FORTY YEARS OF FOLLY
What caused the Sino-Indian boundary conflict and why the dispute is unresolved

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India’s distrustful animus towards China is a toxic element in world politics, preventing development of what might have been the fruitful and long-lasting entente to which the first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru confidently looked forward in the early 1950s, and which could have been a powerful stabilising factor for Asia. The hostility derives from the Indian political class’s wounded memory of their country’s humiliation in the brief, fierce border war of 1962, which Nehru himself misled them into perceiving as the outcome of Chinese aggression. It is a tragic – or perhaps tragic-comic – underlying truth that the border dispute is factitious, and would be readily resolvable if only India would follow the example of all China’s many other neighbours, and submit the issues to the normal diplomatic procedures for boundary settlement.

The fortieth anniversary of the border war has shown again how ill-served the Indian political class is by those of its intelligentsia who write on that subject. Decades after the full story of the dispute and conflict emerged most of them still hawk the old, disproved falsehoods about an innocent India, victim of a calculated surprise act of aggression by an expansionist China; others creep backwards towards the truth which previously they denied, but their progress is crippled and cut short by their obligation of repeated prostrations to the memory of Nehru. Still others show a curious fickleness in their approach. For example one last year observed accurately that the biggest obstacle to improvement in Sino-Indian relations was the public perception in India of “Chinese betrayal in 1962”, and that in truth “it was India that foolishly provoked China and landed itself in a military disaster” - but the fortieth anniversary found the same writer safely re-enlisted in the “Chinese aggression” school of analysis. To “clear the fog of disinformation” and solve the “mystery” of what happened in 1962 he offered this “truth”: “China took advantage of the then ongoing Cuban missile crisis, when the American attention was diverted, to teach India a lesson” by launching a long-prepared surprise attack.

The belief that India was the victim of an unprovoked invasion by China in 1962 is so “deeply embedded in the Indian psyche” that it now seems unlikely that any evidence or persuasion could remove it. For those interested in analysis rather than needing psychoanalysis, however, it may be helpful to summarise the causes and course of the Sino-Indian border dispute, which still so needlessly deforms relations between New Delhi and Beijing, tracing what brought two great Asian powers whose publics had aspired to friendship to conflict. It is a mocking irony that the story is simple, clear and straightforward.
Jawaharlal Nehru and his officials set the course for conflict with China in the first months after India achieved independence, even before the People’s Republic came into existence – and did so unintentionally, blind to the almost certain consequences of their decision. The problem originated with the McMahon Line, the boundary claim advanced by their British predecessors in the north-eastern sector of the Sino-Indian frontier. It was expressed in a series of diplomatic notes from the Guomintang (GMT) government of China, then at its last gasp but retaining enough vigour to repeat to the new Indian government the protests it had lodged over recent British advances up to that Line, and to demand that they be withdrawn. Those protests, Nehru later recalled, were in his in-tray when he became prime minister and foreign minister of independent India in 1947.

For what were practical reasons of national security, Nehru and his advisers decided that the McMahon Line must be preserved as the north-eastern boundary of India. But – fatally – they further decided that India, once having made the Line good on the ground, would refuse to open the subject to negotiation. Their calculation was that, faced with the accomplished “fact on the ground” of Indian occupation and denied the opportunity to raise the issue diplomatically, the government of China would have no alternative but to acquiesce.

The false logic of that decision was soon after applied to the whole stretch of India’s borders with China, which, as the Indians knew full well the British had left undefined - apart from Sir Henry McMahon’s unsuccessful attempt in 1914 to impose on China his concept of a strategic frontier in the north-east. While no doubt appearing to Nehru as no more than a clever plan to nullify the claims of the Guomintang government and pre-empt others that might be lodged in future, his approach in fact meant that India was arrogating to itself the right unilaterally to decide and impose China’s boundaries. The Indian policy contravened international law: axiomatically, an international boundary cannot be defined solely by the administrative act of one of the adjoining states, the process must be bilateral. Furthermore, it was not only pregnant with disputes but foreclosed the sole means of resolving those disputes peacefully - diplomatic negotiations.

