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20 November 1962

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Chief, Dissemination Control Branch, DD/CR

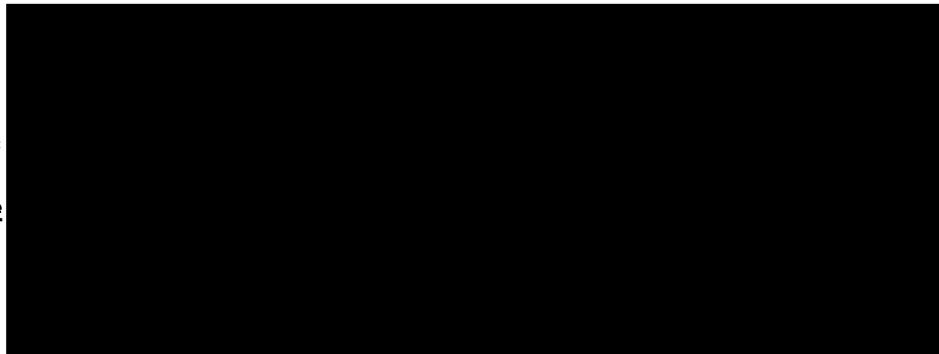
FROM : Chief, Publications Staff, ORR

SUBJECT : Release of CIA/RR GM 62-10, The Sino-Indian Border Dispute in the North East Frontier Agency, November 1962, Secret, to Foreign Governments

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**GEOGRAPHIC  
INTELLIGENCE  
MEMORANDUM**

CIA/RR GM 62-10  
November 1962

***THE SINO-INDIAN BORDER DISPUTE  
IN THE NORTH EAST FRONTIER AGENCY***



DOCUMENT NO. 1  
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**CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
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### Introduction

The border dispute between Communist China and India entered a new phase in October 1962 when heavy fighting broke out at several points along the Sino-Indian frontier. In the period between September 1959 (when the border quarrel first became publicized) and the spring of 1962, China and India exchanged many diplomatic notes about border issues and incidents along the border, but the incidents themselves were few and relatively minor. Nevertheless, during this period both countries greatly increased their military preparedness along the frontier by increasing the strength of their border troops, by establishing a number of new outposts, and by constructing roads to supply their frontier forces.

Military activity increased in the spring of 1962. At first it was confined to the Ladakh sector\* and involved only small units and little actual fighting. Early in September, however, the focus shifted to the east where increasingly sharp patrol clashes occurred along the McMahon Line near the Indian post of Dhola, located a few miles northwest of Towang (see accompanying map). From this area on 20 October the Chinese launched an offensive that quickly overran Indian posts and resulted in the capture of Towang late in October.

The dispute along the eastern sector of the Sino-Indian frontier, which extends from Bhutan to Burma and is about 700 miles long, concerns an area of about 26,000 square miles that includes most of India's North East Frontier Agency (NEFA).\*\* The NEFA area is differentiated from other sectors of the disputed border territory by its larger size; by the somewhat lower but, in many places, extremely difficult and rugged terrain; by heavy stands of forest; and by the existence of an indigenous population numbering several hundred thousand in the disputed territory. These characteristics are in sharp contrast to the high, barren, and largely uninhabited mountain and plateau country that is in dispute in Ladakh. Complicating political factors in the NEFA dispute include questions relating to the validity of the McMahon Line and the past international status of Tibet. Questions also have arisen about the exact location of the McMahon Line.

### Physical Aspects

The physical environment of NEFA is very different from that of contiguous areas to the north and south. The NEFA area consists of a belt of steep hill-and-mountain terrain 50 to almost 100 miles wide rising sharply from the Brahmaputra Valley\*\*\* to the crest of the Great Himalayas. The mountainous terrain of NEFA is deeply cut by numerous streams whose valleys, particularly those in the hills adjacent to the plains, are choked with heavy vegetation. In places -- generally between the outer hills to the south and the high ranges along the border to the north -- more open valleys and rolling hills permit agriculture and tribal settlement. The combination of rugged terrain and dense vegetation has made NEFA hard to penetrate from the plains and has hindered internal communications. These factors have contributed significantly to the lack of administration in this isolated area. They also have contributed to the isolation and fragmentation of the numerous tribal peoples of NEFA.

