

Representation of the 'India-China War of 1962' in Indian Writings and the Western Media

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Abstract

On 26 May 2023, the author delivered a talk on 'India-China War of 1962' during the Conference on 'Nationalism, War and Defeat' held at the University of Copenhagen. This article, an expansion of the above talk, is an outcome of the research carried out by the author jointly with Dr Beáta Biliková, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Applied Languages, University of Economics in Bratislava. Dr Biliková with her expertise on applied linguistics, textual and critical discourse analysis, has covered how the American and the British media represented and reflected upon the war and highlighted some evaluative representations that tried to influence readers to adopt a specific bias towards the conflict. The 1962 India-China war is a significant event in Indian history, marking its only modern military defeat. Despite the importance of this conflict, key figures like Defence Minister VK Krishna Menon and military personnel did not leave behind memoirs. This article delves into Indian writings on the war and examines how Western media, particularly in the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK), portrayed the conflict. Indian perspectives, ranging from military officers to historians, offer diverse insights into the war's

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causes and consequences, while Western media framed it within the broader context of the Cold War, emphasising ideological tensions and strategic interests. The US press focused on strategic gains, while the UK press highlighted moral and historical dimensions, reflecting complex narratives of politics, ideology, and colonial legacies. Overall, both Indian and Western perspectives underscored the war's long-term implications for Asian security.

Introduction

On 20 Oct 1962, India was taken by complete surprise politically, diplomatically and militarily and caught unprepared when China's Peoples' Liberation Army attacked Indian Army positions in the Ladakh sector. The war, which started with baffling suddenness and lasted for about a month, ended with equal swiftness on 21 Nov 1962, when China declared a unilateral ceasefire. The Indian Army suffered 9,743 casualties, including 1,423 killed, 3,078 wounded, 1,655 missing believed killed and 3,587 Prisoners of War (PoW). The country suffered its only military defeat in modern times and it impacted every Indian; from the Prime Minister to the common man.¹

Numerous books, memoirs and articles have since been written by Indian historians, military men and academicians to describe various aspects of the 1962 war. Some bureaucrats, journalists and correspondents, associated with the war, have also written on it.

Indian Writings on the India-China War of 1962

Although a large number of books and other writings by Indians are available on the Indian defeat in 1962, strangely, some key functionaries of the war such as the then Defence Minister VK Krishna Menon, the Chief of Army Staff General Pran Nath Thapar and the Army Commander Eastern Command, Lieutenant General LP Sen did not pen down their experiences for posterity and lesson-learning.² However, some senior army officers have written books highlighting their views and experiences. These include Lieutenant General BM Kaul, Major General DK Palit, Brigadier JP Dalvi and Brigadier Darshan Khullar, who had taken part in the conflict. Lieutenant General BM Kaul, who was commanding 4

Corps during the conflict, and was much blamed for his failures, wrote 'The Untold Story' in 1967, which largely focused on covering his blunders while blaming others for the debacle against the Chinese.³ Brigadier JP Dalvi, who was commanding the 7 Infantry Brigade and was taken as PoW, along with 26 other personnel, wrote the 'The Himalayan Blunder'. The Curtain Raiser to the Sino-Indian War of 1962. His book highlighted the bravery of Indian soldiers on one hand while criticising the political establishment of the time for overlooking the defence preparedness of the nation on the other.⁴

Many more authors, not directly associated with the conflict, have also written about this event. Sarvepalli Gopal has written that the then Indian President, Dr S Radhakrishnan, had a poor opinion of Krishna Menon and was instrumental in getting the latter removed from the Ministry of Defence in the course of the war.⁵ Jaswant Singh was of the view that the decision of the Indian government to adopt a forward posture, based merely on the recommendation of the Intelligence Bureau, without taking the considered view of the Indian Army, was flawed and contributed to the miscommunication between India and China.⁶ JN Sahani in his 'The Lid Off: Fifty Years of Indian Politics 1921-1971' writes that the reliance by Nehru to resolve issues of national security through diplomacy had proved fatal for India.⁷ Another interesting book, '1962: The War That Wasn't' by Shiv Kunal Verma, gives a detailed account of outside interference in the postings and promotions of senior Indian Army officers, that severely undermined the professional competence of the field formations at the critical juncture.

