CHAPTER 6

The Border Dispute with China

The Chinese way is to do something rather mild at first, then to wait a bit, and if it passes without objection, to say or do something stronger. But if we take objection to the first statement or action, they urge that it has been misinterpreted, and cease, for a time at any rate, from troubling us further.1

China Probes the Boundary

The Sino-Indian border incidents which occurred during the summer of 1959 led to the publication of a series of White Papers containing the official correspondence between the two countries. Not only did they reveal that Chinese intrusions into the north-eastern corner of Ladakh had been discovered prior to July, 19582 and the construction of a motor road as part of the Sinkiang-Tibet highway three months later,3 but they also contained an exchange of notes concerning the disputed grazing grounds of Bara Hoti in the central sector, in which each side kept referring to the principles of Panchsheel from July, 1954 onwards. Three notes are dated shortly after Chou En-lai’s visit to New Delhi, but prior to the Bandung Conference.4 The Chinese maintained that Indian troops had crossed the border into the Tibet region of China, which was “not in conformity with the principles of non-aggression and friendly coexistence between China and India, and the spirit of the joint communiqué issued recently by the Prime Ministers of China and India.” The Indian reply stated that on the contrary Tibetan officials had tried to cross the border without proper documents and it literally returned the Chinese phrase just quoted. Later the terminology became considerably harsher. India described the presence of Chinese soldiers south of the border who tried to stop an Indian detachment as “a violation of the Five Principles” which “may well have grave consequences.” After a similar incident India directed “a protest against this

3 Note by the Indian Foreign Secretary to the Chinese Ambassador. White Paper 1, pp. 26–27.
clear violation” of the Five Principles; failure of immediate withdrawal of the Chinese troops “may lead to serious incidents which would mar the friendly relations between India and China.”

In Bara Hoti a kind of uneasy neutralisation was reached. In 1956 both Governments agreed that they would refrain from sending troops into the area, but then the dispute shifted to the despatch of civilian officials. A Chinese party moved in as soon as the Indian revenue officers had left the place before the onset of the winter of 1958–59. The following spring the Indians made sure they were back first. Bara Hoti, or Wu Je as it is called by the Chinese, was only a minor issue in Sino-Indian relations and, as the only grazing ground on a trans-Himalayan route, a classic example of a border dispute. In 1959 Nehru declared that “even with the Tibetan authorities, these arguments about a mile of grazing ground here or there have been there.” It may have been for this reason that Nehru did not attach sufficient importance to this quarrel to influence his views on Chinese behaviour. There is even a possibility that it has strengthened his conviction that China, if properly treated, would confine her territorial aspirations to technical claims of a limited nature. It is significant, however, that the appearance of the Panchsheel principles in the diplomatic notes from both sides, thus demonstrating their potentiality as an unexpected boomerang in practical politics, did not keep Nehru from advocating them in a wider context than bilateral relations with China. Until the summer of 1959 no publicity was given to the disputes, as it was thought that progress could be made through correspondence. That, at least, is the official explanation for the Government’s failure to keep Parliament informed, an omission which has been duly criticised by the opposition. There is more reason to suppose that India’s wish to solve her problems with Peking without drawing attention, either internally or externally, to the aggressive character of Chinese policies was a determining factor.

Another issue arose before the Tibetan rebellion and the subsequent increase in Chinese military activity resulted in incidents at various points of the border. This related to Shipki La, one of the passes opened for trade and pilgrims under the 1954 Agreement, where a Chinese patrol refused to vacate Indian territory in September, 1956. In their Aide Memoire the Indian Government considered “any crossing of this border by armed personnel as aggression which they will resist” and added that they attached great importance to the

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5 Note given to the Chinese Counsellor, Nov. 5, 1955; note of May 2, 1956 concerning Nilang, which belongs to the same sector. White Paper 1, pp. 10–11.
