

Chairman Mao's Road to War and Salvation in 1962

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Abstract

This year is the 58th anniversary of the 1962 war. An angle of the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict that has been insufficiently studied is about Mao Zedong's motivations to go to war. Why did China suddenly decide to humiliate India? The historical sources are still sparse, but going through some available documents one can get a fairly good idea of the Chinese motivations, or more exactly the 'political' compulsions, which pushed the 'Great Helmsman' into this win-win venture. This article attempts to look inside the Great Helmsman's mind, Chinese politics and the global situation at that point of time to get the answers. Readers will find many similarities in the Chinese leadership's behaviour, then and now.

The Great Leap Backwards

The largest man-made starvation in human history began in

China in February 1958 through Mao's 'Great Leap Forward'. By initiating his Leap Forward, Mao Zedong's objective was to surpass Great Britain in industrial production within 15 years. For the purpose, every Chinese had to start producing steel at home with a backyard furnace. In agriculture, Mao thought that very large communes would cater for a many-fold increase in the cereal production to make China into a heaven of abundance. Introduced and managed with frantic fanaticism, it did not take much time before the programme collapsed. One man tried to raise his voice against the general madness and sycophancy. This was Peng Denhai, Defence Minister and old companion of Mao during the Long March. Mao immediately 'purged' old Peng. The Great Leap

Forward was to continue till 1961/1962 and it is today estimated that between 40-50 million died of hunger in China during these three years. At the beginning of 1962, while tension was increasing on the Indian border, did Nehru realise that China was a starving nation? No, very few grasped what was going on in China at that time.

By the end of 1961, Mao was practically out of power because of the Great Leap (Backwards). Dr Zhisui Li, Mao's personal physician recounts how in 1961 Mao was, "...depressed over the agricultural crisis and angry with the party elite, upon whom he was less able now to work his will. Mao was in temporary eclipse, spending most of his time in bed".¹

A year later, at the beginning of the fateful 1962, Mao's situation had not improved and Dr Li noted, "1962 was a political turning point for Mao. In January, when he convened another expanded Central Committee work conference to discuss the continuing disaster, his support within the party was at its lowest".

During the Conference, known as the 7,000 Cadres' Conference, Lui Shaoqi declared, "...man-made disasters strike the whole country". He was targeting Mao. After a month, as the meeting could not conclude, Mao decided that it was enough; he would temporarily retire to stage a comeback against 'left adventurism', and the 'capitalist roaders', later. By the fall of 1962, Mao would return with a bang. The conflict with India will be closely linked with his comeback.

The Three Reconciliations and the One Reduction

In the early 1960s, Wang Jiaxiang was still one of the senior-most leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Wang was appointed first as People's Republic of China's Ambassador to Soviet Union, and then returned to Beijing as the Under Secretary of the Foreign Ministry. In 1956, he was promoted as Commissioner and Secretary of the Central Committee of CCP. During the Lushan Meeting in 1959, he objected to the catastrophic agriculture policy of Mao. In 1959, his close friend, Zhang Wentian² incurred the same fate as Marshall Peng Dehuai, he was purged.

Wang managed to temporarily survive; he even remained for a few months an important voice in foreign policy.

Wang's grand idea was to reconstruct China. For this, it was necessary for the People's Republic to have a 'softer' foreign policy line towards the United States, the Soviet Union, and India. Wang also thought that China should spend less on 'foreign aid', at a time China itself was going through such difficult times. Wang thought that the government should issue a statement defining the general principles of its foreign policy; he believed that peaceful coexistence needed to be stressed. His theory became known as the 'Three Reconciliations and the One Reduction'³. The three reconciliations were with the US, the Soviet Union and India and the reduction referred to unnecessary foreign expenditures.

Wang Jiaxiang spoke with Liu Shaoqi (the boss of the Party in the absence of Mao) and Lui apparently agreed with him. On 27 February 1962, Wang put his thoughts in a letter to Zhou Enlai and other senior leaders. The letter was not sent to Mao. It is greatly helpful to understand China's relations with India, especially at a time when Delhi had adopted a 'Forward Policy' for its Northern frontiers. Wang Jiaxiang challenged, to some extent, the usual Communist "foreign policy route, which was probably the main reason why Mao Zedong later sharply criticised his views. To Mao, a concrete policy may be discussed, but the fundamental theoretical concept should never be questioned". In hindsight, it is evident that the policies the Chinese leaders adopted before the summer of 1962 were in accordance with the strategic principles laid out by Wang Jiaxiang.

