

Ambiguity and India's Claims to the Aksai Chin

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INTRODUCTION

A certain maturity sometimes comes to historical controversies. After a subject like the India–China border dispute has passed through the requisite stages, a time comes when findings and ideas for the various sides can be fashioned into new interpretations.

The body of literature on the Sino–Indian conflict is dialectical in nature. The earliest accounts were partisan toward one side — India. Research findings which even suggested revision aroused anger in some quarters. Among such findings were those of Alastair Lamb on the historical evolution of the border. With the publication of a comprehensive work of revisionist scholarship by the former London *Times* correspondent Neville Maxwell, the lines of thesis and anti-thesis were clearly drawn.¹ They have remained so for over a decade and a half, most recently renewed in the new semi-official biography of Jawaharlal Nehru by the Indian historian Sarvepalli Gopal.²

Ultimately the dialectic should go into its synthesis stage. What follows in these pages is a limited synthesizing effort, focused on just one aspect of the boundary conflict. The argument presented here is that formulation of the Indian version of the border with China required the deciphering of ambiguity. Most Indian politicians and officials were not aware of that ambiguity. Instead they thought that a traditional border had been discovered through documentary and geographic investigation. This was a case of ambiguity or indeterminacy being shaped according to psychological predispositions already held by decision-makers; predispositions derived from Indian nationalist thought and experience.

An essay of this size cannot cover the entire 2000 mile long India–China border. The focus shall be upon a particularly sensitive portion of that border called the Aksai Chin. The Aksai Chin Plateau is now fully occupied by the Chinese, despite Indian claims to it. Situated at

an altitude of 16,000–17,000 feet, the Aksai Chin lies between two Chinese frontier provinces: Tibet and Sinkiang.

China's government presently includes it in Sinkiang. The Indian government regards the Aksai Chin as part of the Ladakh region of Kashmir. For China the Aksai Chin serves as a necessary communications link; an all-weather road system goes through there. For the Chinese it also symbolizes their unwillingness to grant legitimacy to the European imperialist phase in Asian history, and to that episode's territorial results. For India, the Aksai Chin still represents historic territory lost; something unjustly taken from the national patrimony.

THE AMBIGUOUS BRITISH LEGACY

By the late 1940s, when Indian nationalism and other pressures finally induced British abandonment of empire, and when communist victory finally freed China from civil war and foreign intervention, no mutually acceptable India–China border had yet evolved. Demarcation of a border on the ground had occurred at only a few places. Much of the frontier region known as Ladakh had come under the control of the Maharaja of Kashmir in the century or so before 1947. But more crucial to pre-independence thinking about a northern border for Ladakh were British-Indian strategic interests, as gauged in London, Calcutta and New Delhi.

There was no one British policy on the disposition of that territory on the Ladakh frontier called the Aksai Chin. A high altitude desert lying on the edge of the great Tibetan plateau, and cut by some valleys, the Aksai Chin had no intrinsic value. People did go there; nearby Ladakhi villagers used it for summer grazing and thus made it part of the “Cashmere” wool trade. There was jade mining from the Sinkiang side, and some ancient (if secondary) trade routes crossed it. That was all.

Yet, the Aksai Chin could be strategically important as a buffer zone, depending upon developments in the great game of big power influence and balance in Central Asia. To have buffers lying between the populated parts of northern India on the one side, and Russia and China on the other, was a constant British policy. Precisely which regions were to serve as buffers, however, and in what combinations, and the primary power to be thus contained, were all matters which varied as British perceptions of threat varied.

According to a summary memorandum prepared in 1952 by the first Historical Division Director in the External Affairs Ministry of independent India, three alternative British boundary lines had been formulated for Ladakh.³ The most northerly was the so-called Ar-

dagh–Johnson line, which went as far as the great Kuen Lun range of mountains on the north and northeast sides of the Aksai Chin (see Appendix for map). Thus the Ardagh–Johnson line included the Aksai Chin within the area of British-Indian control.

The second of the proposed British borders, in recent years called the Macartney–MacDonald line, represented more caution. Its most significant feature was that almost all of the Aksai Chin's main section lay in Sinkiang. Certain localities on the Ladakhi periphery of the Aksai Chin were on the British-Indian side of the line. These places were the Lingzitan salt plain, and the Chang Chenmo and Chip Chap valleys.⁴ Later they would also become subjects of dispute between India and China.

Finally, the British had at various times thought of the Ladakh frontier as lying along the Karakorum mountain range. But any conceivable Karakorum boundary (such as the Foreign Office line of 1873) would lie far to the south and southwest of the other lines, and thus be favorable to forward movement by the Chinese.

An Indian scholar who helped devise the official view of the Nehru government after independence has argued that during the last two decades of British-India a version of the Ardagh–Johnson line came to be accepted as a matter of policy. He says the final British acceptance of such a line came in 1936.⁵ These assertions must remain speculative so long as independent scholars do not have ready access to the records of that period in Government of India archives. But scholarly opinion is supportive in a general way. Alastair Lamb, for example, reports that after World War I British-India emerged with an Ardagh–Johnson boundary so far as the Aksai Chin was concerned. A 1927 decision to drop any claim to Shahidulla fort north of Karakorum Pass (and thus beyond the Aksai Chin) left intact the claim to the Aksai Chin itself, either because the British had no reason to set a new policy for it, or because they wanted to retain it as a buffer between India and a possibly Russian-dominated Sinkiang.⁶

If a post-1927 version of the Ardagh–Johnson line continued to serve as the basis of British thinking about the Aksai Chin thereafter, this policy was not made clear on Survey of India maps. Despite some references on other official and unofficial pre-1912 maps to an Ardagh-style boundary, it was only after 1945 that Survey of India maps hinted at an Aksai Chin claim by the way a broad “color wash” (band of color) was used along the northern and eastern frontier of Kashmir. The frontier itself was still labelled “undefined”.⁷

That the British considered other possible Ladakh boundaries besides the Ardagh–Johnson line, all through the period from the 1890s to the 1940s, has been proven by recent research in India Office files no longer restricted by the time limit of the British official secrets

rules.⁸ What explains the evidence of competing policy directions is the nature of the institutionalized relationship existing between the British-Indian government in New Delhi, and the India Office (Secretary of State for India) in London.⁹

Where frontier questions were concerned, the India Office was cognizant of more considerations than just the advantages and disadvantages of a specific move in India's borderlands. Together with the Foreign Office, the India Office had to be concerned with the wider political and strategic implications for the Empire of any boundary agreements concluded with other powers bordering India. Such powers included Russia and China and relations with them were seen from London as set by such issues as Anglo-Russian dealings in Europe and the Middle East, and British interests on the mainland of China.

