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Sino-Indian Boundary Dispute, 1948-60

A Reappraisal

This paper traces the evolution of Indian policy on the boundary dispute with China during the years 1948-60. It re-examines the revisionist claim that the dispute took hold mainly because Nehru had ruled out any compromise with the Chinese. The paper contends that such an interpretation does not adequately capture the nuances of the Indian approach. In particular, perceptions of China's territorial ambitions and India's relative weakness are critical to understanding India's stance on the dispute.

SRINATH RAGHAVAN

The historiography of the Sino-Indian war of 1962 has passed through three distinct stages. The earliest accounts viewed India as the victim of Chinese betrayal and expansionism. According to these the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was credulous and insufficiently alert to Chinese adventurism. In 1970, Neville Maxwell published his seminal revisionist account, which blamed Nehru for arrogance and obduracy in the face of Chinese efforts to seek a negotiated solution. Maxwell, however, overreached in attempting to prove that the Nehru government viewed the issue in the same terms as he saw it later. For an account of Indian decision-making, he curiously interpreted Delhi's actions almost as Beijing would have viewed it. The advent of the third stage can be traced to the publication of Steven Hoffmann's post-revisionist account in 1990. Drawing on extensive interviews, Hoffmann provided an important corrective to the revisionist thesis by capturing Indian perceptions more closely.

This paper aims to push the tiller further in this direction. In light of published and archival material now available, it examines the revisionist contention that Nehru had decided in the early 1950s not to negotiate the boundary: Nehru rejected the reasonable offer advanced by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai because he had set his mind against any compromise long ago. A note written by Nehru in 1954 is often adduced as evidence in support of this argument. This paper argues that such claims impart a misleading simplicity and fixity to what was a much more nuanced and shifting position. In particular, perceptions of China's territorial ambitions and India's relative weakness are crucial to understanding the stance adopted by the Nehru government. The paper traces the evolution of India's boundary policy in three phases: from 1948 through the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950 up to late 1953; from the signing of the Sino-Indian agreement on Tibet in 1954 to early 1959 when the boundary dispute came to the fore; and the period thereafter up to April 1960 when epistolary exchanges continued against the backdrop of border clashes, leading to the abortive summit between the prime ministers.

The Sino-Indian boundary is usually divided into the western, middle and eastern sectors. The western sector encompasses the area of Ladakh; the middle sector the boundary of Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh (UP) with Tibet; and the eastern sector the area called the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) – now called Arunachal Pradesh. The boundary dispute has spawned a veritable cottage industry of works examining its historical origins.¹ This paper does not propose to consider the merits of

either the Indian or the Chinese stand on the boundary dispute. For our purposes it would suffice to underscore some salient aspects of the British legacy.

The status of the boundaries at the time of Indian independence is clear from the maps produced by Delhi as late as 1950. The boundary in the western and middle sectors was marked "undefined". In the western sector, the British had toyed with a variety of boundary alignments in keeping with their perceived security requirements. Thus the Ardag alignment of 1897 included the Aksai Chin area within the territorial boundaries of India, whilst the MacDonald note of 1899 placed it within China. China's refusal to respond to the McDonald offer led the British to make further unilateral alterations as mandated by their changing perceptions. The undefined boundary in the western sector reflected the failure of British attempts to secure a frontier agreement with China. In the eastern sector the boundary was shown as conforming to the alignment formalised between the Indian and Tibetan representatives in the Simla conference of 1914. The McMahon Line, as it came to be called after the then Indian Foreign Secretary, was marked on the map of the draft convention and initialled by the Chinese representative. The Chinese government, however, repudiated the Simla Convention.

Independent India's policy towards Tibet was under sporadic consideration even before the Chinese civil war terminated. The contours of official thinking can be discerned from a note prepared in June 1948 by the Indian ambassador in Nanking, K M Panikkar. It stated that following British withdrawal India had become "in law the successor to British rights in Tibet". "The first and most important" of India's interests was the McMahon Line. Panikkar observed that though the Chinese had accepted the Simla Agreement of 1914 they had refused to ratify it. Hence, effective Chinese control over Tibet would mean "the immediate revival of claims against Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim and also the denunciation of the Macmahon (*sic*) line".² Indeed, the assumption that a strong Chinese government would seize Tibet and advance claims to the region below the McMahon Line appears to have been widely accepted.³

No sooner had the communists taken control of China did they announce their intention to "liberate" Tibet. India's policy was to avoid provoking China; but India would not give up its rights in Tibet, and would provide moral and material support to the Tibetan government. As the Secretary General of MEA, GS Bajpai, explained to the British envoy: "Chinese Communists, like any other Communists, reacted well to firmness but would exploit

any sign of weakness".⁴ This attitude, as we shall see, underpinned subsequent Indian policy on the boundary.

The Chinese invasion of Tibet in late 1950 was viewed with concern in Delhi. Bajpai felt that India would now have on its northern frontiers a "militaristic and aggressive nation".⁵ Nehru's senior cabinet colleagues shared these apprehensions. In a famous note to Nehru (probably drafted by Bajpai) Vallabhbhai Patel wrote that Chinese control over Tibet threw "into the melting pot all frontier and commercial settlements". Among other things, Patel warned of a weakly held north-eastern frontier with "unlimited scope for infiltration". He added that "the people inhabiting these portions have no established loyalty to India". Patel suggested a range of issues to be considered including redeployment of the army to protect likely areas of dispute; India's defence requirements; administrative steps to strengthen the frontier provinces; and policy regarding the McMahon Line.⁶

In the aftermath of the invasion, Nehru too began to have "considerable doubts" about Chinese intentions,⁷ but was not prepared to go too far in condemnation thereby "making it inevitable that a break should take place". Nehru elaborated his ideas in an important note.⁸ He conceded that neither India nor any other external power could prevent the Chinese takeover of Tibet. However, he discounted the possibility of an invasion of India as "exceedingly unlikely", for any such invasion would "undoubtedly lead to a world war". At the same time, there were "certainly chances of gradual infiltration across our border and possibly of entering and taking possession of disputed territory, if there is no obstruction to this happening". India had to prepare to counter the "infiltration of men and ideas". In the ultimate analysis, wrote Nehru, "the real protection we should seek is some kind of understanding with China."

Nehru's note delineated the various strands of India's policy towards China in the subsequent years. Underlying these was the realisation of the disparity in power between the two countries. India would strive for a peaceful relationship while simultaneously taking the necessary steps to safeguard its fundamental interests: preservation of its frontiers. This entailed taking measures to prevent gradual occupation of territory rather than preparing to meet an invasion. The assumption that infiltration would be the modus operandi of the Chinese gained currency because the peoples of India's frontier regions had ethnic, religious and cultural ties with Tibet and had remained outside the pale of administration during the raj. It was felt that their loyalties could be susceptible to the lures of communism or kinship: both of which could be exploited by China. Hence, it was important not just to establish check-posts to prevent infiltration but also to integrate the peoples of these areas with India. The economic and political advantages of being a part of India would have to be brought home to them. To examine these issues the government decided to form a committee under Deputy Defence Minister Major-General M S Himmatsinhji.

Presently, Nehru declared India's stance on the boundary in a statement in Parliament. The frontier from Ladakh to Nepal was defined "chiefly by long usage and custom". The frontier in the east was "clearly defined by the McMahon Line which was fixed by the Simla Convention of 1914... that is our boundary – map or no map". This categorical pronouncement was spurred by Delhi's concern to adopt a robust posture in defence of its interests: any sign of weakness, as Bajpai had observed, would be exploited. The emphasis on the McMahon Line stemmed from

two considerations. It is evident from Nehru's statement that India was surer of her rights in the eastern sector than in the west. Further, from the standpoint of security Nehru felt that the "main frontier was the Assam frontier".⁹ The importance attached to this sector led to the decision to occupy Tawang. As Nehru wrote later, "It was on our side of the McMahon line, but it had not been occupied by us and was practically under Tibetan control till then".¹⁰ On February 12, 1951, a Political Officer with an armed escort took control of Tawang amidst the clamorous ululations of the Tibetans. Beijing, however, did not respond in any fashion.