The proposal for peace talks on the border issue in the correspondence between the governments of India and China, in the spring and summer of 1962, were probably a direct consequence of this new policy, though by the end of August, the tone changed and threats were added to the proposal for negotiations. However, we shall see that it is mainly the return of Mao Zedong on the centre stage and the 'leftisation' of China's foreign policy which brought the renouncement to the policy of 'peaceful coexistence' and ultimately the armed conflict with India. Because of the changes in the ideological basis, the foreign and

defence policy of China hardened and the conflict with India was the ultimate consequence.

Wang's policies, however, became visible at the World Peace Congress held in Moscow from 9 to 14 July. According to the US scholar MacFarquhar, in his *Origin of the Cultural Revolution*⁴, "[China and Soviet Union] acted with restraint. Though both sides maintained their positions, some agreements were reached". Regarding India, the same scholar explained, "Wang Jiaxiang seemed to be seeking at least a partial revival of the 'Bandung line' of the mid-1950s, according to which non-communist independent nations of the Third World were regarded as allies in the overarching struggle against imperialism. The line had effectively been discarded in the aftermath of the 1959 Sino-Indian border clash, and as a result of the Sino-Soviet dispute. In his argument with Khrushchev, Mao had rejected the possibility of 'peaceful transition' from bourgeois regimes like Nehru's India to proletarian dictatorship and insisted that they would have to be overthrown by revolution".

It seems obvious that the Sino-Indian conflict would have not degenerated the way it did, if Wang Jiaxiang's policies had been followed.

Armed Coexistence, Jigsaw Pattern

Maxwell has argued that the Forward Policy, which began to be operative in December 1961 in the Eastern sector, was the root cause of the conflict between India and China. He quotes particularly the Dhola Post, which the Chinese considered as their territory, while India believed the area was a part of India.⁵ For Maxwell, the Indian action in this area was THE provocation which triggered the war. The policy of the Chinese government in the first months of 1962 followed the motto '*Armed Coexistence, Jigsaw Pattern*'. Practically, it meant that while both Armies were building their positions in the Western and Eastern sectors, the governments of China and India continued to 'coexist', exchanging a voluminous correspondence, sometimes bitter, sometimes more conciliatory. For example, in a note given by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Embassy of India in China on July 21, the Chinese diplomacy affirms: "The Chinese Government has repeatedly stated that China is not willing to fight with India and the

Sino-Indian boundary question can be settled only through routine negotiations. It has all along exercised the greatest forbearance and self-restraint towards Indian armed intrusions and provocations on many occasions. However, the Chinese Government can by no means sit idle while its frontier guards are being encircled and annihilated by aggressors".⁶ This jigsaw policy (opening new posts and offering negotiations) could have continued longer, at least till the winter, but this is without taking into account the 'return of Mao'.

On the Indian side, there was no unanimity in the Indian Army about holding the 'forward' posts (or creating new ones). Many saw the practical difficulties. Former Indian Chief of Army Staff, General KS Thimayya was one of them: "I cannot even as a soldier, envisage India taking on China in an open conflict on its own. China's present strength in man-power, equipment and aircraft exceeds our resources a hundredfold with the full support of the USSR and we could never hope to match China in the foreseeable future. It must be left to the politicians and diplomats to ensure our security". Unfortunately, Nehru had, till the last day, the absolute certitude that there could be NO war with China. He was comforted in this position by his intelligence Chief, BN. Mullik, who had no clue of what was happening in China.

