

## Re-Learning the Lessons from the 1962 Conflict

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*“No nation can have a sure guide as to what it must do and what it need not do in foreign policy without accepting the national interests as that guide”*

Morgenthau, 1951

### Introduction

**W**ars or conflicts are not stand-alone events but are products of their contexts. No clear answers seem to be available as to why two great civilisations with no baggage of history or animosity, within a decade and a half of their existence as nation states, decided to exchange blows on the Himalayan Frontier. The extant circumstances of that era and the dynamics that would have influenced the thinking of the leadership on either side may provide some answers to why negotiations foundered which led to the conflict in 1962. Three books on the 1962 conflict have been released since 2015 – ‘1962: A View from the Other Side of the Hill’ by PJS Sandhu, ‘The War That Wasn’t’ by Shiv Kunal Verma and the recent ‘China’s India War’ by Bertil Lintner. They attempt to fill up essential voids in the one-sided and binary narratives of the conflict that so far had dominated the mind space of the military and civilian reader alike. Most of the earlier accounts have been from military protagonists who have justified their respective actions. Bertil Lintner in his book, *China’s India War*,<sup>1</sup> has challenged and tried to demolish the one-sided construct of Neville Maxwell in his book ‘*India’s China War*’ that laid the blame for the conflict at India’s doorsteps. ‘1962: A View from the Other Side of the Hill’ and ‘The War That Wasn’t’ provide different perspectives to round up the understanding of this controversial conflict. If conquering territory was not part of the Chinese plan, as has been alluded to by Bertil Lintner, then the motive for war needs to be found elsewhere. The account by Shiv Kunal Verma

also points towards the shortcomings in the Indian statecraft that led to this debacle.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, there has not been a book, so far, by any of the protagonist from the “Establishment” that ran the policy of the day, explaining all compulsions of our Tibet policy starting from our Independence till the conflict of 1962. The focus of this article is to isolate the regional geo-political context to understand the far more complex relationship.

### **War is an Instrument of Policy**

War is an instrument of policy, but the relationship is reciprocal.<sup>3</sup> The military mind must differentiate between war and warfare. Warfare is just one subset of war and definitely not its only facet. It needs to be understood that policy, strategy and war are multi-domain, multilayered, complex and nuanced undertakings and too often have interlinked contexts. While war remains the contest of political will, warfare too is non-linear, chaotic and has its own grammar. War, of course is an option to solve problems of the state, but usually and rightfully is the last choice amongst many that are available to the policy makers. Wars are expensive undertakings and this so-called dialogue of Kings, works at a price.<sup>4</sup> That price is extracted in several currencies – blood, honour, influence and money. War is a grave affair of the State and, therefore, States must remain prepared for it always.<sup>5</sup> The distinct historical experiences of India and China have coalesced into different understanding of the relationship between policy and military effort. China, under Mao and given its history prior to 1949, possibly looked at war as political actions to break entrenched *status quo*. On the other hand non-violence and *Dharma* were very much part of Indian strategic outlook in the formative years after its Independence. In matters of the state, it is essential that policy must guide strategy. War must necessarily serve the larger ends of policy and not become an end in itself. In the run-up to 1962 conflict, this dictum seems to have been disregarded and the entire onus of finding a solution to the situation seems to have shifted from the political realm to the military domain. The words of General George C Marshall “A political problem thought of in military terms eventually becomes a military problem” captures the disarray we possibly found ourselves in the closing years of 1950s and early years of 1960s.

