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## Tibet, Great Game, and the McMahon Line: Issues in India's Geopolitics before the Independence

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### **Abstract**

Tibet has always been a sensitive region with respect to India's geopolitical and geostrategic position. It has a religious and cultural affinity with India but faces the political hegemony of China. Since the colonial period, Tibet has remained at the centre stage of Anglo-Russian geopolitical rivalry, popularly known as the 'Great Game,' across the continent. After the Great Game came to an end in 1907, the McMahon Line controversy emerged. The British effort to demarcate the boundary with Tibet in the northeast region had been challenged by China alleging India's effort to create a buffer zone over Tibet. Both sides (China and India) have remained daggers drawn over the issue of Tibet and the McMahon Line. China tagged the McMahon Line as an imperialistic legacy whereas India accused China of altering the status quo and the balance of power in the region. This controversy forced the two countries to face a bloody war in 1962 where China badly defeated India. This article is an effort to discuss the factual history of the McMahon Line controversy (till Independence) which appeared as one of the major geopolitical issues for India.

**Keywords:** *India, China, British, Russia, Tibet.*

### **1. Geopolitical Position of Tibet**

Geopolitically Tibet is surrounded to the north and east by China to the west there is Kashmir, to the south Nepal, Bhutan, and India surround it. The Tibetan plateau includes one of the top peaks in the world. Tibet's independent status is very much necessary for India's geopolitical aspirations. From the Chinese perception, Tibet is a 'western treasure-house.' 'The roof of the earth' is considered the 'Asia's water tower.' Tibet possesses huge natural gas and crude oil reserves apart from a tourism perspective. Before the Communist China invaded Tibet, it maintained an independent entity. Chinese occupation of Tibet has made the Indian border areas melt pot. The north-eastern boundary of India becomes vulnerable. Chinese threat looms large over the sovereignty and integrity of the northeastern border region of India. China's frequent calling of Arunachal Pradesh as an extended region of South Tibet has appeared as a hazard to the Indian political and military establishment. Chinese military infrastructure across Tibet has appeared as a challenge to India's defence structure. However, Tibet has a distinct economic, political, ethnic, and cultural way of life which distinguishes it from its big neighbours like India and China. Apart from this distinctiveness, there are some affinities also. Regarding linguistic and cultural aspects Tibet is more akin to India whereas politically China has more control over Tibet than India (Garver, 2001, p. 41). Before going to the details of this article, it is to be mentioned here that regarding methodology, this article is descriptive, analytical, and historical in nature. The article follows historical perspectives. This article consists of both the primary and

secondary source materials. The quantitative and qualitative data help in a comprehensive manner to reach in the conclusion.

## **2. A Brief History of Tibet**

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, the king of the Tibetan Yarlung dynasty, Namri Lonsan established diplomatic relationship with the Chinese Tang Kingdom. The Army General of the Tang dynasty Gao Xianzhi in 750 AD occupied Tibet but lost its very control over Tibet. In 821 AD both had signed a peace treaty and the border areas were settled (Richardson, 1985, pp. 105-144). After the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD., the central political administration of the Tibetan empire lost its control. Between the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century AD, Tibet witnessed the revival of Buddhism and this period is often termed as ‘Tibetan Renaissance’ owing to the resurgences of Buddhism in Tibet. Rinchen Zangpo and Mazu Saelbar was the translator and preachers of Buddhism at that time. In 1042 AD, Atisa reached Tibet and made a significant contribution to the flourishing of Buddhism in Tibet. During this time, Tilopa, Milarepa, and Sakya Pandita also played an important role in preaching Buddhism in Tibet.

In the Middle Ages (1240-1354 AD), Tibet was under the control of the Mongols. It was the Altan Khan, the famous Mongol King met the third Dalai Lama, Sonam Gyatso, and became a devout follower of Buddhism. Following the event, Buddhism also entered on a wide scale in Central Asia. The 4<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama also came from the Mongolian origin and thus cemented the tie between Central Asia and Tibet. The successive Dalai Lamas concentrated on centralizing popular power based on the popular support of the followers. The Mongols, thereafter, helped the Dalai Lamas, to continue their politico-religious reign over Tibet for the three hundred years (Laird, 2006, pp. 148-152).

