

NUNAWADING MILITARY HISTORY GROUP

MINI NEWSLETTER No. 20

SINO INDIAN WAR OF 1962

The Sino-Indian War, also known as the Indo-China War and Sino-Indian Border Conflict, was a war between China and India that occurred in 1962. A Chinese disputed Himalayan border was the main cause of the war. There had been a series of violent border skirmishes between the two countries after the 1959 Tibetan uprising, when India granted asylum to the Dalai Lama. India initiated a defensive Forward Policy from 1960 to hinder Chinese military patrols and logistics, in which it placed outposts along the border, including several north of the McMahon Line, the eastern portion of the Line of Actual Control proclaimed by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1959.

The India-China border is divided into three sectors, viz. Western, Middle and Eastern.

Western Sector – dispute pertains to the *Johnson Line* proposed by the British in the 1860s that extended up to the Kunlun Mountains and put Aksai Chin in the then princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (or the Chinese province of Xinjiang). Independent India used the Johnson Line and claimed Aksai Chin as its own. However, China stated that it had never acceded to the Johnson Line.

Middle Sector – the dispute is a minor one and is the only one where India and China have exchanged maps on which they broadly agree.



Eastern Sector – dispute is over the *MacMahon Line*, (formerly referred to as the North East Frontier Agency, and now called Arunachal Pradesh) which was part of the 1914 Simla Convention between British India and Tibet, an agreement rejected by China. Till the 1960s, China controlled Aksai Chin in the West while India controlled the boundary up to the McMahon Line in the East.

In 1960, based on an agreement between Nehru and Zhou Enlai, Chinese minister, discussions held by Indian and Chinese officials in order to settle the boundary dispute failed. The 1962 Sino-Indian War was fought in both of these areas.

1959 Tibetan uprising:

- China's occupation of Tibet began in October 1950, when troops from its People's Liberation Army (PLA) invaded the country.
- The Tibetan government gave into Chinese pressure and signed a treaty that ensured the power of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the country's spiritual leader, over Tibet's domestic affairs.
- As a resistance to the Chinese occupation, there was a revolt in several areas of eastern Tibet in 1956.
- By December 1958, rebellion was simmering in Lhasa, the capital, and the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) command threatened to bomb the city if order was not maintained.
- The March 1959 uprising in Lhasa was triggered by fears of a plot to kidnap the Dalai Lama and take him to Beijing.
- Chinese military officers invited Lama to visit the PLA headquarters for a theatrical performance and official tea, but with no Tibetan military bodyguards or personnel.
- On March 10, 300,000 loyal Tibetans surrounded Norbulinka Palace, preventing the Dalai Lama from accepting the PLA's invitation.

- By March 17, Chinese artillery was aimed at the palace and the Dalai Lama was evacuated to neighboring India.
- Fighting broke out in Lhasa two days later, with Tibetan rebels outnumbered and outgunned.
- In the aftermath, the PLA cracked down on Tibetan resistance, executing the Dalai Lama's guards and destroying Lhasa's major monasteries along with thousands of their inhabitants.

Forward policy of India:

- At the beginning of 1961, Nehru appointed General B.M. Kaul who was influential in all army decisions.
- Kaul reorganized the general staff and removed the officers who had resisted the idea of patrolling in disputed areas.
- In the summer of 1961, China began patrolling along the McMahon Line and entered parts of Indian-administered regions.
- After May 1961 Chinese troops occupied Dehra Compass and established a post on the Chip Chap River.
- The Chinese, however, did not believe they were intruding upon Indian territory.
- In response, the Indians launched a policy of creating outposts behind the Chinese troops so as to cut off their supplies and force their return to China.
- This has been referred to as the "Forward Policy".
- There were eventually 60 such outposts, including 43 north of the McMahon Line.
- Indian posts and Chinese posts were separated by a narrow stretch of land.
- China had been steadily spreading into those lands and India reacted with the Forward Policy to demonstrate that those lands were not unoccupied.
- The initial reaction of the Chinese forces was to withdraw when Indian outposts advanced towards them which encouraged the Indian forces to accelerate their Forward Policy even further.
- In response to Indian outposts encircling Chinese positions, Chinese forces would build more outposts to counter-encircle these Indian positions, which resulted in chessboard-like deployment of Chinese and Indian forces.
- However, no hostile fire occurred from either side as troops from both sides were under orders to fire only in defense.

