

# Mao, Nehru and the Sino-Indian Border Dispute: A Poliheuristic Analysis

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## Abstract

The Sino-Indian border dispute has been effectively stalemated since the end of the 1962 Border War and remains a source of serious tension between the two Asian giants. Yet there were several instances throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s when the two sides could have resolved their dispute amicably. Curiously, despite several detailed historical accounts on how the Sino-Indian border dispute developed, there has been few systematic theoretical accounts exploring why this occurred. To address this gap, I utilise poliheuristic choice theory to examine the choices of the both the key decision-makers of the time, Mao Zedong and Jawaharlal Nehru. The poliheuristic choice theory illuminates why both Mao and Nehru initially chose status quo policies before embracing either compromise or escalation policies, when faced with domestic pressure at home and ideological impulses.

## Keywords

Poliheuristic choice theory, interstate border disputes, Sino-Indian Border War, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mao Zedong

## Introduction

After the dust settled after the 1962 Sino-Indian Border War, what was once effectively an ambiguous frontier had become the longest stretch of disputed territory in the world. Despite ongoing attempts at negotiation, the Sino-Indian border dispute remains intractable and the fulcrum of mistrust in the bilateral relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India (hereafter it simplified as China and India, respectively). Yet the 1962 Border War and the emergence of the dispute itself were not inevitable. Indeed, prior to 1959,

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China and India ostensibly enjoyed close relations and appeared to be committed to working closely to establish a postcolonial world order. Why, then, did the ambiguous frontier between China and India turn into a vigorously contested interstate border dispute?

Curiously, despite the extensive literature chronicling both the Sino-Indian border dispute and the 1962 Border War, there is no clear answer to this question. Most of the literature on these events simply provide historical accounts, exploring the origins of the border dispute or the events surrounding the war itself. Additionally, much of the literature is highly partisan, seeking to establish the legitimacy of their side's claims or blaming the side for the breakdown of relations rather than exploring why the border dispute emerged in the first place (see Dalvi, 1969; Gupta, 1982; Kalha, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Rao, 1968). The only exception to date is Steven Hoffmann's (1990) *India and the China Crisis*. In this study, Hoffmann developed a crisis behavioural model to explore the Indian leadership's handling of the Sino-Indian border dispute prior to and during the 1962 Border War. While Hoffmann's study is undoubtedly a major contribution to understanding the Sino-Indian border dispute, it is nonetheless limited by his focus solely on the Indian leadership rather than both sides of the dispute.

This article addresses the dearth of theoretical analysis in order to cast light on one of the most contentious periods of Sino-Indian relations. In essence, it is argued here that the leading cause for the dispute's emergence, and the war that ultimately froze it, can be found in the decisions that the leaders of both states, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mao Zedong, made between 1950 and 1963. In order to assess why Nehru and Mao made the decisions they did, poliheuristic choice theory is applied to the two leader's respective situations. This article is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the poliheuristic choice theory that illuminates how state leaders decide policy and apply its logic towards interstate border disputes. The second section provides a brief historical overview of the Sino-Indian border dispute and the key issues at stake for both sides. The last two sections investigate how both Nehru and Mao made decisions regarding the Sino-Indian border, using the logic of poliheuristic choice theory to explain their choices. This article concludes by exploring why the decisions made by Nehru and Mao still resonate today and the potential utility for poliheuristic choice theory in assessing current state leaders' decision-making.

## **Poliheuristic Choice Theory and Interstate Border Disputes**

It is a common assumption among most international relations scholars that individual state leaders have little agency over foreign policy due to bureaucratic or international pressures. However, most of the time, the chief executive will have considerable leeway to devise policies, allowing them to weigh the constraints and opportunities offered by a situation before developing a response (Kennedy, 2012, p. 10). Thus, a chief executive's own idiosyncratic ambitions, agendas, perspectives and personalities are essential to understanding their state's

conduct towards any interstate border dispute that it is involved in (Byman & Pollack, 2001, p. 133; Reichwein, 2012, pp. 42–44).

One of the most effective tools available to scholars for explaining a chief executive's foreign policy decision-making process, including towards interstate border disputes, is poliheuristic choice theory. The first premise of poliheuristic choice theory is that the state's chief executive is faced with a plethora of possible foreign policy options towards any given situation and incomplete information about the international environment. In order to compensate for the lack of information and narrow down these choices, a leader needs to have some form of cognitive shortcut in order to make a decision. The second premise is that leaders use heuristics, or an individual's use of their interests and past experiences, as a standard to compare policy options (Goertz, 2004, pp. 14–15; Mintz & Geva, 1997, p. 84).

