BORDERSCAPE
ISSN : 3048-8931, Volume 01, No. 01, January-June, 2024, pp. 17-21

TRAVAILS OF HISTORY: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S BORDERS

Prof. S.D. Muni*

ABSTRACT

The concept of borders did not exist in Asia before the intrusion of Western colonial powers. Asia dwelled with frontiers that were flexible and changing with the degree of assertion and outreach of powers that be. Recall the reference to Ashwamegh Yagna in Ramayan where Lord Ram's horses were stopped by his sons Luv and Kushto contain territorial sway of Ram Rajya. Frontiers were generally less inhibited territories. The concept of frontier prevailed even during and after the Colonial empires in South Asia. Arunachal Pradesh between India and China used to be called North East frontier Agency (NEFA) and Pakistan's border province with Afghanistan inhabited by Pakhtoon community was until recently known as the North West Frontier Province.

***KEYWORDS**: India's Borders, Travails, NEFA, Western Colonial Powers.*

Introduction

Colonial Legacy

Most of the South Asian borders have been marked by the British treaties and Agreements that drew lines on maps, resulting from wars of influence and control. The British obsession with containing the Soviet/Russian expansion towards the South (China, Tibet and the Indian sub-continent) led them to annexations and exchanges of territories. Retrieval and consolidation of territories also led to the exercise of laying down boundaries to define territorial possession and control, that got linked to the concept of sovereignty following the Treaty of Versailles of 1919. Pre-partition boundaries of India were defined mainly by three lines, the Durand Line (1893, with Afghanistan), McMahon Line (1914), with China in the eastern sector), and finally the Redcliff Line (1947, with Pakistan). With China, the Western sector (Ladakh, Aksai China and Karakoram range)was defined by the British through changing alignments of Johnson Line (1865), and Macartney-MacDonald Line (1899).[1]India's boundary with Nepal in the Himalayas has also been in controversy and that is rooted into Sugauli Treaty signed between British India and Nepal in 1816.

Some of these lines were not endorsed by the other concerning parties. For instance, the Durand Line was rejected by the succeeding Afghan governments and the McMahon line was not acceptable to the Chinese Central government though its delegation had signed it. Durand line was the product of 'Great Games' played between Russia and the British Empire for strategic influence in Central Asia. The 'Line' that separated Afghanistan and the British Indian Empire was first drawn in 1893 but changed and readjusted for legitimation subsequently. It was finalised in 1896. The line was

* Professor Emeritus, JNU, Member Executive Council, IDSA & Former Ambassador and Special Envoy, Government of India.

[1] Mohan Guruswamy and Zorawar Daulet Singh, India China Relations: The Border Issue and Beyond, Observer research Foundation, Viva Books, New Delhi 2009, pp. 8-19. Also Maroof Raza, "Looking for common ground on border line" The Tribune (Chandigarh), October 17, 2020.

again reviewed, revised and reconfirmed in 1905, in 1919 under the Treaty of Rawalpindi, in 1921 under Kabul Agreement and again in 1930 between the British Indian Empire and Afghanistan. It is estimated to be a 2430Kms/ 1500 miles – long line from Karakoram range in the Himalayas up to the Iran border. Mortimer Durand, a British diplomat and civil servant, in his capacity as British India's Foreign Secretary, negotiated this line with Abdur Rahman Khan, the Afghan Amir. The Treaty defining the Durand Line was initially written in English but subsequently, its translations in Dari (Afghan language) and Persian (Iranian language) were also prepared.[1]China continues to maintain its denial stance on the McMahon line in relation to India in the face of the fact that this line was the basis of boundary settlement between China and Myanmar.[2] The Redcliffe Line was not fully welcomed by either India or Pakistan.

