

**1962: The War That Wasn't** by Kunal Verma, New Delhi:  
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The title of the book is self-explanatory. And the tone and tenor thereof is an implied challenge to the conventional wisdom, and thesis, propounded in *India's China War*, written by British scribe Neville Maxwell in the 1970s. According to Verma, in 1949, 'China was not a player as far as India's national security was concerned.' None, except Sardar Patel, could read, or anticipate, China and its plan of action. Hence, the 1962 India–China conflict is 'least understood'. Exactly a month before his death, however, Patel wrote a warning letter to the Indian Prime Minister, Nehru. Yet, the outcome thereof was nil owing to Nehruvian 'soft stand' on/towards China, which later resulted in the unmitigated disaster of 1962 for the Indian Army.

Telltale signs of Chinese motive were there for all to see in the 1950s, as Beijing thrust into the Asian heartland and took control, first, of Sinkiang, and then Tibet, thereby abolishing the existence of a buffer Lhasa and establishing direct contact with the territory of India. Expansionist China did not alarm India one bit. Far from it. Instead of strengthening India's defence, Nehru–Menon's calibrated action (or the lack of it) weakened the Indian military. So much so that the military apparatus of New Delhi at that time has been referred to as 'an impotent Headquarters' by the author. Thus, the situation reached a point where the Army Chief, Thimayya, 'by letting Nehru repeatedly have his way, was fast losing credibility with the army.' Clearly, as politics

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started prevailing over the profession of soldiering, it paved the entry of Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) Kaul, the 'courtier soldier', into Nehru's inner coterie. The best of professional officers were sidelined to non-operational positions and those who somehow managed to hold on to sensitive positions were compelled to 'submit' to the bullying tactics resorted to by [Defence Minister] Menon and Kaul, who understandably could not have had done so without the hidden blessings of Prime Minister Nehru. Consequently, to suggest that the morale of the army hit its nadir would be an understatement.

The lamentable lack of understanding of the Indian leadership emerged from the fact that there were 'blanks on the map'; especially in those parts which are regarded as the eternal, natural protector of the Indian continent, that is, the Himalayas. The Indians not only did not understand the gravity of the topography and the geography, they also did not even try to do so. In fact, Nehru had his own 'insecurities vis a vis the generals, combined with the absurd posturing that a non-violent nation did not really need an army', which, in turn, 'created a situation where the Indian Army was almost leaderless and rudderless.'

Earlier, 'the Forward Policy' had been launched by the British masters of the Indian geography around 1878 during the second Anglo-Afghan War, which led to the encroachment of land, with a tendency to grab early and fast, as much as possible, the 'vacant plots', notwithstanding its remoteness in the Asian heartland. This became the name of the game with Britain and Russia doing the same from each other's direction, which inevitably made Tibet the 'buffer state' between the Beijing Hans on one hand, and imperial London and Moscow on the other. In the end, by the late 1940s, several claims and counterclaims emerged on the issue of boundaries between the two nascent nation-states of India and China. Thus, the seeds sown by the Western imperial powers in the nineteenth century resulted in bickering and disputes, which ultimately resulted in a war between the two benign neighbours, India and China.

Thus, it was in such an atmosphere of underlying differences of border perception and competing political space and stage occupation that the Chinese patrol came down the Thagla Ridge (in the North-East Frontier Agency [NEFA]) in September 1962, 'to Bridge 3 at the Namka Chu and asked the men at Assam Rifle post at Dhola to withdraw'. Clearly, the die was cast and physical confrontation loomed larger than before.