The 'jigsaw' built-up continued. On 04 August, (two days before the beginning of the Beidaihe Conference⁷), Beijing wrote, "The Chinese Government approves of the suggestion put forth by the Indian Government in its note for further discussions on the Sino-Indian boundary question on the basis of the report of the officials of the two countries. There need not and should not be any pre-conditions for such discussions. As a matter of fact, if only the Indian side stop advancing into Chinese territory, a relaxation of the border situation will be effected at once. Since neither the Chinese nor the Indian Government wants war, and since both governments wish to settle the boundary question peacefully through negotiations, further discussions on the Sino-Indian boundary question on the basis of the report of the officials of the two countries [in 1960] should not be put off any longer. The Chinese Government proposes that such discussions be held as soon as possible, and that the level, date, place and other procedural matters for these discussions be immediately decided upon by consultations through diplomatic channels".⁸ Nehru himself

probably saw the increasingly frequent missives from Beijing as a bluff; the 'Chinese won't attack' remained the leitmotiv, the 'jigsaw' could continue for months, he thought; in three months' time, winter would settle over the Roof of the world and nothing serious could then happen.

South Block answered the Chinese offer: "The Government of India is prepared, as soon as the current tensions have eased and the appropriate climate is created, to enter into further discussions on the India-China boundary question on the basis of the report of the officials as contemplated during the meeting of Prime Minister Chou [Zhou] Enlai with the Prime Minister of India in 1960". Unfortunately, with the return of Mao at the helm of affairs in Beijing in early September, the current situation could not ease.

Some analysts believe that the swift take-over of Goa in December 1961 boosted the morale of the Indian Army; the top brass thought that they could handle the China problem similarly. Could the Portuguese enclave really be compared to the Middle Kingdom and the Portuguese police to the highly trained People's Liberation Army?

As the Chinese ambassador Pan Zili was leaving his post in India, the Indian Prime Minister invited him for lunch. During the informal talks, Nehru confirmed that India was ready to discuss the border issue without precondition. Unfortunately, during a debate in the Parliament, under the pressure of a democratic political dispensation, the Prime Minister had to back-track about the preconditions; this probably helped Mao to prove that nothing could be expected from the Indians.

Fire will Eventually be Consumed by Fire

Mao's physician remembered, "In the summer of 1962, [Mao] emerged from his retreat. ...I knew that his counter offensive was about to begin". The timings of the Sino-Indian conflict coincided exactly with the beginning of Mao's return to the political stage in China.

In September 1962, at the 10th Plenum of the Party's 8th Central Committee, Mao took back the fate of China into his hands; he denounced 'the members of the bourgeoisie right in the party

ranks'. He even attacked his mild Premier Zhou Enlai and Foreign Minister Chen Yi. They were accused to try to rehabilitate the intellectuals and the scientists, "the party has not yet properly educated the intellectuals. The bourgeois spirit hangs like a ghost over their heads".⁹ We should not forget that till the summer of 1962, Zhou and Chen were the two main makers of China's India policy (along with Wang Jiaxiang) and they were in favour of negotiations with the Indian Government on the border issue.

In a Note dated 13 September 1962, Beijing hardened the tone. It quoted six recent incidents where India had trespassed into Chinese territory (in the Ladakh sector), "The Indian Government should be aware that shooting and shelling are no child's play; and he who plays with fire will eventually be consumed by fire. If the Indian side should insist on threatening by armed force, the Chinese border defence forces are duty-bound to defend their territory and thereby arouse their resistance; it must bear the responsibility for all the consequences arising therefrom". For China, India's mood was not conciliatory enough. Around that time, Mao said that the Indians had been pressing the Chinese along the border for three years; "if they try it a fourth year then China will strike back", he warned.

Internal Situation

By early October, Mao was again in total control of the events, and the people, in Beijing. He was assisted by his submissive servitor, Zhou Enlai and his new protégé and the heir apparent, Defence Minister Lin Biao. Several other leaders participated in the decision to 'slap' India. Some of the decisive meetings were attended not only by Liu Shaoqi, still Chairman of the PRC but also Deng Xiaoping, and, perhaps more importantly, Marshals Liu Bocheng, He Long, and Xu Xiangqian as well as General Luo Ruiqing, the Army Chief. Lui Bocheng was the main strategic advisor; Lui was against the idea of simply 'throwing out' the Indian troops from North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) by pushing them back after 'breaking up their attack, and surrounding them'; he wanted a more decisive victory.

