

HISTORY OF
THE CONFLICT WITH CHINA, 1962

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TO ALL WHO SERVED

THE CONFLICT WITH CHINA 1962

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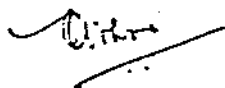
FOREWORD

India and China, both ancient civilisations, had lived as good neighbours for centuries. Ideological differences apart, the Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai syndrome held sway till about the late 50's, when signs of discord started showing up. In 1957, China linked Tibet with the mainland through the Aksai Chin road across Ladakh. She also laid claim over large areas of Indian territory in Ladakh and the erstwhile NEFA. The upsurge in Tibet and the consequent flight of the Dalai Lama to India, in Mar '59, introduced fresh complexities and misunderstandings.

The border dispute came to a head when, in the early 60's, India responded to the expanding Chinese presence in the border areas by establishing new posts on her side of the border. The presence of the two Armies at close proximity led to skirmishes which culminated in the subsequent conflict, which ended badly for India.

The present record of the Sino-India Conflict of 1962 highlights various political, strategic and tactical failures on our side. I trust that our military planners and tacticians will draw benefit from the lessons emerging from a study of this history.

For the past several years, we have been striving to finalise and publish the histories of the three major conflicts in which India has been involved since Independence. For various reasons and continuing sensitivities in certain quarters, it was felt that we should not as yet publish the history of the 1962 Conflict. After further consideration, it was agreed that this record may be circulated on restricted basis, so that the various military training institutions are able to derive benefit. I hope our senior training establishments and the College of Combat will specially gain from a critical appraisal of the account in this volume.


(N.N. VOHRA)

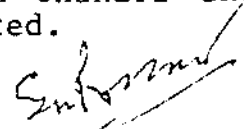
PREFACE

Together with the official History of the Indo-Pak War of 1965, this History of the Conflict with China, 1962, was prepared during the years 1986 to 1990. Thereafter it was vetted by the concerned ministries and agencies, and has now been cleared for limited circulation only.

This history is based on the voluminous records of the Army, the Air Force, and the Ministry of Defence, including the "top secret" Henderson Brooks Report made available to an author for the first time ever. Foot-notes giving the references to original sources and particular files have been deleted under instructions of Government. But they are available in the 'master copy' kept in the History Division, Ministry of Defence. Through interviews with important survivors of those momentous events, to whom we are very grateful indeed, a conscious effort has been made to ensure that even subjective versions received due consideration in arriving at the truth. Published books have also been examined, of course. The study is focussed on the military operations, and political developments are briefly mentioned only to provide the background to the conflict. Our effort has been to present a meticulously researched, balanced and objective account of these highly emotive and controversial events, without getting concerned with individual reputations.

The book is in two parts. Part I was researched and drafted by Dr. P.B. Sinha, and Part II by Col A.A. Athale, who had another assignment also. The work was discussed with me at every stage, modified as required, and then edited finally by me. I accept responsibility for the facts stated and opinions expressed, which do not necessarily reflect the views of the government of India, and do not commit it in any way.

Apart from the authors and the research team, I am grateful to Army HQ and Air HQ, and the Service officers associated with this study as technical advisers, for their cooperation and assistance. Dr. U.P. Thapliyal, Director, History Division, Ministry of Defence, has supervised the preparation of the final press copy of the book; only those familiar with this work can appreciate fully the arduous and painstaking labour involved in it. Shri R.C. Baluja and Shri T.R. Gulati, SROs, also deserve thanks for ably assisting him in this task. Shri D.C. Kashyap, Shri Girdhari Lal and Shri D. Tamil Selvan, provided competent secretarial assistance and worked tirelessly to produce a fair copy of the draft. The work was greatly facilitated and expedited by the active support and personal interest of the Defence Ministers and Secretaries (especially Shri S.K. Bhatnagar, Shri Naresh Chandra and Shri N.N. Vohra), to whom I feel deeply indebted.



