

The Guilty Men of 1962¹

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The ensuing narrative attempts to bring to the fore the situation as it unfolded in the 1950s and 1960s in the run-up to the Indo-China War of 1962. Viewed from a 'non analyst' perspective, the build-up to the 1962 War does exhibit a considerable synonymity to Indo-China parleys and its implications in the present times. No analysis of the reports transcribed in this piece has been endeavoured so that the enlightened readers can draw their own conclusions from the account. The chronology of events that manifested six decades ago follows the prolific portrayal of the politico-military environment obtaining in those times, well laid down in the book *The Guilty Men of 1962* by Shri DR Mankekar.

Incursions

July 1954-1957: About the same time as the signing of the Panchsheel Agreement, China protested at the presence of Indian troops in Barahoti on the Tibet-UP border. A Government of India communiqué, however, attempted to play it down and stated that Barahoti covered two square miles of territory at an altitude of over 16,000 ft and it had no strategic or other importance. In 1955, Chinese troops camped south of Barahoti and later came ten miles south of the Niti Pass to Damzan. In 1957, the Chinese intruded in the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) region for the first time when they entered Walong in the Lohit frontier division. On July 27, 1957, the Chinese hoisted their flag near Rezang La, three miles within the Indian border.

Prime Minister's Statement August 28, 1959: Prime Minister Pandit Nehru made a statement in the Lok Sabha, "There have been some petty intrusions and there is nothing extraordinary because there is no border demarcation at all and parties may sometimes cross over. We have drawn the attention of the Chinese government to the matter and they have withdrawn".

April 2013: A platoon-strength contingent of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) had come inside the Indian territory in Burthe in the Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) sector and established a tented post. The government told the Parliamentary committee that Chinese troops had pitched tents 19 km deep inside the Indian territory in the Ladakh region. The Army had given its inputs to the government and the National Security Adviser-headed China Study Group (CSG), which was handling the situation in Ladakh. The Army had rushed troops from the 5 Ladakh Scouts to DBO.

Prime Minister's Statement, April 27, 2013: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said that India did not want to "accentuate" the situation in the wake of the recent Chinese incursion in Ladakh and was working on a plan to resolve it. "We do have a plan. We do not want to accentuate the situation. We do believe that it is possible to resolve this problem. It is a localised problem"².

Home Minister's Statement, July 18, 2014: Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh commented. "Incursions along the border take place due to the difference of perception about the boundary"³.

Chinese Premier's Call

April 19, 1960: Chinese Premier Zhou En-Lai arrived in Delhi and his talks with Pandit Nehru lasted six days. At their conclusion, the two Prime Ministers announced their failure to resolve the differences between the two countries.

1961: The year 1961 drew up to a close with the northern sky darkened by war clouds. Tensions on the Indo-Tibetan border heightened, threatening to explode any moment. As the Chinese moved further into Indian territory, New Delhi fired protests with the rapidity of a machine gun— indeed, if protests had been lethal missiles, China would have been crushed by their sheer weight and numbers⁴.

September 19, 2014: After an eight-day stand-off, the temperature on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) started coming down after Prime Minister (PM) Modi raised the topic with President Xi Jinping. Chinese troops, locked in a staring match with Indian forces in Ladakh, started withdrawing on Thursday after President Xi Jinping told PM Modi that he was "sad" that tensions between the two Armies had cast a shadow on his visit⁵. Prime Minister Narendra Modi bluntly told the visiting Chinese President that Beijing's intransigence on the border could impact bilateral ties. "Even such small incidents can impact the biggest of relationships *just as a little toothache can paralyse the entire body*"⁶. Barely 24 hours after President Xi Jinping flew back home, the Chinese soldiers were back in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation in Chumar in eastern Ladakh.⁷

A Fully Prepared Army

November 1959: A statement by Pandit Nehru in the Lok Sabha said: “I can tell the House that at no time since independence have our defence forces been in a better condition and fine fettle and greater industrial production than today”. In 1959, following the Chinese intrusion in the Aksai Chin area in Ladakh, Pandit Nehru enjoined upon our civil and military officers to avoid actual conflict unless it was practically forced upon us. “We must avoid armed conflict not only in a big way but also in a small way. On no account should our forces fire unless they are actually fired at.”

September 20, 2012: In his first media address, the Chief of the Army Staff, emphasised that the Army had “plans in place” to ensure that the country’s territorial integrity was never again violated the way it was during the Sino-Indian War. “Such an event will not be repeated as the country’s forces have got plans in place to protect the territorial integrity of the nation. I am assuring the nation as Chief of the Army Staff that 1962 will not be repeated.”⁸.

Of Blades of Grass, Acne and Instant Coffee

1959-61: An agitated country demanded that the government take firm and concrete action. The military forces confronting the Chinese were woefully inadequate, with poor logistical support, mostly depending on air support for maintenance. Between 1959-61, New Delhi dithered, held conferences, pushed files, passed the buck, exchanged elaborate memoranda and took some half-hearted measures, while the Chinese went ahead in a businesslike manner, pitching new posts and sending out patrols far across the Indian borders, building roads and gobbling up more and more of Indian territory. In the autumn of 1959, Pandit Nehru sought to minimise the whole border question in the Parliament when queried by Shri Mahavir Tyagi, and dismissed the Aksai Chin plateau as a wasteland where not a blade of grass grew.

