

The Battle of Namka Chu, October 20, 1962

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India was short of everything, including apex military and civil leadership, but displayed guts, grit and cold courage in its junior leadership and men...

Historical Background

It seems hard to believe, more so because this hypothesis is little known or publicly discussed, but the seeds of the 1962 Sino-Indian War were sown a long time earlier. First manifested in 1759, the *Great Game* was a strategic-positioning exercise played out between Great Britain and Russia in the 18th/19th centuries for ensuring strategic depth for their key territories in Central and South Asia. When this strategic need first surfaced, the distance between the British Indian and Russian territories was 4,000 miles. By 1885, this gap – alarmingly for Britain – had reduced to 400 miles whether across ‘buffer state’ Afghanistan, or, more importantly, across ‘buffer state’, Tibet.

It is relevant to note here that the Sikh Empire in November 1841 had Gen Zorawar Singh extending its boundaries to include the area of the current Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), Ladakh and parts of western Tibet, extending up to the Kuen Lun range/Manasarovar area. The British concluded that the Russian threat could be warded off only if the Kuen Lun-Mushtagh Line was British-influenced.

By the dawn of the 20th century, however, the Russian threat had receded to be replaced by the Chinese one. Britain realised that while it could not prevent a Chinese invasion of “buffer” Tibet, it must have lucrative trade avenues with

Lhasa astride Bhutan in the Chumbi valley and Tawang tract. Chumbi valley was secured through the Younghusband Expedition of 1904 and Tawang tract purchased from Tibet at the Simla Convention of 1914.

In 1864, 18 years after the British had amalgamated the Sikh Empire into their own, a Kashmir survey was carried out by surveyor WH Johnson to demarcate the “traditional” western (Aksai Chin) boundary between China and India. This triggered off several changing boundaries over decades between British India-Tibet (Johnson/Johnson-Ardagh/McCartney-McDonald Lines, etc) with competing Chinese claims, but the boundaries remained undecided because the Qing Dynasty collapsed in 1910 and Tibet declared its independence in 1912, with Britain meanwhile shifting focus to its eastern boundaries. The Simla Convention (1913-14) signed by British India-China-Tibet had the McMahon Line securing British India’s boundaries with Tibet, based on the watershed principle; besides purchase of the Tawang tract from Tibet in exchange of 5,000 .303 rifles/5,00,000 bullets. Assistant Political Officer Maj Relengnao Khathing, oversaw the consolidation of Tawang tract in January 1951.

The Chinese, since 1954, have been claiming 83,000 sq km of what India called the North-West Frontier Agency (NEFA) – now Arunachal Pradesh – from the McMahon Line to the foothills above Tezpur. Post its formation on October 01, 1949, China took over Tibet in October 1950, with India protesting the takeover. Sardar Patel, the Deputy Prime Minister (PM), wrote to PM Nehru on November 07, 1950, on the need of viewing China as a long-term adversary; the need for a proper defence strategy; and for improving soldiering strength/quality, equipment, infrastructure, communications and intelligence. A follow-up Maj Gen Himmatsinhji Committee did recommend/oversee some corrective measures but minus infrastructure development. Overall, Nehru preferred appeasement, as was evident in his steering the April 1954 Panchsheel Agreement which recognised Chinese sovereignty over Tibet.

Appeasement did not, however, help, as the Khampa rebellion in Tibet in March 1959 led to the Dalai Lama seeking exile in India, arriving at Khenzamane, Tawang, at a 5 Assam Rifles post on March 31, 1959. Tension thereafter escalated. Meetings at apex levels, notes and memorandums followed but matters remained frigid. The Longju incident of August 25, 1959, followed by Kongka La on October 21, 1959, brought in a trust deficit that continues till date as at Doka La.

Little known to most, China began a forward deployment – “Armed Co-existence” – commencing June 1960, advancing 112 km southwest of its 1958 positions, setting up strong bases and logistics, with India following six months

later with the political directive of “stopping further PLA advance and dominating Chinese posts in our area,” as Nehru ordered on November 02, 1960.

Assured by President Kennedy that Pakistan would not be allowed to use its American-supplied arms against India, Nehru felt he would have to face only China which he strongly felt would never go to war against India. China, in May/June 1962, got unexpected assurances from both the USSR and USA that they would not create problems that would force China to face a multi-front war. China saw this diplomacy as indicative of superpower neutrality in case China waged war on India.

On May 29, 1962, Headquarters (HQ) General Staff People's Liberation Army (PLA), based on a Chinese Military Commission Directive issued orders to the Tibet Military Command (TMC) to plan for war. Force 419 was raised as its executing agency on June 11, 1962, and High Altitude Area (HAA) training for troops commenced. The die was cast for China to launch its attacks in October 1962.

