

LARS-ERIK NYMAN

TAWANG—A CASE STUDY OF BRITISH FRONTIER POLICY IN THE HIMALAYAS

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the reasons for the British neglect of the fact that the Tawang region of the westernmost Assam Himalaya was as Tibetan as the Chumbi valley. Was it merely due to geographical-strategical naiveté or did it form part of a greater *quid pro quo* scheme of the Simla Conference in 1914? With the help of available official documents and the Bell Papers in the India Office, I will try to trace the development from a cartographical annexation of Tawang in 1914 to the sudden rediscovery and hustle to resolve this boundary question during the late 1930s.*

I. GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION AND PRE-SIMLA CONNECTIONS WITH BRITISH INDIA

The wedge-shaped region of Tawang, 10,000 feet above sea level, with an area of 2,000 square miles in the westernmost Assam Himalaya adjacent to the Kingdom of Bhutan, can for practical reasons be subdivided into three main zones. In the extreme north is the triangular space of Tawang proper. Here the great Tibetan monastery of Tawang, founded in the seventeenth century and a daughter house of the Drepung monastery near Lhasa, is the dominating feature. Southeast of the Se La (Pass), 13,940 feet, the second zone limited by the valley of the Bichom tributary of the Kameng river includes the administrative center of Dirangdzong. The valley of the Tenga tributary of the Kameng, which forms the third zone, is separated from the Bichom by

* The original British sources derive partly from the Foreign Office (FO) files of the Public Record Office, and partly from the India Office Library and Records (IO). The IO documents include the Political and Secret files (L/P & S/), the Collections (Coll.) and the European Manuscripts (EUR.MSS.).

the Bombdi La of 9,640 feet. Here the villages of Rupa and Shergaon are separated by only some thirty miles as the crow flies from Udalguri in the Assam plains. A very important trade route from Tibet to India, which ran through the length of the Tawang region, was made famous in 1959 as the flight trek of the Dalai Lama. For rice the Tibetan merchants traded silver, gold dust, wool and salt. Tawang, or Mönyul in Tibetan, is inhabited by Mönpas similar to those of Eastern Bhutan and to a large extent Tibetanized in language and culture. They form a community distinct from the various uncivilized tribes of Assam Himalaya. Tawang proper was an integral part of the Tibetan district of Tsöna. The two district governors (Dzongpön) spent the cold weather period in Tawang and moved for the summer to Tsönadzong in the north. The two other zones south of Se La were the domain of the Tawang monastery but, as a whole, the Tawang region was governed by the Trukdri, a council of six, seated in Tawang, which included the Dzongpöns of Tsöna and the Abbot of Tawang.

However, whether the Tawang region was governed directly by Dzongpöns appointed from Lhasa or indirectly by officials from the Tawang monastery is a minor problem because in a medieval federacy like interwar Tibet the combinations for governing outlying districts were legion. It is therefore an anachronism to use contemporary terms from western international law when defining suzerainty in Inner Asia. Summarily it should be stated that Tawang proper north of the Se La constituted an integral part of Tibet, while the rest of the region, being a monastic fief, can only partially be considered as a fullfledged district of Tibet. But the *ula*, an indirect taxation for the villages to provide travellers in government duty with men and animals for transport in stages, existed unbroken all over the Tawang region.¹

In Capt. Pemberton's 1838 report on Bhutan, Tawang is referred to as "a tract of country dependent on Lhasa and forming an integral portion of Tibet territory." But after the Burmese war of 1824—26, when Assam came under British control, the British assumed the maintenance of relations which had previously existed between the sovereigns of Assam on the one hand and the Bhutanese and Tibetans on the other. The so-called *duars* (subsidies) were taken over along with Assam, and a system of joint occupation was continued in the foothills.

¹ Mainly drawn from F. M. Bailey, *No Passport to Tibet*, (London, 1957) & Alastair Lamb, *The McMahan Line*, Vol. II, (London, 1966).

For the later annexation in 1884 of Kuriapara a *posa* of Rs. 5,000/—was paid annually to the "Tawang raja," which shows that Tawang was not treated as connected with Bhutan. Rs. 500 of this sum reached Drepung monastery near Lhasa.²

Very soon the British also discovered the importance of the trade route through Tawang. The first step taken by them was to establish at Udalguri in the Assam plains an annual fair, which proved to be a success. In 1873 a boundary alignment about eleven miles north of Udalguri was agreed upon between the British and Tibetan officials from Lhasa, who happened to be on a tour of inspection.

The campaigns by Chao Ehr-feng resulted in Chinese troops being sent to Tsöna, but only the outbreak of the Chinese Revolution in 1911 prevented Chinese officials from penetrating the Tawang region down to the British border. The Indian General Staff was, however, alarmed by the prospects of having Chinese troops on the threshold of the Assam plains and wanted the rectification of the boundary by incorporating this wedge into British territory. An even more advanced frontier than the McMahon Line of 1914 was proposed, suggesting that Tsöna should be included in the British territory.

