The United States, Britain and the Sino-Indian Border War

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In October 1962, a simmering border dispute between India and the People's Republic of China (PRC) that from the late 1950s had embittered relations between Asia's two most powerful states descended into armed conflict. In short order, a succession of rapid Chinese military advances saw some commentators question whether India would emerge from the border war as an independent sovereign state. Speaking to his fellow citizens on 22 October, India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru characterised China's thrust into northern India as 'the greatest menace that has come to us since independence'.[1] With India's armed forces in full retreat, a national state of emergency was enacted, MPs summoned to parliament, sand bags piled around public buildings, and military recruiting stations flooded with eager volunteers. On the streets of the nation's major cities, effigies of China's leader Mao Zedong were torched. Citizens added to the atmosphere of melodrama by publicly penning pledges written in their own blood to defend Mother India.[2]

In framing the U.S. approach to events unfolding in South Asia, President John F. Kennedy informed senior figures within his administration that, 'you would, you must figure India a British mission . . .. I think the British ought to take the lead here'.[3] Kennedy's rationale for placing the British front and centre of a Western response to the border war was rooted, in large part, in an orthodoxy that had shaped Washington's diplomacy in the subcontinent over the preceding decade. Republican and Democrat governments alike had concluded that co-ordinating policy with the United Kingdom in India would best advance American interests. First the

Eisenhower, and subsequently the Kennedy administration, had come to view India as an important bulwark against the expansion of Chinese communist influence in Asia, and beyond. Encouraging the British to maintain a prominent role in South Asian affairs, U.S. officials calculated, would help to offset unease in Congress, Pakistan and the wider international community over increased American economic and political support for Delhi. Moreover, collaborating with London in the subcontinent also promised to deliver benefits in terms of developmental and military burden sharing. Equally, to the surprise of Whitehall, the experience and connections that Britain had accrued in India over the previous two centuries retained currency in Washington. In the midst of the border war, Kennedy informed his close friend and Britain's Ambassador to the United States, Sir David Ormsby Gore, that, in defending India, the United Kingdom with its 'exceptional knowledge of India and as . . . leader of the Commonwealth . . . had an exceptionally important role to play'.[4]

This chapter explores American and British approaches to the Sino-Indian border war, throwing fresh light on Washington and London's approach to territorial disputes in the subcontinent, both before and after the events of late 1962. It goes on to trace how, by spearheading the politico-military effort to support Nehru's government following the outbreak of hostilities with China, the United States and Great Britain accumulated unprecedented Indian goodwill, and an equal measure of Pakistani disapprobation. The chapter interrogates the emergence of U.S.-British disagreements over how best to utilise amplified Western leverage with Nehru's government, and weighs the impact that such disputes had on the broader triangular relationship between the United States, Britain and India. Particular attention is focused upon the significance of tensions between Washington, London and Delhi over the Harriman-Sandys mission to India in November 1962, Indo-Pakistani talks

on the Kashmir dispute and the provision of long-term Western military assistance to Nehru's administration.

Advances in contemporary scholarship on American responses to the border war have been made possible, to a considerable extent, by the declassification of state records and private papers in U.S., British and Indian archives, and the publication of new official documentary collections in the United States, the United Kingdom and India. The release of a wealth of material by, amongst others, the U.S. National Archives, the U.S. Library of Congress, the Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon Presidential Libraries, the Butler Library at Columbia University, the British National Archives, the India Office collections of the British Library, the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, Churchill College Archives at the University of Cambridge, the Indian National Archives, and the Nehru Museum and Memorial Library has helped to deepen and broaden interpretations of the border war. Notably, the emergence of new documentary evidence has called into question the received wisdom that the Cold War, in a South Asian context at least, was conducted in an East versus West binary. Recent examinations of the border war, grounded in the latest primary material, have instead privileged the power of local agency and stressed the extent to which foreign interventions in the region were beholden to potent political, ethnic, communal, religious and cultural forces.

Prelude to war: The Goa Crisis and the Indo-Soviet MiG deal

Two episodes immediately prior to the outbreak of Sino-Indian hostilities underscored the diplomatic risks inherent in an interventionist policy favoured by the Kennedy

administration in South Asia. On 17 December 1961, Indian troops launched 'Operation Vijay.' Entering the Portuguese enclaves of Goa, Daman and Diu on India's Western coastline, Indian forces encountered only token resistance from the territories' garrisons. In Delhi, news of the invasion led John Kenneth Galbraith, America's ambassador in India, to predict that Goa would fall in 'one day and [with] no casualties to speak of'.[5] Galbraith's assessment was prescient. By the morning of 19 December, the Indian army had occupied Goa's capital Panjim, bringing Portugal's four-hundred-and-sixty year presence on the Indian subcontinent to an ignominious end.

