportIndiaChinaTerritorialdispute.pdf. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.

[49] "China Renames 6 Places in Arunachal Pradesh on Its Official Map, Retaliates Against Dalai Lama Visit."Hindustan Times, 12 Apr. 2023, www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/china-renames-6-places-in-arunachal-pradesh-on-its-official-map-retaliates-against-dalai-lama-visit/story-GopcxKWUJsOQ7Cys3nOcsK.html. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.

[50] Guyot-Réchard, Bérénice. Shadow States: India, China, and the Himalayas, 1910-1962. Cambridge University Press, Nov. 2016, p. 52

[51] Sujit Dutta, Dutta, S. (2008). Revisiting China's Territorial Claims on Arunachal. Strategic Analysis, 32(4), 549–581. https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160802215562. P 569

[52] Dorothy Woodman, Himalayan Frontiers, London: Barrie & Rockliff, The Cresset Press, 1969. P 259

[53] Sharma, S. P. (1970). CHINA'S ATTITUDE TO INTERNATIONAL LAW With Special Reference to India-China Border. China Report, 6(6), 68-74. https://doi.org/10.1177/000944557000600609

[54] Dutta, S. (2008). Revisiting China's Territorial Claims on Arunachal. Strategic Analysis, 32(4), 549–581. https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160802215562. p 569

[55] Sharma, S. P. (1970). CHINA'S ATTITUDE TO INTERNATIONAL LAW With Special Reference to India-China Border. China Report, 6(6), 29-30

[56] Work on the highway had begun in 1952 and completed in 1957. India, however, officially reacted only in 1958 and after the Indian embassy in Beijing came across Chinese news reports on the same.

[57] Murty, T. S. "India's Himalayan Frontier." International Studies, vol. 10, no. 4, 1968. p. 478

[58] Murty, T. S. "India's Himalayan Frontier." International Studies, vol. 10, no. 4, 1968. p. 481

Endnotes

[59] In 1947, the Tibet government asked newly formed GOI to return Tibetan lands from Assam to Ladakh and including Darjeeling and Sikkim. But, as noted by H E Richardson, “it was also an example of the way in which the Tibetans interpreted the political testament of the late Dalai Lama by seeking to balance their actions towards one of their neighbours by similar action towards the other. The request to India was the counterpart of the message conveyed to the Chinese Government by the goodwill mission in 1946, in which they asked, in equally wide terms, for the return of all Tibetan territories still in Chinese hands.” H E Richardson, Tibet and its history. P. 174. Hence, the import of later Chinese reference to Tibetan objections to Indian expansion in NEFA in this period is weakened by the fact that Tibet had also claimed territories that China saw as belonging to itself.
[60] Maxwell, Neville. India's China War. 1970, Hamish Hamilton. p 77
[61] Note by Menon, 11 April 1952, Subject File 24, Vijayalakshmi Pandit Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML).
[62] Pg. 24 of Bhasin, landmark agreements. Notably, An MEA note in 1953 identified Aksai Chin in the western sector and Tawang and Walong in the eastern sector as ‘disputed areas’. Bhasin, Landmark 24-25.
[63] Bhasin, Avtar Singh. Negotiating India’s Landmark Agreements. Penguin Random House India, 2024. Chapter 1.
[64] Bhasin, Avtar Singh. Negotiating India’s Landmark Agreements. Penguin Random House India, 2024.
[65] Maxwell, Neville. India's China War. 1970, Hamish Hamilton. p, 84.
[66] Maxwell, Neville. India's China War. 1970, Hamish Hamilton. p, 94.
[67] Minutes of talk with Zhou EnLai, 20 October 1954, SWJN-SS, 27: 17–20.; Srinath Raghavan. A missed opportunity?
[68] Raghavan, Missed opportunity. Mahesh Shankar, Showing Character: Nehru, Reputation, and the Sino-Indian Dispute, 1957–1962
[69] See Sharma, an Indian perspective
[70] Arpi, Claude. Zhou on McMahon. 2016, www.claudearpi.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ZhouonMcMahon-1.pdf. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[71] Swaran Singh–Chen Yi talks, 23 Apr. 1960; (1645). Quoted in Bhasin, Tibet india and China. P. 254
[72] Nehru–Zhou talks, 22 Apr. 1960; (1636). Quoted in Bhasin. P. 254-255
[73] Gibson, Richard Michael (4 August 2011). The Secret Army: Chiang Kai-shek and the Drug Warlords of the Golden Triangle. John Wiley & Sons. pp. 171–172. ISBN 978-0-470-83021-5.
[74] Rao, B. R. Fractured Himalayas: India, China, and the Boundary Question. 2017, National Book Trust. p 233-34
[75] Notes of Conversation Held Between Sardar Swaran Singh and Marshal Chen Yi." Wilson Center Digital Archive, digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/notes-conversation-held-between-sardar-swaran-singh-and-marshal-chen-yi. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[76] Rao, B. R. Fractured Himalayas: India, China, and the Boundary Question. 2017, National Book Trust. p 245
[77] Rao, B. R. Fractured Himalayas: India, China, and the Boundary Question. 2017, National Book Trust. p 248
[78] Notes of Conversation Held Between Sardar Swaran Singh and Marshal Chen Yi." Wilson Center Digital Archive, digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/notes-conversation-held-between-sardar-swaran-singh-and-marshal-chen-yi. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[79] Notes of Conversation Held Between Sardar Swaran Singh and Marshal Chen Yi." Wilson Center Digital Archive, digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/notes-conversation-held-between-sardar-swaran-singh-and-marshal-chen-yi. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[80] Maxwell, Neville. India's China War. 1970, Hamish Hamilton. p 89.
[81] Maxwell, Neville. India's China War. 1970, Hamish Hamilton. p 133-34
[82] Maxwell, Neville. India's China War. 1970, Hamish Hamilton. p 137
[83] "Premier Chou En-lai's Letter to Prime Minister Nehru." Wilson Center Digital Archive, digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/premier-chou-en-lais-zhou-enlais-letter-prime-minister-nehru. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[84] Hoffman, Stephen. India and the China Crisis. 1990, University of California Press. P 110.
[85] Hoffman, Stephen. India and the China Crisis. 1990, University of California Press. P 110-111
[86] Katoch, Ghanshyam. "The 1965 Chinese Ultimatum: A Bird’s Eye View of Coercion." Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), www.archive.claws.in/1432/the-1965-chinese-ultimatum-a-birds-eye-view-of-coercion-ghanshyam-katoch.html. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.