Representation of the War in the Western Media

The representation of the India-China War of 1962 in the Western print media reflects a viewpoint relevant to India due to the political implications that derive from it.⁸ The second part of the article aims to explore how individual components and tools of discourse contributed to the representation and/or reconstruction of events.⁹

The authentic material for the analysis of the war's coverage in the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) Press in 1962 was predominantly retrieved from 'Newspapers.com' which is the largest online archive of digitised newspapers giving access to more than 924 million pages of historical newspapers from around 24,600 newspapers published in the US and other countries.¹⁰

Representation of the War in the US Press

The US press tended to represent the India-China War either as a clash of 'Communist' and 'Neutral' ideologies or a clash between Indian and Chinese nationalism 'In an area of historically vague frontiers'. On 21 Oct 1962, 'The News and Observer' stressed that both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations conceived of the Cold War in Asia as determined by 'The rivalry between India and Communist China'.¹¹ On the other hand, the 'Statesman Journal' of 22 Oct 1962, pointed out it was simply 'The conflict of the Indians versus the Chinese rather than of Neutrals versus Communists'.¹²

However, a certain ideological element had been perceived as present no matter which of the two views was preferred. The ultimate aim of China, as the Statesman Journal believed, was 'To disrupt India's economic development'. At the same time, the Statesman observed that "No area is of vital interest to either country, in economic or population terms. But there is a nationalistic principle involved".¹³ The ever-present ideological element is reflected in the fact that the toponym China is in the researched newspapers usually used in combination with the attributes 'Red' or 'Communist'. Some newspapers are more consistent than others in the use of phrases like 'Red China' or 'Communist China', but the high frequency of such expressions indicated the preoccupation of the US press with the significance of the war's ideological background.¹⁴

The main concerns of the then-US press were the fear of a big Asian war, a possible use of the 'Atom Bomb', the ambiguous role played by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) along with its motive, and the impact of the India-China war on the global political constellation. Americans seem to have considered the war in question, and their involvement in it, as one of the strategic moves in their global political game of chess. At the same time, it was not generally perceived as a major matter. The Des Moines Register of 21 Oct 1962, labelled it as one of 'the world's 'Pocket-Wars', albeit the one with 'By far the most explosive potential'.¹⁵

Contemplating the mistakes of India's administration, the 'Bayonne Times' of 25 Oct 1962, pointed out that what India naively considered to be a new China in fact 'Was very old'. For

'Nothing is more ancient than tyranny'. The article concluded its evaluation of the situation claiming that 'One can have massive sympathy for Nehru's desire not to become involved in war, cold or hot, but it is hard to admire blindness that persists when the enemy is within the gates'. The article employed a rather patronising attitude, one benefitting from the opportunity of hindsight which allowed the reporter to imply that the war was inescapable - of course, and everybody but India's leaders could see.¹⁶ A similar critical note can be identified in 'Tallahassee Democrat' of 26 Oct 1962, which opined that 'Nehru's non-alignment policy and especially Defence Minister VK Krishna Menon's arrogance have not endeared them to many in the US'. Nevertheless, 'Her (India's, author's note) loss would engulf all Asia in Communism. India cannot afford to let China absorb India almost unopposed'.¹⁷

It appears that for ideological reasons the US felt obliged not to let India fail completely. However, they had no intention of helping India regain the territories lost in the struggle with China either. 'Rocky Mount Telegram' of 26 Oct 1962, for example, mused: '(...) one wonders what India hopes to gain by refusing a cease-fire (proposed by China¹⁸, author's note)'. Here, again, a condescending tone can be heard, projecting India's stance as immature and irrational. The article considered the situation in India to be 'Critical' and the author claimed that it was 'particularly embarrassing because of (...) the statements (...) by Nehru that he was going to drive the Chinese Red troops out of Indian territory'. In conclusion, the author laconically underscored the presented analysis with the phrase: 'One thing is not difficult to predict: Nehru is in trouble'. Thus, indirectly, readers get to understand that some changes in the Government of India are imminent. Along with that, the article echoed the frequently discussed idea that the then USSR was a factor in the China-India conflict.

On 03 Dec 1962, 'Winston-Salem Journal' published an article 'Indian Nationalism Responded in Fight'. It described two traditions coexisting in India, one of Gandhi's nonviolence and the other of Subhash Chandra Bose's violent battle. The author of the article argued that the tradition of violence "Is now coming to the front as India faces China".¹⁹ The country responded to the call of 'Nehru, the man of peace turned war leader at age 73'. The ironic transformation of Nehru into a war leader marked the personal tragedy of a man whose lifelong mission was turned upside down.