None of these lines were drawn properly and precisely on the maps through reliable cartographic accuracy, leaving vast areas undefined when one translates these lines on the ground. These lines were also not translated on the ground and borders were delimited, based on proper surveys. The lines only reflected the might of the British Empire and the individual assessments and ambitions of the British officers concerned who were briefed on the strategic calculations of the empire. One British official describing the British approach to India's borders prior to Indian independence, said: "Britain's '...basic policy towards India's northern frontier was primarily one of convenience. It suited us best that the border should not be clearly defined: changed circumstances might make some adjustment desirable. This explains in large part the inconsistencies of the maps of the time and the absence in many of them of any defined border."[3] Because of this approach of convenience and calculated ambiguity, no serious efforts were made by the British to properly demarcate these lines. One of the most volatile line of partition between India and Pakistan, the Redcliffe Line, was drawn hastily. The stories of British manipulation on this line and time constraint on finalizing the partition have been recounted time and again. Redcliffe himself confessed this to Kuldeep Nayar by saying: "I had no alternative; the time at my disposal was so short that I could not do a better job. Given the same period I would do the same thing. However, if I had two to three years, I might have improved on what I did." His yard stick in partition was also not objective. Rejecting Pakistani allegation that he favoured India, Redcliffe said: "They (Pakistan) should be thankful to me because I went out of the way to give them Lahore which deserved to go to India. Even otherwise, I favoured the Muslims more than the Hindus."[4]

Another important aspect of the British approach to boundaries was that the border lines were drawn keeping in mind the significance of geo-strategic factors, including watershed and flow of rivers. There was however, seldom the question of socio-economic and cultural aspects of the populations involved and affected were taken into account. As a result, people and communities were divided into different states precipitating serious issues of nationality. Durand line has been notorious in this respect. India's Northeast was also ruthlessly divided along Myanmar in this respect leaving tribal and ethnic communities, like the Nagas and Mizoes in dispute with the imposed nationalities. The result of the imperial strategies in defining borders in South Asia and the Himalayas has been a legacy of inter-state disputes, conflicts and intra-state insurgencies. The British were acutely aware of the fact that the way Pakistan was created made it inherently vulnerable keeping its eastern and western wings separated by thousands of kilometres.[5]These conflicts remained suppressed under the imperial thrust of power but created huge challenges of regional and domestic peace and stability.[6]

---

1 For details of historical developments related to the Durand Line, see, Azmat Hayat Khan, M.Y. Effendi, The Durand Line: Its Geo-strategic Importance, Hanns Seidel Foundation, Peshawar, 2000. Also Rajiv Dogra, Durand's Curse: A Line Across the Pathans' Heart, Rupa, New Delhi 2017.

2 For an analysis of the McMahon Line, see, Karunakar Gupta, "The McMahon Line 1911-45: The British legacy", *The China Quarterly,* No 47, July-September 1971, pp. 521-45.

3 As quoted in Paul M McGarr, "The Long shadow of colonial cartography: Britain and the Sino-Indian war of 1962", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2019, Vol. 42, No. 5, pp.626-653.

4 Kuldip Nayar, 'I nearly gave you Lahore': When Kuldip Nayar asked Cyril Redcliffe about deciding Indo-Pak border", Scroll, August 24, 2018. https://scroll.in/article/891693/i-nearly-gave-you-lahore-when-kuldip-nayar-asked-cyril-radcliffe-about-deciding-indo-pak-border.

5 Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, Freedom at Midnight, 1975, p.162.

6 Lucy Chester, Border and Conflict in South Asia: The Redcliffe Boundary Commission and the Partition of Punjab, Manchester University Press, 2009.

Nationalist Failures

The foregoing discussion underlines the decisive role played by the Colonial masters in laying down the foundations of borders in South Asia. But this does not absolve the post-independent, and in China's case, post-revolution, leadership from their responsibility in failing to resolve the conflict prone border disputes. All the three concerned countries namely China, Pakistan and India have had their own specific, and often changing approaches to the border questions. Pakistan, as we shall see, did not seem sincerely and genuinely interested in resolving its border disputes with India, specially in Jammu & Kashmir. It pinned its identity and strategic stakes strongly on this issue, which also got linked up with the whole range of domestic (civil military relations) political dynamics and foreign policy (alliance with the US and now with China) issues. China has been keen on settling the border issue entirely on its own terms, specially these days when its territorial nationalism has been heightened under President Xi's leadership. Earlier during the 1950s, China appeared willing for some give and take, like the swapping proposal of 1959 to keep Aksai Chin (30,000 square kilometres) but accept Indian claims on Arunachal Pradesh (90,000 sq. Kms), as also in 2003, acceptance of Sikkim as part of India, but no longer. China has now backed out from the swapping proposal also and become more assertive. India's approach has been a mix of preserving the inheritance handed over by the British and making adjustments and accommodation with the neighbours, particularly the smaller ones, including Pakistan. The constraints of time and space do not permit us to go into the details of all the three approaches, of Pakistan, China and India. We propose to highlight only some of the important aspects of India's approach to the border issues with Pakistan and China.

