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INDIA'S CHINA WAR

Now, it is a question of fact whether this village or that village or this little strip of territory is on their side or on our side. Normally, wherever these are relatively petty disputes, well, it does seem rather absurd for two great countries. . . immediately to rush at each other's throats to decide whether two miles of territory are on this side or on that side, and especially two miles of territory in the high mountains, where nobody lives.

But where national prestige and dignity is involved, it is not the two miles of territory, it is the nation's dignity and self-respect that becomes involved. And therefore this happens.

Jawaharlal Nehru, Lok Sabha, September 4th, 1959



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even before that. If officials in Peking had looked into the boundary question in the western sector in the early 1950s they would have noted that Indian maps showed an indeterminate claim which included Aksai Chin. But these maps—in which the boundary was shown only by an undefined colour wash, marked 'undetermined'—also embraced territory which had been under demonstrated Chinese control since they set up their marker in the Karakoram Pass in 1892: the maps might therefore have been dismissed as expressing an unreal claim of the imperialist era which the Indians were merely keeping on their maps until a boundary could be delimited with China—just as the Chinese were doing with their own maps. The Indian Government had made clear in domestic statements that it regarded the McMahon Line as the boundary in the eastern sector, and since 1951 had treated it as such on the ground; but it had not specified any boundary in the western sector, and until 1958 the Indian presence there fell well short of what the Chinese regarded as the proper boundary.

The modification to the western boundary as shown on the Indian maps put out in 1954 must, if the Chinese embassy in New Delhi was doing its job, have alerted Peking to the possibility of a dispute over Aksai Chin; but, again, the Indians made no attempt to raise the boundary question, and it was left to China to bring up the subject. Chou En-lai did that in his talks with Nehru in New Delhi in 1956, but he referred only to the McMahon Line.⁴⁹ It was not until 1958 that India made a formal claim to Aksai Chin. Before that, if the Chinese had consulted their Foreign Ministry's archives to see what the British ideas about an Aksai Chin boundary had been they would have found only the Macartney-MacDonald proposal of 1899, ⁵⁰ that alignment would have left the entire Aksai Chin road in Chinese territory*

The Chinese activity on Aksai Chin in the 1950s did not arouse the Indian Government for the good reason that they knew nothing about it. The few Indian patrols sent out from Leh to the north-east did not

* It has been argued that the 1899 line would cut the Chinese road for some ten miles in the south-east corner of Aksai Chin; but if the 1899 line is transposed on to a modern map it can be seen that the whole road lies on the Chinese side.

t It has been suggested that the Indian Government did know about the Chinese road-building, and that the information was kept from Nehru 'by persons in high position more strongly, or more recklessly, committed than he was to winning the favour of China'. This inference seems to have sprung from a failure to trace on a map the routes of the patrols which the Indians claimed to have made: that step would have shown that, as the Indians admitted, 'no Indian reconnaissance party was sent to the area in Aksai Chin where the Chinese . . . had built a new road.'" (See G. F. Hudson in *St Anthony's Papers* No. 14, Chatto & Windus, London, 1963.)

cross Aksai Chin—two of these might have reached its westernmost edge but they went nowhere near the road. The first the Indian Government learned about that was from gratified notices in the Chinese press about the completion of this major road-building feat. These the Indian Ambassador in Peking reported to New Delhi in September 1957. The Ambassador's reference was to a small-scale sketch map in a Chinese magazine, and from that the Government in New Delhi could not be sure just where the road did run. A direct inquiry to the Chinese would not have sat with the Indian approach, and so it was decided that two patrols should be sent to investigate the lie of the road* They could not be sent during the winter because the cold was too extreme, so it was not until July 1958 that they left Leh, the Indian base. One of the patrols reported in October from the southern sector of the road that this did indeed cross territory claimed by India; the other patrol, which had been ordered to the northern end of the road, disappeared.

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By 1958 the two no-man's-lands which the imperial era had left at opposite ends of the Sino-Indian frontier had thus been occupied, each side pre-empting the area which was important to it on strategic and practical considerations. In the east the Indians had completed the work left unfinished by the British and made good the McMahon Line, not only asserting administration over the tribal territory but extruding Tibetan—potentially Chinese—administration from Tawang. The area had been renamed the North-East Frontier Agency, listed as Indian territory in the 1950 constitution, and was being administered by members of the newly formed Indian Frontier Service. Work had begun on roads into the tribal territory, notably one that was ultimately to reach Tawang.

In the west, unknown to India, a parallel process had been going on simultaneously, with the Chinese using and then developing the old caravan route across Aksai Chin and turning it into a road which the administration required for what they were to describe as the main traffic artery between Sinkiang and Tibet.

Each side in extending administration into these new areas knew that the other had map claims to it (in the case of India, it is known

* Why aerial reconnaissance was not used is hard to say; perhaps because it might have induced a Chinese protest, while a ground patrol might not be detected?

Indian maps were showing an incorrect boundary in the western sector, it is highly probable that the dispute would have been avoided. The glow, almost euphoria, of *Hindee Chinee bhai-bhai* was then at its zenith and Nehru would surely have seen a marginal modification of Indian maps, bringing them into accordance with actuality on the ground, as a negligible price for its continuance—indeed, he might have welcomed the opportunity to match Chou's pragmatism about the McMahon Line. But the opportunity passed unseen, and two years later the situation was wholly changed. To have it civilly pointed out that your maps do not accord with actuality is one thing; to discover that a neighbour, without a by-your-leave, has built a road across territory your maps show as your own is quite another. The objective reality may be the same but the perception is not, and in this case the perception was everything.

The Indian Government reacted to the discovery of the Aksai Chin road in a note to Peking on October 18th, 1958. This claimed that the territory traversed by the road had been 'part of the Ladakh region of India for centuries', and said that it was a 'matter of surprise and regret that the Chinese Government should have constructed a road through indisputably Indian territory without first obtaining the permission of the Government of India', or even informing it. The note asked if China had any information about the missing patrol.⁶⁵ The reply came as a brusque counter-complaint, stating that Indian armed personnel had unlawfully intruded into Chinese territory and been detained. 'In the spirit of Sino-Indian friendship' the Indians had already been deported,* but Peking described their intrusion as inconsistent with the five principles of peaceful coexistence and asked for a guarantee that there would be no repetition.⁶⁶ With this exchange the conflict of claims over Aksai Chin at last came into the open, and in a prompt reply the Indian Government said that the question of whether the area was Indian or Chinese was 'a matter in dispute'. This was the only time India conceded the existence of a dispute, and a few weeks later this position was reversed.

While awaiting reports from the patrols about the lie of the Aksai Chin road, the Indian Government had formally broached the subject of China's maps, pointing out in a note to Peking that a sketch map in a recent Chinese magazine showed as Chinese various areas which

* By putting them across the 18,000-foot-high Karakoram Pass. The Indians had no post near by at the time, and the little Indian party was lucky to be discovered and rescued.