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A Missed Opportunity?
The Nehru-Zhou Enlai Summit of 1960*

Srinath Raghavan

Fifty years is a long time. Certainly long enough to treat anything of that vintage as nothing but history. But the Sino-Indian crisis and war of 1962 seem to be trapped in a time warp. The events of 1962 have evoked much interest lately owing to the fiftieth anniversary of the war and the availability of the Henderson-Brooks Report. However, much of the recent commentary on the war has been strikingly reminiscent of the post-mortems performed in its immediate aftermath—not least in its continued search for the 'guilty men of 1962', to borrow the title of book by D.R. Mankekar. Jawaharlal Nehru is vilified—especially in the social media—as though he were still the prime minister of a country that had just suffered a humiliating defeat rather than a historical figure that has been dead for five decades.

The great German historian Reinhart Koselleck once observed, 'In the short run history may be made by the victors. But in the long run the gains in historical understanding have come from the defeated.'[1] This has, alas, not been true in our case with the China crisis. It is a pity that despite the passage of time and the availability of new archival material, we persist in asking the same simplistic questions—and worse in insisting on giving the same old answer.

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[1] Cited in Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Abacus, 1998), 317–18.

The historiography of the Sino-Indian war of 1962 has passed through three distinct stages. The earliest accounts viewed India as the victim of Chinese betrayal and expansionism. According to these the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was credulous and insufficiently alert to Chinese adventurism. This perspective continues to inform public discussions on the subject to date. More influential in the academia has been the revisionist critique originally advanced by Neville Maxwell in 1970. Maxwell blamed Nehru for arrogance and obduracy in the face of Chinese efforts to seek a negotiated solution. Maxwell, however, overreached himself in attempting to prove that the Nehru government viewed the issue in the same terms as he saw it later. For an account of Indian decision-making, he curiously interpreted Delhi's actions almost as Beijing would have viewed it. In the years since revisionists scholars have taken little cognizance of the range of archival materials that have opened up, resorting instead to the rhetorical trope of denouncing everyone who disagreed with them as by definition 'nationalist'.[2]

This paper aims to move beyond the tired old blame-game. Instead it focuses on one of the cornerstones of the revisionist case on Nehru's China policy. It examines the revisionist contention that Nehru rejected the reasonable offer advanced by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1960 because he had set his mind against any compromise long ago. It is argued here that such claims impart a misleading simplicity and fixity to what was a much more nuanced and shifting position. In particular, perceptions of China's territorial ambitions and of India's relative weakness are crucial to understanding the stance adopted by the Nehru government.

The paper begins by outlining the evolution of India's boundary policy from 1948 to 1958. It then considers the period between January 1959 and March 1960, when the boundary

[2] See, for instance, the numerous essays on the topic by A.G. Noorani. Also see, Perry Anderson, *Indian Ideology* (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2013).

dispute came to the fore. Finally, it examines the abortive summit between the prime ministers in April 1960. The paper draws on official documents and private papers in India and the UK, as well as published sources. In particular it uses the recently available Indian records of the Nehru–Zhou talks.[3]

Evolution of India's Boundary Policy[4]

The Sino-Indian boundary is usually divided into the western, central, and eastern sectors. The western sector encompasses the area of Ladakh; the middle sector the boundary of Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh (UP) with Tibet; and the eastern sector, the area called the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA), now called Arunachal Pradesh. The boundary dispute has spawned a veritable cottage industry of works examining its historical origins.[5] This paper is agnostic on the merits of either the Indian or the Chinese stand on the boundary dispute. For our purposes it would suffice to underscore some salient aspects of the British legacy to independent India.

The status of the boundaries at the time of Indian independence is clear from the maps produced by Delhi as late as 1950. The boundary in the western and middle sectors was marked 'undefined'. In the western sector, the British had toyed with a variety of boundary alignments in keeping with their perceived security requirements. Thus the Ardagh alignment of 1897 included the Aksai Chin area within the territorial

[3] These papers will soon be published in the *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* ably edited by Professor Madhavan Palat.

[4] This section draws on the fuller discussion in Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India: A Strategic History of the Nehru Years* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[5] Particularly useful are Alastair Lamb's *The China-India Border: The Origins of the Disputed Boundaries* (London: OUP, 1964); *The McMahon Line*, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1966); *The Sino-Indian Boundary in Ladakh* (Columbia, 1975); and Parshotam Mehra's *The McMahon Line and After* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1974); *An 'Agreed' Frontier: Ladakh and India's Northernmost Borders, 1846–1947* (New Delhi: OUP, 1992).

boundaries of India, whilst the MacDonald note of 1899 placed it within China. China's refusal to respond to the MacDonald offer led the British to make further unilateral alterations as mandated by their changing perceptions. The undefined boundary in the western sector reflected the failure of British attempts to secure a frontier agreement with China.

In the eastern sector the boundary was shown as conforming to the alignment formalized between the Indian and Tibetan representatives in the Simla Conference of 1914. The McMahon Line, as it came to be called after the then foreign secretary of India, was defined in a set of notes exchanged between Henry McMahon and the chief Tibetan delegate, Lonchen Shatra on 24–25 March 1914. Accompanying the notes was a map that delineated the border along the highest line of the Assam Himalaya, and that outlined the boundaries and buffer zones between Tibet and China. These were also marked on the map of the draft convention which was initialled on 27 April 1914 by the Chinese as well as the British Indian and Tibetan representatives. The Simla convention was initialled yet again by the British Indian and Tibetan plenipotentiaries on 3 July 1914. They also signed a joint declaration stating that the convention was binding on both parties, irrespective of the Chinese agreement. The Chinese government, however, repudiated the Simla Convention.

Independent India's policy towards Tibet was under sporadic consideration even before the Chinese civil war ended. The contours of official thinking can be discerned from a note prepared in June 1948 by the Indian Ambassador in Nanking, K.M. Panikkar. It stated that following British withdrawal India had become 'in law the successor to British rights in Tibet'. 'The first and most important' of India's interests was the McMahon Line. Panikkar observed that though the Chinese had accepted the Simla Agreement of 1914 they had refused to ratify it. Hence, effective Chinese control over Tibet would mean 'the immediate revival of claims against Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim and also the

denunciation of the Macmahon (*sic*) line'.[6] Indeed, the assumption that a strong Chinese government would seize Tibet and advance claims to the region below the McMahon Line appears to have been widely accepted.[7]

No sooner had the communists taken control of China did they announce their intention to 'liberate' Tibet. India's policy was to avoid provoking China; but India would not give up its rights in Tibet, and would provide moral and material support to the Tibetan government. As the secretary general of Ministry of External Affairs, G.S. Bajpai, explained to the British envoy: 'Chinese Communists, like any other Communists, reacted well to firmness but would exploit any sign of weakness'.[8] This attitude would underpin subsequent Indian policy on the boundary.

