

# Himalayan War: In 1962, India and US were 'that' close to becoming allies in a war against China

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**Bruce Reidel's 'JFK's Forgotten Crisis' offers startling revelations and what-if possibilities.**

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For many years there's been a story floating around that in 1962, when the Chinese invasion was into its fourth unstoppable week, the Indian government panicked completely and wrote to the US government pleading for mind-boggling supplies of armaments - including several squadrons of the latest US fighter aircraft and bombers. I heard this story a few years ago from someone who'd been an aide at the Indian embassy in Washington at the time, who told me how the Ambassador had called him in and wordlessly handed him New Delhi's letter to see.

The two men had then quietly shaken their heads at the sheer magnitude of air power being requested, and what it said about the degree of panic in the Indian government with the many questions it raised - the first one, of course, being who exactly was supposed to fly those highly sophisticated new aircraft (since Indian pilots were obviously untrained to fly them). But there has never been any real confirmation of this story. Until now.

Bruce Reidel is a US security expert, veteran CIA spook, and advisor on South Asian issues. His recent book, *JFK's Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA and Sino-Indian War*, looks at the 1962 War from an unusual perspective: the hitherto unknown, but key, role that the US played behind the scenes. The source of Reidel's information is a rich lode of material in the US, including recently de-classified letters between Nehru and Kennedy and the private diaries of some of the protagonists, among them being JK Galbraith, the US ambassador in India, a key player in the drama. What makes this book especially interesting is the fact that successive Indian governments - including the present one - have been so tight-lipped about what actually happened in 1962 (to the extent that the Henderson-Brooks Report, commissioned to investigate the causes of the defeat, has still not been de-classified, over fifty years later, although a copy is readily available on the Net).

## **Reiterating the ‘Domino Theory’?**

Reidel reveals the fact that Nehru did indeed write to Kennedy on November 19, 1962 requesting as many as 12 squadrons of state-of-the-art fighter aircraft and two squadrons of long-range bombers – 350 combat aircraft, in all! – as well as extensive radar cover and transport aircraft. And as for the question of who was going to fly these aircraft, the letter was, in fact, specific: the Indian government asked for the loan of US pilots and ground crews until such time as the necessary Indian crews could be trained.

The stakes, Nehru’s letter went on to state, were not merely “the survival of India, but the survival of free and independent governments in the whole of... Asia.” This revelation of Reidel’s is dynamite, especially coming from Nehru who, despite his long-standing Non-Aligned position, now seemed to be reiterating President Eisenhower’s famous “Domino Theory”, and inviting a US military presence into Asia (at just about the time that the Vietnam War was first beginning to hot up).

Kennedy and Nehru did not, as it happens, share a particularly good relationship. When they had met, the year before, Nehru had rubbed the young Kennedy the wrong way by appearing to be condescending and preachy. But the situation was too serious to let something like bad chemistry get in the way; the US saw the Chinese attack as the Mao Tse Tung’s most dangerous action since the Korean War, ten years before. Kennedy, therefore, responded swiftly to New Delhi’s appeal by air-lifting emergency supplies for the Indian army, and a dialogue was immediately initiated for the next steps.

## **Holding back the Pakistanis**

There was, however, a serious complicating factor that would have to be tackled straightaway. Pakistan, a close US ally at the time, seeing India diverted by the Chinese attack, perceived a unique opportunity for itself to step in, occupy Kashmir and close that matter once and for all.

Fortunately for India, though, the US ambassador in New Delhi, JK Galbraith, considered this to be military blackmail, and told Washington to “for god’s sake, keep Kashmir out” of the scenario. Washington, in turn, bullied Pakistan into backing off, reminding President Ayub Khan that his country was a member of the US anti-communist alliance, and that the US would therefore not tolerate him taking advantage of a communist Chinese attack on India. Khan reluctantly agreed, but he never forgave what he saw as a great US betrayal.

But most frightening of all was the timing of this: incredibly, it was all happening at precisely the same time that the US was eyeball-to-eyeball with Russia over the Cuban missile crisis, and the world was on the brink of a nuclear holocaust. Indeed, the Chinese had carefully timed their attack on India based on their fore-knowledge of the Cuban crisis, and the calculation that the Russians and Americans would be too preoccupied with each other to interfere in a Sino-Indian conflict on the other side of the globe.

