

CONFLICT IN THE HIMALAYAS

Leo E. Rose

FEW events of modern Asian history are so fraught with long-range implications as the recent eruption of hostilities between India and Communist China. Ironically, the initial impact was felt most strongly within the Communist bloc as well as the non-aligned Afro-Asian nations for which India has long provided leadership and inspiration. But the consequences for the West are likely to be no less significant, for dramatic changes in interregional and interbloc alignments may be in the process of formulation. The Sino-Indian conflict may prove to

be as much an effect as a cause of these developments, but it is the catalyst forcing a reappraisal of policy postures throughout the Afro-Asian world.

Before analyzing some possible repercussions of the conflict, it might be well to examine the origin and basis of this dispute with reference to the objectives and policies pursued by Communist China and India in the past decade. Often these were obscured by the "peaceful coexistence" that has supposedly characterized relations between these two civilizations

in the past. Only now is a more realistic appraisal of their recent relationship possible.

Potential Danger

The Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950-51, in such strength as to belie Peking's claims of "peaceful liberation," had a decisive effect on the shaping of Indian policy toward Commu-



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Nehru has acknowledged that his government made two miscalculations when Red China occupied Tibet in 1951: the timing of a Sino-Indian dispute, and the area in which the conflict would take place

in the Himalayan region. It was not, as has often been charged, that the Indian Government failed to recognize the potential

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danger posed by a Chinese-dominated Tibet. But Jawaharlal Nehru himself has admitted that his government made two basic miscalculations in 1951: the first concerned the probable timing of the emergence of a Sino-Indian dispute, and the second, the area in which this conflict was likely to be centered.

The over-all framework within which India's foreign and defense policy evolved was the decision to concentrate the country's sparse resources on economic development programs. Only the absolutely essential minimum was to be diverted to defense spending, and then whenever possible to programs that contributed to economic development. Thus India's defense preparations, based as they were on the assumption that Pakistan was the immediate threat and that a major war with China was improbable until both countries had developed their resources to a much greater extent, were bound to prove inadequate in any crisis involving a dispute with Peking.

It should be noted, however, that the emphasis on economic development has had its positive aspects, even as far as defense policy is concerned. India is now far more capable of sustaining a war economy than would have been possible a decade ago. Moreover, the considerable success achieved in economic development has had an important effect on the internal political situation, and is one reason why the Indian Government does not face a serious subversion problem in its present dispute with a Communist state.

Strengthened Defenses

Within the limitations of the allocation of resources, New Delhi moved as early as 1950 to strengthen Hima-

layan border defenses. New treaties were signed in 1950 and 1951 with the strategic border states of Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan providing in effect for cooperation in the event of outside (that is, Chinese) aggression. Efforts were also made to strengthen what was then considered to be the most strategic section of the border, the Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA). New Delhi's assessment of defense requirements missed the potential significance of the western (Ladakh) frontier, a miscalculation that later proved extremely embarrassing to the Indian Government.

In Tibet, India's policy in the 1950-59 period was directed primarily toward salvaging as much as possible of the former Indian position and, in particular, placing India's traditional trade and pilgrimage rights on a new legal basis through an agreement with Peking. Formalization of the status of the Indian Mission at Lhasa, which had been established in 1936 on an *ad hoc* basis, was also considered vital, not only for the protection of Indian interests, but also as one means of sustaining and supporting the limited autonomy granted the Dalai Lama's government under the 1951 Sino-Tibetan agreement.

Friendly Relations

As conceived in 1951, then, India's long-term interests on the northern border, as well as broader policy considerations, required the establishment of friendly relations with the Peking regime. Conflicts of interests between the two most volatile Asian societies were to be avoided, or at least postponed. In this period there were no immediate issues upon which Indian and Chinese policies clashed, thus permitting Sino-Indian friendship to appear to flourish.

From 1951 to 1956, though, Peking was cautiously but persistently preparing the ground for the elimination of the limited Tibetan autonomy permitted under the 1951 agreement. Meanwhile, China's policy dictated that open disagreements with India over Tibet or the Sino-Indian border were to be avoided. On several occasions high Chinese officials assured India that no territorial questions existed between the two governments and that Indian rights in Tibet would be scrupulously protected.