The instances of India's flexible approach towards smaller neighbours are many and varied. It handed over Kuchchativu Island to Sri Lanka in 1974 after much debate and disputation. With Bangladesh, India has recently not only resolved the question of enclaves, pending since 1974, but graciously accepted international jurisdiction award on the maritime boundary issue favouring Bangladesh.[1]In relation to Pakistan, India since the mid-1950s, has been prepared for accepting a border resolution in Jammu & Kashmir along the ceasefire line. During 1953-54, when indications of the US military alliance with Pakistan were emerging, India quietly tried to request the US to wait for some time so that it could resolve the J&K issue bilaterally.[2] India had also been pleading with the US through Ambassador Chester Bowles to help in the recognition of the Cease-Fire line as international border. President Eisenhower was inclined to explore this possibility, but the Pentagon had reservations for the fear of exposing US surveillance bases in Pakistan to India. This indicates that the complicated borders created by the Colonial legacy were further distorted due to imperatives of the Cold War.

The evidence of India's accommodative approach to territorial issues with Pakistan was evident during India-Pakistan negotiations on Kashmir question in 1963. The Indian delegation led by then foreign minister, Sardar Swaran Singh was willing to offer maximum territorial concessions to Pakistan in Kashmir for a permanent resolution of the issue. India was under considerable pressure strategically and from the West in the aftermath of China's aggression in 1962.[3]The West had also forced India to accept adjudication on the Kashmir question. However, Pakistan was not serious in resolving the issue as contention on Kashmir catered to both its domestic politics and strategic significance. Shimla Agreement after the emergence of Bangladesh was the best example of India willing to accept the newly drawn Line of Control (LoC, a somewhat revised Cease Fire Line) as international border.[4] That would be in conflict with India's stated claims of the whole of Kashmir being an integral part of India constitutionally. It would also leave the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir with Pakistan. It was intriguing as

---

1 D.H. Anderson, "Bay of Bengal Maritime Boundary (Bangladesh v/s India)", The American Journal of International Law, Vol.109, No.1, January 2015. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-journal-of-international-law/article/abs/bay-of-bengal-maritime-boundary/56CE4438C10D4D714929B530F3463FD8. Accessed on January 04 2021.

2 Messages were communicated to the US using back channel by Nehru through the Canadian Ambassador Escort Read in New Delhi. See his Envoy to Nehru, Oxford University Press, India, New Delhi, 1981.pp. 118-123.

3 For the record of these negotiations, see the account of the then Foreign Secretary, Y.D. Gundevia, Outside the Achieves, Sangam Books, New Delhi, 1984, (Chapters Xi-XIII).

4 P.N. Dhar, Indira Gandhi, the Emergency and Indian Democracy, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000. (Chapter Nine).

to why the northern end of the LoC was not clearly defined initially with the LoC. This gap was however filled up by India moving into the Siachen glacier region in early 1980s. This gave access to India to the Karakoram ranges where Pakistan had allowed China to dominate by gifting it 5300 sq. kms. of territory in the disputed PoK area under the Sino-Pak boundary Agreement of 1963. It has however not been accepted by Pakistan scholars and policy makers that Bhutto had, in principle, agreed to the LoC based solution at Shimla in 1971. Again, India not insisting on reclaiming the whole of Kashmir was evident in the so-called solution worked out between Dr Manmohan Singh and Gen. Musharraf in 2008. This solution could not be carried forward as Musharraf lost power.[1] This situation has now changed with Prime Minister Modi reclaiming PoK to bring conformity between the stated claims and negotiating stance.[2]

