



# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Perceptions of India-China Border which led to the 1962 War



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### Introduction

The Editorial Page of the *Times of India* dated 22 June 2020, reads as follows:

*Leaders in Beijing must be wondering why Indians, who must have some chromosomes, still intact of their canny ancestor, Chanakya are so easily seduced by China's choreographed engagement overtures, and so inexplicably forgiving of its ruthless containment strategies.<sup>1</sup>*

From the first week of May 2020, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been active at few points along India-China border. While the debate around Galwan Valley and the Finger Area of Pangong Tso Lake gains prominence, it is important to understand the differing perceptions of the border which led to the 1962 War.

### Key Points

- The boundary dispute concerned the Western and Eastern sectors. China occupied Tibet in 1950. At that time, the Johnson Line was the boundary on the Western Sector and the McMahon Line on the Eastern Sector.
- On 2 September 1957, China's *People's Daily* published a small map showing a road linking Xinjiang with Tibet. Thereafter, India (to check the veracity) despatched two teams, who later confirmed that the road indeed existed.
- A letter was written by the then Indian Foreign Secretary which was not replied and this compelled Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to write to the then Chinese Prime Minister regarding the road on December 14, 1958. He also pointed out that China had accepted the McMahon Line as the border with Myanmar.
- Chinese Prime Minister replied on 23 January 1959 and stated that the border was not delimited and no treaty was concluded.
- The battle of letters continued and the Chinese Prime Minister later visited India from April 19 to 25, 1960. India wanted to restore status quo ante and China wished to maintain the current status quo. Therefore, no agreement could be reached despite protracted negotiations and finally, it led to India-China War of 1962.

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## Perceptions of India-China Border ...

India-China Border has a total length of 4,056 km. The Western Sector comprises 2,176 km, the Middle Sector 554 km, and the Eastern Sector 1,326 km. According to India, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is 3,488 km, while the Chinese maintain that the length is only 2,000 km.<sup>2</sup> While analysing conditions leading to the 1962 War, the dispute primarily concerned the Western and Eastern sectors. One has to go back to the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries for the genesis of the problem.

### The Boundary

The Western boundary essentially comprises the Ladakh region of India and the Aksai Chin region. The middle region extends from the Sutlej river to the border with Nepal. The Eastern portion commences at Sikkim and extends to Arunachal Pradesh. It is essential to note that the dispute stems mainly on the Western and the Eastern portions including the 1962 War.

The demarcation of the Western boundary commenced in the nineteenth century. One of the surveyors, who had pioneered mapping operations in Kashmir in the mid 1850s, was a junior civilian sub-assistant named W H Johnson. Johnson impressed Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Governor at Leh and surveyed the region up to Khotan. Johnson prepared a map of the area, bounded by Khotan in the North, the Chang Chenmo Valley in the South, the Karakoram Range in the West, and Changthang plateau in the East. He claimed the entire area as part of Maharaja of Kashmir's province of Ladakh. The issues raised by Johnson were further explored by Drew, Hayward, Shaw,

Forsyth, and others. In 1897, a British officer, Sir John Ardagh, proposed a line further north of the Johnson Line. In 1893, the British Consul General at Kashgar, George Macartney, on China's advice, proposed a boundary further south along the Karakoram Range. This was forwarded to the Qing rulers who did not reply. Thereafter, the Johnson Line became the border as far as the British were concerned.<sup>3</sup> The Indian government accepted the Johnson Line which included the entire region of Aksai Chin. The Indian government also referred to the Treaty of 1842 between Kashmir, China, and Tibet. In 1847, the Chinese government admitted that this boundary was sufficiently and distinctly fixed. Further, a Chinese map of 1893 also called the 'Hung Ta Chen map' shows Aksai Chin as Indian territory. In 1950, China built a road connecting Xinjiang and Western Tibet, out of which 179 km passed through Aksai Chin which became disputable.<sup>4</sup> India remained unaware of the road till 1958.

The Central Sector of India-China Border, from the Sutlej river to the border of Nepal is demarcated by centuries of usage and prescription. Both sides of the border were inhabited by civilised people. The movement of traders, pilgrims, and graziers across the frontier was frequent – enabling crossing points to be mutually recognised. This area, therefore, remained undisputed till recently.

