

Rapprochement and the Sino-Indian War of 1962

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Section I: Introduction

James William Fulbright posited that the rapprochement of peoples is only possible “when the common bond of human dignity is recognized.” Yet, to what extent is this true, especially for contemporary Sino-Indian relations? The history of fractious bilateral ties between both countries suggests that the realities of conflict, rather than higher considerations of human dignity, contributed significantly to rapprochement – the re-establishment of cordial relations between two countries.¹ In particular, this paper will argue that the implications of the Sino-Indian War in 1962 directly and indirectly brought about the rapprochement in bilateral relations that followed from 1970-1990. While it appears ironic that a war is seen as a turning point towards peaceful relations, it was indeed the case as this event chiefly demonstrated to both sides the impracticality of the Sino-Indian border dispute. Moreover, the wider realization of the comparative insignificance of this territorial altercation drove Chinese and Indian leaders to seek both a more peaceful solution and more cordial relations.

Section II: Background of the Sino-Indian War, 1962

¹ In this essay, ‘rapprochement’ will be used interchangeably with ‘détente’.

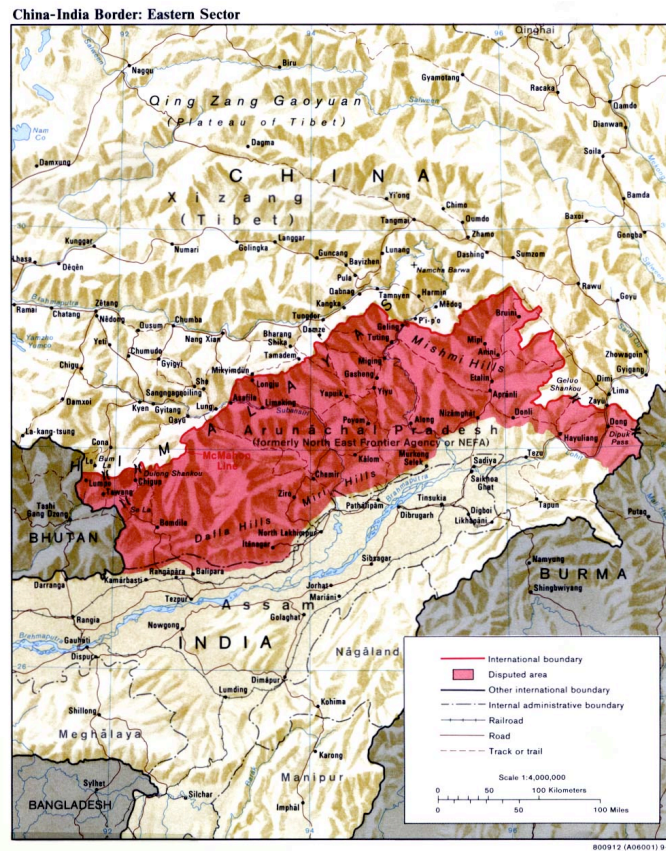


Fig. 1.1 Sino-Indian Northeastern Border and Disputed Territory²

Hasty British withdrawal from India in 1947 left the disputed McMahon Line to serve as the de facto northeastern border between China and India.³ It had questionable credibility as negotiations bypassed the Chinese government altogether and was thereafter forgotten till 1947, when a newly independent India declared the line as the nation's official boundary. Subsequent relations between China and India seemed cordial despite this, with the tacit acceptance of the McMahon Line as the relevant border and the establishment of the *Five*

² Retrieved 30 July 2011 from http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8b/China_India_eastern_border_88.jpg.1

³ The McMahon Line was part of the Simla Accord in 1914 signed by the United Kingdom, Republic of China, British India and Tibet on the territorial status of Tibet. However, the Chinese withdrew midway through negotiations.

Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in 1954.⁴ However, two issues of contention quickly emerged which significantly strained Sino-Indian relations.