The Indian government then privily researched the history and geography of the borders with China and in the light of those investigations, taking into consideration factors of Indian security, defined what it decided would be its northern boundaries – which would also of course be key sectors of China’s southern boundaries. By 1954 the Indians were ready to represent their unilaterally selected alignments as fixed and final boundaries in new official maps, and Nehru instructed ministries concerned that those lines were to be considered “firm and definite [and] not open to discussion with anybody.”

So far, so good, Nehru might have reflected. In fact, however, he had laid a charge that was soon to explode, inflicting deep and lasting injury on India, on China and indeed to the international community - and destroying his own reputation for peace-seeking statesmanship.

If the boundary claimed by India turned out to be acceptable to Beijing there would be no cause for conflict, although Nehru’s approach made its diplomatic formalisation unattainable. But what if its alignment did not accord with Beijing’s perception of the traditional and historic frontier? And what if a Chinese presence
were found to be within what India claimed as its own territory but was asserted by Beijing as exercising rights springing from the Chinese reading of history? Such a presence could only be regarded by India as adverse and illegitimate and, since there could be no negotiation on the matter, the trespassers would be asked to withdraw and expected to comply. Persistent refusal would elevate the offence, in Indian eyes, from trespass to incursion to aggression. Once the charge of “aggression” was made public, politicians and press would take it up and demand action, armed if necessary, to expel the aggressors. Failure to respond would open the government to logically valid charges that its passivity meant surrender of what the public had been taught to regard as national territory – and therefore military action against China would become an unavoidable political necessity.

Exactly that chain of events ensued and by mid-October 1962 had led ineluctably to a weakly armed, under-clothed and under-fed brigade group of the Indian army being deployed beneath impregnable Chinese positions on a towering ridge a few miles north of the McMahon Line, under orders to attack and throw the Chinese back. Those orders were militarily impossible to implement, but in the event the Chinese did not wait to be attacked but launched their own pre-emptive assault.

To his minute enjoining that India’s newly defined boundaries were “not open to discussion” Nehru had linked an order for action: that “a system of checkposts should be spread along this entire frontier”, especially, he emphasized, “in such places as might be considered disputed areas”. Nehru’s calculation must have been that by forestalling the Chinese he would obviate any chance that China might assert rights of occupancy on the territory in the west to which India had just cartographically laid claim. There were two problems about that policy. The first, that Beijing might not acquiesce in its implementation, Nehru apparently believed had been trumped in the wording of the just-signed treaty on trade in Tibet, which bound China to respect India’s territorial integrity. The second was that the boundaries claimed by India in the western sector were at that time far beyond India’s physical reach.

So while Nehru’s disciple-cum-guru B.N. Mullik, intelligence director, took up the task of establishing the checkposts with zeal, it was five years before the armed police patrols he sent out were able to reach Chinese-controlled areas – which were far forward of the Indian claim-lines. When the patrols did cross into Chinese-claimed territory the Indian view, as expressed by Mullik, was that “once we claimed a territory to be our own we were free to go and open our post there, no matter whether the Chinese disputed our claims and raised protests” It was not only the Chinese who protested and warned about that territorially acquisitive and provocative advance, so did senior officials of the Indian foreign ministry and the army high command. The generals recognised that China would ultimately react to the use of armed force against it with armed force, and thus that Mullik’s adventurism would inevitably involve the army in combat it could only lose. When Mullik’s armed police got the worst of a fire-fight at what the Chinese regarded as their frontier post at the Kongka Pass in November 1959, army headquarters was able briefly to close off his aggressive provocations. (Mullik described the incident, and his resentment and frustration, in his memoirs.)

