CHAPTER VI

GEO-POLITICAL DICTATES TO STATES

The geo-political situation of North East region of India has given to these areas its special position of importance. The importance has become greater now with the emergence of seven political units in the region, all on international borders. These borders had already been involved in one great world war and connected to the mainland by a narrow strip called "Chicken-Neck", about 20 miles wide. The security of this corridor can be threatened and is liable to blockade should India's relations with Bhutan and Bangladesh become unfriendly and they, along with China, decide to take collusive military action against India.

The North East region has international frontiers on three sides. Her northern frontier from the Sankosh river on the west to the entrance of the mighty Brahmaputra into Assam is guarded by the Assam Himalayas. The MacMohan Line separates the region from Tibet. The region is

1 Lal Mohan, Harmony Among Peoples of the Northeastern and between it and the Rest of India - Seminar Paper Northeast Region: Problems and Prospects of Development on 30.4.81, Chandigarh.
bounded by Bhutan in the north west, Tibet and China in the north and east and Burma in the south.

Tripura has an international frontier of 930 km, surrounded on three sides by Bangladesh. Its only link with the rest of the country is through a narrow corridor in Assam. The North Eastern Railway connects Dharmanagar, a border sub-divisional town of Tripura with Assam through a single metre gauge line.

Meghalaya is guarded by Bangladesh, Nagaland and Manipur have a common boundary with Burma, with a border running six hundred and thirty miles with Burma and Bangladesh, Mizoram forms an area of strategic importance in India's northeastern region.²

Besides, North East region provided a link between Far-East and India with two land routes, one through upper Assam and Yunan and the other through Cachar and Manipur.

In the beginning, the British interest in North East region was primarily of economic and commercial interest. But later on, their interest turned into political and

military in view of its strategic position. At first, they were reluctant to control this area. But the Burmese intervention in the affairs of Assam, Manipur and Cachar made the danger a reality and changed its outlook. So, the British officers at Rangapur reminded the Fort William to change its non-intervention and non-expansion policy to protect its north eastern frontier. In the words of Mackenzie "Fate seems determined to prove that there shall be no rest for the English in India till they stand forth as the Governor or advisers for each tribe and people in the land."

Strategically, the Britishers discovered Manipur as the gateway of the East and the best land-route to Upper Burma and China and as a pivot from which the British could control insurrection of all neighbouring interior hill areas with her small but homogeneous force. Further, it was pointed out by the military officers that with the assistance of the people of Manipur, a body of troops lightly equipped might at the proper season penetrate without difficulty into Burma and might if necessary, further advance on Ava by a direct march of

---

3 Alexander Mackenzie's Memorandum on the North East Frontier 1869.
fifteen days and strike at the very heart of the Burmese empire. Besides, the interposition of a race of people known to entertain a rooted antipathy to the Burmese seemed to Mr. Scott an effective barrier against the inroads of the Burmese. So, the British authorities thought of giving all kinds of help to Manipuri and they began to contact Manipuri prince Gambhir Singh "the most enterprising of the three brothers". But Gambhir Singh had not sufficient resources to fit out such an expedition because he was "the proudest reigning prince".

Gambhir Singh proved a most valuable friend in the Anglo-Burmese war, with a small force of 500 soldiers, Gambhir Singh could free Manipur from the Burmese yoke which Capt. Vere Gutzlaff could not do with a large army. In the treaty of Yandabo, the British tried to keep Manipur as a buffer state, to protect its north-east region against Burmese invasion.

4 Lahiri R.M., Annexation of Assam, p.52.
6 E.W.Dun, Gazetteer of Manipur, p.43.
7 Captain Grant, Quoted by R.M.Lahiri in his Annexation of Assam, p.53.
The small but homogeneous Manipur force on many occasions, helped the British during the darkest days of Sepoy Mutiny, the Lushai Expedition and the seize of Kohima. But there was a tremendous change in the political geography of north-eastern India, after the annexation of the whole of Burma to the British Empire in 1886. This eclipsed the strategic importance of Manipur. But, during the second world war, the strategic importance of Manipur was increased. The Japanese army considered Imphal as the best allied defence fortress to the valleys of Assam and Bengal and also as a staging post for re-enforcement for counter offensive actions in the neighbouring areas. Similarly, the allied military planners regarded Imphal as the key and a reverse at the battle of Imphal would have been the greatest obstacle to the whole of India. So, strategically, this eastern gateway is no less important than the "Chumbi Valley of Sikkim".

The British penetrated into NEFA apparently to protect the plains of Assam from the tribal outrages and depredation and to maintain law and order in the mountainous region but the most important factor that warranted the extension of authority was the question
of defence of the British empire in the north eastern frontier region. To the British, the North Eastern Frontier was no less important than the North West Frontier at least from strategical point of view. While the fear of Russian advance on Afghanistan was a vital point which influenced the British policy towards North Western Frontier, the apprehension of further Burmese aggression in the North East Frontier Agency was a determining factor that influenced the early British policy towards NEFA. As soon as the tribes of the frontier areas were brought under control, the British India Government defined the external boundary of British India to NEFA. The regional boundary was virtually undefined and inexact. In July 1909, the Government of India was cautioned by the Political officer in Sikkim that undefined and unsurveyed frontier might tempt China in advancing an extravagant claim to the whole or a part of those areas beyond the 'Inner Line'. This prompted Government to undertake the programme of survey exploration and mapping in the northern limit of the frontier hills. The British Government feared the Chinese influence because the Chinese might overawe the hill tribes of the border and dominate all tea gardens north of the
Brahmaputra. Assistant Political Officer of Sadiya Mr. Noel Williamson made a lot of tours in the frontier of NEFA to acquaint with the people and their country and to collect information regarding practicability of trade route towards south-eastern Tibet. In one of such tours in the Abor country, he was murdered at Komsing on 31 March 1911 and Dr. J. O. Gregorson, a tea garden doctor from Tinakuria who was accompanying Mr. Williamson on the tour was also murdered at Pongi on 30 March 1911. This led to the Abor Expedition of 1911-12. One of the main aims of this punitive expedition was to clear up the obscure boundary situation as against China.

