1962 – Battle of Se-La and Bomdi-La*

(A View From the Other Side of the Hill and a Comparison with the Battle of Chosin Reservoir)

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Introduction

Even though nearly half a century has elapsed since the 1962 debacle, its impact continues to be felt on the Indian psyche at all levels. Our thinking and responses continue to reflect the trauma that the Nation went through during those fateful days. The time has not proved to be a great healer because its shadows continue to be cast on the present ongoing situation on our borders and our interactions at bilateral, regional as well as international levels.

How do we come to terms with that terrible experience? One simple way is to face the truth and then move on. Unfortunately, we have kept the happenings of that period under wraps on the pretext of national security. The soundness of such a thinking is questionable. It still continues to be debated extensively in the military as well as academic circles without much success. This has hampered any meaningful research into events of that period. However, some Chinese literature is now available to reconstruct the events as seen from the other side; of course much of this literature is in Chinese and one has to depend on translation which again is not easy.

Some excerpts from the official and semi-official books published in China are available in USI Archives and these have been translated. Using this material as the base and some literature published in the West, I have tried to reconstruct the events of 1962 in the Kameng Sector as seen from the Chinese side and in the process dispel some of the myths that have existed and tend to get perpetuated.

Preview

The article is laid out in three parts as under :-

(a) **Part I**. Battle for Se la-Bomdi La, as reconstructed from the Chinese documents.

(b) **Part II.** In Retrospect – a comparison of the above battle with one of the battles from the Korean War, i.e the Chinese attack against the US 1st Marine Division in Nov 1950 in the area of Chosin Reservoir.

(c) **Part III.** This part contains an analysis of some politico-diplomatic interactions that took place just prior to the Chinese intervention in Korea in 1950 and the Sino-Indian War of Oct-Nov 1962.

Part I - Battle for Se La – Bomdi La

(Reconstructed from Chinese Literature)

Prelude

After the battle of Thag La Ridge Indian Army was pushed back to South of Tawang and concentrated its main force on the Axis Se La – Bomdi La. The hill features there are dangerously steep and the Indian Army considered the area to be a natural obstacle.

Deployment of the Indian Army

Indian 4 Infantry Division with a strength of about 12,000 troops as assessed by the Chinese was holding coordinated defences on Axis Se La- Dirang Zong - Bomdi La as under :-

(a) **Se La**. 62 Infantry Brigade having five infantry battalions supported by a field regiment and a troop of heavy mortars, and other combat support elements (approximately 3300 troops) was deployed in general Area Se La – Senge Dzong.[1]

(b) **Dirang Dzong – Lae Ma Dong**. 65 Infantry Brigade with two infantry battalions and other administrative elements having a total strength of about 1500 troops.

(c) **Bomdi La - Thembang – Poshing La Area.** 48 Infantry Brigade having three infantry battalions with a battery ex 6 Field Regiment, a total strength of approximately 2200 troops.

(d) HQ 4 Infantry Division with HQ 4 Artillery Brigade and other administrative elements having a total strength of approximately 5000 troops was located at Dirang Dzong and nearby areas. This includes the infantry strength of three companys ex 62 Infantry Brigade for protection of the Division HQ.

(e) 67 Infantry Brigade was located at Missamari and was to be used to reinforce 4 Infantry Division Sector

As per Chinese perceptions, Indian 4 Infantry Division was tasked to block the PLA's southward advance and wait for an opportune moment to retrieve the lost ground at Tawang by a counter attack. However, they also believed that the

Indian military strength had been considerably depleted after the battle of Namka Chu. Further, after complete annihilation of the 7 Infantry Brigade in one day's battle (at Namka Chu), the air of arrogance of the Indian Army had entirely disappeared. The majority of *Indian Army officers and soldiers had developed a strong sense of fear towards Chinese forces and their fighting spirit had almost vanished. This created a situation (in the Chinese mind) that a further attack by the Chinese forces would crush the opposing army like dry weeds and rotten wood. Such was the feeling of confidence and élan of the Chinese troops on the eve of the battle.*

Chinese Force Level Opposite Kameng Sector

The operations (which were termed as the counter attack) were undertaken and coordinated by the Tibet Frontier Military Region under the Command of Zhang Guo Hua, a veteran of the Korean War. Chinese forces in this sector were as under :-

(a) 55 Infantry Division with under command 163, 164 and 165 Infantry Regiments.

(b) 11 Infantry Division with under command 32 and 33 Infantry Regiments, and possibly a battalion ex 31 Infantry Regiment.

(c) Force 419 with under command 154, 155 and 157 Infantry Regiments.

(d) Four infantry companies from Shannan Military Sub-district (SMS).

(e) Three artillery regiments (306, 308 and 540).

(f) 136 Engineer Regiment (five companies).

(g) Other services elements.

(h) Total strength – 22,000 troops approximately; infantry component being eight regiments plus.

Strategy, Operational Concept and Plan

It was on 06 Oct 1962 that Mao and the Central Military Commission (CMC) decided in principle on a large scale attack to severely punish India.[2] The 06 Oct directive from Chairman Mao to the PLA Chief of Staff, Lou Ruiquing, also laid out the broad strategy for the projected offensive. *The main assault was to be in the eastern sector, but Chinese forces in the western sector would "coordinate" with the eastern sector.* The CMC staff was then directed to draw up a detailed operational plan for a campaign to expel Indian troops from the area North of the traditional and customary boundary (i.e. China's claim line at the southern foothills of the Himalayas) in the eastern sector.

The Chinese Military Command appreciated that the Indian Army's main defences lay at Se La and Bomdi La. The concept of operations that was evolved by the Tibetan Military District Command was to advance along different routes, encircle these two positions and reduce them subsequently. The plan was approved by Marshal Liu Bocheng, Head of a Core Group of the Central Military Affairs Commission. *He outlined the strategy of concerted attacks by converging columns. Under this strategy, Indian positions were to be split into numerous segments and these were to be destroyed piecemeal.*

Marshal Liu compared the Indian Army dispositions with an analogy – 'a copper head with the tail made of tin, a stiff back and a soft under belly'. After some debate, the operational concept that was evolved entailed : 'smashing the head (Se La), cutting-off the tail (Bomdi La), snapping at the waist (Road Se La – Dirang Dzong) and dissecting the belly (Dirang Dzong).