This process effectively has two stages. The first stage involves the state leader eliminating unacceptable options by implementing a 'dimension-based non-compensatory rule.' In essence, the noncompensatory rule means that an expected poor outcome in one policy area cannot be compensated for by positive outcomes in another. Should a proposed policy negatively impact an issue that the state leader considers vital, then that policy will be considered unacceptable and discarded even if it is the most efficient solution (James & Zhang, 2005, p. 32; Kinne, 2005, p. 115; Oppermann, 2014, pp. 24–25). The second stage involves the chief executive determining the optimum solution from the remaining options. This optimum policy is ascertained by either engaging in a cost–benefit calculation of various alternatives or seeking to maximise the expected benefit towards the state leader's priorities (Goertz, 2004, pp. 15–16; James & Zhang, 2005, p. 33; Mintz, 2004, p. 7).

When addressing an interstate border dispute, a state leader effectively has three general policy approaches or strategies to choose from: to escalate tensions by threatening or using force, to seek a peaceful resolution via some form of compromise, or to maintain the status quo (Astorino-Courtois & Trusty, 2000, pp. 362–363; Huth, 1996, p. 34; Wiegand, 2011, pp. 11–15). Each of these policy strategies contains a spectrum of actual policies that vary in severity that, nonetheless, are grouped together by their intent. Escalatory policies include the use of, or threat to use, the military or other coercive methods in an attempt to compel a change in their rival claimant's policies or position towards the border dispute. Compromise policies encompass the deliberate efforts to reach a deal via diplomatic negotiations in order to resolve the border dispute peacefully. Finally, the status quo maintenance policies are either passive or proactive approaches that do not seek to fundamentally significantly alter the current state of affairs one way or another (Fravel, 2008, p. 10; Huth & Allee, 2002, pp. 47–51).

All state leaders draw upon two primary interests which they are reluctant to allow any policies to impact negatively: their political survival and their political agenda/grand strategy. For most chief executives, the source of their political power comes from the domestic sphere ensuring that domestic political situation becomes the primary consideration in decision-making (James & Zhang, 2005, p. 34; Mintz, 2004, p. 7). The question of how to secure a leader's position depends

upon support from the majority of the population and key members of the administration as well as the number of potential or actual challengers who could replace them (Bueno de Mesquita, Marrow, Siverson, & Smith, 2002, pp. 561–563; Kinne, 2005, pp. 118–120). Strong domestic criticism over a leader's policies can lead to a leader being ousted by their rivals, either through internal party/bureaucratic mechanisms, defeat in elections or through an uprising/military coup. Hence, those policies which would likely cause a backlash from the key groups or weaken the leader vis-à-vis their domestic rivals are therefore discarded (Kinne, 2005, pp. 118–119; Oppermann, 2014, pp. 28–29).

When a chief executive faces an uncertain domestic situation, either due to ambitious rivals or growing discontent among the populous, they will seek policies that will allow them to secure their position and discard those that will not. Escalation policies are useful in creating an artificial threat to rally the population (Levy & Vakili, 1992; Tir, 2010). However, they also contain the inherent risk that the situation will spiral out of control, with the chief executive likely bearing the blame for the crisis, especially if their state's forces are defeated. Compromise policies can remove the dispute as an issue but also hold a significant political cost if any deal involves surrendering territory, as the leader could be charged with cowardice or treason by their political opponents (Fravel, 2005, p. 53; Huth, 1996, pp. 97–98; Huth & Allee, 2002, pp. 44–48). Hence, a state leader will typically consider it politically safest to adopt a status quo policy towards an interstate border dispute so as to avoid unnecessarily risky situations or the 'loss' of territory (Huth, 1996, pp. 94–98; Wiegand, 2011, pp. 34–35).

The state leader's second core interest is to pursue their agenda or 'grand strategy' for their country. Most chief executives have some form of vision for their country that goes beyond state security, encompassing both how they believe their country should develop domestically and engage with the world. In order to implement this vision, a leader develops an explicit or implicit conceptual framework that designates their priorities and appropriate responses to various political stimuli (Brands, 2014, pp. 3–4; Dueck, 2009, pp. 146–148; Stenslie & Chen, 2016, pp. 118–119). Although grand strategies inherently draw upon national interests and emerge out of debate among the wider polity, the onus remains with the leader to articulate its basic contours (Stenslie & Chen, 2016, pp. 123–124; Zhang, 2012, p. 321). Hence, a chief executive will discard those policies that do not resonate with the priorities identified in the strategy when deciding on a best policy approach (Brands, 2014, p. 8; Goertz, 2004, p. 18).

