

Henderson Brooks Report and India's China Challenge

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Introduction

As India finished the 50th year of its humiliating defeat by China, the clamour for declassification of the Operations Review Committee on the 1962 Sino-Indian War (called the Henderson Brooks Report or the HBR) once again found coverage in the mainstream media¹. This was soon after the Union Government informed the Indian Parliament on 10th May 2012 that the Report would not be published following the 2009 decision of the Central Information Commission (CIC). It is to be noted that the decision by the CIC on 19th March 2009 rejecting the declassification demands for HBR under the Right to Information (RTI) Act has not satisfied the appetite of some in media since many of them have the perception of the Report's leakage to the Western press long back². Unfortunately, the emerging debate on HBR is locked within narrow contours of transparency and declassification rules and in the process overlooks the issue that the HBR could be too old and miniscule to understand India's China challenge.³

The Union Government's decision against the declassification may not be final and the wise men (both inside and outside the Government) may continue to argue if the HBR should be declassified at some stage⁴. It has even been urged that the lessons of the China War will remain unlearned unless the HBR is declassified⁵. However, the polemics on the HBR does bring into question many issues related to the history and future of Sino-Indian relations. *First*, how authentic are the claims made by the HBR (assuming that the Report was leaked to Neville Maxwell and reflected in his 1970 book and other publications)? Numerous books, publications and official secret records of many countries throw sufficient light on the developments that led to the war. These collections may help us arrive at a definitive conclusion. *Second*, is the HBR still relevant since it was submitted 50 years

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ago? In particular, does it resolve India's security dilemma vis-a-vis China? Can it help India avoid another unforeseen war against China? *Third*, with or without HBR, one may be tempted to ask if the Indians have learnt any lesson from the 1962 War.

This paper will, therefore, seek to explain the above three issues. The intention here is not to discuss the so-called contents of the HBR or make an authoritative statement about the exact causes of the 1962 War or the factors that led to India's defeat. Enough has been written elsewhere on these issues. Rather, the focus will be on discussing HBR as a representative symbol of Indian efforts to understand Chinese military strategy and an effort to see if India has done enough in the last five decades to avoid another experience of 1962.

Background of the HBR

In the immediate aftermath of the Sino – Indian War of 1962, the Indian Army constituted an internal 'Operations Review Committee' to investigate into the tactical causes and mistakes that led to the debacle. The enquiry team consisted of Lieutenant General TB Henderson Brooks and Brigadier (later Lieutenant General) PS Bhagat and was asked to go through the official records and prepare a report on the War. Sometime in May 1963, the General presented his study to the authorities and was immediately classified as "Top Secret". Rejecting an early demand for making the HBR public, the then Defence Minister YB Chavan said this on 2nd September 1963 in the Lok Sabha :—

I am sure the House would appreciate that by the very nature of the contents it would not be in the public interest to lay the Report on the table of the House. Nor is it possible to attempt even an abridged or edited version of it, consistent with the consideration of security, that would not give an unbalanced or incomplete picture to you ... The publication of this Report which contains information about the strength and development of our forces and their locations would be of invaluable use to our enemies. It would not only endanger our security but affect the morale of those entrusted with safeguarding the security of our borders.

Since then, successive defence ministers have cited 'public interest' as the reason for not declassifying this Report each time

a question on this was raised in the Parliament. In February 2008, in response to a query in Rajya Sabha on the release of HBR, the Defence Minister, AK Antony reiterated that the freeze on the release of the Report would continue considering the sensitivity of information contained in the Report and its security implications.⁶ The fact that various political parties have been in power during this period has not changed the status quo on the HBR. For example, the former Defence Minister, George Fernandes also rejected the demand for the declassification of HBR on more than one occasion when he was in office.⁷ The Ministry of External Affairs has equally been against making the HBR public, since it could jeopardise the relations with China, particularly the ongoing border negotiation that is in critical stage.⁸ The CIC decision has only shown that different organisations of the Government have unanimous opinion on the issue.