The Operational Plan

Please refer to **Sketch 1.** The overall Chinese plan in the Kameng Sector was as under :-

(a) 55 Infantry Division (comprising three infantry regiments and three artillery regiments) was to advance along Axis Tawang – Se La and launch the main attack against Se la. They were given the task of *'smashing the head'.*

(b) Simultaneously with the above, troops of 419 Tibetan Division (three infantry regiments) were to advance from the West through the narrow corridor between Se La and Indo-Bhutan border, assist in the capture of Se La from the South and capture Dirang Dzong in concert with troops ex 11 Infantry Division advancing from the East. This was aimed at *'dissecting the belly'.*

(c) The four companies of SMS were to carry out an outflanking move from the East and position themselves North of the road connecting Se La – Dirang Dzong; their task being to *'snap at the waist'.*

(d) In coordination with the attack against Se La, 157 Infantry Regiment ex 419 Tibetan Division was to carry out a further outflanking move to South of Se La, capture Senge Dzong and link-up with the four infantry companies of SMS which were carrying out a similar outflanking move from the East, in order to cut-off the Road Se La – Dirang completely.

(e) 11 Infantry Division (comprising two infantry regiments) was to carry-out a wide outflanking move along route Rho – Tse La - Poshing La – Thembang and cut-off Road Dirang Dzong – Bomdi La *(cutting-off the tail).* Thereafter, in concert with 1 or 2 infantry regiments of 419 Tibetan Division to capture Dirang Dzong, and develop further operations for the capture of Bomdi La.

(f) 164 Infantry Regiment ex 55 Infantry Division was to act as reserve and was tasked to clear the road axis to Bomdi La.

(g) The offensive was to commence at 0830 hours on 18 Nov 1962.

Sketch 1

Sketch Showing Chinese Concept of Operations in Kameng Sector

Not in scale

The Battle

Advance on Multiple Axes

The concentration of troops for the offensive took place from 10-15 Nov 1962. The Chinese troops advanced on four different routes as shown on Sketch1. 55 Infantry Division under the command of Wang Yu advanced astride Road Axis Tawang – Se La, while troops of 419 Tibetan Division advanced West of the Road Axis on two separate routes through the narrow strip East of Indo-Bhutan border. The Chinese troops had strict instructions not to violate the sovereignty of Bhutan. 11 Infantry Division and troops ex-SMS carried out the eastern outflanking move aimed at cutting off Road Se La – Dirang Dzong while contacting Dirang Dzong (HQ Indian 4 Infantry Division) and

Bomdi La simultaneously. By this manoeuvre, the Chinese had split the Indian 4 Infantry Division in three pockets which were isolated from each other. They had also struck and isolated the Division HQ at Dirang Dzong which pulverised the command and control elements. This was to have a disastrous effect on subsequent conduct of the battle.

Capture of Se La

157 Infantry Regiment ex 419 Tibetan Division (part of the western outflanking force) was to meet the troops from the SMS at Lae – ma – dong (South of Se La) by 17 Nov and cut off the Road Se La–
Dirang Dzong, thus isolating Se La defences which were to be attacked on 18 Nov by the main force of 55 Infantry Division.

The attack on Se La – Senge Dzong was launched jointly by troops of 419 Tibetan Division (154 Infantry Regiment) and 55 Infantry Division (163 and 165 Infantry Regiments) under the overall Command of Chai Hong Ouan, Commander 419 Tibetan Division. The attack was supported by three artillery regiments. 154 Infantry Regiment attacked from the western flank and after capture of the southern part of the defensive position moved on to Senge Dzong. 163 and 165 Infantry Regiments attacked from North and East, thus completing the capture of Se La. The attack commenced at 0830 hours on 18 Nov and the battle was over by 1800 hours the same day. From the Chinese accounts it appears that Brigadier Hoshiar Singh, Commander 62 Infantry Brigade was killed on 23 Nov when his withdrawing party had an encounter with a detachment of Chinese soldiers ex 154 Infantry Regiment near Phudung.

Advance on the Eastern Flank

It was the advance of 11 Infantry Division with 32 and 33 Infantry Regiments under command that was the most spectacular part of the Chinese offensive which unhinged the defenders completely. 11 Infantry Division with 33 Infantry Regiment leading under the command of Yu Zhi Guo commenced its advance from its Concentration Area on 10 Nov and carried out a wide outflanking move from the East, passing through Tse La and Poshing La. Poshing La was captured on 15 Nov. The formation moved on man pack basis, each soldier carrying about 30 kg of provisions in addition to his personal weapon and ammunition. They were also provided 1000 porters recruited locally. The Division marched approximately 160 kms for six days and nights, and secured Thembang by last light 17 Nov. During Night 17/18 Nov, they seized a vital bridge on the Road Dirang Dzong – Bomdi La and thus cut-off HQ Indian 4 Infantry Division from the South.

While the above manoeuvre was in progress, the troops from SMS (four companies) commanded by Guo Zhinxian and led by an old man from the Monpa tribe marched for three days outflanking Se La from the East and reached at a place five kms East of Senge Dzong. After a brief firefight with Indian soldiers and taking a wide detour, they reached Lae – ma– dong in the early hours of 18 Nov and intercepted the highway between Se La and Dirang Dzong.

It would be seen that by the morning of 18 Nov 1962, i.e the commencement of the main attack on Se La, the troops of Indian 4 Infantry Division had been split into three isolated pockets at Se La, Dirang Dzong and Bomdi La.

