ABSTRACT  The pattern of civil–military interaction in India is informed by the notion that civilians should refrain from involvement in operational matters. The emergence of this trend can be traced back to the defeat against China in 1962. In its aftermath, the belief that the debacle occurred because of civilian interference took hold. Thereafter, politicians restricted themselves to giving overall directives, leaving operational matters to the military. The Indian ‘victory’ in the subsequent war with Pakistan was seen as vindicating this arrangement. This essay argues that the conventional reading of the China crisis is at best misleading and at worst erroneous. Further, it contends that the subsequent war with Pakistan actually underscores the problems of civilian non-involvement in operational issues. The historical narrative underpinning the norm of civilian abstention is at the very least dubious.

KEY WORDS: Civil–Military Relations, India, China Crisis, Pakistan War

The war against China in October and November 1962 was a watershed in India’s approach to defence and strategic affairs. As the then Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, put it, the defeat was ‘a permanent piece of education’. Among the other things, the debacle put a spotlight on the question of the appropriate relationship between political and military leaders in war. In the aftermath, the political leadership was skewered for having interfered in operational matters. Thereafter, the notion that the debacle occurred because of political meddling rapidly took hold. Brigadier John Dalvi, to take but one example, devoted an entire chapter in his memoir to the ‘Faulty Higher Direction of War’, excoriating civilians for ‘hustling’ the military and the top Army leadership for failing to ‘resist improper orders’.

1J.P. Dalvi, Himalayan Blunder (Bombay: Thacker & Co. 1969), 397–446.
The politicians, too, tacitly accepted this critique. Thenceforth, they restricted themselves to giving overall directives, leaving operational issues to the military. This pattern of civil–military interaction was evident during the next war with Pakistan in 1965. Brigadier Dalvi, who had fought in both wars, noted with approbation that in 1965 the political leaders ‘did their duty which was to take timely political decisions firmly, issue unambiguous orders and carry on with their proper constitutional duties’. The conduct of operations ‘was left to the Service Chiefs … The Army was grateful for this correct behaviour.’\(^2\) The Indian ‘victory’ in this war buttressed the idea that civilians should focus on the political level and should abstain from involvement in operational issues – a notion that continues to shape civil–military relations in India.

Subsequent scholarship on the war with China has mirrored this view. Neville Maxwell’s influential account argued that Nehru and Defence Minister Krishna Menon had been interfering in military matters since 1959. This had driven the then Army chief, General K. S. Thimayya, to offer his resignation. Although Thimayya withdrew it, Nehru and Menon continued to politicise the top brass and to intrude into professional matters, resulting in the fiasco against China.\(^3\) Stephen Cohen, one of the foremost historians of the Indian Army, observed that ‘neither Menon nor Nehru had any military experience’, yet they had ‘directly supervised the placement of individual brigades, companies and even platoons’. Consequently, the Indian Army harboured ‘an extraordinary amount of bitterness’ at the politicians ‘meddling’. And rightly too, he seemed to add.\(^4\) More recent works on civil–military relations have endorsed this reading.\(^5\)

This essay reconsiders Indian civil–military relations during and after the China crisis. It argues that the conventional account of the crisis is at best misleading and at worst erroneous. It is misleading because it assumes that the military had a better idea than the civilians of how to deal with the challenge posed by China – if not, why was civilian interference a problem? To be sure, it was the civilians who crafted the

\(^2\)Ibid., 474–5.


'forward policy', whereby small detachments of troops were stationed in areas claimed but unoccupied by the Chinese. Yet, the available evidence shows that from late 1959 until the adoption of the forward policy, the military espoused a strategy of ‘defence in depth’: they advocated holding defensive positions far behind the boundary claimed by India. This strategy was obviously incapable of countering Chinese incursions near the boundary – incursions that were the main cause for concern to the political leadership. The military’s inability to come up proposals to meet these intrusions gave the civilians the upper hand in the formulation of strategy. Hence, the essay contends that if the military went along with the forward policy, it was not simply because the civilians rode roughshod over them, but because they had no alternatives to offer.

At places, the conventional account is downright wrong. For some of the crucial decisions in the run-up to the war were actually taken on the advice of the top military leadership. This is not to claim that the politicians bore no blame for the defeat; merely that the argument about civilian interference is flawed.

Furthermore, examining the 1965 war with Pakistan, the essay argues that the institutionalisation of the practice of civilian non-involvement in operational issues had deleterious consequences. First, the civilians took no part in the operational planning. Thus, the military went to war with a remarkably uninspired plan evolved solely by the General Staff. Second, the civilians restricted themselves to taking major political-military decisions (such as counter-attacking across the ceasefire line and the international border) and sought to leave the conduct of the war to the military. This proved difficult in practice, for some operational actions had direct political implications. Moreover, civilian non-involvement exacerbated the lack of coordination between the services – a problem that originally stemmed from the absence of an effective chiefs of staff system. In short, the attempt to segregate the civilian and military spheres resulted in extemporised and poorly coordinated responses. Last, the politicians’ refusal to involve themselves in operational matters led to an early ceasefire, which arguably precluded a more advantageous end-state for India.

The essay rests on a critical reading of existing memoirs and secondary sources. These are supplemented by the Indian official histories of the wars and by freshly available archival material. The essay begins by scrutinising the events surrounding General Thimayya’s resignation in 1959. It then looks at civil-military interactions up to the China war. Next, it considers the changing pattern of civil-military relations following the war. Finally, it underscores the problems engendered by these changes by considering the 1965 war with Pakistan.
The Thimayya Affair

The Sino-Indian boundary is usually divided into three areas. The western sector consists of the boundary of Ladakh with Xinjiang and Tibet. Here, both India and China claimed the Aksai Chin plateau and the territory south and south-west of it. The eastern sector comprises the boundary between Tibet and India’s North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). India claimed that the boundary ran along the McMahon Line, agreed upon in the 1914 Simla conference between India, Tibet and China. The dispute in the central sector, along the boundary between Tibet and the Indian provinces of Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, was a minor one.

The latent boundary dispute came to the fore in early 1959. While the Prime Ministers were exchanging missives, both sides sought to fortify their positions by establishing pickets along the frontiers. Inevitably, clashes occurred. The first serious incident took place in the end of July 1959 in NEFA. In the wake of this incident, military options to deal with the emerging Chinese threat began to be debated. But these debates were overshadowed by the sensational offer of resignation by the Army chief, General Thimayya, and its subsequent withdrawal.

