Security Beyond Survival

Essays for K. Subrahmanyam

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Re-examining the 'Forward Policy'

Rajesh Rajagopalan

Introduction

In late 1959, India faced a difficult situation on its frontiers with China as most of these frontier regions were remote and in forbidding terrain, and were not under the direct administrative control of either India or China. But, at least in one part of this frontier, the Western Sector,[1] China was acting with determined haste to correct this situation. Faced with increasing signs of Chinese hostility and even more so, of signs of surreptitious Chinese occupation of territory that the Indian government considered was Indian, New Delhi decided that it also had to deploy troops into these areas to prevent the further erosion of India's claims to these territories. This policy came to be known as the 'forward policy'.

The forward policy had many flaws: it was unsound at the strategic level, foolish at the narrow military level, was based on misguided assumptions about Chinese behaviour and world politics, and it demonstrated a weak understanding of the relationship between force and diplomacy in grand strategy. But the most serious criticism is that the forward policy was the root of the war: its application in the Western Sector had 'loaded the guns' and, in the Eastern Sector, it 'triggered the border war'.[2] This argument has become the staple theory about the war, and the forward policy has come to be seen as the aggressive and proactive step that forced the Chinese to defend themselves, leading to the war. At one level, such arguments ignore the complex calculations that surely determined the Chinese policy: they ignore, to

mention only one example, the impact of the increasingly strident Sino-Soviet dispute, in which Soviet support for India was a major issue.[3]

More importantly, a careful examination of the evidence suggests a different conclusion: the forward policy, far from being proactive, was a reaction to what was clearly a Chinese forward policy; far from being aggressive, it was defensive in character; and while it had many flaws, threatening China was not one of them. To suggest, as Neville Maxwell did, that the slow build-up of Indian military capabilities, which never came close to matching China's strength in the region, represented a danger to China's forces in the region, let alone China proper, is clearly unconvincing. Those seeking to shine a clearer light on the origins of the 1962 war need to look elsewhere.

THE ORIGINS OF THE FORWARD POLICY

The roots of the forward policy lay in the manner in which the border dispute, particularly in the Western Sector, came to the fore. Though Indian decision makers had been aware that China had differences with India about border, much of the Indian concern was about the Eastern Sector of the border, which India considered to be the McMahon Line.[4] There was also a well-established dispute about the Middle Sector. However, Indian decision makers were apparently unaware of the existence of a dispute in the Western Sector of the border.

In 1954, India formally stated its view of the border, including both Aksai Chin in the west and the areas south of the McMahon Line in the east, in the new official maps. Nevertheless, China still did not reveal to India its claims on the Western Sector. One of the great 'what ifs' of the border dispute is the possibility that the entire border issue could have been resolved peacefully if China had made clear its claims on the Western Sector in the mid-1950s. China had indicated its willingness to recognise India's claim to the McMahon Line in the Eastern Sector. If China had indicated that there was a dispute about the Western Sector in 1954–56, given Chinese acceptance of the reality of Indian possession of the territory it claimed in the Eastern Sector, a compromise could possibly have been worked out, and as Maxwell suggests, the dispute itself could have been avoided.[5] But that was

not to be. Instead, China surreptitiously built a road across the very territory that India had claimed.

Though it is always possible that China was unaware of the Indian claim, it is highly improbable. India's maps of the border with China had been officially corrected in 1954, and given the dispute over the other sectors, as Maxwell notes, it is highly unlikely that China was unaware of the Indian claim, which made the Chinese behaviour even more suspicious. As Maxwell notes, 'to have it civilly pointed out that your maps do not accord with actuality is one thing; to discover that a neighbour, without a by-your-leave, has built a road across territory your maps show as your own is quite another'.[6] More important, in the context of understanding the forward policy, is that the Chinese claim expanded over the years, and, within the Indian government, there was no clear understanding where the Chinese would stop. Though Maxwell suggested that the difference between the 1956 and 1960 Chinese claims were the result of the small scale of the maps used by the Chinese,[7] it had considerable impact on the ground in Aksai Chin.[8]

Despite being aware of the discrepancies in the various Chinese depictions of the Sino-Indian border, the Government of India was in the dark about the extent of Chinese claims, as the Chinese had been maintaining that the maps they had published were based on old Kuomintang maps which the People's Republic had had no time to revise.[9] In the summer of 1958, after receiving reports about the Chinese construction of a road across territory India claimed in Aksai Chin, two patrols were dispatched to the area to find out the exact situation.[10] Only one patrol returned and it reported that the Chinese road was inside the territory enclosed by the boundary as India officially represented it.[11] The publication of a map in the *China Pictorial* in July 1958, which showed Aksai Chin, as well as other areas of India as Chinese territory, further alerted the Government of India to Chinese territorial claims on the border.

In response, India, in two communications to the Chinese Government, enquired about the construction of the road in Indian territory as well as the wrong representation of the territorial boundary in maps published in official journals and asked that 'since ... the present government of the People's Republic of China has now been in office for so many years ... (the) necessary corrections in the Chinese maps should not be delayed further.'[12] The Chinese reply for the first time talked of the need for 'consultations with various neighbouring

countries and a survey of the border areas' before corrections could be affected.[13]

This early Chinese position that the border corrections could be made only after 'consultations' threw open the entire boundary for negotiations. The implications and impact of this position were reflected in the immediate escalation of the level of mutual consultations on the border question. Most of the negotiations and diplomatic posturing were thereafter conducted at the level of the two prime ministers.

The basic Chinese and Indian positions were set out in the first exchange of letters. Expressing his puzzlement about the Chinese position, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru stated that 'there never has been ... a dispute so far as we are concerned .... There can be no question of these large parts of India being anything but India'.[14] The Chinese position was set out in Premier Chou En-Lai's reply: 'The Sino-Indian boundary has never been formally delimited' and the McMahon Line was 'a product of the British policy of aggression against the Tibet region of China' and therefore illegal. Nevertheless, he went on to add: '... the Chinese government on the one hand finds it necessary to take a more or less realistic attitude towards the McMahon Line and on the other hand, cannot but act with prudence and need time to deal with this matter'.[15] Premier Chou En-Lai also asked that in the meantime, the status quo be maintained on the border.