Capture of Dirang Dzong

After reaching the eastern flank of Indian positions at Dirang Dzong –Bomdi La, 11 Infantry Division decided to launch an attack towards Dirang Dzong on the morning of 18 Nov, coinciding with the attack on Se La. They employed 32 Infantry Regiment to attack Dirang Dzong from the East and South East, while 33 Infantry Regiment was simultaneously moving further South to attack Bomdi La. The Indian troops had already withdrawn and the position was occupied by 32 Infantry Regiment.

Capture of Bomdi La

While the above attack was in progress, 33 Infantry Regiment ex 11 Infantry Division whose initial task was to prevent any re-inforcements coming to Dirang Dzong from the South, finding no Indian troops moving up, commenced their southward advance to Bomdi La. The 3rd Battalion of the 33rd Regiment made contact with Bomdi La defences on 18 Nov (AN) and immediately commenced its attack. The Chinese expected Bomdi La to be held strongly and had made

extensive preparations for the attack. However, after initial contact they found that the defences had been abandoned in a haste. They entered Bomdi La town in the early hours of 19 Nov.

The Pursuit

Having secured Bomdi La without much of a fight, 3rd Battalion of 33 Infantry Regiment commenced pursuit towards the South on 19 Nov. At this stage, HQ Indian 4 Infantry Division had ordered two battalions of 67 Infantry Brigade (possibly, 3 JAK LI and 6/8 GR) to re-inforce Bomdi La and to move further North to extricate Indian troops who were trapped at Dirang Dzong and were withdrawing southwards. 3 JAK LI which was leading the northward move of 67 Infantry Brigade, met troops from 48 Infantry Brigade who were withdrawing towards South, about 3 kms North of Tenga Valley. It was then they realised that Bomdi La had been lost. Not knowing whether to proceed, they (3 JAKL LI) decided to disperse and sent a strong reconnaissance party (60 men, possibly a company) to Bomdi La.

This reconnaissance party ran headlong into the leading elements of the Chinese 3rd Battalion of 33 Infantry Regiment advancing southwards at about 1230 hours, 19 Nov. A sharp engagement ensued between the two vanguards and soon enough the main bodies of both the units joined battle. However, the Indian battalion was at a great disadvantage as they were in a valley with all the hill sides dominated by Chinese troops. Finally, bulk of the Indian troops (about 300) were surrounded in the valley from all sides and had to break contact, trying to escape as best as they could. Despite the disadvantage, small parties of Indian troops, surrounded from all sides and without any fire support, continued to put up a gallant fight and inflicted some casualties on the Chinese. *In one such action, the Chinese Battalion Commander was killed.* The battle was over by 1500 hours, 19 Nov. It had lasted for about two and a half hours.

It would be worthwhile to mention the casualties suffered in the battle of Tenga Valley by both sides as per the Chinese estimates. In this battle, Indians suffered 170 killed (including a Major) and 34 were captured (including the Commanding Officer). On the Chinese side, they suffered 22 killed (including the Battalion Commander) and 53 wounded. By all standards, the Indian Battalion (3 JAK LI), even through surprised and at a great tactical disadvantage, had fought in the best tradition of the Indian Army. However, its heroic action has been subsumed in the bigger debacle.

After this short and sharp engagement, the 2nd Battalion of 33 Infantry Regiment resumed the pursuit southwards to Chaku. They made contact with Chaku defences by about 0200 hours on 20 Nov and launched a speedy night attack. The Indian defences were not well organised as 6/8 GR had arrived only the previous day and were preparing for the move North when they were attacked. The Chinese had also cut-off withdrawal routes to the South. There was much hand to hand fighting during the hours of darkness. The battle was over by 0700 hours, 20 Nov.

Overall Casualties

The HQ of 4 Indian Infantry Division had moved to Tezpur and the Division had ceased to exist as an effective fighting force. As per the Chinese estimates, the Indian Army lost about 5100 all ranks killed / wounded and captured. The Chinese suffered 225 killed (27 officers and 198 men) and 477 wounded (46 officers and 431 men).

Unilateral Ceasefire and Withdrawal

An important part of the operational plan which is not well known, were the circumstances and reasons for unilateral ceasefire and withdrawal by the Chinese troops. It was during the planning process in early Oct 1962 that the idea of terminating the war by a unilateral Chinese halt, ceasefire and withdrawal was developed. Some practical difficulties associated with China's domestic situation had a bearing on this decision.[3] These difficulties could be the poor economic situation, famine and the likelihood of resultant social unrest. This was the period of Mao's 'Great Leap Forward' (1958-62) which caused a great famine in which nearly 45 million Chinese had perished.

On 20 Nov 1962, the General HQ issued orders for ceasefire. At 2350 hours on 21 Nov, orders were again issued to stop pursuit and concentrate at the key positions that had been captured. *The order read , "The Central Committee of the CPC had decided that from 22 Nov morning onwards, our Army will stop counter attack, no more attack, no more pursuit. Wherever own forces are as at 2400 hours on 21 Nov, they will stay put there only. No more preparations will be made for continuing further advance".* As per these orders, all the units turned back one by one, carrying-out search operations and eliminating Indian troops that they encountered enroute. For instance, from 19 Nov to 05 Dec 1962, 55 Infantry Division and its units while carrying-out such operations claim to have killed 300 Indian troops, and captured 400 rifles and machine guns (all types) and 30 guns (all types).

Part II - In Retrospect

(A Comparison with the Battle of Chosin Reservoir from the Korean War)

The operational plan of the Chinese for the battle of Se La – Bomdi La can be compared with the Chinese plan for the battle of Chosin Reservoir during the Korean War 1950-53. It will be worth the while to recapture some details from this battle.