II. THE 1914 SIMLA CONFERENCE

During the Spring of 1913, the British, worried by a possible new Chinese attempt to restore the lost suzerainty over Tibet, wanted a tripartite conference to solve definitely the Tibetan question. The British manipulations before the Conference actually started were manifold and were met with Chinese obstruction. First the British tried to make a former Assistant-Amban of Lhasa, Wen Tsung-yao, head of the Chinese delegation, since it was thought that he disagreed with the principle of the five races.³ This venture did not turn out well, but the British-Indian plans for a conference on Indian ground were a complete success. Simla was chosen because there, more than at Darjeeling, the Tibetan delegation could be guarded from Chinese

² FO 371/20963—F 363/11/10: A quotation from "Political Missions to Bhootan, Calcutta 1865" by Sir B. J. Gould in 1937.

³ A point that Alastair Lamb denies (a.a. p. 466) on no grounds at all, but according to a report from a Major Robertson, who actually met Wen in Shanghai, Wen uttered a.o. "The Tibetans were a different race to the Chinese" and the "overbearing manner" on the side of the Chinese must be put to an end. L/P&S/10/340—P 1164/1913: Jordan to FO, Peking June 28, 1912.

intrigues. "At Simla we could exercise much more effective control over the proceedings . . .," the Viceroy announced to the India Office.⁴

Another disturbing feature of the Conference was the secret negotiations between Charles Bell, the Political Officer of Sikkim, and the Tibetan delegate Lönchen Shatra at Gyantse in Tibet. Bell quite frankly advised the Tibetans to assemble all available documents on China and Kham. It can be seen from the intercepted telegrams of Lu Hsing Chi, the Chinese agent in Calcutta, that his government was aware of the fact that "secret negotiations are in progress between Tibet and the Government of India; letters passing between them are not only numerous but long; they can have nothing but a sinister object in these secret discussions."⁵ Later on, the Chinese agent stated that he had placed a counter-spy in the Lönchen's retinue,⁶ but contrary to Dorothy Woodman's view of Lu's importance,⁷ the isolation and supervision of him in Calcutta by the British authorities proved very effective. The British role of the honest broker was thus seriously undermined in the eyes of the Chinese. The Tibetan Government later clad their acknowledgements in the following words: ". . . you (Bell) gave instructions on many important points for the good of Tibet. The result was that many important matters, which the Tibetans did not know, were included in the Treaty . . .,"⁸ when Lönchen Shatra was ill and unable to attend a meeting, he was represented by Bell, an arrangement Chen I-fan, the Chinese delegate, accepted!⁹ This intimate relationship between Charles Bell and the Tibetan delegation dominated the negotiations on the special British-Tibetan problems to such a high degree that B. J. Gould, another prominent political officer of Sikkim, proclaimed the then Sir Charles Bell "the real father of the McMahon line,"¹⁰ a statement which will be scrutinized later in connection with Tawang during the 1930s. In Neville Maxwell's opinion, this cooperation was "not far short of collusion."¹¹

⁴ L/P & S/10/341—P 2376/1913: Viceroy to IO, 15 June 1913.

⁵ L/P & S/10/393—P 3096/2350/13: Calcutta to Peking, 1st July 1913.

⁶ L/P & S/10/393—P 4272/2350/13: Calcutta to Peking, 14. 9. 13.

⁷ Dorothy Woodman, *Himalayan Frontiers*, (New York, 1969), pp. 155—157.

⁸ EUR.MSS. F 80/5a 31: Chief Minister Shokang to Bell, undated (a. 1920).

⁹ L/P & S/10/344—P 1602/1914: Proceedings of the 6th meeting, 7. 4. 1914.

¹⁰ L/P & S/12/Coll. 36/26—P. Z. 3235/1940: Tibet: Factors in Policy by Sir B. J. Gould, 18th April 1940.

¹¹ Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, (London, 1970), p. 47.

The Simla Conference as a whole failed when the Chinese Government refused to recognize the validity of the initialling done by their delegate Chen I-fan. The Foreign Secretary to the Government of India concludes that "the Simla Convention has not been signed by the Chinese Government or accepted by the Russian Government and is, therefore, for the present invalid." Only the Anglo-Tibetan Declaration was considered valid.¹²

For the outlines of the McMahon Line, Alastair Lamb points out the important strategic reasons for advancing the boundary and, in the case of Tawang, he notes the monastic influence south of Se La, which originally was thought of as a reasonable boundary. However, the return of Bailey and Morshead from their Transhimalayan journey up along the Tsangpo-valley and back through Tawang provided Sir Henry McMahon with invaluable, up-to-date information. Influence from the Tawang monastery could jeopardize future British administration south of Se La. Therefore McMahon thought it wise to incorporate the monastery into India.¹³ To achieve this goal Charles Bell was ordered to press Lönchen Shatra to accept Tawang as British territory, but no Tibetan enthusiasm was shown at all. Eventually, after further pressure, the Lönchen promised to leave the decision to the Lhasa authorities. The incomes from Tawang must, however, as before, go to those Tibetan landholding monasteries and noble families.¹⁴ The answer came very soon: ". . . in view of the great help rendered by the British Government in this China-Tibet Conference for the present and for the future welfare of Tibet, they (the Tibetan Government) will consider this question of the boundary favourable."¹⁵ Thus Tawang proper, although a fully Tibetanized country, was ceded to India.

