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INDIA-CHINA BOUNDARY DISPUTES: AN OVERVIEW

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In May 2015, as the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi prepared to embark on a visit to China, foreign policy analysts began to speculate on what might be achieved by the visit. One of the most important questions to be extensively discussed was what steps the two leaders might take to address the decades-old dispute over border demarcation between India and China.

Questions over the India-China border are not a new phenomenon. They are asked whenever there is a Sino-Indian state visit. Despite having close to \$100 billion of trade between them, China and India have failed to bring their frontier disputes to an end. In the 1980s and 1990s it was thought that the increasing economic cooperation between the two countries would act as a prompt to resolve their political disputes, but it has not. Military stand-offs and confrontations between border guards from India and China occur at regular intervals. To address their boundary disputes, they have engaged in frequent dialogues (17 rounds of focused dialogues can be counted between 1988 and 2015), but nothing substantive has yet been yielded through such engagements.

The boundary disputes between India and China have their ultimate origin in the ‘Great Game’ played during the British Empire. At present, the two main areas of dispute along the Himalayan frontier are the western sector (Aksai Chin around 37,250 sq km/14,380 square miles) and the eastern sector (Arunachal Pradesh, around 83,740 sq km/32,330 sq mile).² This article traces the roots of the boundary³ disputes between India and China and attempts to discuss sources of tensions and probable solutions.⁴

History

The eastern sector and the McMahon line

The eastern sector consists of three parts: the western part comprising the Tawang and Subansiri regions, and the central and eastern parts consisting of the Dihang and Lohit regions.⁵ In this sector the genesis of the boundary dispute between India and China lies in the Simla Convention, which was held from October 1913 to July 1914 between British India, China and Tibet.⁶

The Simla Convention was held in the aftermath of the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in China with the intention of settling the status of Tibet. British India had signed treaties with Qing China concerning the borders of Burma and Sikkim with Tibet in the late 19th century.⁷ Before this period, the important trading town of Tawang was regarded as being under the control of Tibet. After Britain's brief intervention in Tibet following Francis Younghusband's 1904 expedition, Britain recognised Chinese claims to suzerainty over the territory in a 1906 agreement with China, and also in the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907. These agreements respectively provided that Britain would not annex Tibetan territory, and that neither Britain nor Russia would negotiate with Tibet directly, but only through China as an intermediary. However, after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, the Dalai Lama regained power and declared Tibet independent, a move that was not recognised by the new Republic of China. In these circumstances, the Simla Convention was regarded as a necessity to resolve the situation: it was the hope of the British to secure their colonial interests in South Asia by maintaining Tibet as a buffer state between India and China.

The Convention led to an Accord that Tibet would be divided into two regions: Inner Tibet, which would be under full Chinese control, and Outer Tibet, which is approximately coextensive with the current-day Tibet Autonomous Region of China. China agreed that the region would be under Chinese suzerainty but would never be converted into a province of China, and the British likewise agreed never to occupy it. On this basis, the Accord was initialled by the representatives of the three parties on 27 April 1914.

However, two days after Chen I Fan, the Chinese representative, put his name to the document, the Chinese Government repudiated his signature. Their objections to the Simla Accord⁸ were solely in regard to the

boundary between Inner Tibet and China and between Inner Tibet and Outer Tibet. However, apparently in the absence of Chen I Fan, the British representative Sir Henry McMahon made an agreement with Lhasa over the boundary between Outer Tibet and India. McMahon's proposal was to move the boundary line northwards from the foothills of the Assam Himalayas to its crest line, so that India would gain the town of Tawang and approximately 2,000 square miles of territory. The border proposal was accompanied by a bi-lateral trade agreement. However, in the absence of Chinese approval, this new boundary, which came to be known as the 'McMahon Line', was not at that time endorsed by the Government of India or actively enforced on the ground.

