

LEAVING THE DOOR OPEN TO A BORDER SETTLEMENT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

Earlier this month, at the second informal summit between India and China at Mamallapuram, off Chennai (October 11-12, 2019), China's President Xi Jinping had told Prime Minister Narendra Modi: "In accordance with the agreement on political guiding principles, we will seek a fair and reasonable solution to the border issue that is acceptable to both sides." But a look at the past will show that the 2005 "Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question" agreement was a ray of light in an otherwise dim process of talks that began in 1981. It signalled that both sides had substantially converged their positions on the overarching principles that would guide a resolution. The agreement declared that a "package settlement" was the only way forward along with a mutual recognition that this would involve only minor territorial adjustments. Yet, the exercise got suspended in politics soon after and both sides have been unable to engage in meaningful negotiations. When they do decide to move ahead seriously, New Delhi and Beijing would do well to look back at history for the status quo has always been the key to a legitimate settlement.

It is now accepted that the frontier politics of British India had failed to produce a single integrated and well-defined northern boundary separating the Indian subcontinent from Xinjiang and Tibet. The legacy, however, was more nuanced across different sectors of the border. In the eastern sector, the British had largely attained an ethnically and strategically viable alignment via the 1914 Simla conference of British India, China and Tibet, even though the Chinese repudiated the agreement itself.

The underlying rationale for the British at the time was to carve a buffer around an autonomous "Outer Tibet" that would eventually fall under its sway. "Inner Tibet" was intended to stay within China's fold. While this attempted zonal division of Tibet never materialised because of Chinese resistance to the idea, the fortuitous by-product of this episode was the delimiting of a border alignment between India and Tibet that mirrors more or less the de facto position today. It is instructive that China's principal concern a century ago was not the precise boundary between Tibet and India but the borders and the political relationship between Tibet and China. This was natural as the Chinese, utterly weak at the time, were primarily concerned about the British extending their sway over much of Tibet. Anyhow, the McMahon Line became the border between India and Tibet.

In contrast, the legacy of the western sector was more blurred. This sector, the crux of the dispute, was never formally delineated nor successfully resolved by British India. The fluid British approach in this sector was shaped by the geopolitical goals of the Empire, and was never envisaged to meet the basic requirements of a sovereign nation state. There were almost a dozen British attempts to arrive at a suitable boundary. Most, however, were exploratory surveys by frontier agents reflecting British expansion in the north-west frontiers rather than a concerted pursuit of an international border. And they varied with British geopolitical objectives *vis-à-vis* a perceived Russian threat. For instance, when Russian influence reached Xinjiang, some British strategists advocated an extreme northern Kashmiri border to keep Britain's main adversary at bay. At other times, a relatively moderate border was favoured, with reliance even being placed on Chinese control of Xinjiang as a buffer against Russia.

The net result was that in 1947, no definite boundary line to the east of the Karakoram Pass existed. On the official 1950 map of India, the boundary of Jammu and Kashmir east of this pass

was expressed as “Boundary Undefined”, while the 1914 McMahon Line, the de facto border between Arunachal Pradesh and China today, was depicted as the boundary in the eastern sector. Hence, in effect, India and China were faced with a “no man’s land” in eastern Ladakh, where the contentious Aksai Chin lay.

Between 1954 and 1956, Jawaharlal Nehru engaged in several long exchanges with Premier Zhou Enlai in Delhi and Beijing but the border issue was mostly excluded from their conversations. New Delhi’s underlying assumption was that highlighting the border issue would re-open the whole question and provide the Chinese with an opportunity to make all kinds of claims. For Nehru, the 1954 Agreement that affirmed Chinese sovereignty over Tibet (but made no reference to the border) was seen as having “dealt with all outstanding matters and nothing remained...”

It is only in December 1956 that the eastern section of the border was raised in the context of the Sino-Burmese border. Zhou Enlai had then remarked that the McMahon Line was an “accomplished fact” and both agreed that the “minor” border problems with India should be settled soon. In early 1957, India invited the Chinese for talks to resolve those “minor” disputes. But that never materialised and was quickly overshadowed by an escalating crisis in Tibet. And China’s attempt to restore its authority in Tibet became inextricably linked with its attitude on the frontier with India. India’s fateful decision of March 1959 to provide asylum to the Dalai Lama dramatically transformed India-China relations. That year would also witness two bloody skirmishes on the border.

Both sides would henceforth perceive each other with deep suspicion and mistrust: India for China’s prevarication on the border, and China for India’s open interference in its domestic affairs. Despite the dramatic setback to the relationship, there was an opportunity to settle the border question on reasonable acceptable terms. It was at this crucial juncture of the crisis where Nehru along with most of the Indian leadership erred.

In April 1960, Zhou Enlai, during his last visit to Delhi, had publicly stated, “As China was prepared to accommodate the Indian point of view in the eastern sector, India should accommodate China in the western sector... We hope, that the Indian Government will take towards the western sector an attitude similar to that which the Chinese Government had taken towards the eastern sector... an attitude of mutual accommodation.” Translating this principle into practice would have meant China accepting present-day Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory in exchange for India accepting Aksai Chin as Chinese territory.

Yet, hobbled by fierce domestic opposition and his own emotional impulses, Nehru rejected a potential deal out of hand: “there can be no question of horse trading in this matter — that you take this and we take that.” In April 1960, Nehru’s response to Zhou Enlai’s suggestion of both sides renouncing all territorial claims is also instructive: “Our accepting things as they are would mean that basically there is no dispute and the question ends there; that we are unable to do.” This was despite Indian policymakers being aware that India’s claim to Aksai Chin was ambiguous at best. Nehru himself admitted this in 1959: “It is a matter for argument which part belongs to us and which part belongs to somebody else. It is not clear.”

In retrospect, the inability of the Indian side to countenance the swap principle was a missed opportunity that could have eventually settled the dispute and contained the escalating conflict in the ensuing years.

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