(This sketch has been copied from the book by David Rees; 'Korea : The Limited War', London Macmillan Co Ltd, 1964, xvi, 511 p)

Please refer to **Sketch 2.** The US 1st Marine Division, part of X Corps of the UN Forces had been advancing to Yalu river on the eastern flank of the UN Forces 8th Army. By about 25 Nov 1950, the US Ist Marine Division, under the command of Major General Smith had reached the Area of Chosin Reservoir and was poised for its final push to the Yalu River. It was disposed of with its two regiments (5 and 7) at Yudam-ni, a regiment(minus) at Chinhung-ni (1 Marine

Regiment) with a marine battalion and some US Army troops at Hagaru, which was kind of an operational base with a vital airstrip. The rest of Smith's command with the British Marine Commandos from 41st Independent Commando Unit were at Koto-ri. Task Force 'Faith' consisting of three battalions of 7 Infantry Division (South Koreans) was operating on Axis Sihung-ni – Hagaru ready to advance to Changjin on the Yalu River. Thus, the US 1st Marine Division was strung along from Yudam-ni in the North to Chinhung-ni in the South, a distance of about 62 kms. The two regiments (5 and 7) of the Division had started clearing the road westward to Mupyong-ni on the Night 27/28 Nov 1950, when the Chinese struck.

Operating against the US 1st Marine Division were the 12 divisions of the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) IX Army Group consisting of three Chinese armies. Three Chinese divisions were in action Yudam-ni and another five on the supply route to Chinhung-ni. For detailed dispositions and Chinese direction of attack, please refer to Sketch 2. By the morning of 28 Nov 1950, the Marine Division had been split into three isolated perimeters at Yudam-ni, Hagaru and Koto-ri by Chinese attacks which had reached upto Chinhung-ni, nearly 62 kms South of Yudam-ni.[4]

The situation that the Indian 4 Infantry Division found itself on the morning of 18 Nov 1962 was almost a mirror image of what the US 1st Marine Division found itself on the morning of 28 Nov 1950, exactly 12 years earlier. The Indian Division was split into three pockets at Se La, Dirang Dzong and Bomdi La, a distance of approximately 61 kms and all the pockets came under attack almost simultaneously. While the US 1st Marine Division was being attacked by eight Chinese divisions, the forces operating against the Indian 4 Infantry Division amounted to about three PLA divisions (11,55 and 419) i.e eight infantry regiments plus a battalion and three artillery regiments. The parallel stops here.

Sketch Showing Splitting Up of the US 1st Marine Division of the UN X Corps by the Chinese Army Group IX Employing Eight Divisions during the Korean War : 27 Nov – 09 Dec 1950.

Sketch 2

(This sketch has been copied from the book by David Rees; 'Korea : The Limited War', London Macmillan Co Ltd, 1964, xvi, 511 p)

The US 1st Marine Division was advancing to Yalu River and there was a feeling of deja vu, a kind of élan that successful attacking troops would naturally have. They were well supplied, equipped and overwhelmingly supported by air. As against this, the Indian 4 Infantry Division had already suffered a serious reverse on Namka Chu three weeks previously; they were in prepared defensive positions at Se La and were in the process of moving to the other positions in the South. They were ill equipped by way of clothing, weapons, ammunition and with very little artillery support. Some units were not even acclimatised. Air support was non-existent as the Indian Air Force was not used as a result of a conscious decision of the political leadership of that time . There was no coordinated battle plan, the morale was low and above all, the higher direction of war was seriously flawed.

The near congruency of the two operational plans makes for fascinating comparison. See **Sketch 3.** If Se La were to be shown in place of Yudam-ni, Poshing La in place of Sihung-ni, Dirang in place of Hagaru (with Axis Poshing La – Dirang replacing Axis Sihung-ni-Hagaru) and Bomdi La in place of Koto-ri, the similarity is startling. The distance between Se la and Bomdi La is 61 kms, while that between Yudam-ni and Koto-ri is about 60 kms. Each of the two divisions were segmented into three parts and each segment dealt with almost simultaneously. A more historically aware higher command could have better anticipated the Chinese strategy and planned accordingly. Those who do not learn from the lessons of history are verily condemned to repeat them.

The outcome – the US 1st Marine Division survived as a fighting force, though they suffered nearly 4400 battle casualties, 718 of them fatal and over 7000 non-battle casualties, mostly frostbite cases who soon got well. Against this the 4 Infantry Division had 5100 casualties of all types. The retreat or more aptly the 'fighting through' by the US Division through Chinese hordes lasted from 28 Nov – 10 Dec 1950 when last of the marines scrambled into Chinhung-ni. The CCF IX Army Group had been so savaged by the American fire power during the march from Yudam-ni to the sea that it was unable to press home an attack on the Hungnum perimeter and even disappeared from the Korean battlefield for three months.[5] The airpower had played a vital role not only in causing attrition to the Chinese but also evacuated over 4500 wounded from the Hagaru airstrip.

Sketch showing splitting up of the US 1st Marine Division and a Comparison with the Chinese Operations against the Indian 4 Infantry Division with Indian Place Names Superimposed

Sketch 3

Part III : Politico - Diplomatic Interactions

It is generally believed that the Chinese are never forthcoming about their intentions. The historical evidence seems to point otherwise. It will be of interest to briefly analyse the politico – diplomatic interactions that took place just before the Chinese intervention in Korea in Nov 1950, as also prior to the Sino-Indian War of Oct-Nov 1962. It would help us to understand the Chinese way of signaling their intentions.

Let us go back to end-Sep/early-Oct 1950 in Korea. Having reached the 38th Parallel, the Americans were contemplating continuing their push to the Yalu River and thus unify the two Koreas. Chinese were issuing warnings in no unambiguous terms that should the US troops enter North Korea, they would intervene. Around 25 Sep 1950, General Nieh Jung-Chen, acting Chief of Staff of the PLA, informed KM Panikkar, the Indian ambassador to Beijing, *"the Chinese Communists would not let the Americans come up to the Yalu. They may even drop atom bombs on us. What then? They may kill a few million people. Without a sacrifice a nation's independence cannot be upheld"*[6]

In yet another warning – at midnight on 02 Oct 1950, in Beijing, Chon-En-Lai formally summoned KM Panikar to a conference in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Dismissing the ROK advance over the Parallel as of no consequence, the Chinese Premier declared that should the American troops enter North Korea, China would enter the war [7]. The Americans considered all these Chinese signals (there were many more delivered through different channels) to be a bluff and came to grief.

