THE EXPERIENCE OF DEFEAT

A divided India augurs ill not only for the Indian people but also for all Asia and world peace.

AUNG SAN,Burmese nationalist leader, June 1947

I

ON THE LAST DAY of March 1959 the Dalai Lama crossed the McMahon Line into the territory of the Republic of India. For years the Tibetan god-king had sat uncomfortably on his throne in Lhasa's Potala Palace, while the Chinese tightened their hold on his country. One contemporary source claimed that there were half a million Chinese troops in Tibet. In their wake had come perhaps ten times as many Han settlers.[1]

This was certainly an over-estimate. Even so, there were far too many Chinese for the Tibetans' liking. In 1958 the Khampas of eastern Tibet launched an armed uprising against the occupiers. After some initial successes, the revolt was putdown by the Chinese. The reprisals which followed threatened to touch the Dalai Lama himself. When New Delhi agreed to grant him political asylum, he fled Lhasa under cover of darkness and with a small group of carefully chosen escorts.

The Dalai Lama spent his first night on Indian soil at the Buddhist monastery at Tawang. Then he made his way down to the plains, to the Assam town of Tezpur, where Indian officials 'debriefed' him. Three weeks later he was taken to New Delhi to meet the prime minister himself.

The conversation began with the Dalai Lama telling Nehru about the Khampa rebellion. The fighting had been bitter, and heavy losses had been incurred by both sides. Across Tibet there was deep resentment against the anti-religious propaganda of the communists. When the Chinese invited the Dalai Lama to Peking to attend a 'cultural function', his advisers warned that this was a plot to capture and confine him. When he refused to go the Chinese issued threats. So he decided to leave for India.

The Dalai Lama told Nehru that any reforms in Tibet should be undertaken by the Tibetans in keeping with their religion and traditions. The Chinese way would leave them ‘a people without their souls’. His own hope now was to bring about Tibet’s independence with Indian help. His old tutor Heinrich Harrer (author of the classic *Seven Years in Tibet*) was also encouraging him to canvass support in the West.

In reply, Nehru told his visitor that India could not start a war with China for Tibet’s freedom. Indeed, ‘the whole world cannot bring freedom to Tibet unless the whole fabric of the Chinese state is destroyed’. Were he to go to the West, Nehru told the Dalai Lama, he would ‘look like a piece of merchandise’. The Americans or Europeans had no real sympathy with his people or his cause: ‘all they want is to exploit Tibet in their cold war with the Soviet Union’.

An ‘independence or nothing’ attitude, Nehru felt, would get the Tibetans nowhere. They must keep the door open for a negotiated settlement with the Chinese. India could help here, but only after it had mended its own broken fences with Peking. As he put it, ‘at the moment our relations with China are bad. We have to recover the lost ground. By threats to China or condemnation of China we do not recover such ground.’[2]

II

By the time of the Dalai Lama’s flight, Indian relations with China were very bad indeed. In the summer of 1957 the Ladakhi *lama* and parliamentarian Kushak Bakula had visited Tibet and noticed evidence of intensive road building towards Sinkiang. Then, in July 1958, an official magazine named *China* Pictorial, published in Peking, printed a map that showed large parts of NEFA and Ladakh as Chinese territory. On 21 August a counsellor in the Chinese embassy was called to the Indian Foreign Office, where a deputy secretary handed over a note of protest about the map. The correspondence became more concerned as the correspondents grew more elevated, and the stakes grew higher too.[3] On 18 October the foreign secretary wrote to the Chinese ambassador protesting about the section of the Sinkiang-Tibet highway that passed ‘across the eastern part of the Ladakh region of the Jammu and Kashmir State, which is part of India’.[4] And by the end of 1958 the prime ministers of the two nations, Jawaharlal Nehru and Chou En-lai, were writing to each

other in an exchange that was to carry on for the next few years, this marked at first by pain and bewilderment, but in the end by anger and resentment.

The letters between Nehru and Chou remain a key source for understanding the border dispute. They may have been drafted by officials, but we can be sure that they were carefully checked by their signatories for tone as well as content. These were two politicians deeply interested in history. Both were imbued with – one might say carried by – a sense of mission, by the desire to take their long-subjected countries to a place of the first rank in the modern world.

In the hierarchy of contemporary Chinese nationalism, Chou En-lai occupied second place to Mao. In most matters he, like some 800 million others, deferred to the will, not to say whim, of the Great Helmsman. But when it came to foreign policy he was given a free hand. Among the top Chinese leadership, only he had lived and studied in the West. Coming of age, intellectually speaking, in Paris, Chou spoke French fluently and also had some English. He affected a cosmopolitan manner; when asked what had been the impact of the French Revolution, he answered, 'It is too early to tell.'

As Stuart Schram writes, by the time of the Bandung Conference of 1955 Chou En-lai had made his mark as 'an urbane and skilful diplomat', appearing 'side by side with Nehru as one of the two principal representatives of the non-European world, divided by ideology, but united by the fact that they were Asian'.[5]

In 1955 Chou and Nehru might have been divided only by political ideology. By 1958 they were divided also by national interest. In December of that year the Indian prime minister wrote the first of a long series of letters to Chou. Nehru began by expressing admiration for China's economic progress before turning, gingerly and gently, to the question of the border. When they met in 1956, recalled Nehru, the Chinese leader had indicated that he thought the McMahon Line was a legacy of British imperialism, but 'because of the friendly relations' between China and India, his government would, after consulting with the local Tibetan authorities, give it recognition. Chou had then confirmed Nehru's impression that 'there was no major boundary dispute between China and India' . But now came this map in *China Pictorial*, whose borderline 'went right across Indian territory'.

A month later Chou En-lai replied, stating that 'historically no treaty or agreement on the Sino-Indian boundary has ever been concluded'. The McMahon Line was 'a product of the British policy of aggression against the Tibet Region of China'. Juridically speaking, 'it cannot be considered legal'. The Indians had protested about a road in an area which, in Chou's opinion,

'has always been under Chinese jurisdiction. 'All this shows that [contrary to Nehru's claim] border disputes do exist between China and India'. That was the context in which the *China Pictorial* map should be viewed. Chou suggested that both sides temporarily maintain the status quo, pending a final 'friendly settlement' on the border question.

On 22 March 1959 Nehru wrote back. He was 'somewhat surprised' to hear that the frontier between India and the 'Tibet Region of China' was not accepted by Peking, for it had the sanction of several specific agreements. These included those forged between Kashmir and Lhasa in 1842 and, in the east, the McMahon Line agreed upon in 1913-14. Besides, there were clear natural features, watersheds and mountain tops, that defined the borders between the two countries. There might be gaps here and there, but, said Nehru, for 'much the larger part of our boundary with China, there is sufficient authority based on geography, tradition as well as treaties for the boundary as shown in our published maps'. The letter ended with the hope that 'an early understanding in this matter will be reached'.

Before Chou En-lai could reply, the Dalai Lama fled to India. This greatly complicated matters, as the Chinese were deeply resentful of the popular welcome given him by large sections of the Indian public. For this they blamed New Delhi. Had not the granting of an audience by Nehru himself given an unfortunate legitimacy to the Tibetan leader? Peking's position was that the Tibetan revolt, far from being a popular uprising, was the product of 'fugitive upper-class reactionaries' aided by the 'American imperialists' and the 'Chiang Kai-shek clique'. Sections of the Chinese media went so far as to claim that the Indian town of Kalimpong was the 'commanding centre of the revolt', that the Delhi government was being influenced by 'imperialist propaganda and intrigues' and that 'Sino-Indian friendship was being destroyed from the Indian side'.[6]

There was some propaganda activity by Tibetan refugees in Kalimpong, the import of which was, however, greatly exaggerated by the Chinese. In fact, much louder protests had emanated from Indian sources, in particular the politician turned social worker Jayaprakash Narayan. 'JP' was a fervent advocate for Tibetan independence, a cause also supported by other, less disinterested elements in Indian politics, such as the Jana Sangh, which wanted New Delhi openly to ally with the United States in the Cold War and seek its assistance in 'liberating' Tibet.[7] But, as the foreign secretary assured the Chinese ambassador a month after the Dalai Lama's flight into exile, 'India has had and has no desire to interfere in internal happenings in Tibet'. The exiled leader 'will be accorded respectful treatment in India, but he is not expec-

ted to carry out any political activities from this country'. This was the government's position, from which some Indians would naturally dissent. For, as the foreign secretary pointed out, 'there is by law and Constitution complete freedom of expression of opinion in Parliament and the press and elsewhere in India. Opinions are often expressed in severe criticism of the Government of India's policies.'

This was not a nuance Peking could easily understand. For, at least in public, there could not be any criticism of the government's policies within China. The difference between these two political systems – call them 'totalitarianism' and 'democracy' – was most strikingly reflected in an exchange about an incident that took place in Bombay on 20 April. According to the Chinese version – communicated to New Delhi by Peking in a letter dated 27 April – a group of protesters raised slogans and made speeches which

> branded China's putting down of the rebellion in her own territory, the Tibetan Region, as [an] imperialist action and made all sorts of slanders. What is more serious is that they pasted up a portrait of Mao Tse-tung, Chairman of the People's Republic of China, on the wall of the Chinese Consulate-General and carried out wanton insult by throwing tomatoes and rotten eggs at it. While these ruffians were insulting the portrait, the Indian policemen stood by without interfering with them, and pulled off the encircling spectators for the correspondents to take photographs . . .

