

# Risk of war on the roof of the world

**A**s winter snows melt on the 1,400 miles of Himalayan peaks and high valleys that form the border between India and China, the threat of a major armed clash between the two powers is rapidly growing. Border tension, on the increase for the past year, is now focused on India's new state of Arunachal Pradesh, formerly the Northeast Frontier Agency. This is a huge, sparsely inhabited Himalayan wilderness of lofty peaks, glaciers and rock, that borders on Bhutan, Tibet and Burma. Even though the area may have more yaks than people, India and China are fast heating up their claims to the disputed region. Beijing has been particularly angered by Delhi's making Arunachal Pradesh into a state.

The problem in this case, like so many others in the Third World, was caused by Imperial Britain. In 1914, Lord McMahon used a thick-nibbed pen to redraw a dividing line between British India and Tibet, an act charge the Chinese—who later annexed Tibet—that gave 63,000 square miles of their territory to India. India hotly denies this and insists that the McMahon line is the proper border between the two nations—in the east. On the western end of the 1,400-mile Sino-Indian border, India claims that China illegally holds 23,000 square miles of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Worse, India accuses China of having ceded some of this property in northern Kashmir to its arch-foe, Pakistan. Many other sectors of the Sino-Indian border are in dispute. McMahon's thick pen line left all sorts of conflicting claims along the world's highest frontier.

India and China have never been friendly and are frequent rivals for influence in Asia. India is also closely



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allied to China's sometime enemy, the Soviet Union. China is Pakistan's closest ally. In the early 1960s, China and India fought a brief border war in the Himalayas. China trounced India but then, having made its point, gave back nearly all the disputed territory it had occupied. Since then, India has been extremely nervous and touchy about its northern frontier.

That nervousness is now sharply increased by patient Chinese efforts to establish close links with the Himalayan states of Bhutan and Nepal which India considers to be its protectorates. Chinese agents are also said to be active in the former kingdom of Sikkim which India annexed without a peep of protest from the outside world. Lately, New Delhi has been making threatening noises about Chinese plans to build a road into Nepal.

The Indians, worry warts at the best of times, do for once have cause for concern. China's Chou En-Lai once remarked that he could easily destroy India without needing nuclear weapons. All he would have to do, said Chou, was to march 500 million Chinese up to Tibet and have them urinate downhill, so washing all of India into the ocean. Colorful, but also strategically correct. India's northern Himalayan border is the source for

most of the nation's ground water. A hostile power atop the watershed could seriously threaten India's vital river system.

At a time when India is also beset by regional upheavals in Punjab, Kashmir, West Bengal and among the hill tracts of its eastern border with Burma, trouble in the strategic Himalayas is unwelcome indeed.

Some overwrought Indian press commentators are even claiming that China and Pakistan are about to crush India in a huge pincer attack. Others make the charge, rather more sensibly, that China is putting pressure on India as a means of extracting concessions from the Soviets over Afghanistan, the Amur River boundary dispute and Cambodia.

Seen on a grand scale, this is great power chess at its most consummate. On a human scale, however, the dispute seems, at best, curious. Up in the contested Wangdung region of the Sumdorong Chu Valley, shivering Chinese soldiers and armed Tibetan yak herders are facing equally miserable Indian *jawans*.

As the weather improves, both sides are bringing up mountain guns and heavy equipment as they dig into the rocky, waterless slopes above the 10,000-foot line. It all seems hardly worth anyone's attention.

But passions are rising in India and Rajiv Gandhi, stuck in growing domestic political trouble, could use the distraction of a foreign enemy. China, for its part, insists that it only wants a peaceful settlement; yet Beijing likes to sometimes teach "jessons" to recalcitrant neighbors. So watch for trouble along the roof of the world between now and when the calming snows again fall in early September.