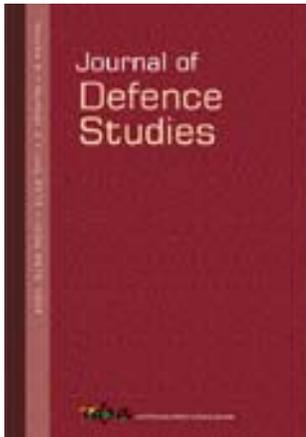


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## The Legacy of 1962 and China's India Policy

*Manjeet S. Pardesi\**

*This article will argue that the legacy of the 1962 Sino-Indian War continues to affect China's policy towards India even today. The three factors that led to China's decision in 1962 to attack India—the status of Tibet, the militarization of their unresolved border and fears of containment—are present even today, albeit in slightly modified forms. This is not to argue that another Sino-Indian War is imminent because the larger strategic context within which China's leaders took the decision to attack India in 1962 has changed. Unlike 1962, China does not face a large-scale rebellion in Tibet today, nor is there any Chinese fear of encroachment of Chinese territory as a consequence of India's 'Forward Policy' today. However, Sino-Indian relations will continue to remain competitive and conflictual because the status of Tibet, their border dispute and Chinese fears of containment continue to bedevil Sino-Indian relations.*

### INTRODUCTION

This article argues that the legacy of the 1962 Sino-Indian War continues to affect China's policy towards India even today. After first arguing that there is a fundamental mismatch in the way India and China approach their disputed border issue and the causes of the 1962 Sino-Indian War, it will be shown that the three underlying factors that led to the Chinese decision to launch a war against India in 1962 continue to affect China's decision makers almost five decades after Asia's two largest states fought all along their Himalayan borderlands. While these three factors do not

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exist in their original form as there have been significant developments in bilateral Sino-Indian relations, and in the international system more broadly, the gist of all three factors remains intact. Consequently, Sino-Indian relations are unlikely to see any major breakthrough in the policy-relevant future.

It will be shown that the three factors that led to China's decision to launch a war against India in 1962—the status of Tibet, a complex border dispute and fears of containment—continue to haunt Sino-Indian relations even today. This is not to argue that another Sino-Indian War is imminent. More importantly, the larger strategic environment within which the three above-mentioned factors led to the Chinese decision to attack India in 1962 has significantly changed. The 1962 Chinese decision was made in the backdrop of a major rebellion against Chinese rule in Tibet. While there is unrest in Tibet even today, its scale pales in comparison to the events that led up to the 1959 Lhasa revolt and its aftermath in Tibet. Moreover, China's massive infrastructure development in that region over the past five decades coupled with its rapid economic growth and military modernization means that its authority is no longer in doubt in Tibet. Furthermore, China's 1962 decision was taken at a time when India was pursuing the so-called 'Forward Policy' by deploying its troops all along the Sino-Indian Himalayan frontier. Both these conditions—large-scale unrest in Tibet and the forward deployment of Indian troops—are absent today and therefore, it is not being argued that another Sino-Indian War is around the corner. However, Sino-Indian relations are likely to remain competitive and even conflictual given that the same factors that led China to launch a war against India in 1962 are present even today.

#### MISMATCH IN INDIAN AND CHINESE VIEWS CONCERNING THE BORDER AND THE 1962 WAR

India and China take very different approaches to their border conflict. While India takes a historical and legalistic perspective on the border, China approaches it from a broader political and strategic perspective. For example, the official Indian position is that the India–Tibet/China border in the western sector is based on history and tradition, and that the border in the eastern sector is a product of the 1913–14 Simla Agreement between British India and Tibet.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, China is of the opinion that the India–Tibet/China border was never marked in the western sector,

and that the McMahon Line defined by British India and Tibet in the eastern sector is unacceptable as Tibet is a part of China and therefore did not have the right to negotiate its border with a foreign power.<sup>2</sup> The ambiguous status of Tibet under the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) or in the first half of the twentieth century notwithstanding,<sup>3</sup> the leaders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) look at the 1913–14 Simla Agreement as an accord with an imperial power (Britain) that was signed during China's century of 'national humiliation' that began with the First Opium War (1839–42).<sup>4</sup> As such, the McMahon Line is unacceptable to Beijing for it would implicitly acknowledge Tibetan 'independence' in the first half of the twentieth century, thereby complicating China's claim over Tibet. At the same time, it would also cast China in the role of a 'foreign aggressor' in Tibet in 1950–51 when the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) invaded and annexed Tibet.