Let us now move on to mid-1962. On 23 Jul 1962, Marshal Chen Yi, China's Foreign Minister and a veteran of the 'Long March' met Krishna Menon, the Indian Defence Minister on the sidelines of the Geneva Conference on Laos and discussed issues related to the Sino-Indian border problem. Towards the end of the discussion, Chen said that he did not wish to argue, but the border problem was a "big one", and the two sides ought to sit down and calmly discuss the same. Chen proposed that he and Menon issue a joint communiqué announcing future talks on the "problem of preventing border conflict". Menon declined this proposal but said he would report the matter to his Government.[8]

Another signal – Indian forces had established an outpost at Dhola at the southern base of Thagla Ridge in June 1962 as part of the Forward Policy and to push back the Chinese forces from atop the Thagla Ridge. Chinese forces responded by entrenching themselves atop that Ridge in Aug 1962.

By early Sep 1962, Beijing was warning New Delhi that if India "played with fire", it would be "consumed by fire". On 08 Sep 1962 a force of 800 Chinese soldiers descended from the Thagla heights to surround the Indian post at Dhola. Neither side opened fire for 12 days, but this display of overwhelming Chinese strength was a clear warning that China was prepared to act. On the other hand, India understood this as another attempt at bluff. On 18 Sep 1962, an Indian Government spokesman announced the Government's intention of driving the Chinese forces from Dhola at the base of Thagla.[9] The dice was now cast for a showdown. By early Oct 1962, Chinese leadership was giving final touches to its operational plans. Chinese had conveyed their intention but we still felt that they were bluffing. We were not able to guage their intentions the same way as the Americans had failed to understand them 12 years earlier.

Now fast forward to the recent events in the East and South China Seas from 2010 onwards. Various incidents involving the Chinese Navy/fishing trawlers vis-à-vis the USA, Japanese, Vietnamese, Philippines and even Indian Naval Ship Airavat would indicate that Chinese have a position which they would defend, even by the use of force. However, timing can be a matter of fine analysis. They would probably wait for American decline and their alliances to weaken further before they decide to enforce their claims. It will be prudent to draw lessons and prepare for such an eventuality.

There is also another developing situation in the South China Sea where the Chinese have objected to joint oil and gas explorations by ONGC (Videsh) Ltd and a Vietnamese company in close proximity to Paracel Islands (claimed by both, China and Vietnam). It is not a coincidence that the Chinese have concurrently announced their plans to expand the 'depth and scope of oceanic research' in a 10,000 sq km area in southwest Indian Ocean for which they have already got the approval from the International Seabed Authority for mining of Polymetallic Sulphide ore. It is the beginning of a new situation. There is a need to understand the Chinese mind from their statements and actions on ground.

In retrospect, one feels that only if our leaders (political and military) had studied the Korean War more seriously and derived some lessons, especially after Indo-Chinese relations had begun to sour in 1959, we could not only have been better prepared to face the Chinese militarily, but may have even given them a bloody nose. Alas, that was not to be!

The Chinese had not only known who the Indian Commanders were but had also studied their profiles, especially that of Lieutenant General BM Kaul, Chief of General Staff and later the General Officer Commanding of newly created IV Corps just before the battle was joined. On the Indian side, there was complete lack of intelligence about the strength, capabilities and intentions of Chinese who had concentrated nearly 22,000 troops opposite the Kameng Sector and were ready for a large scale offensive across one of the most rugged terrain in the world. We are still ignorant of the full facts of the campaign and many myths continue to prevail.

One is tempted to fault the political leadership of that time for the debacle that followed. However, the military leadership can also not be absolved of the blame for neglect and sense of complacency. Military considerations must weigh uppermost in a military commander's mind because on him depend lives of men that he commands. *It is not uncommon the world over that the advice of military commanders may be overruled or disregarded by the political authority but in that case a military commander has a moral duty to perform from which he must not shy away. A career or political goodwill can never be a substitute for discharging one's military responsibility; for on that depends nation's well being and security.*

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to recapitulate the way the operations were planned and executed by the Chinese in the Se La – Bomdi La Sector during Nov 1962 using Chinese material. The operational plan envisaged multi-directional advance, wide outflanking moves, encirclement and splitting up of Indian positions, and tackling them piecemeal since none of the positions could be reinforced. The attack was carried out with such speed and ferocity that it completely unhinged the Indian defences and pulverised the Indian Command, resulting in panic and often contradictory decisions.

Surprise was also achieved at tactical, operational and strategic levels. For instance, while the main objective of the Chinese lay in the Western Sector, the main effort was concentrated in the Eastern Sector so as to deliver a decisive blow. It was a masterly stroke of the strategy of indirect approach. Diplomatic front was also not neglected; the neutrality of the Soviet Union in case of an Indo-China war was assured.

A parallel with Chinese attack against the US 1st Marine Division during the Korean War (Nov-Dec 1950) cannot go unnoticed by a military historian. The two were a mirror image of each other, though the outcomes were completely different. The US 1st Marine Division attacked by no less than eight PLA divisions not only managed to extricate itself and survive as a fighting force but also put out of action the CCF IX Army Group for three months. Of course, the awesome American fire power contributed to this outcome. The outcome for the Indian 4 Infantry Division is too well known and need not be repeated. Among other things, one can say in retrospect that not using the Air Force was a big handicap for India. For some inexplicable reason, Indian Air Force was not brought into battle, even when the very existence of a division and its 14000 men was at stake. Needless to say, political and diplomatic reservations would not be considered a reason enough, when a history of those times is written.