On the other hand, the Government of India and particularly its Foreign Department (after 1935 the External Affairs Department),¹⁰ was naturally most concerned with potential and actual threats to India. Influencing Delhi's perception of such threats was a mentality consistent with ruling a colonial empire rather than an internally secure nation-state. The coming of any independent sovereign power toward India's frontiers, especially an Asian power, was seen as potentially disruptive to internal stability.¹¹

The different perspectives of London and Delhi sometimes led to what one close observer of this relationship has called "bureaucratic chicanery". Via various stratagems Delhi officials like Olaf Caroe, at one time Deputy Secretary of the Foreign Department, would try to push British imperial policy further in certain directions than the India Office in London was prepared to allow. Given the suspicion which often prevailed between the two bureaucratic establishments, the Foreign Department in New Delhi might see London as pro-Chinese, while the India Office might regard someone like Caroe as a "wild man" having to be reined in.¹² It is not surprising, therefore, that India Office documents would often reflect thinking which either favored a cautious line tied to the Karakorum or left the border undefined, while Delhi leaned another way.

Another reason for the appearance of different and competing strands in British policy was that opinion within the Government of India also varied over time.

Thus, a forward boundary for Ladakh proposed by the chief of British Military Intelligence in London, Major-General Sir John Ardagh, was not at first accepted in Delhi when first put forward in 1897.¹³ The then Viceroy (Lord Elgin) and the General Staff of the Indian Army preferred a Karakorum boundary. In 1899, the Indian government initiated discussion with the Chinese government on ac-

ceptance of the Macartney–MacDonald line. The Chinese never agreed to it formally, but their provincial government in Sinkiang thought the proposal a fair one.

Among officials in both India and London, during 1907 and 1908, the proposed Macartney–MacDonald line “was regarded in official British circles as the international boundary of British India, a boundary which, again for this limited period, was certainly delimited.”¹⁴ But in 1911, when apprehension about Russia was again promoting reexamination of the Kashmir frontier situation, the Indian Army came to look more favorably upon the notion of an Ardagh-style line. Aware that the then Foreign Secretary of the Government of India supported an Ardagh option, the military’s opinion was that “the extended frontier would be an advantage provided we have not to occupy the portion beyond our present frontier posts, but merely aim at keeping it undeveloped”.¹⁵ Accordingly, in 1912 the Viceroy (Lord Hardinge) proposed to the Secretary of State for India that the Aksai Chin and adjacent territory be placed within the limits of British India, by using Ardagh’s line.¹⁶

While London and Delhi might have been willing to adopt this suggestion formally, had successful negotiation with Russia taken place, Anglo-Russian diplomacy never went that far. A round of talks over the respective interests of the British and Russian empires in Asia and the Middle East commenced in 1912. It was designed to revise the last broad scale agreement reached between them — the Anglo-Russian convention of 1907 (which had covered Tibet among other things). But the onset of World War I, the inconclusiveness of talks during the war, and the Bolshevik takeover of Russia in 1917, all served to preclude any agreement.

It was the absence of such formal agreement which permitted New Delhi to attempt another policy innovation in 1914, when the British-Indian delegation to an India–Tibet–China conference attempted to assign the Aksai Chin to the then independent Tibet. At the Simla conference of 1914 the British delegation leader, Sir Henry McMahon, produced a map showing (among other things) the Aksai Chin placed within Tibetan territory. An earlier reference to such an idea had been made by the previous Foreign Secretary of the Government of India (Sir Louis Dane) in 1907 and now McMahon (the present Foreign Secretary) was apparently trying it out on the Chinese and Tibetans. The gain being sought in 1914 was to have a Tibetan Aksai Chin serve as a buffer between Sinkiang (still thought likely to come under Russian influence) and British India (Kashmir), without giving the Aksai Chin to revolutionary China. The effort failed when China rejected the conference results for other reasons.¹⁷

Despite the Government of India’s general preference for an

Ardagh–Johnson boundary after 1927, a deviation from that policy came a generation later when the General Staff of the Indian Army assayed the likely defense problems of an India nearing independence. The General Staff's map submitted to the 1946 Cabinet Mission team showed no evidence of either Ardagh, McMahan, or Macartney–MacDonald thinking.¹⁸ Either during 1946 itself, with no obvious threat looming on the frontier, or at some earlier time, the military arm of the Government of India had become reluctant to envisage a forward defence for Ladakh.

THE OTHER SOURCES OF AMBIGUITY

KASHMIR GOVERNMENT CLAIMS

If British border policy left behind some options among which independent India could later choose, so did the frontier policies of Indian rulers before and during the time of their subordination to British power.

Among such rulers was the Kashmir Dogra dynasty, whom the British confirmed as monarchs of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846 as a reward for support in the First Sikh War. The dynamic founder of the dynasty, Maharaja Gulab Singh, had conquered Ladakh a short time earlier as part of an abortive invasion of Tibet. Although the former Kingdom of Ladakh had once been tributary to the Mughal empire, other periods of its history had seen it gravitate toward Tibet. Gulab Singh's takeover had come while he was politically and militarily subject to the Sikh state in the 1830s.

The Kashmir Durbar (i.e. the Government of the Maharajah of Kashmir during the century and a half of its autonomous existence), valued Ladakh highly for its role in Central Asian trade.¹⁹ Expansion beyond the frontiers of Ladakh to enhance control over trade routes was a constant motive underlying Kashmiri claims. The Kashmiri claim to Shahidulla fort, on the route to Yarkand and Kashgar in Turkestan (i.e. Sinkiang), came from that motive as did similar interest in places lying on the trade routes to Tibet.

The conception held by the Kashmir state of its proper Aksai Chin border is probably best seen in a map by the geologist and explorer F. Drew, drawn in 1874 and published in 1875. Having served for a time as an official of the Kashmir government and then as the Kashmir Durbar's governor of Ladakh, his map was based on his own journeys, the travel and survey reports of W. H. Johnson (and those of another explorer named Hayward), and upon the report of the Forsyth mission to Chinese Turkestan in 1870.²⁰

Drew placed the Aksai Chin in Ladakh, as had Johnson, but the

main part of the immediately adjacent Karakash river valley he awarded to Kashgaria (in Sinkiang). The Kashmir government's subsequent willingness to exclude the Karakash valley from its Ladakh claims probably rested upon the interest shown for a time by both the Kashmiris and British in securing good trade and political relations with the then ruler of the Kashgaria principality, Yaqub Beg. He was enjoying *de facto* independence from the Chinese. But with the death of Yaqub and the temporary reassertion of Chinese authority over what had been his domain, the Ardagh–Johnson strain in British–Indian thinking apparently prompted the Government of India to claim the Karakash valley along with the Aksai Chin. Judging from hints in later publications, however, the Kashmir government continued to exclude the Karakash from the claim it was making.²¹

After 1947 the new government of independent India would choose to continue the Karakash claim. But no choice would be necessary between British and Kashmir claims concerning the Aksai Chin. That was because the Drew boundary divided the Aksai Chin from Sinkiang and Tibet by strictly following the line drawn by Johnson (who would succeed Drew as Ladakh governor). Moreover, post-1947 Indian decision-makers would have available to them Kashmiri and British evidence to show that the Ardagh–Johnson–Drew line had some historical basis to it, and thus was not just a matter of British strategic convenience or Kashmiri ambition.

