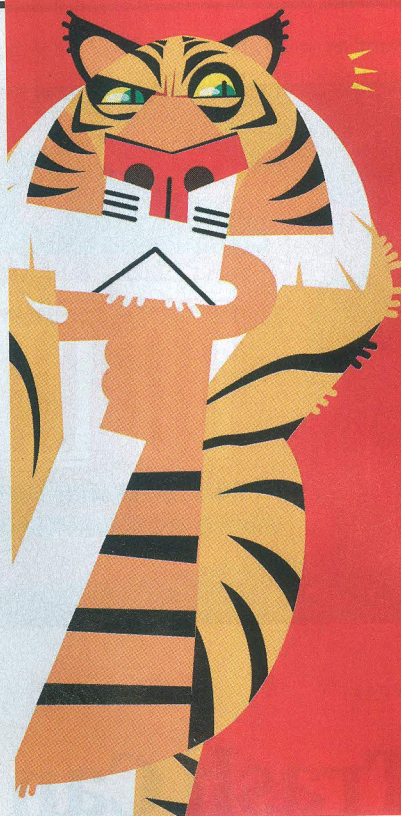
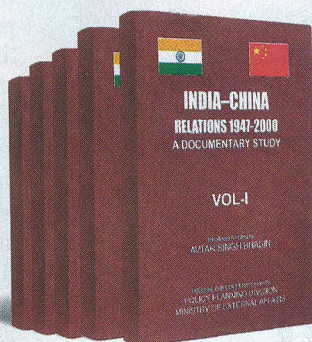


BOOKS

THE CHINA DOSSIER

By Shivshankar Menon

**INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS
1947-2000: A Documentary
Study, Vols I-V**
Edited by A.S. BHASIN
Geethika Publishers
₹15,000; 5,318 pages



This is a monumental work in every sense of the word. Physically, it consists of five large volumes, 2,523 documents, 5,318 pages! Besides, in terms of sheer mastery over material, this is remarkable work and is a worthy follow-on to A.S. Bhasin's earlier works, making the archives on India's relations with her neighbours accessible to scholars and the public. And it is monumental in the detailed introduction that Bhasin, the former director of the Ministry of External Affairs' (MEA) Historical Division, has written for these volumes. He has so far produced documentary studies of India's relations with Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan (in 10 volumes), and now with China. For this dedication and productivity, he deserves our thanks.

There is considerable value to this work that Bhasin has undertaken in his retirement, which should, in my opinion, be a function of a working and well-supported Historical Division in the MEA itself. It is valuable because it helps scholars and the public, who are

interested in the subject, and enables a better understanding of India's policies by our own people—something that is essential in a democracy like ours. That in itself is enough of a reason to encourage and support such work, and to open our archives and to follow the 30-year rule that is on our books, but is followed more in the breach than in practice on important relationships like China.

But there is another, equally important reason why such work has value. If we do not release our documents, we leave the field to others' narratives, based on imagination, whimsy and, in some cases, malice. We cannot then blame others or our own people for their lack of understanding of the big foreign policy issues that India faces. I find it amazing that a former *Sunday Times* correspondent could peddle a narrative combining New Delhi dinner party gossip, a one-sided version of history, and unqualified admiration for an unknown and closed China as an authoritative version of the 1962 war, and that there are those in India who

accept it as such.

It is sometimes argued in government that we should not reveal our thinking when China does not do so, and that it will somehow weaken our case to show the amount of consideration that goes into it. This is a false argument. Bhasin has produced similar documents on other sensitive relationships, like his 10-volume study on Pakistan, and the skies have not fallen.

As for the substance of what the documents reveal, this is a treasure trove that we will be dipping into for many years to come. I would recommend starting with the introduction, all 86 pages of it, to see the conclusions that Bhasin has come to after his great labours.

Let me try and summarise what I found of particular interest:

- The centrality of Tibet to the relationship in the fifties and sixties comes through very clearly. India and China became neighbours with physical congruity for the first time in history in 1950 when the People's Liberation

