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JAWAHARLAL NEHRU AND  
CHINA: A STUDY IN FAILURE?

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# JAWAHARLAL NEHRU AND CHINA: A STUDY IN FAILURE?\*

by Ramachandra Guha

## I

In the late autumn of 1962, there was a short, intense border war between India and China. It resulted in the complete rout of an underprepared and poorly led Indian Army. The battle was seen in national, civilizational, and ideological terms. India became free of British rule in 1947; China was united under Communist auspices in 1949. These two nations were, or at least saw themselves as, carriers of ancient civilizations that had produced great literature, philosophy, architecture, science, and much else, but whose further evolution had been rudely interrupted by Western imperialists. The recovery of their national independence was seen as the prelude to the re-emergence of China and India as major forces in the world.

The defeat of 1962 was thus at once a defeat of the Indian Army at the hands of its Chinese counterpart, a defeat of democracy by Communism, a defeat of one large new nation by another, a defeat of one ancient civilization at the hands of another. In India, the defeat was also interpreted in personal terms, as the defeat of Jawaharlal Nehru, who had held the offices of Prime Minister and Foreign Minister continuously since independence in 1947.

That debacle at the hands of China still hangs as a huge cloud over Nehru's reputation. There is an intriguing comparison to be made here with with his fellow Harrovian, Winston Churchill. Robert Rhodes James once wrote a book called *Churchill: A Study in Failure*, whose narrative stopped in 1940. It excavated, perhaps in excessive detail, its subject's erratic and undistinguished career before that date. But of course,

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all Churchill's failures were redeemed by his great and heroic leadership in World War II. It is tempting to see Nehru's career as being Churchill's in reverse, insofar it was marked for many decades by achievement and success, these nullified by the one humiliating failure, with regard to China, which broke his nation's morale and broke his own spirit and body. The war was fought in October-November 1962; a year-and-a-half later, Nehru was dead.

## II

The four towering figures of 20<sup>th</sup> century India were Rabindranath Tagore, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and B. R. Ambedkar. All four had a close connection with England, a country they each spent extended periods in, and whose literature and politics they were influenced by. But all also had a long engagement with a second foreign country. In the case of Tagore, this was Japan, which he visited on four separate occasions, and whose culture and art he greatly admired. In the case of Gandhi, this second country was South Africa, where he spent two decades working as a lawyer, community organiser, and activist. In the case of Ambedkar it was the United States, where he studied, and by whose democratic traditions he was deeply influenced.

As for Nehru, other than India and England, the country that interested him most was China. His first major book, *Glimpses of World History*, published in 1935, has as many as 134 index references to China. These refer to, among other things, different dynasties (the Tang, Han, Ch'in, etc), corruption, communism, civil war, agriculture, and banditry. Already, the pairing of China and India was strongly imprinted in Nehru's framework. Thus China is referred to as 'the other great country of Asia', and as 'India's old-time friend.' There was a manifest sympathy with its troubles at the hands of foreigners. The British were savaged for forcing both

humiliating treaties and opium down the throats of the Chinese, this being an illustration of the 'growing arrogance and interference by the western Powers'.

More notable, perhaps, was the chastisement of the Japanese, which 'not only followed Europe in industrial methods', but, at least with regard to China, 'also in imperialist aggression.' Speaking of the wars between the two nations in the 1890s, Nehru writes that 'no scruple had ever troubled China in the pursuit of her imperial policy. She grabbed openly, not caring even to cover her designs with a veil.' Nehru also judged Japan harshly with regard to the war with China that took place at the time of the book's writing. Thus, when Japan met with resistance from Chinese nationalists, it 'tried to break it by vast and horrible massacres from the air and other methods of unbelievable barbarity'. But, continued Nehru, 'in this fiery ordeal a new nation was forged in China, and the old lethargy of the Chinese people dropped away from them. ... The sympathy of the people of India was naturally with the Chinese people, as it also was with the Spanish Republic, and in India and America and elsewhere great movements for the boycott of Japanese goods grew.'

The sympathy of this particular Indian manifested itself in a trip he made to China in August 1939. The visit was cut short by the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, which forced Nehru to come home to discuss with his nationalist colleagues the impact of the War on their movement. Even so, the two weeks he spent in China were, wrote Nehru, 'memorable ones both personally for me and for the future relations of India and China. I found, to my joy, that my desire that China and India should draw ever closer to each other was fully reciprocated by China's leaders... . ... I returned to India an even greater admirer of China and the Chinese people than I had been previously, and I could not imagine that any adverse fate could break the spirit of these ancient people, who had grown so young again.'

Shortly after writing these words, Nehru was jailed by the British. While in prison for the next three years, he composed *Discovery of India*, a brilliant and idiosyncratic work that mixes autobiography with history, and cultural analysis with political prophecy. One important strand in the book relates to relations between the two great Asiatic civilizations. Nehru speaks of the exchange of ideas and artefacts carried on down the centuries by pilgrims, mystics, scholars, travellers, and diplomats. 'During the thousand years and more of intercourse between India and China', he writes, 'each country learnt something from the other, not only in the regions of thought and philosophy, but also in the arts and sciences of life. Probably China was more influenced by India than India by China, which is a pity, for India could well have received, with profit to herself, some of the sound commonsense of the Chinese, and with aid checked her own extravagant fancies.'

In the *Discovery of India*, Nehru again compares China favourably with Japan, observing that the former's struggle for national dignity attracted 'much sympathy' in India, in contrast to 'a certain antipathy' for the latter. The Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek had visited India during the War; although the British did not allow him to meet Indian politicians or mix freely with the Indian people, the presence of the Generalissimo and his wife, thought Nehru, 'and their manifest sympathy for India's freedom, helped to bring India out of her national shell and increased her awareness of the international issues at stake. The bonds that tied India and China grew stronger, and so did the desire to line up with China and other nations against the common adversary' (namely, fascism and imperialism).

