



REVISITING THE 1962 WAR

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This October would mark the 47th year of China's war on India. There is an increasing sense that many developments taking place somehow are not dissimilar to those that led up to that war.

For more than four decades the Sino-Indian War of 1962 has weighed heavily on the Indian mind though virtually no authoritative accounts are available of what really happened. Most of the published writings seek to justify or vilify individuals and the government of the day, especially, Prime Minister Nehru. The Chinese took a long time to throw some light at the war from their side; but unfortunately their few books, obviously focusing on their side of the story, have not been translated into English. Perforce, we must rely on perceptions and assessments based on assumptions rather than facts. The fog of war and the passage of time have not helped to clear the air probably adding to the sense of righteousness on one side and mistrust on the other, and this may well be so also among the Chinese. At a time, when China's power is clearly growing, with India lagging behind but still on a rising trajectory itself, there is every risk that rivalries – new and old, may lead to what many people worry about – another conflict.

This assumes relevance when viewed in the context of the recent past which has been witness to increasing rhetoric indicating Chinese assertiveness in spite of the two countries repeatedly emphasising the bilateral relationship in terms of strategic partnership, whatever that implies. There are frequent reports of Chinese intrusions across the line of actual control (LAC) which has yet to be demarcated and agreed upon in spite of the bilateral agreements of 1993 and 1996, when both

countries agreed to maintain peace and tranquillity on the borders, which were meant to specifically obviate such developments and possible misperceptions. It is obviously in India's interest to have the Line of Actual Control demarcated at an early date, and hence the tardiness on the Chinese side becomes difficult to understand (In my own interaction with senior Chinese military, academia and diplomats, the only reason one could elicit from them was that it will take a long time because Indian governments keep changing frequently!). While the government has downplayed these, they have not completely denied these incidents. One can agree with this position so that we do not create any hype over the issue though China grabbed Indian territory before and during the 1962 war through a creeping process in what Prime Minister Nehru referred to as China's concept of similar "mobile frontiers."

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But before going any further, we need to take note of the known events leading up to the war in 1962. To begin with was

Mao Zedong near psychopathic dislike of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, no doubt driven by ideological as well as personal jealousy. A similar factor affected Chinese leaders' attitude toward USSR, the difference being that a weak India led by charismatic Nehru carried most of the developing world with him while the USSR was powerful, ideologically similar, which Mao dreamt of replacing in the world scene as much as it sought to suppress India. New declassified records indicate that Chinese foreign minister Chen Yi hinted openly to Khrushchev (who had stated that the revolt in Tibet was Chinese fault and not that of Nehru) on 2nd October 1959 that "the Chinese belligerence toward India was dictated by the desire

to take revenge for the century of humiliation at the hands of European great powers." Mao intervened to say that, "The border conflict with India – this is only a marginal border issue, not a clash between the two countries" but also clarified that on the question of Tibet "we should crush him (Nehru)." But it is clear that a major factor in all this was the issue of Tibet and the revolt in 1959 which also led to the Dalai Lama seeking refuge in India (although there are some accounts which believe that this was facilitated, if not actually organised, by the Chinese authorities to remove a rallying point from the province).

Declassified documents of Cold War period tell us Mao Zedong (and other PRC leaders) confirmed (on 2nd October, 1959) that, "nobody knew precisely what actually occurred on China Indian border", earlier that year which led to the Chinese guards shooting down 12 Indian policemen which triggered the complications in the relationship. Zhou Enlai admitted to the government in Beijing being unaware saying that the local authorities undertook all the measures there (of shooting down Indian policemen), "without authorisation from the centre."¹ But by that time Mao and his senior advisers, in their drive for export of socialist revolution and the search for global leadership for PRC and Mao, were clearly looking for an excuse to teach India – and Nehru, a lesson through military power no doubt fully aware that India was not prepared militarily to defend the Himalayan frontier largely because no roads existed on which armies could march and be supplied for a war with a major country. In fact, the border defence responsibility (under the police and Intelligence Bureau till then) was passed on to the army only in 1961. Roads began to be constructed only after 1959 and would take more than a decade to become fully usable.