One piece of evidence was a treaty concluded between the Kashmir government and Tibet in the mid-nineteenth century. In September 1842 the Kashmiris and Tibetans had signed a treaty which bound them to respect each other's territory and referred to "old established frontiers" between Ladakh and Tibet. More evidence of an already-fixed Ladakh–Tibet border dates from 1847, when China was pressed by the British to undertake joint border delimitation in this area (at this time Britain recognized Chinese paramountcy over Tibet). A Chinese statement described the Ladakh–Tibet borders as already "sufficiently and distinctly fixed . . ." and as an "ancient arrangement".²² Equivalent language was used in a Ladakhi–Tibetan agreement of 1852.

Yet, while it is possible to see these statements as referring to a traditional border, the post-independence Indian Government surely knew that the British had chosen not to do so. It was British policy to restrain what they regarded as frontier adventurism by native rulers. Successive British-Indian governments were quite dubious about the historic rights allegedly acquired by the Kashmir Government at the edges of Ladakh. Not only was the 1842 treaty taken as not binding upon British India, but the Ladakh–Tibet border was considered unsettled in the absence of formal delimitation and demarcation.²³

Nor did the British think that the 1842 treaty covered any portion of what would later constitute the Aksai Chin. It applied only to part of the Ladakh–Tibet border, and more specifically to places related to recent military action between Tibet and Kashmir. Of the territory further northeast along the Tibet frontier and then northwest into territory contiguous with Sinkiang (Turkestan), the British had no knowledge in the 1840s.

The British approach to Kashmir's claims was based largely upon considerations of strategy and expenditure, but there was some historical justification for British caution, as has since been pointed out by both the Chinese and independent scholars. The 1842 treaty was (or so it has been argued) a nonaggression pact referring to broad frontier zones separating the populated areas of Ladakh and Tibet, rather than linear borders in the modern sense. Moreover, the Chinese were not so much signalling satisfaction with a traditional state of affairs by their 1847 statement on demarcation, as being evasive. They did not want to be drawn into a border creation exercise with a foreign power, having had bruising experiences with such powers on other territorial issues.²⁴

This source of ambiguity is worth exploring further.

It is true that the 1842 treaty was a nonaggression pact designed to cover a large zone of recent hostilities, rather than a document created for the purpose of confirming the existence of a definite border. Yet both that document, and the Ladakh–China agreement which supplements it, speak of frontiers and boundaries to be respected. An earlier Ladakh–Tibet treaty (1684) also referred to commonly understood jurisdictional limits, and there are indications of such known limits in Ladakhi and Tibetan documents going back to the 10th century A.D.²⁵

There is reason, however, to think that such references may not have been to a definite border line. As Lamb suggests, the known traditional border in a sparsely populated mountain region like this one will usually be only a series of separate points. These will generally be “located at passes or at crossing points of streams or rivers”.²⁶ No consensus among frontier peoples or states would necessarily exist as to how to join those points together.

Moreover, Maxwell has argued cogently that inner Asian peoples and rulers traditionally conceived of boundaries as large zones (like the “march” lands of European history) rather than lines. Zones were sufficient to separate populated areas. The concept of linear borders is a modern European invention.²⁷ The implication is that treaty documents from earlier periods in Asian history would not have distinguished between frontiers (as the term is being used here) and borderlines.

The fact that so much of the Indian documentary evidence is specific about particular crossing points from one ruler's jurisdiction to another's, and vague on lines, favors the Lamb–Maxwell argument. But the present Indian Government can claim that linking known border points together, in a way sensitive to topography (noting watershed ridges and other population dividing features), and utilizing evidence of such regular activities as trade, grazing, travel, administration and revenue collection, shows the traditional and customary boundaries to which the treaties refer. Not all segments of such borders may have been linked at the time in the mind of any one ruler or map-maker, but when given a modern interpretation their linear nature is clear. It can also be argued that the known boundary points were such clear political jurisdictional markers to the people using them that some regional awareness of the general location of a linear border must have existed.²⁸

On whether the Ladakh–Tibet treaty of 1842 covered the Aksai Chin at all, by applying to Sinkiang–Ladakh frontier as well as the Tibet–Ladakh frontier, the Government of India can claim that it did. Since China had approved the 1842 treaty at the time, all Chinese dependencies (including those in Sinkiang) were bound by it, and the Chinese Government would have been concerned to “safeguard and represent the legitimate territorial interests” of another of their constituent provinces besides Tibet.²⁹ Moreover, the Ladakh–Tibet line had to reach a junction with the Sinkiang frontier somewhere. The line eventually drawn by Johnson to cover both the Tibet and Ladakh sides of Ladakh, upon his completion of the first official survey of the Aksai Chin and adjacent terrain in 1864, simply showed where that junction was historically known to be, namely in the Kuen Lun mountain range, near 80 degrees longitude.

But this reasoning is rather tortuous and leaves the applicability of the 1842 Treaty to the Sinkiang side of the Aksai Chin ambiguous at best. As for Johnson's work, it creates other problems of ambiguity in addition to this one.

THE EVIDENCE PROVIDED BY W. H. JOHNSON

The legacy of the explorer and surveyor W. H. Johnson, in first setting a boundary line for the Aksai Chin and adjacent territory that the Kashmir government could endorse has been interpreted in several alternative ways. Johnson's line either reflected British imperialism as befitting something drawn by an employee of the Government of India (the Chinese view), Kashmir government ambitions (an interpretation offered by Alastair Lamb), or confirmed an historic bor-

der which long predated the Dogra dynasty in Kashmir (the modern Indian view).

Surely the proposals of Johnson were sensitive most of all to the territorial ambitions of the Kashmir state. Johnson's alignment "coincides very closely with that claimed in 1865 by the Kashmir Government".³⁰ The Kashmiris were still pressing an earlier claim to Shahidulla fort, which lies south and west of the Aksai Chin, on the Sinkiang side of the Karakorum range. As a political surveyor, dismayed at the inactive frontier policies of the British in India at that time, Johnson "may well have felt it his patriotic duty to lend cartographic support to Kashmir's forward claims".³¹ Both Johnson and later Ardagh, by hinging their lines on Shahidulla, may have felt forced to specify a boundary that placed the Aksai Chin within India.

Yet as the Indian side has argued, there is no direct evidence that the Aksai Chin issue was closely tied to the question of Shahidulla in the British mind generally. Shahidulla was a Kashmir claim the British did not want to pursue. Moreover, temporary shifts in British policy on Shahidulla did not produce corresponding map or documentary changes with respect to the Aksai Chin frontier. Thus, Shahidulla and the Aksai Chin, separated by the Qara Tagh mountains, could well have been separate matters to Johnson, and all who supported his boundary definition.³²

Further supporting the post-1947 Indian view is the argument that Johnson and those who had employed him did not think of the territory between Ladakh and Sinkiang as a no man's land, but as an historic Kashmiri region crossed by travellers. Some of those travellers were on the way to the Central Asian principality of Khotan, while others were following a lesser route to Kashgaria, instead of the main one through Karakorum Pass. Johnson and his successors would also have been aware that the Khotan government did not regard the Aksai Chin as its own; the Khotan frontier lay along the Kuen Lun mountains.³³ Thus, Johnson's own reports, and the official position taken by the 1866 report of the Great Trigonometric Survey project (for which Johnson worked before taking employment with Kashmir), do speak of traditional limits of territory, rather than limits newly defined.