As preparations were going on in Beijing, the Indian leaders were not too worried. They continued issuing orders to throw the

Chinese out of the Indian Territory. Unfortunately, the Indian Army was not physically ready to implement the politicians' order. Prime Minister Nehru had just left for the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London while Defence Minister Krishna Menon went to perorate at the UN in New York. By the first days of October, the Indian Army Chief was nervous; he began to insist to get orders in writing from his political boss who lived in another world. No problem, said the Defence Minister, he would cable them from New York. One historian wrote that the notes exchanged between India and China "combined truculence directed at each other and reasonableness addressed to the outside world".

06 October 1962: China Decides to go to War

According to Chinese historians who wrote the history of the 1962 conflict, a first key meeting was held early October, perhaps on 06 October in the morning. Defence Minister and Deputy CMC chairman, Lin Biao, reported about the situation in the Tibet and the Xinjiang Military Districts; in another words the Western (Aksai Chin-Ladakh) and Eastern (NEFA) fronts. Lin said that the Indians continue to advance and often open fire on Chinese outposts; ten Chinese personnel had been killed or wounded during the last few days. Though the Chinese forces strictly followed the principle of not firing first, the situation in both sectors was fast worsening; the Indian Army had begun to concentrate troops and deploy artillery to both sectors, said the Defence Minister. Even more serious, the Chinese military intelligence had gathered that Indian forces were planning an attack on Thagla Ridge on 10 October. This information was absolutely correct, the Corps IV Commander, Lt Gen BM Kaul had planned to attack in Dhola post area on that day.

Mao then addressed his colleagues, "It seems like armed coexistence won't work. It's just as we expected. Nehru really wants to use force. This isn't strange. He has always wanted to seize Aksai Chin and Thagla Ridge. He thinks he can get everything he desires". As he has always done in his career, Zhou Enlai agreed with his mentor: "We don't want a war with India. We always strove in the direction [of avoiding war]. We wanted India to be like Nepal, Burma or Mongolia, i.e. solve border problems with them in a friendly fashion. But Nehru has closed all roads. This leaves us only with war. As I see it, to fight a bit would have

advantages. It would cause some people to understand things more clearly.”

As often in China, after a few leaders agreed to the direction to take, a larger meeting is called to invalidate the decision and work out the details. The meeting was held in the outskirts of Beijing¹⁰ on 06 Oct 1962. Mao chaired the meeting and informed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) top brass that it has already been decided to go to war with India. “The purpose of bringing all of you together today is to convene a military [tactical] meeting”, he said. The Chairman elaborated, “Our border conflict with India has gone on for many years. We did not want war and originally we sought to solve [the issue] through peaceful negotiations. But Nehru is unwilling to talk and has deployed considerable forces, insistently demanding a fight with us. Now, it seems that to refuse a fight is impossible. If we fight, what should be our method? What should this war look-like? Please everyone contribute your thoughts on these policy issues”. Mao, who quoted Sino-Indian history to bring out their historical connect, stated that, “First, the PLA had to secure a victory and knock Nehru to the negotiating table and second, Chinese forces had to be restrained and principled”. The Chairman then spoke of the possible isolation of China on the world stage. He did not consider this to be a ‘decisive factor’: “China needn't fear isolation as long as the front line troops fight well, we will be in an advantageous position. ...It's better to die standing, than to die kneeling. If China fought successfully, in an awe-inspiring way, this will guarantee at least thirty years of peace”. In some ways, it was true!

On 03 October, Beijing had written to Delhi, “The Chinese Government regrets that the Indian Government has once again refused its proposal for speedily, and unconditionally, holding discussions on the Sino-Indian boundary question on the basis of the report of the officials of the two countries. The Indian Government has also refused the Chinese Government's reiterated proposal that the armed forces of each side withdraw 20 kilometres along the entire border. ...[t]he proposal for each side to withdraw 20 kilometres would obviously hinder the Indian side from carrying out its aggressive activities in the eastern as well as the western and middle sectors”. Delhi did not agree to the ‘unconditional’ negotiations, the ‘occupied’ Indian Territory had to be vacated first.