And lastly, the battle proves once again the importance of study of military history by not only military officers but all those who are concerned with national security. It should even be a subject in our universities from where civilian and military leaders of tomorrow will emerge. Alas, if only the military / civilian leaders of those times had studied the Korean War and imbibed its lessons, the outcome might have been different. It will be generations before we come to terms with what happened in Oct-Nov 1962. *The least we can do is to learn its lessons and apply these in the future, for similar challenges still loom ahead.* Least of all, there is a need to declassify complete material of those times and study it thoroughly, and draw lessons.

Endnotes

1. This strength seems to exclude a battalion deployed in covering troops role between Nuranang-Jang and three infantry companies from two different battalions detached and sent away to Dirang Dzong for protection of the Division HQ.

2. John W Garver, China’s Decision for War with India in 1962, accessed on 08 Sep 2011, http:// chinaindiaborderdispute.files.wordpress.com/ 2010/07/garver.pdf

3. Ibid

4. David Rees, ‘Korea : The Limited War’ London : Macmillan, Page 162.

5. Ibid.

6. Panikkar, In Two Chinas, Page 108

7. Ibid.

8. John W Garver, China’s Decision for War with India in 1962, accessed on 08 Sep 2011, http://chinaindiaborderdispute.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/garver.pdf

9. Ibid.

*This account has been reconstructed from Chinese literature which was translated under the aegis of the USI Centre for Historical Research (CAFHR) through the efforts of Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina, Secretary CAFHR.

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Kolahoi Glacier : Kashmir's Vanishing Life Support*

Colonel KS Dhami (Retd)**

General

Kolahoi Glacier is Kashmir's biggest glacier and the main water source of the Jhelum – the life support of the Valley. It is named after the Kolahoi peak – 'Goddess of Light' to the people - that towers above it; and is amongst the fast melting glaciers in the Himalayas. Upstream of Pahalgam Lidder river, with its source in the Kolahoi glacier, is called the West Lidder; and the other, along which pilgrims go to Amarnath cave, is called the East Lidder. Down stream from Pahalgam, it is Lidder till it joins the Jhelum near Anantnag. With the Kolahoi glacier at its head, the West Lidder river valley is amongst the most beautiful in the entire Himalayas. (Refer to Map 1).

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Aru (height 8000 ft), about 10 km from Pahalgam is the road head for the trek to the Kolahoi glacier. From Aru, after a steep initial climb, the 10 km trail is gradual right up to Lidderwatt running above the east bank of the river. This stretch goes through fine forests of blue pine, firs and scenic meadows. Unfortunately, the shepherds and Gujjars have played havoc with the forests through reckless cutting of trees and over grazing. From Lidderwatt to the glacier the distance is about 12 km. The trail for some distance is through bhojpatra forests and then through alpine meadows up to a nomadic settlement Satlanjan. At a number of places one comes across nomadic encampments, located in scenic surroundings. From Satlanjan, the climb is gradual along the river, at places the path goes over glacial moraines. Nearer to the glacier, the climb gets deeper over moraines, right up to the snout.

Melting State : Conflicting, Varying and Confusing Views

The extreme views leading to controversy over the melting state of Himalayan glaciers are well known. The Kolahoi glacier is amongst the glaciers subject to conflicting, varying and confusing views. Some interesting facts that need to be taken note of are as under:

A team of Kashmir University scientists who visited the area in August 2008 have stated that the Kolahoi glacier could "completely disappear within the next ten years," and that the glacier has abnormally shrunk—from 13 sq kms to 11.5 sq kms in the past 40 years and is receding at a rate of nearly 10 feet (3 m) a year.1 The same has also been stated by Rebecca Byerly – a free-lance journalist, reporting for the National Geographic Society News, published in 24 March 2010.2 The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), headed by Dr RK Pachauri has been quoted to state that "In the past four decades, Kolahoi has lost between 15 to 18 per cent of its total volume and that the glacier is retreating by almost ten feet (3 m) a year."3 In another TERI assessment "TERI image of Kolahoi snout"4 the recession at 10 metres annually has been shown to cover the period from 1965 to 2007 (42 yrs). According to mountaineers from Jawahar Institute of Mountaineering (JIM), Pahalgam in 2008, the glacier has receded by half since 1985.5

Online site viewed, even in a photograph shown to be of Kolahoii glacier, is actually of snow beds lying between two heights north of the Lidder nala (as it is called here) and taken from a point about three kms from Satlanjan.6 The first full view of the Kolahoi peak and glacier one gets, is only from the last meadow at the bend, below these heights, looking south-east, about a km short of the glacier snout. Another picture published in a journal with a caption "The Kolahoi glacier, in Kashmir, is receding at a rate of nearly 10 feet (3 m) a year." could be of any peak in the Himalayas (no glacier seen in the picture) – a good picture, but definitely not of the Kolahoi glacier (in the same story by Rebecca Byerly mentioned above.7

The above mentioned facts clearly indicate that these assessments/views are not backed by ground observations/ checks and are based mainly on satellite imagery. It also appears that the 'original source' stating that the 'glacier could completely disappear in 10 years and was receding by 3 m anually" has obviously made an error; and that the others have also just copy pasted the statement, without giving it a thought. It is this kind of approach which led to the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Chairman, Dr RK Pachauri coming out with the statement that "Himalayan glaciers will melt by 2035". He later acknowledged that he had erred on the date.

Local villagers say that they don't need scientists to tell them how much the glacier has melted. According to them, around 1985, the glacier's snout stretched half a mile (800 m) further down the valley.8 This appears to be a better assessment, which works out to about 30 m a year. At the rate of 3 m yearly retreat, there is nothing to worry about as glacier is estimated to be 5 km in length, with an ice field as the accumulation zone. At this rate, it will be many decades before it melts away.