In the aftermath of the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, the Indian government began seriously considering its boundary policy. Presently, Nehru declared India's stance on the boundary in a statement in Parliament. The frontier from Ladakh to Nepal was defined 'chiefly by long usage and custom'. The frontier in the east was 'clearly defined by the McMahon Line which was fixed by the Simla Convention of 1914 … that is our boundary—map or no map'. This categorical pronouncement was spurred by Delhi's concern to adopt a robust posture in defence of its interests: any sign of weakness, as Bajpai had observed, would be exploited. The emphasis on the McMahon Line stemmed from two considerations. It is evident from Nehru's statement that India was surer of its rights in the eastern sector than in the west. Further, from the standpoint of security Nehru felt that the 'main frontier was the Assam frontier'.[9] The importance attached to this

[6] Note by K.M. Panikkar, 9 June 1948, FO 371/70042, The National Archives (TNA), London.

[7] See British Embassy Nanking to Foreign Office (FO), 18 August 1948, FO 371/70043, TNA.

[8] Report on conversation with G.S. Bajpai, United Kingdom High Commission India (UKHCI) to Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO), 2 December 1949, FO 371/76317, TNA.

[9] Statement, 20 November 1950, ibid., p. 348; Nehru to B.C. Roy, 15 November 1950, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* (*Second Series*) (hereafter *SWJN-SS*), 15, pt II: 341.

sector led to the decision to occupy Tawang. As Nehru wrote later, 'It was on our side of the McMahon line, but it had not been occupied by us and was practically under Tibetan control till then.'[10] On 12 February 1951, a political officer with an armed escort took control of Tawang amidst the clamorous ululations of the Tibetans. Beijing, however, did not respond in any fashion.

The Indians felt also that they should try and obtain Beijing's acceptance of the frontier. Bajpai and Foreign Secretary K.P.S. Menon thought that China's recognition of the frontier should form part of an overall settlement on Tibet: India should not withdraw her armed parties from Tibet without securing this. However, Beijing's response was not forthcoming. Menon thought that China's attitude was 'cunning'. He wondered if the Chinese were 'waiting to be free from their preoccupations in the North to be able to enforce a settlement in Tibet after their own hearts?' 'Irredentism,' wrote Menon, 'has always played a part in the policy of the Chinese Government, whether Imperial, Kuomintang or Communists.' A former ambassador to China, he recalled,

> … seeing, on the walls of the Military Academy in Chengtu, a map, showing China as it was and ought to be and including large portions of Kashmir and areas to the south of the McMahon Line. This is perhaps the real reason for the Chinese reluctance to discuss the problem of Tibet with us.

Menon recommended that 'we must firmly adhere to our decision that any such proposal … can only be considered as part of a general settlement on Tibet'.[11]

Following another meeting with Zhou, Panikkar reported that the 'question of boundary was not touched and no allusion made to any political problems'. Zhou, he argued, knew India's declared position; his persistent silence should, therefore, be treated as acquiescence in, if not acceptance of, India's view. India should

[10] Note, 27/29 October 1952, *SWJN-SS*, 20: 161.
[11] Note by Menon, 11 April 1952, Subject File 24, Vijayalakshmi Pandit Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML).

stick to the stand that the frontier had been defined and there was nothing to be discussed. Following some discussion, Panikkar convinced Nehru of the soundness of his suggestion. The nub of his argument: so long as China was unwilling to rake up the issue, India should utilize the time to make its position effective in the frontier areas, where its administrative hold was weak and its political position fledgling.[12]

A key component of India's frontier policy was to adopt a strong stance and eschew any move indicating doubt or weakness. As Nehru explained to his Ambassador in Beijing,

> If we show weakness advantage will be taken of immediately. This applies to any development that might take place or in reference to our frontier problems ... In regard to this entire frontier we have to maintain an attitude of firmness.[13]

As part of this posture, it was decided in 1953 to publish new official maps, which would show the boundary between India and China as unambiguously delimited. The crucial decision, in retrospect, lay in the Ladakh sector. Here the Indian Government decided neither on the ambitious Ardagh Line nor on the MacDonald Line, but a 'compromise line which had some plausibility'.[14] This line placed Aksai Chin within Indian territory. The Foreign Secretary, R.K. Nehru, later recalled, '...in 1953, our experts had advised us that our claim to Aksai Chin was not too strong'. The prime minister was 'agreeable' to adjustments in

[12] R.K. Nehru, 'Oral History Transcript' (OHT), 17–18: 31, NMML. R.K. Nehru, a cousin of Jawaharlal, had taken over as Foreign Secretary in July 1952. He was closely involved with the formulation of the China policy at various points as foreign secretary, ambassador to China, & secretary general of the Ministry of External Affairs. Also see, Karunakar Gupta, *Sino-Indian Relations 1948–52: Role of K.M. Panikkar* (Calcutta: Minerva 1987), 64–5.
[13] Cable to N. Raghavan, 10 December 1952, *SWJN-SS*, 20: 488–89.
[14] J.S. Mehta, 'India-China Relations: Review and Prognosis', in Surjit Mansingh (ed.) *Indian and Chinese Foreign Policies in Comparative Perspective* (New Delhi, 1998), 468. Mehta was the leader of the Indian team which examined the evidence on the boundary dispute in 1960.

'Aksai Chin and one or two other places' being made 'as part of a satisfactory overall settlement'.[15] Thus during the Sino-Indian talks over Tibet in 1954, Nehru enjoined the Indian delegation to refrain from raising the boundary issue. Importantly, he added that 'this will have to be brought in in a larger settlement. In that settlement I should like to make clear our special position in the border States'.[16]

Shortly after the 1954 agreement the two sides began to contest the ownership of a grazing ground called Bara Hoti along the UP–Tibet border. During his talks with Zhou in Beijing later that year Nehru indirectly referred to boundary alignment in Chinese maps. Zhou replied that China had been reprinting old maps. They had not undertaken surveys nor consulted neighbouring countries, and had no basis for fixing the boundary lines. Nehru replied that he was not worried about these maps: 'Our frontiers are clear'. Despite the air of nonchalance, Nehru's unease was obvious: 'Supposing we publish a map showing Tibet as part of India, how would China feel about it?'[17] Zhou did not raise any question about the new Indian maps, which depicted a firm boundary in all sectors and incorporated Aksai Chin within India.

By early 1956, there were reports that the Chinese were constructing roads on their side of the India–Tibet frontier. The Indian Consulate-General in Tibet wrote that these roads could be used for access to border areas and to take possession of these parts. To counteract this, it was essential to accelerate existing measures to 'develope (sic) areas along our border, make roads, educate people and make them conscious of India'. The note also called for check-posts closer to the border and mobile patrols to 'ensure that the Chinese will not encroach on our areas'.[18]

[15] Confidential Note, 'Our China Policy: A Personal Assessment', 30 July 1968, R.K. Nehru Papers, NMML.
[16] Note, 30 August 1953, *SWJN-SS*, 23: 484.
[17] Minutes of talk with Zhou EnLai, 20 October 1954, *SWJN-SS*, 27: 17–20.
[18] 'Recent Developments in Tibet and their Effects on the Security of India' by S.L. Chibber, in P.N. Menon to Apa Pant, 3 February 1956, Subject File 3, Apa Pant Papers, NMML.