This incident in Bombay constituted, in Peking's view, 'a huge insult to the head of state of the People's Republic of China and the respected and beloved leader of the Chinese people'. It was an insult which 'the masses of the six hundred and fifty million Chinese people absolutely cannot tolerate'. If the matter was 'not reasonably settled', said the complaint, in case 'the reply from the Indian Government is not satisfactory', the 'Chinese side will never come to a stop without a satisfactory settlement of the matter, that is to say, never stop even for one hundred years'.

In reply, the Indian government 'deeply regret[ted] that discourtesy was shown to a picture of Chairman Mao Tse-tung, the respected head of a state with which India has ties of friendship'. But they denied that the policemen on duty had in anyway aided the protesters; to the contrary, they 'stood in front of the [Mao] picture to save it from further desecration'. The behaviour of the protesters was 'deplorable', admitted New Delhi, but

the Chinese Government are no doubt aware that under the law in India processions cannot be banned so long as they are peaceful . . . Not unoften they are held even near the Parliament House and the processionists indulge in all manner of slogans against high personages in India. Incidents have occurred in the past when portraits of Mahatma Gandhi and the Prime Minister were taken out by irresponsible persons and treated in an insulting manner. Under the law and Constitution of India a great deal of latitude is allowed to the people so long as they do not indulge in actual violence.

III

In the first week of September 1959 the government of India released a White Paper containing five years of correspondence with its Chinese counterpart. The exchanges ranged from those concerning trifling disputes, occasioned by the straying by armed patrols into territory claimed by the other side, to larger questions about the status of the border in the west and the east and disagreements about the meaning of the rebellion in Tibet.

For some time now opposition MPs, led by the effervescent young Jana Sangh leader Atal Behari Vajpayee, had been demanding that the government place before Parliament its correspondence with the Chinese. The release of the White Paper was hastened by a series of border incidents in August. Chinese and Indian patrols had clashed at several places in NEFA. One Indian post, at Longju, came under sharp fire from the Chinese and was ultimately overwhelmed.

Unfortunately for the government, the appearance of the White Paper coincided with a bitter spat between the defence minister and his chief of army staff. The minister was Nehru's old friend V. K. Krishna Menon, placed in that post in 1957 as compensation for drawing him away from diplomatic duties. The appointment was at first welcomed within the army. Previous incumbents had been lacklustre; this one was anything but, and was close to the prime minister besides. But just as he seemed well settled in his new job, Menon got into a fight with his chief of staff, General K. S. Thimayya, a man just as forceful as he was.

The son of a coffee planter in Coorg, standing 6' 3" in his socks, Thimayya had an impressive personality and amore impressive military record. When a young officer in Allahabad, he had met an elderly gentleman in a

cinema who asked him, ‘How does it feel to be an Indian wearing a British army uniform?’ ‘Timmy’ answered with one word: ‘Hot’ . The old man was Motilal Nehru, father of Jawaharlal and a celebrated nationalist himself. Later, when they had become friends, Thimayya asked him whether he should resign his commission and join the nationalist movement. Motilal advised him to stay in uniform, saying that after freedom came India would need officers like him.[8]

Thimayya fought with distinction in the Second World War before serving with honour in the first troubled year of Indian freedom. He oversaw the movement of Partition refugees in the Punjab and was then sent to Kashmir, where his troops successfully cleared the Valley of raiders. Later, he headed a United Nations truce team in Korea, where he supervised the disposition of 22,000 communist prisoners of war. His leadership was widely praised on both sides of the ideological divide, by the Chinese as well as the Americans.

‘Timmy’ was the closest the pacifist Indians had ever come to having an authentic modern military hero.[9] However, he did not see eye to eye with his defence minister. Thimayya thought that his troops should be better prepared for a possible engagement with China, but Krishna Menon insisted that the real threat came from Pakistan, along whose borders the bulk of India’s troops were thus deployed. Thimayya was also concerned about the antiquity of the arms his men currently carried. These included the .303 Enfield rifle, which had first been used in the First World War. When the general suggested to the minister that India should manufacture the Belgian FN4 automatic rifle under licence, ‘Krishna Menon said angrily that he was not going to have NATO arms in the country’.[10]

In the last week of August 1959 Thimayya and Menon fell out over the latter's decision to appoint to the rank of lieutenant general an officer named B. M. Kaul, in supersession of twelve officers senior to him. Kaul had a flair for publicity – he liked to act in plays, for example. He had supervised the construction of a new housing colony, which impressed Menon as an example of how men in uniform could contribute to the public good. In addition, Kaul

was known to Jawaharlal Nehru, a fact he liked to advertise as often as he could.[11]

Kaul was not without his virtues. A close colleague described him as ‘a live-wire – quick-thinking, forceful, and venturesome’. However, he ‘could also be subjective, capricious and emotional’.[12] Thimayya was concerned that Kaul had little combat experience, for he had spent much of his career in the Army Service Corps, an experience which did not really qualify him for a key post at Army Headquarters. Kaul’s promotion, when added to the other insults from his minister, provoked General Thimayya into an offer of resignation. On 31 August 1959 he wrote to the prime minister conveying how ‘impossible it was for me and the other two Chiefs of Staff to carry out our responsibilities under the present Defence Minister’. He said the circumstances did not permit him to continue in hispost.[13]

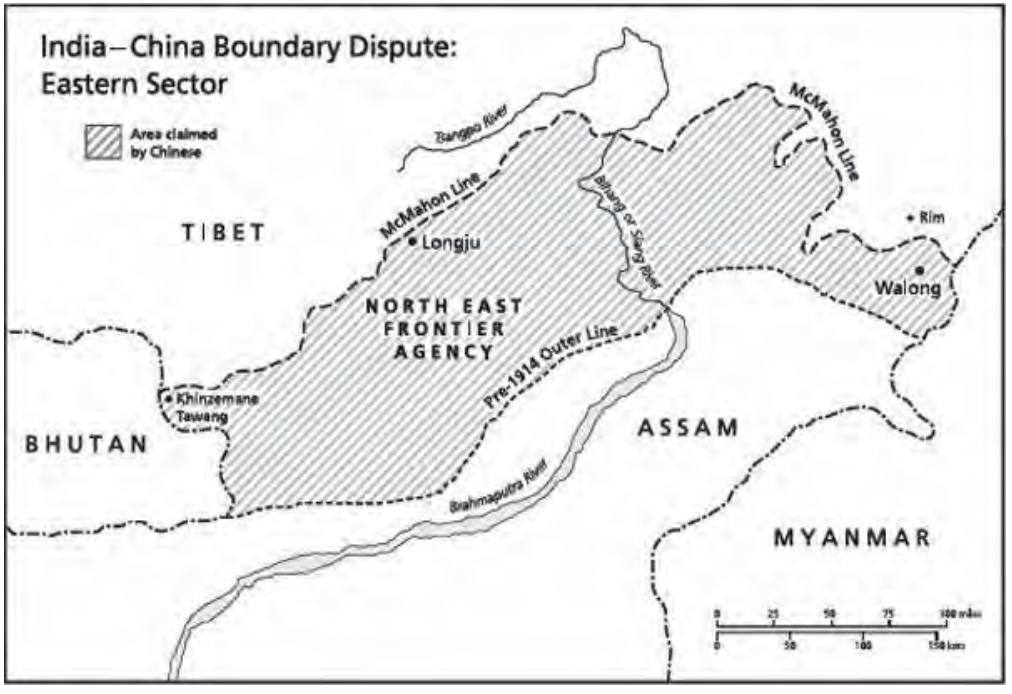
The news of the army chief’s resignation leaked into the public domain. The matter was discussed in Parliament, and in the press as well. Opposing Thimayya were communists such as E. M. S. Namboodiripad, who expressed the view that the general should be court-martialled, and crypto-communist organs such as the Bombay weekly Blitz, which claimed that Thimayya had unwittingly become a tool in the hands of the ‘American lobby’. Those who sided with him in his battle with the defence minister were *Blitz*’s great (and undeniably pro-American) rival, the weekly *Current*, as well as large sections of the non-ideological press. The normally pro-government *Hindustan Times* said that ‘Krishna Menon must go’, not Thimayya. It accused the minister of reducing the armed forces to a ‘state of near-demoralization’ by trying to create, at the highest level, a cell of officers who would be personally loyal to him.[14]

Some hoped that the outcry over Thimayya’s resignation would force Krishna Menon to also hand in his papers. Writing to the general, a leading lawyer called the minister an ‘evil genius in Indian politics’, adding, ‘If as a result of your action, Menon is compelled to retire, India will heave asigh of relief, and you will be earning the whole-hearted gratitude of the nation.’ Then Nehru called Thimayya into his office and over two long sessions persuaded him to withdraw his resignation. He assured him that he would be consulted in all important decisions regarding promotions. An old colleague of Timmy’s, a major general now retired to the hill town of Dehradun, wrote to his friend saying he should have stuck to his guns. For ‘the solution found is useless as now no one has been sacked or got rid of. The honeymoon cannot last long as you will soon find out.’[15]

