

# THE HIMALAYAN BORDER WAR: AN INDIAN MILITARY VIEW

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ON 22 October 1962, while President Kennedy spoke to the American people on radio and television about the Cuban crisis, a half-world away Prime Minister Nehru of India spoke to his countrymen over radio about the Himalayan border crisis.

This was, of course, a coincidence; probably, too, on the opposing side, there had been no deliberately engineered collusion of the two crises. But if you look before and after the events, some striking similarities appear. The military posture of the Soviet Union and the Red Chinese had been strengthened and weapons piled up much before the showdown. When the time for decision came, the Soviet Union abandoned the position of force immediately; Red China did the same a month later.

These crises have had a profound

impact upon national as well as international thinking. As we in India know for certain, our country will never again be as it was in the fall of 1962. And we feel the same can be said of the West.

The Himalayan border extends from the trijunction of Kashmir-Afghanistan-Sinkiang east to the trijunction of Assam-Burma-Sinkiang; it is 2,500 miles long and forms a great divide between Red China and the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. For all but 900 of these miles—in Kashmir and in Nepal—India faces Red China directly.

On her side, Red China enjoys an unbroken control over the entire length of the border, which is a distinct military advantage. It is true, of course, that this control is not uniformly firm throughout: Tibet has seen a rebellion and is not yet returned

to full normalcy; Sinkiang has not completely shed its traditional recalcitrance.

### Natural Guardian

On the other hand, the Red Chinese iron hand is at work and Tibet and Sinkiang could hardly be relied on to present indefinitely "soft bellies." Precisely because Sinkiang and Tibet—the former with great industrial possibilities and nuclear resources—are not completely settled, Red China has concentrated military power in those areas.

This region contains Mount Everest (29,028 feet) and more than three dozen peaks each over 24,000 feet in height. The upper areas are capped with ice and glaciers, where if it does not snow it rains, and if it does not snow or rain, cold, biting winds blow. It contains some of the world's thickest jungles; and is littered with impassable ravines and gorges. This is the Himalayan border long considered by Indians as a standing natural guardian of the north, which could not be demolished or penetrated by an enemy.

But we are in the 20th century. Aircraft take little account of the Himalayan altitudes and there is a regular Delhi-Moscow air service over the Himalayas.

North of the Himalayas there has been an enormous concentration of power which can be applied much more

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widely and effectively than ever before. Altitudes, terrain, and adverse weather conditions have lost a good deal of their edge in the face of new weapons and techniques. The Himalayas were never completely isolated from the traveler, the trader, or the soldier. Today masses of men can operate where yesterday only individuals could.

### Areas of Conflict

China made a breach in two widely separated sectors of the border in Ladakh and the Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA), 900 miles apart.

Ladakh is a province of Kashmir, having Sinkiang, Tibet, and India's Himachal Pradesh as its contiguous territories. Its area of 37,000 square miles contains a population of 100,000, which gives an indication of its sparse character and comparative isolation. No wonder! Leh, its capital, is at 11,000 feet, not far from the Indus River; the average height of the surrounding mountain ranges is 19,000 feet; mean rainfall is 2.7 inches; and temperatures often fall below freezing point. Until India took up development programs, there was practically no road worth the name leading into Ladakh. Against the backdrop of Chinese aggression the poverty of communications is all the more depressing.

Despite its forbidding features, Ladakh has long attracted explorers and adventurers, travelers and traders. It also has been the scene of battles. In the past, in the days of Fa-Hien, whose spirit might be biting Mao, it was a meeting ground of peoples from Sinkiang, Tibet, and India. At Leh converged numerous routes, one from Kashgar, another from Rudok, a third from Gartok, and a fourth from Srinagar. These routes are still

there but they do not converge. That is the price Ladakh paid to become a vital strategic crossland between India and central Asia. Aksai Chin is Ladakh's northern sector, which China has occupied by force and through which she has built a road. This is, in fact, the area best suited for land communications. It is here that you have a peephole into central Asia; and it is the Chinese design to force India out of it.