Typically, an interstate border dispute will have little to do with a chief executive's grand strategy and is usually considered a distraction from their overall agenda. In such cases, a leader will adopt status quo policies so as to expend as little political capital as possible upon addressing an intractable interstate border dispute so as to save their effort and resources for their priorities (Lai, 2010, pp. 30–31; Murdock & Kallmyer, 2011, p. 544). Nonetheless, there are several instances where addressing an interstate border dispute may be part of, or become linked to, the leader's grand strategy. In these situations, the chief executive will discard status quo policy options, instead seeking to either remove the border dispute as an issue or using the dispute as some form of leverage upon their rival (Wiegand, 2011, pp. 55–65).

A chief executive's domestic and grand strategy interests can be either congruous or in conflict. In cases where the two interests are compatible, a leader can use both of them effectively to narrow their options. However, when the two interests clash, the chief executive's leadership style and their current situation will shape the weighting that he/she will place on the specific interest when making a decision (Goertz, 2004, pp. 27, 30–31; Keller & Yang, 2008, pp. 691–693). No leader will completely ignore either interest. Yet those decision-makers motivated by a sense of mission or ideology will be more willing than their pragmatic counterparts to bear domestic costs rather than compromise on their agenda. Similarly, those leaders with more aggressive/impulsive or self-assured dispositions will be less sensitive to the opinions of others and have a higher threshold for domestic opposition than those who are more cautious or vacillating (Byman & Pollack, 2001, pp. 136–140; Keller & Yang, 2008, pp. 688–690).

Once a chief executive has eliminated those policies that he/she considers inimical to his/her interests, then he/she must identify the optimum policy from the remaining choices. Sometimes, a confluence of the chief executive's interests curtails the choices available to them, leaving only one or two acceptable policy options. However, often decision-makers will have a sizable number of choices available even after they have eliminated those policies that do not pass the noncompensatory test. Poliheuristic choice theory argues that the leader will then determine the optimum policy from the remaining options either by engaging in the cost–benefit calculations or by choosing to maximise a specific benefit (James & Zhang, 2005, p. 33; Mintz, 2004, pp. 6–8). At this stage, the leader's decision-making will be shaped by his/her beliefs in his/her state's ability to perform in the international environment and what he/she perceives their rival leader's intentions or likely reactions to be (Kennedy, 2012, pp. 29–31).

To determine which of the remaining policy choices is more likely to succeed, the chief executive draws upon their belief in their state's prowess, typically in the form of military or diplomatic efficacy. Hence, a state leader who is confident in his/her country's martial capabilities may more readily embrace escalation strategies, expecting to be able to compel their rival into making concessions. Those leaders who doubt their military's prowess or loyalty are likely to avoid using force if possible. Similarly, those chief executives who believe they can achieve their vision via diplomatic means will be more willing to seek negotiations or even make bold compromises to achieve a resolution. In contrast, those who lack faith in their ability to convince their rival will discard this option (Kennedy, 2012, pp. 29–35).

As policies towards an interstate border dispute also inherently depend on the policies of the rival state, a state leader must also try to fathom the rival leader's interests and intentions vis-à-vis the disputed border. Hence, when formulating a border policy, a chief executive must take into consideration the most likely response from the rival state. Typically, a chief executive would attempt to choose a policy that will elicit the most favourable reaction from the rival state (Astorino-Courtois & Trusty, 2000; Byman & Pollack, 2001). For example, a leader wanting to resolve an interstate border dispute will need to assess the rival leader's political situation, goals and temperament before deciding whether a cooperative approach

is likely to work. If the rival leader appears constrained by a hostile domestic environment or if her/his leadership style is found to be confrontational, then a cooperative approach would likely fail, and a status quo policy might be more feasible.

The logic of poliheuristic choice theory is amplified in states like China and India, where the foreign policy decision-making is concentrated into the hands of the executive. Yet before we can effectively apply this theory to decisions of Nehru and Mao, it is necessary to briefly outline the situations they found themselves in.