### **Statecraft and Strategy**

People's Republic of China (PRC), under Mao was a revolutionary enterprise involved in carving out a nation-state after a "Century of Humiliation" and after having defeated the Nationalists. An ingrained and collective sense of victimhood resulted in post-imperial ideology to consolidate its territorial sovereignty and restore its status as the Middle Kingdom. The consolidation of PRC required settling the vexed issue of ethnic minorities on its borders to ensure national defence. The Communist ideology provided it with the cement for its coherence and readily made it acquiesce with the Soviet Union. The consolidation of Xinjiang in October 1949 as part of PRC seems to have been an event that the decision makers missed. The same was a harbinger of what was to follow. Of course, at that time we had just emerged after fighting Pakistan and did not have the advantage of hindsight. The declared liberation of Tibet or rather its annexation in 1950 was done by PRC even as they were mobilising for the Korean War. The implications of the annexation of Tibet were not lost on our decision makers who entered into treaties and defence arrangements with Bhutan (August 1949), Nepal (July 1950) and the then Kingdom of Sikkim (December 1950).<sup>6</sup> In fact, General Himmatsinghji Committee to study the problem arising from Chinese aggression in Tibet was ordered by the Prime Minister (PM)<sup>7</sup> in response to the letter by Sardar Patel in November 1950, warning of the peril generated by the Chinese occupation of Tibet. The committee had recommended expansion, concentration and redeployment of Assam Rifles. In the meantime, Major Bob Khating (Retd), in February 1951, had unfurled the Tricolour at Tawang.<sup>8</sup> By 1951 we had accepted Chinese suzerainty (mistakenly conveyed as sovereignty)<sup>9</sup> over Tibet. In the minds of our leadership there was a trade-off between Tibet and the border. PRC, however, saw no co-relation between the imperial borders (unjust in their perception) and Chinese sovereignty over Tibet.

**Reversal of the Century of Humiliation.** During the Korean War (1950-53), PRC mobilised 2,50,000 troops within a month, even before the Inchon landing of September 1950. Pandit Nehru had written to the Chinese PM Chao Enlai, as well as the US and British representatives, regarding the prospects for limiting the Korean conflict. The Indian Ambassador was summoned on 03

October 1950 by Chao Enlai and told to report to the Indian PM that PRC cannot sit idle if the Americans crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. The purpose of this communication was to make a record of Chinese attitude and how it would react to events on their periphery. The dots, however, could not be connected and the salience of the communication was not interpreted to decipher China's strategic behaviour. PRC, by 1953, had emerged from the war exhausted but redefined in its own and the world's eyes. An under-equipped Chinese Army achieved stalemate against one Superpower of the world and this fuelled a sense of spiritual rejuvenation and marked the reversal of the Century of Humiliation. The first Taiwan Strait Crisis, which followed quickly in 1954-55, reinforced the Chinese belief that power does grow from the barrel of the gun and that the same rule was applicable in the international arena. By 1954 historic re-unification of China was gaining traction in their internal discourses and Chinese Secondary school textbooks had started showing maps of 18 Chinese territories taken by Imperialism.<sup>10</sup>

**Two Fronts.** In the sub-continent; Pakistan had become part of Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954 and joined the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) in 1955. For Pakistan, the appeal of the pacts was the potential for receiving support in its struggle against India. Pakistan's foreign policy was crafted with the aim of acquiring a bulwark against India. This development needs to be seen in light of the findings of the Kulwant Singh Committee set up in 1953 which sensitised the leadership of a possible Chinese aggression between 1959 and 1961.<sup>11</sup> The dilemma of a two front problem and the choice between a military response and a peaceful resolution, unquestionably, would have gripped the minds of the decision makers.

**Panchsheel and the Doctrine of Necessity.** Our agent in Gartok had, by 1950, given indications of road building in Tibet which was later also reported by Director of Intelligence Bureau in 1952.<sup>12</sup> This issue was, however, not taken up with the Chinese at that point in time. In fact, the Chinese continued to use the Calcutta Port facilities till the Aksai Chin road was a *fait accompli*. The complexities of nation building, economic rejuvenation, infrastructure development, problem of influx of refugees, severe

food shortage, limited military muscle and the stated policy of *Ahimsa* would have been legitimate considerations in evolving a response to deal with the situation unfolding on the borders.. The borders at that time were the responsibility of the Ministry of External Affairs. That portfolio was solely with the Prime Minister who issued the directive to the Army to focus towards Pakistan and that China would be handled diplomatically. This decision seems to have been borne out of a doctrine of necessity but paid little heed to the strategic and demonstrated behaviour of the PRC. Politics is the master of the strategy it can afford; and how much it can afford is both an economic and political question.

