

## 1962: A war to remember or forget?

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The 1962 war has been, and will be for a long time to come, the single most important paradigmatic influence on India's approach to China. One of the oft-listened sentences in Delhi's strategic circles is that "China cannot be trusted, look what they did to us in 1962". This brings attention to the question of how India should remember 1962 and what can be done to do remember it in a manner, which does not hamper the progress as far as India China relations in the future are concerned.

India's loss has created a lasting sense of insecurity as far as India's security apparatus is concerned. For example, China's rise and data on China's security apparatus tend to be presented in comparison with numbers from India. China's growing defence budget is regularly presented as being thrice the size of India's whereas India is not seen by China as the actor that is at the core of its sense of insecurity. Protection from territorial and identity challenges from the US is of China's national interest.

The biggest cause of the 1962 War between India and China was insecurity, and confidence that turned into miscalculation and on the other hand, a complete misalignment of worldviews of leaders of the respective countries. As a newly independent state, China was insecure in the days leading to the war. Mao's morale boosters to his peasant comrades, the Great Leap Forward had bust, and had pushed China on the verge of bankruptcy. It had also cost it in terms of human capital due to deaths, floods, droughts and chronic food shortages. The Sino-Soviet split had left China without an ally: India was virtually out of the Cold War while China was a part of it, out of the UN and without a friend. The former Soviet Union had also turned down the nuclear deal with China, it had signed only a couple of years earlier after the ideological split and after the initial negotiations on the NPT had begun. Also, Mao's

willingness to use force to secure national interest did not match with India's belief that a newly independent Asian country would not fight a war against India. What we had was a case of classic miscommunication that was waiting to explode into the war.

What has happened since 1962 needs no elaboration; China's points of reference as far as national interests and capacity have changed more dramatically than ever before. In 1962, China and the US were perhaps bigger enemies than China and India. Since China's opening up, they have taken the route of engagement with each other to reduce mistrust and now have enmeshed interdependence that keeps them at peace. They do not fight their wars on borders or in the coastal zones any more; the US-China wars have become wars of words and ideas and are fought in the WTO, the Climate Change negotiations and elsewhere in the multilateral forums. US does not view China's rise as a territorial or a security challenge but an ideological challenge on the global level. In short, rules of engagement and conflict have altered with the unleashing of the forces of globalisation. Clearly what stops India from being an actor that is taken seriously is its nervous outlook on national interest that perhaps draws too much from the experience of 1962.

What India needs to do is to bury the ghosts of 1962 that constrains its strategic outlook. For this to be possible, some graves might need to be dug in order to undertake an honest and clear reassessment of the mistakes and misunderstandings that might have caused the war. It will also need a serious reconsideration of the nation's priorities. From the outside, a nonaligned India looks a fence sitter to the US and appears to be falling in the US lap as far as Chinese insecurities are concerned.

When the inevitability of China's rise became crystal clear in the 1990s, one of the most important questions that the strategists in the US asked was "whether China would become a responsible great power?" In case of India that question might be whether India wants to become a great power that is taken seriously for what it is and what it can do rather than for what it appears to be in context of the external forces. India can achieve that and much more by setting aside its insecurities and participating in the international order as a power that *does* things as a power would rather than advice as a critique would.