International response during the conflict:

- Western nations at the time viewed China as an aggressor and the war was part of a monolithic communist objective to dictate the world.
- The United States was unequivocal in its recognition of the Indian boundary claims in the eastern sector, while not supporting the claims of either side in the western sector.
- During the conflict, Nehru wrote two letters to the U.S. President John F. Kennedy, asking for 12 squadrons of fighter jets and a modern radar system.
- He had also asked that these aircraft be manned by American pilots until Indian airmen were trained to replace them.
- These requests were rejected by the Kennedy Administration.
- The U.S. provided non-combat assistance to Indian forces and planned to send the carrier USS Kitty Hawk to the Bay of Bengal to support India in case of an air war.
- As the Sino-Soviet split heated up, Moscow made a major effort to support India, especially with the sale of advanced Mig warplanes.
- India and the USSR reached an agreement in August 1962 (before the Cuban Missile Crisis) for the immediate purchase of twelve MiG-21s as well as for Soviet technical assistance in the manufacture of these aircraft in India.
- Britain agreed with the Indian position completely.
- The non-aligned nations remained uninvolved, and only the United Arab Republic openly supported India.
- Of the non-aligned nations, six, Egypt, Burma, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Ghana and Indonesia didn't unequivocally condemn China which deeply disappointed India.
- Pakistan, which had had a turbulent relationship with India ever since the Indian partition, improved its relations with China after the war.

Military planning

The Indian side was confident war would not be triggered and made little preparations. India had only two divisions of troops in the region of the conflict. In August 1962, Indian Brigadier D. K. Palit claimed that a war with

China in the near future could be ruled out. Even in September 1962, when Indian troops were ordered to "expel the Chinese" from Thag La, Indian Divisional Commander Maj. General J. S. Dhillon expressed the opinion that "experience in Ladakh had shown that a few rounds fired at the Chinese would cause them to run away." Because of this, the Indian army was completely unprepared when the attack at Yumtso La occurred.

Recently declassified CIA documents which were compiled at the time reveal that India's estimates of Chinese capabilities made them neglect their military in favour of economic growth. It is claimed that if a more military-minded man had been in place instead of Nehru, India would have been more likely to have been ready for the threat of a counter-attack from China.

On 6 October 1962, the Chinese leadership convened. Lin Biao reported that PLA intelligence units had determined that Indian units might assault Chinese positions at on 10 October (Operation Leghorn). The Chinese leadership and the Central Military Council decided upon war to launch a large-scale attack to punish perceived military aggression from India. In Beijing, a larger meeting of Chinese military was convened in order to plan for the coming conflict.

Mao and the Chinese leadership issued a directive laying out the objectives for the war. A main assault would be launched in the eastern sector, which would be coordinated with a smaller assault in the western sector. All Indian troops within China's claimed territories in the eastern sector would be expelled, and the war would be ended with a unilateral Chinese ceasefire and withdrawal, followed by a return to the negotiating table. India led the Non-Aligned Movement, Nehru enjoyed international prestige, and China, with a larger military, would be portrayed as an aggressor. He said that a well-fought war "will guarantee at least thirty years of peace" with India, and determined the benefits to offset the costs.

China also reportedly bought a significant amount of Indian rupee currency from Hong Kong, supposedly to distribute amongst its soldiers in preparation for the war.

On 8 October, additional veteran and elite divisions were ordered to prepare to move into Tibet from the Chengdu and Lanzhou military regions.

On 12 October, Nehru declared that he had ordered the Indian army to "clear Indian territory in the North Eastern Frontier Area of Chinese invaders" and personally met with Kaul, issuing instructions to him.