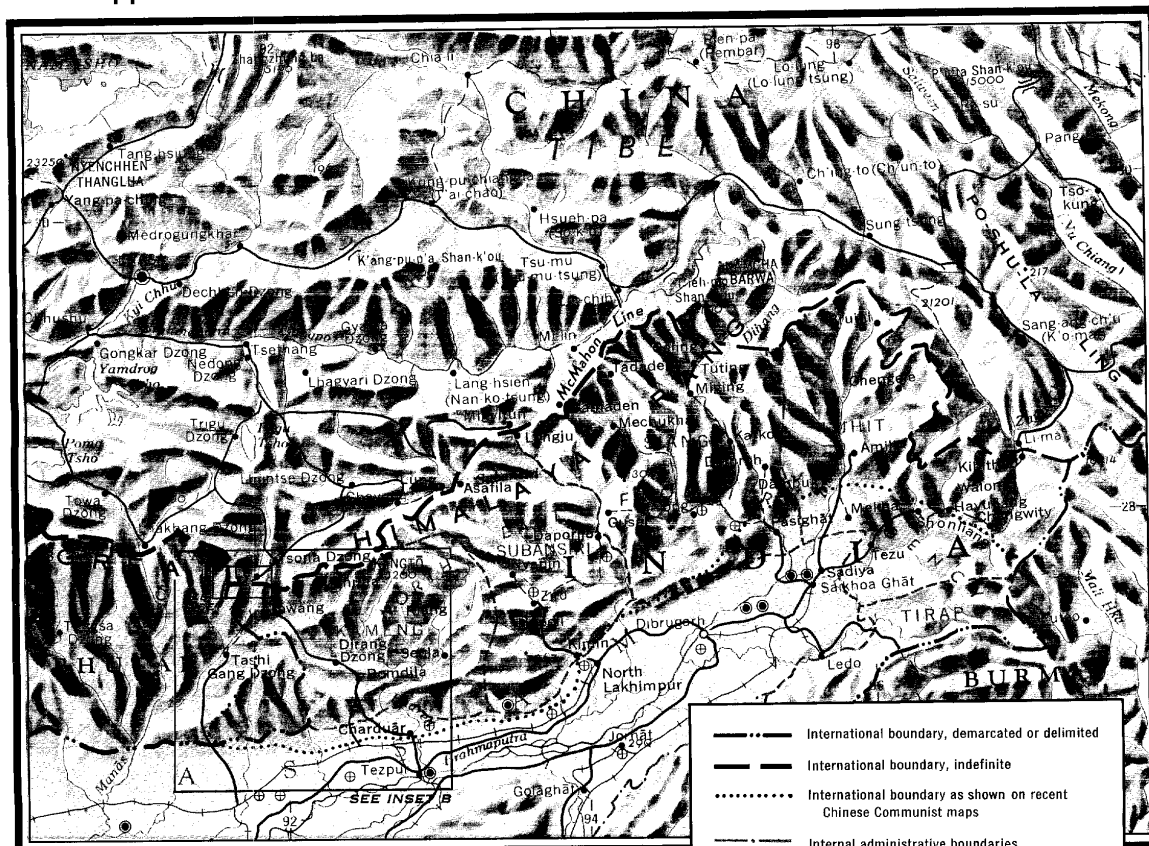
The part of Tibet north of the McMahon Line has two contrasting types of physical environment. West of a line drawn roughly north-south from Gyatsa Dzong to Chayul, the typical Tibetan landscape is one of high, barren plains and mountains and relatively open valleys at elevations of 11,000 to 13,000 feet. Natural vegetation is scanty, confined mainly to drought-resistant shrubs. To the east, however, the Tsangpo and its tributaries have cut deeply into the plateau surface, dissecting the landscape into a complex pattern of steep-sided ridges and narrow valleys in which many streams and rivers flow through narrow gorges. The Tsangpo is one such river. At Tsela Dzong, just south of Lin-chih, the Tsangpo flows at an elevation of 9,700 feet; farther downstream and beyond the gigantic hairpin bend around the peak of Namcha Barwa (25,453 feet), the river flows at an elevation of only 2,000 feet where it crosses the border claimed by India. At the somewhat lower elevations of the eastern area, heavier precipitation permits extensive forests, mainly coniferous. A variety of crops, including rice, can be grown in the comparatively low and humid valleys.