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ABBREVIATIONS

ACM	-	Air Chief Marshal
Adm	-	Administration
AHQ	-	Army Headquarters
Air HQ	-	Air Headquarters
AM	-	Air Marshal
AOA	-	Air Officer Incharge Administration
AOC	-	Air Officer Commanding
AR	-	Asian Recorder/Assam Rifles
Arty	-	Artillery
AVM	-	Air Vice Marshal
AVSM	-	Ati Vishisht Seva Medal
Bde	-	Brigade
BGS	-	Brigadier General Staff
BHC	-	Battle Honour Claim/Committee
BM	-	Brigade Major
Bn	-	Battalion
Brig	-	Brigadier
Bty	-	Battery
Capt	-	Captain
Cav	-	Cavalry
CAS	-	Chief of the Air Staff
Cdr/Cmdr	-	Commander
CGS	-	Chief of the General Staff
CID	-	Central Intelligence Department
C-in-C	-	Commander-in-Chief
CO	-	Commanding Officer
COAS	-	Chief of the Army Staff
Col	-	Colonel
Coy	-	Company
DBO	-	Daulat Beg Oldi
Dets	-	Detachments
DFC	-	Distinguished Flying Cross
DG NCC	-	Director General National Cadet Corps
DIB	-	Director Intelligence Bureau

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Div	-	Division
DMI	-	Director of Military Intelligence
DMO	-	Director of Military Operations
DSO	-	Distinguished Service Order
DZ	-	Dropping Zone
EC	-	Eastern Command
Engrs	-	Engineers
FD	-	Frontier Division
Fd	-	Field
Flt Lt	-	Flight Lieutenant
Garh Rif	-	Garhwal Rifles
GD(N)	-	General Duties(Navigator)
GD(P)	-	General Duties(Pilot)
Gen	-	General
GOC	-	General Officer Commanding
GR(FF)	-	Gorkha Rifles(Frontier Force)
GSO	-	General Staff Officer
HAL	-	Hindustan Aeronautics Limited
Hav	-	Havildar
HER	-	Henderson Brooks Report
HQ/HQrs	-	Headquarters
Hrs	-	Hours
HU	-	Helicopter Unit
HY	-	Heavy
IAF	-	Indian Air Force
IB	-	Intelligence Bureau
IGAR	-	Inspector General Assam Rifles
Inf	-	Infantry
Int	-	Intelligence
JAK Militia/Rif	-	Jammu and Kashmir Militia/Rifles
JCO	-	Junior Commissioned Officer
Jem	-	Jemadar
Km	-	Kilometre
LAD	-	Light Aid Detachment
L Hav	-	Lance Havildar
LI	-	Light Infantry

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LMG	✓	Light Machine Gun
L Nk	-	Lance Naik
L of C	-	Line or Lines of Communication
Lt/Lieut	-	Lieutenant
Lt Regt (T)	-	Light Regiment(Towed)
Maj	-	Major
Mahar(MG)	-	Mahar(Machine Guns)
MC	-	Military Cross
MEA	-	Ministry of External Affairs
MG	-	Machine Gun
NMG	-	Medium Machine Gun
M of D	-	Ministry of Defence
MO	-	Military Operations
Mor Regt	-	Mortar Regiment
MP	-	Member of Parliament/Military Police
MT	-	Mechanical Transport/Military Training
Mtn	-	Mountain
MVC	-	Maha Vir Chakra
NCsE	-	Non Combatants Enrolled
NCO	-	Non Commissioned Officer
NEFA	-	North East Frontier Agency
Nk	-	Naik
OC	-	Officer Commanding
OP	-	Operation
OR	-	Other Rank
ORBAT	-	Order of Battle
Para	-	Parachute
PLA	-	Peoples Liberation Army
PLAF	-	Peoples Liberation Air Force
PM	-	Prime Minister
Pt	-	Point
PTI	-	Press Trust of India
PVC	-	Param Vir Chakra
PVSM	-	Param Vishisht Seva Medal
QMG	-	Quarter Master General
RAF	-	Royal Air Force