From 1947 onward, the Indian government had made a series of fruitless attempts to engage Portugal in bi-lateral discussions on Goa's future. To the Indian government's irritation, Portuguese colonialism was tacitly endorsed by the Eisenhower administration, which valued Lisbon as a Cold War ally. Notably, through its membership of NATO, Portugal provided the U.S. with access to prized military staging facilities in the North Atlantic and in Portugal itself. In December 1955, the U.S. Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, enraged Indians by issuing a joint communiqué with Paulo Cunha, Portugal's foreign minister, in which reference was made to Lisbon's Asian 'provinces'. Asked by journalists to clarify the communiqué's use of the term 'province', Dulles aggravated his diplomatic gaffe by blithely responding that 'As far as I know, all the world regards it [Goa] as a Portuguese province'.[6] Speaking subsequently before a gathering of Goan expatriates in Bombay, Nehru openly castigated Dulles, declaring that he had been 'astonished' at the 'extraordinary statement . . . made by the responsible head of the Foreign office of this great country, America'.[7]

In the weeks preceding Goa's 'liberation', the Kennedy administration had been alarmed at the prospect of an armed clash between Portugal, a NATO ally, and India, a nation pivotal to America's strategic vision for Asia. Above all, White House officials agonized that Indian military action would see the U.S. Congress, and the wider international community, impose financial sanctions on Delhi, sabotaging India's prospects of outstripping Chinese economic growth.[8] Furthermore, both Washington and London harboured misgivings that an Indian assault on Goa could spark further conflict in Asia and Africa. Writing to Nehru on 13 December 1961, Britain's Prime Minister Harold Macmillan cautioned that the annexation of Goa would light the touch paper for a series of regional conflagrations. 'I feel sure', Macmillan warned, 'that President Sukarno would then consider himself justified in making a military attack on New Guinea, and I fear that many of the new African states would have recourse to the same methods in order to solve their feuds and jealousies'.[9]

In Whitehall, the Commonwealth Relations Office was acutely aware that conflict between India and Portugal would place Britain in an awkward bind. Britain's financial, military and political investments in India were considerable. However, Anglo-Portuguese treaties dating from 1661 and 1899 bound Britain to defend Lisbon's overseas territories.[10] In the view of the Foreign Office, Britain had much to lose and little to gain from taking on a prominent role in the Goa crisis. 'Getting into this squabble', British officials insisted, would 'do ourselves nothing but harm with the Indians . . . [inviting their] utmost bitterness to any interference on our part'.[11] Equally, Salazar's outmoded and quixotic imperial pretensions garnered scant sympathy in London. 'It was absurd of the Portuguese', Macmillan recorded, 'to try to hold onto it [Goa]'.[12] Failing back on a precedent reaffirmed by successive post-war

British governments that discounted UK military action against India, or any other member of the Commonwealth, as 'unthinkable', Macmillan's administration followed a policy of concerned detachment.[13]

In the aftermath of the Goa operation, Adlai Stevenson, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, informed the Security Council that a failure to condemn India's act of aggression 'could end with [the UN's] death'.[14] The reaction inside India to such strident Western criticism was one of incredulity mixed with genuine anger. The iniquities of Britain and America's own colonial and neo-colonial histories led many Indians to dismiss Western censure as grossly hypocritical. Washington 'could have made a token protest regarding Goa', one Indian diplomat complained, 'but instead they approached it as though it were comparable to the *Anschluss*'.[15]

Indeed, the Goa incident fuelled concerns inside Kennedy's government that the international community would splinter along colour lines, exacerbating North-South tensions, and widening racial fissures inside the developed world. Throughout the 1950s, the Soviet premier, Nikita S. Khrushchev, took delight in publicly contrasting the Soviet endorsement of nationalist movements in Africa and Asia with the U.S. support for anachronistic colonial regimes. Moreover, Indian passivity in the face of Portugal's refusal to discuss Goa's sovereignty had led African nationalists to openly question Nehru's commitment to the anti-imperial cause. Speaking at a press conference days after India's military had occupied Panjim, Nehru voiced 'deep distress' at the sharp division of opinion and attitude that Goa had revealed to exist between countries in the West and those within the Afro-Asian bloc. 'I do not like this division to put it very crudely between black and white', the Indian leader stated. 'It is a bad sign, but there it is'.[16]