Writing at the conclusion of the Second World War, Nehru could clearly see the decline of Great Britain, and the emergence of the United States and Soviet Russia as the two major powers. This bipolar world would, in time, become a multi-polar world. Nehru thought that 'China and

India are potentially capable of joining that group. Each of them is compact and homogeneous and full of natural wealth, man-power and human skill and capacity... No other country, taken singly, apart from these four, is actually or potentially in such a position'. 'It is possible of course', wrote Nehru presciently, 'that large federations of groups of nations may emerge in Europe or elsewhere and form huge multinational States.'

In his pre-1947 writings, Nehru saw China from the lens of a progressive anti-imperialist, from which perspective India and China were akin and alike, simultaneously fighting Western control as well as feudal remnants in their own society. Chiang and company, like Nehru and company, were at once freedom-fighters, national unifiers, and social modernizers. It stood to reason that, when finally free of foreign domination, the two neighbours would be friends and partners.

### III

I turn now to Jawaharlal Nehru's attitude to China as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. The bridge between these two periods, pre-and-post Indian independence, is provided by the Asian Relations Conference, held in New Delhi in March-April 1947. In his speech to the Conference, Nehru called China 'that great country to which Asia owes so much and from which so much is expected'. The Conference itself he characterized as 'an expression of that deeper urge of the mind and spirit of Asia which has persisted in spite of the isolationism which grew up during the years of European domination. As that domination goes, the walls that surrounded us fall down and we look at one another again and meet as old friends long parted.'

The Chinese delegation to this Conference represented Chiang Kaishek's Guomindang Party; there was also a separate delegation from Tibet. Two years later the Communists took power in China. The Indian Ambassador

to China, K. M. Panikkar, was greatly impressed by the new ruler of China. He compared Mao Zedong to his own boss, Nehru, writing that 'both are men of action with dreamy, idealistic temperaments', both 'humanists in the broadest sense of the term.'

One does not know what Nehru made of this comparison. But an Indian who had a different and more realistic view of Mao and his comrades was the Home Minister, Vallabhbhai Patel. When China invaded Tibet in October 1950, Patel wrote to Nehru that 'communism is no shield against imperialism and that the Communists are as good or as bad imperialists as any other. Chinese ambitions in this respect not only cover the Himalayan slopes on our side but also include important parts of Assam... Chinese irredentism and Communist imperialism are different from the expansionism or imperialism of the Western Powers. The former has a cloak of ideology which makes it ten times more dangerous. In the guise of ideological expansion lies concealed racial, national or historical claims.'

The Prime Minister, however, continued to give the Chinese the benefit of doubt, Speaking in the Indian Parliament in December 1950, he said: 'Some hon. Members seem to think that I should issue an ultimatum to China, that I should warn them not to do this or that or that I should send them a letter saying that it is foolish to follow the doctrine of communism. I do not see how it is going to help anybody if I act in this way.'

Through the first half of the 1950s, Nehru continued to see China as a kindred soul. Like India, it had embarked on an ambitious and autonomous programme of economic and social development, albeit under communist auspices. One more the two great civilizations could interact with and learn from each other. As Nehru wrote to his Chief Ministers in June 1952: '[A] variety of circumstances pull India and China towards each other, in spite of differences of forms of government. This is the long pull of geography and history and, if I may add, of

the future.' Later the same year, after a visit to India's north-east, Nehru insisted that was not 'the slightest reason to expect any aggression on our north-eastern frontier. A little clear thinking will show that it is a frightfully difficult task for any army to cross Tibet and the Himalayas and invade India. Tibet is one of the most difficult and inhospitable of countries. An army may possibly cross it, but the problem of logistics and feeding it becomes increasingly difficult. The climate is itself an enemy of any large-scale movement. Apart from this, there was no particular reason why China should think of aggression in this direction.' Nehru even thought 'there is a definite feeling of friendliness towards India in China.'

In June 1954, Zhou-en-lai visited New Delhi. In a letter to his Chief Ministers written immediately afterwards, Nehru reported that the Chinese Prime Minister 'was particularly anxious, of course, for the friendship and co-operation of India... His talk was wholly different from the normal approach of the average Communist, which is full of certain slogans and cliches. He hardly mentioned communism or the Soviet Union or European politics.' Nehru then reported his own talk: 'I spoke to him at some length about our peaceful struggle for independence under Gandhiji's leadership and how this had conditioned us. Our policies had developed from that struggle and we proposed to follow them.'

Nehru's made a return visit to China in October 1954. His reception there was described by his security officer, KF Rustamji. In Beijing, a million people lined the roads to greet and cheer Nehru and Zhou as they drove in an open car from the airport to the city. 'All along the route', observed Rustamji, 'not a single police in uniform was visible'. Then he visited Canton, Dairen, Nanking, and 'at each place the cheers became louder, the clapping more vigorous. At each place we felt that nothing could be better than the reception given there. Then we moved on and found that there was something

better—Shanghai. There the airport was a mass of people waving gladioli flowers—there were so many flowers that they seemed to change the colour of the airport.'

This reception must certainly have flattered Nehru. But it seems also to have convinced him of the depth of popular support for the regime (with not a policeman in sight), and of the desire for friendship with India. As he wrote to his closest friend, Edwina Mountbatten, 'I had a welcome in China, such as I have in the big cities of India, and that is saying something. ... The welcome given to me was official and popular. ... One million took part on the day of arrival in Peking. It was not the numbers but their obvious enthusiasm. There appeared to be something emotional to it.'