The Eastern portion begins in Sikkim and extends up to the Lohit sub-division of Arunachal Pradesh. In 1826, Britain annexed Assam. Subsequent annexations in further Anglo-Burmese Wars expanded China's borders with British India eastwards, to include the border with what is now Burma. In 1913/14, representatives of Britain,

China, and Tibet attended a conference in Simla and formed an agreement concerning Tibet's status and borders. The McMahon Line, a proposed boundary between Tibet and the Eastern sector, was drawn by the British negotiator Henry McMahon on a map attached to the Agreement. All three representatives initiated the Agreement but China soon refused to sign the Agreement on a more detailed map – the initial Agreement was on a map with fewer details but on a map, with greater details, the Chinese did not agree. However, Tibet and British signed it as a bilateral accord on a detailed map. Neville Maxwell in *India's China War* clarifies that the issue remained unresolved, as China had disagreed to the same. It is often stated that the basis of these boundaries was related to history and the watershed of the Himalayas was taken to be the border between India and Tibet.<sup>5</sup>

### Exchange of Letters and Negotiations

It is indeed interesting to note how issues got exacerbated on the border issue. It was the Chinese who took the initiative to bring India-China boundary issue into a public debate. On 2 September 1957, China's *People's Daily* published a small map showing a road linking Xinjiang with Tibet. To check the veracity, India despatched two teams, who later confirmed that the road indeed existed. On 18 October 1958, the Indian Foreign Secretary complained, through a note to the Chinese Ambassador, that it was a matter of surprise and regret that the Chinese government had constructed a road through Indian territory without obtaining permission from the Government of India. There was no reply from the Chinese side and this compelled the then

Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to write to the then Chinese Prime Minister on 14 December 1958.

Nehru unequivocally drew Prime Minister Zhou Enlai's attention to the fact that he had accepted McMahon Line as the border with Burma and proposed to recognise the same with India. He also referred to the maps published by China, which showed portions of North East Frontier Province (NEFA) and part of Bhutan as Chinese territory. The Chinese Prime Minister replied on 23 January 1959. He clarified that India-China boundary had never been delimited and historically no treaty on the boundary had been concluded. It is important to note Zhou Enlai's views on the McMahon Line, which is as follows:

*An important question, concerning the Sino-Indian Boundary is the McMahon Line. I discussed this with your Excellency as well as with Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu. I would now like to explain [the] Chinese government's attitude. As you are aware the McMahon Line was a product of the British policy of aggression against the Tibet region of China and aroused great indignation of the Chinese. Judicially too it cannot be considered legal. I have told you it has never been recognised by the Chinese Central Government. Although related documents were signed by a representative of the local authorities of the Tibet region of China, the Tibetan authorities were dissatisfied with this unilaterally drawn line. Further, I have also formally told you about their dissatisfaction. On the other hand, one cannot of course fail to take cognisance of the great and encouraging changes. India and Burma which are concerned in this Line, have*

*attained independence successively and become states friendly with China. In view of the various complex factors mentioned above, the Chinese government, on the one hand, finds it necessary to take more or less a realistic attitude towards the McMahon Line and on the other hand, act with prudence and needs time to deal with this matter. However, we believe that on account of the friendly relations between China and India, a friendly settlement can be found for this section of the boundary line.<sup>6</sup>*

This was the first time that China stated about the boundary not being delimited. Nehru could have been patient as Zhou Enlai had stated that the McMahon Line was being considered. Instead, he responded on 22 March 1959 and clarified India's position, some points of which are enumerated below:

- The traditional frontier follows the geographical principle of the watershed on the Himalayan range.
- The boundary of Sikkim with Tibet was defined in the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 and demarcated on the ground in 1895.
- As regards the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir, Nehru referred to the Treaty of 1842 between Kashmir, the Emperor of China and Lama Guru of Lhasa, which mentions about India-China boundary in the Ladakh region. In 1847, the Chinese government admitted that this boundary was fixed. The area claimed by China has always been depicted as part of India on official maps.
- Further, he described the McMahon Line and stated that there was no dissatisfaction ever expressed by the Tibetan authorities.