### Rain Determining Factor

While Ladakh has the air of central Asia, NEFA breathes of the tropical. Assam, of which NEFA is the northern part, receives the full blast of monsoons from the Bay of Bengal, bringing heavy rains. Rainfall is an important determining factor for military operations in this area. The rainy season lasts from May to August, which explains why the Chinese launched their offensive in September. With rains conspire tortuous terrain and high altitudes, and NEFA, with its 30,000 square miles of territory, is described as "so mountainous, so cut about, chopped up, and divided that on a month's tour you may well climb a height exceeding that of Mount Everest." Some of the battles which raged in NEFA were for passes as high as 15,000 feet.

Living conditions are as difficult as in Ladakh, although in a different way. Ladakh is barren, while NEFA is ablaze with luxuriant growth and wet with water. It is a land par excellence of tribal folks—the Monbas, Akas, Daflas, Miris, and Abors. It is being assiduously developed by the Indian Government.

Militarily, Assam is better known to the outside world than Ladakh, for it figured in World War II. It was a part of Assam that a Japanese force

overran in 1944. From bases in Assam, General Joseph W. Stilwell received the bulk of his supplies for the Burma Campaign. From here, too, flew American transport planes over "the Hump" carrying material and equipment to enfeebled and impoverished China. It must have been a most perverted twist of fate which goaded China to invade this region of all regions in the world.

### China Develops Cold War

To go back a little, by 1954 India and Red China had entered into a treaty of peaceful coexistence. India gave away all her rights in Tibet as an earnest of her good intentions. In that same year, China laid claim to a small area in the middle sector of the Himalayas.

During the next five years this small claim bloated to include part of Ladakh and the whole of the NEFA, altogether 50,000 square miles. During these years Red China completed the Aksai Chin Road connecting Tibet with Sinkiang.

A battle of diplomatic exchanges started, accompanied by sporadic skirmishes in Ladakh. From 1959, when the Dalai Lama fled into India following the rebellion in Tibet against Red Chinese rule, Mao turned his full steam on India, which overnight became "reactionary," "imperialist," and "aggressive." To settle the dispute, officials of the two countries met and produced a report. There was no settlement. There were more border incidents and further proposals, but little signs of a major showdown until July 1962 when Red Chinese troops made still another push into Ladakh. Two months later the conflagration spread into NEFA; the invasion came on 20 October 1962.

Red Chinese border designs are

clear. If you look in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1957), you will find this statement about Ladakh: "It extends northward to eastern Gilgit and to a frontier with Sinkiang, undefined but roughly indicated by the Kuen Lun range."

Red China wants the frontier to come down from the Kuen Lun crest, also down from the Karakoram Range, and even farther south, to include the loop of Aksai Chin. In the east the frontier must descend from the crest of the Himalayan Range—along the crest is the famous McMahon Line, described now as an "imperialist creation"—to the foothills. In both cases India must surrender a vital mountain tract of great strategic value; to this she will never agree.

### **The Battles**

In Ladakh, Indian strategy was something like this (Figure 1). The main base was Srinagar, capital of Kashmir, from where supplies could be airlifted or transported by road. The road went up to Leh, a distance of about 200 miles, but could not be relied upon for speedy deliveries. Therefore, air transport was India's principal logistical weapon. Airstrips and landing grounds were gradually constructed north and southeast of Leh, mainly to serve as links in the supply line. About four dozen small military posts were established along the border, good for watch and ward, but feeble against a massive invasion. One such post, more colorful than effective, was at Daulat Beg Oldi, a few miles south of Karakoram Pass. Chushul had an important airfield which did not fall to the Red Chinese despite their heavy shelling.

Chinese strategy was land based rather than air based and was sustained by a network of roads and

strongly garrisoned centers such as Rudok in Tibet. The Aksai Chin Road, 100 miles long, was the base of further roads penetrating into Ladakh and leading to numerous concentrations: a dozen of them could be counted in the Chip Chap River Valley facing Daulat Beg Oldi. Here, the Chinese scored heavily, for all their forward concentrations could be reached by dependable supply lines. Heavy trucks were seen plying on the roads, as well as tanks, which the Chinese brought into the battles. Reliability of communications and rapidity of movement were definite Red Chinese assets.