Nehru's principal concern was with Chinese maps claiming '…quite a good part of Assam … Also, a bit of U.P.'. He was apparently not much bothered about Chinese map lines in the western sector. As we saw, Nehru was amenable to compromise in this sector. He now began to reconsider the wisdom of waiting for China to bring up the issue. Zhou had not accepted India's version of the boundary explicitly and had only said that the maps were old. The continued publication of these maps together with petty border incidents and construction of roads in Tibet produced 'a sense of disquiet'. The prime minister felt that 'we shall have to take up this matter some time or the other'.[19]

During his visit to India in January 1957, Zhou referred to the McMahon Line in the context of the Sino-Burmese boundary. Although China had never recognized the line, they thought. '…now that it is an accomplished fact, we should accept it'. They had not consulted the Tibetan authorities and would do so. Nehru took this as a clear acceptance of the McMahon Line. He suggested that minor border issues such as Hoti could be settled by discussions between officials. Zhou agreed, but the discussions did not commence until April 1958.[20] Zhou still did not question Indian claims in the western sector though the Chinese were constructing a highway linking Xinjiang and Tibet passing through Aksai Chin. China, of course, regarded Aksai Chin as its territory. But, in retrospect, Zhou's silence on this occasion had deleterious repercussions: it lent credence to Delhi's perception that China had occupied Aksai Chin furtively and treacherously.

In early 1958 an intelligence patrol reported increasing signs of Chinese activity near Aksai Chin. Nehru did not consider it feasible to protest without being sure about the alignment of the road. As he wrote: 'What we might perhaps do is that in some

[19] Note to Krishna Menon, 6 May 1956; Note to Foreign Secretary & Joint Secretary, 12 May 1956, *SWJN-SS*, 33: 475–8.
[20] Record of conversation, 31 December 1956/1 January 1957, *SWJN-SS*, 36: 600–1; Subimal Dutt, *With Nehru in the Foreign Office* (Calcutta: Minerva, 1977), 116–17.

communication with the Chinese government in regard to the points in dispute which have to be decided we should mention the Aksai Chin area.'[21]

Clearly, Nehru did not believe that Aksai Chin 'belonged' to India and was not open to discussion. We may note that he was willing to treat Aksai Chin at par with other minor areas in dispute like Hoti. On receiving further information about the road in late 1958, India sent notes protesting the road and questioning Chinese maps. China replied that the road ran through their territory. The Indians response read: 'The question whether the particular area is in Indian or Chinese territory is a matter in dispute which has to be dealt with separately. The Government of India proposed to do so.'[22]

Correspondence and Clashes

Around this time Chinese also handed a reply to India's protest about their maps. It reiterated what Zhou had told Nehru in 1954, and added that with the elapse of time and after consultation with neighbours and surveys, a 'new way of drawing the boundary' would be decided. In the context of recent developments, Nehru was unwilling to abide with tenuous reassurances and decided to write directly to Zhou.

Nehru recalled that Zhou had told him in 1954 that the maps were old. In 1956, Zhou had made it 'quite clear' that China proposed to accept the McMahon Line. China had now published a map which depicted 'A large part of our North-East Frontier Agency as well as some other parts' as Chinese territory; and had given an evasive reply to India's note. He felt 'puzzled' since he

[21] Note to Foreign Secretary, 4 February 1958, cited in Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru*, 3: 79.

[22] *Notes, Memoranda, and Letters Exchanged and Agreements Signed between India and China: White Papers* (New Delhi 1959–66, 8 vols), 1: 26–29. Unless indicated otherwise, all references to official and Prime Ministerial correspondence henceforth is from these volumes.

had thought that there was 'no *major* boundary dispute'. Nehru made it clear that he would not be satisfied with an assurance that these were old maps. 'There can be no question of these *large parts* of India being anything but India' [emphases added]. Evidently Nehru was only bothered by the 'large' areas shown within China's boundaries particularly south of the McMahon Line. There was no mention of Aksai Chin, for India had already conveyed to China that it could be resolved through discussions.

In his reply of 23 January 1959, Zhou stated that the entire boundary had never been formally delimited by any treaty or agreement. The matter had not been raised 'because conditions were not yet ripe for its settlement and the Chinese side … had had no time to study the question'. He averred that Aksai Chin had 'always been under Chinese jurisdiction'; only recently had India laid claim to it. China could not accept the McMahon Line since it was a product of British imperialism and was illegal. Nevertheless, China found it necessary to 'take a more or realistic attitude' towards the Line; but had to 'act with prudence' and needed time. Since the boundary was not delimited there were bound to be discrepancies in maps. China did 'not hold that every portion of this (Chinese) boundary line is drawn on sufficient grounds'. For the first time Zhou questioned Indian maps, 'particularly its western section'. To avoid border incidents Zhou proposed that both sides maintain status quo.

The Indians were surprised but not alarmed by the letter. Apart from Ladakh, the Chinese had not explicitly claimed any area included in their maps. Yet the letter suggested that the Chinese held that their boundary line was drawn on 'sufficient grounds' at least in some sector—probably the western one, where their line ran further the west of Aksai Chin. Zhou's disavowal of the McMahon Line coupled with his guarded assurances might have appeared a slight retraction to Nehru, who believed that Zhou had clearly accepted it in 1956. Most important, the thrust of Zhou's letter was that the entire boundary was undefined and in need of negotiation afresh. The Indians, however, did not think that the boundary drawn by them had no basis at all.

Nehru's response of 22 March 1959 set forth the historical and geographical basis for India's view of the boundary. It is evident from his note that India considered its case for the McMahon Line unassailable and attached greater importance to this sector. In the western sector, a nebulous treaty of 1842 was cited in support of India's claims. On Zhou's suggestion to maintain status quo, Nehru wrote that neither side should take unilateral action in support of its claims: 'Further, if any possession has been secured recently, the position should be rectified.'(Raghavan, War and Peace in Modern India, 248-49). Nehru wrote this in connection with Hoti, which he claimed had recently been occupied. The note did not explicitly state that this proposal applied to Aksai Chin though India would do so at a later stage.

In the following months the relationship between India and China deteriorated sharply owing to the rebellion in Tibet and India's grant of asylum to the Dalai Lama. In their quest to subdue the rebellion, the Chinese moved their forces to the frontier with India in the east. The Indians, too, were engaged in fortifying their presence in these parts. By the summer of 1959 the two sides faced each other along a contested border in NEFA. Not surprisingly clashes occurred. The first of these took place at Longju towards the end of August with both sides accusing the other of provocation. Beijing rightly pointed out that Indian posts at Longju and two other points lay north of the McMahon Line as marked on the original maps of 1914.