Due to a rebellion in Tibet, the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai took some time to respond to Nehru's letter. The reply was sent on 8 September 1959. It may be pertinent to note that before his reply was received, a serious incident took place on 25 August 1959 at Longju in the Eastern Sector. In this incident, Chinese troops opened fire on the Indian troops resulting, in Indian casualties.

Zhou Enlai's letter stated that till the boundary question is settled, both sides should maintain the status quo and not seek to change it by unilateral action, and avoid using force. He further clarified on the issues raised as stated next:

- **Ladakh:** Zhou Enlai conceded that there was a peace treaty concluded in 1842. However, the Chinese Central Government at that time did not ratify the Treaty. Accordingly, the current Indian government stand is not acceptable.
- **Eastern Sector:** The Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai perceived the McMahon Line as a product of the British policy of aggression against Tibet. No Chinese Central Government had recognised it and it was, therefore, not legal.
- **Sikkim:** China refused to discuss the Sikkim Boundary with India.

The letter from China perturbed Nehru. He placed the entire correspondence in the Indian Parliament. This narrowed the scope for any political solution. Nehru, therefore, replied on 26 September 1959 with a detailed explanation of India's position. The major issues brought out are as under:<sup>7</sup>

- **Boundary:** Nehru agreed that India-China boundary has not been demarcated – there are areas where the demarcation was difficult due to constraints of terrain. The entire border has been either defined by treaty or recognised by custom or both. All Chinese governments have respected the border.
- **Tibet and Ladakh Boundary:** It is inappropriate to state that the Chinese government did not send anybody to participate in the signing of the treaty between Tibet and Kashmir in 1842. The Treaty was signed by authorised representatives of the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama. The Chinese representative was Kalon Sakon who was by birth a Tibetan but held a Chinese rank. Further, the Chinese government acknowledged the same in 1847. Official Chinese maps of the nineteenth century showed the boundary talked about by India.
- **McMahon Line:** In 1914, the Chinese representative participated in the conference on the border in Simla. The frontiers of Tibet with India and China were discussed at the Conference. At no stage did the Chinese representative object to the discussions on the boundary between India and Tibet. In these circumstances, the agreement which was reached between India and Tibet, which was known as the McMahon Line, was binding on Tibet and China in accordance with international practices. In fact, this was not the first time that Tibet concluded an agreement with other countries. Thereafter, the Simla Convention was published in the 1929 edition of *Aitchison's Collection of Treaties* and the McMahon Line was shown in the official maps from 1937 onwards. These

were circulated widely, but neither then nor subsequently was any objection raised by the Chinese authorities.

- Nehru concluded by stating that the border has not been demarcated and as a result, disputes regarding whether these places lie on the Indian side or the Tibetan side may arise at some places along the traditional frontier. In the interregnum, the traditional frontiers must be maintained and troops withdrawn accordingly.

It was clear that there were differences on both sides. Nehru wanted restoration of the status quo, whereas Zhou Enlai wanted maintenance of the existing status quo. This was soon followed by an encounter at Kongka La on the Western Sector. Nehru now admitted that India and China had fallen out and that even if some kind of peace prevails in the frontier regions, then it would be an armed peace and that the future appears to be one of continuing tension.<sup>8</sup>

Zhou Enlai replied on 7 November 1959 suggesting that troops of both sides be withdrawn 20 km from their border positions. Nehru felt it was a clever move as it would imply vacating from the NEFA which was inhabited. He replied on 20 November 1959 focussing on the Ladakh area, and suggested that Indian troops withdraw to the international border indicated by the Chinese and vice versa for the Chinese troops. The Chinese saw through the proposal and made a counter-proposal on 17 December 1959 for which there was no logical answer. They asked whether India was prepared to apply equally the same principle to the Eastern Sector, which entailed Indian troops withdrawing to the Chinese line

and the Chinese troops, north of the McMahon Line. Hereafter, Nehru declined to meet Prime Minister Zhou Enlai.<sup>9</sup>

Between September 1959 and March 1960, thirty notes, eight letters, and six memorandums on the boundary issue were exchanged between India and China, but these were of no use in resolving the complex issue.<sup>10</sup> Nehru would not give up and invited Prime Minister Zhou Enlai to visit Delhi. The visit took place from 19 April 1960 to 25 April 1960, during which China acknowledged the following three issues:

- A dispute exists regarding the boundary.
- There exists a LAC, up to which, each side exercises administrative jurisdiction.
- A settlement should take into account the national feelings towards the Himalayas and the Karakoram mountains.