### **Withdrawal**

Within a week of the outbreak of war on 20 October, the Red Chinese launched a three-pronged attack on the Indian positions in Ladakh. One column crossed the border in the vicinity of Daulat Beg Oldi; another came in 100 miles to the southeast at Pangong Lake; the third crossed still another 100 miles southeast at Demchok. After heavy casualties on both sides, numerous Indian posts fell, followed by a general withdrawal of the troops. After a lull of three weeks, Red Chinese pressure was exerted on Chushul. During the lull, however, this important post had been reinforced. Although heavily shelled, it remained in Indian hands.

All told, the Red Chinese advance was hardly more than 15 miles anywhere along the Ladakh front when, on 21 November, Red China declared a unilateral cease-fire. Ladakh was an instance of very limited land warfare, in which light tanks, artillery, and hand grenades were used. The use of airpower was confined to supply drops, and fighter and bomber aircraft were not employed by either side.

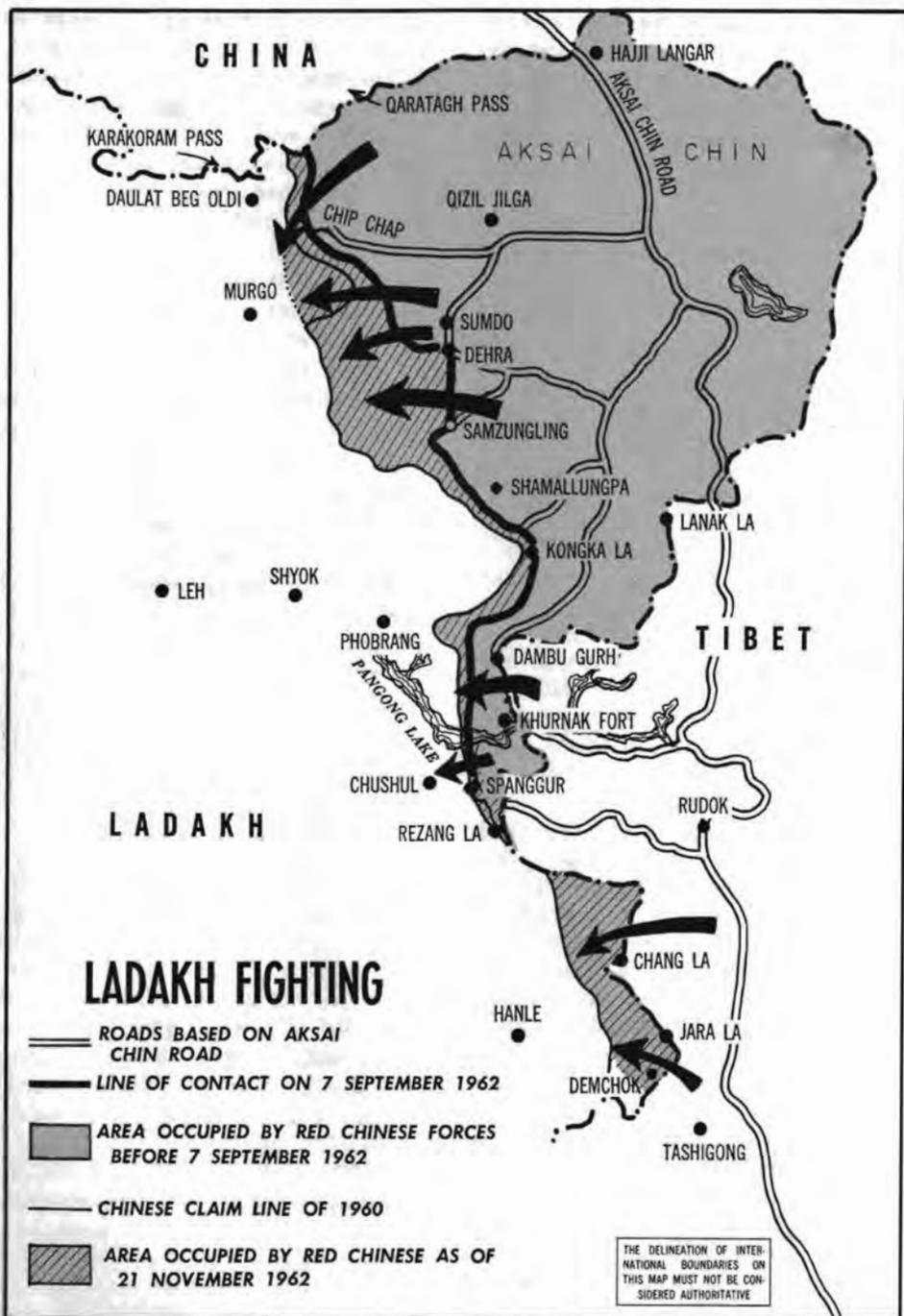


Figure 1.