When the Longju incident occurred, the Indian government was already being questioned about the frontier on the basis of newspaper reports and leaks. Following a request in Parliament, Nehru agreed to consider releasing a White Paper on these issues. He revealed his evolving position on Aksai Chin when he repeatedly stated that the boundary in Ladakh was not sufficiently defined and that Aksai Chin was a disputed area. He described it as a 'barren uninhabited region without a vestige of grass', 'peculiarly suited' for discussions. The road was admittedly 'an important connection' for the Chinese. Ladakh, he declared, was

different from NEFA: India would insist on the McMahon Line boundary, but would discuss issues of interpretation of the line. In contrast the dispute over Aksai Chin was a 'minor' thing. India was prepared to discuss it on the basis of treaties, maps, usage, and geography.[23]

The first White Paper was published on 7 September 1959. The decision to release it was ostensibly taken to stem the tide of criticism, and to demonstrate that the government had not been complacent. This proved a major miscalculation on Nehru's part; for the paper only served to inflame parliamentary and public opinion, and brought the government under intense, unremitting pressure. Nehru was pushed to a position where his diplomatic manoeuvrability was severely curtailed. Henceforth he had to assess constantly what the political marketplace would bear and adopt only those policies that could be conceivably sold to the public.

Nehru's problems were compounded with the receipt of Zhou's letter a day after the White Paper was released. Zhou correctly argued that the boundary in the west had never been formally delimited. But he claimed that the boundary shown by Chinese maps accorded to 'a customary line drawn from historical traditions' up to which China exercised administrative control. This last point would be strongly contested by India. Zhou contended that Nehru had misunderstood his statements on the McMahon Line. He had only stated that to maintain amity and to facilitate negotiations Chinese troops would not cross the Line. He also claimed that the boundary in this sector as shown in Chinese maps was a 'true reflection' of the customary boundary before the so-called McMahon Line came up; India had occupied this region only in 1951. Zhou wrote that he sought a settlement fair and reasonable to both sides, but would not let India impose its one-sided claims on China.

[23] *Prime Minister on Sino-India Relations: Parliament (*New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1963, 2 vols), 1: 101–4, 107–9, 123–4.

Nehru was taken aback by this letter. He thought that China's claims in the east were 'fantastic and absurd', and could never be accepted. Having given evasive answers about maps and assuring him they accepted the McMahon Line, Beijing was not playing fair. It produced a 'lack of confidence' in China's words and assurances. Indeed, China's claims were still not clear and left open the possibility of extending them further. On Ladakh, Nehru told Parliament on two more occasions that the boundary was unclear. Yet in his reply to Zhou, Nehru adopted a firm line. After laying out India's case for a 'historical frontier' in all the sectors in considerable detail, he made it obvious that India would not entertain the latest Chinese claims. He also stated that talks could begin only after Chinese withdrew their posts 'opened in recent months' at Longju, Spanggur, Mandal, and 'one or two other places in eastern Ladakh'. The letter did not call for a Chinese withdrawal from Aksai Chin.

Nehru's main concern was China's 'demand for considerable areas, *more especially in the NEFA*'. China's claims implied that they wanted to establish presence on the Indian side of the Himalayan barrier. If a foreign power managed to do so, India's 'basic security' would be 'greatly endangered'. Further, the Himalayas were the most 'vital part of India's thought and existence'. Nehru felt that the Himalayas could not be gifted to the Chinese—a point which he had also made in Parliament.[24] Thus Nehru's unequivocal rejection of Chinese claims was based on considerations of security and nationalism.

Nehru and his advisors thought that Beijing had advanced these claims with the aim of realizing 'at least substantial parts of them'. Officials in the MEA confided to the British envoy that Nehru's 'uncompromising reply' was actually 'a bargaining position'. Delhi was willing to make 'some adjustments and concessions at various points'.[25] Nehru turned down U Nu's offer

[24] 1 October 1959, *Letters to Chief Ministers 1947–1964* (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1985–9, 5 vols), 5: 288 (emphasis added).
[25] Report of conversations with Secretary-General & Deputy Secretary Eastern Division, 10 October 1959, DO 35/8819, TNA.

of good offices on the same grounds: India would not agree to 'absurd' Chinese claims and an effort by U Nu might suggest that India was anxious for a settlement thereby hardening China's stance.[26]

Nehru's advisors differed in their assessment of Chinese behaviour. Some felt that it arose from the events in Tibet: China was behaving 'aggressively without any long-term plan of aggression'. A majority held a darker view. They feared that this might well be the 'first stage in long-term Chinese ambitions to expand south of the Himalayas'. These differences apart, MEA officials were convinced that they had been 'wantonly tricked' and that China could 'never again be trusted'. Any settlement might only be temporary as the Chinese were likely to revive their claims at a later date when it suited them.[27]

The pessimistic appraisal came to prevail after the Kongka Pass incident. On 21 October 1959, an Indian police patrol was apparently ambushed near the pass leaving five dead, four injured, and ten captured. Delhi's assessment was that the Chinese had crept forward and occupied empty areas in Ladakh (beyond Aksai Chin) over the summer of 1959. Privately, Nehru still maintained that this was an 'indefinite border'. But he was now convinced that India had to face … 'a powerful country bent on spreading out to what they consider their old frontiers, and possibly beyond. The Chinese have always, in their past history, had the notion that any territory which they once occupied in the past necessarily belonged to them subsequently'.[28]

MEA officials thought that episode demonstrated that Beijing wanted to annex areas up to its claim line in the western sector. They were doubtful if the Chinese would want to 'shoot their way

[26] Nehru to U Nu, 29 September 1959, cited in Gopal, *Nehru*, 3: 98.
[27] 'Sino-Indian dispute' by High Commissioner in India, 21 October 1959, FO 371/141272, TNA.
[28] Nehru's letter, 26 October 1959, *Letters to Chief Ministers*, 5: 303–13.

through'; it seemed more likely that they would seek to fill any vacuums in Ladakh.[29]

In the aftermath of the incident, Nehru grew defiant. As he wrote, 'we cannot agree to or submit to anything that affects India's honour and self-respect, and our integrity and independence'.[30] Nehru's attitude also reflected the increasing pressure of public opinion. He wrote to Vijayalakshmi Pandit that the main newspapers were taking advantage of the 'high pitch of excitement' on the border issue 'to attack all our policies internal and external, and to make me a target of attack'. Criticism by erstwhile colleagues like Jayaprakash Narayan and Rajagopalachari also stung. Equally troubling was the attitude of some members of the Congress.[31]