Those resistant generals were soon replaced in headquarters, however, with courtier-soldiers who gladly embraced Nehru’s approach and ordered their troops to
set up strong-points in Chinese-claimed and -occupied territory in the western sector, with the hare-brained idea of thus gradually extruding Chinese forces and making good India’s claims by a sort of satyagraha with bayonets. So by the spring of 1961 it was Indian troops rather than border police who were coming into confrontation with PLA outposts in a challenge, fore-doomed to self-destruction, now named the “Forward Policy.”

Meanwhile, through his foreign ministry Nehru was implementing his ruling that there could be “no discussion” with China of the boundary alignments India claimed. New Delhi adamantly rebuffed Beijing’s persistent urging that negotiations be opened to define Sino-Indian boundaries through the normal diplomatic process which some of China’s other neighbours had already successfully adopted. Nehru’s refusals meant that the Chinese approach could not get off the ground. Beijing proposed that as a first step there should be an agreement to preserve the status quo, with both sides eschewing any forward patrolling: otherwise the existence of disputes meant that there would inevitably be clashes, with consequent poisoning of relations. But the Indians now asserted that there were no true disputes, and no such thing as “disputed territory”: any and all territory claimed by India was ipso facto Indian and there could be no disputation about it, still less negotiation. Thus in the view from New Delhi an agreement to maintain the status quo by a mutual cessation of all forward probing would amount to tacit recognition of the Chinese claims which India’s maps now showed as illicit.

The deadly logic of the decision which Nehru and his officials had taken about 1947, to make good territorial claims and then refuse to negotiate them, had by 1959 already locked India on to a course that must inevitably lead to armed conflict with China, although it seems they were oblivious of that certain outcome. In late 1961 the Chinese began to understand that they faced what was, from their point of view, an expansionist neighbour which, while refusing to negotiate, persisted in deploying armed force in implementation of irredentist claims.

Until recently Chinese reaction to the provocation of the forward policy have had to be inferred, not a very difficult task since any government facing a military challenge from a weaker neighbour could be expected to react finally by meeting force with force. But direct evidence of reactions in Beijing has recently come onto the record, for example minutes of a summit discussion in Beijing between the Chinese leadership and Nikita Krushchev in October 1959 which touched on the firing the previous August at Longju, an outpost the Indians were trying to set up north of the McMahon Line.

(Here it is necessary to intercalate a note on the McMahon Line. Its origin and fundamental point of reference lie in two sets of maps at a scale of eight miles to the inch, each of two sheets, based on surveys made by British military explorers and spies. On these the foreign secretary of the British Indian government, Sir Henry McMahon, drew in 1914 a line depicting what he hoped he could persuade or bully the Tibetan and/or Chinese delegates at the Simla Conference of that year to accept as a new boundary, advancing the traditional alignment which lay some 60 miles to the south. He failed in that attempt; but in 1936 the British decided that nevertheless they would begin
treating McMahon’s line as if it marked the boundary, and sent out expeditions to begin making it good as such on the ground. The Guomintang government promptly and vigorously protested at those advances, seeing them as intrusions into its own territory, which on their maps (and Britain’s!) had long been shown as extending to the foot of the hills rising from the Brahmaputra valley.

Nehru was apprised of that history and the pending Chinese protests when his government assumed power from the British in 1947 and, as noted above, decided to pursue the British precedent, making it indeed more absolute with the “no negotiations” rider. When, moreover, Indian administrators in the mid-1950s reached the tract along which McMahon had traced his line, New Delhi decided that if McMahon had been better informed about the local topography he would have drawn his line several miles to the north in several sectors. And the Indian government then resolved that it would be that “corrected” version of the McMahon alignment which it would treat as the boundary, and refuse to negotiate.