The first issue was Tibet. The Chinese perceived an Indian desire to turn Tibet into a “buffer zone,” carrying forward the “British Imperial Strategy.”⁵ In particular, Chinese military historian Xu Yan described Nehru’s granting of asylum to the Tibetan “splittists [sic]” including the Dalai Lama in 1959 as the “decisive factor” in worsening Sino-Indian relations. Second, mutually exclusive and uncompromising territorial claims from either side also emerged when, in 1959, a clash at the area called Aksai Chin on the western border saw the death of nine Indian frontier guards. India urged China to “adopt a reasonable attitude” while China asserted that India had “refused to hold negotiations” on the border issue.⁶ Indian Premier Jawarharlal Nehru’s idealistic vision of *Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai* fell apart and was in turn replaced by the more aggressive Forward Policy in 1961, which sanctioned the establishment of outposts behind Chinese troops that cut off their supply lines.⁷

Relations continued to deteriorate with the strain of India’s Forward Policy and Sino-Indian differences over Tibet, as border confrontations ensued. In accordance with the Forward Policy, Indian forces established the Dhola post north of the McMahon Line on the Southern slopes of Thag La Ridge in June 1962, further antagonizing the Chinese. On September 8, 1962, 60 Chinese troops surrounded and intimidated the Dhola post. In response, the subsequent directive to Indian Forces was “to fire on any armed Chinese who entered Indian Territory.” In the words of historian Neville Maxwell, Dhola Post had become “as undisputably [sic] Indian as New Delhi itself.”⁸ These mutually uncompromising stances bubbled over into skirmishes on September 20, the official commencement of war. Further Chinese and Indian offensives were carried out through October and November, before Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai declared a unilateral ceasefire in November.

⁴ The Five Principles of Coexistence was also known as *Pansheila*, and was codified in 1954 and meant to govern relations between India and China: Mutual Respect for each other’s territory; Mutual Non-Aggression; Mutual Non-Interference in each other’s Affairs; Equality and Mutual Benefit; Peaceful Coexistence.

⁵ John W. Garver, “The Indian Factor in Recent Sino-Soviet Relations,” *The China Quarterly* 125 (1991): 57.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ This means literally “Indians and Chinese are brothers.”

⁸ Neville Maxwell, “Sino-Indian Border Dispute Reconsidered,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 15 (1999): 905-918.

While Premier Zhou's declaration concluded the major hostilities of the Sino-Indian War, its aftermath was an overwhelming defeat for the Indians. Despite claiming territory North of the McMahon Line, they failed to protect and retain this area, instead retreating further South of the McMahon Line and into Bhutan. A combination of weaker strategic positioning, poor preparation and communication, and sheer overconfidence led to this end. Strategically, India lost Tawang, Walong, Thag La Ridge and all territory North of these three posts to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Section III: Implications of the Sino-Indian War

The implications of the Sino-Indian War on Sino-Indian relations can be categorized into three discrete groups. For India, it resulted in a re-evaluation of Indian foreign policy towards China, manifest chiefly in the abolition of the Forward Policy, and it additionally triggered extensive reform in the underperforming Indian Armed Forces. For China, it encouraged a correspondingly friendlier foreign policy towards India in response to unfavourable international perceptions. Collectively, the war demonstrated to both parties the impracticality of a relatively insignificant border dispute in relation to other national economic and security concerns.

On the Indian front, the official history of the war, written by India's Ministry of Defence in 1992, described the war as a "humiliating debacle" caused by "numerous tactical mistakes" and was recognized as a political failure.⁹ It can be gleaned that the proceedings and outcomes of the war had significant ramifications for Indian foreign policy. The most apparent change was the abandonment of the Forward Policy, which set the stage for war in 1962. Following the war, India realized that its provocative nature could not and would not be accepted without Chinese retaliation. Nehru's "assumption that China would not confront Indian troops and passively retreat" would never again be held, and in future would be "validated by accurate intelligence."¹⁰ This harsh defeat caused Indian leaders to look much more respectfully at Chinese power, eventually leading to the resumption of border negotiations. Hence, the Sino-Indian War saw the end of India's overconfident and excessively aggressive Chinese foreign policy.

⁹ Prasad B. Sinha, Anil A. Athale, and Sri N. Prasad, *History of the Conflict with China* (New Delhi: History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1992).