The release of the White Paper on China, against the backdrop of the general's resignation drama, intensified the feelings against the defence minister. For even members of Parliament had not known of the extent of China's claim on Indian territory. That the Chinese had established posts and built a paved road through what, at least on their maps, was India was seen as an unconscionable lapse on the part of those charged with guarding the borders. Opposition politicians naturally went to town about China's 'cartographic war against India'. As a socialist MP put it, New Delhi might still believe in 'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai', but Peking followed Lenin's dictum that 'promises, like piecrusts, are meant to be broken'.[16]

Perhaps the prime minister should have been held accountable, but for the moment the fingers were pointed at his pet, Krishna Menon. If the country was 'woefully unprepared to meet Chinese aggression', said the *Current*, the fault must lie with the person 'at the helm of India's Defence Forces', namely, the defence minister. Even Congress Party members were now calling for Menon's head. The home minister, Govind Ballabh Pant, an old veteran of the freedom struggle and a longtime comrade of Nehru's, advised the prime minister to change Menon's portfolio – to keep him in the Cabinet, but allot him something other than Defence.[17] The respected journalist B. Shiva Rao, now an MP, wrote to Nehru that he was 'greatly disturbed by your insistence on keeping Krishna Menon in the Cabinet. We are facing a grave danger from a Communist Power. As you are aware, there are widespread apprehensions about his having pro-Communist sympathies'. It was 'not easy for me to write this letter', said Shiva Rao, and 'I know it will be a very difficult decision for you to make'. However, 'this is an emergency whose end no one can predict'.[18]

Nehru, however, stuck to his guns – and to Krishna Menon. Meanwhile the 'diplomatic' exchanges with China continued. On 8 September 1959 Chou En-lai finally replied to Nehru's letter of 22 March that had set out the Indian position. Chou expressed surprise that India wished the Chinese to 'give formal recognition to the situation created by the application of the British policy of aggression against China's Tibet region'. The 'Chinese Government absolutely does not recognise the so-called McMahon Line'. It insisted that 'the entire Sino-Indian boundary has not been delimited', and called for a fresh settlement, 'fair and reasonable to both sides'. The letter ended with a reference to the increasing tension caused by the Tibet rebellion, after which Indian troops started 'shielding armed Tibetan bandits' and began 'pressing forward steadily across the eastern section of the Sino-Indian boundary'.



Nehru replied almost at once, saying that the Indians ‘deeply resent this allegation’ that ‘the independent Government of India are seeking to reap a benefit’ from British imperialism. He pointed out that between 1914 and 1947 no Chinese government had objected to the McMahon Line. He rejected the charge that India was shielding armed Tibetans. And he expressed ‘great shock’ at the tone of Chou’s letter, reminding him that India was one of the

first countries to recognize the People's Republic and had consistently sought to be friend it.[19]

By this time, the India–China exchange comprised bullets as well as letters. In late August 1959 there was a clash of arms at Longju, along the McMahon Line in the eastern sector. Then in late October1959 an Indian patrol in the Kongka Pass area of Ladakh was attacked by a Chinese detachment. Nine Indian soldiers were killed, and as many captured. The Chinese maintained that the Indians had come deliberately into their territory; the Indians answered that they were merely patrolling what was their own side of the border.

These clashes prompted New Delhi to review its frontier policy. Remarkably, till this time responsibility for the border with China had rested not with the army but with the Intelligence Bureau. Such border posts as existed were manned by paramilitary detachments, the Assam Rifles in the east and the Central Reserve Police in the west. Regular military forces were massed along the border with Pakistan, which was considered India's main and perhaps sole military threat. But after the Longju and Kongka Pass incidents, the 4th Division was pulled out of Punjab and sent to NEFA. This was a considerable change; trained for tank warfare in the plains, the 4th would now have to operate in a very different terrain altogether.

Through this new 'forward policy', the Indian government aimed to inhabit no-man's-land by siting a series of small posts along or close to the border. The operation was much touted in Delhi, where maps sprung up in Defence Ministry offices with little blue pins marking where these posts had been located. Not to be found on these maps were the simultaneous attempts by the Chinese to fill in the blanks, working from their side of what was now a deeply contested border. [20]

IV

By 1959, at least, it was clear that the Indian and Chinese positions were irreconcilable. The Indians insisted that the border was, for the most part, recognized and assured by treaty and tradition; the Chinese argued that it had never really been delimited. The claims of both governments rested in part on the legacy of imperialism; British imperialism (for India), and Chinese imperialism (over Tibet) for China. In this sense, both claimed sovereignty over territory acquired by less-than-legitimate means.

In retrospect, it appears that the Indians underestimated the force of Chinese resentment against 'Western imperialism'. In the first half of the twentieth century, when their country was weak, it had been subject to all sorts of indignities by the European powers. The McMahon Line was one of them. Now that, under the communists, China was strong, it was determined to undo the injustices of the past. Visiting Peking in November 1959, the Indian lawyer Danial Latifi was told by his Chinese colleagues that 'the McMahon Line had no juridical basis'. Public opinion in China appeared 'to have worked itself up to a considerable pitch' on the border issue. Reporting his conversations to Jawaharlal Nehru, Latifi tellingly observed, 'As you know, probably too well, it is difficult *in any country* to make concessions once the public has been told it [the territory under dispute] forms part of the national homeland.'[21]

It is also easy in retrospect to see that, after the failure of the Tibetan revolt, the government of India should have done one or both of the following: (i) strengthened its defences along the Chinese border, importing arms from the West if need be; (ii) worked seriously for afresh settlement of the border with China. But the non-alignment of Nehru precluded the former and the force of public opinion precluded the latter. In October 1959 the *Times of India* complained that the prime minister had shown 'an over-scrupulous regard for Chinese susceptibilities and comparative indifference towards the anger and dismay with which the Indian people have reacted'.[22] Another newspaper observed that Nehru was 'standing alone against the rising tide of national resentment against China'.[23]

As Steven Hoffman has suggested, the policy of releasing White Papers limited Nehru's options. Had the border dispute remained private the prime minister could have used the quieter back-channels of diplomatic compromise. But with the matter out in the open, sparking much angry comment, he could only 'adopt those policies that could conceivably meet with approval from an emotionally aroused parliament and press'. The White Paper policy precluded the spirit of give and take, and instead fanned patriotic sentiment. The Kongka Pass incident, in particular, had led to furious calls for revenge from India's political class.[24]

After the border clashes of September and October 1959, Chou En-lai wrote suggesting that both sides withdraw twenty kilometres behind the McMahon Line in the east, and behind the line of actual control in the west. Nehru, in reply, dismissed the suggestion as merely a way of legitimizing Chinese encroachments in the western sector, of keeping 'your forcible possession intact'. The 'cause of the recent troubles', he insisted, 'is action taken

from your side of the border'. Chou now pointed out that, despite its belief that the McMahon Line was illegal, China had adhered to a policy of 'absolutely not allowing its armed personnel to cross this line [while] waiting for a friendly settlement of the boundary question'. Thus,

> the Chinese Government has not up to now made any demand in regard to the area south of the so-called McMahon line as a precondition or interim measure, and what I find difficult to understand is why the Indian Government should demand that the Chinese side withdraw one-sidedly from its western frontier area.

This was an intriguing suggestion which, stripped of its diplomatic code, read, 'You keep your (possibly fraudulently acquired) territory in the East, while we shall keep our (possibly fraudulently acquired) territory in the West.'[25]

Writing in the *Economic Weekly* in January 1960, the Sinologist Owen Lattimore astutely summed up the Indian dilemma. Since the boundary with China was self-evidently a legacy of British imperialism, the 'cession of a large part of the disputed territory . .. would not involve Indian national pride had it not been for the way the Chinese have been trying to draw the frontier by force, without negotiation'. For 'what Mr Nehru might concede by reasonable negotiations between equals he would never concede by abject surrender'.[26]

In the same issue of the journal a contributor calling himself 'Pragmatist' urged a strong programme of defence preparedness. The Peking leadership, he wrote acidly, 'may not think any better of the armed forces of India than Stalin did of those of the Vatican'. The Chinese army was five times the strength of its Indian counterpart, and equipped with the latest Soviet arms. Indian strategic thinking, for so long preoccupied with Pakistan, must now consider seriously the Chinese threat, for the friendship between the two countries had 'definitely come to an end'. Now, the 'first priority in our defence planning' must be 'keeping Chinese armies on the northern side of the border'. India should train mountain warfare units, and equip them with light and mobile equipment. Waiting in support must be a force of helicopters and fighter-bombers. For 'the important thing' , said 'Pragmatist', is to 'build up during the next two or four years, a strong enough force which will be able to resist successfully any blitzkrieg across our Himalayan borders'.[27]

The political opposition, however, was not willing to wait that long. 'The nation's self-interests and honour', thundered the president of the Jana Sangh

in the last week of January 1960, ‘demand early and effective action to free the Indian soil from Chinese aggression’. The government in power had ‘kept the people and Parliament entirely ignorant in respect of the fact of aggression itself’, and now ‘it continues to look on helplessly even as the enemy goes on progressively consolidating its position in the occupied areas’.[28]

Suspicion of the Chinese, however, was by no means restricted to parties on the right. In February 1960 President Rajendra Prasad commented on the ‘resentment and anger’ among the students of his native Bihar. These young people, he reported, wanted India to vacate ‘the Chinese aggression’ from ‘every inch of our territory’. They ‘will not tolerate any wrong or weak step by the government’.[29]