Endnotes

[87] "How the U.S. Viewed the 1967 Sikkim Skirmishes Between India and China." Brookings, www.brookings.edu/articles/how-the-u-s-viewed-the-1967-sikkim-skirmishes-between-india-and-china/. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[88] "Torture, Not Firing, Behind China Border Deaths in 1975, Recalls Veteran." The Hindu, 15 Oct. 2020, www.thehindu.com/news/national/torture-not-firing-behind-china-border-deaths-in-1975-recalls-veteran/article32654100.ece. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[89] Elkin, Jerrold F., and Brian Fredericks. “Sino-Indian Border Talks: The View from New Delhi.” Asian Survey, vol. 23, no. 10, 1983, pp. 1128–39. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/2644204. Accessed 2 Feb. 2025.
[90] Ganguly, Sumit. “The Sino-Indian Border Talks, 1981-1989: A View from New Delhi.” Asian Survey, vol. 29, no. 12, 1989, pp. 1127. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/2644760.
[91] Ganguly, Sumit. “The Sino-Indian Border Talks, 1981-1989: A View from New Delhi.” Asian Survey, vol. 29, no. 12, 1989, pp. 1129. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/2644760.
[92] Pardesi, M. S. (2019). Managing the 1986-87 Sino-Indian Sumdorong Chu Crisis. India Review, 18(5), 534–551. https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2019.1703364; https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/the-tawang-clash-the-view-from-china/ ; https://www.orfonline.org/research/operation-falcon-when-general-sundarji-took-the-chinese-by-surprise
[93] See for instance, G. P. D. “India-China Border: A New Possibility.” Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 23, no. 18, 1988, pp. 877–877. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4378421. Accessed 2 Feb. 2025.
[94] "China Lays Claim to Arunachal." Hindustan Times, 9 Jan. 2023, www.hindustantimes.com/india/china-lays-claim-to-arunachal/story-QDVTkQ1kDNBBf9QMvsDdBM.html. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[95] "China’s Territorial Claims: A Historical Perspective." Eth Zurich, www.files.ethz.ch/isn/137452/IB_Chinasterrorialclaim.pdf. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024. or "PC: Chinese Against Indian Visits to Arunachal." Rediff News, 14 Oct. 2009, news.rediff.com/report/2009/oct/14/pc-chinese-against-indian-visits-to-arunachal.htm. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[96] Tibet. TORRI, MICHELGUGLIELMO. “The Road to Galwan Valley: An Alternative View of India’s Relations with China and the US since 2005.” Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali 88, no. 4 (352) (2021): 491–522. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27117194. Or Pranab Dhal Samanta, China draws another hardline on Arunachal, in «The Indian Express», 7 June
[97] "PM Draws the China Boundary Line, No Uprooting Settled People." The Indian Express, www.indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/pm-draws-the-china-boundary-line-no-uprooting-settled-people/. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[98] "Tawang is Part of India: Dalai Lama." The Times of India, 28 May 2008, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/tawang-is-part-of-india-dalai-lama/articleshow/3097568.cms. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[99] "Concession on Tawang Can Resolve India-China Border Dispute." LiveMint, 13 Jul. 2020, www.livemint.com/Politics/bTPTWh5efcWfdYGW6VMNLL/Concession-on-Tawang-can-resolve-IndiaChina-border-dispute.html. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
[100] "Tibet: India’s Legitimate Ticket to Claim Over Arunachal." Rediff News, 9 Nov. 2009, www.rediff.com/news/column/tibet-indias-legitimate-ticket-to-claim-over-arunachal/20091109.htm. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024. ; Dutta, S. (2008). Revisiting China’s Territorial Claims on Arunachal. Strategic Analysis, 32(4), 549–581. https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160802215562
[101] Reed Chervin (2024) The cold war in the Himalayas: multinational perspectives on the Sino-Indian border conflict, 1950-1970.Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

C-21, 3rd Floor, Qutub Institutional Area, New Delhi, India - 110016.
Phone: 011-43104566 | Email: office@csdronline.com | Web: www.csdronline.com | Twitter:@CSDR_India