In early December, a debate had raged within the Kennedy administration over the merits of balancing a warning to India against military action with a statement condemning colonialism. Galbraith badgered Washington to adopt a 'bolder and more dramatic' approach to the Goa question. Supporting India's position on Goa and strengthening Indo-U.S. ties, the ambassador argued, would better serve Asia's future and America's wider interests than a policy tacitly condoning Portuguese imperialism.[17] Dean Rusk, Kennedy's secretary of state, disagreed. Mindful of Lisbon's importance to NATO, Rusk acceded to a Portuguese request that American officials refrain from any public comment on the colonial dimension of the Goa dispute. Furthermore, on 8 December, following a request for American support from Portugal's Foreign Minister Franco Nogueira, the State Department issued India with a firm warning against military action. In Delhi, a dispirited Galbraith reflected that he had 'hardly imagined that I would be undercut in such a flaccid and incompetent manner by our own management'.[18] So inexplicable had Washington's timidity seemed in the face of 'incredible' Portuguese proposals, which included a suggestion that Pakistani divisions be deployed along India's border to intimidate Nehru's government, that a member of Galbraith's embassy staff 'conclude[d] that the [U.S.] policy was to support the Portuguese fully and that I was out of step'.[19]

Tensions injected into Indo-U.S. relations by the Goa crisis were further exacerbated the following spring when it emerged that India planned to purchase Soviet MiG-21 supersonic fighters. India's air force had previously operated frontline aircraft sourced exclusively from the West. Delhi's change of heart encompassed several strands. Strategically, Nehru's government felt compelled to respond to a decision that Kennedy had taken in July 1961 to supply Pakistan with American F-104 supersonic fighters. Likewise, with the Sino-Indian border dispute turning increasingly rancorous

bolstering the nation's defences appeared prudent.[20] Financially, India's parlous foreign exchange reserves precluded the acquisition of more expensive Western aircraft.[21]

From Washington's perspective, the prospect that Nehru's government would turn away from the West and toward Moscow for its military hardware was seen as politically incendiary. An indignant Congress, Kennedy staffers suspected, would react to such an unwelcome development by censuring India and slashing its allocation of U.S. aid. Offering to supply India with American fighters was ruled out by Washington on the grounds that it would alienate Pakistan and risk Islamabad's withdrawal from Western sponsored regional security pacts, or the closing of U.S. intelligence gathering facilities on Pakistani soil.[22] Instead, Kennedy turned to London and pressed Macmillan to make the British Lightning supersonic fighter available to India.

On balance, the British cabinet concluded that the benefit of preventing India's purchase of a handful of Soviet fighters failed to justify the considerable political and economic costs associated with contesting such a transaction.[23] At this stage, the British were less concerned about the future possibility of a long-term and large scale Indo-Soviet fighter programme and more focused on the heavy price of thwarting what they suspected might prove to be a largely symbolic Indian statement of intent. In Delhi, High Commissioner PaulGore-Booth emphasized that India's purchase of small number of Soviet fighters 'would not, of course be the end of the world'.[24] Some American policymakers concurred. Inside the White House, Robert Komer, the National Security Council's expert on South Asia, argued that a token show of Soviet military support for India might in fact work to Washington's advantage by encouraging Nehru to become more openly critical of China. Llewellyn Thompson,

Kennedy's ambassador in Moscow, agreed. In Thompson's view, an Indo-Soviet MiG deal was unlikely to 'lead to Indian dependence upon [the] Soviet Union in other military fields . . . [yet] would place serious further strain on their [Soviet] relations with [the] Chicoms'.[25]

Nonetheless, under considerable pressure from Kennedy, over the summer of 1962 the British embarked upon a half-hearted and ineffectual campaign to scuttle an Indian acquisition of MiGs.[26] Heavy handed tactics employed by American and British officials, which encompassed dire warnings issued to Indian government ministers that by turning to Moscow and antagonising the U.S. Congress the 'cheap MiG' would turn into 'the most expensive aeroplane the Indians had ever bought', proved counterproductive.[27] On 23 June, fulminating against what he characterized as unwarranted Western duress, Nehru informed India's parliament that 'no independent country and certainly not India, can agree to the proposition that our purchases of aircraft or anything can be vetoed by another country'. Although the West had publicly 'agreed we can buy where we like and what we like', Nehru seethed, 'behind it all, although it is not said as a threat, behind it all is the question of aid'.[28]