Similarly, Indian and Chinese leaders have very different views of the causes of the 1962 Sino-Indian War. For the Indian leadership, China was an expansionist power and the Chinese decision to attack India in 1962 only confirmed China's aggressive nature.<sup>5</sup> Not only did the then Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, describe the 1950 Chinese military attack in eastern Tibet as a 'surprise onslaught',<sup>6</sup> but two months after signing the 1954 agreement with China on trade and intercourse between India and Tibet, he also expressed his fear of a new period of 'Chinese expansionism'.<sup>7</sup> And immediately following the war, Nehru noted that China was motivated by its desire to expand territorially and to humiliate India.<sup>8</sup>

Whether or not China's decision to expand into Tibet in 1950–51 was motivated by territorial aggrandizement, China was operating under a very different set of perceptions in 1962. According to Garver, there were three interrelated factors in the Chinese decision to fight a war with India.<sup>9</sup> Before proceeding, it should be noted that Garver's study is the most authoritative English-language study of the Chinese decision-making process in 1962 as it is based on the official PLA history of the 1962 Sino-Indian War as well as the works of other senior Chinese analysts affiliated with the PLA or the Chinese government that were published over the past two decades. First, the PRC leadership believed that India wanted to undermine Chinese control in Tibet and even wanted to restore its ambiguous international status that existed prior to the PLA's 1950–51 invasion. Second, the PRC leadership wanted to punish perceived Indian aggression as a consequence of

India's 'Forward Policy' against what it believed was Chinese territory. Third, the PRC leadership feared that India was pursuing a policy of 'containment' of China in partnership with the United States (US) and the Soviet Union.

This article will now demonstrate that when seen from Beijing, these three factors continue to bedevil Sino-Indian relations even today. First, the presence of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan 'government-in-exile' and close to 150,000 Tibetan refugees in India, when coupled with unrest in Tibet, is a constant reminder to the Chinese leadership of Indian meddling in China's internal affairs. Second, while India is no longer 'nibbling' away Chinese territory through a Forward Policy, China has changed the stakes in the Sino-Indian border issue as explained later. Finally, the PRC leadership is now worried of Indian participation in the 'containment' of China through India's deepening partnership with the US and through its 'Look East' policy.

#### THE TIBET FACTOR

In 1959, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and other members of the top PRC leadership were convinced that the Indian government, and Nehru in particular, were involved in the 1959 revolt in Lhasa.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the Chinese leadership believed so because the Indian Consul-General in Lhasa had 'met with the Tibetan demonstrators at the start of the uprising'.<sup>11</sup> However, according to the available evidence, Nehru and India had not played any role in causing the 1959 revolt in Lhasa.<sup>12</sup> According to Zhou, India's involvement was revealed by the fact that the 'commanding center of the rebellion' had been established 'in Kalimpong on Indian territory'.<sup>13</sup> Zhou further believed that Nehru's ultimate goal was to establish a 'buffer zone' in Tibet and to force the PLA to withdraw from Tibet.<sup>14</sup> After all, the Dalai Lama had already escaped into exile in India on 30 March 1959, and had announced a 'government-in-exile' in June 1959. While India has never recognized the Tibetan government-in-exile, India's official stand is that the Dalai Lama is a cultural and religious leader and that the Indian government does not permit the Tibetan refugees in India to carry out political activities.

However, the PRC leadership remains suspicious of India's intentions more than five decades since. In 2008, a series of violent protests against Chinese rule began in Tibet that continues till today.<sup>15</sup> This was the third major cycle of protests against Chinese rule in Tibet since the 1959 Lhasa

revolt. The second major cycle of protests in Tibet lasted from 1987 until 1989, and led to a year-long martial law.<sup>16</sup> Notably, China blamed the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan community in India for planning and instigating all of these attacks, including the current cycle of protests. The Chinese leadership strongly believes that the Tibetan community in India led by the Dalai Lama had hoped to launch 'secessionist activities' in Tibet, with the ultimate aim of driving out all non-Tibetans from that region.<sup>17</sup> In particular, China blamed the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), an organization of Tibetan exiles around the world that was founded in India in 1970, for the activities that began in 2008 in Tibet. The PRC is of the opinion that the 'establishment of the TYC was aimed mainly to train a reserve force for the cause of Tibet independence'.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the PRC considers the TYC to be an 'international terrorist organization', like al-Qaeda and East Turkistan groups.<sup>19</sup>