According to traditional accounts, Thimayya’s resignation was sparked off by a disagreement with Defence Minister Krishna Menon over the promotion of senior officers. Menon apparently wanted to promote officers who were close to him. Professional differences were aggravated by Menon’s irascible personality. A recent biographer claims that Thimayya was also worried about Menon’s imperviousness to the need for raising and equipping additional forces to meet the threat from China. All existing accounts agree that Nehru cleverly persuaded Thimayya to retract the resignation in order to protect Menon.

However, the evidence now available shows that the reasons for Thimayya’s resignation ran altogether deeper. In a meeting with Nehru towards the end of August, Thimayya expressed his concerns. In a sententious note on this conversation, he recalled discussing the ‘apathetic attitude of the Minister of Defence regarding Chinese moves’ as compared to his ‘war-psychosis [sic] against Pakistan’. More importantly, he talked about how Menon did not want Nehru to meet President Ayub Khan of Pakistan. This last point needs explanation.

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8 New Delhi, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (NMML), Thimayya Papers, Correspondence with J. Nehru, Note on conversation, nd.
Thimayya raised it in connection with Ayub’s proposed stopover at Delhi airport on 1 September. Earlier in the year, when Sino-Indian relations grew strained, Ayub had proposed joint defence arrangements between India and Pakistan to counter China. Nehru brusquely turned this down, for it would imply forsaking India’s policy of non-alignment. During Ayub’s proposed meeting with Nehru, it was believed that he would renew his offer.

Menon apparently thought that since the proposal was unacceptable, Nehru should avoid meeting Ayub. Thimayya, however, felt that the problem with China had begun to assume alarming proportions, and hence regarded Ayub’s idea favourably. The Prime Minister naturally deemed this an attempt by the Army chief to interfere in matters of policy. Nehru told Thimayya that he would speak to Menon regarding all the issues. A few days later, Menon reproached Thimayya for directly approaching the Prime Minister, and suggested that they could resolve the differences themselves. When matters did not improve, the General sent his resignation to Nehru, claiming that it was ‘impossible’ for him to function under Menon.

Nehru considered this a step to force his hand on Menon and on questions of policy. Without giving any assurances, he convinced Thimayya to withdraw the resignation. By this time, the matter had leaked to the press. When questioned in parliament, Nehru played it down as arising out of temperamental differences. Nonetheless, the Prime Minister’s concerns were obvious when he stressed that ‘civil authority is and must remain supreme’.

The Thimayya affair, then, was not so much about civilian interference in professional matters, as about military intrusion into the realm of policy. The episode underlined the dilemma confronting the military leadership. On the one hand, Thimayya was acutely aware of the threat which China could pose. On the other, he thought that India could never meet a major military challenge from China. The General continued to hold this view even after retiring from

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10As he reportedly did, The Statesman, 2 Sept. 1959.
13The Hindu, 3 Sept. 1959.
office. As late as July 1962, just a few months prior to the war, he wrote: ‘I cannot even as a soldier envisage India taking on China in an open conflict on its own... It must be left to the politicians and diplomats to ensure our security.’\textsuperscript{14} Given this attitude, it is not surprising that the General Staff failed to confront squarely the challenge of developing military measures to deal with evolving situation.

**Military Moves**

In September 1959, the Director of Military Intelligence prepared an appreciation, stating that a ‘major incursion’ by China was unlikely. Based on an assessment of Chinese troop levels, he recommended deploying a brigade in Ladakh, two paramilitary battalions in the central sector, a division with armour in Sikkim, and a division in NEFA. This would entail raising new formations and a redeployment of troops with attendant logistical problems; for despite efforts dating back to the early 1950s, the roads and communications to the frontiers remained underdeveloped.\textsuperscript{15}

The strategy envisioned by the General Staff was to offer only token resistance at the frontier and to prepare to confront the Chinese deep inside Indian territory. As an appreciation put it, ‘We will not rush forward to the border but fight from the ground of our own choosing, easily defensible and sustainable.’ At a briefing on 28 October 1959, the Army chief averred that ‘in case of war, the government may have to accept loss of some territory initially but could rely on the army’s ability to blunt major offensives in depth’.\textsuperscript{16} The Prime Minister admitted that the lack of communications was a serious problem. He also agreed that it would not be possible to ‘wholly prevent incursions’ and that in the event of an attack, ‘the balance of advantage progressively tilts in our favour’.\textsuperscript{17}

Given the state of communications, this strategy made much sense. But it did not cater for alternative scenarios – such as an attempt by the Chinese to grab territory close to the frontier without coming up to the main line of Indian defences; after all it was a boundary dispute.

Furthermore, the force levels stated by the General Staff catered only for a limited attack. Thimayya himself admitted that ‘the measures would not be adequate to contain a major invasion’.\(^{18}\) The requirements for dealing with a larger invasion were apparently neither considered nor projected. This was consonant with the military’s belief that it was up to the politicians to ensure that such an attack did not occur.

By the end of April 1960, negotiations on the disputed borders had reached an impasse. As diplomatic efforts juddered to a halt, events on the ground began to acquire momentum. The following month, the Indian Intelligence Bureau (IB) reported Chinese activity in Ladakh, which indicated that they were attempting to move forward and take control of additional Indian-claimed territory.\(^{19}\) In consequence, the government decided to set up posts and to patrol unoccupied areas; but troops were enjoined to avoid clashes.\(^{20}\) The Army Headquarters, however, refrained from giving firm orders for patrolling. The reasons for their caution were explained by the Chief of General Staff (CGS), Lieutenant-General L. P. Sen, in a letter to the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Sen wrote that owing to logistical difficulties, additional troops had not been inducted into Ladakh. If patrolling were intensified, the Chinese might react sharply, and the Army might be unable to counter a large-scale incursion. Civilian officials thought that the Army was dilatory in implementing important decisions. When asked for an explanation, the General Staff reiterated the problem of logistics.\(^{21}\)

The bureaucrats certainly underestimated the logistical constraints; but part of the problem lay with the military, too. The latter’s approach to their tasks is evident from the Chiefs of Staff paper of January 1961, which spelt out the overall requirements of the armed forces.\(^{22}\) As regards China, the paper noted that they were required to ‘resist to the full and evict any further incursions or aggressions by China’. The Chiefs recommended an increase of two infantry divisions (one each for NEFA and Sikkim) and one infantry brigade (for the central sector). These figures took into account that the projected deployment of

\(^{18}\) TNA, FO 371/141272, UK High Commissioner India to Commonwealth Relations Office, 21 Oct. 1959.