The Panchsheel Agreement signed on 29 Apr 1954 was seen as a diplomatic highpoint in Sino-Indian relations and was presented as the panacea to insulate one frontier. In fact the statement made by the PM in Lok Sabha on 15 May 1954 vindicates this trust placed in the good behaviour of China. While the agreement was essentially a trade agreement, the mention of the six passes helped perpetuate the self-belief that China does not challenge the Indian alignment of the McMahon line which *ipso – facto* was neither mutually agreed upon nor demarcated. While in all fairness the issue of the boundary and the incorrect maps were taken up by Pandit Nehru in October 1954, and later in November 1956, it was brushed aside by PM Chao En Lai as being a relic from the Kuomintang era which would be subjected to revision in due course.<sup>13</sup> With the signing of the Panchsheel Agreement we gave up all our extra territorial rights and privileges we had enjoyed in Tibet. In fact in November 1956, PM Chou En - Lai informed the Indian PM that in case of Burma they had accepted the formalisation of boundary based on the McMahon line and proposed to accept it with India also.

### **Realpolitik and the Neighbourhood**

**The Aksai Chin Highway.** The construction of the Aksai Chin road and its completion in September 1957 altered the trajectory of the relationship. The deceit and Chinese intrusions started with the detaining of Indian patrol in September 1958 at Haji Langar. The PRC, during the second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958, again gave an account of its strategic behaviour which should have informed the polity of her steadfastness and reaction in dealing with borders and issues of reunification. The Indian reaction had

been to treat these intrusions as irresponsible behaviour of local Chinese authorities.

**The Repressive Chinese Regime in Tibet.** The Khampa rebellion and the Chinese reaction in crushing the rebellion led to the Dalai Lama escaping to India in March 1959. The CIA involvement in fomenting the rebellion coming close on the heels of the second Taiwan Strait Crisis could not have been missed by the decision makers in China.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese mind believes in the concept of “*Shi*”. It is premised on the belief that there are no isolated events and that all happenings are woven into a pattern. The asylum given to Dalai Lama was perceived by China as Indian malfeasance which was reflective of further nefarious designs.

**The Escape of Dalai Lama.** The months of March 1959 and August 1959 were two turning points that need to be clearly understood. The Dalai Lama entered India from Khinzemane in March 1959. On 07 August 1959, about 200 Chinese troops pushed our Assam Rifle Party at Khinzemane to Drokung Samba. This was followed by the Longju incident on 25-26 August 1959 in the Subansari Valley further to the East. In the Longju incident firing, blood was spilled for the first time on the borders. This was also the time when in the domestic context the PM was questioned in the Parliament regarding the developments on the borders and the matter spilled out into the wider arena of public debate. The escape of Dalai Lama to India in the Chinese conception undermined their efforts of resolving the problem of its minorities. An unstable Tibet also translates into an unstable Xinjiang and Mongolia. This, inadvertently and inextricably, tied the destinies of the two most populous nations in the world. By September 1959 the Chinese government laid claim to 50,000 sq kms of Indian Territory.

**Teaching India a Lesson.** The account by Bertil Lintner believes that the decision to teach India a lesson was taken by the Chinese leadership in March 1959 immediately after the escape of Dalai Lama. The preparations for the same were to follow and the plan enacted at an opportune time. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 provided just the correct setting when much of the world was focussed on the Caribbean where the second major

Cold War confrontation was played out from 20 October to 20 November 1962.