The passive tone of Chou En-Lai's reply and the hint of compromise on the McMahon Line prompted Nehru to send a detailed reply taking each of the sectors of the border separately. The reply reflected the Indian position that it was the Chinese who had upset the long prevailing status quo on the border. Thus, while agreeing to the proposal to maintain the status quo, Nehru also stated that 'if any possession has been secured recently, the position should be rectified'.[16]

These early communications between the two prime ministers helped in clarifying their respective positions on the border. But further communication between the governments to explore ways to come to an accommodation on the border issue were halted by the revolt in Tibet and the subsequent flight of the Dalai Lama to India. To worsen an already bad situation, a serious clash occurred between Chinese and Indian armed personnel at a disputed point on the McMahon Line on 25 August 1959.

These incidents led to a considerable hardening of the respective positions. Nehru admitted that 'gradually, step by step, the policy of China in regard to this matter has become more rigid'.[17] But he refused

to contemplate the use of force as a means of solving the problem immediately,[18] a refusal that was as much dictated by the state of Indian capabilities in this sphere at that point of time and, following from that, the role that force was to play in the overall scheme of Indian policies.

Though the total strength of the Indian Army had almost doubled since 1947, the primary focus of its strategic disposition reflected a preoccupation with the western—predominantly plains—border.[19] As of mid-1959, the army was neither on the frontiers with China—which was being looked after by either the local police or paramilitary forces like the Assam Rifles and the Jammu and Kashmiri Militia—nor was it contemplating conducting hostilities there. As such, any immediate reaction to border encroachments by China would either have to be in the form of diplomatic protests or such limited employment of force as would be possible with the paramilitary forces already available. The forbidding nature of the terrain as well as the Indian Army's unfamiliarity with warfare at such altitudes and conditions meant that Indian troops could not be easily transferred to such areas. The state of the logistical infrastructure in the border area compounded the problems. There were no hard roads anywhere within the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA) in the Eastern Sector—a situation that was duplicated on the Western Sector of the border also.[20]

Therefore, any Indian military response to the evolving border crisis had, necessarily, to be a gradual one. The logistical difficulty of transferring forces across vast distances, compounded by the imperative of maintaining the existing strength of forces on the western borders with Pakistan, meant that additional forces had to be raised for this new theatre. However, because of the urgency that New Delhi felt about the evolving situation, the army transferred an existing formation to the east, with new units being raised to replace those sent to the border.[21] Similarly, the creation of a logistical infrastructure in a terrain characterised by its singular hostility had also to be a long drawn out process. However, because of the sense of emergency in New Delhi, army formations were ordered into the area before the logistical capabilities were built up. This, of course, hurt the capability of these forces in many ways, including the lack of support equipment such as artillery.

The urgency which dictated such a deployment was the outcome of the changed strategic perception about the utility of force in Indian strategy regarding the border issue. This was partly the result of a

change in perception about the adversary itself,[22] but mainly because available intelligence reported continuous Chinese activities in the disputed areas, which were inferred as preliminary moves for military occupation.[23]

THE FIRST STEPS IN THE FORWARD POLICY

Though the policy directive that came to be known as the forward policy was not drafted until November 1961, the elements that made up the forward policy were part of the Indian strategy since late 1959. Indeed, it is a mistake to see the forward policy as a directive that emerged only in late 1961 because it suggests an abruptness in policy, which was far from the truth. The Indian policy was to try and prevent Chinese incursions by deploying Indian troops in their path, and this policy goes back at least to 1959.

The first step in this process was the replacing of the paramilitary forces by the army in defence of the border. On 25 August 1959, Indian and Chinese armed personnel clashed at Longju,[24] a disputed point on the McMahon Line in the Eastern Sector. About two months later, a much more serious clash occurred on the Western Sector of the border near the Kongka Pass.[25] In response to these clashes and in anticipation of further Chinese forward probes, the government ordered the army to assume direct responsibility for the borders.[26] In the interest of clarity, the application of the forward policy is considered separately in the Western and Eastern Sector.

THE FORWARD POLICY IN THE WESTERN SECTOR

Though the Western Sector of the Sino-Indian border had been formally handed over to the army by November 1959, no actual troop deployments took place immediately due to the lack of proper infrastructural capabilities to support such deployments. Indian dispositions on the border at this time included only local police and some paramilitary forces.[27]

India's policy towards the Indo-Tibetan border had already been set out in a directive issued by Nehru after the Longju clash. This

policy directive was the precursor to the forward policy and it insisted that clashes with the Chinese were to be avoided 'not only in a big way, but even in a small way', unless such were 'forced down upon us'. Regarding the situation on the Aksai Chin, the directive stated that for the present, India would have 'to put up with the Chinese occupation' since it had 'no check posts there and practically little of access'.[28] The defensive nature of the forward policy was clearly stated in this directive; it was to be reiterated several times over the next three years. It is also clear that the directive was reactive, and, in its acceptance of the ground realities in Aksai Chin, was also defensive.