On 14 October, an editorial on *People's Daily* issued China's final warning to India: "So it seems that Mr. Nehru has made up his mind to attack the Chinese frontier guards on an even bigger scale. ... It is high time to shout to Mr. Nehru that the heroic Chinese troops, with the glorious tradition of resisting foreign aggression, can never be cleared by anyone from their own territory ... If there are still some maniacs who are reckless enough to ignore our well-intentioned advice and insist on having another try, well, let them do so. History will pronounce its inexorable verdict ... At this critical moment ... we still want to appeal once more to Mr. Nehru: better rein in at the edge of the precipice and do not use the lives of Indian troops as stakes in your gamble."

Chinese Marshal Liu Bocheng headed a group to determine the strategy for the war. He concluded that the opposing Indian troops were among India's best, and to achieve victory would require deploying crack troops and relying on force concentration to achieve decisive victory. On 16 October, this war plan was approved, and on the 18th, the final approval was given by the Politburo for a "self-defensive counter-attack", scheduled for 20 October.

Chinese Offensive

On 20 October 1962, the Chinese People's Liberation Army launched two attacks, 1000 kilometres (600 miles) apart. In the western theatre, the PLA sought to expel Indian forces from the Chip Chap valley in Aksai Chin while in the eastern theatre, the PLA sought to capture both banks of the Namka Chu river. Some skirmishes also took place at the Nathula Pass, which is in the Indian state of Sikkim (an Indian protectorate at that time). Gurkha rifles travelling north were targeted by Chinese artillery fire. After four days of fierce fighting, the three regiments of Chinese troops succeeded in securing a substantial portion of the disputed territory.

Eastern theatre

Chinese troops launched an attack on the southern banks of the Namka Chu River on 20 October. The Indian forces were undermanned, with only an understrength battalion to support them, while the Chinese troops had three regiments positioned on the north side of the river. The Indians expected Chinese forces to cross via one of five bridges over the river and defended those crossings. The PLA bypassed the defenders by fording the

river, which was shallow at that time of year, instead. They formed up into battalions on the Indian-held south side of the river under cover of darkness, with each battalion assigned against a separate group of Rajputs.

At 5:14 am, Chinese mortar fire began attacking the Indian positions. Simultaneously, the Chinese cut the Indian telephone lines, preventing the defenders from making contact with their headquarters. At about 6:30 am, the Chinese infantry launched a surprise attack from the rear and forced the Indians to leave their trenches.

The Chinese overwhelmed the Indian troops in a series of flanking maneuvers south of the McMahon Line and prompted their withdrawal from Namka Chu. Fearful of continued losses, Indian troops retreated into Bhutan. Chinese forces respected the border and did not pursue. Chinese forces now held all of the territory that was under dispute at the time of the Thag La confrontation, but they continued to advance into the rest of North Eastern Frontier Area.

On 22 October, at 12:15 am, PLA mortars fired on Walong, on the McMahon line. Flares launched by Indian troops the next day revealed numerous Chinese milling around the valley. The Indians tried to use their mortars against the Chinese but the PLA responded by lighting a bush fire, causing confusion among the Indians. Some 400 Chinese troops attacked the Indian position. The initial Chinese assault was halted by accurate Indian mortar fire. The Chinese were then reinforced and launched a second assault. The Indians managed to hold them back for four hours, but the Chinese used weight of numbers to break through. Most Indian forces were withdrawn to established positions in Walong, while a company supported by mortars and medium machine guns remained to cover the retreat.

Elsewhere, Chinese troops launched a three-pronged attack on Tawang, which the Indians evacuated without any resistance.

Over the following days, there were clashes between Indian and Chinese patrols at Walong as the Chinese rushed in reinforcements. On 25 October, the Chinese made a probe, which was met with resistance from the 4th Sikhs. The following day, a patrol from the 4th Sikhs was encircled, and after being unable to break the encirclement, an Indian unit was able to flank the Chinese, allowing the Sikhs to break free.

