

An India-NATO Alliance? Lessons from the Sino-Indian War of 1962

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In the first half of the 21st century, Asia will most probably take centre stage in global politics. Although the United States and China are most likely to dominate in the new 'Great Game' in Asia for the next decade, other important players, especially India, may exert a serious impact on the process of redefining the regional and pan-Asian *Realpolitik*. One of the most serious challenges that Asian big players and global policy-makers may face in the near-future is constructing an effective security mechanism in South Asia, the most multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious region in the world, with a population of 1.8 billion. The region's stability and prosperity largely depend on external factors and bilateral relations with neighbours and geographically (but not strategically) distant partners. A region with rich ancient traditions, South Asia's 20th century history is worth studying to understand how its politics may unfold in the future. South Asia will soon become one of the key arenas of global policies and global businesses and is likely to determine the future of our world to a large extent. Last but not least, it is also a place where a risky regional confrontation with China may take a very dangerous direction.

The Indo-American-British alliance that never was

Although history does not always offer the best explanations for future events, it may nonetheless help us understand the logic behind certain decisions and actions which in turn, could be replicated at another time. For example, a relatively obscure aspect of the Sino-Indian War of 1962 could have changed

the balance of power in Asia half a century ago. This war only lasted for one month and ended when Beijing quite unexpectedly declared a ceasefire instead of moving its victorious troops further to the south, towards Calcutta. It was a rather surprising decision, and for many years hardly any academic analysis could provide a fully satisfying explication. China withdrew its own soldiers from the already-conquered territories and occupied only a relatively small area of Aksai Chin which is not an extremely important strategic geopolitical position. This did not seem to be an ideal example of the *Realpolitik* that Chinese communists were allegedly pursuing in Asia. The cause of Chinese withdrawal, however, was not their propagated desire for peace and stability in South Asia, as we came to know fifty years later. It was a fear that China's military and political threat would push India to become a partner or regional ally of NATO countries including the United States and the United Kingdom. That alliance was in fact very close to materializing by the end of 1962 or in 1963.

On October 20, 1962, China had attacked India on both flanks: in the east, Chinese troops invaded the Ladakh area which is a part of the state of Jammu & Kashmir; and in the west, they crossed the McMahon Line in the former NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Province, now Arunachal Pradesh). The Chinese easily defeated Indian troops in the border territories and were prepared to continue their blitzkrieg. It should be stressed here that Beijing has never recognized the McMahon Line as the international border between China and India and still claims Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh (former

NEFA) to be parts of Western and Southern Tibet respectively.¹

India was militarily battered and politically humiliated. According to Indian Defence Ministry statistics, 1,383 Indian soldiers were killed, almost 4,000 were taken prisoner and 16,996 reported missing. These losses can be considered very small by the standards of modern warfare, yet the Chinese victorious blitzkrieg, as Ramachandra Guha concludes, must have been the most painful trauma in India's imagination; the trauma which still haunts every Indian government.² All in all, the defeat was a psychological and political drama rather than a geostrategic disaster. Ladakh (except Aksai Chin) and NEFA remained as a part of Indian territory as China abandoned its strategic plans to conquer the territories it had always claimed.

Bruce Riedel in his publication "JFK's Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA, and the Sino-Indian War," suggests that India's implementation of the "Forward Policy" served as a major provocation to China in September 1962, and the main objective of Mao Zedong was to humiliate Nehru who was emerging as a leader of the Third World. Riedel refers to many documents which have been declassified in the United States quite recently but are likely still classified in India,³ including the letters by the first Indian prime minister and India's founding father, Jawaharlal Nehru, to President John F. Kennedy and British PM, Harold Macmillan, as well as JFK's and Macmillan's responses to Nehru.

All these documents shed new light on the conflict and its possible implications. When India was losing its territory to China and suffering heavy casualties with every passing day, Nehru wrote to both Kennedy and Macmillan asking for military assistance. It is important to remember the political background of those times – India was following a policy of "Non-Alignment", having declared its "strategic distance" toward NATO and the Warsaw Pact. This philosophy of global political equidistance was designed generally to win popularity among many post-colonial countries in Asia and Africa, which were in search for their own ideological identities and their positioning on the global stage. Nehru and his National Congress government succeeded to some extent in ensuring India's favourable position throughout the postcolonial world, which became a source of anxiety for Beijing. But Nehru, having sought assistance from the leaders of the two most powerful NATO countries in 1962, undermined his (and India's) strategy and might have redefined the logic of building long-term alliances.