In the Western media, the last week of June was categorized as 'a period of fuming, frustration and political rethinking in New Delhi'.[29] The 'almost overt' tactics of coercion adopted by Macmillan's government, and to a lesser degree the United States, one British newspaper commented, 'had the predictable consequence of uniting all extremes of [Indian] opinion behind Mr. Nehru'.[30] The strength of Indian opposition American and British pressure saw Washington beat a tactical retreat, and switch from a policy of cajoling Indian officials to one of ameliorating the friction that the MiG affair had introduced into Indo-U.S. relations. 'At this point', Kennedy was advised toward the end of the summer, 'further frenetic efforts on our part

[against the MiG deal] will merely depreciate our currency further and create bad blood. We should now begin thinking of how best to . . . recover our footing in India'.[31]

Intriguingly, during its first year in office, the Kennedy administration's faith in India's capacity to serve as a bulwark against communism had briefly assumed a nuclear dimension. On this occasion, concern in Washington had centred on China, and Beijing's programme to acquire atomic weapons. India, officials in the State Department reasoned, could, with appropriate American technical assistance, become Asia's first nuclear power. By beating China to membership of the nuclear club, U.S. officials suggested, democratic India would undercut communist claims that state-directed economies offered the surest path to progress and modernity. Moreover, an Indian bomb promised to shield Delhi from Chinese nuclear blackmail, weaken Beijing's influence over its regional neighbours and moderate communism's appeal inside India.[32] A formidable concatenation of practical and political obstacles ensured that an Indo-U.S. nuclear pact remained confined to the pages of a State Department policy paper. Not least, Nehru's vehement public opposition to nuclear proliferation, legal constraints surrounding the transferal of U.S. nuclear technology and the volcanic reaction that was anticipated from Pakistan to such a development combined to seal the proposal's demise.[33] The mere fact that the Kennedy administration seriously debated the merits of such a proposal, however, reveals much about Washington's preoccupation with the expansion of communist influence in Asia in general, and, more specifically, the New Frontier's obsession with what it interpreted as an especially insidious threat to U.S. national interests posed by militant Chinese communism.

The Sino-Indian Border War

The onset of Sino-Indian hostilities in October 1962 provided the Kennedy administration with an early and unexpected opportunity to recover the political ground that it had lost in India over the previous twelve months. From the outset, Washington approached the conflict between India and China as a chance to regain India's favour by providing Nehru's embattled administration with a firm show of U.S.-British support. Alert, nonetheless, to the imperatives of preserving the appearance of Indian non-alignment, assuaging Pakistani insecurity and containing the scope of Sino-Indian conflict, Kennedy and his British partners initially offered India rhetorical, rather than material, backing.[34] So long as the border war remained a localized affair, American officials judged, there was no need to risk alienating Nehru's government with unsolicited offers of Western military assistance. In the circumstances, it appeared more prudent to limit U.S.-British interaction with India to expressions of 'quiet sympathy and encouragement'.[35]

Toward the end of October, the scale of Indian military reverses at the hands of the Chinese led Washington and London reconsider their hands-off approach. On 25 October, a shocked Nehru conceded that his government had been found wanting and was guilty of drifting along 'in an artificial atmosphere of our own creation'.[36] The following day, India's premier called openly for international 'sympathy and support'.[37] In response, Kennedy's administration formally recognised the McMahon Line, which India claimed delineated its north-eastern border with China, and began expediting the delivery of automatic rifles, ammunition and military spares to a grateful India.[38]

At the same time, Kennedy pushed the reluctant British to the forefront of a collaborative Western effort to defend India. Conscious, as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara pointedly emphasized that Britain's financial and military limitations would constrain London's long-term capacity to assist India, Kennedy nevertheless judged that working with Macmillan's government offered short-term advantages. Rehashing familiar arguments, Kennedy reasoned that with the British in the vanguard, American intervention in the sub-continent would prove more palatable to the international community and ease Congress' reservations over U.S. action in South Asia. William Fulbright, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, had privately warned administration officials of his concern that the U.S. would face a problem of strategic overstretch should it embark on unilateral intervention in South Asia. Moreover, the antipathy that Nehru's government had garnered on Capitol Hill led many of Fulbright's fellow legislators to openly gloat at India's predicament. While the extent of Chinese territorial ambitions in the subcontinent remained uncertain, it seemed, Congressmen were in no hurry to rush to Delhi's assistance.[39] Consequently, in co-ordinating a response to the Sino-Indian crisis with London, Kennedy hoped to offset a proportion of the politico-military burden that the State Department and the Pentagon estimated would be required to underwrite Indian security.[40]