Regarding the 20 km withdrawal, it was in India's disfavour due to the mountainous terrain on India's side and the flat Tibetan Plateau on China's.

When Mao decided to punish India, had the Communist leadership received the Indian answer to the above communication from Beijing? It is likely that the Communist regime had got Delhi's answer a few hours earlier. India wanted China to vacate the occupied part of the Indian Territory in the Aksai Chin area as a precondition: "The Government of India have repeatedly stated their desire to enter into talks and discussions, first to devise measures to reduce tensions and to create a climate of confidence, and then to undertake purposeful and constructive discussions in the improved climate to resolve the differences between the two governments over the border question. The Government of India's approach in this matter of talks and discussions has been clear and straightforward — preliminary talks to ease tensions and to create the appropriate climate of confidence to be followed by further purposeful talks, after implementation of measures to ease tensions and restore confidence have been taken, to resolve differences between the two governments on the boundary question on the basis of the report of the officials. If there has been any double-dealing or hypocrisy, it is entirely on the Chinese side".

With each side accusing the other of intransigence, a conflict could hardly been avoided. At the 06 October meeting, Lou Ruiqing, the Chinese Chief of General Staff, was authorised by Mao to start 'a fierce and painful attack on Indian forces. If Indian forces attack us, you should hit back fiercely. ...[you should] not only repel them, but hit them fiercely and make them hurt".

The Central Military Commission decided that the main attack will be launched in the eastern sector (NEFA), however Chinese forces in the western sector should 'coordinate' their actions with the eastern sector. It was logical from a military point of view and also 'ideologically' coherent. It was the route that the Dalai Lama had used three years earlier to take refuge in India and it is was the best way to show the connection between the two events. Though this is not mentioned in the Chinese (or Indian) sources, it was clearly an important factor. When Chinese generals started to work on the details of the military operations, they soon realised that the

campaign could not be sustained for a long time. It was, therefore, decided to terminate the war 'with a unilateral Chinese halt, ceasefire, and withdrawal'. Historian Shi Bo¹¹ believes that in view of 'practical difficulties associated with China's domestic situation', the PLA troops 'would quickly disengage and end the fighting as quickly as possible' after achieving their military objectives. 'China's domestic situation' is obviously referring to the power struggle within the party and the return of Mao to the centre stage.

The Final Decision

Apparently Mao had still some doubt. Politically he could not afford to have a semi-victory, a triumph was necessary to assert his newly recovered position as the head of the Communist State. However, according to the PLA's calculations, China was militarily far superior to India (Indian forces were not prepared and their strength was 1/6th of the Chinese troops). Beijing anticipated some negative reactions from Washington and the Western world in general (and perhaps even from Moscow), but the long-term benefits of a severe, but limited blow, would compensate and ultimately bring peace for several years between the neighbours. Till the last minute, Mao had some questions:-

- Should China permit Indian forces to advance a bit further into Chinese Territory under the 'Forward Policy' to show the world that China acted in self-defence?
- What should be the main objective of the attack against India?
- Should the attack focus on the Aksai Chin in the West, the main bone of contention between India and China?
- At a military point of view, an attack in NEFA had better chance to succeed as larger formations could concentrate in the area which was more accessible with easier lines of communication and supplies.
- To prove Nehru's stubborn and hegemonic attitude, NEFA was ideal as Nehru would then be compelled to agree that the McMahon Line was not an 'established fact', but a disputed border and only negotiations could

achieve a lasting peace and the settlement of the border issue.

- Further, winter was approaching fast so should the operations be postponed for a few months (July-September was the best period for military operations)? The Tibet Military District had warned that the snow in winter could trigger 'great difficulties' in moving supplies and reinforcements across the high passes.
- The Army intelligence informed the leadership that presently [in October 1962] the military balance tilted heavily in China's favour. It might not be the case in a few months' time.

Considering all these points on 17 October, the Central Military Commission¹² met and issued the formal order to 'exterminate the 'Indian aggressor forces'. It termed a 'self-defensive counter-attack war'. What happened on 20 October on the slopes of Thagla Ridge is history.