\* For basic information on the border disputes between India and China as well as Pakistan and China in Kashmir, see CIA/RR GM 62-9, The Disputed Frontiers of Kashmir, November 1962, S.

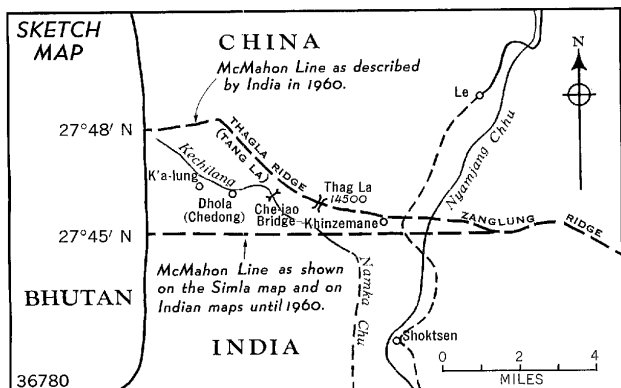
\*\* Chinese Communist claims to NEFA include nearly all of the Kameng and Subansiri frontier divisions and most of the Siang and Luit divisions; the fifth division of NEFA, Tirap, is not contiguous to the border. In this report, discussions of NEFA are confined to the first four divisions named.

\*\*\* The Brahmaputra River of India is known as the Tsangpo in Tibet and as the Dihang River in NEFA.

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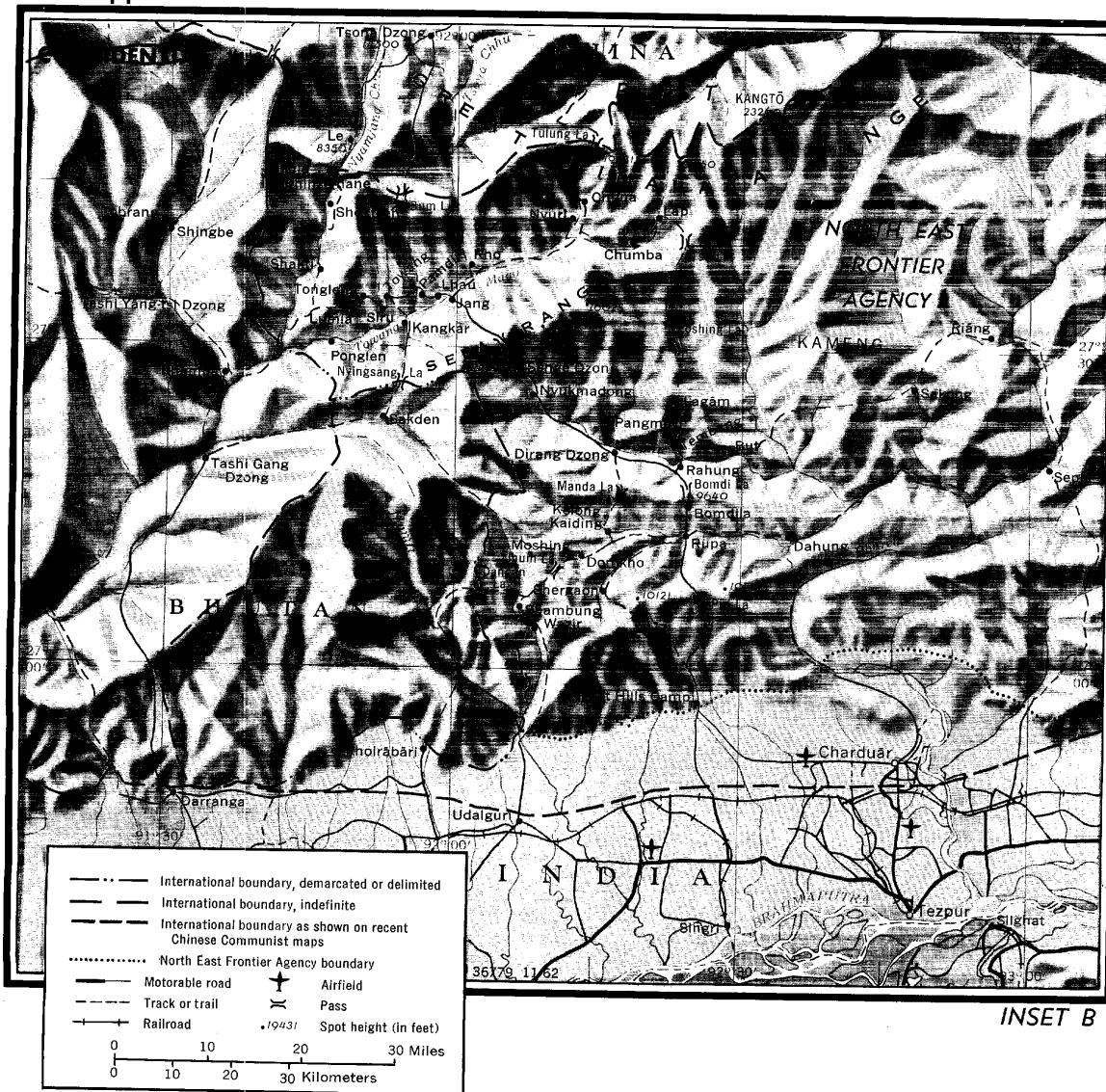