### **Air Transport Vital**

NEFA presents in many ways a duplication of the principal strategic elements found in Ladakh. Tezpur, in Assam, was the principal Indian base. Not far from Tezpur the Himalayas begin to rise, and from a place called Foothills, Indian engineers had constructed a road to Bomdi La, Se La, and Towang, the three important places which figured in the fighting. From Towang to the McMahon Line there was no road until the Chinese constructed one after invasion.

Despite the road to Towang, Indian logistics in NEFA relied heavily on air transport. In fact, to the east at Walong, even a proper road did not exist; air transport was about the only means of supply.

China had at least three airfields in Tibet. But as in Ladakh, surface roads were the main arteries of logistic support; these were constructed almost parallel to the McMahon Line barely 10 to 12 miles away. Facing Walong was the major base of Rima, and Rima is connected through Tibet and Aksai Chin with Sinkiang—a distance no less than 3,000 miles.

Once again it was a three-pronged Chinese attack, at Thaga La to the west, Longju in the center, and Kibito to the east of the McMahon Line (Figure 2). Only the first and the third thrusts were followed by sizable Red Chinese advances. The character of the invasion followed the model of Ladakh; a week of attack, a three-week lull, another week of attack. This shows an efficient central direction on a wide front.

### **Troops Move Southward**

Descending from Thaga La Ridge, the Red Chinese troops overwhelmed the Indian border posts and marched southward to capture Towang. Red

China used the lull that followed to construct a road from the border to Towang, and to bring up supplies and reinforcements. Secure in their supply lines, a wave of Chinese troops swept south and launched a frontal attack on Se La Pass; another wave bypassed the pass and by a pincer movement headed for Bomdi La, 30 miles to the south as the crow flies but 80 miles by road. The fall of this key defense center jeopardized the entire Indian position in NEFA, and was quickly followed by another 30 to 40-mile advance by the Red Chinese troops right up to the edge of Assam Plateau.

### **Civil Administration Restored**

In the center, Longju fell. Similar was the fate of Walong to the east, from where the Chinese marched south to about 100 miles from an important Indian oilfield. Then, on 21 November, the Chinese halted.

Winter set in and the McMahon Line was wrapped in snow. As a self-imposed condition of cease-fire, Red Chinese troops withdrew from NEFA, and by the end of December they had the area almost cleared. Indian civil, but not military, administration in the area was restored. There was no Red Chinese withdrawal from the areas captured in Ladakh. Having done this, the Red Chinese said in effect: "Comrades, let us now sit down and talk."

Meanwhile, other events had transpired. India made a fervent appeal to the Western Powers for assistance, which was forthcoming immediately, particularly from the United States and Great Britain. Six nonaligned powers met at Colombo and made proposals for settlement, which India accepted but Red China did not. From this point on the two antagonists began a life of suspended animation;

