

THE LIVING ARCHIVE

PART SIX OF NINETEEN

The Congress Record

Part Six — China, Tibet and 1962

An agreement that gave away everything and asked for nothing. A road built across territory India claimed, reported by four separate people and believed by none of them. And a report on the defeat that is still classified sixty-three years later.

This part rests on a document the Indian government has never released. Where it is used, it is used through a version published by a journalist and not authenticated by the state — and that grade is stated wherever it appears.

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INDIA · 1950 TO 1963

MISTERLOVE.IN

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Where We Left Off

Part Five left the chronology to look at a map. This part returns to it, in 1950, with a country that had just acquired a two-thousand-mile neighbour it had never had before.

Four findings from earlier parts are load-bearing here, and one of them is the spine of this whole part.

By 1954 there was nobody who could tell the Prime Minister he was wrong. Part Three followed it in detail: Patel died, Tandon was forced out, Ambedkar resigned, Kripalani left, and nothing institutional replaced any of them because nothing institutional had been doing the work. Part Three said the discovery that there is no mechanism happens at the moment you need one. This part is that moment.

When a state that counts everything has no count of something, somebody decided that. Part Two applied it to the Partition dead and to Hyderabad, where a commission the Prime Minister appointed was not published for sixty-four years. Chapter Eight of this part is the same shape, and the report in question is still closed.

A commission is controlled not by pressuring the judge but by writing the questions. Part One's rule about terms of reference. It applies to the inquiry into this defeat with unusual precision, and Chapter Eight is where it earns its place.

The correct diagnosis existing is not the same as the correct diagnosis arriving. Part Four found the government's own committees identifying the failure of the licence system in 1965, 1967 and 1969, with nothing following. One of the men who wrote the 1969 report also wrote a warning about the road across Aksai Chin in 1958, as Foreign Secretary. He appears twice in this series, both times right and both times ignored.

One note on the shape of this part. It is the first in the series where the charge is not about a policy but about a *process* — how information moved, or failed to, between people who all had the same objective. There is no corruption in it and very little bad faith. That makes it harder to write and, I think, more useful.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

The Six Boxes

Six coloured boxes run through the series, each doing one job. Here they are with examples from the material ahead.

A **Word Box** explains a hard word the moment it first appears.

WORD BOX

Suzerainty and sovereignty: two different kinds of authority over a territory, and the difference decides most of this part.

Sovereignty means the place is yours. You govern it, its foreign relations are yours, and nobody else has a standing claim.

Suzerainty is weaker. The outside power controls the territory's external affairs and defence while leaving it to run itself internally. Britain held suzerainty over India's princely states, which is what Part Two's chapter on accession was about.

Why it matters here: for centuries the relationship between China and Tibet was argued over in exactly these terms. In 1954 India signed an agreement describing Tibet as "the Tibet Region of China", and that phrase settled the argument on paper in one direction.

An **In Real Terms** box turns a number too big to picture into something with a body.

IN REAL TERMS

Aksai Chin is roughly 38,000 square kilometres. That is about the size of Switzerland, or a little larger than Kerala.

It is also, for practical purposes, empty: a high cold desert above five thousand metres where almost nothing grows and almost nobody lives. India did not have a single permanent post in it.

Hold both facts at once, because the whole argument in this part lives between them. It is large enough that losing it is a national humiliation, and empty enough that a foreign army built a road across it for several years before anybody in Delhi was sure.

A **How We Actually Know This** box shows the physical evidence and then says what it cannot prove.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The evidence for this part is unusually lopsided and it is important to say so at the start.

The **diplomatic record is excellent**. The 1954 agreement is a published treaty. The exchanges of notes between India and China were laid before Parliament in white papers. Nehru's statements are in the parliamentary record with dates.

The **military record is closed**. The army's own inquiry into the defeat has never been released. What is publicly known of it comes from a copy obtained by a journalist in the 1960s and published on his website in 2014, which the Indian government has never authenticated and scholars generally treat as genuine.

What this means in practice: everything in Chapters Two and Three is solid, and everything about what the army said internally is one grade weaker and marked as such.

An **Argument** box appears where serious people disagree, each side at its strongest.

THE ARGUMENT — WHOSE CLAIM TO THE DISPUTED TERRITORY IS BETTER?

Everything downstream depends on this and it is genuinely unresolved, which is not what either national account says.

INDIA'S CASE

In the east, the McMahon Line was agreed at Simla in 1914 between British India and Tibet, which was then conducting its own external affairs, and it follows the Himalayan watershed, which is the natural and customary divide. In the west, Aksai Chin lay within the boundaries of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, which acceded to India in 1947, and British-era maps show it as Indian. India inherited these boundaries as a successor state, which is the ordinary rule of international law.

