

## ‘A cat’s paw of Indian reactionaries?’

### Strategic Rivalry and Domestic Politics at the India-China- Myanmar Tri-junction

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**Abstract:**

Ostensibly driven by concerns over a military standoff with China similar to Doklam, India increased military deployment at the Myanmar tri-junction. This article assesses the inevitability of systemic factors such as rivalry with China in determining India's approach on border issues. It asks why India sought formalization of its boundary with Burma in 1967? Given its territorial disputes with China, resolving the Burma boundary should have been high priority. Still, it took India two decades after independence to broach the subject. Based on fresh archival and interview data, this article answers the question by examining the India-Burma Boundary Agreement. A three-party territorial dispute, the making of this agreement witnessed simultaneous interplay between states with visible power differentials, and various stakeholders within India’s polity and bureaucracy. The article argues that even when inter-state competition is apparent, domestic factors may be more important in triggering foreign policy change.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The rhetoric of ‘standing up’ to China, showing Pakistan ‘its place’, and protecting ‘every inch’ of national territory are powerful, and intertwined, drivers of modern India’s foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> The 2017 Sino-Indian military standoff in Doklam at the Bhutan tri-junction reified some of these narratives as the crisis re-focused attention on (a) the risk of active conflict between the two powers over an unsettled border dispute, and (b) India’s management of relations with smaller neighbours in light of strategic rivalry with China.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, China’s expanding economic footprint in South Asia as part of the Belt-and-Roads Initiative (BRI) has increased stress on India to compete with Beijing for maintaining strategic influence over its smaller neighbours.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the Doklam crisis, which occurred in the backdrop of India’s refusal to join the BRI, New Delhi sought to secure its ‘special relationship’ with

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<sup>1</sup> The Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy (CISD) at SOAS University of London provided funding support for the archival research that went into this article and for hosting the ‘Foreign Policy Analysis and Indian Foreign Policy’ workshop in February 2018. In New Delhi, Asmita Mahajan offered stellar research assistance at the National Archives of India (NAI) and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML). A longer version of this article benefited tremendously from feedback by (in no particular order) Swapna Kona Nayudu, Karthik Nachiappan, Martin Bayly, Shashank Joshi, Nicolas Blarel, and Walter Ladwig. Thanks also to the two anonymous reviewers who highlighted areas of improvement and gave valuable advice.

<sup>2</sup> If one creates a hierarchy of foreign policy objectives for India, these three are likely to top the list. Other interconnected objectives range from, but are not limited to, economic development, protecting equal human rights, great power status, Non-Alignment, national security, and protecting interests of the Indian diaspora, to seeking/offering ‘good’ global governance. For an overview of India’s foreign policy see David Malone, *Does the Elephant Dance? Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy* (New York: OUP, 2012); Srinath Raghavan, C Raja Mohan, and David Malone, *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy* (New York: OUP, 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Prashant Jha, ‘India will adopt a three-pronged strategy to check China influence’, *Hindustan Times*, 08/007/2018; For more on Sino-Indian dynamics, see: Frank O’Donnell, ‘Stabilizing Sino-Indian Security Relations: Managing Strategic Rivalry After Doklam’, *Carnegie-Tsinghua Centre for Global Policy*, June 2018

<sup>4</sup> On BRI see Michael Clarke, ‘The Belt and Road Initiative: Exploring Beijing’s Motivations and Challenges for its New Silk Road’, *Strategic Analysis*, 42 (2), 2018, 84-102; and for China’s response to India’s rise see Oriana S Mastro, ‘It Takes Two to Tango: Autocratic Underbalancing, Regime Legitimacy and China’s responses to India’s Rise’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, July 2018

Bhutan, and not loose territory to China.<sup>5</sup> What went largely unnoticed was New Delhi's troop build-up at the tri-junction with Myanmar.<sup>6</sup> Given the situation in Doklam, this was a logical military precaution from an Indian standpoint. The difference remains that unlike Bhutan, India does not have special relations with Myanmar. If anything, Myanmar is heavily dependent on China, and India has failed to become a credible counter-balance despite reinvigorating its 'Act East' policy, which emphasizes on economic connectivity to Southeast Asia via Myanmar.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of these contextual differences, it is conventional wisdom that strategic rivalry with China drives India's 'Act East' policy, and territorial sensitivities inform its tactical response to crises such as Doklam. Especially vis-à-vis Myanmar, existing literature emphasizes on competition with China as decisive in shaping India's foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> Though the role of domestic and bureaucratic politics is appreciated, these drivers are not considered critical.

This article interrogates the decisiveness of strategic rivalry with China and territorial sensitivity as drivers of India's approach towards Myanmar and juxtaposes their criticality against factors such as domestic and bureaucratic politics. It does so by

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<sup>5</sup> On how Bhutan reacted to the crisis, see Rudra Chaudhuri, 'Looking for Godot', *Indian Express*, 03/09/2017

<sup>6</sup> 'India steps-up vigil at Walong tri-junction', *The Hindu*, 01/04/2018

<sup>7</sup> On China-Myanmar relations see David Steinberg and Hongwei Fan, *Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence* (Singapore: NIAS Press, 2012); on Act East Policy see Isabelle Saint-Mezard, 'India's Act East Policy: Strategic Implications for the Indian Ocean', *Journal of Indian Ocean Region*, 12 (2), 2016, 177-190

<sup>8</sup> Lack of substantial relations between the two countries due to the *Tatmadaw's* inward-looking policies, its anti-India predilection, and India's own preference for a democratic political system in Myanmar, are other facets outlined in this literature. For more on India's Myanmar policy see: Sunniva Engh, 'India's Myanmar Policy and the 'Sino-India Great Game'', *Asian Affairs*, 47 (1), 32-58; Marie Lall, 'Indo-Myanmar Relations in the Era of Pipeline Diplomacy', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 28 (3), December 2006, 424-446; B Pakem, *India-Burma Relations* (New Delhi: Omsons Publishers, 1992); Renaud Egretreau, *Wooing the Generals: India's New Burma Policy* (New Delhi: Authors Press, 2003); Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East – India, China, and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2012); Andrew Selth, 'Burma and the Strategic Competition between China and India', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 19 (2), 1996, 213-230; John W Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001) 243-274; Thant Myint U, *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2012); Rajiv Bhatia, *India-Myanmar Relations: Changing Contours* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2017); Preet Malik, *My Myanmar Years: A Diplomat's Account of India's Relations with the Region* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2015); J N Dixit, *India's Foreign Policy and its Neighbours* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishers, 2015) 323-334; Frederic Grare, *India Turns East: International Engagement and US-China Rivalry* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2017) 91-110

studying fresh archival and interview data on the formulation and implementation of the 1967 India-Burma Boundary Agreement.<sup>9</sup> The empirical puzzle it seeks to decode is: why did India seek formalization of its boundary with Burma in early 1967? Given its territorial disputes with China (and Pakistan), resolving the boundary issue with Burma should have been a priority issue for India. Still, it took New Delhi two decades after independence, and five years after the 1962 war, to broach the subject. Additionally, once the boundary agreement was signed on paper, both India and Burma remained content with territorial ambiguity on the ground. This case is important for a variety of reasons. One, it shines historical light on why and how India deals with smaller neighbours in the light of its rivalry with China. The agreement is unique not just for its timing but also its content and implementation. A three-party dispute that involved China, the making of this agreement witnessed interplay between recently decolonized states with visible power differentials (i.e. China being most powerful, followed by India and Burma respectively), and rivalry between China and India after the 1962 Sino-Indian war. The tri-junction, which is still under dispute, witnessed heavy fighting between Indian and Chinese troops in November 1962.<sup>10</sup> Two, similar to Bhutanese concerns about losing territory to China in 2017, Burma was concerned about Chinese incursions throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. Unlike Bhutan though, Burma signed a boundary agreement with China in October 1960, and ratified it in January 1961.<sup>11</sup> During Doklam, Bhutan's strong relationship with India was an asset for New Delhi. Burma, however, had given up its claim at the tri-junction as part of the 1961 Sino-Burmese Boundary Agreement. Finally, despite the 1967 agreement, the India-Myanmar border is still contested by local publics residing along the boundary, and the China-Myanmar-India tri-junction continues to remain disputed. Critically, the case shows how India negotiated between domestic politics and foreign policy in 1967 when risk of armed conflict with China was considerably higher (skirmishes did break out later that year).

