A Historical Note on the Sino-Indian Dispute over the Aksai Chin

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THE Sino-Indian conversations that followed the border clashes of late 1959 were undertaken partly for the purpose of examining in detail the historical evidence with which both sides supported their border claims. It is always difficult, however, to use historical evidence to bolster claims to areas which have for centuries been removed from the main stream of human existence. The Aksai Chin, in the extreme north-east of Ladakh, upon which much of the negotiations centred, is such a region; a bleak uninhabited highland which in the past was visited only by the inhabitants of adjacent territories in quest of salt and by occasional hunters. In 1717, however, the Aksai Chin was traversed by the Tsungar invaders of Tibet and 233 years later it was used for the same purpose by the Chinese. The success of this second venture led to the construction of a major road link between Sinkiang and Tibet, the existence of which precipitated the hostilities of 1959 and the discussions of 1960.

At the talks the Indian case for the Aksai Chin rested heavily on the immediate imperial past. But even here relevant historical data was sparse. True, the reports of many travellers were cited, but the Aksai Chin was such a remote area during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that these reports frequently differed even about its location. In 1896, the British agent in Kashgar admitted that the "Aksai Chin was a general name for an ill-defined and very elevated table land at the north-east of Ladakh and it was probably the case that part was in Chinese and part in British territory."[1] The truth of the matter was that while the British rulers of India were anxious to demarcate formally, or at least delimit, India's borders with Afghanistan and Russia, they regarded the frontier of the client state of Kashmir with a moribund China of little importance in itself.

In the early 1890s the Indo-Russian frontier as far as the Little Pamir was defined to the satisfaction of both powers. But British fears of

[1] India Office Library, Foreign Department, *Secret Frontier*, No. 2, January 6, 1897, "Memo of Information Regarding the Course of Affairs Beyond the Northwestern Frontier."

Russian intentions were not totally assuaged. The Russian, British and Chinese Empires all met in the Pamirs and at this point there was considerable uncertainty. Thus the conflicting claims of the British protected state of Hunza and China to the Taghdumbash Pamir and the Raskam valley raised the spectre of possible Russian intervention. As a result the British Government addressed the authorities in Peking suggesting a solution to the immediate problem and a mutual delimitation of the whole Sino-Kashmir border. This letter was written on March 14, 1899, and addressed "To His Highness Prince Ch'ing and their Excellencies the Ministers of the Tsungli Yamen." [2] It has a profound bearing on the whole Aksai Chin issue and is worth quoting in full:

Messieurs les Ministres,

I have the honour by direction of Her Majesty's Government to address Your Highness and Your Excellencies on the subject of the boundary between the Indian State of Cashmere and the new Dominion of Chinese Turkestan.

In the year 1891 the Indian Government had occasion to repress by force of arms certain rebellious conduct on the part of the ruler of the state of Kanjut [Hunza],[3] a tributary of Cashmere. The Chinese Government then laid claim to the allegiance of Kanjut by virtue of a tribute of one and a half ounces of gold dust paid by its ruler each year to the Governor of the New Dominion who gave in return some pieces of silk.

It appears that the boundaries of the state of Kanjut with China have never been clearly defined. The Kanjutis claim an extensive tract of land in the Tagdumbash Pamir extending as far North as Tashkurgan and they also claim the district known as Raskam to the South of Sarikol. The rights of Kanjut over part of the Tagdumbash Pamir were admitted by the Taotai of Kashgar in a letter to the Mir of Hunza dated February 1896, and last year the question of the Raskam district was the subject of negotiations between Kanjut and the officials of the New Dominion in which the latter admitted that some of the Raskam land should be given to the Kanjutis.

It is now proposed by the Indian Government that for the sake of avoiding any dispute or uncertainty in the future a clear understanding should be come to with the Chinese Government as to the frontier between the two States. To obtain this clear understanding it is necessary that China should relinquish her shadowy claim to suzerainty over the state of Kanjut. The Indian Government on the other hand will on behalf of Kanjut relinquish her claims to most of the Tagdumbash and Raskam districts.

