

Summer 2009

Causes of the 1962 Sino-Indian War: A Systems Level Approach

Aldo D. Abitol
University of Denver

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.du.edu/advancedintlstudies>



Part of the [International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Aldo D. Abitol, "Causes of the 1962 Sino-Indian War: A systems Level Approach," *Josef Korbel Journal of Advanced International Studies* 1 (Summer 2009): 74-88.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Josef Korbel Journal of Advanced International Studies* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu.

Causes of the 1962 Sino-Indian War

A SYSTEMS LEVEL APPROACH

ALDO D. ABITBOL

University of Denver

M.A. Candidate, International Security

The emergence of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) nations as regional powers and future challengers to U.S. hegemony has been predicted by many, and is a topic of much debate among the IR community today. Interestingly, three of these nations have warred against each other in the past and, coincidentally or not, it was the nations that shared borders: India and China and China and Russia. This paper attempts an in-depth case study of the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict from an angle that differs from previous studies. Past explorations of this conflict have focused on domestic or the psychological motivations of political leaders for this abrupt war, but I will depart from these studies in assessing the conflict's origin and exploring the reasons for its short duration. Employing a neorealist systems-level approach, I will attempt to explain how the structure of the international system both instigated the Sino-Indian confrontation and also limited the extent of the engagement.

Sun Zi once said, "Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win" (Zi 1988, 20). This declaration applies to the Sino-Indian Border War of 1962 fittingly because of the unprepared manner in which Jawaharlal Nehru entered into armed conflict with the Peoples Republic of China (PRC). Prime Minister Nehru, in a seemingly intractable diplomatic position authorized the use of force against PRC assets in Ladakh, south of the McMahon Line, in order to defend his conception of Indian territorial integrity on October 9, 1962 (Eekelen 1967, 114). The resulting response from the PRC was a devastating counterattack on October 20, 1962 crushing the Indian military. A second Chinese offensive began on November 16, 1962, completely defeating Indian forces in the region (Vertzberger 1984, 66). On November 21, 1962 the PRC declared a unilateral ceasefire, and withdrew 20 km behind the line of actual control represented in Figure 1. Afterwards, no further military engagements ensued. In the aftermath of this limited war the PRC suffered 1,400 casualties in comparison with the Indian military's 3,120 dead, 3,100 captured, and 1,000 wounded (Feng, Cheng, and Wortzel 2003, 188).

However, it is not the purpose of this paper to recount the battles or outcomes of the 1962 Sino-Indian War. What is to be analyzed here is the question: why did the war erupt? Why was an ephemeral armed conflict necessary between China and India despite the peaceful settlement of border issues with other nations bordering China? This question is perplexing considering both the previously warm and amicable state of Sino-Indian relations, in addition to Zhou Enlai's insistence that "[China] shall only use peaceful means and shall not permit any other kinds of methods" in resolving border issues (Maxwell 1995, 905). Additionally, a review of this conflict

is relevant today since both India and China are emerging regional and aspiring hegemonic powers. Thus, it is important to understand what brought these nations to war in the past in order to anticipate the possibility of a reoccurrence, which would have greater implications due to their growing power. Using Kenneth Waltz's systems level of analysis method, it will be argued that a neorealist systemic level analysis best explains the factors that pushed both nations to war in 1962, while accounting for the constraints that limited the conflict in scope and scale.

Sino-Indian Relations 1950-1959

The Sino-Indian relationship from 1950 to 1959 was particularly warm, and several reasons for these cordial relations existed. Arguably the most important was the hasty diplomatic recognition of the PRC in December 1949 by India, making them the second nation in the world after Burma to do so (Vertzberger 1984, 63). This conferment of legitimacy was helpful in establishing a cooperative environment with China, as many nations chose instead to recognize the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan. Furthermore, India's existence as a socialist and not a capitalist state, allowed for greater cooperation with the PRC since they did not come into direct conflict with Maoist ideology like the U.S. This basis of diplomatic and ideological congruency led Prime Minister Nehru to attempt to revolutionize international affairs by producing the Panchsheel Agreement between China and India in 1954. The Panchsheel Agreement stressed five points; (1) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; (2) mutual non-aggression; (3) non-interference in each other's domestic affairs; (4) equality and mutual benefit, and finally; (5) peaceful coexistence (Eekelen 1967, 38). This agreement originates from Nehru's optimism that post-colonial nations could invalidate the precepts of a bipolar world, and that the regional powers of Asia can contradict the validity of traditional balance of power politics.

The diplomatic and ideological reasons for Sino-Indian cooperation are bolstered by shared historical experiences. Both China and India share a long and uninterrupted cultural and historical tradition. Both nations at one time were great powers. Most importantly though, both nations were invaded by Western imperialists and consummately humiliated and exploited. This occupation and exploitation by the West caused the growth of significant nationalist forces within India and China, and the desire to gain independence. The ROC received its independence in 1912, and the later consolidation of the PRC in 1949 ushered in a new era of Chinese sovereignty and independence from imperialism. Likewise, India achieved its independence from Britain in 1947.

