

McMahon Shanghai'd China

How Britain, Tibet and China actually chalked out claim lines at the 1914 Simla conference

Joe Thomas Karackattu



This week marks the centenary of a key attempt at defining and delimiting the India-China boundary in the eastern sector. The 'McMahon Line' was born on March 24, 1914.

Following collapse of the Manchu dynasty in 1911, China was determined to unify Tibet as a province. When Tibet used the weakening of central government control to declare independence in 1913, this was not matched by any constitutive independence. Dalai Lama's government lacked stability and recognition.

Britain, specifically Henry McMahon, then foreign secretary to GoI, had an interest in using this opportunity to secure a buffer between China and India. So when Tibet approached Britain for assistance to secure its boundaries from Chinese interference, the latter readily obliged by threatening China with the consequence of separately negotiating with Tibet.

Was it illegal to have Tibet participate in Simla in a tripartite conference? No. Only in April 1908, following British withdrawal from the Chumbi valley earlier that year, Tibetan trade regulations were signed and sealed in Calcutta by the British commissioner, the Chinese commissioner and the Tibetan delegate.

However, unlike in 1908 when the Tibetan delegate acted under the Chinese commissioner's directions, now the British aim was to make a hitherto bipartite

engagement with China into a triangular process. China was not happy with this.

But China agreed to negotiate settlement of Tibetan affairs under this 'tripartite' arrangement and notified the appointment of Chen I-fen, controller of foreign affairs based in Shanghai, as its plenipotentiary. McMahon was appointed to represent Britain, and Longchen Shatra ('prime minister' of Tibet) was nominated by Dalai Lama.

From October 1913 to July 1914, the Simla 'conference' deliberated on two themes – the status ('autonomy under suzerainty of China') and the limits of Tibet. Though China prioritised

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settlement of the political status of Tibet, by November 24, 1913 communication had been received from the Chinese government authorising Chen to discuss territorial limits of Tibet.

This was confirmed through several coloured lines drawn on a small-scale map (a modified Royal Geographical Society map of 1906) by the parties themselves – yellow claim lines by the Chinese, green by Tibet, blue and red for "inner" and "outer" Tibet respectively. On April 27, 1914 the draft of



China rejects McMahon Line as imperialist legacy

the convention was initiated by Shatra, McMahon and Chen.

What is curious, however, is that despite the three plenipotentiaries deliberating on the limits of Tibet until early July 1914, two other maps (along with exchange of notes) had been separately signed between Britain and Tibet earlier in March. Unlike the small-scale tripartite convention map, these were large-scale maps, signed on March 24, 1914 in Delhi (away from Simla where winter had set in then) by the British and Tibetan plenipotentiaries. Chen was not part of the process of negotiating claim lines on these large-scale maps.

Moreover, it defined the Indian boundary north of Tawang, unlike in the convention map of July 3, 1914 that had a thick red line inked over Tawang and running along the crest of the Himalayas northeastwards, bringing pre-

sent-day Arunachal Pradesh within Indian limits. On March 24, 1914 itself finality had been assumed by Britain and Tibet on the crucial matter of the boundary and the 'McMahon Line' was born even before the draft Simla convention was initiated in April.

China's response to McMahon Line and its application to the India-China border has been outright rejection on grounds of "imperialist legacy". This position is not entirely defensible. For nine months China was legally part of this process. Neither the principle of watersheds (for defining and delimiting territory) nor the purpose of the Simla conference itself was challenged by China. China's only objection was on what constituted "autonomous Tibet".

There is other spatial evidence that supports the McMahon Line alignment in the northeast. French explorer Fernand Grenard

who travelled both in Xinjiang and Tibet in the late 19th century, mapped areas (that presently constitute large parts of Arunachal Pradesh) as clearly non-Tibetan. A similar spatial depiction of this region is available in the 1918 New Atlas and Commercial Gazetteer of China, which also shows this region distinctly outside Tibet.

More importantly, China's claim closest to present-day Arunachal Pradesh was through Chen's claim to the 39 tribes or Jyade (loosely translated as a dependency of China). But that clearly does not refer to areas of present-day Arunachal Pradesh. This also implies that China's persistence in claiming the entire Arunachal Pradesh is about staking a maximalist position to secure a swap for the western sector.

Nevertheless, the process through which the McMahon Line was arrived at was almost slapped as fait accompli on China. McMahon himself acknowledges that the Chinese might not be aware of all documents executed in the conference. But his legacy rests on the underlying principle of watersheds as natural markers of boundaries. This was never really contested by China.

The eastern sector presents an opportunity to India and China to finalise the boundary based on settled populations and mutual accommodation (areas where the McMahon Line was modified by India). Current border management procedures only treat the symptoms of the problem at hand – not its etiology.

The writer is assistant professor at the China Studies Centre, IIT Madras.