The Russian Government was kept in the dark by evasive explanations and, subsequently, the arrival of World War I—in which Great Britain and Russia were allies—buried all protests. According to the Foreign Office it was only a "due fulfillment of the terms specified in the Anglo-Thibetan Agreement of 1904."¹⁶ The Tawang region from

¹² L/P & S/10/344—P 3609/1915(9): For. Sec. to Gov. of India to Bell.

¹³ Alastair Lamb, *The China-India Border*, (London, 1964), p. 150 & Alastair Lamb, a. a., (1966), p. 536.

¹⁴ EUR.MSS. F 80/5e 12(1): Memorandum by Bell (3. 2. 14).

¹⁵ EUR.MSS. F 80/5e 12(3): Lönchen Shatra to Bell, 9. Feb. 1914.

¹⁶ L/P & S/10/340, File 464/1913—P 2036/1913: FO to British Embassy in St. Petersburg, May 23rd 1913.

the Himalayan crest to the Assam Hills is considerably greater than the Chumbi valley, but the success in keeping this fact secret made the Russian silence possible.

The visit of Captain Nevill to Tawang just a few weeks after the establishment of the McMahon line was of little or no impact. In Tawang he was not allowed to talk politics or to inform the local Tibetan authorities of the new boundary alignment, and later his reports were ignored by the Indian Government. The British reluctance to occupy effectively the Tawang region with civilian and military means strengthened the Tibetans in their belief in a *quid pro quo* deal with the Indian Government.

III. SIR CHARLES BELL AND THE *QUID PRO QUO* DEAL

It is no understatement to compare Sir Charles's part in Tibetan affairs with that of T. E. Lawrence in Arabia. As an intimate friend of the Dalai Lama and a man of scholarly character, speaking Tibetan fluently,¹⁷ he dominated the scene long after his retirement. When the Tibetan government found itself in a confused state of affairs, it often asked Sir Charles Bell for advice, which in spite of his noncommittal answers worried and angered the government of India. The highmark of this role was reached at the Simla Conference.

If, as I will try to prove, there indeed was such a thing as a *quid pro quo* scheme at Simla between the British and the Tibetan governments, then the disturbing question of the validity of the agreement on certain points such as the Tawang region will rise automatically.

Already in 1940 one of Sir Charles Bell's successors, Sir B. J. Gould, took up the problem: "The definition of an Indo-Tibetan frontier was not the primary object of the 1914 negotiations. Rather it came in the train of general discussions as to Tibetan frontiers, and almost as a *quid pro quo* for our help—which appeared at the time to be likely to be effective—over the settlement of a China-Tibet frontier and of other matters which were in dispute between Tibet and China." He thought that the reluctance to occupy the Tawang region must have been caused by a desire to avoid getting mixed up with the affairs of the Tawang

¹⁷ EUR.MSS. F 80/5e 140: Semiofficial letter from Norbhu Dhondup to the Political Officer (Sikkim), Lhasa, 27 Aug. 1938: "... Sir Charles is the only officer who discussed business matters *direct* with the late Dalai Lama."

monastery, which was under the authority of the great Drepung monastery at Lhasa, "or because we wished to be lenient in enforcing our claim in full in view of the fact that we had failed in our efforts to establish an agreed China-Tibet frontier." Even some of the British maps had, in the case of Tawang, been against the government of India.¹⁸

In this unofficial *quid pro quo* agreement the British wanted a secure frontier for the Assam plains, "a noman's-land," and then a friendly Tibet north of this belt. No relations with Tibet for its own sake were needed, but as a buffer only. The British with only "a handful of military police and an expedition into the hills about once every 25 years" could be fairly content with the security situation.¹⁹

For this the British had to give Tibet a recognized *and* secure frontier in Kham with China, which the note by Bell and the letter from Lönchen Shatra (notes 12 & 13) together with later arguments during the 1930's clearly show. Another price the Government of India paid for the McMahan Line was a promise for delivery of weapons. The Japanese drill-instructor Yasojiro Yajima remarked to a British informant that "... Tibet had given land (Tawang) to the British Government, while the latter had given arms to Tibet, so that both had done well."²⁰

The fulfillment in Kham came only partly through the armistice arranged by Sir Eric Teichman in 1918 between local Chinese military authorities and the Tibetan army. But in 1921 a successful agreement on delivery of weapons, training of military officers, etc., was concluded during the long stay of Sir Charles Bell at Lhasa, although not to the full satisfaction of the Tibetan Government.²¹

IV. THE LONG INTERMISSION

For a period of twenty years the Tawang region was almost forgotten by the government of India, whose greatest concern was saving money when possible. This policy meant a *status quo* situation for Tawang at a time when the Chinese threat was fully eliminated.

The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 prohibited any

¹⁸ L/P&S/12/Coll. 36/26—P. Z. 3235/1940: Memorandum by Gould.

¹⁹ L/P&S/10/340, File 464/1913—P 1472/1913: Note by "A. H.," Jan. 27th 1913.

²⁰ FO 371/2318—F 89247/1933: Bell to GoI, 19th May 1915, Gangtok.