Neither the first republican nor Guomintang government of China had access to the maps McMahon had presented at the Simla Conference, they were kept privy by the Tibetans until the early 1950s, when, the PRC having reasserted the long-lapsed authority of the central government in Tibet, lama officials produced them from the archives in the Potala. The PRC government then decided, later events prove, that it would treat the McMahon Line as delineated by McMahon as the de facto boundary, ordering its border defence forces not to cross it. The PRC discontinued their GMT predecessors’ protestations about Indian advances up to the McMahon Line, objecting only when, in 1959, the Indians began to cross it.

So, although China was in practice respecting McMahon’s boundary alignment, India’s policy made patrol clashes in small patches of territory north of the McMahon Line inevitable, and the first of those occurred at Longju on 25 August 1959. In its diplomatic protest about the incident the Indian government accused China of “aggression”, and the publication of that note of course immediately began to heat up Indian public opinion.

The Chinese leadership knew from statements made in the USSR when the Longju clash occurred that Moscow disapproved, by implication blaming China for it. But they seem still to have been taken aback by the bluntness with which Krushchev addressed the subject at their meeting: “Why did you have to kill people on the border with India?”, he demanded. That was odd, because so far as is known neither side suffered casualties in the long-range exchange of fire at Longju; but instead of pointing that out Mao meekly replied, “They attacked us first, crossed the border and continued firing for 12 hours”.

Krushchev testily alleges that “Nobody was killed among the Chinese, only among the Indians”.

Zhou Enlai cuts in, again defensively: “But 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.” And he cited an emollient letter he had just sent to Nehru. Other Chinese participants in the meeting interjected more sharply. Zhu De said the McMahon Line “tears away 90,000 square kilometres from China”; Peng Zhen described it as “a dirty line which was not recognised by any government in China”.

Zhou and Mao both emphasized that the Chinese frontier guards returned the Indian fire on their own initiative, Beijing learning about the confrontation only after it had occurred. Mao summed up the basic Chinese position, over-optimistically as it was to turn out:

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 this 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 instructions for them to withdraw. We also worked towards peaceful resolution of the issue.

Zhou was reassuring: “You will see for yourselves 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”. Krushchev welcomed the assurances.

From accounts of the 1962 conflict published in China during the 1990s further stages of the Chinese leadership’s responses to developments in the dispute may be traced. A first scanning of those sources is presented in a paper by the American sinologist John Garver, which is the source for PRC reactions given in the following account.9

At a meeting in Hangzhou in November 1959 China’s top leadership discussed the Longju incident and the far more serious clash that had occurred the previous month at the Kongka Pass in the western sector. They considered a report that Chinese frontier guards were experiencing frequent challenges from Indian patrols and were chafing at the orders which denied them the authority to “rebuff” them. Mao, perhaps still rankled at Krushchev’s dressing down and recognising that further clashes involving Indian casualties would certainly be blamed internationally on China, thought that only disengagement of the two sides’ border forces would prevent them. He therefore proposed a mutual 20 kilometre withdrawal of frontier forces – which should be made unilaterally on the Chinese side if India refused to reciprocate. That policy was implemented by China, in spite of lack of reciprocation on the Indian side. At that point, it is clear, and for at least a year thereafter, the Chinese leadership failed to grasp the seriousness of the problem with which Nehru’s assertive and unyielding approach to the boundary dispute confronted them. And, as noted above, the fire-fight at Kongka La (pass) for a time ended the provocative Indian forward patrolling as it enabled the army high command to rein in Mullik, Nehru bowing for a time to the generals’ warnings.

By the mid-summer of 1961 however the “forward policy” evolved by India’s new army commanders was beginning to bite in the western sector, with Indian army patrols coming into contact with Chinese forces and probing to establish positions cutting off their posts. Now the PRC leadership had begun to appreciate the
intractability of the problem with India because Beijing’s diplomatic calls for negotiations, including letters from Zhou to Nehru, had been rebuffed with the assertion that there was nothing to negotiate, India’s boundaries being already fixed and final. Since Zhou had gone as far as diplomatically possible in those letters and in face to face exchanges in New Delhi in April 1960 to reassure Nehru that China would accept the McMahon Line in negotiations, as it had just done in settling the Sino-Burmese border, it had begun to appear that India might deliberately be making itself an enemy of the PRC, in spite of Nehru’s orations about eternal friendship, and even be bent on provoking hostilities.