Issues Involved in Declassification Demands

The ongoing demand for declassification of the HBR is based on several arguments. *First*, it has met all the cannons of declassification rules. According to such rules, classified government documents should be made available to the National Archives of India after finishing the mandatory period of 30 years for declassification. The HBR has been in the lockers for almost 50 years and hence is a fit case for declassification. The protagonists are, therefore, critical of any further attempts to keep the HBR within the lockers and rather perceive it as a most undemocratic action in a democratic set-up.⁹ From a military point of view, studying history of past conflicts is a must for military planners and strategists and the 1962 War is a fit case.¹⁰

Second, the RTI has come as an added tool to extract binding information from the Government. In December 2005, a veteran journalist, after several failed attempts to extract the information, both inside and outside the Parliament,¹¹ had indeed approached the MoD under the RTI asking for declassification since the document was already mature enough to be declassified. The request was firmly turned down by the MoD since it was part of the "internal review" and, therefore, could not be placed in the public domain. The CIC supported the Ministry's opinion that the controversial HBR, detailing the reason behind the Sino – Indian War in 1962, cannot be disclosed under the RTI Act as it would "seriously" compromise the country's security and its ties with the neighbouring nation even today'.¹²

Third, while the CIC may have valid reasons to keep the HBR under the carpet, some in the journalistic world regret the decision, particularly, since the Report was allegedly leaked to the Western press long back. Apparently, the Report formed the basis of Neville Maxwell's rather controversial and partisan book, 'India's China War (1970)'. Much later, he also published an introduction to the so called contents of the HBR.¹³

Fourth, the protagonists of the declassification movement also suggest that the HBR would be of immense relevance to the Armed Forces in particular and Sinologists in general in learning from the mistakes committed in 1962: while the former (particularly the younger generations of military officers) are deprived of the knowledge they must have in order to avoid the mistakes their forebears made in the past, the latter would have cleared the cobwebs of confusion and motivated misinformation being fed to them all these years. In the long term, this will only help consolidate India's preparations against another attack by China.¹⁴

Finally, there is a broader political constituency that supports the declassification of HBR for variable reasons. Apart from journalists, senior defence officials, academicians and even politicians support the demand for declassification of HBR. The list is quite extensive but the thematic justification is broadly similar: that it will be a knowledge building exercise for India's military historians and strategists and in no way would compromise the national security or for that matter India's preparedness against China.

So-called Contents of the HBR

There is no way to ascertain if Maxwell had access to the HBR. Maxwell specialised in India-bashing and made his career out of consistent and virulent criticism of India, often based on malicious and fallacious grounds. Unfortunately, many in India view the Sino-Indian War through the Maxwellian prism.

Maxwell's claims of access to the HBR is laced with satirical language and sweeping generalisations. According to him, 'while the communist China viewed India through a Marxist prism as a potentially hostile bourgeoisie state; in the Indian political perspective, war with China was deemed unthinkable and through the 1950s New Delhi's defence planning and defence expenditure expressed that confidence'. Further, India would, through its own research, determine the appropriate alignments of the Sino - Indian

borders (left 'undefined' by the British), extend its administration to make those good on ground and then refuse to negotiate the result. Nehru's policy thus willed conflict without foreseeing it. Through the 1950s, this policy generated friction along the borders and led to increased distrust and hostility. From 1961 the Indian attempt to establish an armed presence in all the territory it claimed and then extrude the Chinese was being exerted by the Army and Beijing was warning that if India did not desist from its expansionist thrust, Chinese forces would hit back. China did hit indeed and launched a 'pre-emptive' attack on India all along the borders overcoming the Indian resistance and advancing some distance in the eastern sector.

Maxwell also concluded that the HBR was an expression of the factionalisation of Indian Army which was a by-product of political interference in promotions and appointments. The political leadership forced the Army to implement the forward policy. In many areas, the Army was supposed to attack or defend areas which they could not have done due to paucity of resources or strategic difficulties. If these are the contents of the HBR, then they are mere repetitions of what Maxwell had already said in his 1970 book. There is very little that he dishes out as new revelations. The Maxwellian interpretation of the HBR, therefore, needs to be read along with other researches on the Sino – Indian War in order to have a balanced perspective.

Authenticity of HBR: Inferences from other Publications

If Maxwell's claims about the contents of the HBR are presumed to be 'true', then there are other reports and studies that 'debunk' the Maxwellian hypothesis. In 1992, the MoD published an official *History of the Conflict with China* (1962) which is since then available on internet.¹⁵ What renders legitimacy to this Report is the fact that it was commissioned by the Government of India itself and was allowed access to the HBR as claimed by the authors in the preface. The Report exposes the Chinese hand in instigating the conflict through sustained expansionist policy that was discreet during early fifties but was quite visible by late fifties. All through this Chinese mind game, the Indian political leadership was under the illusion that 'whatever be the situation, China was not likely to attack India. They were, therefore, reluctant to respond to the Chinese aggressive activities in a big way'.¹⁶ At the same

time, the book is quite candid in identifying the tactical mistakes that led to India's defeat in the war. For example, the so-called 'forward defence' went 'too far, got too reckless and lost its balance in its later stages'. The policy decision of not using the Indian Air Force (IAF) is also identified as a serious mistake. Air attacks on the advancing Chinese columns and bases in Tibet would have been advantageous to India not only militarily, but also psychologically and in the politico-diplomatic field. Political factors responsible for the debacle have also been put under critical perspective in the book. Krishna Menon, for example, is blamed for attempting a drastic modification in the existing operational doctrine of the Indian Army which was itself undergoing a transition process and lacked fighting equipment and stores.¹⁷