It is difficult to determine if he was correct, but he did faithfully represent the Kashmir government's perception.

THE AMBIGUITIES OF AKSAI CHIN GEOGRAPHY

If British policy, the claims of the Kashmir government, and the work of early explorers, did not establish an Aksai Chin boundary unequivocally, can the facts of geography do so? While an overall

Ladakh border claim can be tied to watershed ridges (i.e. those ridges which divide one river system from another), this is not easily done for the Aksai Chin. The plateau itself is a jumble of ridges and basins, containing no one drainage system, bound by high mountains only to the southwest and northwest, and blending on its northeastern side into the great Tibetan plateau.

The Indians have sought to use the great Kuen Lun mountain barrier to mark off the Aksai Chin from Chinese territory. But this measure applies only to the Sinkiang side of the Aksai Chin, and even there questions can arise as to inclusion or exclusion of parts of the Karakash river basin. As a team of scholars sympathetic to the Indian case points out, the Aksai Chin alignment the Indians eventually drew follows only one of several plausible watershed divisions.³⁴

However, the Indian line linking Karakorum Pass and the Kuen Lun range does go along a clearly identifiable topographical feature (the Qara Tagh range) and then follows the Kuen Lun crest. On the Tibetan side, the line from Lanak pass up to the Kuen Lun does at least have the justification of being sited along the divide between the Amtogor and Sarigh Jilganang lakes on the one side, and the Lighten and Tsoggar lakes on the other, despite some inaccuracy in Johnson's original plotting of the line, and some vagueness in current Indian conceptions of it.³⁵

There is an overall geographic sense, then, to the Indian line, despite some ambiguities. In contrast, the final (1960) Chinese claim line along the entire Tibet-Sinkiang frontier with Ladakh is geographically arbitrary; following no definite topographical features.³⁶

PROBLEMS WITH ADMINISTRATIVE EVIDENCE

Another realm in which Indian decision-makers faced ambiguity in formulating a border was that of administrative records. Detailed evidence of administrative jurisdiction and practice, drawn from the Kashmir archives, were compiled by the Indian Government.

Among these pieces of documentary evidence were:

1. A Kashmir Government map of 1865 showing the location of police check-posts in the vicinity of Yangi Pass in the northern Aksai Chin;
2. The Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh, regarding use of the Aksai Chin for collection of fuel and fodder;
3. A preliminary report of the 1908 Ladakh (tax) settlement, which included the Aksai Chin and Lingzitang in Ladakh;
4. A map of the Ladakh tehsil (ca. 1913) showing that the Tankste Ilaqa included the Aksai Chin and Lingzitang; and

5. A Kashmir Government record of 1950 regarding salt collections by Ladakhis from the Amtogor lake region of the Aksai Chin.

What the Indians sought to show with these documents and others was that both the Aksai Chin and Lingzitang were traditionally part of the Tanktse Ilaqa (subdistrict) in the Ladakh Tehsil (district) of Kashmir. Revenue records of the Kashmir Government showed assessments and setting of tax rates done from time to time, and “revenue collected from all inhabited places up to the Indian boundary alignment”.³⁷ Such records showed that “Ladakhis had been taxed for use of the area — which was one of seasonal, nor permanent habitation — for at least three-quarters of a century before 1950”.³⁸ The documents also showed Kashmir Government levies on flocks and pastures, maintenance of caravan routes and rest houses, and supervision over trading parties.

The objections made by the Chinese (after 1960) to Indian use of such evidence are pertinent. A village (Tanktse) could not possibly administer the Aksai Chin, the Lingzitang plain, and the Chang Chenmo valley; the area was too large and documents and maps were too imprecise. To rebut the 1865 police post map, for example, the Chinese have cited the 1908 Gazetteer of India which showed no police force stationed in Ladakh, as of that date, although a small garrison of Kashmir troops existed at Leh. The Indians have had to agree that the map of police posts was introduced only to show effective Kashmir jurisdiction over the Aksai Chin as early as 1865, and not to claim that such posts existed on a continuous basis since then.³⁹

However, at least the Indians have been able to describe some administrative dealings with the Aksai Chin over time, associated with the largest village near to it (Tanktse).⁴⁰ The equivalent Chinese evidence has been sparse. The Indians can buttress their administrative case with more surveys and records of journeys made by officials and the occasional private explorers. Despite disagreement by some of them with Johnson’s claim of a border beyond the Karakorum range, these explorers and travellers from the British-Indian side of Ladakh provided the main body of 19th and early 20th century knowledge about the Aksai Chin. Thus the Indian case has rested not just on odd pieces of evidence, but on a “regular sequence of official records, stretching over many years”.⁴¹ Up to the early 1950s, when the Chinese constructed the Aksai Chin road, perhaps with Indian knowledge,⁴² the intermittent contact with the Aksai Chin from the Kashmir side was more than the Chinese or their tributary states had maintained.

It was on the strength of such evidence that the Government of India could ultimately argue that what might be called Chinese juris-

diction had never extended south of the Kuen Lun mountains, despite Chinese insistence that the Aksai Chin and adjacent areas had been administered from the Shahidulla district of Sinkiang. Yet one can argue as well that the Chinese or Chinese tributary states in Sinkiang had established at least minimal contact with the Aksai Chin. The upper Karakash valley was a well-known source of jade, and had been mined from time to time over the centuries.⁴³ Some surveying had been done from the Chinese side for the Kuomintang in the 1930s and 40s.⁴⁴ This sort of contact was quite limited, but it was enough to prove that the Indian tie was not exclusive.

In all, can India claim that there was an administratively defined border? It is doubtful. Even the Indian evidence presented to the Chinese in 1960–61 did not show regular Indian contact and jurisdiction extending all along the boundary line finally claimed for the Aksai Chin. The area was too big, too much of it was uninhabited, and not enough of the empty places could have been seen from grazing grounds or trade and exploration routes or contacted in some other fashion over extended periods of time. Census returns and other public works projects which demonstrated Kashmiri control in other disputed portions of Ladakh would not apply to the bare Aksai Chin. Pasturage records would not cover the large portions of it which are high desert.

From the administrative evidence, however, as with the legal (treaty) and geographical evidence, one can see how the Indians drew the broad conclusions they did. They were that the Aksai Chin was never administratively Chinese, and was less of a no man's land than the British often took it to be. Therefore it must be Indian, and a geographically sensible border could be devised for it which would represent the traditional alignment which must have existed from time immemorial.

INDIAN BORDER DECISIONS

The Aksai Chin border ultimately adopted by the Nehru government was the Ardagh–Johnson line, separated from earlier claims to Shahidulla and other areas further west and south. Just as the British had done in the 1920s and 30s, the Indians decided to make no claim to Shahidulla, but their position on the Aksai Chin showed none of the tentativeness which had characterized British policy up to 1947.

The Government of India was determined that the entire India–China border, including the Aksai Chin sector, be seen as “delimited” even if not physically “demarcated.” “Delimited” meant a border based on tradition and custom more than on British author-

ship. Despite some hesitation shown in public statements by Nehru in the early autumn of 1959, the Indian Government has never deviated from its contention that the delimitation concept covers the Aksai Chin.

