

# India's Defense Strategy: Lessons from and for China

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## Abstract

*The transgressions and clashes at the demarcated border of almost 3,500 kms between India and China have to be seen in the context of the political and military strategies of the two countries in which elements of conflict and cooperation continue to coexist. It seems a part of Chinese strategy to let disputes simmer while it waits for opportune time nationally and globally to strike. Chinese operational tactics is to lure the enemy at its vulnerable points and use PLA's armed mobs to ambush them in the short and swift assaults, without declaring war.*

*On the other hand, India has consistently adopted the strategy of building a strong military befitting the status of a great power. In the current geopolitical context, India has the potential to contribute significantly to a balance of power that maintains international peace and security, and is also helpful in its own rise to the status of a great power. However, as before, China's economic and military strength is still a challenge for India.*

*This article looks into the evolution of defense strategies of India and China since their respective independence in 1947 and 1949, to get a perspective on the overarching framework in which the two countries pursue their national interests. Specifically the article traces the course of development and implementation of India's defense strategy in the context of its relations with China.*

**Keywords:** Defense, Security, Strategy, Military, Diplomacy, Weapons

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## Introduction

Relations between India and China have deteriorated sharply since 15<sup>th</sup> June 2020, when the two armies clashed in hand-to-hand combat in Galwan Valley in Eastern Ladakh, reminding one of “Fourth World War” imagined by Albert Einstein. Twenty Indian army personnel, including a colonel, and unspecified number of Chinese army personnel including a colonel on their side, were killed in the confrontation in which no firearms were used. In terms of casualties, this clash was the most serious since the clash in Nathu La in 1967, in which around 80 Indian army personnel and over 300 Chinese army personnel were killed in artillery, and gunfire between the two armies.

Along with the primitive nature of the combat, it is surprising that in this age of information technology and artificial intelligence, the border between India and China is still not clearly defined or demarcated along its 3,500-km length across the Himalayas which constitute a sort of a natural buffer between the two countries. It also remains a mystery how the officers and personnel of the two armies communicate at the border between the two countries when they don't have mutually approved maps of the area, and when they cannot speak or understand each other's language.

There is more to this issue than what meets the eye. The transgressions and clashes at the border have to be seen in the context of the political and military strategies of the two countries in which elements of conflict and cooperation continue to coexist. It seems a part of Chinese strategy to let disputes simmer while it waits for opportune time nationally and globally to strike. Chinese operational tactics is to lure the enemy at its vulnerable points and use PLA's armed mobs to ambush them in short and swift assaults, without declaring war.

This article looks into the evolution of defense strategies of India and China since their respective independence in 1947 and 1949, to get a perspective on the overarching framework in which the two countries pursue their national interests. Specifically this

article traces the course of development and implementation of India's defense strategy in the context of its relations with China.

### **Battling Colonial Legacy**

The border between India and China had not been and is still not demarcated from point to point throughout its length of almost 3,500 kms from Ladakh in the West to Arunachal Pradesh in the East. Even the LAC agreed to after the 1962 Sino-Indian war is not precisely delineated. In the mountain ranges, several imaginary lines and borders separating the two countries exist which were drawn on maps made by different agencies of Britain, India, and China between 1865 and 1962. Starting from Johnson line in 1865, through the British office Line; MacDonald Line; MacMohan Line: India's Claim Line; and China's Claim line. The perceptual and often one-sided definitions of the international border led to Line of Actual Control after the Sino-India war in 1962.

After independence, India assumed that it had inherited the boundaries of the country from the British. China was reluctant to give legitimacy to anything done by the previous regimes in the country. Theirs was a political and practical approach, in which they seemed to accept the accomplished facts of history as *de facto* controls and not *de jure* claims. Using this approach, they hastened to extend control over what were not accomplished facts of history (Giri, 1999, p.503). Moving fast, they started building Sinkiang-Tibet road in 1951, and completed the 220 Km road in 1957. India did not hear or see anything till the road had been completed and shown in Chinese maps in 1958. Even then, India tried to play down the issue and did not lodge any diplomatic protest (Giri, 1999, p.503).

