

# THE NORTH-EASTERN FRONTIER

*A Documentary Study of the  
Internecine Rivalry between  
India, Tibet and China*

VOLUME 2, 1914-54

Parshotam Mehra

Volume I covered the period from 1906 to 1914. Volume II deals with the forty years between the 1914 Simla Conference and the Sino-Indian agreement on the 'Tibet region of China', a period of considerable interest to those concerned with the more recent history of India's north-eastern frontiers. Following the British failure at the 1914 Tripartite Conference, efforts were made to woo China and gain acceptance of the Simla conclusions, but by 1919 the exercise had proved abortive. Thereafter, until the death of the thirteenth Dalai Lama in 1933, Tibet wrested almost complete independence from a China preoccupied with internal problems. The next two decades witnessed major changes: while Chiang Kai-Shek was contending with the Japanese challenge, and the activities of the Panchen Lama undermined the unity of the Tibet region, both China and Tibet made encroachments into India's eastern territories. By the time the British in India felt able to face these realities India was poised to achieve Independence. Soon Communist China established control over the Tibet region undeterred by the strong *verbal* protests of the government of the new Indian Republic.

The documents in this volume present a fascinating story of a rapidly changing political milieu. Professor Mehra's 34-page Introduction provides a useful survey of the period and knits the documentary material into a coherent narrative. Taken together, both the volumes that comprise *The North-Eastern Frontier* are likely to become authoritative source-books.

Parshotam Mehra, Chairman of the Department of History, Panjab University, Chandigarh, who has edited these volumes, took his M.A. and Ph. D. degrees from the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, having earlier studied at Government College, Lahore. He was Visiting Professor at the University of Bonn in 1972; earlier, he had been a member of the Panjab Education Service and on the teaching faculty of the Indian Military Academy, Dehra Dun.



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VOLUME 2, 1914-54

PARSHOTAM MEHRA

DELHI  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS  
1980

Hist / 22

*Oxford University Press*

OXFORD LONDON GLASGOW

NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON

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The publication of this work has been financially supported by the Indian Council of Historical Research; however, the responsibility for the facts stated, opinions expressed or conclusions reached is entirely that of the author and the Indian Council of Historical Research accepts no responsibility for them

Printed in India by Indraprastha Press (C.B.T.),  
Nehru House, 4, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi 110002  
and published by R. Dayal, Oxford University Press,  
2/11 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110002

For Shefali  
who means so much

## Acknowledgements

It is perhaps not necessary to re-affirm my indebtedness to all those listed in 'Acknowledgements' to the first volume of this documentary study. Here it is pleasant to record my special debt of gratitude to Mr. Girja Kumar, Librarian, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Miss Heera Kapasi of the U. S. Library, Dr. Tilak Raj Sareen of the National Archives and Dr. S. R. Bakshi of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library who were a great help on some geographical names as well as biographical data.

I am equally beholden to Mr. O. P. Gupta of the Panjab University Evening College who has compiled a combined index for the two volumes.

I should add that while the broad plan of the second volume is by no means different from the first, two features may be of interest. One, each section in the table of contents has been given a separate heading; two, the scope of 'Biographical Sketches' has been considerably enlarged.

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## Abbreviations

CMTA	(Kuomintang government's) Committee for Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs
Encl.	Enclosure
F O	Foreign Office
Foreign	Foreign and Political (Department) Proceedings, National Archives of India
H E	His (Her) Excellency
HMG	His (Her) Majesty's Government
I O	India Office
IOR	India Office Records
p. (pp.)	page (pages)
Pt.	Part
PRC	People's Republic of China
Proc.	Proceeding/Proceedings

## Introduction

In the long and chequered annals of India's North-eastern Frontier, the years that have elapsed since the breakdown of the Simla Conference, with which this study is principally concerned, fall broadly into three parts: 1914-19, 1919-33 and the aftermath. The first phase, embracing the five years immediately following the Simla Conference, is perhaps of the greatest moment providing as it does an insight into the Chinese mind and of those among the British who viewed McMahon's manners as overbearing. The former, it would appear, were keen on reaching an understanding, but on their own terms; the latter found fault with the British Plenipotentiary's allegedly pro-Lhasa stance. It may be only fair to point out that Lonchen Shatra had been no less anxious that all the three parties stick to the letter of the Convention, if not indeed improve upon it, to secure his country's advantage. To the exclusion of the other two, the British throughout these years appeared to be pre-occupied with an academic exercise, staged necessarily behind the scenes, and involving a critical, if agonizing, re-appraisal, of the Simla confabulations.

Between Lu Hsing-chi in Calcutta, busily engaged in sabotaging a settlement that appeared to him to be detrimental to the honour and interests of his country, and Yuan Shih-kai in Peking no less determined that he would not yield on what he deemed to be essentials, the innermost recesses of the Chinese mind are starkly revealed. McMahon's veiled references to 'confidential sources' from which he gleaned his information were largely a euphemism for the dark machinations of Lu Hsing-chi, extracts from whose 'intercepted telegrams' have been incorporated in the preceding volume. It may be recalled here that Lu had a lot to do with Chinese intransigence and refusal to compromise, which characterize the negotiations all through, and especially in the final stages of the conference. Herein Peking's memoranda of May as well as June (1914), provide fascinating material for a refreshing analysis. Seemingly willing to yield, it yet took an intractable stand which left little room for a compromise. In its essence, the final Chinese position was that McMahon, and the British, should either accept what the Chinese wanted or else!

It may be conceded, however, that in taking this position both Lu Hsing-chi, and to a lesser extent Ivan Chen, were true to form. In

Peking, Jordan who was close to the hub of things had formed much the same impression. In despatch after despatch to the Foreign Office, which were dutifully relayed to India, the British Minister made no secret of his conviction that the Chinese were unlikely to yield and if they did, would do so, with ill grace. Nor was this true of the hirelings of the Wai-chiao-pu alone, for Jordan who had the most intimate of relations with President Yuan Shih-kai, gathered much the same impression from the man at the helm of affairs. In his talks—some of which took place just between the two of them—Yuan not only invoked China's age-old connections with Litang and Batang, which under the McMahon dispensation were to form part of Inner Tibet, but expressed his inability to enforce a seemingly unpopular settlement, over provinces (Szechuan and Yunnan), which were tacitly hostile to his regime. It would thus stand to reason that the Chinese viewpoint was based on harsh political realities at home, and that Lu Hsing-chi was not so much out of step—Ivan Chen apparently was at times and in Peking, at any rate, even his personal loyalty appears to have been at a discount—as in fact fully in line with the thinking of his political masters back home.

The British Minister, whose knowledge of China and its affairs was second to none revealed a great deal of his own mind in his personal and private correspondence with Langley and others in the (British) Foreign Office. It is interesting that on the eve of the breakdown at Simla, Jordan confessed that

somehow the Delhi negotiations conveyed to us an impression of lack of reality. It looked as if the British and Tibetan representatives knew each other's cards throughout, and as if Ivan Chen was not too loyal to his own government. The methods of the Government of India are similar to those which Russia and Japan have tried but have found of so little service that they seem fit to abandon them.<sup>1</sup>

It was a grave charge to level and yet Jordan's views not only did not undergo a change but found an even more forceful expression in the years following Simla. Thus, in 1916, he bemoaned the fact that Delhi did not take his advice and 'meet the Chinese half-way', when the 'opportunity offered'; in 1918, it was a 'huge blunder' not to clinch a deal when Yuan Shih-kai was in power and 'most friendly

<sup>1</sup>Jordan to Langley, 28 June, 1914, in the author's *The North-Eastern Frontier*, vol. 1, pp. 202-3.

disposed towards us'. But then, he noted, his was a 'cry in the wilderness' and India 'went her own way'.<sup>1</sup>

In Lhasa the position appeared to be no whit better; as a matter of fact, it was much worse. To the Dalai Lama and his Government, the concessions made to the British, and the Chinese—in terms of the cession of Tawang and territory that comprised Inner Tibet—however unpalatable in themselves, became downright unthinkable, even inexcusable, the moment it was known that China had refused to append its signatures to the Convention. And this, above all, underscored the personal tragedy of the Tibetan Plenipotentiary. For Shatra, a shrewd judge of men and affairs, who had played his cards at Simla with a rare acumen, spent the evening of his life under a heavy cloud of dark foreboding and suspicion. The Dalai Lama distrusted him while his contemporaries in Tibet's 'political' life hated him, if only for the reason that he had risen high on the traditionally slippery, and in Tibet's case additionally shaky, hierarchical pole. It is not without significance that it was only when Bell visited Lhasa in 1920-1 that the Dalai Lama seemed, for the first time, to comprehend the significance and appreciate the relevance of 'Inner' Tibet and the gains which his country had made at Simla.<sup>2</sup> The Lama's lack of political maturity may also be gauged from his futile endeavours, which predictably misfired, to seek a rapprochement with Russia as a counter-weight to the British. No wonder that such friendly critics as Hardinge referred to his handling of affairs with a certain measure of condescension as 'tin-pot' diplomacy!