The Geological Survey of India and other Government aided institutions studying the Himalayan glaciers could have given a truer estimate/picture but remained silent spectators as they did not want to contradict the former Environment Minister, Jairam Ramesh who had more than once stated that the "Siachen and Gangotri Glaciers are still advancing but at a decelerating rate". While Dr RK Pachauri got the date wrong, but not the fact that the glaciers were melting fast; Jairam's statement on the contrary was totally incorrect and misleading.

Clearing the Controversies

To put the above controversies to rest, the United Service Institution of India (USI) expedition in its Adventure-cum-Study initiative had fixed the snout positions of Gangotri and Siachen glaciers in October 2010.9 In October 2011, *along with a group from Victor Force (15 Corps), USI has added the Kolahoi Glacier to the list of its reconnaissances. The ground reality today is that Himalayan glaciers can be taken to have been*

melting at an average rate of 15 to 20 m yearly, up to a decade ago. Now, the rate has doubled or increased even more as we discovered over a period of ten years in the case of the Gangotri and the Siachen glaciers — smaller glaciers melt even faster.

The exploratory study of the Kolahoi glacier was carried out to fix the snout position by photographically recording the state of the snout zone and top surface of the glacier's ablation zone. In addition to this, the USI team was tasked to observe and record the state of degradation of forests and pastures in the West Lidder valley. The GPS navigator and GPS data logger were used at all places to record positions, heights and distances. By mid-October 2011, with the monsoons over and the skies clear, the yearly post snow melted conditions were ideal to study the true state of the glacier.

The group comprised Colonel Dhami as the leader, two officers, two JCO's and five other ranks from Victor Force units. The logistics support was provided by HQ 15 Corps. The venture was planned for three days (11-13 Oct, 2011), with two spare days to cater for unforeseen weather conditions. The route and time schedule were: Day-1, from road head at Aru to Satlanjan; Day-2, Glacier snout & back to Lidderwat; and Day-3, back to Road head at Aru. Observations of the group on the glacier and the West Lidder valley are given in succeeding paragraphs.

The Kolahoi Glacier

(a) Unlike other glaciers which are mostly valley bound type, the Kolahoi has three distinct characteristics. Upto the point it has receded, it is a 'U' shaped valley; after that, it is a 'hanging type with a steep rise ending in an ice fall'. After the steep rise it is 'an ice field bedded on gradual slopes like a crescent around the north face of Kolahoi peak', major part of it being towards its west. (Photograph P-1 refers)

(b) About one fourth of the hanging glacier has melted, the left portion appears like a drape of white snow. The cave like water outlet is just below the point from where the hanging glacier's steep rise starts. This part of the snout was photographed and coordinates were recorded on the GPS navigator and GPS data logger. Data on the GPS was filmed, showing the snout coordinates and height. The snout location coordinates, as on 12 Oct 2011, are: Long 75° 20' 12.86" E, and Lat 34° 11' 29.l6" N. Height 3606m. (Photograph P-2 refers)

(c) Considering the conflicting views about its rate of melting, it is not possible to arrive at a definite conclusion, based only on one reading. However, ground checks will be carried out at regular periods. Presently, it is clear that besides the water flow through the cave like opening from melting of the glacier from the top and within the snout face, due to toe cutting, horizontal and vertical crevasses will be subjected to shearing and crumbling leading to faster melting of snout. One can expect the hanging section to melt fast, after which, the snout face of the glacier will give a good visual idea of its depth.

The West Lidder River Valley

(a) I have been right across the Himalayas from the extreme East to the West, including Nepal and Bhutan; and have never seen destruction of trees like one sees on the wonderful Lidderwat trekking trail. In the forests above the trail we can see pockets of dry trees amidst healthy forest covered mountain slopes. Pictures taken by us speak of the manner and the extent of destruction of trees on this route. There is similar damage in other areas of the Valley, but nothing compared to this.

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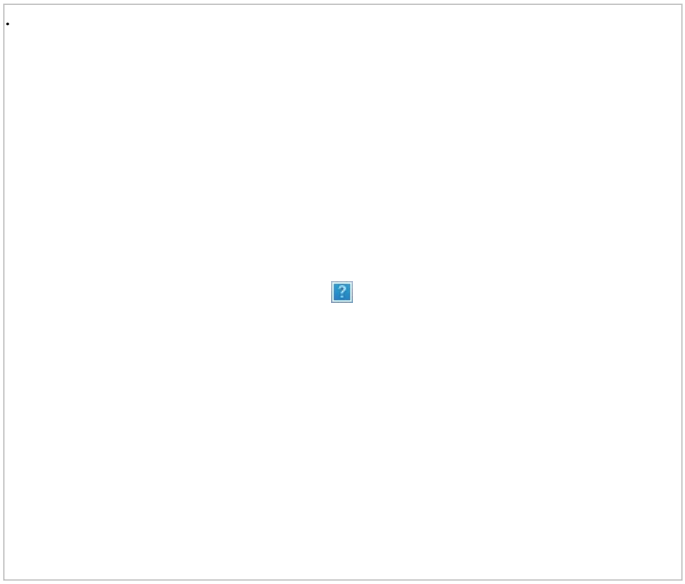

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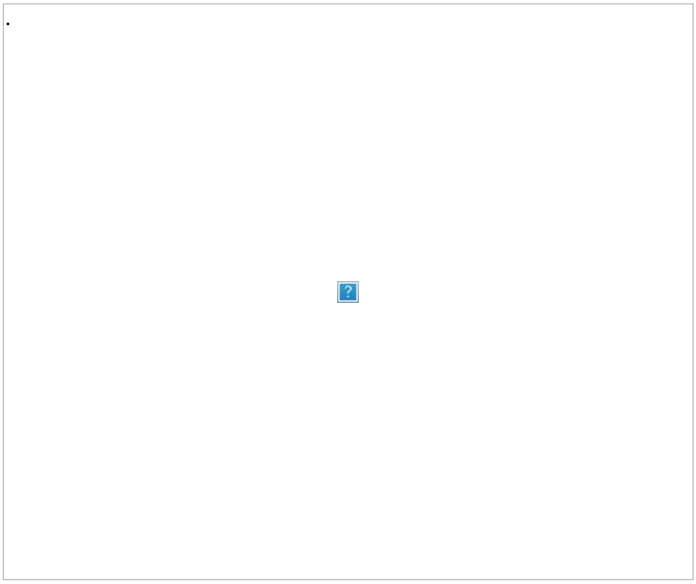

