



The Simla Convention: Ninety Two Years Later

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There is a prevalent custom in Asia: let's first have a cup of tea. Colonel Younghusband¹ had the customary cup when he visited the Tibetan camp at Guru near the Chumbi Valley in 1904². A couple of days later, he officially received his Tibetan counterpart, General Lhading at his camp in Tuna. Then, despite the courteous offering of scarves, tea and refreshments, a battle started between the troops of Younghusband and Lhading. The Tibetans were crushed; they were no match for the British troops equipped with the most modern weapons.

The Choegyol of Sikkim, a relative of Lhading had warned the Tibetan General: *"For the Tibetan army to challenge the British was like throwing an egg against the rock - the egg could only be smashed."*³

After this easy victory, Younghusband continued towards Lhasa, the Tibetan capital. Lord Curzon, his boss, had instructed him to 'start negotiations' with the Tibetan authorities. For years, the Lhasa government had refused to even open the letters of His Gracious Majesty's Government. This was extremely irritating for an all-powerful Viceroy and his officials.

An Englishman later wrote: *"In 1903 the position of Britain and Tibet, was like that of a big boy at school who is tormented by an impertinent youngster. He bears it for sometime, but at last is compelled to administer chastisement."*⁴

Youngusband himself described the situation before the battle:

There was no possible reasoning with such people. They had such overweening confidence in the Lama's powers. How could anyone dare to resist the orders of the Great Lama? Surely lightning would descend from heaven or the earth open up and destroy anyone who had such temerity!⁵ I pointed to our troops, now ready deployed for action. I said we have tried for fourteen years inside our frontier to settle matters. ...For eight months now I had patiently tried to negotiate, but no one with authority came to see me, my letters were returned, and even messages were refused.⁶

The conflict had some unexpected consequences.

Perhaps even more than the bullets of the 'British devils' and the outcome of the battle, another factor flabbergasted the Tibetans. Soon after the end of the hostilities, some British officers visited the battlefield, and instead of killing those still alive, the 'devils with long noses' ordered their troops to take them to their field hospital. This was an incredible gesture for the Tibetans used to fighting wars on their eastern front with Chinese warlords where no prisoner was ever taken leave aside caring for the wounded. This incident, along with the fact that Youngusband paid well for whatever food or fodder he requisitioned on his way to Gyantse, made the Tibetans change their mind about the British; this change of attitude played an important role in future 'negotiations'. For the first time after centuries of isolation, Tibet was forced to enter into contact with the Western world.

From the Russian Threat to the Youngusband Expedition

These events occurred one hundred years ago. Ten years later, they led to the Simla Conference. However to understand the background of these stupendous happenings it is necessary to go back a few years in history. The element which was to play a major role in British foreign policy toward Tibet and thereby decide the fate of Tibet as a nation is what has been branded the 'Russian threat.'

One of the origins of this myth -- or reality -- was some information passed by a Japanese monk called Ekai Kawaguchi to Sarat Chandra Das, the most famous of the Indian Pundits,⁷ who was spying for the British government.

Pretending that the Pundits were Ladhaki, Kawaguchi traveled to Tibet and enrolled himself in the monastery of Sera. He reported that a caravan of 200 camels had arrived in Lhasa from the Northeast. The camels were said to be carrying boxes covered with skins and the drivers refused to answer any questions about their contents. Kawaguchi was told by a Tibetan official that the boxes were a gift of rifles and ammunition from Russia. Even more confusion was brought into the story by the Japanese monk who swore that he had seen 'made in USA' written on one of the boxes. Later, most of the sources such as Waddell, quoted Kawaguchi as their main source of information in an effort to prove that the Tsarist regime was supplying Lhasa with arms.

We need to have a closer look at the 'reality' behind the myth.

Historians have often compared the moves of the Great Powers in Asia to a chess game.⁸ Ultimately, it was Lord Curzon and his associate Colonel Younghusband who emerged as the Grand Masters. The only perennial losers in all the deals were the Tibetans.

One individual played a major role in this game: Agvan Dorjiev. This enigmatic person helped fuel the speculations about a presumed alliance between Russia and Tibet.

In the nineties, some Russian Foreign Policy Archives have been opened to researchers and we will quote from several documents which have come to light⁹ on the presumed role of Dorjiev.

Born in 1854 in the Buryata¹⁰ region of Russia, Dorjiev soon became known as a Buddhist scholar and diplomat. Having shown great capacity in his studies, the high lamas of Buryata recommended that he be sent to Mongolia and Tibet to continue his Buddhist studies. This was a common practice at that time.¹¹ Traveling on foot, Dorjiev went first to Urga¹² and, at the age of 26, he reached Lhasa where he became very renowned for his extraordinary scholarship and debating skills. He was noticed by the

Thirteenth Dalai Lama who appointed him as one of his debating partners. Thus began the connection between Tibet and Russia.

We shall abandon Dorjiev for a moment to try to understand the move initiated by the Buryat monk. We should first realize that the Tibetans had been deeply disturbed by the "Convention on Sikkim and Tibet" signed in 1890 by the Chinese and the British. It was for Lhasa a breach of the century-old Patron-Priest¹³ relationship with China.

The Tibetans were aware that the Chinese no longer had the power -- especially in the face of Western powers like England, France or Russia -- to fulfil their part of the deal and protect the Roof of the World.

The Treaty of 1890 along with the fact that the British (and the Chinese) had decided not to inform the Tibetans about its contents, (which was of direct concern to them), was the last straw.

A note from Dorjiev explained Lhasa's point of view:

The necessity of seeking the patronage of a foreign country was secretly debated at the highest level in Tibet from the moment when the Chinese officials bribed by Englishmen deprived Tibet of the land [a reference to the declaration that Sikkim was a British protectorate]. I was present at one such meeting and expressed the opinion that Russia should be given preference.¹⁴

For Lhasa, China could not be their protector any longer.

The events which followed should be seen more in terms of the Tibetans seeking to find a new protector than the Russians trying to expand their empire.