¹⁰ Garver, "The Indian Factor in Recent Sino-Soviet Relations," 65.

Additionally, the war provided a stark reminder of Indian military weakness and in turn encouraged substantial military modernization. According to Indian military historians, much-maligned Indian Defence Minister Krishna Menon before and during the war attempted to “change the basic Defence posture of India”, by reducing dependence on imported armament.¹¹ This was evident in the creation of the Department of Research and Development in 1958 along with the acquisition of firms such as Bharat Electronics in 1960.¹² The outcome of the war made clear the fact that these changes had yet to fully mature, and that the Indian military structure was still in a period of transition. The war expedited this process of modernization, which was evident in the immediate establishment of the Department of Defence Production in the same year to “create a self-reliant and self-sufficient indigenous Defence production base.”¹³ This evidence corroborates the subsequent establishment of the Ordnance Factory Board in 1979, which today continues to produce a significant proportion of Indian Army ordnance. Thus, the tactical and psychological impact of the war saw India quickly develop a highly trained military force by the early 1970s, which demonstrated its prowess vis-à-vis its convincing victory in the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war. The significant modernization of India's military would also later contribute to the process of rapprochement with China.

On the Chinese front, China's international image suffered despite a tactical victory for the PLA. The American perception of an expansionist Communist state was confirmed, as she clearly saw China as the aggressor, though somewhat mistakenly due to the ambiguous nature of the border.¹⁴ Chairman Mao Zedong's assertion that “the way to world conquest lies through Havana, Accra and Calcutta,” along with China's first nuclear weapons test in 1964, did little to allay these concerns. Moreover, Soviet pressure on the Chinese to accept Indian border claims served to further alienate China within the international community.¹⁵ American public opinion research conducted by the Roper Center for Public Opinion recorded a fall in positive responses to the statement “China as an anti-hegemonic force” in the immediate aftermath of the Sino-Indian war.¹⁶ This study further supports the

¹¹ Sinha, Athale, and Prasad, *History of the Conflict with China*.

¹² Sinha, Athale, and Prasad, *History of the Conflict with China*.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ James B. Calvin, *The India-China Border War* (Quantico: Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 1984).

¹⁵ Yaacov Y. I. Vertzberger, *Misperceptions in Foreign Policymaking: The Sino-Indian Conflict, 1959-1962* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1984): 88.

¹⁶ Hongying Wang, “National Image Building and Chinese Foreign Policy,” *China: An International Journal* 1, Vol. 1 (2003): 53, 56.

claim that while the war was a strategic Chinese victory, it ironically translated into a Chinese defeat in terms of international public opinion, which would later add impetus to the rapprochement that followed.

Most importantly, war brought both sides to the realization of the futility and unfeasibility of a border conflict. The continued maintenance of extraordinary numbers of forces on the border was an unnecessary strain for two developing nations. Furthermore, the inhospitable conditions of the mountainous borders also made fighting unrealistic in the long run. India did not have the necessary infrastructure to maintain supply lines to the border posts in the northeast, and were neither sufficiently prepared nor experienced to wage a battle at high altitude.¹⁷ China, despite possessing the aforementioned infrastructure and high altitude military experience, incurred significant costs in transportation alone.¹⁸ Additionally, China had to divert resources from the Soviet border, incurring an additional opportunity cost due to an escalation in tensions as a result of the Sino-Soviet Split.

Section IV: The Return of *Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai*, 1970-1990

After the 1962 Sino-Indian War, there was an observed shift in Chinese and Indian foreign policy towards reconciliation from 1970-1990. The conspicuous gap of eight years between the war and rapprochement may be explained by fundamental shifts in military and diplomatic perspectives that required time to take root and produce tangible results. These results occurred in three phases – implementation of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), the re-establishment and improvement of diplomatic relations, and the institutionalization of efforts at solving the actual border issue.

First, CBMs constituted the early signs of this new direction when in 1970, Mao Zedong made a “friendly observation” to the Indian *charge d'affaires* in Beijing that India was a “friend of China” and that this old friendship should be renewed.¹⁹ This was followed by Chinese cooperation in the search for two missing Indian soldiers at Chomolhari peak and the relaxation of Chinese “restrictions on Indian diplomats” in 1971.²⁰ These CBMs served as the prelude to the Sino-Indian détente in the next two decades.

