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India-China Border Dispute: A Historical Enquiry on the Political Selection of Boundary Lines

The contestation of the boundary lines claimed by India and China resulted in the 1962 war and remains vexed unto this day. However, examining the boundary-making process reveals that the line each country claims as its 'traditional customary boundary' was not an unambiguous fixed one, and the line was mutable between the 19th and mid-20th centuries. For India and China, the lines emerged from a process of political selection, implying there is enough basis for new interpretations of 'reality' to be introduced to the conversations between the two on the boundary dispute.

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The India-China border dispute comprises areas in the Western Sector (proximate parts of Ladakh and Tibet, and a segment of Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir with Xinjiang), the Middle sector (part of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, with Tibet) and the Eastern sector (vicinity of Arunachal Pradesh with Tibet).² Before delving into how India and China came up with

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² Of these segments, the Middle sector is the least problematic and remained quiet even during the 1962 war.

their versions of the boundary line, it is useful to note the normative expectations of the Chinese, as far as their worldview on inter-state relations was concerned, “Under the wide heaven, there is no land that is not the Emperor’s, and within the sea-boundaries of the land, there is none who is not a subject of the Emperor.”³

The Chinese traditionally held on to a notion of a “universal state” ruled by a “universal emperor”, and this empire included the whole world known to it *rather than limited by geographical boundaries*⁴ (emphasis added). This empire was social in nature and distinct from a nation-state in modern terms of international law.⁵ This divergence in the world view was best reflected in the absence of a “foreign office” within the Chinese bureaucracy to centralise the management of foreign affairs, and it was not until 1861 that the *Qing* court began to recognise Western states on equal terms.⁶ This key divergence in the Chinese world view needs to be borne in mind while making a qualitative assessment of the boundary-making process as it evolved, or even the territorial claims contested between India and China subsequently.

For the British government, the boundary line in the Western sector evolved in the context of the ‘great game’ between Russia and Britain. In the second half of the 19th century, the British government was alert to the possibility of a Russian occupation of eastern Turkestan (currently southwest Xinjiang) that could bring the Russians closer to British territory. In terms of strategy, this meant that the British frontier should be defined northwards of the Karakoram, that is, along the Kunlun range to include places inhabited by tribes such as the Hunzas, Kokandis and Shimsalis, among others who, despite not being subjects of either India or China in the conventional sense, had some ‘dependency’ relationship with China, which ceased upon British intervention.⁷ Even the Qing government had stopped collecting customs from southern Xinjiang neighborhoods from 1832.⁸

³ Verses from the Book of Poetry (*Shi Jing*, *Xiaoya*, *Beishan* in Chinese) are quoted from Immanuel C. Y. Hsu’s translation in *The Rise of Modern China* (1975), 6 cited in Li Zhaojie (James Li). 2002.

⁴ John King Fairbank, A Preliminary Framework, in: John King Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations* (1968) in Li (2002) pp. 27-29.

⁵ Mark Mancall (1984), *China at the Center: 300 Years of Foreign Policy*, pp 13 and 14 cited in Li (2002) p 48.

⁶ The notion of equality with other states was missing from the Chinese worldview of their “universal state”. See Li (2002) p 53.

⁷ See Parshotam Mehra (1992), *An ‘Agreed’ Frontier: Ladakh and India’s Northernmost Borders, 1846-1947*, Delhi: Oxford University Press p 31.

⁸ Ibid.

Hence, it was in the context of this ‘Great game’ that the two main alignments to India’s northern boundary took shape. The northern alignment with the Kunlun range (also known as the Ardagh line of 1897⁹) was pitted against the other school exemplified by the “Macartney-MacDonald” line of 1899, which followed the Karakoram alignment for the northern frontier. The latter excluded Aksai Chin from India but retained a part (Lingzithang plains) in India, and this was the alignment communicated to China. This alignment overlaps with the 1890 *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladak* description of the northern boundary of that area as being bounded by the Lokhzung or Lak Tsung Range. As per British records, in the absence of a Chinese response to the 1899 boundary line, further modifications of the line were made in the western sector (in 1905 and 1912, chiefly coinciding with the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911). None of these lines were subsequently communicated to China.¹⁰ Besides the 1899 alignment and the Ardagh alignment, scholars such as Alistair Lamb¹¹ and AG Noorani have also noted the redrawing of the boundary in the north in 1927 where the Indian government resolved to abandon most claims north of the Karakoram watershed using a variant of the Macartney-MacDonald line that left out a greater portion of Aksai Chin.

China, on its part, regards these lines as products of ‘British imperialism’ but what is ironic, however, is that the then-Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai’s (1949-74) claim of a traditional customary boundary line for China¹² is not substantiated by the presentation of the boundary in this sector in other official maps issued by China (before and after 1949). A closer examination of these cartographic evidences reveals that the Chinese “traditional customary line” was not an unambiguous fixed one, and clearly the line was mutable from the early 20th century onwards.¹³

⁹ Ardagh was Assistant Quartermaster-General in the Intelligence Branch and the basis for this alignment (particularly in the eastern side with Tibet) were the surveys undertaken in the region by British officials and explorers without the Chinese side’s participation. The bulk of these expeditions were conducted when present-day Xinjiang province was restive due to Yakub Beg’s rebellion against the Qing dynasty in independent Kashgaria (1868-77) then. See AG Noorani (2013) (5th impression), *India-China Boundary Problem 1846-1947: History and Diplomacy*, Delhi: Oxford University Press: pp 37-44; and Mehra (1992: pp 42 and 43).