\(^{21}\) Maxwell, *India’s China War*, 201–2; Manekar, *Guilty Men*, 144.

September 1959 had not yet been completed. After spelling out their requirements, the Chiefs added:

Should the nature of the war go beyond that of a limited war... and develop into a full-scale conflagration amounting to an invasion of our territory, then it would be beyond the capacity of our forces to prosecute war... beyond a short period, because of limitation on size, the paucity of available equipment and the lack of adequate logistical support.

As earlier, the military assumed that they would only have to cater for a limited conflict. The question of preparing to counter threats across a spectrum was overlooked; the strategic problem of dealing with territorial incursions was blithely evaded. The Chiefs evidently sought to wage the kind of war with which they were most comfortable. Even here, scant thought had been given to logistical requirements. The assessment of threat and countermeasures were crude: no effort had been made to forecast likely Chinese troops and logistics build-up. Assuming that they would have to prepare for a limited war, the Chiefs projected only a modest increase in resources. And they went on to claim that limited resources were a constraint in waging a higher intensity conflict – indeed in implementing existing plans. The paper showcased a remarkable lack of strategic judgement on the part of the professional military.

**Forward Policy Decision**

The Chiefs’ paper was prepared at a time of rising concern over Chinese activity. Intelligence reports in September and November 1960 indicated that the Chinese were moving further west in Ladakh. The military’s inability to formulate specific proposals to meet such incursions left the initiative for planning in the hands of the civilians. The issue was discussed at the Cabinet’s foreign affairs subcommittee meeting presided by Nehru in January or early February 1961. Krishna Menon suggested the idea of ‘zigzagging’. If the Chinese sited pickets further into Indian-claimed areas, the Indians could place posts behind them in areas claimed but unoccupied by China. This ‘forward policy’ would prevent the Chinese from establishing another ‘line of control’ west of the existing one. No action was initiated along these lines presumably due to the logistical difficulties faced by the Army.

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23Steven Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press 1990), 95.
From early 1961, the IB observed frequent Chinese patrolling and road construction in the eastern and western sectors. In September, the Indians discovered that the Chinese had established a post in the Chip Chap valley in Ladakh, a mere four miles east of an Indian post. Vehicular traffic was observed close to the Chinese post, and their troops attempted to capture an Indian patrol. These developments led the Indian government to conclude that the Chinese were pushing forward towards their claim line, thereby occupying further Indian-claimed territory. The new Foreign Secretary, M. J. Desai, took up the matter with the Army.

A few months earlier, a new team of officers had taken charge at the Army Headquarters. Thimayya had retired and had been replaced by General P. N. Thapar; B. M. Kaul had taken over as his CGS. Thapar’s appointment, it is argued, was another illustration of political preference trumping military necessity; for Thimayya had wanted Lieutenant-General S. P. P. Thorat as his successor. Thapar and Kaul are often portrayed as ‘courtier soldiers’ in contrast to the ‘old-guard professionals’ they had replaced.

The distinction is at once superficial and misleading. For one thing, it obfuscates the continuities with the previous dispensation. Thimayya’s CGS, L. P. Sen, for instance, would play a crucial role in the unfolding drama as the Eastern Army commander. For another, while it is possible that the government chose its senior military advisers for political pliability, it was the military system that had pushed officers like Thapar to the top. Thapar, it bears emphasizing, was the senior most among the candidates for the slot: he had served as independent India’s first Director of Military Operations (DMO), and had performed well subsequently. Besides, the appointment of the Army chief had always been driven by political considerations. Thimayya himself had been chosen because of his acceptability to the political leadership. In any event, the new team was more cooperative with Krishna Menon in establishing additional posts in Ladakh.

On 26 September 1961 the IB submitted a comprehensive assessment stating that ‘the Chinese would like to come right up to their claim line

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26These facts were drawn to Neville Maxwell’s attention while he was researching his book. The informant was General Roy Bucher, a British officer who served as Indian Army chief in 1948–49. Maxwell, however, chose to suppress this information. London, National Army Museum, Bucher Papers, 7901-87/29, Bucher to Maxwell, 4 June 1969, and Maxwell’s reply, 19 June 1969.
of 1960 wherever we ourselves were not in occupation. But were even a dozen men of ours are present, the Chinese have kept away.' The IB recommended opening posts in the unoccupied areas of Ladakh and filling 'gaps' along the McMahon Line.\textsuperscript{28} The tenor of the paper was that China would not react sharply to these moves. This assumption soon became an article of faith for military as well as civilian officials. Thus CGS Kaul wrote to the MoD elucidating the logistical challenges involved in setting up new posts,\textsuperscript{29} but he did not question the IB’s assumption about benign Chinese reaction. In October Menon held several meetings with Thapar and Kaul, taunting them about the Army’s torpidity. Menon seems to have been concerned both by briefings from the director of the IB, B. N. Mullik, and by the tough questioning in parliament regarding the latest Chinese intrusions.\textsuperscript{30}

On 2 November the Prime Minister held a meeting with his civilian and military advisers to discuss measures to meet the situation. It was decided that the Army should establish posts and undertake patrolling ‘as far forward as possible...towards the international border’. This would ‘prevent the Chinese from advancing any further’. But ‘this must be done without getting involved in a clash with the Chinese’. The directive that emerged from the meeting also stipulated that:

In view of the numerous operational and administrative difficulties, efforts should be made to position major concentrations of forces along our borders in places conveniently situated behind the forward posts from where they could be maintained logistically and from where they can restore a border situation at short notice.\textsuperscript{31}

The directive acknowledged the problems voiced by the military during the meeting, and gave them adequate leeway in implementation. For Nehru had been told that owing to numerical and logistical problems India could not keep up in a race with China; ultimately, the Chinese’s superiority could render the Indian posts operationally untenable. The Prime Minister had also observed that he did not expect a battle with the Chinese.\textsuperscript{32} Nehru’s views on the unlikelihood of an armed confrontation with China were based on political

\textsuperscript{28} Palit, \textit{War in High Himalaya}, 97–8.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 103.

\textsuperscript{30} Hoffmann, \textit{India and the China Crisis}, 97; Mullik, \textit{Chinese Betrayal}, 314.

