

China's India War: Collision Course on the Roof of the World by Bertil Lintner, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. xxviii + 320, Rs. 1,115

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In the autumn of 1962, two worlds collided. After long-standing confrontations in disputed border areas, China unleashed its military machinery on India and triumphed. The spectre of the war haunts both sides to this day, as it was shown by the Doklam stand-off in 2017. Understanding the past could guide us in the present, but we still lack the full picture of Indian and Chinese decision making in the run-up to 1962. The second part of the Henderson Brooks Report remains classified and Chinese primary documentation is elusive on the topic. After more than five decades, we are still confronted by the question: why did 1962 happen?

Many have endeavoured to find an answer, such as Neville Maxwell,¹ John W. Garver,² M. Taylor Fravel³ and Mahesh Shankar.⁴ To some extent, most of these narratives put part of the blame on the Indian side. India's assertiveness on the border, its misunderstanding of Chinese considerations, the Forward Policy or Nehru's intransigence are all listed as potential reasons for Mao Zedong's call to punish India by annihilating its warfighting capabilities in the boundary region.

In *China's India War*, Lintner challenges these explanations. He argues that the Forward Policy did not warrant a full-scale attack and proposes that the war was a well-prepared strategic decision rather than

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an impulse in October 1962. China started to enhance its logistics and warfighting capabilities in 1959; and it began to collect intelligence as well in the areas which it was planning to attack three years later. Beijing also constructed prisoner camps more than six months before the attack. Why? Not to capture territory. Rather, Mao fought a war for two other reasons: to make a statement by humiliating Nehru; and to preserve his precarious domestic political position after the failed Great Leap Forward initiative.

Lintner elaborates on his argument through eight chapters. The first half of the book focuses on the run-up to, and the immediate aftermath of, the 1962 war. Chapter 1 gives a brief overview of the whole book. The author explains that China was well prepared for the war as it had a significant number of troops—six infantry regiments—and newly built roads in the disputed area. He also gives the reader contextual information about the origins of the 1962 war. Indian concerns with China started with China's entry to Tibet. Nehru's default approach to mitigate the Chinese threat to the North-East was to make friends with Beijing. Chinese and Indian leaders frequently interacted and the Sino-Indian brotherhood blossomed into an agreement on Tibet in 1954. Things turned for the worse in 1959 with the rebellion in Tibet. The Chinese leaders were convinced that India was a hidden orchestrator of the uprising in south-west People's Republic of China (PRC) and Deng Xiaoping vowed to teach a lesson to India. In Chapter 2, the author covers a lot of ground. His purpose is to give a background to the dispute on the exact alignment of the Sino-Indian border. He touches upon the Simla Convention of 1914, between the Chinese Central Government, British India and Tibet, which signals the birth of the McMahon Line. He also introduces the debate on whether there were secret schemes to bypass the Chinese delegate and reach a hidden agreement. Subsequently, he proceeds to elaborate on the alignment of the border in the western sector, and the Chinese approach to it. He closes the chapter by discussing the 1959 rebellion in Tibet and the Dalai Lama's flight to India.

Chapter 3 encapsulates the author's core argument about the 1962 Sino-Indian border war. One of his main points is that the attack was well planned and based on intelligence collected years before 1962. He also emphasises that China started fortifying its positions in the late 1950s and early 1960s. He further argues that the currently widely accepted narrative that China fought a war because of Indian

assertiveness on the border is mistaken. In fact, China was meticulously preparing for the attack and decided to engage in late October because the Cuban missile crisis provided a good distraction for the great powers. Lintner also suggests that Mao decided to attack for personal reasons. In the late 1950s, Mao initiated an ambitious economic initiative, the Great Leap Forward, that was supposed to propel China into the club of industrial great powers. The initiative failed miserably, led to severe famine across China and tarnished Mao's reputation. The failure resulted in a power struggle among the top Communist Party of China (CPC) leadership, and Mao utilised this conflict to divert attention from it. In Chapter 4, the author talks about the post-1962 developments. He starts off with the removal of Indian officials like Menon and Kaul. Next, he elaborates on the Cultural Revolution and China's support for the Naxalbari rebels, as well as the transformation of North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) into Arunachal Pradesh, a new state of India.

