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'A message for Mr. Nehru's ears only'

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India-China relations in the past 50 years have been marked by a paradox. While India still carries scars of the 1962 border war, China hugely underestimated for many years that war's impact on India. This second of three articles (first on 17 Sept. 2012) looks at the Beijing diplomatic discourse in the immediate aftermath of 1962. PK Banerjee (PKB) headed the Indian Embassy in Beijing from June 1961 to December 1963; his book *My Peking Memoirs of The Chinese Invasion of India*, (Clarion, Delhi, 1990) has received far less attention than it deserves; it details Chinese effort to engage India in political dialogue.

PKB's had seven substantive meetings with Premier Zhou, between the outbreak of the border war and 1963, besides his farewell call. (Interestingly, the Chinese Charge d'Affaires in New Delhi had no access to Nehru or any high personality, and was not a communication channel). On 24 October Premier Zhou received PKB; the atmosphere was 'definitely chilly': *'He then said that the conflict had to stop, it had to end! He had therefore written a letter to Mr. Nehru with three proposals: 1) the two countries should immediately agree to respect quote the line of actual control unquote, and their armed forces should disengage and withdraw 20 km from this line; 2) the Chinese troops in the eastern sector would withdraw north of the line of actual control; 3) the Prime Ministers of the two countries should meet to seek a friendly and peaceful settlement.'* In reply PKB presented the Indian viewpoint, adding: *'...China had agreed in 1960, when Zhou had visited New Delhi, to maintain the status quote in the NEFA area. At this point he*

interrupted me sharply by saying that it was not true; he had never given such an assurance.' On 19 and 20 November PKB had two more meetings with Zhou.

In December 1962, PKB was instructed to come to Delhi, the Sri Lanka PM's visit; the six non-aligned mediator 'Colombo Powers', Burma, Cambodia, Egypt, Ghana, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, had advanced proposals to ease India-China tension. This was PKB's first visit Delhi during the assignment. Little wonder PKB felt that he did not understand New Delhi's thinking.

On 7 January 1963, PKB was summoned, told that he should come alone. PKB writes: *He (Zhou) was in a pensive mood and somewhat tired, and said...he would like me to carry his very personal and verbal message only for Mr. Nehru's ears. He continued that war never solved any problems but only created new ones...positive steps were urgently required besides public declarations and political statements. Mr. Nehru, a man of high philosophy and great vision, and he had known each other personally over a period of many years (sic). He understood Mr. Nehru's current political predicaments but Mr. Nehru should try and understand his (Chou En-lai's) position as well. Mr. Nehru should help Mr. Chou En-lai's 's hand, and a hand extended in friendship and corporation...1) for the next 3 months, Mr. Nehru and he would stop making negative statements about each other's country although this may not stop others from making statements of counter-productive nature. 2) Mr. Nehru and he should meet as soon as possible with only a small entourage, away from the press and publicity, in an agreed place, in order to exchange ideas for an agreed and joint action to defuse the current situation. This meeting in total privacy should last no longer than two days. 3) After this meeting, which would further ensure in every way the strengthening of the cease-fire line, the two governments would draw up a program where they could jointly cooperate in areas like trade, science, culture and technology...When the climate for mutual trust had been created, then the border disputes would be discussed, on a sector to sector basis, by the two*

countries... He requested me again to give this strictly private and personal message directly to Mr. Nehru.

PKB decided to tell no one in Delhi about the content of Zhou's message, not even to Foreign Secretary MJ Desai (pp.87-101). He met Nehru several times: *'(Nehru) wanted me to go with him to his office in South block. In the car he...was mumbling to himself, "What went wrong, where did I go wrong?" During my stay in New Delhi, I was with Mr. Nehru a number of times, and used to hear this type of monologue...(Some days later, at PM's residence) He asked me about the message sent by Chou En-lai...immediately after the meeting with Chou, I had myself typed out so that no point might be missed... I gave him the one-page typed message which I carried constantly with me inside my wallet. He started reading it...going over it a few times. He then put down the paper on the table near him and seemed lost in thought...He returned from his thoughts, looked at me and said that it was not possible since matters had gone too far. He added that during my stay I had met members after government and the opposition, press people, as well as ordinary citizens, and surely I must've reached the same conclusion that no one in India would stand anymore Chinese bluff and all nonsense. He briefly recalled his efforts to help China with goodwill and friendship, and his close association with Chou En-lai, whose betrayal had led to fraudulent territorial claims by China and the invasion off India. He gave descriptions of meetings and details off discussions and negotiations with Chou En-lai. It was a melancholy monologue... (Meeting some days later) He asked me if I had mentioned or shown the substance of Chou En-lai's message to anyone. I said that I had not. He struck a match, and held the paper to the flames and burnt it over a large crystal ash-tray. He said that from the Indian side it would take more than a quarter of a century to return to any substantive negotiation, provided the Chinese refrained from another attack on India.'*

PKB returned to Beijing on 28 January 1963, and was summoned to meet Premier Zhou a few days later. *'He asked whether I had given his verbal message to Mr.*

Nehru personally and wanted to know the response. I told him briefly about the current atmosphere in India, and gave him an outline of Mr. Nehru's reply, namely, that as a first step, China should, like India, except the Colombo proposals in toto. India had announced her acceptance on 27 January. After China's acceptance in toto and after the required implementation was completed by both countries, the second step would be to discuss other matters. Chou En-lai was visibly excited, if not angry, and said he had done everything within his power and that India would be responsible for future stalemates and complications. He said that he would now write formally to Mr. Nehru on the matter.'

PKB had three more meetings with Zhou in 1963, but efforts at dialogue were over. On 17 December 1963, Zhou unusually received PKB for a farewell call; I was one of four officials that accompanied him. In a cordial mood, Zhou said he was sorry to see PKB leave and invited him to come again as his guest. About a year later, China was immersed in the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese Premier never received any other Indian resident envoy. India next surfaced in Beijing's agenda with Mao's 1970 May Day gesture – an event that also produced its' misreading, but that is for another day.
