STUDY OF EMERGING DISPUTE AT INDO-CHINA BORDER

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I. INTRODUCTION

The border dispute between India and China is one of the most intricate and complicated issues in India's foreign policy. Undoubtedly, abrupt changes in the global power-structure and the India's emergence as an economic power calls for restructuring of the nation's foreign policy so as to maximise geo-strategic advantage through transparent initiatives and by exercising fresh options that foster national security implying peace on borders, control of internal insurgency and mutually beneficial understanding with key countries of the world.

All the three components are interconnected. In this context, this paper is an attempt to analyze the factors leading to increasing complexity of the border issue between India and China culminating eventually in the 1962 war and the need to highlight the need of fresh options and approaches for its resolution.

In the mid-20th century, China with other newly liberated states of Asia was faced with the task of converting traditional frontiers and inadequately defined borders into boundaries in order to establish its identity as an independent modern political unit on the model set up primarily by the western European states during their course of last three centuries. The fact that it had a vast empire whose territories were lost in the 19th century and after the II-World War had about a dozen states as neighbours made the task highly challenging. Thus even after tacitly abjuring irredentist claims to territories which once were part of the vast empire, the PRC (People's Republic of China) faced a large and daunting task: negotiating and renegotiating to achieve agreed and accurately defined boundaries with its border states contiguous with China over thousands of miles in 'often accessible territory charted primitively if at all.'

India too after independence in 1947 was faced with a very dismal and discouraging political scenario. The Mountbatten Plan provided for the creation of Pakistan succumbing to the communal demands and pressures of the Muslim League and thereby gave a severe jolt to the attempts of the INC (Indian National Congress) struggling hard to keep all threads of the country together and united. Again, the doctrine of the Lapse of Paramountancy had made 562 Princely States independent to choose their political future in effect thereby presenting a scattered, fragile and disintegrated sub-continent. Kashmir's indecision to decide its political option and Pakistan's attempt to seize it by force which culminated into the deadlock consequent upon the U.N.'s intervention aggravated the situation further. It is against this background that Indian national leaders were faced with a new reality in 1949 with the emergence of Red China replacing the Nationalist Government.

The status of the boundary at the time of India's independence along the Chinese border is clear from the maps produced by New Delhi as late as 1950. Four official maps showed the boundary from the Indo-China-Afghanistan tri-junction to the India-China-Nepal tri-junction as undefined, while all four depicted the MacMohan Line as the boundary in the east.) The undefined boundary in the western sector reflects the British failure to successfully negotiate a boundary-settlement with China. The frontier in this sector includes a large piece of territory known as Aksai Chin projecting out to the north-east. The altitude of this area over 16000 feet and the composition of its soil make it unfit for human habitation but has considerable strategic value for the Chinese as forming the shortest road link between Tibet and Sinkiang. In the eastern sector, the MacMohan Line came into existence in 1914 at Shimla which was accepted by India and Tibet but not by China though the Chinese representative at the Conference had not at any time complained the bilateral agreement between India and Tibet defining 850 miles of their borders. Independent India's policy towards its north-eastern border particularly Tibet was under sporadic consideration even before the civil war in China ended as it was felt that a strong Chinese Government would advance claims to the region below the MacMohan Line. For India, the maintenance of the MacMohan Line was crucial for the protection of her strategic interests as it had advanced India's border northward by some 60 miles from its then alignment beneath the foothills of the Assam Himalayas to the crest of mountains rimming the Tibetan plateau. Therefore the rift between de jure and de facto line was ended on Feb. 12, 1951 when Major R. (Bob) Khating evicted the Tibetans from Tawang. China interestingly did not protest at all though it had all along made its determination to "liberate" Tibet clear in no unambiguous terms which it did in 1951 establishing full control of Tibet. Indian leaders were particularly apprehensive about the north-eastern sector as the people inhabiting these areas had no established loyalty to, India and moreover had ethnic, cultural and religious ties with Tibet. Their
loyalties, it was feared, could be susceptible to the lures of communism and kinship; both of which could be utilized by China. Hence, it was held important to establish check posts to prevent infiltration while simultaneously making efforts to integrate the peoples of this area with India. This policy of the Indian Government was in no small measure guided by her perception of China as irredentist, militaristic and expansionist state\(^1\) and therefore a robust and firm stand on the border issue was required necessary vis-a-vis China. This stand was the guiding factor in Nehru's directive in 1954 to publish new maps replacing old ones leaving no undemarcated line.\(^5\) This line was to be non-negotiable and along with Nehru's refusal to Chinese proposals for a border settlement has been criticised as the "escalation strategy"\(^9\) by the revisionists' accounts.\(^6\) The new maps incorporated Aksai Chin within India in the western sector and were not protested by China at all, though, In the historical perspective, India's inclusion of Aksai Chin within her territories was open to question.\(^7\)

That China did not evoke any interest in holding discussions about the definition of the Indo-China boundary served only to create uncertainty and doubt about China's intentions in the Indian establishment during 1950s. In 1957 during his visit to India, Tho en Lai, the Chinese Premier, referred to the MacMohan Line in the context of the Sino-Chinese boundary that although China had never recognised the Line they thought that "now that is an accomplished fact, we should accept it". It was taken in India as a clear acceptance of the MacMohan Line by China. 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. This only lent credence to Delhi's perception that China had occupied Aksai Chin furtively and treacherously.