In the years following the breakdown at Simla, the Chinese made three distinct attempts to revive the stalemated talks and pick up the threads where they had snapped earlier. The most important of these, in terms both of the seeming seriousness of its intent as also in providing a realistic basis for the talks, was the May 1919 offer. Essentially, the Chinese now accepted the Simla basis with some territorial adjustments in regard to the boundary of Inner-Outer Tibet. A major gain was the concession of Chamdo to the Dalai Lama's kingdom while the much fought-over Litang, Batang and Tachienlu were to be part of Szechuan. The only bit which the British, and the Indian authorities, found hard to swallow—and the earlier experience of dealings with Chang Yin-tang and Kuo-yin had been too recent to be

<sup>1</sup> Jordan to Butler, 11 April, 1916 and Jordan to Macleay, 16 April, 1918. For the texts, pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Alfred Bell, *Portrait of the Dalai Lama*, London, 1946, pp. 206-7.

easily forgotten—was the posting of Chinese commercial agents at the trade marts. While opposing the Chinese agents, Whitehall was no less keen that part of the tripartite Convention in respect of the British Trade Agent at Gyantse be modified to the extent that the following be inserted (after the main clause):

Should the British Government hereafter decide, with the consent of the Tibetan Government, to station a permanent British representative at Lhasa, there will be no objection on the part of China.<sup>1</sup>

The above notwithstanding, it is necessary to emphasize that both Whitehall and Delhi were prepared, in the last count, to give way to Chinese importunities in achieving what they viewed as a final settlement of the Tibetan question. So indeed would have Lhasa. And, sensibly, the British had refused to give the latter a veto over the terms that Peking now offered.

What is important about the May 1919 initiative is the fact that, despite a lot of cogitation at the highest levels of government and a hectic exchange of notes between Delhi, London and the Minister in Peking, the British were prepared to accept, without much ado, China's proffered terms in the hope that these might bring about a 'permanent settlement' of the Tibetan question, 'safeguard' India's frontiers in the East and 're-adjust' Delhi's own relations with the Lhasa Government. It is true, India had its reservations and Lhasa, understandably, wanted to stick to the letter of the Simla compact. And yet it is easy to see that Delhi would not press its opposition to a point where a breakdown became inevitable. Nor would Lhasa for, in the final count, it would have been bull-dozed into submission. It is revealing that the Tibetan authorities were consulted only *after* Jordan had handed down a reply to the Wai-chiao-pu in Peking.

In sum, the real significance of the May 1919 offer is two-fold. One, it defined the terms on which China was prepared to settle; two, it revealed that the stalemate at Simla, which persisted in the years that followed, was due principally to Peking's fiat. Thus it were the Chinese who for a variety of domestic compulsions completely backed out of terms which they had, on their own initiative, originally proffered. Nor did any amount of coaxing or cajoling avail, for once Peking's masters realized that they had obtained an upper hand in

<sup>1</sup>For details see Memorandum by Secretary, Political Department, India Office, 14 July, 1919, pp. 11-14.

Outer Mongolia, they were loath to yield any ground in Tibet. For even as the situation in Urga had been transformed, might it not change for the better in Lhasa as well? After all the Mongols, even though the Bogdo Hutukthu had refused to fall in line, had ardently petitioned that their autonomy be revoked.<sup>1</sup> Was it beyond the bounds of reason, therefore, to argue that eventually the Dalai Lama and his cohorts too might change their mind and return to the fold of the great Motherland?

Interspersed with Chinese initiatives in the years following the Simla conference lie two developments concerning Tibet. One was a 'Memorandum' drawn up by the British consular official Eric (later Sir Eric) Teichman in May 1917; the other, a truce arranged, in August 1918, through the same initiative, in the fighting that had raged intermittently all the years since 1913, between Tibetan forces and the levies of Szechuan-Yunnan. The 'memorandum' is an interesting document, powerfully expressive of what Sir Beilby Alston called the 'Peking point of view', on McMahan's performance at Simla, as seen through the eyes of a British official 'well up' in the Tibetan question. Teichman held that the bane of the British plenipotentiary's handiwork was the concept of 'Inner' Tibet which needs must be demolished, entailing in the case of an eventual settlement, the reversion to China of the Kokonor territory, and large parts of the March country. More, it was

difficult to see (Teichman wrote) what anyone gains by the artificial creation of 'Inner' Tibet in which China is apparently at liberty to make what military dispositions she pleases. . . . Unless it be that China's irritation and loss of face is considered of advantage to Tibet.<sup>2</sup>

Teichman further reasoned that if the notorious Chinese penchant for procrastination and delay was allowed to have its way, there was an 'ever-increasing risk' of the Tibetans giving way and negotiating independently with China. This alone, he warned, should make the British use the opportunity presented by the elimination of Chinese power, as a result of the revolution of 1911, to create an autonomous Tibet while the time was still 'favourable'.

<sup>1</sup>For a detailed analysis see the author's, 'Tibet and Outer Mongolia vis-a-vis China', *Journal of Indian History* (Trivandrum), XLII, 3, December 1964, pp. 727-61.

<sup>2</sup>For the text of Eric Teichman's 'Memorandum' datelined Peking, 24 September, 1916 see Sub-Encl. 2 in Alston to Balfour, 19 May, 1917, pp. 15-20.

Nor did a new tripartite conference, the British official emphasized, appear necessary for a fresh settlement could be negotiated through normal diplomatic channels. Simla failed, Teichman argued, because McMahon took an extreme pro-Tibetan stance. One wonders though whether, in turn, Teichman's was not an exercise, and he bent over backwards, in projecting a decidedly pro-Chinese point of view?

## II

It may be recalled that during the months the Simla negotiations were taking place, there had been continuous, and sometimes even loud complaints now by China and then Tibet, about each pushing the other out in Kham and deciding issues through the use of *force majeure*. British protests in Peking, and pressure on Lonchen Shatra did however, to a degree, restrain the two combatants. The breakdown at Simla nonetheless took away such constraints as existed and the years that followed were witness to a sharp recrudescence in the fighting. Civil war in China which had begun to claim a heavy toll both in men and material, even before Yuan Shih-kai breathed his last, further complicated a fairly complex political situation. Szechuan and Yunnan had loosened from Peking's hold and local warlords, swayed by what looked like profitable ventures, were often enough only too keen to fish in troubled waters.

General Peng was one such adventurer. In his overweening pride and vaulting political ambition to march on to Lhasa he had, it would seem, reckoned without his hosts. He was, however, soon disillusioned and discovered, to his great chagrin, that since Chao Erh-feng's days the situation in the March country had undergone a complete metamorphosis. Thanks to British arms and drill, Lhasa's levies were now better trained and equipped. No wonder, the Tibetan commander Kalon Lama's rejoinder to General Peng's bluff and bluster was a studied silence whose meaning was clearly revealed when it came to an open clash of arms. The Chinese were completely routed and the Tibetans so far successful that they not only recovered areas to which they held a measure of legitimate claim but marched deep into what was indubitably a part of Peking's domain.

It was this striking, if also unchecked, progress of Tibetan arms that Teichman now sought to arrest. With the unexpected, dramatic fall of Chamdo, and the arrest of General Peng that followed, Tibetan levies appeared to be carrying all before them. The British

consular official argued, and convincingly, that it was necessary to call a halt to the fighting for fear of the dread consequences that might befall Lhasa's clean sweep. For any such gains, at the expense of what was admittedly Chinese territory, would lead to a reaction that may prove disastrous—and not least to the peace of the March country. Its ramifications were bound, Teichman felt convinced, to envelop large parts of West China, Tibet, as also the peace of the Indian frontier. The latter, if not the former, was his immediate concern and hence the uninvited, if also self-imposed role of a mediator.

Both the Chamdo agreement and the Rongbatsa truce, concluded in August and October 1918 respectively, are a standing tribute to Teichman's resilience and skill as a negotiator, against the heaviest of odds. Briefly, these may be summed up as strong Tibetan opposition, sustained Chinese indifference and, based thereon, Jordan's considered view that the British Consul's time and effort could have been better utilized elsewhere. Teichman's arguments, Jordan wrote in a private letter

about the possibility of the Tibetans advancing upon Batang, Litang and Tachienlu, unless he had undertaken to mediate, have not the slightest weight upon the Central Government who, having lost Szechuan, do not care a brass farthing what happens to these outlying frontier regions.<sup>1</sup>

Jordan's however was a simplistic view. The fact is that given the circumstances in which the parleys took place viz., precipitate Tibetan gains as against headlong Chinese retreats, the two settlements offered a fair, and one may add a reasonably objective, solution to the March imbroglio. It may be recalled that the Chamdo Agreement was an attempt at establishing 'peaceful relations' and delineating a 'provisional frontier'. Besides, as Teichman sought heavily to underline, it was of a

temporary nature and shall only remain in force until such time as the Governments of China, Tibet and Great Britain shall have arrived at a final and permanent tripartite settlement; but in the meantime it cannot be modified in any way except with the unanimous consent of all three contracting parties.<sup>2</sup>

As at Simla, so at Chamdo, and later Rongbatsa, on the British

<sup>1</sup>Jordan to Macleay, 24 October, 1918, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>For the text of the Chamdo Agreement, dated 19 August, 1918, pp. 5-8; the citation is from Clause 2.

fell the self-imposed and thankless task of the 'arbitrator and middleman'. It is hardly necessary to add that the Rongbatsa truce concerned 'mutual withdrawal of troops and cessation of hostilities' as between China and Tibet, and foreswore all responsibility for a 'definite settlement' of the questions at issue.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, it is only fair to add that the Yangtse boundary and the neutralization of Derge, despite Lhasa's long and loud protests, stood the test of time and, barring slight adjustments, remained practically undisturbed for more than a quarter century. The peace that reigned on the frontier was a tribute at once to the British Consular official's patience, and persistence.