Western theatre

On the Aksai Chin front, China already controlled most of the disputed territory. Chinese forces quickly swept the region of any remaining Indian troops. Late on 19 October, Chinese troops launched a number of attacks throughout the western theatre. By 22 October, all posts north of Chushul had been cleared.

On 20 October, the Chinese easily took the Chip Chap Valley, Galwan Valley, and Pangong Lake. Many outposts and garrisons along the Western front were unable to defend against the surrounding Chinese troops.

Most Indian troops positioned in these posts offered resistance but were either killed or taken prisoner. Indian support for these outposts was not forthcoming, as evidenced by the Galwan post, which had been surrounded by enemy forces in August, but no attempt made to relieve the besieged garrison. Following the 20 October attack, nothing was heard from Galwan.

On 24 October, Indian forces fought hard to hold the Rezang La Ridge, in order to prevent a nearby airstrip from falling.

After realising the magnitude of the attack, the Indian Western Command withdrew many of the isolated outposts to the south-east. Daulet Beg Oldi was also evacuated, but it was south of the Chinese claim line and was not approached



by Chinese forces. Indian troops were withdrawn in order to consolidate and regroup in the event that China probed south of their claim line.

Lull in the Fighting

By 24 October, the PLA had entered territory previously administered by India to give the Peoples Republic of China a diplomatically strong position over India. The majority of Chinese forces had advanced sixteen kilometres (10 miles) south of the control line prior to the conflict. Four days of fighting were followed by a three-week lull. Zhou ordered the troops to stop advancing as he attempted to negotiate with Nehru. The Indian forces had retreated into more heavily fortified positions around Se La and Bomdi La which would be difficult to assault. Zhou sent Nehru a letter, proposing

- 1. A negotiated settlement of the boundary**
- 2. That both sides disengage and withdraw twenty kilometres (12 miles) from present lines of actual control**
- 3. A Chinese withdrawal north in NEFA**
- 4. That China and India not cross lines of present control in Aksai Chin.**

Nehru's 27 October reply expressed interest in the restoration of peace and friendly relations and suggested a return to the "boundary prior to 8 September 1962". He was categorically concerned about a mutual twenty kilometre (12-mile) withdrawal after "40 or 60 kilometres (25 or 40 miles) of blatant military aggression". He wanted the creation of a larger immediate buffer zone and thus resist the possibility of a repeat offensive. Zhou's 4 November reply repeated his 1959 offer to return to the McMahon Line in NEFA and the Chinese traditionally claimed MacDonald Line in Aksai Chin. Facing Chinese forces maintaining themselves on Indian soil and trying to avoid political pressure, the Indian parliament announced a national emergency and passed a resolution which stated their intent to "drive out the aggressors from the sacred soil of India". The United States and the United Kingdom supported India's response. The Soviet Union was preoccupied with the Cuban Missile Crisis and did not offer the support it had provided in previous years. With the backing of other great powers, a 14 November letter by Nehru to Zhou once again rejected his proposal.

Neither side declared war, used their air force, or fully broke off diplomatic relations, but the conflict is commonly referred to as a war. This war coincided with the Cuban Missile Crisis and was viewed by the western nations at the time as another act of aggression by the Communist bloc. According to Calvin, the Chinese side evidently wanted a diplomatic resolution and discontinuation of the conflict.

Continuation of War

After Zhou received Nehru's letter (rejecting Zhou's proposal), the fighting resumed on the eastern theatre on 14 November (Nehru's birthday), with an Indian attack on Walong, claimed by China, launched from the defensive position of Se La and inflicting heavy casualties on the Chinese. The Chinese resumed military activity on Aksai Chin and NEFA hours after the Walong battle.

Eastern theatre

In the eastern theatre, the PLA attacked Indian forces near Se La and Bomdi La on 17 November. These positions were defended by the Indian 4th Infantry Division. Instead of attacking by road as expected, PLA forces approached via a mountain trail, and their attack cut off a main road and isolated 10,000 Indian troops.

