

A GAME OF CHESS IN THE HIMALAYAS

In the standoff with China, India has two choices — walk into the trap that has been laid, or learn from the 1962 event

With the tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) refusing to die down, despite the marathon military and diplomatic-level talks, the obvious question that stares at every stakeholder is this: is 2020 another 1962? While the future is uncertain, the present is undoubtedly tense. As stated by India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, this is "surely the most serious situation" along the India-China border "after 1962".

The parallels are hard to ignore. In August 1959, after the first border clash between Indian and Chinese troops in Longju, in the eastern sector, China said Indian troops had crossed the McMahon Line and opened fire, and the Chinese border guards had fired back. The next day, New Delhi protested against the Chinese statement, saying it was Chinese troops that had moved into Indian territory and opened fire. Sixty-one years later, the statements issued by India and China after the border clashes are eerily similar. Both sides accuse each other of transgressing across the LAC. Both sides accuse each other of opening fire. Both sides blame each other for the current standoff.

The trigger

What led to the war? To understand the current tensions, one has to go back in history. When the Longju incident happened, not many in India might have thought the border tensions would lead to a full-scale Chinese invasion. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Defence Minister V.K. Krishna Menon were absolutely certain that China would not attack India. Nehru had bet big on India's friendship with China. He saw both countries as victims of imperialism and the natural leaders of Asia. The realist in Nehru believed that peace on India's northern border was an imperative for the newly-born republic's rise and material development. So in the 1950s, Nehru continued to defend China in international fora. India accepted Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and signed an agreement with Peking over trade with Tibet. But what Nehru hoped in return for India's friendship was China respecting its bequeathed boundaries — the McMahon Line in the east and the frontier (based on the 1842 Tibet-Kashmir agreement) in the west. Nehru was wrong.

The first setback to this position was the Longju incident. Within two months, an Indian police patrol team in Kongla Pass in Ladakh came under Chinese attack. This was a wake-up call for Nehru. He asked Chinese troops to withdraw from Longju in return for an assurance from India not to reoccupy the area and proposed that both sides pull back from the disputed Aksai Chin, where China had already built (unilaterally) a strategic highway. China rejected this proposal and made a counter offer — to recognise the McMahon Line in the east in return for India's recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Aksai Chin. Nehru, having checked the historical maps, documents, including revenue records and land surveys, which he got from the India Office in London, rejected the Chinese offer because he thought it would mean India abandoning its legitimate claims over Aksai Chin. After the collapse of the Nehru-Zhou Enlai [Chou en Lai] talks in 1960 in Delhi, tensions escalated fast. China intensified patrolling along the border. In November 1961, Nehru ordered his Forward Policy as part of which India set up patrol posts along the LAC, which was seen as a provocation in Beijing. In October 1962, Mao Zedong ordered the invasion.

The parallels

The situation today is not exactly the same as 1962. Back then, the Tibet factor was looming over India-China ties. As soon as the Dalai Lama took refuge in India, Chinese leaders, including Deng Xiaoping, had threatened "to settle accounts" with the Indians "when time comes". China also feared that India was providing help to Tibetan rebels, after the 1959 rebellion. Today, both sides have managed to sidestep the Tibetan question in their bilateral engagement. And unlike in 1962, when India was not politically and militarily prepared for a war with China, today's conflict is between two nuclear powers. But the problem is this; while the overall situation is different, the border conflict looks similar to what it was in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The boundary has still not been delimited and demarcated. China has not recognised the McMahon Line and India has not accepted China's control over Aksai Chin.

Despite the volatile situation, an uneasy truce prevailed on the border at least since 1975 and both sides have made improvements in ties since Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in 1988. This

period of truce allowed both countries to focus on their development. But that truce has now been disrupted with China first moving to block Indian patrolling in the Finger area of Pangong Tso and the Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh during the summer. India then made a forward move on the southern banks of Pangong Tso last month, similar to Nehru's Forward Policy in 1961, taking over the heights of the Kailash Range. When Nehru ordered the Forward Policy, his aim was to secure the vast border and prevent further incursions. He never thought China would attack. Now, despite the experience of 1962, India appears to be taking a calculated risk by making forward movements. This led to the opening of fire in the region, for the first time in 45 years. So, practically, the border situation is back to what it was in 1961.

Strategic dominance

In the run-up to the 1962 war, Mao had taken a "unity and struggle" policy towards India. This meant, laying emphasis on unity with India on mutually agreeable matters while continuing the struggle over the border issue. Nehru failed to understand the gravity of this approach. He first saw only unity, and, after the Longju and Kongla clashes, he saw only struggle. China, on the other side, consistently played what game theorists call the game of "strategic dominance"—the strategy which would yield positive outcomes, irrespective of the strategies of the rival player. Back then, China saw itself as the most powerful force in Asia. Japan had been devastated by the war. The British withdrawal and the partition of the subcontinent had changed the geopolitical balance in the continent. Mao was facing challenges to his leadership within the party after the disastrous Great Leap Forward. Globally, there were cracks in the Sino-Soviet alliance, especially after the Soviet intervention in Hungary. When it set the ball of border tensions rolling, it knew that the ultimate risk would be a limited war and it was ready to take that risk because even in the event of a war, China calculated that it could retain its strategic dominance. And it did so in 1962.