It is in this backdrop that we need to understand the Chinese motivations for the war in 1962, for which it prepared fully by May-June, 1962. Mao planned his strategy well. His one major concern at that time was whether Taiwan with US support would attack China. However, he sought and received assurance from the Americans through the back channel talks going on at Warsaw that the US had asked Chiang Kai-shek (and he had confirmed) not to initiate any military action against PRC. Mao's other concern was Moscow since the relations between the two communist giants were never smooth. Khrushchev had already declined to back China in case of conflict with India. In fact, he had told Mao that the Soviet

Union had already agreed to give the supersonic MiG-21 interceptors to India. Mao in return had assured him that Sino-Indian border conflict would be resolved peacefully and had even assured Khrushchev that the "McMahon line with India will be maintained, and the border conflict with India would end." But with the Soviet deployment of missiles in Cuba, Khrushchev had to ensure that China would not stab it in the back. Hence, he did a volte-face in early October 1962 and at a Banquet announced that Moscow would stand by PRC in the conflict with India, and even delay the sale of Mig-21 to New Delhi.

But the Cuban missile crisis was essentially settled by 28th October, the Russian clearly came out on the Indian side on 5th November making the Sino-Soviet rift simmering for many years becoming a reality. Declassified documents containing the discussions between Zhou Enlai and

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Mongolian president J. Zedenbal on 26th December, 1962 give us more insights into Chinese thinking on the war. During these discussions it becomes clear that China believed that India was getting too close to the United States, Zhou even stating that India "speaks the language of

America." Zhou's statement that "Nehru is searching for a way to subordinate India and Pakistan to American domination", clearly indicates the serious errors of assessment and judgement being made in Beijing; and given Mao and his sycophants' ambition to be acknowledged as the world superpower then driving China to its aggressive war. And with an assurance of US-Taiwan not likely to start a conflict in the east, this became a major reason for "teaching India a lesson." Zhou ended the meeting by asserting that: "Our government is not fighting with India because of a few dozen kilometres of area. We have made absolutely no territorial claims, only the Indian side has." If that was so what was the war all about? And why did the Chinese ambassador go on TV to claim Arunachal Pradesh?

One possible answer lies in the running theme of Chinese thinking in the 1950-60s: that India was getting too close to the United States; and hence had to be taught a lesson or two. How do those lessons apply to now and the future? But before that we need to very briefly look at the reasons for our setbacks in the 1962 war. The most important of these was the failure of higher defence organisation (set up in September 1947) which had been eroded into nothingness since the mid-1950s both institutionally as well as the style and defence minister's method of working. Krishna Menon had virtually decimated the higher military

system. The Defence Committee of the Cabinet, the highest authority to decide on military preparedness and operations, had stopped meeting. The whole cruel drama of "forward policy" and establishing posts was carried out in late 1950s by the foreign secretary and the Director IB without any consultation with the Chiefs of Staff Committee.

The second was the non-use of combat air power in spite of adequate force being available. Generally four reasons emerge from study of available facts: (i) concern about Chinese bombing of our cities especially Kolkata, (ii) Army HQ's concern that use of IAF fighters would provoke the Chinese to use their air forces and this would adversely affect the air supplies to its troops which rated higher in priority than interdicting Chinese advance, (iii) IAF view that close air support would not be useful in high Himalayas and hence not advisable; there was no mention of interdicting Chinese forces and supplies, (iv) advice from the Americans not to use combat air power due to risk of escalation. The third was the lack of preparedness of the military to fight at such heights and the logistics nightmare it involved. While the Indian Army had fought with great élan and valour in numerous battlefields of the world, it had no experience of fighting at heights of around 15,000 ft in Himalayan ranges which poses serious physiological, climatic and operational challenges. With only a few brigades stretched out on the 4,400-km frontier, troops were rapidly rushed up to face seasoned forces superior in numbers and already acclimatised, clothed and armed.

