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The Ghost of the 1962 War

The primary lens through which Indians view China, especially on the border issue, is of betrayal. That the Chinese cannot really be trusted is almost a mantra in India. Understanding of contemporary events and dynamics of international relations between the two countries is almost always coloured through this lens that has its origin in the Himalayan border dispute and the short war in 1962 that resulted in a humiliating defeat for India. Even the warming up relations between China and India after the nadir of 1962 war and hostility of 1960s-1970s and a quantum leap in economic interactions between the two large emerging economies along with serious progress made in border talks continue to be viewed through this betrayal lens.

There are three primary ideas associated with this -- Indian claims are unquestioningly legitimate, the Chinese aggression in 1962 was an unexpected shock, and the Indian political leadership failed to deal with China. However, almost half a century on, it is intellectually disingenuous, morally dubious, and political self-harming if Indians continue to buy this myth of benign India and duplicitous China.

The Indo-Tibetan border, that became Indo-Chinese border as China occupied Tibet by 1951, has been presented as natural, historical, and traditional within India. This is not without its problems both in the Western and Eastern sectors. In 1958 when the news of Chinese highway cutting across Aksai China became public, India lodged a diplomatic protest. Nationalist hysteria prevented Indians from asking the important question -- if this vast stretch of territory indeed belonged to India, why were there no Indians there since 1947 or why did years of roadbuilding by the Chinese go undetected. Instead it was convenient to blame the Chinese of surreptitiously occupying Indian land. In fact, the Indian government did show some recognition of flexibility over its claims here, but as the tensions between the two sides increased, its public posturing left no room for compromise.

In the Eastern sector, McMahon Line becomes more than an arbitrary line drawn on a secret map by a British colonial official -- it becomes a legitimate boundary that separates India from China-Tibet. India's claim over NEFA is given a history that is not without its problems. There is very little evidence of Indian civilization inroads into what the British called the Assam Himalayas. Even the ever-expansionist British usually saw the region as a buffer between Tibet and Assam, one populated by hostile tribals or Tibetan Buddhist Monpas, especially in Tawang. While Indian maps naturalised McMahon Line soon after 1947, actual control over Tawang was asserted only in 1951. Indian claim is not based on this physical control but on the legitimacy of McMahon alignment. However, this alignment has a problematic history, related to the British-Chinese-Tibetan Simla negotiations of 1913-14.

Even though much of Indian scholarship remains rather partisan on the Eastern sector, many reasonable Indian commentators now recognise that the Indian claims

in the Western sector were not strong and some blame Nehru for not taking advantage of Chou's suggestion in 1960 for what has become known as the 'swap theory' -- since China and India have territories strategically vital to them, India should give up its claim in the West in return for China's recognition of areas south of McMahon Line as part of India. That is, legitimise the status quo, the only sensible solution. When in the heat of the dispute and deteriorating relations, Nehru rejected the idea of 'bartering' away India's territories, he lost a valuable opportunity.

Instead of adopting a sacral-moral-legalistic approach to territory, understandable on account of the scar of partition, had the Indian leadership of 1950s shown more understanding of the ambiguous legacy of British Raj and therefore the need to be politically more mature and flexible, we may not have been talking of China-India border dispute.

The adoption of a moral-legalistic vocabulary instead of a political language of accommodation naturalised the boundary claims in the public imagination of Indians. Since the leadership, except for occasional utterances which were drowned by the cacophony of opposing voices, presented the Indian case as 'all we claim is rightfully ours', the only way in which the Chinese intentions and actions could be read was as 'malevolent aggression'. There was no thorough investigation after the 1962 debacle that became public and the government found it easier to ascribe the dispute to Chinese duplicity and the conflict to unexpected Chinese aggression. Nehru/India was portrayed as naively trusting and therefore ill-prepared to face the Chinese in a border war.

A close study of Indian activities in the disputed regions in the Western and Eastern sectors since 1959 challenges the myth of Indian benign inaction and at the very least presents a picture of conflict where no one side was exclusively aggressive. 1962 war was one where Chinese military routed India in the Eastern sector and made some gains in the Western sector. The war started on 20 October 1962 and ended with unilateral ceasefire declared by China on 21 November and China withdrew from the entire NEFA region it had won in the war. Surely China was therefore not a pacifist power. But this war did not take place out of blue but was preceded by two years of building tension, rising conflict and diplomatic impasse to which India contributed a fair share. While rejecting McMahon Line as illegitimate product of British imperialism, China withdrew north of it after it ceasefire and even during the war there, it avoided ridges that fell under Bhutan. Clearly the intention was to punish India and not a result of inherent Chinese expansionism or Community aggressiveness.

War and peace are ultimate responsibility of the government of the day. Therefore the setbacks of 1962 war was primarily the responsibility of the political leadership of Nehru. However, a close analysis of Indian decision making before 1962 shows that while political leadership had clearly failed to prevent the war, it was the military leadership at all levels that finally lost the war. A curious mix of arrogance, ignorance, fatalism, defeatism, and confusion amongst commanders at all levels -- Delhi, Command, Field -- in the Eastern sector is what led to the rapid loss of territory there. Contrary to the general view that Chinese victory was primarily due to overwhelming numerical superiority, the main reason for rapid defeat in the

Eastern sector was the collapse of command and control. In fact, a day before the Chinese announced unilateral ceasefire, Corps command was scrambling faster than the civilian administration to withdraw from Tezpur on the foothills of NEFA.

The most interesting question that emerges from the study of forward policy is that it was based on a hypothesis -- Chinese will not retaliate. While it is tempting to blame this solely on the intelligence failure under IB's B N Mullik, there is no doubt that even the military top brass planned their move on the assumption that the Chinese will not respond militarily. Agreeing to and implementing a forward policy in a frontier zone disputed with a militarily stronger country without adequate preparation on the belief that the enemy will not respond robustly should go down in the annals of Indian military history as nothing short of a disaster. A disaster for which the civilian and political leadership both were responsible. Yet, the betrayal lens dominant in India, while assuaging nationalist sentiments, prevents serious questions about the problematic validity of Indian boundary claims, the dominant picture of Chinese aggression and Indian innocence, and the notion that it was primarily a fault with democratic decision making that left the military unprepared.

Does this problematisation of Indian position then necessarily imply that the Chinese claims are more defensible? Not at all. A critical analysis of Chinese claims requires another article. If India was guilty of adoptive a moral legalistic vocabulary that restricted its options to compromise, Chinese position was easy to be interpreted as evasive and ambiguous. Ambiguity offers better opportunities for compromise or accommodation, but it also lends itself to the charge of opportunistic claims making. Moreover, there is a fundamental question about illegitimacy that lies at the heart of Chinese rule over Tibet because of which India acquired not Tibet but China as its neighbour.

The ghost of the traditional Tibetan state that disappeared with the Chinese control and Indian complicity with it, continues to haunt the two beneficiaries that scavenged upon Tibetan territories and reduced the border dispute as a strategic question forgetting the human beings that inhabit the space.

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