\textsuperscript{31} Maxwell, \textit{India’s China War}, 221–2; Palit, \textit{War in High Himalaya}, 107. Also see, Sinha and Athale, \textit{Conflict with China}, 86–87, notes 89, 92.

calculations; the IB’s assessments only supplemented them. Nehru reckoned that the Chinese would be wary of launching a major attack on India owing to their concerns about American involvement in such a conflict. Moreover, he believed that the Soviet Union would restrain Beijing.\(^{33}\)

The directive was shown in draft by foreign office officials to Kaul and was issued after his approval. Kaul felt that the Army Headquarters had the whole winter to create sufficient logistical back-up using airlift. He also drew comfort from Mullik’s assurance that China would not contest Indian moves with force.\(^{34}\) The Army chief was not quite convinced by Mullik’s assessment. In a letter to the Defence Minister he registered his concerns; but stated that he had already issued orders to establish posts.\(^{35}\) Furthermore, in his instructions to the operational headquarters, the point about supporting troop concentrations in the rear was not mentioned. The available evidence shows that omission was deliberate, though the rationale remains unclear.\(^{36}\) Whatever the General Staff’s reasoning, it ran counter to the Prime Minister’s thinking. Nehru’s statements in parliament confirm that the concentrations of forces were integral to his conception of the forward policy. The Army Headquarters’ instructions contravened his directive, and apparently did so without his knowledge.\(^{37}\)

Kaul and Thapar went along with the civilian advocates of the forward policy despite initial reservations. In this instance, as in subsequent ones, personality and proximity to political leadership only partly account for their stance. The nub of the problem was that the military leadership had no alternatives to offer, no professional

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\(^{34}\)Palit, War in High Himalaya, 105, 110.

\(^{35}\)Sinha and Athale, Conflict with China, 86, note 91.

\(^{36}\)Later, Thapar asserted that such a build-up would have taken a long time, and by then the Chinese would have occupied considerable parts of Indian territory. [P.N. Thapar, ‘The Chinese Invasion’, Statesman, 9 Jan. 1971]. In his memoir, Palit claimed that Nehru had never mentioned this point in his instructions; it was added by the Foreign Ministry as an afterthought to hedge their bets and was credulously accepted by Kaul. But Palit’s testimony is dubious. His own account states that when Nehru was told about the necessity for tactical support, he asked what exactly was meant by it. Palit responded that it implied the availability of reserves and reinforcements in case of a firefight [Palit, War in High Himalaya, 106–9]. This was the point mentioned in the directive. Note that the Indian official history supports Thapar’s version [Sinha and Athale, Conflict with China, 69–70].

\(^{37}\)Gopal, Nehru, Vol. 3, 208–9. Even Maxwell, whom no one can accuse of a bias in Nehru’s favour, admits this. India’s China War, 223–4.
judgment that applied to the situation. This vacuum was best illustrated
by the DMO, Brigadier D. K. Palit’s proposal to the CGS that in the
light of the logistical problems it would be best for the army to hand
back control of the frontiers to the IB.\footnote{Palit, \textit{War in High Himalaya}, 109.} Thus, criticism of the top
military commanders for not ‘standing up’ to the politicians is widely
off-beam.

At this point we could address another charge leveled at the
politicians – that they ignored the military’s demands for purchasing
weapons and equipment from other countries and that military budget
was actually reduced in the years 1960–62. There is force to this
argument. Nevertheless, in evaluating it at least three factors need to be
considered.

First, while the overall allocation for the military was reduced, this
did not necessarily impact on the military’s projected requirements to
meet the Chinese threat. As seen earlier, even in 1961 the Chiefs of Staff
were only asking for modest increases for this purpose, which could
have been met within the existing defence budget.

Second, Thapar and Kaul did make efforts to draw the political
leadership’s attention to the shortages in weapons and equipment,
particularly in the spring and summer of 1962. But the urgency of these
warnings would have been considerably diluted by the drift of other
reports sent by the Army Headquarters. For instance, in June 1962,
Kaul wrote: ‘I am convinced that the Chinese will not attack any of our
positions even if they [Indian posts] are relatively weaker than theirs.’\footnote{Cited in Sinha and Athale, \textit{Conflict with China}, 82, note 59.}

Third, and perhaps most important, at this time India faced a
potentially grave balance of payments situation. As a trusted adviser on
financial matters wrote to Nehru: ‘the need for immediate tightening up
of all expenditure of foreign currency of any massive kind is very great.
It is also necessary to take stock of position as it is today. All this will
need some kind of freeze’.\footnote{NMML, T.T. Krishnamachari Papers, Correspondence with Nehru (1962), T.T.
Krishnamachari to Nehru, 13 Jun. 1962.}

\section*{Implementing the Forward Policy}

Before establishing posts in Ladakh, the Army Headquarters asked
Western Command to submit an assessment of force requirements. The
latter placed its needs at a full division with artillery, and also
‘expressed alarm’ at having to take on additional tasks without an
increase in logistical resources.\footnote{Palit, \textit{War in High Himalaya}, 155–7.} The Army Headquarters, however,
decided to establish posts in ‘penny pockets [sic] rather than wait for substantial build-up’.\(^{42}\) In March–April 1962 posts, with barely 10–20 troops, were sited in Ladakh. The Chinese countered these moves by establishing posts encircling the Indian ones. Thus, in the spring of 1962, Indian and Chinese posts were established, overlooking and crisscrossing each other. Despite inducting a fourth battalion, India could not match China’s numerical and logistical superiority.

On 6 May about 100 Chinese troops, in ‘assault formation’, advanced towards an Indian post in the Chip Chap valley. The Western Army commander sought the Army chief’s permission immediately to pull back the post. Thapar and DMO Palit felt that if they withdrew the first post to be threatened, it would signal a lack of resolve. The Prime Minister thought that China’s move was ‘a show of force’ to test India’s resolution. He directed that the post should stand firm and be reinforced. In the event, the Chinese backed off without attacking. The Army chief and CGS Kaul concluded that the incident had vindicated their assumptions about Chinese reactions, and that the forward policy could be pursued without much risk.\(^{43}\) These perceptions were reinforced when the Chinese refrained from escalation during a second, similar, stand-off in Ladakh.