With positions hardening, New Delhi invited Chou En-lai for a summit meeting on the border question. The meeting was scheduled for late April, but in the weeks leading up to it there were many attempts to queer the pitch. On 9 March the Dalai Lama appealed to the world ‘not to forget the fight of Tibet, a small but independent country occupied by force and by a fanatic and expansionist power’. Three days later a senior Jana Sangh leader urged the prime minister to ‘not compromise the sentiments of hundreds of millions of his countrymen , and ‘to take all necessary steps against further encroachment by the Chinese . Less expected was a statement of the Himalayan Study Group of the Congress Parliamentary Party, which urged the prime minister to take a ‘firm stand on the border issue’.[30]

In the first week of April the leaders of the non-communist opposition sent a note to the prime minister reminding him of the ‘popular feeling’ with regard to China. They asked for an assurance that in his talks with Chou En-lai ‘nothing will be done which may be construed as a surrender of any part of Indian territory’.[31] Hemmed in from all sides, the prime minister now sought support from the Gandhian sage Vinoba Bhave, then on a walking tour through the Punjab countryside. Nehru spent an hour closeted with Bhave in his village camp; although neither divulged the contents of their talks, these became pretty clear in later speeches by the sage. On 5 April Bhave addressed a meeting at Kurukshetra, the venue, back in mythical time, of the great war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. On this blood-soaked battlefield he offered a prayer for the success of the Nehru-Chou talks. ‘Distrust belonged to the dying political age,’ said the Gandhian. ‘The new age was building itself around trust and goodwill.’ The conversations with the Chinese visitor, hoped Bhave, would be free of anger, bitterness and suspicion.

It was not a message that went down well or widely. Five days before Chou En-lai was due, the Jana Sangh held a large demonstration outside the

prime minister's residence. Protesters held up placards reminding Nehru not to forget the martyrs of Ladakh and not to surrender Indian territory. The next day, the non-communist opposition held a mammoth public meeting in Delhi, where the prime minister was warned that if he struck a deal with the Chinese his 'only allies would be the Communists and crypto-Communists'. In this climate, the respected editor Frank Moraes thought the talks were doomed to failure. The gulf between the two countries was 'unbridgeable', he wrote, adding: 'If Mr Chou insists on maintaining all the old postures, all that Mr Nehrucan tell him politely is to go back to Peking and think again.'

Nehru, however, insisted that the Chinese prime minister 'would be accorded a courteous welcome befitting the best traditions of this country'. Chou was then on a visit to Burma; an Indian viscount went to pick him up and fly him to Delhi. When he came in 1956, he had been given a stirring public reception; this time – despite the Indian prime minister's hopes – he arrived 'amidst unprecedented security arrangements', travelling from the airport in a closed car. The Hindu Mahasabha organized a 'black flag' demonstration against Chou, but his visit was also opposed by the more mainstream parties. Two jokes doing the rounds expressed the mood in New Delhi. One held that 'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai' had become 'Hindi-Chini Bye Bye'; the other asked why Krishna Menon was not in the Indian delegation for the talks, and answered, 'Because he is in Mr Chou En-lai's party.'[32]

Chou En-lai spent a week in New Delhi, meeting Nehru every day, with and without aides. A photograph reproduced in the *Indian Express* after the second day of the talks suggested that they were not going well. It showed Chou raising a toast to Sino-Indian friendship, by clinking his glass with Mrs Indira Gandhi's. Mrs Gandhi was stylishly dressed, in asari, but was looking quizzically across to her father. On the other side of the table stood Nehru, capless, drinking deeply and glumly from a wine glass while avoiding Chou En-lai's gaze. The only Indian showing any interest at all was the vice-president, S. Radhakrishnan, seen reaching across to clink his glass with Chou's.

Chou En-lai and Nehru spent nearly twenty hours in conversation. The transcripts of their talks are still officially secret, but copies kept by a vigilant (or rule-breaking) official have been consulted by this writer. These highlight vividly the hurt and hostility that pervaded the discussion. Nehru began by recalling all that India had done for China, such as introducing its leaders to the Asia-Africa conference at Bandung and pushing its case in the United Nations. In the light of these good turns, the Chinese 'infringement' of India's frontiers 'came as a great shock'. Chou answered with a complaint of his own, which was that in view of the friendship, ancient and modern, between India

and China, ‘the activities of the Dalai Lama and his followers have far exceeded the limits of political asylum’.

For two days Nehru and Chou traded charges and counter-charges. If the Indian insisted that the Himalaya had long been considered his country’s natural as well as demographic frontier, then the Chinese dismissed the McMahon Line as a pernicious legacy of imperialism. Both prime ministers showed an excellent grasp of detail, each defending his case with impressive exactitude, each mentioning specific villages, valleys, hilltops, rivers, posts and treaties to make or advance his country’s claims. Finally, Chou suggested that they try to ‘seek a solution’ rather than ‘repeat arguments’. A suitable settlement, in his view, would be that ‘neither side should put forward claims to an area which is no longer under its administrative control’. Some hours later he became more explicit, when he said that ‘in the eastern sector, we acknowledge that what India considers its border has been reached by India’s actual administration. But, similarly, we think that India should accept that China’s administrative personnel has reached the line which it considers to be her border in the western sector’.

Again, suitably decoded, this meant – your case is stronger in the west, but our needs are greater there. And while our case is stronger in the east, perhaps more of your interests are at stake there. Please keep Tawang and its environs, Chou was saying, for all we want is Aksai Chin and the road linking Sinkiang and Tibet.

Chou advocated the retention and recognition of the status quo, but as Nehru pointed out in reply, that term was itself disputed. ‘The question is, what is status quo?’ said the Indian Prime Minister. For ‘the status quo of today is different from the status quo of one or two years ago. To maintain today’s status quo would be very unfair if it is different from a previous status quo. The solution suggested by Chou would justify what, in Nehru’s (and India’s) view, were gains made illegally and by stealth by China.[33]

Chou En-lai also met the home minister, G. B. Pant, and the vice-president, Dr S. Radhakrishnan, both of whom complained, more in sorrow than in anger, of China’s lack of appreciation for all India had done to gain its communist government legitimacy in the eyes of the world. Chou was more combatively challenged by the brilliant and opinionated finance minister, Morarji Desai. When the Chinese leader asked how the Indians could have allowed their soil to be used by Tibetan dissidents, Desai answered that ‘in our country everybody holds conventions; the Algerians do so and so do the Indians sometimes [against their Government]’. Then he cleverly (or perhaps mischievously) added: ‘The Chinese Prime Minister is aware that Lenin sought asylum

in the UK but nobody restricted his political activities. We in India do not encourage anyone to conspire against China but we cannot prevent people from expressing their opinions. Freedom of speech is the basis of our democracy.'[34]

Reporting on his talks with Chou En-lai to the Indian Parliament, Nehru drily noted that 'the significant sentence in the [joint] communiqué [issued by the two sides] is that in spite of all these efforts no solution was found'. An apt epitaph to Chou's visit was also provided by Frank Moraes: 'Like Charles II the Sino-Indian talks seem a long time dying'. They did indeed. For the failed summit was followed by talks between lesser officials, these held in Peking in June–July 1960, in New Delhi in August–October, and finally in the Burmese capital Rangoon in November–December. Each side put forward masses of notes, maps, documents and letters to buttress their arguments. A contemporary commentary on this mountain of evidence remarks that 'it is quite evident that as far as consistency is concerned – and the length of time the claims have been advanced – the advantage lies with the Government of India'. No official Chinese maps showed Aksai Chin as part of China before the 1920s, and a Sinkiang map of the 1930s showed the Kunlun rather than the Karakoram to have been the customary boundary – which had been the Indian claim all along. At least in the western sector (where the Chinese transgressions had taken place) India seemed to have the stronger case. 'The Indian Government was both thorough and careful in presenting its case', whereas the Chinese presentation was marked by a 'maze of internal inconsistencies, quotations out of context, and even blatant and easily discernible falsehoods'.[35]

Even if the Indians had the better of this argument overall, there remained a basic incompatibility of positions. Any evidence emanating from Western sources – even from unaffiliated travellers and itinerant Jesuit priests – was dismissed as tainted by 'imperialism'. The Chinese would, up to a point, present counter-evidence, but in the end they would back off, saying that the border had not been delimited between the two countries as sovereign nations, that India could not claim the (ill-gotten) legacy of British India and that communist China did not stand by any treaties negotiated by anyone presuming to represent Tibet or China before the year of the revolution, 1949.[36]

It is noteworthy that the Chinese wished to maintain their gains in the western sector, where their historical position was weak. In exchange, they were willing to forfeit their much stronger claims in the east. This was clearly because of their need to have speedy access to Tibet. In October 1960, after his own summit with Nehru had failed and the officials' meetings were going nowhere, Chou En-lai vented his frustrations in this regard to the American journalist Edgar Snow. He claimed that the boundary dispute 'came to the

fore' only after 'the Dalai Lama had run away and democratic reforms were started in Tibet'. He accused India of wanting to 'turn China's Tibet region into a "buffer zone"'. 'They don't want Tibet to become a Socialist Tibet, as had other places in China', he complained. And then he drew this somewhat far-fetched conclusion: 'The Indian side . . . is using the Sino-Indian boundary question as a card against progressive forces at home and as capital for obtaining "foreign aid".'[37]

V

The territorial map of India was being challenged from the outside by the Chinese. There was also pressure for the map to be redrawn from within, by various linguistic groups left dissatisfied by the recommendations of the States Reorganization Commission of 1956. The Maharashtrians continued to press the centre to give them the city of Bombay. Their case was artfully presented by the dynamic young chief minister, Y. B. Chavan, who argued that this was the way the Congress could makeup the losses of the 1957 election, when the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti had made a serious dent in its vote and seat shares. Eventually, on 1 May 1960, the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra came into being, with Bombay allotted to the latter.