Following Kennedy's cue, Dean Rusk set about cajoling the British to mobilise a coalition of the 'old' Commonwealth forces to assist India. A Commonwealth coalition, Rusk suggested, could assist Delhi by halting grain shipments to China, convening an emergency summit, calling on Pakistan to extend an olive branch to India, and possibly sending a detachment of combat troops to the subcontinent.[41] Discounting the absence of a Commonwealth collective security mechanism, Rusk

made clear that without the participation of the old Commonwealth, 'the United States would face political difficulties in underwriting India's security'. To reinforce this point, Galbraith was instructed to ensure that Nehru's government 'insist[ed] on maximum Commonwealth support . . . Specifically, any requests for assistance made of us should also be addressed to the British'.[42] For its part, Macmillan's government was alarmed at the prospect of Britain becoming enmeshed in a Sino-Indian War. One Foreign Office report contended that by scrambling to furnish India with military assistance, the Commonwealth risked dislocating the existing balance of power between India and Pakistan and squandering precious resources if, as was suspected, China's territorial ambitions proved limited. Moreover, the Foreign Office added, Britain's economic problems alone suggested that 'even if the Americans can afford to give unlimited aid [to India] we cannot'.[43]

After a lull in Sino-Indian fighting toward the end of October, by the middle of November 1962 a combination of Indian jingoism, Delhi's decision to rebuff peace overtures from Beijing and intelligence indicating that fresh Chinese troops were being mobilized along the border, set alarm bells ringing in Washington and London. What had seemed 'essentially a border conflict', Galbraith reflected on 13 November, now looked set to develop into 'something more serious'.[44] On 15 November, in the most potent demonstration of Chinese power since the People's Liberation Army had flooded across the Yalu River and into North Korea in October 1950, India suffered a second wave of catastrophic military defeats. In a rerun of October's debacle, more than forty Indian Army outposts were overrun in the Western Himalaya in Ladakh, and the strategically vital Chushul airfield peppered with Chinese artillery fire. In the northeast, Chinese forces took control of the Indian towns of Walong and Bomdila and, in the process, breached the defensive line guarding India's densely populated

central plains.[45]

Addressing a stunned nation on 19 November, Nehru announced that his government had appealed to the United States and Great Britain for 'massive' military aid. In tones redolent of that archenemy of Indian nationalism, Winston Churchill, India's leader declared defiantly that 'we are not going to tolerate this kind of invasion of India . . .. India is not going to lose this war, however long it lasts and whatever harm it may do us'.[46] The implication that Nehru might consider temporarily qualifying Indian Non-Alignment was driven by a real and present danger that, without immediate and substantial international military assistance, much of northern India risked falling under Chinese control. India's Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri had earlier cautioned his cabinet colleagues that with the Indian Army in full retreat, the PLA was free to walk unopposed into Assam and Bengal. Contingency plans had been put in place, Shastri added sombrely, to disable Assam's oil fields before they fell into Chinese hands.[47]

In a stark personal appeal to Kennedy, Nehru represented India's situation as 'desperate'. Only prompt American military intervention in the conflict, an incredulous American president was informed by India's prime minister, could avoid 'nothing short of a catastrophe for our country'. Specifically, Nehru asked Kennedy to authorise the transfer to India of twelve squadrons of American supersonic fighters, two squadrons of bombers and a mobile radar network. Aghast that Nehru was 'clearly in a state of panic', Kennedy speculated whether the ageing premier's nerve and judgement had abandoned him.[48] Galbraith shared Kennedy's concern. Having sent much of his time in Delhi deflecting charges from the Indian Left that Washington was conspiring to undermine the nation's independence, the U.S.

Ambassador was dismayed to find the Indian government now 'pleading for military association'.[49]

Doubtful that the latest Chinese thrust would materialize into a full-scale invasion of India, Dean Rusk instructed Galbraith to advise Nehru that his government would have to accept some tough conditions before America considered direct intervention in the Sino-Indian War. These included maximizing India's mobilization of its own political and military resources, exploring an Indo-Pakistani rapprochement and garnering support from the British Commonwealth and South East Asia nations, such as Thailand, Burma and Malaya, with a common interest in containing China. Moreover, if, having first exhausted all other avenues, Delhi requested assistance from American combat forces, as a *quid pro quo* India would be expected to abandon its Cold War neutrality and become a formal ally of the West.[50]