²¹ G. N. Roerich, *Trails to Inmost Asia*, (New Haven, 1931), p. 377.

crossing of the so-called Inner Line (running along the foothills of the Assam Himalaya) into Tibet without a special pass from the Deputy Commissioner or Political Officer concerned. In 1924 the government of India suggested that the regulation should include all British Indian subjects and not merely Europeans. For Assam the problem was not one of importance because the traffic between this province and Tibet did not attract many travellers or traders. All Europeans other than officers on government duty were forbidden to pass the Inner Line without authorization; but "the prohibition is not confined to Indians, Nepalese, Bhutanese and Tibetans . . .," the Governor of Assam stated. Further on he added that the control of the Inner Line was already great and did not need any modification.²² Thus the rule of no interference with the Hills was re-laid for many years to come. The Tibetan government continued unmolested its harsh rule over the Tawang tract. With a friendly Tibet north of the McMahon Line there seemed no need for agreements on this tiny wedge of land. Maintaining the *status quo* dominated all other considerations and was undoubtedly the best way of handling the problem both politically and economically. Only a handful of administrative officers were needed for the purpose. No one thought of the day when a weak China was to regain strength!

The different movements by Tibetan troops along the McMahon Line aroused fears within the Indian government at several times during the 1920's. With the apparently innocent intention of planting tea, four hundred Tibetan troops proceeded to Chayul northeast of the Tsangpobend.²³ A few years later a critical situation in Po-me north of Chayul arose when the population of this "semi-independent" country declared that "rather than pay taxes to Tibet, they would prefer to be taken over by the Government of India."²⁴ The following year, in 1928, the Government of India was relieved from these embarrassing requests when, following a series of Chinese intrigues from Tachienlu and military defeats, Tibetan troops finally conquered the Po country. The British were not unduly alarmed but regarded the

²² FO 371/10285—F 1390/643/10: GoI to Gov. of Assam, Delhi 20th March 1924.

FO 371/10285—F 2007/643/10: Gov. of Assam to GoI, Shillong 26th May 1924.

²³ FO 371/9187—F 2113/15/10: Brit. Trade Agent to GoI, Yatung 26th May 1923.

²⁴ FO 371/12487—F 8407/1822/10: Pol. Officer (Sikkim) to GoI, Camp Yatung 19th Sept. 1927 (No. 808-P).

whole question as an interior one, for Tibet to solve alone. In the eastern regions of the McMahon Line Tibetan troops even made raids across the boundary and collected taxes. Tibetan citizens and escaped slaves were brought back to Tibet by force. Certain difficulties regarding official protests to the Tibetan Government sprang up because no British official had been able to visit these regions.²⁵

The extreme adherence to the *status quo* policy by the government of India is clearly shown in a printed military manual from 1931 on the Presidency and Assam District. The annual payment of Rs. 5,000 to the Tawang monastery was known to go in part to the Drepung monastery at Lhasa. The abbot and chief officials were appointed from Lhasa. The country north of Se La was administered by the two Tsöna dzongpöns from Tibet—one layman and one monk official. The rest of the Tawang tract south of the Se La was under the jurisdiction of the Tawang monks. According to an official report: "The inhabitants are ground down by the heavy and unjust taxation of the monks and complain that the dzongpöns are of no use to them. They pay taxes but receive no protection nor do they receive any benefit from their rule."²⁶ Compared to the British Raj, its Tibetan variant was indeed a stern one and in this case, since 1914, utterly illegal, but apparently for the time being accepted by the government of India as the best alternative to a costly military occupation and an expanded civil administration afterwards. The British were also determined not to disturb the new Anglo-Tibetan cordiality developed after the setback of 1925, when the reactionary monks of Lhasa got the upper hand and the Dalai Lama, scared by the Young Tibet Party's *coup d'état* trial in 1924, pursued new diplomatic connections rather than the British ones. Also during the years 1930—31, a war had been raging in Kham between Tibetan and Chinese troops and the attention of the Tibetan Government was badly needed in the East. This Tibetan ability to resist was an argument for an unaltered situation in the Hills, in spite of the repression of technically British-Indian subjects. Diplomacy and economy continued to be the two leading stars of the British Raj in the northeast.

While the British remained noncommittal about Tawang, the

²⁵ FO 371/16240—F 7241/7241/10: Govt. of Burma to GoI, Rangoon 17th Aug. 1932.

²⁶ L/P & S/20 (D 162)—P. Z. 6542/31: Military report on Presidency & Assam District, Simla 1931. 224 pp.

Chinese were very much aware of its existence and placed the region on numerous maps within Tibet, then regarded as part of China. Dr. Sun Yat-sen recognized the Tawang region as a potentially important communication line between Lhasa and Assam. A railway should, according to Dr. Sun, run from Lhasa via Tawang and Dirang Dzong down to the Assam foothills, where the international boundary was to be reached.²⁷

V. THE REDISCOVERY OF TAWANG

The British neglect of the Tawang question ended in April 1936, when Capt. Lightfoot, Political Officer of Balipara Frontier Tract, returned from a visit to Tawang proper. He filed a very alarming report on the Tibetan influence in the region: "The people, round Tawangdzong especially, definitely consider themselves as being under the Tibetan Government and there is no doubt whatever that the Tibetan Government definitely rules the Tawang area and collects revenue from as far south as Dirangdzong." Since the last official to visit Tawang had been Captain Nevill in 1914, the need for fresh and reliable information had become acute. The policy of British non-interference in the internal administration of Tawang allowed the Tibetans to establish their rule over the region. The tours of inspection made by British officials during every cold weather period in different sections did not extend far beyond the Inner Line and very rarely reached the neighborhood of the McMahon Line.²⁸