Policy Revised

The outbreak of a widespread revolt among the Kham tribesmen of eastern Tibet in late 1955, however, forced a radical revision of Chinese policy in the frontier area, for the uprising threatened the security of communications between China and Tibet.

The main components of this communication system were two lengthy roads, traversing fantastically difficult terrain between China and Lhasa—one from Szechwan and the other from Tsinghai Province. Both roads had been hastily constructed and were expensive and difficult to maintain. By 1956 their most serious handicap was that they ran through Kham-populated areas. It was obvious to Peking that a long and arduous campaign was required before the Kham rebels, operating in ideal guerrilla country, could be suppressed. A new, more reliable route to central Tibet was essential, and quickly, for the Kham revolt could not long be isolated from the other areas of Tibet.

To solve their problem the Chinese decided on the construction of a road from a different direction—the bypass route across the high alkaline plain known as Aksai Chin ("white stone" desert) that linked Sinkiang

and western Tibet. This route held several advantages over the two roads from the east. By comparison, the topographical problems were minimal. Much of the Aksai Chin route traversed desolate, plateau terrain where, as Nehru noted, it was only necessary "to even the ground a little and remove the stones and shrubs."¹

Moreover, most of this area was uninhabited and rebel activity was unlikely to pose any serious difficulties. Climatic considerations were also favorable. The Aksai Chin is most easily crossed in the cold, dry winter months—the time of year that the other two roads are frequently obstructed by heavy snows and landslides.² Previously, the intense summer heat and the absence of water had detracted from the utility of the Aksai Chin route in the summer months, but modern technological development reduced the seriousness of these handicaps.

Indeed, there was only one major drawback: Aksai Chin is the north-eastern section of Kashmir and is, therefore, Indian territory. Apparently the route was so badly needed that Peking decided to risk a break with New Delhi, probably on the assumption that India would reluctantly recognize a *fait accompli* once the road had been constructed, in order to avoid straining Sino-Indian friendship and "peaceful coexistence."

Chinese parties surveyed the route in 1956 and road construction commenced shortly thereafter. Peking announced completion of the road on 5 October 1957, although the exact alignment of the route was not speci-

¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's Foreign Policy, Selected Speeches, September, 1946-April, 1961*, Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1961, p. 333.

² Two historically verified invasions of Tibet had used the Aksai Chin route—the Dsongar Mongol invasion in 1717 and the Chinese Communist invasion in 1950-51. In both instances the invaders chose the early winter months for their movements.

fied. Reports of Chinese activity had reached New Delhi in late 1957, but weather conditions delayed the dispatch of reconnaissance parties to the area until the spring of 1958.

The question has been asked why India was so late in learning of the road construction, but this is not as strange as it might appear. The area is uninhabited and, until 1958, the Indian authorities only sent up occasional reconnaissance parties. Prior to 1951, Ladakhi trading parties had sometimes traversed Aksai Chin while on their way to Sinkiang, but the enforced closure of the Indian Consulate in Yarkand in 1951 had terminated this commerce. The Chinese had also placed difficulties in the way of the establishment of the Indian Trading Agency in western Tibet, provided in the 1954 Sino-Indian Treaty, thus permitting this agency to operate only a few weeks of the year.

When it was finally determined that the Chinese road ran through Indian territory, a note was sent to Peking protesting the infringement of Indian sovereignty. Thus by the end of 1958 India and China were involved in a major territorial dispute, although it was several months before the Indian and Chinese publics were to learn of the collapse of "peaceful coexistence."

Primary Objective

The extension of the Kham revolt to central Tibet in March 1959 enhanced the importance of the Aksai Chin route. That this route is vital to China's position in Tibet was further demonstrated in 1961 when Peking abandoned the projected Tsinghai-Lhasa railway and then announced that a railroad would be pushed through Aksai Chin connecting Khotan in Sinkiang with Taklakot, a strategic center on the Tibet-Nepal

border, where it would meet the extensive road system the Chinese have constructed directly to the north of the Himalayas.

