



## **The Hidden Story of Sino-Indian Border Conflict (1954-62)**

**K S Subramanian**, Former Director General of Police, Tripura

**Chair: Prof Alka Acharya**, Director and Senior Fellow, ICS

**29 April 2015**

**Institute of Chinese Studies**

**Delhi**

The speaker began his talk with a remark, ‘we need to have friendship, not enmity with China’. His presentation sought to divulge many hidden secrets of Sino-Indian border conflicts during a particular phase of Indian history that was not adequately brought up in the academic discourses. Presenting the context of the paper, the speaker briefly touched the key points of his research such as conflict scenario, issues of human rights, Nehru’s original policy, Aksai Chin and the McMahon Line. Yet the major thrust of Subramanian’s presentation focused on the impact of excessive militarization that is underway in the North Eastern India. Referring to his books entitled ‘Security, Governance and Democratic Rights’ and ‘State Policy and Conflicts in North East India’ (yet to be published), the speaker made his first argument. He stated that militarization in the North East stems from India’s dispute with China on the McMahon Line. To substantiate his argument, he brought into light many important facts, figures and numbers. The speaker argued that the inordinate deployment of forces have undesirably reduced the role of the police or civil society in North East India. As a result, many of the developmental programmes have failed to be implemented in a proper manner. Since the speaker saw a connection between militarization of the region and the border dispute, he examined the nature of conflict between India and China, its causes, consequences and possible solutions.

Therefore for him, it is prudent to revisit the period before 1962 war. Having examined all sorts of correspondence between the two countries, he believed that not everything was going well. The speaker remarked that the process of conflict generation had taken place before the war. He further expressed that, although Nehru, the then Prime Minister informed the Intelligence Bureau (IB) about India's good relations with China, he had cautioned the army and the intelligence agencies to remain watchful. Critically reflecting on Nehru's complex stands, the speaker mentioned how Nehru in his internal remarks branded China as its enemy, whereas in other occasions he claimed India's good relations with China. The speaker opined that this was a safe strategy that Nehru adopted as he was aware that the issue of border conflict between India and China was likely to creep up any time.

The speaker discussed the various institutions such as the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Intelligence Bureau (IB) and the Indian Army. He meaningfully focused on the personalities with political, military, and intelligence background, who played crucial roles in making many political decisions during 1954-1960.

Coming to the northern border of Kashmir, the speaker remarked that Nehru's original intention was to have peaceful relations with China. S Gopal's (the Director of the Historical Division of the Ministry, 1954-66) much debated report to Nehru after his return from London implying that 'our claim to Aksai Chin is as good as China's claim', forced the Prime Minister into taking a rigid stance on the northern border of Kashmir in 1959. Questioning the reliability of the report, the speaker categorically stated 'Nehru's rigid posture was not based on any facts of history'. Therefore, he held Nehru responsible for relying on the verbal report given by his advisor and taking a rigid stance towards China. The speaker failed to understand as to why the MEA should have its own secret archives? He believes that through these documents past faults could be understood and this could also prepare India for its future security.

In 1960, during Zhou Enlai's visit to Delhi, he showed his willingness to negotiate on the border question with India. In the view of the speaker, this was perhaps the best chance

for India to resolve the issue through swapping of sectors. To Subramanian, this proposal appeared to be very reasonable. Referring to some of the scholars, the speaker said that India's claim to Aksai Chin had no basis in treaty, usage or geography such as watershed principle. But India's claim to McMahon had basis in geography and usage, but no basis in terms of international treaty between India and China. Therefore, he categorically mentioned that 'McMahon Line is illegal', but India can claim it. McMahon Line, he believed, was falsely created in 1914, on the so called border dispute between China and Tibet. He argued that the inclusion of India-China border into McMahon Line was totally illegal, and the finding was also rejected by the British government.

His presentation also dealt with India's approach towards its borders and he explained Nehru's adamant posture on border questions, which opened no space for negotiations with China. India's claim for its border is sacrosanct in nature and therefore, the questions of dispute and negotiation do not arise. Reflecting on India's rigid stance, he stated that border issue is a modern political issue and it must have negotiations with the people who are claiming the same border. Interestingly, the speaker noted that Chinese have always pressed hard for negotiations and compromises. By not coming to the negotiation terms, he pointed out; that it was not China but India, who was in reality asking for war with China. To substantiate his view, he implied that as per the international law 'no country can unilaterally declare its border, it is unacceptable'. To the speaker, the Chinese approach to negotiation was unquestionably more scientific, rational and flexible than India's.

The speaker took note of Ramsay Muir who had stated that India's northern frontier has been where it is now for the last three thousand years Muir's statement claiming about 2500 miles long India's frontier from Kunlun to Burma border instigated the Kongka La pass incident in October 1959. Adding to this, he reveals how Nehru at times wrongly claimed the northern boundary of Ladakh and Kashmir with Sinkiang range along Kunlun range. For all these errors, the speaker held the MEA responsible for what they represented to include the whole of Aksai Chin area within the Indian boundary. In his view, this move was neither scientific, nor rational

Although the IB then was led by B N Malik, from the beginning he had established a close relationship with Nehru. The speaker said that Malik was a very articulate and shrewd man. And Nehru was the victim of bureaucratic thinking surrounded by influential, but opportunist civilian, foreign and intelligence officials.