The shocking report by Captain Lightfoot on the situation in Tawang prompted the Government of India to ask the Foreign Office to pass instructions to Sir Basil Gould, at that time in Lhasa, to the effect that he should make friendly representations in a suitable manner "regarding the collection of civil as distinct from monastic revenue in the Tawang area, and regarding a written reaffirmation of McMahon line." A year earlier, in 1935, in connection with the Kingdon Ward case,²⁹ the Tibetan Government indicated its respect of the McMahon Line. The Foreign Office wired laconically "concur."³⁰

²⁷ Sun Yat-sen, *The International Development of China*, (London, 1928), pp. 133—134 and Folding map at end.

²⁸ FO 371/20222—F 5191/4/10: Gov. of Assam to GoI, Shillong 29th May 1936.

²⁹ For details on the Kingdon Ward case see: D. Woodman, a. a. p. 197 and P. L. Mehra, *The McMahon Line and After*, (Delhi, 1974), pp. 420—22.

³⁰ FO 371/20222—F 5484/4/10: IO to FO, 9th Sept. 1936.

When Gould took up the problem along these lines, the Kashag, or government of Tibet, answered, that up to 1914 Tawang had undoubtedly been Tibetan. The Indo-Tibetan boundary agreement was "part and parcel of the general adjustment and determination of boundaries contemplated in the 1914 Convention." If the British could secure a Sino-Tibetan boundary, the Tibetan government would "be glad to observe the Indo-Tibetan boundary as defined in 1914." The Kashag also remarked, that "at no time since the Convention and Declaration of 1914 had the Indian Government taken steps to question Tibetan, or assert British, authority in the Tawang area," which they took for British concurrence in their views. This *quid pro quo* deal was at once denied by Gould, since the boundary of 1914 was agreed upon without any qualifications. As Tawang was a very suitable base for troops on both sides of the McMahon Line, it could not be severed from the Indian territory. The attitude of the Kashag was described as wholly untenable by the government of India, because the notes exchanged in 1914 and during the Kingdon Ward case in November 1935 were independent of securing a definite Sino-Tibetan border in Kham.

Gould did not want to disturb the cordial atmosphere between the governments of India and Tibet by a written reaffirmation concerning Tawang and the McMahon Line. Then perhaps the whole 1914 Convention had to be reconsidered! Gould wished to confer with the Assam Government first and was ready to be provisionally satisfied with an oral explanation. In this the government of India concurred and did not insist upon a written statement concerning the McMahon Line. Before any further action, the government of India concluded, Gould had better discuss the problem with the Assam authorities.³¹

Thus the Tawang question was put on ice by the authorities in New Delhi and Shillong for a few years. The renewed British hesitation regarding the full suzerainty of the Tawang tract could only be interpreted by the Kashag as an indication of guilt when the British efforts in Peking had met only failure in establishing a secure boundary in Kham.

Rai Bahadur Norbu Dhondup, the British Trade Agent of Tibetan origin, expressed himself strongly on the Tawang question and

³¹ FO 371/20963—F 363/11/10: GoI and Gould, Nov.—Dec. 1936. Lhasa & New Delhi.

advocated that the territory be annexed immediately or as soon as possible. Once the British occupation was accomplished, the Tawang authorities would report the matter to the Tibetan government for further reference to the resident British representative. Norbu then would have an excellent opportunity to point out to the Kashag that the action taken by the government of Assam was correct because the Tibetan government had ceded Tawang to India in 1914.³² Again nothing could move the government of India to act pending the second visit to Tawang by Captain Lightfoot scheduled for 1938.

VI. TIBETAN STUBBORNESS

Already in 1936 the government of India proposed that starting in 1938, because of the inaccessibility of the area Tawang be visited biennially.³³ These intentions to intensify British influence in Tawang were enthusiastically endorsed at Shillong. The Assam government wished to see a platoon of the Assam Rifles, including a doctor, to visit Tawang during the spring of 1938. The prospects for opening a permanent trade route to Tibet via Tawang after the pacification gave the expedition its real *raison d'être*. In the Foreign Office the strategic reasons put forward by both Sir Henry McMahon and Sir Charles Bell dominated, but the treaty aspect examined in the light of "the awkward fact that for twenty-three years we have taken no steps to implement our treaty rights" cannot form the ground for a Tibetan case. The action proposed by the Assam government seemed to be very alarming to the Foreign Office officials, who, however, relied on the cool handling of the problem by the government of India. Two points were noted: there existed a very deep anti-Chinese feeling among the officers of the Indian government (Sir Basil J. Gould was one), and the Himalayan frontier should, in spite of protests from the U.S.A., remain also in the future a "closed" one.³⁴ Behind these warnings from the Foreign Office we can easily trace the successor of the Russian bogey, namely the very diffuse "international opinion" closely related to America and China. The United States was during these crucial pre-war years a strong potential ally acting as a self-proclaimed defender of

³² L/P&S/12/Coll. 36/27—P. Z. 1694/1938: Norbu to Pol. Officer (Sikkim), Lhasa 18th Dec. 1937.