On 7 November 1959, Zhou wrote to Nehru that pending delimitation of the border the status quo should be maintained. To obviate further clashes, both sides should withdraw 20 kilometres from the McMahon Line in the east, and 'the line upto which each side exercises actual control in the west'. Zhou also proposed talks at the Prime Ministerial level in the immediate future. This proposal was unacceptable to India on several grounds. The Army argued that pulling back 20 kilometres from the McMahon Line was 'absurd and unrealistic'. The Chinese could approach the border by roads while the Indians had to traverse several mountain ridges; pulling back would be tantamount to handing over control of the passes to the Chinese.[32] Delhi also felt that Beijing sought to equate India's possession of NEFA with Chinese control over Ladakh. They believed that the Chinese had come west of the Indian-claimed boundary in Ladakh only between 1956 and 1959. Further, they had not yet

[29] Report of conversations with Secretary-General & Deputy Secretary Eastern Division, UKHCI to CRO, 3 November 1959, FO 371/141273, TNA.
[30] Nehru's letter, 4 November 1959, *Letters to Chief Ministers*, 5: 322.
[31] Nehru to Vijayalakshmi Pandit, 3 & 7 November 1959, Subject File 61, Vijayalakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML.
[32] Note on conversation with Chief of General Staff, 10 November 1959, DO 35/8820, TNA.

reached the line claimed by their maps. The Chinese idea of a 'line of actual control' had no historical basis nor did it accord with ground realities.[33] Besides, a mere 20 kilometre withdrawal would leave the Chinese in effective control of most of the occupied territory.

In response, Nehru suggested that patrolling be suspended in NEFA. In Ladakh, he proposed that India should withdraw to the west of China's claim line and China should pull back east of India's claim line. Nehru would meet Zhou only if these measures were implemented. This proposal was unacceptable to Beijing; for it would entail evacuation of nearly 20,000 square miles and abandonment of the Aksai Chin road, whereas India would only have to give up about 50 square miles. Nehru was aware of the importance of the road to China, and in consequence had wanted to couple this proposal with an offer to utilize the area in Aksai Chin across which the road was built. Due to opposition from Home Minister G.B. Pant, the offer had to be withheld.[34] Within a few days, Nehru managed to partially convince his colleagues. In a press conference and in Parliament, Nehru stated that as an interim measure India was prepared to allow the use of the Aksai Chin road for civilian traffic.

Nehru's proposals indicated a gradual hardening of India's stance on Aksai Chin. Hitherto, he had openly voiced his doubts about the strength of India's claims. After the Kongka Pass incident, Nehru was disinclined to concede anything to China under duress. This attitude was bolstered by the growing pressure of parliamentary and public opinion, which decried any hint of 'surrender' of territory. At this juncture, the director of ministry of external affairs' historical division, Sarvepalli Gopal, returned from London where he had been studying the basis of India's claims in the British archives. Gopal thought that India had a sound historical case for Aksai Chin and conveyed it to Nehru; but it was only in February 1960 that Gopal took Nehru through all the evidence and finally convinced him that India's claims to

[33] Steven Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990): 80–1; Dutt, *With Nehru*, 124–5.
[34] Nehru to Pant, 15 November 1959, cited in Gopal, *Nehru*, 3: 103.

Aksai Chin were strong.[35] Available evidence suggests that up to this point Nehru was thinking of Aksai Chin as a bargaining counter. As R.K. Nehru recalled, '…until 1960, we ourselves were not sure that the territory belonged to us and we were thinking in terms of giving up our claims as part of a satisfactory settlement'. This policy had changed after a more thorough examination of India's claims to Aksai Chin.[36]

Towards the Summit

Towards the end of January 1960 Nehru agreed to meet Zhou. The Indians thought that the correspondence was getting nowhere while a thick tension prevailed on the frontiers. As Nehru told Khrushchev, 'Although for the moment there is no basis for negotiations, a personal meeting will generally be helpful … It will be unfortunate if tensions were to continue indefinitely.'[37] Writing to Zhou, Nehru said there could be no negotiations on the ground that the entire boundary was undelimited: 'Such a basis for negotiations would ignore past history, custom, tradition and international agreements.'

Underlying this position was the apprehension that if India gave up its stance that the boundary was a traditional one delimited by geography, custom, and treaty, the entire border would be up for bargaining. It would open the sluice gates to completely arbitrary and variable Chinese claims all along the frontier. In view of past Chinese conduct Delhi felt that it could ill afford to run the risk.[38] The earlier concerns about China's irredentism were now buttressed by the conviction that the

[35] Jagat S. Mehta, *Negotiating for India: Resolving Problems through Diplomacy* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2006), 74. Mehta was the director of China division in the foreign office. Also see, Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, 82–3.

[36] 'India & China: Policy Alternatives', n.d., R.K. Nehru Papers, NMML. Also see, Confidential Note, 'Our China Policy: A Personal Assessment', 30 July 1968, ibid.

[37] Record of talk between Khrushchev and Nehru (in New Delhi), 12 February 1960, Subject File 24, Subimal Dutt Papers, NMML.

[38] Dutt, *With Nehru*, 131; Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, 87.

Chinese could not be trusted. These perceptions were accentuated by Nehru's belief that the Chinese leadership had personally deceived him. As Mountbatten observed, Nehru 'was greatly shaken by their duplicity'.[39]

From the end of 1959, Delhi felt that Beijing would come up with a proposal whereby China would forsake claims south of the McMahon Line in return for India accepting its claims in Ladakh.[40] From the Indian standpoint this would entail giving up not just Aksai Chin but the entire area incorporated by the customary line up to which the Chinese claimed to exercise control. This solution was deemed unacceptable for a host of reasons.

First, the idea of 'barter', as it came to be called, was staunchly opposed by public opinion. Nehru acknowledged this when he reputedly stated, 'If I give them that I shall no longer be Prime Minister of India—I will not do it'.[41] It is difficult to judge whether an embattled Nehru was overreacting to public opinion. But we now know that his senior Cabinet colleagues and officials also thought that he would be 'out of office as Prime Minister' if he ceded territory to the Chinese.[42]

Second, Nehru himself felt that bartering would be incorrect given the manner in which the Chinese had used deceit and force to occupy the area. From February 1960 onwards, the Indian government was convinced that it had a strong case and saw no reason to relinquish its claims in a deal, particularly when public opinion was 'passionate against any concession whatsoever'. [43]

[39] Record of talks with Nehru, 13–15 May 1960, DO 35/8822, TNA. Also see OHT R.K. Nehru, OHT Kingsley Martin & Dorothy Woodman, NMML.
[40] Report of conversation with S. Gopal, 9 January 1960, UKHCI to CRO, FO 371/150440, TNA.
[41] Cited in Maxwell, *India's China War*, 161.
[42] Reports of conversations with Secretary General N.R. Pillai, 17 March 1960; Finance Minister Morarji Desai, 5 April 1960, UKHCI to CRO, DO 35/8822, TNA.
[43] Ibid. Also see N.R. Pillai's views in Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, 86.

Third, in March 1960 the Indian Supreme Court gave a ruling on the government's boundary agreement with Pakistan over the Berubari enclave, involving transfer of some territory to East Pakistan. According to the ruling, the executive did not have the authority to cede or accept territory: it would have to seek an amendment of the constitution on each occasion. Such an amendment would require approval of a two-thirds majority in Parliament and at least half of the 14 state legislatures. Given Nehru's emasculated political position on this issue, securing an amendment would have been very difficult.