Towards the end of 1961 Mao called a meeting of the Central Military Commission (CMC) to consider China’s response to the Indian forward policy, which he compared to moves in Chinese chess. “What should we do?”, he asked: “We can also set out a few pawns … If they don’t then [advance], that’s great. If they do, we’ll eat them up. Of course, we can’t just blindly eat them. Lack of forbearance in small matters upsets great plans. We must pay attention to the situation.” Orders issuing from that conference looked to undoing the 20 kilometre Chinese withdrawal and accelerating road construction in the border areas. Mao took the “struggle with India” under his personal control and ordered that no shot should be fired from the Chinese side without his prior approval.

In March 1962 the CMC convened again to discuss the situation on the borders. Indian troops continued to press forward in the western sector, attempting to cut off Chinese posts and sometimes opening harassing fire upon them. On the diplomatic front, New Delhi was meeting every Chinese appeal for a mutual military stand-still and negotiations with the demand, encoded in diplomatic language but nonetheless absolute, for total Chinese withdrawal from all territory claimed by India. The CMC decided that there should be no retreat under Indian pressure. When Indian troops established posts threatening Chinese positions Chinese forces should simply outflank and dominate them in turn. Thus the two sides would be confronting each other in inter-locking, reciprocally threatening positions: Chinese forces would continue to be forbidden to fire without clearance from above, however. Since Nehru had rejected Zhou’s calls for peaceful coexistence, Mao reflected, then he should have “armed coexistence”: “Nehru wants to move forward and we won’t let him. Originally we tried to guard against this but now it seems we cannot prevent it. If he wants to advance, we might as well adopt armed coexistence. You wave a gun and I’ll wave a gun. We’ll stand face to face and can each practice our courage”.

The summer of 1962 saw only intensification of that situation. The minatory tone and content of Beijing’s diplomatic protests about the forward policy steadily mounted, their threats of counter-force became more open: New Delhi’s replies continued to be confidently insouciant. Nehru, relying on the advice given by Mullik and his military courtiers, believed that the Chinese were bluffing, and took satisfaction in the “annoyance” the forward policy had aroused in Beijing.

A high level meeting between the two sides in July shook the Chinese hope that the policy of “armed coexistence” would contain the Indian challenge – and this incident shows how something seen as trivial by one side could on the other appear as momentous. Zhou instructed Chen Yi, foreign minister, to seek out Krishna Menon when they were in Geneva for a conference on Laos to urge the need to find a
peaceful resolution of the border dispute, and they duly met. In India news of the meeting only intensified distrust of Menon, who was suspected of being “soft on China”. Nehru brushed the complaints aside and dismissed the meeting as irrelevant. In Beijing more serious conclusions were drawn. Chen reported to Zhou that Menon had only re-stated the Indian position, that there could be no border dispute since India’s boundaries were clearly marked on its official maps, and therefore there was nothing to negotiate. When Chen complained about the forward policy Menon had retorted that the Indian army was doing no more than advancing into India’s own territory. Moreover, Chen reported, Menon’s tone was arrogant. Zhou concluded: “It seems as though Nehru truly wants a war with us”.

Taken literally, that conclusion was wholly mistaken. Nehru certainly did not want war. What he wanted, and at this point expected, was victory without war. That under the remorseless pressure of the forward policy the Chinese would, grudgingly but steadily, withdraw from Aksai Chin and thus enable India to fill out to its chosen boundary along the crests of the Kuen Lung mountain range (for which claim, the outstanding Indian analyst of this subject pointed out, there was “no basis in treaty, usage or geography”\(^1\)). But if Zhou is taken to have meant that Nehru’s policy would inevitably lead to war then he was of course quite right.

