

India-China boundary conflict

An Essay on recent developments and historical context

Eastern Sector

The first of these disputed regions is Aksai Chin, located either in the Indian union territory of Ladakh or the Chinese autonomous regions of Xinjiang and Tibet. In the 1840s Kashmir was partly controlled by the Sikhs. The Chinese and the Sikhs signed a treaty on September 1842 on behalf of Maharaja Gulab Singh and the Lama Gurusahib of Lhasa, and the representative of the Emperor of China. This was one of the first agreements on our frontiers in the eastern sector. The borders are marked by the natural elements and there is no demarcation as such. It lies on the Karakoram Pass in the west to Pangong Lake in the east. The Aksai Chin area in the middle is largely undefined. In 1846 the British overthrew the Sikhs in the Ladakh region but both Chinese and British were satisfied with the existing boundary. W. H. Johnson, a civil servant, proposed the "Johnson Line" in 1865, which put Aksai Chin in Jammu and Kashmir. This was the time of the Dungan revolt when China did not control Xinjiang, so there is nobody to respond let alone resist this. Around the 1900s there were tensions in the British government that Russia might be the successor to China in ruling Xinjiang. Now Britain needed some sort of treaty agreement with China to avoid friction when the ruling changes. Here it had two choices either to push frontiers towards north up to Kunlun Ranges or pull back to give control to Chinese in these regions so that Russians are at distance. After thorough discussions among British scholars, the Macartney-MacDonald Line was presented in 1899. There was no response from the Qing government on this note.

In 1911, the Xinhai Revolution collapsed the central power in China, within the same decade World War 1 ended. Owing to these changes British government reverted back to Ardagh-Johnson (proposed in 1897 around the time of Macartney-MacDonald but didn't come to much use) alignment which is Johnson line with slight modifications. It didn't make any attempts to establish outposts or to discuss with Tibet or China regarding these changes. This area remained undemarcated at India's independence. After independence, India fixed on this Ardagh-Johnson line to be its western boundary. The same is not the case with boundaries to the west of Karakoram. They were settled by the countries based on the Macartney-MacDonald line. On 1 July 1954 Prime Minister Nehru wrote a memo directing that the maps of India be revised to show definite boundaries on all frontiers. Up to this point, the boundary in the Aksai Chin sector is undemarcated.

Western Sector

The second area lies to the south of the McMahon Line, formerly known as the North-East Frontier Agency and now called Arunachal Pradesh. In 1888 there were aggressions along the Sikkim border with Tibet. To settle this and few trade concessions Anglo-Chinese Agreement of 1890 was held. In this China agreed that they don't have authority over Tibet. Even after a series of discussions, the frontiers remained inconclusive. Following that, there was the Anglo-Tibetan Treaty of 1904. This treaty mostly concerns about no foreign power will influence or get benefit from the Tibetan government which the British do not already have. This is the time Britain feared of Russian invasion into China and Tibet (check the timeline with the western sector). China declared republican on 1 January 1912 and Tibet declared independence in 1913, so questions for a fixed border arose. As a result in 1913–14, Britain, China, and Tibet attended a conference in Simla. Chen I-fen (Foreign affairs, Shanghai), McMahon (Colonial Administrator, Britain), and Longchen Shatra (Prime Minister of Tibet nominated by Dalai Lama) are the plenipotentiaries representing each country. The discussions went on for more than 9 months. Several times the British threatened to negotiate separately with Tibet. The tripartite convention was initiated on 27 April 1914 but even before that on 24 March 1914 (in Delhi, not Shimla), the McMahon line was established concerning Tibet (with signatures of Britain and Tibetan plenipotentiaries only). The maps used in the march are large scale and show Tawang to be a part of India but those used in July are small and had a thick red line inked over Tawang and running along the crest of the Himalayas in the northeastern direction. It is also stated in the report sent to Britain from India that the Chinese were not probably aware of all documents finalized at the end of the conference. By engaging directly with Tibet, the British had violated the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 and the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1906. Even after all this Tibet continued to administer Tawang until World War 2 and the British slowly gained control. The McMahon Line follows the main watershed ridge that divides the Himalayas so it is a kind of a natural demarcation.