India could not accept these issues. Acceptance that a dispute exists would lead to admission that there was no traditional boundary and the entire length would have to be delimited and demarcated. Further, the existence of the LAC would imply that China always possessed the territory on the Western Front in the Ladakh sector—an issue that India denied. The acceptance of a settlement on national feelings was the approval of a barter deal which India was not prepared to recognise and Nehru felt ours was a strong case.

The then Foreign Secretary, S Dutt sent a Circular Telegram to the Indian Heads of Missions after the meeting. The Telegram stated that the Chinese Premier had seven long talks with Prime Minister

Nehru. The views of the two governments remain as far apart as before. The Chinese stand was as stated next:<sup>11</sup>

- The Sino-Indian boundary is not delimited and has to be settled by discussion between the two governments.
- The Chinese will never accept the McMahon Line as a valid boundary.
- Ladakh has been traditionally and historically a part of Sinkiang in China and Western Tibet. It has never been disputed until India tried to extend her control during the last 1 or 2 years.
- Neither side should make a territorial claim as a precondition.
- A joint committee of officials should meet, examine the material in the possession of both sides, and make recommendations for border adjustments.

The Indian side disagreed with China on every point. The Chinese aimed to make India accept their claim in Ladakh as a price for recognition of the Indian position in NEFA. Throughout the discussions, they connected Ladakh with NEFA and stressed that the same principles of settling the boundary must govern both these areas. The only substantive agreement in the joint communiqué is that officers of both sides should examine the maps and documents in each other's possession and send a joint report to both the governments.<sup>12</sup>

Nehru explained the failure of talks with the Chinese to the Lok Sabha on 26 April 1960. He explained that our stance was that the Chinese had made incursions into the Indian territory, while their view

was that, they were always there. There was a huge gap between the historical and actual facts with no meeting ground.<sup>13</sup> Despite these setbacks both the prime ministers did not wish to abandon the effort to resolve the issue and agreed that dialogue must continue. It was agreed that official level talks will continue. Officials would examine, check, and study all historical documents, records, accounts, maps, and other relevant material to draw up facts for discussion.

The official level talks took place at Beijing from 15 June 1960 to 25 June 1960, and in Delhi from 19 August 1960 to 5 October 1960 and Rangoon from 7 November 1960 to 12 December 1960. India presented 650 items in support of the case, whereas the Chinese could marshal only 245 items. To any dispassionate observer, India's case appeared to be strong, whereas the Chinese case was based more on the insistence that the boundary had never been formally delimited and that it should be drawn up as fresh. The perceptions did not change resulting in the 1962 War. This is to give a perspective to what was the start point. The current position is being repeatedly stated by both countries.

## Conclusion

India-China conflict occurred due to Chinese' refusal to accept historical realities. Despite persistent efforts by the Indian Government to clearly state the aspects pertaining to the border, the Chinese had perceptions which grossly differed with the treaties, agreements and facts on the subject. China built a road linking Xinjiang with Tibet which was published by China's *People's Daily* on 2 September 1957. Apart from verification on

ground, India communicated to China in the form of letters at the level of Prime Ministers regarding the need for sticking to the boundaries. As both countries had differing perceptions, the Chinese Prime Minister visited Delhi from 19 to 25 April 1960 which did not help in resolving the case. This was followed by a series of diplomatic meetings which only widened the gap and ultimately leading to the War of 1962.

\*\* The excerpts of the letters exchanged between Nehru and Zhou Enlai has been taken from the book "1962: A View from the Other Side of the Hill" by Major General PS Sandhu.

## Notes

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