

Revisiting Inevitability and Misperceptions: The 1962 Sino-Indian War

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AKSHAYA DEVASIA, MAY 26 2019

The idea that nation states are able to accurately 'interpret' the world is a presupposition that underlies many scholarly explanations about why states behave the way they do. Robert Jervis contends this view and points out that their perceptions of reality is influenced by several cognitive biases which in turn effects how nations respond to a situation. He broadly defines misperceptions as inaccurate inferences, miscalculations of consequences and misjudgements about how others will react to one's policy (Jervis 1998). In his work, Jervis draws a distinction between the two ways misperceptions are fundamentally created: Through the availability of limited information or through the tendency to consciously or unconsciously discard information inconsistent with existing predispositions. It is important to understand that Jervis is not trying to engage with or counter the rationality of state behaviour but is instead emphasizing the centrality and active political role of misperceptions in shaping state actions.

A sovereign, self-administered Indian nation was created after decades of rule under the British government in 1947 and The People's Republic of China was established soon after in 1949. These were two nations aiming to establish their respective national identities and further their respective economic interests. They managed to adopt relatively amicable bilateral relations despite having different political leanings until the mid-1950s. This relationship was best characterised through the famous slogan of the time, 'Hindi Chini Bhai-Bhai.' However, a series of misperceptions regarding military capability, political and territorial interests and diplomatic willingness by the two countries lead to the unravelling of a series of events engulfed in suspicion and misattribution ultimately resulting in a relationship aptly characterised by the slogan 'Hindi Chini Bye-Bye.'

In this paper I attempt to explore how certain misperceptions on both sides of the border intensified the security dilemma spiral thereby making the India-China war of 1962 inevitable. I examine three key factors that are central to understanding the conflict, namely the dispute over Tibet, the clash in the NEFA region and the compounding influence of nationalism.

A possible limitation of the paper could be the difficulty of determining the accuracy, or lack thereof, of perceptions held by nations from secondary sources. I adopt Jervis' approach to this predicament wherein I attempt to primarily focus on the information available to both states that formed their perspectives and determine the accuracy of these perceptions in light of events that followed.

It is axiomatic that revisiting history is a key link to understanding International disputes. The genesis of the 1962 conflict was the 1950 Chinese invasion of Tibet. The invasion of Tibet was a significant national security concern to the subcontinent as it meant the conversion of Tibet from a buffer state into a live border, posing several security challenges in the region. Adding to the confusion was shaky legal grounds namely the 1914 Simla Accord signed between British India, China and Tibet. This Accord defined the boundary between Tibet and British India (the McMahon line) but the Chinese had refused to ratify it stating that the proposed boundary was simply unacceptable to them.

India's approach to China during the early 1950s was certainly a curious one where although India initially covertly supplied arms to the Tibetan government and diplomatically protested the PLA occupation of Tibet, it later adopted a

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policy of appeasement. Based on an underlying assumption that China would withhold its promise to respect Tibetan autonomy, India went out of its way to help consolidate Chinese control in the region. India was key to squashing the Tibetan appeal to the United Nations in 1950 and also turned down proposals for an Indo-US alliance to extend support to the Tibetan government (Garver 2006). Furthermore, India persuaded the Dalai Lama against trying to gain international support and urged him and the Tibetan government to seek a diplomatic solution with the PRC. India formally recognised Chinese ownership over Tibet in 1954. India has often been criticized for not using this opportunity to engage in negotiation with China and for failing to use legal historical evidence^[1] to mobilise world opinion against the annexation of Tibet. Their inaction in the situation was fuelled by the thinking of a section of the Indian political elite that a policy of appeasing China would win India favours at the negotiating table with respect to the contested borders between the two nations. As a consequence, India did not commence preparations to either resist or make concessions to the People's Republic should the borders be contested. In addition to this, India's policy of non-alignment coupled with strained relations with Pakistan further narrowed her military capabilities and options. (Dalvi 1969)

A big turning point in the relationship between the two nations was Nehru's decision to support the 1959 Lhasa uprising. The Chinese were infuriated by India's decision to grant asylum to the Dalai Lama, the fact that the rebellion was discussed in the Indian parliament and also that national newspapers openly condemned 'expansionist China.' While these three contentions resulted in a marked deterioration of Indo-Chinese relations it is interesting to think about whether anything would have changed had cultural misperceptions been addressed here. Firstly, revisionist literature indicates that CIA influenced the decision to take the Dalai Lama in and that India had attempted to appease the Chinese through prohibiting him and all Tibetan refugees from engaging in political activities in addition to repeated attempts from the top to curb anti-Chinese propaganda. Second, the Chinese also failed to understand that Indian politicians had the liberty to discuss anything in the parliament (Hoffman 1990).