The weight of all the positive evidence amassed by the Indians, rather than any individual piece of it, made for a plausible case, although not as strong a case as has been fashioned for most of the rest of India–China border. Relative to the largely negative line of argument advanced by the Chinese, the Indians have the advantage.

But, to the extent that independent India claims absolute rather than relative worth for its Aksai Chin case, by holding that the border has been conclusively and unambiguously delimited, the Indian argument goes beyond what the historical evidence will justify. Whenever someone discovers one or another flaw in the Indian case, a presumption is naturally created that if India's claims are not absolutely correct, then they must be absolutely unjustified. This is far from the truth, but the Indian Government has so structured the situation as to allow even fair-minded critics to perceive matters in this fashion, at least initially.

THE INDIAN DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

As the recollections of some of its founders have shown, the foreign office (i.e. the eventual Ministry of External Affairs) of the independent Government of India was already functioning soon after independence. It was the direct successor to the Foreign Department (after 1935 the External Affairs Dept.) of British days, although its personnel were generally not drawn from that source.⁴⁵

The primary responsibility for determining what kind of border the new Indian nation-state shared with its northern neighbors, China and Tibet, fell to the Ministry's Historical Division. With the Prime Minister, Mr Jawaharlal Nehru, serving as his own foreign minister and having the MEA report directly to him, his involvement in the border formulation process was intensive and detailed.

The key person handling the documentary detail was the Historical Division's first Director, Dr K. Zakariah. A former academic and an older man who did not remain in government service long, he is recalled by his colleagues as brilliant, scholarly and honest.⁴⁶ As part of a long discussion about the northern frontier taking place within the Ministry between 1947 and 1954, Zakariah came to be charged with gathering British and Indian records and collating them. Only in 1951

did he start putting them up to the Prime Minister. Kashmir government documents were not yet included.⁴⁷

Junior officials like those at the Historical Division level, and even more senior ones within the MEA, counted for little compared with Nehru's own experience and ideas. There were few restrictions on him since foreign policy decision-making was hardly institutionalized at this point,⁴⁸ and his domestic political standing was secure. Long the keen student of world politics, and practitioner of it for the Indian nationalist movement, he was also an amateur historian. Although Nehru read every line of the historical material the MEA submitted to him (he liked to do the work of officials for them), it was the sweeping political conclusions to be drawn from history that held a fascination for him. Nehru would never know the documentary details as well as his subordinates, but the policy conclusions were very much Nehru's own.⁴⁹

It has been suggested that the adoption of the Ardagh–Johnson line as the basis for the Ladakh border came just after independence, with the crises then besetting the new Government of India. Contributing to the decision were: the trauma of partition and the sense it left behind of a fragile Indian state and nation, the dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir, the presence of Kashmiri politicians in India able to act as lobby, and the close ties between the Prime Minister and other high officials with a Kashmiri heritage.

Involvement in a territorial conflict with Pakistan was especially important, since it required that the limits of the disputed region be defined. But such definition could not offend the sensibilities of those Kashmiris leaning toward India, or uncommitted to Pakistan. Considerations of subcontinental military defense similar to those which had exercised the British also had to be given their due.⁵⁰

It is quite likely that the process which eventually produced the Aksai Chin border was begun in this way and for these reasons, in 1947. But the sparse evidence available now indicates that the actual drawing of the Aksai Chin boundary and the decision to declare openly where it lay was a delayed reaction to the Chinese military takeover of Tibet in 1950. Only then was the interministerial North and Northeastern Border Defence Committee (Himmatsinghji Committee) created with participation by the military. The committee sought historical information about the Ladakh border from the Ministry of External Affairs.⁵¹ The Committee probably recommended that some boundary defining decisions be taken, not merely for the Aksai Chin but for the entire India–China frontier.

The Nehru government was then impelled to act on the strength of certain strategic perceptions as well. The Prime Minister was prepared to accept the consequences of the loss of Tibet as an autonom-

ous buffer between Chinese and Indian power. While he always maintained a sense of India having a special political interest in Tibet and in Tibetan autonomy, he made clear his conviction that instead of a Tibetan buffer India must have a recognized border.⁵²

In addition, Sino-Indian ties had been strained briefly, at the time of the 1950 Chinese move into Tibet. Rapid recovery and improvement of those ties did not entirely erase concern about the Chinese intentions. Although no armed attack on India was expected, Nehru “did not rule out infiltration by groups or even occupation of disputed areas”.⁵³ It was therefore important to establish Indian border claims clearly and leave no question about them.

A decision by the Prime Minister to reject the Macartney–MacDonald alternative and consider the Aksai Chin to be properly Indian came in 1953. It was part of a larger policy-setting decision to publish official maps showing an unambiguous delimited boundary between India and China. Just at this point Zakariah was retiring, to be replaced by Mr J. N. Khosla, who stayed only until 1954. Most of the work of confirming and solidifying the Indian case for the border fell to Khosla’s successor, Dr Sarvepalli Gopal, who assumed the Director’s post in 1954.

Examination of Kashmir records did not come until 1959, after the Sino-Indian border conflict had already erupted. At that time Gopal reviewed the whole historical-documentary case, with trips to Srinagar and London. He did so because the Prime Minister wanted a reconsideration of the entire issue. With Gopal reporting that the case was sound, and with the completion of India’s portion of the Indian and Chinese document known as the *Officials’ Report* in 1960–61, the Prime Minister was finally satisfied that proper historical research standards had been observed. His 1953 Aksai Chin decision was thereby confirmed.⁵⁴

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BORDER FORMULATION

A more basic set of attitudes and beliefs shared by both the Prime Minister and his officials, was brought to bear on the process of border formulation, in addition to strategic or political considerations. Underpinning them all was the fervent belief that an Indian nation had existed through time, defined by culture, common experience, custom and geography, long before the British had created and imposed their own state structure on the subcontinent.

Nehru’s own pre-independence writings had dealt with this last point at length. Indeed, his major books, such as *The Discovery of India* (published in 1945, only two years before independent Indian

border definition began in 1947), ranked among the most eloquent nationalist repudiations of the British view of India. Crucial to that view had been the British belief that India existed as a viable political unit only because of of British military and administrative power.

With the Indian belief in a “discovered” India came a corollary. The traditional and customary boundaries had long existed, based on natural features like mountain ridges and watersheds, and naturally evolved by populations and cultures. The British had chosen to reinforce these boundaries, or to deviate from them, either for political reasons or from ignorance of geography, history, and Indian society. Indeed, because the British were a foreign occupying power, with a perspective that was non-Indian, the British were sometimes prepared to sacrifice Indian interests and sensibilities when formulating frontier and border decisions.⁵⁵

It was toward this last conclusion especially, that the Prime Minister and the MEA would have been drawn when confronting the British-Indian historical files. They did not have immediately available to them all of the India Office records (the London archives were not consulted until 1959), but they did have the National Archives in New Delhi. Those archives would contain most of the relevant India Office material and most pertinent documents from the British Foreign Office as well. They would show the restraining hand London had often applied on the British-Indian government and the restraint Calcutta and New Delhi had exercised upon the Kashmir government. It is ironic that Indian nationalists had themselves once castigated the British for adventurism and expenditure undertaken in Afghanistan and other places.