### **Origins of the Sino-Indian Border Dispute and War**

The origins of the dispute emerged from the inability of the British Raj and Imperial/Republican China to establish a clear border along the Himalayas. On the western border section, Britain was unable to convince their counterparts in China to delineate their shared border, resulting in ambiguous ownership over several pockets of territory. The most salient of these is the Aksai Chin, a desolate and uninhabited plateau just north of the Karakorum Ranges historically only crossed by the occasional explorer or shepherd. Britain was unwilling to force the issue, ensuring that the entire area was simply shaded as 'undefined' on their official maps (Deepak, 2005, p. 198; Hoffmann, 1990, pp. 13–16). In the east, the main dispute revolves around what is now the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, but was known before 1987 as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). This is rugged and heavily forested territory that was inhabited primarily by autonomous tribes prior to 1930 when Britain started establishing police outposts up to the McMahon Line, a border negotiated between Britain and Tibet in 1914 but rejected by China (Lamb, 1964, pp. 115–125; Mehra, 2007, pp. 122–133). Figure 1 shows the basic contours of the dispute.

This general neglect of China's and India's precursor states to establish a clear border ensured that neither side could present a clear historical claim to the disputed territory, but each side became convinced of its own position's legitimacy. This first emerged as a potential issue in 1950, when the newly proclaimed People's Republic of China 'liberated' Tibet, establishing a contiguous frontier between China and India for the first time since 1911 (Chellaney, 2013, pp. 48–49; Dalvi, 1969, p. 6). Initially, both sides were reluctant to discuss their newly shared border. Instead, both China and India sought to focus on building upon their shared anti-colonial sentiments and pan-Asian ideas. Despite the atmosphere of bonhomie created by these shared ideologies, there remained an undercurrent of suspicion between China and India throughout the 1950s (Deepak, 2005, pp. 152–154; Garver, 2001, pp. 51–52).

Unfortunately, both sides mistook each other's silence on the border's location and overtures of friendship as a tacit acceptance of their own position (Kalha, 2014, pp. 56–57; Mehra, 2007, pp. 169–172). By the late 1950s, this mutual avoidance was becoming untenable as border patrols began to confront each other and China finished constructing the Xinjian–Tibet highway which passed through



**Figure 1.** The Sino-Indian Border Dispute

**Source:** The author.

the Aksai Chin. In December 1958, Nehru broached the topic with Premier Zhou Enlai, attempting to address the topic indirectly by stating that China was still using old maps that showed parts of India in China. Zhou responded that the border had never been properly delimited, starting an increasingly acrimonious exchange of correspondence between the two officials in which each outlined their state's positions (see Ambekar & Divekar, 1964, pp. 112–166).

This correspondence coincided with a deterioration of Sino-Indian relations caused by the aftermath of China's brutal suppression of the 1959 Tibetan uprising. In the months following the Chinese crackdown, the first lethal skirmish between the two sides' border forces occurred, resulting in the deaths of nine Indian border police and one Chinese soldier. Despite public outrage over these events, Nehru eventually agreed to Chinese requests for direct talks on the border in April 1960. However, he proved unwilling to budge from India's position on the border and accept Zhou's offer of a territorial swap (P. N. Haksar Papers, 1960). Further discussions between low-level Chinese and Indian diplomatic officials during 1961 did little to clarify matters, instead entrenching each sides' belief in the superiority of their own claim (Deepak, 2005, pp. 206–222; Lüthi, 2017, pp. 33–34).

During 1962, events began to escalate quickly. In November 1961, India devised what became known as the Forward Policy during a high-level, multi-department meeting. In essence, this policy involved establishing outposts occupied by Indian troops as close to the Indian claimed border as they could get so as to establish an Indian presence and deter further Chinese 'incursions' (Henderson Brooks, 1963, pp. 8–10; Hoffmann, 1990, pp. 94–96). This action backfired as it prompted China to resume its active patrolling in the Aksai Chin

and up to the McMahon Line, which had been suspended after the 1959 skirmishes. After Chinese and Indian troops clashed in the Thag La region along the McMahon Line in September 1962, a special meeting of China's Central Military Commission (CMC) was convened in early October. The Chinese leadership decided that war was necessary to prevent any further Indian advances and thus ordered additional divisions to Tibet and the necessary logistical preparations be made (Fravel, 2008, p. 192; Garver, 2006, pp. 115–118). On the morning of 20 October, Chinese forces launched a simultaneous assault on Indian positions in the Aksai Chin and along the McMahon Line.

