

The McMahon Line: A Century of Discord, by J.J. Singh,
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The Sino-Indian boundary dispute remains the most enduring and challenging problem that bedevils relations between India and China. With a history of well over a century of differences on the border alignment, and a war that represented its lowest point in their relations, the two countries remain suspicious of each other's motives, actions and statements emanating from them and their possible implications.

Conflicts between major powers, especially nuclear ones, have fast receded into the background. Trade and economic interactions have gained in prominence. It is the over \$90 billion in trade between the two countries that has increasingly become the focus of the relationship, not only at the level of the two governments but also amongst the people. However, the potential and scope of this endeavour remains constrained by the failure to resolve the border issue. Despite the judicious decision to not allow it to interfere with growing cooperation between the two countries, there is no getting away from its shadow on the relationship.

It is in this context that the recently released book, *The McMahon Line: A Century of Discord*, by General J.J. Singh, is a timely addition to the existing literature on the subject. Given the focus of the book on the politics and history of the McMahon Line, its structuring clearly reflects this. Throughout the book, that is, in each part, the emphasis on local history and the geography of the region has painstakingly been applied

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to the contentious issue. This remains one of the abiding strengths of the book—an element facilitated by the author's visits to most of the areas along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), his dealings with his counterparts across the border during talks as well as his tenure as Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, the Indian border state, which remains the most critical area of the border dispute influenced by the perception and claims by both sides. It is possibly for this reason that unlike most other books on the subject, the author delves deep into the geography of the region, its implications on historical decisions taken and the role it played in a series of actions that influenced control of locations along the border not only with India but also between China and Tibet.

The book is divided into nine parts, each providing an in-depth analysis of the events that guided the actions of the main actors. Commencing with the geography, history and geopolitics of the area that interlinks India, China and Tibet, the book thereafter describes Younghusband's expedition, the subjugation of Tibet by China, British assertion in the backdrop of events that witness China's rise, commencement of negotiations that led to the emergence of McMahon Line, politics of the Tibetan region, and the boundary issue at the time of India's independence. The book signs off with an assessment of China and the way forward in seeking a resolution to the vexed dispute between the two countries.

The geopolitical roots of Tibet's decline, British role and influence, and China's gradual control over the area are all narrated in detail in the initial chapters of the book. Thus, this part traces the events in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in depth and brings readers up to date with the more recent events and their root causes.

The part on Younghusband's expedition makes for an interesting read, with the obvious understanding of a military campaign and its associated logistics clearly evident from the narrative. Interestingly, the military component of the expedition was led by a Corps of Engineers officer of the British Indian Army; this was possibly due to the expertise he could bear to bring to the expedition considering the difficult terrain that they were required to traverse. While the expedition succeeded in achieving the aim of a trade settlement on favourable terms as well as showcasing British military might, it also exposed the weakness of the Tibetans. This was exploited soon thereafter by the Chinese, who noted the vacuum that had been created and the opportunity to claim suzerainty that it presented. While this did not immediately concern the

British Empire, it laid the foundation for Chinese presence on India's borders, bereft of the buffer of Tibet.

The book justifiably devotes a major part to the period preceding the boundary negotiations between India, China and Tibet, painstakingly documenting the historical evidence to create a timeline of events that led to the signing of the agreement between Britain and Tibet in 1914. The agreement also included the delineation of the boundary on a map, a far-sighted initiative, which gave a legal standing and foundation to the McMahon Line, which continues to remain the basis for resolutions that may take place on the subject in the future.

The book brings to light a number of interesting points which remain relevant to the ongoing negotiations even today. The issue of China not signing on the McMahon Line map and agreement, despite the initials of the negotiator, is one. However, remarkably, the book indicates that China had problems with the blue line delineating the boundary between China and Tibet and not the red line between Tibet and India. The red line clearly indicated Tawang as being on the Indian side.

But the Chinese had no problem with the red line and McMahon's alignment of the Indo-Tibetan boundary, either during the conference or even later. In light of this, their objection to this line in the present times is difficult to reconcile with. (p. 223)

The issue of boundary negotiations with China and the need for caution immediately after India's independence are also highlighted, with quotes from Sardar Patel's correspondence with Nehru. The former Home Minister's assessment of China disowning 'all the stipulations that Tibet had entered into' with India in the past predictably came true. However, the inability to discern China's larger objectives and motives led India to play into their hands. Over time, despite the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement, China guarded its strategic interests zealously, even as India gave in to false promises and misread the reality of the situation.

This was further compounded by false bravado, coupled with internal weakness within the military, which practically rendered the army unfit to fight an adversary like China. The book quotes Lieutenant General Daulet Singh, who said:

It is imperative that political direction is based on military means. If the two are not coordinated there is a danger of creating a situation where we may lose both in the material and moral sense much more than we already have. (p. 292)

This concern was, yet again, prophetic in its pronouncement. India's defeat during the 1962 War with China witnessed a perceptible disconnect between political ends and the military means that were at the disposal of the country at the time of decision. The argument of Daulat Singh is equally relevant in the present context, wherein military ability and strategic ambitions must remain aligned. It is also equally important that the senior military hierarchy must be an integral part of the national security apparatus. This stood out as an obvious limitation during 1961–62 and reflected in the decision-making process and its resultant impact on military actions.

The author, while looking at the way ahead, outrightly rejects the falsely projected idea of 'South Tibet' as part of the claims made by China, highlighting the absence of any historical evidence to support the same. The book further outlines the differences that exist between both countries, as also the convergences, including the large volume of trade. The author feels that war is increasingly unlikely between the two countries and the settlement of the border dispute at the highest political level remains the practical and mutually beneficial way ahead for India and China.

Concluding the book, the author suggests that India needs to enhance its deterrence to a level that any possibility of war becomes prohibitive in the political, economic, diplomatic and military dimension (p. 368). He reinforces the need to reduce the 'trust deficit' (p. 365) that remains between the two countries. One of the ways suggested is military confidence-building measures, which have in the past contributed to building trust between both the countries. It is rightly concluded that both countries are competitors and not rivals, as is often made out to be.