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Recce	-	Reconnaissance/Reconnoitre
Regt	-	Regiment
Retd	-	Retired
Rfn	-	Rifleman
SAA	-	Small Arms Ammunition/Scales of Ammunition
2 I/C	-	Second in Command
Sep	-	Sepoy
SITREPS	-	Situation Reports
Sp & Adm Coys	-	Support and Administration Companies
Sqn Ldr	-	Squadron Leader
TAC HQ	-	Tactical Headquarters
Tp	-	Troop
Tr	-	Track
UNO	-	United Nations Organisation
UP	-	Uttar Pradesh
VIP	-	Very Important Person
Vr C	-	Vir Chakra
VSM	-	Vishisht Seva Medal
WD	-	War Diary
Wg Cdr	-	Wing Commander

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph presents a detailed account of the conflict with China in 1962. Many books have already been published on those tragic events, including several memoirs or personal accounts of important participants, though they suffer from obvious handicaps of subjective approach and incomplete data base. This brief Introduction attempts to project the entire episode in historical perspective, and to submit an objective analysis and verdict.

It will be convenient to view the conflict from the political, the strategic and the tactical levels separately, though, of course, each impinged heavily on the others.

At the tactical level, while Tawang was lost due to the blunder of pushing up 7 Inf Bde to the Namkha Chu, the humiliating debacle on the Sela-Dirang-Bomdila front was caused entirely by the failure of the military commanders on the spot. Maj Gen A.S. Pathania and Lt Gen B.M. Kaul share the maximum blame. But Gen Thapar and Lt Gen Sen were also guilty of abdicating their responsibility, by refusing to issue orders to Pathania when Kaul was not available at the Corps HQ. For HQ 4 Div, Senge was certainly a better location than Dirang. But nobody seems to have considered locating 48 Bde at Thembang (with the troops positioned in depth along the Poshingla track) instead of Bomdila. If feasible, this would have kept the enemy far away from Bomdila or the vital road to Dirang and Sela. Where there was no major tactical mishandling, at Walong and in Ladakh, the Indian troops suffered defeat but no dishonour. Inevitably, it is the result at the tactical level which catches public attention and makes the headlines - the battle is always the pay-off.

The numerous tactical mistakes need not be elaborated here, as they are widely accepted, and discussed fully in the main text of this book.

Strategically, Walong, Tawang and the forward areas in Ladakh, were indefensible, in 1962, against a major attack. But, regarding eastern Ladakh in particular, it is difficult to think up any viable strategy to save it once the Chinese had stolen a march in logistics by quietly building the road through Aksai Chin. If those tiny outposts had not been hastily pushed up east of the upper Shyok and Chushul, the vacant areas would have been occupied all

the more easily by the Chinese, without firing a shot. The so-called 'Forward Policy', therefore, appears fully justified. But it went too far, got too reckless, and lost its balance in its later stages.

It may be recalled that, although the Chinese had already moved into Aksai Chin before 1961, a wide corridor of empty area separated the forward Chinese posts from the Indian positions in eastern Ladakh. But the Chinese were steadily pushing forward their posts, occupying more and more of the empty area. Indian posts were also, therefore, pushed forward in an effort to show that the remaining area was not empty. The basic assumption behind this forward policy was the belief, specially of the Intelligence Bureau, that the Chinese "were not likely to use force against any of our posts, even if they were in a position to do so".

At first, this conclusion appeared valid, and there were a number of cases of the Chinese patrols going back when they found some place already occupied by a few Indian troops. Encouraged by this, a large number of Indian posts were established quickly. These little posts were too small to withstand any attack and were not backed up by proper bases for supplies or reinforcements in case of need.

The Chinese also quickened the forward movement of their posts, and soon the empty area between the two armies disappeared. When some Indian posts, for example in the Galwan Valley, were established outflanking the Chinese posts, the Chinese attitude changed and became more threatening. Instead of going back when they encountered an Indian post, the Chinese started surrounding the post to cut off its land route of supply, and even opened fire at a number of places. The new development clearly showed that the basic assumption behind the forward policy decision was no longer valid, and a serious reappraisal of the new situation should have been undertaken by Army HQ and the Government of India. This reappraisal, however, never took place and the situation was allowed to drift. Whereas the earlier intention of the 'forward policy' was to prevent any further advance by the Chinese into any empty area, it was now decided to push back the Chinese from posts they had already occupied, as on the Namka Chu in the Tawang sector in Arunachal Pradesh. Whereas the Indian posts in Ladakh earlier had orders to fire only when fired upon, on 22 July 1962, Army HQ gave discretion to all post commanders to fire on the Chinese if their posts were even threatened. In the Tawang sector, 7 Inf Bde was ordered to push back the Chinese from Thag La ridge.