Another factor, which played a role in this complex game was the visit of Prince Henri d'Orleans to Tibet in 1888; he declared that France was ready to have diplomatic relations with Tibet.

This corresponded to the time when Lhasa became interested in events outside its secluded Shangri-La. Suddenly many in the Tibetan capital were keen to hear more about these Great Powers who had more power than the mantras of the lamas.

With this background, the Lhasa government decided to send a mission to Russia. It was to be a preliminary mission to check the possibility of a shift in their foreign policy.¹⁵

Dorjiev's first journey to Russia

Dorjiev was the leader of the delegation, but it was clear that he had no power of decision making. The delegates traveled to St. Petersburg via India, China, Mongolia and Buryata. On reaching St Petersburg in 1899, Dorjiev met some important personages at the Tsar's court such as Count Lamsdorff, Count Witte and General Kuropatkin. The general feeling in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was that Tibet was not a priority. Some Russian officials like Count Lamsdorff suggested that Russia could open a Consulate in Tibet, but the Tibetans themselves were more than reluctant. However, in a long letter to the Dalai Lama, Dorjiev described the people of Russia, the critical position of China and the great future of the 'Russian connection.' It seems that Dorjiev's dream was to have a relationship between Russia and Tibet, which would be similar to the one the early Manchus had with the Lamas of Tibet, a sort of *Choe-Yon* relationship,¹⁶ which would exclude other big powers, particularly the British.

The British crown and specifically the new Viceroy Lord Curzon were not ready to accept this new entrant in Central Asian politics.

Sir G. Scott, the British Ambassador to Russia at St. Petersburg inquired about the character of the Tibetan Mission from Count Lamsdorff. He was reassured that though the Tibetan visitors had been described as Envoys Extraordinary of the Dalai Lama, their mission could not be regarded as having *"any political or diplomatic character."*¹⁷

Nevertheless, London cabled back to its envoy that *"His Majesty's Government could not regard with indifference any proceedings that might have a tendency to alter or disturb the existing status of Tibet."*

The return of Dorjiev provoked a lot of debate in Lhasa. Percival Landon, a British journalist who had traveled with Younghusband explained:

[Dorjiev's] arguments were these: you have no strength in the country to resist the invaders, your natural protector and suzerain

China, is a broken reed; even at this moment she is entirely under the domination of the British. If you remain any longer trusting to her support, you will find that she throws you as a sop to the Indian government. The English are a rapacious nation and heretical nation; they will not respect your religion....

On the other hand, if you will ask aid of Russia, you will secure the most powerful protector of the world."¹⁸

Dorjiev's contention was better to "address Russia where Buddhism prospered freely."¹⁹

One month after his return to the Tibetan capital, it was decided to send Dorjiev back to St. Petersburg with a high-ranking delegation. In March 1901, he left for Russia again; this time he traveled by sea to Vladivostok and sailed up the river Amur.

On their way, they saw a Chinese town, Aigun, where the entire population had been savagely killed and the town itself destroyed. They must have reached the conclusion that a similar fate could befall Tibet if a new protector could not be found.

On their arrival in Russia, though Dorjiev was received with honour, the Tsar's government was not comfortable with his visit.

The visit of the delegation nevertheless got a lot of coverage in the local as well as the British press. While the British papers saw the visit as a danger to the interests of the Crown, Russian journalists were more interested by its exotic aspect.

In the meantime the rumours of an agreement between Russia and China on Tibet continued to circulate. This treaty, known as the "*Commercial Agreement between Russia and China*" has not been acknowledged by many historians, but it certainly was one of the direct justifications for the events of 1903-04.

The Imperial Solution

The Younghusband expedition was seen by Lord Curzon and the Government of India as the best way to call the Russian bluff. If Russia failed to abide by her presumed assurances, her prestige would be

destroyed in the eyes of the Tibetans and they would have no alternative but to request Britain's help and friendship.

We shall quote some parts of a lengthy report from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India. This dispatch dated January 8, 1903 detailed the future British policy for Tibet.

*... What we are concerned to examine is not the mere settlement of border dispute or even the amelioration of our future trading relations with Tibet but the question of our entire future political relations with that country, and with the degree to which we can permit the influence of another great Power to be exercised for the first time in Tibetan affairs.*²⁰

Then Curzon made it clear that the 'addiction' of Lhasa to its policy of isolation was only temporarily 'tolerated' by British India. In those days,²¹ the British Empire was one of the Great Powers and the existence of smaller nations was only tolerated 'at the will' of these Powers.

Curzon was not against having a tripartite conference but it had to be on British terms: it should be held in Lhasa and the Tibetan government should participate as an equal.²² Then followed the most famous statement of the Viceroy:

*In our view, the attempt to come to terms with Tibet through the agency of China has invariably proved a failure in the past... **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 only solution was then to open a dialogue, but how to open a dialogue with the recalcitrant Tibetans? To conclude, Curzon suggested to London that a 'trade' mission be sent to Tibet under military escort to negotiate a trade agreement.

For the Viceroy it had become evident that the only way to establish 'amicable relations' was to use force.

The Secretary of State for India in his answer accepted to follow a forward policy toward Tibet, although London was still very cautious about Curzon's plans:

*His Majesty's Government thinks it necessary, before sanctioning a course which might be regarded as an attack on the integrity of the Chinese Empire, to be sure that each action can be justified by the previous action of Tibet, and they have accordingly come to the conclusion that it would be premature to adopt measures so likely to precipitate a crisis in the affairs of Tibet as those which your Excellency has proposed.*²³

London was of the opinion that the Russians should be requested to make a public statement of their foreign policy regarding Tibet and China and they should be warned of the British Government's *"intention to meet any action on their part by more than counter-balancing measures of our own."*

However, the Russians remained non-committal over their Tibet policy; in the words of a Russian diplomat: *"Although the Russian Government had no designs whatever upon Tibet, they could not remain indifferent to any serious disturbance of the status quo in this country. Such a disturbance might render it necessary for them to safeguard their interests in Asia, not that, even in this case, they would desire to interfere in the affairs of Tibet as their policy was not targeted on Tibet in any case."*²⁴

Curzon decided that the best way to get rid of the Chinese 'fiction' was to establish direct contacts with the Dalai Lama's government in Lhasa. Unfortunately, the 'normalisation' process between British India and Lhasa was prevented by the uncompromising attitude of some Tibetan leaders. In June 1903, Curzon dispatched Colonel Younghusband with some troops to Khamba Dzong, inside Tibetan territory. On hearing news of the approaching British army, the Tibetan Government immediately sent two negotiators to stop the British advance at any cost. However, winter was approaching and Younghusband had no choice but to return to India. Curzon's plans were postponed.