The position began to alter in the 1930s. The Government in New Delhi started to become concerned at China's increasing interest and presence in Tibet, and hence were inclined to become more hawkish on the matter of this particular frontier. When, in 1935, the British plant-hunter Kingdon Ward entered Tibet via Tawang without the permission of the authorities at Lhasa and was arrested, the McMahon line was revisited. Olaf Caroe, at that time a Deputy Secretary in the Indian Foreign and Political Department, researched the question of Tibetan authority in the region and virtually rediscovered the 1914 Simla Accord, which had to all intents and purposes been forgotten. Caroe held that the 1914 bi-lateral agreement between Britain and Tibet was valid and strongly advocated that it should be enforced. The text of the agreement, which up to then had been kept secret, was published. The McMahon line was indicated on the Survey of India maps, and in 1938 a small British patrol was sent to Tawang. This latter action brought a sharp protest from Lhasa. The Tibetan Cabinet, the Kashag, stated that Tawang and the surrounding territory had undoubtedly been Tibetan before 1914, and that acceptance of the McMahon line was contingent on British assistance in securing a definite border between China and Tibet – an objective in which the 1914 Conference had failed. China maintained that any agreement reached between Britain and Tibet in 1914 was invalid without their approval.⁹

The British did not attempt to repeat the 1938 patrol of Tawang. However, towards the end of the Second World War, the British, fearing that the Chinese would become more assertive in Tibet, attempted to enforce the McMahon Line more vigorously. The policy was inherited by India on independence. In 1954 the sovereign India recognised and adopted the McMahon line as the border between India and China.

Although China formally contested this claim and sought a boundary demarcation along the lines of pre the 1914 accord, the Chinese position throughout the 1950s on the problem appeared ambiguous to Nehru. Following discussions with Zhou En-Lai in 1954, Nehru recorded

the Chinese Premier had never heard of this [McMahon] line before though of course the then Chinese Government had dealt with this matter and not accepted the line Although he thought that this line, established by British imperialists, was not fair, nevertheless, because it was an accomplished fact and because of the friendly relations which existed between China and the countries concerned, namely, India and Burma, the Chinese government were of the opinion that they should give recognition to this McMahon line.¹⁰

China was content to substantially accept the Eastern portion of the McMahon Line as the basis for the boundary demarcation between China and Burma (Myanmar) in 1960.¹¹

The western sector: the Johnson-Ardagh v Macartney-MacDonald lines

India and China have had long-standing disputes over the Ladakh and Himalayan frontiers in north India. The boundary of Jammu and Kashmir with Xinjiang and Tibet is about 1,100 miles. Of this the frontier with Ladakh forms two-thirds.¹²

The question of the Indo-China frontier in this region originally fell to Britain 1846, when it added Jammu and Kashmir to its expanding territorial empire in South Asia.¹³ Shortly before this, the Sikh Empire of the Punjab had annexed Ladakh to Jammu, and in 1841 had proceeded to invade Tibet. Following a conflict with the Chinese forces in Tibet, who themselves staged a counter-attack on Leh and Ladakh, the Sikhs and Chinese made a peace treaty in 1842. Signed by the representatives of Kashmir, the Dalai Lama and the Emperor of China, its terms included recognition of the traditional frontiers of Ladakh and Tibet, and that neither side was to transgress or interfere with each other's territorial integrity. In 1847, following the British assumption of the Punjab, the Chinese Government informed the British that as the boundary was "sufficiently" and distinctly fixed, there was no need for additional measures for fixing it.¹⁴ Nonetheless, although parts of the border were clearly recognised, particularly the Karakoram Pass and the Pangong Lake, other areas, in particular in the remote and scarcely-inhabited Aksai Chin, were not demarcated or otherwise defined.

This lack of clarity was not to be resolved throughout the entire period of British rule. An early proposal in 1865 by William Johnson of the Trigonometrical Survey of India, following an unauthorised journey from Ladakh as far as Khotan, for a boundary which included Aksai Chin as part of India found no official favour from the British. A modified version of this line, the 'Johnson-Ardagh Line', which followed the Crest of the Kun Lun Mountains, proposed in 1897 by Sir John Ardagh, then Director of Military Intelligence, was also not accepted by the British at that point, in spite of arguments that it would be defensible against the danger of Russian expansion by way of that region. In 1896, following discussions between George Macartney, the British Consul-General at Kashgar, and local Chinese officials, a further proposal for the frontier to follow the Karakoram Mountains and allowing China to take control of Aksai Chin was submitted to the British Government. This latter line was considered to be defensible against any threat from Russia and was accepted by the British. A note to this effect was sent to the Chinese Government in 1899 by the British Minister in China, Sir Claude MacDonald – earning the line the name 'the Macartney-MacDonald Line'. Macartney was informally notified that there was no official objection to the British proposal, but no formal reply was received.¹⁵

