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One major event which has affected the course of history for India in the post-independent is related to the India–China war of 1962. In fact, the history of India has not experienced no other so much influential development than this war.

It is a matter of great importance to the contemporary historian to explore the real truth behind this war. There are many historical dimensions of this war. The role of Nehru has remained one such issue which has not been solved yet that to which extent he was responsible for the war and whether his decision making faltered during the war. The present paper attempts to analyse the role of Nehru in this war.

There are different opinions and understandings about the role of Nehru in the 1962 war with China. Many scholars accuse Nehru for the eventual war clashes with the China. In their opinion it was the stubbornness of Nehru and his forward policy which led the war of 1962. This is half truth and injustice to Nehru and his contemporaries. The study of geopolitical history of that age tell different stories. In fact, since the establishment of China in 1949, Nehru had evolved his China policy in a comprehensive manner. He was a student of history and knew well that India and China had lived peacefully in the past, had shared religious-cultural values, both countries possessed more or less similar philosophical-ideological bases and their similar stand on anti-colonial and anti-imperialism were sufficient enough for them to come closer on most of the issues.

He was also convinced that growth story of Asia was not possible without India and China. He was aware that India and China were geographically located so near hence their destiny could not be separated. Therefore, he adopted a China policy full of pragmatism, trust and confidence. “Nehru’s overall policy was one of befriending China so as to ensure that under the leadership of India and China there was peace in Asia. An allied goal was to keep the west, especially the US, away from meddling in Asian affairs.” [and] To start with, he was unwilling to embarrass Beijing
by lending any overt support to Tibet’s cause at the UN,[and] he was also strongly supportive of Beijing taking its rightful place in the UN Security Council and even though offered by Washington on a platter as it were, resisted the temptation of taking China’s place on the most powerful UN body.”

Nehru’s China policy was based upon mutual cooperation and peace though in later years it lost its significance due to reversal in 1962 war. China since Bandung conference had recognised India’s influence on the developing countries. That seems to be a turning point in Chinese thinking towards India which culminated in the war of 1962. The attack was planned under a well thought strategy and its objective was to enhance Chinese power and role in the world politics. “The motives behind the Chinese aggression should not be seen in isolation from the motives behind the Chinese anxiety to keep the Sino-Indian border issue alive. It is this anxiety alone which can explain the series of Chinese intrusions into Indian territory followed by withdrawal every time during the 1960s. The Chinese aggression, in fact should be taken as only a tactic employed at a time, which was considered opportune in China’s calculation. to exploit the border issue to the full.”

In fact China was not keen to conclude the boundary settlement since start. The showing of incorrect maps was a policy to restrain India on the boundary issue. “As early as 1953, and also during the following years, numerous maps were published in China showing large areas of India’s North-East Frontiers Agency, Bhutan and Ladakh [in Kashmir] as parts of China, each revised map showing even larger areas of India’s territory as Chinese. Whenever the government of India raised objection to the cartographic aggression, the Chinese government replied that those were the old maps published by the Nationalists and that they would be revised whenever they had leisure to do so” but these were not revised and showed the real Chinese intentions.

Much has been written about the last Chinese proposal when Chou En-Lai had come India to settle the boundary disputes but Nehru refused it, This conclusion holds no truth if real Chinese intentions are critically studied. China was in fact not serious to settle the boundary issue in spirit of cooperation. “In November 1956, Beijing negotiated a border agreement with Burma which broadly accepted the contours of the McMahon Line. Then Zhou told Nehru that mindful of Beijing’s friendly relations with New Delhi, the border with India too would be settled taking
into account the existing ground reality. It may be noted that not unlike Burma, India too was willing to make adjustments in specific locations along the McMahon Line. That settlement however was never made⁴ and by 1959 China had started saying that “Sino and India border [was] an open question.”⁵ In the April 1960 New Delhi meet between Nehru and Chou En-Lai, the proposal for boundary settlement made by China was not accepted by India “because its acceptance would imply a derogation of the judicial basis of India’s title to the northern frontiers established by the 1914 Shimla convention and 1842 treaty.”⁶ Nehru took a stand with national interests in mind.