Earlier in November, American officials, led by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense William Bundy, had travelled to London to co-ordinate the provision of Anglo-American military assistance to India. Between 12 and 14 November, Bundy's team negotiated an agreement with the British to confine military aid to India to 'reasonable quantities' of defensive equipment, encompassing small arms, radio sets and winter clothing. Such a moderate programme of military support for India, American and British officials rationalised, would prove sufficient to uphold Indian sovereignty and avoid exacerbating Pakistan's insecurity or encouraging China to escalate the border war.[51] Back in Delhi, an angry Galbraith smouldered that the London talks had failed to adequately address India's sense of vulnerability. 'After lecturing the Indians for years on the aggressive tendencies of the Chinese Communists', the Ambassador fumed, 'we cannot now turn around and explain that these chaps are really lambs'.[52]

Galbraith's fears were assuaged when, in response to Nehru's plea for American military support, Kennedy shelved the London agreement and sent a high level fact-finding mission to the subcontinent to assess the gravity the situation facing India. Based on the Taylor Mission that had reviewed the military picture in South Vietnam for Kennedy in October 1961, the U.S. delegation to India was commanded by the veteran diplomat Averell W. Harriman. Harriman's brief was to establish the precise nature of India's military predicament, and to provide Nehru's government with an overt demonstration of American solidarity.[53] At the same time, Macmillan despatched a British politico-military team to India, led by Duncan Sandys, the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations.[54] On 20 November, with Harriman and Sandys yet to reach India, the Chinese government unexpectedly declared a unilateral ceasefire. Catching politicians in Delhi, Washington and London by surprise, Beijing announced that its armed forces would pull back to positions 20 kilometres behind the line of actual control that had existed prior to 7 November 1959.[55]

The timing of the ceasefire declaration, Whitehall officials observed ruefully, had left India 'somewhat more committed to the West than would have been the case had the Chinese acted two days earlier'.[56] More significantly, perhaps, the Chinese action effectively absolved Nehru of the responsibility for taking what, for the Indian leader, would have been an agonising decision. Beijing's loud protestations that Nehru had compromised Indian nonalignment by turning to the West for military support, while rejected by many inside the developing world, nevertheless, left many Indians feeling uneasy. In the absence of the Chinese ceasefire, how would Nehru have balanced obligations to uphold Indian national sovereignty with stipulations from Dean Rusk that direct American intervention in the Sino-Indian War would necessitate New

Delhi's adherence to the Western system of collective security?

With the prospect of a Western combat role in the War having receded by the time Harriman and Sandys arrived in Delhi, once on the ground in India the separate British and American missions quickly concurred that the Chinese threat to South Asia could only be contained at a manageable economic and political cost by India and Pakistan burying their animosities and entering into a joint defence plan for the subcontinent.[57] Engineering a rapprochement in Indo-Pakistan relations, however, at least from Pakistan's perspective, was dependent on the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, which had embittered relations between Delhi and Islamabad since 1947. Over the course of 1963, American and British attempts to cajole Nehru's government into an agreement under which India would trade Western military support against China in return for an Indo-Pakistan Kashmir settlement would prove futile, and succeed only in driving a wedge between India, the United States and Great Britain.

The Kashmir Dispute and Indian Air Defence

The Kennedy administration's policy of linking the provision of Indian military aid to an Indo-Pakistan Kashmir settlement made little sense to American diplomats in the subcontinent. An excited Galbraith warned Washington that Indians were bound to react with cold fury should America, Britain and Pakistan appear to be colluding to enforce the surrender of Indian territory while the Chinese were grabbing land elsewhere in the north. 'For God's sake', Galbraith implored the State Department, 'keep Kashmir out of it'.[58] Choosing to ignore Galbraith's counsel, Harriman and Sandys inveigled upon a resentful Nehru to open talks with Pakistan on Kashmir. Failure to do so, the Indian premier was cautioned, would erode the political and

public support in the United States and United Kingdom that Kennedy and Macmillan needed to deliver a programme of military assistance to India. As Galbraith had suspected, however, six rounds of Indo-Pakistan on Kashmir, held between December 1962 and May 1963, succeeded only in aggravating fractious relations between India and Pakistan.[59]

