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The Ghosts of Henderson Brooks and Bhagat

***Double, Double Toil and Trouble*¹**

by
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The War that Defied Impulse

Sun-Tzu, exhorting the virtues of a skilful Commander, advocates the attainment of a position from which he cannot be defeated and misses no opportunity to master his enemy. Thus, he declares, “A victorious army wins its victories *before* seeking battle, an army destined to defeat, fights in the hope of winning.”² This pithy avowal so aptly describes the strategic essence and outcome of the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962.

India had blinded itself to every principle that governed national strategy making; from the absence of an understanding of the nature of war that was to be fought, to calamitous incompetence of leadership at the highest political and military levels. The fact of courtiership pervading control, disintegrating logistics, and the sheer fantasies that replaced political and strategic orientation were the consequences of institutional ineptitude. So it hardly astounded the detached observer (and they were many) when on 17 November 1962, Prime Minister Nehru faced Parliament, and as the American news magazine, Time, reported, “his agony was apparent, as he rose in Parliament, three days before the Chinese cease-fire announcement, to report that the Indian army had been decisively defeated at Se La Pass and Walong.”³

The Abstract and Contradictory Legacy of the Sino-Indian Border

The Sino-Indian (un-demarcated) border runs along the Himalayas for a distance of about 3,225 kilometres starting with the Aksai Chin in the West, broken

into three segments by Nepal and Bhutan. The Western segment of the border was derived in 1846 when sovereignty of Ladakh passed on to the British after the defeat of the Sikhs. However the 'Great Game,' played out in Central Asia between imperial Russia and Britain, saw a state of cartographic jugglery in the region; the British had delineated 11 different boundary lines in the region to exploit opportunities provided by the changing political fortunes of Russia, China and Britain.⁴ Significant to the boundary situation are the Johnson Line of 1865 which placed the Aksai Chin in Kashmir; and the McCartney-MacDonald Line of 1899 which showed Aksai Chin as Chinese (China was not a signatory to either of these border delineations). However, by the second decade of the 20th century as both China and Russia lapsed into turmoil the British sensed a closure to the Great Game and once again the border was redrawn as the original Johnson Line.⁵ At the time of India's independence in 1947, the Johnson Line was an inheritance of the partition award.⁶

The eastern segment was defined by the McMahon Line as a part of the Simla Agreement of 1914, an accord entered into between Tibet and Britain. China, though represented in the talks, never ratified it. The Line spans 890 Kilometres from Bhutan in the west, north of Bum La, journeys along the crest of the Himalayas passing through Tunga La, Yonggyap La and Tsang Kang La, before joining the Burmese border north of Diphu Pass. China however, continues to reject the legality of the Simla Accord on grounds that they were neither a party to it nor was Tibet sovereign at the time of endorsing the agreement.⁷

By the closing years of the 1940s, the world was witness to the British Empire in its death throes. South Asia which hastened this collapse was partitioned into India and Pakistan and by 1949 the region also saw the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). At that time there were no apparent conflicting territorial claims; whether on account of an inward looking orientation or a preoccupation with nation building, is not entirely clear. But the Battle of Chamdo in October 1950 which led to the annexation of Tibet and the consequent moves aimed at strategic consolidation of the Aksai Chin to conform to the McCartney-MacDonald Line, presaged the coming clash. All this went either unheeded by Indian leadership or was explained away as the natural articulation of an emerging giant.

In 1959, as an upshot of the failed Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule, the 14th Dalai Lama, sought asylum and was accommodated by the Indian Government. This was the trigger that set into motion a series of border incidents and a growing

