

# INDIA'S CONTINUING TWO-FRONT CONUNDRUM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

Since 1959, when India-China relations sharply deteriorated, India has known that it has two geopolitical adversaries. Concerning China and Pakistan, the American academician, Professor Wayne Wilcox of Columbia University, famously stated in an article in *Survival* that India has to “hedge all bets and cover all contingencies”. Recently, India’s Chief of the Army Staff, General Manoj Mukund Naravane, reassuringly said in May at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses that the Indian Army remains “alive” to a “two-front” war.

Whenever India has forgotten that it has two antagonists and let its guard down, it has paid dearly for it. Conversely, whenever India has accounted for the prospect of a possible threat from both quarters, it has done well. The two obvious examples are the 1962 and 1971 wars.

China policy lacks perspicacity

In 1962, India’s Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Defence Minister V.K. Krishna Menon had both believed that the threat to India’s security came principally from Pakistan. In 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi took account of a possible Chinese move in support of Pakistan. India, therefore, took out an insurance policy in the form of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation between the Government of India and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The mistake made earlier is instructive today. There has been an obsession concerning the threat from Pakistan, together with a degree of complacency *vis-à-vis* China, in part because the recent stand-offs in Depsang, Chumar, and Doklam were defused. The interactions between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping at Wuhan (April 2018) and Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu (October 2019) further blind-sided those involved in foreign and security policy planning in New Delhi.

In the India-China interactions leading up to the 1962 China-India war, India had demonstrated friendliness without reciprocity and firmness without force. Despite deteriorating India-China relations in the late-1950s, neither Nehru nor Krishna Menon had contemplated a war between the two countries.

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A contemporary observer, Raj Thapar, founder-editor of the journal, *Seminar*, described in her autobiography how Mr. Menon, “firmly opposed moving a single man from the Kashmir front, so convinced was he that Pakistan would attack at any opportune moment”. She wrote that it was his immutable belief that Pakistan was the threat, not China. Krishna Menon could go to any lengths to convince others of this point of view. He asked India’s High Commissioner to Pakistan, Rajeshwar Dayal, to brief a group of senior Indian Army officers about Pakistan’s war preparations against India. Warned that projecting a danger from Pakistan was part of the Defence Minister’s larger plan, in the meeting Ambassador Dayal said that he had detected nothing about the Pakistani preparations. According to witnesses, Krishna Menon was visibly annoyed.

Nehru too shared the view that Pakistan posed the greater threat to India. He and Krishna Menon reinforced each other’s slant in this respect. “To be frank about it,” Nehru had acknowledged in parliament soon after the 1962 war, India’s defence dispositions “were based

on our unfortunate position *vis-à-vis* Pakistan.” He was misled also by the good equation he had developed with Premier Zhou En-lai, forgetting that countries seldom predicate their security interests on the personal predilections of their leaders.

Remaining non-aligned is good advice

India’s complacency and misjudgment in 1962 were not for want of warning signs from China. Indian leaders had apparently convinced themselves that the Chinese would not attack. Indeed, it was Nehru who told Krishna Menon and India’s Chief of the Army Staff that he had reliable information that the Chinese forces would not offer resistance if there was a show of force from India. Well over a year before the outbreak of hostilities, Krishna Menon took to denying that there was any problem with China, or that China was in occupation of what the government of India considered Indian territory. Addressing officers of the Indian Air Force Station, Agra, he had declared: “I am not aware of any aggression, incursion, encroachment or intrusion by the Chinese of any part of Indian territory.”

The then Chief of the Army Staff, General P.N. Thapar, had told Krishna Menon that the Indian Army did not have the necessary strength to evict the Chinese from their posts. With the troop deployment of six Chinese soldiers to one Indian, the Indian Army could have been facing an adventure. Krishna Menon reassured him that the Chinese Deputy Premier, Chen Yi, had told him that China would never fight India over the border issue. General Thapar had wanted to share his misgivings with Prime Minister Nehru, but was dissuaded by the Cabinet Secretary on the ground that Nehru might consider that General Thapar was “afraid to fight”. Later, when a prominent Indian journalist checked from Krishna Menon whether General Thapar had brought up his concerns, Krishna Menon had replied with an acid tongue: “That toothless old woman; he did not know how to fight a war.”

On October 20, 1962, the People’s Liberation Army struck simultaneously, all along the India-China frontier — a move smacking of long preparation. The 13 forward Indian posts, from Galwan Valley up to north of Daulat Beg Oldi were attacked by the Chinese forces. Concurrently, in the eastern sector, they launched an attack on Indian forces deployed along the Namka Chu river and at Khinzemane, eventually enveloping in their attack on four out of the five frontier Divisions of the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), namely Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, and Lohit Divisions.

In his biography of Prime Minister Nehru, Professor Sarvepalli Gopal suggested that when Nehru issued instructions in November 1961 for the management of the India-China border, it was based on advice from the Intelligence Bureau that while the Chinese would move into areas where there was no Indian presence, they would keep away where Indian personnel had established themselves. It was assumed that the Chinese would not do anything against Indian forces when “even in a position to do so.” Professor Gopal also suggested that Nehru was perhaps unaware of the warning by the Indian Army’s General that the Indian Army was in no position to sustain an operation across the entirety of the India-China border.

It would not be out of place to remind ourselves why India became the object of Chinese aggression.

Nehru had explained in an interview aired just nine days before his death in 1964 that the Chinese acted the way they did principally as “they wanted the Asian world to realise that they are the top dog in Asia and that any person or any country in Asia should remember that”. Months earlier, Nehru had written to U.S. President John F. Kennedy that China was making a bid for leadership, not just of Asia, but “as a first step in their bid for world leadership”. So far as India was concerned, continued Nehru, China’s aim was not to acquire territory: the real aim

was “to force on India a political settlement which will involve India re-orienting its policies to suit the pattern of Chinese global policies”.

Although circumstances are different today, India continues to face the two-front conundrum. The last word on the present crisis is yet to be said. India must meanwhile assess its options in a balanced way. While remaining clear-eyed about Chinese intentions, India must resist the temptation to remedy past errors by precipitate action. These need a long-term vision, executed with patience and perseverance.

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