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To push them back was simply not possible, as the Chinese were much stronger along the line of control both in Ladakh and in Arunachal Pradesh. In 1959, the People's Liberation Army in the Ladakh sector was estimated at more than one regiment or brigade, and so the Western Command projected a requirement of one brigade of five battalions in Ladakh. The Chinese further reinforced their troops, and after Exercise Sheel, Western Command required one full division to defend Ladakh. But by August 1962, only four battalions could be positioned in Ladakh due to logistic difficulties. The Srinagar to Leh road was completed only in October 1961, and was blocked by snow during the winter months. Airlift capability of IAF was also strictly limited. Small airfields were available only at Leh, Chushul, Thojs in the Shyok Valley and at Fukche near Dungti in the Demchok area. Most of the numerous other posts had to be supplied by air drops. Even the four battalions available in Ladakh were distributed in penny packets in the numerous posts in the forward areas. These posts were bound to get over-run if the Chinese chose to attack them. But the Government of India and Army HQ continued to believe that the Chinese would not attack. Disaster was inevitable if their faith was belied.

Military strategy, however, is always, and quite rightly, the hand-maiden of politics. And the debacle of 1962, was basically a political failure. The political factors, therefore, deserve close attention.

The Indian defence set up after Independence lacked institutionalised support for decision-making at the national level. Well established and well respected agencies providing politico-military linkages were just not there. It was personality-oriented decision making in the vital area of national security. That is how Krishna Menon, the Defence Minister, and B.N. Mullick, the Intelligence Bureau Chief, acquired near total control over the national defence policy, and even the disposition of troops in the forward areas. Krishna Menon in particular received maximum blame for the debacle, and lost his job. A brilliant intellectual, he was also selfless, hardworking and well informed. But he was arrogant, abrasive, intolerant, and politically a light weight. Above all, he was a visionary. He has been held guilty, and rightly so. But it is also necessary to understand why he acted as he did, and what he was trying to achieve.

Krishna Menon, it appears, wanted to change the basic defence posture of India. This posture had changed little after the British left in 1947. The

army still remained a close-knit professional body deliberately isolated from the citizen. Its predominant motive force remained esprit de corps and not identification with the people. Some day it may even act like the Praetorian Guards of the Roman Empire. The Indian Army trained and fought like the British Army, unimaginative, elephantine, rule-bound and road-bound. Armies of Germany, Japan, USSR or China were vastly better war machines, and patterned very differently. Again, the Indian armed forces were dependent on imported arms and equipment, which was a critical weakness, and also hampered growth of local industries. Krishna Menon wanted to change it all.

To reduce India's dependence on imported weapons and equipment, he created a separate Department of Research and Development in his Ministry under a Scientific Advisor from 1 January 1958. A Defence Production Planning Committee was set up in 1957; the Defence Minister's (Production) Committee started working in 1959. Bharat Electronics, struggling in its birth pangs since 1954, was pulled up to start production in 1960. The Mazagon Docks, the Garden Reach Workshops and the HAL were all acquired in the public sector through Krishna Menon's initiative. In May 1962, Moscow was persuaded to agree to set up in India the facilities for the manufacture of modern MiG fighter planes. This was Krishna Menon at his best.

At the same time, he tried to change drastically the operational doctrine - indeed the very ethos of the Indian army, which was the preponderant element in the armed forces of India. Perhaps he wanted to model it after the Peoples Liberation Army of China, more egalitarian, flexible, closer to the people. He wanted it to participate directly in nation building activities, just as the PLA engaged itself in raising crops and building bridges and schools in peace time.

Such basic changes required first of all a committed, or at least pliant, band of army officers in key positions. So mediocre Thapar was selected instead of the doughty Thorat as the Army Chief, and Bijji Kaul was made the CGS. Kaul soon collected a band of committed officers. They may have lacked ideological orientation, but were willing to follow him blindly. The old guard was steadily side-lined.