bellicosity, bringing into sharp focus the distinct divergence in the orientation of the border and territorial contiguity. By 1960 not only had border clashes intensified but so had the cartographic-conflict. Politically exasperated by the uncompromising and intrusive patrolling by China along the McMahon and the McCartney-MacDonald Lines, India initiated a “Forward Policy” with the aim of creating offensive posts behind Chinese patrol lines to threaten and beat back their thrusts. While the concept may have had notional appeal, the awkward irony was that neither the Indian army had materially trained and prepared for such confrontational operations nor was there an appreciation that the solution, given the balance of forces, largely lay in politics and diplomacy. After all, as recent as 1960, Zhou Enlai had ‘unofficially’ offered a *quid pro quo* in Aksai Chin and the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), that India accept the McCartney Line while China would abandon its claims across the McMahon Line. Negotiations on this critical issue were never considered with any seriousness by the Indian Government, reportedly on account of a 1954 statement made by the PM that the borders of India as defined by the Johnson and McMahon Lines were inviolate and non negotiable.⁸ The context of this assertion is remarkable, for it came at a time when the ink on the Sino-Indian Panchsheel Agreement⁹ was barely dry and there remained major unresolved cartographic disparities in the alignment of borders which could well have been addressed within the Panchsheel framework. This did not happen.

In the event, India in pursuance of the ill advised Forward Policy went on to establish 60 new border outposts, 43 of them north of the McMahon Line, under circumstances that were militarily untenable both materially and logistically. These resulted in periodic skirmishes through the summer of 1962 which intensified by the autumn. While analysts have offered many theories for the reasons that China went to war, ranging from the opportunity presented by the Cuban crisis to a belief that China was in fact defending her territory, clearly the implementation of the Forward Policy was the tipping point.

Brief Narrative of the Conflict

War broke out on 20 October 1962 when China launched two assaults. In the Aksai Chin sector the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) sought to expel the Indian forces from the Chip Chap valley. In the NEFA the McMahon Line was breached and

fighting broke out at Walong and along the Tawang-Bombdi La-Se La axis. By 24 October, Chinese forces had moved nearly 16 kilometres south of the line controlled by India prior to 20 October. In the Aksai Chin the Chip Chap valley had been vacated and Chinese forces had moved to Pangong So. Four days of fighting was followed by a lull of three weeks during which Zhou Enlai once again offered the 1959 *quid pro quo*. The offer was rejected and fighting resumed in both sectors on 14 November. In the Aksai Chin, Indian forces put up stiff resistance at Rezang La and the Chinese advance was stalled. A unilateral ceasefire was declared on 21 November. In the east, Chinese forces had penetrated to the outskirts of Tezpur, a distance of almost 60 kilometres south of the Indian line of control by this time. The Chinese also undertook to withdraw 20 kilometres behind the line of actual control that existed on 07 November 1959.¹⁰

One of the abiding puzzles of the entire episode which could have had a critical impact on the outcome was, why combat air power was not brought to bear on the operational situation. Particularly in the light of the PM's declaration of the inviolate nature of India's borders in 1954, and the events of 1959 which ought to have stimulated preparedness. The Indian Air Force of that day certainly had in its inventory a combination of modern fighter aircrafts (Hawker Hunters and Dassault Mysteres) and bombers (English Electric Canberras) that were quite capable of operating in both sectors. What is even more mystifying is the reported request by Prime Minister Nehru for air power support from the USA.

The Immediate Aftermath--In Parliament and Institutional Responses

The Government of the day faced harsh criticism despite enjoying an overwhelming majority. The primary condemnation was the woeful neglect of defence preparedness, an unreal approach to international relations, particularly with China, and the dangerous inadequacies of higher defence management (significantly the intrusive, extemporized and incompetent manner in which civil military relations had evolved). President Radhakrishnan went on to censure the Nehru government declaring that they had been "crude and negligent about preparations." Lack of preparedness of the military was blamed on the Defence Minister who had to demit office. Nehru assured the Rajya Sabha on 09 November 1962 (during the three week lull in fighting) "People have been shocked, all of us have been shocked, by the

events that occurred from 20 October onwards, especially of the first few days, and the reverses we suffered. So I hope there will be an inquiry so as to find out what mistakes or errors were committed and who were responsible for them.¹¹

The Inquiry took the form of an ‘Operations Review’ ordered by the new Chief of Army Staff Lt. General J.N. Chaudhuri assigning the task of investigation to Lt. General Henderson Brooks and Brigadier P.S. Bhagat. Terms of reference set for the inquiry were:

- Adequacy and Potential of Training for High Altitude Warfare
- Material and Equipment Appropriateness
- System of Command
- Physical fitness of troops
- Capacity of Commanders to influence the men under their Command.