By summer of 1962 the forward policy in the Western sector was being implemented in miniature in the east, with Indian forces setting up new posts on the Chinese side of the McMahon Line in those places where New Delhi thought it necessary to correct Sir Henry’s cartographical shortcomings. In May they reoccupied Longju, occasioning a heated warning from Beijing that China would not “stand idly by” under such provocation. Defiantly, in July the Indians opened another position across the McMahon Line near the border with Bhutan, which the army named Dhola Post. But Mao Zedong was still not ready to concede that his policy of “armed coexistence” was failing to dissuade the Indians from their advances. In July the CMC reasserted his orders: the PLA should “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.” In August Beijing received a report from the Western sector that Chinese troops, who had already suffered killed or wounded casualties from Indian fire, could no longer block the Indian advance without themselves opening fire. In confrontations in the Dhola and Longju areas of the Eastern sector the Chinese were also taking casualties.

Early in September the Chinese deployed a heavily outnumbering force to confront Dhola Post, and the PLA troops began hectoring its garrison with demands that they withdraw. In that move the Chinese were doing nothing new, but simply applying against the Indian advances across the McMahon Line the tactic of “armed coexistence” which they had developed to contain the forward policy in the west. But Nehru had by this time become so much a captive of his own delusions about India’s right unilaterally to impose exactly its own version of its boundaries, to the last kilometre, that he completely misread the Chinese move. Beijing had argued earlier that year that if it adopted India’s approach it would be justified in applying a “forward policy” of its own by crossing the McMahon Line into India’s North East Frontier Agency. Ignoring the fact, well known to him and his officials, that Dhola Post and Thagla Ridge were miles on the Chinese side of the McMahon Line, he
reacted as if Beijing were now implementing that implied threat, with Chinese forces, not India’s, crossing the Line. The Indian army was therefore given orders to attack the Chinese troops investing Dhola Post, drive them back and occupy Thagla Ridge.

Thus Nehru dropped the forward policy (the essence of which was that the Indians would not attack Chinese outposts but merely outflank and cut them off) and replaced it with orders for a frontal attack on a strongly held Chinese position. And that decision was not kept secret, on 6 September Nehru proclaimed it. At that point, it can be said, Nehru had opted for war, and if he did not do that knowingly he can only have been acting irrationally.

On 3 October Beijing delivered a final diplomatic appeal to India to turn back from war and negotiate. Upon its immediate rejection, and noting Nehru’s revelation of his attack order, the Chinese leadership accepted that the policy of “armed coexistence” had failed. After listening to a situation report describing intensified skirmishing in the west, while in the east Indian troops were concentrating for an assault on Thagla Ridge timed for October 10 (Chinese intelligence was accurate), Mao commented: “It seems armed coexistence won’t work. It’s just as we expected. Nehru really wants to use force. This isn’t strange. He has always wanted to seize Aksai Chin and Thagla ridge. He thinks he can get everything he desires”. He went on:

We fought a war with old Chiang Kai-sheik. 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 not be friendly – courtesy emphasizes reciprocity.

Zhou Enlai added:

We don’t wish for 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. The Chinese appreciated that the Indians posed no immediate military threat. In the west they could apply only pin-pricks and even an all-out attack on Thagla Ridge would easily be beaten back, so strong were the PLA’s positions there, so overwhelming its advantages in numbers, weaponry and communications. But a local victory there, or over the scores of puny Indian positions in the Western sector, could only worsen China’s strategic predicament. The widely shared international perception was expressed by Moscow: “One cannot possibly seriously think that a state such as India, which is economically and militarily immeasurably weaker than China, would really launch a military attack on China and commit aggression against it”11 The logical
conclusion from that premise was that, as the Indians constantly alleged, China must be the aggressor. Consequently local Indian defeats would only be taken as more evidence of China’s aggressiveness, while in reality serving to nourish Nehru’s.