¹⁷ Maxwell, *India's China War*, 301.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ China Report, “India-China Relations (May-September 1970),” *China Report* VI, No. 6 (1970): 75.

²⁰ Karki T. Hussain, “Sino-Indian Relations,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 6, No. 38 (1971): 2021.

Next, a marked improvement in diplomatic relations facilitated the resolution of the protracted border issue and construction of cross-border socio-economic links. In 1976 ambassadorial relations were restored, leading to the first high-level exchange in 15 years – a visit to India by a delegation of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries in 1978. The opening of Chinese ports to Indian ships a year earlier concomitantly demonstrated a re-opening of economic links between the two countries. This restoration culminated in Indian Minister of External Affairs Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to China in 1979, the first ministerial meeting since Zhou's 1960 visit to India. Hence, by the late 1970s it was clear that progress, albeit of a largely symbolic nature, was being made towards the normalization of Sino-Indian relations.

Finally, the evolution of diplomatic relations was followed by an institutionalization of efforts aimed at solving the outstanding border issue. Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Huang Hua's return visit to India in 1981 initiated a series of eight border talks beginning in the same year. This marked the first conduit of official dialogue since the border conflict. While the first three rounds of talks ended largely in a stalemate, they ensured continuing dialogue and the prevention of a fall back to the dearth of discourse characteristic of the 1960s. The fourth round saw a turning point in negotiations, as there was a momentous consensus that talks would be conducted in a sector-by-sector basis, rather than an overall "package deal" as previously desired by the Chinese.²¹ More importantly, there was an agreement that normalization in other areas could proceed independent of the unsolved border issue, expediting bilateral cooperation in terms of science, culture and trade.²² The extent of rapprochement was further emphasized when talks proceeded despite the threat of perceived antagonistic posturing by both parties. In 1986 India granted statehood to the still-disputed area of Arunchal Pradesh, while in the following year a buildup of Chinese and Indian forces along the border at Arunachal Pradesh brought China and India to the brink of confrontation. However, the fact that the seventh and eighth rounds of talks continued despite these two seemingly provocative incidents demonstrated a new maturity in the Sino-Indian relationship, along with its importance to both countries.

While there was no absolute resolution of the border dispute as a result of the series of talks, there was nonetheless significant progress with regard to general territorial disagreements. When Huang Hua

²¹ Sumit Ganguly, "The Sino-Indian Border Talks, 1981-1989: A View from Delhi," *Asian Survey* 29, No. 12 (1989): 1128.

²² *Ibid.*

attended the celebration of Indian Independence in 1980, he expressed China's neutrality on the Kashmir issue, one that was of vital importance to Indian external affairs.²³ In response, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi asserted that "Tibet is an internal affair of China" in 1988 on a visit to China.²⁴ Moreover, the conclusion of talks saw the formation of a Joint Working Group on the border issue. Compared with the previously held annual sessions, this group was a permanent standing committee, ensuring constant efforts at finding an appropriate solution to the border issue. Therefore, this new phase of Sino-Indian relations was cemented towards the end of the decade, with the capstone of renewed non-aggressive military exchanges in July 1990.

Section V: How the Implications of the War led to Rapprochement

The observed rapprochement between 1970 and 1990 may be seen as a product of the implications of the Sino-Indian War in 1962. The removal of the Indian Forward Policy allowed tangible progress towards border resolution, while China's desire to alter international perceptions meant a more conciliatory Chinese foreign policy towards India. Strategically, reform in the Indian Armed Forces, coupled with an equally strong Chinese military, discouraged further incidents of belligerent military action by either party. Most importantly, there was a collective realization of the unfeasibility of such a protracted border conflict, and this arguably catalyzed the search for a more amiable Sino-Indian relationship, along with the establishment of governing principles in territorial affairs.