Between May and July 1962, India established an additional 34 paramilitary posts close to the McMahon Line. The Army, however, had not catered for “major concentrations” behind the outer string of posts. In fact, 4th Division had only two brigades – 7th and 5th Brigades – in NEFA. As part of this precipitate drive to ‘plug gaps’ a picket, called Dhola post, was sited in the valley of the Namkachu River, overlooked by the Thagla Ridge. This was a sensitive area. During official discussions in 1960, Beijing had contested Delhi’s interpretation of the alignment of the McMahon Line in the area. The divisional commander, Major-General Niranjan Prasad, thought that if the area did belong to India, it made better tactical sense to occupy the Thagla Ridge itself.\(^{44}\) By the time the Army Headquarters obtained a clarification from the Foreign Ministry, the Chinese had occupied the Thagla Ridge.\(^{45}\)

The following day, 9 September 1962, Eastern Command ordered 7th Brigade to prepare to move ahead within 48 hours and to deal with

\(^{42}\)Sinha and Athale, *Conflict with China*, 69–70

\(^{43}\)Palit, *War in High Himalaya*, 173–6. Also see, Maxwell, *India’s China War*, 237.


the Chinese investment of Dhola post. The Indian government saw it as foreshadowing a Chinese strategy of responding to the forward policy in Ladakh by opening a new front in the east. To deter further incursions in NEFA, India had to demonstrate resolve in the Thagla area. Chinese presence south of the Indian-claimed boundary was fraught with domestic implications, too. Soon enough, the main opposition parties were railing against the government’s complacency and demanding Nehru’s resignation.

At a meeting chaired by Menon on 10 or 11 September the government decided to use force to expel the Chinese from Thagla. The Army chief and the Eastern Army commander, L. P. Sen, thought that Chinese strength near Dhola approximated 600, whereas India would soon have a brigade in the area. They also felt that adequate supplies were available and that the brigade could be maintained by air. In consequence, they believed that the Chinese could be evicted.

However, commanders down the military echelon considered the operation utterly unfeasible. On 12 September, the commander of 33rd Corps, Lieutenant-General Umrao Singh, told Sen that China could easily outstrip any effort to push Indian troops into the Thagla area. Logistically, too, they were in a much superior position, with a roadhead only a few miles short of the Thagla Ridge. Umrao recommended withdrawing the Dhola post. Sen insisted that the government was ‘not prepared to accept any intrusion of the Chinese into our territory’. After a heated exchange, Sen demanded that Umrao and his subordinate commanders produce a plan with ‘utmost speed’.

At another meeting on 17 September, Thapar queried about the danger of all-out war if the Army used force near Dhola. Foreign Secretary Desai said that since the operation would be carefully circumscribed, escalation was unlikely – though Indian posts at one or two places might be threatened. This was indicated by the pattern of Chinese behaviour. On the night of 20 September firing broke out in the Dhola area; sporadic exchanges continued for the next ten days. These pushed to the fore the Army chief’s latent concerns about

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46Prasad, Fall of Towang, 25–; Dalvi, Himalayan Blunder, 169–70, 177–8. Dalvi was commanding 7th Brigade.
47Maxwell, India’s China War, 311–12.
48Kaul, The Untold Story, 355–6; Palit, War in High Himalaya, 196; Hoffmann, India and the China Crisis, 131–2.
49Maxwell, India’s China War, 305.
50Sinha and Athale, Conflict with China, 141, notes 2 and 3.
51Prasad, Fall of Towang, 32; Sinha and Athale, Conflict with China, 97.
52Mullik, Chinese Betrayal, 345.
Chinese retaliation. On 22 September Thapar presented his appreciation of likely Chinese reaction to the operation. He noted that China could reinforce its troops opposite Dhola; retaliate elsewhere in NEFA; and/or retaliate in Ladakh, which he considered most likely. The Indians, he observed, were ‘much weaker’ to resist a determined effort. Desai said that the government would not accept any encroachment in NEFA. When the Army was ready, the Chinese should be evicted from Dhola, even at the cost of losing additional territory in Ladakh. Thapar then asked for written instructions. Despite his concerns, the General was not challenging the decision, but merely playing safe by asking for formal confirmation. Indeed, the instructions were drafted in the meeting itself.\(^5^3\)

Meantime, in response to the pressure from Sen, the divisional and brigade commanders prepared a plan to dislodge the Chinese from Thagla. Incredibly, the plan was a make-believe one, expressly designed to show the impossibility of evicting the Chinese. The logistical requirements projected were well beyond what could be built up before the onset of winter. Umrao considered even this plan too ambitious.\(^5^4\)

An upgraded version calling for a division with full artillery and logistical support was handed to Sen. Umrao added for good measure that the operation was totally unfeasible.\(^5^5\) Sen retorted that the field commanders ‘seemed to have gotten cold feet’. He refused to accept that the projected logistical build-up was truly necessary, and argued that airlift could be used to improve the current situation.\(^5^6\)

Reviewing the situation on 2 October, Sen held Umrao responsible for the delay in launching the operation, and called for his removal. Thapar agreed and sought the Defence Minister’s permission to replace Umrao.\(^5^7\) The following day an extraordinary set of decisions were taken. Instead of sacking Umrao, 33rd Corps would be divested of responsibility for NEFA; a new formation, 4th Corps, would take over. Kaul would command the new corps and would continue to function as the CGS.\(^5^8\) He would have no additional troops apart from two brigades of 4th Division: his sole task would be to force the Chinese out of Thagla.

By the first week of October 1962, Kaul had taken charge in NEFA. Despite strenuous objections from the divisional and brigade

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\(^{53}\)Record of meeting on 22 Sept. 1962, reproduced in Palit, *War in High Himalaya*, 213.

\(^{54}\)Dalvi, *Himalayan Blunder*, 233–41.

\(^{55}\)Prasad, *The Fall of Towang*, 40.

\(^{56}\)Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis*, 147.


\(^{58}\)Sinha and Athale, *Conflict with China*, 97.
commanders, he made so bold as to send a patrol across the Namkachu on 9 October. Early next morning, as more troops were preparing to cross the river, the Chinese attacked and seriously mauled the patrol. Kaul immediately informed the Army Headquarters that ‘a grave situation’ had developed and that he wanted to fly to Delhi to present his case. On receiving approval, he departed after instructing Prasad to hold the positions along the Namkachu.

The next evening a meeting was held, chaired by the Prime Minister, with Menon, Mullik, Thapar, Sen, and other officials in attendance. Kaul began with a briefing of the situation at the Namkachu. He underscored China’s numerical superiority, and the tactical and logistical problems that his troops faced. Kaul later claimed to have offered three alternatives: attack despite Chinese superiority; abandon the idea of an attack but hold present positions; withdraw to better positions in the rear. Nehru said that he did not want to jeopardise the troops, and asked the military to make the choice. Kaul argued against persisting with an attack; but it is not clear which of the other two alternatives he favoured. In any event, Thapar and Sen felt that a brigade could hold the existing defensive positions against an enemy division. They urged that the positions along the Namkachu be held, even if the plan of attack was shelved. The Prime Minister accepted their recommendation.