Unfortunately, a spiral had been set in motion and Mao personally instructed *Renmin Ribao* to criticise "Indian expansionists who want ardently to grab Tibet" (Garver 2006). Chinese opinions about the Indian objectives in Tibet i.e. that India was aiming to turn it into an "Indian protectorate" was an important misperception that determined their subsequent approach to the territorial dispute. In fact, there are lines in the official PLA history that claim Nehru's end game was the creation of a "Great Indian Empire" in South Asia and control of Tibet was key to attaining this (qtd Garver 2006). The idea that Indian actions in the region were motivated by this desire continued to be central to Chinese thinking in the time leading up to the war. This is a classic example of the Fundamental Attribution error^[2] wherein the Chinese attributed India's actions with regard to Tibet, as India acting in line with their intentions (here, what the Chinese believed were Indian intentions in the region) as opposed to the situation they were faced with (Jervis 1998). There was a disproportionate focus on the pre-dispositions held by the Chinese about Indian intentions while the actual situation faced by the India was discounted. As a consequence of this, misperceptions formed their own reality.

While the 1959 rebellion drastically soured relations between India and China, the border issue escalated due to a change in the Indian military strategy: namely, the forward policy. Before discussing the details of the forward policy, it is important to look at the diplomatic events surrounding and preceding its adoption. India remained opposed to the idea of bringing the border issue on the negotiating table initially stating that there was nothing to discuss and then demanding that for any such territorial negotiation to take place, Chinese forces must first withdraw completely from the Aksai-Chin plateau. India's decision to espouse an inflexible policy on border negotiation and China's rejection of the McMahon line unsurprisingly led to both countries acting independently along their common frontiers, Aksai Chin and the NEFA region. One evident drawback of this approach was that in the absence of a formally and mutually agreed upon demarcation, the actual borders would then be decided by either side's ability to demonstrate administrative control over the disputed regions. As we will examine in detail below, this was an especially unfavourable situation for India to be in, owing to a seriously under-equipped, under-prepared and underfunded military.

Despite coming to odds over Tibet and the considerably strained nature of the relationship between the two nations, China continually stressed that they wanted a diplomatic solution to the border dispute. In fact, China offered to swap Aksai Chin for the western sector which Nehru refused reaffirming that no discussion could take place unless the

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Chinese fulfilled the precondition set by India for the same i.e. the withdrawal of PLA from the Aksai Chin plane. Nehru's rejection of a proposal, which was internationally considered a significant concession by the Chinese and credited as being a viable solution to the conflict was met with widespread criticism.

However, it wasn't Nehru's opposition to the idea but domestic pressures including resistance from the Swatantra party and his own that led him to reject this offer. He was cognizant of the domestic backlash he would face had he entered into diplomatic dialogue with China without the PLA's withdrawal from the region. However, it was interpreted as Nehru's general reluctance to diplomatically engage with China. This along with India's perceived aggression against Chinese territory are considered factors that triggered the 1962 war (Maxwell 1972).

This 'perceived aggression against Chinese territory' refers to India's military strategy in the Ladakh region whereby several forward-posts were built behind the line claimed by China citing defensive purposes. India's adoption of and continued persistence with this policy was based on a firm belief that China would not react militarily to these forward movements and instead withdraw from these regions. This assumption was a miscalculation on India's part that Chinese offensive actions would invariably bring in other world powers and result in a world war (Raghavan 2010). Initially China did just that and withdrew when surrounded by Indian troops, adopting a policy of 'armed coexistence' which India's misinterpreted as a sign of Chinese weakness and advanced further into the frontier. However, as Indian troops advanced further into the contested territory, the PLA began retaliating by establishing their outposts around the new Indian ones in order to cut off their supply routes (Garver 2006). This retaliation was inconsistent with a fundamental belief held by the Indian side that the Chinese troops would not resort to the use of force.

