**Buffer Zones**

A buffer zone is, in fact, a higher order of frontier. States and dependences in such zones provide a reduction of the impact of contact between power blocs and also provide physical separation.

These zones may face the risk of either absorption by one power block or demands for settlement including shifts of boundary, e.g., absorption of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria by the Soviet power block as these separated the latter from the western bloc. Similarly, Austria and Yugoslavia in Europe and Laos in South-East Asia acted as buffers between the two power blocs during the Cold War

Buffer states survive because they separate potentially powerful neighbours and any attempt to absorb them is met with hostility from the other side.

Buffer zones are not unique to the twentieth century. Some have come up on their own while others have been created. Some of the buffer zones have been discussed below.

Increasing ideological conflict between China and erstwhile Soviet Union made a buffer zone of Mongolia. The Russian attempt to move eastwards towards Siberia and propaganda in Mongolia and the Chinese assertion on ethnic links with the population in border areas led to attempts by both the powers to gain control over the buffer area.

The McMahon Line between India and China could be one of the few remaining frontiers in the classic sense which never actually performed the functions of an international boundary because both countries have failed to reach a mutual acceptance of the boundary as a legitimate one (Fig. 9.9). China obviously sought shifts in boundary delimitation further South of the McMahon Line, simply because it required a buffer area for the continuance of Tibet as a Chinese region, so that Chinese sovereignty over Tibet could be unchallenged.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century’s, Thailand became one of the largest ‘natural’ buffer areas, separating the British Empire in Asia from French realm in the Indo-China-Pacific region. But it was never subjugated (Fig. 9.8).

Afghanistan, Persia were maintained as buffers by the British against the Russian empire after the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1897.

Laos in South-East Asia acted as a buffer between the Eurasian continental communist powers in the North and the non-communist maritime powers in the South in the mid-twentieth century till the end of the Cold War.

In the post-Cold War period, a large number of nation-states emerged in East-Central Europe after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. A unified Germany emerged. Political geographers consider the string of nation states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czech Republic, and Slovak Republic) that emerged post-Cold War, along with the older states of Finland, Austria and Hungary, as tending to perform the function of a board buffer zone between Germany and Russia, particularly. This buffer zone could be considered a natural buffer zone as its evolution has been spontaneous, not involving either Germany or Russia in its creation.

In the year after the Cold War, buffer zones have lost much of their relevance.

**This is because of:**

(i) A growing detente between potential rivals and neighbouring nations;

(ii) The gradual demise of totalitarian systems and imperialism of the old order;

(iii) The emergence of many independent states and federations/confederations;

(iv) The emergence of regional and multi-lateral cooperation on political and economic fronts (WTO, EU, ASEAN, SAARC); and

(v) The end of the Cold War.