Understanding China's moves

The Chinese strategy today is not very different from that of the 1960s. Now, China considers that it has arrived on the global stage as a military and economic superpower. The COVID-19 outbreak has battered its economy, but it is recovering fast. India, on the other side, is in a prisoner's dilemma on how to tackle China. India is a big, rising power, but is going through short-term challenges. Its economy is weak. Its geopolitical standing in the neighbourhood is not in its best days. Unlike in the 1960s, when Nehru's non-alignment was blamed for Chinese aggression, today's India has cautiously moved toward the United States. But still, there is no guarantee that it would deter China or if the U.S. would come to India's help in the event of a war. A combination of all these factors might have led China to believe that it can play the game of strategic dominance once again. If India plays it on China's terms, there will be war. The question is whether it should walk into the trap laid in the Himalayas, or learn from the experiences of 1962.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

- ❖ **standoff** (noun) – deadlock, stalemate, impasse (in a dispute/conflict).
- ❖ **trap** (noun) – trick, ploy, deceptive plan.
- ❖ **die down** (phrasal verb) – come to an end, stop, dwindle, diminish/reduce.
- ❖ **diplomatic** (adjective) – (delicate & sensitive) consular, foreign-policy.
- ❖ **Line of Actual Control (LAC)** (noun) – the de-facto (effective) border between India and China. The LAC is a 4,057-km border running through three areas-Western (Ladakh, Ladakh (Kashmir)), middle (Uttarakhand, Himachal) and eastern (Sikkim, Arunachal).
- ❖ **setback** (noun) – problem, difficulty, issue.
- ❖ **stare at** (verb) – look fixedly, gaze, watch closely.
- ❖ **stakeholder** (noun) – a person with an interest in something.
- ❖ **uncertain** (adjective) – unsure, doubtful, dubious, unreliable.
- ❖ **tense** (adjective) – agitated, disturbed, panicky, in a state of agitation.
- ❖ **parallel** (noun) – similarity, comparison, resemblance.
- ❖ **McMahon line** (noun) – the demarcation line between Tibet and the North-east region of India proposed by British colonial administrator Sir Henry McMahon at the 1914 Simla Convention signed between British and Tibetan representatives. It is the effective boundary between China and India.

- ❖ **eerily** (adverb) – peculiarly, oddly, in a strange and frightening way.
- ❖ **transgress** (verb) – breach, violate, disobey, contravene.
- ❖ **trigger** (noun) – cause, reason.
- ❖ **full-scale** (adjective) – thorough, comprehensive, extensive, complete.
- ❖ **invasion** (noun) – attack, assault; violation, infringement, breach.
- ❖ **absolutely** (adverb) – definitely, positively, unconditionally, categorically; decisively, conclusively, manifestly.
- ❖ **certain** (adjective) – sure, confident, convinced.
- ❖ **bet** (verb) – be certain, be sure, be convinced, be confident.
- ❖ **bet big on something** (phrase) – to provide a lot of support to something with a lot of risk involved (i.e., if it is not successful in the end, you will risk losing something else).
- ❖ **imperialism** (noun) – an action that involves a country (usually an empire or a kingdom) extending its power by the acquisition of territories.
- ❖ **realist** (noun) – a person who acknowledges a situation and gets ready to tackle it accordingly.
- ❖ **imperative** (noun) – necessary condition, precondition, essential requirement.
- ❖ **material development** (noun) – it is defined as “both a field of study and a practical undertaking” in which theory and practice interact with one another.
- ❖ **fora** plural form of **forum** (noun) – assembly, gathering, conference.
- ❖ **sovereignty** (noun) – authority, supreme power, domination.
- ❖ **Peking** (noun) – former name of Beijing, the capital city of the People’s Republic of China.
- ❖ **bequeathed** (adjective) – granted, transferred, entrusted (by a will).
- ❖ **frontier** (noun) – boundary, borderline, border.
- ❖ **patrol** (noun) – watching/guarding an area (over a period of time).
- ❖ **pass** (noun) – a navigable (passable) route (road/passage) through a mountain range.
- ❖ **come under** (phrasal verb) – be subjected to.
- ❖ **wake-up call** (noun) – something which alerts a person to a problem and makes him/her to do some remedial action.
- ❖ **pull back** (phrasal verb) – withdraw, retreat, disengage.
- ❖ **Aksai Chin** (noun) – a territory in Ladakh, is under illegal Chinese occupation.
- ❖ **counter** (adjective) – contrary, adverse, conflicting, opposed.
- ❖ **unilaterally** (adverb) – used to indicate something done by a person/country without approval/agreement from other people/countries involved in the situation.
- ❖ **legitimate** (adjective) – valid, reasonable, reliable.
- ❖ **escalate** (verb) – increase, rise, intensify, heighten.
- ❖ **forward policy** (noun) – a set of foreign policy doctrines applicable to territorial ambitions and disputes in which emphasis is placed on securing control of targeted territories by invasion and annexation or by the political creation of compliant buffer states.
- ❖ **set up** (phrasal verb) – establish, start/begin, inaugurate, create.
- ❖ **post** (noun) – border outpost, a military base/camp, command post (for border patrol).
- ❖ **provocation** (noun) – stirring, goading, instigation, agitation.
- ❖ **loom** (verb) – emerge, appear, become visible, reveal itself, take a threatening shape.
- ❖ **ties** (noun) – bond, association, relationship.
- ❖ **refuge** (noun) – protection, shelter, place of safety, place of security.
- ❖ **settle accounts with** (phrase) – retaliate, get one’s revenge, reciprocate, give someone a taste of their own medicine.
- ❖ **rebellion** (noun) – defiance, disobedience, dissent, nonconformity, subversion.
- ❖ **sidestep** (verb) – avoid, evade, dodge, escape.
- ❖ **bilateral** (adjective) – involving two groups or countries.
- ❖ **engagement** (noun) – participation, taking part, involvement.
- ❖ **delimit** (verb) – define, delineate, determine, demarcate, mark off, mark out (boundary).
- ❖ **volatile** (adjective) – unpredictable, turbulent, uncertain, inconstant.
- ❖ **truce** (noun) – an ad-hoc (temporary/makeshift) arrangement, arrived at by the combatants (fighters), to pause the fighting.
- ❖ **prevail on/upon** (verb) – persuade, induce, influence, prompt.
- ❖ **Finger area** (noun) – The 134 km of Pangong Tso lake’s northern bank juts/extends out like a palm, and the various protrusions/projections are identified as “fingers” to demarcate territory. While India asserts that the LAC (Line of Actual Control) starts at Finger 8, China claims it starts at Finger 2, which India dominates.

