
Sino-Indian Border Impasse: Strategy for Resolution

Sheru Thapliyal

A frontier of hundreds of miles between two powerful nations holding each other in mutual contempt seems to point at anything but peace.

— Dr Buchanan Hamilton
Adviser to Lord Hastings
on Himalayan Matters

Introduction

Although it was said over a hundred years ago, the saying above is applicable to India and China even today. The recent Chinese air and ground intrusions in Ladakh have shown that only a fragile peace prevails on our borders with China despite the Peace and Tranquillity Agreement of 1993 and confidence-building measures (CBMs) put in place in 1996. Fourteen rounds of talks of the Joint Working Group have taken place without any success. It should be obvious to the policy-makers that if they are serious about resolution of the border problem between the two countries, a fresh and bold approach with complete transparency is required. We cannot be petrified of China and resolve the border problem at the same time. We have to understand why it is that China has resolved its border problem with 11 out of 13 countries with whom it shares a land border. And why it has accepted its border with Myanmar along the McMahon Line whereas in our case it denounces the same line as an imperialist legacy. Obviously, the Chinese have some concerns, just like we have, and these need to be addressed. Of course, in the process, our national interest needs to borne in mind.

The border problem is like a festering sore. We may put it on the back-burner and step up the economic engagement with China but unless we resolve the

Major General **Sheru Thapliyal** (Retd) is former General Officer Commanding of an Infantry Division and is at present working in a multinational information technology company.

border issue, we shall always remain anxious, unbalanced and unhinged. There is a need to be proactive and put across some proposals to force China to either reject or accept them. We have never put across any proposals in our nearly 60 years of negotiations with the Chinese. Let us be bold and assertive for once.

Evolution of Sino-Indian Border

Prior to independence, the British were either unwilling or unable to settle the border with Tibet, then an independent country. Although two sets of boundaries were forced on Tibet and by implication on China, the British did not insist on written acceptance or even acknowledgement by China. The result was that it gave the Chinese an opportunity to denounce these boundaries as an imperialist legacy and now they are forcing their own version of the Sino-Indian boundary on us.

Boundary in the Eastern Sector

Although a loose kind of boundary existed between Assam in the south and Tibet in the north, with the watershed more or less as an accepted boundary, it was formalised during the Shimla Convention of July 1914 between Great Britain, China and Tibet. It needs to be borne in mind that at the time, Tibet was an independent country and remained so till 1950, when the Chinese forcibly occupied it. Great Britain was represented by Sir Henry McMahon, the foreign secretary, China by Ivan Chin and Tibet by Lonchen Shatra. The Chinese representative only initialled the Declaration which left them the room to repudiate the McMahon Line as an imperialist legacy and lay claim to the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh. As far as Sikkim was concerned, its boundary with Tibet was formalised by the convention of March 17, 1890, between Great Britain and China. Since this convention was signed by the Chinese representative Sheng Tai, the Chinese could not repudiate it, and have recently created a controversy in the Finger Area in North Sikkim.

Boundary in the Western Sector

In 1842, Maharaja Gulab Singh, then governor of Kashmir under Sikh rule, had captured Ladakh and advanced upto the Kunlun range of mountains, 70 miles north of the Karakoram range. A peace treaty was thereafter signed between Maharaja Gulab Singh and Tibet but no mention was made of a boundary between Ladakh and Tibet. It was left to Captain W H Johnson, an officer of the Survey of India, who recommended that the boundary be along the Kunlun range of mountains. Johnson was supported by Sir John Ardagh, the director of

Military Intelligence. However, the alignment of this boundary was not conveyed formally to the Chinese. Later, the Viceroy, Lord Elgin, felt that this line was too far forward. A new alignment was proposed by George McCartney, the British representative in Kashgar who discussed it with the Russian representative as well as the Chinese officials. This line was then formally proposed to the Chinese by the British Minister in Beijing, Sir Claude McDonald. This line came to be known as the McCartney–McDonald Line. Since the Chinese gave no indication that they had accepted this line, the viceroy proposed that the Johnson Line be accepted as the boundary between British India and Tibet, and it was interposed on the maps. As far as the boundary west of the Karakoram Pass is concerned, the British fixed the boundary between Hunza area of Northern Territories and Xinjiang along the highest crest line of the Karakoram range and the Chinese have never objected to this. Thus, this was the boundary inherited by India at the time of independence.

Boundary in the Middle Sector

As far as the Middle Sector is concerned, the British continued their map making to define the border between Himachal Pradesh, Garhwal and Kumaon with Tibet. In all these areas, the boundary was drawn to follow the highest Himalayan crest line. Except for a few small pockets in Shipkli La area in Himachal Pradesh, and Jadhong and Bora Hoti in Uttarakhand, which are claimed by the Chinese, the border is dispute free.

