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Prelude to War

No adequate evidence is available to explain the change in stance adopted by Ch'en Yi in Geneva on July 23 and, ten days later, in Peking. In Geneva, he had told the press that the situation in Ladakh was a local problem that would not lead to war. Could he be deliberately misleading? And Chou En-lai's outburst during the meeting with Banerjee was uncharacteristic of the man.

It was customary for the Chinese leaders to meet between July and September either at the seaside resort of Peitaiho or another summer resort like Lushan. In the summer of 1962, meetings did take place in Peitaiho and Peking. The Tenth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party issued a formal communiqué after a plenary session in the last week of September. The communiqué made no reference to the Sino-Indian border dispute. But it praised the Chinese People's Army and the public security forces for guarding the frontiers of China and maintaining public order within the country.

Many years later, unpublished speeches of Mao Tse-tung surfaced during the Cultural Revolution. Mao's speech at the

plenary session of the Tenth Plenum was among them. Speaking on September 24, 1962, he said the 'contradiction between the people of the whole world and imperialism is the primary one.' China must support national liberation movements. 'We want to unite with so many people. But they do not include the reactionary national bourgeoisie like Nehru,' in other words, collaborators of imperialism. He referred approvingly to the 'tens of thousands of people (who) demonstrated and smashed the Indian consulate and India became isolated.' The reference was to the demonstration in Jakarta at the time of Asian Games in September, 1962. The Indian representative on the organizing committee of the Asian Games had favoured inviting Israel to take part in the Asian Games, And this had resulted in the local protest.

He also referred critically to Khrushchev and the problem of 'revisionism' within the Chinese Communist Party. He spoke of the role played by security services in curbing 'enemy sabotage' which might have referred to Kuomintang activities in the southeastern provinces of China.¹

The reply promised by Chou En-lai was sent on August 4. China denied it had gone beyond the border shown in the 1956 map. It asserted that the map provided by the Chinese officials in 1960 showed the Western border correctly and there were no discrepancies between the two maps. Tension on the border was caused by Indian encroachment on Chinese territory and would be eased by Indian withdrawal and not by Chinese withdrawal from its own territory. Since neither side wanted war and wished to settle the question peacefully, talks should commence expeditiously on the basis of the Officials' Report. 'There need not and should not be any pre-conditions for such discussions.' It suggested that the 'level, date, place and other procedural matters for these discussions be immediately decided' through diplomatic channels.²

Responding to public criticism of the concessions implied in the July 26 Note, Nehru declared in Parliament on August 13, 1962 what would constitute the agenda of the suggested talks.

There should be discussions to remove the existing tensions on the border and thereby create an appropriate climate for discussion of the Officials' Report to resolve the differences on the boundary question. Perhaps, this was his response to what Chou En-lai had said the previous week.

India replied on August 22 to the Chinese Note of August 4. The reply drew attention to the statement of the Chinese Foreign Minister to an Italian-Swiss Radio TV Network on August 3, that 'to wish that Chinese troops would withdraw from their own territory is impossible. That would be against the will of 650 million Chinese. No force in the world could oblige us to do something of this kind.' The Minister's statement, the Indian reply said, amounted to a precondition – that India accept Chinese claims before further discussions start. It was an attempt to prejudge the issue even before discussions commenced. The reply repeated what Nehru had said in Parliament and expressed willingness to receive a Chinese representative to discuss these essential preliminary measures.³

The Chinese response was two-fold. It challenged establishment of an Indian post at Dhola (in the Thagla ridge area in the Eastern Sector) by sending its forces across the border there on September 8, 1962. This was China's most significant intrusion across the border in the Eastern Sector. Five days later, in a Note sent on September 13, it regretted the refusal of India to engage in 'discussions on the boundary question as soon as possible on the basis of the report of the officials of the two countries.'

Totally ignoring its deployment of forces near the Dhola post, the Note said China had maintained *status quo* and India had altered it. 'Such aggressive activities of the Indian Government not only took place in the Western Sector of the Sino-Indian border, but extended also to its Middle and Eastern Sectors.... Now the Indian Government, while carrying out aggressive activities in the Sino-Indian border areas, has turned to put before the Chinese Government a pre-condition for negotiations. It can be said definitely that it is utterly futile for

the Indian Government to use this inept method to disguise the fact that it lacks sincerity for negotiations.' If India should continue to nibble at Chinese territory, it will certainly meet with China's resistance, and 'must bear responsibility for all consequences arising therefrom'.

Then, the Note laid down the following Chinese demands:

- i Withdraw 20 kilometres along the entire border to end tensions on the border.
- ii Hold discussions on the basis of the officials' report without preconditions.
- iii Appoint representatives to start these discussions from October 15 first in Peking and then in Delhi, alternately.²⁴

India's reply on September 19 observed that: 'In the context of the tone and content of the Chinese Note and the concurrent attempts at creating tension in the Eastern Sector of the India-China border which has till now been peaceful, it would appear that the Government of China, while repeating their professions for a peaceful settlement, are determined to do all they can to continue their aggressive activities and to alter by force the *status quo* of the boundary unilaterally, using talks and discussions between the two Governments only as a cloak to further their aggressive and expansionist aims.'