The British authorities could not rule out the possibility of Chinese advance into this frontier hills. Because, the country between the inner and outer lines was very sparsely inhabited and was mostly dense jungle. Besides British Political Officer exercised a very loose jurisdiction. If the Chinese obtained complete control up to the British boundary, they could attack the British

---

8 Reid Sir Robert, History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam, Delhi, 1963, p.217.

areas and defence would be extremely difficult. So the best way was to settle the boundary question between India, Tibet and China. The representatives of China and Tibet were invited to a tripartite Conference (India, China and Tibet) at Simla in 1913 to settle the frontier boundary question. Later a convention of the representatives of the Governments was held on April 1, 1914 and the frontier between Tibet and North East India was defined. The frontier line from the east of Bhutan for a distance of 850 miles came to be known as MacMohan Line after the name of Sir Henry MacMohan, the Secretary of the Government of India in foreign department. The 1914 convention was never published, because the Chinese Government failed to ratify it. After India's independence, the issue of the eastern section of the Sino-Indian boundary again raised and "the Chinese Government absolutely does not recognise the so-called MacMohan Line".

After 1914 convention, no action was taken by the Indian Government to exert its authority up to the new frontier. Indeed, the local agents of British Government


11 Letter from the Prime Minister of China to the Prime Minister of India dated 8 September 1959.
in Assam were actually not made aware of the exact boundaries of the frontier. Meanwhile, the latest Chinese map showed almost the whole of the tribal area south of the MacMahon Line up to the administered border of Assam as included in China. Chinese Man had also shown a new province of China called Sikang, partly carved out of Szechwan and partly out of Eastern Tibet, as including the whole of tribal areas down to the administered border of Assam and they would probably include Chutun also in this province. 12 Besides, the British local agents also feared Russia's and China's advance into the frontier hills and it was borne out by Annual Administration Report for 1927-28, where Captain Nevill observed "There is no doubt that as soon China settles down this Tibetan frontier will become of great importance. China has still its eyes on Tibet and on Lhasa, the pro-Chinese Party is growing in influence and should China gain control of Tibet, the Lawang country is particularly adopted for a secret and easy entrance into India. Russia is also trying to establish her influence in Tibet, and, if successful, could safely

and secretly send her emissaries into India by this route. 13

As a result, an expedition under Cap. Lighfoot visited Tawang in 1938, partly to lay the border between Bhutan and these tribal areas and partly to ascertain the degree of Tibetan interference south of red line (MacMahon Line).

It is reported that the Tibetans had established an oppressive rule. So, the Governor of Assam recommended to the Government of India for the extension of administration over Tawang, but the Government of India turned down the recommendation. Thus, the problem of Tibetan controversies and geographically undemarcated border became a conflicting ground of Sino-Indian relations based on self assertion claims on historical inheritance of past covered by phrases of traditional claims and actual line of control.

After independence, NEFA (Arunachal Pradesh) was placed under the Ministry of External Affairs. One of the most important factor which influenced the decision was emergence of Communist Government in 1949 in China. There was a new vigour in Chinese policy towards Tibet. India's recognition of Tibet as an autonomous region of China had greatly changed geo-political perspective of the

international border in the north of the region. A new significant development was appointment of the External Affairs Ministry to act as the administrative agency for the President and it was therefore granted ultimate responsibility for the administration of this sensitive area. The threat of the Communist China invasion of Tibet seemed imminent since late 1949. These considerations apparently induced the Government of India in deciding to retain direct administration of the NEFA at least for the time being. Internally, India was facing a crisis. Partition made India weak and the Kashmir problem locked the bulk of Indian army in North West region. China was quick to learn this and she marched her troops into Tibet and occupied it. The hope of the Government of India that the Chinese would respect the wishes and opinions of the Tibetan people were rudely destroyed.

Nagaland is full of jungle clad hill ranges rising one behind the other like sea waves. From a military point of view, it is the worst terrain one can imagine. It is full of virgin thick forest. At the same time, the Indian military planners must remember that the old India-Burma-China road constructed by the Americans during the war against the Japanese in 1944-45 is still
available to a Chinese invader of India. So, India's strategic interests require that Nagaland's security should be fully safeguarded. For that matter, India cannot afford political rebellion.

After independence, strategic considerations played decisive role in the case of Tripura and Manipur. Manipur and Tripura are border states which are surrounded by Burma and Bangladesh respectively. After signing Merger Agreements, the prevailing democratic Manipur Constitution Act 1947 was suspended to give place to the rule of Chief Commissioner. The cause of this suspension was primarily security aspect of geo-politics. The security arrangement of this area required the special attention of the Government of India and it was therefore decided to take it over for central administration.14

---