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The 1962 War: What Went Wrong in Our Relations with China?

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Most Indians are convinced that the 1962 attack on our Himalayan frontier by China was an act of betrayal. Recent documents, as they have emerged confirm the calculated nature of that attack, and the months of planning that went into it. The intent of ‘teaching India a lesson’ underlay Chinese actions; the conjunction of international events, including the Sino-Soviet split played a role. Did our own actions, inadvertently, also contributed to that outcome? Should we take them into account? In this third final article, let us look to diplomatic exchanges not covered in the first two pieces.

First, the full story of Premier Zhou’s April 1960 talks in Delhi has not yet emerged. In *Negotiating for India* (2006) Jagat S Mehta (JSM) lifted the curtain a little. Zhou arrived on 17 April and was expected to stay for two days; in the event he stayed for 7 one-to-one exchanges with Nehru, with only interpreters present (Paranjpe and Chieh). JSM writes: In contrast to Zhou ‘an ace diplomat, in total command of details...(Nehru) did not have the matching capacity for marshaling facts’. Senior ministers (Morarji Desai, GB Pant, Krishna Menon ‘with or without the PM’s approval’) had separate meetings Zhou and Chen Yi. After each meeting, Nehru summarized the discussion to Foreign Secretary S Dutt, in JSM’s presence; Paranjpe prepared the minutes. None have been published.

At the penultimate meeting, Zhou put forward *'the Six Points which he hoped would be endorsed by both the Prime Ministers. At the meeting Nehru raised no objection as they seemed innocuous and unobjectionable.'* JSM felt 'alarmed' on reading these. The first principle read: *'There exists a dispute with regard to the boundary between the two sides.'* He rushed to FS's residence, but the latter *'did not wholly share my alarm'*, but told him to go to PM. Nehru dismissed the idea and asserted that there is obviously a dispute, and then showed his 'visage of anger'. The cabinet foreign affairs committee met at the home of GB Pant, where Nehru summarized his discussions. As Nehru was to depart for the seventh and final meeting with Zhou, JSM *'made bold to mention to the PM that consistent with past pronouncements, we cannot subscribe to the idea of a dispute mentioned in the Six Points. If we accept them then we cannot charge them with violation of our frontier. The PM heard me and said nothing and got into his car.'* (p.81-2) JSM adds: FS 'roundly admonished' him for daring to advise PM, and that too in the presence of his Cabinet colleagues. At that final meeting Nehru told Zhou that he could not subscribe to the six points; just prior to departure, Zhou announced these as a Chinese proposal. JSM has justified his action in terms of *'an obligation to volunteer advice and dissent even if not asked'*.

If one side is convinced that its case is 100% solid, and it can sustain that position against the other party on a bilateral issue, the above is perfectly logical. In negotiation theory, this is called 'positional bargaining' (PB). It works only if the other side capitulates, or if one can impose one's standpoint in some other manner. Of course, one may start a negotiation with a 100% demand, but if one cannot offer territorial or other concession that gives some satisfaction to the other side, the process can only result in failure, unless the other side gives in completely. Is there example of any country winning a negotiation this fashion? If India could not do that, the border issue became a Greek tragedy, with a preordained outcome.

Second, when did we come to believe that we had a 100% case on the border? We started with a flexible standpoint, especially in respect the Western sector, i.e. in Aksai Chin and its neighborhood. Our maps of the early 1950s were imprecise; Nehru's early statements about Aksai Chin, that 'not a blade of grass grows there', pointed to this. In the East, the McMahon line was always our bottom line. We came to our PB stance in the late 1950s, but the facts are hidden in our closed archives. How did this happen?

At the 1960 talks JSM, who led the Indian team writes: '...the Indian side was hemmed in by imposed political constraints', leading to the publication of two parallel reports, in one document. They furnished evidence 'on which each side relied in support of its stand'. The Indian side 'were advocates in defence of a specified delineation already established and communicated in the PM's letters. The latter left not an iota of discretion for give or take.'

Third, in July 1961, RK Nehru (RKN) visited Beijing on way back from Mongolia; our attempt at a dialogue resulted in acrimony. Indian records remain hidden, but the Woodrow Wilson Center's Cold War Project carries a long, incomplete note (provided by Beijing) covering a discussion on 17 July 1961, immediately following the Zhou-RKN meeting, when Amb. Parthasarathi met Asia Director Zhang of the Chinese Foreign Ministry. That rare, fascinating verbatim account shows the differing negotiation styles of the two sides.

Fourth, at the 1970 May Day parade, Chairman Mao shook hands with Indian Cd'A Brajesh C Mishra (BCM) on the Tienanmen rostrum, saying: 'My greetings to President Giri and to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Shall we keep on quarrelling like this?' For China that represented a serious initiative to resume dialogue, but before BCM could reach Delhi to report on this and offer his recommendations, the Mao's words were leaked in the Indian media, and the gesture was trivialized as a 'Mao smile'. BCM noted in his oral history account published by the *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* that the leak came from the pro-

Soviet lobby in the Indian hierarchy. (It is striking that in 1962-63, PKB had a like view of such a lobby). The net result was that an opening was missed; the Bangladesh crisis in the months that followed meant that it was only after 1972 that real India-China dialogue could be resumed.

In sum, we need to review our past diplomatic approaches, in cool and dispassionate fashion. New information that has emerged from diverse sources needs examination. Some primary material is in the Cold War Archives; read for instance the long, hard-hitting Soviet record of Khrushchev's 3 October 1959 meeting with Mao where India figures prominently (digital collection: 'Cold War in Asia'). John W Garver's long essay 'China's Decision for War with India in 1962' (also on the net) is rich in citations from diverse Chinese sources, including material citing Politburo discussions. No doubt equally relevant material is to be found in the archives of other foreign ministries that have been opened up. Above all, our own archives can answer many of the mysteries of the lead up to, and the aftermath of 1962.

Is it not high time that we rethink our total clampdown on India's China records? Why should the bulk of official papers of the Nehru and Indira Gandhi era be treated as private documents? When regimes in Beijing and Moscow open their historical records, must democratic India fear its own past?

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