The first days of 1904 saw a new British expedition again led by Younghusband with 5,000 Sikh and Gurkha troops, marching to Gyantse. A few weeks later, the clash occurred in Guru (after the cup of tea) and

700 Tibetan soldiers were massacred by Younghusband's troops. The road to Lhasa was finally open.

Having informed about the British approaching Lhasa, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had fled: a 'living Buddha'²⁵ could not be caught alive.

The old and wise Ganden Tripa²⁶ was appointed Regent. He decided to negotiate with the British. The result of Younghusband's expedition was a Convention, the first one between Tibet and British India, signed on September 7, 1904 in the Potala Palace.

It was only much later that the Tibetans realized that this Convention was not such a bad bargain for them. In the seventies, the historian Shakabpa wrote:

*It is quite clear that the British were dealing with Tibet as a separate and independent state, particularly since the 1904 convention makes no reference to China or to Chinese authority in Tibet. The Manchu Amban, the Bhutanese representative, and the Nepalese officer merely witnessed the signing of the Convention, but did not sign it themselves.*²⁷

Article 1 stated that the Tibetan Government engages in respecting the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890²⁸. The main objective of the 1890 Agreement had been the Chinese acceptance of authority of the British Crown over Sikkim. The Lhasa Convention of 1904 put the Tibetan seal on British overlordship on Sikkim. The British could now undertake to open trade marts at Gyantse, Gartok and Yatung (in the Chumbi valley)

The Tibetan Government agreed that no power should be allowed to intervene in Tibet's internal affairs and no Agents of any Foreign Power would be admitted and no "*concessions for railways, roads, telegraphs, mining or other rights, could be granted to any Foreign Power.*" It added that "*in the event of consent to such concessions being granted, similar or equivalent concessions shall be granted to the British Government.*" This was perhaps in reply to the presumed Commercial Agreement of 1902 between China and Russia.

It was the beginning of a new phase in political relations between British India and Tibet. On September 23, 1904, the British expedition left Lhasa to return to India.

A String of Treaties

While the Qing Emperors had mastered the art of bestowing titles on their 'vassals' to keep them in check, the Kings in London had mastered the art of binding friends and foes alike by treaties.

In 1906, the British signed an Adhesion Agreement with China known as *The Convention between Great Britain and China Respecting Tibet*.²⁹ It was a balancing act favouring China, in case their help would be required in the future.³⁰

London was *"sincerely desirous to maintain and perpetuate the relations of friendship and good understanding which now exist between their respective (Chinese and British) Empires."* The British had to admit that the Tibetans had not been consulted before³¹ signing the 1890 Anglo-Chinese Convention. For this reason, the Tibetans had refused *"to recognise the validity of or to carry into full effect the provisions of the Anglo-Chinese Convention."*

The Convention of 1904 was confirmed, subject to some modifications. Article III is important as it completely changed the meaning and content of the Lhasa Convention of 1904. In Article IX of the 1904 Convention, the concessions mentioned in para (d) were denied to 'any Foreign Power': It was clear that for the purpose of the Lhasa Convention, China was a foreign power.

After having pressed for the recognition of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, the Chinese diplomats managed to get the words 'other than China' mentioned, thereby regaining recognition of the special relationship between Tibet and China.

The Tibetans were back to square one. Richardson, the last British head of the Mission in Lhasa admitted:

The peculiarly privileged position which had accrued to the British from the negotiations at Lhasa was virtually reversed by the

recognition that China was not a foreign power... It seems extraordinarily high-handed or negligent that, after a treaty had been signed directly with the Tibetans, the British Government should have made no attempt to keep them informed of other acts affecting and modifying that treaty."³²

But that was not all for the Tibetans!

The Agreement of 1907 with Russia

In 1907, an understanding between the Russian and the British Empire was reached. The Agreement called *The Convention between Great Britain and Russia relating to Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet*,³³ was signed at St. Petersburg on August 31st, 1907. The 'treaty policy' continued. Having tackled Tibet in 1904 and China in 1906, London was now neutralizing Russia.

Regarding Tibet, it was agreed that the British Government and Russia recognize *"the suzerain rights of China in Thibet"*³⁴. It also considered *"the fact that Great Britain, by reason of her geographical position, has a special interest in the maintenance of the status quo in the external relations of Thibet."*

However, both parties engaged *"to respect the territorial integrity of Thibet and to abstain from all interference in the internal administration."*

Article II again gave a prominent role to China: *"In conformity with the admitted principle of the suzerainty of China over Thibet, Great Britain and Russia engage not to enter into negotiations with Thibet except through the intermediary of the Chinese Government."* Once again the strangest fact is that although the clause affected Tibet, the Tibetan authorities were neither consulted nor informed.

The Tibeto-Mongolian Treaty

Soon after the Dalai Lama's return from exile,³⁵ a treaty was signed between Tibet and Mongolia at Urga in January 1913. The Dalai Lama had learnt his lesson.

The Preamble said that: *"Mongolia and Tibet, having freed themselves from the Manchu dynasty and separated themselves from China, have*

become independent States, and the two States have always professed one and the same religion, and to the end that their ancient mutual friendships may be strengthened...."