In a letter to his Chief Ministers, Nehru likewise insisted that 'this welcome represented something more than political exigency. It was almost an emotional upheaval representing the basic urges of the people for friendship with India.' He had 'no doubt at all that the Government and people of China desire peace and want to concentrate on building up their country during the next decade or so.'

#### IV

Towards the end of 1956, Zhou-en-Lai visited India again. The Dalai Lama was also in his party. The Tibetan leader briefly escaped his Chinese minders, and told Nehru that conditions were so harsh in his country that he wished to flee to India. Nehru advised him to return. In 1958, the Indian Prime Minister asked to visit Tibet, but was refused permission. Now the first seeds of doubt, or at least confusion, were planted in his mind—perhaps the Chinese were not as straightforward, or indeed as progressive, as he had supposed.

In July 1958, a map was printed in Beijing which showed large parts of India as Chinese territory. It was also revealed that the Chinese had built a road linking

Xinjiang to Tibet, which passed through an uninhabited, and scarcely visited stretch of the Indian district of Ladakh. There were protests from New Delhi, whereupon Zhou-en-Lai wrote back saying that the McMahon Line, marking the border between India and China, was a legacy of British imperialism and hence not 'legal'. The Chinese leader suggested that both sides retain control of the territory they currently occupied, pending a final settlement.

Meanwhile, a revolt broke out in Tibet. It was put down, and in March 1959 the Dalai Lama fled into India. That he was given refuge, and that Indian political parties rushed to his defence, enraged the Chinese. The war of words escalated. That autumn there were sporadic clashes between Indian and Chinese troops on the border. In October 1959, Nehru wrote to his Chief Ministers that 'this tension that has arisen between India and China is, of course, of great concern to us. That does not mean that we should get alarmed in the present or fear any serious consequences. I do not think any such development is likely in the foreseeable future. But the basic fact remains that India and China have fallen out and, even though relative peace may continue at the frontier, it is some kind of an armed peace, and the future appears to be one of continuing tension.'

'Behind all this frontier trouble', Nehru continued,

There appears to me to be a basic problem of a strong and united Chinese State, expansive and pushing out in various directions and full of pride in its growing strength. In Chinese history, this kind of thing has happened on several occasions. Communism as such is only an added element; the real reason should be found to lie deeper in history and in national characteristic. But it is true that never before have these two great countries, India and China, come face to face in some kind of a conflict. By virtue of their very size and their actual or potential strength, there is danger in this situation, not danger in the present, but rather in the future. That

danger may be minimized by other developments and by the world moving gradually towards peace. But the danger will still remain, partly because of the tremendous rate of increase of the population of the Chinese State. Apart from population, there has been and is a certain homogeneity among the Chinese people which probably we lack. I have no doubt, however, that in the face of danger there will be much greater cohesion in India than we have at present. Perhaps, that may be one of the good effects of this new and unfortunate development.

By now, Nehru appeared to have come around, at least in part, to the point of view articulated by Vallabhbhai Patel in 1950. The Chinese state was more nationalist than communist. Still, he felt that there was no chance of a full-fledged war between the two countries. To protect India's interests, Nehru now sanctioned a policy of 'forward posts', whereby detachments were camped in areas along the border claimed by both sides. This was a preemptive measure, designed to deter the Chinese from advancing beyond the McMahon Line.

In 1960, Zhou-en-Lai came to New Delhi in an attempt to find a settlement. India's case was stronger in the Western sector, where Chinese interests were greater. Here lay the access road linking the two troublesome provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang, a road that passed through territory claimed by India. On the other hand, in the Eastern sector, where Chinese claims were more robust, their strategic interests were minimal.

Zhou offered a *quid pro quo*. The Chinese would not challenge Indian control of the eastern sector, so long as the Indians in turn winked at their incursions in the west. It was a practical, and in terms of *realpolitik*, a reasonable proposal. Nehru himself was open to considering it favourably. But by this time knowledge of the road in Ladakh had become public, and there was an outcry in Parliament and the press. The border clashes and the flight of the Dalai Lama had further inflamed public opinion. Opposition politicians accused Nehru of

betraying the national interest by talking to the Chinese. Not an inch of Indian territory, they said, could or should be ceded to the Chinese. In the prevailing climate, Nehru chose not to pursue the idea of a settlement.

## V

In July 1962, there were clashes between Indian and Chinese troops in the Western sector, followed, in September, by clashes in the east. In the third week of October, the Chinese launched a major military strike. In the west, the Indian resisted stoutly, but in the east they were slaughtered. The Chinese swept through the Brahmaputra Valley, coming as far as the Assam town of Tezpur. The great city of Calcutta was in their sights. However, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November, the Chinese announced a unilateral cease-fire, and withdrew from the areas they had occupied.

Why did the Chinese act when they did? One school of historians argues that they were reacting to Nehru's provocative forward policy. Another school argues that the military adventure was to distract the attention of the Chinese people from domestic events, such as the failure of the Great Leap Forward. This led to increasing criticism of Mao within the Chinese Communist Party, to deflect and answer which the plan to invade India was sanctioned.

This dispute, between those who see India as the instigator and those who see China as the aggressor, dominates the literature to this day. A third explanation for the war was offered by Jawaharlal Nehru himself, soon after the events, in a fascinating, forgotten letter written to his Chief Ministers on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1962. Here, Nehru admitted the lack of preparedness of the Indian army and the lack of foresight of the political leadership in not building roads up to the border to carry supplies and ammunitions. On the other side, the

invasion of Tibet and the Korean war had made the Chinese primed and ready for battle. Then he asked the question—why did the Chinese attack when and in the manner they did? The answer, he argued, had to do not so much with the border dispute as with their larger desire to keep the Cold War going.