### III

Between the end of 1919 when the Chinese offer, made earlier that year, to resume the Simla negotiations proved abortive and 1931-2 when Peking, unequivocally and indeed categorically, repudiated any intent whatever to hold that basis as valid, intervene some momentous events. At the outset, in the opening months of 1920, there is the visit to Lhasa of a mission from the far western Chinese province of Kansu. From all that can be culled from circumstantial evidence, it is clear that the Peking regime was keen to use the mission as a sounding-board to gauge the Dalai Lama's views on a direct, bilateral deal between the two countries—to the exclusion of the British. The Lama, however, was circumspect and, despite the Kansu mission's four months in Lhasa, refused to yield ground on essentials. He harked back to the terms concluded at Simla and stated that the British should play the role of guarantors for a bilateral, Tibet-China, deal. The Kansu mission, it was thus evident, was likely to draw a blank. Was it any wonder then that Peking hastened to disown it and dismissed as unauthorized, whatever negotiations it may have conducted?

Despite its repudiation at home, the Kansu mission proved to be an eye-opener for the British. Perhaps because Peking disowned it, Whitehall no less than Delhi was convinced that it was playing a clever game, and that behind their backs the Chinese were ingratiating themselves with the Lama's regime. Since all these years, after failure at Simla—and despite repeated and indeed fervid

<sup>1</sup>The 'supplementary agreement' regarding the provisional frontier was signed at Rongbatsa on 10 October, 1918. For the text, pp. 9-10.

promises to the contrary—the British had not supplied Lhasa any arms, might it not, weaned away from them, fall securely into the Chinese lap?

Opinion in Whitehall over the question was sharply divided. The India Office, reflecting the strong and powerful advocacy of the Government in Delhi, recalled that in 1914 Tibet had been solemnly assured of 'reasonable assistance', in munitions of war; that the country was in danger of 'being overrun' by frontier raids; that HMG had pledged 'all possible assistance' in resisting Chinese aggression; that the arms were intended to control 'forces of disorder' over which the Chinese, left to themselves, could exercise no control. To counter this, the Foreign Office urged that arming the Tibetans would be a breach of an international covenant; that once armed it may be difficult 'to restrain' them 'within' the limits of an international frontier; that in arming Tibet, the British would be helping to push China into the fold of Japan and simultaneously give them (the Chinese) a handle in their propaganda campaign against the perfidy of the British. The whole issue was keenly debated with the India Office, all out for arming Tibet, and in battle array against the Foreign Office, traditionally Sinophile.<sup>1</sup>

Bell's visit to the Tibetan capital, which came not long after the arms debate had raged, and at white heat, was an attempt to find a way around the dilemma that now faced British policy-makers. If Lhasa was to be armed so as to be able to stand up against Peking's importunities and clever tactics, a thorough re-appraisal of the policy that had been pursued hitherto was necessary. It followed that Bell's major tasks in Lhasa were to attempt an overall assessment of Tibet's political landscape, gauge the extent to which the latter might go it alone with China and finally, offer a cogent alternative to the hitherto pursued objective of sterilizing the country.

Initially planning to stay no more than a month, Bell tarried on in Lhasa for a whole year (1920-1). The Political Officer enjoyed a unique position, indeed some rare advantages: his relations with the Dalai Lama were of the most intimate; his opportunities to assess the situation, the most unrivalled; his movements in and around the capital, and meetings with men of affairs, completely uninhibited. Additionally, even though his pro-Lhasa bias was

<sup>1</sup>For an excellent summary of the rival arguments and how these were sought to be resolved, see Foreign Office Memorandum, 13 May, 1920 and Lord Curzon's minute of 27 June, 1920, pp. 24-30 and 30-1.

widely acknowledged, Bell was held in great respect in the official hierarchy in Delhi. What was more, Beilby Alston, then British Minister in Peking, not only strongly supported the visit, but also gave his fullest backing to its repeated extensions. Thus more than Delhi or London, Bell's lukewarm sponsors, and supporters at best, it was Alston who insisted that the Political Officer's stay was useful and that he be given a free hand in formulating his views.

Essentially what Bell recommended was to pull Tibet out of its isolation and help gradually build it up into a small, albeit viable, political and economic entity. It followed that its strength needed to be buttressed; hence, his emphasis on the sale of arms and ammunition, on training and equipping a small, but select, army and police force. More, the country must be opened up, a fact that would largely explain his stress on the establishment of telegraph and postal services, on mine and mineral prospecting. Above all, Tibet was to be assured of Britain's full diplomatic support, should the Peking regime try to push it around or disturb the peace of its eastern frontier.

'Lama-struck' and full of himself, Bell was optimistic about the results of his mission. *Inter alia*, he felt that it 'had increased' the 'probability' of China negotiating a tripartite treaty with Britain and Tibet. To use the proconsul's own words—and they capture the mood faithfully:

one may perhaps say without exaggeration that the Tibetan question has been settled as it can be settled at present. This settlement should last for several years and promote very greatly our own interests as well as the interests of Tibet and further—in the truest sense—the ultimate interests of China.<sup>1</sup>

Whitehall endorsed Bell's new policy and Delhi was only too willing to give it a trial. This was the more significant insofar as the author of this policy had superannuated from government service and dissolved into anonymity after his return from Lhasa. It is interesting to reflect that both Bell and McMahan had precious little to do with the actual execution either of a policy in one case or with giving concrete shape to a boundary-line in the other.

The 13th Dalai Lama, in the initial stages at any rate, had been sold on Bell's ideas and took them up enthusiastically. By the mid-

<sup>1</sup>For details see excerpts from Bell's 'Final Report', dated 29 November, 1921, pp. 32-4

twenties, however, a serious rift in the lute was noticeable. The first rumblings of the approaching storm could be heard in December, 1923, when the Panchen Lama fled from his seat of authority at Tashilhunpo, ostensibly with a view to collecting enough funds to meet Lhasa's imperious demands, but in reality to register a strong protest against its new-fangled passion for modernization. Soon it was clear that other powerful monasteries, in and around the capital, shared the Panchen's views. In any case, they were loath to part with such checks as they were wont to exercise over the Potala's unbridled authority; what was more, they faced a new challenge to their traditional rights and privileges from its freshly organized armed forces, and its police.

The challenge of monastic reaction to his new-fashioned and, in the context of Tibet, undoubtedly revolutionary ideas of modernization proved a little too powerful for the Lama to face. For a time, especially after the flight of the Panchen, it seemed that he would rally around. This phase, however, was woefully short-lived. The new army and police proved costly adjuncts; more, they made numerous enemies. And all the while, British support, far from steady at the best of times, was a broken reed to lean upon.

The British Political Officer, Captain (later Colonel) Bailey's one-month sojourn in Lhasa, in the summer of 1924, was a significant event. Among other things, he succeeded in capturing the atmosphere on the eve of what turned out to be a *coup d'etat*. Reading between the lines of his report, it is evident where precisely the rub lay. Tibet's finances were in a bad way and the Shaps complained that

what was urgently needed was relief from the present unbearable expenditure, which had been met by special taxation much to the discontent of the people.

Nor was the story different on the military front. Here again the Shaps pinpointed that theirs was a

poor country but very religious, and they were accustomed to spend large sums on their religion, and were finding it very difficult to maintain a large army on the Chinese frontier. The soldiers also wanted to go back to their homes. Could the Chinese be persuaded to come to an agreement?<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Excerpts from Colonel Bailey's report, dated 28 October, 1924 are at pp. 35-9.

This was like begging the question. Had not the British bent over backwards in seeking a solution? Bailey did his best to assuage anxiety but could offer nothing more concrete than verbal promises of diplomatic support.

The 1925 coup in Lhasa was, characteristically, sharp and swift. The Lama struck unmistakably against all those that had dared disturb the peace of his realm. Tainted with the heresy of modernization, British-trained personnel were dismissed from service, exiled; the police, cut down to size; Tsarong, who more than anyone else exemplified in his person an obsessive if also perhaps uncritical fascination for these importations, was summarily cast off.

All in all, it was an interesting coup. To start with, the Dalai Lama survived it and, as before, managed to remain on top, even though in the process he had completely shifted the base on which he stood. In happier days this would be a godsend, and Peking would fain have fished in troubled waters to its obvious advantage. In 1925, however, times were very much out of joint and the land racked by an ugly civil strife had been parcelled out among its rich crop of warlords. No wonder, viewed from Lhasa, China seemed distant, if also perhaps indifferent.

Delhi was a study in contrast. Not unlike its Political Officer, it felt deeply agitated, as also vitally concerned. Bailey who held charge had even suggested that he should repair to Lhasa to remonstrate. This, however, was overruled by Whitehall as far too precipitate a step. All that it eventually agreed to was the visit to the Tibetan capital of Norbu Dhondhup, Bailey's Assistant and trouble-shooter. The purpose too was now different, not so much to lodge a protest against what the Lama had done/undone, as to assess the then prevailing situation. No wonder, even though deeply concerned, the British felt unable, nay perhaps unwilling, to intervene. They nonetheless realized that the Lama was playing at high stakes and with a single stroke of the pen had demolished all that Bell, and the succeeding years, had so laboriously helped to build up. In the final count, he had managed to stay at the helm of affairs and yet successfully reversed the gears on modernization. Some heads rolled. Laden La and Ludlow disappeared from Tibet's political landscape, followed by an understandable cooling off in the Lama's relations with their British masters.