Most of this road system is depicted only tentatively on the map since its exact alignment is not known. From Chinese, Nepali, and Indian sources, however, it is known that a road, starting at Taklakot, parallels the entire Tibet-Nepal border



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At one point in the dispute, Peking offered to renounce all Chinese claims to the NEFA in return for India's concession of Aksai Chin

(approximately 20 miles to the north according to a Nepali boundary marker team that used this road in the spring of 1962), and then runs into the Chumbi Valley. From here roads run to the east, to the areas bordering on Bhutan and the NEFA.

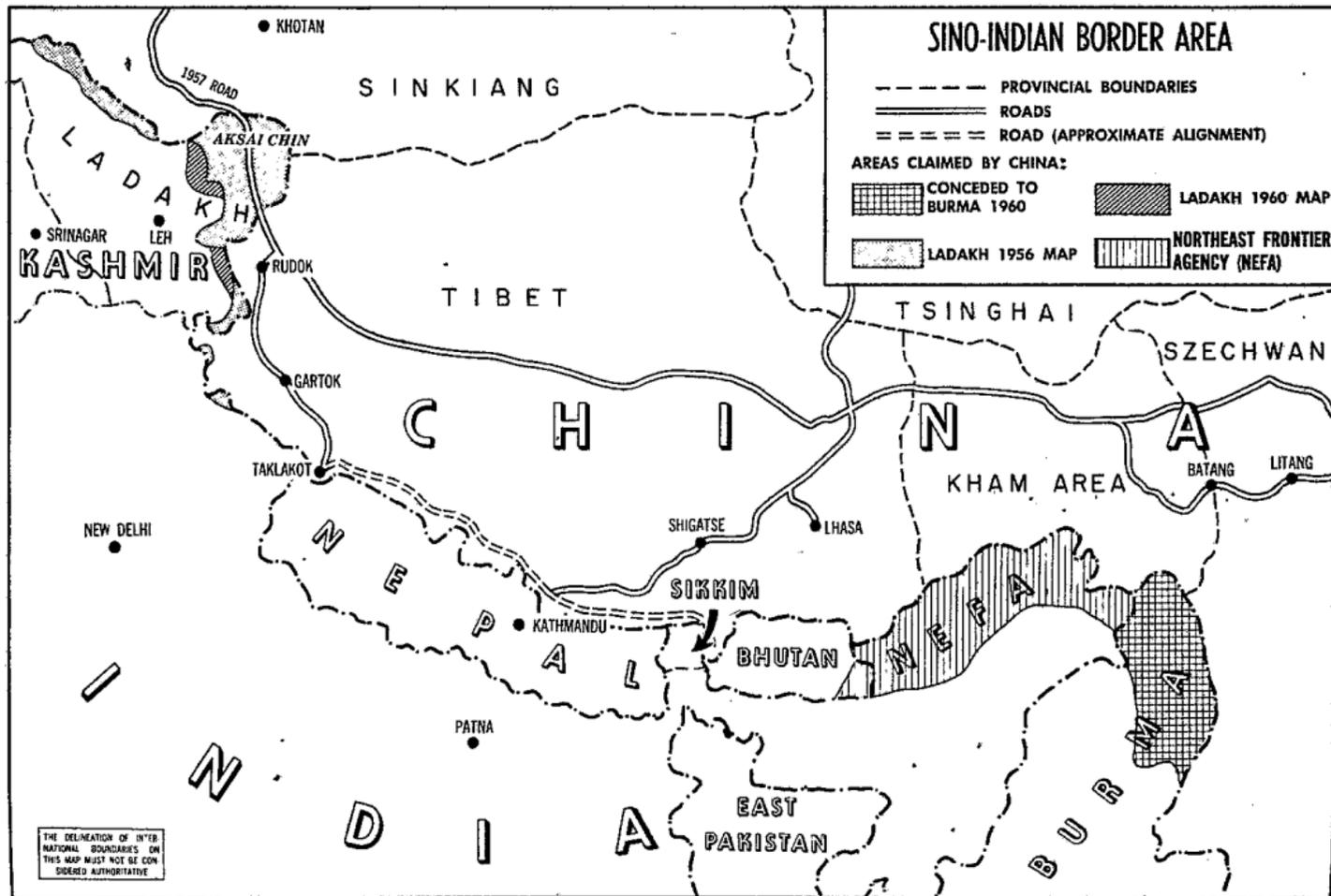
Thus the primary objective of Chinese policy in the frontier area since 1959 has been to force India to surrender the disputed areas of north-eastern Ladakh. Various tactics have