Conclusion and Recent Developments (both sectors)

By 1960 both governments were stable and the boundary disputes heated up. Indian prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru stated that Aksai Chin was a part of the Ladakh region of India for centuries and that this is not open to discussion with anybody. Countering that the Chinese minister, Zhou Enlai argued that the western border had never been delimited, that the Macartney-MacDonald Line, which left the Aksai Chin within Chinese borders was the only line ever proposed to a Chinese government, and that the Aksai Chin was already under Chinese jurisdiction. Both countries started friendly negotiations in the same year. Zhou stated that neither side should put forward claims to an area that is no longer under its administrative control and they would accept McMahon Line if India showed a similar attitude in the western sector. These claims didn't end well

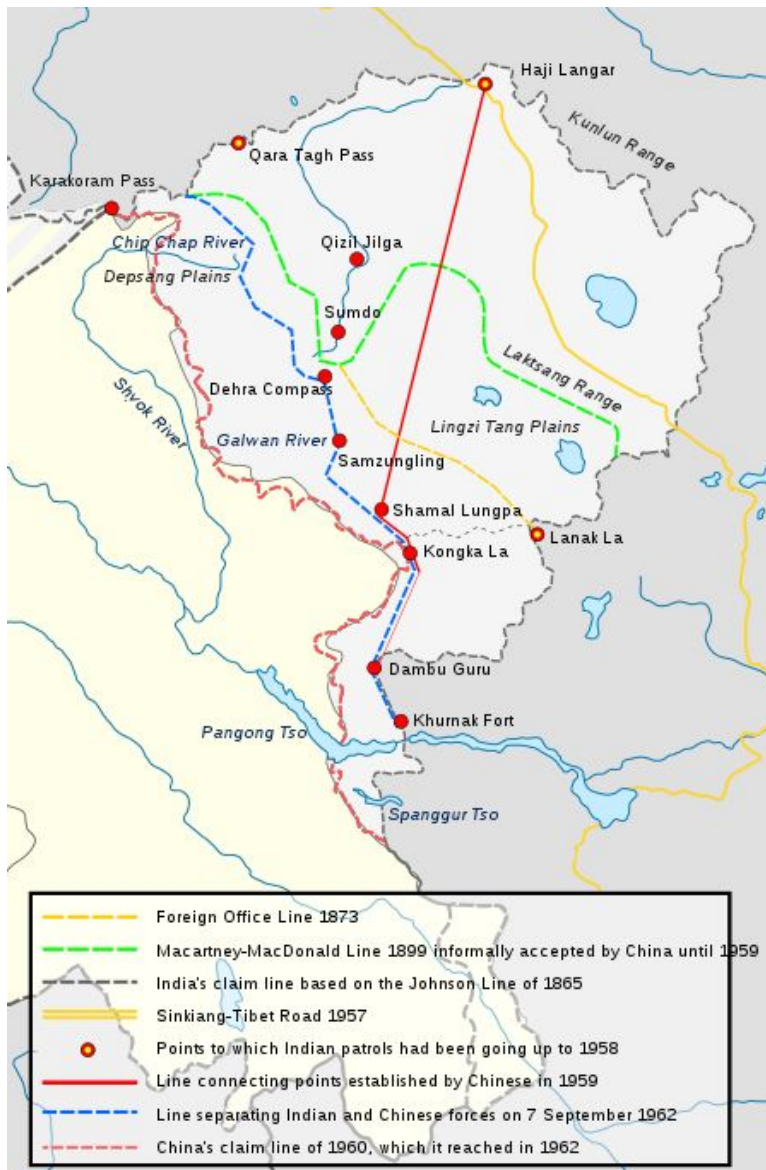
and resulted in the 1962 Sino-Indian War which was fought in both of the disputed areas. From then clashes, small or big kept on happening in both sectors. Some of them are -

- The Nathu La clashes on September 11, 1967, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) attacked Indian outposts in Nathu La
- On October 20, 1975, four Indian soldiers were killed in Tulung La in Arunachal Pradesh
- In September 2015, Chinese and Indian troops faced each other in the Burtse region in northern Ladakh
- On June 16, 2017, the Chinese brought heavy road construction machinery to the Doklam region and began building a road in the controversial area. India intervened within 2 days. On August 28, India issued a statement saying that both countries had agreed on an "expeditious disengagement" in the Doklam region
- In June 2020, Indian and Chinese troops became involved in a fight in the Galwan Valley, which was reported to result in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers. Claims have been made about the deaths of more than 40 Chinese soldiers, but these claims have been rejected by the Chinese authorities

In conclusion, these longing disputes owing to many factors like the geography of disputed areas, the gimmicks Britain played in fixing frontiers in the past, the dynamics that both countries have been through, current political parties, etc. As of today, both countries are economically dependent on each other (India is a huge market for Chinese electronic goods and finished products), more than ever maybe that will tune things in the right direction.

Maps





Sources

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