The Indian Army was handed over the Chinese border to defend after the Longju/Kongka La incidents of October 1959. With political decision-making out of kilter, with the ground realities and the serious apex level military-civil discord, the Army went through its own learning curve. The die was cast for it too. Relations between Army Chief Gen Thimayya and Defence Minister Menon were severely strained, leading to Thimayya's dramatic resignation in September 1960; its withdrawal and his subsequent retirement in May 1961. Clearly, the Army was drastically underprepared and at odds with the governance; not a happy portent for successful war-fighting.

Tawang Sector Terrain/Operational Logistics and Deployment

India's adoption of a 'forward policy' made the McMahon Line alive again. In December 1961, orders were issued to set up posts closest to the McMahon Line. In NEFA, this was a formidable challenge as the roadhead, such as it was, ended at Tawang and the troops would have to be air maintained with only 30 percent chance of recovery of air drops due to the thick jungle, steep cliffs and absence of flat ground. That notwithstanding, by June 1962, 24 forward posts had been set up along the McMahon Line. The tri-junction among Bhutan/Tibet/India where the McMahon Line began, did not follow the watershed principle, with the ThagLa ridge being about 7 km north of the map coordinates. This led to competing claims and much acrimony but 5 Assam Rifles on June 04, 1962, set up the

Che Dong Post, assisted by Capt Mahavir Prasad, 1 SIKH, not at the inaccessible tri-junction but on the valley floor below it, on the southern bank of the Namka Chu, naming it Dhola after a pass that was a few km south of Che Dong. Reacting in September 1962, 60 PLA soldiers took up positions around Dhola but did not attack it. The Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) post Commander, however, troops reported the strength as 600 PLA which escalated matters.

It is germane to point out here that whereas the Chinese had lateral connectivity and roadheads right up to the McMahon Line; had stocked logistics and acclimatised their troops, the Indian terrain was exceptionally tenuous, forested and mountainous, with poor lateral connectivity, if any, between its north-south valleys. The rivers had strong, deep currents and the bridges were either of logs or suspension bridges. See Fig 1.

Fig 1: Road Axis – Tawang Sector



The decision to launch Op Leghorn in such terrain (where it took five days for a good vehicle to reach Tawang and six days walking from there to reach the McMahon Line) to “throw out the Chinese,” taken in September 1962, with

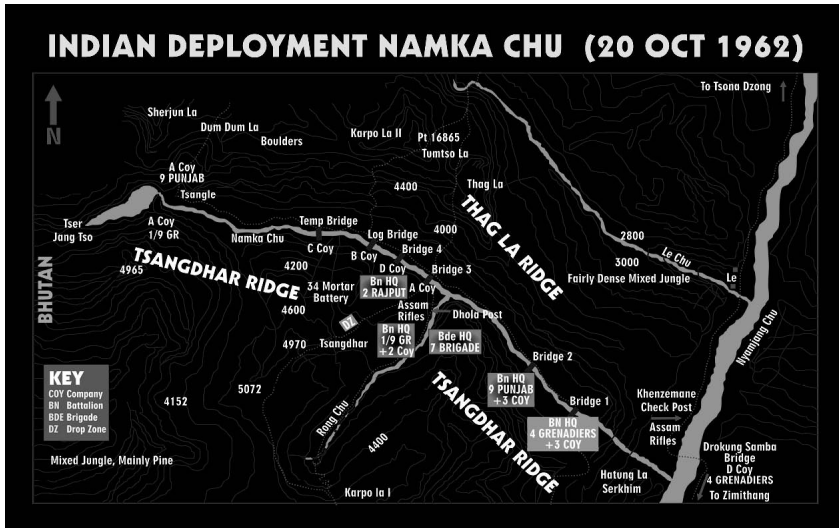
neither troops, equipment, operational logistics in place nor a coherent plan, was, therefore, doomed to failure. The Chinese, by comparison, could move 7-ton vehicles almost to their defences.

The troops available for doing so were the Tezpur headquartered 4 Infantry Division with 7 Infantry Brigade, headquartered at Tawang, with a battalion each at Tawang/Dirang Dzong/Bomdi La, and 5 Infantry Brigade scattered in NEFA. 11 Infantry Brigade was deployed in Nagaland. HQ 33 Corps was in Shillong. When 7 Infantry Brigade was ordered to deploy on the Namka Chu in September 1962, it effectively had a half-strength 9 PUNJAB. Troops had to use either the short-cut via Hathung La at 13,500 ft or the longer Karpo La route at 16,000 ft, taking three days to do so. Worse, the troops had summer uniforms and one blanket/ 50 rounds/man. Only one and a half batteries, without much dumped ammunition, were available. Thirty days supplies/ammunition besides rations were needed to be air-dropped by October 10, but were not; with just a few days' logistics available *in-situ*. The men had no entrenching tools.