Going by the scope of an ‘Operations Review’ and the terms of reference handed down, would clearly suggest that the aim of the convening authority was to deliberately limit and strait-jacket the investigators to the operational level of the conflict. Conventional wisdom and military analytical tradition will, however, advocate the need to start a scrutiny of this nature with an understanding of the political direction, strategic posture and preparation, and higher military decision making in the run-up to war and its prosecution. Leaving the Inquiry divorced from the functioning and decision making at service headquarters, Ministry of Defence and indeed by the Cabinet of Ministers headed by the Prime Minister (where decisions on strategic orientation and the political direction of the war were made), was not only to castrate the Inquiry, but was also to insinuate that all was well in the realm of higher defence management and decision making. Facts had made it pretty apparent that it was here that an inquiry was most needed. The Supreme Commander’s terse censure of the Prime Minister and his Government had underscored where the fault lines ran.

The Report

The Henderson Brooks and Bhagat report was presented to the new Defence Minister Mr Y.B. Chavan on 02 July 1963. Earlier in April, in reply to a question in Parliament, he affirmed that Army Headquarters had already instituted measures to implement the lessons to be learned based on the terms of reference of the report.

These included quality of planning, air-land cooperation, training for high altitude warfare, depth of officer man relationship, focused intelligence service and the creation of a chain of strategic airfields.¹² What was conspicuous in its omission was a statement on the blemishes in higher defence management, the failings in the political direction of the war and ‘courtiership’ being promoted in the military. He also mentioned that the contents of the report in its entirety were not being disclosed for considerations of security.

On 02 September 1963, an intriguing statement was made by the Defence Minister in Parliament, he disclosed that the Inquiry Committee had not confined its investigations to operations alone but had also examined the “developments and events prior to hostilities as also the plans, posture and the strength of the Army at the outbreak of hostility.” Further, that a detailed review of the actual operations had been carried out “with reference to terrain, strategy, tactics and deployment of troops.” He also summarised the main recommendations of the report sticking to the terms of reference (which by now was well known) and later (on 09 September) in a statement on defence preparedness, he confirmed that changes were underway which encompassed expansion, reorganisation, modernisation, development of comprehensive infrastructure and enhancing operational efficiency. The value and effectiveness of these sweeping changes were soon to be confirmed during the wars of 1965 and 1971 against Pakistan.¹³

What remained disturbingly unanswered was the out-of-mandate areas that the report addressed with regard to “developments and events prior to hostilities, strategic posture and plans, which must be taken to have included civil military relations, higher defence management, decision making and the political direction of war.” In 1963 to divulge these may well have compromised national security, but to persist through time is to invite long shadows to loom over the military establishment.

Fast Forward Half a Century: The Question

In 2008 India’s Defence Minister Mr A.K. Antony told Parliament that the Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report could not be declassified because its contents “are not only extremely sensitive but also of current operational value.”¹⁴ Fifty years on it is challenging to comprehend what the report could contain that would warrant such sarcophagal silence. As far as “operational value” is concerned it is an uncomfortable

contradiction that there exists a document in the public domain titled “The Official History of the Conflict with China (1962)” by Sinha and Athale, published by the History Division of the Ministry of Defence in 1992, that has, in 475 pages, given a detailed and critical operational account of the war including the run-up. The Introduction Section on page XXII sets the tone of the document, when alluding to the transformation in the defence establishment that Krishna Menon was experimenting with, “such basic changes required first of all a committed, or at least pliant, band of army officers in key positions. So mediocre Thapar was selected instead of the doughty Thorat as the Army Chief, and Bijji Kaul was made the CGS.”

There are also a host of analytical books written on the subject in addition to Neville Maxwell’s “India’s China War” which claims access to the Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report. It is also an awkward truth that the Woodrow Wilson Centre in the USA has obtained a large collection of Chinese archival documents featuring Beijing’s foreign policy before and during the 1962 conflict which would undoubtedly throw light on only the Chinese perspective.¹⁵ For scholars and students of history, without an alternate point of view the first becomes the gospel.