In April 1963, frustrated by the 'badly lagging tempo' of Indo-Pakistan talks on Kashmir, Galbraith hatched a plan to break the negotiating impasse by offering Nehru 'a crude bazaar level' bargain. Changing tack, and abandoning the position he had staked out in November 1962, Galbraith suggested asking India to relinquish a 'substantial' area of the Kashmir Valley to Pakistan in return for a 'sizable' long-term programme of American military aid.[60] The White House dismissed Galbraith's proposal as an unnecessary and risky intervention in bilateral discussions between India and Pakistan at a point when they had yet to run their course.[61] On 15 April, disregarding instructions from the State Department to take no action, Galbraith presented the 'bazaar bargain' to Nehru.[62] The infuriated Indian premier turned it down flatly. His 'bazaar level' approach having backfired, a chastened Galbraith was left to inform Washington that Nehru had subsequently delighted in informing anyone that would listen 'that we [Americans] were real bastards'.[63]

Further initiatives undertaken by the Kennedy administration to extract a political advantage from Nehru's government by exploiting Indian anxieties in relation to Beijing faired equally poorly. A scheme to boost American radio penetration into China by locating a Voice of America (VOA) transmitter in eastern India was a case in point. Allowing a radio transmitter located on Indian soil to disseminate U.S. anti-Chinese propaganda could not be considered a defensive measure vital to the nation's defence and, as such, clearly cut against the grain of nonalignment. Under

considerable American duress, Nehru first agreed to the operation of a VOA transmitter in India, and then, confronted by powerful domestic opposition, reneged on the deal. The very public debacle left Nehru politically weakened, and Washington red-faced.[64]

Likewise, pressure exerted on India by Washington in the air defence field proved largely ineffectual. In mid-November 1962, Nehru's call for American combat jets to be sent to the subcontinent to defend Indian airspace had been prompted by fears that China's Air Force would bomb the country's eastern cities.[65] Concerned that America's armed forces were overcommitted elsewhere, the Pentagon recommended that prime responsibility for Indian air defence should be left to the British.[66] The State Department agreed, arguing the operation of Commonwealth as opposed to American fighter squadrons in India would prove more acceptable to Pakistan and help to make ongoing military support for Nehru's Government more 'saleable' on Capitol Hill. 'Indian air defence', Dean Rusk confirmed on Galbraith in early December 1962, 'is a field in which we are going to insist on Commonwealth leadership'.[67]

In New Delhi, Galbraith objected loudly to what he saw as the State Department's inexplicable willingness to allow the British to 'get the credit' from sending their fighter aircraft to India's rescue.[68] In the estimation of the American ambassador, Nehru's government was on the verge of cooperating in the containment of Communist China in return for the provision of long-term Western military aid. The importance of exploiting such a propitious opportunity to draw India into the Western orbit, Galbraith insisted, meant that the air defence issue was far too important to be left to the feckless British.[69] In response, Washington acknowledged that a prominent Commonwealth role in India's air defence risked alienating Nehru's Government by

permitting the British to dictate when, and in what form, fighter support might materialise. Nonetheless, the political value of working though the Commonwealth in South Asia retained a surprising amount of currency with senior American policymakers.[70]

Characteristically, the British approached the air defence question from an entirely different angle. Macmillan's government recoiled at the prospect of the Royal Air Force undertaking combat air patrols over India. The possibility that British fighters might be compelled to shoot down Chinese bombers over India, embroiling the United Kingdom in hostilities with Beijing, was regarded as unthinkable. Duncan Sandys maintained that deploying the RAF in the subcontinent was militarily unnecessary and more likely than not to 'provoke the Chinese to attack India again in the hope of involving Western prestige in an Indian defeat'.[71] This in turn, Sandys postulated, could see events in the subcontinent spiral out of control, and result in 'a major trial of strength between China and the West and possibly a nuclear war'.[72]

In general, the British were troubled that the United States' breach with Communist China after 1949 had led 'the Americans . . . to view with much greater equanimity than we . . . the prospect of a shooting war developing between the West and China'.[73] Mindful of its substantial trading stake in China and the strategic vulnerability of Hong Kong, Macmillan's government had no wish to break with Beijing. In January 1963, the British underlined this fact by welcoming Lu Hsu-Chang, China's vice-minister for foreign trade, to London. 'It is important for our trade with China that we do this', Lord Home informed Duncan Sandys, 'we are so badly in need of export outlets it would, I think, be difficult to justify to Parliament and public a more rigid attitude towards China, out of deference to India'.[74]