Kaul returned to his headquarters on 13 October. Two days later Prasad requested that 7th Brigade be withdrawn from its positions along the Namkachu. Prasad’s contention was backed by Kaul’s staff.

On 16 October Kaul sent a signal to the Army Headquarters, arguing that the positions along the Namkachu were untenable. The Army chief was rather agitated, and himself drafted a reply to Kaul. Thapar ordered Kaul to reinforce the area and to carry out ‘aggressive patrolling’. Furthermore, Kaul was asked to forward, at the earliest, his recommendations and requirements for the operation to evict the Chinese. Clearly, despite the discretion vested in him by the Prime Minister, Thapar was eager to get on with the offensive.
That same evening Krishna Menon, Thapar, Mullik and Sen flew to Kaul’s headquarters. Kaul strongly argued that Namkachu positions were untenable. Menon responded that public opinion would not tolerate any further loss of territory. After nearly three hours of discussion, the civilians left room to let the military commanders confer among themselves and arrive at a decision. Considering Thapar’s orders to Kaul the previous day, it is not surprising that the generals decided against any withdrawal. Thapar agreed to provide additional supplies, equipment and troops.\textsuperscript{64}

**Border War**

Even as these discussions were underway, Beijing had given the operational order for launching the war. Meanwhile, Kaul took seriously ill owing to his exertions in NEFA. He was evacuated to Delhi on 18 October, but rather unusually continued to command from his sickbed. On the night of 19 October Chinese troops began to infiltrate Indian positions along the Namkachu. At the crack of dawn the onslaught began.

The Chinese undertook simultaneous offensives in NEFA and Ladakh. In the following weeks, the Indian forces suffered heavy reverses, particularly in the NEFA.\textsuperscript{65} By the evening of 19 November the Indian Army stood seemingly helpless to withstand further Chinese onslaughts. Ultimately, it was the unilateral cessation of hostilities by the Chinese which obviated further disaster.

During four weeks of hostilities, the civilian leadership did not in any manner constrain the conduct of military operations. The pattern of civil–military interaction was exemplified by the decision to evacuate Tawang – the major town in western NEFA. Until 22 October, both the Army commander and the Army chief were keen to defend Tawang. The divisional commander, however, was convinced that Tawang was untenable. Concurrently, at the Army Headquarters, DMO Palit sought to convince his superiors of the imperative of evacuating Tawang and concentrating at the rear at the dominating Se-la massif. But Thapar felt that the government would not accept abandoning Tawang.

At a meeting presided by Nehru on 23 October, Thapar asked Palit to explain his views. Briefing from a map, Palit pointed out that the Chinese could use numerous tracks to by-pass Tawang and head


\textsuperscript{65}The military events are well documented. For an overview see, Srinath Raghavan, ‘A Bad Knock: The War Against China, 1962’ in Daniel Marston and Chandar Sundaram (eds.) *A Military History of India and South Asia* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 157–74.
straight for the plains of Assam. Hence, it was important to pull back from Tawang and hold Se-la. Nehru unhesitatingly left the decision to the Army chief: ‘It is a matter now for the military to decide – where, how they should fight... I cannot lay down conditions about Tawang [sic] or any other place on grounds other than military.’

By this time, the prime minister was under increasing pressure to remove the Defence Minister. Shortly after the war began, there was a groundswell of criticism of Menon, who was regarded culpable for the early reverses. Nehru was compelled to accept Menon’s resignation and assume charge of defence himself. Speaking to the Chiefs of Staff shortly afterwards, the prime minister explained his conception of civil-military relations: ‘Our broad strategy must be governed by political factors, but detailed strategy – and tactics especially – have to be judged by military considerations.’

Nevertheless, the politicians were involved in a decision that proved disastrous – to reinstate Kaul in command of 4th Corps. A few days into the war, Kaul had been persuaded to step down and Lieutenant-General Harbaksh Singh was appointed instead. Just as Harbaksh had settled down and set in motion his plans, Kaul was abruptly restored as corps commander. The role played by Nehru and Menon in reinstating Kaul is unclear. But the decision could not have been taken without their consent. Following Kaul’s return, the momentum built up by Harbaksh slackened. Worse still, Kaul refused to be briefed, and tampered with the defensive plan drawn up by Harbaksh. Yet it would be unfair solely to blame Kaul for the defeat. Both his subordinates and superiors in the chain of command failed to get to grips with the developing military situation. Indeed, the Indian Army abandoned strong defensive positions and conceded NEFA with very little resistance. To be sure, the responsibility for the disaster ultimately rested with the Prime Minister. But the defeat in NEFA was in every sense a military failure.

Aftermath

Following the debacle at NEFA, Thapar stepped down as Army chief, and was replaced by General J. N. Chaudhuri. Kaul, too, tendered his resignation. Nevertheless, in the aftermath, the political leadership was...
vociferously criticised by the opposition, press and public opinion. In response, the government instituted an inquiry into the Army’s operational performance. On instructions from the new Defence Minister, Y. B. Chavan, Chaudhuri appointed a two-member ‘operations review committee’ comprising of Lieutenant-General Henderson-Brooks and Brigadier Prem Bhagat.

The committee, however, was determined to go beyond its remit. As Maxwell observes, they ‘in effect ignored the constraints of their terms of reference, and kicked against other limits Chaudhuri had laid upon their investigation’. The report was completed and submitted to the government in 1963. Although the Henderson–Brooks report was never declassified, its gist was released in a parliamentary statement and subsequently parts of the report were accessed by journalists. Among other things, the report told an admonitory tale of meddlesome civilians, timorous military, and an avoidable catastrophe. Despite being unable to access documents from the MoD or the Foreign Ministry, the report concluded that the higher direction of war was ‘out of touch with reality’.

Unsurprisingly, this narrative proved congenial to the military. The principal lesson drawn from it was the importance of ‘standing up’ to politicians who intruded in professional matters. More importantly, in the loss of nerve induced by the war, the civilians too came to believe that the military must be given a free hand. Thus, following the defeat against China a convention was established whereby the civilian leadership restricted itself to giving overall directives, leaving operational matters to the military.