The reply reiterated the earlier proposal for discussions to 'define measures to restore the *status quo* in the Western Sector'.

Implementation of those measures would, said the reply:

'create a climate of confidence between the two Governments, which alone can make possible constructive discussions to resolve the differences between the two Governments on the boundary question on the basis of the report of the Officials.

'The Government of India are agreeable to these discussions starting from October 15, first in Peking and then in Delhi. The Government of India will take further action to discuss and settle the details of these discussions through appropriate diplomatic channels

after the Government of China indicate their acceptance of the proposals in the preceding paragraph.⁵

China replied two weeks later, on October 3. It accused India of refusing to hold discussions 'speedily and unconditionally' on the basis of the report of the officials of the two countries. It alleged India's refusal to withdraw forces 20 kilometres was motivated by a desire to carry out 'its aggressive activities in the Eastern as well as the Western and Middle Sectors'. India had altered the *status quo* in West, Middle and Eastern Sector...It dismissed the McMahon Line as 'without any legal or practical value'. 'It was only after China had liberated Tibet that the Indian side unilaterally altered by force the traditional customary line in the Eastern Sector and pushed its frontier forces up to the so-called McMahon Line', 'a line which a Briton drew on a map at will and without any basis'. The reply asserted that Indian forces had crossed the McMahon Line last June and set up four 'aggressive strongpoints'.

India's Note of September 19, it said, was followed by continuous attacks since September 20 on Chinese frontier guards resulting in the death of five and injury to nine guards. 'Hollow words can deceive no one and calculated deeds of continuously altering the *status quo* of the boundary unilaterally and by force will certainly bring India no good.'

Introducing a new element, the Note said: 'It is not difficult for the Asian countries and all peace-loving countries to see from this that the Chinese Government is sincerely working for a peaceful settlement of the Sino-Indian boundary question.'

It proposed 'once again' that discussions commence on October 15 in Peking followed by discussions in Delhi 'on the basis of the report of the officials of the two sides' and 'during the discussions questions concerning the Middle and Eastern Sectors of the boundary must be discussed as well as those concerning the Western Sector, in a word, that neither side should refuse to discuss any question concerning the Sino-Indian boundary that may be raised by the other side.'⁶

India was quick to reply. It said on October 6: 'The Government of India will not enter into any talks and discussions under duress or continuing threat of force. The latest Chinese intrusion must be terminated first.' After that India was prepared to make necessary arrangements for starting discussions in Peking or in Delhi from a mutually convenient date as soon as 'the latest intrusion by Chinese forces in Indian territory south of the McMahon Line has been terminated'.

The reply added: 'No one can be deceived by suggestions for talks and discussions and professions of peaceful settlement when force is actually being employed to grab Indian territory even while these Notes for talks and discussions are being exchanged.' The Chinese proposal of talks without agenda, in India's view was a 'cover for their aggressive and expansionist activities along the India-China border.'

Military Activity

Concurrent with the correspondence on the agenda and the environment of the meeting, India and China exchanged a number of Notes on the activities on the border. China accused India of setting up 34 posts in the Western Sector in order to nibble at Chinese territory in the Western Sector after having occupied 'much Chinese territory in the Eastern and Middle Sectors' of the boundary.

India pointed out that China had set up 40 posts in the Western Sector since July. The Chinese troops in these posts had attempted to interdict Indian patrols and interfered with supply lines of the Indian posts. Exchange of fire had taken place on a number of occasions. It maintained that all Indian posts in the Western Sector were situated 'west even of the claim line shown in the Chinese map of 1956 about which Premier Chou En-lai wrote to the Prime Minister of India in his letter of December 17, 1959.

Referring to an alleged incident on August 26, 1962, India asked: How could an Indian patrol party of seven press forward in a menacing manner against a large Chinese force? At no time

or place could Indian posts pose a serious threat to Chinese positions that were well connected and well supplied from bases in the rear.

On October 12, China accused India of 'rampant provocations' in the Galwan valley. It referred to previous Notes in July and August and alleged new provocations in the preceding two weeks, coincident with clashes in the Thagla Ridge area. This was indicative of an Indian attempt to extend armed clashes all along the border and a proof of India's 'dual policy' towards China of paying lip-service to holding talks while actually preparing to fight.' India rejected these allegations a week later, on the eve of the fighting all along the boundary in the Eastern and Western Sectors.

Thagla Ridge

It was never in doubt that any violation of the border in the Eastern Sector would pose a serious challenge to the credibility of the Indian Government at home and abroad. By late July, the Government had tacitly agreed that the whole boundary would be subject to discussion between the two Governments. It sought prior discussion of the Chinese presence in the disputed areas in the Western Sector, which the Chinese refused to concede. In contrast, the Chinese references to the Eastern Sector boundary become increasingly belligerent: the McMahon Line was not just illegal – India had taken advantage of China's preoccupation elsewhere to extend its control even beyond the McMahon Line.