**Sino–Soviet Split.** The Chinese were also having trouble with their ideological brethren i.e. USSR after the death of Stalin and the Sino-Soviet split was in its infancy. The lack of support from Khrushchev<sup>15</sup> in the growing rift between India and China also worried the Chinese leadership and underscored the growing stature of Nehru, who was increasingly being seen as the leader of the Non Aligned Movement. This too was an irritant for Mao and jeopardised his ambition of dominating the political space in Asia. Mao had tried to organise the Non Aligned Movement into a safety net against the Soviet hegemony.<sup>16</sup> A historic Middle Kingdom could well do without an ardent competitor bent on undermining its consolidation in the immediate neighbourhood. Nehru's insistence of not accepting any dialogue or negotiations till restoration of the *status quo* ante was justification enough for Mao to use force to try and get him back to the negotiating table.

**The failure of the Great Leap Forward.** The Great leap forward was the signature campaign started by Mao in 1958 to modernise China's economy to rival that of America's. The failure of the campaign brought into question the legitimacy of Mao's rule. With 20 million deaths<sup>17</sup> and no worthwhile or tangible progress, his political credentials were under severe strain. He called on the Communist Party to take him to task over his failures but also asked his party members to look at themselves and their performance. He was popular with the people but he still had to resign from his position as Head of State. A winnable war could provide the necessary distraction domestically to resurrect his authority and re-establish Mao as the leader of the State.

The play of events from 1960 onwards followed the classic Chinese stratagems. The Chinese claim lines varied as per their bargaining convenience affording them the much needed time to prepare for the offensive. The falsehood and deception which followed was the warp and woof of the peace offensive which lulled the Indian leadership to believe that there was sincerity in the talks at the highest level. The simultaneous major offensives in three widely separate theatres of Eastern Ladakh, Tawang and Walong are testimony that the conflict was a well-conceived and a pre-planned activity with adequate time devoted for military

preparations. It was not a reaction to local and defensive Indian actions of setting up flag posts to prevent surreptitious Chinese advance on Indian Territory.

### **The Fallacy of Coherence**

The Indian reaction to the Longju incident was to mobilise 4 Infantry Division from Ambala and order its movement to Eastern India. The responsibility of the borders was shifted from the Ministry of External Affairs to the Ministry of Defence and the Indian Army was committed to a policing role. There was not much change in force levels on the ground as logistic and administrative constraints severely restricted the number of troops that could be committed in the forward areas, especially Tawang, which did not have a road axis ahead of Dirang.<sup>17</sup> The policy of patrolling continued with not many changes being made to the overall defence architecture to synergise the actions of the Army and the Assam Rifles. The Assam Rifles remained under the Ministry of External Affairs and sometimes acted independent of the Army. The establishment of the Dhola Post in June 1962 is a classic example where 7 Infantry Brigade was not entirely in the loop for the developments that were taking place in their area along the Namka Chu.

The handing over of the situation to the Army of course made the political temperatures to cool down, but did little to reverse the strategic direction in which the situation was headed. The leadership remained shackled to the Intelligence Bureau assessment that China would not use force. The battle indicators were not taken seriously. The last ditch effort by the military to sensitise the leadership was Exercise LAL QILA.<sup>18</sup> It was conducted in March 1960 at Eastern Command Headquarters by Lieutenant General SPP Thorat. It elaborated on the magnitude of threat from China and the Indian vulnerabilities. It suggested a three tier defensive layout and was later called the “Thorat Doctrine”. However, deployment of additional troops did not take place. Unfortunately, in the given context we were neither prepared for war, nor were able to avert it.

In the run-up to September-October 1962 the tyranny of smaller things and toxic pathologies in civil-military relations were allowed to ride roughshod over genuine security threats and



ground realities. After the Chinese patrol came to Dhola Post on 08 September 1962, the Army decided to beef up its presence in the area opposite the Thagla Ridge. The incident of 08 September 1962 also activated the corridors of South Block which saw frenzied activity. The Army Headquarters ordered move of additional troops to the Namka Chu. The unprepared and underequipped troops responded to their call of duty. The Defence Minister on 12-13 Sep 1962 after consultations with the Chief of the Army Staff General Pran Thapar and the Eastern Army Commander, Lieutenant General LP Sen, ordered Operation LEGHORN to evict the Chinese. It is of little surprise that the decision to commit forces was not taken by the Cabinet but by the Defence Minister who had earlier promised to sort out the issue single handedly using his diplomatic clout. The events that unfolded were a recipe for disaster wherein the political leadership was seduced by the idea of using military force without due thought process, intelligence appreciation and preparation. The Army has to shoulder part of the blame for the debacle. The inputs from ground troops were disregarded. The military hierarchy was found wanting in discharging their professional roles which led to the disaster.

