

China's Tawang Conundrum

The Statesman

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Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh has caused a flutter in the Beijing roost. Wary of the fall-out from Dalai Lama's visit to the picturesque 17th-Century Twang Monastery, which to Tibetans is next in importance after the Potala Palace in Lhasa, the erstwhile abode of the Dalai Lama, China has severely warned India that Dalai Lama's visit "to the contested area will inflict severe damage on the China-India relationship". In a reversal of its earlier timidity and nervousness while dealing with China, India has of late also become more assertive, sensing correctly that in order to make its big neighbor more sensitive towards its own concerns like United Nations Security Council, NSG or Masood Azhar, it has to aggressively confront China on issues like Tibet and One-China Policy, which for China are non-negotiable. In fact, the Dalai Lama's visit may just provide some extra ammunitions to India, which it may leverage to its advantage both at the political and diplomatic levels.

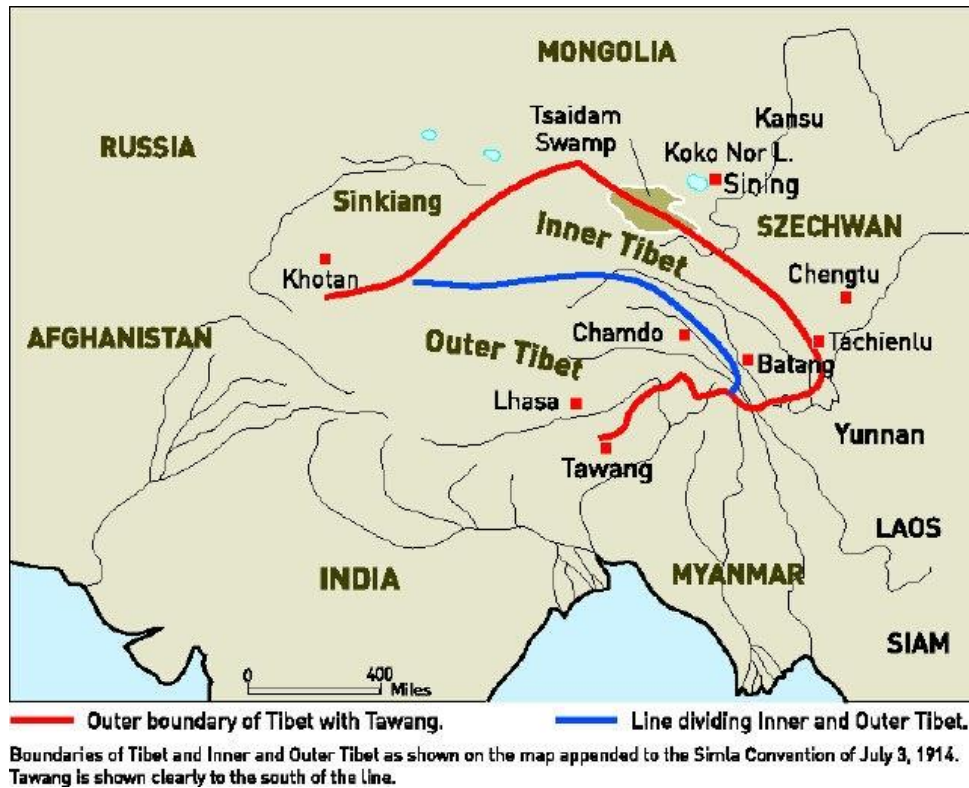
Since the 1962 war, not a single shot has been fired along the nearly 3500 km. long disputed border with China, but the Chinese positions on the border has remained unyielding. China claims the entire Arunachal Pradesh as its own territory, being 'Southern Tibet'. But the Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang undermines Chinese claims and instead strengthens Indian position by imparting legitimacy, which riles China.

The origin of the dispute goes back to early 20th century. The 885 km long northern boundary of Arunachal Pradesh today known as the McMahon Line – a bone of contention between India and China, takes its name from Sir Arthur Henry McMahon, Secretary to the Government of India (1911 – 1914).

At the beginning of the twentieth Century, the Qing dynasty of China was on decline. China at that time exercised only a limited control over Tibet, which was autonomous in every respect except foreign policy and international relations which were determined by China. However, taking advantage of the falling powers of the Qing emperor, Tibet started asserting its independence. In a last desperate attempt to reassert its authority, the Qing Government sent military forces to Tibet in 1910, before it itself finally collapsed in the wake of the 1911 Republican Revolution in China, prompting the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet, to expel all Chinese officials and troops from Tibet and proclaim the independence of Tibet from Chinese occupation. Tibet sought international recognition for its new freedom in 1913.

A conference was therefore held in Simla between Tibet, India and China to settle the frontier and other matters relating to Tibet. While India was represented by Sir McMahon, Mr Ivan Chen represented China and Lonchen Ga-den Shatra Pal-jor Dorje represented Tibet. The accord signed on July 03 1914, known as the Simla Convention, provided that Tibet would be divided into "Outer Tibet" and "Inner Tibet": "The Governments of Great Britain and China recognising that Tibet is under the suzerainty of China, and recognising also the autonomy of Outer Tibet, engage to respect the territorial integrity of the country, and to abstain from interference in the administration of Outer Tibet (including the selection and installation of the Dalai Lama), which shall remain in the hands of the Tibetan Government at Lhasa."