It will not be necessary to mark out the frontier. The natural frontier is the crest of a range of mighty mountains a great part of which is quite inaccessible. It will be sufficient if the two Governments will enter into an agreement to recognise the frontier as laid down by its clearly marked geographical features. The line proposed by the Indian Government is briefly as follows. It may be seen by reference to the map of the Russo-Chinese frontier brought by the late Minister Hung Chün from St. Petersburg and in possession of the Yamen.

[2] Public Record Office, F.O. 17/1373.
[3] My brackets.

Commencing on the Little Pamir from the Peak at which the Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission of 1895 ended their work, it runs South-East crossing the Karachikar Stream at Mintaka Aghazi; thence proceeding in the same direction it joins at the Karchenai Pass the crest of the main ridge of the Mustagh Range. It follows this to the South passing by the Kunjerab Pass and continuing Southwards to the peak just north of the Shimshal Pass. At this point the boundary leaves the crest and follows a spur running east approximately parallel to the road from the Shimshal to the Hunza post at Darwaza. The line turning South through the Darwaza post, crosses the road from the Shimshal Pass at that point and then ascends the nearest high spur and regains the main crests which the boundary will again follow, passing the Mustagh Gusherbrun and Saltoro Passes by the Karakoram. From the Karakoram Pass the crests of the range run east for about half a degree (100 li) and then turn South to a little below the thirty-fifth (35th) parallel of North Latitude. Rounding then what in our maps is shewn as the source of the Karakash, the line of hills to be followed runs North-east to a point east of Kizil Jilga and from there in a South-easterly direction follows the Lak Tsung Range until that meets the spur running South from the K'un lun Range, which has hitherto been shewn on our maps as the Eastern boundary of Ladakh. This is a little east of 80° East-longitude.

Your Highnesses and your Excellencies will see by examining this line that a large tract of country to the north of the great dividing range shown in Hung Chün's map as outside the Chinese boundary, will be recognized as Chinese territory.

I beg your Highness and your Excellencies to consider the matter and to favour me with an early reply.

I avail etc.

(Signed) C. M. MacDonald

The Chinese never saw fit to answer this letter but it is nevertheless of significance in the context of the present Sino-Indian controversy over the Aksai Chin. Did the letter give the British version of the northern frontier of Kashmir at that time? Or was the line so clearly delineated in the letter merely a proposed new border deviating from the then official British view and depending for its implementation upon certain Chinese concessions? Both interpretations are possible. The British did indeed recommend a reciprocal arrangement. But the extent of the proposed exchange seems to be contained in the fourth paragraph of the letter which suggested that China relinquish all its claims to Hunza in exchange for most of the Taghdumbash Pamir and the Raskam valley.

The wording of the fifth paragraph leads to the conclusion that the British were suggesting the mutual recognition of what seemed to them an already clearly defined border. "It will not be necessary to mark out the frontier," the letter states. "It will be sufficient if the two Governments will enter into an agreement to recognise the frontier as laid down by its clearly marked geographical features." In the description that follows, the section of the frontier from the Little Pamir to

Karakoram Pass is essentially in agreement with the present Indian concept of the border. From the Karakoram Pass eastward the letter defined a line materially different from that on any current Indian or former British map of the area, one that included within China more than half of its present claim in the Aksai Chin, all the 1957 Aksai Chin road, and part of the 1959–60 road.

Why the frontier west of the Karakoram Pass was eventually reflected in British maps, but not that of the section to the east, it is hard to say. For it was in the western rather than in the eastern sector that the British were apparently proposing all the specific changes in the existing position. Any concessions in this region were to be based on China relinquishing its claims to Hunza and this was never done.

The British Government found the Sino-Kashmir frontier of such little importance that its definition was rarely thrust into the deliberations of imperial statesmen. Consequently, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries British maps of the Ladakh area were usually inaccurate and contradictory—it being difficult to determine the official Government position. As late as 1909 the *Imperial Gazeteer of India* placed the Sino-Kashmir border west of the Karakoram Pass well to the north of the line that independent India inherited from the British,[4] and the inaccessible and arid reaches of the area east of the Pass may never have received proper cartographic attention.

