

The Sino-Indian Border Dispute

IN ONE SENSE it would have been difficult to choose a more unlikely area for an international border dispute. The Central Asian cordillera, with its vast mountain ranges — the Kunlun, the Karakorum and the Himalayas — that separate the subcontinent from the lofty plateaus and mountains of Sinkiang and Tibet, forms one of the least-known areas of the world. One might have expected little concern over the limits of national sovereignty in such harsh country. In another sense, however, the very remoteness and inaccessibility of wind-swept passes, isolated valleys and high tablelands provide scattered and obscure border situations over which bitter disagreement can arise. It is in locations such as these that the present Sino-Indian dispute developed and has now come into the open after several years of confidential charge and counter-charge. The differences between the two countries are focussed mainly on each end of the 2500-mile border area — in the eastern part of India known as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), and in the Kashmir province of Ladakh in the west.

Both sides have presented claims based on little-known agreements, old maps, custom and convention. In the east the dispute revolves round the acceptability of the McMahon Line as a boundary. This is a logical line following the crest of the Himalayas eastward from northeast Bhutan across the great bend of the Brahmaputra River to the junction of the Chinese, Indian and Burmese borders. It was drawn at the Simla Conference of 1913-14, in which Chinese and Tibetan officials participated with the representative of British India, Sir Arthur Henry McMahon. The purpose of the conference was to indicate clearly where the limits of India's control reached the limits of Tibet. Despite the new line, maps published for some years after the conference showed the Indian border as running along the foothills of the Himalayas. This is the border now claimed by the Chinese. It would include as part of Tibet virtually all the land north of the Brahmaputra, from the southeastern corner of Bhutan to the border junction with Burma, some 34,000 square miles. Communist China has based its claim on the fact that the McMahon Line had never been accepted by any Chinese central government. Writing to Mr. Nehru on the matter in January 1959, Premier Chou En-lai said: An important question concerning the Sino-Indian boundary is the question of the so-called MacMahon (*sic*) Line . . . As you are aware, the "MacMahon Line" was a product of the British policy of aggression against the Tibet Region of China and aroused the great indignation of the Chinese people. Juridically, too, it cannot be considered legal. I have told you that it has never been recognized by the Chinese central government. Although related documents were signed by a representative of the local authorities of the Tibet Region of China, the Tibet local authorities were in fact dissatisfied with this unilaterally drawn line.

To this Mr. Nehru replied in March as follows:

Contrary to what has been reported to you, this line (MacMahon) was, in fact, drawn at a Tripartite Conference held . . . between the Plenipotentiaries of the Governments of China, Tibet and India. At the time of acceptance of the delineation of this frontier . . . the Tibetan Plenipotentiary, in letters exchanged, stated explicitly that he had received orders from Lhasa to agree to the boundary as marked on the maps appended to the Convention. The line was drawn after full discussion and was confirmed subsequently by a formal exchange of letters; and there is nothing to indicate that the Tibetan authorities were in any way dissatisfied with the agreed