The article argues that domestic security and bureaucratic politics trumped external factors in the making of the boundary agreement. More than India's rivalry

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<sup>9</sup> The term 'Burma' is used in the article for the pre-1989 phase. For other references, the term 'Myanmar' is used.

<sup>10</sup> Arjun Subramaniam, *India's Wars: A Military History 1947-1971* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2016) 245-246

<sup>11</sup> United States Government (USG), 'International Boundary Study – Burma-China Boundary', The Geographer, Office of the Geographer, *Bureau of Intelligence and Research*, No. 42, 30/11/1964, <http://fall.fsulawrc.com/collection/LimitsinSeas/IBSO42.pdf> and Maung Maung, 'The Burma-China Boundary Settlement', *Asian Survey*, 1 (1), March 1961, 38-43

with China, it was the outbreak of the Mizo insurgency in 1966 (coupled with an ongoing Naga insurgency) that pressed India into action to resolve its boundary dispute with Burma. The insurgencies were potent enough to make India, bigger of the two powers, to willfully cede territory to Burma if needed. Such a move was inconceivable at a time when the defeat of 1962 was fresh and losing territory could result in political damage for a government in New Delhi. Yet, the combination of worsening security situation, a requirement for the state of India to assert its administrative presence and demonstrate its distribution potential in its Northeastern frontiers, and simultaneous deterioration in Sino-Burmese relations, pushed India to formalize the boundary. Moreover, territoriality was far from a zero-sum game for both sides, as India was willing to make territorial compromises and ensure unhindered flow of people and capital across the border. These findings about the importance of domestic politics and security are not necessarily surprising. Nonetheless, they are counter-intuitive given the potency of the narrative around Sino-Indian rivalry as the core driver of India's Myanmar policy. They demonstrate that rivalry with China, or India's territorial prickliness, does not adequately explain the reasons for or timing of India's formalization of its boundary with Burma in 1967. True, the strategic importance of securing this border given the threat perception from China in the 1960s was not lost upon Indian policymakers. The Chinese media reaction to the agreement was telling as it blamed Burmese leaders for being a 'cat's paw' of 'Indian reactionaries' and ramped up anti-Burmese and anti-India propaganda. But the trigger for India's policy change was domestic and not external.

This case study shows that retrospective explanations of foreign policy output risks (over) assuming intentionality and attributing excessive analytical weight on visibly obvious geopolitical trends. Understanding the actual policymaking process then becomes less important. Hereon, the article is divided into four sections. The first section offers a brief historical overview of how colonialism shaped the contours of the India-Myanmar border, and why governments of both countries asserted that the 1967 agreement only 'formalized' a 'traditional' boundary. The second section explains the immediate context in 1966 and 1967 that pushed Indian policymakers into viewing an unsettled boundary with Burma as a 'problem' that must be managed with urgency. The third section then takes a deep historical dive into why the agreement was signed in March 1967, why Indian policymakers bypassed all regional stakeholders in Northeast India, how India negotiated the agreement with Rangoon, and how China reacted to the same. The fourth and penultimate section offers analytical takeaways from this case study, just as the conclusion builds on this analysis to demonstrate the

value of domestic forces – sometimes over and above external rivalry – in dictating the timing of India’s foreign policy actions vis-à-vis Myanmar.

## **Colonialism and Territoriality**

Territoriality, or the idea of a defined geography over which a state commands sovereign control is critical in the study of international politics.<sup>12</sup> In practice, territoriality has serious implications for states that struggle to uniformly assert authority across recognized borders. Postcolonial states such as India, for instance, inherited its territorial construct from the British Raj.<sup>13</sup> Such inheritance of colonial boundaries implied inheritance of problems associated with them as well. For example, the imposition of administrative and physical limits on communities historically unburdened by such divisions led to violent friction between the Raj and these communities, notably in the Northwest Frontier Province and the Northeast Frontier Agency. Often resulting in mutually accepted agreements, these frictions ensured that ‘frontier regions’ were beyond the administrative purview of the colonial state, and implied compromised levels of imperial sovereignty.<sup>14</sup> The history of modern India’s international territorial disputes and domestic separatist movements can be traced to this colonial period. Continuation of colonial administrative practices by independent India in order to deal with separatist resistance is also visible in equal measure.<sup>15</sup> Sensitive about its existence as a viable state, India’s political leadership gave priority to the issue of integrating communities living on the peripheries.

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<sup>12</sup> The concept of territoriality goes beyond just physical geography and encompasses a variety of tangible domains (human geography, financial geography and so on). But in this article emphasis remains on physical geography. For more on territoriality and IR see J G Ruggie, ‘Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations’, *International Organization*, 47 (1) Winter 1993, 139-174; J Strandsbjerg, *Territory, Globalization and International Relations: The Cartographic Reality of Space* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> For more on postcolonial states and territoriality see: Jeffrey Herbst, ‘The Creation and Maintenance of National Boundaries in Africa’, *International Organization*, 43 (3), Autumn, 1989, 673-692; James C Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Itty Abraham, *How India Became Territorial: Foreign Policy, Diaspora, Geopolitics* (California: Stanford University Press, 2014)

<sup>14</sup> Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014) 5-13

<sup>15</sup> There have been differences in the way India and Pakistan dealt with separatism in Balochistan and North East. See Elisabeth Leake, ‘At the Nation-State’s Edge: Centre-Periphery Relations in Post-1947 South Asia’, *The Historical Journal*, March 2016, 1-31

## *Geographical Features of the India-Myanmar Frontier*

The India-Myanmar frontier is a virtual wall of jungle-clad mountains stretching from the Patkai, the Naga, and the Manipur hills in the north to the Lushai and the Chin Hills in the center of the frontier region. A set of narrow and relatively low-heighted hills (averaging 7,000 feet), these ranges join the Arakan Yomas in the south, which further continues into the maritime sphere and emerge as the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. The India-China-Myanmar borders meet in Myanmar's northernmost region of Kachin state, and the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. A set of parallel ridges and valleys averaging about 100 miles broad, this hilly border is difficult to penetrate and has few land routes connecting the two countries.<sup>16</sup> Demographically, the region is a mélange of different linguistic, ethnic, religious, and tribal groups. The more prominent communities include the Nagas, the Mizos, the Kukis, the Meiteis, the Bodos, and the Assamese on the Indian side, and the Nagas, the Kachins and the Chins on the Burmese side. In practice, the border has meant little for people living in these areas. However, from a bureaucratic and security perspective, it defines the sovereign limits for both Myanmar and India.

## *The Frontier's Sociopolitical Dynamics*

Historically, three aspects came to define the socio-political dynamics of this frontier. First, were the British Raj's relations with Burma. Much like its northwest frontier where the Raj fought various wars with Afghan and Sikh kings, it fought three wars with Burma before colonizing it completely in 1885. King Thibaw Min of Burma was considered both inept and unfriendly and viewed as a hindrance between easy trade access between India and China via Burma. This powerful economic drive to 'tame' Upper Burma (akin to 'Lower Burma' which was under British influence) in order to access lucrative Chinese markets played a decisive role in the overthrow of the king.<sup>17</sup> Second, was the Raj's relations with local powerbrokers in the Northeast, such as the Maharaja of Manipur and various Naga tribal leaders, as well as relations these powerbrokers had with Burma. Various power brokers in India's northeast had accepted British suzerainty and became princely states under British rule. These small kingdoms had traditionally been at odds with the Burmese who had invaded Assam

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<sup>16</sup> R Kozicki, *India and Burma, 1937-1957: A Study in International Relations* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1959) 6-8

<sup>17</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 186-189

and Manipur in early nineteenth century before being defeated comprehensively by the British in the First Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826). Following the British victory, a formal agreement about the frontier was signed in 1826 in Yandabo. The Treaty of Yandabo ended the war and led to the ceding of Assam (annexed by Burma in 1821), Manipur including the Kabaw Valley (annexed by Burma in 1813), Arakan (now Rakhine, annexed by Burma in 1784), and the Tenasserim (Taninthayi) coast south of the Salween River to the British victors.<sup>18</sup> The Burmese were forced to cease 'interference' in the Cachar and Jaintia Hills District, pay an indemnity of £1 million in four installments, exchange diplomatic representatives between Ava and Calcutta, and sign a commercial treaty.<sup>19</sup> The indemnity payment that crippled Burma financially coupled with loss of territory, began a slow but sure process of popular antipathy against the British. Not surprisingly, the two issues that preoccupied the British Resident in Burma included (a) the payment of indemnity, and (b) boundary demarcation in the frontier region where raids by armed Burmese bands became routine affairs.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, Assam and Manipur became assertive in demanding (unsuccessfully) more territorial and financial concessions from Burma with British help.