# NORTHEAST FRONTIER AGENCY FIGHTING

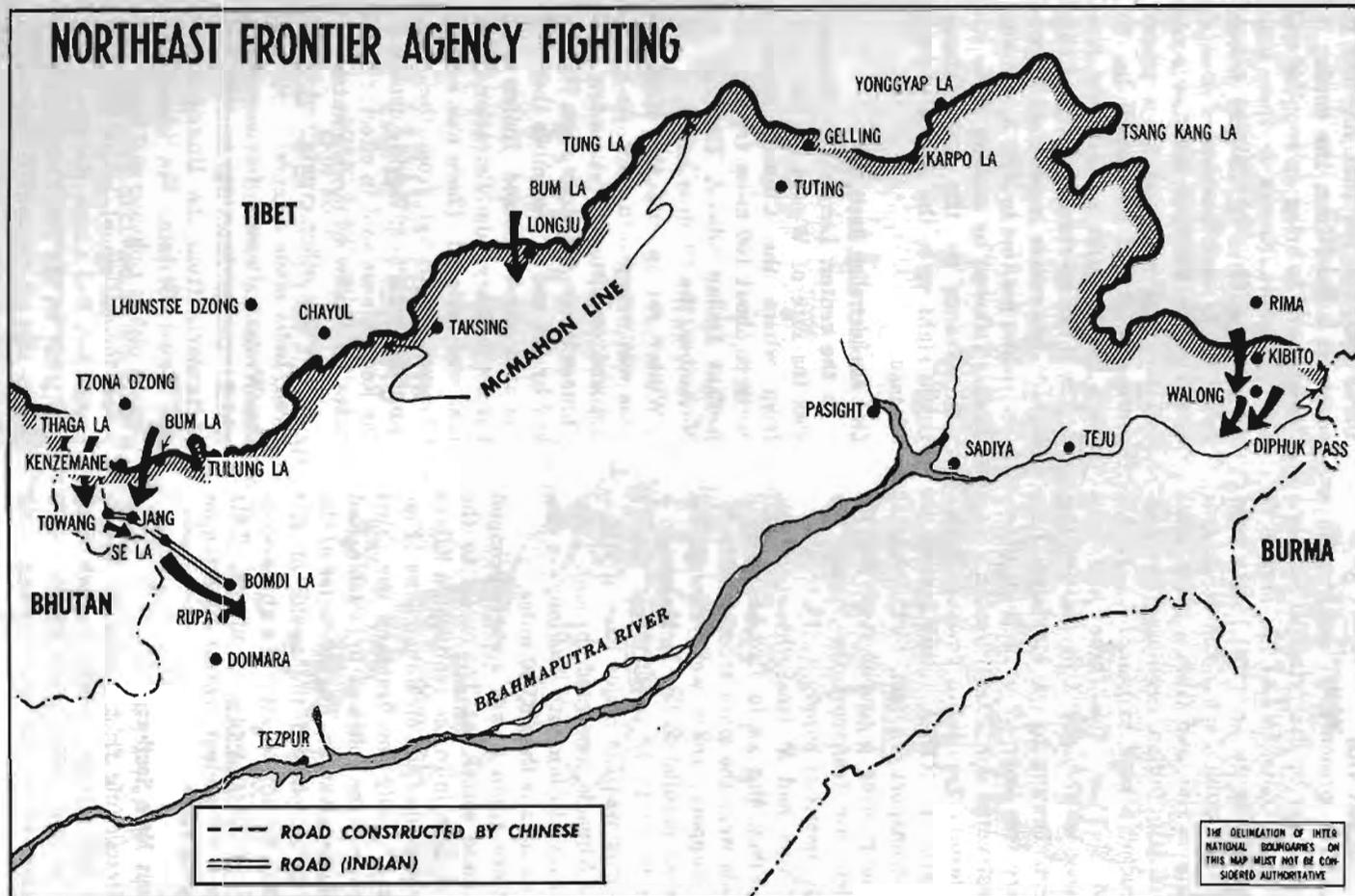


Figure 2.

this may continue for years, unless it becomes worse.

### **Retrospects and Prospects**

In the wake of the conflagration, numerous questions arise. Why did the Red Chinese call a halt when their armies touched the fringes of the Indian Plain and there seemed to be nothing to stem their galloping speed? There could be many answers. With the onset of winter the Red Chinese could not afford stretching their lines of communications. Indian resistance showed every sign of mounting. Western aid was quick and could become massive if hostilities stretched. Even the Soviet Union did not go whole hog with China. And Mao must have asked himself: "Do we have the means of fighting against Western and Indian Powers simultaneously—along an Asian front of 8,000 miles?"

The dramatic collapse of Indian resistance would be another point of query. Here, only a few indications are available. The control and direction of Indian military policy was unsatisfactory. There weren't enough men or material and what was available failed to acquire momentum. The Indian Army was excellent for the good old times, but not for guerrilla warfare of the Communist pattern. Adverse terrain and inadequate acclimatization to high altitudes hampered operations. Above all, Indian intelligence services were poor.