The reactive nature of the forward policy is evident in the subsequent directives also. After the Kongka Pass incident, while the directive on avoiding clashes as far as possible continued to be held, the intentions with regard to the Aksai Chin area were altered. The Intelligence Bureau[29] reported that despite earlier Chinese undertaking, they had been making further incursions not only in Ladakh but also in other parts of the frontier.[30] By the end of 1959, Chinese forces had occupied the Lingzhitary Plain and advanced beyond the head of the Changchenmo Valley.[31] In response to these various developments, the Western Command was, in February 1960, ordered to take up positions along a line roughly between Murgo, Tsogstasalu, Phobrang, Chushul, and Demchok.[32] The underlying imperative of avoiding clashes with the Chinese was reflected in the fact that all these positions except Demchok were between 20 and 50 miles away from the Chinese positions, which were thought to be at Qizil Jilga, Dehra La, Samzungling (on the Galwan river), Kongka Pass, and Khuranak Fort. Demchok alone was less than 20 miles from the southern extremity of the main Chinese road.[33] Once again, Indian policy makers were reacting to changes on the ground in Aksai Chin, changes brought about by Chinese actions.

But Indian military capabilities to carry out such directives were somewhat limited. Chinese military strength across the border was estimated to be at more than one regiment,[34] and was provided with supporting arms and also reportedly, some armour.[35] It was also believed that the Chinese network of roads had made great progress (though still short of completion) and gave them immense advantage of supply and manoeuvrability.

The Indian Army's capabilities to meet such a Chinese force or to carry out the government's directive were grossly inadequate. There were only two battalions of the Jammu and Kashmir Militia in Ladakh.

There were neither regular troops nor supporting arms and the logistical capabilities were poor with no road to or within the Ladakh sector. The Srinagar–Leh road had not been completed and Leh was still accessible only by mules or by air. Chisel had a landing strip but all other positions in Ladakh had to be supplied by airdrops. Clearly, irrespective of the motives that underlay the forward policy, the Indian army did not have the capabilities for carrying out even the limited objectives that New Delhi had set for it.

The preparations were on for meeting the military contingency in the Ladakh sector aimed at the eventual deployment of infantry brigade groups once suitable operational infrastructure were created. A line of forward bases and posts was visualised from Shyok Valley to Daulet Beg Oldi, near the southern entrance to the Karakoram Pass, with Chushul being the 'anchor' for this system of posts.[36] The brigade group to be inducted (consisting of five infantry battalions plus supporting arms) was to be in addition to the militia battalions already in the sector.[37] Further contingency planning for the Ladakh sector convinced the Indian military planners that existing logistical deficiencies would severely limit the preparation of a successful defence against a serious and sustained Chinese attack.[38]

Similar contingency plans for the Sikkim–Bhutan sector took into account not only the military threat from the north but also the possibility of Pakistani interference in the corridor between the northern tip of the then East Pakistan and Bhutan. The plan in this sector aimed at the eventual deployment of an infantry division with one brigade at Kalimpong and one brigade at Gangtok with its forward elements stretching to the Natula Pass on the Sikkim–Tibet border. But the army's capacity to carry out the forward policy was somewhat better in this sector than in the Western Sector. The relatively easier terrain and better logistical facilities in this sector helped the army carry out New Delhi's objectives more easily. By January 1960, one infantry brigade with one battalion and brigade headquarters was sited at Siliguri, one battalion sent to Kalimpong, and one battalion to Gangtok with its forward elements extending to the Natu Pass.[39] In the Ladakh sector, the 114th Infantry Brigade was inducted with the 7th and 14th Jammu and Kashmir Militia under its command.[40]

But as Indian capabilities in the Western Sector region slowly expanded, China once again moved the goal posts. Indian intelligence had been reporting continued Chinese military and related activities since late 1959. It was feared that the Chinese were now trying not

only to occupy the territory claimed in 1956 but to even push beyond it.[41] These suspicions were strengthened by what was felt to be the 'uncompromising attitude' of the Chinese during the April 1960 summit meeting between Prime Ministers Chou En-Lai and Jawaharlal Nehru in New Delhi, and were confirmed when the Chinese put forward a new map, which claimed more territory during the Officials Meeting on the border questions in 1960.

The Indian decision makers were forced once again to catch up with the increasing and advancing Chinese presence in the region. In May 1960, therefore, further posts were ordered to be set up.[42] Though India had earlier pledged to avert clashes, it was rationalised that there was no commitment on not setting up border posts as long as this did not involve clashes with the Chinese.[43] In any case, the logistical capabilities precluded the induction of new troops and curtailed the establishment of additional posts for another year.

In April 1961, the 1/8 Gorkha Rifles Battalion was inducted into Ladakh, raising the Indian strength in the area to a total of three battalions including the two militia battalions. The original schedule of troop inductions into Ladakh had called for four of the five battalions to be inducted in 1960 with the remaining battalion to be inducted in 1961 with a total strength of seven battalions. The continuing logistical logjam prevented these planned inductions and as late as in September 1962, only two of the new battalions had been inducted into the area.

A number of initiatives were taken by the government to improve the logistical infrastructure in the northern areas, both directly by the central government and by the state governments of Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh with support from the centre. These included increased expenditure of development funds on the border regions, construction of new roads and improving existing ones, and the like. Steps to strengthen the constabulary and raise their efficiency to the same level as the Assam Rifles were also undertaken.[44]

These measures, though taken as early as in 1959, did not bear immediate fruit. Thus, the governmental directives on induction of troops into Ladakh and their deployment to forward areas remained unfulfilled. As late as in March 1961, for instance, the Army Headquarters informed the government that limitations of air transport had made it impossible to induct the proposed brigade into Ladakh. This meant that the two militia battalions that were in Ladakh could do little more than prevent the Chinese from advancing across their own claim line and defend Leh.[45] This weak force represented no

danger to the local Chinese forces; and to suggest that they were the trigger for the war, as Maxwell claims, is untenable.

But it is not just the balance of forces that makes it difficult to think in terms of these forces posing a threat to Chinese positions in the Western Sector. The operationalisation of the governmental directive on forward deployment created further tactical disadvantages for the Indian Army. The lack of facilities prevented the induction of the originally proposed number of battalions, thus reducing the number of troops available to carry out the tasks allotted to the brigade, while the absolute political necessity of establishing a large number of posts that were required meant that these posts had to be established with far fewer number of troops than would have been desirable. Logistical problems also determined the siting of these posts at tactically disadvantageous positions on valley floors, to facilitate air supply—a condition forced by the lack of roads within Ladakh. Such posts were extremely vulnerable to Chinese troops occupying the higher slopes. Their vulnerability is what is most striking about these forward-deployed Indian forces, not the threat they posed to Chinese forces.