Ultimately the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) did not offer any real protection at the time of war, so in the world of *Realpolitik*, India was forced to identify the most reliable partners who would be able to stem the Chinese tide. In the letter of 19 November, Nehru very openly presented his requests, which looked more like demands, concluding with words that were not previously heard in communication with a NATO country:

We are confident that your great country will in this hour of our trial help us in our

¹ See: Tom A. Grunfeld, *The Making of Modern Tibet*, ME Sharpe, Armonk NY 1996, esp. pp.53-67 on the Simla Convention (1914) signed by representatives of Tibet and Great Britain while the Chinese representative repudiated it.

² Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi. The History of the World's Largest Democracy*, Picador 2008,

p.336. Obviously Guha did not have access to Nehru's letters both to Kennedy and Macmillan while writing his book.

³ See: Bruce Riedel, *JFK's Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA, and the Sino-Indian War*, The Brookings Institutions, Washington 2015

*fight for survival of freedom and independence in this subcontinent as well as the rest of Asia. We on our part are determined to spare no effort until the threat posed by Chinese expansionist and aggressive militarism to freedom and independence is completely eliminated.*⁴

The message conveyed in the letter was clear: Nehru requested the U.S. president to join the war against China, just a decade after American forces had reached a ceasefire in the Korean War in which Beijing had actively participated. A similar letter was also delivered to the British prime minister.

Both recipients of Nehru's message responded positively. The United States and the United Kingdom were ready to assist India in its then and future struggle against Chinese aggression in South Asia. In the letter dated 10 December (after a ceasefire proposal was made by Beijing but met with scepticism in New Delhi), President Kennedy drafted a regional solution for India and Pakistan in the context of possible Chinese strategic plans:

Prime Minister Macmillan and I reviewed the urgent problems caused by the Chinese threat to the subcontinent and what best we could do to strengthen India's defenses. On the particular problem of air defense, we propose to send at an early date a joint UK-US team for full explorations with you and your people.

⁴ Letter dated 19 November (pp. 2 and 3) with an attached message by S.K. Nehru (Ambassador of India to US), Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. India: Subjects: Nehru correspondence, 1962: JFKNSF-111-017. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum; Electronic versions of declassified documents available at <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKNSF> [accessed: 6th July 2020]

⁵ *Outgoing Telegram*, 08721, December 22, Department of State; Papers of John F. Kennedy.

*We also discussed what the subcontinent can do to direct its energies more fully toward its defense. We were both greatly encouraged by the historic decision of India and Pakistan to take up in direct talks the great problems which separate you [...].*⁵

In another letter, the British prime minister echoed Kennedy's offer of support.⁶

The promise of future military assistance was paralleled by diplomatic activities. President Kennedy, who had already been in close contact with President Ayub Khan of Pakistan, likely played a decisive role in preventing a Pakistani attack on India. Both American and British leaders strongly encouraged Nehru to pursue diplomatic correspondence with Khan, and to start bilateral negotiations leading to more long-lasting peaceful solutions (which, unfortunately, was unsuccessful in the long term). This top-level diplomacy was effective, as might be concluded from the course of events: Pakistan did not invade Kashmir while India was deeply absorbed in the conflict with China, and the Chinese invasion did not ultimately destabilize the region of South Asia. Beijing, having learned about the possibility of a US-UK-India alliance, did not wish to face this military and political

Presidential Papers. National Security Files. India: Subjects: Nehru correspondence, 1962: JFKNSF-111-017. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum; [accessed: 7th July 2020]

⁶ *Incoming Telegram*, Unnumbered, December 24, Department of State; Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. National Security Files. India: Subjects: Nehru correspondence, 1962: JFKNSF-111-017. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum; [accessed: 8th July 2020]

challenge that could bring about disastrous implications for its future strategic plans.⁷

Political complexity in 21st century South Asia

This historical precedent of the “Indo-American-British Triangle” should be kept in mind when analysing the geostrategic situation in South Asia and the potential developments of regional scenarios. Advanced technologies and increased mobility of people have reshaped the social and economic landscapes, but unlike in Central and Eastern Europe, the politico-ideological map of this part of Asia and its geopolitical conditions have not changed significantly since the 1970s. India, led by Narendra Modi’s BJP government, may be more interested, as Parag Khanna suggests, in developing political meritocracy in a Singaporean fashion than preserving classical liberal democracy, but that does not eliminate the external challenges faced by the country.⁸ India is more strategically focused on China than on Pakistan, and is building its conventional military capabilities accordingly. Pakistan is still strategically focused on India and perceives Indian conventional build-up as seriously threatening, so it is keen on developing its nuclear capabilities accordingly. All the players have quite complex relationships with each other. India is for China not only a

political and military competitor, but an economic partner as well, while Pakistan has been a political and military ally and recipient of Beijing’s politically motivated economic aid and investments.⁹