Due to their history of Western occupation, China and India had additionally failed to develop independent industries. Their occupations meant that the Chinese and Indian economies were still largely agrarian, and dependent on the import of finished goods. This led the Indian government to implement a form of democratic socialism, while the PRC engaged in agrarian based communism, or Maoism. Regardless of their system's differences, both nations abhorred capitalism creating an ideological common ground. Their common historical experience produced a familiar perspective upon which Indian and Chinese policymakers could relate to one another.

This environment of common history and diplomatic cooperation producing positive relations would be challenged by the Chinese policy of taking back historical possessions. The 1950 invasion and takeover of Tibet by the PRC would begin to show strains in the relationship. Trepidation over Tibet's seizure by the PRC was based in the idea of a historical Indian-Tibetan

relationship, but the Seventeen Points Agreement of May 1951 ironed out their differences with India recognizing China's historical sovereignty over Tibet while still preserving Indian economic and social interests in Tibet. The agreement appeared to settle a possible dispute over Tibet between the two powers, but right-wing elements in the Indian parliament expressed this viewpoint of the PRC invasion, "the final action of the Chinese, in my judgment, is a little short of perfidy" (Vertzberger 1984, 64). This underlying opinion of the Tibet invasion by the PRC would bring forward another issue heightening tension in the relationship.

This issue was the definition of China's border with India in the Northeast and Northwest. Maxwell argues that one of China's diplomatic priorities was defining diplomatically agreed boundaries, as "boundaries are one of the first expressions of a modern state" and the PRC sought this validation of modernity (Maxwell 1995, 905). However, to not endanger Sino-Indian relations over the border question, Nehru and Zhou Enlai agreed to leave the border issue between mid-level bureaucrats to be mediated at a later date paving the way for the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement (Hoffmann 1990, 32). Thus, this issue remained on the back-burner of Indian foreign policy until the PRC began to make moves towards its historical conception of Sino-Indian boundaries south of the McMahon Line in 1957.

Two years later Tibet rose up in a massive revolt against Chinese authority. China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) moved in to put down the rebellion by breaking popular will in the capital of Lhasa. March 31, 1959 the Dalai Lama fled from Tibet into India where he was granted political asylum. This course of events angered the Indian public as they saw it as a renunciation of Indian trade and cultural access to Tibet guaranteed in the Seventeen Points Agreement (Vertzberger 1984, 65). PRC officials chaffed at India's meddling in their domestic affairs by granting asylum to the Dalai Lama and thereby violating the 1954 Panchsheel agreement (Hoffmann 1990, 64). The Tibetan revolt combined with gradual Chinese assertion of borders in 1957 due to diplomatic impasse, are the primary factors contributing to a hostile Sino-Indian diplomatic relationship from 1959 to the outbreak of hostilities.

Origin and Events Leading to Border Dispute

The 1914 Simla Convention between Britain and Tibet established the McMahon Line as the official border between British India and China, denying the right of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet (Dalvi 1969, 11). However, the line's namesake McMahon, was ordered back to London in disgrace over the "chicanery" he exercised in border negotiations in which he presented a different map to the Chinese envoy, thus distancing Britain from the legitimacy of the negotiated border (Maxwell 1995, 907). Thirty years later British cartographers began drawing the McMahon Line as the border between British India and China, thus reviving the line's legal legitimacy.

When India gained its independence from Britain in 1947 it inherited all of the British territorial agreements, and as such inherited the McMahon Line as the border between it and China. Indian belief in the legitimacy of the McMahon line dated back to the Simla Convention of 1914, as well as to the numerous maps of British India with the line delineating its northern border. As such Nehru shrugged off Chinese insistence in border negotiation during the 1954 agreement stating that "the McMahon line marked their border with China, where was the need" (Varma 1965, 28)? Despite India's view of the McMahon Line's legitimacy, China had not signed the Simla Convention and under no circumstances consented to any bilateral agreement between Tibet and Britain because it violated their sovereignty (Gupta 1971, 523).

Indian intransigence on negotiating a border acceptable to both parties led the PRC to act independently in areas south of the McMahon line. The justification for this was that in the absence of mutually negotiated borders, the true national boundary was a line of actual control represented by the extent of either nation's ability to administrate the territory. Practical assertion of this idea was first revealed to India in 1957 when an Indian patrol discovered an all-weather road which had been constructed in the Aksai-Chin Plain connecting Xinjiang and Tibet (Vertzberger 1984, 65). The Indian government launched diplomatic protests asserting a violation of their territorial integrity; however the PRC "considered [Aksai-Chin] to have long been Chinese territory" (Maxwell 1995, 911). This issue was not resolved as the Indian government refused to engage in territorial negotiations until Chinese forces completely withdrew from the Aksai-Chin Plain. The PRC refused to do so, and instead of a diplomatic solution India began to pursue a more confrontational approach to assert their territorial claims.

The rebellion in Tibet helped to drastically sour relations between the PRC and India, but the border dispute widened due to a change in Indian military strategy. This change in military strategy was to create forward-posts behind the Chinese claim line, and in strategic locations to flank Chinese military positions (Hoffmann 1990, 94). These posts were constructed to assert Indian territorial claims in the Ladakh region and to threaten the Xinjian-Tibet road in Aksai-Chin. By September, 1962 a similar series of forward posts had been built beyond the Chinese claim line in Tibet, and four such posts were built even beyond the McMahon Line (Hoffmann 1990, 109). This resulted in an inability to claim that these posts were simply to defend Indian territorial integrity. The territorial dispute from India's perspective, coupled with the building of forward military posts by the Indian military caused the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement to not be renewed in 1961. Crossing both the claim and McMahon lines, both nations were in violation of each other's territorial conception, and India was now physically challenging Chinese sovereignty in Tibet.

