

Book Review

NEVILLE MAXWELL, *China's Borders: Settlements & Conflicts: Selected Papers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 291 + xiii, £49.99 (cloth), ISBN: 978-1-30690-708-8.

This is an interesting collection of papers and articles published between 1971 and 2006, written by a renowned scholar who rose to fame with his sharp critique of India's position on its border dispute with China; this unresolved border dispute dominates the collection.

The book has three sections: some 120 pages are devoted to the India–China border dispute; another 70 cover the China–Russia border issue; the final 40 detail the negotiations and events preceding the handover of Hong Kong. Most chapters (not numbered) are reproductions of published articles, with three exceptions: a chapter titled 'The Pre-Histories of the Sino-Indian Border Dispute', another titled 'China's India War' and a third titled 'Whose Tawang?' do not give any prior publication history.

Maxwell writes in a short preface: 'with stubborn refusal to negotiate, the first independent Indian government hardened a minor problem in diplomatic deadlock and finally armed conflict, leaving a problem no successor government in Delhi has seriously tried to resolve' (p. xii). This sweeping assertion, emblematic of his one-sided analysis, is inaccurate on several counts. The issue was 'minor' only if India was simply to abandon its history-based standpoint and concede China's territorial claims. Maxwell says nothing of China's duplicitous conduct in asserting throughout the early 1950s that the issues were minor and involved old maps that had not been addressed, while pressing ahead with building its border infrastructure, including a major Sinkiang–Tibet road through the disputed Aksai Chin.

The 1962 border war and its aftermath are rehashed in several pieces. Maxwell is critical of Nehru and his advisers, but ignores evidence on how China prepared from early 1962 onwards to hit India with a sharp attack, which through its scale and intensity amounted to an act of planned aggression. For Maxwell, the attack of

20 October 1962 was ‘legitimately justified as an offensive in anticipatory self-defence’ (p. 153). He ignores evidence that shows how China planned for that war. Kissinger has written how in mid-1962, the Chinese Ambassador to Poland who led their side in the China–US Warsaw talks cut short his vacation in China for an urgent meeting on a fictitious Taiwan threat with his US counterpart, the real aim of which was an indirect assurance that the US would not use ‘the looming Sino Indian conflict to unleash Taiwan against the mainland’ (*On China*, Allen Lane, UK, 2011, p. 189). In mid-1962, a letter purportedly written by a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) colonel serving on the Tibet border reached the Indian Embassy in Beijing, warning India to desist from pushing forward on the border or risk a heavy blow; from February 1962 to August 1963, that Embassy did not have a Chinese language official and that letter came to light only in early 1964.¹

The author divorces the border issue from its international context. He ignores the impact of the Dalai Lama’s flight to India in 1959, which prompted China to see the border issue as a threat to its underbelly at a time when it was preoccupied with consolidating its position in Tibet. He has no comment on China’s larger Asia calculations and ambitions for a dominant role, in which cutting India to size was a key aim.

The principal flaw of this collection is that it is stuck in the past, rehashing the author’s earlier writings, barely taking note of recent developments. In his final piece on the India–China border, a tract written in 2000, Maxwell gives credit to Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and his foreign secretary J.N. Dixit for the 1993 treaty to maintain peace and tranquility, but laments that the ‘diplomatic nuptials celebrated in 1993 have yet to be consummated, so to speak: agreement on the location of the line of control (LAC) has still not been reached’ (p. 162). Maxwell does not acknowledge the efforts made in the subsequent years by senior representatives of the two countries in a series of meetings to resolve the issue.

But Maxwell is right on one vital point. India understands well that a settlement will involve accepting less than its claims, that is, sizable concessions that are implicit in the 1993 treaty. Despite this, India has not publicly acknowledged that settlement of the border dispute can be achieved only through major territorial compromise, vis-à-vis the country’s original border claims; nor has any post-1993 Indian leadership prepared domestic public opinion for that eventuality. Perhaps, the reason is not to show one’s hand on the compromise that will have to be the basis for a settlement. This is one of the paradoxes in dealing simultaneously with both the negotiation adversary and the home public on such a major, sensitive issue—in what Putnam has called a ‘two level game’. But Maxwell ignores the efforts India has made, in several rounds of border talks, to get China to make explicit its claim on the ‘line of control’, showing willingness to hand over its own maps. That is not a posture of unwillingness to settle the border issue.

¹ See Rana, ‘Battle Lines of the 1962 War’, *Business Standard*, 18 September 2012. http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/kishan-s-rana-battle-lines-of-the-1962-war-112091700046_1.html (accessed on 16 December 2016).

The segment devoted to the China–Russia border shows ‘both Beijing and Moscow at their worst and best, pulling back from armed conflict, reversing (in Moscow’s case) an irrational policy, and patiently, over years, negotiating their way to an amicable compromise settlement’ (p. xiii). A 30-page article, written in 2007, details the history of that dispute and how a settlement was reached via the 2005 Treaty of Vladivostok, though it is short on details of that final negotiation process.

The long essay on Hong Kong’s convoluted 1997 transformation from a British colony to China’s ‘Special Administrative Region’ was written 2 years before the handover. It details at length the confrontation engineered in 1994 by UK’s last Governor, Chris Patten, predicated on his newfound passion for introducing democratic change in that colony on the eve of that handover. It amounted to a crude effort to sabotage the 1984 treaty that Margret Thatcher had signed. It is a pity that Maxwell did not update that essay or comment on the way China has handled Hong Kong after 1997. The absence of an index, perhaps a result of the eclectic nature of this collection, and lack of effort by the author to update or annotate the older essays, is a drawback to the work.

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