been employed to attain this end. At one point Chou En-lai offered to renounce all Chinese claims to the NEFA in return for India's concession of Aksai Chin, but these terms were unacceptable to New Delhi because it would have involved exchanging an area in active dispute for territory in which, until September 1962, Indian control was unchallenged. Too, the patently expedient character of Chinese territorial claims had fully impressed itself on Indian officials by 1960 and a surrender on one section of the border was viewed as an invitation for further Chinese claims.

To strengthen its demand for a "negotiated" settlement of the border dispute, Peking also exerted direct pressure upon the Indian position in Ladakh. Military posts were established in Aksai Chin and feeder roads constructed, with the objective of bringing all the approximately 15,000 square miles of disputed territory under Chinese control.

Peking's deliberate refusal to specify the precise extent of its territorial claims in the Ladakh area constituted a more subtle form of psychological pressure. In 1956, when Peking decided to push a road through Aksai Chin, a new map had been issued depicting this area as part of China. In September 1959 Chou En-lai wrote Nehru that the 1956 map correctly showed the boundary alignment as conceived by China.

Less than a year later the Chinese casually presented India with a new map incorporating an additional 2,000 square miles of Ladakh as Chinese territory. When questioned on the divergence between the two maps, Chen Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister, made the demonstrably absurd assertion that the boundaries as marked on



both maps were equally valid.³ There is only one interpretation that could make this statement meaningful: this was an implied threat to produce another map claiming additional Indian territory if New Delhi continued in its stubborn refusal to cede Aksai Chin.

Indian Response

The Indian response to Red China's overtures and pressure tactics since 1959 has taken a number of forms. Proposals for negotiations were consistently rejected until and unless China withdrew from all territory in dispute.

India commenced a program aimed at reducing the tremendous tactical advantages the Chinese enjoyed in the immediate vicinity of the border. A ban was imposed on the export of "strategic" goods to Tibet, thus complicating the problems the Chinese faced in supplying a large military establishment in Tibet. High priorities were assigned to the development of communications in the frontier areas, with Ladakh receiving special emphasis. By 1962 an all-weather road had been completed to Leh, the district headquarters in Ladakh, and support roads to various sections of the border were scheduled for completion by 1964. Substantial progress was also made in the development of air transport.

As the development of communications permitted, Indian military posts were established in the vicinity of the border. In the NEFA, posts had been placed earlier at every major access point along the McMahon Line, at that time respected, although not

recognized, by the Chinese as the *de facto* boundary.

In Ladakh the tactics had to be different since the new posts were set up on territory in active dispute with the Chinese. Here, the Indian objectives were to block all paths for further Chinese penetration; to regain control over territory previously seized by the Chinese; and, when feasible, to cut the supply lines to Chinese posts. In addition, several barrack and supply posts were established in the immediate vicinity of the border in 1961, thus permitting the transformation of advance Indian posts into all-year stations. Previously, both the Chinese and Indians had withdrawn border posts with the onset of winter, a situation that greatly favored the Chinese since for climatic and topographical reasons they could remain longer in the fall and return earlier in the spring.

The Indian military program achieved limited but significant success, as was attested by the increasingly strident Chinese complaints about "Indian imperialism." Of the 12,000 square miles of Ladakh previously lost to the Chinese, 2,500 square miles had been regained by August 1962. Obviously, these developments constituted a serious threat to the vital Chinese communication lines across Aksai Chin. A critical point was reached in July 1962 when a large Chinese detachment through intimidation tactics attempted to force the withdrawal of a newly established Indian post in the Galwan River Valley. The heavily outnumbered Indian troops stood firm and refused to withdraw. Finally, after more than a week of tense maneuvering, the Chinese withdrew without having attained their objective.

³New China News Agency, Peking, 6 December 1961, *Survey of the China Mainland Press*, 12 December 1961, Number 2637, p. 27.

