



The Mc Mahon Line

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Nowadays, it is fashionable to speak about the 'irrelevance of borders'. In October 2006, the Indian Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh spoke about his vision for Kashmir: *"We have to work to create a situation in which it is irrelevant on which side of the border the inhabitants of the area live, because goods as well as people can move freely. It is the only alternative."*

A few months earlier the Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf had also declared that a solution to the Kashmir dispute lay in making boundaries 'irrelevant'.

It is not the place here to discuss if the two leaders have a similar definition of the word 'irrelevant', but one does regret that in the eastern sector of India this semblance of goodwill does not even exist.

In November 2006, India was shocked when Sun Yuxi, the Chinese Ambassador to India claimed in an interview to CNN-IBN that he still considered Arunachal Pradesh as a part of China. His declaration coincided with the arrival of the Chinese President Hu Jintao in Delhi. Sun made it clear: *"In our position the whole of what you call the state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory and Tawang (district) is only one place in it and we are claiming all of that - that's our position."*

Though the Indian media has a tendency to forget the past hoping for a better tomorrow, the claim on the territories south of the McMahon

Line is not novel; in fact it has been renewed on the occasion of each important Indo-China State visit.

When Prime Minister Vajpayee journeyed to Beijing in 2003, the Indian External Affairs Ministry had to admit the transgression of the McMahon Line (also known as the LAC or Line of Actual Control) by a Chinese patrol on June 26, 2003, in the upper Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh.

At that time, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan denied any trespassing as *"China does not recognise the so-called Arunachal Pradesh mentioned by the Indian report."* He even counterattacked: *"Regarding the incident mentioned, after investigations, we have found that the Indian side crossed the eastern sector of the LAC."*

What is the history behind this McMahon Line? How did it become a bone of contention between the two Asian giants?

To understand the dispute, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of the 20th century. In 1903, Lord Curzon the Viceroy decided to start trading with a reclusive Tibet which obstinately refused to have any contact with the 'outside world'. Curzon was aware of the peculiar relationship between the Land of Snows' and China: *"We regard the so-called suzerainty of China over Tibet as a constitutional fiction, a political affectation which has been maintained because of its convenience to both parties."*

The question was how to open a dialogue with the recalcitrant Tibetans? Curzon suggested to London that a 'trade' mission could be sent to Tibet under military escort to 'negotiate' a trade agreement. This is the background of the Younghusband expedition of 1904 which ended by a bilateral Convention signed in Lhasa between Tibet and British India.

In signing this treaty with the Crown Representative, Tibet was 'acknowledged' by London as a separate nation. However political deals are never simple; Tibet's Western neighbour, China, was extremely unhappy not to be a party to the accord.

Ten years later (March 1914), wanting to show fairness, London called for a tripartite Conference in Simla to settle the issue: the three main protagonists sat together for several months in the pleasant surroundings of the Indian hill station.

The main dispute between Tibet and China (with British India being the referee) was the Sino-Tibetan border which had never been fixed and had been fluctuating over the centuries. As the proceedings were taking longer than expected, the Tibetan and the British delegates took the opportunity to define their own borders between the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) of British India and Tibet.

Contrary to the view prevailing in India today, the Chinese were not invited to discuss the question of the border between India and Tibet and their acceptance of the McMahon Line was never sought; nor did they protest or complain about the final demarcation.

Through an exchange of notes and a map between the British and Tibetan Plenipotentiaries, the Indo-Tibet frontier was demarked. On March 24, 1914, Sir Henry McMahon, the British Plenipotentiary made an official proposal to Lonchen Shatra, his Tibetan counterpart and the next day, Lonchen Shatra officially replied: *"As it was feared that there might be friction in future unless the boundary between India and Tibet is clearly defined, I submitted the map, which you sent to me in February last, to the Tibetan Government at Lhasa for orders. I have now received orders from Lhasa, and I accordingly agree to the boundary as marked in red in the two copies of the maps signed by you."*

Thus was born the McMahon Line in the form of a fat red line.

The result of the Simla Conference was not fully satisfactory as the Chinese only initialized the main document and did not ratify it, but the Convention itself had no implications on the demarcation of the border between Tibet and India.

On 15th August 1947, India became an independent nation and inherited all the treaties signed by British India with her neighbours. The McMahon Line became the border between India and Tibet and the NEFA, an integral part of the Union of India administered by the Ministry of External Affairs with the Governor of Assam acting as agent to the President of India (the area became a Union Territory in 1972 and a full State of the Union in 1987).

However on October 7, 1950, an event changed the course of the history of the region: Chinese troops entered Eastern Tibet to, in Mao's words, 'liberate' the Roof of the World. For India, which feebly reacted to the advance of the People's Liberation Army, the consequences were dramatic. She now had a new neighbour, a China which believed in the power coming from the barrel of the gun, while Tibet had always sworn by the Buddhist principles of ahimsa.

