The disputed frontier

J.J. Singh writes a comprehensive account of the India-China border row

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At the turn of the 20th century, Tibet became a strategic chessboard in the Great Game between the Russian and British empires. Russia was seeking to expand its influence across Central Asia. The Manchu empire in China was on its last legs. Britain feared that the Russians would come to a weakened China and raise new threats to British India. In 1903, British troops under the leadership of Col. F.E. Younghusband invaded Tibet. The British plan was to create a buffer between Tibet and India and get favourable trade deals with Tibet. The Younghusband “expedition” set off a chain of events in the eastern Himalayan region the effects of which are still felt in Indo-China relations.

Shifting goalposts

Understandably, J.J. Singh, former Army chief and Arunachal Pradesh Governor, goes straight into the Younghusband expedition, after explaining the geography of Tibet, in his exhaustively-researched book, *The McMahon Line: A Century of Discord*. In 441 pages – a substantial chunk is dedicated to notes and appendices with original documents – Singh offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of one of the most complex border disputes of the modern world.

While Great Game is well-known, The *McMahon Line* narrates the less-talked about story, of its impact on East Asia. After the Younghusband mission, an alarmed China sent troops to Tibet to directly occupy the region. While Britain accepted the de facto Chinese control of Tibet, it wanted the Indo-Tibetan border demarcated and Tibet to remain a buffer. In 1914, Britain called for a conference in Simla between British, Tibetan and Chinese officials. Sir A.H. McMahon, a secretary in the Foreign Department of the British Indian government, represented India in the conference. After parleys that stretched across months, India and Tibet signed a convention that demarcated the Indo-Tibetan boundary but the Chinese side refused to sign it despite the convention’s promise to respect China’s suzerainty over Tibet (not sovereignty).

This boundary, the red line drawn by McMahon on the map, came to be known as the McMahon Line, which is also internationally accepted as the border between India and China in the eastern sector. But it also remains a bone of contention between the two countries. Singh writes that though China did not sign the Simla convention, it had not opposed the McMahon Line initially. Tibet also saw decades of independent rule after the Simla conference. But the Chinese, he writes, kept changing their goalposts.

Singh is extremely critical of the way Jawaharlal Nehru handled China’s reoccupation (liberation, according to China) of Tibet in 1950. He calls Nehru an idealist, who failed to foresee China’s strategy. “The British strategy of over half a century, of having an autonomous Tibet as a buffer, was put to rest as India looked on passively,” Singh writes. “The Chinese takeover of Tibet by force... exposed the northern borders of India to potential Chinese threat for the first time, highlighting our vulnerability.”

Tangled history

While it’s doubtful whether India at that time could have done something effectively to prevent China from taking over Tibet – India had its own problems in Kashmir, the unification process was still under way and Tibet itself had signed an agreement with China after troops reached Lhasa – it could certainly have prepared itself better for possible Chinese aggression. There were repeated skirmishes along the border. Nehru, despite his emphasis on friendly relations with China, had told his ambassador to Peking in 1958 that he didn’t trust “the Chinese one bit... They are an arrogant, untrustworthy, devious and hegemonic lot”. But still, Nehru didn’t think there would be a war. The Chinese assault in 1962 led to a humiliating defeat for India.

Both India and China have come a long way since the 1962 war. Though the border issue remains unresolved, bilateral relations have markedly improved over the decades. India is a rising economic power which is now perhaps the only country that could challenge China in the developing world, Singh writes. “There is an equilibrium and strategic balance of sorts between India and China.” But going forward, he emphasises on three points: India should expand its defensive, offensive and deterrence capabilities; the political leadership of both countries should resolve the border dispute, and work together for a stable and peaceful Asia. India should deepen its engagement with world powers including the U.S. and Russia. While stressing that “peaceful rise” should be India’s motto, Singh repeats the geopolitical axiom: “The unilateral desire of a nation to live in peace cannot be a guarantee of its peaceful existence.”