Between Russia and the United States, said Nehru, lay a large number of countries which, though weak in conventional military terms, had become symbols 'of peaceful co-existence and their policy of non-alignment to military blocs has gradually been appreciated more and more even by the big blocs. Both the United State of America and the Soviet Union have appreciated this policy of non-alignment and peaceful co-existence, even though they cannot adopt it for themselves because of their fear of each other. ... While some individuals in either group of countries may think and behave like war-mongers, the fact is that most countries or nearly all, including the leaders of the two blocs, do not want a war and would welcome some peaceful arrangement. The hunger for disarmament is itself witness of this urge.'

In Nehru's view, to this 'desire for peace and co-existence there is one major exception, and that is China. ... It believes in the inevitability of war and, therefore, does not want the tensions in the world to lessen. It dislikes non-alignment and it would much rather have a clear polarization of the different countries in the world. It is not afraid even of a nuclear war because as it is often said, they can afford to lose a few hundred million people and yet have enough numbers left.'

China, claimed Nehru, was upset with 'Russia's softening down, in its opinion, in revolutionary ardour and its thinking of peace and peaceful co-existence...' In recent years, this difference in opinion had led Russia to withdraw economic and technical support to China, and even to Russia offering aid to India. Nehru wrote that

It was possible for China to fall into line with Russian thinking and present policy, and thus perhaps get more aid. But they are too proud to do this and trained too much in the old revolutionary tradition to accept defeat in this matter. What else then could they do? The other course was to heighten tensions in the world and to make non-alignment and peaceful co-existence more and more difficult to maintain. ... India was said to be the chief non-aligned country in the world, and a country which constantly preached the virtues of peaceful co-existence. If India could be humiliated and defeated and perhaps even driven into the other camp of the Western Powers, that would be the end of non-alignment for other countries also, and Russia's policy would have been broken down. The cold war would be at its fiercest and Russia would be compelled then to help China to a much greater degree and to withdraw help from the nations that did not side with it completely in the cold war.'

If this reasoning is correct [continued Nehru], then India became the stumbling block to China in the furtherance of its wider policy. The removal of India as a power which has become an obstacle in the way of China becoming a great power, became the primary objective of Chinese policy, and the elimination of non-alignment became particularly important from China's viewpoint. China wanted to show that Soviet policy was wrong. If this could be demonstrated then the Communist countries and those that followed them would veer round to the Chinese point of view and a hegemony of that bloc would be created. At the same time, the Asian and African countries would have to choose one way or the other. Many of them would be frightened of China. In this state of affairs, China would get much more help from the Soviet and allied countries and her industrialization would proceed more rapidly. If war comes, well and good. If it does not come, the strength of the Communist and allied bloc would grow and there would be interdependence of Soviet Union and China.

This then was Nehru's interesting and possibly somewhat ingenuous explanation for the war—that China hoped by its actions to thrust India into the American camp, and thus restore the clear, sharp, boundaries that once separated the Russian bloc of nations from the American

one, boundaries that however had become blurred and porous owing to the success of the Indian, or more specifically Nehruvian, idea of non-alignment.

## VI

I now move on to an analysis of how Indians, then and how, have written or spoken of Jawaharlal Nehru's policies vis-à-vis the Chinese. There are and have been three distinct views on the subject. The first is empathetic. Affirmed by Nehruvians, Congress supporters and a large swathe of the middle-aged middle-class, this holds Nehru to be a good and decent man betrayed by perfidious communists.

This point of view finds literary illustration in a novel by Rukun Advani called *Beethoven among the Cows*. A chapter entitled 'Nehru's Children' is set in 1962, 'the year the Chinese invaded India, a little before Nehru died of a broken heart.' The action, set in the northern Indian town of Lucknow (a town Nehru knew well, and visited often) takes place just before war, when much sabre-rattling was going on. The people in Lucknow were spouting couplets 'shot through with Nehru's Shellyean idealism on the socialist Brotherhood of Man' (a brotherhood now being denied and violated by the perfidious Chinese). Drawing on his childhood memories, the novelist composed four couplets that reflect the mood of the times. Here they are, in Hindi:

*Jaisé dood aur malai, Hindi-Chini bhai bhai  
Hosh mé ao, hosh mé ao, Chou, Mao, hosh mé ao*

*Jaisé noodle, vaisé pulao, Nehru saath chowmein khao  
Chou, Mao, hosh mé ao, hosh mé ago aur chowmein khao.*

*Haath milao, gaal milao, Nehru saath haath milao  
Chou, Mao, hosh mé ao, hosh mé ao aur haath milao.*

*Dono bhai Chou Mao, Nehru saath baith jao  
Baith jao aur chowmein khao, Chou, Mao, hosh mé ao.*

I will not attempt here a literal translation of each of the four couplets, but content myself with the one line summary of the novelist, which is that these verses 'asked the Chinese leaders to shake hands with Nehru, eat chowmein with him, and generally come to their senses.'

The second view, opposed to the first, is contemptuous of Nehru. It sees him as a foolish and vain man who betrayed the nation by encouraging China in its aggressive designs on the sacred soil of India. This viewpoint is associated with ideologues of the Hindu right, speaking for organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In the 1960s, the RSS chief MS Golwalkar wrote witheringly that 'the slogans and paper compromise like "peaceful co-existence" and "Panchsheel" that our leaders are indulging in only serve as a camouflage for the self-seeking predatory countries of the world to pursue their own ulterior motives against our country. China, as we know, was most vociferous in its expression of faith in Panchsheel. China was extolled as our great neighbour and friend for the last two thousand years or more from the day it accepted Buddhism. Our leaders declared that they were determined to stick to China's friendship "at all costs". ... How much it has cost us in terms of our national integrity and honour is all too well known.'