In the treaty, the Dalai Lama *"approves of and acknowledges the formation of an independent Mongolian State"*. The Jetsun Dampa Lama³⁶ reciprocated and approved the formation of an independent Tibetan State with the Dalai Lama as its leader.

But for the British, war in Europe appeared imminent; they finally had to accept that the treaties on Tibet signed with China had no relevance as they could not be implemented in practice. In these circumstances, it was decided to call all the parties for a tripartite Convention to solve the Tibetan problem, secure a buffer zone between British India and China and ensure peace and stability in the region. Simla was selected as the venue of the Conference³⁷ and Sir Henry McMahon was to chair the tripartite talks.

It was not an easy proposal; for months the Chinese were very reluctant to sit at the negotiating table on an equal footing with the Tibetans. But diverse factors were putting pressure on them. They knew that the Dalai Lama was close to some British officers such as Charles Bell. They could fear another Lhasa Convention which perhaps, they would not even be asked to ratify.

In Kham, the military situation was not very favourable to the Chinese as most of the territory captured by Zhao-Erfeng had been recovered by the Tibetan troops. The Tibetan army was now better organised and arms and weapons were imported. After the Dalai Lama's return, the Tibetan army was given a British type of training.

This fact worried the Chinese who were also apprehensive after Mongolia had been passed over to Russian control. Would the Tibetans join the British sphere of influence, if they refused to participate in the Conference?

Thus the Chinese felt they had no alternative but to accept the British conditions and to attend the Convention.

The Simla Conference

The Thirteenth Dalai Lama chose Lonchen Shatra Paljor Dorje, his old and experienced Prime Minister as his representative. He had dared to suggest negotiations with the Younghusband Mission ten years earlier. His assistant was Trimon, who had prepared detailed documentation on the legal status of Tibet, especially of the eastern border areas.

It was certainly one of the great surprises of the conference: the Tibetans had come so well prepared with volumes and volumes of original documents,³⁸ while the Chinese had no documents to prove their allegations.

The Chinese were represented by Ivan Chen while the British Plenipotentiary, Sir Henry Mc Mahon³⁹ was assisted by Charles Bell, the Dalai Lama's old acquaintance from his Darjeeling days.

The brief given to Lonchen Shatra by the Dalai Lama was very clear:

- 1- Tibet was to look after its own internal affairs;
- 2- Her foreign affairs were to be managed for important matters in consultation with the British;
- 3- No Chinese Amban or official should be posted in Tibet;
- 4- Tibetan territory should include all the Tibetan-speaking areas up to Dartsedo in the east and Kokonor in the north-east.

When the Conference assembled it became immediately clear that the positions of the Tibetan and Chinese delegates were diametrically opposite.

In his presentation, Lonchen Shatra reiterated the Dalai Lama's points and asked for recognition of the independence of Tibet. He also wanted the Dalai Lama to be acknowledged as the temporal and spiritual leader of Tibet. He claimed that the Tibetan territory should include all the Tibetan-speaking areas of Kham and Amdo. Lonchen Shatra also requested that the Conference declare the Conventions of 1906 and 1908 invalid, as Tibet had not been a party to them. Further, an indemnity from the Chinese was claimed for the damage and destruction in Lhasa and in Kham following Zhao Erfeng's invasion.

The Chinese stand was very different. Ivan Chen claimed Tibet as a part of China. He explained that due to the conquest of Genggis Khan, Tibet had become a part of the Chinese Empire. This was further confirmed when the Fifth Dalai Lama accepted some titles from the Chinese Emperor. Another argument he used was that the Tibetans had called upon the Manchus for military assistance many times and each time the Emperor had come to provide support. He gave the examples of the invasions of the Dzukar in the 18th and Gorkha in the 19th century.

Regarding Zhao Erfeng, Ivan Chen explained that his government had only acted in accordance with the Treaty of 1906 and his troops were sent to protect the Trade Marts. Another 'proof' advanced by the Chinese Plenipotentiary to show that Tibet was part of China, was that the compensation to be paid under the Convention of 1904 had been paid by China on behalf of the Tibetan Government.

He further claimed that the Amban had the right to have an escort of 2,600 men to control the internal and foreign affairs of Tibet. He requested that a thousand men be stationed in Lhasa and the rest in other places to be decided by the Ambans.

For the Chinese, the status of Tibet had to be restored as per the 1906 Agreement and the border between China and Tibet was to be in Gyamda, some 150 miles east of Lhasa.

The Tibetan delegate managed to counter the Chinese point by point, especially on the problem of demarcation of the territory, by tabling revenue documents.

Regarding the payment of compensation for the Younghusband expedition, the Tibetans declared that they had never asked the Chinese to pay the amount of 25 lakhs of rupees to the British and that they were not even aware of the payment.

The British Plenipotentiary was caught between two opposing viewpoints, and on behalf of His Majesty's government, McMahon had to harmonize the two sides.

He found a way out by dividing Tibet into two parts with consequences which can still be felt today.⁴⁰ McMahon thought that he could impose on

both parties a 'fair deal' which would also have advantages for Great Britain. Tibet would be divided into two parts:

1- 'Outer Tibet' which corresponded roughly to Central and Western Tibet including the sections skirting the Indian frontier, Lhasa, Shigatse, Chamdo; and

2- 'Inner Tibet' including Amdo Province and part of Kham.

The arrangement was as follows: 'Outer Tibet' was to be recognised as autonomous. China would not interfere in the administration of Outer Tibet, nor with the selection of the Dalai Lama. No troops or Ambans would be stationed there. It would not be converted into a Chinese Province. Maps were also prepared showing the boundaries of Inner and Outer Tibet. In the interest of settling the dispute, Lonchen Shatra reluctantly agreed to McMahon's proposal. This was in February 1914.

The Indo-Tibetan Border: the McMahon Line

But then the Chinese delegate started delaying tactics. This gave the opportunity and the time to the Tibetan and the British delegates to discuss their own borders. The object of the talks was India's North-eastern areas, between what the British called the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) 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 ask anything about the final demarcation.