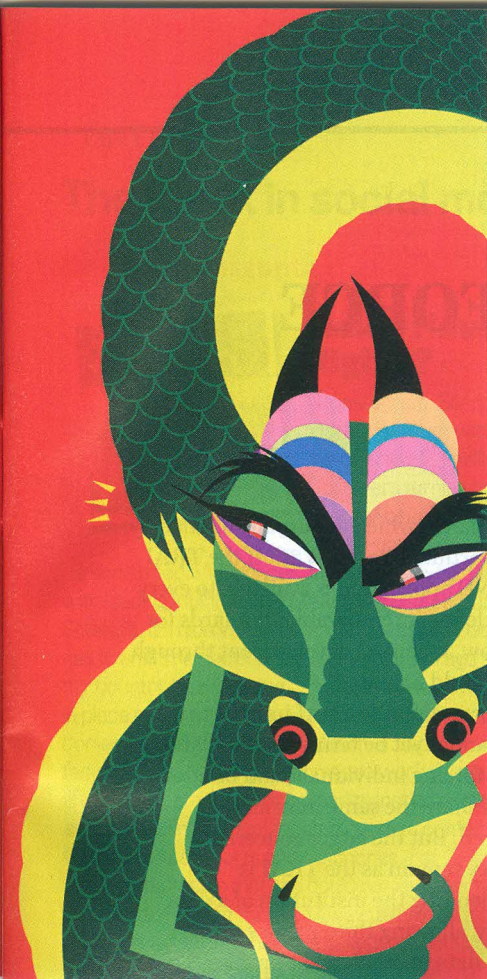


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

Army (PLA) marched into Tibet. Throughout the fifties, India underestimated the importance of this factor and failed to draw the necessary conclusions from it. Incidentally, the People's Republic of China (PRC) chose to 'liberate' Tibet and postpone the invasion of Taiwan, even though US Secretary of State Dean Acheson had withdrawn the military umbrella from both Taiwan and South Korea. Kim Il-sung seized his opportunity, Mao didn't in Taiwan. Besides, Tibet was also the only part of China with which they signed a separate agreement about 'liberation', the 17-point Agreement of May 1951, thus acknowledging implicitly Tibet's unique status among all the territories claimed by the PRC. These also show how important Tibet was to China.

• As the story proceeds, however, the salience of Tibet in the India-China relationship diminishes. Both countries grow, so does their self-perception of their interests, which now involve multiple points of contact and interaction between India and China. This

both complicates the relationship and gives policymakers on both sides more to work with.

• The world has always impinged on the India-China relationship, and the Chinese have been acutely conscious of this fact; India less so, judging by Indian reporting and Chinese actions, which may, perhaps, be an unfair comparison. The original impact of the Cold War world on India-China relations was not benign—it made China suspicious, maybe paranoid. The end of the Cold War was probably the most propitious international climate for India and China to deal with the relationship on their own terms, without looking over their shoulders at the rest of the world. Now again, the international situation is complicating India-China relations. China's drive for primacy and contention with the US make life harder for others, who are asked by both China and the US to choose one or the other. Between themselves, China and the US are both contending and co-dependent and they reserve the right to work together and cooperate with each other while denying it to others.

• There are fascinating documents here about India-China triangles with our other neighbours, such as Nepal and Burma/ Myanmar.

As for a boundary settlement, which will possibly get the most public attention, Bhasin sets the record straight about some wilder public allegations about Deng Xiaoping's 1982

'offer' to G. Parthasarathi of a package settlement, making clear the limited and hedged nature of what was said. Bhasin's broader conclusion after reviewing the entire available documentation till 2000 is that a boundary settlement is probably 'impossible' (pp. 86, Introduction). I am not so sure. Nothing is impossible in politics. What is impossible is a settlement on the terms the Chinese have announced in public, which include Tawang and significant Indian concessions in the eastern sector in Arunachal. But as the history of the last 69 years of India's relations with the PRC show, nothing should be assumed to be set in stone.

The book is also fascinating for what it reveals of China's behaviour and propensity to take risks. Under internal and external pressure in 1962, Mao opts for war against India, dealing with internal and external enemies simultaneously at one stroke, forcing the Soviets to stand with China when preoccupied with the Cuban missile crisis, and eliminating Wang Jiaxiang and others to gain control of China's foreign policy at the September 1962 Lushan plenum. Today again, when China is under internal and international pressure, she has opted for an assertive policy in her periphery. This makes one wonder about the motivations behind China's assertion of her global ambitions and regional pre-eminence since 2012, and what they reflect of Chinese leaders' sense of their own vulnerability.

All in all, this is a book that will repay detailed study, an invaluable resource which is unlikely to be bettered as a reflection of official Indian thinking on China during a critical period. If only one could get a similar insight into Chinese consideration of the India-China relationship. ■

Nothing is impossible in politics. What is impossible is a settlement on terms the Chinese have announced in public

The author is a former foreign secretary and National Security Advisor