

Losing the war, winning the peace

India is not short of memories on 1962. The India-China War ended fifty-five years ago to the day, yet each winter brings back reminiscences of the conflict. The Chinese assault on the Thagla Ridge early in the morning of October 20, 1962, which turned simmering military tensions into open war. The doomed struggle of ill-equipped jawans. Jawaharlal Nehru's awkward radio address to Assam, just as the Chinese seemed poised to enter the plains. The unilateral ceasefire that China announced on November 21, 1962, saving Assam but ending India's chance of recovering the Aksai Chin. And above all, the scar of national humiliation at the hands of a triumphant China.

But is there all there was to the war? One can doubt it. Standard histories of 1962 almost completely ignore a key aspect of the conflict: the way the authorities and people of Arunachal Pradesh — the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), as it was then called — experienced it. Look away from the fighting and the India-China War takes on quite a different hue, one where the war does not end at the point of ceasefire and where the roles of winners, losers and bystanders aren't so neatly divided.

The October shock

When large-scale fighting erupted between China and India, it did not take long for NEFA's civilian officials to realise their entire administration was in jeopardy. By October 23, Tawang had to be abandoned. Meanwhile, Chinese troops were advancing onto Walong in the east. The retreat of the Indian Army entailed that of the civilian administration. Dozens of administrative centres were evacuated, leaving most of northern NEFA unoccupied and open for Chinese occupation. Thousands of Tibetan refugees followed suit, along with many local people (*Picture shows refugees fleeing from the India-China border war, in 1962*). Evacuee officials focussed on organising relief, and even began considering their permanent rehabilitation elsewhere in Assam. At the time, India's loss of NEFA seemed in danger of becoming permanent.

The war formally came to an end with China's unilateral ceasefire on November 21, but the crisis did not. Gains in the Aksai Chin aside, the People's Republic of China (PRC) now occupied significant portions of NEFA. Officially this was temporary, but everything was done to complicate India's return. Government stores, supplies, equipment, furnishings, weapons and often buildings were systematically damaged, eaten or destroyed. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) pointedly delayed its departure, keeping Indian troops and officials in the dark about it. On January 17, 1963 the Chinese still occupied Tawang. The local official only resumed his duties a few days later. In military terms, the India-China War had lasted only a month. As an occupation, almost three.

Battle for hearts and minds

What most worried India's frontier officials was how the inhabitants would receive them back. India's state presence in NEFA was recent. The Raj's eastern Himalayan frontier had barely been administered and remained poorly explored. Civilian administrators had made huge efforts since 1950 to consolidate India's sovereignty over the region; but given the difficult terrain, wet climate, and financial and human shortages, doing so required local inhabitants' cooperation. Gaining the loyalty of the Mishmis, Monpas or Adis was an aim in itself, if they were to become Indian citizens. Winning them over was key. The problem was that Indian officials' state-building per force had to contend with the PRC's own efforts in nearby Tibet. China too faced an uphill struggle to concretise its hold there, and it too needed border inhabitants' cooperation. Yet, in this porous Himalayan borderland criss-crossed by social, cultural or family ties and regular movement, people had ample opportunity to observe and compare what India and China respectively offered

— both the good and the bad. The result was a fierce competition for Himalayan hearts and minds, well before military and diplomatic tensions appeared between the two countries.

This struggle for authority and legitimacy did not stop when fighting erupted. On the contrary, the 1962 War offered China a chance to gain the upper hand in it. There is much evidence that the PRC's occupation of northern NEFA was a sort of public relations exercise *vis-à-vis* local people. Indian officials came back to Tawang to find that no women had been molested and nothing taken without payment; houses, monasteries and possessions were intact. Chinese troops had brought in gifts and exotic goods and made every effort to convince people that their religion, customs, and freedom would be respected. In fact, China had one key message for the people of NEFA: it was there to liberate them from India.

The story of NEFA's occupation suggests that, among other things, the 1962 War was China's chance to prove to Himalayan people that it was the better state — whereas a weak India could neither protect nor deliver. The unilateral ceasefire and withdrawal helped preserve the image of Chinese invulnerability and benevolence *vis-à-vis* local inhabitants while preventing an international escalation of the conflict. "Tell us to come back and we'll free you from India," departing troops reportedly said.

In an ideal scenario, Himalayan inhabitants would do just that. More realistically, a China-supported, anti-Indian uprising might erupt like in nearby Nagaland — and India would stop posing a threat to China's sovereignty in Tibet.

Going back

India's frontier officials had every reason to worry about returning to NEFA. Would people welcome them back considering China's impressive wartime performance? To their own surprise, the answer was by and large yes. Many inhabitants expressed both their disappointment at having been left behind and their support for Indian authorities' return. They made concrete demands to ensure that the disappointment would not re-occur, and that their support would be rewarded. Something strange was happening. China had won the war on both fronts, military and political; yet this had not been enough to win people over, especially since many people had heard of repression in Tibet from refugees passing through. In hindsight, China's demonstration of superiority seems to have been counter-productive. The Indian state might be weaker and less efficient, but from the inhabitants' standpoint it was less of a risk, and offered more chance for negotiation.

On that count, we may need to revise our standard narrative of 1962. The war was not just about winning more territory (in the Aksai Chin) or teaching India a lesson (which it did). It was also about winning over hearts and minds. And if the PRC did win the war, on that front it also lost the peace.

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