One can go on. But let us leave this here by a conclusion that the war in 1962 and its outcome was an aberration that cannot be replicated again unless we neglect our defensive capabilities significantly and/or the Chinese arrive at similarly flawed conclusions as they did in 1962. The trouble is we see some elements of both in recent years. China has grown in power and self-confidence during the past two decades. Its grand strategy remains seeking to be a global super power as it was earlier; and

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There is evidence of the latter in the greater assertiveness of China in its attitude towards India, especially, since 2005 when Indo-US relations were encapsulated in the new Defence Framework in June and the Joint Statement of 18th July that year for closer cooperation. Its sense of vulnerability after the Soviet collapse soon after the Tiananmen tragedy was palpable in the early 1990s and it sought two agreements (in 1993 and 1996 to establish

There is every risk that Chinese could make the same mistake that they made earlier and try to use force (in the context of outstanding territorial disputes along the frontiers) in order to influence India's rise and/or its close relations with the United States.

"peace and tranquillity" which included demarcation of the Line of Actual Control to pre-empt any misunderstanding and potential for clashes and conflict) on which there seems to be a domestic consensus in China not to implement them. The new found confidence in its power contains the risk of over-reach. It tried to block the progress of some steps like the NSG waiver enabling

Indian access to nuclear cooperation and the very basis of treating India as a de-facto nuclear weapon state. It is deeply concerned with not only the obvious progress of Indian access to US weapons and military technology, but cooperation across the board in military and civil sectors.

Its rapid economic growth and military modernisation has long helped it to overcome earlier vulnerabilities and it now seeks a dominant role in world affairs in the framework of a multipolar world. But there are all indications that the multipolar construct it seems to favour implies a unipolar Asia (with China at its head) where US influence is sought to be undermined (through SCO, East Asia economic grouping, etc.) and slow down India's rise to power through discouraging it from any deeper cooperation with the United States. At the same time, its neo-alliance support to Pakistan has reached new

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heights with the aim of enhancing its autonomy with regard to the US, and at the same time to complicate and enlarge the challenges for India. Its policy on Kashmir seems to have further tilted in favour of Pakistan. Last time it did so (in 1964) encourage Pakistan to launch a war the following year. China could hardly be oblivious to the fact that Indian military modernisation has been on a glacial pace though showing promise of definite improvement in the coming years. But there is a visible window of vulnerability for the coming decade or more.

For example, IAF combat force level has come down unplanned by nearly 25% which would create major problems in case of collaborative crises on the frontiers. This has to be seen in the context of the Chinese defence policy as officially stated to win local wars through "command of the sea and command of the air." It can hardly achieve any significant success in the ground war without air dominance which it might conclude it can achieve with the air power balance grossly in its favour now and likely to remain so for a decade or more. Our nuclear deterrent is robust, but only up to limited ranges which remain well short of reaching Beijing and Shanghai. Meanwhile, Tibet has been experiencing disturbances since last year, and the Dalai

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Lama, who has maintained great moderating influence over nearly 180,000 Tibetans refugees living in India (mostly in the Himalayan regions) is getting older. There is obvious potential here for future trouble getting out of hand and into the violent zone.

The bottom line is that if we are to ensure that any tendency toward repeating 1962 is nipped in the bud, we need to take note of the relative changes taking place especially in terms of military capabilities. We must not allow a situation to develop where the fighting men have again to pay with their life and limbs for the failures of the planning people to put their signatures to paper in files and the decision makers in the air conditioned offices of South and North Blocks. Obviously, we have enough affordable money to upgrade our defence capability to credible levels; and it is only negligence and poor decision making that leads to enormous funds remaining unspent in search of some elusive deals. These "savings" may cost us enormously.

Notes

¹ Document No. 3, "Memorandum of Conversation of NS Khrushchev with Mao Zedong in Beijing, 2nd October, 1959, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin, Issue 12/13*, Wilson Centre, Washington, pp. 262-269.



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