The second half of the book goes beyond the border war and explores other areas of Sino-Indian competition. In Chapter 5, the author focuses on Sikkim and its role in Sino-Indian relations. Although there was no fight on the Sikkim–Tibet border during 1962, the central sector became the centre of confrontations later. In 1963, after India built a road to connect Gangtok and Nathu La, China charged its neighbour with establishing new outposts on Chinese territory. During the 1965 India–Pakistan War, China chose the central sector to mobilise troops and deter India from further fighting Pakistan. Confrontations did not stop here: Chinese and Indian troops fired at each other in September 1967 (the author incorrectly notes 1966, p. 167) at Nathu La. The author asserts that subsequently, China chose to fight a covert war against India by supporting the Naxalite and Mizo movements. After this, Bhutan is the focus of Chapter 6. This Himalayan kingdom is the sole neighbour with which China has no diplomatic relations. Bhutan's foreign policy is a sophisticated process of trying to walk the line between being a close friend, India, without entirely alienating China. Chapter 7 discusses the Nepal–China–India triangle. Here, the author argues that China's aim is to foster good relations with Nepal in order to make strategic inroads in India's backyard. Nepal–India relations, on the other hand, have witnessed ups and downs due to an Indian blockade in 1970 and the decoupling of Nepal's and India's rupees. Chapter 8 again covers a lot of ground, extending from dam projects on the Brahmaputra River through

the Sumdorong Chu stand-off of 1986–87 to Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean. On the last point, he ponders if there is a new ‘Great Game’ evolving between Beijing and New Delhi.

As a student of political science, it is difficult to give a review on Lintner’s book as it is not a work of a political scientist proposing a new theory or testing an existing one. Nor is it a thick description written by a historian. It is a story told by a journalist. Nevertheless, the book has its strengths and fallacies. The greatest strength is that it draws attention to factors which have often been overlooked or downplayed in existing research. Few works on the topic emphasise how precarious Mao Zedong’s position was after the failure of the Great Leap Forward initiative and how it could have influenced his decision making in the autumn of 1962. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that the threat of losing power had no influence on Mao’s call to arms. The second strength of the book is that it proposes an interesting analytical framework which conceptualises China’s India policy as a protracted war waged on the South Asian giant, involving the border war in 1962, China’s role in the 1967 Naxalbari uprising and the geopolitical competition in the Indian Ocean Region. Finally, it cannot be denied that the author is an excellent writer, providing the reader with lively descriptions and easily accessible content, especially for non-experts.

That said, there are also some shortcomings. First and foremost, the author claims to give an account of Chinese top-level decision making related to India. However, this reviewer found few, if any, references to any kind of documentation written in Mandarin. In this context, claims of heralding state-level Chinese decision making on India must be treated with caution. Without evidence, Lintner’s arguments are in the realm of educated speculation. The second weakness is that his story lacks a coherent argument that links all the chapters together. Why is China waging a war on India? In the case of 1962, he argues that Mao started the fight to distract attention from his failures. Nevertheless, this argument cannot be extended to the following chapters. He also argues that China and India are competing to become the leaders of Asia—something that could be applied to all the chapters—but why is that so? Without a cogent proposition binding the chapters together, the book resembles a set of disconnected stories rather than one coherent volume. Finally, the author tries to cover too much ground in his chapters—the topic of one chapter could be extended to a book-length work in itself—which prevents him from conducting an in-depth analysis.

Overall, the book is a must-read for anyone interested in China–India relations in general, or the 1962 war in particular. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, we might still ponder: why did 1962 happen?

NOTES

1. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, Dehradun: Natraj Publishers, 2013.
2. John W. Garver, 'China's Decision for War with India in 1962', in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross (eds), *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006, pp. 86–130.
3. M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008.
4. Mahesh Shankar, *The Reputational Imperative: Nehru's India in Territorial Conflict*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018.