Despite this apparent resolution, there was no proper settlement. Following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty and the end of the First World War, the British advanced a claim on Aksai Chin up to the Johnson-Ardagh Line. In 1927, the British adjusted their claim back to a line based on the Karakoram Range. However, during the Second World War following a further perceived threat of Soviet penetration, the British claim returned to the Johnson-Ardagh Line. Nonetheless, up until the time of Indian Independence the British had made no attempts to establish a presence in the remote Aksai Chin region. British and Chinese maps printed over the period showed a variety of boundaries amongst them, and the border remained without formal demarcation.

India and Pakistan jointly inherited this problem from the British Empire, following the de facto division of Jammu and Kashmir between India and Pakistan after the first Kashmir war in 1948. In 1963 Pakistan resolved its territorial disputes in the region with China, accepting the Macartney-MacDonald Line as the basis of the boundary (a settlement not recognised by India, which still claims the land thus ceded by Pakistan). However, the problems continued for India post-Independence. In 1954, the Johnson-Ardagh Line was claimed by India to be the boundary in the region, with Indian insistence that Aksai Chin was a long-standing part

of Ladakh. However, during this period China, following its annexation of Tibet in 1951, constructed a road between Xinjiang and Western Tibet through Aksai Chin, whose existence was only discovered by the Indian Government in 1957. The Chinese position was that the Macartney-MacDonald Line was the only frontier which had been approved by agreement with the Chinese and that they were already in actual possession of Aksai Chin. There were tentative efforts throughout the 1950s to resolve the disputes diplomatically with Nehru's aspirations to create a Sino-Indian alliance, but towards the end of the decade a number of incidents in the border areas led to an increase in tension. The tensions were further inflamed by the Government of India's decision to give asylum to the Dalai Lama and others who fled Tibet after the Chinese People's Liberation Army launched an operation to crush the 1959 Tibet Rebellion. In 1960 Zhou En-Lai unofficially offered to drop the claims in the eastern sector in return for India withdrawing claims over Aksai Chin, but Nehru refused to make any concessions or to negotiate until China withdrew troops from Aksai Chin.¹⁶

Steps taken to resolve the boundary disputes

After November 1961, to maintain its claim over these regions, India launched a more overtly confrontational 'forward policy', which involved establishing military positions north of the existing Chinese posts in the disputed territories in an attempt to cut off Chinese supply lines, and force a withdrawal. This was not only provocative but was based on an assumption that China would not retaliate.¹⁷ At that time China was reeling under the disastrous impact of its Great Leap Forward programme of economic reform and facing threats of a military invasion from Taiwan and from US involvement in proxy conflict through Laos. However, once the Chinese situation improved China attacked India in both eastern and western sectors on 20 October 1962.¹⁸ The armed conflict, which lasted for a month, resulted in Chinese penetration considerably south of the McMahon line in the eastern sector and up to the Macartney-McDonald line in the western sector. When China declared a unilateral ceasefire on 21 November 1962, they withdrew the People's Liberation Army forces to 20 km north behind the McMahon Line in the East, but continued in occupation of Aksai Chin, though again holding the PLA 20 km behind the Johnson-Ardagh Line.