While this should have been an obvious indicator of the need for an immediate reassessment of the situation and existing policies, it never happened and the policy was taken forward on the same assumptions. This lapse in judgement is both a result of administrative incompetence in dealing with China and a result of cognitive limitations of the mind best understood through Jervis' first Hypothesis. This states that "Decision-makers tend to fit incoming information into their existing theories and images (Jervis 1968)." This tendency to preserve central beliefs and the lengths one would go to either discard contrary information, including accepting conspiracy theories and attributing unanticipated state behaviour not to irrationality but rather to individual idiosyncrasy, is astounding (Hansen 1967). This need to distort information was also because of the commitment^[3] made by the political leaders in sanctioning the forward policy. Political leaders create commitments when they are convinced of the ability of the act to achieve its objective purposes, resulting in them supporting policies which are untenable and likely to be met with resistance by the opposition which is exactly what unfolded in this circumstance (Hypotheses 5, Jervis 1976).

The Chinese position at this point in time can be best described as one of 'Military optimism.' Jervis describes this as one where a country is especially likely to strike if it knows that it can win immediately, feels that the chances of diplomatic settlement are low, and that the military situation is likely to deteriorate. In such a scenario, the justification is that there exists no other solution to an otherwise intolerable drama (Jervis 1988).

On the 23rd of July 1962, Chen Yi and Krishna Menon met prior to the Laos accord signing and made considerable diplomatic progress after over three negotiation sessions. The outcome of this was an indication by India that they might reconsider Chinese interests in Aksai Chin if such a move is reciprocated on the McMahon line. Yi expressed interest to publish a communique signalling the proposal of further talks but this never happened due to some logistical constraints. This was one of the last straws and Beijing concluded that there could not be a clearer indication of India's 'insincerity' to find a peaceful solution to the problem. Mao decided to escalate the situation as the Chinese evaluation of it was that the "gridlock was complete." He issued the "20-character directive" which stated that military restraint would not be exercised where India demonstrated a persistent lack of intent to retreat (Raghavan 2010).

Another factor that was influential in shaping policy was the compounding influence of nationalism and more specifically in this case, national pride. Both nations had only recently received independence and established the current governments, therefore the need to preserve sovereignty and national identity lay at the heart of each side's approach to the dispute. For each side the ability to demonstrate unquestioned regional control and international recognition of the disputed region was important to validating their identity as a nation-state. Beijing viewed the

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stationing of weakly armed, under clothed and unprepared Indian brigadiers as a direct provocation. India's persistent advances in the NEFA region and seemingly confrontational border policy was viewed by the Chinese leadership as a violation of the territoriality, sovereignty and legitimacy of the state. Essentially, it was interpreted as an attack on the nation-state identity of the republic which provoked such a reaction. In fact, this sentiment that 1962 was not a geopolitical war but one fought out of the desire to assert national identity and dignity is reflected in official Chinese reports and speeches of the time (Guang 2004). As Alistair Ian Johnson puts it, this was a period of intense nationalism and China suffered from a high-degree of chino-centrism wherein any offensive measure was justified as being a defensive measure which ultimately made the war inevitable. On the 20th October 1962, Chinese troops launched attacks along the disputed western and eastern frontiers leading to a 32-day war between the two nations ending in a bitter defeat for India and the occupation of Chinese forces in the Aksai Chin to date.

States have two tendencies when it comes to interpreting the behaviour of other states: one, they often tend to overestimate the hostility of the other and two, they are likely to either underestimate or overestimate the aggressiveness of the other. The former is problematic because this results in states adopting unprovoked 'defensive' positions thereby pushing the opponent to act with the amount of hostility initially assumed (Jervis 1988). While misperceptions will always exist, it is important to be cognizant of the problem at hand and design policies that seek to address these discrepancies. This is especially relevant in an age of nuclear weapons where there must be careful thought and deliberation to avert potentially disastrous consequences. There is a need for nation states to strategize in a manner so as to mitigate and not catalyse the spiral. While the task at hand is not an easy one as it would require that states use a combination of threats and firmness with credible willingness to negotiate and compromise, it could point to ways outside the gridlock of historically inevitability.

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Notes

[1] See Dalvi Chapter 2 for a detailed account

[2] See Edward Jones, "How Do People Perceive the Causes of Behaviour?" and Jervis, Perception and Misperception and Misperception and War

[3] See War and Misperception 693

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