Though in April 1954, an 'Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India,' known as the 'Panchsheel Agreement' was signed between Beijing and Delhi, the McMahon Line did not figure in the talks. It was not a contentious issue then.

At the end of 1956, Zhou Enlai, the Chinese Premier visited Delhi thrice in just two months. Jawaharlal Nehru had long discussions with his Chinese counterpart. Surprisingly, Zhou told Nehru: *"I knew nothing about McMahon Line until recently."* He added something which can appear astonishing today: *"We studied this question and*

although this Line was never recognised by us, still apparently there was a secret pact between Britain and Tibet and it was announced at the time of the Simla Conference. And now that it is an accomplished fact, we should accept it. But we have not consulted Tibet so far."

Strangely Zhou Enlai put the question on the Tibetans: *"But now we think that we should try to persuade and convince Tibetans to accept it. So, although the question is still undecided and it is unfair to us, still we feel that there is no better way than to recognise this Line."*

Clearly in 1956-57, China had no problem with the Line as a border.

It might have been true that some Tibetan officials dreamt to 'get back' these Buddhist areas to form a Greater Tibet, but this could not in any case change the terms of the bi-lateral agreement signed by their government in 1914.

Once the Dalai Lama told us this story: *"About Tawang in NEFA area, I remember that around 1948/49, I heard that an [emergency meeting] of the Tibetan National Assembly was taking place. The session was called because some Indian troops had entered Tawang area. The Tibetan government wanted to protest... Although in 1914 at Simla the border was already demarked and [a convention] was signed, perhaps most of the Tibetans did know that (laughing).*

When some Indian officials came [in Tawang], Tibetan officials told them: "This is our land" (laughing). They did not know that the [Tibetan] Government had already decided in 1914. Such a wonderful Government! (the Dalai Lama kept on laughing)"

Going through the correspondence between Nehru and Zhou Enlai, one understands why the Chinese began claiming NEFA in 1958/59.

What triggered the claim was the protest from Delhi against the building of a road in the Aksai Chin region of Ladakh. This strategic road cutting across the Indian territory and linking Tibet and Xinjiang

was of great importance to China. Though built in the mid-fifties, it was 'officially' discovered by Delhi only in 1958. After the Indian Ministry of External Affairs lodged a strong protest to China, Beijing suddenly remembered that the McMahon Line in the Western sector was not 'settled'.

In December 1958, when Nehru reminded his Chinese counterpart that in 1956 *"you proposed to recognise this border with India"*, Zhou Enlai soon replied: *"As you are aware, the 'McMahon Line' was a product of the British policy of aggression against the Tibet region of China and aroused the great indignation of the Chinese people. Juridically, too, it cannot be considered legal. I have told you that it has never been recognised by the Chinese Central Government."*

From that time Beijing has stuck to its position: the 1030 kms long border has not been accepted. However it was clear during the 5-rounds of negotiations between India and China in 1960 that the only objective of the Chinese for changing their stand was to have a bargaining chip for the Aksai Chin occupied by them: *"Recognize our occupation of this remote part of Ladakh and we will acknowledge that Arunachal belongs to India"*.

On October 20, 1962, the slopes of Taghla ridge, the western most part of the McMahon Line witnessed a massive attack from the People's Liberation Army. The McMahon Line was again in the news for what has remained one of the most traumatic events of Independent India.

Fifty years later, Ambassador Sun reiterates the old claim for the same purpose: to have something to barter with against the Aksai Chin during the regularly held border talks between China and India.

A more amusing argument used by the Chinese to establish their claim on Arunachal is the fact that the Sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyaltso

(meaning the Precious Ocean of Pure Melody) was born in 1643 in Monyul, today known as Tawang

The Dalai Lama lived his first years in a small hamlet called Ugyeling. Even today, near the local temple there is a tall, magnificent tree (probably sandal wood) around which many legends revolve; some say that this tree was planted by the Sixth Dalai Lama before being taken away to his destiny in Lhasa. He had then prophesied that when the three main branches would become equal, he would come back to Tawang. The local Lama says that the three branches reached the same size in 1959, a few months before the Dalai Lama, fleeing Tibet after the Chinese invasion, crossed the McMahon Line and reached Tawang. He had returned to Ugyeling 'again'.

The Sixth Dalai Lama became one of the greatest poets of the Land of Snows. Consistently refusing to take the monastic vows, he preferred pleasures of life, visiting at night the taverns below his Potala Palace and writing love songs to his lady friends. His exquisite poetry is still today sung in Tibet and the Himalayan region during long winter evenings around a fire and after several cups of chang, the local barley beer.

But this is a distant past. In December 2006, Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche, the Tibetan 'prime minister in exile' reiterated: *"Tawang was part of Tibet before the McMahon Line was drawn, delineating the Indo-Tibet border. However, it became part of India once the McMahon Line came into existence"*.

The McMahon line is very much relevant today, whether the Chinese Ambassador accepts it or not.