Issue of Tibet was quite complex, although India had concluded the agreement in 1954 with China on Tibet but China always viewed India a threat to its Tibet policy. Chinese thinking was negative to India, the contributions of Nehru in helping China in several global issues and making its acceptance to world was misinterpreted by China. It started to think in terms of India as its competitor “in the mind of Mao Zedong, the Chinese leader, the belligerent Indian attitude of a forward policy along the disputed northern border regions, as well as its harboring of Tibetan resistance movements and the CIA’s support of them, was evidence of a foreign conspiracy possibly leading to an invasion, or at the very least a threat to Chinese control over Tibet.”⁷ Evolution of such mindset speaks volume about the wrong interpretation of Indian friendly efforts towards China. In fact it was Nehru who had helped China to consolidate its position in global affairs. Besides India showing a cooperative relationship with China in Geneva conference on Indo China, India was major player in introducing China in the Bandung conference. “India was one of the five sponsors. China owed her participation in the conference to India. It was because of the insistence of Nehru, along with Prime Minister U Nu of Burma, that China was invited to participate in the conference. During the conference, Nehru introduced Zhou En Lai to the delegates from other Asian and African countries.”⁸

Since its establishment as a communist state primary objective of Chinese foreign policy was to assert itself at the global level. Sudden changes in Chinese policies started to take place and relations with India were not given much premium particularly after 1955, besides boundary and Tibet issue, “in its domestic policies in its debate with the Soviet Union and in its foreign policy
as a whole, China was manifesting an ideological militancy which challenged and threatened key elements of Nehru’s policy structure. Even more on issues of sensitivity to Indian security—in its relations with Nepal and on the border issue—China was growing more and more recalcitrant. Moreover, China’s determination to consolidate its control over Tibet led not only to discontent and rebellion, but also a massive communication programme which brought China physically to Tibet’s southern borders—a situation that threatened the Sino-Indian amity that was the cornerstone of Nehru’s grand scheme.”

These developments suggest that deterioration in Sino-India relationship was not an Indian contribution and China was not keen to present friendly approach to resolve the issues. Nehru had realized it. He had started to perceive a war with China by the end of 1960. His statements in parliament were indicative of it. As noted commentator K. Subrahmanyam has stated that “it is difficult to find statements after 1959 in which Prime Minister had dismissed the possibility of a conflict with China or had underrated the threat from China This can not, however, be said of the then defence minister.”

Technically Nehru may not have been well prepared with respect to the war, perhaps he still had faith in the China. He thought that it would be involved in the smaller skirmishes but not on the large scale fights. Moreover the complete failure can not be put on Nehru because at that time other agencies were too operative on which he had to depend much. In fact these failed in overall understanding of the Chinese intentions. Political ruling class was dependent upon experts of the country to make the decisions “The war was not forced on the Chinese by the Indians, or on the Indian armed forces by the Indian Government. It does not seem correct to say that political decisions were forced on the commanders. Churchill, who has been often accused of interfering with his army commanders and has convicted himself, also never interfered with military operations. Military decisions had been left by Churchill to the military; within the broad framework of policy, Nehru took similar decisions. When Nehru made his statement on his way to Colombo, he had military advice behind him.”

Nehru had to depend upon many institutional structures to frame the overall policy. It is true that ”the nature of Chinese threat was not very seriously debated within the government and the alternative possibilities were not fully explored. The forums for this kind of debate were Joint Intelligence Committee, The chiefs of Staff Committee, and the Defence Committee of the Cabinet. The failure of the last was inevitable in view of the failure of the first two.”

The first two were responsible for making
available the proper threat perception and the potential intelligence but they could not accomplish their task successfully. Hence blame can not be put solely on Nehru. Nehru’s only folly was that he visualized a world architecture of peace in which he assigned an important role to China but he failed to appreciate the real designs of China. “History will record that Nehru’s perception of India’s problems of security was accurate. The policies he pursued were also perhaps the best under the circumstances. But he failed partly in their implementation and partly for reasons which could never have been anticipated, such as the local command failure in the 1962 war. If we take into account the magnitude of the crisis that India faced, it would seem that Nehru pulled her through it at a relatively low cost.[K Subramanyam]”

The war with China was not a result of Nehru’s policies but were expression of real Chinese designs. The forward policy like concepts have unnecessarily been highlighted and blame has been put on India and Nehru, the reality is that China is following similar policies and the present global view of it is an extension of the primary objective of its foreign policy in which India was the first target.

Bibliography

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3. Mahendra Kumar, Theoretical aspects of International Politics, 305
5. Mahendra Kumar, Theoretical aspects of International Politics, 309
6. ibid


