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Kishan S Rana: Battle lines of the 1962 war

New evidence suggests that China was preparing to hit hard across the Himalayas

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It is 50 years since the India-China border war, a transformative event that shaped our foreign policy and left a scar on the Indian psyche. Much has changed, not the least in India-China relations. It behoves us to look back with objectivity at the issues that led to the 1962 War, in particular, examining the information now available.

It is anyone's guess as to when India's China archives will be opened but material from foreign sources is now increasingly available, including Chinese material; memoirs of some Indian players of the time have also been published. Some of this seemingly fits into the jigsaw puzzle; each piece that emerges has to be assessed to see if it really connects the missing gaps, or if it should be discarded as a misfit, or put aside if it might link up with some other information that could become available in the future. As Donald Rumsfeld might ruminate, the known unknowns roil with the unknown unknowns, leaving both the China-*wallah* and the layman perplexed. With these caveats, let us consider some pieces.

New evidence confirms that by mid-1962, China was preparing to hit hard across the Himalayas.

First: Henry Kissinger's book, *On China*, (Allen Lane, UK, 2011, p 189) reveals the planning that went into the Chinese attack. China wanted assurance that Taiwan would not use "the looming Sino Indian conflict to unleash Taiwan against the mainland". Chinese Ambassador to Poland Wang Bingnan, who was conducting US-China talks in Warsaw, was on leave in China and was sent back to Poland, seeking an urgent meeting with his US counterpart (probably in July 1962; Kissinger does not provide a specific date). "There he claimed that Beijing had noted preparations in Taiwan for a landing on the mainland. The American ambassador, who had not heard of any such preparations—since they were not, in fact, taking place—was *instructed to reply that the United States desired peace and that 'under the present circumstances' would not support a Nationalist offensive*." Kissinger goes on to cite from Wang's memoirs that this information played a "very big role" in the decision to proceed with the operation in the Himalayas. Kissinger adds: "There is no evidence that the United States government asked itself what policy might have produced the request for a special meeting. *That was the difference between a segmented and comprehensive approach to policymaking* [emphasis added]."

Kissinger also writes that before the final decision on the war, word was received from Khrushchev that in case of war, the Soviet Union would back China under the provisions of their 1950 Treaty of Friendship and Alliance; his conclusion is that Khrushchev wanted Chinese support in the context of the Cuban missile crisis, and that this offer was never renewed once the Cuban crisis was over (p 190).

Second: In his 2010 memoir, The Tryst Betrayed, former Foreign Secretary Jagat S Mehta (JSM), Charge d' Affairs in Beijing (1964-66), writes:

"On the file, I found a letter written some months before 1962, with a specific warning that the Chinese were planning an attack on the Indian frontier. I felt this was explosive and so I removed it from the file and took it with me when I went home on consultation in 1964 and showed it to Foreign Secretary Gundevia. He recognized that it could be dynamite in its implications, as it should have been transmitted to Delhi. Without much ado he promptly tore it to shreds!"

That full story is even more intriguing. I reached Beijing in August 1963, after Chinese language studies at Hong Kong; the embassy, under P K Banerjee (1961-63), had been without a language officer for a year and a half since the departure of First Secretary S K Bhutani in February 1962. Around February 1964, rummaging through an old desk, I chanced upon a folder containing six or seven letters written in Chinese. None bore a receipt date or initials of any official. All but one, on scraps of paper, spoke of the terrible famine in China; they urged India to bring their plight to the attention of the world.

One letter was different. Written in a particularly clear hand on a long, unused brown envelope that had been cut open to make a writing paper, the writer claimed to be a colonel commanding a PLA (People's Liberation

Army) regiment in Tibet. He said that India was moving forward in the border areas into Chinese territory. If it did not stop these activities, the Chinese armed forces were ready to deliver a heavy blow to India to teach it a lesson. India should heed this warning. The letter ran to about 12 lines. It seared in my memory. I prepared a full translation of that letter in a single copy plus a summary translation of the others, and took this to JSM after showing it to First Secretary A K Damodaran, a sympathetic mentor. JSM, taken aback that such an important, even if enigmatic, communication had received no notice in the Embassy, asked that the papers be left with him. I never asked him at the time what happened thereafter. As JSM writes, we did receive the odd letter tossed over the tall solid steel gates of the old embassy complex, located on Legation Street. Was the "colonel's letter" a deliberate, quasi-official warning or was it a gesture by an individual? The former seems probable, but one simply does not know.

Third: Does the above sequence of preparation in mid-1962 fit the diplomatic discussion narrative available from P K Banerjee's (PKB's) memoir? (*My Peking Memoirs: of The Chinese Invasion of India*, Clarion, Delhi, 1990.) Between mid-1961 and December 1963, PKB had 11 substantial meetings with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai (I attended the final one). At the first, in September 1961, the Chinese premier praised Nehru in a 40-minute statement made to PKB and said he wanted to use PKB as a channel for contact. In December 1961, PKB met Foreign Minister Chen Yi after India's Goa action; PKB writes: "Chen Yi listened to me with almost cold indifference…said that China was a peace-loving country and did not believe in military action to solve international problems." That same month, meeting PKB Zhou requested Nehru to end protest note exchanges; PKB writes: "they were useless and counterproductive. If Mr. Nehru would agree he would also instruct his foreign office to stop sending notes of protest. He seemed most serious and earnest…He said that Mr. Nehru was badly advised and influenced…he (Nehru) did not know about protest notes sent…I told him that his analysis was incorrect…" (pp 28-29).

In June, PKB was instructed to meet Zhou and inform him that India would be prepared to send a ministerial-level delegation to Peking to discuss, without preconditions, all bilateral problems and disputes. PKB was told that Zhou was unavailable, but Chen Yi would receive him. "*Chen Yi said that it was not acceptable unless the Govt. of India unequivocally and publicly withdrew all fictitious and false claims on Chinese territory. The present proposal was…a trap and therefore not acceptable*." India, then, sent a note on 26 July, 1962, again indicating willingness to enter into further discussions, in an appropriate climate. PKB writes of his conversations with Soviet envoy in Beijing, which suggested to him that they were behind these moves (pp 51-52).

Premier Zhou received him on August 4, 1962, for the third of his meetings; PKB writes: "China would agree to meet India and hold such talks but entirely on China's terms...India should withdraw from Chinese territory and not make further excuses…" PKB was apprehensive that even his top-secret telegrams seemed to leak to the media and to the Soviet Union, so he reported that conversation in a letter sent by a diplomatic bag; he requested Secretary General M J Desai to show it personally to the PM (pp 53-54).

The shift in Zhou's tone between the September-December 1961 meetings and the June-August 1962 exchanges bears out greater Chinese rigidity by mid-1962. Chinese accounts of Politburo discussions during 1962 that have emerged in recent years reveal Mao's "laconic and earthy" language towards India in voicing that decision to attack India. What was the trigger? Several pointers. One, India's forward policy of building new outposts along the de facto line of control, even pushing that line forward, annoyed China immensely. Second, there was some disagreement in the Chinese leadership, especially over lack of Indian response to what China saw as its efforts for easing tension; Mao's preference for a hard response prevailed. Third, China's widening split with the Soviet Union, and Indian perceived proximity to Moscow. Barely months after the border war, China tried a soft line and sought talks; let me leave this aside for a subsequent article.

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