The first attempt after the 1962 conflict to resolve the boundary dispute by way of mediation was made at Colombo. The Colombo Conference, an initiative taken by six non-aligned Afro-Asian countries – Ceylon (Sri

Lanka), Burma (Myanmar), Indonesia, Cambodia, the United Arab Republic and Ghana – to break the stalemate was held on 10–12 December 1962. It proposed, in the western sector, that a 20-km wide demilitarised strip around the cease-fire line in Ladakh “be administered by civilian posts of both sides”, and in the eastern sector that the forces of India and China should separate their forces without the need for a specific demilitarised zone. China, however, objected to the establishment of civilian posts by India and unilaterally established seven posts of its own.¹⁹ Negotiations on the basis of the Colombo Conference were difficult, in that India interpreted the proposals as something to be accepted in their totality, whereas China understood them to be a basis for further discussion. India was also concerned that the acceptance of a withdrawal around the cease-fire line – the ‘Line of Actual Control’ – would legitimise the Chinese presence in areas which had not practically been occupied by China before the 1962 War.

After the 1962 War the first high-level step towards establishing further negotiations to resolve the boundary issues was made by Nehru on 17 May 1964, when he stated that India would be prepared to negotiate with China if the Chinese Government agreed to remove their posts in Ladakh. This was contemptuously rejected by the Chinese Premier Zhou En-Lai and accusations were made that India was proposing these ‘array of obstacles’ to make negotiations impossible.²⁰ Pandit Nehru, in a letter to Zhou En-Lai, also suggested various constructive steps including international arbitration that could resolve the boundary issue in peaceful way, but this was rejected by the Chinese government.²¹

Post 1962, relations remained difficult. There were regular skirmishes between border guards, one of which at Nathu La in September 1967 escalated to a five-day exchange of heavy artillery with the death of 62 Indian soldiers. China supported Pakistan in its 1965 war with India and built a second road across territory claimed by India, connecting Xinjiang with Pakistan. The 1963 boundary settlement between China and Pakistan (described above) which ceded territory to China claimed by India also weighed down relations.

However, India’s policy towards China took a major shift under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. She ordered India’s special frontier force to draw back at least ten kilometres from their original position along the Indo-Chinese border and also dispatched an Indian ambassador to China in July 1976, thereby restoring the diplomatic relationship to the ambassadorial level some 15 years after it was downgraded in 1961.²²

When Mrs Gandhi made a return to power in 1980 the then Chinese foreign minister Huang Hua visited India in June 1981. At that time the two sides agreed to resume talks on the border issue at the level of vice-ministers, annually by rotation in their capital.²³ But still confrontation at the border was a regular affair, which increased in the middle of the 1980s with the substantive changes taking place in the international order.²⁴ The Wangdong incident in the eastern sector in 1986, where Chinese troops entered territory claimed by India in the Sumdorong Chu Valley in Arunachal Pradesh and built helicopter landing facilities – an incident which brought the threat of another fully fledged border war – prompted the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to visit China and hold talks with the Chinese leadership on boundary issues.

It is reported that during this visit to China in 1988, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping had expressed his intention to leave the settlement of the territorial dispute to a “future generation”.²⁵ Working in the spirit of addressing their border disputes the two countries agreed in 1988 to establish a Joint Working Group (JWG). As a follow-on to it, in 1993 they set up an expert group comprising diplomats, military officials and cartographers for the purpose of subjecting to closer scrutiny each side’s position and clarifications on the Line of Actual Control (LAC).²⁶ On the military front, in 1996 the two armies committed to limit the number of field-army troops, border-defence forces, paramilitary forces and major categories of armaments along the LAC; to avoid holding large-scale military exercises near the LAC and to notify the other side of exercises involving one brigade (5,000 troops) or more; not to discharge firearms, cause biodegradation, use hazardous chemicals, set off explosions or hunt with firearms within two kilometres of the LAC; to hold regular meetings of border representatives; and to set up hot-line telecommunication links between local military headquarters along the LAC.²⁷ To assist the JWG, Special Representatives (SR) were appointed in 2003 after the then Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee visited China and stressed the importance of including political viewpoints in the solving of border disputes. Yet since 1988, despite these initiatives, more than a quarter of a century has passed but the dispute has not been satisfactorily resolved or managed.²⁸

To further de-escalate their tensions, in 2005 the two countries signed a treaty setting out guiding principles to manage incidents at the border as well both sides’ aspirations for a final peaceful settlement of all boundary disputes. Again, in 2013 India and China signed a border defence cooperation agreement to ensure that border patrols could not trigger an exchange of fire between the border guards of the two sides.