Through an exchange of notes between the British and Tibetan Plenipotentiaries, the Indo-Tibet frontier was fixed in March 1914. It is worthwhile to quote these letters that would have important consequences for the future of both nations, especially India which, 48 years later, would fight a war along the McMahon Line.

The British Plenipotentiary wrote to Lonchen Shatra on March 24 attaching a map.⁴¹

A few conditions regarding some private estates and a few pilgrimage places were added. 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 subject to the condition mentioned in your letter.

Thus the McMahon Line was born in the form of a fat red line on a map showing the Indo-Tibetan boundary in the eastern sector. The British and the Tibetan delegates signed and sealed the map.

The Simla Convention

The Convention itself was finally initialled on 27 April 1914.

China pledged not to convert Tibet into a Chinese province, while Great Britain was not to annex any portion of the country.

We shall go through some of the Articles of the Simla Convention and study their implications for the three nations.

In Article 2, the contracting parties recognised 'the autonomy of Outer Tibet' and engaged *"to respect the territorial integrity of the country, and to abstain from interference in the administration of Outer Tibet (including the selection and installation of the Dalai Lama), which shall remain in the hands of the Tibetan Government at Lhasa."*⁴²

More importantly for the Tibetans: *"The Government of China engages not to convert Tibet into a Chinese province"* while the British Government engaged not to annex Tibet or any part of her [its] territory.

The following Article would have very serious political repercussions when in 1947, the Government of newly independent India took over the mantle from the British. It recognized *"the special interest of Great Britain, in virtue of the geographical position of Tibet, in the existence of an effective Tibetan Government, and in the maintenance of peace and order in the neighbourhood of the frontiers of India and adjoining States."*

In 1947, not only did the Government of India step into Britain's shoes, but it also felt that due to the geographical proximity, the Indian

Government naturally had a 'special interest' in Tibet and should give a lead in any policy concerning it. This explains why the Western governments chose to always align themselves with India's position at that time.

In the next Article, the Government of China engaged not to send troops into Outer Tibet, not to station civilian or military officers, nor to establish Chinese colonies on the Roof of the World as well as to withdraw any troops posted in Tibet. The British also agreed not to station military or civil officers in Tibet (except as escorts at the Trade Marts).

However, a high Chinese official was allowed to be posted in Lhasa with a maximum of 300 men. Though he was not called 'Amban', the large escort was intended as a sort of balance to the presence of the British troops stationed at the Marts.

Article 5 had important consequences because the Governments of both China and Tibet agreed that *"they will not enter into any negotiations or agreements regarding Tibet with one another, or with any other Power"* except with the British Government.

It meant in particular that in 1950, the Government of India which had ratified this treaty with the Tibetan Government could have insisted on having tripartite negotiations, but by that time, Nehru believed that the Simla Convention was an imperialist treaty whose clauses should be rejected.⁴³

The use of the term 'foreign power' to describe China in the 1904 Convention was cancelled. The Tibet Trade Regulations of 1893 and 1908 were also cancelled and the Tibetan Government and the British agreed to negotiate new Trade Regulations for Outer Tibet.

The borders of Tibet, and the boundary between Outer and Inner Tibet, were drawn on maps attached to the Convention.

The Chinese did not want to accept the new demarcation line between Inner and Outer Tibet and between Inner Tibet and China. After the conquests of Zhao Erfeng, China was not keen to surrender the newly-acquired territories and the Tibetans were more than reluctant to let go of

any territories inhabited by Tibetans, especially in areas where Tibetan monasteries were commanding great authority and revenue.

It was the thorniest point of the negotiations and eventually became the reason (or pretext) for their breakdown.

Richardson thus summarized the consequences of the Convention: *"In effect, there would have emerged two regions with differing status. Outer Tibet would have been like a self-governing dominion of China, while Inner Tibet would have been the subject of peaceful contention in which the better or more attractive administration could be expected to win."*⁴⁴

Although in April Ivan Chen initialled the draft Convention, he received an order from his government not to sign the final Convention.

But the British lost their legendary tolerance: *"the patience of His Majesty's government is exhausted and they have no alternative but to inform the Chinese Government that, unless the Convention is signed before the end of this month, His Majesty's Government will hold themselves free to sign separately with Tibet."*

Finally, on July 3, 1914, Great Britain and Tibet signed the Simla Convention.

On the withdrawal of the Chinese, a Declaration was signed by the plenipotentiaries of Britain and Tibet declaring that the Convention was to be binding on the Governments of Britain and Tibet and agreeing that so long as the Chinese Government withheld its signature, it would be debarred from the enjoyment of privileges accruing from it.

The following para was included: *"The powers granted to China under the Convention shall not be recognized by Great Britain and Tibet until and unless the Government of China ratifies the Convention."*

The law of impermanence, however, was knocking at Europe's door.

On August 4th 1914, just one month after the signature of the Convention, Great Britain entered the First World War. This perhaps explained London's impatience and what Richardson called the *"disinclination to assume additional responsibilities."* London now had to concentrate its efforts on the European front.

Conclusions

By not signing the Convention, the Chinese were not only deprived of the benefits of the Convention but also of the Notes exchanged between the signatories. It is in these Notes that the Tibetans had made some major compromises, particularly the one that says that *'Tibet forms part of Chinese territory'*.

The other benefits that the Chinese lost were the recognition of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet; the right of sending a Representative to Lhasa with 300 troops; the admission that China was not a 'foreign power' for the purpose of the 1904 Convention.

The new Anglo-Tibetan Trade Regulations were also signed on the 3rd July 1914. As mentioned in Article 7 of the main Convention, these were to replace the Regulations of 1893 and 1908 which stood cancelled by this article.

The new Regulations gave tremendous advantages to the British who suddenly became the main and only player in Tibet. They would remain in force till the signature of the Panchsheel Agreement of 1954. In the meantime, the Government of India had stepped into British shoes in August 1947.