April 26, 2013: External Affairs Minister Mr Salman Khurshid on Thursday described the stand-off over the Chinese incursion in Ladakh’s Depsang Valley as “acne” which “can be addressed by simply applying an ointment”. “Doomsday predictions are absolutely absurd. It’s absurd not so much for China as it’s absurd for us,” he said. “One little spot is acne, which cannot force you to say that this is not a beautiful face... that acne can be addressed by simply applying an ointment... An ointment is part of the process of growing up, just as acne is part of the process of growing up”.⁹

September 21, 2014: The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spelt out India's stand in response to questions on why the border stand-off between the Armies of India and China was still continuing despite talks after the latest Chinese PLA border incursion at Chumar in Ladakh. The MEA also said, "Diplomacy is not instant coffee. It works in ways that are difficult for the people who are not engaged with it to perceive and understand what is happening".¹⁰

Indian Border Police Vs PLA

October 20, 1959: China's military forces advanced 40 miles within the Indian territory in the Chang Chenmo Valley in southern Ladakh. Encountering an Indian patrol near Kongka Pass, they opened fire, killing nine Indians. Ten others were taken into captivity. Following the clash, the responsibility for the security of Ladakh region was also transferred directly to the Army for the first time.

February 22, 2012: The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has stonewalled the Army's proposal to take operational charge of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), another of the seven central police forces, for better guarding of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China in eastern Ladakh. India's long unresolved land borders with Pakistan and China continue to suffer from lack of synergy among various forces deployed in the forward areas. This, when the Group of Ministers' report on reforming the national security system had underlined the importance of the '*one border-one force*' principle over a decade ago¹¹.

September 19, 2014: India's fumbling responses to the increasing Chinese incursions do not bode well for its Himalayan security. India still deploys border police to fend off such incursions. The ITBP, with its defensive training and mindset and under the Union Home Ministry, is no match for the PLA's aggressive designs.¹²

India's Defence Budget

A Comment on the Defence Budget, 1957: Acharya JB Kripalani, who later turned out to be the most uncompromising critic of Pandit Nehru's China policy, sang a different tune until 1959. The staunch Gandhian, speaking on the defence budget in the Lok Sabha in 1957 declared: "The mounting expenses on the Army should be cut down. The followers of Gandhi and adherents of universal peace should not increase military expenses. We had believed that in a non-violent India, the last thing that the government would contemplate would be an increase in the military budget. But I am so sorry to say, and I think it would disturb the soul

of the father of the nation that in the recent year there has been an increase of Rs 14 crore in the defence budget. **May I ask why are we increasing our military establishment? Have we any design on any country?"**

An Analyst's Comment on the Defence Budget, March 25, 2008: "The grim truth about our fast-rising military expenditure should make us all sit up, interrogate the government and demand corrective action, including deep cuts in allocations, rationalisation of arms procurement and operational procedures, and other economy measures. A radical change in our spending priorities is imperative if we are to halt India's growing militarisation. A society that spends such a huge proportion of its scarce resources on the military when it cannot even feed all its people or overcome the chronic malnutrition prevalent among half its children is very, very sick. Many of the new military capabilities – especially, sophisticated hardware – that India is acquiring have little to do with any notion of self-defence or 'adequate defence'. They are about power projection through offensive stances and extending India's strategic reach well beyond the neighbourhood".¹³

Raksha Mantri, Finance Minister and Prime Minister on the Defence Budget, February 11, 2013: Talking to reporters at the Aero India show in Bengaluru, Union Defence Minister AK Antony said, "India is not an island. Government is drastically cutting down expenditure across the board and budget cuts will fall on our department too." He said that there will be no cuts in "priority areas" and the "operational preparedness" of the military will not be affected. Union Finance Minister P Chidambaram, when asked about the cuts in the defence budget, said, "You must have the money to provide the money." He also said that this year's cut could be made good the next year only if India recorded faster growth translating into more tax collections. Hinting at a possible cut in the country's defence budget, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh addressing the combined commanders conference in November 2013 said, "The Services will have to exercise prudence in acquisitions in view of the economic slowdown, we need to cut our coat according to our cloth"¹⁴.

Arming the Services

1959-62: Indeed, it must be conceded that Parliament as a whole generally shared Acharaya Kriplani's prejudice against expenditure on defence right from 1947 onwards and all along grudging funds for the modernisation of the armed forces. For quite a while, Parliament actually questioned the need for a strategic bomber air command for a Gandhian country on the ground that strategic bombers

were offensive weapons which India did not need as it had no desire to go to war against any country. Similarly, for many years, the government had turned a deaf ear to the Navy's persistent plea for an aircraft carrier. On September 02, 1963, Shri YB Chavan, the then Defence Minister, made a statement in the Parliament about the NEFA enquiry. "The enquiry has confirmed that there is indeed an overall shortage of equipment both for training and during operations. The crucial difficulty in many cases was that the equipment could not reach the troops on time. The situation was made worse because of overall shortage of vehicles and that our fleet was too old, and the absence of roads, and the steep gradients in mountain terrain".

