



INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

The Genesis of the Shimla Conference (1913-14) and Impact of McMahon Line On Sino-Indian Boundary Negotiations

Speaker – General J. J. Singh

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Considering the boundary issue that India and China have had, its profound impact was felt on the contemporary relations. Keeping this issue in mind, the speaker primarily delved into the history of the India-China boundary negotiations – the Shimla Conference. According to the speaker, the armed skirmishes that were occurred in 1967 in Nathu la; standoff in the Sumdorong Chu Valley in 1987; and the recent Doklam standoff (2017) implies that something is jelling between the two that actually limits the major flare-ups. Nonetheless, the understanding of Indians on the subject is superficial hence knowing Chinese better is vital to understand ourselves and to give an account of China in any dimension.

Understanding history is significant to study the relation between the two countries but understanding geography is equally important. In India-China relations geo-strategy is a neglected sphere. The speaker argued that, where the rivers cut across in the Himalayas, the boundary issue occurs there. Hence understanding the emergence of Tibetan plateau and Tibet itself in entirety is significant to understand the nuances of boundary negotiations between India and China.

Highlighting the religious and political history of Tibet, the speaker argued that Tibet was not necessarily subordinated to the external powers. The Tibetans are different from the Han Chinese. The existence of South Tibet is recent which China repeatedly deploys to buttress their

claim in Arunachal Pradesh. The Temporal and ecclesiastical power was given to Dalai Lama by Mongols.

Tibet had long remained a forbidden territory for foreigners. The expedition led by Col. F.E. Younghusband allowed British Empire's forces to enter Lhasa. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of British India was compelled to invade Tibet because of the attitude of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government, wherein, earlier trade agreements were not being respected and the Viceroy's letters were returned unopened. The passive response from Tibet compelled Younghusband's force to reach Lhasa on 7 September 1904 where the Anglo-Tibetan Convention was signed. As a result, the Tibetans were brought to heel, the British imposed heavy reparations on them and secured the desired trade privileges.

However, the Tibetans were astonished and surprised to see the victorious British expedition making their way back after a fortnight of the signing of the Treaty.

Younghusband's expedition advanced in Tibet made the Qing empire exposed and made vulnerable from the southern direction. The shaken regime in Peking undertook urgent measures to assert their authority over Tibet much beyond the stipulations laid down by the British and reneged from their assurances that they would allow Tibetans to exercise the fullest autonomy under Chinese suzerainty. They simultaneously unleashed a wave of terror to subjugate Tibet. The British decided to review their 'hands off' policy on Tibet and called for a tri-partite meeting of representatives of Tibet, China, and British India at Shimla in 1913-14. At the end of nine months of negotiations, however, the Chinese plenipotentiary did not sign the final agreement, but the British and the Tibetan plenipotentiaries went ahead and did so. In addition, they signed maps delineating the Indo-Tibetan boundary (the famous red line of McMahon). For independent India, the McMahon line as it is referred to now have proved to be a boon and is cartographically accepted and shown as the boundary in maps worldwide.

Report prepared by Diki Sherpa, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

About the Speaker

General JJ Singh is a former Governor of the State of Arunachal Pradesh (2008-2013) and a former Chief of Army Staff (2005-2007) and Chairman Chiefs of Staff of the armed forces (2007). As Governor, he was instrumental in implementation of the Prime Minister's development package of Rs 20,000 crores for development of the state in major infrastructural projects related to road, rail, air connectivity and power. During his tenure as army chief, Gen. Singh refined operational planning and war-fighting doctrines. Gen. Singh was recently honoured with the Légion d'Honneur by France.