The 'Kansas City Times' of 10 Dec 1962, published W.R. Frye's article 'Dividends Accrue to West' in which he summed up the outcomes of the India-China War. His description started from the observation that the war was "One of the most important developments of the decade"²⁰ and then he gave an account of the positive outcomes of the India-China war. First of all, it was the fact that, despite remaining officially non-aligned, in Frye's view India "Is, in fact, emotionally, politically and militarily with the West".²¹ The second positive side-effect of the war was an increased antagonism between China and Russia. The next one was a foreseeable settlement of the India-Pakistan 'Quarrel' over Kashmir. And finally, there was an ensuing joint pressure, including India, on the USSR to comply with a nuclear test ban. The article concluded the outline of the benefits brought about by the India-China War by saying that "The West has reaped rich dividends already from Red China's incredible stupidity and avarice in India. It stands to reap a lot more—if it acts with skill and subtlety".²²

On the whole, the presentation of the India-China War of 1962 in the US press did not focus on the situation and motives of the two involved countries. The nature and effects of the war were rather projected in a much broader context of Asia, or even in the global context of ideological confrontation. Special emphasis was usually laid on the consequences of the war and their interplay with the US global political interests, i.e., boosting the democratic 'Front' opposing Communism.

Representation of the War in the British Media

The British press showed a great deal of concern with the India-China War. One of the fundamental messages was that India, being a Commonwealth country, deserved and would get humanitarian and military aid from Britain.

Compared to the US media, the British press laid emphasis on a different set of issues. One of the most complex articles concerning the India-China War was published on 26 Oct 1962, in the 'Daily Telegraph and Morning Post'. It was entitled 'India's Hour of Trial' which may be a distant echo of the darkest hour, a phrase associated with Winston Churchill and the British resistance against Germany in World War II. In the introduction, the article contemplated the unique paralleling of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Himalayan conflict and remarked it almost looked as if the

two actions had been coordinated, aiming to divert the attention of the world from the Chinese invasion of India.²³ The effect 'Of the coincidence is to leave India for the moment isolated (...) from the instant and active preoccupation which her plight would otherwise evoke'. Next, the article criticised the outrageous ceasefire offer from China, with the terms humiliating to India, and appreciated Mr Nehru for 'Bravely Resisting' the proposal. 'All honour to him (...) it will be accorded no less sincerely by those who have felt him to be dangerously deluded in his attitude towards international communism and misguided in his neutralism'.

Another interesting view was presented by the 'Glamorgan Gazette' on 02 Nov 1962, in the article 'Reds' Attack on India Is a Menace to World Peace, says Ogmore MP. It claimed that it was a 'Real Tragedy' that the nuclear threat over Russian bases in Cuba distracted attention from the Chinese-Indian conflict which 'In the long run may prove to be more important for the future of humanity than the Cuban crisis'.²⁴

Unlike the US press, the British newspapers generally did not condemn Nehru for his non-alignment policy and did not represent it as immature and naive, although they were critical of his neutralist attitude. Some newspapers even appreciated that he had acknowledged his fault. The 'Daily Telegraph' concluded that Mr Nehru was not a Churchill of his country, but he "Has nevertheless risen bravely and honestly, though belatedly, to meet his country's crisis".²⁵ The House of Lords debate reported on by the Guardian on 02 Nov 1962, included the speech of Lord Henderson who had condemned the Chinese aggression and proposed to give India full support.²⁶ A similar view had been presented by Lord Attlee who, nevertheless, included a critical remark too in respect of Mr Nehru finally 'Waking up to Realities'.²⁷

On 01 Nov 1962, the 'Birmingham Post' offered a summary of opinions of Harold Wilson, a Socialist 'Shadow' Foreign Secretary who urged: 'There is no need to sneer about India's neutrality'. He appreciated India's part in promoting peace. Wilson even proposed to institute 'A massive programme of lend-lease' in order to provide India with sufficient military aid and solve the issue of the India-China boundary line by the International Court at the Hague.²⁸

Occasionally though, there occurred articles disclosing the weak points jeopardising India's ability to fight China, e.g., the article by RHC Steed in the 'Daily Telegraph' on 01 Nov 1962. The article entitled 'India Criticism Rejected' informed that Mr Menon played havoc with service chiefs and armed services. Their ordnance departments are in a fantastic muddle. As it turns out Mr Nehru played his role in maintaining that chaos by appointing Mr Menon as Minister of Defence Production soon after Menon was dismissed from his post as Minister of Defence.²⁹ The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post of 20 Nov 1962 explained that senior staff officers had been talking about unpreparedness and preparing for the wrong war for years and mentioned Major General Habibullah and Major General Kulwant Singh as examples of the state policy critics.³⁰

Conclusion

The India-China War of 1962 stands out as one of the most defining moments in the history of independent India. Unfortunately, the key functionaries of the war did not leave their memoirs and the war has not been as adequately covered as the subsequent conflicts with Pakistan. The coverage of the War in the Western media has brought out some significant facts, that are of relevance today. Both the US and the UK press showed concern and offered support to India, and realised the long-term implication of the war to the security of Asia in times to come.