Since the General Officer Commanding (GOC) 33 Corps was very critical of Operation Leghorn, a new Corps, 4 Corps was raised at Tezpur headed by Lt Gen BM Kaul, and 33 Corps was given other responsibilities. *The Times of India* described Kaul as "having extraordinary courage and drive" when he took over on October 04. His task, as it turned out, would be to command 7 Infantry Brigade in war. Reaching Dhola post on October 07, he realised that his rushing troops to the Namka Chu line, overlooked by Thag La, was a "low lying trap" but, instead of restraining himself, he ordered 2 RAJPUT to take Yumtso La (16,000 ft) which dominated the Chinese deployment at Thag La. As a preliminary operation, he had a 9 PUNJAB patrol sent to Tsengjong which dominated Namka Chu from the north. In the ensuing firefight on October 10, both sides suffered casualties, with the Indians withdrawing, leading Kaul, who was watching, to exclaim "Oh my God! They mean business!" Leaving Brig Dalvi to manage Namka Chu, Kaul departed for Delhi where Nehru chaired a Cabinet meeting also attended by the Army/Indian Air Force (IAF) Chiefs and Kaul. The Cabinet decided that 7 Infantry Brigade would continue at Namka Chu. Nehru's flippant "throw out the Chinese" remarks to the media on October 12, before departing for Colombo were interpreted by the *New York Times* as "Nehru declares war on China".

On the eve of the war, the deployment of the Indian Army at Namka Chu was as depicted in Fig 2.

Fig 2: Indian Deployment at Namka Chu



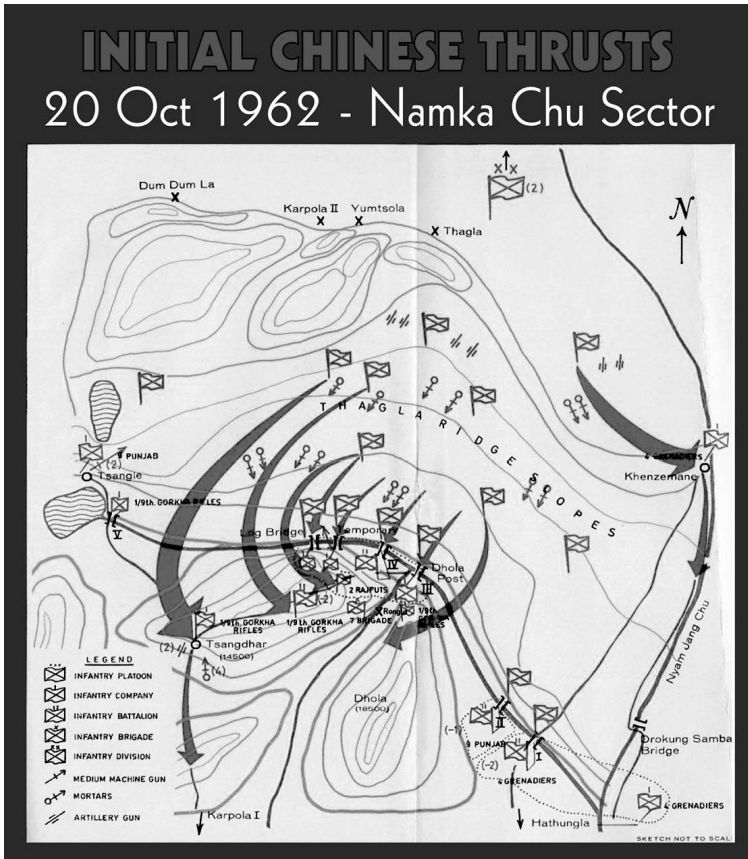
China Prepares for War

Chinese training for war commenced in June 1962 with 34.2 percent of the commanders having Korean War experience. Stocks were built up and roads developed up to Le under the Shannon Military Region. On October 06, the final bold, manoeuvre-warfare based attack plan was formulated under Marshal Liu Bocheng using the copper-head-with-tail-of-tin-stiff-back-and-soft-belly analogy till the Chinese claim line was reached. It involved:

- Smash-head at Se La.
- Cut-off-tail at Bomdi La.
- Snap-at-waist meant cutting off Road Se La-Dirang Dzong (Div HQ Main).
- Dissect-belly at Dirang Dzong.