The changing dynamics of civil–military relations was evident in the months following the war. On 29 January 1963, the Prime Minister directed the Army to move back into the NEFA, except in disputed areas such as Thagla. The civilians believed that the Army must be prepared to meet another attack from China. The directive specifically mentioned that the induction should ‘be undertaken now’. But the Army chief decided against the move, believing that it would provoke a

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73 P.R. Chari, ‘Civil–Military Relations in India’, *Link*, 15 Aug. 1977, 75. Chari was a senior civilian official in the MoD.
renewed Chinese offensive. Accordingly, the General Staff instructed the Eastern Command:

In accordance with the policy given out by the COAS, we shall give battle to the enemy in the plains for the present... Recent operations in this area have brought out clearly our inability to maintain adequately the troops deployed there [NEFA]. No regular Army units will, therefore, be moved up until they can be maintained by land routes.

The Army chief was, of course, entitled to hold a different opinion. But instead of raising the matter with the political leadership, Chaudhuri kept them in the dark and pursued his own military policy.

The dissonance between the government’s policy and the army’s actions came to the fore in early July 1963, when the IB issued a grim warning of Chinese troop concentrations north of the McMahon Line. In inter-agency meetings, Chaudhuri played these down, claiming that if Indian troops re-entered NEFA China would definitely strike. The corps commander, Lieutenant-General Sam Manekshaw (later the Army chief during the 1971 war against Pakistan), concurred, and urged the General Staff against inducting troops. The Defence Minister was under the impression that some forces were already in place, and asked for an operational update. During the briefing, the deputy chief (Chaudhuri was travelling) vaguely alluded to the presence in NEFA of ‘elements of forward brigades” of a division in the plains. The minister realised that the Army had been tardy, but did not probe beyond seeking some clarification. Nor did he confront the Army chief on the matter subsequently. Chaudhuri, for his part, persisted with chicanery. After conferring with Manekshaw, he decided to send one brigade into southern NEFA for training, and informed the MoD that he had a brigade for defensive operations. In the event, the Indian Army began to deploy in NEFA only towards the end of 1963.

**War with Pakistan**

Within a year of the China crisis, then, the civilians had ceded control of operational matters to the military and had become wary of treading on the latter’s toes. These changes were evident in the war against Pakistan in 1965; not so, their baleful consequences. We shall briefly look at the planning, conduct and termination of the war.

The civilians were insulated from the planning and conduct of operations. In early August 1965 Pakistani irregulars began to infiltrate across the Ceasefire Line (CFL) in Kashmir. As their numbers rose, the Army chief sought Prime Minister L. B. Shastri’s permission to take
offensive action across the CFL against the infiltrators’ bases. Furthermore, he requested that if this action escalated and drew in the Pakistani Army, the Indian forces should be free to retaliate at any place of their choosing. Owing to the gravity of the situation, the Prime Minister acceded to this request, knowing full well that it might lead to war with Pakistan. Yet, he took no interest in the military’s plans for waging such a war. As the then Defence Minister recalled, ‘After giving the broad directive on 13 August, the Prime Minister did not concern himself with the details of the operations.’ The Defence Minister, too, ‘never interfered in operational matters’. Indeed, throughout the war, the emergency committee of the Cabinet ‘never discussed operational matters but only political issues’.75

On 3 September 1965, Pakistan responded to Indian moves across the CFL by launching a full-scale assault on Akhnur aimed at sealing off Indian-held Kashmir from the south. The Prime Minister authorised an attack across the international boundary in Punjab. But at no point did the politicians engage their military advisers in any discussion of strategy – of how military means were expected to translate into the desired political ends. As his principal secretary wrote, Shastri restricted himself ‘to defining the war objectives of the political leadership, leaving the details of military strategy to the army and air force chiefs’. The Prime Minister identified the objectives as defeating the Pakistani attempt to capture Kashmir; destroying the offensive power of Pakistan’s armed forces; and occupying only minimum necessary Pakistani territory for these purposes, which would subsequently be vacated.76 The second of these was obviously the most ambitious; yet how exactly it would be achieved was never discussed. Left to himself, Chaudhuri decided to make shallow advances on a wide front and then dig in, hoping that the enemy would wear himself down in waves of counter-attacks. The Indian official history is justly severe in its assessment of this plan: ‘Instead of delivering a large number of inconsequential jabs, the Indian Army could perhaps have gone for a few selected, powerful thrusts... Faulty strategy led to stalemate, with no strategic decisions whatsoever.’77

The difficulty of sequestering the political and military spheres was apparent early on in the war. Once the strength of the Pakistani attack on Akhnur became clear, an alarmed Chavan told the Army chief that

‘if Akhnur fell, heads would roll and he himself would resign’. Eventually, despite a poorly coordinated Indian defence, Akhnur held owing to the Pakistani forces’ inability to exploit their initial successes. As the operations progressed, the civilians realised that ‘our planning at the outset had not provided for an adequate superiority of force in the western sector; we had only 6⅓ divisions against Pakistan’s six divisions’. Chaudhuri, however, was averse to shifting any formations from the eastern theatre. Hence, the Indian Army did not have adequate reserves to meet a Pakistani counter-attack in Punjab. Chavan belatedly pressed Chaudhuri to move a division from the east, but the battle began before these troops moved. On this occasion, the Indian forces prevailed because of superior tactics and leadership at the lower levels.

The politicians’ decisions to stay aloof from operations also contributed to the lack of coordination between the Army and the Air Force. From the outset, this was a problem owing to the absence of a functional chiefs of staff committee. In such a situation, civilian oversight was all the more important to ensure jointery. Even a minimal involvement in the process would have shown that the Army chief had edged out the other services. As the then Vice Air chief observed, ‘he [Chaudhuri] treated the whole business as his personal affair, or at any rate that of the army’s alone, with the air force as a passive spectator’.

This had an impact on both defensive and offensive operations. For instance, when the Pakistani attack towards Akhnur began, Chaudhuri demanded immediate close air support. The air chief agreed but only after pointing out that ‘in attacks launched without adequate preparation, losses must be accepted and that pilots may make mistakes between friend and foe’. The Indians lost four aircraft in this action, besides attacking some of their own armour, troops and ammunition dumps. The Air Force also played a limited role in the Indian offensive in Punjab. Although the initiative lay with the Indians, the Air Force was not used for a strike against Pakistani airbases. In fact, even as the Indian offensive began, the Pakistani Air Force attacked Indian airbases all along the western front, inflicting serious damage to aircraft on the ground.