Last, and perhaps most important, the Indians had completely lost trust in their Chinese interlocutors. In the run-up to the summit, Zhou Enlai had worked out a draft paper on the approach to the negotiations, wherein he anticipated a limited agreement of some kind.[44] The ambassador in Beijing reported that the Chinese had told other embassies that 'we are confident of finding a solution in the forthcoming meeting'. His assessment, however, was that 'The Chinese will maintain this posture of reasonable trying to make it difficult for us to reject their approach. But we should clearly say "no" to any attempt to persuade us to accept joint discussions to delimit the entire boundary'.[45] The Indians believed that even if they acceded to China's claims in Ladakh, it would not be a 'final settlement'. The Chinese would only be emboldened to advance additional claims later. The Finance Minister, Morarji Desai, told the British envoy that Nehru and his colleagues were not prepared to let the Chinese make Ladakh 'the thin edge of a wedge'.[46]

During this period, the Indians were considering other alternatives too. These discussions were held very discreetly, and

[44] Niu Jun, '1962: The Eve of the Left Turn in China's Foreign Policy', Cold War International History Project Working Paper 48: 11.
[45] Ambassador in Beijing to Foreign Secretary, 21 March 1960, Subject File 25, P.N. Haksar Papers, NMML.
[46] Report of conversation with Desai, 5 April 1960, UKHCI to CRO, DO 35/ 8822, TNA. Also see Dutt, *With Nehru*, 131; Gopal's views in Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, 87.

were confined to Nehru, his senior cabinet colleagues and some officials.[47] The Indians sought to come up with compromise solutions that would not involve formal relinquishment of territory. The outlines of such an idea did not crystallize until a few days before Zhou's arrival on 20 April. As late as 1 April, Vice-President Radhakrishnan told the British High Commissioner, Malcolm MacDonald, that there would be 'a breakdown' in talks between Nehru and Zhou 'on the second day'.[48] The internal discussions seemed to have proceeded apace in the next few days. Following a meeting of the Cabinet's Foreign Affairs Committee on 5 April, Morarji Desai informed MacDonald that the Indian government 'fully appreciated' the importance of the Aksai Chin road to the Chinese and were prepared to assure them use of the area. 'But this would have to be done without any surrender of Indian sovereignty over the region.'[49]

When Radhakrishnan met MacDonald a week later, Nehru's thinking on these lines had evolved further. Radhakrishnan made it clear that Nehru could not cede territory 'if only because Indian public opinion will not tolerate this'. India would want China to accept the McMahon Line. In Ladakh, if the Chinese would accept Indian sovereignty 'in theory', the Indians would 'agree to them remaining in practical occupation of the territory which they now occupied'. They realized that the Chinese had established themselves there and were unlikely to get out; hence they had to 'face facts'. The right solution was thus for 'the Chinese to concede to us the shadow whilst we concede to them the substance' of sovereignty in Ladakh. This was a significant shift in the Indian position. As MacDonald wrote, 'This shook me.' Asked if India would station any administrative personnel in the area in support of its sovereignty, Radhakrishnan replied in the

[47] Foreign Secretary to Ambassador in Beijing, 27 March 1960, Subject File 25, P.N. Haksar Papers, NMML.

[48] Record of conversation with the Vice-President by MacDonald, 1 April 1960, FO 371/150440, TNA.

[49] Report of conversation with Desai, 5 April 1960, UKHCI to CRO, DO 35/ 8822, TNA.

negative. When MacDonald expressed 'great surprise and disappointment' at India's changed stance, Radhakrishnan said that the whole idea was a 'face saving' one. He reiterated that all faces could be saved if the Chinese yield the 'shadow' while the Indians yield the 'substance'. Such an agreement may not be reached at this summit, but the Indians could reach a 'tacit understanding' with the Chinese along these lines.[50] The stage was now set for the prime ministerial discussions.

The Opening Rounds

On 20 April 1960, Zhou Enlai accompanied by Foreign Minister Chen Yi and other officials reached Delhi. The reception was in marked contrast to his earlier visits. As a junior Indian official noted in his diary, '…The welcome was subdued, if not chilly. No "Hindi-Chini bhai bhai" slogans. The tension was almost visible.'[51] The talks between the prime ministers were held over seven sessions, lasting five days. At the outset, it was decided that the prime ministers would meet alone, unaccompanied by ministerial colleagues or officials. Between these discussions, the Chinese leaders met with Nehru's senior Cabinet colleagues, including Morarji Desai, G.B. Pant, V.K. Krishna Menon, and Swaran Singh. They also had separate meetings with Radhakrishnan and former ambassador to China, R.K. Nehru. Besides, Nehru regularly briefed his colleagues and the Foreign Affairs Committee on his talks with Zhou.

In the opening session, Nehru spoke at length about Indian feelings on the boundary issue. India had no doubts about its own frontiers which had been 'clearly defined on our maps'. His earlier discussions with Zhou had led him to believe that there were no major problems between the two sides: only a few minor ones

[50] It is evident that Radhakrishnan was giving this information after speaking to Nehru. In fact, during the conversation, Radhakrishnan gave MacDonald a gist of the remarks which Nehru would make at the first session of discussions with Zhou. Record of conversation with Radhakrishnan by MacDonald, 12 April 1959, DO 35/8822, TNA.

[51] K. Natwar Singh, *My China Dairy, 1956–88* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2008), 87.

which could be settled by mutual consultations. '…What distressed us most was that if the Chinese Government did not agree with us, they should have told us so. But for nine years nothing was said … these developments, therefore, came as a great shock.' India did not agree with China's claim that the entire frontier was undefined and not delimited. After laying out India's conception of, and basis for, the boundary, Nehru insisted that 'the question of demarcation of the entire frontier does not arise'.[52]

Zhou responded to Nehru's points at the second session that evening. China had stated that they did not recognize the McMahon Line but they were willing to take 'a realistic view'. They were 'shocked and distressed' that the Indian government used the Simla Convention in support of its claims. Interestingly, he clarified that 'we only adduced proof that areas south of the McMahon line belonged to Tibet and that there was a customary line which later changed. We did not put forward any territorial claim'. China had merely advocated maintenance of the status quo pending negotiations. 'There was only a misunderstanding on the part of India.' Zhou was evidently suggesting that the position adopted on this sector by Beijing since September 1959 need not be taken at face value. In the western sector, they had 'never thought that there was any question on that side'. The treaty of 1842 mentioned by India made no specific reference to where the boundary lay. History, administrative records, survey, and maps: all supported China's conception of this boundary. Besides, since 1950 they had sent supplies and troops from Xinjiang to Tibet through this area. 'It was only last year that the matter was brought up by India and it was a new territorial claim made by India.' This muddied the waters, for it led to some confusion among the Indians about what exactly the Chinese premier meant when he referred to territorial claims. On the whole, Zhou averred that 'We have made no claims and we have only asked for status quo and negotiations.'[53]

[52] Record of the talks between PM and Premier Chou En-Lai held on 20 April 1960 at 11am, Subject File 24, P.N. Haksar Papers, NMML.
[53] Record of the talks between PM and Premier Chou held on 20 April 1960 from 5 pm to 7 pm, ibid.