Himmatsinhji Committee

The Himmatsinhji Committee submitted its report in two parts in April and September 1951. Under the Committee's recommendation, the government sought to extend administrative cover into remote tribal areas of NEFA and to introduce economic and welfare measures. A road-building programme was initiated and check-posts established close to the frontier.¹¹ The Committee also seems to have suggested that in the sectors where the boundary was undefined, India should decide its claims, if only as a basis for negotiations. Having decided on its claim line, effective steps should be taken to prevent unilateral occupation of these areas by Chinese or Tibetans. In disputed areas, armed police might have to be stationed to prevent infiltration or intrusion.¹²

These measures apart, the Indians felt that they should try and obtain Beijing's acceptance of the frontier. Bajpai and Foreign Secretary K P S Menon thought that China's recognition of the frontier should form part of an overall settlement on Tibet: India should not withdraw her armed parties from Tibet without securing this. In January 1952 instructions on these lines were issued to ambassador Panikkar. When Panikkar met the Chinese premier the following month, Zhou Enlai spoke only about trade and cultural issues. Panikkar felt that Zhou was anxious not to open up wider issues, and ignored his instructions and remained silent about the frontier. In their next meeting too Zhou was reluctant to talk about India's interests in Tibet. He stated that they had been in Tibet for a short duration and had not yet studied the problem thoroughly. Instead he expressed desire for facilities to transport food supplies to Tibet via India.

Menon thought that China's attitude was "cunning". He wondered if the Chinese were "waiting to be free from their preoccupations in the North to be able to enforce a settlement in Tibet after their own hearts?" "Irredentism", wrote Menon, "has always played a part in the policy of the Chinese Government, whether Imperial, Kuomintang or Communists". A former Ambassador to China, he recalled

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.

Menon recommended that "we must firmly adhere to our decision that any such proposal ... can only be considered as part of a general settlement on Tibet".¹³ Nehru agreed with Menon that Zhou's response "does not carry conviction". He wrote to Panikkar that Zhou's request could only be considered in the context of a general settlement of India's interests, which were "not confined to trade relation but involve political interests such as affirmation of the Frontier".¹⁴

Following another meeting with Zhou, Panikkar reported that the "question of boundary was not touched and no allusion made to any political problems". Zhou, he argued, knew India's declared position; his persistent silence should, therefore, be treated as acquiescence in – if not acceptance of – India's view. India should stick to the stand that the frontier had been defined and there was nothing to be discussed. Nehru initially concurred that it would not be desirable to raise it "at this stage". Soon, he began to doubt the wisdom of such a course: "I am beginning to feel that our attempt at being clever might overreach itself. I think it is better to be absolutely straight and frank".¹⁵ Nehru's thinking was apparently influenced by a Chinese note stating that the existing arrangement regarding Tibet was a "scar" left by British imperialism. More importantly, Bajpai – now the Governor of Bombay – wrote to the Secretary General, N R Pillai, contesting Panikkar's stance. He argued that the McMahon Line could be one of the scars: China "may seek to heal or erase this scar on the basis of frontier rectifications that may not be to our liking".¹⁶

Meantime, Panikkar had completed his term in Beijing and was in Delhi. He managed to convince Nehru of the soundness of his point.¹⁷ Reviewing this decision in March 1953, Nehru felt that it was as yet not a suitable time to raise this question. "But if occasion offers itself and especially if any challenge to the frontier is made, then we shall have to make this perfectly clear".¹⁸ Nehru persisted with this attitude at the eve of negotiations with China over Tibet. The officials representing India suggested that the boundary issue be raised in India's general statement. Nehru declined, but importantly added that "this will have to be brought in in a larger settlement. In that settlement I should like to make clear our special position in the border States".¹⁹

Panikkar's advice and Nehru's acceptance of it have been sharply criticised by scholars. Even so sympathetic a historian as Sarvepalli Gopal agrees that Nehru succumbed to ill-considered advice. Nevertheless, Panikkar was not, as Gopal contends, rationalising "a shirking of unpleasantness". Nor was he trying to be clever as Nehru had put it earlier. Panikkar's point was that China was unlikely to accept the McMahon Line since successive governments had repudiated the Simla Agreement. In such a situation, they might offer to negotiate a fresh boundary, which "would not be advantageous to us". On the other hand, if China raised the issue India could stick to its stated position that McMahon Line was the boundary and there was nothing to discuss.²⁰ This last point has led most scholars to overlook the nub of Panikkar's argument: so long as China was unwilling to rake up the issue, India should utilise the time to make its position effective in the frontier areas, where its administrative hold was weak and its political position fledgling.²¹

In retrospect this decision was disastrous as India passed up an opportunity to settle the boundary issue. But in 1952-53, this argument would have appealed to Nehru for a variety of reasons. For one thing, it was widely held that China had latent claims towards territory along India's frontiers. For another, Delhi had received reports from its Mission in Lhasa suggesting that the Chinese were indulging in a "whispering campaign" that after Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan and areas south of the McMahon Line would be "liberated". Nehru himself thought that India had to be on the guard "for some kind of gradual spreading out or infiltration".²² For a third, although various steps were initiated in accordance with the Himmatsinhji report, there was not much progress.

The listless implementation of these measures was a periodic cause for concern to Nehru. Since October 1951, the UP

Government had been writing to him about the possibility of Tibetan incursions abetted by the Chinese and of the need to expedite the requisite measures. As late as February 1953, the issue remained mired in financial and bureaucratic delays. Nehru reminded his Home Minister that the matter had been "delayed very greatly".²³ The following month, the UP Chief Minister, G B Pant wrote directly to Nehru about disconcerting reports that Tibetans were likely to enter and take possession of a village. Pant knew of the existing proposals but observed that "no visible progress" had been made.²⁴ A few days later, Pant met Nehru and again conveyed his apprehensions about possible infiltration. The lack of progress in NEFA was also underscored by Joint Secretary T N Kaul following his tour of the region. Throughout, Nehru continued to issue instructions emphasising the urgency of the problem and the need to deal with it expeditiously.²⁵

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that Nehru sought to avoid pushing the boundary question to the fore. India was far from consolidating its influence in the border regions, and was ill-prepared to counter any efforts by the Chinese to take possession of these areas. If the issue became an openly contested one, India might be unable to defend its claims.

A crucial component of India's frontier policy was to adopt a strong stance and eschew any move indicating doubt or weakness. As Nehru explained to his ambassador in Beijing,

If we show weakness advantage will be taken of immediately. This applies to any development that might take place or in reference to our frontier problems...In regard to this entire frontier we have to maintain an attitude of firmness. Indeed there is nothing to discuss there and we have made that previously clear to the Chinese Government.²⁶

As part of this posture (and probably in pursuance of Himmatsinhji Committee's recommendations), it was decided in 1953 to publish new official maps, which would show the boundary between India and China as unambiguously delimited.²⁷ The crucial decision, in retrospect, lay in the Ladakh sector. Here the Indian Government decided neither on the ambitious Ardagh Line nor on the MacDonald Line, but a "compromise line which had some plausibility".²⁸ This line placed Aksai Chin within Indian territory. The Foreign Secretary, R K Nehru, later recalled that "in 1953, our experts had advised us that our claim to Aksai Chin was not too strong". The Prime Minister was "agreeable" to adjustments in "Aksai Chin and one or two other places" being made "as part of a satisfactory overall settlement".²⁹

Panchsheel and After

In keeping with his approach, Nehru instructed the Indian delegation not to raise the boundary question during the negotiations over Tibet: "If the Chinese raise it, we should express our surprise and point out that this is a settled issue". He openly stated that "our people have not gone there to discuss the frontier problem. It is not an issue at all to be discussed".³⁰ The agreement on Tibet was signed on April 29, 1954. India gave up its rights in Tibet and recognised it as a "region of China". These, as R K Nehru explained, were "a concession only to realism".³¹ Nevertheless, there were other points on which India had to give way. India wanted the treaty to be valid for 25 years while China wanted five; India had to settle for eight. The Chinese objected to mentioning Demchok (in the western sector) as a border point for traders, ostensibly to avoid mentioning Kashmir. Though the Indians felt suspicious, they had to agree to a formulation

referring to the “customary route”.³² Delhi was also keen to include the Five Principles or ‘Panchsheel’ in the text of the treaty. Nehru hoped that the acknowledgement of these would lay the foundation for peaceful Sino-Indian relations. But Nehru was not naïve. As he wrote:

In the final analysis, no country has any deep faith in the policies of another country, more especially in regard to a country which tends to expand...But whatever its urges might be, we can, by our policy, strengthen our own position and even curb to some extent undesirable urges in the other country.³³

Soon after returning from Beijing, TN Kaul wrote a preliminary note on the negotiations, wherein he recorded his misgivings. Kaul thought that the Chinese would attempt to push their claim lines along the frontier within the next five years: hence their insistence on this duration for the agreement. India should, therefore, establish check-posts at important points on the frontier to prevent Chinese encroachment. Check-posts should particularly be installed in areas like Demchok, which the Chinese appeared to consider disputed and towards which their attitude had aroused suspicion.³⁴

Nehru was already concerned about the sluggish implementation of these measures. A few months ago, a minister in the UP Government had drawn his attention to it. Chief Minister Pant had also written to Nehru reminding him of the urgency of the matter and the lassitude of the ministries concerned. Nehru had enjoined his officials to delve into the bureaucratic mess and to “get this moving”.³⁵ In this context, Kaul’s note amplified Nehru’s anxiety about the frontiers. Nehru agreed that India should establish check-posts at all disputed points and extend its administration to the border provinces. “We should find out how matters stand and try do something to expedite decisions and action”.

A couple of months after the agreement was signed, Zhou visited India. The talks between the prime ministers mainly pertained to international issues; neither raised any point about differences on the frontier. After Zhou’s departure, Nehru read the detailed report on the negotiations in Beijing and issued an important directive. He remarked that he was generally in agreement with the approach suggested by Kaul. On the crucial issue of the frontier, he wrote:

7 All our old maps dealing with this frontier should be carefully examined and, where necessary, withdrawn. New maps should be printed showing our North and North-East frontier without reference to any “line”. These new maps should also not state there is any undemarcated territory...

8 Both as flowing from our policy and as a consequence of our Agreement with China, this frontier should be considered a firm and definite one which is not open to discussion with anybody. There may be very minor points of discussion. Even these should not be raised by us. It is necessary that the system of check-posts should be spread along this entire frontier. More especially we should have check-posts in such places as might be considered disputed areas.³⁶

Revisionist scholars have argued that this directive conclusively proves that Nehru wanted to unilaterally settle the boundary issue on his own terms. To Maxwell, Nehru’s intention is clear: “India should fill out to what she considered her proper boundaries, and then decline to discuss them with China”.³⁷ Maxwell reached these conclusions based on a partial reading of the directive; by his own admission, he had access only to paragraph 8 of the document.

Read in light of preceding developments, it is clear that the intentions behind this directive were quite different. The disputed areas which Nehru had in mind, as he revealed in the next paragraph, were Demchok and Tsang Chokla: areas over which Chinese intentions were suspect according to Kaul. Nehru also wanted check-posts along the UP-Tibet border, which reflected his prior concerns regarding Chinese intrusions there. Moreover, Nehru carefully defined the tasks of these check-posts as to “control traffic, prevent unauthorised infiltration and act as symbols of India’s frontier”. The intent was prophylactic: to preclude the Chinese from infiltrating and occupying territory, so presenting a fait accompli to India. Nehru’s wider concern was to develop the frontier areas and integrate them with India. In short, his policy was to implement a hearts and minds programme whilst simultaneously taking minimum necessary measures to ensure that India was not caught unawares.

What about the revisionists’ claim that Nehru had shut the door to discussions on the boundary? We now know that Nehru had already been thinking in terms of a “larger settlement”, which would entail some concessions by India. It had suited India to wait for China to raise the issue. Meanwhile, India would make its conception of the boundary clear and assume a firm stance in backing these claims. The agreement on Tibet seemed to indicate that the Chinese had implicitly accepted the existing frontier; yet the negotiations suggested that they held a different conception of some parts of the boundary and that they might attempt to seize these. The situation confronting Indian decision-makers was thus one of great uncertainty about China’s claims and intentions. Hence, there was a need to adopt a commensurately unambiguous and resolute public posture by issuing new maps clarifying India’s claims and by treating the frontier as “firm and definite”. Nehru thought that India should not raise any question regarding the frontier, for that itself would suggest “some doubt on our part”.³⁸ Nonetheless, in the concluding paragraph of the note he directed that if Chinese maps continued to depict large swathes of territory claimed by India within China’s boundaries, Delhi would have to join issue with Beijing. If Nehru was indeed determined not to discuss the boundary issue why then would he think of broaching the question of maps with the Chinese?

Shortly after the 1954 agreement the two sides began to contest the ownership of a grazing ground called Bara Hoti along the UP-Tibet border. During his talks with Zhou in Beijing later that year Nehru indirectly referred to boundary alignment in Chinese maps. Zhou replied that China had been reprinting old maps. They had not undertaken surveys nor consulted neighbouring countries, and had no basis for fixing the boundary lines. Nehru replied that he was not worried about these maps: “Our frontiers are clear”. Despite the air of nonchalance Nehru’s unease was obvious: “supposing we publish a map showing Tibet as part of India, how would China feel about it?”³⁹ Interestingly, Zhou did not raise any question about the new Indian maps, which depicted a firm boundary in all sectors and incorporated Aksai Chin within India. The following summer the Hoti problem cropped up again. G B Pant – now the Home Minister – felt that the Chinese had “their eye on Hoti”. He wrote to Nehru that issue of defining the boundary in this area might have to be taken up, “but there is no urgency and it can well wait for easier days”.⁴⁰ Pant’s comments reflected the consensus within the government that the issue was best left for consideration at a later date.

By early 1956, there were reports that the Chinese were constructing roads on their side of the India-Tibet frontier. The Indian Consulate-General in Tibet wrote that these roads could be used for access to border areas and to take possession of these parts. To counteract this, it was essential to accelerate existing measures to "develope (sic) areas along our border, make roads, educate people and make them conscious of India". The note also called for check-posts closer to the border and mobile patrols to "ensure that the Chinese will not encroach on our areas".⁴¹

Nehru's principal concern was with Chinese maps claiming "quite a good part of Assam... Also, a bit of UP." He was apparently not much bothered about Chinese map lines in the western sector. As we saw, Nehru was amenable to compromise in this sector. He now began to reconsider the wisdom of waiting for China to bring up the issue. Zhou had not accepted India's version of the boundary explicitly and had only said that the maps were old. The continued publication of these maps together with petty border incidents and construction of roads in Tibet produced "a sense of disquiet". Though R K Nehru – Ambassador to China – thought that India should bide its time, the Prime Minister felt that "we shall have to take up this matter some time or the other".⁴² Later that year when Burmese Premier U Nu requested India's help in resolving Burma's boundary disputes with China, Nehru agreed to write to Zhou. He thought that India should not directly bring up the question of its own frontiers, but it might come up indirectly as the McMahon Line encompassed a part of Burma's northern boundary too.⁴³

Zhou Visit 1957

During his visit to India in January 1957, Zhou referred to the McMahon Line in the context of the Sino-Burmese boundary. Although China had never recognised the line, they thought "now that it is an accomplished fact, we should accept it". They had not consulted the Tibetan authorities and would do so. Nehru took this as a clear acceptance of the McMahon Line. He suggested that minor border issues such as Hoti could be settled by discussions between officials. Zhou agreed, but the discussions did not commence until April 1958.⁴⁴ Zhou still did not question Indian claims in the western sector though the Chinese were constructing a highway linking Sinkiang and Tibet passing through Aksai Chin. China, of course, regarded Aksai Chin as its territory. But, in retrospect, Zhou's silence on this occasion had deleterious repercussions: it lent credence to Delhi's perception that China had occupied Aksai Chin furtively and treacherously.