Speaking at length on India China relations, in Rajya Sabha on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1959, the Prime Minister made a statement which had significant bearing on the subsequent course of mutual relations of the two countries, and the development of India's defense strategy ; "... we have always looked upon the Ladakh area as a different area as, if I may say so, some vaguer area so far as the frontier is concerned because the exact line of the frontier is not

at all clear as in the case of the MacMahon Line. When we discovered in 1958, more than a year, ago, that a road had been built across Yehchong in the north-east corner of Ladakh, we were worried. We did not know where it was. Hon. Members asked, why did you not know before? It is a relevant question but the fact of the matter is that we just are not within hundred miles of that area. It is an uninhabitable area and it has not been under any kind of administration. Nobody has been present there. It is a territory where not even a blade of grass grows, about 17,000 feet high. It adjoins Sinkiang. We sent a party, practically of explorers, small group of six or seven or eight or ten, mountaineers and others, to find out about this. One of the groups of this party was apprehended by the Chinese Government and there was correspondence on this”.

Following this statement on 10<sup>th</sup> September, a note was sent on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1959 to Defense Secretary, Home Secretary and External Affairs Secretary to the effect that “the Aksai Chin area has to be left more or less as it is. We have no check-post there and practically little means of access. Any questions relating to it can only be considered, when the time arises, in the context of the larger question of the entire border. For the present, we have to put up with the Chinese occupation of this North-East sector and their road across the area” (HBR, 2014, p.7).

The Prime Minister’s statement and the subsequent directions had been given after the Chinese had overrun the Indian post at Longju in NEFA on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1959, claiming that it was in the Chinese territory. At a time when China had already shown signs of adventurism and had made incursions into Indian territory NEFA, it was a clear sign of vacillation and self-doubt in India’s defense strategy when the Prime Minister admitted ignorance of the extent of Indian territory in Ladakh and played down the evidence of China’s infrastructure building activities in the region.

A month later, on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1959, the Chinese army ambushed an Indian patrol in Ladakh, in Kongka La, close to the Hot springs and Galwan Valley. These two incidents, with the Prime Minister’s

articulation of India's defense strategy in between, heralded that the might of China had arrived in Ladakh and Tibet. China had made clear that they meant to hold on to their claims, by force if necessary. These incursions also transformed the then dormant borders in Ladakh and Tibet into a live one (HBR, 2014, p.3.) By the end of the next year, China had forcibly annexed a part of the Depsang Plains opposite Daulat Beg Oldie in northern Ladakh, and a total of 7,000 sq. miles of unoccupied territory in this sector. In 1961, China forcibly annexed the pastures between the passes of Lanak La and Dumjor La. China was now seeking and annexing unoccupied territory, which would give it a strategic advantage not only in terms of war, but also for demonstration of strength to condition India into a gradual submission (Khatri, 2017, p. 76).

As the dispute became deeper and the relations between the two countries worsened, a 'Forward Policy' was initiated at the highest levels of decision making in India. In a meeting at Prime Minister's office on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1961, it was decided that:

1. "So far as Ladakh is concerned, we are to patrol as far forward as possible from our present positions towards the International border as recognized by us. This will be done with a view to establishing our posts which would prevent the Chinese from advancing further and also domination from any posts which they may have already established in our territory. This must be done without getting involved in a clash with the Chinese, unless this becomes necessary in self-defence.
2. As regards UP and other Northern areas, there are not the same difficulties as there are in Ladakh. We should, therefore, as far as practicable, go forward and be in effective occupation of the whole frontier. Where there are any gaps, they must be covered by patrolling or by posts.
3. In view of the numerous operational and administrative difficulties, efforts should be made to position major concentration 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.” (HBR, 2014, p.8).