As Ahmed Rashid points out, many Pakistanis believe that if their relationship with the United States were to break down, lost economic aid could be replaced by China. Indeed, China is geographically close to Pakistan and has helped substantially with Islamabad’s nuclear weapons and nuclear energy programs; and it has provided the military with several billion dollars’ worth of heavy weapons at cut-rate prices. Not surprisingly, Pakistan calls China its “all-weather friend.”¹⁰ China, according to Khanna, “whether under the slogan of ‘peaceful rise’ offered in the 2000s by President Hu Jintao or the more current ‘harmonious world’ used by Xi Jinping, is seeking to combine Ming Dynasty expansionism with Tang Dynasty cosmopolitanism.”¹¹

In other words, China plans to create a world order in which its glorified principles and interests sit at the core, and Western dominance and hierarchy would gradually be replaced by some sort of parity among civilizations. However, Beijing will serve as the *primus inter pares*, at least in the first phase of this promoted Pan-Asian

⁷ It is not entirely clear how the Chinese learned about this possible Indo-American-British Alliance. The only semi-official channel of regular communication between U.S. and China (they did not maintain official diplomatic relations at that time) was in Warsaw. These were Sino-American ambassadorial talks held on a regular basis from the late 1950s to 1970. Not much, however, is available in Polish archives while Chinese archives are closed to Western researchers.

⁸ See Parag Khanna, *The Future is Asian*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2019, especially the chapter *Singapore: A Technocratic Role Model*, pp. 286 – 301 See also: Chatterji, Angana; Blom, Hansen, Thomas Blom; Jaffrelot, Christophe (ed.), *Majoritarian State*.

How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India, London 2018.

⁹ Robert D. Lamb, Sadika Hameed, Kathryn Mixon, *South Asia Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns. A Framework for U.S. Policy and Strategy in South Asia, 2014 – 2026*, http://csis.org/files/publication/140116_Lamb_SouthAsiaRegionalDynamics_WEB.pdf [accessed: 7th July 2020]

¹⁰ Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink*, Allen Lane, Noida 202, p. 195.

¹¹ Parag Khanna, *The Future is Asian.*, p. 137.

transformation. Sooner or later, India will recognize it as a serious threat to its own interests in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.¹² For other regional players as well as for international policy-makers, India is perceived as a fundamental pillar of the Pan-Asian balance of power, whose serious weakening would ultimately lead to pan-continental destabilization and pave the way for further Chinese expansion. This sentiment is echoed in the statement made in July 2020 by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, that “the US is reviewing its global deployment of forces to ensure it is postured appropriately to counter the People’s Liberation Army, given the increasing threat posed by China to Asian countries like India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines”.¹³ However, it should be noted here that Asia’s political complexity is ill-suited to a “Unipolar Moment” strategy, and a much more multinational and collaborative approach is needed.

Conclusion: Historical precedents offer lessons for the future

There is no efficient mechanism for international security in South Asia. India, as the largest democracy in the world, should be interested in maintaining regional and pan-continental stability with reliable partners. The challenges of political/military expansionism, energy security or nuclear proliferation should compel New Delhi to look for additional frameworks which allow it to work closely with other regional powers.

¹² See esp. Abdurrahman Utku Hacıoğlu, *The case for NATO’s global partnership with India*, NDC [NATO Defense College] Policy Brief, No. 03 – February 2020, <http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1419> [accessed: 9th July 2020]

¹³ Lalit K. Jha, *US reducing its troops in Europe to counter Chinese threat to India & others*, *Pompeo says*, *Diplomacy*, “The Print”, 26 June, 2020, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/us-reducing-its-troops->

NATO provides an instructive framework, one with more than six decades of experience in multinational military planning and cooperation.¹⁴ Prime Minister Narendra Modi may have critical views about Jawaharlal Nehru and his policies, but he should be reminded that history sometimes provides us with potential partners. When Nehru’s India was in real danger in 1962, two NATO members were prepared to offer military and political assistance, and their preparedness probably stopped further Chinese aggression, as well as preventing an Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir. History tends to repeat itself, and the diplomatic version of the proverb “a friend in need, is a friend indeed” may be the most succinct description for how India and NATO can move forward together.

[in-europe-to-counter-chinese-threat-to-india-others-pompeo-says/448947/?amp& twitter impression=true](https://twitter.com/ndc_nato/status/1274489474444444444) [accessed: 5 July 2020]

¹⁴ I deal in a detailed way with the problem of India – NATO relations in my publication *The Issues of Political Security in South Asia and Its Implications for the EU and NATO*, “The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs”, vol.25, no. 3/2016, pp. 22-44.