



1962: A View from the Other Side of the Hill

Speaker: Maj Gen PJS Sandhu (Retd), Deputy Director and Editor, United Service Institution

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Maj Gen PJS Sandhu in his presentation sought to dispel the many myths surrounding China's actions with regard to the war fought with India in 1962. The speaker particularly focused on the period between 1949 and 1956. Between these years India and China were locked in a battle that extended from the Western Frontier to the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). The speaker also threw light on the 'heart of the military campaign' that took place from 1947 to 1952. During the course of the presentation, it was pointed out that China was already engaged in liberating and annexing their peripheral regions into the motherland of PRC, while India was quick to announce and denounce the colonial inheritance in Xinjiang and Tibet. India had a lead time of two years after the independence in 1947 but it was China's prompt and proactive military action in the region even before it became a Communist state that enabled it to acquire these regions.

The speaker began his presentation by revealing the Chinese covert designs in acquiring Tibet and the Western region even before PRC was formed in 1st October 1949. Hence, immediately in November 1949, the PLA marched into Xinjiang and this annexation preceded the annexation of Tibet. China was concerned by the Soviet 'liberation' of Outer Mongolia, that they may be forced to forego their claims on Inner and Outer Tibet too. The PLA advanced towards Tibet and upon reaching the de facto border of China and Tibet held negotiations with the Tibetan army. The outcome of these negotiations was a seventeen-point agreement with the Tibetan government. By 1952 the implications of Chinese annexation of Tibet were becoming clearer. However, the political leadership in India failed to perceive the Chinese motives in Tibet.

In the next part of the presentation, the speaker reflected on what independent India could have done to prevent the annexation of Tibet. According to the speaker, India could have prevented the annexation of Tibet at least till the India-China border agreement was signed had it shown its military sagacity. By 1956-7, China was already suspicious of India. As situation in Tibet worsened, it was destined to be a core issue in India-China relations. Also, China started road construction in the contested region and within Aksai Chin, 160 kms passed through Indian claimed territory. India had sent spies to check on China's road construction in the western region, the report of which is available with the White Papers from MEA. Indian intelligence personnel disguised as herdsmen had reported about building

of the Aksai Chin road. However, their reports were dismissed. Relations reached a nadir post this event. In 1962, Beijing warned, if India played with fire then it will be met by fire.

Military Campaign

The speaker gave a detailed review of the military campaigns during the 1962 war. The Chinese grand strategy and operational considerations were focused on the Western sector that comprised Ladakh, the Kameng frontier divisions, Lohit Frontier Division and Subansiri and Siang frontier division. It was an attempt to bring Nehru to the table based on Chinese terms. By November 1961, a forward policy was adopted by India. The Chinese approach was of armed coexistence. The speaker further apprised that in the Eastern sector, Chinese operations were conducted in three different phases. The first phase was the battle of Namka Chu in October 1962. The second phase was the capture of Tawang and in the third phase, it was the battle of Sila, Bomdila and Derang. In November 1962, India launched an attack in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), which was the only place where India launched an attack. However, the Chinese preponed their attack and outflanked the Indians thereby bringing the battle to an end.

In conclusion, the speaker revealed that in all of these engagements, India did not use air force because India had no night interceptor capabilities. It was also due to the fear that China had superior air force capabilities. But actually, PLA air force posed no threat nor was any PLA air force deployed in the sector during the war. They had deployed about six anti-aircraft battalions to counter the Indian air force only as a caution. In the overall assessment, the Indian air force intervention may have made some difference in Ladakh. But the total lack of operational and strategic intelligence on the part of India resulted in debacle for India.

Discussion

The discussions that followed the presentation centred on the inefficiencies of the then political leadership in India. The other point of discussion was about the reasons behind not engaging the air force in the battle. The scholars present during the discussion reiterated the importance of synergizing India's military power, which comprises of the navy, the army and the air force. War is a test of a nation's capability and the enemy's capability should not be underestimated. The Indian assessment was not based on actual facts and points to a failure on the part of Indian intelligence. Overall, there was no justification for India not to use its air force in an offensive war. According to the speaker, it was a lack of both political will and strategic planning on the part of the Indian military that was responsible for India's war debacle.

Report prepared by Kimneijou Rosy Lotjem, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Major General PJS Sandhu was commissioned into the Armoured Corps on 15 June 1966. He retired after 37 years of service on 31st July 2003 as the Chief of Staff of a Strike Corps (strategic reserve). During his Military service, he commanded an armoured regiment, an independent armoured brigade and an armoured division. He participated in the 1971 Indo-Pak war in the Shakargarh/Sialkot Sectors and also served as a deputy commander of an infantry brigade in high altitude in counter insurgency operations and on the Line of Control

in Jammu and Kashmir. He has also served as Deputy Director General of Military Operations at the Army HQ, where he dealt with strategic issues.

Presently, he is the Deputy Director and Editor of the United Service Institution (USI) of India since 01 May 2007. He participated in the Second Xiangshan Forum organised by the Academy of Military Sciences of the PLA in Beijing from 26-28 Oct 2008. He also led a four member USI delegation for bilateral discussions with the China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CISS) in Beijing from 09-14 Sep 2013. His areas of interest include Strategy, Military History and International Relations. He has been studying China since 1987.

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