From the mid-fourteenth century onwards, for almost four hundred years, Tibet enjoyed independence. From the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, Tibet witnessed the rule of the Dalai Lamas. The notable factor was that, by this time China’s Ming dynasty did not enforce direct rule over Tibet but retained a nominal claim by setting up *Regional Military Commissions* in the last half of the fourteenth century. These military commissions had a friendly approach to the Tibetan religious leaders vis-à-vis the rulers. The Chinese Quing dynasty’s rule over Tibet came into effect in 1720 and continued till 1912. The Quing rulers appointed *Ambans* (imperial residents). During this period, although the Dalai Lamas ruled Tibet, the *Ambans* with the armed Chinese troops kept vigilant eye on the administration of the Dalai Lamas.

## **3. Chinese Effort to Control Tibet**

In 1791, Nepal invaded Tibet but failed. This invasion prompted the Quing dynasty to tighten its control over Tibet. Thenceforth, the *Ambans* were entrusted with more political power. The defence and foreign affairs of Tibet were controlled by the Quing dynasty. The presence of Chinese troops was increased. Trade relations with Tibet also came under control. Travel to Tibet was restricted and depended only on the permission of the *Ambans*. Despite all these, the Quing dynasty did not claim actual sovereignty and was satisfied with imposing only symbolic authority over Tibet (Jr., 1996, p. 137). In October 1911, after the fall of the Qing dynasty, the geopolitics of Tibet changed suddenly. The Quing forces also left Tibet immediately. From 1912-1951 Tibet, under the Dalai Lamas, regained independence. In 1913, The Dalai Lama

explained the Sino-Tibet relationship through a proclamation that it was a *patron-priest relationship*, nothing subordinates to that (Shakabpa, 1967, pp. 246-248).

#### 4. Tibet's Relationship with India

On the other hand, Tibet's relationship with India dated back even before the flourishing of the Buddhism in Tibet. According to the Tibetan chronicles, many Tibetan races were the descendants of *Rupati* who was a Military General of the *Kaurava Kingdom* of the Hindu mythological era (the age of Mahavharata). According to the Legend of Tibet, *Rupati* took shelter in Tibet along with his fellow army men after the defeat by the *Pandavas*. Later, many Tibetans claimed their lineage to *Rupati* and to the soldiers of the *Kaurava dynasty* (Ibid, p. 5).

India has a deep-rooted connection with Tibet in terms of art, poetry, philosophy, and religion. Tibet was flourished by Buddhism. Between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century AD., *Bhiksu Kamalasila*, *Padmasambhava*, and *Santarakista* helped the entry of Buddhism into Tibet. The *Vinaya*, *Sutra*, and *Abhidharma Pitkas* were translated into Tibetan language and became the cornerstone of the Tibetan culture. The word 'compassion' plays an important concept in the Tibetan life which has a direct linkage with the *Compassionate Buddha*. It is considered that the Dalai Lamas are the incarnation of that compassion or *karuna*. The same word compassion and *karuna* also plays an important role in Indian tradition and culture. The Indian concept of *Avatara* (incarnation) has a direct linkage to the Tibetan belief pattern in incarnation and reincarnation (Mehrotra, 1997, p. 2).