In September 1957, the embassy in Beijing drew Delhi's attention to an official announcement of the completion of the Sinkiang-Tibet road. A small-scale map of the road was also published, which suggested that the road might run through Aksai Chin. Years later the Director of the Intelligence Bureau (IB), B N Mullik, wrote that he had provided "enough information" about the construction of the road from 1951 onwards.⁴⁵ Whilst information was certainly received, available evidence suggests that it might not have been as definitive as Mullik claimed. The main sources were reports from the Indian representatives in Tibet, who were aware of the road under construction. Nevertheless, as late as February 1956, their assessment of roads being constructed did not suggest that the Sinkiang road might cut through Aksai Chin. Other sources like traders, travellers and Tibetan émigrés might have provided clearer

inputs. But, in general, these sources were not deemed reliable.⁴⁶ The Indians' awareness that their claims to Aksai Chin were not definitive would have further inhibited them from acting on uncertain intelligence. Thus, in September 1957, it was thought that the alignment had to be ascertained before any steps could be taken.⁴⁷

In early 1958 an intelligence patrol reported additional signs of Chinese activity near Aksai Chin. The IB recommended that a protest be lodged. The MEA thought that since the boundary in this area had not been delimited a protest would not be on firm grounds. The army took the view that the road was of no strategic importance and besides they could not oust the Chinese from Aksai Chin.⁴⁸ Nehru did not consider it feasible to protest without being much surer about the alignment of the road. As he wrote: "What we might perhaps do is that in some communication with the Chinese government in regard to the points in dispute which have to be decided we should mention the Aksai Chin area".⁴⁹ Clearly, Nehru did not believe that Aksai Chin "belonged" to India and was not open to discussion. It is important to note that he was willing to treat Aksai Chin on par with other minor areas in dispute like Hoti. In June, following further reports, the government decided to send two patrols to verify the alignment of the road.

Negotiations on Hoti were held in April-May 1958. The Chinese proved implacable and refused to provide the requisite information to make any headway. The Indians got the impression that the Chinese were unwilling to negotiate a minor issue or even make their claims clear.⁵⁰ In July 1958 the *China Pictorial* published a small-scale map depicting a large portion of NEFA, Ladakh and some parts of UP within the "approximate boundaries" of China. Delhi now sent a formal protest note.

In October 1958 one of the parties returned from Aksai Chin and confirmed that the road passed through Indian-claimed territory; the other appeared to have been intercepted. Accordingly, the Chinese ambassador was given an informal note on October 18. Besides asking for information about the patrol, it expressed surprise at China's construction of a road on what was "indisputable Indian territory". It concluded by stating that India was "anxious to settle these petty frontier disputes". Although India's claims were asserted, Delhi considered Aksai Chin a minor issue, and indicated its willingness to deal with it. In their reply, Beijing asserted that the road lay within their territory and informed that the patrol had been detained and sent back through the Karakoram Pass. India, in turn, expressed shock at the treatment meted out to the patrol. As for China's claim over the area, the Indian response read: "The question whether the particular area is in Indian or Chinese territory is a matter in dispute which has to be dealt with separately. The Government of India proposed to do so".⁵¹

The Chinese also handed a reply to India's protest about their maps. It reiterated what Zhou had told Nehru in 1954, and added that with the elapse of time and after consultation with neighbours and surveys, a "new way of drawing the boundary" would be decided. In the context of recent developments, Nehru was unwilling to abide with tenuous reassurances, and decided to write to Zhou directly. Nehru's intention was not to force Beijing to accept India's conception of the boundary but to get an affirmation that they were not claiming the vast areas shown by their maps.⁵² Nehru recalled that Zhou had told him in 1954 that the maps were old. In 1956, Zhou had made it "quite clear" that China proposed to accept the McMahon Line. China had now published

a map which depicted "A large part of our North-East Frontier Agency as well as some other parts" as Chinese territory, and had given an evasive reply to India's note. He felt "puzzled" since he had thought that there was "no major boundary dispute". Nehru made it clear that he would not be satisfied with an assurance that these were old maps. "There can be no question of these *large parts* of India being anything but India" (emphases added). Evidently Nehru was only bothered by the "large" areas shown within China's boundaries particularly south of the McMahon Line. There was no mention of Aksai Chin, for India had already conveyed to China that it could be resolved through discussions.

In his reply of January 23, 1959, Zhou stated that the entire boundary had never been formally delimited by any treaty or agreement. The matter had not been raised "because conditions were not yet ripe for its settlement and the Chinese side...had had no time to study the question". He averred that Aksai Chin had "always been under Chinese jurisdiction"; only recently had India laid claim to it. China could not accept the McMahon Line since it was a product of British imperialism and was illegal. Nevertheless, China found it necessary to "take a more or less realistic attitude" towards the Line; but had to "act with prudence" and needed time. Since the boundary was not delimited there were bound to be discrepancies in maps. China did "not hold that every portion of this (Chinese) boundary line is drawn on sufficient grounds". For the first time Zhou questioned Indian maps, "particularly its western section". To avoid border incidents Zhou proposed that both sides maintain the status quo.

The Indians were surprised but not alarmed by the letter. Apart from Ladakh, the Chinese had not explicitly claimed any area included in their maps. Yet the letter suggested that the Chinese held that their boundary line was drawn on 'sufficient grounds' at least in some sector – probably the western one, where their line ran further the west of Aksai Chin. Zhou's disavowal of the McMahon Line coupled with his guarded assurances might have appeared a slight retraction to Nehru, who believed that Zhou had clearly accepted it in 1956. Most importantly, the thrust of Zhou's letter was that the entire boundary was undefined and in need of negotiation afresh. The Indians, however, did not think that the boundary drawn by them had no basis at all.

Nehru's response of March 22, 1959 set forth the historical and geographical basis for India's view of the boundary. It is evident from his note that India considered its case for the McMahon Line unassailable and attached greater importance to this sector. In the western sector, a nebulous treaty of 1842 was cited in support of India's claims. On Zhou's suggestion to maintain the status quo, Nehru wrote that neither side should take unilateral action in support of its claims: "Further, if any possession has been secured recently, the position should be rectified". Nehru wrote this in connection with Hoti, which he claimed had recently been occupied. The note did not explicitly state that this proposal applied to Aksai Chin though India would do so at a later stage.

Why did Nehru claim a definite boundary in the western sector instead of acknowledging that the boundary had not been delimited? For one thing, his letter sought only to explain the basis on which India had drawn the boundary and did not claim that there was nothing to discuss further. Indeed, India had already admitted that the ownership of a part of this sector –

Aksai Chin – was disputed. Nehru was all along aware that he might have to compromise on the area. He would not have indicated this for tactical reasons. The talks over Hoti had shown that any negotiation with the Chinese would necessarily be prolonged and tough. It would, therefore, be imprudent to display eagerness to make concessions upfront, lest it encourage the other side to press further.

Border Clashes

In the following months the relationship between India and China deteriorated sharply owing to the rebellion in Tibet and India's grant of asylum to the Dalai Lama. In their quest to subdue the rebellion the Chinese moved their forces to the frontier with India in the east. The Indians, too, were engaged in fortifying their presence in these parts. By the summer of 1959 the two sides faced each other along a contested border in NEFA. Not surprisingly clashes occurred. The first of these took place at Longju towards the end of August with both sides accusing the other of provocation. Beijing rightly pointed out that Indian posts at Longju and two other points lay north of the McMahon Line as marked on the original maps of 1914.

Delhi's view was that whatever the disputes about the exact alignment of the Line at certain points the use of force was gratuitous. Nehru considered it "the culmination of progressive Chinese unfriendliness towards India".⁵³ In communications with China, India insisted that the McMahon Line was the boundary but expressed its readiness to discuss the alignment at contested places. Subsequently, India withdrew a post agreeing that it lay north of the boundary.