The creation of Maharashtra quelled resentment in the west of India, while giving a boost to unfulfilled expectations in the north. For the one major language group that still didn't have a state of their own were the Punjabis. Their demand had been refused on the grounds that here language was dangerously allied with religion; that what was presented as 'Punjabi Suba' was in fact a 'Sikh Suba', a pretext for what could even become a separate nation of the Sikhs. Anyway, throughout 1960 and 1961 the evergreen Master Tara Singh launched a series of agitations for a Punjabi-speaking state. With him was another Sikh holy man, Sant Fateh Singh, a deputy who would later become a rival of the Master. Led by these two men, the Akali Dal volunteers began to court arrest in groups. Meanwhile, the Master and the Sant would go on periodic fasts, each announced as being 'unto death', each called off before making that supreme sacrifice.[38]

Against the Akalis, Nehru stood firm; the Congress chief minister of Punjab, Pratap Singh Kairon, firmer still. He came down hard on the Akali agitation, putting thousands of protesters in jail. Educated in America, Kairon was a man of drive and ambition, characteristics somewhat lacking in the oth-

er chief ministers of the day. Nehru thought this also translated into popular appeal. As he wrote to a friend, 'Sardar Pratap Kairon's strength in the Punjab is that he represents, and is largely trusted by, the rural people. Those who criticize him are usually city people, whether Sikh or Hindu. During the recent fast of Master Tara Singh, it is extraordinary how the rural areas were not affected by it. They were busy with the Panchayat elections and other activities.' [39]

Kairon was the uncrowned king of Punjab for the eight years he was in power. He had dash and vision; he started an agricultural university, pioneered the tube-well revolution and persuaded peasants to diversify into such remunerative areas as poultry farming. He drew out the Punjabi women, persuading them to study, work, and even – given their athleticism – participate in competitive sports. He mingled easily with the common folk; anyone could walk into his office at any time. On law and order, his dispensation of justice was rough and ready. Thus he instructed his police to fine rather than imprison a peasant protester, who didn't mind becoming a martyr in the off-season but 'can't bear losing his earnings'. But a townsman who broke the law must be jailed, 'for he can't stand separation from the sweet lubricants of family'.[40]

As it happened, these were lubricants that Kairon could not be easily separated from himself. His two sons ran amok during his chief ministership, building huge business empires with the help of the state machinery, flouting property laws and zoning clauses. The chief minister was accused of the 'gross abuse of office to promote the business interests of his sons who have minted crores of rupees in the last few years'. Civil servants were instructed to turn a blind eye to these transgressions. Tough questions were asked in Parliament. Several Congress leaders, among them Indira Gandhi, urged the prime minister to replace Kairon. But Nehru stood by his man, expressing admiration for his drive and his stalwart stand against Punjabi Suba. However, he did agree to constitute a Commission, headed by a Supreme Court judge, to enquire into the allegations againstKairon.[41]

As the historian A. G. Noorani has written, 'in very many ways Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon [of Punjab] and Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed [of Kashmir] were alike'. Both men 'were blunt in speech, direct in approach, impatient with bureaucratic delays and disdainful of the proprieties of public life. Each did a hatchet man's job.' And 'both enjoyed the patronage of Prime MinisterNehru'.[42]

There was bad publicity for the prime minister in one border state, the Punjab, owing to the Akali agitation and the malfeasance of the state administration. And there was worse publicity in another border area, the Naga hills,

owing to the dramatic appearance in London of the rebel leader A. N. Phizo. Sometime in 1956 Phizo had hopped across into Burma and then into East Pakistan, from where he continued to direct the Naga resistance movement. After three years of long-distance generalship he decided his case needed the backing of the Western world. Travelling under a forged El Salvadorean passport, he reached Switzerland, where he made contact with Reverend Michael Scott, a radical Anglican priest who had previously worked with the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. With Scott's help he reached the United Kingdom.[43]

In London Phizo called a series of press conferences where, flanked by Michael Scott, he charged the Indian army with genocide against the Naga people. Also with Scott's help, he printed a pamphlet which spoke of how 'our age-old freedom has been and is being systematically destroyed by the Indian Army . . . They have tried to subjugate our nation and to annihilate it. The army's campaign was dubbed 'a plan of racial extermination in the worst manner of the European fascists'. Indian troops, claimed Phizo, were 'shooting Christian pastors and church leaders, burning men and women alive, burning churches'. His pamphlet demanded an end to the 'slaughter', and the recognition by the government of India of 'the sovereign and independent state of Nagaland'. Phizo said that an independent Nagaland would 'wish to remain within the fold of the Christian nations, and the Commonwealth . . . [T]iny Nagaland is happy to be a follower of Jesus Christ, whom we have come to believe in as our Saviour'.[44]

Phizo was here simultaneously appealing to the British love of the underdog, to memories of the still recent war against fascism (with the Nagas placed in the role of the Jews, and the Indian government as the Nazis) and to the Christian sentiments of his audience. The rhetoric was somewhat artless, and yet surprisingly successful. His cause was taken up by David Astor, the liberal owner of the *Observer* newspaper who had played a stellar role in the fight against the Nazis. Phizo's charges were given wide play by the paper, and by several other journals too.[45]

Always sensitive to the opinions of the British press, the government of India answered with a propagandist tract of its own. This said that while the prime minister had assured the Nagas of 'maximum autonomy', under Phizo's leadership, 'the Naga movement began to assume a violent character'. The extent of violence and the suffering of civilians was not denied, but the blame for this was placed on the insurgents. The government's stand remained that 'they are prepared to concede the largest possible autonomy to the Nagas in their internal affairs in addition to all the privileges of Indian citizenship, such

as representation in Parliament, but they could not agree to an independent state for them'.

This was reasonably put, but the effect was spoilt by an appendix which cast Phizo as a villain motivated merely by frustration and failure:

> Phizo's mental attitude has been conditioned by a series of frustrations and setbacks. He failed in the Matriculation examination. His attempts to establish himself first in motor-parts business and then as an insurance man did not meet with success. He was attacked by paralysis, which disfigured his face and as a result he acquired a strong complex . . . He has been known to have been suffering from a strong feeling of guilt for having misled his co-tribesmen into a path of hostility and violence, resulting in many deaths and reducing many of them to a state of misery.[46]

However, between the government of India and the leader of the Naga National Council stood a number of 'moderate' Nagas. These had banded together in a Naga Peoples' Convention which, from 1957 onwards, had begun seeking a peaceful settlement to the problem. The Aos were prominent among these peacemakers, but there were representatives of other tribes too. On 30 July 1960 the Naga Peoples' Convention presented a memorandum to the prime minister demanding a separate state of Nagaland within the Indian Union. This would have its own governor, chief minister, council of ministers, and legislative assembly, and the Union Parliament would not have the power to interfere with Naga religion, social practices or customary law.[47]

The demand for a Naga state within India was resisted by the Assamese elite, loath to let go of any part of their province. But with the Naga question now successfully internationalized, Nehru thought it prudent to make the concession. In the first week of August 1960 he announced in Parliament that a state of Nagaland was to be carved out of Assam. The decision to create this, the smallest state of the Union, gave rise to a series of responses that were interesting, varied and yet utterly predictable. The right-wing Jana Sangh saw the creation of Nagaland as 'an act fraught with explosive possibilities'; it was a concession to terror, 'tantamount to putting a premium on violence and rebellion', a wanton encouragement to 'regionalism and parochialism' which would endanger 'the unity and integrity of the country' . Some other tribes in Assam, the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias, resolved to fight for a state of their own, to be called 'Eastern Frontier'.[48]

Also predictable was the response of Phizo's men. Some Naga intellectuals thought that the granting of statehood within India was 'not only all they can hope to get but all they need to protect their social and political identity'. But how was one to convince the ordinary villager of this? For, as one newspaper noted, the 'armed rebels can emerge from the jungle any night with arguments that the statehood party are Quislings, and with bullet or bayonet correct any who disagree.'[49]

VI

After a decade in which it had seemed confidently in control, Jawaharlal Nehru's government suddenly looked very shaky indeed. There was dissent in the south, in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and in the border zone, in Punjab and the Naga hills. Meanwhile a Ford Foundation report warned of the 'stark threat' of an 'ominous crisis' in the agricultural sector. Unless food production was tripled in the next decade, it claimed, there would be mass starvation and famine in India.[50]