The Prime Minister also acted upon his belief in the historic expansionism of the Chinese state. He told his intelligence chief at the time (1952) that during periods of internal unity and vigor China tended to be aggressive, or so his reading of Chinese history indicated to him. Despite his hopes of establishing a friendly India–China relationship, given the imperative Indian need for it, and despite his recognition of the anti-imperialist experience and feelings the two countries shared, he was still prepared in 1952 to see China as a potential security threat on a par with Pakistan.⁵⁶

CONCLUSIONS

There are some generalizations in the political science literature which help to explain India's creation of an Aksai Chin border. A convenient way of summarizing them was devised some years ago by the political scientist Robert Jervis.

One of his points was that: “decision-makers tend to fit incoming information into their existing theories and images. Indeed, their theories and image play a large part in what they notice.”⁵⁷

In the case of the Aksai Chin it cannot be said that Nehru and his advisors were applying well-developed theories so much as important attitudes and images embedded in Indian nationalism. But a particular theory of border origins was developed between 1947 and 1953 as historical and geographical evidence was first examined. It was probably made more sophisticated when the full historical-legal case had to be presented to the Chinese between 1959 and 1961. Development of an Indian border theory and gathering of information were two parts of the same process.

Jervis further argues that: “it is not necessarily irrational for actors to adjust incoming information to fit more closely [to] their beliefs and images . . .”. He goes on to say that foreign policy decision-makers, especially, must form conclusions on the basis of evidence that is usually ambiguous. Indeed, the evidence “almost always permits several interpretations”.⁵⁸

Thus, while those formulating the Aksai Chin border (and indeed the Indian version of the entire Sino-Indian border) may have made occasional factual errors, it was not necessarily erroneous or irrational to see their information as more determinate than it was. Despite the fact that the task before them was unusual in late 20th century (establishing a border some 2000 miles in length), the psychological approach they brought to it is common and indeed normal in foreign policy decision-making.

Moreover, the process of choice involved in formulating the Indian border was not irrational, if one defines irrationality (the way Jervis does) as acting under influences that the actor would not call legitimate “even if he were conscious of them”.⁵⁹ Persons involved in the creation and later elaboration of the Indian border case have openly written or spoken about their assumptions and attitudes. Indeed, they see their thinking and criteria for decision-making as falling well within the context of regular international law and practice.⁶⁰

“Decision-makers who reject information that contradicts their views” says Jervis, “or who develop complex interpretations of it, often do so consciously and explicitly.”

Since the evidence available contains contradictory information, to make any inference requires that such information will be ignored or given interpretations that will seem tortuous to those who hold a different position.⁶¹

Some scholarly opinion has not merely decried the seeming tortuousness of Indian border reasoning. A few critics have even come to

see the Indian border case as deliberately falsified from the start. Either Nehru was deceived by advisors like Gopal (the Karunakar Gupta position) or Nehru himself was involved in deception of his country.⁶²

Yet scholars, like statesmen and officials, are liable to see things as self-evident and unambiguous on the strength of pre-existing beliefs. "To someone with a different theory the same data may appear to be unimportant or to support another explanation."⁶³ Rather than devise conspiratorial explanations, scholars may find it wise to deal with psychological subtleties still unexplored.

Similarly, on the political level the Chinese Government may have to recognize that whatever debating points they (or anyone else) may score against the Indian position, no *de jure* boundary settlement will be achieved unless Indian psychological assumptions are respected. Just as the Indians failed to be sufficiently sensitive to the border psychology of the Chinese, when China was considered merely expansionist by India and much of the world, China has never understood the Indian psychological dimension of the border dispute.

Were the Chinese to do so now, they might abandon their public claim that the entire Sino-Indian boundary is negotiable, with uncontested title to the Aksai Chin and other parts of Ladakh to be secured by trading away other Chinese territorial claims elsewhere. Few self-respecting states would consider a 2000 mile long frontier open to barter, even if assured of a favorable negotiating outcome and no expansionist designs on the other side. Surely that is too much to expect of the present Government of India, which perceives in the Chinese negotiating stance an attempt to denigrate the historical authenticity of the Indian nation. A true nation would not, in the Indian view, be asked to negotiate its historically evolved borders. That request or demand could only come from a neighbor which (like India's former British rulers) regards India as an artificial creation.

NOTES

1. For early but sound scholarly works leaning toward the Indian side see Margaret W. Fisher, Leo E. Rose and Robert A. Huttenback, *Himalayan Battleground: Sino-Indian Rivalry in Ladakh* (New York: Praeger, 1963); Dorothy Woodman, *Himalayan Frontiers: A Political Review of British, Chinese, Indian, and Russian Rivalries* (New York: Praeger, 1969); P. C. Chakravarti, *India's China Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966); and W. F. Van Eekelen, *India's Foreign Policy and the Border Dispute with China* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964). Among Alastair Lamb's major books on the border dispute are: *The China-India Border, The Origins of the Disputed Boundaries*, (London: Chatham House Essays No. 2, Oxford University Press, 1964); and *The Sino-*

Indian Border in Ladakh, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1975).

The Chinese position on the dispute is given in the *Official Report* compiled by Indian and Chinese teams in 1960–61, the full citation of which is *Report of the Officials of the Government of India and of the Peoples Republic of China on the Boundary Question* (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 1961). For a recent presentation of their case see Chen Tiquang, “Legal Aspects of the Sino–Indian Border Question” reprinted in Joint Publication Research Service, *China: Political, Social and Military Affairs*, No. 298, pp. 1–52.