Endnotes

¹ Li Zhisui, Dr, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (London: Arrow, 1996)

² Also one of the '28 Bolsheviks'

³ *san he yi shao* in Chinese. Eric Hyer, *China's Policy of Conciliation and Reduction and its Impact on Boundary Negotiations and Settlements in the Early 1960s*; see: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/cwihp_wp_85_hyer_china_boundary_negotiations_1960s.pdf

⁴ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The origins of the Cultural Revolution*, Volume III (New York, the Columbia University Press, 1997). Chapters 12 and 13, (Mao changes the Signals and War in the Himalayas, Crisis in the Caribbean) are particularly enlightening.

⁵ Maj Gen. DK Palit who was DMO during the conflict and is the author *War in High Himalaya* wrote about the doubts regarding the alignment of the McMahon in this area: "Later, almost as an afterthought, Niranjana [Maj. Gen. Niranjana Prasad, GOC, 4 Infantry Division] told me about the incident of the Dhola post and about his doubts regarding the alignment of the McMahon Line in the area west of the Nyamjang-chu. He said that whereas all the way from the Burma border to the Nyamjang valley the McMahon Line, as marked on the quarter-inch scale Survey of India map

sheet, coincided with the Himalayan Crestline, westwards from Khinzemane the Line was marked as lying well to the south of the main Thag-la ridge. (The extent of the area between the Thag-la crestline and the McMahon Line marked on the map was about 60 sq km.)

A patrol had set out across the Nyamjang River in mid-July to establish an Assam Rifles post near the Bhutan border. The political officer's representative accompanying the patrol had insisted that the Thag-la ridge itself was the watershed border and that was where our post should be. The patrol leader, a regular army officer, disregarded this advice because his map clearly showed the McMahon Line as passing well south of the ridge. Accordingly, he established a post on the southern bank of the Namka-chu, a stream flowing along the lower slopes of Thag-la ridge. He called it Dhola post, though in actual fact the site was known as Tsedong. Actually Dhola was a pass on the ridge 3 km to the south.

HQ 4th Division had referred the doubt about Thag-la ridge to HQ XXXIII Corps, asking for clarification on the exact alignment of the McMahon Line west of Nyamjang-chu. Niranjana had also suggested in his letter that if indeed the border lay along Thag-la ridge, he would like to establish his post tactically on the crest of the ridge, rather than in the valley below. In the month that had since passed he had received no reply and now, he added, the Chinese had beaten him to it because they had occupied Thag-la ridge. He told me that he would still like a clarification of the correct alignment of the border and asked me to have the reply expedited from Army HQ."

⁶ Note given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Peking, to the Embassy of India in China, July 21, 1962; *Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged and Agreements Signed Between the Governments of India and China, 1954-1959*, White Paper 7 (Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, 1962).

⁷ A conference is held in Beidaihe, a seaside retreat for the CCP in Qinhuangdao City, Hebei Province every year. Beidaihe is regarded as the summer capital of China, because it is an occasion for the leadership of the Communist Party to exchange views and sort out issues.

⁸ Note given by the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, to the Embassy of China in India, 26 July 1962, White Paper 7, op. cit.

⁹ Note given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Peking, to the Embassy of India in China, 13 September 1962, White Paper 7, op. cit.

¹⁰ To this new meeting held at Xishan (Western Hills) were present Mao Zedong; Premier Zhou Enlai; Foreign Minister Chen Yi; Defence Minister

Lin Biao; Marshal Liu Bocheng; Marshal Ye Jianying; Chief of Staff General Lou Ruiqing; Vice Chief of General Staff Yang Chengwu; General Shao Hua, the head of the PLA General Political Department; General Qiu Huizuo, the head of the General Logistic Department, Lt Gen. Zhang Guohua, the Commander of the Tibet Military District and He Jiachan, the Commander of the Xinjiang Military District.

¹¹ Shi Bo, editor, *Zhong yin da zhan jishi* (Record of events in the big China-India war) Beijing: Da di chubanshe, 1993

¹² Mao, Zhou, Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, Lo Ruiqing, and Marshals Liu Bocheng, He Long and Xu Xiangqian participated in the final meeting.

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