Unfortunately, the disputes remain. During his visit to China in 2015, the Indian Prime Minister maintained “On the boundary question, we agreed that we continue to explore a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable resolution. We both reiterated our strong commitment to make all efforts to maintain peace and tranquility in the border region”.²⁹

Even after these more recent steps to defuse tensions, they still occur but have not escalated above an ‘accepted’ level. In 2013, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s (19–22 May) visit to India was preceded by a Chinese intrusion in Ladakh near the Daulat Beg Oldie. China withdrew only after India agreed to demolish its bunker in Chumar, a concession which China had been seeking for several months. The joint statement between the leaders on the occasion of the visit did not touch the intrusion issue.³⁰ A similar incident was repeated in the western sector in 2014, following the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The Chinese government continues to consider certain parts of the eastern and western sectors as its own sovereign territory. Any suggestion to the contrary is met with a strong reaction by the Government of China and Chinese media. For example, on 17 January 2015, replying to a question after delivering the Sapru House Lecture on “Special Partnership for the Era of the Indo-Pacific” at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), the Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida mentioned the status of Arunachal Pradesh (China calls it North East Frontier Agency). There was an outcry amongst the Chinese media, and a protest was lodged by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The impact was such that Kishida had to defend himself. He told the reporters in Brussels on 19 January that “India basically and effectively controls [the region], and China and India are continuing consultations on the border issue. I made the remark taking these facts into account”.³¹

Solution and stymie

As the root of problem lies in the past, the solution can be found only after re-visiting the history. Incremental changes or agreements can only resolve the immediate issues, which still leave a lot of space for military confrontation between the two countries. Re-visiting the past to resolve the issue demands compromise, adjustments and political determination. This is possible only when there is a consensus to do so among the political leadership, institutions and dominant political

constituencies. This is undoubtedly a difficult exercise on account of bitter memories of history, as well as existing socio-political narratives about each other in the respective countries. A move to address the bitterness requires a re-negotiation with history and review of the past to sketch out a draft for the future. Unless this frank reassessment happens the likelihood of settling the India-China boundary issues through a series of incremental measures, as has taken place over the last quarter century, is bleak.

China is certainly capable of compromise. Taylor Fravel maintains

Beijing has often been very flexible about principles in reaching territorial settlements with other states. The decisive factor is the judgment of China's leaders about what best serves their national interests – flexibility or inflexibility on principle. In relation to India, rather than being flexible Beijing has chosen to stand on inflexible principle, making a solution of the territorial conflict less likely.³²

As an example, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union China took the first step with the newly emerging Central Asian Republics to settle its border disputes with them. In a few of these cases, it even made significant adjustments to compromise on its pre-1990 territorial demands. As regards India, in previous years India indicated that a solution on the lines of an 'LAC plus' might be acceptable, which would consist of the status quo remaining in the eastern sector accompanied by Chinese concessions in the western sector. Further discussions after 1985, again taken up in 2005, looked at a compromise where China hinted at making concessions over Aksai Chin but only in return for significant concessions in the eastern sector; it should be noted that given the ever increasing developments in transport infrastructure and connections to Tibet, the strategic importance of Aksai Chin to China is not as great as it was in the past. Nevertheless, no mutually agreeable solution has yet been found.³³

In 2015, during her visit to China, India's External Affairs Minister, Mrs Sushma Swaraj, had talked about the need for 'out-of-the-box' solutions to resolve long-pending territorial disputes between India and China.³⁴ These 'out-of-the-box' solutions may be similar to those mentioned above to resolve boundary disputes between the two countries.