³³ FO 371/20963—F 363/11/10: GoI to Gould, New Delhi 19th Nov. 1936.

³⁴ FO 371/20964—4311/11/10: Assamgov. to GoI, Shillong 27th May 1937.

the Chinese Republic and saw no reasons for alleged British encroachments on Tibetan, i.e. Chinese, suzerainty. In the background also lurked the omnipotent threat by the Chinese of a trade boycott of British wares, which was not an empty threat as the Japanese had learned. The British Government was extremely sensitive to opinions on its policy in India and China. Nothing wearing the semblance of "the Great Game" of the nineteenth century was allowed to be revived in India.

In May 1938 the Tibetan Government received the alarming report from Tawang that Captain Lightfoot and two hundred men had arrived without British notification. Orders would be issued to stop the expedition, and in spite of Gould's reference to the Tibetan cession of Tawang in 1914, the Kashag insisted that Gould should send a telegram to the government of India requesting "to withdraw the expedition." In possession of a copy of the treaty map, Gould declared himself willing to discuss the question.³⁵ When approaching the Regent, who governed Tibet during the minority of the Dalai Lama, Gould was told that the Kashag had not yet referred the Tawang question to him, but he would then see his way to abide by the treaty.³⁶ Thus the Tibetan government gained a valuable respite in handling the matter without any loss of face.

Arguing that Tawang had never been ceded to India, the Tibetan government then intended to fix the boundary with Bhutan in the Tawang area so as to obtain admission from Bhutan that that territory was Tibetan.³⁷ This clever diplomatic step was followed by another prolonging one, when in Lhasa the Tibetan government pointed to certain shortcomings of its archives, since ". . . most of the officers who had been to India in connection with the Anglo-Tibetan Simla Conference of 1913—14 had expired and some of them had already retired from the Government service and that the present Cabinet Ministers and the King (Regent) are all ignorant of the Knowledge that Tawang was ceded to British India."³⁸ After so many years of oblivion this

³⁵ L/P & S/12/Coll. 36/29—P. Z. 3507/1938: Gould to GoI, Yatung 4th May 1938.

³⁶ L/P & S/12/Coll. 36/25—P. Z. 5818/1938: Lhasa Mission Diary, June 1938 (20/6).

³⁷ L/P & S/12/Coll. 36/29—P. Z. 5109/1938: Gov. of Assam to GoI, Shillong 5th July 1938.

³⁸ L/P & S/12/Coll. 36/29—P. Z. 7366/1938: Norbu to Pol. Officer (Sikkim), Lhasa 26th Aug. 1938.

could very well be the truth in a medieval state like Tibet, where the archives were kept without any proper method and many a document stayed with the office holder at the time. The British maneuvered the Tibetans in a rather anachronistic way by asking too much of this medieval regime but underrated them badly on the diplomatic field as had previously been done during the years after the break in 1925. The approaching World War softened the British stand, too. This is clearly shown in a proposal made by Sir Basil Gould, in which he of course concurred in the view that Tawang was a part of India, but wished a loose administration like that of the Chumbi Valley in 1905—07 which let the inhabitants manage their own affairs and imposed only a light, formal tax. With the then economic emergency the whole situation should just “simmer” and the Tibetan government might be requested to withdraw their officials. Contrary to Gould’s compromising attitude, the Assam government wanted to station one platoon of Assam Rifles in Tawang and another in Dirangdzong. In the meanwhile Capt. Lightfoot should be sent to Tawang with a small expedition. The government of India, however, doubted the advisability of such a tour. The party would be too small, so the proposal was rejected on this ground.³⁹ Where earlier the various political officers had been the principal advocates of keeping the whole Tawang tract, now Gould started to question the British claims on the area. The Assam government was soon to follow, and the *status quo* attitude of the government of India would as a result be the most offensive position.

The India Office agreed with the policy of refraining from sending annual parties because such acts would augment the responsibility and the pressure on the Assam government to establish a permanent administration in Tawang. Therefore the intentions of the Assam government for an expulsion of the Tsöna dzongpöns from the British side of the McMahon Line were ignored. It mattered little for the India Office that after the departure of the Political Officer from Tawang “the last expedition will produce little or no effect at all on the local people and make no change in the conditions prevailing in the area.”⁴⁰ It had just been a show of force in Tawang to underline the British claims on the area. A quiet situation barring all undertakings and not

³⁹ FO 371/23493—F 10948/393/10: Gould, Gov. of Assam & GoI, Nov.—Dec. 1938 and 12th April 1939.

⁴⁰ L/P & S/12/Coll. 36/29—P. Z. 2976/1939: Gov. of Assam & IO minute Jan. resp. June 1939.

unduly offending the Tibetans was to remain the ideal of the British and Indian governments.

Even a reasonable compromise put forward by the governor of Assam and Captain Lightfoot did not attract any comments. They wanted the river Digien or nearby Se La as a new border of the McMahon Line. Such a move would lessen the cost of administration by one quarter and "the Digien river forms a clearly defined boundary both as regards Bhutan and regards Tawang . . ." ⁴¹ This was a very sensible proposal but hardly acceptable to the government of India, eager to avoid any kind of confrontation with Tibet, or with the Chinese Republic, threatening to rearrange the Treaty of 1914, which was mainly a border treaty.

