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China 'pivot' trips over McMahon Line

By Peter Lee

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China is looking for a "Western" pivot to counter the United States' diplomatic and military inroads with its East Asian neighbors such as Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Myanmar.

For China's strategists, as an interesting analysis in the Indian Express tells us, the "Western" pivot means nurturing the PRC's continental Asian relationships with the interior stans and, across the Himalayas, India. Pakistan's descent into basket-case status and the PRC's concurrent anxiety about Islamic extremism in Xinjiang indicates that the old China/Pakistan lips and teeth united front against India (and offsetting threats of destabilization in Kashmir and Tibet) may be past its sell-by date. [1]

But, if Inner Asia lacks disputed islands and the Seventh Fleet, it has disputed borders and an aggravated Sinophobe faction in India eager to spurn China and strengthen ties with the United States.

This is Sino-Indian friendship year, a good omen for rebooting Sino-Indian relations. Unfortunately for Beijing, it is also the fiftieth anniversary of the Sino-Indian war, a golden opportunity for refighting the battles of 1962.

Sino-Indian relations, like Sino-Japanese relations are potentially hostage to territorial disputes. The disputes date back to imperial escapades from the turn of the 20th century. In the case of Japan, it goes back to the seizure of the Senkakus as war spoils in 1895. For India, it is the McMahon Line, first drawn in 1914, and the grim precedent of the 1962 war.

Although the Sino-Indian border war of 1962 is largely forgotten by Chinese - a Global Times poll apparently showed that 80% of Chinese youth didn't even know it had happened - it is still an occasion for handwringing in India that borders on the masochistic. [2]

That is because India, though it only suffered 7,000 casualties and lost no effective control of territory, lost the brief war in as complete and humiliating a fashion as can be imagined.

The short-form version of the war is that the Indian government escalated its border disputes with the People's Republic of China by establishing military outposts north of the McMahon Line, the Line itself a piece of unilateral boundary-making mischief executed by the British Raj.

The Nehru government calculated that its exercise in establishing "facts on the ground", combined with diplomatic backing from the Soviet Union and the United States and India's position of moral authority, would cause Beijing to back down and accept Indian claims in Aksai Chin (a bleak desert north of Kashmir) and the North East Frontier Administration (the southern face of the Himalayas east of Nepal; now Arunachal Pradesh).

In one of many ghastly miscalculations, the Nehru government had concluded that the PRC would not respond militarily to the encroachment of military posts into the disputed territories.

Unfortunately, Nehru's crystal ball, especially when it came to Chinese suprema, Mao Zedong, was remarkably foggy, especially as it related to the PRC's touchiness over Tibetan issues, the equivocal Indian stance over Tibet and, critically, Nikita Khrushchev's delight in rubbing the Chairman's nose in the debacle of his Tibet policy.

In his study *China's Decision for War with India in 1962*, John Garver (currently professor of international relations at the Georgia Institute of Technology) describes the encounter:

The question of responsibility for the crisis in Tibet figured prominently in the contentious talks between Mao Zedong and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in Beijing on 2 October 1959. After a complete disagreement over Taiwan, Khrushchev turned to India and Tibet, saying: "If you let me, I will tell you what a guest should not say - the events in Tibet are your fault. You ruled in Tibet, you should have had your intelligence [agencies] there and should have known about the plans and intentions of the Dalai Lama" [to flee to India].

"Nehru also says that the events in Tibet occurred on our fault," Mao replied.

After an exchange over the flight of the Dalai Lama, Khrushchev made the point: "If you allow him [the Dalai Lama] an opportunity to flee to India, then what has Nehru to do with it? We believe that the events in Tibet are the fault of the Communist Party of China, not Nehru's fault."

"No, this is Nehru's fault," Mao replied.

"Then the events in Hungary are not our fault," the Soviet leader responded, "but the fault of the United States of America, if I understand you correctly. Please, look here, we had an army in Hungary, we supported that fool Rakosi - and this is our mistake, not the mistake of the United

States."

Mao rejected this: "The Hindus acted in Tibet as if it belonged to them."

Mao was determined to assuage his feeling of embarrassment (and his jealousy of Nehru's leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement and his anger at Khrushchev's pro-Delhi tilt) by knocking India off its perch.

Nehru apparently misread the conciliatory stylings of Zhou Enlai as an accurate representation of China's military determination, and the Indian military was completely unprepared in every conceivable way - manpower, materiel, logistics, conditioning, positioning, tactics, or strategy - to withstand the People's Liberation Army when it attacked on October 20, 1962.