The only resolution to the problem Beijing faced was to inflict on India a decisive, stunning blow on the largest possible scale, limited only by the requirement that the PLA should not advance outside the disputed territories. The military logic and topographical imperatives dictated that the major blow be delivered in the eastern sector, with complementary cleaning-up operations in the west: the declared Indian intention to attack at Thagla Ridge provided just the occasion and justification for decisive action in the east that Beijing needed. On or about 6 October Mao and the CMC decided that such a “defensive counter-attack” would be launched.

Contingency planning and precautionary troop concentrations had necessarily begun before that, and general staff studies of the possible campaign had led to the conclusion that it must be brief as well as decisive. China must throughout keep the initiative, which meant deciding when to terminate hostilities as well as when to open them. To that end, the PLA must deploy crack troops and put them under orders to achieve swift victory at whatever cost in casualties. Once all Indian troops in the disputed territories had been killed, wounded, captured or dispersed into flight, Beijing would declare a ceasefire, implement it unilaterally if necessary, and follow up with troop withdrawals to the previously obtaining lines of actual control. If that punitive foray did not “knock India to the negotiating table” then at least, Mao reflected, China would enjoy 30 years undisturbed on the borders.

On 8 October Beijing notified Moscow that it had learned that India was on the point of attacking its positions in the eastern sector and that when it did so the PLA would counter-attack. (On the 10th the Indian troops made their first offensive move against the Chinese positions on Thagla Ridge.) On 13/14 October Krushchev replied that Soviet intelligence also knew of India’s intention to attack and understood the need for China to take appropriate counter-measures. (While in retrospect some Chinese scholars have attributed that reversal in the Soviet attitude to Moscow’s foreknowledge of the imminent Cuban crisis – and many Indians claim that China’s attack was timed to coincide with that crisis - the chronological evidence contradicts those inferences. It was not until 14 October that the Americans detected the Soviet missile deployment in Cuba, and not until President Kennedy broadcast on the evening of 21 October that anyone outside the White House learned of the danger of war between the USA and the USSR.).

On 17 October, a week after the Indian troops beneath Thagla Ridge had launched their sally preparatory to a full assault, inflicting severe casualties on the Chinese, orders went from Beijing to the area command to prepare to launch the “self-defensive counter-attack”’. The commander of the Indian troops under orders to take Thagla Ridge did not need to be warned of that decision; he had appreciated, on hearing on the radio in September the prime minister’s disclosure of his attack orders, that since “Nehru had declared his intention to attack, then the Chinese were not going to wait to be attacked”.12 On the 18th an expanded Politbureau meeting approved the war decision and the PLA’s operational plans, and the attack was set for 20 October.
Since the Indian force below Thagla Ridge had begun its offensive moves on the 10th, was deployed for further offensive action and being reinforced, and Nehru had announced India’s intention to attack, the Chinese pre-emption was certainly justifiable as anticipatory self-defence under international law and the UN Charter. (Beijing was to obscure that legitimacy by propagating the false charge that the Indians had launched a general offensive on 20 October.)

The unfortunate Indian troops deployed beneath Thagla Ridge put up what resistance they could to the Chinese assault but were overrun in half an hour, as were the most advanced outposts in the western sector. In the eastern sector the Chinese took Tawang without meeting further Indian resistance. On 24 October Beijing offered a ceasefire to be followed by a Chinese withdrawal, conditional on India committing to a subsequent stand-still agreement and negotiations. New Delhi rejected the offer out of hand, and began to build up forces in the north-east for a counter-offensive. That fulfilled Beijing’s expectations and plans - the more troops the Indians concentrated the greater would be their defeat. After a pause for concentration the Chinese renewed their assault and on 21 November, total victory having been achieved in three days of further PLA attacks on both fronts, Beijing declared the pre-planned unilateral ceasefire, to be followed by a general Chinese withdrawal. India now had little choice but to acquiesce. (The American ambassador, J.K. Galbraith, rushed to Nehru’s residence in time to dissuade him from any posturing of Churchillian defiance. He knew that Nehru had been appealing for American assistance to wage all-out war.)