Writing in 1998, the journalist M. V. Kamath named names. Saluting the nuclear tests overseen by his party, the BJP, he recalled the 'time, under Jawaharlal Nehru and V.K. Krishna Menon when a decision must have been taken not to engage in a "debilitating and criminally wasteful arms race"; it was very noble of the two gentlemen who taught us to sing Hindi-Chini-bhai-bhai in chorus. For our efforts China kicked us in the teeth.'

Kamath was writing decades after the conflict, but a contemporary expression of this point of view can be found in the writings of Deen Dayal Upadhaya, the leading ideologue of the BJP's mother party, the Jana Sangh. When the first clashes broke out on the border in September 1959, Upadhaya argued that 'the present situation is the result of complacency on the part of the Prime Minister. It seems that he was reluctant to take any action till the situation became really grave'. Nehru, complained the Jana Sangh leader, had 'more faith in his Panch Sheel perorations than in preparation and performance', The Prime Minister was compared to the notoriously effete and incompetent 19<sup>th</sup> century ruler of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah. 'Only he [Nehru] knows when a crisis is not a crisis', wrote Upadhaya sarcastically, only Nehru knew 'how to emit smoke without fire and how to arrest a conflagration in a Niagara of verbiage!'

Week after week, Upadhaya excoriated Nehru and his China policy in the pages of the RSS journal, *Organiser*. 'As usual the Prime Minister has exhibited his temperamental weakness in dealing with the issue of Chinese aggression' he remarked: 'Why can't he [the Prime Minister]—with equal justification, and more justice—accept Tibet's case [over China's], which is also in our national interest? What native impotence makes him willing to strike but afraid to wound? What confuses him into subverting all three aims of his Northern policy by his single misunderstanding of the position of Tibet? Is it plain ignorance? Is it simple cowardice? Or is it a simple national policy induced by military weakness, ideological ambiguities and weakening of nationalism?'

Upadhaya accused Nehru of showing little serious intent in acting upon border transgressions by the Chinese. Thus, 'while on the one hand, he [Nehru] had been declaring that India was firm in her stand, on the other he counselled forbearance in the Lok Sabha, saying that there were limits to firmness also. Of course there

are limits to everything, but unfortunately the Prime Minister's limits are set to startling points'.

The Prime Minister's attitude to China, concluded Upadhaya, was 'characteristic of his weak and timid nature.'

The argument that India's first Prime Minister was pusillanimous with regard to China was also articulated by that obsessive critic of all that Nehru stood for, the brilliant and maverick socialist thinker Rammanohar Lohia. In a speech in Hyderabad in October 1959, Lohia asked Nehru and his government 'to take back the territory the Chinese have captured by whatever means it thinks fit.' 'Increase the country's strength and might', he thundered; 'Then alone China's challenge can be met.' Then, when Zhou en Lai visited Delhi in April 1960 and was met with a hostile demonstration organized by the Jana Sangh, Lohia said that 'if any one deserves a black flag demonstration, it is no one else but Mr. Nehru for extending an invitation to an outright aggressor.'

The third view of Nehru's attitude to Chinese claims and demands was perhaps the most interesting. Exuding pity rather than contempt, this held Nehru to be a naïve man misled by malign advisers and by his own idealism. Responding to the border clashes in the second half of 1959, C. Rajagopalachari wrote several essays urging Nehru to abandon his long held and deeply cherished policy of non-alignment. 'Rajaji' had once been a colleague of Nehru in party and Government. Now, however, he was a political rival, as the founder of the Swatantra Party.

In the realm of domestic policy, Rajaji and Swatantra criticized Nehru for his hostility to the market. In the realm of foreign policy, they deplored his reluctance to identify more closely with the Western bloc of nations, led by the United States. The growing tension between India and China provided, in Rajaji's view, one more reason to abandon non-alignment. The change in creed, he said, was made necessary by the fact that 'one

of the nations engaged in the cold war makes aggression on an uninvolved nation.' 'The path of peace', wrote this other and equally remarkable follower of Gandhi in the first week of December 1959, is 'not always smooth. China has incontinently betrayed India and Nehru. He dare not resist Indian public resentment over China's aggression and her attempt to sabotage India's position in the Himalayan frontier. Whatever be China's objective, this aggression and show of power have put an end to any meaning in non-alignment'.

Rajaji sympathized with Nehru's desire to avoid full-scale war, which lay behind his reconciling attitude to the Chinese. Nor had he any illusions about the Western powers, whose policies reflected an general unwillingness to accommodate the aspirations of the post-colonial world. Still, the border conflict had, he wrote in the last week of December 1959, called for 'a complete revision of our attitude and activities in respect of foreign policy.' With China backed implicitly and explicitly by the Soviet Union, India had no alternative but to seek support from the Western powers. Rajaji found justification for a tilt to the West in a verse of the ancient Tamil classic, the Kural of Tiruvalluvar, which, in his translation, read; 'You have no allies. You are faced with two enemies. Make it up with one of them and make of him a good ally.'

In May 1960, after Zhou-en-lai had come and gone, and Nehru himself had begun making noises about standing firm on India's claims, Rajaji warned that it would be a mistake to seek to unilaterally evacuate Chinese forces from the thousands of square miles of territory it controlled which were claimed by India. 'Our armed forces can be used against this trespass', he wrote, 'but no one can guarantee the localisation of conflict. It would be foolish to start an operation knowing fully well that it would be a leap in the dark. The only legitimate and wise course is to drop the isolationist policy which we have been hugging to our bosom, and get into closer bonds of

alliance with the World Powers that are ranged against Communism.' There was, he said, 'no other way, and so it must be followed, for the rehabilitation of India's prestige and gathering of moral power against the aggressor.'