An unsuccessful war on the basis of the abrasive Forward Policy effectively ended its existence, constituting the removal of a major stumbling block to border negotiation. The Forward Policy asserted Indian military presence beyond the already disputed McMahon Line, and thus gave the Chinese no basis for a conclusive negotiation to border settlement. Beijing lamented that a recognized border, if permitted to be changed at will by either side, would not "constitute a border at all," providing no basis for negotiation in the first place.²⁵ Hence, this important shift in stance on India's part was in fact the pre-requisite for the commencement of the Sino-Indian border talk series in December of 1981, and the subsequent formation of the Joint Working Group, both of which contributed to substantial Sino-Indian rapprochement.

²³ Garver, "The Indian Factor in Recent Sino-Soviet Relations," 67.

²⁴ Such as the granting of asylum to amongst other Tibetan separatists, the Dalai Lama, in 1959.

²⁵ Maxwell, *India's China War*, 298.

Indian realization of internal military weaknesses on the back of the embarrassing defeat had two results for Sino-Indian relations. First, the build-up of Indian armed forces served as a deterrent in China's foreign policy, for the increased level of Indian military provision and preparation made China wary of ever attempting a similar defence strategy. Resistance would certainly be stronger in the event of future military incursions, if not more effective. These newfound fears were confirmed by India's swift victory over Pakistan in 1971 and subsequent successful nuclear tests in 1998. Correspondingly, the Indian bureaucrats and military commanders showed new restraint, as "Indian leaders... look[ed] much more soberly and respectfully at Chinese power" after the war.²⁶ Such new attitudes were clearly demonstrated by the restraint both sides showed in the light of a threatening military build-up in the Sumdurong Chu valley in mid-1987.²⁷

The international community reacted negatively to China's role in the war, and saw their actions as an exemplification of a "reckless, chauvinistic and belligerent foreign policy."²⁸ Despite achieving some measure of tactical success in 1962, China suffered a defeat in terms of public opinion, and desired to alter such disapproving views of her ambitions. This Chinese desire to construct a more palatable image to facilitate her growing global ambition arguably encouraged the détente that followed from 1970-1990. Academic Sumit Ganguly observed that the "Chinese have taken vast majority of the initiatives, ranging from the package proposal to the opening of Mansarovar and Kailash."²⁹ Indeed, the first diplomatic exchange after 1962 was a visit from China, while the renewal of economic relations also began with the opening of Chinese ports to Indian ships. These Chinese initiatives clearly demonstrated the priority placed on relations with India, and moreover, the desire to construct a peaceful Sino-Indian friendship – a possible result of the increasing alienation and suspicion China received from the international community.

Crucially, the unfeasibility of a border conflict deterred future possible confrontations and encouraged the normalization of relations. For India, the terrain was disadvantageous throughout the western border – the terrain, as described by Maxwell, was "broken and mountainous, and thickly jungled," making troop and equipment

²⁶ Garver, "China's Decision for War With India in 1962," in *New Directions in the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy* eds. Robert S. Ross and Alastair I. Johnston (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006).

²⁷ The Sumdurong Chu Valley was part of the disputed Arunachal Pradesh area.

²⁸ Maxwell, *India's China War*, 423.

²⁹ Mansarovar and Kailash are important Hindu pilgrimage sites.

movements exceedingly difficult and expensive.³⁰ Despite this, Nehru and his top military brass proceeded determinedly with the Chinese confrontation, as he told journalists confidently that the advantage lay with India.³¹ This ultimately led to a humiliating loss, and a realization of the immense strategic limitations inherent in pursuing military-led approach to border re-negotiation. On the other hand, the Chinese had come to see the limited border war as a liability in spite of pronounced advantages in terms of topography and terrain experience. The Chinese had all-weather roads able to accommodate the largest military vehicles and equipment reaching within a few miles of the McMahon Line, along with extensive high-altitude experience from forays in Tibet in previous years.³² However, the eruption of the border war was contemporaneous with a twin security threat arising from the Sino-Soviet split and a more confrontational American stance with regard to Taiwan.³³ This twin superpower threat worried China significantly more than the comparatively miniscule border war did.³⁴ These two factors highlighted for India and China respectively the need for more peaceful resolution of the border dispute, opening the way for a fresh approach to reconciling general territorial disagreements.