THE FORWARD POLICY IN THE EASTERN SECTOR

The Eastern Sector of the Sino-Indian border stretches from Bhutan to Burma. At the time of the Sino-Indian border conflict, the area of dispute was under the administrative control of India and was called the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA). Militarily, the responsibility for the border lay with the Eastern Command of the Indian Army, which in 1959 raised the 33rd Corps to directly take charge of McMahon Line, which India claimed as the border.[46] But logistical difficulties, which plagued Indian forces in the Western Sector, were to create equally serious problems in the Eastern Sector.

Though the defence of the McMahon Line was handed over to the army soon after the Longju clash, this did not make any difference to the military position on the border as no deployments took place immediately. Two months later, after further clashes on the border, the 4th Infantry Division was ordered to move into NEFA from its peacetime station at Ambala.[47] The 33rd Corps, under which the 4th Division was placed, was responsible for Sikkim, the Bhutan boundary, NEFA and the McMahon Line, East Pakistan, and Nagaland.[48] The

4th Division itself was given responsibility for the entire McMahon Line from Bhutan to Burma.

The transfer of the division began immediately and its headquarters was established at Tezpur by the end of 1959. Further movements into NEFA proper were seriously handicapped both by the onset of winter and the generally deficient logistical support infrastructure that existed in the NEFA. These difficulties were so formidable that only one company of troops from one of the constituent battalions of the division could reach Bomdi La in the Kameng sector of NEFA by January 1960.[49] In March, another company reached Towang.[50]

As in the west, the primary concern in the east was the possibility of Chinese incursions and the need to block them. Of course, there was one critical difference between the Western and the Eastern Sector—China was already in control of much of the disputed territory in the Western Sector, while India was in a somewhat analogous position in the Eastern Sector. But there was also a critical similarity: in both sectors, the terrain favoured the Chinese. If China had not yet penetrated the disputed territory in the Eastern Sector, the possibility of such ingress could not be ruled out. And logistical constraints made it difficult for India to position a capable enough force to deal with such ingress. From the Indian perspective, the vulnerability that was common to both sectors was a far more salient issue than who controlled which sector. In any case, given the difficulties facing the Indian administrators and the military, 'control' was probably too strong a word to use to describe their condition. Thus, preventing small-scale Chinese incursions and defending against the possibility of a large-scale invasion became the primary concern for India in the east. Indeed, the forces that were being deployed to the eastern theatre, which were given little by way of intelligence appreciation of the Chinese order-of-battle or even basic guidelines, were given specific instructions that they should avoid any skirmish with Chinese forces, and indeed, not even approach within 3 km of the Chinese border.[51] The primacy of this instruction says a lot about the attitude of New Delhi as it moved its forces to the border.

Since the mountainous terrain of the NEFA presented a few ingress routes for any invading force, the initial Indian military planning revolved around the defence of these ingress routes by preparing to hold specific, tactically advantageous points along these routes. The most important and vulnerable of these routes was through the

Kameng Division of the NEFA and hence, the Indian Army's concentration in the NEFA was primarily in this area. Towang, in the Kameng Division was ordered to be held at all costs.[52] The symbolic importance of the Towang monastery and the tactical importance of the dominating heights of Towang were the primary considerations behind this order.

Despite the lack of sufficient logistical infrastructure, one battalion had concentrated at Towang by August 1960 and Towang was made the battalion headquarters. Bomdi La, another major defensive feature further to the southeast of Towang, was made the brigade headquarters of 7th Brigade, which was responsible for the defence of the Kameng Division. Two battalions of the 7th Brigade were deployed in the Tenga Valley and Bomdi La area.[53] The battalion deployed at Towang was also part of the 7th Brigade.

Of the other two brigades of the 4th Division, the 11th Brigade was allotted the defence of the area east of the Se La in the Kameng Division, while the 5th Brigade was given the responsibility for the defence of the rest of the NEFA border. The former, however, was almost immediately diverted to Nagaland to strengthen the army's existing counter-insurgency forces there and its area of responsibility was entrusted to one of the battalions of the 7th Brigade.[54] The 5th Brigade, responsible for the rest of the NEFA, established its brigade headquarters at North Lakhimpur. But its further forward deployment was experiencing great difficulty due to the lack of roads and other logistical support infrastructure in its area of responsibility.[55]

Early contingency planning by the Indian Army did not envisage the holding of the McMahon Line in the event of a full-scale Chinese invasion.[56] In an exercise held in January 1961, it was estimated that three infantry divisions would be needed to defend the NEFA—two of them on the line and one in reserve. For contingency purposes, the units allotted to the plan were the 4th Division, the 'Naga' Division of approximately 14 battalions, which was then deployed for counter-insurgency operations in Nagaland, and the 5th Division from Punjab, which would act as reserve. The operational plans called for the concentration of the active defensive units in the vicinity of Bomdi La, which was to be made the main bulwark. This defence line would be strengthened by the induction of light tanks and artillery drawn from units stationed at Calcutta and Agra. As the logic of the Indian deployment of force became increasingly subservient to a purely political

objective of holding the McMahon Line, these contingency plans were effectively overturned.

The government had, as noted earlier, already set out a directive against the use of force except for purposes of self-defence. Reflecting on this directive, in November 1959 the Army Headquarters told the Eastern Command to make clear to all ranks that 'actual conflict' with the Chinese should be avoided and that no patrol should approach closer than 2 miles of the McMahon Line except in those places where posts had been set up on the line itself.[57] The chances of such clashes were slight nevertheless, since no army unit was until then deployed anywhere near the McMahon Line. The posts on the border were still being held by the Assam Rifles, albeit under the operational command of the army.