When the Longju incident occurred, the Indian government was already being questioned about the frontier on the basis of newspaper reports and leaks. Nehru was asked in Parliament whether China had refused to accept the McMahon Line. In keeping with his policy of not publicising these issues, Nehru tergiversated. He was also queried about the road through Aksai Chin. Nehru conceded that China had built a road, but said that although Indian maps showed the area within their territory the boundary was not clear. He distinguished between the McMahon Line and the boundary in Ladakh, which was not defined: "Nobody had marked it". It was an issue for discussion between the two sides.⁵⁴ At this point, Delhi was prepared to discuss specific areas "in dispute or as yet unsettled", but not the "considerable regions" claimed by Chinese maps. They held NEFA to be "indisputably Indian territory". Whilst they also claimed Aksai Chin, they thought the area was "very remote and uninhabited", and were considering what steps to take regarding it.⁵⁵ They were also awaiting a reply to Nehru's letter of March 22.

By this time, several MPs thought that the government had not been alert to China's activities, and that important information was being withheld. Nehru accordingly made detailed statements on the subject.⁵⁶ Following a request in Parliament, he agreed to consider releasing a White Paper on these issues. Nehru revealed his evolving position on Aksai Chin when he repeatedly stated that the boundary in Ladakh was not sufficiently defined and that Aksai Chin was a disputed area. He described it as a "barren uninhabited region without a vestige of grass", "peculiarly suited" for discussions. The road was admittedly "an important connection" for the Chinese. Ladakh, he declared, was different from NEFA: India would insist on the McMahon Line

boundary, but would discuss issues of interpretation of the line. In contrast the dispute over Aksai Chin was a "minor" thing. India was prepared to discuss it on the basis of treaties, maps, usage and geography.⁵⁷

On September 7 the first White Paper was published. The decision to release it was ostensibly taken to stem the tide of criticism, and to demonstrate that the government had not been complacent. This proved a major miscalculation on Nehru's part; for the paper only served to inflame parliamentary and public opinion, and brought the government under intense, unremitting pressure. Nehru was pushed to a position where his diplomatic manoeuvrability was severely curtailed. Henceforth he had to constantly assess what the political marketplace would bear, and only adopt those policies which could be conceivably sold to the public.

Nehru's problems were compounded with the receipt of Zhou's letter a day after the White Paper was released. Zhou correctly argued that the boundary in the west had never been formally delimited. But he claimed that the boundary shown by Chinese maps accorded to "a customary line drawn from historical traditions" up to which China exercised administrative control. This last point would be strongly contested by India. Zhou contended that Nehru had misunderstood his statements on the McMahon Line. He had only stated that to maintain amity and to facilitate negotiations Chinese troops would not cross the Line. He also claimed that the boundary in this sector as shown in Chinese maps was a "true reflection" of the customary boundary before the so-called McMahon Line came up; India had occupied this region only in 1951. Zhou wrote that he sought a settlement fair and reasonable to both sides, but would not let India impose its one-sided claims on China.

Nehru was taken aback by this letter. He thought that China's claims in the east were "fantastic and absurd", and could never be accepted. Having given evasive answers about maps and assuring him they accepted the McMahon Line, Beijing was not playing fair. It produced a "lack of confidence" in China's words and assurances. Indeed, China's claims were still not clear and left open the possibility of extending them further. On Ladakh, Nehru told Parliament on two more occasions that the boundary was unclear. Yet in his reply to Zhou, Nehru adopted a firm line. After laying out India's case for a "historical frontier" in all the sectors in considerable detail, he made it obvious that India would not entertain the latest Chinese claims. He also stated that talks could begin only after Chinese withdrew their posts "opened in recent months" at Longju, Spanggur, Mandal, and "one or two other places in eastern Ladakh". The letter did not call for a Chinese withdrawal from Aksai Chin.

Nehru's main concern was China's "demand for considerable areas, *more especially in the NEFA*". China's claims implied that they wanted to establish presence on the Indian side of the Himalayan barrier. If a foreign power managed to do so, India's "basic security" would be "greatly endangered". Further, the Himalayas were the most "vital part of India's thought and existence". Nehru felt that the Himalayas could not be gifted to the Chinese – a point which he had also made in Parliament.⁵⁸ Thus Nehru's unequivocal rejection of Chinese claims was based on considerations of security and nationalism.

Nehru and his advisors thought that Beijing had advanced these claims with the aim of realising "at least substantial parts of them". Officials in the MEA confided to the British envoy that

Nehru's "uncompromising reply" was actually "a bargaining position". Delhi was willing to make "some adjustments and concessions at various points".⁵⁹ Nehru turned down U Nu's offer of good offices on the same grounds: India would not agree to "absurd" Chinese claims and an effort by U Nu might suggest that India was anxious for a settlement thereby hardening China's stance.⁶⁰

Nehru's advisors differed in their assessment of Chinese behaviour. Some felt that it arose from the events in Tibet: China was behaving "aggressively without any long-term plan of aggression". A majority held a darker view. They feared that this might well be the "first stage in long-term Chinese ambitions to expand south of the Himalayas". These differences apart, MEA officials were convinced that they had been "wantonly tricked" and that China could "never again be trusted". Any settlement might only be temporary as the Chinese were likely to revive their claims at a later date when it suited them.⁶¹

Kongka Pass Incident

The pessimistic appraisal came to prevail after the Kongka Pass incident. On October 21, 1959, an Indian police patrol was apparently ambushed near the pass leaving five dead, four injured and ten captured. Delhi's appreciation was that the Chinese had crept forward and occupied empty areas in Ladakh (beyond from Aksai Chin) over the summer of 1959. Privately, Nehru still maintained that this was an "indefinite border". But he was now convinced that India had to face "a powerful country bent on spreading out to what they consider their old frontiers, and possibly beyond. The Chinese have always, in their past history, had the notion that any territory which they once occupied in the past necessarily belonged to them subsequently".⁶²

MEA officials thought that episode demonstrated that Beijing wanted to annex areas up to its claim line in the western sector. They were doubtful if the Chinese would want to "shoot their way through"; it seemed more likely that they would seek to fill any vacuum in Ladakh.⁶³

China claimed Kongka as a border pass and their version of the incident was diametrically opposed to India's. On October 26, Beijing issued a statement that if India continued to send its personnel across the boundary claimed by China in the west, the Chinese would have reason to come south of the McMahon Line. In a note to his ambassadors abroad, Nehru interpreted this as a minatory warning that unless India made a territorial concession in Ladakh, China would start trouble in NEFA.⁶⁴ In the aftermath of the incident, Nehru grew defiant. As he wrote, "we cannot agree to or submit to anything that affects India's honour and self-respect, and our integrity and independence".⁶⁵

Nehru's attitude also reflected the increasing pressure of public opinion. Addressing a public meeting after the incident, Nehru referred to the remarkable record of friendship with China and said that it had been "vitiated a little of late". India could not take any steps in "anger or passion" and had to bear in mind the long-term consequences.⁶⁶ The speech drew the ire of the opposition and the press, and a barrage of criticism descended upon Nehru.⁶⁷ In a speech delivered a week later, the placatory accent was muted. Nehru now spoke of Chinese arrogance and declared that "We will defend our country with all our might". Nehru was also confronted with increasing disapproval from his

own party. On November 4, he had a meeting with over a 100 Congress MPs, who importuned him to adopt a stronger line. Nehru explained that this would not just increase tension but would make any agreement with China all the more difficult. The MPs, however, were not satisfied with Nehru's explanations.⁶⁸ Nehru could hardly remain impervious to the mounting depreciation. He wrote to Vijayalakshmi Pandit that the main newspapers were taking advantage of the "high pitch of excitement" on the border issue "to attack all our policies internal and external, and to make me a target of attack". Criticism by erstwhile colleagues like Jayaprakash Narayan and Rajagopalachari also stung. Equally troubling was the attitude of some members of the Congress.⁶⁹

On November 7, Zhou wrote to Nehru that pending delimitation of the border the status quo should be maintained. To obviate further clashes, both sides should withdraw 20 km from the McMahon Line in the east, and "the line up to which each side exercises actual control in the west". Zhou also proposed talks at the Prime Ministerial level in the immediate future.⁷⁰ This proposal was unacceptable to India on several grounds. The army argued that pulling back 20 km from the McMahon Line was "absurd and unrealistic". The Chinese could approach the border by roads while the Indians had to traverse several mountain ridges; pulling back would be tantamount to handing over control of the passes to the Chinese.⁷¹ Delhi also felt that Beijing sought to equate India's possession of NEFA with Chinese control over Ladakh. They believed that the Chinese had come west of the Indian-claimed boundary in Ladakh only between 1956 and 1959. Further, they had not yet reached the line claimed by their maps. The Chinese idea of a "line of actual control" had no historical basis nor yet did it accord with ground realities.⁷² Besides, a mere 20 km withdrawal would leave the Chinese in effective control of most of the occupied territory.