Following these orders, patrolling in the Galwan Valley region by Indian forces was initiated, and a post was established 5th July, 1962 which was subsequently brought upto approximately a platoon strength. Within a week, however, this post was surrounded by some 70 Chinese, and gradually they increased their strength to a battalion. While the Western Command recommended air maintenance of the besieged post, the same was turned down by Army Headquarter which directed that maintenance was to be carried by land route only. Land columns were sent between 15-18 July 1962, but they were intercepted and prevented by the Chinese from reaching the post. The siege of Galwan post ended only on the morning of 20<sup>th</sup> October 1962, when China launched a coordinated attack all along the border and this post was overrun in a matter of hours (HBR, 2014, p. 12).

### **Losing Touch with Reality**

Independent India's first attempt to integrate strategic defense with operational and tactical offense had failed miserably. As India's defense policy and preparation lay shattered, Prime Minister Nehru was compelled to admit that, "We were getting out of touch with reality in the modern world and we were living in an artificial atmosphere of our creation. We have been shocked out of it, all of us, whether it is the government or the people; some have felt it less, some more" (Gopal, 1980, pp. 222-3). The defeat led to an intriguing question in India's defense strategy: how did China manage to occupy and annex vast Indian territory despite Nehru being at the peak of his leadership role in the global stage?

An internal inquiry into the debacle was ordered by the new Chief of Army, Gen. Chowdhary. The inquiry was conducted by Maj. Gen. Henderson Brooks and Brigadier PS Bhagat. The Henderson Brooks Report brought out the political and military naivete,

muddled thinking, contradictions and infighting that prevailed in decision-making structure and the failure of planning and command (Verghese, p. 7). Indian leadership's unwillingness to face the reality of its systemic weakness is also evident from the fact that the Henderson Brooks Report officially still remains top-secret classified document yet to be discussed in the Parliament. The substance of the report was available to London *Times* correspondent Neville Maxwell who used the extracts from the Report in his book *India's China War*. Extracts from the Report are now available online.

From the report we learn that in a crucial meeting with the Defense Minister on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1962, the Chief of Army Staff had cautioned that any action by India in NEFA may result in the Chinese retaliating in the Galwan Valley region. However, the Foreign Secretary was of the opinion that the operation for the eviction of the Chinese from NEFA should be undertaken, even at the expense of loss of some territory in Ladakh (HBR, 2014, p.17). The army was accordingly directed to "throw the Chinese out" from the NEFA region, and "fight it out" in the Ladakh region.

The making of this decision, and all the information, analysis, departments, ministries, and persons who contributed to the making of this decision is itself an area for essential research. From Prime Minister to the Corps Command, through the Defense Ministry, Intelligence Bureau, Army Headquarters, and the Foreign Ministry, a whole system of decision making seems to have been bypassed to give irrational orders which were militarily untenable. "The orders to "fight it out" to those far flung, tactically unsound and uncoordinated small posts brings out vividly how unrealistic these orders were. It is orders such as these that were issued, time and again, that bring out to one's mind whether the General Staff Branch Army Headquarters were in touch with the realities of the situation. It appears that events controlled actions rather than actions events" (HBR, 2014, p. 19).

A shocking aspect of decision making at the highest levels during the conflict, revealed by the Henderson Brooks Report is that of

formation of 4<sup>th</sup> Corps of Army shortly before the Chinese aggression on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1962. The 33<sup>rd</sup> Corps of the Army was responsible for defense of NEFA till 3<sup>rd</sup> October. It had made perhaps the only military planning in this conflict, acting as a bulwark and refusing to be hustled into a gamble that was so obviously militarily unsound, and for its pains it was replaced by the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps” (HBR, 2014, p. 81). All of a sudden, the plan and the preparations recommended by the 33<sup>rd</sup> Corps were sidelined. On 4<sup>th</sup> October, just two weeks before the start of war, it was replaced by 4<sup>th</sup> Corps with Lt. Gen. BM Kaul as Corps Commander. Till a day before, the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps had not been constituted, and the organization had not been formed. Yet it was raised the next day and it was supposed to form, function, conduct operations and aggressively defend the NEFA border against the Chinese army mobilized and waiting there for almost a year.