But, as it turned out, they were wrong on that score.

## **More startling revelations**

By November 20, India’s situation looked desperate. The Chinese army, led by officers who had humbled the US forces in Korea, were using some of their tested Korean tactics in NEFA and

Ladakh, with devastating effect. They now seemed poised to slice off the entire North-Eastern part of India, east of Siliguri, and Kolkata itself was under threat.

But by now Western arms supplies were pouring into India. According to Reidel, not only were US and British aircraft flying in military aid around-the-clock, but 10,000 US servicemen had actually landed in the country, and Canada and Australia had also been enlisted, just as they had during the Korean War. Moreover, a US aircraft carrier group had been moved strategically into the Bay of Bengal. These revelations, too – assuming they're true – are dynamite, and one wonders why one didn't know about all this before.

Meanwhile, discussions were going on between India and US for a massive military aid program. India had asked for \$1.3 billion worth of aid (close to \$10 billion today), which the US balked at. Finally, a package of \$500 million (approximately \$3.5 billion today) was tentatively agreed upon.

At this point China suddenly surprised everybody by ending its invasion and unilaterally withdrawing its forces. As US ambassador JK Galbraith noted with relief in his diary, "Like a thief in the night peace arrived".

The theory so far has been that this withdrawal was because China had achieved its objective, taught India a lesson and personally destroyed Nehru in the bargain. But Reidel suggests a new theory to us: that the withdrawal was because China's leadership, surprised by the US's prompt response to the situation, was worried that it might now decide to up the stakes and actively enter the conflict on India's side – and it was not willing to take that risk.

That is certainly food for thought.

### **Discussing a nuclear deterrent!**

The fighting may have ended in late November 1962, but there were fears that the war was not necessarily over, and that with the thawing of the Himalayan snows the Chinese might be back the following spring.

Hence, 1963 saw a significant upswing in India's relations with the US, diplomatic as well as military; as Kennedy was to say, "I can tell you that there is nothing that has occupied our attention more than India in the last nine months". US pilots were training in India, along with along with British, Canadian and Australian pilots, and the US Secretary of Defense was actually discussing with Kennedy the scope of the US commitment to defend India – and whether it would extend to the use of a nuclear deterrent or not.

Meanwhile, the \$500 million US military aid package to India was to be finalised by Kennedy on November 26, 1963. But just four days before that could happen, Kennedy was assassinated, and his successor, Lyndon Johnson, postponed the decision.

The deal was to come up for finalisation once again on May 28, 1964, but it seems to have been fatally jinxed: just the day before, Nehru died in New Delhi, and the Indian team that had arrived in Washington to sign off on it had to return home abruptly.

And so, once again, the deal was postponed, with President Johnson now coming under increasing pressure from Pakistan, who threatened to terminate US access to the Peshawar air-base, from where it had been operating vital spy flights since the 1950s.

## Fascinating questions

By now, however, the climate in New Delhi was changing under the new Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, who had begun to look, instead, to the Russians for military support. And so the chapter was quietly closed.

The fact that India did not ultimately sign that arms deal with the US was a “lost opportunity in Indo-American relations”, as the then US ambassador noted regretfully. Kennedy had, since the very beginning of his presidency, given thought to the question of who would take the lead in Asia in the long term, India or China, and the developments of 1962 could have – who knows? – led to an economic partnership with the US to set up India as a counterweight to China.

Reidel’s book gives rise to many fascinating questions. And foremost among them is probably this: what if Kennedy and Nehru had not both died when they did, and India had indeed been drawn into a Western-led military alliance as a key member?

What would have happened, for example, when the Vietnam War suddenly blew up a couple of years down the line?

What would India’s stance have been then?

There are some questions that are just too complicated to wrap one’s head around.

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*JFK’s Forgotten Crisis*, Bruce Reidel, Brookings Institution Press.

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**P.S.**

\* Scroll.in. Jan 23, 2016 · 11:30 am:

<http://scroll.in/article/802276/in-1962-india-and-us-were-that-close-to-becoming-allies-in-a-war-again-st-china>

\* We welcome your comments at [letters@scroll.in](mailto:letters@scroll.in)