## IV

Broadly speaking, in the long and fascinating story of Tibet, the decade following Bell's visit to Lhasa is a period of relative quietude. The Teichman line gets more or less to be the accepted boundary with China and the Rongbatsa truce of 1918, even if initially valid only for a year, is not seriously violated by either side. Inside Tibet, barring the coup of 1925, briefly referred to in the preceding paragraphs, the country is at peace and although there is a considerable lack of warmth in relations with India, there are no signs of a noticeable strain. Contrary to popular belief that the British ruled the roost in Lhasa, the latter visibly demonstrated its sturdy independence of any extraneous control by refusing, in 1929, to extend to the then British Political Officer, Colonel Weir, an invitation to visit the Tibetan capital. This much-sought for summons was a matter of deliberate policy and it is interesting, and indeed revealing, that New Delhi studiously played down the implications of the Dalai Lama's action. It ruled that Lhasa's point-blank refusal could be based on a 'genuine misapprehension' and that Weir's reply, far from threatening in tone, should positively eschew any 'diminution' of 'friendly relations' with Tibet.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the tone and temper of the exchanges, the episode is nonetheless eloquent of the Lama's new stance of a distinct lack of enthusiasm towards India's British rulers.

A year later, however, things had changed—and, from New Delhi's point of view, for the better. Thanks to effective British mediation in Lhasa's quarrel with the Gurkhas, which well-nigh landed it into an open breach of the peace, the Lama was now much more amenable and, on his own, extended an invitation. Weir for his part assuaged Lhasa's genuine fears. *Inter alia*, he underlined the fact that in New Delhi's considered judgment, while a detailed settlement of the Tibetan question must await the return of more favourable conditions in China, in the interregnum pending its fruition, the maintenance of the status quo was the best that could be hoped for.<sup>2</sup>

The status quo, however, was soon disturbed. What initially

<sup>1</sup>For the texts of telegrams from and to Weir, dated 19-20 July, 1929, see p. 40.

<sup>2</sup>For instructions to Weir on his visit to Lhasa in 1930 see text of Minute by Secretary of State, dated 28 July, 1930, pp. 41-3.

began as a minor skirmish between rival monasteries on different sides of the (1918) truce line, soon developed into a see-saw of hostilities in which larger numbers, and higher authorities, got inextricably mixed up. For a time, and all through 1931, confusion reigned supreme with contradictory reports, often exaggerated, of rival gains and losses by the opposing sides. By early in 1932, however, it was clear that the Chinese were on the offensive and, what was more, carrying all before them. In July, news arrived of the fall of Rongbatsa; in August, Derge was re-captured.

Understandably these developments upset Lhasa and in a move strongly reminiscent of the dark days of 1910, the Dalai Lama proposed to the British conclusion of 'secret treaties'. Though temporarily shaken by the gravity of the situation, Indian reaction in 1932 was no whit different from what it had been nearly a quarter century earlier. Then, as now, New Delhi would hate to add to its responsibilities and was positively averse to any binding entanglements. The response to the Lama's urgent 'S O S' was, therefore, no more than a promise to apply diplomatic pressure in Nanking and help restore normalcy on the frontier, while at the same time working towards a permanent settlement.

In doing all this, it was soon apparent that the British had reckoned without their hosts. For Kuo-min-tang China's reaction to their intercession on the Lama's behalf, proved to be an eye-opener. Ingram, the British Charge d'Affaires was reminded that there could be no question of a 'frontier' dispute in the same country and that the root of the trouble lay in the British supply of arms to the Tibetans. It followed, Nanking argued, that the earlier this supply ceased, the more speedily would peace return to the frontier. More pointedly, the Wai-chiao-pu was emphatic that HMG's intervention—Ingram took pains to explain that he meant mediation, or even 'friendly' good offices—was unsolicited: neither necessary, nor called for. The issue, as Nanking sought to spell it out, concerned China and Tibet; the British, in any case, were outsiders.<sup>1</sup> Ostensibly unwilling to promise to do anything, Nanking yet directed its local commanders on the Yangtse to cease hostilities, which they eventually did. This, however, was a result not so much of obedience to a superior command from headquarters as an aftermath of the outbreak of a local civil strife.

<sup>1</sup>Minute of meeting with Hsu Mo at Waichiaopu on 31 August, 1932, pp. 47-8.

Long simmering underground, it now burst into an open revolt with rival factions in Szechuan, not unnaturally, thinking it more expedient to settle scores nearer home than with the Dalai Lama. He, in any case, was far in the distance.

Blunting the edge of British initiatives by referring to them as unwanted interlopers was easy enough for Nanking. And yet its inevitable corollary in terms of a direct, bilateral, settlement with Tibet proved far harder to achieve. In this, however, there had been, over the years, a number of feelers which each side had thrown to the other. For the most part, the initiative had been taken by the Chinese and the beginnings went as far back as the Kansu mission of 1920, briefly referred to in the preceding paragraphs. Refusing to be overly daunted by its lack of success, the Chinese in 1930—and in the meantime, it may be recalled, the Lama's relations with the British had appreciably cooled after 1925—sponsored the missions of Liu Man-ching and Yuggon Dzasa. The Chinese lady, half-Tibetan by birth, was a functionary of the Kuo-min-tang's much-publicized Committee for Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs<sup>1</sup>; the Tibetan head of the well-known Lama monastery in Peking, was ostensibly an appointee of the Lhasa regime, even though, somewhat oddly on the pay-roll of the Nanking government.

Liu Man-ching was not a great success, except perhaps on the social plane; Yuggon was, but then he was cast in a different role. It is necessary to emphasize that he was the Dalai Lama's high-placed functionary in China, who in this case was the bearer of a special message from the KMT regime. No wonder both in Lhasa, as well later on his return to Nanking, he was the recipient of special honours and of a great deal of attention. His political mission, however, and this despite the Lama's much-publicized answers to the questions he had brought from the Nationalist regime, or perhaps because of them, was a conspicuous failure. At best, the Dalai Lama had been discreet; at worst, evasive—for his replies, more than anything else, had underscored a basic difference in approach on the two sides. This notwithstanding, the feeling had gained ground, and not least among the British who for a time (i.e. during Weir's visit to Lhasa in 1930) had felt convinced, if also perhaps concerned that

without doubt (there was) a strong undercurrent of feeling among several officials that Tibet will not be able to retain her independence of China indefinitely and that steps should be taken to make

<sup>1</sup>Better known by its abbreviation, 'CMTA.'

friendly overtures to China. If such overtures are made, they anticipate that a semi-independence at least will be achieved which would be preferable to complete absorption by China.<sup>1</sup>

A practical test as to whether a broad understanding did, in fact, exist or could be put to use came in 1931, at the time of the Hsikang-Tibet fighting. It is evident, and the subject has already been briefly touched upon in the preceding paragraphs, that the Dalai Lama was not too sanguine about being able, on his own, to persuade the Chinese to cease hostilities or come to a workable settlement on the frontier dispute. His hectic messages to Colonel Weir, containing more than a broad hint about 'secret treaties', and later imploring the Political Officer to extend his stay until news of a cessation in the fighting could be confirmed, bear eloquent testimony to the Lama's unsettled state of mind. These also lay bare, if indirectly, both Chinese ambitions as well as the Lama's own inability to make them see reason. And yet it would seem that, towards the close of 1932, the two sides did make an effort for a direct understanding.

The reason for this change of stance lay, if partly, in the KMT's anxiety to prove that, as between itself and the Lama, matters could be settled 'without the intervention of the outsider'; that it rated it 'most inappropriate' to place 'another person of [a] different nationality' as an intermediary 'between ourselves'.

It is significant that the Lama, even though he too paid lip service to some of these pious platitudes demanded, in reply, that the Simla Convention of 1914 be 'immediately concluded', that as between him and the Chinese, the British act as an intermediary! It is evident that what displeased the mandarins in Nanking was his further hint that for the British representative, the then Political Officer, Colonel Weir be nominated, as he was 'acquainted with the full facts' of the Tibetan case.

These high-level exchanges between Lhasa and Nanking did little to save Tibet from the Chinese onslaught in the east; if anything, they revealed the wide chasm that separated the respective positions of the opposing sides. Tibet was eventually saved, as has been briefly alluded to earlier, by the outbreak of a fierce civil war which soon held Szechuan in its grip. The result was that a purely 'local' settlement of sorts was worked out in June, 1933 and the British learnt, on the authority of the Lama himself, that its terms had been carried out by both sides, including a mutually-agreed withdrawal of troops.

<sup>1</sup>Para 12 in Weir's report dated 18 November, 1930, pp. 43-6.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, a heated, and at times even acrimonious, debate had raged between New Delhi, Whitehall and the latter's envoy in Peking as to the attitude which the British should adopt towards direct China-Tibet parleys. At best, New Delhi was cool to the idea, while its Political Officer was openly hostile. In the final analysis, what it would lend its countenance to was British diplomatic pressure on the Chinese so as to persuade them to negotiate a permanent settlement with Tibet, while Whitehall played the not-unfamiliar role of the honest broker. To this course of action, the then British Minister in China was unalterably opposed. Sir Miles Lampson felt convinced that the Chinese would never agree to British mediation, that their attitude towards Tibet best resembled that of a preoccupied parent towards a mulishly obstinate, an impossible child who, sooner or later, was bound to return to the mother's fold. Tibet too, Sir Miles argued, would eventually come back to China and the British role should be to help, rather than hinder, this consummation.<sup>1</sup>

After weighing the pros and cons carefully, Whitehall finally decided upon what looked like the golden mean. The Lama was 'encouraged' to discuss frontier matters direct with the Chinese but while engaged in these parleys, and even after they had concluded, the British assured him of 'friendly advice'. Additionally, they undertook to tender 'diplomatic assistance' so as to make the Chinese accept any treaty or agreement that might result from direct Sino-Tibetan talks.

