

China Borders: Settlement and Conflicts—Selected Papers, by Neville Maxwell, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, pp. 289, £49.99

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This book is a compilation of papers written by journalist Neville Maxwell over a career span of five decades. Those who look at China–India relations closely, notably the border dispute, will know that Neville Maxwell is not new to the India–China border discourse. Accredited to *The Times*, he was their South Asia correspondent in New Delhi during the tumultuous years from 1959–62, when he extensively covered the Indo-China War of 1962. A self-confessed fan of Nehru till he revisited the India–China War, Maxwell wrote his side of the war account in the well-acclaimed book, *India's China War*, first published in 1970. That book was a clear indictment of Nehru and his government for the debacle of 1962. This book, a compilation of his writings in various journals/publications after 1962, only reinforces his viewpoint. The book is laid out in four broad parts, in which Neville Maxwell reiterates that China has been magnanimous, passive and accommodating in its dealings on border issues with its neighbours. He picks on the examples of India, Russia and Hong Kong to buttress his argument. In his view, not only has China been wronged but also that she has been a victim of scheming Western policies, often to the extent of trickery. To a China watcher today,

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this argument in contemporary international relations where China looks at 'ruling the world' and challenging the world order appears absurd, even naïve.

In the introductory part, covered in two chapters, the author defends the discourse on the 'China threat' theory. He argues that China is a victim of Russian and British imperialism. The consolidation of Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet was nothing but a 'reassertion of temporary lapsed central authority'. He asserts China's repeated declaration to abjure irredentist claims and peaceful settlement of boundaries with its neighbours, and emphatically disproves the common charge that China follows a policy of chauvinism, irredentism and adventurism. In the second part, written in 2006, he traces the history of China's border settlement and its four-pronged policy: admission and identification of a dispute; a standstill agreement to maintain status quo; protracted negotiation in a peaceful atmosphere; and finally, use of force if the adversary decides to opt for force. Citing examples of the peaceful settlement of complex boundaries with Nepal, Burma, Afghanistan, Mongolia and even Hong Kong, the author believes this policy has been a success, except with India and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Those who have read Maxwell's *India's China War* would not see any new argument or enquiry in the second part of the book. Spread over seven chapters, this part covers the Sino-Indian border dispute and the 1962 war. The chapters are repetitive and only re-emphasise what is already known to an informed reader. Of these, two chapters—on the Henderson Brooks report and the issue of Tawang—merit attention.

The Henderson Brooks report continues to remain classified and was in the news recently when the government was urged to release it to the public. This chapter is scathing on the state of the military and higher direction of war of the Indian polity, giving the reader an impression that Maxwell has, in some way, been provided access to its contents. However, a lot is left to conjecture and is not entirely supported by evidence or proof. Statements like B.N. Mullick's 'papal infallibility' or Palit's own 'careerist ambitions', or even the 'Kaulist putsch' in running army headquarters (HQs), are bereft of evidence and reflect an inherent bias in the writing.

The argument on Tawang is even shriller. The author notes that McMahan 'bullied and bribed the Tibetan delegation into acquiescence to his scheme' and argues that British occupation of Tawang was a part of a 'deceptive, documentary and cartographic expansionist project'. Having

said that, the chapter fails to convince the reader of the reason for China's vacation of Tawang after capturing it in 1962, a decision that has puzzled many students of history.

The last chapter on 'How to Settle' makes for an interesting read. Assuming that both nations agree to settle the border dispute, the author suggests one possible and amicable solution to the dispute. Maxwell believes that the Eastern Sector could be easily settled to generally follow the alignment of the McMahon Line with the representatives of Bhutan and Myanmar in attendance to fix the tri-junction points. If the issue of Tawang is elusive and if Chinese are obdurate, then he suggests that the solution be left to future generations. He, however, feels that it would be the western sector which is likely to be difficult and calls for statesmanship from both parties. He suggests that the 1889 McCartney–McDonald Line, which gives depth to the Xinjiang–Tibet highway as well as reasonable part of Aksai Chin to India, would be acceptable to both parties. On Sikkim, Maxwell believes that while the 1890 treaty between Sikkim and Tibet is settled, the 1975 occupation of Sikkim by India continues to be sore issue in the Chinese discourse and can be finally resolved by a fresh demarcation of the boundary on the lines of the 1890 treaty as a full and final settlement.