From China’s point of view, its campaign went precisely as planned. Mao, who had warned the PLA that it would be facing experienced Indian troops, over-estimated the prowess of the Indian army. Incompetent commanders, obeying politically motivated and tactically crazy directives from New Delhi, had played everywhere into their enemies’ hands and speedily brought their own troops to defeat and rout. The Chinese were lucky. Even as it was, with Indian troops unsteadied and ill-led, the PLA’s orders to achieve swift victory at all costs meant that its troops often suffered heavy casualties in pressing frontal assaults. If the Indian army had had cool and competent commanders and, after the first defeats below Thagla Ridge, had rallied and concentrated for a stand at a strong, easily supplied defensive position, the Chinese might well have found themselves locked into a costly and protracted campaign of attrition, with the USA and Britain rushing support to India.

In only one aspect did the achievements of China’s pre-emptive and punitive operation fall short of its planners’ hopes: India defeated in battle became if anything even more stubborn in its refusal to negotiate a settlement. No sooner had the Chinese attack been launched than the Indians redoubled their cries of “aggression”. Memory of the previous weeks’ eager expectation of a victorious Indian offensive was obliterated and the debacle was ascribed to a surprise act of treachery from a neighbour India had befriended. India’s political class found in that bizarre inversion salve for the humiliation of defeat, and its government still retells the myth of “Chinese aggression in 1962” when to do so offers political advantage. China did not enjoy quite the 30 years of calm on the borders Mao had predicted, it lasted only 25 years. In 1987, under General Sundarji, the Indian army again crossed the
McMahon Line in deliberate provocations which nearly triggered a second round of India’s China war.

Every Indian government since Nehru’s, except one, has been content to remain in the strait-jacket of his irrational injunctions: no negotiation, no preliminary stand-still agreement – China must surrender the territory India claims. The single exception came in 1993 when prime minister Narasimha Rao and his foreign secretary J N Dixit showed the courage secretly to negotiate with Beijing a treaty to “maintain peace and tranquility along the line of actual control”, in other words to stabilise the status quo (the essential preliminary to negotiations which China had been urging since 1959.) But successor governments relapsed into Nehru’s obduracy and the pacificatory potential of the Rao/Dixit initiative was aborted. The Indians will not agree on a broad-brush definition of the line of control, but persist in bickering over marginal territorial differences as if these were final negotiations. The Indian approach means that a boundary settlement remains as unattainable as ever, and the “peace and tranquillity” on the borders may last only until some Indian government sees advantage in disturbing it.

Nehru was right when he spoke in the early 1950s about India and China being blessed with an absence of possible grounds for conflict, claiming to envision a future of Sino-Indian amity. It was his own irrational, self-defeating policies – his folly – that doomed that aspiration, and their lasting effect leaves the two huge powers still estranged, with festering enmity against China harboured by the Indian political class, first duped, now self-deceived.
For example Brahma Chellany. “Forty years after Indo-China war”, *Hindustan Times* 20 October 2002.


Chellany, loc.cit.

Home minister Patel, in his famous 1950 letter, warned Nehru of the dangers arising from the “undefined” borders with China.

Full documentation relevant to this paper can be found in other works by the writer: *India’s China War* (1970); and a recent full up-dating, *The Chinese “Aggression” of 1962*, available as an offprint from the writer > ngmaxwell@aol.com


Quoted in *The Truth about How the Leaders of the CPSU have allied themselves with India against China* (Foreign Languages Press, Peking 1963) p.13.


As did Prime Minister Vajpayee in 1998 in a letter to President Clinton justifying India’s nuclear weapon tests.