The Reasons for the Border Problem and Chinese Concerns

- **The Chinese Psyche:** China considered itself the centre of the civilised world for centuries and the idea remained firm in Chinese minds, long after it had ceased to be a fact. In their minds, territory once won for civilisation must not be given back to barbarism; therefore, territory which was once Chinese, must forever remain so, and if lost, must be recovered at the first opportunity. Such loss cannot be legal or valid; it is at best recognition of passing weakness. The whole growth of the Chinese Empire, throughout more than 3,000 years, had been built on this principle. The barbarians were conquered, and then absorbed and turned into Chinese by slow assimilation and cultural influence. To deny this process, to the Chinese, would be a denial of a right, the recognition of failure.

- The most important conceptual reason from the Chinese point of view is to use the border problem as a means to keep India confined to South Asia and not allow it to realise its full potential and pose a challenge to Chinese dominance of Asia. At the tactical level, the Chinese have some compulsions in both the Western as well as Eastern Sectors. In the Western Sector, the greatest Chinese concern is to ensure depth for its Western Highway and its claim line has been cleverly projected to ensure that India cannot sever the Western Highway by launching an offensive from anywhere in this sector. Since we are in *de facto* possession of the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh, the Chinese claim on it is only to force us to accept Chinese *de facto* occupation of Aksai-Chin. Subtle indications of this East-West swap were given by Zhou-en-Lai in the late Fifties and prior to the 1962 War, and by Deng Xiaoping in 1988 during Rajiv Gandhi's path-breaking visit to China. Any future settlement will have to keep this factor in mind.

India's Concerns

We on our part will have to remember that the Chinese are already in *de facto* possession of the territory in the Western Sector which they need to give depth to the Western Highway. By its occupation of the passes in Ladakh, China has ensured that we cannot launch an offensive to cut off the Western Highway. We are also concerned that the East-West swap should not be considered by the opposition and general public as a sellout. Another Indian concern is that once the border question is settled, no more provocative issues like Tawang Tract, and Finger Area in North Sikkim should come up. A joint survey needs to be done. The boundary should be accepted along the watershed and it needs to be demarcated by the erection of boundary pillars.

Negotiating a Strategy for Resolution of the Border Problem

It is incredible to note that in nearly 55 years since the Chinese created the border dispute, we are yet to put across a proposal to them for resolving this dispute. We get overwhelmed by the Chinese in this respect. It is they who forced the Peace and Tranquillity Agreement on us in 1993. It resulted in the entire Indo-Tibet border being disputed instead of a few pockets and the whole border being called the Line of Actual Control. That notwithstanding, the suggested negotiating strategy should be along the following lines:

- Take a pragmatic approach and resolve the border question sector-wise, by and large on an 'as is where is' basis. Make specific proposals to the Chinese.
- The border along the entire length should be based on the watershed principle, the internationally accepted norm in the mountains.
- Once resolved, the border needs to be demarcated and border pillars erected.
- Keep the whole process transparent and in public view and evolve a joint approach with the opposition.
- Basically our approach should be :
 - Think out of the box.
 - Address Chinese concerns.
 - Use leverages.
 - Make them an offer they can't refuse.
 - Show our reasonableness to the world.
 - Put the ball firmly in the Chinese court.

Specific Proposals

Option I : The Proposal

- The boundary to be along the McCartney-McDonald Line in the Western Sector.
- The Chinese to forego their claim on Arunachal Pradesh as a *quid pro quo*.

Merits of the Proposal

- The McCartney-McDonald Line is along a watershed unlike the present Johnson Line.
- It addresses the Chinese concern of depth to their Western Highway.
- India gets back 15,000 sq km of territory in Aksai Chin out of 36,000 sq km occupied by China at present.

Option II : The Proposal

- Concede the entire Chinese claim in Aksai Chin. The Chinese forego their claim on Arunachal Pradesh, and for giving our territory to the Chinese in Ladakh, we get Chumbi Valley in lieu.

Merits of the Proposal

- Formalise the Chinese claim up to their claim line in Aksai Chin but as a *quid*
-

pro quo, no Chinese claim on Arunachal Pradesh.

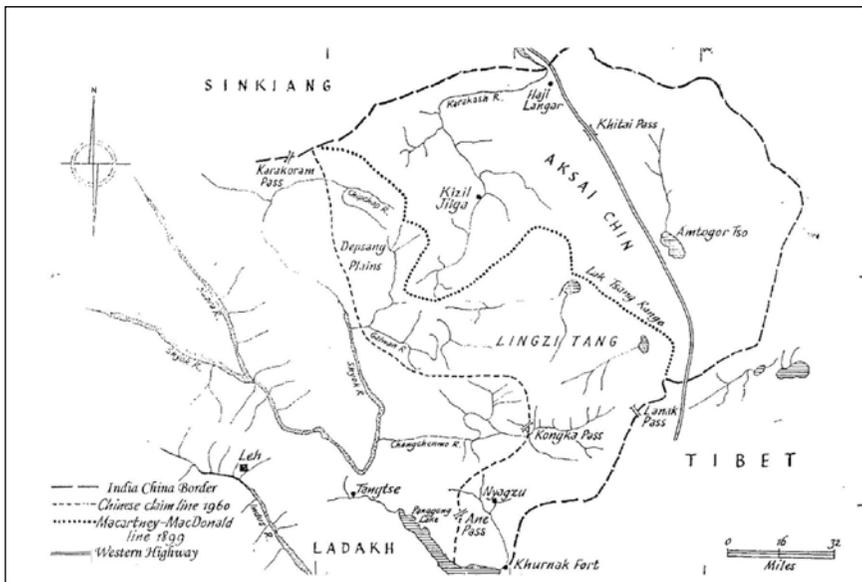
- Strategic Chumbi Valley to be gained by India. Threat to Western Bhutan and Siliguri corridor removed.