The Following Decades

The relations between Tibet and the British Empire continued to be cordial but in Lhasa many had begun to doubt that the British had the power to bring the Chinese back to the negotiating table and get them to sign the Simla Convention.

Were the British only interested in securing their border and open trade marts? Were they also able to be an effective protector? These were some of the questions doing the rounds.

It was in this context that London decided to send to Lhasa, Charles Bell, McMahon's Assistant in Simla, to have a frank discussion with the Tibetan leaders. It has to be noted that for once it was London which took the initiative while the Viceroy's Office was shy of extending more recognition to Tibet. One of the considerations might have been that after the Russian

Revolution, the Anglo-Russian Agreement had been declared null and void and the danger from that quarter had faded away.

Charles Bell remained in Lhasa for one year and through his many meetings with his friend, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, he was able to give London a clear picture of the political situation on the Roof of the World. As a result of Bell's visit, the British Government decided to help the Tibetan Government in its development and also to supply a reasonable quantity of arms and ammunition for its self-defence.

Other projects were also undertaken, such as laying a telegraph line from Gyantse to Lhasa, making a geological survey of Central Tibet, building a small hydro-electric plant at Lhasa and reorganizing the Police. However the most important aspect for Tibet's security was the training of officers and men by British instructors in Gyantse and in India.

On the diplomatic front, no positive development occurred as *"disunity in China, the low prestige of the Central [Chinese] Government and the prevalence of a chauvinistic spirit made progress impossible"* as Richardson put it.

Although the British position was clear, as seen from Lord Curzon's declaration in 1921: *"We should regard ourselves at liberty to deal with Tibet, if necessary without referring to China; to enter into closer relation with the Tibetans ...to give the Tibetans any reasonable assistance they might require in the development and protection of the country,"* the Tibetan issue remained unresolved and the situation on the eastern front was very unstable.

15 August 1947: The Fate of the Simla Convention

Just before the Independence of India, a Tibetan delegation visited India on the occasion of the Asian Relations Conference in March-April 1947. Considering that the Tibetans were novices at diplomatic games, they managed rather well and for the first time, they realised that Tibet could not remain isolated any longer.

For centuries Tibetans had lived a peaceful religious life on the Roof of the World.

While the world over people were talking of 'Revolution', 'Independence' or 'The Last Days of Imperialism', life in Lhasa continued as usual. These new concepts meant very little in Tibet. Only very few who had travelled to Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Chungking or Nanking, could grasp the meaning of these words.

For most Tibetans and especially for the monks in the Great Monasteries around Lhasa, 'independence' only meant that they could go on practising their religion as they had done for centuries.

The Dalai Lama once told us an amusing story. Soon after Independence, an Indian army patrol visited Tawang in NEFA. The rumour immediately spread in Lhasa that Tibet was invaded by India. The National Assembly was called for an emergency meeting. Something had to be done! It was later discovered that this territory was south of the McMahon Line as agreed by the Plenipotentiaries of Tibet and British India in Simla in 1914. Only a handful of senior officials knew about it.

The Tibetans were quite alarmed when they first heard of the departure of the British from the subcontinent, they could sense that the withdrawal of British 'protection' was a negative development for the Land of Snows. Would the new Indian Government be willing to play the same role as the British had played? And supposing that they accepted to play this role, would they have the strength to do so effectively?

The Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten was a man in a hurry and his thoughts were only concentrated on how to get rid of the 'jewel' of the British Empire as fast as possible, regardless of the harm to the Indian subcontinent. The Land of Snows was nowhere on his agenda.

In 1947, Tibet was still considered a more or less independent State by the government British India. The relations between India and the Crown were regulated by the Simla Convention and Trade Agreement attached to it.

In August 1943, Anthony Eden in a note to Dr. T. V. Soong, the Chinese Foreign Minister, had made clear the British position:

*Since the Chinese Revolution of 1911, when Chinese forces were withdrawn from Tibet, **Tibet has enjoyed de facto***

independence.⁴⁵ She has ever since regarded herself as in practice completely autonomous and has opposed Chinese attempts to reassert control.

Since 1911, repeated attempts have been made to bring about an accord between China and Tibet. It seemed likely that agreement could be found on the basis that Tibet should be autonomous under the nominal suzerainty of China, and this was the basis of the draft tripartite (Chinese-Tibetan-British) convention of 1914 which was initialled by the Chinese representative but was not ratified by the Chinese Government. The rock on which the convention and subsequent attempts to reach an understanding were wrecked was not the question of autonomy (which was expressly admitted by China) but was the question of the boundary between China and Tibet, since the Chinese Government claimed sovereignty over areas which the Tibetan Government claimed belonged exclusively to their autonomous jurisdiction.⁴⁶

This position was reiterated in 1949 on the occasion of a Parliamentary question on the status of Tibet. The new Indian Government followed, for some time, the same policy.

The first communication of the Government of independent India to the Foreign Office of the Tibetan Government was to request the latter to ratify the Simla Convention. By itself this formal request from the Government of India to the Foreign Office of Tibet is an acknowledgement of Tibet's independent status in 1947:

*The Government of India would be glad to have an assurance that it is the intention of the Government of Tibet to continue relations on the existing basis until new arrangements are reached on matters that either party may wish to take up. This is the procedure adopted by all other countries with which India has inherited treaty relations from His Majesty's Government.*⁴⁷

Richardson diplomatically said that the Tibetan Government acknowledged the message but did not make any immediate reply.⁴⁸

At a time when Lhasa needed all its friends, the Tibetans committed a monumental blunder by not immediately ratifying the Simla Convention. This made the new Indian Government suspicious of their intentions. It is difficult to say today whether it would have made a difference, but it is certain that the only wise course for the Tibetan Government would have been to reply asserting its faith in the Simla Convention and other treaties, accepting the Indian Government as the successor to the British and requesting them to eventually start talks on the 'lost' territories. India would automatically have assumed the legal rights and obligations of the British. It appears that in 1947-48, Nehru was still willing to assume the 'imperial' mantle of the British. Richardson wrote about the Indian rights inherited from the Simla Convention: *"it appeared at that time [in 1947] that the rights were of value to the Indian Government to the same extent as they had been to its predecessor and that the Indian Government was anxious to secure Tibetan consent to the transfer of the whole of the British heritage."*⁴⁹

India becomes Independant

On August 15, the British Mission Lhasa officially became the Indian Mission. Hugh Richardson, a British Officer was nominated the first Indian Head of Mission.