Not that such an eventuality ever came to pass—at any rate not during the lifetime of the 13th Dalai Lama. On the eve of his death, Williamson, then on a visit to the Tibetan capital, revealed that the Lama

was very frank in his views on the frontier situation. He told me that the Chinese Government had appointed one person after another to come to Lhasa to discuss outstanding questions but that all had been afraid and had made excuses. In any case he did not want a Chinese official ever to visit Lhasa, as all that the latter would want to do would be to pave the way for the renewal of Chinese domination.<sup>2</sup>

Thus it was that at the time of the Lama's passing away, in Decem-

<sup>1</sup>For details of Chinese, Tibetan and British attitudes see 'British Mediation in Tibet: 1932', pp. 52-60.

<sup>2</sup>Williamson's interview under reference took place on 21 September, 1933. For excerpts, see p. 63.

ber, 1933, the Tibetan question was exactly where it had been these twenty years since the Simla negotiations—unsettled, hanging about in mid-air.

## V

The 'retirement to the heavenly fields' of the 13th re-incarnation of Chenrezi upset a lot in Tibet. A regime that depends, at the death of its ruler, on the discovery, installation and growing into manhood of a new-born god-king may not be exactly distinguished for strength. The latter quality was now at a further discount with the then Regent, and the Kashag, openly arrayed against the old Lama's favourites. As if this were not a grim enough prospect, there was, overhanging Lhasa, the sinister shadow of the Panchen Lama who, long in self-imposed exile, now found in the KMT regime powerful support.

To add to the embarrassments of Lhasa's new masters, the Chinese decided upon sending, ostensibly as official mourners, a high-powered delegation, headed by General Huang Mu-sung, then Chairman of the powerful CMTA. The real aim Nanking had in view was to persuade Lhasa—now that the commanding personality of the 13th Dalai Lama no longer dominated the political stage—to accept a measure of Chinese hegemony. In this objective, and despite his six months (April-October 1934) and seemingly unlimited supplies of gold, the Chinese functionary nearly, yet not quite, succeeded. Thus it is known that Lhasa did make what in Nanking's view was a 'sufficiently definite' commitment watering down appreciably its hitherto complete independence, in practice, of Chinese control. From what appeared in the press, both in India and China, it was clear that Lhasa had given Huang 'a written acknowledgment' of Chinese suzerainty while, as for Nanking, it viewed Tibet as a 'part of China', if only 'an outlying one'.

General Huang's mission aroused the British to a fever-pitch of counter-action culminating in the despatch of Williamson, then Political Officer, for an extended sojourn in Lhasa in the latter half of 1935. Apart from concessions in making payments for munitions, and permission to buy additional arms, Williamson's brief made it plain that should a permanent Chinese representative make an appearance in Lhasa, the question of appointing his British counterpart would be 'seriously considered'. It was true, Whitehall argued, that the re-establishment of Chinese control in Tibet would not pose an actual military danger, yet surely it could, from British India's

point of view, be 'a source of constant irritation and annoyance'. For in any case from China, 'a difficult neighbour' with a powerful (Kuo-min-tang) regime in control, New Delhi argued, the military threat could become a live reality. Significantly, a clear distinction was now sought to be drawn between guaranteeing the defence of Tibet against the Nanking regime, 'whose suzerainty' Lhasa itself had acknowledged, and aggression by forces 'hostile' to the Chinese government (*viz.* Russian/Chinese communists).<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, thanks to the travels of the botanist Kingdon-Ward and an unseemly row between Bhutan and Assam as to where their common frontier lay, New Delhi was suddenly awakened to the grim realization that the McMahon Line, ratified by Tibet in 1914, had been observed more in its breach than acceptance. At the Whitehall end, the documents reveal an amazing tale of hyper-sensitive scruples, a stark casualness, now fear of treading on Russian, now Chinese corns. No wonder that year after year, and decade after decade, the publication of the Simla convention, and the Trade Regulations, not to mention the boundary agreement, and the maps, was held up—on one pretext or another. Nor were things, nearer home, in India, any the better: New Delhi had all but forgotten about McMahon and his line; its Political Officer, whose chief preoccupation it ought to have been, was far from sure; Assam had been kept completely in the dark on the (McMahon) frontier; Burma, but barely, knew. The revised edition, in 1928, of the well-worn Aitchison compendium of treaties made no mention of the Simla parleys, much less of what happened there.

All out of the blue, on 9 April, 1936, New Delhi sought Whitehall's permission to publish the 1914 compacts and rectify its maps so as to show the correct frontier. Failure to do so, it pointed out, would make China argue, plausibly enough, that as between itself and India, there was 'no ratified' agreement concerning the frontier. Besides, the new instalment of constitutional reforms, adumbrated in the Government of India Act, 1935, necessitated a more accurate definition of the tribal areas of Assam. More, the impending separation of Burma made a precise description of the boundary imperative. Additionally, there was the uncomfortable truth that, all through the years since the tripartite meet in 1914, the delineation

<sup>1</sup>For the Indian reaction to Huang's Mission see Matcalfe to Williamson, 17 September, 1934, Williamson to India, 6 October, 1934 and India to Secretary of State, 28 June, 1935, pp. 65-9.

of the frontier on the maps, in India and outside, was shown wrongly, as though it lay along the foothills.

It is characteristic, and indeed revealing, of the then resolute fickleness of the India Office that, after a great deal of debate, it could discover 'no strong balance' of argument either for, or against, publication of the (1914) Convention and the maps. It ruled, however, that *if* the Foreign Office were willing, New Delhi 'might perhaps' decide to publish. The Whitehall viewpoint, as recorded in its 'minutes' and 'memoranda', makes interesting reading and bears an eloquent testimony to its notorious lack of decision. It noted for instance that New Delhi's proposal was by no means 'free from doubt' and though

the risk of attracting unwelcome Chinese notice has been the reason for non-publication, we have not felt very strongly about it so far as the Government of India and this office is concerned.

To publish it was finally decided, even though there were many a 't' to cross and an 'i' to dot. Whitehall ruled that there was to be no fanfare (for 'ostentatious publication' was to be scrupulously avoided); that the joint Indo-Tibetan Declaration of 3 July (1914) was to be withheld; that New Delhi might await a re-issue of Aitchison's compendium to insert the treaties; that maps, however, may be rectified without much ado. Within the four corners of its brief, New Delhi hastened to correct the maps and instead of waiting for a new edition of Aitchison's, which, it reckoned, might take another 15-20 years, decided upon a re-issue of the relevant volume XIV.<sup>1</sup>

Publication was only one facet of the question; the other, perhaps more vital, was to make good the frontier as laid down (in 1914). A major stumbling-block here had been the long-standing Tibetan encroachments south of the McMahon Line, more pronouncedly in the area around Tawang. Initially, New Delhi favoured a firm assertion of its rights, more so as it was made to believe that in the Kingdon-Ward case, briefly referred to earlier, Lhasa had re-affirmed its acceptance of the 1914 Red (*viz.* McMahon) Line. Later, however, during Gould's visit to the Tibetan capital, in 1936-7, it was discovered that the Kashag's reported admission had been anything but clear or unequivocal; that there would be insuperable difficulties in obtaining a written re-affirmation; that Tibet felt that the 1914 settlement of its boundaries would be valid only to the extent that

<sup>1</sup>For further details see 'India Re-discovers the McMahon Line', pp. 91-9.

China accepted its part of the Sino-Tibetan territorial alignment in the east.

In the initial stages, Gould advocated—and he was the man who alone had first-hand knowledge of men and affairs—a firm line of action. Thus his report on the Lhasa Mission (1936-7) underlined that, in respect to Tawang the

only possible policy is to take a firm line particularly in view of the consideration that, were China again to become dominant in Tibet, she might proceed to claim both Tawang and territories to the east of it. . . . Vis-a-vis the Tibetan Government the line which it is necessary to adopt, and which I have adopted in conversation with the Kashag, is that since 1914 everything to the south of the McMahon Line has definitely been British, and that, if there were a matter of *quid pro quo*, Tibet has had value in the form of support both in arms and in the field of diplomacy.<sup>1</sup>

New Delhi, however, took time to decide its line of policy. Nor was it an easy one to map out. For one thing it was exposed to rival pressures: from Assam, touchy on Tibetan encroachments, for early action to make the boundary line effective; from Norbu and Gould, in touch with existing realities in Lhasa, to be less hasty, more deliberate. Finally, after Gould had conferred with the Assam Governor, it was decided that Captain Lightfoot, then Political Officer, Balipara, should undertake a 'preliminary and exploratory' mission to Tawang in the spring of 1938. His brief was characteristically vague, in itself a faithful reflection of New Delhi's own vacillation and irresolution.

Lightfoot found the Monbas misgoverned to a degree and wrote at length about the high-handedness of local Tibetan functionaries. The inhabitants, he reported, lived in mortal dread of Lhasa's freebooters and felt far from sure if the British meant business in affording them protection. He, therefore, recommended a gradual take-over of the administration—including that of the powerful (Tawang) monastery—and, as a first step, the creation of a 'control area' around Tawang. Lightfoot's recommendations received the powerful support of the Governor in Shillong who now categorically proposed that New Delhi should

assume full responsibility in this area, and that subject to the exigencies of the relationships which at present subsist between the

<sup>1</sup>Para 30 in Gould's report on the 'Lhasa Mission, 1936-37', pp. 78-9; for more excerpts, see pp. 75-89.