The self-immolation of Tibetans protesting against Chinese rule that began in 2009 has highlighted the precarious nature of Chinese authority in Tibet (and ethnically Tibetan regions of China).<sup>20</sup> According to the Dalai Lama's spokesman in Dharamshala in northern India, the 'root cause' of these acts 'is the Chinese repression in Tibet...It is like a lockout as the military [the PLA] is present everywhere in Tibet'.<sup>21</sup> The PRC leadership is of the opinion that these are subtle hints that indicate that the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan 'government-in-exile' want nothing less than the pull out of all PLA troops from Tibet.<sup>22</sup> It is believed that the Dalai Lama and his supporters 'want to remove all non-Tibetans and Chinese troops from Tibet', and that they have adopted the 1987 'five-point peace plan' and the 1988 Strasbourg proposals as their political guidelines since 2005.<sup>23</sup>

In September 1987, while addressing the US Congress, the Dalai Lama made several proposals to resolve the Tibetan issue by suggesting that Tibet should be transformed into a 'zone of peace'.<sup>24</sup> A modified version of these proposals was made by Dalai Lama while addressing the European Parliament in June 1988, when he said that the maintenance of this 'zone of peace' would give China the 'right to maintain a restricted number of military installations in Tibet'.<sup>25</sup> For China, these proposals are tantamount to Tibetan independence or the maintenance of Tibet as a 'buffer state' between China and India. Furthermore, these proposals 'were seen as extension of Indian foreign policy',<sup>26</sup> even as there is no evidence that they were put forward at India's urging, because

the only country to benefit from the removal of the PLA from Tibet would be India as Tibet is essentially landlocked between the two Asian giants.

More importantly, China remains unconvinced that the activities of Tibetan exiles on Indian soil are limited to cultural and religious activities only and is likely to see an Indian hand in what it believes is India's aim to drive the PLA out of Tibet using the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile. China took note of the fact that India (along with several other countries around the world) allowed the Tibetan exiles to vote for a new prime minister for the Tibetan government-in-exile (based in India) in 2011 after the Dalai Lama gave up his political role.<sup>27</sup> This was a glaring example of Tibetan political activity on Indian soil for the Chinese leadership. Writing in *Renmin Ribao*, the daily newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, a Chinese analyst argued that it is 'because of the Indian government's ambiguous attitude that the exile Dalai Clique carried out waves of activities such as a rally against the Chinese government and incited some domestic reactionary organization to conduct activities undermining the social stability in Tibet.'<sup>28</sup> Notably, because of Lobsang Sangay's—the Prime Minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile—past association with the TYC, the PRC not only thinks that the Tibetan exiles will now demand full independence for Tibet, but is also of the opinion that a 'terrorist' is now leading the Tibetan movement from his India-based government-in-exile.<sup>29</sup>

#### THE BOUNDARY ISSUE

There are three aspects to China's approach to the border dispute with India. First, as explained earlier, the boundary issue is intrinsically linked with the status of Tibet in the first half of the twentieth century in China's political and strategic thinking. At the same time, China believes that India uses the Dalai Lama to shore up its boundary claims. 'The Dalai Lama clique cooperates closely with India whenever Sino-Indian border negotiations are being held or the Indian side is speculating over a border dispute.'<sup>30</sup> For example, the Dalai Lama's visit to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh (claimed more or less in its entirety by China) in 2009 led the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman to strongly criticize it as an 'anti-China' visit that exposed the 'separatist nature of the Dalai clique'.<sup>31</sup> India was believed to behind this move as the Dalai Lama

would not have visited Arunachal Pradesh without a tacit approval from the Indian government. Similarly, Sino-Indian border talks that were to be held in New Delhi in late November 2011 had to be postponed after China raised objections to the Dalai Lama's participation at an unrelated Buddhist conference in New Delhi that coincided with the border talks.<sup>32</sup>

Secondly, in addition to the Tibet issue, China's calculations regarding the Sino-Indian border dispute also factor in the role that China perceives India aspires to play in South Asia, the Indian Ocean region and in Asia. The Chinese justification for attacking India in 1962 is worth repeating:

[Nehru's ambition since the mid-1940s was the] establishment of a great empire unprecedented in India's history... [that would] far surpass that of the colonial system set up in Asia in the past by the British empire... [The Indian leadership] took over from British imperialism this concept of India as 'the centre of Asia'... It is precisely from this expansionist viewpoint that the Indian ruling circles regard China's Tibet region as an Indian sphere of influence... After India's declaration of independence, the Indian ruling circles regarded as India's those Chinese territories which the British imperialists had occupied and those which they had wanted to occupy but had not yet succeeded in occupying [Tawang]... Again and again, the Indian authorities arbitrarily and unilaterally altered their map of the Sino-Indian boundary to incorporate large areas of Chinese territory into India [Aksai Chin]... The total area so claimed is about the size of China's Fukien [Fujian] Province, or four times as large as Belgium or three times as large as Holland.<sup>33</sup>