The selection of the Dalai Lamas, Tulkus, and Rinpoches based on true reincarnation is derived from the Indian philosophical *concept of rebirth*. The monastic tradition in Tibetan life is also found in India. The monastic lives of Tibet are the evolved form of the Indian monk and temple culture (Ibid). The *Manas Sarovar* situated in Tibet is considered a sacred place in Hindu religion also. From the 7<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century AD., scholars (*pandits*) from India and the translators (*Lotsawa*) from Tibet used to make reciprocal visits. *Brahmi* and *Khorosti* scripts were prevalent in North and West Tibet. The early Tibetan books were written following the Indian palm leaf format. It did not follow the Chinese scroll format. Tibetan records were reserved in *punthi* which is an evolved form of the *Sanskrit punthi/pustika*. In fact, *Sanskrit* books and learning had influenced the Tibetan culture from the ancient times. The Tibetan alphabets match a lot with the *Sanskrit* alphabets. Saraswati is still regarded in Tibet as the deity of wisdom. Rig-Vedic literature had a tremendous impact on the Tibetans before the advent of Buddhism in Tibet. The *Sanskrit* words like *Arya*, *Dharma*, *Pandita*, *Ratna*, and *Vajra*, are also found in Tibetan literature. The Indian historical documents from the early to modern ages, suggest that the Himalayas form the northern borders of India (*Bharata*). *Arthasastra* of Kautilya also suggests so. Apart from that most of the Indian mythological sources confirm the Himalayas as the frontier of India (Rana, 1963, pp. 20-22).

During the time of the *Maurya*, *Kushan*, and *Gupta Empires*, Himalaya became the solid frontier of Northern India. The Chinese pilgrim *Hieu Tsiang* also referred Kashmir, Ladakh, Nepal, and Assam as Indian territory and the Himalayas as the border of India (Rao, 1991, pp. 68-70). During the medieval period of Indian History, Bhaktiar Khilji and Mohammad– Bin–Tughlak carried a separate military expedition to Tibet but failed. Mughal emperor Aurangzeb along with his Kashmiri Governor Ibrahim Khan confronted Tibetan–Mongol joint Forces to save Ladakh from their joint invasion in 1679 (known as the Battle of Basgo) (Francke, 1998, pp. 56-62).

## 5. The Great Game over Tibet

During the British rule in India, in the 1880's the British Indian Empire was alarmed at the steady progress of the Russia towards the central Asia. It was Russian Captain Grombchevsky who penetrated to Hunza in 1888 taking advantage of the weak defence between the Pamirs and Sinkiang and threatening the entire defence of north India. The British officials namely Sir Henry Mortimer Durand alerted the British government about the reopening of the *Great Game* by the Russians once again. Earlier the British followed the *Ring Fence* policy to consolidate the British Empire in Indian subcontinent (Tellis, 1990, pp. 80-82).

In the inner ring fence, there were the territories immediately close to the British Indian Empire, such as Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Assam, North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), Leh, Gilgit, Ladakh, Kashmir, and the northeastern borderland regions. In these regions, the British had a direct control. In the outer ring fence, there were states like Afghanistan, Tibet, and Sinkiang which were not directly under the British Empire but were aimed to be used as a *buffer zone* for the safety and security of the British empire in India. This ring fence policy necessitated to combat the approaching Russian empire towards the central and South Asia. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, this power rivalry went on between the Russian and British Empire and came to be known as *The Great Game* (Ibid).

In the last half of the nineteenth century, as Qing China became weak, the Russian expansion appeared a real possibility to the British Indian Empire. Sir John Ardagh, the director of the British military intelligence in 1897 drew the British boundary in north to the Kun Lun mountain ranges and validated the *Jhonson Line*. A revised boundary plan was put forward by the British in 1899. It was originally proposed under the suggestion of George Macartney, serving the post of the then consul General of the British Empire in Khasgar. The proposal also got the support of the then Governor General Lord Elgin and Sir Claude Maxwell MacDonald, the then British administrator in Peking. The revised plan envisaged the northern boundary up to the crests of the Karakoram Mountain instead of the Kunlun Mountain. This was done mainly to get natural access to the Indus River watershed. The revised plan was aimed to keep the dissolute land of Askai Chin under the control of the Chinese which would have a strong deterrent to the Russian expansion. (Noorani, 2003, pp. 40-44).

It was then sent to the Qing government for their official recognition but the Chinese government did not respond to the proposal and chose to be silent in this regard. Their silence was considered as their silent acceptance of the proposal (Verma, 2006, pp. 6-8). From 1899, the *Johnson Ardagh lines* used to be published on maps of India, published by the British Empire. The Chinese also did not protest it. At last, in 1908, the British government officially adopted the line as the boundary of the British Empire (Woodman, 1969, p. 79).