More worrying, at least to Nehru, was the resurgence of communal conflict after a decade of comparative social peace. In June 1960 virulent anti-Bengali riots broke out in Assam. The victims were post-Partition refugees from East Bengal, who were accused of taking jobs from the Assamese and not speaking their language. Thousands of homes were destroyed and many Bengalis killed. Others fled across the border into refugee camps in West Bengal. The home minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, flew to Assam to forge an uneasy peace which endorsed Assamese as the official state language while permitting the use of Bengali in the district where the migrants were in a majority.[51]

Then, in January 1961, a religious riot broke out in the central Indian city of Jabalpur. A Hindu girl had committed suicide; it was alleged that she took her life because she had been assaulted by two Muslim men. The claim was given lurid publicity by a local Jana Sangh newspaper, whereupon Hindu students went on a rampage through the town, attacking Muslim homes and burning shops. In retaliation a Muslim group torched a Hindu neighbourhood. The rioting continued for days, spreading also to the countryside. It was the most serious such incident since Partition, its main sufferers being poor Muslims, mostly weavers and *bidi* (cigarette) workers.[52]

The troubles on the border with China and the intensification of social conflict within the country gave rise to fresh concerns about the future of democratic India. In 1960 an American scholar published an impressively learned book with a simple title – *India* – but a portentous subtitle: *The Most Dangerous Decades*. The chapter and section titles were also revealing – 'Will the Union Survive?' was one, 'Totalitarian Equilibrium?' another. The writer was disturbed by the divisions of caste, region, religion and language, and by the rise of Indian communism. There were, he felt, 'seemingly irresistible compulsions of totalitarian experiments of one sort or another in the nature of the Indian Union'.[53]

The following year, 1961, the writer Aldous Huxley visited India after a gap of thirty-five years. He was overwhelmed by what he found, namely, 'the prospect of overpopulation, underemployment, growing unrest'. 'India is almost infinitely depressing', he wrote to a friend, 'for there seems to be no solution to its problems in any way that any of us [in the West] regard as acceptable.' Writing to his brother Julian, Huxley expressed the view that 'when Nehru goes, the government will become a military dictatorship – as in so many of the newly independent states, for the army seems to be the only highly organized centre of power'.[54]

The verdict of the British intellectual was echoed by the workaday journalist. Visiting India soon after Huxley, a reporter for the London *Daily Mail* thought that 'until now Nehru alone has been the unifying, cohesive force behind India's Government and foreign policy'. But after he was gone, 'the powers of caste and religion, of Rightism and Leftism . . . could eventually split this country from top to bottom and plunge it back 100 years'.[55]

VII

During 1960 and 1961, as some Indians rioted and others protested, their government continued its correspondence with its Chinese counterpart. No longer were these statesmanlike, or even conducted by statesmen; rather they consisted of notes exchanged by anonymous functionaries accusing the other party of transgressions of one kind or another. A Chinese note listed fifteen violations of their air space by Indian aircraft; an Indian note listed various incidents of ill-treatment of Indian citizens in Tibet.[56]

These exchanges, published in successive White Papers by the government of India, led to a renewed call for Krishna Menon's head. Leading the

charge was J. B. Kripalani, the Socialist Party MP from Sitamarhi in Bihar. Scholar, teacher, *khadi* worker and rebel, Kripalani was an authentic hero of the Indian freedom struggle. His moral authority derived in part from the fact that he had come close to Gandhi while aiding him in the Champaran *satyagraha* of 1917, years before Nehru himself made the acquaintance of the Mahatma. Kripalani had also been president of the Congress and, of course, spent many years in jail for his cause.

On 11 April 1961 Kripalani delivered what was described at the time as 'perhaps the greatest speech that has been made on the floor of that House since Independence'. This was a blistering attack on the defence minister. Under Krishna Menon's stewardship, said Kripalani, 'we have lost 12,000 square miles of our territory without striking a single blow'. Army promotions, he claimed, were based not on merit but 'according to the whims and fancies of the defence minister or what will suit his political and ideological purposes'. Menon had 'created cliques [and] lowered the morale of our [armed] forces'. In a stinging indictment, Kripalani charged the minister with 'wasting the money of this poor and starving nation', with 'the neglect of the defence of the country', and with 'having lent his support to the totalitarian and dictatorial regimes against the will of the people for freedom'.

Kripalani ended his speech with an appeal to the conscience of the members of the ruling party. Recalling how, back in 1940, the Conservative members of the British Parliament had compelled their prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, to resign, he appealed to those 'Congressmen who were not afraid of the British bullets and bayonets to place the good of the nation above the good of the party'. With this parting shot Kripalani sat down, to vigorous applause from the opposition benches.[57]

Throughout the second half of 1961 the Indian Parliament witnessed a series of bitter debates about the dispute with China. The prime minister himself was harried and hurt by a group of terriers at his heels. Three in particular nipped hard: Atal Behari Vajpayee of the Jana Sangh, Hem Barua of the Praja Socialist Party and N. G. Ranga of the Swatantra Party. Nehru was accused of turning a blind eye to Chinese 'occupation' of Indian territory and of placing himself magisterially above the fray. 'In regard to border disputes', said one member, 'the prime minister has a tendency to act like an umpire in a cricket match rather than as one whose interests are involved'. The criticisms had a personal, polemical, edge. For Nehru also served as foreign minister, and the policy of friendship with China was known to be his particular project. Unaccustomed to such hostility, the prime minister became increasingly irritable,

on one occasion going so far as to refer to his critics as ‘childish and infantile’. [58]

By now, there were elements in his own party who had made known their view that the prime minister should take a stronger line on China. When an opposition member taunted Nehru with regard to his remark that Aksai Chin was barren land, with no grass growing on it, a Congress MP added this telling supplement: ‘No hair grows on my head. Does it mean that the head has no value?’ This was widely viewed as a dig at Nehru who, of course, was completely bald himself.[59]

VIII

In the third week of December 1961 a detachment of the Indian army moved up to the borders of the Portuguese colony of Goa. For a decade now New Delhi had sought, by persuasion and non-violence, to convince Portugal to give up that territory. With those measures failing, Nehru’s government decided to ‘liberate’ Goa by force.

On the morning of 18 December Indian troops entered Goa from three directions: Sawantwadi in the north, Karwar in the south and Belgaum in the east. Meanwhile, aeroplanes dropped leaflets exhorting the Goans to ‘be calm and brave’ and to ‘rejoice in your freedom and strengthen it’. By the evening of the 18th the capital, Panjim, had been encircled. The troops were helped by the locals, who pointed out where the Portuguese had laid mines. The colonists fired a few shots before withdrawing. In the smaller enclaves of Daman and Diu the resistance was somewhat stiffer. In all, some fifteen Indian soldiers lost their lives, and perhaps twice as many Portuguese. Thirty-six hours after the invasion began, the Portuguese governor general signed a document of unconditional surrender.[60]

The Western press had a field day with this display of ‘Indian hypocrisy’. Exposed for so long to lectures by Nehru and Krishna Menon, they now hit back by attacking the use of force by a nation that professed ‘non-violence’. The action was also represented as a breach of international law and, more absurdly, as a threat to Christians and Christianity in Goa.[61] In fact, 61 per cent of Goa was Hindu, while prominent Goan Christians, such as the journalist Frank Moraes and the Archbishop Cardinal Gracias, had an honoured place in Indian public life. There had long been an indigenous freedom movement within Goa and many, perhaps most, Goans welcomed the Indian ac-

tion. In any case, the Goans were now at liberty to choose their own leaders, something always denied them by the Portuguese.

That Goa was legitimately part of India was not in dispute. That India had waited long enough before acting was also evident. Still, the timing of what was called 'Operation Vijay' was open to question. Why did it take place in December 1961 rather than December 1960 or December 1962? Nehru perhaps thought he had waited long enough for the Portuguese to leave; fourteen whole years. And he was under pressure from both left and right on the issue; the Jana Sangh and the communists, in a rare show of agreement, were urging him to use the army to liberate the colony. Still, the suspicion lingered that the precise timing of the invasion was determined by the electoral needs of his colleague Krishna Menon. Before the troops went in, the defence minister inspected them on the border. As the *New York Times* reported, he was here 'conducting a double campaign : one for the war that was about to commence, the other for the general election that had been scheduled for February 1962.[62]

In that election, Krishna Menon would be opposed by his Parliamentary *bête* noire, Acharya Kripalani, who had announced that he would shift from the safe seat of Sitamarhi and take on the defence minister in the constituency he represented, North Bombay. All the opposition parties (the communists excepted) announced that they would support him. A battle of prestige was brewing; since the prime minister had refused to drop Menon from the Cabinet, the opposition now hoped that he would be removed via the ballot box.

Less than two months after his troops marched into Goa, Menon was in Bombay to fight his corner of the 1962 general election. Batting for him were the powerful Maharashtra chief minister Y. B. Chavan and senior members of the Union Cabinet. Even Menon's known critics in government, such as Morarji Desai and Jagjivan Ram, were commanded to go out and campaign on his behalf. Speaking on Kripalani's side were such stalwarts as C. Rajagopalachari, as well as many distinguished non-party men – lawyers, intellectuals and industrialists.

The contest was, among other things, a tribute to the cosmopolitan character of Bombay, with a Malayali and a Sindhi competing for the affections of the people of a state not their own. The constituency was very heterogeneous indeed – many Marathi and Gujarati speakers, but also many Bhaiyyas from UP, Goans, Sindhis and Tamilians. These various segments were wooed by both contestants, with the campaign manifesting an intensity commensurate to the stature of the disputants, and the importance of their dispute.