Se La occupied high ground, and rather than assault this commanding position, the Chinese captured Them-bang, which was a supply route to Se La.

Western theatre

On the western theatre, PLA forces launched a heavy infantry attack on 18 November near Chushul. Their attack started at 4:35 am, despite a mist surrounding most of the areas in the region. At 5:45 the Chinese troops advanced to attack two platoons of Indian troops at Gurung Hill.

The Indians did not know what was happening, as communications were dead. As a patrol was sent, China attacked with greater numbers. Indian artillery could not hold off the superior Chinese forces. By 9:00 am, Chinese forces attacked Gurung Hill directly and Indian commanders withdrew from the area and also from the connecting Spangur Gap.

The Chinese had been simultaneously attacking Rezang La which was held by 123 Indian troops. At 5:05 am, Chinese troops launched their attack audaciously. Chinese medium machine gun fire pierced through the Indian tactical defences.

At 6:55 am the sun rose and the Chinese attack on the 8th platoon began in waves. Fighting continued for the next hour, until the Chinese signaled that they had destroyed the 7th platoon. Indians tried to use light machine guns on the medium machine guns from the Chinese but after 10 minutes the battle was over. Logistical inadequacy once again hurt the Indian troops. The Chinese gave the Indian troops a respectful military funeral. The battles also saw the death of Major Shaitan Singh of the Kumaon Regiment, who had been instrumental in the first battle of Rezang La. The Indian troops were forced to withdraw to high mountain positions. Indian sources believed that their troops were just coming to grips with the mountain combat and finally called for more troops. The Chinese declared a ceasefire, ending the bloodshed.

Indian forces suffered heavy casualties, with dead Indian troops' bodies being found in the ice, frozen with weapons in hand. The Chinese forces also suffered heavy casualties, especially at Rezang La. This signalled the end of the war in Aksai Chin as China had reached their claim line – many Indian troops were ordered to withdraw from the area. China claimed that the Indian troops wanted to fight on until the bitter end. The war ended with their withdrawal, so as to limit the number of casualties.

The PLA penetrated close to the outskirts of Tezpur, Assam, a major frontier town nearly fifty kilometres (30 miles) from the Assam-North-East Frontier Agency border. The local government ordered the evacuation of the civilians in Tezpur to the south of the Brahmaputra River, all prisons were thrown open, and government officials who stayed behind destroyed Tezpur's currency reserves in anticipation of a Chinese advance.

Ceasefire

China had reached its claim lines so the PLA did not advance farther, and on 19 November, it declared a unilateral cease-fire. Zhou Enlai declared a unilateral ceasefire to start on midnight, 21 November. Zhou's ceasefire declaration stated,

“Beginning from 21 November 1962, the Chinese frontier guards will cease fire along the entire Sino-Indian border. Beginning from 1 December 1962, the Chinese frontier guards will withdraw to positions 20 kilometres (12 miles) behind the line of actual control which existed between China and India on 7 November 1959. In the eastern sector, although the Chinese frontier guards have so far been fighting on Chinese territory north of the traditional customary line, they are prepared to withdraw from their present positions to the north of the illegal McMahon Line, and to withdraw twenty kilometres (12 miles) back from that line. In the middle and western sectors, the Chinese frontier guards will withdraw twenty kilometres (12 miles) from the line of actual control”.

Zhou had first given the ceasefire announcement to Indian chargé d'affaires on 19 November (before India's request for United States air support), but New Delhi did not receive it until 24 hours later. The aircraft carrier was ordered back after the ceasefire, and thus, American intervention on India's side in the war was avoided. Retreating Indian troops, who hadn't come into contact with anyone knowing of the ceasefire, and Chinese troops in NEFA and Aksai Chin, were involved in some minor battles, but for the most part, the ceasefire signalled an end to the fighting. The United States Air Force flew in supplies to India in November 1962, but neither side wished to continue hostilities.

Edited from Manifest IAS & Wikipedia