The PLA quickly routed the Indian Army in the eastern theatre, compelling them to withdraw from the NEFA completely. The Indian Army offered stiffer resistance in the western theatre but ultimately was pushed off the Karakorums (Deepak, 2005, pp. 254–255; Maxwell, 2013, pp. 448–465). On 21 November, the PLA troops halted their advance, and China issued statement unilaterally declaring a ceasefire, declaring that it would withdraw its troops north of the McMahon Line in the east and the 'Line of Actual Control' in the west by 1 December 1962 (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 1963, pp. 17–21). China completed its withdrawal on schedule, marking the end of the war and establishing a *de facto* border between China and India that remains today. In total, India recorded 4,885 soldiers killed or missing with 3,968 captured during the conflict. China, in contrast, only suffered 722 dead with 1967 wounded soldiers with no personal captured (Deepak, 2005, pp. 255–258; Maxwell, 2013, pp. 482–484).

There were numerous participants in the decision-making process that led to the Sino-Indian border becoming actively contested. However, as discussed earlier, chief executives still have the final say over the policy direction of their state. Indeed, both Nehru and Mao made several key decisions that ensured the border became disputed and remained intractable. Thus it is necessary to turn our attention to the factors that influenced both statesmen's decision making during this period and ultimately made the compromises necessary to resolve the Sino-Indian border dispute impossible to reach.

## **Nehru and the Sino-Indian Border Dispute**

After the death of the powerful Indian National Congress leader Vallabhbhai Patel in 1950, Jawaharlal Nehru remained the undisputed leader of India until his own death in 1964. Though Nehru demonstrated a willingness to use force when necessary, he was an ardent believer in the morality and efficacy of non-violence and diplomacy (Kennedy, 2012, pp. 142–163). This belief in pacifism manifested in Nehru's drive to establish India as a social democracy with a staunchly independent and neutral foreign policy. In pursuit of this vision, Nehru played a leading role in the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and ensuring that India became a champion of greater multilateralism and anti-imperialism causes (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2009, pp. 5–7; Narang & Staniland, 2012, pp. 81–84). However, Nehru's vision also manifested in deliberately starving of the Indian



military of resources, allowing it atrophy lest it detract from the pacific agenda or the country's modernisation (Wilkinson, 2015, pp. 19–26).

Concerning the Sino-Indian border dispute, Nehru initially dismissed the more confrontational or escalatory policies proposed by Patel and others at the time. Instead Nehru initially adopted a status quo policy of avoiding pursuing the issue with China (Dalvi, 1969, pp. 15–20; Hoffmann, 1990, pp. 31–32). Though cooperation was a possible option, Nehru instead calculated that negotiations would unnecessarily aggravate Sino-Indian relations. Nehru also took the position that the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement removed all irritants in Chinese-Indian relations. Indeed, Nehru considered that the Agreement's identification of several mountain passes to be opened for trade and pilgrimage amounted to a 'gentleman's agreement' on the border's position (Kalha, 2014, pp. 66–67; Lüthi, 2017, p. 32).

Nonetheless, it is also evident that Nehru believed that he could secure India's claimed border *via fait accompli* by quietly establishing a presence in the undefined zones. This policy was most clearly expressed in the memorandum that Nehru issued in July 1954. In it, Nehru stated that following the Panchsheel Agreement, India's northern border was to be considered 'a firm and definite one, not open to discussion by anyone' and directed that border posts be established along the frontier 'especially in those places as might be considered disputed areas' (Edwardes, 1971, p. 281; Maxwell, 2013, pp. 76–77). As part of this policy, the official maps of India were amended in 1954. The McMahon Line was marked as established, and the undefined northwestern border was replaced with one showing the Aksai Chin as part of Ladakh. There were also efforts to establish border posts along the McMahon Line, though the difficult terrain and logistical issues prohibited similar efforts in the Aksai Chin (Gupta, 1982, pp. 56–62; Kalha, 2014, pp. 72–73).

However, by the late 1950s, Nehru was forced to recognise that this tactic had failed in the face of China's construction of the Xingjian-Tibet Highway through Indian claimed Aksai Chin, border clashes and China's insistence that border was not established. Thus, Nehru recognised that it was necessary to adopt a different policy towards the border. At first, Nehru was in favour of reaching some form of compromise with the Chinese over the Aksai Chin region and sought to defuse tensions by ordering the border forces to cease patrolling (Gupta, 1982, pp. 61–64; Kapur, 1994, pp. 182–183). However, China's ruthless suppression of the 1959 Tibetan uprising, news of the lethal skirmishes on the border and Chinese polemics against the Indian government generated significant anti-China sentiment and an upsurge in jingoism throughout India.

