

## A Study of Sino-Indian Border Issues

\*Uday Pratap Singh

Research Scholar, Deptt. of Defence & Strategic Studies, University of Allahabad, Allahabad (India)

---

### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Article History

Received: 18 Sep 2017

Accepted: 22 Sep 2017

Published Online: 23 Sep 2017

#### Keywords

Line of Actual Control

Line of Control

Doklam

Aksai Chin

McMahon Line

Gilgit-Baltistan

self rule

Islamic fundamentalism

Terrorism

SASAC

---

### ABSTRACT

*Border promotes a sense of permanence (although not ever permanent) followed by formalisation, mutual acceptance and recognition through tradition, custom, distinctive natural features and mutually agreed artificial agreement. It shows a line that divides one country, state, province from another or a frontier line. One you cannot cross the border without a visa. LAC and LOC, on the other hand, connote a sense of transition which may get altered at any moment as these are neither recognised nor formalised. In short, LAC when delineated on map and demarcated on the ground becomes LOC and when LOC gets the seal of formalisation on the basis of mutual acceptance and settlement, it becomes a border. There is a geographical and geopolitical aspect to the ongoing Sino-Indian standoff in the Doklam region. Geography locates Bhutan on a sensitive part of the Himalayan belt. Its history, small size and state capacity have made it an element in the geopolitical contest between India and China.*

---

### \*Corresponding Author

Email: [udaydefence@gmail.com](mailto:udaydefence@gmail.com)

---

### INTRODUCTION

In case of India and China, both countries have often used different terminology for the same features and frontiers along the border. The desolate region devoid of inhabitants makes it difficult to know each other's actual control. It is interesting to note that there were three different LACs between the two countries - one that existed in November 1959, and the two others were before 8th September 1962 and 20th, October 1962 when China attacked India. The agreement signed on 7th September 1993 does not define the LAC. The Chinese official sources maintain that there is an LAC well known to both sides while Indian officials claim there is an LAC which exists objectively and is known to both sides.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, China and India boundaries were not as firm or as immutable as they have now become. The boundaries of China and India was kept changing with the rise and fall of its empire. They were not marked or demarcated with precision on the ground or map. Historically, Indian empires extended much beyond what it is actually today. The more powerful Mauryan and Mughal Empires went well beyond the geographical limits of the Indian sub-continent. It extended beyond the Himalayas to include large parts of Afghanistan. Similarly, the Chola dynasty in South had taken Straits of Malacca under them. In early days, therefore, there were no mutually predetermined international boundaries but rather separate zones, which usually occurred without plan or consciousness on the part of the tribal, ethnic or national groups which were separated.

### THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF HIMALAYAS

The Himalayas in the past were a stabilising factor in the geology of the subcontinent. It was able to check the tide of

great population movements from Central Asia which overran large parts of Europe. Because of its unique teature, the Himalyas became important not only in the sub-continent but also in Asian continent. Himalayas gave the land route to the people who have carried the torch of religion, spirituality and commercial activity over a long time. To a Hindu, Himalaya is his spiritual home. Most of the religious places of the Hindus are located in these mighty mountains and connected to centuries old beliefs which can be read in Vedas and other religious history text of epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana. Places like Badrinath, Kedarnath, Kailash Mansarovar and Amaranth and scared rivers like Ganges and Yamuna are all inshrined in the Himalayas. They not only have bearing on the climate of India but also other parts of Asia in its proximity.<sup>2</sup>

### AKSAI CHIN AND LADAKH REGION

The Aksai Chin region lies towards the North Eastern side of Ladakh. It is about the size of Switzerland. Being situated between the regions of Xinjiang and Tibet, it is a high-altitude wasteland almost uninhabited having natural resources. This is a barren plateau and has been occupied by China a claim made by India as part of region's section of the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Aksai Chin in the past was travelled only by the people of neighbouring territories in search of salt and by infrequent hunters. In 1717, however, it was crossed by the Tsungar invaders of Tibet and in 1950 it was used for the same intention by the Chinese.<sup>3</sup> At present, Aksai Chin is administered by China as part of Hotan County in the Hotan Prefecture of Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The line that bifurcates the Indian occupied areas of Jammu and Kashmir from Aksai Chin

is known as the LAC. It has been is synchronised with the Chinese Aksai Chin claim line.