One must also refer to JW Garver, a Sinologist with otherwise pro-China leanings. He is quite critical of Maxwellian hypothesis that he feels, is based on inferences drawn from Chinese public sentiments. Garver argues that Chinese perceptions of Indian policies toward Tibet were fundamentally erroneous, and that, these misperceptions contributed substantially to the 1962 War.¹⁸

Elsewhere, the CIA had also sponsored secret studies on Sino – Indian War known as *Polo Series*. Declassified now, this study establishes that the Chinese leaders were motivated by one primary consideration, apart from other considerations in attacking India. They were determined to retain the ground on which their border forces stood their ground in 1962. The primary reason reflected their view that the Indian leaders had to be shown once and for all that China would not tolerate any strategy to 'recover' border territory. In clearing away Indian border posts in two key sectors, the Chinese conducted what has been called a 'punitive' expedition to chastise the Indian leaders for past and intended moveups.¹⁹

HBR: Is it Relevant in Addressing India's Security Dilemma Against China?

The HBR was perhaps a telling comment on a series of factors that led to the defeat in war against China. These include issues such as logistics and infrastructure, political and military leadership and finally doctrinal and strategic preparedness. Even then, the HBR holds little relevance primarily because of two contemporary realities. *First*, the report is almost five decades old and may no

longer reflect the ground reality. *Second*, the basket of issues that constitute India's security dilemma against China have either changed or expanded and need to be analysed in the present context. Whatever indices are taken to measure India's strength against China, the position continues to be as shaky and vulnerable as it was in the early sixties. Some of them are discussed as follows:

(a) Logistics and Infrastructure. The ground reality is that India has made only marginal progress since sixties. The efforts of dedicated organisation like the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) notwithstanding, India still doesn't have fair-weather roads to ensure round the year movement of troops and supplies. While there have been a further push to road building plans in the Northeast, the Central tracts still remain neglected. The Terai area adjacent to Nepal still remains poorly served. If China were to attack India alternatively through (in collusion with) Nepal, it would be a cakewalk for them to reach the Gangetic plains.

(b) War Waging Capacity. Despite having increased infantry presence along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) including few mountain divisions as well, the proportionate troop strength is far below compared to China. Similarly, India is yet to operationalise long range attack weapons despite the development of Agni series.

(c) Doctrine and Strategy. India still doesn't have a doctrine or strategy for defence against China, at least in public, which would spell out the war fighting strategies against China. The so-called 'cold start war strategy' (later denied) was Pakistan – centric and had little to offer against China.

(d) Confidence. The asymmetrical size of China supplemented by its huge defence expenditure and tactical advantage in Tibet area creates a confidence gap that is unlikely to be bridged under any circumstances.

HBR: Has India Learnt to Know China Better?

HBR was an assessment, rather, reflection of the knowledge gap about China that led to the humiliating defeat in 1962. While a timely publication of the report could have helped in objective assessment of the knowledge gap, the situation is no better today. India still doesn't have primary ways and means to gather and

analyse intelligence about Chinese military preparedness and strategic thinking. To a large extent, information about China are derivatives emanating from Anglo–American sources. These secondary sources of information are of little importance in addressing India's knowledge management about China.

It is really debatable if serious steps are being taken to bridge this knowledge gap through indigenous methods. India still doesn't have a healthy basket of Mandarin speaking people. The number of Sinologists having fluency in Mandarin is even less. Further, there is not much autonomous development of societal relations between the two countries, despite state level support from the two sides. Both countries have only a symbolic presence of emigrant population. The communications networks are very shallow and even the recent initiatives of direct flights have not created much enthusiasm in the two countries. The bilateral economic relations are way behind what China has with its other neighbours.

Conclusion

The debate over declassification of HBR is unlikely to end soon. However, the perceived benefits would be marginal; more so, since considerable time has elapsed. Declassification, therefore, is not desirable. The protagonists of declassification debate, it seems, are less keen to learn the strategic and operational lessons from the HBR. On the contrary, the objective (perhaps) seems to be to bring embarrassment to political and military class. Whether the HBR declassification will serve the National Security interests vis-à-vis China, (therefore) remains an open ended proposition. Perhaps, it is time to move beyond HBR and develop contemporary sources of information that will help India manage relations with China.

Endnotes

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