It is reasonable to infer from the given excerpt that the Chinese leadership believed that once India settled the Tibet and the border issue, it would be able to project its power in Asia as it tries to emerge as a major power. In recent years, the Chinese analysts have been making essentially the same argument but have replaced India's desire for an 'empire' with India's quest for 'hegemony'. According to *Renmin Ribao*, India not only wishes to become a 'superpower' but also aspires to pursue 'hegemony', which is 'a hundred-percent result of British colonialism'.<sup>34</sup>

According to Hu Shisheng, the Deputy Director of the Institute of Asian and African Studies of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR),<sup>35</sup> India views itself as 'the natural successor to the British Empire' and is trying to force its conception

of the border upon China.<sup>36</sup> It is widely believed in Chinese strategic circles (especially in the military–strategic community) that India is seeking ‘hegemony’ in South Asia, a ‘sphere of influence’ in the Indian Ocean region, and is basically trying to become ‘a big Asian-Pacific country from being a big South Asian country’.<sup>37</sup> As such, China has little incentive to resolve the Sino-Indian border issue as its resolution would unleash India’s power to establish its supremacy in the subcontinent and the Indian Ocean region, thereby challenging China in the wider Asian strategic arena.

Finally, the Sino-Indian border issue also has a bilateral and regional (South Asian) dimension. To begin with, India and China disagree about the length of the border itself. According to the current Indian Ambassador to China, the Sino-Indian border is 3,488 km long. However, China’s state-run media has described the border to be only 2,000 km long.<sup>38</sup> This discrepancy is probably linked with China’s position on the state of Kashmir, a disputed region between India and Pakistan. In fact, it may even be argued that China has always been a party to the Kashmir issue given the Sino-Indian territorial dispute in Aksai Chin in the western sector. However, China’s state-run media has recently made statements that imply that the Sino-Indian border dispute exists only in the eastern sector (where China claims territory—Arunachal Pradesh—under Indian administration) but not in the western sector (where India claims territory—Aksai Chin—under Chinese administration).<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, there has been a palpable tilt in China’s Kashmir policy towards a pro-Pakistani position.<sup>40</sup> In recent years when Indian citizens of Kashmiri origin have applied for Chinese visas, China has not been stamping their visas directly on their Indian government-issued passports. In order to highlight the disputed status of Kashmir, China has been granting them visas on separate pieces of paper which are then stapled on to their passports. But troublingly for India, this treatment has not been meted out to Pakistani citizens hailing from Pakistan-administered Kashmir. In fact, in a particularly troubling case for New Delhi, China refused a visa to the Army Commander officer of the Indian Army’s Northern Command in 2010 as he was serving in an ostensibly disputed region.

In addition to raising the diplomatic ante over Kashmir in recent years, there are also disturbing signs of China’s military activities in Pakistani Kashmir. The presence of several thousand troops of China’s PLA in the Gilgit–Baltistan region of Pakistani Kashmir where they

are engaged in infrastructure-building activities has led one prominent analyst to question if Pakistan was handing over the 'de facto control' of this region to China.<sup>41</sup> While these troops may belong to the PLA's engineering corps (instead of armoured or infantry corps meant for war fighting), their presence has also been confirmed by the Indian security agencies.<sup>42</sup> In the midst of all these diplomatic and military developments over the status of Kashmir, the Indian Foreign Minister, S.M. Krishna, informed the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao that Kashmir was a 'core' issue for India just like Tibet was for China. In fact, India has also officially asked China to stop its activities in Pakistani Kashmir.<sup>43</sup>

It is quite possible that by questioning the length of the Sino-Indian border and through its asymmetrical treatment of Kashmiris hailing from India and Pakistan on matters pertaining to visa, China has begun to question Indian sovereignty over Kashmir even as China has made no overt statements clarifying its position on Kashmir or on the length of the Sino-Indian border. China's efforts are focused primarily on the eastern sector where the de facto boundary—the McMahon Line—was defined by British India and Tibet as noted earlier. While China and India had signed an agreement on the political parameters and the guiding principles of settling the border issue in 2005, China seems to have changed its position.<sup>44</sup> Through this agreement that promised to 'safeguard the interests of... settled populations in the border areas', India believed that the eventual settlement would not involve any population transfers. However, Beijing is said to have categorically told New Delhi earlier this year that the Sino-Indian border issue cannot be resolved until it received its 'share' of Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>45</sup>

China is particularly interested in a small sliver of territory known as Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. Tawang is the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama (1683–1706), and China is certainly keen on incorporating this region to bolster the legitimacy of its rule over Tibet. At the same time, a Chinese military presence in Tawang—south of the Himalayas—will provide the PLA with a tactical military advantage that has the potential to put India's entire north-eastern region at risk given that it is connected to the rest of country through the narrow Siliguri corridor which, in turn, is also vulnerable to a PLA offensive through the Chumbi Valley in Tibet. Given its political and military value, China is unlikely to soften its bargaining position in the eastern sector.