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South of NEFA is the flat country of the Assam Valley, which averages about 50 miles in width. The main feature of this broad valley is the wide, braided Brahmaputra River. The river is in flood stage from June through October every year, and much of the plain is inundated to a depth of 4 or 5 feet. Transport routes often are blocked by flooding.

The climate of NEFA is dominated by the summer monsoon that dumps 70 inches to well over 100 inches of rainfall on the plains from June through September, although significant amounts of rainfall also occur in April and May from premonsoonal storms. In the mountains, precipitation varies greatly according to local terrain, but generally rainfall decreases toward the north. It appears that the driest part of NEFA is in the northwest where the ridges, apparently because of their alignment, block some of the summer rainfall; nevertheless, even here rainfall is sufficient to support a fairly heavy vegetative cover. In Tibet the openings provided by the north-south-aligned valley of the Brahmaputra and, similarly, by the valley of the Luit River to the east, permit monsoonal rains to penetrate southeastern Tibet during the summer. Most of NEFA is at such relatively low elevations that cold temperatures and snow are not problems. Snow appears to be a problem only in the higher passes along the Tibetan border on the north. Although heavy snowfalls may block a pass and also the higher portions of supply routes for a few days, even these stretches probably can be kept open with sufficient maintenance. Lower valley routes, such as those along the upper Subansiri tributaries and the Nyamjang River, can be used when the passes are blocked. Late in March 1959 the Dalai Lama entered NEFA via the Nyamjang Valley route.

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In Tibet on the open plains south from Tsethang, strong winds during winter and spring usually prevent any significant general accumulation of snow below the high peaks. In the part of Tibet nearest Towang, however, winter temperatures may reach 0°F and locally may create problems for military actions. In general, winter weather does not appear to be severe enough to halt or deter military operations for long periods. In most of NEFA below the high passes and ridges the winter season is the best for such operations because the streams are low and fordable then and the ground is dry.