Notwithstanding such hiccups, the politicians refrained from a more active role at the operational level. A diary maintained by Chavan

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83 Ibid., 249–51.
shows that the Defence Minister was mostly content being briefed by the Chiefs on the operations. Apart from a couple of occasions where he exhorted the military to press on with the attacks, there is no evidence to suggest that he probed deeply on the conduct of the operations. The military, too, sought to avoid close civilian oversight. As the Defence Minister noted with chagrin when the Indian offensives began to stall, ‘Morning meeting – As usual “nothing special” report was given by the COAS... I must find out why things are not moving’.  

The civilians’ reluctance to intervene in military matters could be carried to absurd lengths. Consider a little known incident from the war. India’s decision to strike across the border in Punjab was leaked to a journalist by a military source a day before the operation started. The MoD learnt of it soon afterwards, and was alarmed at the leak of such sensitive information. In fact, to maintain secrecy, the government had not even informed the President of India and the representative at the United Nations. On inquiring, it was found that the source was none other than General Chaudhuri. Although the Defence Minister was apprised of the matter, the Army chief was not even asked for an explanation, let alone reproved. As the then Defence Minister explained later, ‘In the view of the public outcry since the 1962 debacle about the relative role of politicians and the Services and their chiefs’, the military leadership had been given ‘somewhat of a long rope’.  

Such an attitude proved detrimental in the closing stages of the war. Two weeks into the offensive against Pakistan, Delhi found itself under increasing international pressure for a ceasefire. Chavan consequently sought the Army chief’s assessment of the situation. Chaudhuri asserted that the objectives of the war were achieved. ‘We are on top of the situation (and) if we agree to cease-fire now Army would support it. The respite we will get will be good to put things right as far as supplies were concerned.’ At another meeting that evening the Prime Minister enquired whether they could expect significant military advantage if the war continued for a few more days; if so, he would keep the UN Security Council at bay. Chaudhuri counselled for a ceasefire, claiming that most of the Army’s ammunition had been used and that there had been considerable tank losses. The Indian government accordingly decided to accept the UN proposal for a ceasefire. Chaudhuri should have known better, for at the point ‘only about 14 per cent of India’s frontline ammunition had been fired, and the number

of tanks held by India was twice the number Pakistan had’.\textsuperscript{87} If anything, the logistical situation of the Pakistani forces was parlous. But the earlier reverses had made Chaudhuri rather circumspect, and in consequence he plumped for a ceasefire. The politicians’ refusal to delve deeply into military matters or to ask searching questions resulted in the war ending in stalemate.

Coming in the wake of the fiasco against China, the ambiguous outcome of the 1965 war was hailed as a triumph. The war, it was widely assumed, vindicated the ‘lessons of 1962’. The politicians, too, concluded that spectre of 1962 had been exorcised. ‘The lessons of the NEFA debacle had been well learnt and India’s defence forces had been resurrected from the humiliating debacle.’\textsuperscript{88}

\textbf{Conclusion}

The pattern of civil–military interaction in India is informed by the notion that civilians should eschew involvement in operational matters. As a senior MoD official observed,

\begin{quote}
while the operational directive is laid down by the political leadership, the actual planning of operations is left to the chiefs of staff, and, over the years, a convention has been established that in purely operational matters such advice of the chiefs is almost automatically accepted.\textsuperscript{89}
\end{quote}

This arrangement is sustained by a particular understanding of what had happened during the China crisis and after – an understanding shared by military and civilians alike. In this view, the defeat was the result of extensive civilian interference dating back to 1959. In the subsequent war with Pakistan, it was believed, that the politicians got it right. They set clear political objectives, and let the military get on with their task. The outcome of the war vindicated this pattern of civil-military interaction.

At best, this reading of these events is misleading. For a start, Thimayya’s resignation was the outcome of differences over policy as well as professional issues. Underlying the affair was the military’s inability to conceive of an adequate response to the threat posed by China. Over the next two years, the Army ignored the strategic...

\textsuperscript{87}Chakravorty, \textit{History of the Indo-Pakistan War}, 333–4. Also see, Palit, \textit{War in High Himalaya}, 427.

\textsuperscript{88}Pradhan, \textit{Debacle to Revival}, 299.

\textsuperscript{89}P.R. Chari, ‘Civil-Military Relations in India’, \textit{Armed Forces and Society} 14/1 (Nov. 1977), 13.
problem of countering Chinese incursions, insisting that it would prepare to fight the Chinese well behind the frontiers. By so doing, it almost consigned itself to irrelevance in the face of continued Chinese activity along the borders. If the new leadership at the Army Headquarters went along with the forward policy, it was not merely because the civilians forced them; nor yet because they were complaisant; but because they did not have any viable alternative to offer.

At worst, the conventional account is erroneous. Some of the crucial decisions during the China crisis were taken on the advice of the top military leadership. The Army chief and the Eastern Army commander approved of the operation in Thagla because they considered it militarily feasible. Later, it was on their advice that the Prime Minister decided to suspend the offensive but hold the existing positions. The Army chief’s subsequent eagerness to launch the attack confutes the claim that an unwilling military were ceaselessly pushed by overreaching politicians. To be sure, commanders at lower levels vigorously disputed the top brass’s schemes. But differences between military professionals point to the need for greater civilian involvement in operational matters, not less. Indeed, had the politicians taken a more active interest, they would have realised early on that in implementing the forward policy the military had not catered for adequate reserves in the rear areas. Nehru was aware of the dictum that war was too serious a business to be left to the generals, but failed to grasp its import.

In the aftermath of the war, civilians chose to keep away from operational issues. Contrary to received opinion, this did not have beneficent effects. The war with Pakistan underscores the problems that arise when politicians steer clear of the operational level. For one thing, it led to the adoption of an unimaginative plan, which squandered India’s military superiority. For another, it resulted in ad hoc and uncoordinated responses to Pakistan’s moves. Finally, the civilians’ reluctance to immerse themselves in military details led to a premature ceasefire, arguably depriving India of a more advantageous end state. The experience of the 1965 war does not uphold the view that civilians should concentrate on politics, leaving operations to the military.

This is not surprising, for the fundamentally political character of war makes its management an out-and-out political business. All activities, including those at the tactical level, are pregnant with political implications. Hence, civilian involvement is essential, even if it may not always have a salutary effect. The impact of the norm of

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90 Talk by Nehru on 3 Nov. 1962 cited Palit, *War in High Himalaya*, 278.
civilian abstention on the subsequent conflicts waged by India will have to await further inquiry. Indeed, this is perhaps the least explored aspect of Indian civil-military relations. For now, it is clear that the historical narrative underpinning this attitude and arrangement is at the very least dubious.

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