Section VI: International and Domestic Factors

While the Sino-Indian War offers a convincing explanation for resultant developments from 1970 to 1990, consideration must be given to the evolution of domestic and external factors, which arguably augmented the process of détente.

Domestic politics had important ramifications for the process of rapprochement, as regime changes reflected changing attitudes to Sino-Indian relations. In India, the victory of the Janata party in 1977 over a previously-dominant Indian National Congress saw a turnaround in a trend of frigid relations with China, coinciding with the first diplomatic

³⁰ Maxwell, *India's China War*, 301.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ On the back of the First and Second Taiwan Strait Crises in 1954 and 1958, there was an acute fear of a military flare-up especially with the continued presence of the American Seventh Fleet. Concomitantly, a result of the Sino-Soviet split was a build-up of military personnel and aircraft along the Soviet border with China, from 12 divisions in 1961 to approximately twice that amount four years later, demonstrating that the Soviet threat was far more pressing than the Indian one. For more see Thomas G. Mahnken, "Current Sino-Soviet Military Relations," *Asian Affairs* 14, No. 2 (1987): 93.

exchanges since 1962. These actions may be seen as thinly veiled attempts at discrediting the Congress party and entrenching Janata rule by cultivating Sino-Indian relations.³⁵ Similarly, in China, the purging of radical Maoists and the emergence of a new leadership consensus led by Deng Xiaopeng arguably sped up the process of rapprochement, independent of the implications of 1962. There was a concerted push for economic modernization and a departure from Mao's autarky, actions that possibly explain Chinese economic overtures to India, such as the opening of Chinese ports to Indian vessels in 1977. This paralleled Deng's trips to Burma and Nepal in 1978, suggesting that Indian détente was but part of a larger picture of "China's turn outward," grounded in the Chinese desire for economic progress.³⁶

Another factor that should be considered is the impact of the Sino-Soviet split on eventual rapprochement. The deepening Soviet aversion towards China prompted China to seek much closer, if not peaceful, ties with India to prevent a situation of encirclement by unfriendly powers. While this split may in some measure be explained by the pre-existing, underlying ideological tensions between the Soviet Union and China, it was nevertheless precipitated in part by the Sino-Indian War, as tacit Soviet support for India prompted the ideological divergence to be "brought into the forefront."³⁷ The war in the first place surfaced worries of strategic encirclement, and was a vital element that caused the Sino-Soviet rift to "burst into the open."³⁸

Section VII: Conclusion

Though it is tempting to attribute the process of rapprochement to emerging international and domestic developments, these must fundamentally be seen as functions of the events of 1962. Deng recognized the failures of Mao in 1962, discerning that the improvement of China's economic and international standing would only be achievable with a less confrontational foreign policy towards India. Similarly, the Janata party's sea change in foreign policy must be seen as part of the desire to reverse the frigid state of Sino-Indian relations set by the Congress party in and before 1962. Thus, even domestic changes in both countries were at least in part a response to the experiences of 1962.

³⁵ Peking Review, "Indian general election and Soviet setback in South Asia," *Peking Review* No. 14 (1977): 23-4.

³⁶ Garver, "The Indian Factor in Recent Sino-Soviet Relations," 57.

³⁷ Rudolf Schlesinger, "Observations on the Sino-Soviet Dispute," *Science and Society* Vol. 27, No. 3 (1963): 259.

³⁸ Mahnken, "Current Sino-Soviet Military Relations," 93.

While the Sino-Soviet split increased Chinese desire for the establishment of a new friendship with India, the same cannot be said for the reverse. This factor cannot sufficiently explain the subsequent Sino-Indian détente alone. Therefore, the centrality of the Sino-Indian War in the evolution of Sino-Indian relations cannot be understated. The war served not only as a trigger for rapprochement, adjusting mutual foreign and military policy in relation to the newfound realities emerging from the war, but also as a catalyst, contributing to the international and domestic factors that further augmented rapprochement between 1970 and 1990.

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