Apart from debates and disagreements over which village or cluster of villages belonged to Assam and Manipur or Burma, dispute over the Kabaw Valley became a serious diplomatic issue. In order to assuage protests, the valley was ceded in its entirety to Burma in January 1834, and the British Indian government promised to pay Rupees 6,000 yearly to the Maharaja of Manipur as compensation for property lost. Yet, disputes over forestry rights and raids across this border ensued, prompting colonial authorities to begin demarcating the boundary in 1880. A portion of the boundary was demarcated in 1882, and the rest (between boundary pillars, or BPs, 1 and 39) was completed in 1896, with the border lying at the eastern foot of the chain of mountains that rose immediately from the western side of the Kabaw Valley.<sup>21</sup> Though agreeable to the Burmese the boundary on the ground allegedly bereaved Manipur of large tracts of teak forests and, as forcefully stated by the Maharaja in 1926, it differed considerably from the terms of Agreement in 1834.<sup>22</sup> Citing that he was a

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<sup>18</sup> Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 214-215

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> W S Desai, *History of the British Residency in Burma, 1826-1840* (Yangon: Rangoon University, 1939) 10-23

<sup>21</sup> MEA, SECRET, Naravana Rao to Additional Secretary, 26/08/1974, D1692/DDHDIII/74, NAI

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 3

'minor' in 1896 to credibly assess the degree of 'injustice' against the people of Manipur during the demarcation process, he wanted to 'reopen the boundary question'. Not only was such a demand 'intolerable' to the Government of Burma, it failed to impress the British as well. The central government was concerned that reopening the boundary question in Manipur could lead to similar demands in other sectors potentially unsettling the border. Rejection of Manipuri demands by the British set a precedent wherein regional advocacy on the boundary issue were suppressed or bypassed completely by central governments in independent India. This dialectic between colonial expansion with local collaboration and resistance not only defined British India's relations with Burma, but also shaped the interaction between independent India and Burma on one hand and that between local power-holders in the frontier region on the other. Thus, the contours of the boundary, as viewed by either side, were representative of this multi-leveled political push-and-pull; and continue to remain so till today.

#### *Post-Independence Politics in Northeast India*

Soon after independence, the two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship in 1951 and developed close ties on a range of issues including the Non-Alignment movement. The problem of Indian migrants in Burma, and rice trade, were top priority.<sup>23</sup> Though the border areas remained un-administered and mostly violent, they were not high up the political agenda. This was despite the fact that (a) both Burma and India had a boundary dispute with China, (b) they shared a tri-junction at the northern most extremity of the boundary, and (c) people in Naga Hills had opposed becoming part of India and launched the Free Naga Movement that operated on both sides of the border. It was not long before frontier violence became intense enough to require active governmental intervention. In 1951, people from the Pennu village

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<sup>23</sup> During the colonial period, the ruling British authorities migrated many Indians to work in Burma. These people, who came from Tamil Nadu, Bengal, and other parts of the subcontinent, eventually came to dominate Burma's economy. This economic migration and the resulting inequalities generated discontentment among locals and led to many rounds of anti-Indian riots in Burma before and after independence. In 1962, General Ne Win began a nationalization drive that essentially broke the back of Indian traders, landowners, and agricultural workers, forcing them to leave the country on short notice. The exodus of Indians from Burma throughout the 1960s became a huge diplomatic issue between the two countries. As for rice trade, Burma was the largest supplier of rice to India. The exodus of Indians working in paddy fields had a direct impact on Burma's potential to grow and export rice. At the same time, India itself was facing acute food shortages and required more – not less – of rice imports from Burma. For more, see Kozicki, *India and Burma*, 1-50

Burma raided an Indian Naga village called Nomyu. They took 93 'heads' as trophies, burnt nearly 400 houses, and looted grains and livestock.<sup>24</sup> Active intervention from local administrations settled the dispute with the clause that the inhabitants of Pennu will pay a compensation of Rupees 15,000/- in kind to inhabitants of Nomyu.<sup>25</sup> Such occurrences were common across the region. Instead of resolving the issue, India's first PM Jawaharlal Nehru downplayed their importance saying that such incidents were unrelated to both the boundary issue and with the Free Naga Movement.<sup>26</sup> They were: 'disputes more or less of family type, i.e. between one clan and another'.<sup>27</sup> Unable to find a lasting solution for such issues, India and Burma agreed 'to 'keep a fatherly eye' on this un-administered area.<sup>28</sup> India's defeat in the 1962 Sino-India war impacted the way New Delhi viewed its strategic landscape. Not only did it come to appreciate its vulnerabilities in the frontier regions, it also became aware of the possibility of a Sino-Pakistan axis to exploit these vulnerabilities. This was most visible in the support these countries gave to the increasingly violent Naga insurgency throughout the 1960s.<sup>29</sup> Friendly relations with Rangoon were required to ensure support on the Naga issue as well as in dealing with China. For its part, Burma had signed a boundary treaty with China in October 1960 and with Pakistan in 1964. These settlements increased pressure on India to resolve its own boundary issue with Rangoon. Still, it took India another five years to propose the formalization of the boundary. The next section explains why.

### **Formalizing the Boundary**

There were three axes along which the situation developed. One, bilaterally, India's relations with Burma improved after a hiatus after 1962 (due to the Sino-Indian war and the military coup in Burma). Two, domestically, the security situation in Northeast worsened. Three, regionally, India's relations with both China and Pakistan remained poor. All these aspects created an environment for India to take the lead and propose the formalization of the boundary in 1966. The perils of an un-demarcated

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<sup>24</sup> Parliamentary Debates (HP), Part I, 2 (43), 17/04/1954

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Parliamentary Debates (HP), Part I, 2 (3), 01/07/1952

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> MEA, UNCLASSIFIED, 'Joint Border Meeting between Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills (Burma) and Assistant Political Officer, Konyak Sub-Division', 07/03/1953, NAI

<sup>29</sup> Marcus Franke, *War and Nationalism in South Asia: The Indian State and the Nagas* (London: Routledge, 2009) 107-109

boundary with Burma were evident to the Indian leadership since the defeat of 1962. Ensuring territorial security required resolving outstanding boundary disputes with smaller neighbours. Yet, there is no evidence that the issue was discussed with the visiting Burmese head of state and military dictator General Ne Win and his wife in February 1965. His first to India since the military coup in 1962, Ne Win's visit highlighted that a change in leadership in New Delhi had paved way for improvement in bilateral ties. Till then, Nehru's ill-health and a lack of rapport with Ne Win, coupled with U Nu's unceremonious ouster had prevented fruitful dialogue on most pressing bilateral issues including the exodus of Indian workers. Ne Win's 'neutral' participation in the Colombo Powers meeting in 1962 to resolve the Sino-Indian border dispute did not help the cause either. Rangoon's failure to condemn Chinese actions distressed India even if New Delhi tried utilizing the Colombo Powers' proposals to reach a settlement with China. Moreover, by mid-1964, the bonhomie between China and Burma had faded. Ne Win was unhappy by Chinese support to the Burmese 'White-Flag' Communists whereas the Chinese were unimpressed by Ne Win's 'Burmese Way to Socialism'.<sup>30</sup> Improving relations with India resonated in Rangoon. The 1965 visit was important for both countries.

