The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence

INDIA AND INDOCHINA

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The Sino-Indian Border

strated. Although the area had been shaded as Indian since 1954 on New Delhi's maps, no Indian activity had sought to establish rule in this barren area, to which access required crossing the Ladakh mountains through a 13,000 foot pass. Details of the completed road were announced by the NCNA on October 5, 1957, and Indian patrols were dispatched the following summer to ascertain the facts. One patrol confirmed that the southern portion of the road crossed territory claimed by India; a second disappeared in the northern sector. On October 18, 1958, New Delhi for the first time formally protested the Aksai Chin developments to Peking, whereupon the PRC acknowledged seizure of the patrol "on the Sinkiang-Tibet road in Chinese territory" and "deportation" through the Karakoram pass.

Nehru made no public mention of the dispute at that time. Potentially the most serious border controversy to have developed, it was actually the second such incident. The first concerned possession of the so-called "central sector," specifically Barahoti (Wuje). In April 1954, Nehru and Chou had concluded an agreement on "Trade and Intercourse Between the Tibet Region of China and India." They enunciated inter alia the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence or "Panch Shila," which became a focal point of public rhetoric for both sides during the subsequent years of rapprochement and estrangement. Within a few months, however, charges and countercharges were exchanged privately over respective claims at Barahoti, with minor incidents occurring over the next few years. The circumstances of the unresolved dispute of Barahoti established a precedent for handling the more serious Aksai Chin dispute in which no clear basis existed for resolving the dispute in favor of either side. Unfortunately, only a mutual willingness to compromise or a mutual confrontation of force would determine the outcome.

In April, 1958 bilateral talks began in New Delhi on the central sector, wherein India proposed and China rejected a mutual withdrawal of troops and the cessation of any effort at enforcing control while negotiations were under way. In June the official China Pictorial published a map, already circulating in other Chinese publications, showing much of NEFA, part of Bhutan, and the disputed central sector and eastern Ladakh as PRC territory. New Delhi protested the maps, and provoked an evasive rejoinder from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in November. The reply noted that as Chou had pointed out to Nehru in 1954, the issue concerned "maps published in China before the liberation" and expressed
Nehru privately rejected this position in a letter to Chou, denying that nine years of PRC rule justified this rationale and insisting "there can be no question of these large parts of India being anything but Indian and there is no dispute about them."

Neville Maxwell's detailed analysis of the subsequent Chou-Nehru correspondence emphasizes: (1) Chou's apparent willingness to concede Indian rule over NEFA while remaining adamantly opposed to the legality of the McMahon line per se, presumably because accepting the Simla accords would retroactively ratify Tibet's independence; (2) Chou's insistence that Aksai Chin lay in Chinese territory; and (3) Nehru's refusal to acknowledge any basis for contesting the McMahon line while (4) demanding that China withdraw from all recently occupied territory which India claimed. Maxwell notes that the Nehru position emerged "some twelve months before the boundary dispute became a matter of public knowledge or political agitation in India," terming it a "collision course." If this is so, Chou En-lai either did not perceive it in this way or remained hopeful of changing Nehru's position, since in December, 1959, the Chinese Premier proposed a summit meeting which materialized the following April in New Delhi.

Chou's proposal and trip came after a steady deterioration in Sino-Indian relations during 1959. The revolt in Lhasa that March, climaxed by the Dalai Lama's flight to India, triggered an outburst of public polemics between New Delhi and Peking, with a rising chorus of Indian press and political and public opposition to Nehru's official posture of Sino-Indian friendship. By August, leaked details of the various border disputes, including information on the Aksai Chin road, fed the flames of controversy. This was followed by brief but bloody clashes between Indian and Chinese patrols at both the eastern and western extremities of the border. Few casualties resulted and no substantive changes in position occurred, but the fighting made explicit the threat of war.

In this context, Chou's gesture took on added significance as a possible move to break the impasse. A further indication of willingness to compromise appeared to be the Chinese agreement with Burma that their mutual boundary would follow the McMahon Line in its essentials without acknowledging its specific legitimacy. Following this announcement in Peking in January, 1960, Chou formalized the position in Rangoon en