This sudden surge in the salience of the dispute within India created the first serious threat to Nehru's position since independence, with critics publicly questioning his leadership and policies for the first time (Edwardes, 1971, pp. 286–287; Ma, 2014, pp. 107–109). In the face of such opposition Nehru felt compelled to discard any concessionary policies. Indeed, Nehru reportedly declared during a high-level meeting held in December 1959 that '...if I give them that [the Aksai Chin], I shall no longer be Prime Minister of India-I will not do it' (Garver, 2001, p. 102; Kennedy, 2012, p. 228; Maxwell, 2013, pp. 176–177).

Nehru opted instead to simply amend the current status quo approach, agreeing to Chinese requests for negotiations while obstinately maintaining India's position, ensuring they became deadlocked (Deepak, 2005, pp. 229–232; Keith, 1989, pp. 128–130).

By the end of 1961, Nehru reconsidered this policy, calculating that a change in direction was needed. Adopting an unyielding stance in negotiations with the Chinese had not eased the public uproar over China's continued control of the Aksai Chin region. The bilateral investigation into the historical bases for the Sino-Indian border was completed in December 1960 and had found that neither side could produce any definitive evidence to support their border alignment. Yet Nehru was convinced that the final report showed the superiority of India's claim and was increasingly irate that the Chinese would not change their position (Kennedy, 2012, p. 229; Maxwell, 2013, pp. 244–248). As such, Nehru calculated that a more forceful policy was necessary to gain an advantage over China in future negotiations and counter his domestic critics' claims that his government was failing to act.

However, an openly aggressive escalation policy was antithetical to Nehru's vision of India as a non-aligned and pacific state. Nehru believed he had found the solution in the form of the Forward Policy. In essence, the Forward Policy involved establishing small, primarily symbolic, military outposts along the border in order to establish an Indian presence in the disputed territory. In this policy Nehru considered that he had found a convergence of his three key interests at the time: maintaining his nonviolent agenda; countering his critics' claims of laxity towards border defence; and bolstering India's presence in the disputed areas, thereby strengthening their negotiating position (Chung, 2004, pp. 107–108; Kennedy, 2012, pp. 229–230). Indeed, Nehru reportedly declared during a high-level meeting on 2 November 1961 that 'whoever succeed in establishing a post would establish a claim to that territory as possession was nine-tenths of the law' (Dalvi, 1969, p. 68).

Unfortunately for Nehru, and the Indian border troops, he had based his calculations on the efficacy of the Forward Policy on the two erroneous premises. The first was that the Chinese was unwilling to launch a war over the Sino-Indian border. The second was that the Indian military was capable of operating at these high altitudes despite the serious logistical obstacles and supply shortages that it faced in the early 1960s (Dalvi, 1969, pp. 67–70; Henderson Brooks, 1963, pp. 8–10; Maxwell, 2013, pp. 248–254). Despite several signs that these assumptions were flawed, efforts to implement this policy continued unabated throughout 1962 until the Chinese forces attacked and dealt a comprehensive defeat to the Indian forces.

Following the 1962 Border War, India's evident military weakness vis-à-vis China precluded any further escalation policies. However, India's humiliating defeat generated near universal shock and outrage throughout the state, ensuring that any efforts to negotiate a compromise with China would have prompted serious backlash against the government. Nehru himself, though retaining office, was personally demoralised to see his grand strategy ruined and was in no mood

to negotiate (Edwardes, 1971, pp. 311–314; Kennedy, 2012, pp. 235–236; Maxwell, 2013, pp. 500–504). Thus, Nehru was compelled to adopt a status quo approach, refusing to even engage with China directly over the border at all, maintaining this policy till his death in 1964.

## **Mao and the Sino-Indian Border Dispute**

The blame for turning the historically ambiguous Sino-Indian border into a full-fledged border dispute lies predominantly with Prime Minister Nehru's inept diplomacy and ham-fisted tactics. However, it was ultimately Chairman Mao Zedong's decisions that were responsible for escalating the Sino-Indian border dispute into a war. Chiefly motivated by revolutionary zeal, Mao was convinced of the need for a 'continuous revolution' to establish communism within China and the need to adopt a vanguard role in a worldwide revolution. Yet Mao was also increasingly anxious that his revolution would be discarded without his leadership and that he would be denounced in posterity just as Stalin had been in the Soviet Union (Chen, 2001, pp. 10–15; Kissinger, 2011, pp. 92–112).