In the rich and by now very extensive history of Indian elections, there has perhaps been no single contest so loudly trumpeted as this one. The journ-

al Link, sympathetic to Menon, called it ‘the most important election in the history of our democracy’. The social worker Jayaprakash Narayan, a friend of Kripalani’s, said that in this contest ‘the future of Indian democracy and our spiritual values are at stake’.

The campaign was colourful, replete with evocative posters and savage slogans. The left-wing weekly *Blitz* ran a blistering campaign against a man they chose to refer to as ‘Cripple-loony’ . On the other side, Menon was lampooned by versifiers in several languages. One ditty went: *Chini hamla hoté hain/ Menon Saab soté hain/ Sona hai tho soné do/ Kripalani ji to aané do*. (As China advances, Menon sleeps/ Let him sleep if he must/ But call Kripalani to be with us.) An English verse advanced the same sentiments, if more elegantly: I do not hold with all these cracks and mockery/ At Krishna Menon./ It is his virtues I would rather pin on./ For instance, consider his skill with crockery:/ What could be finer/ Than the loving care with which he handles china?

The prime minister took the challenge to Menonas a challenge to himself. Nehru inaugurated the Congress campaign in Bombay, and found reason to support his man in other places as well. In Sangli, in Poona, in Baroda, he said that a defeat for Menon would signal a defeat for his own policies of socialism and non-alignment. His mentor’s support helped Menon immeasurably. So did the liberation of Goa, which resonated well with the public of North Bombay, and not just with the Goans among them.

In the event, Kripalani’s campaign was undone by Nehru’s speeches, the action in Goa and the strength of the Congress Party machinery. He lost by more than 100,000 votes.[63]

IX

In the general elections of 1952 and 1957 the Congress had made much of its being the party of the freedom struggle. In 1962, however, its campaign focused more on what it had done since. Its policies, it said, had increased agricultural and industrial production, enhanced education and life expectancy and promoted the unity of the country. Never having held power, the opposition could not match these claims with counterclaims of their own.[64] In the event, the Congress comfortably retained its majority in Parliament, winning 361 seats out of 494 all told. The communists secured 29 seats, while the new opposition party, Swatantra, put up a decent show, returning 18 MPs. In

the state of Madras there was a challenge from the quasi-secessionist DMK, which won 7 Parliamentary seats (to go with 50 in the Legislative Assembly). But on the whole the Congress Party was confirmed in its pre-eminence, and Jawaharlal Nehru entered into his fourth term as prime minister.

The opposition within had been shown its place, but the opposition without remained. Throughout the spring and summer of 1962 clashes on the border continued. In July the Delhi journal *Seminar* ran a symposium on India's defence policy. One contributor insisted that 'the People's Republic of China does not pose any military threat to our country'. Another contributor was not so sure. This was General Thimayya, now retired, who noted that there were threats from both Pakistan and China. Where the country was moderately well placed to meet an attack from the former, Thimayya could not 'even as a soldier envisage India taking on China in an open conflict on its own. China's present strength in manpower, equipment and aircraft exceeds our resources a hundred fold with the full support of the USSR, and we could never hope to match China in the foreseeable future. It must be left to the politicians and the diplomats to ensure our security'. The 'present strength of the army and air forces of India', said the general, 'are even below the "minimum insurance" we can give to our people'.[65]

The implications were clear: either the diplomats should seek a treaty deal with China, or the politicians should canvass for military help from the Western bloc. But the rising tide of patriotic sentiment ruled out the first; and the non-alignment of the prime minister, strengthened by the anti-Americanism of his defence minister, ruled out the second.

In the third week of July 1962 there were clashes between Indian and Chinese troops in the Galwan valley of Ladakh. Then, in early September, a conflict arose over the Dhola/Thag La ridge, in the valley of the Namka Chu river, some sixty miles west of Tawang. The region was where the borders of India, Tibet and Bhutan all met; the exact alignment of the McMahon Line was in dispute here. The Indians claimed the ridge fell south of the Line; the Chinese argued that it was on their side.[66]

It was back in June that a platoon of the Assam Rifles had established a post at Dhola, as part of the still continuing forward policy. On 8 September the Chinese placed a post of their own at Thag La, which overlooked (and threatened) Dhola. Peking and New Delhi exchanged angry letters. On the ground, Indian commanders were divided as to what todo. Some said that the Chinese must be shifted from Thag La. Others said that it would be too difficult, since the terrain was disadvantageous to the Indians (Thag La lay some 2,000 feet above Dhola). Meanwhile, at the site itself, the Chinese troops took

to addressing homilies in Hindi via a megaphone. '*Hindi-Chini bhai bhai'*, they shouted: '*Ye zamin hamara hai. Tumvapas jao'* (Indians and Chinese are brothers-in-arms, but this land is ours, so you may please vacate it).

The stalemate continued for three weeks, troops of the two nations facing each other across a narrow river, not knowing whether their leaders were making peace or about to go to war. Finally, on 3 October, Lieutenant General Umrao Singh, who had counselled prudence, was replaced as corps commander by B. M. Kaul, who flew in from Delhi to take command in NEFA. Those who recommended caution were overruled. 'To all objections Kaul gave sweeping and unrealistic assurances, based on the assumption of Delhi's future logistical support for any gamble he might now take.'[67] To dislodge the Chinese from Thag La, he now moved two battalions up from the plains. The troops had light arms and only three days of rations, no mortars or rocket launchers and only promises that supplies would catch up with them.

Indian soldiers reached the Namka Chu valley on the afternoon of 9 October, after a march through 'mud, mountains and rain'. 'Exhausted by days of marching over massive heights and appalling weather conditions, [these were] troops badly in need of a breather and the tools for war.'[68] That same evening they setup a post in a herder's hut from where they would, when reinforcements arrived, try to uproot the enemy. They were not given the chance. On the morning of the 10th the Chinese attacked. The *jawans* fought hard, but they had been drained by the long march up. They were also outnumbered and outgunned, their light arms proving no match to the heavy mortar used by the Chinese.

From 1959, in both Ladakh and NEFA, the Chinese and Indians had played cat-and-mouse, sending troops to fill up no-man's-land, clashing here and there, while their leaders exchanged letters and occasionally even met. Now things escalated to unprecedented levels. The Indian siting of Dhola was answered by the Chinese coming to Thag La, directly above it; this in turn provoked an attempt by the Indians to shift them. When this failed, Nehru, back in Delhi, told the press that the army had been given instructions to once more try and push out the 'enemy'.

In the event it was the enemy who acted first. A phoney war, which had lasted all of three years, was made very real on the night of 19/20 October, when the Chinese simultaneously launched an invasion in both the eastern and western sectors. The 'blitzkrieg' across the Himalaya had come, as 'Pragmatist' had predicted it would. And, as he had feared, the Indians were unprepared. That night, wrote the *New York Times*, a 'smouldering situation burst into flame' as 'heavy battles broke out in both of the disputed areas. Masses

of Chinese troops under the cover of thunderous mortar fire drove the Indians back on each front'. Both sides had built up forces on the border, but 'independent observers laid the onslaught to the Chinese'. The Chinese attacked in waves, armed with medium machine guns backed by heavy mortars. Two Chinese divisions were involved in the invasion, these using five times as many troops as had the Indians.[69]

The Indians were 'taken by surprise' as the Chinese quickly overran many positions, crossed the Namkha Chu valley and made for the monastery in Tawang. Another detachment made for the eastern part of NEFA. Chinese troops moved deeper and deeper into Indian territory. Eight posts were reported to have fallen in Ladakh; almost twenty in NEFA. Tawang itself had come under the control of the Chinese.[70]

The ease with which the Chinese took Indian positions should not have come as a surprise. Their troops had been on the Tibetan plateau in strength from the mid-1950s, fighting or preparing to fight Khampa rebels. Unlike the Indians, they were well used to battles in the high mountains. Besides, access was much easier from the Tibetan side, the relatively flat terrain conducive to road building and troop movement. The geographical advantage was all to the Chinese. From Assam up to the McMahon Line the climb was very steep, the hills covered with thick vegetation and the climate often damp and wet. The Indian forward posts were hopelessly ill equipped; with no proper roads, they 'lived from air-drop to air-drop', dependent on supplies and for survival on sorties by helicopters.[71]

The Indian problems were compounded by a vacuum of leadership. On 18 October General Kaul had come down with acute chest pains. He was evacuated to Delhi and his corps was left leaderless for five days, by which time Tawang had fallen.

On 24 October the Chinese halted their advance, while Chou En-lai wrote to Nehru seeking away to 'stop the border clashes' and 'reopen border negotiations'. Over the next fortnight they wrote each other two letters apiece, these achieving nothing. Chou said that China and India shared a common enemy, 'imperialism'. The current conflict notwithstanding, he thought it possible for both of them to 'restore Sino-Indian relations to the warm and friendly pattern of earlier days and even improve on that pattern'. His solution was for each side to withdraw twenty kilometres behind the line of actual control, and disengage.