### *India-Burma Bilateral Relations*

The core purpose of the visit, from India's perspective, was to warm-up with Ne Win since the hiatus of 1962. Speeches of the two heads of state underlined that they truly were seeking to 'renew' old ties despite differences.<sup>31</sup> A variety of issues ranging from the situation in Indochina, non-alignment, and nuclear test ban treaty, to bilateral relations were discussed.<sup>32</sup> Though there is no evidence of India bringing up the boundary issue, the visit convinced officials that Ne Win wanted to develop friendly relations.<sup>33</sup> Ne Win's friendliness during the visit became a driver in pushing the formalization of the boundary in 1966-67.<sup>34</sup> By this time the issue of Naga 'hostiles' crossing into Burmese territory and visiting China, only to return home to foment separatist violence, was high on India's national agenda. In December 1965, a month before his demise, PM Lal Bahadur Shastri visited Burma. The focus of this visit was

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Taylor, *General Ne Win: A Political Biography* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2015) 309-315

<sup>31</sup> MEA, *Foreign Affairs Records*, 'President's Speech at Dinner in honour of General Ne Win', 05/02/1965.

<sup>32</sup> MEA, *FAR*, 'Joint Communique on General No Win's Visit', 12/02/1965

<sup>33</sup> Cabinet Secretariat, SECRET, 'Demarcation of Indo-Burma Border', Joshi to MEA, 04/01/1967, NAI

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

on the condition of the Persons of Indian Origin and their (mis)treatment by Burma. The boundary issue itself did not merit attention. Notably, the two leaders also did not talk about Naga separatism. The Nagas, engaged in a fractured dialogue with New Delhi at that point, routinely crossed into Burma.<sup>35</sup> When asked in the parliament on March 01, 1966 as to why this issue was not discussed, the government argued that it was India's an 'internal matter'.<sup>36</sup> Shastri's untimely death in January 1966 and the ascendance of Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter, did not stem the momentum of bilateral talks. In mid-1965, Gandhi's private secretary visited Burma to secure a supply of 80,000 tons of rice as a gesture of friendship and laid the ground for continuous dialogue.<sup>37</sup>

### *Situation in the Northeast*

On the second, domestic axis, on the same day when the government defended non-inclusion of the Naga issue in talks with Ne Win, the Mizo National Front made a declaration of independence from India and launched a series of attacks across the town of Aizawl. The Indian military counter-attack forced nearly 1,000 insurgents to cross the border into Burma.<sup>38</sup> Four weeks later, EAM Swaran Singh told the Parliament that such an act by the Mizos made the government 'unhappy' because – '[it] may create some problem for our friendly neighbour Burma with whom we will co-operate fully for taking suitable steps to cope with this act of the Mizos'.<sup>39</sup> The Mizo insurgency had begun, and the issue had ceased to be strictly internal. Seeking Burma's assistance in such a scenario was a critical security requirement. The opposition regularly questioned the government on the level of such cooperation. On August 08, 1965, for instance, Rishang Keishing, a Congress MP from Manipur, quizzed the government on how exactly Burma was cooperating in dealing with the Nagas and the Mizos. The government cryptically responded that India was receiving 'friendly cooperation' from Burma in preventing underground Nagas and Mizos from using Burmese 'territory as a corridor for crossing over to Pakistan or as a sanctuary'.<sup>40</sup> The two sides, Keishing was informed, had begun discussing measures of 'mutual interest

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<sup>35</sup> Franke, *War and Nationalism in South Asia*, 105-126

<sup>36</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> RSD, 'Statement by Minister re Visit of Late PM Lal Bahadur to Burma', 01/03/1966.

<sup>37</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> LSD, 15<sup>th</sup> Session, 'Visit to Burma by Secretary to the Prime Minister', 08/08/1966

<sup>38</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> LSD, 14<sup>th</sup> Session, 'Mizo Refugees in Burma', 28/03/1966

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> LSD, 15<sup>th</sup> Session, 'Cooperation from Burma Government', 08/08/1966

to be adopted along the border, in this connection'.<sup>41</sup> India had secured the repatriation of some 657 Mizos by early August already, and put them up in camps in Assam.<sup>42</sup> Such Burmese support was coupled with proactive border patrolling by Indian forces. Both the underground Nagas and the Mizos were now crossing into Burma and harassing Indian forces. The inadequacy of Indian state's coercive arm to stem violence underlined India's loss of sovereign control in these regions. And the ease with which insurgents moved in and out of what was considered Indian territory, highlighted the meaninglessness of the 'traditional boundary' between India and Burma.

That the situation in Northeast not only required coordination with Burma but also clear territorial limits became a pressing concern. On August 02, 1966, parliamentarians called attention of the house to 'a matter of urgent public importance'.<sup>43</sup> Burmese border forces had shot at Manipuri tribesmen near Moreh, killing one and injuring several in two separate incidents. Burma claimed that the tribesmen had entered their territory and did not surrender to Burmese forces when challenged. Home Minister Gulzarilal Nanda faced tough questions in the parliament regarding the incidents, why they occurred, and what help Burma was offering India. Nanda was emphatic that Burmese forces supported India by capturing and returning Naga and Mizo 'hostiles' but was unable to explain why certain parts of Indian territory were viewed as Burmese by the other side. When parliamentarians asked whether the India-Burma boundary had been properly demarcated with boundary pillars, Nanda quickly responded: 'It has been demarcated'.<sup>44</sup> Given that no formal process had begun on this issue this was probably a 'soft lie' to ensure maneuvering space for the government. The incident firmly indicated that Burmese support on the Naga and Mizo issues, though important, was not adequate to resolve outstanding border issues. It also highlighted that occurrence of such incidents came with political costs for the state and national level leadership and risked undermining India's image as a state that could credibly defend its citizens living on the periphery.

On October 01, 1966, the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), then operating within the 'Intelligence Wing' of the Cabinet Secretariat (that became India's premier external intelligence agency in 1968 i.e. the Research and Analysis Wing, or R&AW),

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> LSD, 15<sup>th</sup> Session, 'Repatriation of Mizos from Burma', 01/08/1966

<sup>43</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> LSD, 15<sup>th</sup> Session, 'Firing by Burmese Customs Personnel on Indian Baite Tribesmen', 02/08/1966

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

offered a sobering assessment of the situation along the border in a secret report.<sup>45</sup> The committee emphasized that India's eastern and northeastern frontiers strategically and politically 'very sensitive'. In particular, the three major movements for an independent Nagaland, a sovereign Mizoland, and a greater Chinland were 'threats to the territorial integrity of India'.<sup>46</sup> It presciently forewarned that the Mizo National Front had gained and influence since the start of the year and was likely to turn violent. The chairman of the committee argued that there were indications of 'transborder tribal unity' among the Burmese and India Nagas as well as the Mizos and the Chins, who had signed a written agreement to this effect.<sup>47</sup> The JIC was confident that proactive counter-measures by the Burmese military will weaken the Chin insurgents and reduce the salience of the Mizo-China alliance. For this to happen, however, New Delhi needed General Ne Win's support. The intelligence report ended on a somber note:

'The paragraphs above show that the situation in the Eastern and North Eastern tribal areas of India is more serious than when the JIC made its previous assessment in February, 1966. Unless quick and effective action is taken, violent movements are likely to develop on a larger scale. Both Pakistan and China will encourage and assist such movements against the integrity and security of India.'<sup>48</sup>

By late 1966, the need to clearly demarcate the boundary had become a pressing requirement as a variety of domestic issues became aligned: (a) the need to assert statehood and territorial limits on a dissenting populace (at a time when India's domestic borders were also being reorganized), (b) display that India could provide livelihood and security to its citizens living at border areas, and (c) ironically, securing support from Burma to contain the Naga and Mizo insurgencies.