Defining the Systems Theory

Now that a historical context for Sino-Indian relations during the 20th Century has been established, it is necessary to define the systemic level theory from which the case will be analyzed. A systemic level of analysis eschews the individualities of states and the impact of individual leaders on foreign policy outcomes. Instead it focuses on the structure of the international system, and how this structure forces states to conform to a set of probable responses regardless of their individual differences.

In Kenneth Waltz's seminal work, *Man the State and War*, he lays down the foundation for a levels-of-analysis framework for studying international relations. Waltz does not contend to have created this framework, but instead argues that different theories of international relations promote one or another level of analysis over the other. The basis of this assertion is in Waltz's take on how is politics best to be studied, "Can man in society best be understood by studying man or by studying society" (2001, 5)? If one believes that man in society can best be understood by studying man then you will focus on individuals and reject the influence of society on them, and vice versa. This idea is then refocused from the question of man and politics to the question of why states go to war.

Classical realists like Hans Morgenthau believe that war is driven essentially by the natural evilness of man. Essentially the "ubiquity of evil in human action arising from man's ineradicable lust for power and transforming churches into political organizations ...revolutions

into dictatorships... love for country into imperialism” (Waltz 2001, 24). From this perspective, society and government are not influential forces in history, but instead magnifiers of man's collective malevolence when grouped into nations. From a classical model states cannot cooperate because “passion often obscures the true interests of states as of men,” and not because “states are never honorable and peaceful” (Waltz 2001, 25). Waltzian neo-realism departs from these ideas by exploring the other half of the question. Believing that “Man is born and in his natural condition remains neither good nor bad,” but is influenced by society to one extreme or the other, as states are influenced by a society of states (the international arena) to engage in war or not (Waltz 2001, 5).

Neorealist systems theory is driven by one primary characteristic: in no matter what form the system is structured, the system is driven by the essential existence of anarchy. The source of this anarchy is the absence of an overarching international body with the power to force the conformity of the units of the structure (the states). As such the United Nations and other international organizations are not important and have no bearing on the system since they lack the capability of shaping the unit actors' decisions. Acknowledging this, states are the only relevant actors, and the anarchic system leaves them with two realities. The first is that states are responsible for their own security, and secondly that threats to this security are unending (Waltz 2008, 59).

Additionally, neo-realism departs from classical realism in that classical realists view power itself as the ultimate goal of the state, whereas neorealists view power as a means with the end being security (Waltz 2008, 57). Peace in an anarchic system is fragile, and therefore each state must provide for its own security. However, providing for one's own security through military power or alliances often times undermines the security of neighboring states. This paradox where increasing a state's security undermines the perception of security in another state is known as the “security dilemma,” and is a major structural explanation for the outbreak of war. This is due to the fact that one can never be certain if additional security measures are defensive or offensive in the anarchic system. Another cause on the systemic level for the outbreak of war is the failure of deterrence. Deterrence strategy implies a buildup of military force adequate enough in perception or reality to prevent a state from threatening another state's security. If any state misperceives the deterrent capability of another, or believes it has a greater offensive capability war is likely to break out.

In addition to these universal characteristics of the systemic structure is the variable concept of how power in the international system is actually divided. In the period of the Sino-Indian war the world was locked in a bipolar balance of power led by the U.S. and the Soviet Union. In a bipolar system states are rigidly aligned to either pole, but states in each camp have great flexibility of strategy. This was caused by the zero-sum nature of a bipolar system, in that the gain of one side is the loss of the other. As such, the leader of either faction is unwilling to allow client members to fail in policy endeavors. Finally, in a bipolar system states that refuse to join either faction drastically increase their security dilemma unless they have the power to challenge the international structure towards a multi-polar balance. Now that the neorealist systemic level theory is defined it shall be applied to explain the variables causing the outbreak of the Sino-Indian war.

International Variables Leading to Conflict: India

The three main variables motivating Indian behavior towards conflict with China on the systemic level are: Indian national interests, the system's influence on Indian behavior through structural constraints, and the relationship between Indian perception of the international structure and reality. To begin a systemic explanation of India's actions we must first identify its national interests, as it is what drives Indian action throughout the international structure. According to neorealist thought the primary end of all states is security. This being the case, not only is security the primary Indian national interest, but any issue relating to national security becomes a primary interest.

Official borders, and their enforcement is a primary interest of each state for obvious reasons. However, in the Indian case this issue takes on greater importance than it otherwise would for other nations. This can be attributed to two factors. The most prevalent factor was that India bordered a nation which not only questioned the legitimacy of the established border, but also violated it. The second factor is the modern international system is formed by the interaction of nation-states, which as defined by the Westphalian system are the only entities capable of legitimately exercising sovereignty.