May 01, 2012: Vindicating the Army Chief's claim about the critical shortage of tank ammunition in a letter to the Prime Minister, a Parliamentary panel pulled up the government saying it was alarmed over the way deficiencies were allowed to continue, leading to such a situation. The Army Chief had written a letter to the Prime Minister highlighting the shortage of ammunition for tanks and 97 percent obsolescence in air defence systems. In its report tabled on Monday, the Standing Committee on Defence remarked, "The committee has observed that there are huge gaps between the required and the existing force levels, armaments, equipment, aircraft, etc... The committee feels there is an urgent need to build the defence capabilities to face any of the challenges, including the worst scenario of a two-front war".¹⁵

December 22, 2014: The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence said that national security is being compromised with the fast eroding combat aircraft squadron strength of the Indian Air Force (IAF) vis-a-vis neighbouring countries, leading to a very grim situation.

An Illusion Shattered

Pandit Nehru professed that in the post-war nuclear era, war is not only outmoded but had ceased to be an instrument of policy, and personal diplomacy was the new instrument. India, with its traditions of non-violence and spiritual values, would come into its own and would have a decisive and leading role to play in international affairs. The international community of the early Fifties unanimously regarded Pandit Nehru as a mature statesman and undisputed leader of the fast growing and influential Afro-Asian bloc. Pandit Nehru introduced the idea of peaceful coexistence and fashioned a new design for international living. Encouraged by the warm reception received for his new philosophy, Pandit Nehru went all out almost recklessly, to build on this Earth

the ideal world of his imagination. With the signing of the Panchsheel Agreement in 1954, Pandit Nehru believed that he had achieved the consummation of his glorious dream of a world settled down to peaceful coexistence. The pact was at once the cornerstone of India's relations with China and the sheet anchor of Pandit Nehru's foreign policy. Chinese frontier units in the meanwhile were busy surveying more than ten routes for the Aksai Chin Highway to connect Sinkiang to Tibet.

December 05, 1961: While replying to the China debate in the Lok Sabha, Pandit Nehru made this revealing statement: "My whole soul reacts against the idea of war anywhere. That is the training I have received throughout my life, and I cannot get rid of it at the age of 72."

October 22, 1962: As the Chinese launched their assault, Pandit Nehru went on All India Radio, referring to his efforts to negotiate: "But all our efforts have been in vain in so far as our frontier is concerned, where a powerful and unscrupulous opponent, not caring for peace or peaceful methods, has continuously threatened us and even carried the threats into action."

October 25, 1962: After the Chinese actually invaded India, Pandit Nehru, speaking to the Lok Sabha on October 25, described the military assault as a severe shock and made this remarkable confession: "We were getting out of touch with reality in the modern world and we were living in an artificial atmosphere of our own creation."

It is hoped that there are no identical media reports in the times to come.

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Notes

1. DR Mankekar, *The Guilty Men of 1962* (The Tulsi Shah Enterprises, 1968).
2. "Chinese Incursion a Localized Problem, Can be Resolved: PM", April 27, 2013.
3. "Chinese Incursions due to 'Difference of Perception': Rajnath," Express News Service, July 18, 2014.
4. Mankekar n.1.
5. Shishir Gupta, "Ladakh Shadow on Modi Xi Talks," *Hindustan Times*, September 19, 2014.
6. "Chinese Incursion in Ladakh: A Little Toothache can Paralyze Entire Body, Modi tells Xi Jinping", September 20, 2014.
7. Shishir Gupta, "Xi Gone, Chinese Troops Back in Ladakh Faceoff," *HindustanTimes* September 21, 2014.

8. "There Will not be a Repeat of 1962 War, says Army Chief General Bikram Singh," *Mail Today*, September 20, 2012.
9. Shubhajit Roy, "Incursion Acne, Can be Cured with Ointment, says Khurshid", *Financial Express*, April 26, 2013.
10. "Diplomacy is Not Instant Coffee", *Asian Age*, September 21, 2014.
11. Rajat Pandit, "Turf Wars Make One Border-One Force Theory Non-Starter", *Times of India*, February 22, 2012.
12. Brahma Chellany, "Hawkish China, Defensive India," *Hindustan Times*, September 19, 2014.
13. Praful Bidwai, *Frontline*, Vol. 25, Issue 07, March 29-April 11, 2008.
14. "Prime Minister Hints at Trimming Defence Budget, says Need to 'Cut Our Coat According to Our Cloth,'" *Economic Times*, November 23, 2013.
15. "Parliamentary Panel Confirms Ammo Shortage in Army," DNA, May 01, 2012.