In Lhasa, the transition was almost imperceptible. The existing staff was retained in its entirety and the only change was the flag. In Tibet the change might have been minimal, but the Tibetans discovered soon enough the tremendous changes shaking Asia.

The first to discover was Tsepon Shakabpa who headed a Trade Mission to Delhi in January 1948. The Government of India and the Prime Minister gave them to understand that the immediate need was for *"Tibetan and Indian relations to be put on some official basis."*⁵⁰ The Indian government refused to talk about trade matters unless the Tibetans recognized that the Indian government was *"the legal inheritor of the treaties, rights and obligations of British India."*

No breakthrough could be achieved in the negotiations because

Jawaharlal Nehru was quite upset that the Tibetan Government had refused to accept the Government of India as the successor of the British government.

The Trade Mission decided to inform Lhasa about the stalemate, but since no decision was forthcoming from Lhasa, Shakabpa had no alternative but to continue on his journey to China.

B.N. Mallick, the Director of the Indian Intelligence Bureau, summed up Nehru's feeling when he wrote *'this ill-advised claim [to lost Tibetan territories], made by the Tibetan Government resulted in the temporary loss of a certain amount of Indian sympathy for Tibet.'*⁵¹

It would take another six months⁵² for Lhasa to announce that Tibet had accepted India as the successor of British India. In the meantime a lot of harm had been done.

But in 1947 Lhasa was living in another world.

The End of Tibet as an Independent State

In 1952, as a gesture of goodwill towards China, India agreed to dismantle all her 'colonial' rights in Tibet to transfer them to Mao's China. As mentioned earlier, the rights acquired during the tripartite Simla Convention and inherited from the British comprised the telegraph lines, the military escort posted in Gyanste, Gartok and Yatung, the Indian Trade marts in Tibet and the Mission in Lhasa.

In September, the Indian Political Officer was demoted to Consul General and K.M. Panikkar, the Indian Ambassador to Beijing was happy: *"there was no outstanding issue between us and the Chinese at the time of my departure"*.

Krishna Menon, one of the main instigators of the pro-China foreign policy of India also declared: *"Tibet, including the various trade arrangements involved, was the only problem we had with China, which called for regularisation. We were determined not to be in anybody else's territory, and we wanted to make some practical arrangements."*

The argument that India did not want to be stationed on anyone else territory is fallacious. In the case of Sikkim and Bhutan treaties were

signed between India and these countries⁵³ giving Delhi the responsibility to look after external affairs and defence. Something similar could have been envisaged in the case of Tibet.

During the following year, in 1953 India initiated talks with the Chinese government with the view of having an agreement emphasizing the new position of the Government of India vis-à-vis Tibet and China. It was, in fact, a revision of the terms of the Anglo-Tibetan Trade Regulations of July 1914.

In September, Nehru announced in the Parliament that negotiations with China would soon start at the suggestion of the Government of India. The border problem was not to be discussed; the talks were to deal with the problems of trade and pilgrimage in Tibet only.

The dichotomy in India's policy came to light during a debate in the Parliament. Though Nehru wanted to drop the 'colonial' terms of the Simla Convention, he wanted to stick to its main outcome, the McMahon Line. He declared: *"as far as India is concerned there is nothing to discuss about the frontier. The frontier is there, the McMahon line. We have nothing of discuss with anybody, with the Chinese government or any other Government about it."*

The negotiations began on December 1953 and they lasted till April 1954. It was to take only six weeks, but they lasted five months. The Government of India accepted to remove all the contentious issues and based the new Agreement on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. The *"Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India"* was signed on 29th April 1954 in Beijing by the Indian Ambassador N. Raghavan and the Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister of China.

While presenting the Agreement to the Lok Sabha, Nehru was in his revolutionary best, he said: *"Now we must realise that this revolution that came to China is the biggest thing that has taken place in the world at present, whether you like it or not... For the first time in several hundred years of history China now has a strong central government, This is a very important fact for Asia and the world."*

In the same speech Nehru spoke about Panchsheel: *“Live and let live, no one should invade the other, no one should fight the other... this is the basic principle which we have put in our treaty.”*

But it was in fact the end of an independent Tibetan State. The tripartite Simla Convention was now replaced by a bipartite agreement between India and China. Tibet, the object of the agreement was nowhere in the picture.

Nehru wanted this treaty to become the example of good neighbourhood for all the developing and non-aligned nations of the world. But many observers felt that it was in fact an ‘unequal’ and colonialist treaty, worse than any treaty signed earlier by the British or other imperialist nations. More important (and more damaging) than the agreement itself is the letter exchange between the Indian Ambassador in Beijing and the Chinese Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The Government of India through this letter was handing over all the benefits accrued from the Simla Convention. It was viewed by Nehru as part of the colonialist heritage that India had to get rid of as quickly as possible.

The issue of the Indo-Tibetan border was skipped. It is unfortunate that fifty years later, it is still pending with both the governments of India and China which are striving to find a solution to the vexed issue. Today Arunachal Pradesh State is still claimed by China, who does not recognise the McMahon Line, an outcome of the Simla Conference.

The Panchsheel Agreement lapsed on June 3 1962.⁵⁴ Since then it has never been extended; this practically means that the articles of the Agreement are no more binding on India. Legal experts further believe that the only legal document between India and China regarding the Autonomous Region of Tibet is the Simla Convention and the Trade Regulations attached to it.

The Agreement signed in 1914 may still be a valid document, the only one existing today between India and Tibet, however the past 90 years have witnessed tremendous changes in the Himalayan region. It is highly time

for the protagonists to sit again at a negotiating table and devise new arrangements for trade with Tibet.