### **'Frontier Guards'**

The tactics of the Red Chinese "frontier guards" would be another field of observation and research. Drawn from mountainous areas, they had been trained on the "roof of the world," in Tibet; acclimatization was no problem. Not far from the frontier a large number of bunkers have now been photographed, dug into earth to

make soldiers' homes. The Red Chinese soldier's garb was shabby, but reasonably comfortable. The Red Chinese soldier often stole the olive green of the Indian dead or wore the native tribal dress for deception. His food was simple; not for him hot meals, rum rations, "cakes and ale." Movements depended upon requirements. Groups of men prowled about causing little sound and leaving behind no trace; occasionally they took Indian posts unawares.

### **Blitzkrieg Methods**

Most of the frontal attacks were made in waves in overwhelming numbers, sometimes exceeding Indian garrison strength in the ratio of 10 to 1. Shouts, whistles, and explosions were frequent precursors of attacks. A traditional tactic, which the Red Chinese had practiced in Korea, was this: each rifleman in the attacking wave would be supported by two others carrying ammunition and lighter weapons. Earth-moving machinery and automatic saws were two important tools operated by a special labor corps which accompanied the troops. This corps also performed other vital functions. As the lugger of heavy equipment, it carried guns and wheeled transport over high passes; it helped build roads, so that the 16-mile road from Thaga La Ridge to Towang, constructed in less than a fortnight, must certainly be a record. The Chinese push had all the air of a blitzkrieg. There was one difference, however, it was not mechanized.

"Time and the hour runs through the roughest day"—thus said Shakespeare in *Macbeth*. It may be quoted to describe the fortunes of the Indian Army. It was not so much the losses the Indian Army sustained, but the sheer weight, fury, and suddenness of

pounding. The army found its Pearl Harbor in NEFA, but not its Waterloo.

### Reorganization

The reorganization and augmentation of the Indian armed forces is presently a foremost task of the Indian Government, and this is being done with the assistance of British and American experts. While it will take time before new patterns are evolved, certain angles of approach are becoming visible.

In general, the entire strategy of Indian defense must change, with the Himalayan border as a focus, and it must take into account the global aspects of defense against Chinese expansionism. Reputedly half a million strong, the Indian armed forces will expand considerably in consonance with the greater demands of security. Defense production, which so far has functioned within its own departments and fields, will be geared to the total five-year plans which India has been pursuing since 1950.

A more realistic assessment will be undertaken as to the assistance to be sought from foreign powers. From what occurred in NEFA, Indian training must now incorporate quickly the tactics of mountain and jungle warfare. The new Defense Minister, Y. B. Chavan, the "angry young man" of the Indian Cabinet, is known for his drive and efficiency, as well as for a freedom from inhibitions and predilections; he is expected to deliver the goods.

### Military Assistance

Foreign military assistance to India has raised an important point: Will India be aligned or unaligned? The United States and Britain have come to India's help speedily and generously, a factor which has deterred

Red China from further adventurism. Soviet friendship has been shown to India, but it had little direct effect on the crisis. In any case, in material terms it has been nothing comparable to what the Western Powers have given. A comment could be: "Prime Minister Nehru has not crossed the Rubicon, but he is ankle deep in water."

### Nonalignment

On the other hand, the Prime Minister has declared that India will not give up her policy of nonalignment. A little reflection would show that this is no mere diplomatic profession. During the Chinese invasion, Communist powers were by and large friendly toward India, but even more important than this is the hard reality of the geopolitical situation. The Soviet Union is a neighbor of India, only a stone's throw from the frontier in Kashmir. Having one hostile neighbor such as Red China is bad enough; to have two like her might be a disaster. After all, if you live in water you try not to fight with all the crocodiles. In any case, nonalignment is only a policy, not a principle; it must change under the pounding of events. Some Indians are asking for a change.

But foreign policy, of which nonalignment or otherwise is but a part, will be only one factor in the shaping of things in India. There will be many another—the massive and baffling geography of the border; India's capacity; the vital compulsions of social and economic uplift; democratic ways of life, which are difficult; and emotions bound with culture and civilization.

Out of all this must now develop power. It is power alone that can stem the contagion and menace of the Asian heartlands.