Both the Chinese and Indian delegations at the border talks were aware of the existence of the letter and used it for their own purposes. The Indians, unless they were referring to a different letter, which is unlikely, took the view that the letter was a proposal to change the existing frontier in China's favour in return for concessions to Hunza—a proposal that was never implemented. They emphasised that part of the sixth paragraph which described the frontier east of Kizil Jilga as running south-east along the Lak Tsung range until it met the spur running south from the Kunlun range. Here the letter strongly implied a change from former British concepts by stating that this spur of the Kunlun had " hitherto been shown on our maps as the Eastern boundary of Ladakh. This is a little east of 80° East Longitude." The Indian delegates duly pointed this out, but in referring to the letter in detail, they altered its provisions considerably. Instead of saying that it was the spur running south from the Kunlun range which former British maps had shown as the *eastern* boundary of Ladakh—a situation which the proposals in the letter did not essentially change—they said it was the Kunlun range itself which the British had described as being the *northern*

[4] The border depicted in the 1909 *Gazeteer* was the official Pakistan claim line until the recently concluded treaty with China.

frontier of Ladakh. The Indian representatives stated that in the letter:

> the British Government gave a description of the northern boundary of Kashmir with Sinkiang [which] stated explicitly in the context that the northern boundary ran along the Kuen Lun range to a point east of 80° Longitude where it met the eastern boundary of Ladakh. . . . If nothing came of the 1899 proposals, it was not because the Chinese Government declined to recognise the boundary according to the traditional alignment shown on Indian maps, but because even they did not seem to consider necessary any formal definition of what was a well-known and well-recognised boundary in this area.[5]

It is in the realm of what the British considered well known and well recognised that the Chinese could have made good use of the letter. The British, as has already been stated, felt that the boundary was so clearly defined by geographical features that it would not even be necessary to mark it out, and the border they then described gave China much of what it claims today. The Chinese delegates were satisfied, however, to put only to very slight use what might well have been the chief weapon in their arsenal. They limited themselves to asserting:

> that in 1899 the Indian Government had again proposed "to delimit" the boundary between Sinkiang and Tibet but none of these proposals had been accepted by the Chinese Government. The submitting of these proposals was in itself said to show that the boundary had not been delimited; and it was argued that the fact that these proposals were resultless showed that the boundary question had not been settled.[6]

The Chinese case has always been based on the contention that the border has never been delimited at all and that certainly unilateral delimitations made by the imperialists were not valid. In the *Sino-Indian Boundary Question*, published by the Foreign Languages Press, Peking, in 1962, the 1899 letter is again referred to and briefly discussed:

> The British Government proposed in 1899 to delimit the boundary between Ladakh and Kashmir on the one hand and Sinkiang on the other, but nothing came of it. It is also inconceivable to hold that the territory of another country can be annexed by a unilateral proposal.[7]

This last statement seems needlessly doctrinaire when applied to the contents of the letter; but perhaps it is made more intelligible when it is remembered that the line described in the letter included within China only about half of Peking's current claims in the Aksai Chin.

[5] India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Report of the Officials of the Governments of India and the People's Republic of China on The Boundary Question* (New Delhi: 1961), p. 55.
[6] *Ibid.* pp. 54–55.
[7] People's Republic of China, *The Sino-Indian Boundary Question* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1962), p. 55.

Nevertheless, greater flexibility might well have allowed the Chinese to maintain their position and to meet the Indians on their own ground as well. In analysing the Chinese use of the letter and in comparing the presentation of the Chinese and Indian cases in general, one is forced to notice the meticulous care usually taken by the Indian Government in preparing the historical data to support its contentions and the remarkably slipshod efforts of the Chinese. China seems to have agreed to an analysis of the historical background of the divergent border claims as a mere façade of moderation and reason. To China power and physical presence in the disputed areas made a much stronger case than historical precedent.