In response, Nehru suggested that patrolling be suspended in NEFA. In Ladakh, he proposed that India should withdraw to the west of China's claim line and China should pull back east of India's claim line. Nehru would meet Zhou only if these measures were implemented. This proposal was unacceptable to Beijing; for it would entail evacuation of nearly 20,000 square miles and abandonment of the Aksai Chin road, whereas India would only have to give up about 50 square miles. Nehru was aware of the importance of the road to China, and in consequence had wanted to couple this proposal with an offer to utilise the area in Aksai Chin across which the road was built. Due to opposition from Home Minister Pant the offer had to be withheld.⁷³ Within a few days, Nehru managed to partially convince his colleagues. In a press conference and in Parliament, Nehru stated that as an interim measure India was prepared to allow the use of the Aksai Chin road for civilian traffic.

Nehru's proposals indicated a gradual hardening of India's stance on Aksai Chin. Hitherto, he had openly voiced his doubts about the strength of India's claims. After the Kongka Pass incident, Nehru was disinclined to concede anything to China under duress. This attitude was bolstered by the growing pressure of parliamentary and public opinion, which decried any hint of "surrender" of territory. At this juncture, the Director of MEA's Historical Division, Sarvepalli Gopal, returned from London where he had been studying the basis of India's claims in the British archives. Gopal thought that India had a sound historical case for Aksai Chin and conveyed it to Nehru; but it was only

in February 1960 that Gopal took Nehru through all the evidence and finally convinced him that India's claims to Aksai Chin were strong.⁷⁴ Available evidence suggests that up to this point Nehru was thinking of Aksai Chin as a bargaining counter. As R K Nehru recalled: "until 1960, we ourselves were not sure that the territory belonged to us and we were thinking in terms of giving up our claims as part of a satisfactory settlement". This policy had changed after a more thorough examination of India's claims to Aksai Chin.⁷⁵

The Nehru-Zhou Summit

Towards the end of January 1960, Nehru agreed to meet Zhou. The Indians thought that the correspondence was getting nowhere while a thick tension prevailed on the frontiers. In his missive to Zhou, Nehru stated that there could be no negotiations on the ground that the entire boundary was undelimited: "such a basis for negotiations would ignore past history, custom, tradition and international agreements". Underlying this position was the apprehension that if India gave up its stance that the boundary was a traditional one delimited by geography, custom and treaty, the entire border would be up for bargaining. It would open the sluice gates to completely arbitrary and variable Chinese claims all along the frontier. In view of past Chinese conduct Delhi felt that it could ill-afford to run the risk.⁷⁶ The earlier concerns about China's intentions were now buttressed by the conviction that the Chinese could not be trusted. These perceptions were given an edge by Nehru's belief that the Chinese leadership had personally deceived him. As Mountbatten observed, Nehru "was greatly shaken by their duplicity".⁷⁷ The pervasive suspicion of Chinese motives can also be witnessed in Delhi's reactions to China's boundary agreements with Burma and Nepal in early 1960. The Indians viewed these developments as arising from China's anxiousness to present itself as eminently reasonable in contrast to an obdurate India. Nehru himself thought the agreements were intended "to put pressure on us".⁷⁸

From the end of 1959, Delhi felt that Beijing might come up with a proposal whereby China would forsake claims south of the McMahon Line in return for India accepting its claims in Ladakh.⁷⁹ From the Indian standpoint this would entail giving up not just Aksai Chin but the entire area incorporated by the customary line up to which the Chinese claimed to exercise control. This solution was deemed unacceptable for a host of reasons. First, the idea of "barter", as it came to be called, was staunchly opposed by public opinion. Nehru acknowledged this when he reputedly stated: "If I give them that I shall no longer be Prime Minister of India – I will not do it".⁸⁰ It is difficult to judge whether an embattled Nehru was overreacting to public opinion. But we now know that his senior cabinet colleagues and officials also thought that he would be "out of office as Prime Minister" if he ceded territory to the Chinese.⁸¹ Domestic pressures on Nehru can be gauged from the virulent reaction in parliament and press to his invitation to Zhou for talks in Delhi. These were amply underscored by protests from the non-communist opposition parties prior to Zhou's visit, including the observation of a "no surrender week" and a massive demonstration staged by the right-wing Jan Sangh party outside Nehru's residence.

Secondly, Nehru himself felt that bartering would be incorrect given the manner in which the Chinese had used deceit and force to occupy the area.⁸² From February 1960 onwards, the Indian

government was convinced that it had a strong case and saw no reason to relinquish its claims in a deal, particularly when public opinion was "passionate against any concession whatsoever". Further, in March 1960 the Indian Supreme Court gave a ruling on the government's boundary agreement with Pakistan over the Berubari enclave, involving transfer of some territory to East Pakistan. According to the ruling, the executive did not have the authority to cede or accept territory: it would have to seek an amendment of the Constitution on each occasion. Such an amendment would require approval of a two-thirds majority in Parliament and at least half of the fourteen state legislatures. Given Nehru's emasculated political position on this issue, securing an amendment would have been very difficult.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, the Indians had completely lost trust in their Chinese interlocutors. They believed that even if they acceded to China's claims in Ladakh, it would not be a "final settlement". The Chinese would only be emboldened to advance additional claims later. As the Finance Minister, Morarji Desai, told the British Ambassador, Nehru and his colleagues were not prepared to let the Chinese make Ladakh "the thin edge of a wedge".⁸³

During this period, the Indians were considering other alternatives too. These discussions were held very discreetly, and were confined to Nehru, his senior cabinet colleagues and some MEA officials. The Indians sought to come up with compromise solutions that would not involve formal relinquishment of territory. The outlines of such an idea did not crystallize until a few days before Zhou's arrival on April 20. As late as April 1, Vice-President Radhakrishnan told the British High Commissioner, Malcolm MacDonald, that there would be "a breakdown" in talks between Nehru and Zhou "on the second day".⁸⁴ The internal discussions seemed to have proceeded apace in the next few days. On April 5, Morarji Desai informed MacDonald that the Indian government "fully appreciated" the importance of the Aksai Chin road to the Chinese and were prepared to assure them use of the area. "But this would have to be done without any surrender of Indian sovereignty over the region".⁸⁵

When Radhakrishnan met MacDonald a week later, Nehru's thinking on these lines had evolved further. Radhakrishnan made it clear that Nehru could not cede territory "if only because Indian public opinion will not tolerate this". India would want China to accept the McMahon Line. In Ladakh, if the Chinese would accept Indian sovereignty "in theory", the Indians would "agree to them remaining in practical occupation of the territory which they now occupied". They realised that the Chinese had established themselves there and were unlikely to get out; hence they had to "face facts". The right solution was thus for "the Chinese to concede to us the shadow whilst we concede to them the substance" of sovereignty in Ladakh. This was a significant shift in the Indian position. As MacDonald wrote, "This shook me". Asked if India would station any administrative personnel in the area in support of its sovereignty, Radhakrishnan replied in the negative. When MacDonald expressed "great surprise and disappointment" at India's changed stance, Radhakrishnan said that the whole idea was a "face saving" one. He reiterated that all faces could be saved if the Chinese yield the "shadow" while the Indians yield the "substance". Such an agreement may not be reached at this summit, but the Indians could reach a "tacit understanding" with the Chinese along these lines.⁸⁶

The talks between Nehru and Zhou were held over several sessions, yet they got nowhere. Zhou's position was that the entire boundary had to be negotiated with both sides maintaining the status quo. Although Zhou resolutely refused to accept the McMahon Line, the Indians understood that China would be prepared to freeze the status quo in NEFA in return for India accepting the Chinese claimed boundary in Ladakh.⁸⁷ The Chinese Foreign Minister, Chen Yi, also conveyed an impression that a new line could be agreed upon after joint surveys, not very different from the McMahon Line.⁸⁸ The Indians rejected such a bargain. As the Secretary-General N R Pillai explained, public opinion apart, "if they gave way now on this matter, it will only encourage the Chinese to feel that they were weak and to press even more ambitious claims later".⁸⁹ In the crucial western sector Zhou was unwilling to concede anything. He insisted that they had all along been in effective control of the area shown by their claim lines – a point strongly contested by Nehru. In such a scenario, the Indian idea of ceding control of occupied areas in Ladakh to China, in return for an acknowledgement of Indian sovereignty was a non-starter. The only point on which India assented to the Chinese proposals was on appointing a group of officials on both sides to examine the legal-historical record. The report submitted by the teams would then be considered by the prime ministers.