Lack of proper logistical support infrastructure remained a constant worry to the Indian Army. Though the process of building roads into the NEFA had been stepped up after the establishment of the Border Roads Organisation in January 1960,[58] its progress was slow. In fact, the NEFA would not be serviced by an all-weather road throughout this period. After a considerable effort, a one-ton fair weather road had been laid from Tezpur to Towang through Se La, Dirang, and Bomdi La and this formed the major logistical link between the strong points within the Kameng area of NEFA and between Kameng and the plains. Air link was the second major source of logistical support for the troops deployed in the forward posts. However, the weather and the general topography of the region made this, at best, an uncertain link. Though the government had taken a number of measures like buying new aircraft specifically for the purpose of providing air link,[59] these capabilities continued to remain poor.

The Indian Army's orders continued to reflect the importance of the defence of Towang. This was mainly because further forward deployment or defences were beyond the logistical capabilities of the army but also reflected the belief that there were no serious military threats to the NEFA during this early period. In fact, the tasks allotted to the 7th Brigade, which was responsible for Towang were, in the order of priority, as follows:

(a) the defence of Towang—the primary role;
(b) the prevention of penetration of the McMahon Line;
(c) the establishment of Assam Rifles posts; and
(d) rendering assistance to Assam Rifles posts.[60]

Deployments in the NEFA reflected these operational priorities. By November 1960, further support units, including a Mountain Battery and Engineers, had reached Towang. By April 1961, the brigade headquarters of the 7th Brigade was moved up from Bomdi La to Towang. Active preparations were also made for the defence of Towang. These deployments also reflected the relatively improved logistical capability in the region. Further evidence of the primacy attached to the defence of Towang was the decision taken in July 1962 to relieve the 7th Brigade of its responsibility to maintain the lines of communication up to Towang so that it could concentrate on its primary task of defending Towang.[61]

Two clear conclusions can be drawn about the Indian Army's deployments in the Eastern Sector during this early period. One, these deployments were primarily defensive and two, such deployments, prior to the creation of appropriate logistical back-up, made these forces extremely vulnerable. As in the Western Sector, these were forces that could barely maintain themselves in peacetime. Their capacity to defend themselves in a test of arms with Chinese forces in the region was highly suspect, and the thought of them presenting a provocation or a threat to China, far-fetched.

THE FORWARD POLICY DIRECTIVE

By September 1961, further intelligence reports started coming in about Chinese activities, especially in the Galwan river valley in the Western Sector. These were taken as indications of Chinese forward moves with the object of filling out the Chinese claim line of 1960 in the Western Sector. Specifically, their occupation of the Chip Chap river valley by the establishment of a post there brought them to their 1960 claim line in this sector.[62] It was hoped that the Chinese response to India's posts would be passive, taking the form of diplomatic protests rather than active military measures to remove these posts by force.[63]

In November, therefore, a new directive was issued to the army. Traditionally, this is what was called the 'forward policy' directive and it included the following policy decisions:

(a) 'Forward patrolling towards the international border in Ladakh to *prevent the Chinese from advancing any further and*

also dominating from any posts which might have already been set up.' The earlier instructions about avoiding clashes except in self-defence were retained.

(b) The effective occupation of those sections of the border where logistical difficulties did not exist to the extent it did in Ladakh. This was to be done by setting up posts and by patrolling.

(c) Efforts to be made 'to position major concentrations of forces along our borders in places conveniently situated behind forward posts from where they could be maintained logistically and from where they can restore a border situation at short notice'.[64]

This directive was not very different from the earlier governmental directives as regards the basic aim—the setting up of border posts with the objective of preventing further Chinese incursions, while avoiding clashes other than in self-defence. The major difference this time was the sense of urgency, but this reflected the impact of the continuing Chinese incursions.

The most significant change was the decision to patrol forward to the international border. Recall that in the earlier directive, the decision was to 'put up with the Chinese presence in the Aksai Chin'. The new directive, though still enjoining the Indian forces to avoid any clash with the Chinese, clearly sought to prevent the Chinese forces from moving forward. However, this difference should be seen in the proper context: the 1959 directive was prepared when India had few military options in countering the Chinese presence in the Aksai Chin. Now, though Indian forces still faced considerable logistic difficulties in the region, and would still have been hard put to resist any direct Chinese attack, there were sufficient Indian forces in the sector to at least show the flag. The primary difference between the 1959 and 1961 directives, in other words, was the Indian military capability, not the manner in which this force was used. In other words, if New Delhi could call on the amount of forces in 1959 in Aksai Chin that it could in 1961, it is unlikely that the 1959 directive would have asked the Indian military to put up with the Chinese presence in the Aksai Chin.

These directives were communicated by the Army Headquarters to the Western Command in December 1961, with two alterations. The directive on the build-up of troops behind the forward posts was

not communicated and the phrasing of the earlier part of the directive that asked that the Chinese be prevented from dominating any of their posts was changed. It now ordered the Western Command to set up posts 'to dominate any Chinese posts already established on Indian territory'.[65] This was clearly by way of clarifying the government order and reflected basic military common sense. It was necessary to make this point, however, because previously many Indian posts were established with an eye to easy air link (and thus in tactically unsound sites, such as valleys) rather than in places that were easily defensible. However, the primary objective of the forward policy directive was reiterated, and it was 'to prevent the Chinese from advancing any further'.[66] At no time was the forward policy intended to force the Chinese back from the territory and posts they had already occupied and claims that civilian officials in Delhi 'were confident that the Chinese would give way before the forward probes of Indian troops'[67] completely misrepresents the intention of the policy, in addition to being completely unsupported by any evidence.