Nehru replied, '…our interpretation of not only history but facts also differs (sic) greatly'. Zhou might consider India's position as territorial claims, '…But when did we make these claims? … If our maps were wrong, as you hint, surely some idea could have been given to us, when we raised the question on many occasions.' The McMahon Line, he emphasized, was based only on a reflection of earlier surveys: 'no new line was drawn'. On the western sector, he guardedly revealed his approach, stating that the Indians had visited parts of Ladakh which were now occupied by Chinese forces. 'I presume, therefore, that this occupation has taken place in the last year or two and is of recent origin.' Nehru was more forthright in expressing his domestic constraints: '…boundaries of India are part of the Indian Constitution and we cannot change them without a change in the Constitution itself.' This failed to make any impact; for the Chinese could not believe that the Indian *political* system could be much different from theirs. For instance, during the meeting with Radhakrishnan, Chen Yi observed that India was not curbing public protests against China's Tibet policy: '…There are many people like J.P. Narayan [prominent activist for Tibet] in China but the Chinese democracy controlled them.'[54]

When Zhou repeated that the status quo should be maintained prior to negotiations, Nehru replied that 'the question is what is the status quo? Status quo of today is different from status quo of one or two years ago … to maintain a status quo which is a marked change from previous status quo would mean accepting that change. That is the difficulty.' Zhou insisted that there had been no such change in the western sector: China had all along controlled the area claimed by it. 'When we say status quo, we mean status quo prevailing generally after independence'.[55] The Indians refused to accept this claim. They held that not only had China sidled westwards from the Aksai Chin road over the

[54] Record of conversation between the Vice-President and Premier Chou En-Lai, 21 April 1960, Subject File 26, P.N. Haksar Papers, NMML.
[55] Record of the talks between PM and Premier Chou held on 20 April 1960 from 5pm to 7pm, Subject File 24, P.N. Haksar Papers, NMML.

previous year, but the Chinese still did not control all the areas (beyond Aksai Chin) claimed by them.

The prime ministers continued the exposition of their respective stances the next day. Nehru stated that the western sector was large area.

> …I do not know to which part of it your remarks apply. We are quite certain that large areas of it, *if not the entire portion*, were not in Chinese occupation … Apart from the northern tip of the area … the Chinese forces seemed to have spread out to other parts … only in the last year and a half.

He insisted that there was a major dispute in this sector, but importantly added: '…We must, however, distinguish between eastern Ladakh and certain parts of it.'[56] This was consonant with his desire to reach an agreement that would cede to China control of the area around the road built by them.

Zhou laid out China's case in detail and stated that the areas claimed by them had been under Chinese administrative jurisdiction since the 18th century. He also pointed that India's own control of the eastern sector had only been established in the early 1950s. Nehru said that 'apart from minor dents' the eastern sector had never been under Chinese control. India could not give up the watershed as the boundary in this area. The Himalayas were dear to the Indian mind. Besides, if the principle of the watershed as defining the boundary were given up, 'the whole country would be at the mercy of the power which controls the mountains and no government can possibly accept it'. Reverting to the western sector, he reiterated that he was questioning China's presence not in 'the northern tip of this area where the road was made but to the south and south-eastern part' which had come recently into Chinese control.

[56] Record of the talks between PM and Premier Chou En-Lai held on 21 April 1960 from 4pm to 6.30pm, Subject File 26, P.N. Haksar Papers, NMML. (Emphasis added.)

Seeking a way out of this impasse, Zhou suggested appointing a joint committee to look into the material that both sides possessed and possibly carry out investigation or surveys on the spot to ascertain the facts. Meantime, status quo should be maintained and troops on both sides pulled back to an agreed distance. Nehru agreed that an examination of the material would be useful. However, he felt that sending teams to the boundaries would be nugatory. The question was not merely geographical but political. The committee could help identify areas of divergence which could then be considered by the principals.

Chinese Proposals and Indian Response

On the morning of 22 April, Zhou dealt with the problem in three parts: facts; common ground; and a proposal. After a detailed reprise of Beijing's position, he suggested the following as common ground. First, the boundaries had to be fixed by negotiations. Second, there was a 'line of actual control' up to which the administrative personnel as well as patrolling troops of both sides had reached. In the eastern sector, this was the McMahon Line. In the western sector, 'the line is the Karakoram [range] and Konka [*sic*] pass'. Third, the watershed was only the only geographical determinant of the boundary: valleys and mountain passes should also count. Fourth, neither side should advance claims to the area no longer under its administrative control. There were 'individual places which need to be adjusted individually but that is not a territorial claim'. Fifth, like the Indians the Chinese people, too, were emotionally attached to the Himalayas and the Karakoram mountains. Zhou stated that 'he had come here mainly for reaching an agreement on principles'. He proposed that that they set some time limit for the joint committee to submit its report either jointly or separately.[57]

Clearly, Zhou was suggesting that the basis of a final settlement should be China's acceptance of Indian control over

[57] Record of talks between PM and Premier Chou En-Lai held on 22 April 1960 from 10 am to 1.10 pm, Subject File 24, P.N. Haksar Papers, NMML.

NEFA and India's acceptance of China's control over the parts of Ladakh claimed by it. The third point indicated that in the western sector, the Chinese sought to press their claims to some areas south of the Karakoram watershed (which ended near the Kongka Pass), including the Changchenmo valley, Pangong Lake area, and the Indus valley—areas that they claimed had always been part of Tibet. The third and fourth points together suggested that the Chinese also wished to possess some areas south of the watershed in the eastern sector. This stemmed from two reasons. Having repeatedly and openly denounced the McMahon Line, Beijing could not entirely accept the alignment. As Chen Yi explained to Swaran Singh, 'If the Chinese government recognised the Simla Convention and the McMahon Line, there would be an explosion in China and the Chinese people would not agree. Premier Chou has no right to do so.'[58] Moreover, doing so would strengthen the Dalai Lama's claim that Tibet had been independent from 1911 until the Chinese invasion. After all, the line had been agreed between British Indian and Tibetan representatives. The Chinese might well have sought to acquire pockets of territory—such as Longju—that lay north of the map-marked line but actually ran south of the highest watershed.

At the prime ministers' suggestion, officials from the two sides met that afternoon to clarify their respective positions in detail. Chinese officials, however, told their Indian counterparts that they did not have the requisite documents with them and hence could not provide the precise latitudes and longitudes of their claimed boundary in the western sector. In consequence, there was no detailed exchange of views.