There were, of course, points of overlap between the positions articulated by Rajaji, Deen Dayal Upadhaya, and Lohia. This is not surprising, since all were opponents of Jawaharlal Nehru and the ruling Congress Party. However, there were also points of divergence. Rajaji more clearly recognized that India did not have the military might to combat, still less overcome, the Chinese. Hindu ideologues like Upadhaya suggested that India's deficiencies in this regard could be made up by a mobilization of militantly spiritual energy; socialists like Lohia thought that the gap could be filled by collective social action. Rajaji could see, however, that it was not merely a failure of nerve, but of capacity, which could be remedied only through the forging of a new strategic alliance.

## VII

First articulated in the late 1950s, the three views outlined above found powerful expression in the immediate aftermath of the war. A debate in Parliament in November 1962 saw many members express solidarity with the Prime Minister. India's leader had been betrayed, and it was time to close ranks and stand behind him. The debate ended with a resolution affirming 'the firm resolve of the Indian people to drive off the aggressor from the sacred soil of India however long and hard this struggle may be'.

Ordinary citizens also rallied around Nehru, with young men lining up outside army recruitment centres and young and middle-aged women donating their jewels to the National Defence Fund. Letters to the editor urged

Opposition leaders to forget past differences and work in co-operation with the Prime Minister.

In the first weeks of the war, when it became clear that the Chinese advance had not and could not be stopped, there was much criticism of the Defence Minister, V. K. Krishna Menon. Menon was not new to controversy; in April 1961, in a polemic described at the time as 'perhaps the greatest speech that has been made on the floor of [the Indian Parliament] since Independence', the Gandhian socialist J. B. Kripalani had attacked Krishna Menon for having 'created cliques [and] lowered the morale of our [armed] forces', by promoting incompetent officers congenial to 'his political and ideological purpose.' Now, with the Indian defences disintegrating, there were loud calls for Menon to resign.

These criticisms usually stopped short of attacking Nehru himself. The respected editor of the *Indian Express*, Frank Moraes, wrote that it was 'the Defence Minister who is most culpable for the deficiency of arms'. The lack of preparedness of the army under his leadership now made Menon look 'like Cardinal Wolseley, left naked to his friends and enemies.' The readers of the newspaper agreed. The Defence Minister, said one G. R. Subbu, 'should make room for another man. All our Defence losses spring from the policies of Mr Krishna Menon.' When the Prime Minister at first resisted the calls for Menon's head, Frank Moraes offered a very muted criticism of Nehru himself, remarking that 'the Prime Minister's loyalty to his colleagues is commendable provided it is not pushed to a point where it endangers the safety and unity of the country.'

A rare, personal attack on Nehru came from N. G. Ranga of the Swatantra Party. Speaking in Parliament in the third week of November 1962, he noted that 'the Prime Minister has also been good enough to make a number of admissions in regard to the failure of his dreams [as regards Asian solidarity]. We all dream, true. And our

dreams do not come true. That is also true. But, at the same time it is very dangerous to go on dreaming and dreaming for years and years and over such a terrific crisis and problem as this with the result that not only our people but also people abroad have had to wonder how this country's leadership has been guiding our people with all this atmosphere of dreaming.'

The three views of Nehru and China analysed above first became visible in the period 1959-62, as the border dispute was revealed to be serious, and as it resulted in war. These views have each been held and articulated these past fifty years, by politicians and by ordinary citizens alike. The first, empathetic view, was probably dominant in the aftermath of the 1962 war. The second, contemptuous view, has become more widespread in recent years, with the rise to political salience of the BJP and Hindutva. The third, pitying view, was energetically articulated in the 1950s and 1960s by Rajaji and some other old associates of Nehru in the Gandhian Congress (such as Acharya Kripalani, Jayaprakash Narayan, and Minoo Masani). It may be now enjoying a sort of after-life, in the form of the argument, now quite common in the press and in policy circles in New Delhi, that India must actively pursue closer military and economic ties with the United States to thwart and combat an assertive China.

#### VIII

In retrospect, it is evident that in the years between the invasion of Tibet in 1950 and the war of 1962, Jawaharlal Nehru did make a series of miscalculations and errors in his dealings with China. These miscalculations were of three kinds. The first were personal—his faith in officials who gave him wrong or foolish advice, or who executed the jobs assigned to them with carelessness or lack of foresight. Two men in particular appear to have been unworthy of his trust: the intelligence officer, B.

N. Mullick, who advised Nehru to sanction the provocative forward posts; and Krishna Menon, who as Defence Minister refused to properly arm the military, and who promoted incompetent Generals and otherwise damaged the morale of the armed forces.

A second set of miscalculations were political, namely, his ignorance or under-estimation of the nationalist underpinnings of Chinese communism, his taking on trust the professions of internationalism and Asian solidarity proffered by Zhou En-lai and his like. A third miscalculation was strategic, his endorsement of Krishna Menon's policies of not modernizing the military, and his naïve thinking that the forward policy would not provoke a reaction.

Nehru's mistakes were considerable; however, beyond the merely personal, there were important structural and conjunctural reasons behind the clash of armies and national egos between India and China. If Jawaharlal Nehru had not been Prime Minister, there would have still have been a border dispute between India and China. Indeed, all other things remaining constant, India and China may still have gone to war had Jawaharlal Nehru never lived.

The most consequential question that divided the two countries concerned the status and future of Tibet. The Tibet factor in India-China relations had three dimensions—which we may gloss as the long term dimension, the medium term dimension, and the short-term dimension respectively.

