In the *New York Times* of Thursday, April 17th, 2008, the front page features a center of page headline—“Tibet, Past and Present: Conflict Rages from Beijing to Durham”—with two byline stories by Jim Yardley from Beijing and Shaila Dewan from Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Yardley’s article is not typical of U.S. media coverage of the current anti-Chinese unrest in Tibet in that Yardley does explore with interviews some of the conflicting views on China’s relationship with Tibet as far back as the 13th century. Yardley’s article includes a photo of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama in Beijing with Mao in 1956 before the Dalai Lama’s flight to exile in India in 1959. Yardley also notes that Beijing has launched a major campaign to shape the history of Tibet-Chinese relations with a new museum devoted to Tibet, a patriotic education campaign, over 50 Tibetology research centers to promote the Chinese view on the relationship, and trained tour guides to work in Tibet. The article also mentions Chinese sensitivities about foreign intervention with references to a British invasion of Tibet in 1903-1904 and U.S. Central Intelligence Agency activity in Tibet in the 1950s. A companion article on A12 discusses the prospect of Tibetan protests in India when the Olympic torch arrived from Pakistan, noting that an estimated 100,000 Tibetans resided in India.

So Tibet is back in the news, Tibetans are protesting the growing presence and influence of Han Chinese in their traditional territories, the Dalai Lama is calling for conciliation and conversation with Beijing officials, and the Chinese government as well as Chinese nationals around the globe are very upset as they proudly prepare to host the Summer Olympics in Beijing. By fortuitous circumstances H-Diplo has a roundtable that definitely enhances understanding of the history of the Tibetan relationship with its powerful neighbors, China, India, and the British Raj. From the time of his graduate studies at Johns Hopkins, Parshotam Mehra focused his scholarly attention on frontier studies -- from China’s Asian frontiers with special reference to Mongolia and Sinkiang and then to Tibet.

1 For a discussion on the CIA in Tibet, see the *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8:3 (Summer 2006) for a special issue devoted to U.S. policy toward South Asia in the 1950s-1960s with special attention to Tibet.
with his dissertation on the British expedition to Lhasa in 1903-1904 to block any Tsarist Russia designs on Tibet). When China occupied Tibet in 1950 and border conflict erupted between China and India in 1962, Mehra settled into his productive career of borderland studies.

Mehra's essays concentrate on the India-China border relationship and rely very extensively on British and Indian sources. The reviewers note with appreciation a number of significant characteristics in the essays including

1.) Mehra’s approach as a historian to contentious national and border issues is favorably noted by the reviewers. Steven Levine, for example, stresses that “Mehra is an historian, not a scribbler in the service of politicians, and he grounds his work in careful analysis of the documentary record, of persons and personalities, and in acute awareness of the prevailing international norms and conditions of different historical periods.” (1)

2.) To understand contemporary border problems, Mehra emphasizes the importance of closely exploring the available primary sources, the treaties, maps, diaries, and diplomatic reports in order to understand disputes such as the Sino-Indian border dispute. Tom Grunfeld does note the absence of Chinese sources in Mehra’s essays, although recognizing that they were not available for much of Mehra’s career. Grunfeld suggests that Mehra’s reliance on British archives and secondary sources tends to reinforce his India based perspective and raises unanswered questions in several essays.

3.) Mehra’s perspective on Tibet challenges the contemporary media view by putting Tibet into the context of Asian empires, rejecting both Tibetan claims for historic independence and Chinese assertions of historic sovereignty over Tibet. Thus, Mehra views Tibet as a buffer region in “The Elusive Triangle: Tibet in India-China Relations-A Brief Conspectus,” (107-121) As Jing-dong Yuan emphasizes in his review, “Tibet’s ties with China and India have always been complex and rarely clear-cut … a relationship [that] was largely personal rather than one between the subordinate and superior.” (3)

4.) India’s relationship with Tibet is a major preoccupation of Mehra who contrasts China’s administrative demands for hegemony with India’s cultural, religious, and geographical connections. The importance of Tibet as a buffer between it and China remained central to India in “India’s Land Frontiers: The Role of the Buffer,” (83-106), and Mehra is very insightful on the nature and role of a buffer. When Mao’s China established control over Tibet in 1950, India lost its buffer and, as Mehra notes, the border with China remains unsettled to this day.

5.) Nehru’s role in Sino-Indian relations and the disputed border area with China is a major theme of Mehra’s essays. Levine notes that Mehra has a mixed view that stresses China’s miscalculations in attacking India and, at the same time, Nehru’s failure to strengthen India in the face of Beijing’s hostility on the border. (2)
Grunfeld suggests that Mehra gives insufficient consideration to Indian army maneuvers and the establishment of outposts in the contested border regions as a provocation. (2) At the same time Levine and Grunfeld agree with Yuan's appreciation for Mehra's endorsement of Nehru's concerted effort to bring Communist China into the United Nations and to negotiate a major trade agreement in 1954.

6.) Yuan asks for one more essay from Mehra, a retrospective on "if, how, and to what extent any impact of the passage of time and the availability of primary sources ... has [had] on his understanding and interpretations" on the border issues. As Yuan concludes, Sino-Indian relations have improved since the late 1980s with expanding bilateral relations and the re-emergence of two ancient civilizations that have become major powers in the global economy and international organizations.

Participants:

Parshotam Mehra was formerly Professor, and Chairman of the Department of History and Central Asian Studies at the Panjab University, Chandigarh. He has written extensively on India's land frontiers and relations with Tibet and China. Noteworthy among these are The North West Frontier Drama 1945-1947: A Re-Assessment (1998); An 'Agreed' Frontier: Ladakh and India's Northernmost Borders 1846-1947 (OUP, 1992); The McMahon Line and After (1974); and The Youngusband Expedition (To Lhasa): An Interpretation (2nd edition, 2004).

A. Tom Grunfeld is SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor at Empire State College/SUNY. He specializes in the history of modern China and Tibet. He received his PhD. from New York University. He is the author of The Making of Modern Tibet (1996) in addition to many articles and book chapters pertaining to Tibetan history. Currently he is moving away from the study of Tibet and is engaged in historical research pertaining to the Chinese Communist Party during the 1920s and 1930s.

Steven I. Levine received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in Government and Far Eastern Languages in 1972. He is the author of Anvil of Victory: The Civil War in Manchuria, 1945-1948; co-editor of China's Bitter Victory: The War with Japan, 1937-1945, and has published about several score book chapters, journal articles, and review-essays. He is co-authoring a book on America's wars in eastern Asia from the Philippines through Vietnam with Michael H. Hunt of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and collaborating with senior Chinese scholar Zi Zhongyun on her English-language autobiography. He is also translating an authoritative Russian-language biography of Mao Zedong and a Chinese-language collection of essays on the Cold War for publication in the U.S. He is Associate Director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at the University of Montana.

Jing-dong Yuan is the director for the East Asia Nonproliferation Program at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies and an associate professor at the Graduate School of International Policy Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, where he also coordinates the Certificate in Nonproliferation Studies program. Dr. Yuan has held
teaching and research positions at Queen’s University, York University, the University of Toronto, and the University of British Columbia and is a recipient of the prestigious Killam fellowship. He was a visiting research scholar at the Cooperative Monitoring Center at Sandia National Laboratories before he joined CNS/MIIS in 1999. Dr. Yuan’s publications have focused on Asia-Pacific security, global and regional arms control/nonproliferation issues, and China’s defense and foreign policy. He is the co-author of *China and India: Cooperation or Conflict?* (Lynne Rienner, 2003).