

Chinese intrusions will not stop¹

They have done it again. According to media reports, Chinese troops walked into what India considers its side of the LAC; in one of the five reported incursions, they would have come as close as 2 km to the Indian posts.

The novelty is that on July 16-17, the Chinese troops used horses and ponies to cross the LAC.

All this happened soon after the senior-most general of the People's Liberation Army, General Fan Changlong, Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission, visited the Xinjiang Military District (XMD) on which the Ladakh front depends. Fan was accompanied by several top generals; amongst them, General Liu Yuejun, commander of the Lanzhou Military Region and General Wang Jianping, commander of the Peoples' Armed Police and General Sun Jianguo, Secretary General of the State Defense Mobilization Committee.

The visit of this battery of generals is probably connected to the intrusions.

The high-level visit to the XMD occurred during the Indian Defence Minister's trip to China. Did General Fan deliberately choose not to be in Beijing on this important occasion? Was his mission to Xinjiang and XMD more important?

To understand the present situation in Ladakh, it is necessary to take a flashback in history.

The Year 1959 has been crucial for Sino-Indian relations, first and foremost because of the uprising in Tibet (March 10) and the subsequent flight of the Dalai Lama to India.

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Undoubtedly the refugee status offered by Nehru to the Tibetan leader and his followers angered the Communist regime in Beijing.

After pretending to have 'liberated' Tibet since 8 years, for Mao and his colleagues it was the worst slap in the face.

But why is the situation still not solved 55 years later?

The transcript of a press conference held by Nehru, the Indian Prime Minister in Delhi on September 11, 1959 really opened my eyes. It was a day before he announced in the Parliament that the Chinese had occupied the Aksai Chin.

Meeting the media, Nehru talks about the McMahon Line. He mentions notes attached explaining 'specific points' ("this place is on this side of the line or that side of the line"), adding that some minor changes were then [in 1914] 'suggested for practical reasons': "a Buddhist temple, which was slightly on this side, India's side; but it was greatly valued by Tibetans; so it was put on the Tibetan side".

This is rather vague, as nothing in the published correspondence with Tibet or China confirms this point.

More strange is when a journalist requests the Prime Minister to clarify a statement made the previous day in the Lok Sabha (in which Nehru said that Zhou Enlai, the Chinese Premier, thrice accepted the McMahon line in the course of a meeting with Nehru in 1956). "Were things written down?", asks the journalist.

The Prime Minister's answer is 'no', though he says that several years later he had reminded Zhou Enlai of his assurance in a letter. With no official bilateral records, it was easy for the Chinese Premier to repudiate what he had said.

What pervades the press conference as well as the debates in the Parliament is prevarication and vagueness!

Regarding Longju in NEFA, where a few weeks earlier the Chinese troops had encircled an Indian detachment, the Prime Minister explains that the border "was not strictly delimited or marked. And, as you know, it is mostly in areas where no human beings dwell; may be some do very occasionally, in a very small village somewhere; but broadly speaking, no people live there".

When a correspondent raises the issue of India's allies: "if in case of war, will India seek allies in the large world?", the Prime Minister is furious, he retorts: "I hope, our country will not suffer that weakness of character."

Three years later, in one day (November 19, 1962), Nehru sent two letters begging President Kennedy for military help.

When someone asks the Prime Minister to fully disclose the violations of the NEFA border, Nehru takes it badly: "Is that an indirect reflection on my integrity, or what?"

He adds: "I do not think that we have kept secret any marked incursion across the border". But one day later, Nehru would disclose the big one, the Aksai Chin. We shall come to it.

It is however clear that the uprising in Tibet in March 1959 marks the end of the Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai era during the following months and years, the relation between Delhi and Beijing would harden more and more, till the fateful day of October 1962. Nehru is conscious of it: he mentions that Zhou Enlai's latest letter "showed a certain hardening of attitude" and adds: "and it is a always serious thing when in a controversy, any country digs its toes in."

When asked if the government has decided to provide "weapons of offense to the Indian troops", the Prime Minister quips: "What do you think? They go about with bows and arrows?" And he tells the journalist: "Well, you are an expert at it!"

The Prime Minister believes that what has happened in Tibet was deplorable, but his conclusions are: "the seriousness of the situation is not a mile on this side and a mile on that side, but the growing feeling of estrangement, irritation and sometimes anger, on both sides." Nehru philosophically explains: "[when you get angry], you lose your moorings, mental, psychological. You are excited, passionate, angry and it is not a good thing for a country or a people to become that."

The next day, he would announce that China also claims the Aksai Chin. In his words: "This place, Aksai Chin area, is in our map undoubtedly. But I distinguish it completely from other areas [NEFA area]. It is a matter for argument as to what part of it belongs to us and what part of it belongs to somebody else. It is not at all a dead clear matter. However, I have to be frank to the House. It is not clear."

The Chinese have fully used this statement over the years to move the LAC to where it is today.

To make the matter worse, China is not ready to give a map of its 'perception' of the LAC, keeping the issue open for further discussion (and advancement of the LAC).

It won't be easy for the officials from China and India to find a solution to the border dispute and it is doubtful if the Chinese will stop their 'incursions' soon.