#### Transportation

The construction and maintenance of roads in the frontier area of NEFA by both China and India have been hampered by rugged terrain and heavy rainfall. The most highly developed network in the vicinity of the frontier is in Tibet, across the border from the Kameng frontier division and the western section of Subansiri. In 1957, a road from Lhasa, the main Chinese supply base in Tibet and the terminus of the strategic Tsinghai-Tibet road, was completed as far as Tsethang -- an important town in an agricultural area south of the Tsangpo. As an aftermath of the flight of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan guerrilla activities at that time, the Chinese rapidly extended their road network to the south and eventually linked the frontier towns of Lhaxhang Dzong, Tsona Dzong, and Chayul with major Chinese roads to the north. Much of the terrain along the route is high (over 12,000 feet) but relatively open, and road construction probably has been hampered only locally. It appears that at least one Tibetan pass higher than 16,000 feet must be crossed before the frontier towns are reached; consequently, snow and ice are very likely to be problems during winter. It is considered probable, however, that the Chinese can move supplies to Tsona Dzong and forward areas with only brief delays even during the winter. The relatively good logistical system supporting the western sector of the NEFA frontier is reflected in the larger number of Chinese troops that have been deployed there. To the east the roads are less well developed, although motorable routes lead to Chayul and probably to Migyitun, across the border from

and highest ridges as guiding principles, India in 1960 described the McMahon Line according to the actual terrain in this area, following the Thagla ridge from the Bhutanese border to the Nyamjang River. Although Chinese notes have made much of this particular difference, recently published Indian maps also have portrayed slight differences from the original Simla map at other places along the McMahon Line without arousing Chinese charges of inconsistency.

#### The Current Situation

The Chinese attack southward on 20 October 1962 quickly overran the Indian post at Dhola and supporting posts with the result that on 26 October the Chinese captured the key town of Towang. At the same time, the Chinese launched a lesser attack in the east down the Luhit Valley, an attack which threatened the important Indian post at Walong, about 15 miles from the border. Apparent diversionary feints were made along the remote frontiers of the Subansiri and Siang divisions. In the Towang area the Chinese moved south from the high plateau -- their key base at Tsona Dzong is at 14,500 feet -- into the valley in which Towang itself is located at an elevation of 10,000 feet. In contrast to the earlier situation around Dhola, the Indians now possess high ground on the Sela Range (10,000 to 16,000 feet in elevation) overlooking the Towang Valley. In the east the Indian forces at Walong are located in the narrow Luhit Valley (elevation about 4,000 feet) around which surrounding hills rise very sharply to 10,000-foot ridges. In both the Towang and Walong areas but particularly in the latter, most of the valley sides and ridges below 13,000 feet are forested.

The current Chinese military position in the Towang Valley is handicapped by the lack of motorable Chinese roads to Towang and by the fact that the Indians have superior defensive terrain. Although there are roads from Tsona Dzong to Le in the Nyamjang Valley and, apparently, to Bum La -- the pass located due north of Towang -- Chinese forces there now must rely on animal transport and porters. Extensions to these roads probably will be made if Chinese planning calls for additional advances in NEFA. A road south from Le along the Nyamjang Valley would be roughly 45 miles in length and probably would require some cutting into the sides of the mountains, judging from the alignment of the existing trail. A much shorter route of about 15 miles might be built down from the 14,500-foot pass (Bum La) to Towang at 10,200 feet.

Chinese alternatives to frontal attacks against the Indian positions guarding the pass of Se La, which protects the Indian bases to the south at Dirang Dzong and Bomdila, include a possible flanking maneuver to the east by moving up the Towang Valley. To cross the high Sela Range to the east, however, the Tse La (a pass at 15,600 feet) would have to be used, and from this pass the trails south to Dirang Dzong are difficult. Another alternative would be to move down the Towang and Manas Valleys to the southwest into Bhutan, thus outflanking the Indian forces. At Tashi Gang Dzong, a few miles southwest of the Bhutanese-Indian border, a jeepable road leads south to the plains. Part of eastern Bhutan is claimed by China, and this claim could be used as justification for entering Bhutanese territory.

Possible negotiations to settle the border question in NEFA undoubtedly would involve the complex problems of the Ladakh sector as well. Although since 1959 China and India have engaged in a voluminous correspondence about creating the proper conditions for negotiations, the basic positions of 1959 apparently remain irreconcilable.

Longju. East of Migyitün there appear to be no motorable routes leading to the McMahon Line, but some construction has been reported near the border on a road running from Lin-chih along the south bank of the Tsangpo. A motorable road to Li-ma (Rima) that was used by the Chinese in their attacks against Walong, in the Luhit Valley south of the border, is connected with the main Szechwan-Tibet road to the north and with a parallel road from Szechwan to the east. All of these roads, however, are subject to seasonal blockage by landslides and rockfalls that are induced by the heavy summer precipitation. The roads farther east and north in Tibet, over which supplies to the frontier must move, not only are susceptible to slides but they also cross high passes where winter precipitation is a serious problem.