Actually, Indian failures were not limited to diplomatic and military tunnel vision. They also extended to profound conceptual shortcomings, ones that have relevance to today's standoff between the PRC and Japan over the Senkakus/Diaoyu Islands.

Nehru leaned on the McMahon Line for his definition of the PRC-Indian boundary. The McMahon Line, originally designed to contain China, turned out to be a generous gift to the PRC.

In the early years of the 20th century, protecting India by creating a Tibetan buffer zone between China and Russia and the precious Raj was a priority for imperial British thinkers. To this end, the British government took advantage of China's post-1911 disarray to convene a conference of representatives of China, Tibet, and Britain in New Delhi in 1914 to negotiate the Simla Accord.

Its key objective was to partition Tibet into Chinese-governed Outer Tibet and locally governed Inner Tibet "under Chinese suzerainty" and define a border between India and ethnic Tibetan regions that had the buy-in of the largely autonomous Tibetan government in Lhasa. The Tibetans were eager to sign, since the Accord implied the ability of the Lhasa government to conduct its own foreign policy and conclude treaties; the Chinese government repudiated the treaty.

The British Foreign Office did not support Tibetan independence, however, and was more mindful of maintaining cordial relations with China; it let the initiative fade away. The Accord was published in the official compendium of Indian treaties, Charles Umpherston Aitchison's *Collection of Treaties, Engagements, and Sanads*, with the notation that no binding accord had been reached at Simla.

The Accord and the McMahon Line languished in obscurity until Olaf Caroe, a strategist in the Indian Foreign Office, decided to invoke them in 1937 as a binding precedent for settling persistent border tiffs between India ... and Tibet.

Since the historical record showed that the British government itself did not acknowledge the validity of the Simla Accord, some unseemly imperial legerdemain was called for. A new version of Aitchison was commissioned; instead of noting the Accord was not binding on any of the parties, it stated that Britain and Tibet, but not China, had accepted the Accord.

As Steven A Hoffmann wrote in his *India and the China Crisis*:

The Aitchison changes were allowed to appear in 1938. In order to publish them quickly, and to give a greater sense of authenticity to the new entry without having it attract undue notice, the India Office (and possibly Caroe) contrived to issue an amended version of the appropriate 1929 Aitchison volume, without giving it a new publication date. Copies of the original 1929 volume - located in offices and libraries in India, England, and elsewhere - were then replaced by request and discarded.

Perhaps only three original versions of the relevant 1929 Aitchison volume exist in the entire world (including one at Harvard University). The McMahon Line found its way onto India Survey maps and never left.

After Indian independence, Nehru inherited the now-sacrosanct McMahon Line, largely by default, and used it as the baseline for many of his boundary discussions with the People's Republic of China. (Caroe's deception was not discovered until 1964, after the war, when a British diplomat compared the two versions of the Aitchison volume at Harvard.)

But the McMahon Line had a fatal flaw: it was in a terrible, terrible place.

The line was conceived as a series of heroic outposts strung along the bleak Himalayan ridgeline. The vision of a hundred fists of stone raised in defiance against the enemies from the north on the edge of the Tibetan plateau perhaps enthralled armchair strategists, but fortifying and defending the McMahon Line demanded that troops and supplies had to be pushed from the southern valleys up to the 4,000- and even near 5,000-meter commanding heights.

For the purposes of a military commander defending Indian territory, it would have been infinitely preferable to have the boundary at the base of the foothills, within reach of reasonably expeditious resupply and reinforcement, and leave to the enemy the glory of clambering across the jagged mountains and battling out of the valleys.

Neville Maxwell, the London Times South Asia correspondent at the time and author of *India's China War*, a widely-read (and, in India, widely-resented) depiction of the 1962 war as Nehru's folly, described the military state of affairs in an interview:

The very idea of a strategic frontier was out of date by the 1930s. Any sensible soldier will tell you if China is going to invade India from the Northeast the place to meet them and to resist them is at the foot of the hills. So when the invaders finally come panting out of breath and ammunition, you can meet them from a position of strength. The last place, strategically, to meet the Chinese was along the McMahon alignment. Caroe is very much the guilty party in all of this. [3]

In an atmosphere of escalating tensions and distrust between India and the People's Republic of China in the aftermath of the Tibet rebellion and the Dalai Lama's flight to India, Nehru compounded his geographic disadvantage by sending troops beyond the McMahon Line to establish outposts on the Chinese side - the so-called "Forward Strategy".

