



CLAWS

Five Decades of China's War on India in 1962: Current Contextualisation

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The remnants of the India-China War, fought in October 1962, have left an indelible impression on the Indian psyche as we enter the 50th year of that war. Shattering a myriad myths and leaving room for nothing but guarded suspicion for the People's Republic of China. It has been five decades since the Chinese troops launched a full-blown attack in sectors of India's northwest and northeast—the Ladakh sector and the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), which is present-day Arunachal Pradesh—demolishing the Indian conviction that it had bought peace with China by signing the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement. By means of launching calibrated punitive strikes in both these sectors, Beijing handed over to Delhi its worst military defeat ever.

China attacked India due to several unconcealed as well as covert reasons. Relations between Beijing and New Delhi had taken the downward spiral—set off by the Dalai Lama fleeing to India following the failed uprising in Tibet in March 1959. This, in fact, has been indicated in a document of China's premier military research institute, the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, which states that Tibet was an important factor leading to the 1962 War.

More importantly, the evolving regional geo-strategic permutations, with Mao Tse-tung and Nikita Khrushchev going on a collision course by early 1959,

need to be kept in mind. Transcripts of the Mao-Khrushchev summit illustrate sharp exchanges between the Soviets and the Chinese over the Sino-Indian border conflict. Beijing accused Khrushchev of siding with Delhi against a Communist ally and tried to convince the Soviet leader that it was India which had initiated the attack. Rebuffing the Chinese position, Khrushchev responded, "Do you really want us to approve of your conflict with India? It would be stupid on our part."

Khrushchev believed that by instigating a war against India, the Chinese had a larger game plan — to sabotage the Soviets' détente with the United States. Beijing's grievance against the Soviets in general, and Khrushchev in particular, became lucid when on 7 November 1962, at the sixth national foreign affairs working meet, Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Zhang Hanfu alleged that the Soviet attitude on the Sino-Indian border dispute was pro-Delhi.

It is essential to understand Mao's foreign policy which allowed a pivotal place for "revolution". He never really distinguished foreign policy from China's internal political policy-making dynamic. His select writings mirror this statement as he constantly analysed the "current situation" so as to classify the tasks for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), both internally and externally.

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From Mao's viewpoint, the 1962 War was proposed with a larger aim of preventing a Soviet-infused fundamental change in the global political agenda. As the year 1961 drew to an end, a meeting of China's Central Military Commission (CMC) was convened in which Mao Zedong took under his personal control the "struggle with India". The objective was not a local victory, but to inflict a defeat so crushing that India got "knocked back to the negotiating table", as Mao asserted. Further, according to a 2010 Pentagon report, China has repeatedly launched acts of military preemption under the pretext of "self-defence". The report states, "The history of modern Chinese warfare provides numerous case studies in which China's leaders have claimed military preemption as a strategically defensive act."

Ancient Chinese military strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu advocated that all warfare is based on deception. This was demonstrated amply by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai during his negotiations with India. The ruling political elite in India was convinced during the decade preceding 1962 that having woven China into the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement, New Delhi had managed to craft a China policy which envisioned a simultaneous emergence for both.

The debacle in the 1962 War was the result of a failure of India's strategic vision and military capabilities, and, more importantly, the Indian political leadership's paying no heed to the nation's military requirements. For that matter, the decision not to use combat air power during the 1962 conflict also proved to be a severe error of judgement, further adding to India's woes. The events of 1962 led to an inquiry that ultimately came out in the form of the Henderson Brooks Report in 1963; this report has not been officially declassified till date.

Today, as we enter the 50th year of the Sino-Indian War, which uncovered gaping lacunae in India's defence preparedness and strategic priorities (foreign policy?), the conditions are far from being congenial.

India and China display a peculiar case of "constrained cooperation" with economic convergence of interests tending to artificially overlook prevailing strategic differences. While on the face of it, India and China have in place a cordial bilateral relationship with burgeoning economic cooperation (which is heavily tilted in Beijing's favour), deep down exist wide fissures that threaten to upstage the relationship.

China's long-term military and strategic motives goad it to keep a wide array of options available, including that of military coercion, with the objective of pressing for politico-diplomatic advantage as it stands to resolve impending disputes in its favour, while bargaining from a position of strength. There is a mounting sense of apprehension and unease, especially among nations within Asia in the context of coercive diplomacy being exercised as a potent tool by China. This facet seemed further pronounced in Japan's 2011 Defence White Paper which defined China's future actions as "worrisome" and interpreted China's method of addressing clashing interests with its neighbours as "overbearing". Moreover, since the past three decades and over, China has worked towards stretching the parameters of its science and technology base in the backdrop of sustained economic development, which, in turn, has served as the foundation for Beijing's military modernisation programme as propounded by Deng Xiaoping.

While on the face of it, the possibility of a full-fledged military conflict between China and India remains low in the near future, it also needs to be acknowledged that China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is leaving no stone unturned in preparing for any conflict situation that potentially leads to war, especially in the high altitude terrain in its western sector.