Forward policy or not, the situation on the ground in the northern frontiers did not improve much from Delhi's perspective. The onset of winter prevented any major moves on the ground immediately, though Indian troops had begun to move forward in a small way. In April 1962, another battalion, the 5th Jat, was moved to Leh.[68] The headquarters of the 14th Jammu and Kashmir battalion was moved to Panamik and Daulet Beg Oldi was transformed into a military base with supply depots at Sultan Chusku and Murgo.[69]

In the earlier phase, while avoiding clashes between Indian and Chinese troops was relatively easy as they rarely came into contact with each other, this was not possible by mid-1962. With posts being set up by each side further and further forward, it was impossible to prevent at least some of them to be so sited that it presented a threat to either the post directly or to the supply lines. The logistical difficulties mentioned earlier resulted in the Chinese domination of Indian posts in most cases. Nevertheless, some of the Indian posts, especially in the Galwan river valley, sat astride the Chinese supply routes and therefore threatened some of the Chinese forward posts. But as both sides tried to consolidate their position with additional forward posts and positions, confrontation became inevitable.

The Chinese reacted to these moves on the ground swiftly. They had already formally announced that they were re-starting forward patrolling.[70] On 10 July 1962, Chinese forces surrounded the Galwan

river post in great numbers in what seemed to be preliminary preparation for an all-out assault. The Indian troops held their ground and the Chinese did not force the issue until their general assault, which started on 20 October.

The Galwan post incident only confirmed what India already believed or wanted to believe—that China would not use force against the forward posts that India was setting up.[71] But while not directly assaulting such posts, the Chinese surrounded these posts with large number of troops preventing land communication and forcing these posts to be supplied through airdrops. Other than the Galwan post, Indian posts at the Chip Chap river valley, Yula, Sirijap, and several smaller posts on the Depsang plains were also so surrounded.[72]

On 17 August 1962, the army was directed to use force, if necessary, to prevent such encirclement of Indian posts.[73] The threat to these isolated posts, the number of which expanded from 13 to more than 60 between April 1961 and August 1962,[74] had already been communicated to the Western Command, which had been ordered to send reinforcements. But in the absence of sufficient troops, the Western Command could do little. Of the original five battalions, only two had so far been inducted. As they were set up in posts all over the frontier, there were practically no tactical reserves behind the forward line of the posts. In response to a complaint from the General Officer Commander-in-Chief (GOC-In-C) Western Command, the Army Headquarters told the Western Command that the Government of India was fully aware of the impossibility of guaranteeing the prevention of further Chinese ingress into Indian territory or the defence of Leh and accepted this position.[75]

In short, despite the forward deployment of Indian troops, the orientation of the forward policy remained the same: to prevent, as far as possible, further forward movement of Chinese troops into the disputed territory. The weakness and vulnerability of the Indian forces were also clearly evident. Despite hectic effort, Indian forces were not even capable of putting up a strong defence of their positions—as would be demonstrated when the Chinese did attack in October—let alone mount any offensive against the Chinese forces. The forward policy 'strategy' did not require it because the assumptions underlying the strategy did not foresee any Chinese assault on the Indian posts. Concerns of various army officers about the vulnerability of these forces were repeatedly brushed away by brandishing this assumption. But the more important point is this: at no point did the forward policy

even contemplate offensive action, or for that matter, any type of combat action.

The situation was similar in the Eastern Sector. In December 1961, reflecting the government's directive to the army to be in effective occupation of the entire frontier wherever possible, the Eastern Command was asked to set up posts as far forward and close to the McMahon Line as possible to assert Indian claims over the entire NEFA area.[76] 'Operation Onkar', a programme started earlier to expand the number of Assam rifles posts on the McMahon Line, was to be vigorously implemented.[77] The location of these posts and their strengths were specified by the Intelligence Bureau, evidently because the army was, by itself, unable to pick out suitable areas for the establishment of such posts.[78] 'Operation Onkar' was started in April with Assam Rifles posts being set up all along the McMahon Line.

The situation facing the Indian troops in the Eastern Sector was similar to that facing their compatriots in the Western Sector. Since these were small posts of company or platoon strength, they would have been hard put to defend themselves in the event of a determined Chinese assault. In order to be able to come to their assistance faster in case of such exigencies, the 7th Brigade was ordered to implement a limited policy of re-siting of regular troop locations and establish additional localities forward of Towang and closer to the McMahon Line.[79] These re-sitings were to be done in two sessions: the first to be completed by 30 November 1962, while the second would be taken up in 1963. By September 1962, both battalions of the 7th Brigade that were at Towang—the 1st Sikhs and the 9th Punjab—were well into the process of establishing these additional forward locations.[80]

THE END OF THE FORWARD POLICY

The Chinese reacted to these Indian forward redeployments in the Eastern Sector on 8 September 1962, when a force of some 60 Chinese troops appeared on the Thagla Ridge opposite a forward Indian post, called the Dhola Post.[81] Since India considered the Thagla Ridge a boundary feature, the presence of the Chinese on the Ridge was considered to be the long awaited Chinese move against NEFA in retaliation to Indian moves in the Western Sector. Believing that either a

weak response—or worse, no response—would encourage the Chinese to make further incursions in the NEFA, the government ordered the army to evict the Chinese from the Thagla Ridge.[82] The order was not actually carried out: as the outnumbered Indian troops, in as tactically a disadvantageous position as anywhere on the frontier, moved to their forward position, they were attacked and repulsed by the Chinese forces. Ten days later, the general Chinese attack on India began.

The order to evict the Chinese from the Thagla Ridge, effectively, was the end of the forward policy. Though Indian forces continued to be deployed as per the forward policy directive everywhere else on the frontier, the decision to use force diverged fundamentally from Indian policy until this point. The Chinese decision to use force probably anticipated this Indian decision, considering the strength of their offensive and coordination required for such an offensive. This, of course, is only a deduction. Until key Chinese decision makers narrate their side of these events, or Chinese archives are opened for scholarly scrutiny, students of the crisis will have to depend upon only Chinese public policy statements. Until then, we can only speculate about how important Chinese decisions were made, why the Chinese did not react to Indian maps of the Western Sector, what Chinese decision makers calculated when they decided to surreptitiously build the Aksai Chin road, when the decision to use force to resolve the border was taken and why, and countless other similar decisions.