Tibetan Government and the Government of India steps will be taken at an appropriate time, the earlier the better, to relieve the Monbas from the grievous oppression to which they are now subjected.<sup>1</sup>

Pressures from Assam notwithstanding, New Delhi refused to be hustled into early action, if partly, because its Political Officer counselled a policy of deliberation, of caution, of delay. Gould argued that the Monbas were a remarkably docile lot who may be hard to stir in their own cause; that local conditions needed a more thorough investigation before any action was decided upon; that interference with the Tawang monastery would be completely unjustified. Adverting to financial stringency, of which New Delhi often complained, he advocated putting off any decision for, whatever the course of action, some financial outlay would be unavoidable. 'Let the whole position simmer for the time being', was the Political Officer's firm conclusion. This tied up, and admirably, with New Delhi's own thinking of letting sleeping dogs lie. And lie they did—until the very last day of British rule.

## VI

Apart from Tibetan encroachments into Mon-yul, south of the McMahon Line, the Chinese had trespassed into chunks of tribal territory on India's north-east frontier, including a portion of northern Burma. These facts came prominently into view in the early thirties when the boundaries of the newly-carved province of Hsi-kang (Western Kham) were sketched out by Chinese map-makers, from whom they came to be widely copied elsewhere. In drawing Whitehall's attention to these acts of cartographic aggression, New Delhi was quick to point out that even though China's claim did not include Tawang, the exercise of jurisdiction by Tibet might, at a later date, enable China to stake its 'prescriptive rights'. The situation, as New Delhi viewed it, admitted of no complacency, for the position

briefly is that the cartographical activities have set up a claim to absorb in China a very large stretch of Indian territory, while in a portion of India just west of the area claimed by the Chinese as part of Sikiang province, namely Tawang, the Tibetan government over whom the Chinese claim suzerainty, are collecting revenue and exercising jurisdiction on the Indian side of the international frontier. China's claim does not actually include Tawang

<sup>1</sup>For the text of Assam's recommendations on Lightfoot's report see Assam to India, 7 September, 1938, pp. 101-4.

itself, but there can be little doubt that it will be extended to Tawang, and even to Bhutan and Sikkim, if no steps are taken to challenge these activities.<sup>1</sup>

The British Government's rejoinder to the Indian note was a strong counter-argument in favour of a 'do nothing' policy. China, it reasoned, was not responsible for the acts of private cartographers, nor was it alone guilty—after all the (London) *Times* too had published similar maps! Besides, the Nanking regime had at no stage recognized the 1914 Agreement. Why then, Whitehall argued, in making these protests, arouse China's ire, incur its wrath, its deep displeasure?

Unexpectedly, New Delhi discovered an ally in the person of the then British envoy in Nanking. While conceding that the Chinese were not a party to the Simla Convention, Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen yet saw no reason why it should not be pointed out that the boundaries of their new province were not acceptable, and insofar as these encroached upon Indian territory, not recognized by HMG. Whitehall, however, was difficult to persuade and stubbornly, if foolishly, stuck to its earlier position that there was no occasion for a protest—unless the Chinese sought to translate their paper claims into reality.

Nor did the British confine themselves to a determined refusal to lodge a protest. For when, after a great deal of delay, and some polite-impolite reminders, the new Survey of India map, 'Highlands of Tibet and the Surrounding Region', finally issued in January 1939, Whitehall ruled that the correct frontier should be 'unobtrusively marked'—so sensitive was it on arousing Chinese susceptibilities! No wonder, knowledgeable India hands viewed its attitude as being typical of British apathy in all that affected India's north-eastern frontier.

It had long been evident that questions relating to this frontier were inextricably mixed up with Sino-Tibetan relations which had, since the death of the 13th Dalai Lama, been greatly disturbed. For even if it were accepted that General Huang Mu-sung's mission was a success, as made out by throatful Chinese propaganda, there is no doubt that his pushful diplomacy had aroused a deep distrust, and suspicion, in Tibetan breasts. This would largely explain Lhasa's decision to stay neutral in World War II when, to its great surprise, it found the British allied with China!

<sup>1</sup>Foreign Secretary (India) to Under Secretary (London), 17 August, 1936, pp. 93-5.

Part of the price for this alliance had to be paid by Tibet. Deeming the war a godsend, Chungking demanded the opening of an alternate supply-route, after the fall of Burma to the Japanese had made the Rangoon-Lashio road inoperative. The new link suggested was to connect Assam, through the north-eastern tip of the Lohit and the Tibetan province of Zayul, with south-western Szechuan. In pursuance thereof, and in a characteristically high-handed manner, Chungking—without consulting Lhasa—despatched a large retinue of its 'surveyors' into Tibetan territory. Lhasa, however, refused to be pushed around, stood its ground firmly and, before long, made the Chinese beat a retreat. As the then U.S. Ambassador in Chungking informed his superiors, on 13 July, 1942, the Chinese

have abandoned whatever plans they may have had for constructing a motor road and for stationing troops in Tibet, the former because the road would have no early value to the war effort due to the time required for construction and the latter because Tibetan opposition would certainly be encountered.<sup>1</sup>

Another Chinese effort, much in the same direction, was to press into service the traditional Tibetan trade-route to Szechuan, via Lhasa, for pack-animal transport of its badly-needed supplies. Even to achieve this end, a great deal of high-level British, and American, pressure was needed before Tibet finally acquiesced. And yet it did successfully resist Chinese efforts to station their men, and put up their agencies along the route. Thus the American President's Personal Representative in India informed his superiors, early in 1943, that the Chinese Commissioner, then recently back from Chungking,

believes that after allowing for essential Tibetan traffic, the actual annual capacity of this route, so far as through shipment to China is concerned, would be nearer 1,000 tons than the 3 to 4,000 originally estimated. Political difficulties are also involved. Tibetans are uncooperative, apparently distrusting intentions of both India and China and fearing undue expansion of their influence. India lays blame for this attitude on China and vice versa. Tibetans apparently made difficulties over proposed stationing of British Indian and Chinese officials along route to check shipments and for a time consideration was given to possibility of turning goods over to ordinary caravans for unsupervised transportation to Chinese border.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ambassador Gauss to Secretary of State, 13 July, 1942 (in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1942), pp. 127-8.

<sup>2</sup>Phillips, Personal Representative of President Roosevelt to India) to Secretary of State, 26 January, 1943 (in *Foreign Relations*, 1943), p. 133.

It may perhaps be relevant to point out that it had been made clear in the initial stages that only non-military goods were to be transported. Thus as early as August, 1942, the British informed the Americans that Chungking had accepted Tibetan stipulations

in regard to the despatch of 'non-military supplies' (which would include petroleum, but not arms, ammunition and explosives); that they have accepted the Gyalam as the supply route with Batang as delivery point; and that they appeared to think that contract with Tibetan transport firm must be negotiated.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, the whole exercise is clearly revealing of Chinese motives and motivations which were suspect *ab initio*. Thus early on, the British Foreign Office had concluded that the Chinese seemed 'more anxious' to extend their influence in Eastern Tibet than 'to obtain supplies'. Nor was Lhasa slow in drawing its own conclusions. In any case, failing to achieve their major objective, Chinese interest, it may be recalled, both in the alternate route through the Lohit as also in pack-animal supply, via Lhasa, was singularly short-lived.

In another direction, however, the KMT regime scored a major victory. This was largely a result of the visit to Lhasa, in 1940, of Wu Ching-hsing, then Chairman of CMTA, on the occasion of the installation of the child, barely a few years old, 14th Dalai Lama. Conscious of exploiting this opportunity to the full, Wu would fain have established in Lhasa the office of a Chinese High Commissioner, yet had to be content with formalizing the 1934 office of the two wireless operators, left by General Huang Mu-sung, into the high-sounding 'Regional Office of the CMTA'. Four years later, Chungking upgraded the post by appointing Sheng Tsung-lien, then working on the personal staff of the Generalissimo.

As the war progressed, KMT China, thanks to the fortunes of its Allies, and more especially their role in the Pacific theatre, found itself elevated, if by proxy, to the status of a Big Power. Nor was it slow in making use of its new-gained importance. It is significant that at the Allied summit meetings in 1943, the Americans, out of touch with the harsh realities of the Tibetan situation, and thus the more gullible, were exceedingly friendly to Chiang's cause. No wonder, with Washington's tacit support, Chungking took the British severely to task for what it called their ambivalence on the question. The then

<sup>1</sup>British Foreign Office to Embassy in Washington, 15 August, 1942, delivered to the Department of State, 27 August, 1942 (in *Foreign Relations*, 1942), pp. 130-2.

Chinese Foreign Minister Soong claimed that Tibet was 'a part of China', while the considered British reply to persistent Chinese needling underlined Whitehall's own dilemma. For while on the one hand it was

bound by a promise to the Tibetan Government to support them in maintaining the practical autonomy of Tibet, which is of importance to the security of India and to the tranquillity of India's north-east frontier, on the other hand Great Britain's alliance with China makes it difficult to give effective material support to Tibet.

Finally in the oft-cited (Eden) Memorandum of August, 1943, Whitehall spelt out a reasonably succinct statement of the position as it was understood at the time. Shorn of the usual frills and verbiage which are a necessary concomitant of State documents, it amounted to this: Britain recognized Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, but 'only on the understanding' that Tibet was regarded as 'autonomous'. More, it pledged that

neither the British Government nor the Government of India have any territorial ambitions in Tibet but they are interested in the maintenance of peaceful conditions in an area which is coterminous with the North East Frontier of India.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, in furtherance of a bilateral understanding between Tibet and China, HMG undertook 'gladly [to] offer' any help desired by both parties towards this end.