Following the conduct of its first live military exercise in Tibet in 2010, in November 2011, for the first time, the PLA rehearsed capture of mountain passes at heights beyond 5,000 metres with the help of armoured vehicles and airborne troops. The Chinese Ministry of

Defence made this claim in an official report, which described the exercise as a “challenge” since it was being conducted on a plateau with an elevation of more than 4,500 metres. The exercise was depicted as the “first joint actual-troop drill of the PLA air and ground troops under information-based conditions in frigid area with a high altitude”. The joint drill involved the Chinese Air Force, ground troops, armoured columns and a range of support entities. The Chinese Defence Ministry’s report displayed muscle flexing by providing rare details of the exercise, stating that the new type warplanes of the PLA Air Force conducted accurate strikes at the targets.

Besides, earlier in October 2010, the PLA conducted its first Group Army-level joint air-land exercise (*shimingxingdong*). The primary participants from Beijing, Lanzhou, and Chengdu Military Regions (opposite India’s northeastern theatre) practised manoeuvre, ground-air coordination, and long-distance mobilisation via military and commercial assets as they transited between Military Regions. China’s long-term, comprehensive military modernisation campaign is aimed at improving the PLA’s capacity to conduct high-intensity, regional military operations—anti-access and area denial operations. The growing expanse of China’s military reach, by virtue of consistent technological and scientific steps taken forward, represents a contrasting facet to the tall claims made by Beijing in so far as its ‘peaceful rise’ campaign is concerned.

The outlook of the political and military elites in China appears to have been shaped with a view to building the nation towards achieving comprehensive large-scale military reach and further cement its stake in the direction of becoming a global power. The Chinese realists are sub-divided into “offensive” and “defensive” as well as “hard” and “soft” camps, wherein each strand believes that the state has to build its own strength. The hard-power realists argue for strengthening comprehensive national power (*zongheguoli*) – particularly the military and economic dimensions, while soft-power realism emphasises diplomacy and cultural power. The “offensive

realists” argue that China should use its newly built military, economic, and diplomatic influence to essentially coerce others toward the ends China desires.

Despite 15 rounds of talks between the Special Representatives of India and China to resolve the boundary dispute, no tangible breakthrough has seen the light of day. China’s reluctance, or for that matter refusal, to show its version of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) points towards a larger ploy of progressively building up a case of its claims over Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. India needs to maintain a vigilant posture in the backdrop of Beijing’s ongoing military modernisation campaign. Chinese claims of a ‘peaceful rise’ are only meant for public consumption. Its actions on the ground, including the inroads into India’s immediate and extended neighbourhood, aim to counter Delhi and assert maritime dominance in the northern Indian Ocean. From the standpoint of analysing China’s power projection capabilities, especially in the Indian Ocean region, they only tend to add a further degree of credence to Beijing’s long-term objectives towards reinforcing its maritime claims and footprint in and around the region.

Chinese decision-making has always sought to retain the initiative, and the politico-military intensity displayed by China in the past few years through its decision-making elite and state-controlled media only seems to conform to the above intent. This brings to attention the definitive shift in Beijing’s Kashmir policy. The Middle Kingdom chooses to remain non-committal when it comes to explaining its position vis-à-vis the nuclear arming of Pakistan and the influx of Chinese soldiers in the disputed territory of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). In an apparent bid to gain tacit control of the region — both militarily and diplomatically — Beijing has exponentially increased its investment and sponsorship of various ‘development projects’ in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of PoK. The projects involve several thousand Chinese troops belonging to the construction corps of the PLA, providing a whiff of an expansionist Chinese

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geo-strategic agenda in the region. Besides, by issuing stapled visas to Indian passport holders from Jammu & Kashmir, Beijing aims at questioning the status of the state vis-à-vis the Indian Union, thereby providing diplomatic support to Pakistan's position on the issue. Significantly, yet another manifestation of China's dubious intention of keeping India "in check" through the Pakistan channel became public when it decided to export two new 650 MW nuclear reactors to Islamabad, namely Chashma 3 and Chashma 4. In fact, this was not the first time that China was trading in sensitive nuclear technology to Pakistan outside the realm of international nuclear rules as well as under its obligations to the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Given that till date there is no mutually agreed upon LAC between the two countries, sporadic incidents of border transgressions appear to be a covert Chinese strategy of asserting its claims in the western sector, especially in northeastern Ladakh. Similarly, in the eastern sector too, the LAC is not physically demarcated on the ground, including that on military maps. India is faced with a two-lane highway built by the PLA to drive up to the border in this sector. Managing the LAC is an immediate requirement. After all, India's land border with China stretches to 3,488 km, displaying complex topography, high-altitude climate and affiliated logistic

difficulties. At this stage, China holds the benefit of heights, easier acclimatisation and capabilities for rapid build-up of forces along the border—thus, ensuring a smooth chain of supply and supplementing its power projection capacity in the region.

India needs to invest heavily in developing border infrastructure, especially roads of operational significance alongside the Sino-Indian border. Special focus needs to be accredited to the all-weather roads identified for construction along the LAC with China. Effective border management is the instant prerequisite to prevent/counter Chinese intrusions. For this, the country needs to put in place synergised border management operations that include intelligence-sharing, patrolling, joint-operational training and alert.

In the long-term, if it is prudence that drives India's current policy of accentuating economic engagement and collaboration with China, would it not be equally circumspect for our decision-making elite to accord highest priority to political realism in so far as dealing with Beijing is concerned? After all, economic convergence cannot take the liberty of putting at risk issues pertaining to national interest and security. Elucidation of numerous tenets of China's military power cannot afford to escape the classic realist theory angle wherein a high degree of probable Chinese belligerence looms large.



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