CHINA'S CASE

China never ratified the Simla Convention and was not a consenting party, so a line agreed between Britain and a Tibet whose competence to sign China disputes cannot bind China. In the west, the British themselves drew several different lines at different times and never settled on one, and India could not have inherited a boundary that its predecessor had never fixed. Aksai Chin was historically connected to Xinjiang and Tibet by trade and administration, and India had never occupied it or administered it at any point.

Where things stand: India's eastern case is much stronger than its western one, and China's western case is much stronger than its eastern one — which is precisely why a package settlement was available and, as Chapter Nine discusses, was hinted at in 1960. The single most awkward fact for both national accounts is Zhou Enlai's own observation that no treaty or agreement on the boundary had ever been concluded between the two governments. He said it to make a point in China's favour, and it is true, and it cuts at India's position and China's equally.

What would settle it: nothing. There is no tribunal, both parties reject third-party adjudication, and after 1962 the operative line is where the armies stopped — which Part Two's Chapter Eight already identified as the usual way these things are actually decided.

Why people care so much: because two nuclear powers still patrol it, men still die on it, and both countries teach schoolchildren a version in which the answer is obvious.

A **Hidden Assumption** box digs out a belief sitting underneath an argument that *both sides accept without discussing*.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Everyone arguing about 1962 — in India, in China, and among the historians of both — assumes **that there was a border, and that somebody crossed it**.

The Indian version: China invaded Indian territory. The Chinese version: India pushed posts into Chinese territory and provoked a response. Both are accounts of a line being violated, and both parties argue about who did the violating.

No boundary had ever been agreed between the two governments. Not in 1914, not in 1947, not in 1954, not ever. Zhou Enlai said so directly, and India's own difficulty in 1959 was that it had to assert a line in the west that British administrators had drawn several incompatible versions of.

Once that is in view, a great deal of the argument dissolves and something harder replaces it. If there is no agreed line, then a patrol is not trespassing and a post is not an invasion; each is a *claim being asserted physically*, and both countries were doing it. The Forward Policy in Chapter Five looks completely different once you stop asking whether it crossed a border and start asking what it was for.

Why neither side will drop the assumption. A country that admits the line was never agreed has admitted that its own maps are claims rather than facts, which no government can say to its own population while men are dying on the line. So both

states describe a legal violation, and the actual situation — two claims meeting in an unmapped desert, with neither side willing to say so out loud — is discussed by almost nobody in either country.

And every chapter closes with a **Remember This** box: the chapter in the plainest words available.

REMEMBER THIS

Part Three found that by 1954 **nobody could tell the Prime Minister he was wrong.** This part is what that cost when it was tested against a war.

The diplomatic record here is **excellent** and the military record is **closed**. Every claim from the army's own inquiry is one grade weaker and is marked as such.

No boundary had ever been agreed between the two governments. Both countries argue about who crossed a line that never existed, because neither can afford to say that its own map is a claim.

Part Six

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CHAPTER ONE

The Neighbour That Arrived

For as long as anybody could remember there had been something soft between India and China. In 1950 it stopped being there, and India's answer was to hope it had not.

1.1 — What Tibet was for

For the whole of the British period, India's northern frontier had a peculiar and very comfortable property. Beyond the mountains lay Tibet — enormous, thinly populated, poor, militarily negligible, and running its own external affairs in practice whatever the theory said.

Britain had built an arrangement on top of that. Indian trade agencies operated at Yatung, Gyantse and Gartok. A small military escort protected the route. India ran the postal, telegraph and telephone services along it, and maintained rest houses. There was an Indian Mission in Lhasa.

These were not romantic imperial relics. They were the physical apparatus of a buffer: eyes on the ground, a line of communication, and a set of rights that made the northern frontier something India could see.

In 1950 China moved into Tibet and the arrangement ended. India acquired, for the first time in its history, a long land frontier with a large, unified, militarily capable state.

1.2 — What India inherited, and what it did not

The frontier itself came in two very different halves, and confusing them produces most of the bad writing on this subject.

In the east, along what is now Arunachal Pradesh, India claimed the **McMahon Line** — agreed at a conference in Simla in 1914 between British India and Tibet, following the crest of the Himalaya. It is a real line on a real map with a real signature on it. China's objection is that it never ratified the convention and disputes that Tibet was competent to sign.