The long term dimension had its origins in a conference held in 1913 in the British imperial summer capital, Simla. This was convened by the Government of India, and attended also by Chinese and Tibetan representatives (Tibet was then enjoying a period of substantial, indeed near-complete, political autonomy from Chinese overlordship). A product of this conference was the McMahon Line, which sought to demarcate the frontiers of British India. When India became independent

in 1947 it recognized the McMahon Line, and adopted it as its own. The Chinese however had serious reservations about this line, reservations which intensified after the Communists came to power in 1950. The Chinese Government said the demarcation of the border had been imposed by the British at a time when they were powerless; besides, they did not recognize that Tibet had a right to send separate delegates of its own. All through the 1950s, while India insisted on the sanctity of the McMahon Line, the Chinese said that since it was a legacy of imperialism, the border question had to be negotiated afresh and a new boundary decided upon.

The medium term dimension related to the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet in 1950. So long as it was semi-independent, Tibet served as a buffer state for India. Besides, there were close and continuing connections between India and Tibet, as in an active cross-border trade, and regular visits of Hindu pilgrims to the holy mountain of Kailas. There were thus strategic as well as sentimental reasons for India to be concerned about what, from their point of view, was an excessive Chinese presence in Tibet after 1950.

The short-term dimension was the flight of the Dalai Lama into India in the spring of 1959. That he was given refuge the Chinese Government could perhaps accept; that he was treated as a honoured visitor, and that a steady stream of influential Indians queued up to meet him, they could not abide. What upset them most was the mobilization of anti-Chinese and pro-Tibetan sentiment by opposition parties in India.

Nehru could have perhaps been less trusting of the Chinese in the early 1950s. But he could scarcely have gone to war on the Tibetans' behalf. India was newly independent; it was a poor and divided country. There were a clutch of domestic problems to attend to, among them the cultivation of a spirit of national unity, the promotion of economic development, the nurturing of democratic institutions. War would have set back these

efforts by decades. It would have led to political instability, and economic privation.

After the Dalai Lama fled into India, the balancing act became more delicate still. Nehru could scarcely hand him back to the Chinese. Nor could he keep him imprisoned and isolated. The exiled leader had to be provided refuge, consistent with his dignity and stature. In a democracy that encouraged debate, and in a culture that venerated spiritual leaders, the Dalai Lama would attract visitors, who would make public their admiration for him and their distaste for their persecutors. Nehru could hardly put a stop to this; nor, on the other hand, could he use the situation of the Dalai Lama to wag a threatening finger at the Chinese.

The open manifestation of support for the Tibetans and their leader brings us to the second structural reason behind the failure to solve the border dispute — the fact that China was a one-party state and India a multi-party democracy. When, on his visit to New Delhi in 1960, Zhou complained about the protection afforded to the Dalai Lama, Desai compared his status to that of Karl Marx, whom the British had given sanctuary to after he was exiled from his native Germany.

This, perhaps, was a debating point — and Morarji Desai was a skilled debater — but the fact that the two political regimes differed so radically had a powerful bearing on the dispute. Thus, when a group of anti-communist protesters raised Free Tibet slogans and defaced a portrait of Mao outside the Chinese Consulate in Mumbai, Beijing wrote to New Delhi that this was 'a huge insult to the head of state of the People's Republic of China and the respected and beloved leader of the Chinese people', and which 'the masses of the six hundred and fifty million Chinese people absolutely cannot tolerate'. If the matter was 'not reasonably settled', the complaint continued, the 'Chinese side will never come to a stop without a satisfactory settlement of the

matter, that is to say, never stop even for one hundred years'.

In its reply, the Indian Government accepted that the incident was 'deplorable'. But it pointed out that 'under the law in India processions cannot be banned so long as they are peaceful... Not unoften they are held even near the Parliament House and the processionists indulge in all manner of slogans against high personages in India. Incidents have occurred in the past when portraits of Mahatma Gandhi and the Prime Minister were taken out by irresponsible persons and treated in an insulting manner. Under the law and Constitution of India a great deal of latitude is allowed to the people so long as they do not indulge in actual violence.'

That one state was totalitarian and the other democratic had a critical impact on how the debate was framed, on why it escalated, and why it could not be resolved. After the first border clashes of 1959, Opposition MP's asked that the official correspondence between the two countries be placed in the public domain. The demand was conceded, whereupon the evidence of Chinese claims further inflamed and angered public opinion. Now Zhou arrived in Delhi, with his offer of a *quid pro quo*. You overlook our transgressions in the west, said the Chinese leader, and we shall overlook your transgressions in the east.

In a dictatorship, such as China, a policy once decided upon by its top leaders did not require the endorsement or support of anyone else. In India, however, treaties with other nations had to be discussed and debated by Parliament. In purely instrumental terms, Zhou's proposal was both pragmatic and practicable. However, Nehru could not endorse or implement the agreement on its own; he had to discuss it with his colleagues in party and Government, and, pending their acceptance, place it on the floor of the House. As it happened, knowledge of Chinese maps that made claims that clashed with India's, knowledge of a Chinese road in land

claimed by India, knowledge of Indian soldiers killed by Chinese soldiers, knowledge of the persecution of supporters of the Dalai Lama—all this led to a rising tide of nationalist outrage inside and outside Parliament. And with members of his own Cabinet firmly opposed to a settlement, Nehru had no chance of seeing it through.

Behind the border dispute lay the respective national and civilizational aspirations of the two countries. Now, in 2012, with surging growth rates and sixty years of independent development behind them, China and India seek great power status. In the 1950s, however, they sought something apparently less ambitious but which, in the context of their recent colonial history, was as important, namely a respect in the eyes of the world comparable with their size, the antiquity of their civilization, and the distinctiveness of their national revolution.

