

CHINA'S INDIA WAR

How the Chinese Saw the Conflict

By Neville Maxwell

(May 2011)

The Chinese leadership was slow to recognise the seriousness of the problems presented to it by the Nehru government's border policy. Soon after the establishment of the Peoples Republic in 1949 its government had recognised border settlement as a problem involving all its numerous neighbours, and had evolved a strategy to deal with it: forswearing irredentist attempts to regain "lost lands", China would accept the border alignments with which history had left it, and negotiate where necessary to formalise and confirm them, in the spirit of "Mutual understanding and mutual accommodation". In the case of India, this meant that India should retain the territory, up to what they called the McMahon Line, which the British imperialists had seized in their final expansionist foray. Zhou Enlai gave assurances to that effect in his several meetings and exchanges with Jawaharlal Nehru in the 1950s, and Beijing foresaw no territorial dispute with India.

Their first inkling of troubles ahead came in 1958 when Beijing found itself accused of "aggression" (an extreme and loaded term in diplomatic parlance) when Indian border guards found a Tibetan/Chinese presence in small tracts claimed by India in what became known as the middle sector of the border. Then an Indian patrol was detected and detained in Chinese-claimed and -occupied territory in the western sector. And in August 1959 an armed clash at a point called Longju on the McMahon Line, in which an Indian border guard was killed, set off an outburst of public and official suspicion and anger against China, not only in India but in the West generally and, critically, in Moscow. So in October that year the Chinese leadership found itself being reprimanded over the Longju incident by the visiting Nikita Krushchev.¹ "Why did you have to kill people on your border with India?" he demanded to know. Mao Zedong replied, defensively, "They attacked us first, crossed the border and continued firing for twelve hours". Krushchev retorted, "Nobody was killed among the Chinese, only among the Indians".

Zhou Enlai came in: "What are we supposed to do if they attack us first? We cannot [just] fire in the air! The Indians even crossed the McMahon Line. Besides, very soon Vice President Radhakrishnan is coming to China – that shows that we are undertaking measures to resolve the issues peacefully by negotiations".

Mao summed up the Chinese position: "The border conflict with India is only a marginal issue, not a clash between the two governments. Nehru himself is not aware of what happened [at Longju]. As we found out, their patrols crossed the McMahon Line. We learned about it much later, after the incident took place. All this was known neither to Nehru nor even to our military district in Tibet. When Nehru learned that their patrols had crossed the McMahon Line he issued orders for them to withdraw. We also worked towards peaceful restoration of the issue."

Zhou continued with those reassurances: “You will see for yourself later that the McMahon Line with India will be maintained and the border conflict will end”. Mao underlined that prediction: “The border issue with India will be decided through negotiations”.

So it can be seen that at that stage the Chinese had failed to grasp the truth behind the border friction and beneath the careful wording in the Indian government’s diplomatic communications. Nehru had decided, well before this and irrevocably as it turned out, that India would never agree to negotiate its borders. And the Longju clash was not accidental but reflected the Indian approach to borders that was later to be named, from the British imperial vocabulary, the “forward policy”, involving here the unilateral amendment of McMahon’s alignment in accordance with Indian convenience. India was treating the territory it claimed as *ipso facto* (by reason of that claim) Indian territory.

The more serious clash in October 1959 at the Kongka Pass on the Kashmir/Xiangkang border, with killed on both sides, had a galvanic effect on Indian public opinion and jolted the Chinese leadership into alarmed attention. Convening again to discuss the border with India, with Army commanders in attendance, they learned that Chinese border guards were experiencing frequent challenges from Indian patrols, and were chafing at orders that denied them the right to “rebuff” them. Mao, perhaps rankling still from Krushchev’s dressing down and certainly recognising that further clashes resulting in Indian casualties would add to the international opprobrium on China, decided that only disengagement of the two sides’ forces would prevent them. He ordered a 20 kilometre withdrawal of Chinese guards all along the border, with a request to be made to India for reciprocation. That request was refused but the proposed withdrawal was implemented by Chinese forces.²

Still, and for at least a year thereafter, the Chinese leadership failed to appreciate the severity of the problem with which India’s assertive and unyielding approach to the border dispute confronted them, apparently expecting that their repeated diplomatic calls for negotiation, and for agreed short-term measures to tranquillise the borders, would ultimately be accepted.

By mid-1961, however, the newly named forward policy of using force, non-violently, to extrude the Chinese from the tracts of territory claimed by India, was beginning to bite in the Western border sector. Indian patrols, conducted now by the Army rather than armed police, were challenging Chinese posts and probing for positions from which to dominate and sever their lines of communication. The unyielding granite in India’s diplomatic refusal to negotiate had been personally felt by Zhou in his abortive summit meeting with Nehru in April 1960. It now began to occur to the Chinese leadership that India might deliberately be making itself an enemy of China – and even be bent on provoking hostilities.