¹⁰ The 1899 line was the only officially communicated boundary line pertaining to delimitation of boundary, sent without an accompanying map.

¹¹ Alistair Lamb (1964), *The China-India Border. The Origins of the Disputed Boundaries*, (Chatham House Essays.), London: Published for the Royal Institute of International Affairs by Oxford University Press, 1964.

¹² In the map appended to Premier Zhou En-Lai’s letter to the leaders of Asian and African countries on the Sino-Indian Boundary question, 15 November 1962, in *The Sino-Indian Boundary Question*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, November, Enlarged Edition; 1962.

¹³ For a detailed examination see Joe Thomas Karackattu (forthcoming), “India–China Border Dispute: Boundary-Making and Shaping of Material Realities from the Mid-Nineteenth to Mid-Twentieth Century”, *Journal of The Royal Asiatic Society*, Cambridge University Press.

As for the boundary line in the eastern sector, that is, the Arunachal-Tibet border, the line emerged from the tripartite conference called as the ‘Simla conference’ convened at the request of Tibet – from November 1913 until July 1914. The process of arriving at this line was also complex. Sir Henry McMahon, then-Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, noted that acceptance by China for the tripartite conference in India was obtained by the “threat of a dual settlement between England and Tibet independently”. The nine-month long conference produced a convention in April 1914, initialed by the three plenipotentiaries.¹⁴ This convention was, subsequently, amended but the participants did not initial the amended convention a second time, rendering the convention document invalid according to McMahon himself. The proceedings during the conference also included a dubious back-channel negotiation between the British and Tibetan representatives unbeknownst to the Chinese plenipotentiary.¹⁵ This resulted in an agreement signed on 24 March 1914 between the British and Tibetan representatives – and what is known as the “McMahon Line” today was born even before the tripartite convention (involving China) was initialed on 27 April 1914.¹⁶

China did not record any objection to the lines dividing Tibet and India during the nine months it participated in the ‘Simla conference’, and neither did it contest the basis of the line vis-à-vis the southern limit of Tibet, even though the process of arriving at the “McMahon Line” may be questionable. The Chinese representative’s objections related more to the geographic limits of inner and outer Tibet – not concerning the alignment with India, and certainly not in the proximity of present-day Arunachal Pradesh. Contrary to the understanding that cartographic representations elsewhere, such as the *Times Atlas of the World* (mid-century edition; 1958), have supplanted China’s position on the boundary, *The Times Index Gazetteer of the World* (published subsequently in 1965) clarified the location of Aksai Chin in Kashmir with the geographical coordinates of 35.08 N and 79.45 E.¹⁷ It is fair to assume that a part of what comprised Aksai Chin was recorded as part of India, even though it may not corroborate the Indian claims up to the 80.30 E longitude line. Similarly, Tawang is listed in the gazetteer

¹⁴ Apart from McMahon, Ivan Chen (Chen Yi-fan 陈贻范; controller of Foreign Affairs based at Shanghai) was the Chinese plenipotentiary and Longchen Shatra (Prime minister of Tibet) was representing Tibetan interests.

¹⁵ Joe Thomas Karackattu, “McMahon Shanghaied China”, Lead op-ed in *The Times of India*, 27 March 2014, available online at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/edit-page/McMahon-Shanghaied-China/articleshow/32737251.cms>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *The Times Index-Gazetteer of the World*, London: The Times Publishing Co Ltd., Printing House Square, 1965. The Gazetteer preface notes that the volume provides an instant reference to ‘where or which country in the world the sought for location belongs’.

as located in “Assam, India” with coordinates of 27.34 N and 91.54 E¹⁸

While both India and China are currently using a mechanism of Special Representatives to resolve the vexed issue, the positions on both sides have hardened towards what appears to be an inflexible interpretation of boundaries. This was not always the case. Then-Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s (1947-64) own views were not entirely hardline, to begin with. On the western sector he held, ‘The actual boundary of Ladakh with Tibet was not very carefully defined’. Even Zhou Enlai conceded to Nehru before the 1962 war that, “we made no claim in the eastern sector to across south of the McMahon Line, but India made such claims in the western sector.”¹⁹ Then-Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping’s (1982-87) subsequent articulation that China “never asked for the return of all the territory illegally incorporated into India by the old colonialists after independence”²⁰ – clearly indicated a shift vis-à-vis China’s demands in the eastern sector. Over recent years, China has set up fresh claims over the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh (beyond just Tawang).

Today, each side holds on to its own interpretation of the boundary. An examination of diplomatic correspondences and cartographic evidences reveals what each side claims to be the “traditional customary boundary line” resulted from the creation of knowledge, beliefs, and norms in each country that altered the meaning and construction of the material reality of the boundary itself. The political importance of these lines does not lie in their being ‘true’, or in the claim being ‘real’ or even the lines being consistent – but in their being shared by a process of political selection and then being reified. The boundary lines were mutable between the 19th and mid-20th centuries, and that, in and of itself, provides enough bases for new interpretations of ‘reality’ to be introduced to the conversations between India and China relating to the boundary dispute.

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¹⁸ Ibid, p 838.

¹⁹ Zhou Enlai’s five points sent to Nehru on 22 April 1960 cited in Noorani (2013: 228).

²⁰ Cited in Neville Maxwell (2013), *India’s China War*, Dehra Dun: Natraj Publishers, (Revised and Updated Edition), p 509.