Conclusion

The Delhi summit was the last time the two leaders would meet to discuss the boundary question. As the foregoing account shows, Nehru refusal to accept Zhou's suggestions for a solution cannot be simplistically attributed to his intransigence or to a decision taken in the early 1950s not to discuss the boundary. Indeed, until early 1960, Nehru was open to negotiation and compromise on Aksai Chin, which was presumably the core Chinese interest. He was, however, unwilling to treat the entire boundary as negotiable. This position stemmed from long-standing apprehensions about China's territorial ambitions. Beijing's handling of the issue only seemed to bolster these concerns and convinced Delhi that the Chinese were not trustworthy.

Further, Nehru's willingness to accommodate Chinese interests in Aksai Chin suggests that a solution such as a long-term lease of territory could have been worked out. Here China's unyielding insistence that it had controlled the area for the last two centuries queered the pitch. In retrospect, this might not seem much of a concession. But given the pressures on Nehru from parliamentary and public opinion it might well have been the only feasible arrangement. None less than Neville Maxwell wrote in 1960 that this would have been the "logical solution", but it was not possible "since China has now simply annexed it (Aksai Chin) and killed Indian soldiers on its soil".⁹⁰ Maxwell, of course, was unaware that this was precisely what Nehru and his colleagues sought.

India's actions reflect what James Fearon terms the "commitment problem": if I agree now, and I am the weaker party, how can I trust that you as the stronger party will honour whatever agreement we reach.⁹¹ Thus the Indians felt that if they acceded to Chinese claims in Ladakh, Beijing would only be emboldened to press for further concessions in the future. Scholars have often claimed that by turning down Zhou's suggestions for a deal Nehru passed up an excellent opportunity to arrive at a settlement, which would have respected both sides' principal interests. Such

claims, however, are made in the full glare of hindsight. As the historian John Lewis Gaddis wrote, "Nightmares always seem real at the time – even if, in the clear light of dawn, a little ridiculous". EPW

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Notes

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- 1 Particularly useful are Alastair Lamb's *The China-India Border: The Origins of the Disputed Boundaries* (London, 1964); *The McMahon Line*, 2 Vols (London, 1966); *The Sino-Indian Boundary in Ladakh* (Columbia, 1975). And Parshotam Mehra's *The McMahon Line and After* (New Delhi, 1974); *An 'Agreed' Frontier: Ladakh and India's Northernmost Borders, 1846-1947* (New Delhi, 1992).
- 2 Note by K M Panikkar, June 9, 1948, FO 371/70042, The National Archives (TNA), London.
- 3 See for, e.g., British Embassy Nanking to Foreign Office (FO), August 18, 1948, FO 371/70043, TNA.
- 4 Report on conversation with GS Bajpai, United Kingdom High Commission India (UKHCI) to Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO), December 2, 1949, FO 371/76317, TNA.
- 5 Note on conversation with Bajpai, UKHCI to CRO, October 26, 1950, FO 371/84456, TNA.
- 6 Letter to Nehru, November 7, 1950, *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, Vol 10, pp 335-41.
- 7 UKHCI to CRO, October 26, 1950, FO 371/84456, TNA; Nehru to Rajagopalachari, November 1, 1950, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Second Series* (SWJN), Vol 15, pt II, pp 338-39.
- 8 Note, November 18, 1950, ibid, pp 342-47.
- 9 Statement, November 20, 1950, ibid, p 348; Nehru to B C Roy, November 15, 1950, ibid, p 341.
- 10 Note, October 27-29, 1952, SWJN, Vol 20, p 161.
- 11 B N Mullik, *The Chinese Betrayal* (New Delhi, 1971), pp 125-27; Embassy in India to Secretary of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1951, Vol VII, pt II, p 1692.
- 12 D R Manekkar, *The Guilty Men of 1962* (Bombay, 1968), p 137. Also see, Steven Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis* (Berkeley, 1990), p 24. Hoffmann is not entirely sure if the Committee gave directives regarding the boundary. Documents now available suggest that this section of Manekkar's book drew upon government sources. His citations of Nehru's directives are accurate paraphrases. Compare *The Guilty Men of 1962*, pp 138-39 with SWJN, Vol 25, p 482 and Vol 35, pp 515-16. Manekkar's access to official records is also confirmed by Maxwell, *India's China War* (London, 1970), p 13.
- 13 Note by Menon, April 11, 1952, Vijayalakshmi Pandit Papers, 2nd Instalment, Subject File 24, NMML.
- 14 Cables to Panikkar, April 12 and May 24, 1952, SWJN, Vol 18, pp 471-73.
- 15 Cable to Panikkar, June 18, 1952, ibid, p 475; Note to Foreign Secretary, July 25, 1952, SWJN, Vol 19, p 585.
- 16 Quoted in Maxwell, *India's China War*, p 76; Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru* (London, 1979) Vol 2, p 179, fn 64.
- 17 Note for Foreign Secretary and Panikkar, July 29, 1952, SWJN, Vol 19, p 651.
- 18 Note to Secretary-General and Foreign Secretary, March 5, 1953, SWJN, Vol 21, pp 555-58.
- 19 Note, August 30, 1953, SWJN, Vol 23, p 484.
- 20 Panikkar made these points in a letter to Bajpai in August 1952. Maxwell, *India's China War*, p 77.
- 21 R K Nehru, Oral History Transcript, pp 17-18 and 31, NMML, R K Nehru, a cousin of Jawaharlal, had taken over as Foreign Secretary in July 1952. He was closely involved with the formulation of the China policy at various points as Foreign Secretary, Ambassador to China and Secretary-General MEA. Also see, Karunakar Gupta, *Sino-Indian Relations 1948-52: Role of K M Panikkar* (Calcutta, 1987), pp 64-65.
- 22 Note by Menon (note 13 above); Letter to Chief Ministers, August 2, 1952, p 695, SWJN, Vol 19, p 695; Note, October 25, 1953, SWJN, Vol 24, pp 596-98.
- 23 Nehru to Sampurnand, October 31, 1951, SWJN, Vol 16, pt II, p 541; Nehru to K N Katju, February 13, 1953, SWJN, Vol 21, p 305.
- 24 G B Pant to Nehru, March 3, 1953, *Selected Works of Gobind Ballabh Pant* (SWGBP), Vol 18, p 396.
- 25 Note to Secretary-General, March 9, 1953, SWJN, Vol 21, p 308. Note by T N Kaul, April 21, 1953, Bisnuram Medhi Papers, File 2, NMML, Nehru's response to this note, April 24, 1953, SWJN, Vol 22, pp 235-36.
- 26 Cable to N Raghavan, December 10, 1952, SWJN, Vol 20, pp 488-89.
- 27 That the decision to publish new maps was taken in 1953 is from Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, p 25.
- 28 J S Mehta, 'India-China Relations: Review and Prognosis' in Surjit Mansingh (ed), *Indian and Chinese Foreign Policies in Comparative Perspective* (New Delhi, 1998), p 468. Mehta was the leader of the Indian team which examined the evidence on the boundary dispute in 1960.
- 29 Confidential Note, 'Our China Policy: A Personal Assessment', July 30, 1968, R K Nehru Papers, NMML.
- 30 Note to Secretary-General, December 3, 1953, SWJN, Vol 24, pp 598-99; Reply in Parliament, December 24, 1953, ibid, pp 577-78.
- 31 UK HC India to CRO, May 14, 1954, FO 371/110647, TNA.
- 32 Kaul, *Diplomacy in Peace & War* (Delhi, 1979), p 102.
- 33 Nehru to K K Chettur, May 9, 1954, SWJN, Vol 25, p 479.
- 34 The contents of this note are inferred from T N Kaul, *A Diplomat's Diary* (Delhi, 2000), p 64, and Nehru's comments on it in Note to Secretary-General and Foreign Secretary, May 12, 1954, SWJN, Vol 25, pp 469-70.
- 35 G B Pant to Nehru, February 17, 1954, SWGBP, Vol 18, pp 407-8. Note to Secretary-General and Foreign Secretary, February 20, 1954, SWJN, Vol 25, p 204.
- 36 Note to Secretary-General and Foreign Secretary, July 1, 1954, SWJN, Vol 26, pp 481-84.
- 37 Maxwell, *India's China War*, p 80.
- 38 Letter to Chief Ministers, July 1, 1954, SWJN, Vol 26, p 557.
- 39 Minutes of talk with Zhou En-Lai, October 20, 1954, SWJN, Vol 27, pp 17-20.
- 40 July 3, 1955, SWGB, Vol 16, p 267.
- 41 'Recent Developments in Tibet and their Effects on the Security of India' by S L Chhibber, in P N Menon to Apa Pant, February 3, 1956, Apa Pant Papers, Subject File 3, NMML.
- 42 Note to Krishna Menon, May 6, 1956; Note to Foreign Secretary and Joint Secretary, May 12, 1956, SWJN Vol 33, pp 475-78.
- 43 Note to Foreign Secretary and Commonwealth Secretary, August 26, 1956, SWJN, Vol 34, pp 385-87.
- 44 Record of conversation, December 31, 1956/January 1, 1957, SWJN, Vol 36, pp 600-01; Dutt, *With Nehru in the Foreign Office* (Calcutta, 1977), pp 116-17.
- 45 Mullik, *The Chinese Betrayal*, pp 196-99.
- 46 Note by Chhibber (note 41 above). Subimal Dutt (Foreign Secretary) to Apa Pant, May 1, 1956; Apa Pant to Dutt, May 7, 1956; Apa Pant Papers, Subject File 3, NMML.
- 47 Nehru's statement, August 31, 1959, *Prime Minister on Sino-Indian Relations (PMSIR): Parliament*, Vol I, p 100.
- 48 Mullik, *The Chinese Betrayal*, pp 200-01 and 205. R K Nehru also recalled that "the experts were doubtful whether a protest should be lodged at all". (Confidential Note cited in note 29 above).
- 49 Note to Foreign Secretary, February 4, 1958, cited in Gopal, *Nehru*, Vol 3, p 79.
- 50 Dutt, *With Nehru*, p 117; Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, p 35.
- 51 *Notes Memoranda and Letters Exchanged and Agreements Signed between India and China: White Papers* (New Delhi 1959-66, 8 vols) Vol I, pp 26-29. Unless indicated otherwise, all references to official and Prime Ministerial correspondence henceforth is from these volumes.
- 52 Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, p 36.
- 53 Nehru to Harold Macmillan, September 30, 1959, FO 371/141271, TNA.
- 54 PMSIR: Parliament, Vol I, p 70 and pp 85-86.
- 55 Report of conversations with Secretary-General and Foreign Secretary, UKHCI to CRO, September 1, 1959, DO 35/8819, TNA.