Brigadier JP Dalvi, who was at the forefront at Namka Chu river with his 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade when the Chinese attacked and was taken as prisoner of war to be released only seven months later, wrote in his book, in the chapter entitled “The End of Make Believe”, that Prime Minister Nehru had himself told the Army Chief that “he had good reasons to believe that Chinese would not take any strong actions against us” (Dalvi, 1979, p. 245). It is thus evident that the decision was taken at the highest level against the military recommendation from the ground, and there was no overall plan to respond to a major Chinese counterattack across the border. The very basis of knee jerk formation and deployment of 4<sup>th</sup> Corps in NEFA rested on wishful thinking of the higher leadership that there will be no retaliation from the Chinese and the government will be able to claim success in defending the borders against Chinese incursions. President Radhakrishnan minced no words when he held the Government responsible for its “credulity and negligence” (Verghese, p.6). There is little doubt that “for the Government of India it turned out to be the Himalayan Blunder at all levels, a failure of the higher direction of war” (Dalvi, 1979, p. 15).

One aspect of the higher direction of war that has not received sufficient attention in study and research on India's China policy so far is the role of Indian diplomacy. Security and defense are not the concerns of military only. In fact, war has long been considered as diplomacy by another means. India's China policy during the Nehru years must be seen as having failed. But before it failed on the borders, it had already failed at the negotiating table. We are yet to probe deeply into the shortcomings of Indian diplomacy in our relations with China. At least on two occasions India's policy was short sighted. First was when we could have negotiated a realistic deal when Nehru acquiesced with the Chinese resuming their suzerainty and jurisdiction over Tibet. Second occasion was when we did not take firm stand against the Chinese early enough when we came to know of their territorial ambitions and transgressions (Dixit, 1998, p. 354).

During his tenure, Nehru was the External Minister also and he was frequently characterized in the Western diplomatic correspondence as lacking "practical realism", and as being "volatile and quick tempered," "effeminate," and "racially resentful" (Graham, & Davis, 2020, p.199). Each of Nehru's three visits to US were seen as "profound disappointment" with lasting impact on Indo-US relations. As a leader, he was regarded as riddled with "uncertainties rather than decisiveness," "wooly and evasive", and singularly unfit to steer India on the right course in the geopolitical context at that time (Graham & Davis, 2020, pp. 210-11). Eisenhower believed that Nehru had a vacillating leadership style, and was swayed more by personality than by logical argument (Graham & Davis, 2020, pp. 219-20). Lester Pearson, Canadian Prime Minister and Nobel laureate branded Nehru as a naïve idealist and hypocrite (Graham & Davis, 2020, p.218). Such views served to confirm the views expressed by Dr. Radhakrishnan, and by the Henderson Brooks Report.

### **Lessons Learnt and Taught**

India's humiliating defeat and loss of vast territory in the war with China made it imperative to review the defense strategy and

operational policies. While the Henderson Brook Report remained classified, its recommendations generally formed the basis of reforms undertaken in the following years. Reorganisation and restructuring of the Army was the first priority. Force deployment patterns were changed on the basis of the lessons learnt from the war. While some sections of the Army were converted into mountain divisions, the Indo Tibetan Border Police which had already been raised with four battalions during the war, was further expanded in strength and role. Subsequently, the entire stretch of India China border was assigned to ITBP for border guarding duty. Along side, another paramilitary force, the Border Security Force was created to manage the first line of defense and ensure continuous monitoring of the defense situation from border observation posts along the borders.

Modernization of the weapons systems of the armed forces was an immediate necessity, considering that Indian soldiers fought the 1962 war with World War II vintage 303 Enfield rifle, while the Chinese were already producing and using Type-56 assault rifles since 1956. It was a copy of Soviet AK-47 rifle, and was being made in millions in state factory and even exported globally for subversion and guerilla warfare. This small arm was a significant factor in China's dispatch of waves of armed mobs across the borders during the war with India. India's indigenous assault rifle INSAS entered production only in 1994, and this too was a copy of AK-47. As indigenous production was a far cry, India took recourse to procurement from foreign suppliers, the major acquisitions of military equipment from foreign countries included the MIG aircraft and T Series tanks from Soviet Union, which subsequently came to be manufactured in India and still constitute the backbone of Indian Army and Air Force.