It was soon apparent that the Eden Memorandum did not suit the Chinese book. The result was that the deadlock persisted. Later, in 1945, when, in return for what promised to be durable peace with the Soviets, Chiang signed away the *de facto* independence of Outer Mongolia, the much-trumpeted facade of a plebiscite notwithstanding, all that he could offer Tibet was 'a very high degree of autonomy'. Not that it deceived anyone. Nor yet did China's other clever ruses as for instance the alleged manoeuvring of Tibetan delegates' presence at the meetings, in 1946, of the National Assembly in Nanking or staging of a violent demonstration against an apparently innocuous map at the unofficial Asian Relations Conference, in New Delhi, in 1947. Distrust grew apace and the gap continued to widen.

<sup>1</sup>The Eden Memorandum incorporated in a 'personal letter' from Mr. Eden to Dr. Soong was dated 5 August, 1943. For the text (in *Foreign Relations*, 1943), pp. 146-7.

## VII

In the years immediately preceding India's independence, New Delhi had to face the problem of continued Tibetan, and Chinese, encroachments across the north-eastern frontier. Insofar as these violations of territory were no longer a secret, steps had to be devised to meet the challenges they posed. Unfortunately, in so doing, Indian authorities showed their characteristic lack of decision coupled with an amazing refusal to safeguard the country's frontiers. Two of their principal considerations appear to have been: *one*, an all-out appeasement of China, so that anything likely to disturb or upset the apple-cart in the slightest degree was to be avoided; *two*, treading warily on Tibetan corns lest Lhasa kick up a row that might attract outside, more specifically Chinese, attention. Finance continued to bedevil more sensible if also more realistic approaches, although the attention given to it was by no means as compelling as in the years preceding World War II.

In dealings with Tibet, Tawang and the Monbas still occupied the centre of the stage. Early in 1943, Lhasa despatched thither a band of officials, with an escort, to hold some non-descript enquiry, besides taking up direct with Bhutan the question of a number of persons of Tibetan extraction. On both issues, New Delhi made it abundantly clear to the Regent and his coterie that it was far from happy about the way things were being done. The warning did not go unheeded and before long Lhasa folded up its enquiry and beat a retreat.

Earlier, on the eve of the outbreak of World War II, both in New Delhi as well as Shillong renewed attention was being given to the question as to whether, in the light of known Tibetan opposition, the (1914) boundary alignment in the Kameng division was really necessary. It has already been noticed that in the previous year New Delhi had soft-pedalled Lightfoot's recommendations, even though these had been powerfully endorsed by his principals in Shillong. In March 1939, a new Acting Governor there called for a change in tune and in so doing cast serious doubts on the validity of the British claim on Tawang. *Inter alia*, Twynam argued that humanitarian considerations for the welfare of the Monbas

alone would scarcely be sufficient to justify a 'forward' policy as similar grounds could be urged for other areas of Tibet. It is true that last year's expedition may have excited hopes and raised claims, but it is possible that much could be done to fulfil expecta-

tions without going so far as to occupy an area which has always been oriented towards Tibet ethnographically, politically and in religion and is even now in Lightfoot's words 'dominated by representatives of the Tibetan Government'.... The crux of the whole question apart from the financial aspect appears to lie in Lhasa's reactions to a forward policy and the extent to which these should be allowed for....<sup>1</sup>

A few weeks later, the Governor went a step further to underline that taking over of Tawang would 'inevitably alienate' Lhasa 'without any particular advantage' to New Delhi. The then Governor General, Lord Linlithgow was not unimpressed by Twynam's line of reasoning and confided in the Secretary of State that

there is much to be said for his [Twynam's] proposal both on general and financial grounds particularly as he thinks that a boundary on the Se La would only cost about one-fourth of the expenditure estimated to be necessary if we were to decide eventually to go right up to the McMahon Line and include Tawang...<sup>2</sup>

An additional argument now pressed into service was that the Monbas may, in reality, make poor 'Wardens of the Marches' and that the best about the 1914 boundary was that it looked well on a map! Not long after, in August, 1940, a high-level meeting of officials in Shillong ruled that

commonsense demands that we should not press our claims on Tawang, but tacitly assume that a more suitable line than the McMahon Line would be one farther south, either at the Se La or farther south in the neighbourhood of Dirang Dzong.<sup>3</sup>

Partly, if not wholly, the above line of reasoning was characteristic of a bureaucratic frame of mind that must justify to itself its lack of action, or decision, on an issue of such vital importance. There could be no doubt that it was afraid of upsetting the Chinese, afraid lest any attempt at resisting Tibetan incursions create a hullabaloo in Lhasa. This, it was argued, would be grist to the Chinese propaganda mill in drumming British imperialist aggrandisement at a time when Chungking was engaged in a life and death struggle—indeed fighting with its back to the wall. Faced with a harsh choice, the British dithered, soft-pedalled and swept controversial questions under the carpet as it were.

<sup>1</sup>Twynam to Linlithgow, 17 March, 1939, in *IOR*, L/P&S/12/36/23, Part I.

<sup>2</sup>Viceroy to Secretary of State, 24 August, 1939, in *IOR*, L/P&S/12/36/29, Part I. For further details see the author's *McMahon Line and After*, pp. 453-5.

<sup>3</sup>Assam to India, 5 August, 1940, in *IOR*, L/P&S/12, External Collection 36/23, Part I. For details 'McMahon Line', p. 456.

Road-building activity in NEFA, however, continued through the World War II years and, increasingly, in the Lohit, Subansiri and Mon-yul divisions new posts were being established. It is thus evident that by the time British rule in India was reaching its fag-end, New Delhi's viewpoint had crystallized to the effect that it was not really necessary to offer Tibet any boundary rectifications. If deemed fit, however, territory north of Se-la may be used as a bargaining counter to make Lhasa accept the rest of the 'Red' Line, without qualification.

As the War drew to a close, a question of some complexity came up in regard to the precise constitutional position of NEFA. The 1919 Act had treated it as part of what were called the 'Excluded and partially Excluded Areas', yet the position was far from clear under the Government of India Act, 1935. Paradoxically thus while NEFA was situated to the north of Assam, it was not a part of the territory over which the writ of the government of that province ran. Again, its administration was a charge on central revenues. Partly to tide over these constitutional hurdles, the years immediately preceding the end of the war proliferated in proposals for the creation of a 'North-eastern Protectorate', or a 'Non-regulated area'. These trial balloons were, however, soon overtaken by events. For with the impending transfer of power to Indian hands, it became difficult to project proposals that were, in essence, tantamount to a continued British presence in or hold over an area which, however strategically important, formed an integral part of the subcontinent.

It may also bear notice here that on the eve of the British withdrawal from India, the Tsongdu in Lhasa had fully affirmed its acceptance of the Simla Convention and the Trade Regulations of 1914. Thus as early as October 1944, the Tibetan Foreign Office had informed Gould 'by direction of the Kashag', that it 'did not wish' to dispute the validity of the McMahon Line as determining the limits of territory in which India and Tibet respectively (subject to such minor adjustments as then contemplated) are entitled to exercise authority! Nonetheless in view of the 'territorial and political settlement' with China, then pending, and which was 'a matter of overwhelming importance' for Lhasa, it was requested that 'extension of their [British] regular administration up to the Line [should] be postponed'.<sup>1</sup> By much the same reasoning it may be

<sup>1</sup>India to Secretary of State, 4 November, 1944. For details *McMahon Line*, p. 458.

argued that the Tibetan cable of October 1947, claiming large chunks of Indian territory in the north, was essentially an exercise in counter-balancing a similar claim which Lhasa had lodged in Nanking—for return of territories occupied by the Chinese which it legitimately regarded as part of its domain. What needs to be underlined is the fact that before many months had passed, Lhasa accepted the change-over in New Delhi, without any known reservations.

### VIII

As a cursory glance at the table of contents would reveal, the last two sections in this volume rest on a base which is materially different from all that precedes them. Until about 1940 it is now possible to have access to government archives in London and, to a limited extent, nearer home in New Delhi. This fact, however, certainly does not hold valid for the years that follow. The result is, and this despite a vast plethora of white papers, officials' reports, and plagiarized, if also garbled and incomplete, versions of important, secret, state documents, that it is not possible to arrive at any degree of finality. It follows that, of necessity, such conclusions as have been drawn must remain tentative, nor for the matter of that, could the summary treatment attempted in the following paragraphs bear an imprint of being original, much less definitive.

On the eve of the British withdrawal from India and, logically, the countries of its landward periphery, there was an abortive *coup d'état* in Lhasa in which, allegedly, the Kuomintang Chinese were directly involved. Not long after, Chiang's China was badly beaten at home—it had won the war against Japan, by proxy as it were, as a U.S. ally—and took refuge, along with the Generalissimo himself, in Taiwan. The new Communist regime's interest in Tibet was in no way less pronounced than its predecessor's, albeit with one vital difference: whereas the KMT had confined itself to paper protests, however loud, Mao's China matched its strident proclamations with the use of *force majeure*. Nor did it take long to translate its threats to 'liberate' Tibet into an actual physical onslaught to give shape and content to its cherished goals.