- 56 Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, p 67.
- 57 PMSIR: Parliament, Vol I, pp 101-4, pp 107-9, pp 123-24.
- 58 October 1, 1959, *Letters to Chief Ministers 1947-1964*, Vol 5, p 288 (emphasis added).
- 59 Report of conversations with Secretary-General and Deputy Secretary Eastern Division, October 10, 1959, DO 35/8819, TNA.
- 60 Nehru to U Nu, September 29, 1959 cited in Gopal, *Nehru*, Vol 3, p 98.
- 61 'Sino-Indian dispute' by High Commissioner in India, October 21, 1959, FO 371/141272, TNA.
- 62 Nehru's letter, October 26, 1959, *Letters to Chief Ministers*, Vol 5, pp 303-13.
- 63 Report of conversations with Secretary-General and Deputy Secretary Eastern Division, UKHCl to CRO, November 3, 1959, FO 371/141273, TNA.
- 64 *Times of India*, October 30, 1959.
- 65 Nehru's letter, November 4, 1959, *Letters to Chief Ministers*, Vol 5, p 322.
- 66 *Times of India*, October 25, 1959.
- 67 The *Hindustan Times* (October 26) wrote: "to go on talking of our desire for friendly and peaceful relations is to compromise the nation's honour, so brutally tattered already". According to the *Indian Express* (October 26), Nehru's attitude had begun "increasingly to dismay the Indian people and embolden the Chinese". The *Times of India* (October 26) called upon Nehru to remove "any Chinese impression of Indian appeasement". On October 28, *The Hindustan Times* bemoaned the "the present spectacle of our helplessness". It went on to say: "Mr Nehru has been a great symbol of national stability, but we must have real fears that his capacity to unite the nation behind him can in certain circumstances be seriously impaired".
- 68 Note on conversation with HC Heda, Secretary, Congress Party, November 5, 1959, FO 371/141273, TNA.
- 69 November 3 & 7, 1959, Vijayalakshmi Pandit Papers, 1st Instalment, Subject File 61, NMML.
- 70 Zhou to Nehru, *White Paper III*, pp 45-46.
- 71 Note on conversation with Chief of General Staff, November 10, 1959, DO 35/8820, TNA.
- 72 Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, pp 80-81; Dutt, *With Nehru*, pp 124-25.
- 73 Nehru to Pant, November 15, 1959, cited in Gopal, *Nehru*, Vol 3, p 103.
- 74 Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, pp 82-83.
- 75 'India and China: Policy Alternatives', nd, R K Nehru Papers, NMML. Also see document cited in note 29 above.
- 76 Dutt, *With Nehru*, p 131; Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, p 87.
- 77 Record of talks with Nehru by Mountbatten, May 13-15, 1960, DO 35/8822, TNA. This point was highlighted by other contemporaries too. See Oral History Transcripts of R K Nehru and Kingsley Martin and Dorothy Woodman, NMML.
- 78 Report of conversation with Commonwealth Secretary, February 8, 1960, UKHCl to CRO, DO 35/8821, TNA; Memorandum of conversation with Nehru, October 7, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-1960, Vol XV, p 567.
- 79 Report of conversation with S Gopal, January 9, 1960, UKHCl to CRO, FO 371/150440, TNA.
- 80 Cited in Maxwell, *India's China War*, p 161.
- 81 Reports of conversations with Secretary-General, N R Pillai, March 17, 1960; Finance Minister, Morarji Desai, April 5, 1960, UKHCl to CRO, DO 35/8822, TNA.
- 82 Ibid. Also see N R Pillai's views in Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, p 86.
- 83 Report of conversation with Desai (note 81 above). Also see Dutt, *With Nehru*, p 131; Gopal's views in Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, p 87.
- 84 Record of conversation with the Vice-President by MacDonald, April 1, 1960, FO 371/150440, TNA.
- 85 Report of conversation with Desai (note 81 above).
- 86 It is evident that Radhakrishnan was giving this information after speaking to Nehru. In fact, during the conversation, Radhakrishnan gave MacDonald a gist of the remarks which Nehru would make at the first session of discussions with Zhou. Record of conversation with Radhakrishnan by MacDonald, April 12, 1959, DO 35/8822, TNA.
- 87 Report of conversation with N R Pillai, April 25, 1960; Report of conversation with G Parthasarathy, April 27, 1960, UKHCl to CRO, FO 371/150440, TNA.
- 88 Dutt, *With Nehru*, p 127.
- 89 Report of conversation with N R Pillai, April 25, 1960 UKHCl India to CRO, FO 371/150440, TNA.
- 90 *The Times*, November 14, 1960. Curiously, Maxwell does not make this point in his book.
- 91 James D Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', *International Organisation* 49:3 (summer 1995), pp 379-414.

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