India's and China's divergent national interests remain a major hurdle in resolving their boundary disputes, prompting them to maintain a confrontational posture. Both of them are parallel rising powers, who are (wrongly) perceived to be bound to collide over time. Their confrontation is further escalated by continuing interactions with each other's arch-

rivals. China maintains a close relationship with Pakistan, and is suspected (sometimes correctly) by the Indian establishment of supporting it even at the cost of India's security interests. In 2015 China gave support at the United Nations to Pakistan over the matter of Zaikur Rehman Lakhvi, a ringleader of the 2008 attacks on Mumbai. Coming immediately after the visit by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to China in 2015, this caused a significant souring in the relationship of India and China. Likewise India's engagement with the USA and Japan has caused discontent in Beijing. In January 2015, whilst the US President Barak Obama was in India, a carefully worded article appeared in the *Global Times* and *People's Daily*, the official newspapers of the Chinese Communist Party, cautioning India not to fall into the "trap" being laid to pit New Delhi against Beijing by Washington as part of its "pivot to Asia" doctrine, but voicing an offer by Xi Jinping to lift China's strategic partnership with India to a "higher level" in recompense for such carefulness.³⁵ As a checkmate, during Obama's visit to India, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif embarked on an official visit to China. The Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, in his meeting with General Raheel Sharif, stated that Pakistan was China's irreplaceable all-weather friend and that both countries were part of a shared destiny.³⁶

Conclusion

The two sides could resolve their international boundary problems by simply accepting the areas and regions which are at present under their control. This seems to be an easy solution, but in reality it is not. The two countries have to declare that they are accepting their present situation and ultimately have to avoid confrontation on lines drawn in the past. But in taking such a path, they may not be supported by their respective domestic constituencies, political institutions and international actors. Hence, the 'out-of-the-box' solution still awaits discovery.

NOTES

1. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Indian Council of World Affairs.
2. David Scott, 'Sino-India Territorial Issue: The "Razor's Edge"', in Harsh V. Pant (Ed.), *The Rise of China: Implications for India*. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2012, pp. 195–217. There are also disputed areas in north India over the Himalayan frontiers in Uttarkhand and Himachal Pradesh, and as regards Tibet the Nilang-Jadhang area, Bara Hoti, Laphthal and Sangcha Malla.

3. In this article a clear distinction is drawn between the words ‘boundary’, ‘border’ and ‘frontier’, which are not synonyms. A boundary line has to be very accurately depicted, with precise coordinates and marked by well-known geographical features. For it to be an effective instrument, it must not only be properly delineated on a map but also visible and effectively demarcated on the ground. This can be categorised into: natural boundaries, astronomical or mathematical boundaries and historical boundaries. ‘Border’ refers to zones of indeterminate width that form the outermost parts of a state that are bounded on one side by a national boundary. ‘Frontier’ is a vague and indefinite term. It has two conceptual meanings. The first concept means a political frontier that divides two states, and it need not be under the control of either state. The second concept of a frontier defines it with reference to ‘settlements’ within a single country. It represents the distinction between *occupied* and *controlled land*. Many countries prefer to use ‘frontier zones’ rather than boundary lines because it absolves them from negotiating and policing specific boundary lines that may entail a heavy financial expenditure. Definitions used in Ranjit Singh Kalha, *India-China Boundary Issue: Quest for Settlement*. New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2014, pp. 2–3.
4. This author has published a number of essays and papers on India-China relations, and some of the ideas and materials from these papers are unavoidably repeated here. The author also acknowledges the assistance from the Editor of the Asian Affairs Journal for suggestions as to historical material which has been incorporated into this article.
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6. Manjari Chatterjee Miller, *Wronged by Empire: Post Imperial Ideology and Foreign Policy in India and China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 60.
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12. ‘India-China Border Problem’, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, December 22, 1959, p. 2.

13. A.G. Noorani, *India-China Boundary Problem 1846-1947: History and Diplomacy*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.
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15. See James Barnard Calvin, *The China-India Border War*. Virginia: CSC, 1984.
16. See Robert S. Ross and Alastair Iain Johnston, 'China's Decision for War with India in 1962', in *New Approaches to the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005.
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21. 'India-China Conflict', Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi, February 1965, p. 15.
22. Muchkund Dubey, *India's Foreign Policy: Coping with the Changing World*. New Delhi: Pearson, 2013, p. 195.
23. Ibid.
24. In particular the decline of the USSR, a rapprochement between the USA and China but a decline in USSR-China relations, and also a perception that India supported the Soviet presence in Afghanistan.
25. Tansen Sen, 'Hindi Chini Shy Shy'. *Times of India*, September 22, 2014.
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