The post at Dhola in the Thagla Ridge area had been set up sometime in June 1962. The post was indefensible. It was located nearly 60 miles away from the nearest road-head at Tawang whereas the Chinese army base was no more than 10 miles away. When the Chinese moved their forces to force the withdrawal of Indian troops from the Thagla Ridge area, it was obvious that the Chinese action was premeditated and based on considerations other than a localized movement across the

boundary. This precluded the Longju option — vacation of the disputed locale by both sides as at Longju in the Eastern Sector in 1959, or as earlier proposed for Hoti in the Western Sector in 1958. Nor was the option considered.

As at Longju or Hoti, it was obvious that the two countries had conflicting interpretations of the border in the area. India maintained that the Indian notion of the boundary had been fully described by Indian officials during their meetings in 1960. It was available in the Officials' Report and the disputed post was south of the border. The Chinese held the contrary view: the post was located north of the McMahan Line and, therefore, constituted a breach of the line of actual control.

But, there was no agreed line of actual control.

The exchanges about the location did not lead to a de-escalation of tensions. Quite the contrary. There were increasingly serious clashes resulting in loss of life on both sides, heightened tensions and reinforcement of troops on the border.

Thus, the Dhola post located in a contested position became the focus of intense military pressure and resulted in political pressure on India to engage in discussions on Chinese terms. This was close to what Chou En-lai had wanted in his conversation with Dr. Banerjee on August 4 — that China would set the agenda and the terms of discussion. Since India would not engage in discussions on Chinese terms and said so on October 6, it had to be braced for continued military pressure. Would the pressure be localized or applied all along the border? By October 16, India had concluded that China intended to move all along the border in the Eastern Sector.

Diplomatic Pressure on India

Ch'en Yi addressed a meeting held to mark the first anniversary of the Sino-Nepalese boundary treaty on October 6, 1962. He accused 'Indian reactionaries' of wanting to occupy Chinese territory that even the British had not managed to do. He said all countries favouring Asian unity were against the Indian

policy. 'The Nepalese people can rest fully assured that should any foreign power dare to attack Nepal, the Chinese Government and people, along with all countries and people upholding justice, will stand forever at the side of Nepal.' The message to Nepal and India was clear – Nepal was expected to practise neutrality in any Sino-Indian conflict.

Six days later, on October 12, it was announced that China and Pakistan had agreed on 'procedural matters concerning future discussions' on their boundary. This followed up on the decisions announced in May 1962. The Chinese and Pakistani delegations remained engaged in these discussions for the next two months.

The next day, October 13, was marked as the anniversary of the Sino-Burmese border protocol. The boundary settlement with Burma was held out as an example that any 'complicated problem' between countries left behind by history can be settled if the countries wish to settle them and if they adhere to the principles of equality and mutual benefit.

Meanwhile, in Moscow, on October 8, the Chinese Ambassador conveyed formally to the Soviet Government about the impending conflict with India. The Soviet authorities responded, six days later, by confirming that the Soviet Union would stand by China in that event.⁸

The Chinese had now completed the diplomatic preparation for the war they were to launch on October 20, 1962.

Press

The comments in the Press had become increasingly threatening since September. The *People's Daily* said on October 11: The Indian Government did not wish to settle the boundary dispute peacefully; it wants to provoke serious clashes on the border and 'stir up a new anti-Chinese campaign in conformity with the needs of the imperialists and their lackeys.' India's activities can only 'arouse the boundless indignation of the Chinese people.'

Following Nehru's statement⁹ that he had asked the Indian Army to free Indian territory in NEFA of Chinese presence and it was up to the Army to decide on steps to implement the direction, the *People's Daily* wrote on October 14:

'All comrade commanders and fighters of the People's Liberation Army guarding the Sino-Indian border, redouble your vigilance! Indian troops may at any time attempt to carry out Nehru's instructions to get rid of you. Be well-prepared! Your sacred task now is to defend our territory and be ever-ready to deal resolute counterblows to any invaders!

'And it told Nehru – "Better rein in at the edge of the precipice and don't use the lives of Indian troops as stakes in your gamble".'

When India initiated no action even a week after Nehru's statement, the Chinese launched their offensive.

Notes:

- 1 *Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed, Talks and Letters: 1956-71*, edited by Stuart Schram, Penguin Books, 1974, pp.188-196.
- 2 Note given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Peking, to the Embassy of India in China, August 4, 1962, *White Paper VII*, pp.17-18.
- 3 Note given by the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, to the Embassy of China in India, August 22, 1962, *White Paper VII*, pp.36-37.
- 4 Note given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Peking, to the Embassy of India in China, September 13, 1962, *White Paper VII*, pp.71-73.
- 5 Note given by the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, to the Embassy of China in India, September 19, 1962, *White Paper VII*, pp.77-78.
- 6 Note given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Peking, to the Embassy of India in China, October 3, 1962, *White Paper VII*, pp.96-98.
- 7 Note given by the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, to the Embassy of China in India, October 6, 1962, *White Paper VII*, pp.100-102.
- 8 This is confirmed in the memoirs of the Chinese Ambassador, Liu Hsiao, published in Chinese in 1986, under the title '*Eight Years as Ambassador to the USSR*'.
- 9 Nehru's statement has been interpreted as a public declaration of war. In actual fact, it made no difference.