Topographically, Aksai Chin is a high altitude desert. In the southwest, the Karakoram Range is the de facto border, i.e., LAC runs between Aksai Chin and Indian occupied Kashmir. Glaciated peaks in the middle part of this boundary reach heights of 6,950 meters. In the north, the Kun Lun Range splits Aksai Chin from the Tarim Basin, where the rest of Hotan County is located. The northern piece of Aksai Chin is known as the Soda Plain and contains Aksai Chin's main river, the Karakash. The river, which gets melted water from several glaciers, crosses the Kun Lun farther northwest, in Pishan County and penetrates into the Tarim Basin, where it acts as one of the chief sources of water for Karakash and Hotan Counties. The eastern branch of the area contains a number of small endorheic basins. The biggest of them is that of the Aksai Chin Lake, which is fed by the Aksai Chin River. The region is more or less uninhabited, has no stable settlement, and receives modest precipitation as the Himalayas and the Karakoram obstruct the rains from the Indian monsoon.

At 17,000 feet Aksai Chin was important for its trade route. Today, China's National Highway 219 runs through Aksai Chin linking Xinjiang and Lazi in Tibet. Despite this region being virtually unfit for inhabitation with little resources, remains strategically significant for China as it links Tibet and Xinjiang and is easy to defend but difficult to attack. It is observed from the satellite pictures that Aksai Chin is divided into two unequal portions by a ridge called Lakhsang, or Lakhsung, which runs southeast, towards a little north of Lanak La, and is about 15 miles across.<sup>4</sup>

The northern Plateau, from Lakhsang Ridge to the source of the Karakash River in extreme north is the proper Aksai Chin. The southern Plateau between Lakhsang and Changchenmo Ridge is called the Lingzithang plains or the White Plains. The western highway from Kashgar to Lasha passing through Aksai Chin is a strategic lifeline for western Tibet, with huge convoys seen during the fair season. The Kashgar-Aksai Chin road has major halting places at Yarkhand Mazar (at 241 km), Tielong (at 672 km), and Sumxi (at 730 km). Rudok is 933 km from Kashgar and Sumxi is the first Tibetan inhabited place on the road. At km 518, begins the soda plains and km 670, near Tielong Aksai Chin plains end to enter Tibet.

#### POST 1962 WAR

After the 1962 war Chinese withdrew to the McMahon line in the eastern sector but retained western sector i.e., the area of Aksai Chin. It shows how much importance China gave to of both the areas. Tawang being closer to the Indian plains can be reinforced in a much quicker time frame by India than China could do in case of an extended war. Chinese reinforcement trail would be much longer from its mainland and, hence, difficult to sustain and defend. Moreover, she was more interested in consolidating its rear i.e. strengthen Eastern China against US and Japan and Western China with Central Asia.

By having a long drawn war in its rear, it would have to perforce open a rear front which was against her strategic interest and would engage her into a prolonged expenditure of her national comprehensive power and depleting her economic resources thereby causing instability and liability. On the other hand, Aksai Chin was a high altitude, barren land with extremely cold weather conditions, and absolutely no vegetation and habitation. Economically, this area had no

importance except the historic old silk route existed in that part of the country which had lost its economic relevance at that point of time. However, it overlooked Central Asia and could be used to tame the Central Asian region.

Strategically Aksai-Chin has become so important that China had constructed a highway which connects Tibet and Xinjiang. The aim was to shift more of Han Chinese in Tibet to influence the Tibetan population in that region and evoke its all-time ally Pakistan. Some lateral roads were been planned at that point of time as a long term strategy. It connected the Aksai Chin road to the Line of Actual Control for the purpose of quick built-up of Chinese troops and reinforcements whenever required. This road without India's knowledge was built in a disputed territory. Knowing the strategic importance of the area it was not possible for China to vacate the occupation in order to safeguard its longtime national interest. Moreover India played down the issue of Aksai Chin because it was a remote area and of little strategic interest to India. According to John W. Garver, it was "essential to Chinese control of western Tibet". In other words, in contrast to India's legalistic and nationalistic claims over the region, China's control over Aksai Chin had a geopolitical imperative.<sup>5</sup>

#### IMPORTANCE OF KKH AND GILGIT-BALTISTAN

KKH is the highest paved international road in the world. It connects China and Pakistan across the Karakoram mountain range through the Khunjerab Pass at an elevation 4,693 meters. It connects Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa region to China's Xinjiang.<sup>6</sup> The region of Gilgit-Baltistan has a geo-political importance which the Chinese understood well before the Indians could put their mind together. After the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962, the government of Pakistan illegally ceded a huge portion of territory of the Shaksgam Valley of PoK, (5,180sq km) to China in a border agreement of 1963.