In a bid to avoid Britain being sucked into an air war with China, Macmillan's government stipulated a series of onerous preconditions that would have to be met by Washington before the RAF was be permitted to operate in India. These encompassed a concomitant United States Air Force combat presence and Kennedy's undertaking to protect British assets, such as Hong Kong, from Chinese retaliation. Disinclined to offer Delhi security guarantees on a par with that of formal allies, such as Pakistan, but with none of the attendant responsibilities, the British also insisted on formal Indian military association with the West in return for the provision of air defence.[75] Kennedy spurned Macmillan's terms, considering them likely to drive a wedge between his administration and Pakistan, and alienate Nehru's government by calling for India's abrogation of non-alignment. A fudged solution emerged from the U.S.-British impasse. This saw Britain and the United States conclude an agreement with the Indian government to stage periodic joint air exercises in the subcontinent, without either party entering into mutual security obligations of any kind.[76]

Frustrated American officials subsequently lamented that British timidity had sacrificed a valuable opportunity to consolidate Western influence in India by offering Nehru a no-strings attached security guarantee. In an NSC meeting on 9 May, McGeorge Bundy, Assistant to President Kennedy for National Security Affairs, griped that the British 'really don't accept our basic view that there is a revolution in policy in the subcontinent. I think that's what it comes down to'. Reflecting upon the potential deterrent effect of a comprehensive air defence scheme on future Chinese aggression against India, Kennedy himself mused that 'I don't think there's any doubt that this country is determined we couldn't permit the Chinese to defeat the Indians. Don't know what we're doing if we were. We might as well get out of South Korea and South Vietnam . . .. We would quite obviously use nuclear weapons if we were

really going to be overrun in . . . India . . .. [The question is] is a deterrent necessary to the Chinese and therefore do we want to express a guarantee at this time, and secondly in what way can we get the most political mileage out of it if we give the guarantee to the Indians, and the least political heat from the Pakistanis, and do we need the British to go with us on it'.[102]

The air defence compromise proved more satisfactory to the British, principally by limiting the risk of their involvement in a regional conflict with China. Tellingly, however, with tensions between Beijing and Delhi having cooled by early 1963 and opposition mounting in India to foreign participation in the country's defence, Nehru had perhaps the most cause for satisfaction from the air defence arrangement. From the Indian premier's vantage point, the Chinese had been given a clear signal of Western military intent, whilst, nominally at least, Indian non-alignment remained intact. In November 1963, following a single combined training operation in the subcontinent, involving Indian, American, British, and Australian military aircraft, Nehru quietly shelved a second exercise scheduled for April 1964.

Conclusion

The chasm that existed between relative American and British power at the time of the Sino-Indian border war and the divergent viewpoints from which Washington and Whitehall approached their relationships with India and Communist China, militated against the operation of an effective U.S.-British partnership in the Indian subcontinent. American and British strategic goals in South Asia were broadly compatible. Pronounced tactical differences existed between American and British policymakers, however, over how best to address regional challenges or exploit

regional opportunities. By electing to work closely with Harold Macmillan's government in South Asia, initiatives championed by the Kennedy administration were invariably delayed, diluted and rendered ineffectual. In the case of the Sino-Indian border war, as Washington belatedly came to acknowledge, London was pressed by the United States to take on a financial, political and military role in support of India, for which Britain was singularly ill equipped.

Equally, the documentary records suggest that in the early 1960s American policymakers had a profoundly inadequate sense of the extent to which India's previously intractable problems were susceptible to external manipulation. Whether attempting to prevent Delhi's annexation of Goa, halt India's purchase of Soviet combat aircraft, coax Nehru's government into becoming a de facto member of the West's system of collective security, or broker a settlement to the Indo-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir, actions undertaken by the United States in concert with Great Britain invariably succeeded only in alienating Indian opinion.

Having come to office in January 1961 with the intention of transforming India into a beacon of Asian democracy and to advocate American interests inside the non-aligned world, toward the end of 1963 the steam had run out of the Kennedy administration's Indian project. Protracted and enervating disputes between Washington and Delhi over military aid and Kashmir brought on by the Sino-Indian war had a chilling impact on Indo-U.S. relations. Moreover, an abrupt change at the top of the American government in November that year exacerbated a growing sense of detachment between India and the United States. On 22 November, following Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, Texas, Lyndon B. Johnson took charge of a traumatised nation and inherited a series of pressing domestic and foreign policy problems. Issues left over from his predecessor's intervention into the politics of the Indian subcontinent,

Johnson decided, could wait while more urgent matters were addressed, at home and abroad. Washington's focus in Asia was, however, already moving away from the Indian subcontinent and towards the turmoil engulfing South Vietnam. Other wars loomed large on the Asian horizon, and it was to these that successive American governments redirected their attention.

Notes

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