Under these circumstances the belief that there exists continued operational value in keeping the Report classified must be viewed with considerable circumspection. The question that then begs to be asked is, what is it in the contents of the Report that makes it sensitive enough to cling on to the ‘Top Secret’ classification, even after half a century? If the answer to the question is, as mentioned earlier, “developments and events prior to hostilities, strategic posture and plans which must be taken to have included civil military relation, higher defence management, decision making and the political direction of war” (if this hypothesis is true) then it is the accountability of offices and the ‘Teflon’ authority that they wield and not individuals (since all primary protagonists are long gone) that is being safeguarded. This is the key scepticism that must be removed if credibility is to be restored in the military establishment.

The Long Shadow of Ghosts

Even after the passage of fifty years we note that the fixing of liability at the heights of higher defence decision making for the 1962 debacle remains unfulfilled despite the four thousand plus casualties (killed, wounded, missing), the humiliation,

and indeed the credibility amongst the comity of nations. The perpetuation of this causeless inability may be directly linked to some of the more recent happenings in the military establishment, which can be considered to have been cast in the same mould of politico-bureaucratic opacity:

- The curious sacking of the Chief of Naval Staff on 30 December 1998 based on a hastily compiled imbalanced booklet by an Additional Secretary that had pretensions of being a ‘White Paper’ (it was distributed to all MPs) which invoked Article 310 of the Constitution that officers serve at the pleasure of the President. Primary reason apparently was the officer’s refusal to brook bureaucratic interference and high handedness in service matters.¹⁶
- The Group of Ministers that reviewed the national security system in the wake of the Kargil conflict 1999 recommended the creation of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) so that the military perspective would be reflected at the strategic level of warfare and would be taken note of when defining political direction and attaining strategic postures. While successive Service Chiefs have themselves to blame for not having followed up with the necessary vigour for petty reasons of turf protection and internal incoherence, the office most affected would have been the Defence Secretary who currently perpetuates and plays at being the de-facto CDS with no liability to that office.
- The Group of Ministers also recommended the integration of service headquarters into the Ministry of Defence. This while given lip service has not happened. Service headquarters continue to be treated as attached offices to service the MoD as hitherto. Responsibility and accountability for operational matters remain with the military while controlling authority and higher defence decision making resides in the MoD.
- The recent General V.K. Singh age fiasco could well have been resolved discreetly without compromising integrity of the Army. This was not done and there is reason to believe that behind the scenes military bureaucratic tensions ensured that the matter, by design was allowed to rupture in public.

India has faced many traumatic events since 1962 that have had critical impact on security of the nation including three wars, bloody insurgencies, gory terrorist acts, periodic crumbling of the law and order mechanism, incompetent governance, authoritarian rule, a crippling lack of strategic vision, a sycophantic establishment and an inexplicable abhorrence to change. In this contra rotating vortex two institutions stand out: firstly, the civilian-military bureaucracy who's 'duck-back' all-weather-non specialist virtue makes it impervious to the demands of accountability; the second institution is the Military who have stood steadfast in every adversity, unfortunately, without the savvy to either rid courtiership when it manifests or to view the entire spectrum of force application as a unity.

Finding Banquo's ghost sitting at the head of the royal table, the horror-struck Macbeth, speaks to it; and then recovers; telling his company "I have a strange infirmity which is nothing to those that know me."¹⁷ And so it is with the Indian Politico-Military Establishment, it too has a strange infirmity (in the form of a well-entrenched self-centred bureaucracy) that is nothing to those that know it.

The spectres of Brooks and Bhagat will continue to consume us unless they are exposed to the light of day.

(Word Count 4176)



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End Notes

¹ Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth* Act 4 Scene 1. The three witches from the play await the coming of Macbeth, the man who they said would be king. The witches with their incantations are piling up toil and trouble till they yield twice the toil and double the trouble for Macbeth.

² SunTzu. *The Art of War*, translated by Griffith, Samuel B. Oxford University Press, New York 1963, Chapter IV, Paragraphs 13-14, p 87.

³ Time Magazine, Cover feature, *India: Never Again the Same*. Friday, 30 November 1962.