### *India's relations with China and Pakistan*

The third factor was India's relations with China and Pakistan. The 1962 defeat from China was very fresh, and so was the 1965 stalemate with Pakistan. Both these

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<sup>45</sup> Joint Intelligence Committee, SECRET, 'Developments Among the Tribes of Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam since February, 1966', *Cabinet Secretariat* (Intelligence Wing), Paper Number 41(66), 01/10/1966, Gulzarilal Nanda Papers, Microfilms Section, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, India.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

neighbours escalated support for the Naga and Mizo insurgencies. By August 1966, India was convinced that Pakistan was supporting the Nagas and Mizos from East Pakistan.<sup>49</sup> It accused Pakistan and China of interfering in its domestic affairs in national and international platforms and considered Pakistani president Ayub Khan's 'denial' of such support as an obvious 'defensive act'.<sup>50</sup> Given India's links with a variety of Bengali nationalists in East Pakistan, the Pakistani leadership viewed support to Northeast insurgents as a 'tit-for-tat' model of paying India back.<sup>51</sup> For China, it was continuation of its coercive strategy since 1959 when India gave shelter to the Dalai Lama. Both Naga and Mizo rebels received training and military supplies in Yunnan, where they reached by crossing Burma.<sup>52</sup> Since 1962, China had countered India not just militarily but also diplomatically and pushed the line that India was an expansionist and aggressive state akin to the British imperialists and was incapable of resolving boundary disputes peacefully. Such Chinese pressure had generated sufficient concern in India about a potential Chinese military attack via Burma. Ved Prakash Malik, then a mid-ranking army officer working on Northeast and Burma (and who later became the Chief of Army Staff), remembers that the Indian army 'took the threat of a Chinese invasion via Burma very seriously'.<sup>53</sup> Not just India, even the US policymakers were worried about China opening a front against India via Burma. On 23 May 1963, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), drafted a secret report titled 'Chinese Communist capabilities for attacking India through Burmese territory'.<sup>54</sup> One of the main assumptions of the report was: 'the government of Burma would not resist the movement of Chinese forces across Burmese territory and would acquiesce in the utilization by the Chinese of Burmese transportation facilities and airfield along the routes of advance'.<sup>55</sup> In November 1964, the US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) prepared an even more detailed 30-page dossier on the same issue.<sup>56</sup> It highlighted that there were only two routes by which China could move through Burma to attack India i.e. (a) Kunming-Guwahati/Tezpur via Mandalay and Imphal, and (b) Kunming-

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<sup>49</sup> The October 1966 JIC report underlined these concerns. Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> LSD, 15<sup>th</sup> Session, 'Pakistan's Hand in Training Mizos', 29/08/1966

<sup>51</sup> Sumit Ganguly and David Fidler ed. *India and Counterinsurgency: Lessons Learned* (London: Routledge, 2009) 56-58

<sup>52</sup> Lintner, *Great Game East*, 38-134

<sup>53</sup> Author interview with General (ret'd) Ved Prakash Malik, via Telephone, 30/06/2018

<sup>54</sup> USG, Central Intelligence Agency, SECRET, 'Chinese Communist capabilities for attacking India through Burmese territory', 23/05/1963, CIA Online Reading Room

<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> USG, Defence Intelligence Agency, TOP SECRET, 'Chinese Communist military logistics and capabilities to attack India thru Burma, 04/11/1964, CIA Online Reading Room

Dibrugarh via Myitkyina and Ledo.<sup>57</sup> The only difference between the 1963 CIA and 1964 DIA dossier was that the latter did not take Burmese acquiescence for granted, but was convinced that any resistance by Burmese forces will be 'swept aside'.<sup>58</sup>

Though preparation of such assessments is part of intelligence and military activities, that the CIA and DIA would go to such lengths in gauging the practicalities of a Chinese incursion into India via Burma demonstrates that the situation in the mid-1960s may have been similar to what India faced at Doklam in 2017. Resolving the boundary with Burma, in this context, was a low-hanging fruit for India. The only serious issue was the China-Burma-India tri-junction in the northern sector of the boundary. A 5-1/2 mile patch in present day Arunachal Pradesh, agreeing on this particular stretch required coordination with and acceptance of China. This was as unlikely in 1966, as it remains in 2018. China had resolved its boundary with Burma by ratifying the border treaty in January 1961.<sup>59</sup> Much to India's annoyance, U Nu had presented the treaty as a format that India could emulate.<sup>60</sup> The tri-junction was kept 'provisional' in the Sino-Burmese treaty so as not to upset India and continued to remain disputed territory for both China and India. In 1959, the Indian and Burmese premiers had met to coordinate strategy regarding border settlement with China and had jointly agreed that they will remain firm on demarcation along the McMahon Line.<sup>61</sup> Though Burma was able to solve its own border issues with China in 1961, the issue led to war for India in 1962. In light of these developments, Beijing's reaction to an India-Burma boundary agreement was likely to influence Burmese decision-making. This aspect was not lost on Indian policymakers when they started preparing the ground for the boundary agreement. Either way, by late 1966, as the bilateral relations between Burma and India improved, the situation in Northeast worsened, and relations with China and Pakistan remained strained, New Delhi decided to move ahead.

## **Making of the Agreement**

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> USG, Central Intelligence Agency, UNCLASSIFIED, 'Boundary Treaty Between the People's Republic of China and the Union of Burma', *Peking Review*, DS701, 3 (40), October 1960  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP08Co1297R000100190005-8.pdf>

<sup>60</sup> B Pakem, *India-Burma Relations*, 97-99

<sup>61</sup> William Johnstone, *Burma's Foreign Policy: A Study in Neutralism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963) 147

On December 29, 1966, the MEA pitched the boundary agreement to the 'Secretaries' Committee on Foreign Affairs' for political clearance. Four days later the Committee met and approved the proposal. Cabinet Secretary D S Joshi, who had been forewarned by the JIC about how precarious the situation truly was, informed the MEA that though the committee agreed that the Indo-Burma border did not present any serious challenge 'at present', it was a good idea to 'have the border demarcated in agreement with the Burmese government as early as possible so that it may not in future become a crisis'.<sup>62</sup> The committee wanted to seize the moment in view of General Ne Win's 'very friendly attitude towards India'; a fact that could change any moment given how top-down decision-making was under the military. The committee noted Burma's anxieties about external interference in their domestic affairs and suggested caution on India's part. Joshi was emphatic that the Indian team should not 'rush the Burmese who have natural suspicion of undertaking formal obligations'. In order to impress the other side about the usefulness and advantage of demarcating the border, the Cabinet Secretary took pains to highlight the 'way forward'. As a first step, an informal (yet deliberate) approach was recommended, 'preferably in the course of discussions on other issues'.<sup>63</sup> This was to be done by any officer accompanying the foreign minister in the latter's forthcoming visit to Indonesia, wherein the officer could return 'via Rangoon'.<sup>64</sup> As this was a national boundary, there was no mention of consulting official and other stakeholders in the region about the boundary. In fact, this non-inclusion of Northeastern states became a problem *after* the agreement was signed and during the demarcation phase. In January 1967, instead of sending a mid-level diplomat, the external affairs minister M C Chagla himself visited Burma and met with Ne Win to discuss the matter and successfully sought the general's approval.<sup>65</sup> Joshi and Chagla's approach towards the issue underlined India's appreciation of Burmese anxieties and the importance of the boundary issue for India. R D Katari, India's ambassador in Rangoon noted that despite 'excellent' discussions, 'in deference to Burmese susceptibilities' no joint communique was issued after Chagla's visit.<sup>66</sup> What was more important, Katari said, was that: 'It became evident (as indeed we had suspected all along) that Ne Win's main concern in the foreign field at the moment is

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<sup>62</sup> Joshi to MEA, 04/01/1967, NAI

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

<sup>64</sup> Ibid

<sup>65</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> LSD, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 'Statement re. India-Burma Boundary Agreement', 13/06/1967

<sup>66</sup> Embassy of India, Rangoon, SECRET, 'Political Report for the Month of January 1967', 03/02/1967, D713/R1/67, NAI

to utilise the growing USSR-USA pressure on China'.<sup>67</sup> With Sino-Burmese relations on a decline, Indian overtures were welcomed in Rangoon.