Could the decision to use force at the Thagla Ridge (and it was an isolated decision) be seen as an extension of the forward policy? Most accounts of Indian decision making during this period do not make a distinction between the forward policy and the Thagla Ridge directive. But the Thagla Ridge directive was a radical departure from the forward policy because the forward policy was only designed to stop the forward movement of Chinese forces, and primarily so in the Western Sector. At no point did the forward policy consider forcing the Chinese out of the disputed territory. Additionally, the forward policy had explicitly abjured the use of force; the only concession was self-defence, specifically in the event of a direct threat.[83] But the Thagla Ridge directive was to use force. The two fundamental elements of the forward policy, namely, that it was designed to stop the forward movement of the Chinese advance and that it was to be done without using force were overturned. In essence, the Thagla Ridge directive and the forward policy were two completely different beasts.

CONCLUSION

The forward policy was a reaction, and a weak one at that, to the surreptitious Chinese occupation of significant parts of the disputed Aksai Chin. Its primary purpose was to prevent *further* incursions, not to uproot any that had already taken place. Its defensiveness was its most noteworthy feature. To Maxwell, no defender of India's actions in the crisis, it smacked of *satyagraha*.[84]

The policy was born of the need to counter continued Chinese forward movement—what was, in fact, a Chinese forward policy. Its evolution was determined by two factors: the further advance of Chinese forces into the disputed Aksai Chin area and the nature of the terrain on the Indian side. The first added urgency and momentum to the Indian response, but the second determined the actual pace of the Indian movement. The military logic of the policy was suspect, but the legendary illiteracy of India's civilian policy makers about military matters—and their total control over strategic decision making—ensured that these suspicions never got an adequate hearing. These flaws ensured the Indian defeat in 1962, but to suggest that they caused the war is to entirely misread the forward policy.

NOTES

1. The Sino-Indian borders are made up of three distinct geographical areas called the Western, Middle and Eastern Sectors. The Western Sector extends between the Karakoram Pass and Demchok, the Middle Sector from that point to Nepal, and the McMahon Line from the Bhutan tri-junction to the Myanmar tri-junction point.
2. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing, 1970), p. 291.
3. On some of these factors, see Rosemary Foot, 'Sources of Conflict between China and India as Seen from Beijing', in Sumit Ganguly and Ted Greenwood (eds), *Mending Fences: Confidence and Security-Building Measures in South Asia* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 60–61. On the impact of the Sino-Soviet dispute on the Sino-Indian border confrontation, see, M.Y. Prozumenschikov, 'The Sino-Indian Conflict, The Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Sino-Soviet Split, October 1962: New Evidence from the Russian Archives', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issues 8–9, Winter 1996/1997, pp. 251–58, and 'New East-bloc Documents on the Sino-Indian Conflict, 1959 and

1962', *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issues 8–9, Winter 1996/1997, pp. 258–70.

4. The McMahon Line, named after the Sir Henry McMahon, Foreign Secretary to the British Indian Government, and the leader of the British delegation to Simla Conference in 1914, was the line determined at the Simla Conference between the British Indian Government and the Tibetan Government. Because China refused to accept that Tibet had any independent authority to conclude such an agreement, they refused to accept any agreement signed by Tibet as binding on China, thus questioning the legitimacy of the McMahon Line.
5. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 95.
6. Ibid., p. 95.
7. Ibid., p. 209.
8. On what the different Chinese claims encompassed on the ground, see D.K. Palit, *War in the High Himalayas: The Indian Army in Crisis* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1991), p. 44.
9. This explanation was provided by Chou En-Lai to Nehru when the latter visited China in October 1954. Nehru took this assurance, he later admitted, to mean that the 'border line would be corrected before long'. See, *Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged between the Governments of India and China: White Paper I*, (New Delhi: Government of India, 1959), p. 49. Hereafter, *White Paper I*.
10. B.N. Mullick, *My Years with Nehru: The Chinese Betrayal* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1971), pp. 197–201.
11. The other patrol was captured by the Chinese and later released. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 89.
12. *White Paper I*, p. 46.
13. Ibid., p. 47.
14. Ibid., pp. 48–51.
15. Ibid., pp. 52–54.
16. Ibid., pp. 55–57.
17. In Rajya Sabha on 10 September 1959. See Government of India, *Prime Minister on Sino-Indian Relations*, Part I (New Delhi, 1961), p. 138. Hereafter, *PMSIR*.
18. Replying to a proposal from a parliamentarian to bomb 'out of existence' the Aksai Chin Road, Nehru said: 'In places like this, decisions can only be made by conferences, by agreements. Countries do not, should not go to war without proceeding in these other ways over such matter'. Ibid., p. 99.
19. For a detailed study of the Indian military, its growth, and dispositions during this period see, Lorne J. Kavic, *India's Quest for Security: Defence Policies, 1947–1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).
20. A road link between Srinagar and Leh in the Western Sector was begun in 1954 but halted halfway, after the discovery of financial irregularities. Ibid., p. 51.
21. The Fourth Infantry Division from Punjab was ordered to NEFA. A new division, the seventeenth, was raised to take its place in Punjab. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 182.
22. Replying to a discussion in the Lok Sabha on 27 November 1959, Nehru said that he doubted 'if there is any country in the world ... which cares less for peace than China today', *PMSIR I*, p. 215.