## 6. Captain Young Husband's Mission

In 1893, Britain came to an agreement with the Qing China and secured its trading rights to Tibet. When the Qing control over Tibet began to deteriorate, the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama gripped his control over Tibet. He dismissed the said trade agreement and rejected its validity. Britain was highly offended to this decision. The British were suspicious about Russian involvement behind the decision. The whole matter was analysed under the purview of the continued *Great Game* between the Russian and – the British empire. The British came to know that among the closest

of the Dalai Lama's advisors, there was a Russian Buddhist monk who was acting under the Russian empire as an envoy. Lord Curzon, the then Governor General, was determined to neutralize the Russian threat over Tibet. He decided to send Captain Young Husband's expedition. In December 1903, Young Husband marched towards Tibet. Intense and fierce fighting took place. By June, the effective artillery in collaboration with the courageous Gorkha and Pathan soldiers, the British took control over Tibet. On 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1904, Younghusband reached Lhasa and got the trade agreement signed by the prominent Dalai Lama's representatives. This agreement ensured British priority to trade with Tibet, delimited Tibet-Sikkim border areas, war indemnity to the British, and neutralized Russian threat to Tibet and vis-a-vis to the British Empire (Ibid).

*The Treaty of Lhasa* signed in 1904 was further validated and confirmed by the *Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1906*. This convention also ensured that the British would not annex the Tibetan territory and would send representatives directly to the Qing Court. China, in turn, promised not to allow any other foreign country (namely Russia) to interfere in the domestic affairs of Tibet or with the Tibetan territories (Bell, 1924, p. 288).

In the meantime, under the growing threat of Germany under the Kaiser William II, Russia, and Britain were coming closer to combat the growing German threat in the Middle East and other adjoining areas. On 31<sup>st</sup> August 1907, the *Anglo-Russian Convention* was signed to stop the continued rivalry between the Russia and Britain in the central and south-Asian region. By this treaty, the Russians promised not to meddle with the affairs of Tibet and Afghanistan, and in return, Britain promised not to interfere in northern Persia. In a broad sense, this convention extended cooperation between Britain and Russia which continued till the beginning of the *First World War* to the advent of the *Bolshevik Revolution* in Russia. In another sense, the Anglo-Russian convention of 1907 put an end to the prolonged Great Game (Siegel, 2002, pp. 145-156).

## **7. Chinese Effort Continued to Subjugate Tibet**

Qing China in the meantime, in 1910, tried to occupy Tibet and bring it under its direct control. A military expedition was sent under Zhao Erfeng. He defeated the Tibetan Army. The 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama had no other option. He chose to take shelter in British India. His actions offended the Qing Empire.

The fall of the 200-year-long Qing dynasty in 1912, extended the path to the establishment of the Republic of China under Sun-Yat-Sen. The newly established government of Sun-Yat-Sen was apologetic to the Tibetans and assured to restore Dalai Lama's control over Tibet. The Dalai Lama later did not accept any Chinese title and began to rule Tibet independently (Mayhew, Kohn, & McCrohan, 2005, p. 32). After returning to Lhasa, the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, by issuing a proclamation announced that the relation between the imperial China and Tibet always had been like the relationship of patron and priest nothing subordinate than that (Proclamation, 1913, 106). In 1913, Tibet and Mongolia signed a treaty of mutual recognition and continued to protect each other's territorial integrity in a joint security method. After the demise of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in 1933, the governing council of Tibet (known as Kashag, set up by the fifth emperor of the Qing Dynasty) announced that Tibet was nominally a part of China; however Tibet could manage her political affairs. China did not declare her sovereign rights over Tibet (India Office Records 1935, L/PS/12/4175). Since 1912 Tibet had always enjoyed independent status, although the Republican Government of China had always been vigilant to the activity of the Tibetans.

The fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912 alerted the British too. Governor General Lord Hardinge informed the Secretary of State for India in September 1912 that the northern boundary limit of the British Empire should be, the line as proposed by *Johnson-Ardagh* instead of the *Macterny-Macdonald's proposed line*. He thenceforth advocated retaining of Aksai Chin fearing future Russian progress and China's inability to deter Russia (Woodman, 1969, p. 80).

## **8. Simla Accord & the McMahon Line Controversy**

In 1913, the British convened a conference at Simla to determine its rights over Tibet and delimit the boundaries of the British Indian Empire. The representatives of the Republic of China, Britain, and the Tibetan government took part in this conference. The Indian delegation was headed by the then foreign secretary of the Government of British India Henry McMahon. He was an expert in demarcating boundary. Before drawing any lines with Tibet, McMahon considered various aspects apart from geostrategic compulsions. He was guided by the ethnic, religious, and political aspects of the region too. The Monpas of Tawang were ethnically non-Tibetan but Buddhist in religion. In the southern part of Lohit Valley, there were some areas inhabited by the tribal *Mismis* who were of Tibetan origin. In his plan, McMahon divided the entire Tibet into 'inner' and 'outer' Tibet. It was proposed that the inner Tibet meant the Tibetan inhabited regions which included – Gansu, Hunnan, Qinghai, and Sichuan under the direct control of the Chinese government. The outer Tibet included mainland central Tibet (modern-day Tibet). Regarding the border with Tibet, McMahon drew a line which came to be known as the McMahon line (Hoffman, 1990, pp. 18-21).

In the McMahon Line, the boundary was extended with a total length of 890 km. It covered the areas from Bhutan to Brahmaputra. Earlier in 1912 the British took the NEFA under its control and the McMahon line clearly divided the boundary areas between Tibet and NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh). In drawing the maps, McMahon was driven by the natural crests of the Himalayas across Bhutan and the Brahmaputra. The Simla convention also proposed that the outer Tibet would be administered by the Tibetan government under the suzerainty of the Chinese government. It also envisaged that despite suzerainty the Chinese government would have no right to interfere in the internal affairs of the Tibet. It was also stated that regarding the outer Tibet, the Chinese parliament would not enforce any legal provisions (Goldstein, 1997, p. 75).

The three respective delegates put their initials to the draft convention on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1914. But immediately the Chinese government expressed their resentment over the inner boundary (boundary between Tibet and China) (India Office Records, 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 1914). The Chinese delegate Ivan Chen was called back by the Chinese government. After the withdrawal of the Chinese plenipotentiary, both the Tibetan and British delegates decided to sign a bilateral agreement. The agreement thenceforth denied giving China any future privileges (Treaties and Convention Relating to Tibet, 1914). The two delegates also signed a new regulation regarding the trade rights of the British in Tibet which was an extended part of the 1904 and 1908 agreement. The validity of the Indo-Tibetan boundary cannot be judged whether the Chinese plenipotentiary signed it or not rather it depends on the fact that despite knowing the presence of the Loncen Shatra as a Tibetan plenipotentiary, the Republic of China sent her delegation to the Simla Convention of 1913 that reflected the independent status of Tibet (Rowland, 1967, p. 61). However, the British did not challenge the rights of the Chinese suzerainty over Tibet. In 1915,

1916, and 1919 the Chinese tried to correct their understanding of Tibet and wanted to revive the Simla conference once again. The later Chinese negotiator Lu Hsing-Chi knew it well that Ivan Chen by putting his initials on the drafts of the Simla convention, made a historic blunder which 'did not recognize Chinese Sovereignty over Tibet' (Mehra, 2003, p. 75).