- ❖ **Valley** (noun) – a low area between hills or mountains typically with a river running through it. Valley is a metonym of Jammu & Kashmir in this context (Metonym is used as an alternative for something else with which it is closely related/associated).
- ❖ **take over** (phrasal verb) – assume control of, take charge of, take command of.
- ❖ **height** (noun) – a high place or area.
- ❖ **range** (noun) – a line or series of mountains.
- ❖ **incursion** (noun) – invasion/attack; it is the act of entering another's territory; And it is the sudden arrival of someone into an area where they do not belong.
- ❖ **calculated** (adjective) – intentional, purposeful, preconceived, deliberate.
- ❖ **strategic dominance** (noun) – the strategy which would yield (give) positive outcomes, irrespective of the strategies of the rival player.
- ❖ **run-up to** (noun) – a period of time just before an important event.
- ❖ **lay emphasis on** (phrase) – to emphasize the importance of something.
- ❖ **gravity** (noun) – seriousness, importance/significance, severity.
- ❖ **yield** (verb) – give, provide, produce.
- ❖ **irrespective of** (adjective) – notwithstanding, without regard for, regardless of.
- ❖ **devastate** (verb) – wreck, ruin, destroy; shatter, traumatize, distress.
- ❖ **geopolitical** (adjective) – relating to the study of the geographical factors (a country's position on the earth, size, climate, and natural resources & etc.,) in world politics and interstate relations.
- ❖ **Great Leap Forward** (noun) – The Great Leap Forward of the People's Republic of China was an economic and social campaign led by the Chinese Communist Party from 1958 to 1962. Chairman Mao Zedong launched the campaign to reconstruct the country from an agrarian economy into a modern industrial society with greater ability to compete with Western industrialized nations. But, the Great Leap Forward resulted in one of the world's worst famines and turned into a national disaster; in all, about 20 million people were estimated to have died. It was the largest single, non-wartime campaign of mass killing in human history.
- ❖ **crack** (noun) – split, break, fracture, rupture.
- ❖ **set the ball rolling** (phrase) – make a start, initiate, embark on, get cracking, start business.
- ❖ **intervention** (noun) – the process of intervening in something; involvement, interference.
- ❖ **arrive** (verb) – succeed, achieve success, be successful, reach the top.
- ❖ **superpower** (noun) – a nation which is very powerful and possesses military, political or economic might (power) with dominant status on the globe. (like the Soviet Union (erstwhile) or United States of America).
- ❖ **outbreak** (noun) – sudden appearance/occurrence, outburst, flare-up.
- ❖ **batter** (verb) – damage, spoil, impair/ruin; smash, hit/strike repeatedly.
- ❖ **prisoner's dilemma** (phrase) – it is a classic game theory which examines how two players interact based on an understanding of motives and strategies. Both players benefit most by cooperating with each other. If both players act in their own self-interests, they do not produce the optimal outcome.
- ❖ **go through** (phrasal verb) – undergo, experience, face.
- ❖ **standing** (noun) – position, good reputation, status.
- ❖ **non-alignment** (noun) – a term used for an international organization who do not want to officially align themselves with, or against, any major power bloc (group of countries).
- ❖ **aggression** (noun) – hostility, belligerence, combativeness, warmongering, hawkishness.
- ❖ **deter** (verb) – prevent, stop, put off/discourage.
- ❖ **on someone's terms** (phrase) – according to someone's conditions; according to how someone considers or understands something.
- ❖ **term** (noun) – condition.