The speaker explained that the whole idea of 'forward policy' in 1954 was the brainchild of Malik. He had successfully persuaded Nehru that there was no question of Chinese retaliation even if it is in their position. Although the military intelligence had an issue with Malik, yet because of Nehru's unwavering support to him, his decision always stood as final. From the presentation one gets the impression that 'forward policy' was a mistake that was bound to result in confrontation with China. In the speaker's view, it was a short sighted policy, which required much logical explanations. Contextualising the whole discussion within a historical context, he stated that the main beneficiary of the emerging Sino-Indian border conflict would have been the US. Subramanian took issue with Malik's close relationship with the US intelligence agencies, which according to him, left many questions unanswered.

Following this, the speaker reflected on 21 October 1959 Kongka La incident near Aksai Chin. Viewpoints differ about who is to be held responsible. While the MEA had been accusing the Chinese forces of intrusion, referring to a official document, Subramanian mentioned that all along in a particular meeting of the Prime Minister with the various Ministries and Defense headquarters, Malik was accused of expansionism. The speaker questioned, 'is this not a major contradiction?' The speaker asked Nehru's ambivalent policies put the army in a fix. His directive to push the Chinese back from the Indian territory reconfirmed the 'forward policy' more rigorously.

In conclusion, the speaker implied that Nehru's legacy pertaining to the border dispute was deeply flawed. The Indian parliament and the people were kept in the dark. As a suggestion he pointed out that India should have limited the claims to the Aksai Chin area to the Macartney/Macdonald Line of 1899. He ended his presentation on a positive note by mentioning that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's forthcoming visit to China may offer the last chance to settle the Sino-Indian border dispute forever.

## **Discussion**

The discussion started with a question on border posts and the question ‘who actually gave the order of “forward policy”?’ Responding to this question, the speaker presented the views of Malik and the Home Secretary separately. The former, in his book, has mentioned that it was the order of the Prime Minister, whereas the latter believed that it was Malik who gave the order of ‘forward policy’. In the speaker’s view, it was Malik’s idea that was actually sold to Nehru. The other question pertained to the individual and institutional problems. Some of the audience members were also interested in knowing why Nehru or the personality-centric analysis again? Was it not also a multi-institutional systemic failure? The speaker responded by adding that Nehru was also an institution by himself.

Another question pertained to contemporary geopolitical developments. What sort of viable solutions would the speaker suggest to the present government if they were to pursue negotiations or a settlement? The speaker replied that India should compromise on Aksai Chin, but unfortunately, this offer is no longer open. The speaker reflected upon the incompatible relationship between the Military Intelligence and IB. On the question if things have changed now, he speaker responded that there is a lot of rivalry even today. Another question was if the General Himmat Singh report would have any positive impact on the state of affairs pertaining to inter-agency problems? Since the speaker had not read the report he could not comment on it. Another question pertained to the effect of the border dispute on the North East region as a whole. The North East regions, he mentioned is a military dominated region. The local police has no responsibility for law and order in the region, which is under the Assam Rifles.

Both the speaker and the audience members were concerned about the lack of access to the reports and documents presented by S Gopal to Nehru. However, an audience informed that recently Nirupama Rao has been given access to a report. One of the participants affirmed that 1962 incident has been a comprehensive disaster for the whole nation. This was an utterly avoidable conflict that served no political purpose what so ever for China or for India. But as a nation we need to learn the lessons, so that those

very mistakes are not repeated again. In the end, three important comments were made from the audience: it is high time that 'we' mature to face the faults that we made. Border disputes cannot be resolved through conflict, but through negotiations and compromises. And militarization in North East region is not a solution to counter the fear of Chinese coming in; and if it remains so, it will be a total failure on the part of the government of India.

*Report prepared by Konchok Paldan, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.*

### ***About the Speaker***

Mr. K.S.Subramanian was a member of the Indian Police Service (1963-1997) and was Director General of Police in Tripura. Earlier, he was Director of the Union Home Ministry's Research and Policy Division (1980-85). He has held senior fellowships in the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla (1973-75), Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford (1983-84), Institute of Development Studies, Sussex (1989-90), Nehru Memorial Museum (1986-91) and the Indian Council of Social Science Research (2011-12) and Professorships. He is the author of several books including 'Political Violence and the Police in India' (Sage 2007) and 'State, Policy and Conflicts in Northeast India' (Routledge, forthcoming).

### **Disclaimer**

*The Wednesday Seminar at the ICS is a forum for presentations on current affairs as well as ongoing research by scholars, experts, diplomats and journalists, among others. This report is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion, All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speaker(s) and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.*