While noting Nehru's long-standing declarations of friendship towards China and welcoming his support for their claims to UN representation, as Marxists the Chinese had always harboured a reserve of distrust of Nehru as a "national bourgeois" politician. As such he was unreliable, and might at any time, for domestic political reasons or to curry favour with China's implacable counter-revolutionary foe, the USA, turn towards enmity. To the Chinese, that seemed to be the only possible explanation for India's aggressive policy and Nehru's bellicose utterances, since conflict with China could not be seen as being of benefit for India.

Toward the end of 1961 a meeting of the Central Military Commission (CMC) was convened to consider the response to India's forward probing. Mao, in the chair, compared those to chess moves. "What should we do?", he asked. "We can also set out a few pawns.... If they then [stop advancing] that's great. If they don't, we'll eat them up. Of course we can't just blindly eat them. 'Lack of forbearance in small matters upsets great plans' [as the saying goes]. We must pay attention to the situation." Orders were issued for Chinese forces to reverse their previous unilateral withdrawal, and for road construction to forward areas all along the border to be accelerated. Mao took the "struggle with India" under his personal control, ordering that no shot be fired from the Chinese side without his prior approval.

In March 1962 the CMC met again to reconsider the border situation. Indian troops were continuing to press forward in the Western sector, attempting to cut off Chinese posts and sometimes opening harassing fire upon them. On the diplomatic front India was meeting every Chinese appeal for a mutual military standstill and negotiations with demands for unilateral Chinese withdrawal from all territory claimed by India. It was decided there should be no retreat under Indian pressure. When Indian troops established positions threatening Chinese posts in the western sector, additional Chinese forces should simply use their great advantage in manoeuvrability and numbers to outflank and dominate them in turn. Thus the two sides would be confronting each other in interlocking, mutually threatening positions. Chinese forces would still be forbidden to fire without permission from the central political authority. Since India was rejecting China's calls for peaceful coexistence, Mao quipped, it should be confronted with "armed coexistence".

The summer of 1962 saw only intensification of that situation. Beijing increased the minatory tone and heat of its diplomatic warnings and made its threats of counterforce more open. Delhi's replies continued to be insouciant and intransigent, Nehru being confident in the assurances from his Intelligence chief and courtier generals that the Chinese were bluffing and would never dare hit back at India. For their part too the Chinese were uncertain about India's motives and ultimate intention. Could it really be true that India, so obviously weaker militarily and at every logistical and tactical disadvantage along the border, would press on to the point of war?

Zhou Enlai directed Chen Yi, now foreign minister, to meet privately with the Indian defence minister, Krishna Menon, when they were in Geneva at an international conference, and sound him out about India's real intentions. Chen reported that

Menon had simply re-stated his government's position: Beijing's complaints were groundless since Indian troops were doing nothing more than advancing into their own territory; the international borders were clearly marked on India's maps and were fixed and final – therefore there was nothing to negotiate. Menon's tone was arrogant, Chen added. Zhou concluded, "It seems as though Nehru truly wants a war with us".

Meanwhile the forward policy had begun to be implemented in miniature in the north-east, with Indian forces advancing across the McMahon Line in such places as the Indians thought it necessary to correct McMahon's cartographic deficiencies. Their reoccupation of Longju in May prompted Beijing to warn that it would not "stand idly by" under such provocation – only to see another Indian post established across the McMahon Line near the trijunction with Bhutan. The Indians named it Dhola post,

But Mao was still not ready to admit that his policy of "armed coexistence" was failing to deter India. In July the CMC reasserted his orders: the Chinese Army must "absolutely not give ground, strive resolutely to avoid bloodshed, interlock [with Indian positions] in a zigzag pattern, and undertake a long period of armed coexistence". That cautious patience was understandable. China's international position was parlous: the Americans were warring in Vietnam, Chiang Kai-shek was threatening to invade the mainland from Taiwan, the Soviet Union was turning hostile. All rational considerations pointed to avoidance of hostilities with India if possible.

On 8 September the Chinese extended their tactic of containment through "armed coexistence" to the recently established Dhola post north of the McMahon Line at its western extremity. An outnumbering force (about 60 troops) was ordered to invest the little Indian post, use threats to induce its withdrawal if possible, and anyway to block further advance. This move was likely to have been made by the sectoral command without consultation with Beijing since it did no more than implement the orders already in effect.

Misreading that move as a deliberate incursion into Indian territory (although the Indian government was aware, of course, that the threatened Indian post was well to the north of the map-marked McMahon Line), Nehru gave orders that the Chinese must be repelled. The Indian Army was given orders to attack the Chinese troops threatening Dhola post and drive them off all the territory there claimed by India. Moreover Nehru publicly proclaimed his order as soon as he issued it,

The Chinese would have recognised instantly that Nehru's announced order meant a radical escalation in the Indian policy which they had been passively containing. Although the Chinese had begun to suffer casualties in clashes in the Western sector there had been no Indian attacks on Chinese positions there; but now Nehru had declared that a determined assault in force was to be launched on Chinese troops – positioned on their own side of the McMahon Line. There was no doubt that any such attack could be thrown back, even wiped out. Controlling the high ground on Thagla Ridge, dominating Dhola post, the Chinese troops could swiftly fortify their

position to make it impregnable. However many troops India put into their attack the Chinese could effortlessly outnumber them. But would such a local victory do China any good?