Direct Military Action

To Peking, this incident must have dispelled any illusions that its goals could be achieved through the mere threat of the use of force. Moreover, the comparative position of the two adversaries on the Ladakh border had changed considerably from the 1959 situation when the Chinese held an unchallenged superiority. With the completion of roads presently under construction, the Indian position would be further improved. Possibly 1962 was the last year in which the Chinese could take direct military action in this area with the advantages still heavily weighted in their favor.

Peking's decision to launch an armed attack on the eastern and western extremities of the Sino-Indian frontier in October 1962 was doubtless motivated by a number of considerations, some of them global in perspective and, hence, subject to diverse interpretations.

Red China's immediate goal in the border area, however, is more readily apparent. The failure to achieve its primary objective in Ladakh through "peaceful" means placed Peking in a dilemma. Chinese control over Aksai Chin had not been consolidated, and new, more drastic measures were considered necessary. The time of year and locale chosen would seem to indicate that, in the first stage of operations at least, the Chinese viewed the attack as a limited war with limited objectives. All areas of Ladakh shown as Chinese on the 1960 map were to be seized as well as a large section of the NEFA, the latter possibly for use as a bargaining lever in future negotiations with the Indians.

Perhaps other considerations, only indirectly related to the Sino-Indian dispute, were uppermost in Chinese

Communist calculations. The twists and turns characteristic of Sino-Soviet relations in recent years reached a critical stage in 1962, threatening to culminate in a complete and open split. The reasons for the deterioration in the relations between these two powers are exceedingly complex, involving perhaps a basic divergence in their respective views of the world.

But one factor that has long infuriated Peking was Moscow's implicit "pro-India" policy with regard to the India-China border dispute, most evident in the USSR's economic aid program. At the very time (1959-60) that economic assistance to China was being reduced drastically, the Soviets were substantially increasing aid to India—and much of it in heavy industries. Moreover, under an indifferently disguised military assistance program, aid was extended, aimed specifically at strengthening India's defenses in the frontier area. New Delhi was sold Soviet transport planes and helicopters, suitable for use in the Himalayan regions, at substantially reduced prices.

To add insult to injury, Soviet instructors helped train Indian pilots in the use of these aircraft in the Ladakh area, and the world witnessed the strange spectacle of Communist Soviet pilots helping supply Indian troops facing Communist Chinese forces.

USSR's Position Difficult

China's attack on India obviously placed Moscow in a difficult position, particularly since it coincided, intentionally or not, with the Cuban crisis. The definitive account of the inter-relationship between these and other events will not be written for several years. Nevertheless, there is sufficient grounds for speculating that Peking's

decision to seek a military solution of the dispute with India also constituted one facet of a major offensive against Khrushchev's leadership, both within the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc. The least that could be expected was that the Soviet Government would be forced to abandon or modify its tacitly pro-Indian policy.

Indeed, the elaborate pretense with which Peking sought to give the impression that China was acting defensively in launching the attack on India may be explained in part by the existence of a mutual defense pact with the Soviet Union. If Moscow could be induced or maneuvered into accepting the Chinese version of the origin of the conflict, all Soviet aid to India would have to cease, and military and economic aid be extended to China. The USSR, however, has been careful to avoid this pitfall in her official statements on the conflict.

Yet a flexible Soviet policy will become increasingly more impractical if Sino-Indian hostilities should be renewed on a large scale—unless, of course, Moscow is prepared to risk an open rupture with China. The attitude of other Communist Parties, and particularly Asian parties, may well be crucial in determining ultimate policy on this question, and this would seem to preclude anything more than a policy of nonalignment leaning toward China for the Soviet Union.

Implications

The implications of the conflict for Sino-Indian relations are, naturally, even more comprehensive. China's "limited war" policy failed to achieve the results confidently expected because India rejected all cease-fire proposals that did not provide for the withdrawal of Chinese forces to positions held prior to 8 September, the

day Chinese troops first crossed the McMahon Line. Having failed to "induce" New Delhi to negotiate a surrender, Peking decided to exert further military pressure. A second offensive was launched in the NEFA area in mid-November, which succeeded in overwhelming the badly outnumbered Indian forces.

