

# TIBET ON A CHESSBOARD

By Shyam Saran

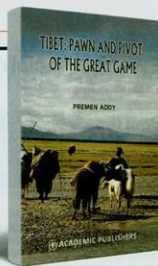
Preman Addy has written a well-researched book on Tibet and its changing fortunes in Central Asia, lying at the intersection of competing ambitions of the British empire in India, the Russian empire in Central Asia and the fading power of the Manchu empire in China. The story unfolds over the 19th and 20th centuries, culminating in the occupation of Tibet in 1950 by China, asserting absolute sovereignty over a country that had survived—in relative independence—in its vast and forbidding geography through political ambiguities about its status. The persistent fiction of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, a vague and elastic term, would never have been sufficient to sustain Tibet's autonomy whenever the Chinese power was in a position to extinguish it. China had always rejected the notion of suzerainty as diminishing its untrammelled jurisdiction over territories claimed as part of its historic empires. This was the case with Chinese Turkistan and later in Tibet. And it is evident more recently in the South China Sea.

The writer produces a wealth of documentary material to expose the different perspectives on the Tibet issue between those charged with safeguarding Britain's worldwide empire and those primarily concerned with the interests of its Indian empire. The latter recognised that "it is the Tibetan plateau, not the Himalayas which forms the real northern frontier of India" and, therefore, looked favourably on Tibet's emergence as an independent entity friendly to, and supported by, India. However, for

London, the policy towards Tibet had to be aligned with its European and global compulsions. The myth of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet was maintained because China was viewed as "a possible ally against Russian expansionism and it was because of this that London had put a brake on the Indian government". Later, when Britain and Russia became allies in 1907, Britain was loath to taking any action in Tibet that might raise Russian suspicions. The author also presents evidence of the US taking on an early role as a self-appointed guardian to China, upholding its claims over Tibet as inherited from the Manchu empire.

The book draws a parallel between the evolution of Outer Mongolia as an independent state under Russian tutelage and what could have been a similar process of Tibet emerging as juridically independent under the British aegis. Both Mongolia and Tibet were territories recognised as being under Chinese suzerainty, but the Russians ensured that China had to eventually recognise the Mongolian Republic as an independent entity. The Russians had even proposed to Britain that in return for the latter recognising a Russian sphere of influence in Mongolia they

**It is the Tibetan plateau, not the Himalayas, which forms the real northern frontier of India**



**TIBET: Pawn and Pivot of the Great Game**  
By Preman Addy  
Academic Publishers  
₹795; 380 pages

would accept British primacy in Tibet. But this offer was not accepted even though the Russians were able to get Japanese acquiescence to Mongolian independence in return for recognising Japanese interests in Manchuria.

Despite their weakened state, successor republican regimes in China continued to lay claim over territories which, according to them, had paid tribute to the Manchu empire. These included Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. This finally convinced the British to seek a defined border between Tibet and the territories south of the Himalayas. The result was the McMahon Line drawn up at the Simla Conference in 1914 where China, Tibet and the British were represented. The Chinese representative initialled the agreement, but later repudiated it, thus sowing the seeds of the border dispute between India and China.

The author has drawn attention to the events leading up to India acquiescing in Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950. The implications of Chinese control over Tibet were well understood by the leaders of independent India and its diplomats. In a 1948 report, K.M. Panikkar, who later served as India's ambassador to Mao's China, argued

that "an effective Chinese government or even influence in Lhasa will mean the immediate revival of claims against Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim and also the denunciation of the McMahon Line", and this had to be prevented through support to the Tibetan government. However, after the liberation of Tibet by Mao's armed forces in 1950, Panikkar conceded that "Tibet as an area in which we had special political interests could not be maintained". In the post-World War II world, ambiguities inherent in terms like suzerainty and political autonomy were no longer sustainable.

The debate on whether India could have done more to preserve Tibet's independence and, if not, could it have obtained better terms from China as a price for recognising Chinese sovereignty over the territory will continue. Premen Addy believes India could have. I accept his argument that a prudent Indian policy may have been to accept the Chinese offer of recognising the alignment of the McMahon Line in the east while conceding Chinese claims in Aksai Chin in the west. But the fevered politics in India at the time made this impossible.

The book also has an annexure with texts of key agreements and treaties. This is of great value to interested readers and scholars. However, the book's editing is poor. It is difficult to separate quotations from the author's own text and there are spelling mistakes and omissions. The author is wrong on just one point of history. It was Padmasambhava, not Atisha, who introduced Buddhism into Tibet in the 8th century. Atisha went to Tibet only in the 11th century.

The last chapter, 'Cold War Prism: Tibetan Pivot in Sino-Indian Relations' is somewhat disjointed with random paragraphs on India's relations with major powers. The author should have kept the focus on Tibet and its current role in India-China relations. Overall, this is a valuable addition to literature on Tibet and Premen Addy deserves credit for his immense and painstaking effort. ■

---

*Shyam Saran is a former foreign secretary and currently senior fellow, Centre for Policy Research*