India's negligence in overlooking the importance and urgency of establishing administrative control over far flung areas in Aksai Chin was an opportunity that China did not miss. China's completion of a road across Aksai Chin in 1957 was a trigger for India China conflict in the 1950's. After the war, India's Border Roads Organisation, which had been created in 1960, was

integrated with Military Engineering Service to build network of roads adjacent to India's frontiers to ensure easy and quick access to forward areas all along the border. The completion of 220 km DBO-Shyok road by the BRO along the LAC in Ladakh in April 2019, is one of the reasons for Chinese troops to revisit Galwan valley after sixty years and try again to sneak into Indian territory and occupy a vantage point overlooking the DBO-Shyok road. Earlier tactics of intrusion, occupation, consolidation, with heavy reinforcement for support in the event of a provoked clash, backfired this time as the Indian forces got immediate reinforcement and responded aggressively.

China's comments with regard to current border incidents, that India should remember lessons of 1962, should remind them of some lessons India has taught them since then. In September 1967, a series of minor construction activities near the mountain pass at Nathu La led to another clash between Indian and Chinese soldiers. As Chinese soldiers opened fire from their bunkers, heavier fire from Indian artillery tactically better located at high ground destroyed most of Chinese bunkers and caused heavy casualties on the Chinese side (Rowand, 2020). For next twenty years Sino-Indian border remained peaceful, till it erupted again in 1986 and met with even stronger Indian response. Faced with Chinese intrusion in Sumdorong Chu region, the then Indian Army Chief General Sundarji launched Operation Falcon and used Russian MI-26 helicopters to airlift and land a brigade to take up positions on Hathung La ridge overlooking Sumdorong Chu. As the standoff continued, Sundarji further strengthened Indian forces all across the Himalayan border. Aggressive posture and standoff for almost nine months yielded results and bilateral negotiations resolved the dispute (Joshi, 2017).

### **Evolving Defense Strategy**

The 1962 war between India and China was more than a border war. It was not a misadventure on the part of either of them. Instead, it was a clash of ambitious strategies of two newly independent states aspiring to play a big role in regional and

international politics. Jawahar Lal Nehru, the maker of India's foreign policy during the early years, had written even before independence that India and China were capable of joining America, Soviet Union and Britain as great powers, and India's potential resources were probably greater than China's (Sondhi, 1994, p. 44). He also saw convergence of interests among the Asian nations, particularly India and China, and he wanted that "the affairs of Asia be handled by a China-India axis (Sondhi, 1994, p.51). This strategy of keeping the super powers out of Asia and building a China-India axis as another pole in the balance of power in international politics confirmed that India was a balance of power actor steeped in Anglo-American tradition (Kapur, 1971, p.75).

In keeping with the objective of achieving rightful place for India in the community of nations and the potential capability to play a constructive role in promoting peace and development in Asia and the world, India pursued a policy of building its industrial and technological strength to serve the cause of peace and development. The policies for building heavy industry, nuclear and space research, and conventional arms were initiated in the early decades and were meant to achieve rapid industrialization of the country, which was good from the economic point of view as well as for defense. However, India did not seem to have a clear connection between its long term strategy and operational tactics to defend itself before it was strong enough (Sondhi, 1994, p. 47).

On the other hand, Mao-Tse tung did not quite share Nehru's vision of Sino-Indian cooperation and friendship leading to an era of peace and development in the Asian region. The Chinese leadership was more pragmatic and focused sharply on its territorial integration and strategic interests. Barely two years after Chinese independence, it initiated work on border roads linking far flung areas of Tibet and Sinkiang. The Chinese leadership believed, and still believes, that their destiny is to be the most important Asian power and to become one of the greatest powers of the world" (Dixit, 1998, p. 353).