The PLA pounced, and the result was a humiliating defeat followed by a unilateral Chinese

withdrawal to north of the "Line of Control", the unofficial but effective boundary that divides India and the People's Republic of China even today.

On the 50th anniversary of this debacle, it is hard for Indian nationalists to find silver linings. One noteworthy example was an article describing the closer integration of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh into the Indian linguistic, cultural, and political mainstream: "India Lost War With China But Won Arunachal's Heart".

When the Dalai Lama thinks of India's consolidation of Arunachal Pradesh, however, he probably feels little joy and more than a twinge of bitter melancholy in his heart, relating to the great religious town and market center of Tawang, which occupies a thumb of territory sticking out on the northwest corner of the state and which has always been the critical pivot upon which the northeast Indian version of the Great Game has revolved.

Tawang is triple-Tibetan: it is in a Tibetan cultural area, it has been a major center of Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhist practice for centuries (the 6th Dalai Lama was reincarnated there; the town hosts a large monastery); and it holds a special place in the history of the modern Tibetan resistance. The Dalai Lama entered India from the PRC at Tawang in 1959, and actively patronizes the monastery and the town.

In addition to its ethnically Tibetan residents, Tawang also hosts a considerable number of Tibetan refugees.

In 1914, at Simla, the Tibetan government had acquiesced to the inclusion of Tawang into British India by endorsing the McMahon Line. However, as the Simla Accord languished, it subsequently understood on both sides of the McMahon Line that Tawang was under the administration and effective control of Tibet - if not by Lhasa, then by the local monastery.

In 1935, a British botanist/spy Frank Kingdon-Ward was arrested in Tawang; the Tibetans compounded their error by complaining to a British mission in Lhasa. This disturbing state of affairs came to the notice of Olaf Caroe and led to the resurrection of the Simla Accord and the McMahon Line - and the Indian claim on Tawang.

In 1947, after Indian independence, the government in Lhasa appealed to the new government to acknowledge its rule over Tawang.

Didn't happen.

The India-friendly Wikipedia entry on Tawang states:

[Tawang] came under effective Indian administration on February 12, 1951, when Major R Khating led Indian Army troops to relocate Chinese squatters. India assumed control and sovereignty of the area and established democratic rule therein to end the oppression of the Monpa.

An article in the Guardian provides an interesting picture of the political dynamic that the Indian government found and exploited in Tawang:

Pema Gombu says he has lived under three flags: Tibetan, Chinese and Indian. Although his living room is decked with pictures of the current Dalai Lama, the 81-year-old says the Tibetan administration in the early 20th century was the worst.

"The [Tibetan] officials in that time were corrupt and cruel. I am sure his holiness did not know this. In those days if a Tibetan stopped you they could ask you to work for them like a slave. They forced us to pay taxes. Poor farmers like me had to give over a quarter of our crops to them. We had to carry the loads 40km [25 miles] to a Tibetan town as tribute every year."

It was this treatment that turned Tawang away from Tibet. Mr Gombu said he helped guide Indian soldiers into the town in 1950 who carried papers signed by the Tibetan government which transferred Arunachal's 35,000 square miles [90,000 square kilometers] to India. "It was the happiest day of my life."

Judging from Pema Gombu's references to Tibetans, he is presumably ethnic Monpa. Monpa are an ethnic group that adopted Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhism in the 17th century and center their religious practices on Tawang. They form the demographic backbone of Tawang. Although they are "Tibetan Buddhists" ie followers of the Gelugpa sect, they aren't Tibetans, as the history of Tawang makes clear.

It would appear that the Indian government used the same justification to take control of its Tibetan areas as Beijing did: to rescue the local inhabitants - the Monpa, in this case - from the corrupt and brutal rule of their Tibetan overlords - possibly the government in Lhasa, but more likely the overbearing bosses of the monastery in Tawang.

This history provides an interesting and melancholy perspective on the Dalai Lama's 2009 visit to Tawang.

The visit attracted an enormous amount of media interest because there was the Dalai Lama, going up to the Chinese border, stating that the contested territory of Arunachal Pradesh belonged to India, thereby sticking his finger (in a non-violent, Buddhist fashion) in the Chinese dragon's eye!

But for the Dalai Lama it must have been, at best, a bitter-sweet experience.

He is clearly unwillingly to accept that Tawang is Indian territory. In 2003, as the Times of India tells us, the Dalai Lama asserted that Tawang was part of Tibet, before backpedaling:

NEW DELHI: For the first-time, Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama has said that Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, a territory that's still claimed by China, is part of India.