Trouble with Tibetan infiltration and oppression south of the McMahon Line were not at all confined to the Tawang area. In 1938 an expedition parallel to that of Captain Lightfoot had to be sent into the Siang valley from Sadiya. Tibetans from Pome had come south of the international boundary and collected taxes in an area not visited by any British officer since 1913. ⁴² The difference, however, was that here a predominantly tribal area had come under Tibetan influence quite recently during the 1930's, while in Tawang, Tibetan influence and culture had been established for centuries. The root of all evil was undoubtedly the absence of British influence, which was interpreted by the Tibetan authorities as the evidence of a lapsed *quid pro quo* agreement.

VII. THE LULL OF WAR

Future visits to Tawang had to be made by native agents working for the Political Officer of the Balipara Frontier Tract. This was no satisfactory solution for the British but the best one at hand. The approach of war in Asia made the Tibetans a likely target for Japanese propaganda along Pan-Asiatic lines mixed with Buddhistic overtures. Therefore the question of Tawang had to be left dormant in order to retain Tibet as a neutral and benevolent neighbor north of the McMahon Line. This negligence was later to be tested during the Japanese advance

⁴¹ L/P & S/12/Coll. 36/29—P. Z. 2520/1939: Gov. of Assam to Viceroy, Shillong April 3. 1939.

⁴² FO 371/23492—F 7655/393/10: Report from Mr. R. W. Godfrey (Pol. Officer of Sadiya) March 1939.

to the threshold of Assam. So far the British policy of restraint proved successful.

In 1940 a Tibetan agent in British pay visited Dirangdzong and could report "that there is a strong feeling of disaffection and resentment against the present regime, and that he was being constantly asked if the British government was sending another column to Towang and if any action was taken to take over the country as had been previously promised." New incidents emanating from the arbitrary Tibetan rule over the Tawang region occurred. However, from Lhasa Sir Basil Gould cabled the reassuring message that there was reason to suppose that the Tibetan government was not at all inclined to raise the question of Tawang in any acute form.⁴³ With this the Government of India was content. The rigid *status quo* thinking began to pay off. The governments on both sides of the McMahon Line were interested in a fluid frontier, because by a process known as "rectifying the frontier" it could be possible, according to the well known explorer F. Kingdon Ward, "to claim a little more than your due."⁴⁴ Thus a postponement of the question until after the war promised benefits to both countries concerned.

In his memorandum, "Tibet: Factors in Policy," Sir Basil Gould discusses the implications of the British policy towards Tibet and Tawang. Drawn from his vast empirical knowledge and available documents, the memorandum deals in a very unbiased way with the past, present, and future British policy. Special attention is reserved for the McMahon Line.

Sir Basil Gould says that aided by British diplomatic support in China and help in various indirect ways, Tibet acts as a useful buffer covering the whole of the northeast frontier of India. The British problem is mainly a question of how to get the Tibetan government to pay some attention to their army and the welfare of "the common people," without disturbing the pro-British inclinations dominating Tibet for the present. As already discussed, Sir Basil Gould sees the 1914 agreement as a *quid pro quo* one for British help to settle the Sino-Tibetan boundary in Kham. Sir Charles Bell is described as "an enthusiast about Towang" and the Tibetan Government must tend to

⁴³ L/P & S/12/Coll. 36/29—P. Z. 2907/1940: Assam & Lhasa, 6th resp. 27th April 1940.

⁴⁴ F. Kingdon Ward, "Exploration in the Eastern Himalaya," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Soc.* 1940, Vol. XXVII, (ii), p. 216.

think that the British failure to occupy Tawang was a deliberate act. Also, the maps have in many cases been against the British.

Gould's conclusions suggest a renewed overhaul of "how long people of Tibetan race have been established in particular areas, and that it should be considered what would, *in particular* areas, be the ideal limit of British administration, irrespective of the existence of the red line on the map" (i.e. the McMahon Line). Moreover, he suggests that ridges are not suitable as boundaries, because a grazing encampment is often pitched there.⁴⁵

Gould proposes nothing short of a reasonable revision of the Simla Treaty of 1914, which could be achieved through a re-delimitation of the McMahon Line from the administrative rather than the strategical point of view, keeping in mind one essential gist, that Tibet should remain as an adequate buffer covering the whole northeast frontier. Here Gould struck on the weak point of the government of India, whose policy of *status quo* was aimed at maintaining at the lowest cost possible a fluid but secure frontier zone with a pro-British Tibet north of India. The war had transformed the Chinese Republic into an ally and the United States even sent two military officers on a mission to Lhasa with a personal letter from President Roosevelt. The Chinese view of the much debated status of Tibet was also the American one. This complicated situation presented no simple solution. The Government of India preferred the wait-and-see policy, which, in the Tawang case, had developed into a tradition over the years. Of course Sir Basil Gould's views were neglected by the government of India. The war commanded full attention.

During 1942 this hollow policy was upset anew by a party of twenty-five Tibetan soldiers under Jing-pa Depon visiting Tsöna and Tawang for a registration of Tibetan villages and citizens.⁴⁶ The bloodless war of attrition continued.