India's casual and complacent approach to the border with China was exposed in 1956-57, when it discovered that China had built roads in the Aksai Chin region linking Xinjiang with Tibet. Political heat generated by such exposer in India drove Nehru to be rigid on the border issue and do his best to preserve the inheritance handed over by the British. He deputed eminent historian S. Gopal to carefully study the border issue in British archives and adopted even an assertive 'forward policy' in the Himalayas to back up the Colonial claims. The Chinese offer of territorial swap clearly underlined the strategic significance of the border grasped by the Chinese. They valued, under the swap proposal, Aksai China much higher than Arunachal Pradesh because the former facilitated their control over the turbulent peripheries of Xinjiang and Tibet and gave them strategic access to Pakistan and Central Asia.[3] The present standoff between India and China in Ladakh is a part of the Chinese calculation. China has become serious on this part of the border because the Indian leaders, Prime Minister Modi and Home Minister Shah, have reiterated their claims on Aksai Chin and PoK, and India's moves to secure these areas have taken the form of infra-structure development along the Himalayan borders. China under BRI has taken another initiative to strengthen its Himalayan connectivity and coordinate its strategic presence in the region with Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan.[4]

Conclusion

India's borders with Pakistan and China are serious hot spots of conflict contributed both by the Colonial legacy as well as nationalist leaders owing to their casual, complacent and conflictual perspectives on the role of territory in building states and their relations with neighbours, in all the three countries. The emphasis has heavily been on territory and its strategic significance. The dimension of human habitation along these crafted and conceived borders been incidental or almost negligent. While India's borders with Pakistan is mostly well inhabited (with the exception of Sir Creek area in Gujrat), borders with China in the Himalayas are mostly not inhabited except in Arunachal Pradesh. It was only in 2005 that India and China in their Agreement on "Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question", decided to pay attention, besides strategic interests and other aspects, to the habitation factor. The Agreement decided that "in reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas." (Art. VII). The extent to which the two countries will be able to respect this understanding in the fast-changing context remains to be seen.

Border situation is heavily tilted against India in relation to China and Pakistan. Both of its adversarial neighbours have a close strategic understanding and defense coordination with each other.

---

[1] Steve Coll, "The Back Channel: India and Pakistan's Secret Kashmir Talks", The New Yorker ,https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/02/the-back-channel. Also, Harinder Baweja, "Almost had Kashmir deal on Kashmir- Ex-PM's Envoy Lambah", The Hindustan Times , October 16, 2015. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/almost-had-kashmir-deal-with-pakistan-ex-pm-s-envoy-lambah/story-7L6fUH2J9ngCEmTCZngoLJ.html.

[2] Priyanka Singh, "India's renewed push on Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK)", Policy Brief, IDSAhttps://idsa.in/policybrief/pok-psingh-120220.

[3] For details on India's Aksai Chin claims, see SujanChinoy, "The Forgotten fact of 'China-Occupied Kashmir'. IDSA Special Feature, 13 November 2020.https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=rm&ogbl#search/Mukesh+IDSA/FMfcgxwKjnXXGfWLBCdDwqZrPzXQtNvc?projector=1&messagePartId=0.10. Also John LallAksai Chin and Sino-Indian Conflict Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1989.

[4] Jagannath P. Panda, "The Trans-Himalayan 'Quad', Beijing's Territorialism and India", Jamestown Foundation, November 12, 2020 https://jamestown.org/program/the-trans-himalayan-quad-beijings-territorialism-and-india/.

China has long back given up its proclaimed stance of neutrality on the bilateral dispute in Kashmir between India and Pakistan. China now stands by Pakistan, its all-weather friend, strategically. In any serious outbreak of conflict, India facing a two front challenge seems to be a real possibility and Indian military planners are acutely aware of it. India's border infrastructure is much too inferior as compared to that of China's in the Himalayan region and along the McMahon line. India is fast filling the gaps in this respect but China would always enjoy an edge over its efforts since China started much earlier. Pakistan has been breaching even fortified Indian border through its cross-border terrorism campaign that involve building under-ground tunnels to pump in terrorists and arms. With the sharpening of great power rivalries in Asia and expanding faceoffs between India and its adversarial neighbours, prospects of peace seem to be in peril in the region.

❑❑❑