Outer Tibet covered approximately the same area as the modern Tibet Autonomous Region, while “Inner Tibet” would remain under the jurisdiction of the Chinese government. Article 9 of the Convention stated: “For the purpose of the present Convention, the borders of Tibet, and the boundary between Outer and Inner Tibet, shall be as shown in red and blue respectively on the map attached hereto.”



The red line, defining the boundary between Tibet and China, approximately coincides with the McMahon Line, which ran along the highest ridges of the Himalayan ranges following the watershed principle of map making. The only exception was at Tawang, the birthplace of the Sixth Dalai Lama, which was on the Tibetan side of the watershed, but the British negotiated to shift the McMahon line north of it, thus including Tawang in India for protecting its trade and political interests.

The draft Indo-Tibet boundary was formally confirmed in March 1914 and submitted at the 7th full meeting of all the delegates on 22 April 1914 along with the map, which was signed by the Chinese Plenipotentiary Ivan Chen on 27 April 1914. The final 3 July 1914 accord lacked any textual boundary description, but attached an identical map. Delegates from India, China, and Tibet agreed on this frontier, but the talks broke down on the issue of the boundary between inner and outer Tibet. Two days later, the Chinese government disavowed its delegate and refused to sign the Convention.

However, the Tibetan and British representative went ahead and with the Agreement and declared that “We, the Plenipotentiaries of Great Britain and Tibet, hereby record the following declaration to the effect that we acknowledge the annexed convention as initialled to be binding on the Governments of Great Britain and Tibet, and we agree that so long as the Government of China withholds signature to the

aforsaid convention she will be debarred from the enjoyment of all privileges accruing therefrom.” China refused to sign the Convention and emphatically stated that any bilateral agreement between Tibet and Britain would not be recognized by it, since Tibet not being independent could not have independently signed treaties; further as per the Anglo-Chinese (1906) and Anglo-Russian (1907) conventions, any such agreement would be invalid without Chinese assent. But Chinese rule on Tibet had effectively ceased by then and China was too weak to challenge the might of the British Empire in India; hence no one challenged the authority of Tibet to sign the agreement. The Survey of India finally published a map showing the McMahon Line as the official boundary between China and India in 1938.

Much is made by scholars like Melvyn Goldstein, Alastair Lamb, Neville Maxwell and others of the fact that the Simla Convention was not signed but only initialled by the Chinese delegate and hence lacked legality. The fact remains that the map of 27 April 1914 showing the India-Tibet boundary bear the full signatures of the Tibetan Plenipotentiary and the Chinese Plenipotentiary. Mr McMahon initialled the map of 27 April 1914, while he and the Tibetan Plenipotentiary had signed the map of 3rd July 1914. To deny historical reality, one needs stronger grounds than initials and signatures.

The historical reality is that China has never protested against this position until 90 years later, in 2006. Both Chou En Lai in his discussions with Nehru in 1960 and Deng Xiaoping in 1985 refrained from referring to Tawang; Chou in fact conceded that while the McMahon Line was “undecided and unfair”, it had become “an accomplished fact” and that “there was no better way than to recognize this Line”. India and China has since held 19 rounds of border talks and signed five confidence-building agreements, in 1993, 1996, 2005, 2012 and 2013. The Sept 7, 1993 agreement categorically stated that “Pending an ultimate solution to the boundary question between the two countries, the two sides shall strictly respect and observe the line of actual control between the two sides” which was reiterated in all subsequent agreements. The 2005 agreement further asserted, “In reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas.” As the Economist then noted, this “implied that China had dropped its historical demand for Tawang”.

The first time Tawang entered the official discussions was in March 2006, when Dai Bingguo, the special representative for boundary discussions insisted that the eastern sector including Twang be made the focal point in border discussions, followed by the Chinese envoy Sun Yuxi claiming the whole of Arunachal Pradesh including Twang as Chinese territory. This was clearly going against the spirit of the 2005 agreement to leave areas with settled populations undisturbed. In 2007, the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi told the then Indian Foreign Minister, Mr Pranab Mukherjee, that mere presence of settled population would not alter Chinese claims. Since then there has been very little progress in negotiations between the two countries which have practically become stalled, and relation between the countries has become strained, moving from ‘dispute settlement to crisis management’. India has effectively junked the “one-China policy” intensifying its interactions with Taiwan, and connecting it with China's acceptance of a “one-India policy”.

China should realise that diplomacy and international relations depend on reciprocity. India is not overly disturbed over Chinese activities in Aksai Chin which was India’s territory as a legacy of history, neither

has it engaged in robust diplomacy to counter Chinese involvement in the POK, through which China is building its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. It is time China realised that it is now dealing with a mature, strong and confident India.