23. B.N. Mullick, *My Years with Nehru*, pp. 238–39 and 246.
24. *Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged between the Governments of India and China: White Paper II* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1959), pp. 3–6.
25. Ibid., pp. 13–18.
26. *PMSIR I*, p. 161.
27. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 200. Kavic mentions the presence of an infantry battalion at Leh, optimised for contingency operations against Pakistan. See Lorne J. Kavic, *India's Quest for Security*, p. 21. However, no other account refers to this battalion.
28. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, pp. 129–30.
29. Due to the lack of adequate autonomous intelligence gathering facilities, the armed forces had to depend on the civilian Intelligence Bureau (IB) for most of their information. The IB thus played a major role at both the tactical and strategic levels of collecting and distributing intelligence and therefore gained a disproportionate, though necessary, say in the decision-making process. See Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 310.
30. B.N. Mullick, *My Years with Nehru*, pp. 305–6.
31. D.K. Palit, *War in the High Himalayas*, p. 44.
32. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 199.
33. Ibid., pp. 199–200.
34. One Chinese regiment was roughly comparable to an Indian brigade.
35. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 120.
36. Lorne J. Kavic, *India's Quest for Security*, p. 87.
37. Ibid., See also Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 200.
38. Lorne J. Kavic, *India's Quest for Security*, p. 88.
39. Ibid., p. 87.
40. Maj. Gen. Jagjit Singh (Retd), *The Saga of Ladakh: Heroic Battles of Rezang La and Gurung Hill, 1961–62* (New Delhi: Vanity Books, 1983), pp. 38–39.
41. B.N. Mullick, *My Years with Nehru*, pp. 308–9.
42. Ibid., p. 307.
43. This distinction was appreciated more by the political leadership than the military. See D.R. Mankekar, *The Guilty Men of 1962* (Bombay: The Tulsi Shah Enterprises, 1968), p. 143. See also Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, pp. 71–74.
44. These details are from Lorne J. Kavic, *India's Quest for Security*, pp. 71–74.
45. D.R. Mankekar, *The Guilty Men of 1962*, p. 145.
46. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 174; Captain S.R. Johri (Retd), *The Chinese Invasion of NEFA* (Lucknow: Himalaya Press, 1968), p. 32.
47. K.C. Praval, *Red Eagles: A History of the Fourth Division of India* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1983), p. 174.
48. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 174.
49. The NEFA comprised five administrative divisions the Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit, and Tirap. Only the first four were contiguous to the Tibetan border, K.C. Praval, *Red Eagles*, p. 179.
50. Ibid., p. 182.
51. D.K. Palit, *War in the High Himalayas*, p. 51.
52. K.C. Praval, *Red Eagles*, pp. 181–82.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., p. 193.

55. Ibid., p. 183.
56. For details of these contingency plans, see Lorne J. Kavic, *India's Quest for Security*, p. 88.
57. For this directive as well as the Army Headquarters order to the Eastern Command, see Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, pp. 129 and 199.
58. B.N. Mullick, *My Years with Nehru*, p. 284.
59. A variety of aircraft, both fixed wing and rotary, were bought during this period specifically for service in the north east and a new Air Force Eastern Command was established in 1959. These aircraft included 29 C-119 G transports, 8 S-62 and 6 Bell 47-G-3 helicopters from the US, and Mi –4 helicopters and II-14 and An–12 transports from the Soviet Union. See Lorne J. Kavic, *India's Quest for Security*, p. 105.
60. Brigadier J.P. Dalvi (Retd), *Himalayan Blunder: The Curtain Raiser to the Sino-Indian War of 1962* (Bombay: Thacker and Company, 1969), p. 118.
61. Ibid., p. 144.
62. Lorne J. Kavic, *India's Quest for Security*, p. 169.
63. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 221.
64. As quoted in Neville Maxwell, ibid., pp. 221–23. Defence Minister Krishna Menon would subsequently criticise the term 'forward policy'. See Michael Brecher, *India and World Politics: Krishna Menon's View of the World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 153.
65. Cited in Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 223.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., p. 225.
68. Maj. Gen. Jagjit Singh, *The Saga of Ladakh*, p. 43.
69. Major S.R. Johri (Retd), *The Chinese Invasion of Ladakh* (Lucknow: Himalaya Publications, 1967), p. 80.
70. *Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged between the Governments of India and China: White Paper VI* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1962), p. 39. See also B.N. Mullick, *My Years with Nehru*, p. 324.
71. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 237; Maj. Gen. Jagjit Singh, *The Saga of Ladakh*, p. 40.
72. B.N. Mullick, *My Years with Nehru*, pp. 334–35; D.R. Mankekar, *The Guilty Men of 1962*, p. 41.
73. D.R. Mankekar, *The Guilty Men of 1962*, pp. 41–42.
74. Maj. Gen. Jagjit Singh, *The Saga of Ladakh*, p. 45.
75. D.R. Mankekar, *The Guilty Men of 1962*, pp. 43–44.
76. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, pp. 222–23.
77. 'Operation Onkar' was to begin in 1960 but a lack of sufficient number of Assam Rifle troops had delayed it till early 1962. See B.N. Mullick, *My Years with Nehru*, pp. 323–24.
78. Ibid. See also B.M. Kaul, *The Untold Story* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1967), p. 318.
79. Brigadier J.P. Dalvi, *Himalayan Blunder*, p. 143.
80. Ibid., pp. 143–44.
81. In the Western extremity, because McMahon could not find any watersheds to guide him in drawing his line, he choose what he thought was the highest ridge as the boundary feature. But India later found that the highest ridge in this region

ran further to the north of the McMahon Line. This ridge, called the Thagla Ridge, had therefore been considered by India as the boundary feature. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, pp. 292–93. Mullick claimed that the Indian interpretation had been accepted by the Tibetan authorities. B.N. Mullick, *My Years with Nehru*, pp. 328–29.

82. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, pp. 302–3.
83. In September, in an isolated incident, Indian forces did use force in the Western Sector, killing several Chinese troops. This action was the outcome of the army's August directive, which gave permission to use force to prevent the Chinese from completely surrounding Indian posts.
84. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, p. 175.