A key component of nation-state status under the Westphalian system is the existence of demarcated and respected borders. These borders represent the extent of national sovereignty and define where each nation's authority begins and ends. The questioning of India's established border by China undermines both Indian sovereignty and security. Security is undermined first by the direct military and administrative challenge to Indian territory, and second by delegitimizing India's position as a nation-state. If India can neither defend nor define borders respected by other nations, other states may begin to question their position as a nation-state in the system and then their sovereignty. This was a chief concern for India as they regarded the Chinese threat to their border as one compromising their "independence, self-determination, and position as a great power in Asia" (Vertzberger 1984, 67).

Another issue of national security relating to Indian interests was defense of the McMahon Line. Two key issues aided the creation of security dilemma situation along the McMahon Line. The first was the discovery of the Chinese road connecting Xinjiang and Tibet through the Aksai-Chin area in 1957. The second was the imposition of martial law on Tibet in 1959 by the PLA. China argued that completion of the road southeast of the McMahon Line in Aksai-Chin was simply the reestablishment of a historical commerce route from Xinjiang to Tibet (Eekelen 1967, 110). This road not only represented a blatant Chinese violation of India's McMahon Line border, but it also caused armed tension in the region. Shortly after the roads discovery, PLA frontier guards began patrolling the Aksai-Chin region, but never more than 20km away from the road's location (Hoffmann 1990, 77). The issue of the road in Aksai-Chin and the PLA's role in Tibet in 1959 became linked since the majority of Chinese troops entered Tibet via the road from Xinjiang.

The surge of PLA soldiers into Tibet aroused suspicions of a forcible border assertion by the PRC. These tensions were heightened by the flight of the Dalai Lama from Lhasa, and the closure of Tibet to commercial and cultural access by India, guaranteed in the 1951 treaty. Defensive maneuvers or not, these activities created a security dilemma along the border as India felt that Tibet was "essential for mastery over South Asia, and the most economical method for guaranteeing India's security" (Garver 2006, 93). Forced to account for increasing Chinese military power near or past the McMahon Line, India responded by deploying their military in

forward positions along the border with China as early as 1960. Accounting for India's national interest with force posturing, they attempted to both affirm the legitimacy of the McMahon Line as a border and to account for the security dilemma created by the hardening of PLA positions in Tibet and Aksai-Chin.

The second way a systemic level analysis accounts for the 1962 war is the manner in which India's policy was defined by the structure of the international system. In looking at the geostrategic positioning of India within the system, it is immediately apparent that they attempted to remain neutral or unaligned in the bipolar structure. India remained a powerful enough state to deter the third world adventurism of either bloc within its territory, but weak enough to be challenged by hostile neighbors. An excellent example of this was the persistent threat of Pakistan on their Northwestern border. The poor relationship of Pakistan and India is rooted in domestic level variables, but a systemic level cause was a disputed claim over the sovereignty of Kashmir. Both sides claim the right to sovereignty over Kashmir, and this has resulted in a heavily armed border. Additionally, appearances of a Sino-Pakistani agreement to hem in India developed with Chinese diplomatic overtures to Pakistan for peaceful border settlement beginning in 1961 (Dalvi 1969, 42-47). This forced India to take a hard-line stance in their border dispute with China out of fear that concessions would show weakness, and endanger their control of Kashmir in a Domino-Theory type logic train.

Another structural element of the international system was the existence of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons invalidated traditional calculations of deterrence, and thus the great powers were those whom possessed them. In India's regional calculations neither themselves, nor did any other surrounding nations possess nuclear weapons keeping intact the use of deterrence as a method of securing or defending interests. This being the case, the option of engaging in armed conflict with surrounding nations remained possible as long as in India's force calculations they were superior to their target. A prime example of India's employment of force to further interests was their invasion of Portuguese controlled Goa on December 17, 1961 (Eekelen 1967, 75). This use of force to assert sovereignty over perceived territory is an excellent precedent for the October 9, 1962 offensive against the PLA in Ladakh. Force against PLA incursions remained off the table as long as the Indian military believed their strategic position and capabilities to be inferior to the Chinese. Returning from a 1960 diplomatic tour of the U.S., Nehru expressed the idea that due to Soviet and Western military aid, "the military balance had changed in favor of India" (Eekelen 1967, 109). Thus in the absence of nuclear weapons, India disregarded the Chinese effort at deterrence and employed the use of force to settle their territorial claims.

Finally, it is necessary to point out how India's perception of the international system, which differed from reality, influenced their decision to employ force against the PRC. India perceived the international system as open to change from a bipolar to a multi-polar structure. This was based in their success of remaining unaligned to either bloc, while still receiving significant military and economic aid from both camps. Given India's strategic geographic position in the system, both superpowers sought to gain the allegiance of India to their side through the use of aid. Understanding this, India played both sides against each other, and assumed that either superpower would be willing to intervene on their behalf in the event of Sino-Indian hostilities for pragmatic and alliance building reasons. Thus, India viewed its use of force as a no lose situation. Either the force would succeed in attaining their national interests, or if Indian power proved to be inadequate, "the superpowers would intervene to prevent any large-scale war between India and China;" therefore, bailing out India from a potential catastrophe (Vertzberger

1984, 101). This perception of Indian value to either superpower and the general misperception of the international system would cost them.