With the PM and the Defence Minister away from the country, the Minister of State for Defence, Shri Kota Raghuramiah presided over a meeting on 22 September 1962 and the orders for throwing the Chinese out from Thagla Ridge were issued in writing signed by Shri HC Sarin, Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Defence.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the understanding of the nuances of war and warfare were shallow and what followed was an abject failure of statecraft and a military debacle.

The role of military commanders in chain has been written about in numerous accounts. The tactical actions were mere reactions, lacked doctrinal coherence and operational direction. There was no higher direction and firm plan. 7 Infantry Brigade at Namka Chu was left to face the consequences. The flip flop and replacement of key commanders during the operations only added to the confusion. Not only was the politico-military synergy a failure, the strategic military management of warfare proved to be a disaster. Why the Air Force played only a limited role remains unexplained and fuzzy.

The Indian soldier deserved better. If body count and casualties are indicators to go by then the soldier did not fail the nation. The Army at the end of the war was left to bear the burden of the ignominy it had little part in scripting. The people who ran the policy owed much more than resignations and apologies to the soldiers who chose to fight and die in safeguarding the honour of the motherland. Civilian supremacy undoubtedly must reign but has to be earned and paid for in terms of accountability and commitment. The defence budget is but the price for the nation's foreign policy. The latter deserves to be well crafted. Tactical brilliance cannot offset strategic lunacy.

### **Conclusion**

International Politics is about power. It is not about doing good or being right. The exercise of power, however, is almost always linked to values. Statesmen and military leaders are obliged to protect the vital interests of their nation and state. The strategy is to be jointly forged by the policy maker and the military leadership. For a student of Military History the singular important lesson is to understand that policy would ask its military instrument accomplishments which are within its means. And when such advice is sought it needs to be balanced, pragmatic and cost effective.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Linter Bertil, *China's India War : Collision Course on the Roof of the World*, (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Shiv Kunal Verma, *The War That Wasn't*, (Aleph Book Company, 2016), p.24

<sup>3</sup> Colin S Gray, *Fighting Talk*, (Praeger, 2007), p.29.

<sup>4</sup> Colin S Gray, op.cit, p.17.

<sup>5</sup> *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, Translated from the Chinese by Lionel Giles, (Allandale Online Publishing, 2000), p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, (Natraj Publishers, 1970), p.67

<sup>7</sup> Shiv Kunal Verma, op.cit. p.7.

<sup>8</sup> Shiv Kunal Verma, op.cit. p.11.

<sup>9</sup> Shiv Kunal Verma, op.cit. p.6.

<sup>10</sup> "A Brief History of Modern China" (Peking, 1954), reproduced in United States Central Intelligence Agency, People's Republic of China, Atlas (Washington, D.C.: United States Central Intelligence Agency, 1971),

- p.75 accessed at  
<http://www.washington.edu/uwpress/books/samples/GARPRC.pdf>
- <sup>11</sup> Shiv Kunal Verma, op.cit. p.15.  
<sup>12</sup> Shiv Kunal Verma, op.cit. p.17.  
<sup>13</sup> Bertil Lintner, op.cit. p.22.  
<sup>14</sup> Bertil Lintner, op.cit. p.73  
<sup>15</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China*, (Penguin Books, 2011), p.171.  
<sup>16</sup> Henry Kissinger, op.cit, p.163  
<sup>17</sup> Henry Kissinger, op.cit, p.184  
<sup>18</sup> Shiv Kunal Verma, op.cit. p.114  
<sup>19</sup> Shiv Kunal Verma, op.cit. p.41  
<sup>20</sup> Shiv Kunal Verma, op.cit. p.121.

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