Picking up the discussion the next day, Nehru insisted that it was essential to '…know definitely where our differences lie. My idea was that we should take each sector of the border and convince the other side of what it believes to be right'.[59] In so

[58] Record of the talks between Swaran Singh and Chen Yi, 23 April 1960, Subject File 26, P.N. Haksar Papers, NMML.

[59] Record of talks between PM and Premier Chou En-Lai held on 23 April 1960 from 4.30 pm to 7.45 pm, Subject File 26, P.N. Haksar Papers, NMML.

doing, Nehru also sought to decouple the western and eastern sectors. The Indians had begun to understand that it was by linking these that Zhou sought to obtain concessions from India in the western sector. Following a lengthy recital of India's conception of the boundary in Ladakh, Nehru yet again distinguished between 'north Aksai Chin area' and 'other parts of eastern Ladakh'. Zhou, for his part, insisted that both the sectors should be considered together: '...When we talk about the western sector of the boundary, we should discuss it in relation to other sectors.' (See Footnote 59). After a commensurately detailed rehearsal of China's views on the boundary, he restated the five points set forth the previous day. If Nehru agreed with them, it would facilitate the work of the joint committee and the task of negotiating a settlement.

At the start of the next session, Nehru sought yet again to pin down Zhou on when Chinese forces had moved into different parts of Ladakh. He underscored his oft-repeated distinction between area adjoining the road and other areas. Zhou retorted that 'The case is precisely the same as the eastern sector where India regards the line of actual control as her international boundary.' In the Tawang area, for instance, Indian personnel had only reached in 1951. 'Our position in this area,' he reiterated, 'is like India's position in the eastern sector.' China acknowledged that Indian administration had reached up to the line that India regards as its borders. 'But, similarly, we think that India should accept that China's administrative personnel has [*sic*] reached the line which it considers to be her border in the western sector.' [60] There could little doubt about what the Chinese considered the basis for a settlement.

After further discussion, Nehru conceded that there was a yawning gulf between the two sides' positions. He mentioned again that 'even the slightest change in our border' would require an amendment of the constitution. He also drew Zhou's attention to the Berubari case and the Indian Supreme Court's ruling. Nehru

[60] Record of talks between PM and Premier Chou En-Lai held on 24 April 1960 from 10.30 am to 1.45 pm, Subject File 26, P.N. Haksar Papers, NMML.

agreed with Zhou that it was 'very difficult and unlikely for us to find a way of settlement on this occasion'. Turning to the five points advanced by Zhou as common ground, he questioned the suggestion that neither side should put forth territorial claims: 'Our accepting things as they are would mean that basically there is no dispute and the questions ends there; that we are unable to do.' Zhou explained that there should be 'no pre-requisites. Neither side should be asked to give up its stand'. He also suggested issuing a joint communiqué on the talks.

A couple of hours later, officials from both sides met to draft the communiqué. The Indian draft focused solely on the decision to appointing a joint committee to examine the material held by the countries. The Chinese wanted the draft to include the points of common ground proposed by Zhou. The meeting ended without a communiqué.[61]

At the final prime ministerial session the next morning, Nehru made it clear that points advanced by Zhou were unacceptable and were not to be included in the communiqué. Zhou frankly expressed his disappointment at the draft suggested by Nehru, but eventually he gave in.[62] After five days and nearly 20 hours of discussion, the only point of agreement was on appointing a joint committee.

By the time the summit ended, the Indians had understood China's negotiating stance quite clearly. The foreign secretary informed Indian envoys abroad:

> It is quite obvious that the Chinese aim is to make us accept their claim in Ladakh as a price for their recognition of our position in NEFA. Throughout the discussions they have invariably connected Ladakh with NEFA and stressed that the same principles of settling the boundary must govern both these areas. It was also obvious that if we accepted the

[61] Verbatim proceedings of the meeting at 4pm, 24 April 1960, ibid.
[62] Record of talks between PM and Premier Chou En-Lai held on 26 April 1960 from 11 am to 2.40 pm, ibid.

> line claimed by China in Ladakh they would accept the McMahon Line. There might be need for minor frontier rectifications, but that would not create much practical difficulty.[63]

Delhi had 'of course firmly rejected any such approach'.[64] As the secretary general of the Ministry of External Affairs explained to the British high commissioner, public opinion apart, 'if they gave way now on this matter, it will only encourage the Chinese to feel that they were weak and to press even more ambitious claims later'.[65] Indeed, the Indians were not even sure 'whether the Chinese will implement this agreement [to appoint a joint committee] sincerely.'[66]

Conclusion

The Delhi summit was the last time the two leaders would meet to discuss the boundary question. By the time the officials' committees had submitted their reports, events on the ground had over taken meaningful diplomacy. As the foregoing account shows, Nehru refusal to accept Zhou's suggestions for a solution cannot simplistically be attributed to his intransigence. Indeed, until early 1960, Nehru was open to negotiation and compromise on Aksai Chin, which was the core Chinese interest. He was unwilling, however, to treat the entire boundary as negotiable. This position stemmed from longstanding apprehensions about China's territorial ambitions. Beijing's handling of the issue only bolstered these concerns and convinced Delhi that the Chinese were not trustworthy.

Further, Nehru's willingness to accommodate Chinese interests in Aksai Chin suggests that a solution such as a long-

[63] Foreign Secretary to Heads of Mission, 27 April 1960, Subject File 25, P.N. Haksar Papers, NMML.
[64] Foreign Secretary to Ambassador in Nepal, 25 April 1950, ibid.
[65] Report of conversation with N.R. Pillai, 25 April 1960 UKHCI to CRO, FO 371/150440, TNA.
[66] Foreign Secretary to Heads of Mission, 27 April 1960, Subject File 25, P.N. Haksar Papers, NMML.

term lease of territory could have been worked out. Here China's unyielding insistence that it had controlled the area for the last two centuries queered the pitch. In retrospect, this might not seem much of a concession. But given the pressures on Nehru from parliamentary and public opinion, it might well have been the only feasible arrangement.

India's actions reflect what James Fearon calls the 'commitment problem': 'if I agree now, and I am the weaker party, how can I trust that you as the stronger party will honour whatever agreement we reach'.[67] Thus the Indians felt that if they acceded to Chinese claims in Ladakh, Beijing would only be emboldened to press for further concessions in the future. Scholars have often claimed that by turning down Zhou's suggestions for a deal Nehru passed up an excellent opportunity to arrive at a settlement, which would have respected both sides' principal interests. Such claims, however, are made in the flat glare of hindsight. Fifty years on, it is easy to argue that a deal should have been struck with Zhou Enlai on his terms. But opinion within (and outside) the Indian government at the time was overwhelmingly against any such bargain with the Chinese. However appealing in hindsight, the argument fails the test of political plausibility—just as the wider revisionist case fails the test of historical plausibility.

[67] James D. Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War', *International Organization* 49:3 (summer 1995), 379–414.