What truly highlighted India's strong desire to strike the agreement, however, was its willingness to cede territory to Burma if required and wherever possible without incurring heavy political cost. For a country that had lost territory in 1962 to China and saw it as national shame, this was a bold step. If such planned territorial concessions risked national outcry, they guaranteed pushback from the states. In his secret letter to the MEA, Joshi expressly mentioned that the Secretaries' Committee on Foreign Affairs accepted that 'India should be prepared, in keeping with our friendly relations with Burma, to show a sense of accommodation and if necessary, give in on small demands that might be put forward by Burma during the course of the negotiations' – even if that risked pushback from national and state level groups.<sup>68</sup> When quizzed by the opposition in the parliament in June 1967 on whether India did lose any territory to Burma, Chagla categorically rejected the concern.<sup>69</sup> Technically he was correct, because the two sides had just reached an agreement without demarcating the boundary using border pillars on the ground. On February 17, 1967, the Indian delegation led by K M Kannampilly from the MEA, and constituting members from the ministries of defence, home, and education, as well as the Survey of India, reached Rangoon to enter formal negotiations.<sup>70</sup> Both sides agreed that there was no 'dispute' regarding the border. Then, a map was drawn and initialed and the boundary drawn and accepted. This boundary on the map proceeded on two bases i.e. there were some sectors in which recent official notifications between the two sides firmed the boundary. In other sectors, it remained undefined (or was 'traditional' as Chagla termed it to the public).<sup>71</sup> All these sectors were to be jointly patrolled and delimited by the newly formed Joint Boundary Commission.

#### *Dispute over the location of the tri-junction*

The 906 miles boundary was divided into five main sectors most of which had two or more subsectors. These were: sector A-B signifying boundary of the Mizo District of Assam with Burma; sector B-D between Manipur and Burma; sector D-F

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid

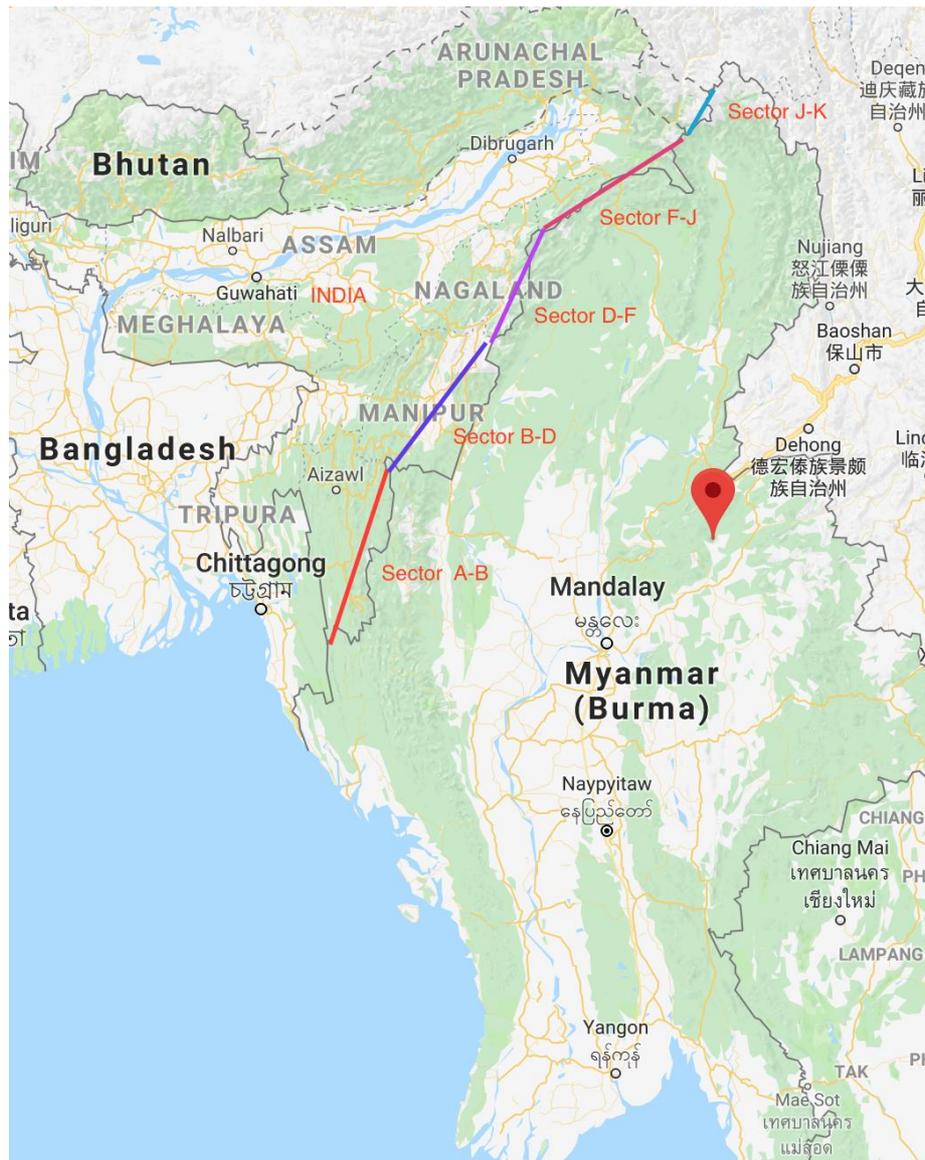
<sup>68</sup> Joshi to MEA, 04/01/1967, NAI

<sup>69</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> LSD, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 'Statement re. India-Burma Boundary Agreement', 13/06/1967

<sup>70</sup> MEA, SECRET, 'India-Burma Boundary Agreement', Chari to Nayyar, 03/09/1974, D1760/DDHDIII/74, NAI

<sup>71</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> LSD, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 'Statement re. India-Burma Boundary Agreement', 13/06/1967

between Nagaland and Burma; sector F-J between the Tirap Frontier Division of Assam and the Naga Hills District of Burma; and sector J-K between Lohit Frontier Division and the Myitkyina District (see Map 1).<sup>72</sup> All these sectors were to be demarcated using numbered boundary pillars (BP). Expectedly, ‘difficulty’ arose between the two sides regarding the northernmost J-K sector at the China-Burma-India tri-junction.



Map 1: India-Myanmar Border<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Chari to Nayar, 03/09/1974, NAI

<sup>73</sup> Google Maps; sectors highlighted by author.

According to Indian officials, the boundary in the northernmost sector J-K ran along the watershed between the Bhrmaputra and the Irrawaddy rivers and joined the ridge forming the India-China boundary north of Di Chu River that was treated as the tri-junction by India.<sup>74</sup> Though the 1914 McMahon Line maps on 1": 8 miles scale identified this point at the Diphu Pass, survey operations in 1918-20 established that the watershed ran further north and met the Irrawaddy watershed at a point 5-miles northeast of Diphu Pass. By 1922 the tri-junction was rectified officially on the maps. Article V of the 1960 Sino-Burmese Boundary Treaty highlighted the western section of the boundary as running along the watershed between the Tulung (Taron) river and the Tsayul (Sayul) river on one hand, and along upper tributaries of the Irrawaddy on the other.<sup>75</sup> The attached maps, as Indian officials noted, however, showed the Sino-Burmese boundary ending at the Diphu Pass.<sup>76</sup> During the Sino-Burmese Agreement proceedings India issued a note to both parties asserting that the 'delineation of the Sino-Burmese boundary' in its the western-most sector should not end at Diphu Pass but five miles north of it'.<sup>77</sup> Nehru noted in February 1961 that Burma had clarified that: 'they were not accepting the interpretation of the map [and] that was none of their business, that was a business for India and China to determine, and they are bound to keep the terms of their own treaty and their own boundary. So, they adopted a perfectly straightforward attitude in this matter'.<sup>78</sup> The Chinese reaction was different. Not only did they oppose the Indian interpretation of the tri-junction, but also held that India misread China's agreement with Burma.<sup>79</sup> After a few exchanges, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a strong letter to New Delhi on August 06, 1961, saying:

The Indian government continues to insist in its Note on its misinterpretation of the Sino-Burmese Boundary Treaty and the attached maps, arbitrarily asserting that the Treaty and the attached maps had defined Diphu Pass as the Western extremity of the Sino-Burmese boundary. An exhaustive answer to this was already made by the Chinese Government in its memorandum of February 21, 1961, and its Note of May 04, 1961, pointing out clearly that the Sino-Burmese Treaty had not defined the location of the western extremity, i.e. the tri-junction of China, Burma, and India and that this was because China and India still differ in their

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> Text of Treaty: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP08C01297R000100190005-8.pdf>

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> Chari to Nayyar, 03/09/1974, NAI

<sup>78</sup> LSD, 1 (8), 08/02/1961

<sup>79</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> LSD, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 'Statement re. India-Burma Boundary Agreement', 13/06/1967

understanding of the eastern section of the Sino-Indian boundary and a settlement through negotiations was yet to be achieved.<sup>80</sup>

This response made it clear that regardless of how China and Burma determined the tri-junction in letter, in spirit, or on a map, the bigger and more pressing problem, from the Chinese viewpoint, was India's intransigence. The question for the Indian leadership in 1967 was whether Burma will support the Indian claim on the tri-junction or not. Though the weakest of all three players, Rangoon's decision on this issue was critical from a legal and political standpoint. Endorsement of the Indian claim promised to put India on a stronger diplomatic footing vis-à-vis China. Given the history of coordination between Burma and India on the boundary issue, there was hope in New Delhi that it could garner Burmese support on the issue. However, as the Indian team realised during the negotiations, the Burmese, understandably so, 'did not want to appear to be taking sides in the dispute between India and China regarding the exact location of the northern extremity'.<sup>81</sup> Similar to their stand with China in 1961, they stuck to a fiercely 'neutral' position with India as well.

