

Nehru gave away Aksai Chin to China¹

The Special Representatives (SR) of India and China will hold the 16th round of talks on their disputed border.

Not much has been achieved so far; the best proof was of this that the Chinese could walk into India's territory with impunity, pitch their tents for 3 weeks in Depsang Plains in the vicinity of the Karakoram pass in Ladakh and go back without any serious consequences on Sino-Indian relations.

The SR's meet could be routine if it was not for the appointment of a new Chinese SR. Yang Jiechi, the former Foreign Minister was recently promoted State Councilor in the new Cabinet of Premier Li Keqiang.

Ms. Hua Chunying, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson declared that the talks would help to "maintain the negotiation momentum, safeguard peace and tranquility in border areas, exchange views on bilateral relations as well as major international and regional issues, and push for comprehensive and in-depth development of relations."

The same words are repeated before each meeting, but this time, one is told that some 'momentum' has been 'injected' after the Chinese Premier's visit to India last month.

When Ms Hua says that "pending the final settlement of the issue, we should safeguard peace and tranquility of border areas", she should be told that it is not India who pitched tents on Chinese soil, and 'safeguarding the peace' depends very much on Beijing.

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Considering the outrageous claims from China and the constant by moving goal posts (the LAC), the wishy-washy handling of the situation by Nehru decades ago did not help. Let us look at some facts.

On October 6, 1957, a Chinese newspaper, *Kuang-ming Jih-pao* reported: "The Sinkiang-Tibet – the highest highway in the world – has been completed. During the past few days, a number of trucks running on the highway on a trial basis have arrived in Ko-ta-k'e in Tibet from Yehch'eng in Sinkiang. The Sinkiang-Tibet Highway... is 1179 km long, of which 915 km are more than 4,000 meters above sea level; 130 km of it over 5,000 meters above sea level, with the highest point being 5,500 meters." The reporter spoke of: "thirty heavy-duty trucks, fully loaded with road builders, maintenance equipment and fuels, running on the highway on a trial basis" heading towards Tibet.

The Aksai road was opened. It should have been clear, even for the blind Intelligence Bureau Director, B.N. Mullick and other in Delhi that the Chinese had build a road on Indian soil; unfortunately, it took nearly two years for the news to become public in India.

Five months after the opening, Subimal Dutt, the Indian Foreign Secretary wrote to Nehru: "there seemed little doubt that the newly constructed 1,200 kilometre road connecting Gartok in Western Tibet with Yeh in Sinkiang passes through Aksai Chin."

Dutt suggested sending a reconnoitering party 'in the coming spring' to find out if the road had really been built on the Indian territory.

The next day, Nehru agreed for the reconnoitering party, but added: "I do not think it is desirable to have air reconnaissance. In fact, I do not see what good this can do us. Even a land reconnaissance will not perhaps be very helpful."

The Prime Minister then suggested: "our maps should be sent to the Chinese. ...But I think it would be better to do this rather informally."

Indian territory had been occupied but the Prime Minister wanted to remain informal about it.

Eventually the reconnoitering party went and while some jawans were captured, several others were killed. Was India to remain informal?

On October 18, 1958, the Indian Foreign Secretary handed over an 'informal note' to the Chinese Ambassador in Delhi: "The attention of the Government of India has recently been drawn to the fact that a motor road has been constructed by the Government of the People's Republic of China across the eastern part of the Ladakh region of the Jammu Kashmir States, which is part of India."

While detailing the route of the road, Dutt reminded China about India's 'old established frontiers'. The Foreign Secretary's conclusion was: "It is matter of surprise and regrets that the Chinese Government should have constructed a road through indisputably Indian territory without first obtaining the permission of the Government of India and without even informing the Government of India."

Indeed, it was not nice.

Further, the Chinese workers who constructed the road did not have a proper passport and visa: "No applications for visas from Chinese personnel working on the road or from Chinese travellers traversing this road have ever been received by the Government of India."

The note seems surreal, but: "as the Chinese Government are aware, the Government of India are anxious to settle these petty frontier disputes so that the friendly relations between the two countries may not suffer."

This is the background of the beginning of the 'dispute' that Shivshankar Menon has to solve with his Chinese counterpart.

But that is not all. A year later, Prime Minister Nehru hid the truth in the Parliament.

The issue came up on April 22, 1959 during a discussion on Chinese maps displaying Indian territory as China's.

An MP, Braj Raj Singh queried: "May I know whether Government's attention has been drawn to the news item published in several papers alleging that the Chinese have claimed some 30,000 sq. m. of our territory and they have also disputed the McMahon line?" This was clearly related to the Aksai Chin as well as the eastern sector.

Nehru answer: "I would suggest to Hon. Members not to pay much attention to news items emanating sometimes from Hong Kong and sometimes from other odd places. We have had no such claim directly or indirectly made on us."

The Prime Minister deliberately 'omitted' to mention the Aksai Chin.

It was only in August 1959 that Nehru dropped the bombshell in Parliament: the 'Tibet-Sinkiang highway' was built through the Indian territory.

Shivshankar Menon is now tasked to solve the issue: not easy!