International public sympathy was with India, whose charge that it was China which had embarked on a program of aggressive expansion and was refusing to negotiate its territorial claims was almost universally accepted -- "Standing truth on its head" as Beijing ruefully described it. A local Indian defeat, with many casualties suffered, would be taken as another demonstration of brutal Chinese aggressiveness; and the Indians, with plentiful American and British support, would only build up for a much stronger attack and a wider war.

On 3 October Beijing sent its final diplomatic warning and plea for immediate, unconditional negotiations: India instantly rejected it. After listening to a situation report of intensifying skirmishing in the west and Indian troop concentrations around Dhola post Mao conceded: "It seems armed coexistence won't work.... Nehru really wants to use force: he has always wanted to seize Aksai Chin [in the western sector] and Thagla Ridge. He thinks he can get anything he desires."

Like a war-horse hearing bugles, he reminisced: "We fought a war with old Chiang Kai-shek. We fought a war with Japan, and with America. With none of those did we fear. And in each case we won. Now the Indians want to fight a war with us. Naturally we don't have to fear. We cannot give ground, once we give ground it would be tantamount to letting them seize a big piece of land equivalent to Fujian province.... Since Nehru sticks his head out and insists on us fighting him, for us not to fight with him would be unfriendly -- courtesy emphasises reciprocity".

Zhou Enlai followed up: "We don't want a war with India. We have always striven to avoid war. We wanted India to be like Nepal, Burma or Mongolia, and solve [border] problems with us in a friendly fashion. But Nehru has closed all roads. This leaves us only with war. As I see it, to fight a bit would have advantages. It would make some people understand us better".

"Right", Mao concluded: "If someone doesn't attack me, I won't attack him. If someone attacks me, I will certainly attack him!" Thus the Chinese leadership decided to take up India's challenge to war. But how to fight and win that war? "What should be our method? What should the war look like?", Mao asked at a subsequent meeting.

What China needed was not a local victory but to inflict a defeat so crushing that India might be "knocked back to the negotiating table", Mao said, or at least taught a lesson that might last thirty years. To that end, China must keep the initiative throughout, deciding when to terminate hostilities as well as when to open them. Crack troops of the Peoples Liberation Army should be deployed, with orders to achieve swift victory regardless of casualties, keeping always within the disputed areas. When all Indian forces in the disputed areas had been destroyed a unilateral

ceasefire would be declared and then PLA forces would withdraw from all territory occupied in the campaign. On 18 October an expanded Politburo meeting approved the PLA's operational plans and set 20 October as the day for action. In terms of international law Beijing could argue that in the circumstances, with Nehru having declared his belligerent intentions and the Indian army having, on 10 October, made its first offensive move in the Dhola area and being steadily reinforced there, China was fully justified in acting in "anticipatory self-defence".

The Chinese campaign went precisely as planned. Mao had over-estimated the prowess of the Indians when he warned the PLA to expect strong resistance from experienced Indian troops. In the event incompetent commanders on the Indian side, obeying politically motivated and tactically foolish directives from Delhi, quickly brought their own troops to defeat and rout. Having achieved total victory in a two-phase campaign Beijing declared its pre-planned ceasefire on 21 November and all Chinese forces withdrew a few weeks later..

The political aims of the "counter-attack in self-defence" were not fulfilled, however. There was no change in the Indian approach, and nearly 50 years later India still refuses to negotiate, while Mao's expectation of a 30 year lull on the borders fell short by five years: in 1987 after a minor confrontation at Sumdurong Chu, not far from Dhola, India again moved troops across the McMahon Line in calculated challenge, and war was narrowly averted. Still today there is no agreed "line of actual control", friction on the borders is constant, the danger of renewed conflict ever-present. India's refusal to negotiate has left it isolated in this regard; every one of China's other contiguous neighbours (except Bhutan) has amicably negotiated a boundary settlement.

[2800 words]

¹ The Minutes of that meeting are in *Cold War International History Project* Vol. 12/13 (Fall/Winter 2001), pp 264-267.

² The China's government has been far more liberal than India's in releasing documentation about the diplomatic and military events around 1962.. The account of the Chinese leadership's thinking and comments here is drawn from John Garver "China's Decision for War with India in 1962" in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, editors, *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, Stanford University Press, 2006, pp 86-130. The writer has drawn on this material previously in his fuller paper, "Forty Years of Folly: What Caused the Sino-Indian Border War and Why the Dispute is Unresolved" in *Critical Asian Studies* 35:I (2003), pp 99-112.