Having impressively flexed its muscles, the Chinese then unilaterally imposed a cease-fire along both the NEFA and Ladakh fronts, at the same time offering India humiliating terms that amounted to a virtual surrender of some of India's most basic strategic and political interests. Peking announced that Chinese troops would withdraw 20 kilometers to the north or east of the line of "actual control" as of 7 November 1959 and the Indians were warned to withdraw all forces an equal distance to the south or west of this line. Negotiations would then be undertaken to settle the boundary dispute on the basis of the existing situation.

Nothing less than an irreparable military defeat could have made these terms acceptable to New Delhi. In addition to the loss of territory involved, India would have to abandon most of her major lines of defense in both the Ladakh and NEFA areas. In these circumstances China could renew her aggression at any time under conditions even more advantageous than those prevailing at present.

To meet this threat, India would have to divert her energies and resources to military preparations while China, as the potential aggressor, would not be under similar obligations. No less critical is the effect the acceptance of these terms would have on the Himalayan border states and southeast Asia where Indian prestige

and influence has already suffered a serious blow. China could not be permitted to enjoy the fruits of aggression quite so easily. Certainly, the temper of Indian public opinion was strongly and unanimously opposed to any surrender to Peking's dictates.

Alternative Policies

Despite the successes achieved to date, Peking must decide between a number of alternative policies, none of which are particularly attractive. Presumably, a return to the pre-October situation in the Ladakh and NEFA areas is unacceptable to China, and some form of action will be required to retain the initiative in Chinese hands. Perhaps, further incursions, limited in scope and area, may be undertaken in order to impress upon New Delhi that the price demanded for a settlement will become progressively higher the longer India refuses to negotiate on the basis of the existing situation. Or the Chinese may decide to shift the main area of conflict to new ground, possibly the border states of Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan where India faces even greater problems in countering Chinese moves than on her own territory.

Inherent in both these policies is the greatly enhanced danger of all-out war, which China may still prefer to avoid. In an expanded war situation the short-range advantages the Chinese hold throughout most of the border area because of the comparative ease of communications within Tibet would diminish somewhat in importance. Virtually every item of supply, including gasoline, must be brought into Tibet from China over lengthy and unreliable lines of communication. Once the Himalayan range is crossed, China's logistics problems become even more formidable.

Moreover, India's sources of external military aid are greater, particularly if the USSR maintains her present attitude toward the dispute. Any superiority in weapons the Chinese may have had in the initial period of the conflict would thus prove temporary. Indeed, the timing of the attack on India, so advantageous from the viewpoint of the limited objectives Peking apparently had in view, may eventually prove to have been a serious miscalculation if the conflict is not soon brought to a successful conclusion.

Repercussions

The prospect of an extended period of hostilities with China cannot help but have fundamental repercussions on India's relations with other neighboring states. A settlement of the long-standing dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir, for instance, is absolutely essential to the maximization of Indian defensive efforts on the northern frontier. Both Pakistan and India have legitimate security interests in Kashmir which would be surrendered only with the greatest reluctance. With Communist China's intentions now proved aggressively hostile, Ladakh is vital to the security of the entire Sino-Indian frontier, while the Gilgit area of Kashmir (presently under Pakistani control) is equally important to Pakistan's defense posture. Unfortunately, this fact vastly complicates the solution of the Kashmir dispute, since the best lines of communication into Ladakh and Gilgit run through Kashmir Valley, the real bone of contention between these two powers. It may be unrealistic, therefore, to expect anything more than a moratorium on the Indo-Pakistani dispute until the Chinese threat has diminished.

The Chinese Communist aggression also holds incalculable dangers for the Himalayan border states of Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan, possibly the next objectives of Chinese expansionist designs. Sikkim is in the most exposed position, for the easiest access route to the heart of the Gangetic

trate on Nepal and Bhutan (or just Bhutan) which at present are not protected by the Indian armed forces and in which communications are less well developed.

The immediate effect of the Chinese Communist aggression was to tie the border states more closely with India.



United Nations

The settlement of the India-Pakistan dispute on Kashmir is essential for maximum Indian defense efforts on the northern frontier. Here, a United Nations observer transmits an Indian complaint to a Pakistani officer on the cease-fire line.

Plain in India lies through this tiny Indian protectorate.