The third part looks at the Sino-Russian disputes over the Chenpao Island on the Ussuri River and the Bear Island on the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri rivers. Tracing the historical context to the 'unequal' Treaties of Aigun and Peking in 1858 and 1860, respectively, Maxwell believes that even after World War II, China was 'disregarded' at the Yalta conference of 1945 by the Imperial powers which provided for independence of Mongolia, a Soviet satellite nation, in exchange for Soviet non-interference in Sinkiang and Manchuria. The Soviet view was that China was 'bellicose, expansionist and reckless' (p. 186), while in Maxwell's view, China continued to follow a moderate stance seeking negotiation rather than confrontation. He stresses that the Chinese behaviour towards Russia was restrained, seeking a settlement on the basis of status quo, thus making a point that reconciliation has been China's policy line even against a stronger adversary.

Describing the 'Chenpao' Island issue that brought the two nuclear powers to a head, the author provides a personal account of his on-site visit and recounts the entire incident in considerable detail. The confrontation which resulted in casualties on both sides did not escalate into an all-out war reflecting a mature and balanced stance by both the

powers. But the takeaway for the Chinese was that standing up to Soviet pressure paid dividends and gave confidence to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) against a much superior and formidable Soviet military.

The 'Bear Island' issue was also resolved by use of a similar tactic of reciprocal pressure—counter-blockade—to Russian Navy's blockade of the main navigational channel on the Amur River. The equality of resolve and demonstration of strength, in Peking's view, brought Russia to the table. It was the sagacity and statesmanship of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1986 that set the ball rolling for a full and final settlement of an issue that had inflamed tensions between the two giants for over four centuries. Ultimately, Maxwell argues, Russia agreed to terms of the Treaty of Peking to settle the dispute based on the 'thalweg' principle—boundary along the deepest part of the channel—thus vindicating Chinese stance on the issue. The success is attributed to the consistent observance of Chinese principle of 'mutual understanding and mutual accommodation'. The other attribute of the Chinese negotiation strategy was to put aside intractable issues for a wiser generation to settle, while going ahead with negotiations on other sectors.

The last part looks at the reversion of Hong Kong to China after a lease of 99 years by the British. Here, again, the discourse is that of China being a victim of imperialistic ambition and denied its rightful ownership of Hong Kong after the Japanese surrender in 1945. Hong Kong was swamped by Chiang Kai-Shek's nationalists on the run from a marauding communist army. It turned into an advance base and a bulwark against communist expansion in China. Maxwell argues that here, too, China showed remarkable restraint in seizing Hong Kong, even though, around the same time, precedence existed in the Indian invasion of Goa in 1961.

The reversion of Hong Kong came to be considered in earnest from 1971 when China, on assuming a permanent seat in the United Nations, ensured that Hong Kong was deleted from list of territories to be decolonised. China argued that Hong Kong was lost due to 'series of unequal treaties'. Margaret Thatcher, triumphant after the Falkland War of 1982, questioned the validity of the treaties of the nineteenth century which ceded Hong Kong and Kowloon to Britain, but Deng was firm and warned of 'disastrous' consequences (p. 255). After much negotiation, in which China refused to compromise on sovereignty, Britain and China agreed to transfer power on 1 July 1997 and China codified a 'Basic

Law', in effect a constitution, and agreed to make Hong Kong a Special Administrative Region.

Maxwell believes that Britain was never serious about granting democratic rights to Hong Kong, and till the very last continued to vest power only with the Chief Executive, while the members of the Legislative Council continued to be appointed and not elected. Closer to the transition, Britain began to initiate the process of democratisation in the hope that the process would be presented as 'fait accompli' to China. Herein, again, the author argues that China showed immense restraint and acceded to concessions by accepting a gradual election of members of Legislature Council from 18 in 1991 to 30 in 2003. This, despite a newly appointed British Governor, Chris Patten, who conducted business with the Chinese on the back of a 'high risk policy of unilateral, public confrontation' (p. 277). The chapter underlines two major policies consistent with Chinese strategy of negotiation: no compromise on sovereignty; and adherence to peaceful and smooth transition, followed by pragmatism and restraint.

Overall, the book provides a good backgrounder for students researching China's border resolution strategies. At best, it could be a basic guide to the Chinese thinking on sovereignty, but does not add value to Neville Maxwell's known and stated views on the border dispute between India and China. The essays, written over a period of four decades, attempt to portray China as a benign, pragmatic and magnanimous power while dealing with contentious border issues. Whether the book is relevant to the discourse today is a matter of debate, particularly when Chinese policies on border disputes, particularly in East China Sea and South China Sea, have shown muscular and aggressive strategies in dealing with sovereignty issues.