Nehru's replies displayed his wounds for all to see. 'Nothing in my long political career has hurt me more and grieved me more', he said, than 'the hostile and unfriendly twist given in India-China relations' in recent years, cul-

minating in ‘what is in effect a Chinese invasion of India’, in ‘violent contradiction’ of the claim that China wanted to settle the border question by ‘peaceful means’. Peking had taken ‘a deliberate cold-blooded decision’ to ‘enforce their alleged boundary claims by military invasion of India’. Chou’s offer, he wrote, was aimed at consolidating and keeping the gains of this aggression. The solution he proposed was for Chinese troops to get behind the McMahon Line in the east, and to revert in the west to their position as of 7 November 1959, thus cancelling out three years of steady gains made by establishing posts in territory under dispute.[72]

Meanwhile, a casualty in Delhi had been added to all those suffered on the front. Now that Indian weaknesses had been so comprehensively exposed, V. K. Krishna Menon was finally removed as defence minister. (He was first shifted to the Ministry of Defence Production, then dropped from the Cabinet altogether.) Menon’s exit was accompanied by a call by Delhi for Western arms. On 28 October the American ambassador went to see the prime minister. Nehru ‘was frail, brittle and seemed small and old. He was obviously desperately tired’. India must have military aid from the West, he said.[73] Soon Britain and America were sending transport planes with arms and ammunition. France and Canada had also agreed to supplyweapons.[74]

On 8 November the prime minister moved a resolution in Parliament deploring the fact that China had ‘betrayed’ the spirit of Panchsheel and India’s ‘uniform gestures of goodwill and friendship’ by initiating ‘a massive invasion’. The hurt was palpable; that ‘we in India, who have . . . sought the friendship of China . . . and pleaded their cause in the councils of the world should now ourselves be victims of new imperialism and expansionism by a country which says that it is against all imperialism’. China may call itself ‘communist’, said Nehru, but it had revealed itself as ‘an expansionist, imperious-minded country deliberately invading’ another.

Nehru’s speech might be read as a belated acknowledgement of the correctness of Vallabhbhai Patel’s warning of 1950: that communism in China was an extreme expression of nationalism, rather than its nullification. The debate that followed took a full week; 165 members spoke, apparently a record.[75]

Back on the borders, the lull in the fighting was broken by a second Chinese offensive on 15 November. A 500-mile front was attacked in NEFA. There was a bitter fight in Walong, where soldiers from the Dogra and Kumaon regiments, hardy hill men all, fought heroically and almost wrested control of a key ridge from the Chinese.[76] There was also some spirited resistance in Ladakh, where the field commander was not subject to conflicting signals

from Delhi. Here the troops stood their ground, and 'forced the Chinese to pay dearly for the territory they won'.[77]

But across most of NEFA it had been a very poor show indeed. Here the Indians simply disintegrated, with platoons and even whole regiments retreating in disarray. When the Chinese swept through there was much confusion among the Indian commanders. Where should they make their first, and perhaps last, stand? The option of Tawang was considered and abandoned. One general advocated Bomdi Lal, a good sixty miles to the south, where supplies could be easily sent up from plains. Finally, it was decided to stop the Chinese advance at Se La, a mere fifteen miles from Tawang.

The decision to make the stand at Se La was Kaul s. When he fell ill, his place had been taken by Lieutenant General Harbaksh Singh, a highly regarded commander with much field experience. But before Singh could adequately reorganize the defences, Kaul had flown back from Delhi to resume charge once more.

The Chinese had occupied Tawang on 25 October. When they halted there, the Indians were deceived into inaction. In fact, the Chinese were working on improving the road to Se La. On 14 November the Indians began a proposed counter-attack, choosing as their target an enemy post near Walong. Meanwhile, battles broke out north of Se La, the Chinese again with the advantage. The garrison commander, in panic, ordered withdrawal, and his brigade began retreating towards Bomdi La. There they found that the Chinese had already skirted Se La and cut off the road behind them. Large sections were mown down in flight, while others abandoned their arms and fled singly or in small groups. Se La was easily taken, and Bomdi La fell soon afterwards.[78]

The fall of Bomdi La led to panic in Assam. An Indian reporter, reaching Tezpur on 20 November, found it a 'ghost town'. The administration had pulled back to Gauhati, after burning the papers at the Collectorate and the currency notes at the local bank. Before leaving, 'the doors of the mental hospital [were] opened to release the bewildered inmates'.[79]

Back in Delhi and Bombay, young men were queuing up to join the army. The recruiting centres were usually sleepy places, open one or two days a week, with 90 per cent of the boys who showed up failing the first examination. Now their compounds were 'besieged by thousands of would-be recruits'. Some were labourers and factory hands; others, unemployed graduates. They all hoped that in this emergency 'the army will lower its physical requirements and give them food and lodging and a purpose in life'.[80]

It seems unlikely that these men would have made a better showing than those who had already fought, and lost. In any case, they did not get the chance. Poised to enter the plains of Assam, the Chinese instead announced a unilateral ceasefire on 22 November. In NEFA they pulled back to north of the McMahon Line. In the Ladakh sector they likewise retreated to positions they had held before the present hostilities began.

Why did the Chinese pack up and go home? Some thought they were deterred from coming further by the rallying of all parties, including the communists, around the government. The Western powers had pledged support, and were already flying in arms and ammunition.[81] As important as these considerations of politics were the facts of nature. For winter was setting in, and soon the Himalaya would be snowbound. And by pressing deep into India, the Chinese would make their supply lines longer and more difficult to maintain.

While the end of the war can be thus explained, its origins are harder to understand. There were no White Papers issued from the Chinese side, and their records are not open – and perhaps never will be. All one can say is that behind such a carefully co-ordinated attack there must have been several years of preparation. As for its precise timing, a speculation offered at the time and which still seems plausible was that the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, were preoccupied with the Cuban missile crisis, allowing Peking its little adventure without fear of reprisal.

The border war had underlined Chinese superiority in ‘arms, communications, strategy, logistics, and planning’.[82] According to Defence Ministry statistics, 1,383 Indian soldiers had been killed, 3,968 were taken prisoner, while 1,696 were still missing.[83] These losses were small by the standards of modern warfare, yet the war represented a massive defeat in the Indian imagination. Naturally, the search began for scapegoats. Over the years, a series of self-exculpatory memoirs were published by the generals in the field. Each sought to shift the blame away from himself and towards another commander, or towards the politicians who had neglected their warnings and issued orders that were impossible to carry out. In his own contribution to the genre, Major General D. K. Palit – director general of military operations at the time of the war notes that in these memoirs ‘there are striking inconsistencies; each had his own wicket to defend’. Then he adds: ‘Hindsight tends to lend rationality to events that in fact are innocent of coherence or logical sequence.’[84]

Among the Indian public, the principal sentiment was that of betrayal, of being taken for a ride by an unscrupulous neighbour whom they had naively chosen to trust and support. In his letters to Chou En-lai, Nehru expressed these feelings as well as anyone else. But for the deeper origins of the dispute

one must turn to his earlier writings, in particular to an interview in which he spoke not as India's leader but as a student of world history. Back in 1959, Nehru had told Edgar Snow that 'the basic reason for the Sino-Indian dispute was that they were both "new nations", in that both were newly independent and under *dynamic nationalistic leaderships*, and in a sense were "meeting" at their frontiers for the first time in history'. In the past, 'there were buffer zones between the two countries; both sides were *remote* from the borders'. Now, however, 'they were meeting as *modern nations* on the borders'. Hence it 'was natural that a certain degree of conflict should be generated before they can stabilize their frontiers'.[85]

The India-China conflict, then, was a clash of national myths, national egos, national insecurities and – ultimately and inevitably – national armies. In this sense, however unique (and uniquely disturbing) it must have seemed to Indians, it was very representative. For competing claims to territory have been an all too common source of conflict in the modern world. Nehru's comments to Edgar Snow said as much. However, let us give the last word to an unlikely authority, the beat poet Allen Ginsberg. In March 1962 Ginsberg began a two-year trip around the subcontinent, bumming and slumming in the search for nirvana. In August, just as the clashes on the border began to intensify, he made an entry in his diary which set the India/China border conflict properly in perspective:

> The Fights 1962:
> US vs Russia in General / China vs Formosa over possession / India vs China over border territory / India vs Pakistan over possession Kashmir – Religious / India vs Portugal over possession Goa / India vs Nagas over Independence /Egypt vs Israel over possession of territory and Religion / E. Germany vs W. Germany sovereignty / Cuba vs USA Ideas/N.Korea vs So. Korea – Sovereignty / Indonesia vs Holland – Territory / France vs Algeria – Territory / Negroes vs whites – US / Katanga vs Leopoldville / Russian Stalinists vs Russian Kruschevists / Peru APRA vs Peru Military / Argentine Military versus Argentine Bourgeois / Navajo Peyotists vs Navajo Tribal Council – Tribal / W. Irian? / Kurds vs Iraq / Negro vs Whites – So. Africa – Race / US Senegal vs Red Mali – Territory / Ghana vs Togo – Territory / Ruanda Watusi vs Ruanda Bahutu – Tribe power / Kenya Kadu vs Kenya Kana – Tribe power / Somali vs Aethopia, Kenya, French Somali / Tibet Lamas vs Chinese Tibetan secularists / India vs E.

Pak – Assam Bengal over Border & Tripura / Algeria vs Morocco over Sahara.[86]