However, Article 6 of this agreement clearly stated that "the two parties have agreed that after the settlement of the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India, the sovereign authority concerned will reopen negotiations with the Government of the People's Republic of China, on the boundary as described in Article two of the present Agreement, so as to sign a formal Boundary Treaty to replace the present agreement."

In Pakistan the KKH is referred as N-35 and in China as China National Highway 314 (G-314). It was built by Pakistan and China together The construction started in 1959 and was completed in 1979. It was opened to the public in 1986. The route of the KKH traces one of the many paths of the ancient Silk Road. It runs from Kashgar in China to Abbottabad, Pakistan for 1300 km. An extension to southwest meets the Grand Trunk Road, at Hassanabdal, Pakistan. It is being connected to Gwadar port and the city of Rawalpindi in Pakistan.

In case of hostilities between India and China, the PLA Navy would find Gwadar port most convenient logistic location on the Indian Ocean. The strategic use of this highway in prior stocking of the port to avoid interdiction by air during active operations and due to the closure of the road in winters would help both China and Pakistan to enhance their operational capabilities.

This illegally occupied POK covers an area sizes up to approximately 85,793 sq. km. It was further divided in 1970 into two separate administrative divisions, namely, Mirpur-

Muzaffarabad (commonly referred to as Azad Jammu and Kashmir, by Pakistan) and the federally administered Gilgit-Baltistan. Being the northernmost part of PoK, Gilgit-Baltistan was earlier referred to as the "Northern Areas" in Pakistan. The Shaksgam Valley or the Trans Karakoram Tract is part of Hunza-Gilgit region of PoK, and is a disputed territory claimed by India but controlled by Pakistan. It borders Xinjiang Province of PRC to the north, the Northern areas of PoK to the south and west, and the Siachen Glacier region to the east. Situated between the Hindu Kush and Karakoram Range of mountains in the north and western Himalayas in the south, the geo-strategic placement of Gilgit-Baltistan makes it ever more significant for the country occupying it.

The region borders Pakistan's Director, Swat, Kohistan and Kaghan districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the west, the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan in its northwest, Xinjiang Province of China to its east and northeast, Azad Jammu and Kashmir under control of Pakistan to the southwest, and a 480 km-long LOC running alongside India in the southeast covering a total area of 74,600 sq km Gilgit-Baltistan is an intersection of Asia's massive landmass. It connects parts of West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and China. The economic linkages and benefits established through this region are visible especially to Pakistan, China, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The region provides for a passage to the critical trading routes stretching from West Asia and Africa through to China.

In order to access the mineral and energy-rich markets of Central Asian countries including Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, Gilgit-Baltistan became much more important to both and China have underscored the consequence of this corridor to further their geo-strategic objectives in the region. Making it more lucrative and communicable, China's western highway, known as the Lhasa-Kashgar or Xinjiang Highway which connects Xinjiang to Tibet, by linking Kashgar and Lhasa (3,105 km), from Quilanalai, branches off to the Khunjerab Pass and, subsequently, becomes the KKH right up to Gilgit.<sup>7</sup>

Comprehending the long-term importance of the highway, the Pakistan Highway Administration and China's state-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) signed an agreement in 2006 to upgrade and widen the highway from 10 to 30 meters. Besides this, the Pakistan and Chinese Railways have proposed 700 km Karakoram Rail Corridor through the Khunjerab Pass in the Karakoram Range. This corridor shall link Kashgar in Xinjiang to Havelian (adjoining Abbottabad) near Rawalpindi in northern Pakistan.

In order to put a check on the continuing revolts against political suppression and long-standing alienation, the Pakistan government granted "self-rule" to the Northern Areas in August 2009. Pakistan approved the "Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order" which made way for an elected Legislative Assembly and elected government. But, the ordinance has failed to bring about any legitimate political reform to region which has no politico-constitutional status or fundamental rights.

Although, currently Pakistan seems focuss to benefit from the geo-strategic placing of Gilgit-Baltistan, it might just be a matter of time when the region's political subjugation shall become its Achilles' heel. Reports are there that Pakistan is to likely leasing this area to China in the garb of constructing the rail network, since this arrangement would meet the requirements of both the countries.

China off, late, has also discovered that expansion beyond its boundaries is a two-way street. China not only exports influence, but is influenced in turn and not always for the best; Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism and separatism are problems that China has begun to face with increasingly following the opening of its overland links to Pakistan and other Central Asian countries. China will, therefore, be increasingly interested in how Pakistan and by extension, Afghanistan deal with rising Islamic sectarianism and fundamentalism, in order to safeguard its own domestic interests.