Burma suggested that the northernmost sector of the boundary should be 'left out of description'.<sup>82</sup> Though ostensibly neutral, such a stand risked compromising India's position further vis-à-vis China on the territorial dispute. As pushback, the Indian delegation highlighted that Chou Enlai had admitted before the Chinese National Congress that the Diphu Pass was the tri-junction indeed.<sup>83</sup> If the Chinese felt aggrieved, they should take the matter up with India and Burma in a normal way adopted in such circumstances. When this information also failed to convince the Burmese delegation, India bluntly pointed out that, 'the correspondence exchanged between the Prime Minister of India and Burma had signified the acceptance of the tri-junction north of Diphu Pass, and this had been reiterated by India after the signing of the Sino-Burmese boundary treaty in 1961'.<sup>84</sup> A member of the Indian delegation later highlighted in a secret note to the Cabinet Secretary, it took considerable 'high-level' pressure from India to convince Burma into agreeing to at least define this sector.<sup>85</sup> Burma pressed that since the Western extremity of the Burma-China boundary had

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid; This letter was quoted by Chagla in the parliament.

<sup>81</sup> Chari to Nayyar, 03/09/1974, NAI

<sup>82</sup> Ibid

<sup>83</sup> MEA, SECRET, 'Indo-Burma Boundary – note by DHD to JS (S)', 06/03/1976, NOH1/107(1)/76, NAI

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> Chari to Nayyar, 03/09/1974, NAI

been kept vague, the northern extremity of the India-Burma boundary should also be kept vague.<sup>86</sup> The Burmese proposed to articulate the tri-junction as such:

The boundary between Burma and India from Shawngshan Bum shall run along the watershed between the Irrawaddy and the Bhramaputra River systems to its northern extremity, the site of which extremity will remain provisional pending the final determination.<sup>87</sup>

The emphasis on Shawngshan Bum by Burma essentially confirmed the Chinese claims on the line instead of helping India. After some back-and-forth and more pressure from India, the two sides finally agreed to:

Thence [the boundary runs] along the watershed between the Irrawaddy and the Brahmaputra river system to its northern extremity, the exact location of which northern extremity will remain provisional pending to its final determination.<sup>88</sup>

### *China's Reaction*

According to the Chinese press, Beijing issued a memorandum to the 'reactionary Ne Win ... seriously warning' against the boundary agreement with India while the Indian delegation was in Rangoon.<sup>89</sup> The *New China News Agency* (Xinhua) was quick to brand Ne Win as a 'cat's paw of Indian reactionaries' and threatened 'counter-attack' against his conspiracy to 'occupy ... large tracts of Chinese territory'.<sup>90</sup> With Chinese pressure building, Burma was keen on extricating itself from the dispute and conveyed India its willingness to give up territorial claim north of the Diphu Pass. This essentially made the exact location of the tri-junction a Sino-Indian problem instead of a three-party dispute.<sup>91</sup> The two sides accepted to show the tri-junction at Diphu Pass on maps similar to the Chinese maps. As per an Indian delegate, this was fair game. It did not compromise India's claim to the northern extremity beyond the Diphu Pass because both the Sino-Burmese and the Indo-Burmese agreements recognised that the boundary in the Diphu Pass area lay along the Sayul-Irrawaddy

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<sup>86</sup> DHD to JS (S), 06/03/1976, NAI

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> MEA, Text of the Agreement on International Boundary with Burma, 10/03/1967:

<http://mea.gov.in/bilateral->

[documents.htm?dtl/5886/Agreement+on+International+Boundary+with+India](http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5886/Agreement+on+International+Boundary+with+India)

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in B Pakem, *India-Burma Relations*, 113

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Ibid

<sup>91</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> LSD, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 'Statement re. India-Burma Boundary Agreement', 13/06/1967

watershed and the Lohit-Irrawaddy watershed.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, India's claim conformed to the 'highest watershed principle' based on which the McMahon Line had been drawn in the first place, and that had been accepted by China in their agreement with Burma.<sup>93</sup> The boundary agreement was signed on March 10, 1967, and ratified on May 30. It was agreed that the demarcation process would begin from the southernmost extremity and move northwards. As an Indian delegate noted that, 'finally, by signing this Agreement with the Government of Burma we have given the lie to the Chinese accusation that India is not willing to formally delimit its borders with any of her neighbours in a peaceful manner'.<sup>94</sup> Without consulting any regional stakeholder in the Northeast, or speaking with China with whom India had frosty relations, the central government under Indira Gandhi, formalized the India-Burma boundary.

### **Analytical Takeaways**

The making of this agreement offers counter-intuitive results. One, despite the potency of systemic factors such as inter-state rivalry, domestic politics trumped in influencing the substance and timing of India's decision-making. Indeed, stiff negotiations over the tri-junction make the argument that this agreement was India's response to its frosty ties with China tempting. Ne Win's strained relations with Beijing and his opening up to India since 1965 lends credence to this line of analysis. However, the China factor, though present and strategically important, did not drive India's outreach to Burma on the boundary question at that particular point in time. As the letter by the Cabinet Secretary to the MEA and parliamentary debates highlight, a spike in cross-border violence, Burma's coercive handling of the situation, and outbreak of the Mizo insurgency in concert with an ongoing Naga separatist movement made India propose the boundary agreement to Rangoon. All these issues were firmly related to domestic politics and security and were viewed as portents of an impending diplomatic crisis with Burma. Though both domestic and external drivers were important, it was the former that was pivotal strategically and temporally in 1966. As R Khathing, head of the Indian team in the joint boundary commission reminded his Burmese counterparts in 1973, the demarcation was being done to 'avoid any future confusion or misunderstanding of territorial jurisdiction'.<sup>95</sup> The fact that India was willing to

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<sup>92</sup> Chari to Nayyar, 03/09/1974, NAI

<sup>93</sup> Ibid

<sup>94</sup> Chari to Nayyar, 03/09/1974, NAI

<sup>95</sup> MEA, UNCLASSIFIED, 'Minutes of the 14<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the India-Burma Joint Boundary Commission', 12-13/11/1973, NAI

make territorial concessions to Burma in order to resolve the boundary issue betrayed that the pressures generated by multiple separatist insurgencies and border incidents on a state with a weak hold over its periphery. Though Indian and Chinese forces engaged in another brutal skirmish at Nathu La and Cho La near Sikkim in September and October 1967, there was no such military pressure at the Burma tri-junction.<sup>96</sup>

Two, the process of territorial delimitation for India and Burma was far from being a zero-sum game where the loss of one was viewed as an unsavory gain for the other (despite India's territorial sensitivities). India, the bigger of two powers and a state that had recently lost territory to China in 1962, was ready to cede territory to Burma. Not just territory, both states were willing to negotiate their sovereign authority over citizens living in the frontier areas (till the time, more or less, the exact boundary was known and formalized). This was visible in the meetings that Indian and Burmese officials undertook with people straddling along the border areas to jointly address administrative issues. India's willingness to cede territory to, and coordinate administrative issues with, Burma was rooted in the Indian state's desire to expand and deepen its footprint in the Northeast, and to be able to cater for the well being of a definite citizenry. Such internal push for state-building and domestic security (more than geopolitical *realpolitik* calculus) led India to delimit its boundary with Burma in 1967 on the one hand, but also allowed space for territorial ambiguity in the light of regional and local dissent on the other. All three sides, China included, chose territorial ambiguity at the tri-junction over a military standoff. This remains to be the case till today, even though India and China have steadily militarized the tri-junction since early 2018.<sup>97</sup>