The textual and discourse analysis of the collected research material indicates that there were significant differences between the representations of the India-China War in the US and the British print media. While the US press offered a markedly pragmatic portrayal of how the war fits the US strategic goals, frequently employing metaphors of business (dividends, gain, cannot afford, reap, etc.), the British press appears to have been more value-oriented in its representation of the war, often involving expressions such as 'Bravely Resisting', 'Honour', 'Accorded Sincerely', 'Justice', 'Risen Bravely' and 'Honestly to meet his country's crisis', etc. In addition, in the case of the British press media, the motif of the colonial past is not irrelevant. Some newspaper articles seem to be trying to come to terms with Britain's responsibility for the path taken by the relatively young independent India of 1962.

Endnotes

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- ³ BM Kaul, *The Untold Story*, (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1967), ix, 388-390, 399.
- ⁴ JP Dalvi, *Himalayan Blunder: The Curtain Raiser to the Sino-Indian War of 1962*, (1969), 2-3.
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- ⁶ Jaswant Singh, *India at Risk; Mistakes, Misconceptions and Misadventures of Security Policy*, (New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2013), 52-54.
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- ⁸ Laura Filardo Llamas, Michael S Boyd, *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*, (London, 2018), 318.
- ⁹ Jackie Abell, Elizabeth Stoke, Michael Billig, *The Discursive (Re) Construction of Events*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 180-192.
- ¹⁰ <https://www.newspapers.com/>
- ¹¹ "Troops of India Retreat Before Red China Attack", *The News and Observer* at *Newspaper.com*, 21 Oct 1962, pg. 1.
- ¹² Henry Bradsher, "Nationalism Cause of Fighting in Asia", *Statesman Journal* at *Newspapers.com*, 22 Oct 1962, pg. 4.
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- ¹⁴ "Troops of India Retreat Before Red China Attack", *The News and Observer* at *Newspapers.com*, 21 Oct 1962, pg. 1.
- ¹⁵ William Frye, "China-India War Seen as Explosive", *The Des Moines Register* at *Newspapers.com*, 21 Oct 1962, pg. 134.
- ¹⁶ "India's Bitter Awakening", *The Bayonne Times* at *Newspapers.com*, 25 Oct 1962, pg. 4.
- ¹⁷ "Let's Turn Chiang Loose", *Tallahassee Democrat* at *Newspapers.com*, 26 Oct 1962, pg. 4.

¹⁸ "India's Situation Critical", Rocky Mount Telegram at Newspapers.com, 26 Oct 1962, pg. 4.

¹⁹ "Indian Nationalism Responded in Fight", Winston-Salem Journal at Newspapers.com, 3 Dec 1962, pg. 13.

²⁰ William Frye, "Dividends Accrue to West", The Kansas City Times at Newspaper.com, 10 Dec 1962, pg. 43.

²¹ William Frye, "Dividends Accrue to West", The Kansas City Times at Newspaper.com, 10 Dec 1962, pg. 43.

²² William Frye, "Dividends Accrue to West", The Kansas City Times at Newspaper.com, 10 Dec 1962, pg. 43.

²³ "India's Hour of Trial", The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post at Newspapers.com, 26 Oct 1962, pg. 14.

²⁴ "Reds' Attack on India is a Menace to World Peace Says Ogmores MP", The Glamorgan Gazette at Newspapers.com, 2 Nov 1962, pg. 1.

²⁵ op. cit. "India's Hour of Trial", pg. 14.

²⁶ "World Applauding Victory of Commonsense on Cuba", The Guardian at Newspapers.com, 2 Nov 1962, pg. 2.

²⁷ "World Applauding Victory of Commonsense on Cuba", The Guardian at Newspapers.com, 2 Nov 1962, pg. 2.

²⁸ "Mr. Wilson Wants Arms Embargo on South Africa", The Birmingham Post and Birmingham Gazette at Newspapers.com, 1 Nov 1962, pg. 7.

²⁹ R.H.C. Steed, "India Criticism Rejected", The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post at Newspapers.com, 1 Nov 1962, pg. 28.

³⁰ Stephen Barber, "Double Nemesis for Mr. Nehru", The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post at Newspapers.com, 20 Nov 1962, pg.12.