It was reported that a Chinese civil company (China Mobile) was also constructing cell towers for mobile networks in this region. However, some people were of the view that Pakistan was handing over de-facto control of the strategic Gilgit-Baltistan region in the Occupied Kashmir to China because of the simmering rebellion of the people against Islamabad. *The New York Times* in a report said that there were two important new developments in Gilgit-Baltistan; a simmering rebellion against the Pakistani rule and the influx of an estimated 7,000 to 11,000 soldiers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army in the area which is otherwise closed to the world. With the strategic equations taking twists and turns in South Asia, the importance of the region is now beginning to affect the Indian strategic health.

There are sufficient reasons for China to control this strategic area to assure unfettered road and rail access to the Gulf through Pakistan, for which it is building high-speed rail and road link. The link would enable Beijing to transport cargo and oil tankers from eastern China to the new Chinese built Pakistani Naval base at Gwadar, Pasni and Ormara in Baluchistan, just east of the Gulf in 48 hours. There are unconfirmed reports of the construction of 22 tunnels in secret locations, where even Pakistanis are barred to go. Tunnels would be necessary for a projected gas pipeline from Iran to China that would cross the Karakoram through Gilgit. "However use of these tunnels for storage of missiles cannot be ruled out", stated *The New York Times*. This theory may most likely be believed in the light of probable use of the KKH for the transfer of nuclear and missile equipment to Pakistan earlier.<sup>8</sup>

## STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

The land is mostly mountainous with Himalayan ranges along the northern borders crisscrossed with mountain ranges running north-south. These divide the state into five river valleys: the Kameng, the Subansiri, the Siang, the Lohit and the Tirap. High mountains and dense forests have prevented intercommunication between tribes living in different river valleys. It is rich in minerals and natural resources. The geographical isolation thus imposed, led different tribes to evolve their own dialects and grow with their distinct identities. It provides strategic depth to Brahmaputra valley and other Northeastern states of India. It has all weather communication system for any military purpose as compared to Aksai Chin. It provides security to Bhutan's Eastern flank by virtue of being contiguous to India. Tawang which is an important religious monastery is located on the periphery and is a sensitive issue between China and India.

In case Tawang is exposed, Bhutan would be in a pincer grip of China on both its flanks. This would also be detrimental to India's security interests, wherein China's borders would rest on the plains of Assam; posing a threat to the other North Eastern states of India. The Chinese obsession with the Tawang

Region is totally strategic in nature. In any future conflict with China this region offers the shortest route to Tibet thereby threatening China main land. India's communications infrastructure in this region was developed in World War II for US military aid to China and is still existent and is being further improved.

In terms of any air operations in this region Arunachal Pradesh would provide multi-layered air defense deployments on the ground as deterrence. Veiled references in the past were made by Indian official spokesmen that progress in this area could not be made as China was constantly pressurising India to accept a swap of Tawang in lieu of Aksai-Chin. China claims about 90,000 sq km (55,900 square miles) of Arunachal Pradesh along the border as part of its territory that it sees as "southern" Tibet and is keen to seek further depth to Tibet.

### CURRENT CRISIS ON DOKLAM

China had built a dirt track to the area near Doka La in 2005. They used to park their vehicles there and conduct foot patrols to the Jampheri ridge where the RBA maintained an outpost. Some time on June 16, the PLA construction party began road construction, and the RBA personnel sought to stop them on the basis of the Chinese commitment to maintain status quo in disputed areas. The Chinese say that as a goodwill gesture they had informed the Indian side, once in May and then again in early June, that they were planning the construction. Two days later, Indian Army personnel came down from Doka La to dissuade the Chinese as well and blocked their movement forward. Subsequently, the matter was taken up at the diplomatic level and also discussed at a Border Personnel Meeting at Nathu La on June 20. The public would only get a hint of the crisis on June 23, when newspapers reported that China had abruptly closed the Nathu La to pilgrims traveling to Kailash Mansarovar. The reports cited the Indian official spokesperson confirming this development, saying that "the matter is being discussed with the Chinese side." According to the reports, the Chinese side claimed that there were landslides in the mountain route on their side. However, the real story became apparent soon enough when the Chinese official spokesperson Geng Shuang acknowledged on June 26 that the yatra was indeed barred from the Nathu La due to "security concerns". The official said: "Recently, the Indian border troops crossed the China-India boundary at the Sikkim section and entered the Chinese territory, obstructing Chinese border troops' normal activities in Doklam. The Chinese side has taken proportionate measures in response." He pointed out that the Sikkim part of the Sino-Indian boundary had been defined by the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 which had "repeatedly" been confirmed by India.<sup>9</sup>