As '600 armed Chinese' were reported to have approached, the Defence Minister, V.K. Krishna Menon, called a conference on 12

September to discuss the Dhola incident. With the entire top brass in attendance, 'decision to mount an attack on the Thagla Ridge to clear out the Chinese was taken', though 'there were no records kept of the meeting'. The author rues that since 'there were no written records maintained, it is not known who took this incredible decision'. Nevertheless, what emerges clearly is that the new rulers of independent India displayed catastrophic misjudgement, resulting in the killing of thousands of helpless and hapless soldiers of the state, possessing nothing but self-respect, honour and bare hands to face the invading soldiers of the Red Army, and also facing biting cold, hunger and total logistics as well as command failure. It was the manifestation of a legacy: the 'culture of Delhi Durbar', started by the Mughals and steadfastly allowed to be continued by the British and then, by the rulers of independent India.

Understandably, post-12 September 1962 meeting, there was a wide divergence of opinion in the plan of action to be followed between the command headquarters in Delhi and the field commanders facing the foe in the harsh terrain of high hills. The best (or should one say 'worst') part of the emerging story was that the decision to confront China was political, and not military. The blue-eyed Army Commander of Prime Minister Nehru, Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) Kaul, boasted that 'eventually his corps would command the whole frontier from the Uttar Pradesh to the Burma border' and that this 'crucial responsibility' was 'given by the Prime Minister himself'. Was Kaul implying that Nehru was like a Field Marshal who himself was appointing as well as deploying generals to fight the foe? Are we to believe that the democratically elected barrister, Prime Minister of India, was endowed with an astute and rare military acumen, unrivalled by any other contemporary political stalwart?

Furthermore, how does one interpret and evaluate Lt Gen Kaul's statement in front of his juniors in the soon-to-be-battle arena: 'I have given an assurance to the Prime Minister that I will carry out the operation'? Does a corps commander of the Indian Army report to the Prime Minister of the country and give political 'assurance' on military operations, thereby bypassing the whole chain of command consisting of the regional army commander, army chief, Ministry of Defence and the Defence Minister? Were the chosen few of the Indian Army top brass taking the affairs of national defence and national security as their own family's internal and private affairs?

The inevitable soon followed, with catastrophic consequences,

particularly for the Indian Army, and the image and reputation of the apparently 'infallible' Nehru's enlightened regime was tarnished. Namka Chu was followed by Bum La, Se La, Tawang, Bomdila; and also in the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), from near Karakorum pass to Pangong Lake. Regiment after regiment was decimated, or they surrendered before the marauding soldiers of China's People's Liberation Army. This happened not because they lacked courage to face the bullet in the face, but because the government failed miserably to address the basic minimum needs of national defence apparatus, thereby jeopardising the very safety and security of the nation. So much so that, at one point in time, the Government of India had virtually lost all hopes of retaining Assam and the entire North-East's vast swathe of land.

Even when the war was in mid-course, the situation has been tersely, but truly, described by the author pertaining to the chaos, confusion and the lamentable lack of clarity in the minds of the highest echelons of the Indian administration consisting of the Prime Minister, Defence Minister, Army Chief and division commander facing the assault of the Chinese in NEFA. 'Even in their wildest dreams, no Chinese commander could have anticipated that the Indians would fold so easily...It is indicative of the complete collapse of the decision-making process.' Thus, in the midst of the war, the unthinkable happened. Lt Gen Kaul was replaced by Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh as the commander of IV Corps. However, the change of commander did not change, or reverse, the fortunes of the soldiers fighting on the front and the course of war.

In hindsight, it can be said that although Indians have rarely succeeded in stopping foreign invasions taking place through the north-western frontiers since time immemorial, the first major invasion through the north-eastern frontier took place in 1962. And here, too, India's performance in the battlefield was as bad as it had been in the north-west.

Although one has virtually read all contemporary writings on Sino-Indian War of 1962, today one does not have any hesitation to state that *1962: The War That Wasn't* is remarkably fresh in its approach and gripping in its description and analysis. I believe the author is neither a historian nor a soldier. However, the quality of the book appears of such rare vintage that one is compelled to state that it is not always necessary to be a trained historian or three/four-star general to write on military history. The book is a must for anyone wishing to understand the genesis of Sino-Indian relations and the 1962 'war that was not'.