After the Simla Convention and the signing of the McMahon Line in 1914, The British kept it in their archives and did not make it publish for almost two decades, for various reasons including due to the outbreak of the World War I. Secondly, the clauses of the Simla Convention and maps in the McMahon Line might cause resentment among the Russians because the 1907 Anglo-Russian convention recognized mutual non-interference in the internal affairs of Tibet on the part of both the British and the Russians. Ultimately, it was British deputy foreign secretary and strategist Olaf Caroe who understood the importance of the immediate publication of the McMahon Line and referred the entire matter to the Secretary of State, India. He further gave a note mentioning the future complications if the British did not publish it immediately. He apprehended that further delay might lose the validity of the Simla Convention and the McMahon Line (India Office Records, 5<sup>th</sup> November, 1935). It was then published in the Survey of India Map in 1937. In the following year, it was published in Aitchison Treaties. After its official Publication neither China nor Russia made an official protest to the border alignment between British India and Tibet (Mehra, 2003, p. 235).

## **9. Conclusion**

Prior to the India's independence, the British government informed the Tibetan government that all the rights of the British government to Tibet would be inherited by the Government of Independent India. The then Tibetan government under Dalai Lama considered this development as an opportunity to solidify its territorial claim from the independent Government of India. On 16<sup>th</sup> October 1947, the Tibetan government sent a note to Delhi asking for the return of Sikkim, Darjeeling, Ladakh, Walong, Sayul, and various other parts of India adjacent to Tibet (Woodman, 1969, p. 214). Hugh Richardson, the then India's representative in Tibet informed Delhi not to take the issue too seriously. He noted that it might be an attempt on the part of the Tibetan government to test the attitude of the newly independent Government of India towards the Indo-Tibetan Border. In reply, the government of India stated that the boundary with Tibet was already settled by the British government. As an inheritor, the Government of India did not wish to alter or delimit any of her territory or territories without prior consultation with the concerned country. The Tibetan government considered the letter as an acceptance of the existed boundary between India and Tibet (Richardson, 1984, p. 174).

In 1948, a Tibetan delegation team visited New Delhi. The Republic of China was very much apprehensive of the intention of the tour. The republican government urged Delhi to ensure Chinese rights over Tibet. In reply, the Government of India stated that the purpose of the Tibetan Delegation did not wish to frighten the Chinese government, it was merely a visit for the development of the Indo-Tibet relations. At that very time, in Tibet anti-China protest movement took place. Tibetans attacked the Chinese installations in Tibet. The radio station was destroyed. However, Chiang Kai-shek in his last days still considered Tibet as a Chinese part. He further proposed to Delhi to examine the 1908 trade agreement with Tibet and to come out from that agreement. New Delhi was aware of the Chinese tactics that the Chinese were indirectly questioning the validity of the Simla Convention and the McMahon Line. In reply, India noted that India wished to continue the trade relations with Tibet (Woodman, 1969, p. 216).

However, after the fall of the Republic of China, the communist government (People's Republic of China) (PRC) under the leadership of Mao Zedong tagged the Simla Convention as an imperial conspiracy and denied to accept the validity of the McMahon Line. The People's Republic of China took control of Tibet in 1950. The dream of Tibetan sovereignty shattered completely. Later in the name of the *Sino-Indian Agreement on Tibetan trade and intercourse (also called the Panchsheel Agreement)*, India gave away all her existing trade rights in 1954. The *Panchsheel Agreement* did not work altogether. The frequent intrusions by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) into the Indian territories increased the mistrust. The secret construction of the Xinxiang-Tibet Road passing through Aksai Chin made the relationship more complex. China accused India of a Tibetan revolt in 1959. The great escape of Dalai Lama and his taking of shelter in Indian territory made the whole affair cumbersome. The blame game shrouded the bilateral relations for a long time which culminated a bloody war where India was defeated by the sudden, unexpected, and a pre-planned Chinese aggression in 1962. However, China has never clarified the question— If the McMahon Line was invalid then why did the erstwhile Chinese government send a representative to the Simla Convention and put affirmative initials in the draft of the Simla Convention? Why did the Chinese government remain silent (did not lodge a formal protest) even after the publication the Survey of India Map in 1937 where both the Simla Convention and the McMahon Line was clearly mentioned? China is yet to answer these questions, putting India's geopolitical ambitions hanged in the fray.

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