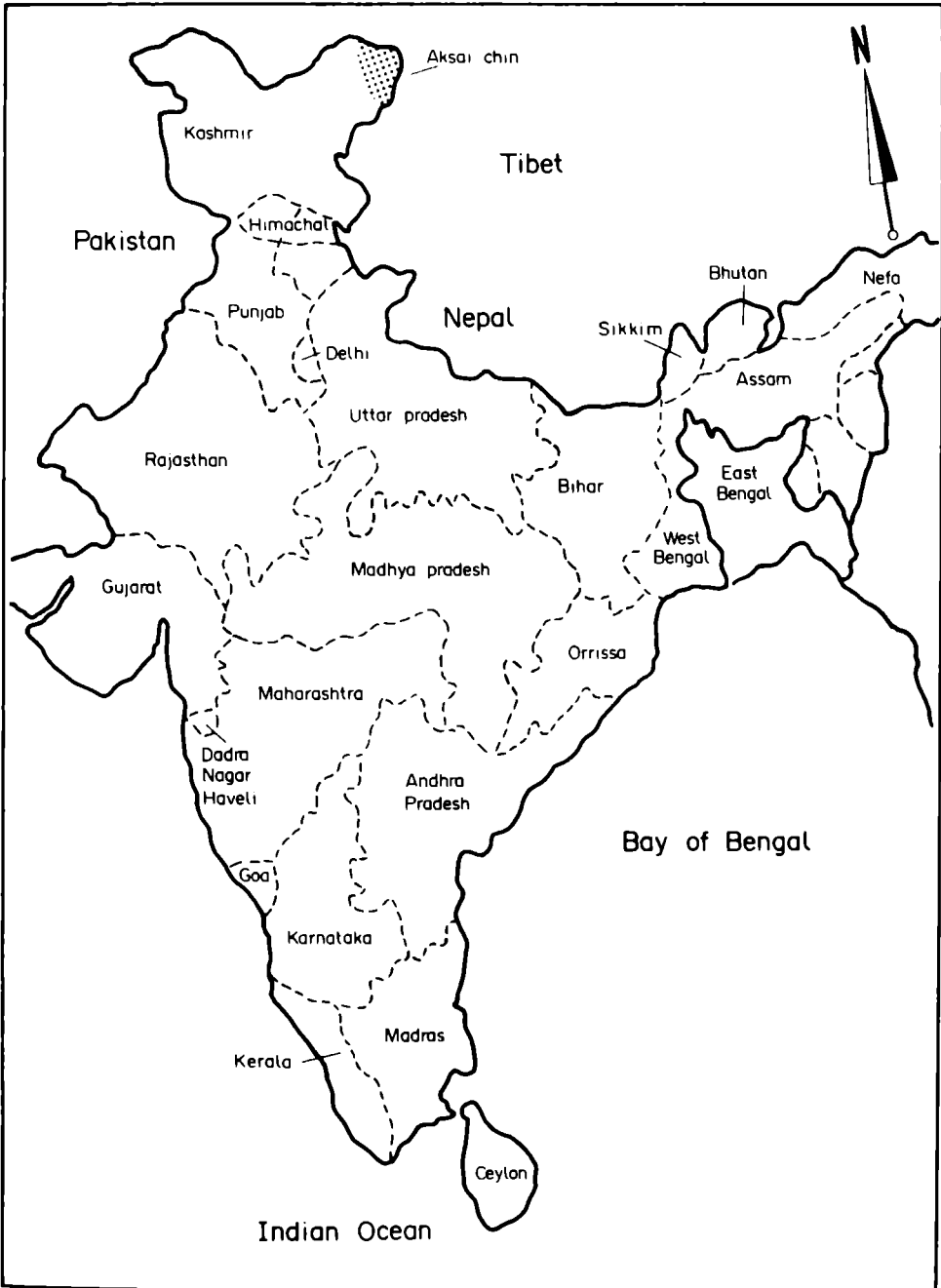
The citations from the Maxwell book used here come from the paperback edition — *India's China War* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

2. Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru, A Biography*, 3 Vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976, 1979, 1984).
3. Karunakar Gupta, *The Hidden History of the Sino–Indian Frontier* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1974), pp. 22–23.
4. The names now used for the several proposed Ladakh borders of British days were coined by Alastair Lamb in his 1964 volume. Prior to that, it seems that the only Kashmir boundary given an official name was the Durand Line. Lamb, personal communication (7 May 1984).
5. G. Narayana Rao, *The India–China Border: A Reappraisal* (New York: Asia Publishing House), pp. 59–60.
6. Lamb, *China–India Border*, pp. 110, 112–114; Ladakh, p. 14.
7. Gupta, *Hidden History*, p. 23; on pre-1912 maps see Lamb, Ladakh, pp. 8–9.
8. See Karunakar Gupta, “A Note on Source Material on the Sino–Indian Border Dispute — Western Sector,” *China Report* Vol. XVII (1981), No. 3, pp. 51–55.
9. Alastair Lamb, “Studying the Frontiers of the British Indian Empire,” *Royal Central Asian Journal* (October 1966), p. 247.
10. In 1935 the two wings of the Foreign and Political Department were made into two separate departments. What responsibility was permitted the Government of India for foreign and border affairs came under what was now called the External Affairs Department. See Subimal Dutt, *With Nehru in the Foreign Office* (Calcutta: Minerva, 1977), pp. 20–21.
11. Lamb, “Studying Frontiers,” p. 245.
12. Alastair Lamb, interview — Hertford, U.K. (1983).
13. Woodman, *Himalayan Frontiers*, pp. 364–365.
14. Lamb, *Border in Ladakh* p. 12.
15. Rao, *India–China Border*, p. 59.
16. Much of Hardinge’s text is in Woodman, *Himalayan Frontier*, pp. 79–82. For complete text of Ardagh memorandum, see Woodman, Appendix 5.
17. Lamb, *Border in Ladakh*, pp. 11–12, 67–68.
18. Gupta, “Source Material,” p. 54.
19. Lamb, personal communication, (7 May 1984).
20. Frederic Drew, *The Jummoo and Kashmir Territories; A Geographical Account* (London: Edward Stanford, 1875), pp. 1, 23–25, 331–333, 474–476, 496.
21. Alastair Lamb, personal communications, (7 and 17 May 1984); Lamb, *The Kashmir Problem; A Historical Survey* (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 95.
22. *Officials Report* (1961), pp. 53–54.
23. Maxwell, *India's China War*, pp. 11–12.
24. Such was their reasoning in 1847 when approached by the British about the Ladakh–Tibet border, and most likely would have been their reaction throughout the rest of the 19th century, see Chen (1982), p.6.
25. See Woodman, *Himalayan Frontier*, p. 36–37, 351; Fisher *et al.*, *Himalayan*

