

40 years after the fall of Taghla

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Political analysts predict that today the planet is very close to an upheaval of an amplitude not seen since World War II. One of the main reasons is the proposed US military intervention in Iraq which could trigger a chain of unexpected consequences: From an unprecedented rise in the oil prices, to the fall of certain regimes in West Asia or a serious split between Europe and the US.

A similar situation occurred 40 years ago when the Cold War reached its climax. The confrontation was then between the US and the Soviet Union in Cuba over the installation of ballistic missiles targeting American cities. But, we should not forget that during the same week the fate of humanity was hanging fire, Chinese troops entered India in the North-East as well as Ladakh.

No doubt, nobody will celebrate these events. However, Cuba has found an interesting way to commemorate the stupendous events of the Bay of Pigs. The Cuban government, with the National Security Archive of George Washington University, has organised a conference titled *'The October Crisis: Political Perspectives 40 Years Later'*. The exciting fact is that some of the veterans who participated in those dramatic days have been invited to discuss the stand-off between Khrushchev and Kennedy.

Amongst the several participants from the American side were former US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, John F Kennedy's speechwriter Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy's aide Arthur Schlesinger, General William Smith of the US Air Force and some retired CIA officers.

Opening the 3-day conference, McNamara posed some key questions: *"I want to learn more about nuclear danger in October 1962, about the factors that led to it, about the reasons we escaped the ultimate consequences in the events, about what might have happened but thankfully did not, and about whether, or how, the lessons learned from the missile crisis might assist those of us who are interested in reducing the risk of nuclear catastrophe in the 21st century."*

The questions brought up by McNamara raised compelling questions vis-à-vis India's conflict with China. On October 22, Kennedy made his historic speech in which he gave the choice to Khrushchev: Either dismantle the missiles or be held responsible for a nuclear conflict.

Two days earlier, Mao's People's Liberation Army had run down the slopes of the Tagla ridge in Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh to invade large chunks of North-East India. The previous evening, Brigadier John Dalvi, the author of the celebrated book, Himalayan Blunder, had phoned his GOC to inform him that an attack was imminent and that the Indian troops were stuck "in a death trap". The GOC told him to stop flapping and obey orders. While the details of the India China operations are quite well-known through several generals' and journalists' books, numerous other aspects of the conflict remain nebulous, even 40 years after the events.

Would it not be in India and China's interests to bring together those who lived through these days and try to clarify some important questions? Amongst the many issues which remain unanswered are the relation between the Cuban crisis and the Indo-China war; the importance of the split between Moscow and Beijing which came into the open in October 1962; Moscow's sudden change of stance vis-à-vis India in the midst of the conflict; the internal political factors in China and Mao's motivations (he was facing a strong opposition from within the Communist party after his disastrous Great Leap Forward); the reasons for the sudden Chinese unilateral withdrawal; the dubious role of the Indian communists during the war or the non-intervention of President Ayub Khan.

Can we dream of such a conference presided over by John Kenneth Galbraith, the US Ambassador in Delhi in 1962? Many officers and generals who were closely involved with India's China policy are still around and could be invited: To name a few, Mr GS Mehta of the MEA who conducted the talks with China in 1960, Mr NB Menon, in charge of the China desk in 1962, Maj. Gen. DK Palit, former DGMO and author of a history of the war and some Indian intelligence officers.

Would it harm the "strategic interests" of India to host such a conference or would it help to heal old wounds? We could bet on the latter. Even if many issues existing at the time in 1962, such as the border dispute or the Tibetan thirst for autonomy, are still present today, other things have changed in China and India during the last 40 years. China will soon have the 'fourth generation' taking over from Mr Jiang Zemin's team. As Mao himself used to correctly say: *"We have to learn from the past to serve the present."*