The required political support was amply available, for Menon and Kaul had the full backing of Prime Minister Nehru.

To carry through this transformation of the national defence set up, a decade of peace was

absolutely essential: For establishing indigenous weapons manufacture, money had to be found by cutting arms imports. The armed forces would be short of equipment and stores for several years till the new arms factories started producing. The officer cadre was a house divided within itself till the new breed fully took over. A period of transition was inevitable, during which the fighting machine would not be fully efficient and would be vulnerable.

Therein seems to lie the basic cause of the debacle of 1962. India failed to avoid a war during the transition period. It became a typical example of changing horses in mid-stream. Lulled by faulty political assessment and wrong intelligence forecasts, the country got caught in a war when least prepared.

Indeed, many, including Lt Gen Daulet Singh, GOC-in-C, Western Command, argued that the only safe course would be to leave, for the time being, the Chinese in possession of the Indian territory they had already grabbed, and to consolidate the areas still in Indian possession by pushing roads forward, building up strong bases and inducting a division of troops into Ladakh to match the Chinese strength. But this sound advice could not be accepted by Army HQ, which was being pressed by the Government of India, on the IB's advice, to push forward. The Government of India, in turn, was under tremendous pressure from the Parliament, the Press and the public. Sadly unfamiliar with military matters, these vociferous and strident opinions accused the Government of lack of will, and insisted that the Indian territory already occupied by China must be liberated at the earliest, if necessary by armed might. The debates in Parliament and the editorials in the national dailies from 1960 to 1962 make shocking reading today. In this dilemma, the Government appears to have indulged in some wishful thinking, and continued to assume, in the face of mounting evidence, that the Chinese would draw back from the brink of war if India put up a brave front.

Another serious mistake, really caused again by the people's ignorance, was the policy decision not to use the air force against the Chinese. As discussed in Chapter X, 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. It was not done, because even the few retaliatory Chinese air raids on Calcutta, Guwahati or Dhanbad might result in panic and large scale exodus. The decision-makers felt that the citizens in their ignorance would take such enemy air raids as proof of Indian defeat.

A study of the 1962 conflict, as also of the 1965 and 1971 wars, therefore clearly brings out the imperative necessity and urgency of educating the people about the basics of war and familiaring them with military matters, if a democratic state is to be safe and strong.

The 1962 conflict appeared to be, and was called, a debacle. It, however, involved only a small fraction of the Indian Army. The great bulk of it, holding the western front in Punjab and Kashmir, was not tested. The navy and air force remained out of it, except for air supply and transport. But its politico-military fall out was significant. Krishna Menon had to go. With him went out his vision of revamping the army. The old guard, represented by officers like J.N. Chowdhary, Harbakhsh Singh and Sam Manekshaw, was rehabilitated. Expansion and rearmament of the forces had to be started, again with imported equipment. The armed forces soon recovered their monolithic character, morale and elan. The test came soon enough in the 1965 war with Pakistan. The army and the IAF stumbled through it in typical British fashion; successfully thwarting Pakistan's big effort to change the status quo through war. The Nathu La incident of 1967 conveyed the same message to the Chinese. When the forward Chinese troops suddenly opened machine gun fire on 11 September 1967, inflicting heavy casualties on the Indian troops working in the open, the Indian troops replied with mortar fire. When Chinese mortars also opened fire, the GOC 17 Div - the redoubtable Sagat Singh - blasted the Chinese positions and bases with 5.5" medium guns, and moved up more units. The Chinese agreed to a cease-fire on 16 September. They had lost an estimated 400 troops killed or wounded, compared to Indian losses of 65 killed and 145 wounded. Finally, a clear military victory over Pakistan was achieved in 1971, though the expected transformation of the political scene proved elusive.

In the political and diplomatic fields too, significant changes came through the 1962 episode, bringing more realism. Same was the case with the civil-military equation within the government. The people's ignorance about military matters, however, continued unchanged. Each for its own reason, the concerned departments of government remained wedded to total secrecy, unmindful of the clear needs of national security.

In the long history of war, defeat has always proved a better teacher than victory. The 1962 episode proved it once again. But no nation can afford to have many such teachers.