Ultimately the Indians failed to acknowledge that while the interests of the superpowers may partially depend on India's well being, the system is ultimately in anarchy and each nation is responsible for assuring their own security. Additionally, India had miscalculated both the willingness and ability of the superpowers to intervene on their behalf. In reality the Soviet Union could not exercise restraint on Chinese actions or compel them to drop the border issue. The Sino-Soviet split had not yet occurred, but its origin is in the late 1950's, and the attempt to restrain PRC actions towards India was a contributing factor in the decline of Soviet influence (Vertzberger 1984, 92). Indian belief in U.S. intervention was based on a miscalculation of U.S. interests in Asia, as well as willingness to repel PRC advance based on the Domino Theory. While the U.S. intervened in Korea, Taiwan, and Indochina, India overlooked the essential element common to each. This element was the inability of each nation to resist communist advance on its own. In this case, the projected image of Indian power was a liability. The realities of the international system and its anarchic nature would ensure that their decision to use force would not be consequence free. Now the Chinese causes for war will be evaluated at the systemic level.

International Variables Leading to Conflict: China

The systemic level variables motivating China towards conflict, like in India, revolved around Chinese national interests, the system's influence on Chinese behavior through structural constraints, and the role of anarchy in the system. Because of the anarchic structure of the international system, China is no different than India and state security must be its prime end. China's membership in the communist bloc does not grant it any guarantee of protection, and therefore its national interests are calculated in ways of maximizing national security. As such we shall discuss the three main interests affected by the border dispute with India.

As in India's case, the delineation of official borders for the PRC was a prime interest in order to gain legitimacy in the international system. This legitimacy is rooted within the conventions of the Westphalian system, where borders are paramount as they define the extent of sovereignty and political self-determination. The PRC's inheritance of territory which was divided by Western imperialists had a strong legal and pragmatic interest in negotiating legitimate borders with its neighbors. The basis of Chinese territorial definition was on the extent of historical holdings, but the PRC had determined in 1950 to negotiate borders based off the alignments they had inherited (Maxwell 1995, 905). This meant that China would not bog itself down in unreasonable claims in Indochina or other areas of traditional imperial suzerainty. This mentality guided border settlement by peaceful means with Burma, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Mongolia, Cambodia, and Laos (Maxwell 1995, 905). Peaceful settlement of the Sino-Indian border however, was not possible due to Indian unwillingness to negotiate based on the perceived legitimacy of the McMahon Line (Hoffmann 1990, 71).

A second national interest challenged by the border dispute with India was the Chinese right to non-intervention of foreigners in their domestic affairs. This principle of domestic sanctity from outside interference is also one of the rights of states in the Westphalian system. Chinese security was undermined by India's role in manipulating domestic events in both Tibet and in Ladakh. The Indian military's establishment of forward posts and patrols of the Ladakh region, beginning in 1960, was direct interference in Chinese domestic areas. While it was true China

did not have legal sovereignty over the Ladakh area due to its position south of the McMahon Line, that argument remains moot as international boundaries must be agreed upon at least bilaterally, and the PRC gave it no such recognition (Cukwurah 1967, 159). Furthermore, Ladakh, and more importantly the Aksai-Chin plain was a strategically important tract of land connecting Xinjiang and Tibet.

Indian interference in Tibet after the 1959 uprising was also taken as a direct violation of domestic sanctity, and a challenge to Chinese security and interests. The PRC became aware of Indian efforts to covertly aid the Dalai Lama and Tibetan separatists shortly after the PLA moved in to suppress the uprising. In fact, India had gone so far as to allow the CIA bases of operation along the border for a covert campaign in Tibet from 1957 to 1961 (Garver 2006, 97). Furthermore, a series of four Indian military bases were constructed and manned in Tibet north of the McMahon Line. These actions illustrated India's desire to keep Tibet as a buffer state, and recognize Chinese suzerainty instead of sovereignty in the region, thus directly challenging China's security.

The Chinese interest of maintaining a secure border with India was also threatened by the border dispute. Reinforcement of Tibet after 1959, the Aksai-Chin road way, and Chinese military patrols of the border were an attempt to maintain their territorial integrity. This added military presence created a security dilemma for India, and they began building up and strengthening their own military capacity near contested areas. The adoption of a forward Indian military policy in 1960, coupled with Indian scouting patrols across the border and the construction of military posts around Ladakh and Tibet severely undermined Chinese border security. This led to the PLA "digging in" around contested border areas and effectively militarizing the border.

China's response to the Indian military buildup as well as their covert programs in contested border areas was constrained by the structure of the international environment. A major constraining force on Chinese action was the geostrategic situation in Asia during the late 1950's. Beginning in 1950 with the Korean War, the major battles of the Cold War were fought in Asia in the West's effort to contain the communist bloc. The PRC had to contend with anti-Chinese forces in South Korea, a U.S. backed ROC in Taiwan, a U.S.-fortified Japan, and increasing U.S. involvement in Indochina by 1960. These numerous threats on China's Western front were significant, and severely limited their maneuverability in other areas of concern. Unbeknownst to the West, the PRC was increasingly unable to depend on the support of the communist bloc due to increasing belligerence from the U.S.S.R. on various diplomatic and territorial issues. The Soviets pressured the PRC to acknowledge Indian border claims, and Sino-Soviet relations strained under their own border issues (Vertzberger 1984, 88).