Another problem was the Assam-China Road where the British had to act as a mediator between the two stubborn neighbors, Tibet and China, since the road had partly to pass on Tibetan soil. A compromise could be reached, when the Chinese government promised to send only non-military supplies along this road, which had a psychological

⁴⁵ L/P & S/12/Coll. 36/26—P. Z. 3235/1940: Gould; "Tibet: Factors in Policy," 18th April 1940.

⁴⁶ L/P & S/12/Coll. 36/30—EXT. 6469/1942: Ludlow to Pol. Officer (Sikkim), Lhasa 10th Aug. 1942.

significance for the Chinese war effort. Tibet remained neutral throughout the war.

With the Japanese troops next door, every precaution was taken not to offend the Tibetan government. The *status quo* policy had moved from the economic into the political sphere. After the war the Tawang question could easily be handed over to an independent India, which also proved to be the case.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

At the Simla conference in 1914 the negotiations were carried on at two separate levels. Sir Henry McMahon conducted the official one, while the unofficial level was to be left to Sir Charles Bell, whose friendship with the Dalai Lama and the Kashag placed him in the very strong position of an adviser extra-judicial.

After reading the report of Bailey and Morshead, McMahon must have understood the political implications involved in annexing the Tawang area to India. However, strategical needs won the day over political fears. Officially a fair deal was concluded. According to the available source material, McMahon cannot be blamed for anything more serious than an imperialistic and harsh treatment of the Chinese delegation.

However, as we have seen from his activity before and during the Simla Conference, Sir Charles Bell cannot be considered equally clean-handed. On the contrary, his identification with the Tibetan cause and his keen maneuvering skill in the interests of India with some very palpable Tibetan gains made him a dishonest broker to both sides. There was clearly an ORAL *quid pro quo* agreement between Bell and the Tibetan delegation. Later developments reveal that one part of this oral agreement was munitions. The agreement concluded during Bell's visit to Lhasa in 1921 gave Tibet the necessary military stamina to stay free from Chinese troops in spite of several wars. The second part about the Tawang-Kham connection never came into force, but the magnificent scheme was reduced into a noncommittal diplomatic undertaking of furthering the Tibetan case in China, which eventually stranded on the Chinese refusal of signing even a rewritten Simla Treaty. In Chinese eyes, Tibet could never be anything but an internal question.

The machinations from Sir Charles Bell did not stop with his

retirement, but he used his intimate friend Dewan Bahadur Palhese as a middleman giving the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government written advice on several occasions much to the dismay of the government of India.⁴⁷ In spite of an earlier promise to refrain from political activity, Bell confessed his actions and the government of India now feared that the Tibetans could believe the advice to be given "with the authority of the Government of India."⁴⁸ Later on the Political Officer of Sikkim, F. Williamson, asked for permission to tell the Tibetan government "that Williamson, and not Bell, is our representative for the purposes of discussions with Tibet."⁴⁹

These examples show very clearly the continuance of a pattern recognizable from the Simla proceedings: The former Political Officer giving the Tibetan government advice with a pretended authority from the government of India. Bell's solidly pro-Tibetan views made his advice welcome to the Tibetans, who of course could not (or would not!) understand that their "Great Minister Bell," about whom the people of Lhasa sang: "inwardly he helps our religion and our Government,"⁵⁰ was retired. With his great love for Tibet and the Tibetans, Sir Charles Bell enjoyed his role as a self-proclaimed ambassador extraordinary to the government of Tibet.

In conclusion it can thus be stated, that during the Simla Conference there existed two parallel levels of negotiation. On the official level Sir Henry McMahon dealt solely with the rectification of the Himalayan frontiers, while on the unofficial level Sir Charles Bell drew up an oral Anglo-Tibetan *quid pro quo* agreement about incorporation of the Tawang area into British India in exchange for a secure Sino-Tibetan boundary in Kham and certain other minor British undertakings. The complementary additions to the Anglo-Tibetan agreement must largely be regarded as products of Bell's machinations. With a friendly Tibet as a northern buffer, no need existed to bring these secret and oral agreements into daylight by enforcing the McMahon Line in Tawang. When this was tried by the expeditions of Captain Lightfoot, the governments of India and Tibet became equally embarrassed by the

⁴⁷ EUR.MSS. F 80/5a 126a: Palhese to Bell (Reed 26th Jan. 1926); EUR. MSS. F 80/5a 124a: Bell to Gov. of Tibet from "Advice." Kalimpong 6/11/34.

⁴⁸ FO 371/19253—F 1999/12/10: GoI to IO, New Delhi 20th Feb. 1935.

⁴⁹ FO 371/19253—F 5419/12/10: GoI to IO, Simla 10th Aug. 1935.

⁵⁰ EUR.MSS. F 80/5a 42, p. 13: Song of praise to Sir Charles Bell, when leaving in 1921 for India. Recorded 30. 11. 21 by Laden La.

revival of this old, imperial *corpus delicti*. Noticing that the prescription period apparently was out, the local branches of the government of India wanted to settle the problem with an honorable compromise. Fear of international complications thwarted such efforts.

Sir Charles Bell's scheme failed when the oral *quid pro quo* agreement could not be carried out because of China's resistance. Tawang was handed over as a spurious morning gift to an independent India in 1947.