The troops to be used were Force 419 (154/155/157 Infantry Regiments), 11 Infantry Division with 31(-)/32/33 Infantry Regiments; 2 Infantry Regiment, 308 Artillery Regiment (two companies) and part 136 Engineer Regiment. The main attack was on Bridges III and IV by Force 419 (four battalions) with the PLA infiltrating behind Namka Chu defences for Tsangdhar DZ/7 Infantry brigade logistics base. Dhola was ignored (See Fig 3).

Fig 3: Initial Chinese Thrusts



The Battle of Namka Chu

On October 18 1962, orders were issued by Force 419 to launch the Namka Chu attack on October 20. The option of attacking both flanks of the 7 Infantry Brigade with the main strike on 2 RAJPUT (Bridge 3 to Bridge 4) along with simultaneous infiltration attacks was sent to Chairman Mao, who was personally monitoring the war, by the Tibet Military Command (TMC). He approved.

155 Infantry Regiment plus the battalion of 157 Infantry Regiment was to attack 2 RAJPUT and Dhola Post. 157 Infantry Regiment less one battalion was to attack 1/9 GR and cut off the track from Bridge 1 to Hathung La, trapping 9 PUNJAB and 4 Grenadiers. 2nd Battalion/31 Infantry Regiment was to pin

down 2 RAJPUT from the north bank of the Namka Chu to aid flanking/rear attacks. A battalion ex 154 Infantry regiment was to attack Khenzamane and the 4 Grenadiers post at Drokung Samba bridge, then move along Nyamjung Chu valley to threaten Tactical HQ of 4 Infantry Division at Zimithang. Information of the final Chinese build-up was conveyed by the forward posts to 7 Infantry Brigade and thence to senior HQ but was not acted upon.

At 0500 hrs on October 20, the PLA attacked, preceded by heavy bombardment. Telephone and radio communications soon broke down with no communication between the Brigade HQ and units. The brigade left flank, held by 2 RAJPUT was infiltrated and attacked. Bitter fighting ensued for three hours. Out of 513 All Ranks, 282 were killed, 81 wounded, 60 survived and 171 were taken prisoner. The Commanding Officer (CO) Lt Col MS Rikh, Commander, Signals 4 Infantry Division, Lt Col Tiwari and CO 5 Assam Rif were taken prisoner. The PLA had 80 killed, and 113 wounded.

On the right flank, the PLA attacked and captured Khenzamane post and Drokung Samba bridge simultaneously. The withdrawal route to Zimithang was cut off. At the same time, the rear areas in the eastern flank behind Bridges 1 and 2 were attacked but in a delayed timeframe (1800 hours on October 20) allowing 9 PUNJAB and 4 Grenadiers to withdraw without major losses.

Tsangdhar, including the Dropping Zone (DZ), located six km behind Namka Chu, defended by Coy 1/9 GR was attacked by 1st Battalion/157 Infantry regiment at first light October 20, from the west, and captured by 1300 hrs. Thereafter, the balance of 157 Regiment followed and took the adjoining mountain passes. CO 1/9 GR, Lt Col Ahluwalia and 492 All Ranks were taken prisoner. At 1900 hrs, October 20, Force 419 passed orders for the capture of Tawang with operations to commence at 1600 hrs on October 21. By first light October 21, 7 Infantry Brigade was devastated. By 1200 hrs on October 22, Lumpu (Administrative Base) and Zimithang (Tactical HQ 4 Infantry Division) were taken, having being abandoned. Commander 7 Infantry Brigade, Brig John Dalvi was also captured on October 21, 1962, bringing the sordid chapter on the Namka Chu to a close.

In retrospect, the Battle of Namka Chu should never have been fought – provided the military hierarchy starting with GOC 4 Infantry Division, Maj Gen Niranjana Prasad had stood up for what they considered tactically unviable and defended their opinions with a soldier's ultimate weapon – resignation. That did not happen at any level other than Brig Dalvi's but his offer of resignation was on the eve of the battle and was not processed. On the contrary, even as

GOC 33 Corps disagreed with the plan, he was side-stepped. Disaster was, thus, the only result one could expect and an unmitigated disaster it was.

At the macro level, though, there were major gains as India woke up to the need for urgent uprating of its war-fighting machine. The armed forces were, thus, better prepared for the 1965 Indo-Pak War and at their peak of prowess in 1971. The worrying macro issues that remain are our whimsical approach towards infrastructure development; professional military education; apex level military-civil war-fighting structures and inter-Services synergy. We need to do so much more; starting right now.

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