Acknowledging the limiting effects of these security threats on Chinese military power, the PRC advocated a policy of peaceful border settlement. China used this policy to its advantage and scored a critical victory in neutralizing a potential Pakistani threat to their security interests by a warming of relations. The geostrategic environment in which the PRC found itself was one of being surrounded by a ring of hostile states. Indian diplomatic intransigence on border issues and known subversion in Tibet added another threat in that ring. Thus, the structure of the international environment drove the PRC to rely on diplomacy to achieve its interests against minor powers in order to preserve its military power for guarding its borders against larger threats. This situation explains a seemingly coincidental rapprochement in relations with Pakistan, India's arch-rival, while Sino-Indian relations simultaneously deteriorated in 1959.

This hostile geostrategic environment ruled out the option of using military force to settle the border dispute with India because of the potential pitfall of starting a two front war. Thus PRC actions along the Indian border were limited by the international structure to defensive posturing, deterrence, and entrenchment. This is illustrated by the numerous Chinese overtures to Indian representatives to keep patrols 20km behind each border (Eekelen 1967, 92-111). Rapprochement with Pakistan was pragmatic in the freedom of action the PRC gained by not needing to guard the Sino-Pakistani border heavily. Therefore, Chinese policy was constrained by the system to not initiate force against India in order to settle the border dispute, but instead to bolster its defenses. However, the PRC declared that “force would be met with force” on the border issue, and this is evidenced by the PLA counter offensives launched on October 20 and November 16, 1962 (Maxwell 1995, 905).

Finally, the anarchy present in the international system played a significant role in the actions of the PRC on the border issue. Unlike their Indian counterparts, China properly assessed the international situation and never lost sight of the fact that only China could assure Chinese security. The emerging Sino-Soviet split was a key element in the PRC’s unwillingness to rely on outside support for their interests. Not only did the Soviets urge China to a settlement counter to their interests, but they openly aided India in both the construction of a domestic MIG program and a pledge to help them develop nuclear energy (Vertzberger 1984, 87). Simultaneously, Soviet aid to China was severely cut including assistance in developing a nuclear program. Clearly a common Soviet-Sino communist ideology was unimportant to their “allies,” as they even ventured to grant India great power status through nuclear development.

In addition to the Soviet military aid was U.S. support of India in the form of agricultural assistance and millions in financial aid packages. Although India pledged neutrality, the PRC clearly believed that they were in the West’s bloc. Indian based CIA operations into Tibet and India’s role in the Korean War helped bolster this perception. Unable to rely on either superpower for protection or intervention on their behalf, the PRC assessed that any military movements in securing the border would have to be proportional, decisive, and most importantly retaliatory. This assessment was gained from a rational calculation of the potential geostrategic and political consequences of a PLA initiation of force. While neither the PRC nor India possessed nuclear weapons, they feared a PLA offensive into India would be interpreted by the West as communist advance and therefore provoke a nuclear response. In the wake of the Taiwan Straits Crisis, and keeping in mind Sino-Soviet agitation, China was unwilling to risk a potential nuclear strike from the West, especially without full Soviet support. This being the case, China resolved that its armed response to Indian aggression would be purely political. The PRC would paint itself as the victim of aggression, but would then unleash a massive but calculated counterattack to force diplomatic concessions by India on the border issue, thereby resolving the issue once and for all (Eekelen 1967, 191-192). While the systems level of analysis plainly explains both the motives and limitations of India and China leading to the Sino-Indian War, it is contended that the model overlooks key motivations of either state leading to conflict.

Alternative Explanations of Conflict: Domestic Level Analysis

A valid criticism of a systemic level approach to explaining conflict is that it overlooks key variables and differences between states in the assumption that all states are equal due to constraints that the structure of the international system places upon them. Singer argues that at this level of analysis “actors are characterized and their behavior predicted in relatively gross and

general terms” (Singer 1961, 82). To account for the generalization of state behavior inherent in a systemic level analysis a brief domestic level analysis explaining the Sino-Indian war will be attempted. Based on Vertzberger’s literature review on the subject, my domestic level analysis will be limited to the most influential domestic variable driving China and India to war; ideological and political considerations (Vertzberger 1984, 70).

Indian ideological and political causes for war centered on the belief in non-alignment as a viable alternative to the bipolar system. The source of Indian non-aligned thought was that the Cold War was a conflict between the imperialist Western nations, and therefore newly independent former colonies had no reason or interest in siding with their former masters. The Indians by remaining non-aligned, hoped to establish a third pole of power in the international system organized by the nations of the Third World. This third bloc of nations would fight for issues that really mattered to them such as ending colonialism, racial discrimination, and raising living standards in the developing world (Eekelen 1967, 4). Nehru envisioned that this Third World bloc would act as an arbiter in the West’s conflict, thereby gaining both moral authority and legitimacy.

In concert with the Bandung Conference in 1955 and the Sino-Indian Panchsheel Agreement, Nehru hoped to expand his concept of non-alignment into a full-blown pan-Asianism movement (Vertzberger 1984, 98). This pan-Asianism was based in the common historical experience of colonialism that these nations shared, but Nehru failed to account for historical differences and regional rivalries. Nehru asserted that, “the basic challenge in Southeast Asia is between India and China,” but he forgot this reality in supporting an Asian solidarity bloc. Nehru, and India’s conception of a non-aligned third world was based on not only its viability, but that India would be both the natural and unchallenged leader of such a group. Traditional Sino-Indian rivalry for influence in Asia challenged Indian thinking as China asserted its right to be the leader of such a group. The need to exert its regional great power status over China led to diplomatic intransigence on the issue of border negotiations. Thus, India saw Chinese dispute of border areas to be a political challenge to their right to lead Asia, and in turn pushed backed in order to show strength.