Three, more than opposition from China, it was domestic discontent over the formalization of the boundary that concerned Indian policymakers most. On June 13, 1967, the Minister of State for External Affairs, Surinder Pal Singh stated: "the Agreement [was] only the first step. The Joint Boundary Commission to be appointed by the two Governments will proceed to have the boundary demarcated on the ground. The Commission will also prepare the draft of a Boundary Treaty to be signed by India and Burma. That will be the final act in the friendship to transform this traditional border between the two friendly neighbouring countries into a fully delineated and demarcated boundary."<sup>98</sup> Such a treaty never came about. Soon after Singh laid the statement in the parliament, he vacated the floor for Chagla to 'take questions' on the

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<sup>96</sup> John Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001) 171

<sup>97</sup> Bhuyan, 'Army increases strength at India-China-Myanmar tri-junction near Tibet', *LiveMint*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*

issue. Hem Barua, a prominent Assamese poet and parliamentarian challenged that in 1961 Burma had assured India of revising the ‘provisional agreement’ over the tri-junction with China once an agreement was reached with India (this was not the case in fact).<sup>99</sup> Rangoon’s neutrality, and India’s acceptance of the same, according to Barua, meant that: ‘we [India] are sacrificing our land’.<sup>100</sup> When Chagla responded with the classic quip i.e. ‘we are not sacrificing an inch of our land’, Barua’s riposte was sharp: ‘how many miles make an inch?’ Most people in Northeast India viewed the boundary as an imperial and unjust imposition falsely dividing communities. It was unlikely that any state-government in the Northeast would have agreed to what India had on offer for Burma i.e. territorial concessions, however small and strategically inconsequential. Conceding territory was a deeply emotive issue for local populace sensitive about the history of Burmese invasions, as well as for national leaders who still felt humiliated by the 1962 defeat. Gandhi offered the Agreement as a *fait accompli* (an ‘international commitment’) to disgruntled regional politicians and populace instead of debating its merits. Vehement and sometimes violent domestic protests led to the shelving of the idea of signing a border treaty with Burma.<sup>101</sup> By not taking various domestic stakeholders into confidence prior to the boundary demarcation, the government risked and eventually did face severe domestic pushback. Questions over loss of territory became routine both in the parliament and the media, and the central government’s lack of consultation with stakeholders from Northeast *before* signing the agreement, though constitutionally correct, created more problems on the ground than expected. For a state that sought to deepen and legitimize its presence in the Northeast, the boundary agreement had the exact opposite effect. The Indian state became, for many, an unwelcome entity that was erecting false barriers between communities by accepting colonial territorial constructs for its own purposes.

## Conclusion

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<sup>99</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> LSD, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, ‘Statement re. India-Burma Boundary Agreement’, 13/06/1967

<sup>100</sup> Ibid

<sup>101</sup> In the parliament, when EAM M C Chagla was quizzed whether India had lost territory to Burma as part of the agreement, he astutely responded: ‘Not an inch’. At the time of the agreement, India had only planned for making territorial concessions during the negotiations phase, but not ceded territory on the ground. For their part, the Burmese had no inkling of the extent to which India would go to formalize the boundary. 4<sup>th</sup> LSD, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, ‘Statement re. India-Burma Boundary Agreement’, 13/06/1967

Today, India and Myanmar have instituted a Free Movement Regime (FMR) that allows citizens of both sides to travel across the border without a visa for 16-km.<sup>102</sup> In practice, there is no checking mechanism even if citizens from either side cross the 16-km mark and enter deeper into the other country's territory – rendering the border pillars largely meaningless.<sup>103</sup> The tri-junction with China in the Walong sector continues to remain disputed and militarized. Unlike the Doklam crisis where Bhutanese support was critical for Indian planners, the situation is likely to be different if similar hostilities break-out at the Myanmar tri-junction. This is simply because Myanmar extricated itself from the border dispute – making it strictly bilateral between China and India – in 1961. Had India secured an understanding on the boundary issue with Burma before the 1961 Sino-Burmese agreement, it is possible that the situation around this tri-junction would be similar (not the same) to the one at the Bhutan tri-junction. In this context, this article raised the question: why did India seek formalization of its boundary with Burma in 1967? Based on analysis of hitherto unexplored archival material, it argues, first, that domestic politics and security trumped external factors in this case. Given the potency of the Sino-Indian rivalry, this is a counter-intuitive finding. It shows that intentionality can be incorrectly assumed when offering retrospective explanations of foreign policy decision-making. Geopolitical trends that seem *obvious*, then, may receive excessive analytical weight at the cost of understanding the actual policymaking process.

Rivalry with China and Pakistan, or India's territorial prickliness, does not *adequately* explain how India's Burma policy evolved in the mid-1960s. Pressures on the ground with the outbreak of the Mizo insurgency in 1966 (and ongoing Naga separatism), combined with pressures in the parliament, imparted *sufficiency* and *urgency* to the boundary issue. It was becoming apparent to India that the state needs to be an attractive entity in the Northeast to counter separatist discourses. And for the state to develop as a service provider in the region, it needed well-defined administrative boundaries with Burma (and ideally with China). For this purpose, India was willing to make reasonable territorial concessions to Burma that did not require huge loss of cultivated and inhabited land. Being a smaller power that was not contesting the core principle of independent India's inherited territorial constructs, Burma was not viewed as a threat in New Delhi. Conceding territory to such a neighbour was a low cost to pay for what India was to receive in return. That formalization of this boundary would also undermine Chinese propaganda of India

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<sup>102</sup> "Free Movement' along Myanmar Border', *The Hindu*, 16/10/2017

<sup>103</sup> But if caught by the authorities, these people are liable to prosecution. Author's fieldwork in Manipur, May 2018

being incapable of resolving border disputes peacefully was an *added advantage*, not the core purpose of the agreement. Formalizing the boundary with Burma, from an Indian perspective, was not just a foreign policy decision (even if it was treated as one), but equally a domestic decision wherein the state intended to extend its administration to previously ungoverned spaces. Disaggregated in its presence and distribution potential, boundary delineation was necessary for India to ensure provision of goods and services to its citizens on the periphery. This case of foreign policymaking by a postcolonial state struggling to assert its authority on an unaccepting populace in its periphery and desiring to formalize its sovereign limits in a region marred by international (and domestic) territorial disputes, is critical in making sense of Indian decision-making.

Lastly, such a historically grounded study of a postcolonial states' behavior in international relations also complicates assumptions about territoriality. Despite public rhetoric, India did not view the boundary issue in a zero-sum light. If anything, all three parties to the conflict were (and to continue to remain) largely comfortable with certain degree of ambiguity in their territorial disputes. This is because a definite resolution of boundary disputes is likely to result in both territorial gains and losses for all parties. While showcasing gains is easy, justifying losses to domestic audiences is difficult. Such territorial compromises, though sensible from a systemic perspective (i.e. India as a weaker power accepting the *reality* of the threat from a stronger China), come with a heavy domestic political cost. It is for this reason that both the India-China and India-Myanmar boundaries continue to remain ambiguous. Simply put, the domestic political cost of resolving these disputes (in the light of these countries' colonial past and current sensitivities) is higher than the accruing rewards. For instance, the fallout of Indira Gandhi's (miscalculated) determination to demarcate the boundary despite local and national protests is still visible. Northeast India continues to remain a hotbed of insurgencies and organized crime, and the salience of the boundary issue is yet to subside. The Indian state came to be viewed as one that was willing to compromise Manipuri, Naga, or Mizo interests to secure its own. Ironically, for a postcolonial state wanting to offer itself as a viable alternative to the people of the region, such lack of consultation and respect of their interests on this boundary issue ended up increasing suspicion about its intent and resistance against its purpose.