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¹ Later Sir Francis.

² Chumbi is the first valley in Tibet after crossing the Indo-Tibet border at Nathu-la (Sikkim).

³ Shakabpa, Tsepon W.D., *Tibet: a Political History* (New York: Potala Corporation, 1967), p. 210.

⁴ French Patrick, *Younghusband -- the Last Great Imperial Adventurer* (London: Flamingo, 1975), p. 219.

⁵ We were told that the Tibetan government had once returned a letter from the British Government caked with yak dung to show their contempt for the British for having signed a treaty in 1890 concerning Tibet and not having informed Lhasa.

⁶ French, *Younghusband*, op. cit., p. 174.

⁷ The Indian Pundits were sent by the Government of British India to survey unknown Himalayan areas including Tibet and to gather intelligence. Most of the time the British chose natives from the border regions and gave them training near Dehra Dun, the HQ of the Survey of India.

⁸ A truer comparison might be a poker game, as most of the players were adventurers.

⁹ See Nikolai S. Kuleshov, *Russia's Tibet File* (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1996).

¹⁰ Even today, Buryata is a Republic of the Russian Federation. Most of the population is Buddhist and owe allegiance to the Dalai Lama who has visited the Republic several times.

¹¹ Kawaguchi said that there were more than 200 monks from Buryata in the Great Monasteries around Lhasa.

¹² Today's Ulan Bator in Outer Mongolia.

¹³ In the Priest-Patron relation (or *choe-yon*), the Priest is the Emperor of China who receives teachings from his guru, the Priest, the Head Lama of Tibet. In exchange, he provides military protection, when needed. The Sakya Lamas first established this arrangement with the Mongol Khans in the 13th century.

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- ¹⁴ Kuleshov, *op.cit.*, p. 2, quoting from Russian Foreign Policy Archives.
- ¹⁵ 'Foreign Policy' is a great word, because nothing such as a declared 'foreign policy' existed.
- ¹⁶ One of the bases of this *Choe-yon* relationship would have been the patronage given by the Tsar to the Buddhist population of Buryata and Kalmyk.
- ¹⁷ British Parliamentary Papers, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
- ¹⁸ Landon, P., Lhasa, (London, 1905), p. 22.
- ¹⁹ Kuleshov, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- ²⁰ Text of Lord Curzon's letter in Taraknath Das, *op. cit.* p. 438; also in *British Parliamentary Papers on Tibet (1855-1914)*, p. 187.
- ²¹ Is it different now?
- ²² The idea will be used again by Sir Henry McMahon in 1913 for the Simla Convention.
- ²³ Taraknath Das, *op. cit.*, p. 439.
- ²⁴ Taraknath Das, *op. cit.*, p. 440.
- ²⁵ *Living Buddha* is usually the term used by Beijing to designate the high reincarnated Lamas.
- ²⁶ The Throne Holder of Ganden Monastery as well as the formal head of the Yellow Hats sects of Tibetan Buddhism.
- ²⁷ Shakabpa, Tsepon W.D., *Tibet: a Political History* (New York: Potala Corporation, 1967), p. 217.
- ²⁸ The main objective of the 1890 Agreement had been the Chinese acceptance of authority of the British Crown over Sikkim.
- ²⁹ *British and Foreign States Papers (1905-06)*, pp. 171-173.
- ³⁰ Mainly to oppose the Russian Empire.
- ³¹ And even after.
- ³² Richardson, H.E., *Tibet & Its History* (Boulder, Shambala, 1984), p 94.
- ³³ Bell, Sir Charles, *Portrait of a Dalai Lama* (London: Wisdom Publication, 1987), p. 289-91.
- ³⁴ *Tibet* is sometimes written *Thibet* at the beginning of the 20th century.
- ³⁵ After the Younghusband expedition, he first fled to Mongolia, then to China and finally to India.
- ³⁶ The Head Lama of Mongolia.
- ³⁷ We remember that 10 years earlier, Curzon had thought of Tibet as the place for such a Conference.
- ³⁸ All the documents had to be examined and initialled by Sir Henry McMahon, the president of the Conference.
- ³⁹ McMahon left his name to the famous line demarcating the border between Tibet and India.
- ⁴⁰ It has to be noted that the major stumbling block in the negotiations between the present Dalai Lama's administration and the Chinese government is the definition of Tibet's territory. The Chinese want to negotiate for the *Tibet Autonomous Region* (TAR) only, which corresponded roughly to McMahon's 'Outer Tibet'.
- ⁴¹ The map referred to in this letter was published for the first time in *An Atlas of the Northern Frontier of India*, issued on 1st January 1960 by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.
- ⁴² For text of Convention, see Richardson, *op. cit.* p. 283 ff.
- ⁴³ Though he believed in the validity of the McMahon line.
- ⁴⁴ Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

⁴⁵ Emphasis added by the author.

⁴⁶ The British 'legal' position vis-à-vis Tibet was the same in 1950 when the Chinese invaded Tibet.

⁴⁷ Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged and Agreements Signed by the Government of India and China (Delhi: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 2, 1959), p. 39.

⁴⁸ The Tibetans claimed their 'lost' territories of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Arunachal Pradesh and certain parts of Ladakh before ratifying any treaty. The Chinese will use this Tibetan demand to in turn claim all these areas as part of the People's Republic at the end of the fifties. The conflict of 1962 was born out of these claims.

⁴⁹ Richardson, op. cit., p. 176.

⁵⁰ Goldstein, Melville, *The Fall of the Lamaist State* (University of California Press: 1989), p. 574.

⁵¹ Mullik B.N., *My Years with Nehru — The Chinese Betrayal* (Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1971), p. 54.

⁵² On June 11, 1948.

⁵³ Sikkim was a still a separate entity in 1950.

⁵⁴ Though signed on April 29, the Panchsheel Agreement was ratified more than a month later by the governments of India and China.