Chinese ideological and political causes for war centered on the belief that its Maoist interpretation of communist revolution was not only correct, but purer than the Soviet model. This dispute on the merits of Maoism over Leninism was focused squarely on the Soviet Union’s insistence on backing the Indian position in the border dispute through political and military aid. The PRC challenged Soviet actions on three points; that their diplomatic position showed a lack of solidarity with a fellow communist nation, that Soviet support of a bourgeoisie regime in India would not forward the goal of communist revolution, and that India wasn’t truly non-aligned but in fact in league with the imperialists (Eekelen 1967, 177-182). Soviet military aid inflamed the PRC, especially in light of Soviet cuts to Chinese aid, because it appeared as if the Soviets were turning their backs on a Marxist brother. Furthermore, the PRC believed that only through struggle and challenge, not foreign aid, could they achieve the end of global Marxist revolution. Finally, Indian overtures to the West for aid, and their assistance to the West in fomenting problems on China’s border led the PRC on a quest to convince the Soviets that they were being used. The PRC concluded that superior PLA military forces and position in the region would force the Indians to rely on Western intervention to bail them out in the event of hostilities (Vertzberger 1984, 91). This would both expose the Indians as true imperialists, and score an ideological victory against the Soviet Union in the enlarging diplomatic split (Eekelen 1967, 178).

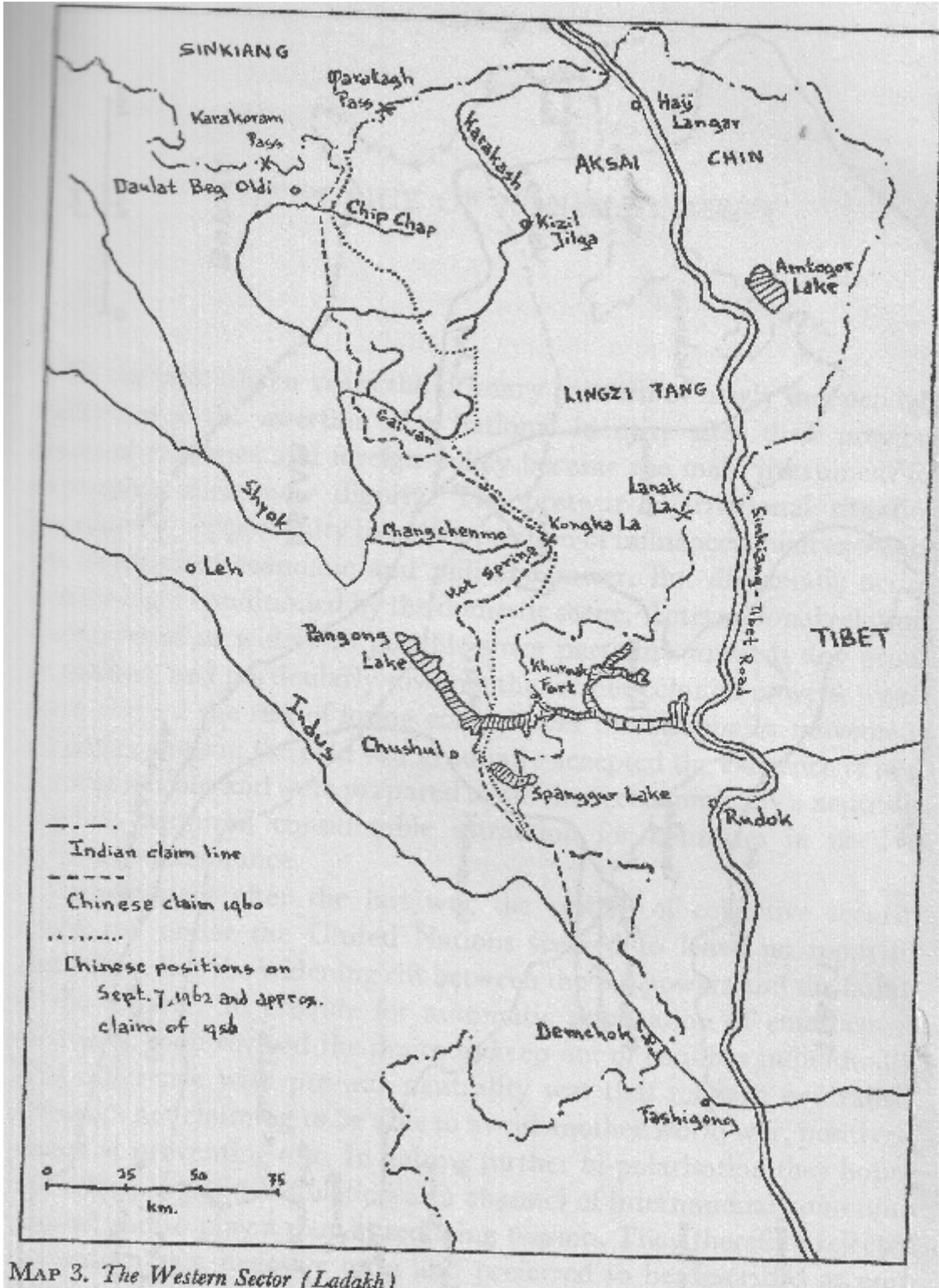
The domestic level analysis contends that it is domestic differences between states that drive them towards conflict. Examining the most influential domestic factors (according to scholars on the subject) on Chinese and Indian decision making leading to the 1962 war, it seems as if ideology had differing levels of importance for each nation. Indian ideology and their belief in leading a pan-Asian bloc nationalized tensions with China, creating a zero-sum game. If the Indian's backed down they would seem weak, and to avoid this they took a non-compromising stand on border issues. In China, Maoist ideology was more so an issue with hierarchy within the Soviet bloc than with Indian recalcitrance on border issues. The PRC actively believed the Indians not to be non-aligned, but this was not important as ideologically they did not pose a threat to the Chinese communist system. As such, Chinese ideology was not as important in crafting policy, and Zhou Enlai was able to take a pragmatic stand. As Singer points out the overgeneralization of a systemic analysis, he also points out that a domestic analysis suffers from the same weakness but instead an undue focus on state differences (Singer 1961, 83). The domestic analysis helps us better understand the importance of the border issue in each nation's context, but in this case it does not adequately explain the actions undertaken by either regime. Furthermore, only with a systemic level analysis can we explore the limitation on action caused by the international structure on each state. Ultimately, Chinese ideology does not explain why they did not take the offensive to oust India as imperialists, or why India decided to change its military policy towards an aggressive forward base strategy. Therefore, a systemic level analysis is more suited to explaining the actions leading to the Sino-Indian War.