As a result of these convictions, Mao was primarily interested in cementing his position as China's paramount leader so he could carry out his communist revolution domestically and ensure that it would not be abandoned after his death. Initially, these interests saw China ally with the Soviet Union in exchange for economic support and engage in numerous domestic political campaigns designed to restructure Chinese society (Chen, 2001, pp. 47–52; Pantsov & Levine, 2012, pp. 390–412). However, these interests ensured that Mao had no motivation in pursuing any proactive policies towards China's southern borders. Thus, Mao initially adopted the status quo policy of effectively ignoring the Sino-Indian border rather than risk detracting from his agenda (Fravel, 2008, p. 70).

This situation dramatically changed in 1959 when two key events compelled Mao to change his policy towards the Sino-Indian border dispute. The first was the economic failure and subsequent famine in late 1959 caused by Mao's Great Leap Forward. These problems perturbed several senior members of the Politburo, leading to an unprecedented level of criticism of Mao's policies within the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) plenums. Though Mao kept his formal title of Chairman, he was forced to make a 'self-criticism' and was effectively side-lined from the day-to-day governance in early 1960 (Chen, 2001, p. 83; Joffe, 1975; Pantsov & Levine, 2012, pp. 463–484).

The second event was the Tibetan uprising in March 1959. Though the short-lived revolt had primarily been provoked by the excesses of CCP personal and Chinese chauvinism, Mao became convinced that it was the result of foreign interference from the USA and India (Fravel, 2008, pp. 79–82; Garver, 2011, pp. 103–106). The logic of this thinking can be found in Mao's radical Marxist-Leninist worldview. According to Maoist thought, Nehru and his administration were 'anti-imperialist bourgeoisie', a class that could be allies of convenience for communist revolutionaries in their struggle against colonialism. However, these

anti-imperialist bourgeoisie would eventually transform into enemies of the revolution as they would eventually begin to exploit the proletariat and other countries in order to accumulate more resources. Mao believed that Nehru and other Indian leaders were undergoing this metamorphosis in 1959 and that they were trying to formulate a revolt in Tibet so that they could make it into a protectorate (Garver, 2006, pp. 93–95; Maxwell, 2013, pp. 295–299).

The Great Leap Forward's failure and the Tibetan uprising loosened Mao's hold on office and raised the salience of border dispute roughly simultaneously. Hence, Mao perceived that status quo policies were no longer feasible and some action on the Sino-Indian border dispute was necessary. Though evidently seething at what he perceived to be Nehru's role in the Tibetan revolt, Mao initially sought to compromise over the Sino-Indian border. Mao likely considered a compromise approach to be the optimum policy for two primary reasons. First, Mao seemed to believe that Nehru was inclined to negotiate over the border and that the two sides could strike a bargain to pacify the issue if India was offered a favourable deal. Second, Mao clearly considered the issues surrounding the Sino-Indian border dispute to be a sideshow and by securing China's southern border he could focus on re-establishing his position and pursuing his ideological programme (Chen, 2001, p. 240; Fravel, 2008, pp. 83–86).

Thus, in late 1959, Mao instructed his chief diplomat, Premier Zhou Enlai, to propose that both states withdraw 20 kilometres to establish a buffer zone between the two border forces and seek negotiations. Although India rejected these proposals, Mao ordered Chinese troops to unilaterally withdraw 20 kilometres from the Chinese recognised boundary and cease patrolling in order to defuse the situation (Garver, 2006, p. 106; Kissinger, 2011, p. 187). Further, in January 1960, Mao convened a meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee where it was agreed that a resolution should be sought on a 'give and take' principle (Chung, 2004, p. 104; Fravel, 2008, p. 85). Despite Nehru's obstinance during discussions with Zhou, Mao maintained cooperation was the optimum policy and Chinese officials continued to pursue negotiations (Deepak, 2005, pp. 231–232; Fravel, 2008, pp. 95–96).

However, by 1962, the situation had changed significantly enough for Mao to re-evaluate his approach of the Sino-Indian border dispute and adopt more escalatory policies. The first major catalyst for Mao's change in policy was India's confrontational Forward Policy. The Forward Policy further raised the salience of the Sino-Indian border dispute within the Politburo and drove Mao to the conclusion that Nehru was unreceptive to negotiations. Therefore, Mao decided that some forceful action was necessary to wrench Nehru out of his complacency, hence launching in April 1962 a proportionate escalatory policy he dubbed 'armed coexistence' (Garver, 2006, pp. 107–110; Kissinger, 2011, pp. 187–188). In essence, this policy involved Chinese border forces resuming patrols within the 20-kilometre buffer zone and to counter any established Indian positions by erecting posts of their own. However, Mao explicitly ordered China's soldiers to refrain from opening fire unless authorised by the central leadership (Fravel, 2008, pp. 184–188; Garver, 2006, pp. 109–110).