To achieve its objective, China adopted a pragmatic and dynamic policy of aligning with the super powers in the cold war period. During the first two decades of its independence, it relied completely on Soviet capital and technology for industrial and military development. Soviet assistance ranged from scientific and technical education to project design, and product engineering to the creation of modern industrial and military organization. After the Sino-Soviet border conflict in 1969 over Zhenbao island in Ussuri river, in which China used the strategy of “Man over Weapons” to overwhelm Soviet military, China emerged as an aspiring power in its own right. In the heyday of non-alignment, in 1972, China entered into economic and technical cooperation with the United States to modernize its industrial capabilities through selective engagement with market economy.

While China achieved nuclear capability in 1964, India conducted peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974 and declared nuclear capability in 1998. Both countries have a declared nuclear strategy of “No first Use”, and “Credible Minimum Deterrence”. India has been a strong advocate of complete and universal disarmament and has played a key role in UN initiatives for nuclear disarmament. India has not been engaged in arms race with any country, even when Pakistan has reportedly more warheads. While India keeps its nuclear capability at the minimum level required for effective deterrence, its current nuclear doctrine allows the advantage of adapting interpretation of effective deterrence to counter any threat to its security and defend itself in whatever manner it deems fit (Vij, 2017 p.13). China, too, has made “no promise to renounce the use of force and reserve(s) the option of taking all measures” (PRC, 2019, p.5).

India has consistently adopted the strategy of building a strong military befitting the status of a great power. Drawing lessons from its wars with China and Pakistan, India has continuously upgraded its military equipment and organization. As Prime Minister, Modi stressed in his address to the armed forces in Ladakh on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020, a strong military in India is not only an assurance of security of the country but it is also a strong force for

world peace. Towards this end, effective steps have been taken to build strategic relationships with the US, Russia, France, and Israel, to procure most modern weapons for the Indian armed forces to build strong defense capabilities for the country and the region.

A quick look at the global geopolitical context shows that in recent years international strategic competition is on the rise. Russia's military doctrine of 2014 gives an impression of going back to the great power doctrines of the past. "In the manner of Monroe doctrine, it sends Western powers the message that Russia's neighborhood should be regarded as its sphere of influence, which Moscow is ready to defend, if necessary by all means". (Sinovets & Renz, 2015, p.11). Taking note, the US National Defense Strategy of 2018 declared that "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security. China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbours while militarizing features in the South China Sea. Russia has violated the borders of nearby nations and pursues veto power over the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of its neighbours" (US, 2018, p.1). China as the new entrant in this strategic competition sees in its Defense Paper 2019 opportunities, "as the realignment of international power accelerates and the strength of the emerging markets and developing countries keeps growing, the configuration of strategic power is becoming more balanced" (PRC, 2019, p.1).

India would have loved to play this game at the high table, but so far, its lack of sufficient economic and military power has kept it on the sidelines of great power games.

Nevertheless, in the current geopolitical context India has the potential to contribute significantly to a balance of power that maintains international peace and security, and is also helpful in its own rise to the status of a great power. This is something like what Nehru tried to do in the 1950s and tripped over the Chinese hurdle. As before, China's economic and military strength is still a challenge for India. However, India has learnt the lesson well and

can now teach China a lesson or two even with current resource disparities and capability gaps.

Sharpened integration of operational and tactical offense with the defense strategy, selective investment push in weapon's acquisition and organizational modernization, closer security partnerships with the US and Russia, and above all unflinching determination and political will, have put India in a position from where it can look China in the eye with strength. If acquisition of S-400, Rafael, Apache, Chinook, Globemaster, and Hercules in recent years from Russia, France, and the US is any indication, India is on the right path of building its strength through important strategic partnerships in time to face renewed and recurring challenges from China. The current standoff in Ladakh is a test of will in which India has dared to stand up against China's bullying tactics. This is an opportunity for Indian leadership to let the standoff continue into 2021, galvanise the Northeast and Ladakh regions with the nation and use the immense power of a country of 1300 million for security, peace and development of the India and the world. India now has a sagacious 'higher direction of war'.

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