Conclusion

While valid alternative theoretical models explaining the causes for war exist, a neorealist systems-level analysis best explains the factors leading India and China to war in 1962. Keeping in mind the historical context of generally cordial Sino-Indian relations prior to 1959 it seems unlikely that solely ideological differences drove the two nations to war. If ideology was such an important motivator behind the militarization of the Sino-Indian border dispute, then it is unlikely conflict would have waited to develop until 1962. Additionally, if Sino-Indian rivalry for dominance in Asia was so virulent why did India recognize PRC sovereignty in Tibet in 1951, and later agree to a mutual treaty of peaceful coexistence in 1954? A domestic level analysis cannot account for these otherwise amicable diplomatic relations.

What a systemic level analysis reveals is certain changes in national interests, geostrategic positions, and the anarchy of the international system brought both nations closer to the precipice of conflict. Various actions and reactions by both nations along the border created a security dilemma for each, and this brought the border dispute to the forefront of Sino-Indian relations. Furthermore, India believed they had the power to reshape the international system from a bipolar to multi-polar world. Their lack of either nuclear capability or significant conventional power exposed their status as simply a minor power of strategic importance in the international system. Thus either superpower was only motivated to preserve their security so long as it was in their interests to do so, and not as an ultimate necessity contrary to Indian belief. The ultimate cause for war in 1962 was India's assertion that it was a major power in world affairs. China's incentive in limiting their defeat of the Indian military was motivated by their interest in delegitimizing the McMahon Line and consolidating their sovereignty in Tibet (Guang 2005, 503). The systems level analysis reveals not only what urged each nation to war, but also explains how the anarchy of the system limited the extent of the fighting.

Figure-1 (Eekelen 1967, XIII)



References

Cukwurah, A. O. *The Settlement of Boundary Disputes in International Law*. Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1967.

Dalvi, J. P. *Himalayan Blunder: The Curtain-Raiser to the Sino-Indian War of 1962*. Bombay, India: Thacker & Company Limited, 1969.

Feng, Cheng and Larry M. Wortzel. "PLA Operational Principles and Limited War: The Sino-Indian War of 1962," in Mark A. Ryan, David Michael Finkelstein, and Michael A. McDevitt. *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949*. Watertown, Massachusetts: East Gate Books, 2003.

Garver, John W. "China's Decision for War With India in 1962," in Robert S. Ross and Alastair Iain Johnston, *New Directions in the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006.

Guang, Lei. "Nationalism: International Sources of Chinese Nationalism," in *Modern China*. October 2005.

Gupta, Karunakar. "The McMahon Line 1911-45: The British Legacy," in *The China Quarterly* July – September, 1971.

Hoffmann, Steven A. *India and the China Crisis*. Berkley, California: University of California Press, 1990.

Maxwell, Neville. "Sino-Indian Border Dispute Reconsidered," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 10, 1999.

Singer, David J. "The Level of Analysis Problem in International Relations," in *World Politics*, October 1961.

Varma, Shanti Prasad. *Struggle for the Himalayas: A Study in Sino-Indian Relations*. New Delhi, India: Sterling Publishers LTD, 1965.

Van Eekelen, W. F. *Indian Foreign Policy and the Border Dispute With China*. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967.

Vertzberger, Yaacov Y.I. *Misperceptions in Foreign Policymaking: The Sino-Indian Conflict, 1959-1962*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1984.

Waltz, Kenneth N. *Man the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Waltz, Kenneth N. *Realism and International Politics*. New York, New York: Routledge, 2008.

Zi, Sun. *The Art of War*. Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala, 1988.