The difference between the two countries on border widened during the second half of the 1950s when China published her maps depicting "a large part of our North-East Frontier Agency as well as some other parts as Chinese territory". Tho held that the entire boundary had never been formally delimited by any treaty or agreement and averred that Aksai Chin had always been under Chinese jurisdiction; only recently had India laid claim to it. He categorically refused to accept the MacMohan Line as it was a product of British imperialism and was illegal though he found it necessary to take "a more or less realistic attitude" towards the Line. This development along with border clashes caused a mixed feeling of anger, despair and surprise in India. Nehru was not prepared to accept any large claim on the vast area along the border.\(^8\) It was felt that having given evasive answers about maps and assuring that the Chinese accepted the MacMohan Line Beijing was not playing fair. China's claims implied that they wanted to establish presence in the Indian side of the Himalayan border which, it was held, would greatly endanger India's basic security.

The relationship between India and China deteriorated sharply in 1959 following the rebellion in Tibet and India's grant of asylum to the Dalai Lama with consequence that by the summer of 1959, the two sides faced each other along a contested border in NEFA. China repeated its position in 1960 during Zhou's visit to India when it expressed the need to negotiate entire boundary with both the countries maintaining the status quo. The Chinese Foreign Minister, Chen Vi, conveyed an expression that a new Line could be agreed upon after joint surveys not very different from the MacMohan Line." But, by this time, the feeling of Chinese betrayal and duplicity had become so condensed in India that it was feared that any concession to China would only encourage the Chinese to press even more ambitious claims later. Nehru's resentment was based on two grievances- China never objected to India's maps and it extended its sway in Ladakh after the dispute became public in 1959." In 1961, N. Delhi adopted the "Forward Policy" establishing a military presence in the disputed Aksai Chin area. China's military response came in Oct. 1962. The short war ended when Beijing declared a unilateral ceasefire on Nov. 21 and withdrew to positions 20 km. behind the line of Actual Control (LAC) that existed in 1959. The War belied Nehru's unrealistic perception of war in the context of balance of power which evaded the concept of limited war and expected other countries to act as counterbalance to China in a possibility of war.\(^9\)

After the War, talks between the countries started in 1981 at the level of officials and ambassador level exchanges were restored in 1976. Since then, four agreements have been concluded on the boundary question:

i) Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas on Sept. 7, 1993;

ii) Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in the military field along the LOAC on Nov. 26, 1996;

iii) a Declaration of Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation on Jan. 23, 2003; and,

iv) an agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the Indo-China Boundary Question on April 11, 2005. But progress for settlement of the border issue has not been satisfactory for a number of reasons.

It is a fact that China has borders with fourteen nations and has settled border issues with all of them excluding India on the basis of mutual concession and accommodation. The Chinese approach to the boundary disputes is based on the premise that only political leaders can accomplish this objective. They simply laid down procedures for carrying out deals made earlier politically- with Myanmar on Jan. 28, 1960; Nepal on Mar. 21, 1960; Pakistan on Mar. 2, 1963; Mongolia on Mar. 26, 1963; Afghanistan on Nov. 22, 1963; the Soviet Union on May 16, 1991; Kazakhstan on April 26, 1994; Russia on Jan. 28, 1994; Bhutan on Dec. 8, 1998; Vietnam on
Dec. 25, 2000; and Russia finally on Oct. 25, 2004, and June 2, 2005. On July 21, 2008, China and Russia settled the last disputed points, namely, two islands at the confluence of the Amer and Ussuri rivers.6 But the within the Chinese establishment, there is a doubt about the will and ability of the Indian authorities to negotiate a border deal and then sell it to the public).17

At present, it is a fact that neither of the two countries can afford to engage in a full fledged war on the border issue but at the same time while China, due to its geo-strategic location, is in a position to cause enormous problems in Kashmir, the Uttar Pradesh border, Sikkim, Arunanchal Pradesh and Assam, a pro-Independent Tibetan policy actively pursued by India can create highly embarrassing situation for China internally and globally both. An important development in this context is the need felt by both the countries to improve overall climate before seeking to resolve the vexed question of the border-demarcation which has paved the way for initiation and enhancement of cultural, educational and scientific exchanges's while, economically, China has emerged as the largest trading partner of India. On the border issue too both the parties have agreed upon the idea of a comprehensive package settlement encompassing all the sectors', and work towards a political agreement avoiding excessive focus on historical claims and legal niceties. It is obvious that in a democratically functioning country like India, an environment conducive to border settlement is inevitable which itself requires evolution of political consensus followed by education of the public so as to make it acceptable on the basis of rational calculations.

REFERENCES
6. The expression was used to end any kind of doubt about complete sovereignty as against "suzerainty" implying autonomy subject to Chinese control over defence and foreign affairs.
7. Nehru said, "Whenever China has been powerful in history, it has been expansionist," quoted by Gini Deshingkar in "A Defence Strategy", Frontline, Oct. 22, 0999, p.89.
8. "Selected Works of Jawarlal Nehru", Vol. 26, p. 482. Stanley Hoffman mentions that the decision to replace old maps with new ones was taken in1953. India and the China Crisis, p. 25.
9. Huth Paul K. has described 3 strategies a state may adopt to deal with boundary dispute: i) a delaying strategy, II) an escalation strategy, and iii) a cooperation strategy, "Standing Your ground: Territorial Disputes and International Conflict", University of Michigan, 1996.
11. The Ardagh alignment of. 1897 included the Aksai Chin area within the territorial jurisdiction of India whilst the MacDonald note of 1899 placed it within China.
12. Stanley Hoffman, India and the Chinese Crisis, p. 36.
19. This is to be seen against the clash between India's "sector by sector" approach and China's stress on "comprehensive" deal during 1950s.