The Chinese are unlikely to agree to this proposal since Chumbi Valley had never been in possession of British India.

Other Disputed Areas and Suggested Approach

- Keep Shaksgam Valley issue alive till the final solution of the Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) problem between India and Pakistan.
- In Ladakh, since we are insisting on the boundary along a watershed, the Chinese claim line, based on passes southeast of Aksai Chin, to be conceded. In lieu, the Chinese to forego their claim on Demchok funnel, being south of the watershed.
- In the Middle Sector, India to continue in occupation of Shipki La Pass in Himachal Pradesh. In lieu, Jadhang and Bara Hoti could be conceded since these are not of any strategic or tactical significance.
- In the Eastern Sector, India to concede Chinese claims on Longju and Khenzmane Rima. In lieu, the Chinese to forego their claim on Tawang.

Fig 1: Western Sector Proposal



Conclusion

The Sino-Indian border dispute is the longest running unresolved border dispute in the world. We need to put forward some proposal to the Chinese and thereby put the ball in their court. For whatever reasons, we are yet to do that. The result is an atmosphere of distrust and uncertainty. We are getting hemmed-in in South Asia, and let alone the world, we cannot even compete with the Chinese for being an Asian power. Negotiations need to be kept in the public eye. The government should not spring surprises on the public like was done in the Fifties. Then the result was that hostile public opinion and a vociferous Opposition forced the government to adopt a hard stand, leaving no room for manoeuvre. Let us learn from the past so that its mistakes are not repeated in the future.

CLAWS MANEKSHAW PAPERS

No. 1, 2008	The Impact of Geo-Politics of Southwest Asia on Afghanistan: A Medium Term Perspective <i>Rahul K Bhonsle</i>	No. 12, 2009	Principles of War: Time for Relook <i>P K Mallick</i>
No. 2, 2008	Indo-US Strategic Convergence: An Overview of Defence and Military Cooperation <i>Ashok Sharma</i>	No. 13, 2009	Sri Lanka: The Last Phase in the Eelam War IV From Chundikulam to Pudukattalan <i>SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda</i>
No. 3, 2008	The Al Qaeda in India <i>Rahul K Bhonsle</i>	No. 14, 2009	Winning Hearts and Minds Lessons from Jammu and Kashmir <i>Rahul K Bhonsle</i>
No. 4, 2008	Armed Forces in Disaster Management: A Perspective on Functional Aspects of Role, Training and Equipment <i>O S Dagur</i>	No. 15, 2009	India's Missile Defence Programme: Threat Perceptions, Technological Evolution and Growing Indo-US Missile Defence Collaboration <i>Ashok Sharma</i>
No. 5, 2008	Trends in Pakistan's Defence Spending <i>Shalini Chawla</i>	No. 16, 2009	The Emerging Balance of Power in Asia: Conflict of Cooperation? <i>Rajeswari Pillar Rajagopalam</i>
No. 6, 2008	Insurgency in the FATA & NWFP: Challenges & Prospects for the Pakistan Army <i>Samarjit Ghosh</i>	No. 17, 2010	Militancy and the Pakistan Army <i>Brain Cloughley</i>
No. 7, 2008	Iran's Nuclear Quagmire: Trends and Challenges <i>Monika Chansoria</i>	No. 18, 2010	Changing Nature of Conflict: Trends and Responses <i>Proceeding of an International Seminar hosted jointly by Army HQ and CLAWS 23 & 24 November 2009</i>
No. 8, 2009	The Rising Tide of Left Wing Extremism in India and Implications for National Security <i>Amit Kumar Singh</i>	No. 19, 2010	Understanding the Indian Mujahideen <i>Rohit Singh</i>
No. 9, 2009	Left Wing Extremism in India: Context, Implications and Response Options <i>G D Bakshi</i>	No. 20, 2010	'Informationising' Warfare: China Unleashes the Cyber and Space Domain <i>Monika Chansoria</i>
No. 10, 2009	India's Strategic Culture: The Impact of Geography <i>Harjeet Singh</i>	No. 21, 2010	Jammu and Kashmir: The Emerging Contours and the Way Ahead <i>Narender Kumar</i>
No. 11, 2009	Why India, Why Not Pakistan? Reflections on South Asian Military Politics <i>Zoltan Barany</i>	No. 22, 2010	Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won <i>Ashok Mehta</i>