The Bhutanese Ambassador in New Delhi, Maj Gen (retd) V Namgyel, responded through an interview that appeared in *The Hindu* on June 28, noting that the road construction was in an area which is disputed between China and Bhutan and was, in fact moving towards a camp of the RBA at Zompelri (Jampheri) ridge. He said, "Bhutan has conveyed that the road construction by the PLA is not in keeping with the agreements between China and Bhutan. We have asked them to stop and refrain from changing the status quo." The Bhutanese government issued a press release on June 29, reaffirming Namgyel's remarks. It provided a backdrop to the events: "On 16th June 2017, the Chinese Army started constructing a motorable road from Dokola in the Doklam area towards the Bhutan Army camp at Zompelri... Bhutan has conveyed to the Chinese side, both on the ground and through the diplomatic

channel, that the construction of the road inside Bhutanese territory is a direct violation of the agreements [on maintaining the status quo pending a settlement] and affects the process of demarcating the boundary between our two countries. Bhutan hopes that the status quo in the Doklam area will be maintained as before 16 June 2017."<sup>10</sup>

### CONCLUSION

China developments in these areas in early 1959 have raised doubt about Chinese intentions. In January 1959 Zhou En Lai wrote to Nehru, that a border dispute did exist between the two countries. It was a complete U-turn from his earlier confirmation; other was an illegal quelling of rebellion in Tibet and accusing India of interfering in Tibetan affairs. Nehru's understanding of promises made by Zhou Enlai on China's willingness to accept the McMahon Line and preservation of Tibetan autonomy got a jolt and viewed by Nehru as signs of betrayal by China, and a hostile step towards India.

The Chinese have changed the map of the border between India and China. India maintains that the border dispute covers 4,057 km along LAC, China now states that the dispute was confined to 2,000 km, that is Arunachal Pradesh, and discounting western sector altogether. There are disagreement on both sides regarding claims of where the LAC is. To strive for the settlement of the China-India boundary question and to make greater progress in the China-India strategic and cooperative partnership, both sides have to show restraint. In the last few decades, focus has been on establishing channels of communication between the two governments to deal with crisis situations and improve border management as a whole.

Many such groups and committees have been formed but it gives an impression that the Chinese are eager to take steps towards solving the border issue. However, the drafts and meetings of repetitive nature, reiterating the same points and regularly violating the LAC is indicative of each of the Chinese is tend to positively more forward to settle the boundary issue.

The present crisis has shown that today, any resolution of Bhutan's boundary issue must be embedded in the bigger picture of a Sino-Indian border settlement. With the Sino-Indian and the China-Bhutan processes facing a dead-end, the time has come for the countries to explore new institutional mechanisms of resolving their border dispute and maintaining peace and tranquility on their border.

Both China and India will not go for war today. But both the nations are simultaneously modernizing their militaries to face any serious eventuality. The over-all national security policies appear to maintain status quo till comprehensive national power reaches a level where surplus can be invested in war making.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Times of India, New Delhi, 4 September 1993.
- [2] RK. Chatterjee, "India's Land Borders: Problems and Challenges", New Delhi Sterling Publishers (P) Ltd, 1978, pp.35-51.
- [3] R.A. Huttenback, 1964:201-207.
- [4] G.N. Rao, "The India-China Boundary: A Reappraisal", London, Asia Publishing House, 1968, p. 56.
- [5] The Hindu, 27 April, 2013.

- [6] Z.Khalid, "Pakistan in The Pamir Knot, Geostrategic Imperatives" Lahore: Vanguard, 1987, p. 115.
- [7] V.S.Verma, "Geo- strategy and the Karakoram Highway", as given in "Sino-Pakistani Strategic Co-operation", Peace Initiatives, Vol.V, Nos.III-V1, May -December 1999, p.16.
- [8] B. Raman, "Gilgit & Baltistan, China & North Korea," South Asia Analysis Group, *SAAG Paper*, No. 289, 7 August 2001.
- [9] Foreign Ministry Spokesperson GengShuang's Remarks on Indian Border Troops Overstepping China-India Boundary at Sikkim Section, 2017/06/26 [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2535\\_665405/t1473280.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1473280.shtml)
- [10] Press Release Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan June 29, 2017 <http://www.mfa.gov.bt/press-releases/press-release-272.htm>