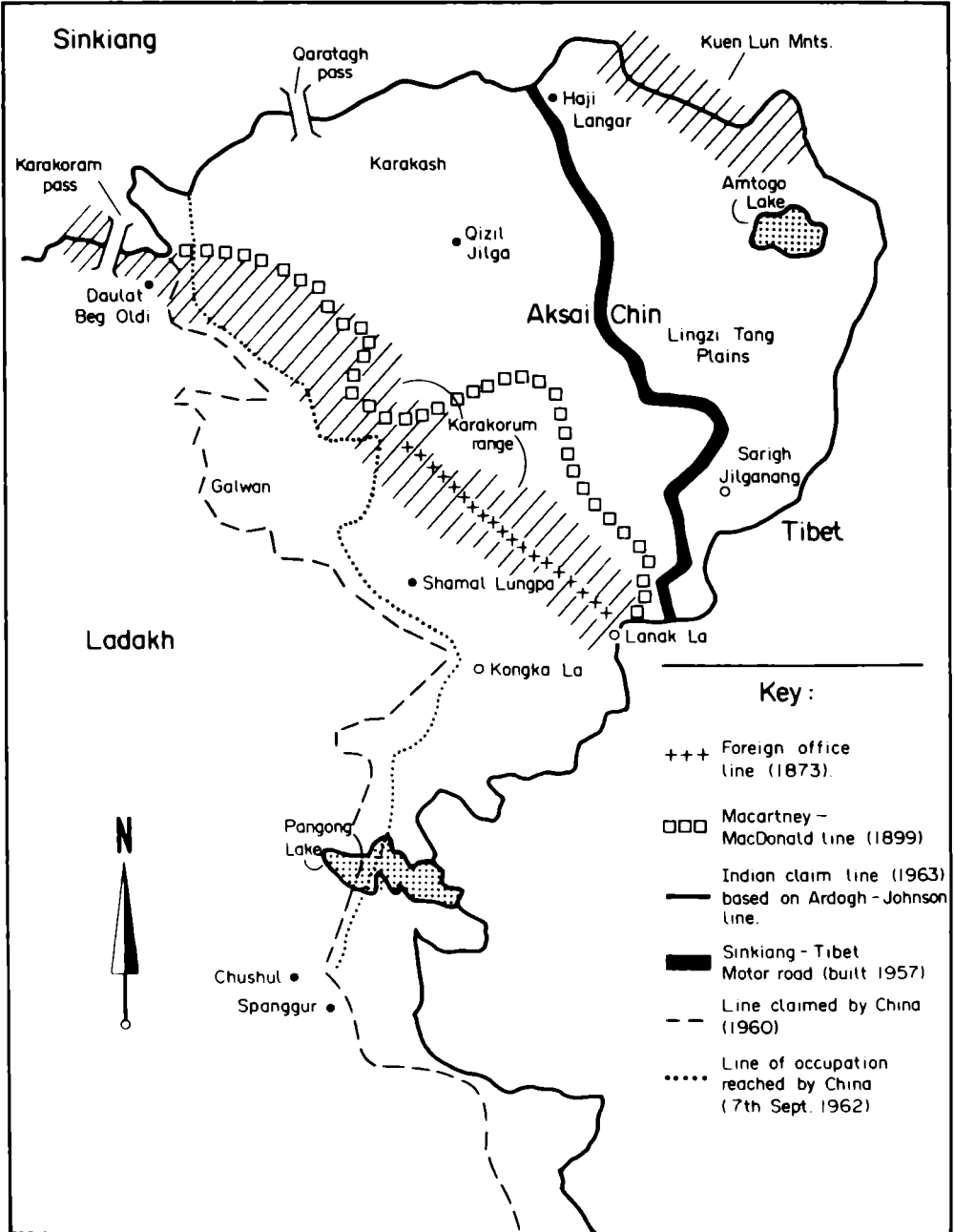
- Battleground*, pp. 18–41.
26. Lamb, *China–India Border*, pp. 67–68.
 27. Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 7. The comparison to the European “march” land is from Lamb (Interview, 1983).
 28. Mr J. S. Mehta, Foreign Secretary (ret.), Government of India (Interview, New York, 1984).
 29. *Officials' Report*, p. 266.
 30. Lamb, *China–India Border*, p. 83.
 31. Lamb, *China–India Border*, oo, 34–40.
 33. *Officials' Report*, p. 145.
 34. Fisher, *et al.*, *Himalayan Battleground*, p. 96.
 35. Lamb, *Border in Ladakh*, p. 10.
 36. Fisher *et al.*, *Himalayan Battleground*, p. 119. After first making their most plausible argument, i.e., that no boundary for the Aksai Chin ever existed, the Chinese ultimately did produce their own version of such a border, starting in 1959 and more fully in 1960. According to Alastair Lamb, the Chinese 1960 line seems to have merely linked points of occupation recently established by them (interview, 1983).
 37. All foregoing quotations and material taken from Fisher *et al.*, *Himalayan Battleground*, p. 118–119.
 38. Geoffrey Hudson, “The Aksai Chin,” *St. Anthony's Papers* Vol. 14 (1963), p. 12.
 39. *Officials Report*, pp. 153, CR p. 112 (CR refers to Chinese-supplied version).
 40. Drew in 1875 described Tanktse as the largest settled place encountered on the Ladakh side along the track to the Aksai Chin. There is no evidence of any change occurring up to 1959. See Drew, *Jummoo and Kashmir*, p. 334.
 41. Sarvepalli Gopal, “Appendix: The Northern Frontier of India of India,” in *Jawaharlal Nehru, A Biography*, Vol. III (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 303.
 42. See Hudson, “Aksai Chin,” pp. 20–22.
 43. Lamb, personal communication (7 May 1984).
 44. *Officials Report*, CR pp. 80–82.
 45. Dutt, Foreign Office, pp. 4–5, 20–21; Badruddin Tyabji, *Indian Policies and Practice* (Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1972), pp. 12–13, 21.
 46. Interviews, N. R. Pillai (London, 1983); J. S. Mehta (New York, 1984).
 47. Interview, Gopal (London, 1983).
 48. Shashi Tharoor, *Reasons of State, Political Development and India's Foreign Policy Under Indira Gandhi* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1982), pp. 22–23.
 49. Gopal interview (London 1983); see also Tyabji, *Indian Policies*, pp. 7–8.
 50. This point of view is Alastair Lamb's, presented in his review of the Maxwell book for *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 5 (1971), No. 4, pp. 392–397. Parts of this summary were also taken from an interview (1983); and personal communications (7 and 17 May 1984).
 51. Karunakar Gupta first reported this information in his *Hidden History*, pp. 22–23, but seems to have secured it from one or more Indian officials. Judging from Dr Gupta's later writings the source was either Mr K. P. S. Menon or Mr R. K. Nehru. There is no reason to doubt that the information on the Zakariah memorandum was accurate.
 52. This writer's interpretation, explained at greater length in *India and the China Crisis*, book-length manuscript, in preparation. On the failure of Nehru to secure Chinese acceptance of a border, under the influence of Ambassador Panikkar in Peking, see Gopal, *Nehru*, Vol. II, pp. 177–181.

53. Gopal, *ibid.*, p.176.
54. This account of the Aksai Chin decision-making process was supplied by Dr Gopal during an interview, (London, 1983). It is a valuable version for several reasons. First, it is information coming from a participant in decision-process, rather than an interpretation. Second, a similar description (although much more general) emerged from interviews conducted in New Delhi during 1966–67 with another veteran of the Historical Division, Dr K. Gopalachari. Gopalachari served as Acting Director in 1958–59, while Gopal was on leave. He had also been a research officer in the Division since 1949. On the subject of Nehru's hesitation in 1959, see my article: "Perceived Hostility and the Indian Reaction to China," *India Quarterly* (October–December, 1973), pp. 283–299.
55. See Rao, *India-China Border*, p. 30; and S. Gopal's review of the Maxwell book, in *The Round Table*, No. 245 (Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Oxford) (January 1972), p. 117.
56. B. N. Mullik, *My Years With Nehru 1984–1964*, pp. 78–79.
57. Robert Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," *World Politics* Vol. 20 (1968), p. 455.
58. Jervis, "Hypotheses," p. 460.
59. Jervis, "Hypotheses," p. 456.
60. E.g. see T. S. Murty, *Paths of Peace, Studies on the Sino–Indian Border Dispute* (New Delhi: ABC Publishing House, 1983), pp. 37–134.
61. Jervis, "Hypotheses," p. 460.
62. This last view was expressed by Mr Neville Maxwell (interview, Oxford, 1983).
63. Jervis, "Hypotheses," p. 462.

APPENDIX: MAPS



Map 1. India and the Aksai Chin.



Map 2. British formulated boundaries for Ladakh.