Acknowledging the validity of the MacMohan Line as per the 1914 Simla Agreement in an interview to Navbharat Times, he said that Arunachal Pradesh was a part of India under the agreement signed by Tibetan and British representatives.

In 2003, while touring Tawang, the Dalai Lama had been asked to comment on the issue, but had refused to give a direct answer, saying that Arunachal was actually part of Tibet. China doesn't recognize the MacMohan Line and claims that Tawang and Arunachal Pradesh are part of its territory.

The statement is bound to impact the India-China dialogue, as Beijing has already stated that if Tawang is handed to it, it will rescind claim on the rest of Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese proposal is strategically unacceptable to India, as Tawang is close not just to the northeastern states but also to Bhutan.

After the Dalai Lama's 2009 trips to Japan and Arunachal Pradesh, the Indian press reported that he had stated categorically that Arunachal Pradesh and Tawang are part of India.

In a rather bitter irony, amid the myriad failures of the McMahon Line in securing the borderlands, its only triumph is the modest advance Olaf Caroe intended in 1938: the alienation of Tawang from Tibet.

Nehru's unwise fetishizing of the McMahon Line has been carried on by many in India's political, military, and security elite. In an interesting inversion of the secretive Communists versus transparent democracy framing, the PRC has declassified many official documents relating to the war. The Indian government, on the other hand, has still classified the official inquiry into the war - the Henderson-Brooks report - presumably because it documents the shortcomings of Nehru, the civilian government, and the Indian military in embarrassing fashion.

The cock-up was so complete, in fact that the line between incompetent provocateur and innocent victim has blurred, to India's advantage. Plenty of self-serving assertions have filled the informational vacuum left by the continued classification of the Henderson-Brooks report, allowing nationalistically minded or Sino-phobic Indian commentators to describe the Chinese attack as unprovoked aggression and warn darkly that Chinese perfidy can and probably will be repeated.

On the 50th anniversary of the war, the Deccan Herald declared:

Make no mistake about it. That China is a hydra-headed monster with massive expansionist plans across South Asia is no longer a secret. It was Mao who termed Tibet as the "palm" of a hand with its five fingers as Ladakh, Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, and what has so long been as NEFA [North East Frontier Agency] that pertain to our north eastern states. [4]

Brahma Chellaney found a Western home for this particular brand of historiography at the Daily Beast, the electronic rump of the now-defunct Newsweek, in an article intended to use the Indian experience to educate the democracies of East Asia about how to protect their precious atolls from the PRC: Mr Chellaney declares: China gave India a "lesson" in 1962. Study it now.

My advice: by all means study the 1962, but please don't study Mr Chellaney, especially since he says things like:

China's generals believe in hitting as fast and as hard as possible, a style of warfare they demonstrated in their 1962 blitzkrieg against India. The aim is to wage "battles with swift outcome" (*sujuezhān*). This laser focus has been a hallmark of every military action Communist China has undertaken since 1949. [5]

In a spirit of scholarly skepticism, I presume to direct Mr Chellaney's attention to the PRC intervention in Korea: three years (1950-53), 500,000 casualties. 'Nuff said.

The key lesson from the 1962 is not that China's neighbors should muscle up in order to counter

a PLA "blitzkrieg": rather that it is dangerous to fetishize territorial boundaries in order to make them into national rallying points. As Mr Hoffmann observed in his largely sympathetic account of the Indian government's border catastrophe:

[The] Indian government came to believe that the McMahon Line was not merely a British Invention ... the McMahon line itself constituted recognition that the watershed crest of the Assam Himalaya formed the natural geographical divide between Tibet and [the Assam Himalaya].

... the weight of all the evidence amassed by the Indians ... made for a plausible case ... But to the extent that India claimed absolute rather than relative worth for its border case, by holding that linear borders had been conclusively "delimited" by history and discovered through documentary investigation, the Indian case became vulnerable ...

India drew the line in the Himalayas - but it turned out to be the wrong line. As for the Senkakus/Diaoyus ...?

Notes:

1. China's new 'Look West' policy to give primacy to India: expert, The Indian Express, Nov 1, 2012.
2. Over 80 per cent Chinese have no knowledge of 1962 war: Survey, Niti Central, Oct 20, 2012.
3. China Was The Aggrieved; India, Aggressor In '62, Outlook India, Oct 22, 2012.
4. The Battle of Attrition, Deccan Herald, Nov 2, 2012.
5. How China Fights: Lessons From the 1962 Sino-Indian War, The Daily Beast, Oct 29, 2012.