The second change of policy in 1962 was precipitated by Mao's eagerness to reassert his authority and reverse the 'revisionist' policies that had been adopted during his time on the sidelines. Mao mobilised his supporters and launched angry tirades against moderates in a Central Committee work conference held during July–August and again at the Tenth Plenum of the Central Committee in September (Joffe, 1975, pp. 44–50; Pantsov & Levine, 2012, pp. 484–486). In these meets, Mao accused moderate CCP members of seeking to abandon collectivisation and adopting 'capitalist' policies in trying address China's problems. Concerning foreign policy specifically, Mao attacked the moderate foreign policy adopted in early 1962, which sought to improve relations with China's neighbours (Fravel, 2008, pp. 100–101; Kennedy, 2012, pp. 107–109). Though Mao succeeded in reconcentrating power back into his hands, in rejecting the moderate's more conciliatory foreign policies, he had also effectively ruled out any compromise options with India in the near future. Additionally, prominent moderates, like Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi, were cowed but remained in office. Thus, Mao needed some form of bold successful policy to reunify the CCP and consolidate his leadership (Kennedy, 2012, p. 108; Pantsov & Levine, 2012, p. 486).

With compromise and status quo options considered unacceptable and the current policy of armed coexistence failing to disabuse Nehru of his provocative border policy, Mao concluded that a bolder escalatory policy was necessary. Hence, Mao decided during the CMC meeting in early October that a sharp punitive war with India was necessary, famously declaring that it was time to 'teach them a lesson' (Garver, 2006, p. 115; Kissinger, 2011, p. 190). Mao chose to launch a limited war in part because his policy options at this point were increasingly limited, but mostly because he perceived it to be a perfect opportunity to consolidate his leadership. Additionally, Mao also argued that given India's recent actions, a decisive defeat was necessary to deter further Indian incursions, 'sober up' Indian policymakers and to 'knock Nehru to the negotiating table' (Fravel, 2008, pp. 194–196; Garver, 2006, pp. 115–119).

India's defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian Border War did not compel it to the negotiation table as Mao expected. Nonetheless, Mao achieved his other key goals of neutralising the border dispute as an issue and consolidating his position as the paramount leader. With India defeated and the threat to China's territorial integrity removed, the salience of the border dispute for Mao and other CCP leaders evaporated. This allowed Mao to refocus his attention on consolidating his leadership domestically and pursuing his revolution (Garver, 2016, pp. 171–181; Pantsov & Levine, 2012, pp. 486–489). As the Sino-Indian border dispute had little impact on these interests, Mao was content to return to the status quo policy he had maintained prior to 1959. Although Mao did indicate his willingness to reengage India, this state of affairs continued throughout most of his life, with relations only being normalised just before Mao's death in 1976.

## Concluding Remarks

Using poliheuristic choice theory to analyse the decision-making calculations of both Nehru and Mao towards the Sino-Indian border dispute, it becomes clear

how the tragedy slowly played out. It is evident neither Nehru nor Mao intended to generate a crisis on the Sino-Indian border or actively sought war, yet both were unable to reconcile their interests and reach a mutually acceptable compromise. While this article was historical in its focus, it has shown how the logic of poliheuristic choice theory can be used to assess how leaders make policy decisions towards interstate border disputes. As such, the model presented here can help those scholars who are attempting to divine what is driving state leaders of contemporary disputes.

Nehru's and Mao's policy decisions in the lead up to the 1962 Border War continue to have ramifications, with the border dispute seemingly no closer to being resolved than it was before the 1962 Border War. The general revanchist sentiment within India towards China and its tumultuous domestic politics has ensured that it remains difficult for any Indian Prime Minister to contemplate compromise policies. In China, Maoism has been largely replaced with jingoistic nationalism that is no more accommodating to Indian sensitivities, making similarly difficult for Chinese leaders to consider any territorial compromises. Yet state leaders on both sides recognise that escalatory policies are highly risky and unlikely to resolve much (Garver, 2016; Smith, 2014, pp. 39–66). As poliheuristic choice theory predicts, the state leaders of India and China have little incentive to pursue a proactive policy, calculating that the status quo is the safest course of action. Without a dramatic change in the interests of state leaders on both sides, it is unlikely that the Sino-Indian border dispute will be resolved any time soon.

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