⁴ Hopkirk, Peter, *The Great Game*, Oxford University Press 1990. Survey and delineation of the Northern borders of British India as a part of the “shadowy struggle” between Czarist Russia and Britain is a continuous refrain in the text.

⁵ Maxwell, Neville, *India's China War*, New York, Random House 2000. General reference for the Sino-Indian border.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Graver, John W., “China’s Decision to go to War with India in 1962” in *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross Eds., Stanford University Press, 2006, pp. 86-130. The Sino-Indian Boundary Question, full text of the Letter from Premier Zhou Enlai to Prime Minister Nehru, proposing the quid pro quo dated 07 November 1959 available at www.marxists.org/subject/india/sino-india-boundary-question/ch04.htm Source: *Sino Indian Border Question*, Foreign Language Press, Peking 1962, p 47-50. Critical extracts are shown below:

“.....(China notes that) the Indian Government attaches great importance to the maintenance of friendly relations with China and agrees to the view consistently held by the Chinese Government that the border disputes which have already arisen should be settled amicably and peacefully and that pending a settlement the status quo should be maintained and neither side should seek to alter the status quo by any means. In order to maintain effectively the status quo of the border between the two countries, to ensure the tranquillity of the border regions and to create a favourable atmosphere for a friendly settlement of the boundary question, the Chinese Government proposes that the armed forces of China and India each withdraw 20 kilometres at once from the so-called McMahan Line in the east, and from the line up to which each side exercises actual control in the west, and that the two sides undertake to refrain from again sending their armed personnel to be stationed in and patrol the zones from which they have evacuated their armed forces, but still maintain civil administrative personnel and unarmed police there for the performance of administrative duties and maintenance of order. This proposal is in effect an extension of the Indian Government's proposal contained in its note dated September 10 that neither side should send its armed personnel to Longju, to the entire border between China and India, and moreover a proposal to separate the troops of the two sides by as great a distance as 40 kilometres. If there is any need to increase this distance, the Chinese Government is also willing to give it consideration. In a word, both before and after the formal delimitation of the boundary between our two countries through negotiations, the Chinese Government is willing to do its utmost to create the most peaceful and most secure border zones between our two countries, so that our two countries will never again have apprehensions or come to a clash on account of border issues. If this proposal of the Chinese Government is acceptable to the Indian Government, concrete measures for its implementation can be discussed and decided upon at once by the two Governments through diplomatic channels. The Chinese Government proposes that in order to further discuss the boundary question and other questions in the relations between the two countries, the Prime Ministers of the two countries hold talks in the immediate future.....” Ambassador C.V.Ranganathan’s Book, “India and China, The Way Ahead”, second edition, 2004 gives strong credence to this thesis, Chou Enlai, swap offer and its non acceptance by India, without however any specific official level citation (p. 187, Chapter 7). Also, a detailed narrative of the 1979 talks in Beijing between Deng and the visiting External Affairs Minister then Indian Mr. Vajpayee (later PM), wherein the Swap had figured (pp. 166-168).

⁹ The Panchsheel Agreement signed between India and China on 29 April 1954 were a set of principles to govern relations between the two States. The 5 principles include: mutual respect for each others territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non interference in internal affairs, equality and peaceful co-existence. Full text is in *United Nations Treaty Series*, Volume 229, pp. 57-81.

¹⁰ Sinha and Athale, *The Official History of the Conflict with China (1962)*, History Division of the Ministry of Defence: 1992, www.bharatrankshak.com

¹¹ Noorani, AG, *Publish the 1962 War Report Now*, The Hindu, e-paper, 12 July 2012, Opinion.

¹² Arpi, Claude, *The War of 1962: Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report*, Indian Defence Review Vol 26.1 Jan-Mar 2011

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Woodrow Wilson Centre project on Cold War Archives at www.wilsoncentre.org/digitalarchive Collection on Sino-Indian geography.

¹⁶ Bhagwat, Vishnu, *Betrayal of the Defence Forces: A Soldiers Diary*. Manas Publication 2001. The fact of bureaucratic officiousness is a recurrent theme.

¹⁷ Macbeth, Act III Scene 4.