The 'liberation' of Tibet, and the process spilled over from October 1950 into May of the following year, marks a veritable watershed, and not only in relations between the two countries. For New Delhi too, as the next-door neighbour, felt deeply, even intimately,

involved. The wordy duel in which it now engaged with the new regime in Peking reveals the harsh truth that Communist China did not pay much heed to promises, or commitments, much less to the niceties of accepted norms of diplomatic usage or behaviour. To start with, New Delhi's note of 28 October (1950) is revealing of what was at stake. After heavily underlining the fact that with the invasion of Tibet underway, negotiations could only be 'under duress', it further stressed that in the then

context of world events, the invasion by Chinese troops of Tibet cannot but be regarded as deplorable and, in the considered judgment of the Government of India, not in the interest of China or of peace. The Government of India can only express their deep regret that in spite of the friendly and disinterested advice repeatedly tendered by them, the Chinese Government should have decided to seek a solution of the problem of their relations with Tibet by force instead of the slower and more enduring methods of peaceful approach.<sup>1</sup>

In sharp, if striking contrast, the tone and temper of Peking's notes and memoranda was couched in words and phrases that left a lot to be desired: its action in marching troops into Tibet, despite stern warnings and protests, laid bare the uncomfortable truth that its peaceful professions to the contrary notwithstanding, it would resort to brute force whenever, in the interest of achieving its goals, this was deemed necessary. In sum, new China made it unmistakably clear that

regardless of whether the local authorities of Tibet wish to proceed with peaceful negotiations, the problem of Tibet is a domestic problem of the People's Republic of China and no foreign interference shall be tolerated... [further] with regard to the viewpoint of the Government of India on what it regarded as deplorable, the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China cannot but consider it as having been affected by foreign influences hostile to China in Tibet and hence express their deep regret.<sup>2</sup>

Peking's new tone and temper did not go un-noticed. For India apart, the Dalai Lama and his people too awakened to the grim realization that, above all else, China's new masters meant business. In the final count, to its immediate neighbours, no less than to the world at large, the 'liberation' of Tibet served notice that the 19th

<sup>1</sup>Embassy of India to China, 28 October, 1950, pp. 156-7.

<sup>2</sup>Reply of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 30 October, 1950, pp. 158-9.

century Manchu China which, masquerading as a phantom republic had spilled over into the 20th, was dead as a dodo, a thing of the past.

The 'liberation' itself may be said to have been achieved in two stages. The first, in May 1951, was formalized by the conclusion of the 17-point 'Agreement on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet'. *Inter alia*, Peking assured Lhasa that

all nationalities within the boundaries of the Chinese People's Republic are equal and that they shall establish unity and mutual aid and oppose imperialism and their own public enemies, so that the CPR will become a big family of fraternity and cooperation, composed of all the nationalities.<sup>1</sup>

Even a cursory glance at the 'Agreement' would reveal that the Dalai Lama, and his regime, which had fled from its seat of authority on the morrow of the news that Peking had launched its assaults both in the east as well as the west, had knuckled down to Red China's armed might. Perhaps the more relevant question would be whether, in the context of the prevailing situation, it really had an alternative. It may be noted however, if in extenuation, that in the initial stages at any rate the behaviour of the People's Liberation Army in its encounters with the territories, and the people, it overran was exemplary. This was in such sharp contrast to previous regimes in China that it evoked a great deal of favourable comment; nay, even a measure of sympathy and understanding for the 'liberators'. There was the added fact that the May 1951 'Agreement'—the Dalai Lama later (1959) alleged that the seal used on it for and on his behalf, was a fake one, thereby invalidating it *ab initio*—contained a lot which, if faithfully and honestly implemented, would have ensured a goodly measure of Tibetan autonomy. All in all, the Lama and his entourage, confident that a new page had been opened in the chequered annals of their relations with a powerful neighbour, felt sufficiently reassured and repaired home from Chumbi, in a spirit of robust optimism.

The second phase in Tibet's 'liberation' which at the same time marks the opening of a new and friendly era in Sino-Indian relations was the conclusion of the April 1954 Agreement on 'Trade and Intercourse' between the 'Tibet Region of China' and India. There

<sup>1</sup>For the text, *Hsinhua*, 23 May, 1951. In *Concerning the Question of Tibet* (Peking, 1959), pp. 14-16, the text of the 'Agreement' is given without its preamble; the citation in the text is from the latter source.

was a lot in the 'Agreement', and the notes exchanged on the occasion, which smacked of a unilateral surrender: the character of the Indian mission at Lhasa was abruptly, if materially, changed from a diplomatic into a consular entity; New Delhi withdrew its small military escorts, stationed for over half a century, at the trade marts of Gyantse and Yatung; it handed back, without demur, its postal, telegraph and telephone facilities, not to mention the rest houses it had put up on the road to Lhasa. As against the tangibles it thus gave up, its gain was the largely intangible goodwill enshrined in the five high-sounding principles (or platitudes!) of 'Panch Shila' which were loudly proclaimed as laying down the bases for the new relationship between the People's Republic of China and India. The Preamble spelt them out as

- i) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty;
- ii) mutual non-aggression;
- iii) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs;
- iv) equality and mutual benefit;
- v) peaceful co-existence.<sup>1</sup>

With the new agreement concluded, Tibet's 'liberation', to employ the then current Chinese jargon, now seemed to be complete and, on paper at any rate, it met the basic desiderata which a regime in Lhasa, or for the matter of that the British in India had long demanded: a guarantee of Tibetan autonomy within the framework of the larger whole of Chinese suzerainty.

It is a matter of no small significance that the ink on the April 1954 agreement was barely dry when important, if more intractable, issues opened up. As the larger study lays bare, as early as October 1954, the Indian Prime Minister, then on a visit to China, raised the question of maps which Peking had published and which showed the (Indian) frontier in the western, as certainly in the eastern sector, completely erroneously. Chou En-lai evaded a direct answer and pleaded for time to rectify contours which, he claimed, his government had but copied from the Kuo-ming-tang regime. Two years later, the issue was raised afresh, during the Chinese Prime Minister's return visit to India. Once again broad generalities were discussed, largely because, as Chou was to explain later, 'time was not yet

<sup>1</sup>For the text of the Agreement, pp. 165-8.

(deemed) ripe' for detailed discussions. Nor is it necessary to recount here that long, and sordid, tale except perhaps to underline that, shortly afterwards, Peking called into question the entire basis of the Sino-Indian boundary which, it affirmed, had 'never been formally delimited'.

The long, repetitious and argumentative despatches which now passed between New Delhi and Peking were marked by growing acrimony and bitterness. By 1958, superficially at any rate, the enthusiasm and euphoria of the 'Hindi Chini Bhai-Bhai' phase of two years earlier appears to have ebbed away yielding place to a certain disillusionment, lack of warmth, and even coolness, in the relations between the two countries. It is at this stage, early in March, 1959, that the Rebellion in Lhasa, which itself appears to have been a spontaneous outburst, born of a long series of flagrant breaches of the May, 1951 agreement, led to a number of complications, and not only in relations between Lhasa and Peking. To be sure, in more ways than one, the Rebellion marks a distinct, and indeed an important, watershed in the relations between India and China. In its wake, a long trail of hapless refugees headed by the Dalai Lama himself, poured into India, and with that Peking's posture took on a decidedly hostile stance. *Inter alia*, it now openly charged New Delhi with giving succour and sustenance to an insurrection in a neighbouring and friendly land. It was a grave accusation which left a deep imprint on the relations between the two countries for the breach that now occurred was never healed and, in actual fact, continued to widen with every day that passed. The border, and not only in the eastern sector, grew tense and hot blood marked the trail of the diplomatic exchanges whose colour and content grew ever more ominous.

For India, after the March (1959) Rebellion, the situation became especially more difficult. Most of what had happened in Ladakh, or across the Aksai Chin, not to talk of Wu-je or Bara-hoti, or even Longju, the then Prime Minister Nehru had kept scrupulously to himself. But with the Lama's flight from Lhasa, public pressures mounted considerably, resulting in the publication of the first White Paper which revealed the sad tale of growing discord over the years since 1954. This was to serve as the starting point for an unceasing lava of notes and memoranda which has, over the years, known no end. As the cold, unpalatable facts became common knowledge and the implied, if half-hidden dimensions of the problem came to

be realized more fully, popular reactions began to harden while the possibility of a compromise, receded farther and farther into the distance.

The 1962 war, with the deep thrusts which the Chinese made into the western sector no less than in the Kameng and Lohit districts of what is now Arunachal Pradesh, is still a live subject of controversy, with rival protagonists arrayed powerfully on either side. Thus it has been held that, after 1956, the two countries were set unerringly on a 'collision course', that India's 'forward policy' so-called was misconceived and indeed an open invitation to disaster. Nor, as events turned out, was retribution long delayed. The contrary view—that the road across the Aksai Chin was Peking's stab in the back of a friendly, trusting, neighbour, through territory to which New Delhi had a powerful claim; that the flag posts in Ladakh, and across the Thag La ridge, as no doubt Prime Minister Nehru's not always discreet utterances, were thin pegs on which to hang the well-rehearsed, massive onslaughts of October 1962—is held equally strongly. Above all, a student of the frontier has to face the uncomfortable truth that, for a variety of reasons, relations between the two neighbours worsened to a degree where any worthwhile discussions became well-nigh impossible. Nor is it difficult to deduce that the present imbroglio is bound to persist as long as public postures are not materially modified in a meaningful give and take across the table. Stalemates in themselves offer no solutions, nor for that matter need they be taken as immutable.

Also published

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