The Tibetan airfield nearest to NEFA is at Tang-hsiung, north of Lhasa, some 200 miles north of the Towang area. The Tang-hsiung airfield can be used by jet fighters and light bombers. In some areas that are closer to Towang, the terrain is suitable for landing strips, which probably could be constructed fairly quickly.

In general, the more formidable terrain and the heavier rainfall in the NEFA hills have handicapped Indian efforts to construct roads north to the Indian outposts along the McMahon Line. Except for the road to Towang, which was completed only recently, motorable routes extend northward from the plains only 30 to 40 miles (see the accompanying map), and border posts have to be supplied over mule trails or by airdrop. Some of the trails shown on the map may be jeepable. Air supply has been important to Indian activities in NEFA. Advanced posts long have been supplied by airdrop, and numerous small airfields have been carved from the valleys during the past 10 years. A few of them are mere strips suitable only for landing single-engine liaison planes and as drop zones, but most of the new airfields are usable by twin-engine planes.

Heavy summer rains periodically disrupt Indian road communications in NEFA. Although the lack of roads and trails and the fast-flowing streams that hinder local movement are important military obstacles, an ameliorating factor is the widespread availability of trees, which would provide material for constructing makeshift and temporary bridges during a tactical situation.

#### Basis for Border Claims

In 1960, officials from India and China met to discuss and document their respective border claims. Neither China nor India, however, could muster convincing evidence to prove that all of NEFA had incontestably been under its control. What emerged from the talks was the fact that there had been little interest in or administration of NEFA until recent times. Tibet had had some influence in the northwest in and near Towang because of the predominance of Tibetan Buddhism in that area. The British also had had some influence, but it was confined largely to the tribal areas of the hills that were adjacent to the plains and did not extend to the higher and inaccessible areas of the north. In 1943, however, the British initiated a program for integrating NEFA into the administrative fabric of India. This policy of integration was pursued by India after its independence, with marked acceleration in recent years as tensions along the border increased. Basically, the rival claims to NEFA revolve about the central question as to whether or not the McMahon Line is a legal boundary.

Chinese Claims: In most places the Chinese claim in NEFA extends to the foothills overlooking the Brahmaputra Valley and includes an area extending from 15 to about 80 miles south of the border claimed by India. Aside from citing maps to support their claim, the Chinese in 1960 presented evidence consisting principally of documents that purportedly showed Tibetan jurisdiction in the northwestern part of the Kameng frontier division, the part referred to as the Monba area. This area (centered on Towang) is named after the Monbas, a tribal group having more than 40,000 members who are closely akin to the Tibetans in appearance and culture. What is more important, in relation to the border question, is the fact that the Monbas are Buddhists of the Lamaist or Tibetan Buddhist faith and that many Buddhist monasteries are located in this area. The Chinese contend that in the past Tibetan administration prevailed in the Monba area and that taxes were paid to Tibet. India contends that the money that was collected was for religious purposes only and that the administrative machinery was in fact merely that of the Lamaist hierarchy, which was concerned solely with ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Additional Chinese claims include apparently small but somewhat vague areas in Luhit. The Indians refute these claims and cite an official Chinese paper on the limits of Tibet, dated 1914, which did not include these areas.

Indian Claims: Although at the 1960 conference India presented numerous documents as evidence of administration over NEFA, the real basis of the Indian claim is the validity of the McMahon Line. In turn, the validity of the line depends upon whether or not Tibet was an independent state at the time that the McMahon Line was defined and, therefore, whether it was capable of incurring international obligations and entering into treaty relations.