(b) What surprised me the most during my last trek three years ago was the way the Gujjars and shepherds were killing trees when there was so much dead wood lying around. I found the answer this time. They bring down the trees by chopping the trees/fire; let them burn to collect the charcoal; and sell that at a rate of about Rs 500/- per 25 kg bag mainly for their 'kangries'.10

(c) The alpine pastures are victims of over grazing by shepherds and bakarwals. The Gujjars and shepherds are from local villages of the Lidder valley; the bakarwals come with their herds from across the Pir Panjal Range during summer months to graze their flock of sheep on the higher alpine pastures.

(d) According to a study by the 'Action Aid International' the forest cover in J&K, has shrunk from 37 per cent to 11 per cent – and the study goes on to state, how water bodies like the Wullar lake in Kashmir are an evidence of how the denuding of mountains affects the water flows and water bodies.11

(e) Forests and glaciers are the source and feeders of rivers. All will not be lost with melting of glaciers only. We cannot intervene in the melting of glaciers, but forests can be preserved, added to and pastures can be protected. Only massive and urgent effort, to preserve and add forest cover, can mitigate the impact of the loss in water flow due to vanishing glaciers. It is the forests in many parts of the world that keep the rivers flowing throughout the year — even when there is no rain. Forests are the key to survival — especially for the Kashmir valley. Nobody knows this better than the Kashmiris themselves through their folklore.

Future Scenario

River Jhelum is the life support for the people of the Kashmir valley and the Lidder river is its main source. The Jhelum after picking up flow from the Lidder meanders its way through the Valley catering to the drinking and irrigation needs of the people. After Srinagar, short of Wullar lake, it is met by the Sind river and then it does not empty out into the Wullar lake; but flows, cutting a channel through the highly weeded lake and flows out near Sopore, through the Uri gorge, and finally bids farewell to the Valley as it crosses the Line of Control (LC) into POK to join the river Indus. With reduced water inflow, due to ecological degradation and vanishing glaciers, the outflow from the Wullar lake will stop, it will become land locked; the Jhelum and the lake it feeds will shrink and become highly polluted — and the Valley will face desert like conditions.

Time Running Out

There is likelihood of drastic decrease of water flow due to the environment degradation by the people and melting of glaciers that is taking place in the Valley, especially the West Lidder valley. If the reckless cutting of trees and over exploitation of the pastures is not stopped the soil will lose water holding capacity; with the glacier gone, the river will dry up and become seasonal. It is a man made disaster in the making, getting further aggravated by global warming; not only for the Kashmir valley, but for Pakistan too; as it will lose water to which it is entitled to as per the 1960 Indus Water Treaty. Pakistan needs water not only for drinking and irrigation, but for their hydel power also.

Kashmir's water needs can only be assured on sustainable basis by preserving its green cover and protecting glaciers from human activities on the lines being done to save the Gangotri glacier and the Bhagirathi river valley up stream from Gangotri; and what was done, as a last resort, to rejuvenate the 'Nanda Devi Sanctuary'. Urgent action is required on these lines starting with West Lidder river valley and Kashmir's biggest glacier at the head of which rises 'Kolahoi' revered to by the local people as Gashibrar –"Goddess of Light".

Author's Note

This article is based on ground observations recorded and filmed by our group. References to some amazing and conflicting statements mentioned in the article, like the controversy created by Dr RK Pachauri stating that Himalayan glaciers will melt by 2035, and Mr Jairam Ramesh taking the other extreme view that some were advancing, can be accessed from the Endnotes given below.

Endnotes

1. **http://southasia.oneworld.net/todaysheadlines/climate-change-threatening-kashmirs-glaciers#top**

2. **http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/03/100324-himalaya-glacier-melt-water/**

3. **http://freshinitiative.net/kashmir-news/news/4672-kashmirs-kolahoi-glacier-melting-fast**

4. **http://all-travel-point.blogspot.com/2009/02/kolahoi-glacier.html**

5. **http://southasia.oneworld.net/todaysheadlines/climate-change-threatening-kashmirs- glaciers#top**

6. **http://www.igsoc.org/journal.old/13/68/igs_journal_ vol13_issue068_ pg279-283.pdf .**

7. ***snouthttpwww.google.co.insearchq=TERI+Expedition+to+kolahoi+glacier&hl=en&rlz=1T4ACAW_enIN376IN379&prmd=ivns&ei=fs6wTtCfA4LqrAfZmYxC & start=10&sa=N For terminal image of kolahoi***

8. *ibid 4.*

9. *USI Journal, Vol CXL, Oct-Dec 2010, No. 582, pg 503-510.*

10. *Earthern pots, filled with burning charcoal, carried by Kashmiris under their loose fitting gowns (*Pherans*), to keep themselves warm during extreme winter conditions.*

11. *ibid 5.*

*In continuation of USI sponsored adventure-cum-study tours of the glaciers started in October 2010, this was the second such trek undertaken by Colonel KS Dhami alongwith volunteers from the Victor Force by courtesy HQ 15 Corps from 11-15 Oct 2011.

Colonel KS Dhami was commissioned into 14 Horse on 12 Jun 1960. Later, he volunteered for transfer to the Parachute Regiment, commanded 6 PARA and took premature retirement in 1983. He led the USI sponsored study trek to Gangotri Glacier in conjunction with the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun from 20-25 Oct 2010; and to Kolohoi Glacier from 11-15 Oct 2011.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLI, No. 586, October-December 2011.