So, even as there is a military–territorial status quo all along the Sino-Indian border today, politically speaking, the two sides are virtually stuck in the same positions as they were during 1959–62. If anything, their simultaneous rise has made them more assertive about their territorial integrity. In 2010, the PLA conducted its first-ever live fire military exercises involving air force, armour, artillery and electronic warfare divisions on the Tibetan Plateau close to the Indian border.<sup>46</sup> This was followed by PLA military exercises that simulated capturing mountain passes at heights over 5,000 meters with the help of armoured vehicles and air-borne troops in 2011.<sup>47</sup> And earlier this year, the PLA conducted another massive military exercise near its Indian border during which it also tested its J-10 fighter jets.<sup>48</sup> In order to offset any Chinese military advantage in this region, India is in the process of raising two new mountain divisions comprising 60,000 soldiers to be deployed along the eastern sector of the border. At the same time, India is also inducting two new Sukhoi-30 squadrons each to existing air bases in Tezpur and Chabua in the state of Assam which borders Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>49</sup> Earlier this year, India also conducted a massive military exercise involving Special Forces of the army and Sukhoi-30 fighters close to the borders with China.<sup>50</sup>

#### INDIA AND THE CONTAINMENT OF CHINA

From late 1950s onwards, China was concerned about the growing Indo-Soviet relationship as well as America's growing interest in democratic India as a counter to the Chinese communists in Asia.<sup>51</sup> In fact, the timing of the 1962 Sino-Indian War may even have been influenced by the 1962 Cuban missile crisis that coincided with the war in the Himalayas.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, China is now worried that India will partner up with the US to contain China's rising power in Asia.<sup>53</sup> In 2005, the US State Department had openly announced its intention of a new partnership with India when it stated that its goal was 'to help India become a major world power in the twenty-first century'.<sup>54</sup> Significantly, the State Department further added that the US fully understood the implications, 'including military implications of the statement'.<sup>55</sup> In 2008, China became upset that the US changed its domestic law and took the lead in changing international law to make an exception for international civilian nuclear commerce with India even as India is not a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.<sup>56</sup>

While it is generally believed that India's quest for strategic autonomy will prevent it from allying too closely with the US to contain China, a former Chinese Ambassador to India has warned that given China's 'friendly relations' with Pakistan, 'there might be changes in the situation that will be unfavorable to India' should an 'alliance' aimed at China emerge between India and the US.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, China noted warily last year when the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, encouraged India to 'not just look east, but to engage East and act East as well'.<sup>58</sup> China is already concerned about India's 'Look East' strategy and what it perceives to be India's attempt to balance (and contain) Chinese power in East and Southeast Asia.<sup>59</sup> In particular, the Chinese leadership is concerned about India's growing ties with Japan and Vietnam, both of which are China's traditional rivals in East Asia.<sup>60</sup> Give this context, it seems reasonable to assume that China is also worried about the first-ever US–Japan–India trilateral meeting that was convened late last year.<sup>61</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the legacy of the 1962 Sino-Indian War still informs Chinese policy towards India. When seen from China's perspective, all three factors that led to the Chinese decision to launch a war against India in 1962—the status of Tibet, a complex border dispute and fears of containment of China—are present in the current strategic environment. This is not to argue that the threat of a Sino-India War is looming in the background.<sup>62</sup> Notably, these three factors led to the Chinese decision to fight a war in 1962 in the context of a massive uprising in Tibet coupled with the Indian military's 'Forward Policy'. Neither of these contextual dimensions exists in the current strategic environment. While India and China are not on the verge of a second war, the presence of all three factors that precipitated the Chinese decision in 1962 does not bode well for Sino-Indian relations today. China is unlikely to resolve the border dispute in the absence of a resolution of the status of Tibet. Furthermore, India's ambitions to play a larger strategic role in Asia gives China the incentive to keep the border issue alive so that India's strategic focus remains along its Himalayan frontiers as opposed to the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea.

NOTES

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