Background on the McMahon Line

The modern history of Tibet, particularly its status as an independent state, is beclouded by the various relationships that have existed between China and Tibet since the 17th century. At first these relationships were primarily religious, but during the 18th century three Manchu military interventions in Tibetan internal affairs placed Tibet under some degree of Chinese control. Whatever the extent and effect of Chinese control during the 18th century, it is undeniable that during the closing decades of the 19th century China's influence over Tibet was merely nominal. Chinese military efforts of the early 20th century to reassert Chinese control in Tibet collapsed after the fall of the Manchu dynasty and the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1912. In an effort to clarify and define the status of Tibet and its relationship with both China and India, the Simla Conference was convened in 1913 through British initiative. Plenipotentiaries of Tibet, China, and Great Britain attended the Simla Conference. During the negotiations a proposal was made to establish an autonomous Tibet, referred to as Outer Tibet, that would be under a shadowy Chinese suzerainty and an Inner Tibet in which Tibetan religious authority would be recognized but secular power would be left in Chinese hands, thereby necessitating the drawing of a border between the two parts of Tibet. At the same time the Indian-Tibetan boundary east from Bhutan to the territory that now is northern Burma also was defined. This eastern boundary was drawn on the map prepared at the Simla Conference and became known as the McMahon Line, named after the British plenipotentiary. There is no record that the Chinese representative at Simla contested the delineation of this boundary. Nevertheless, the Chinese were displeased. Although the Chinese representative initialed the draft convention, his government did not permit him to sign the final version. Consequently, in July 1914, only Great Britain and Tibet signed the Simla Convention, which included as an appendix the map that showed the now famed McMahon Line. India maintains that the McMahon Line as delineated on this map is defined by a treaty signed by two independent countries and therefore is a legal boundary.

The Chinese position is that Tibet has been and is an integral part of China and that because China failed to sign the Simla Convention it is not binding and that consequently the McMahon Line has no validity. A number of legal authorities convened in 1959-60 as a Legal Inquiry Committee to investigate the Tibetan question under the aegis of the International Commission of Jurists, a body with consultative status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council. Both the Commission and its Legal Inquiry Committee concluded that during the period 1912 to 1950 the status of Tibet was "at the very least one of de facto independence." Recently, American Ambassador Galbraith stated officially that the McMahon Line is the international border that is accepted and sanctioned by modern usage and that, accordingly, the United States regards it as the northern border of NEFA.

The increasingly sharp patrol clashes that occurred in the vicinity of the Indian outpost of Dhola early in September 1962 had at issue the exact location of the Dhola outpost with respect to the McMahon Line. China contended that the post was north of the McMahon Line as drawn on the map used at Simla; India replied that in relation to the traditional boundary and the watershed in this area, the Dhola post was south of the McMahon Line.

The guiding principle used in defining the McMahon Line was that it should follow the main watershed, or water divide, along the crests of the Great Himalayas. Strictly applied, however, a boundary following the water divide would place some parts of the McMahon Line as much as 50 miles north of its presently accepted location, because several streams have their sources north of the crests of the main ranges. This is the situation in the Dhola area where the Nyamjang (or Manās) River extends well north into Tibet. In determining the alignment of the border in these areas, the British at Simla relied on the southward extent of Tibetan jurisdiction.

The map used at Simla to delineate the McMahon Line was at the scale of one inch to eight miles -- an unusually small scale for boundary delineation. Furthermore, the map was a provisional edition based on rough compilation, and in many areas along the frontier the terrain features were merely sketched in. Until recently, India probably had no better information about the terrain of the frontier than that provided by this and other outdated maps. During the past 3 years, however, India has made ground and aerial surveys that provide accurate information about the location of terrain features. Although Survey of India maps published through 1959 showed the western extremity of the McMahon Line, where it joins the Bhutan border, at latitude 27°45' N and thus conformed to the Simla map, the Indian description of the McMahon Line that was given to Chinese officials in 1960 did not correspond with the location of the line as shown on the Simla map. Instead, the description placed the western extremity of the McMahon Line at 27°48' N, about 3 miles north of the earlier version, with an alignment trending northwest-southeast and rejoining the line according to the old version of the border about 10 miles to the east (see accompanying map). The discrepancy appears to be explained by the fact that the Indians had acquired a more accurate knowledge of the terrain from their recent surveys. Using the watershed