Towards the end of 1959, after the first clashes on the border, and the arrival into India of the Dalai Lama, Jawaharlal Nehru was interviewed by the American journalist Edgar Snow. In Snow's recollection, Nehru told him that 'the basic reason for the Sino-Indian dispute was that they were both "new nations", in that both were newly independent and under dynamic nationalistic leaderships, and in a sense were meeting at their "frontiers" for the first time in history; hence it was natural that a certain degree of conflict should be generated before they could stabilize their frontiers.' Nehru added that in the past there were 'buffer zones' between the two countries/civilizations, but now India and China were 'filling out, and meeting [for the first time] as modern nations on the borders.'

Nehru was speaking here not as a politician—whether pragmatic or idealist—but as a student of history. In this, more detached, role, he could see that a clash of arms, and of ideologies and aspirations behind

it, was written into the logic of the respective and collective histories of India and China.

### VIII

There is an noticeable asymmetry in the ways in which the war of 1962 is viewed in the two countries that fought it. The Indian sense of humiliation, so visible in some circles even five decades later, is not matched by a comparable triumphalism in China. This may be because they fought far bloodier wars against the Japanese, and among themselves. At any rate, while histories of modern India devote pages and pages to the conflict (my own *India after Gandhi* has two chapters on the subject), histories of modern China (such as those written by Jonathan Fenby, Jonathan Spence, and others) devote a few paragraphs, at most. Likewise, the conflict with India merits barely a passing reference in biographies of Mao or Zhou, whereas the conflict with China occupies a dominant place in biographies of Nehru.

In the popular imagination, Nehru's place of history is assessed principally across three axes—his role in the independence movement; his economic policy; and his foreign policy in general but with particular regard to China. With regard to the first he is generally judged a hero. With regard to the second the judgement has varied across time—once celebrated for forging an autonomous path of economic development, Nehru has more recently been demonized for shackling the forces of individual enterprise and innovation. However, with the global financial crisis and the growth of crony capitalism within India, Nehru's economic record may yet be regarded in less dark terms. With regard to the third, the verdicts are less ambiguous. Most Indians now believe that Nehru betrayed the country's interests with regard to China.

This essay has sought to qualify and nuance that judgement. For Nehru was not as much in control of these

events as commonly supposed. The border conflict had deep structural roots, and was made more intractable by contingent factors such as the Tibet question and the different, and in a sense rival, political regimes in the two countries. At the same time, the massive emotional investment of Indians in the defeat of 1962 is also not commensurate with the event itself. A mere three thousand Indian soldiers died on the battlefield, far fewer than Indian casualties in the two World Wars, and a trivial number compared with the loss of life that accompanied the Partition of India. It was really a skirmish rather than a war. Nor did it really change the facts on the ground, since the Chinese withdrew to where they were before the battle began.

The historian may document, and contextualize, but the conventional wisdom will most likely remain impervious to his work. Citizens and ideologues shall continue to personalize a political conflict, seeing it principally through the lens of what Nehru did or did not do, or is believed to have done and not done, with regard to China. Their verdicts are, as noted, of three kinds — empathetic, pitying, and contemptuous.

I shall end this essay with a verdict that combines the empathetic, the pitying, and the contemptuous. It was offered by H. V. Kamath, a former civil servant turned freedom fighter, who served several terms in Parliament and was jailed both by the British and during Indira Gandhi's Emergency. In a book entitled *Last Days of Jawaharlal Nehru*, published in 1977, Kamath took his readers back to a Parliament session in September 1963, when he saw 'an old man, looking frail and fatigued, with a marked stoop in his gait, coming down the gangway opposite with slow, faltering steps, and clutching the backrests of benches for support as he descended.' The man was Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India at this time for the past sixteen years.

As H. V. Kamath watched 'the bent, retreating figure', a cluster of memories came to his mind. Was this

the same man, who, while Kamath was studying at the Presidency College, Madras, he had seen 'sprightly, slim and erect', speaking at the Congress session of 1927 in that city? The same man, who, when he visited him in Allahabad ten years later, had 'jumped two steps at a time, with me emulating him, as I followed him upstairs from his office room on the ground floor to his study and library above?' The same man, who, when they were both members of the Constituent Assembly of India, during one session 'impulsively ran from his front seat and literally dragged a recalcitrant member from the podium rebuking him audibly *yeh Jhansi ki public meeting nahin hai.*' [This is not a public meeting in Jhansi.] The same man whom the nationalist poetess, Sarojini Naidu, had 'affectionately conferred the sobriquet "Jack-in-the-box" - a compliment to his restless agility of body and mind'?

Kamath was clear that it was the war with China that alone was responsible for this deterioration and degradation. As he wrote, 'India's defeat, nay, military debacle in that one-month war not only shattered [Nehru] physically and weakened him mentally but, what was more galling to him, eroded his prestige in Asia and the world, dealt a crippling blow to his visions of leadership of the newly emancipated nations, and cast a shadow on his place in history.'

It was, the affectionate yet critical observer insisted, a debacle that could have been avoided, had Nehru not 'stubbornly turned a deaf ear to all friendly warnings', offered, for example, by his own Deputy Prime Minister, Vallabhbhai Patel, who, as far back as 1950, had alerted him to 'China's intentions and objectives in invading Tibet, and its dangerous implications for India's future security', and more recently by his old comrades Jayaprakash Narayan and Acharya Kripalani, who had 'cautioned against appeasement and adulation of China'. Kamath himself, after a tour of the India-Tibet border in the summer of 1959, had said publicly that

'Nehru will have to adopt a firmer attitude towards China and her colonisation in Tibet must be exposed and condemned, just as he had criticised European imperialism in the past.' Alas, recalled Kamath twenty years later, Nehru 'pooh-pooh[ed] all criticisms of his China policy but even dubbed the critics as war mongers who were spreading fear and panic in the country'. Thus it was that in 1962, as a consequence of Jawaharlal Nehru's 'supine policy', 'our Jawans, ill-clad, ill-shod, ill-equipped were sent like sheep to their slaughter'.