On the other hand, Indian troops are entrenched throughout Sikkim and communications are comparatively well developed. Unless the Chinese were intent upon pressing an attack through Sikkim to the borders of east Pakistan, cutting off Assam and the NEFA from the rest of India in the process, they might prefer to concen-

Fear of China has been real, if officially unacknowledged, in the border states. Heretofore, the fear has been mitigated by the belief that China would not directly challenge India's hegemony south of the Himalayas. This assumption completely shattered, the limited degree of flexibility granted the border states by their previous status as "buffers" between India and China has been largely dissipated.

Sikkim and Bhutan are probably more directly inhibited by recent developments than Nepal, whose attitude toward the current power struggle in the Himalayas will be determined to a considerable extent by the success and firmness with which India eventually handles Chinese aggression. For the moment the common danger appears to have overridden the mutual recriminations and suspicions that had periodically disturbed relations between Nepal and India in recent years. But the temptation to seek security through guarantees from China, no matter how little faith may be reposed in Peking's word, could prove tempting to Nepal if China is permitted an unchallenged superiority through the Himalayan area. The repercussions on India's security would be disastrous.

Fundamental Changes

To meet the multifarious threat posed by China's aggressive policies, fundamental changes in the orientation of Indian foreign policy are inevitable. Initially, these may not take the form of an outright repudiation of basic principles, such as nonalignment, but may be most perceptible in the way in which these principles are interpreted and implemented. In the first place, India would consider it advantageous to encourage the Soviet Union and the European Communist Parties to maintain at least a neutral position in the Sino-Indian dispute. Soviet economic and military assistance to India, although desirable for its political impact, is not the crucial factor in New Delhi's calculations. Far more important, the Soviet Union must not be placed in a position where she might feel constrained to extend substantial military assistance to the Peking regime.

Furthermore, the abandonment of

nonalignment could easily tend to alienate India from important sections of the Afro-Asian bloc. Peking's intensive efforts to expand its influence, at India's expense, throughout the nonaligned camp make the situation even more critical. New Delhi has ample reasons for feeling gravely disappointed with the hesitant and equivocal position assumed by some of the nonaligned powers in their reaction to Chinese aggression. Nevertheless, India's ties with these states must be strengthened, and this could not be achieved by an outright renunciation of nonalignment.

Indeed, one of the more intriguing aspects of the current situation concerns the policy India may now decide to pursue toward southeast Asia, for here also previous Indian policy is outdated. If circumstances should appear favorable, New Delhi may even be prepared to throw its weight behind efforts to establish some new form of relationship among south and southeast Asian countries, aimed primarily at forestalling China's bid for the domination of all of Asia.

Could India hope to have any success in welding south and southeast Asia into a viable alliance? Realistically speaking, probably not, at least until the impression of China's overwhelming strength has been effectively countered. Nevertheless, China's resort to overt aggression has greatly increased already existent apprehensions in all southeast Asian countries and has finally dispelled any illusions that the Peking regime is a sincere adherent of "peaceful coexistence."

Prior to October 1962 the mere suggestion of the necessity for a unified Asian response to the threat posed by Chinese expansionism would have been summarily dismissed by many Asians

as "cold war" politics. While the obstacles confronting such a proposal are still formidable, at least now it would be assured of consideration by southeast Asian Governments desperately seeking alternative forms of security against the ambitions of their powerful northern neighbor.

What are the implications of the Sino-Indian conflict for the West? Perhaps the most significant consequence in the long run will be found in that largely intangible emotional factor upon which relations between countries are based. The generous and unquestioned response from Mr. Kennedy and Mr. MacMillan to India's urgent pleas for military assistance has had a dramatic impact on

Indian public opinion, unmatched by any event in postindependent India's history. In the West there is a fuller appreciation of India's vital importance to the defense of the rest of Asia against Communist expansion, as well as a tendency to view India's complex relations with neighboring states in a new, broader perspective.

There will, of course, continue to be issues upon which India and the West will disagree. But these will seem less substantial than in the past, and the spheres in which there is a recognized community of interests, already substantial, have now been considerably enlarged. Needless to say, the potential implications for the future of Asia are tremendous.

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