In the west, in Ladakh, there was nothing so tidy. British administrators had drawn several different lines across the Aksai Chin plateau at different times and for different purposes, and had never settled on one. Some put the boundary far to the north; others put it much further south, leaving Aksai Chin outside India.

So India in 1947 inherited, in the east, a boundary its predecessor had asserted and, in the west, a set of options its predecessor had never chosen between.

WORD BOX

Watershed principle: the idea that a mountain boundary should follow the highest ridge — the line where water starts flowing one way rather than the other.

It is appealing because it is visible on the ground, hard to argue about, and usually corresponds to where people actually live and trade. Most Himalayan boundaries are described this way.

Why it matters here: the McMahon Line broadly follows it, which is India's strongest single argument in the east. Aksai Chin does not sit on a watershed at all — it is a high plateau — which is why the western boundary was never obvious to anybody, including the British.

The scale of what changed in 1950 is easy to state and hard to feel, so here it is in a form that can be pictured.

IN REAL TERMS

India's frontier with China runs roughly 3,500 kilometres. That is about the distance from Delhi to Rome.

Before 1950 almost none of it needed a soldier. Beyond the mountains lay a territory with no army worth the name and no capacity to threaten anything, and India's presence there consisted of some trade agents, a few escorts and a post office.

After 1950 the same line faced an army that had just fought the United States to a standstill in Korea. Nothing about the geography had altered. Everything about what the geography required had.

India's response over the following eight years was to reduce its presence in Tibet to nothing and to build almost no roads on its own side. Chapter Three is what that produced.

1.3 — The place itself

Aksai Chin is about thirty-eight thousand square kilometres of high cold desert, mostly above five thousand metres. Nothing grows. Almost nobody lives there. In winter it is among the least habitable places on the planet.

It matters to China because it is the only practicable route between Xinjiang and western Tibet. A road across it links two vast provinces that are otherwise separated by the Kunlun and the Karakoram.

It mattered to India because it was on the map.

That asymmetry is worth sitting with rather than skipping past. For one country the territory had a specific, concrete and continuous military use. For the other it had a legal and symbolic value and no physical presence at all — no post, no patrol route, no road, and no way of knowing what was happening in it without deliberately going to look.

1.4 — The frontier with no roads

One decision from this period explains more of what happened in 1962 than any other, and it was not taken in a crisis. It was taken calmly, over years, as a settled view.

India did not build roads to its northern frontier.

The reasoning was not neglect and it was not stupidity. It was a doctrine, and it had a respectable pedigree: **a road into difficult country helps the invader more than the defender.** An army coming down from Tibet would have to carry everything across the highest mountains on earth. Build a road up to the passes and you have solved that problem for them. Leave the approaches trackless and the mountains do the defending.

Against a nineteenth-century opponent this is sound. Against an opponent who has spent twelve years building his own roads on his side of the line, it is the opposite of sound, because the advantage of the terrain now belongs entirely to whichever side has built through it.

By 1962 the practical position was that Chinese formations could be supplied by road to within reach of the frontier, and Indian formations could not. Indian units walked in, or were dropped to from aircraft onto slopes where much of what was dropped was never recovered. That is not a failure of logistics in the sense of things going wrong. It is a policy working exactly as designed, in a situation the design no longer fitted.

Two things follow, and the second is the more important.

The first is that the Forward Policy of Chapter Five was placing posts into country that had deliberately been left without any means of reaching them. Western Command's objection about logistics was not a complaint about shortages. It was a statement that the ground had been prepared, for a decade, for the opposite of what was now being ordered.

The second is that this is the clearest example in the part of a decision that was correct when taken and became wrong without anybody revisiting it. Part One's Chapter Two set out the difference between a decision that was wrong at the time and one that became wrong later, and said the interesting question is always *when* it changed and who was in the room. Here the answer is available: it changed in 1950, when the buffer stopped existing, and nothing was reconsidered for another twelve years.

REMEMBER THIS

Tibet was a **buffer with an apparatus**: trade agencies, escorts, post offices, a mission in Lhasa. In 1950 India acquired a long frontier with a large unified state for the first time in its history.

The frontier came in two halves. **In the east, the McMahon Line** — signed, mapped, broadly on the watershed. **In the west, nothing settled**: the British had drawn several incompatible lines and never chosen.

Aksai Chin is **Switzerland-sized and empty**. For China it was the only route between Xinjiang and Tibet. For India it was on the map and nowhere else.

CHAPTER TWO

1954: The Agreement

India gave up every right it held in Tibet, accepted a phrase it had never accepted before, and did not raise the boundary. The agreement ran for eight years and expired four months before the war.

2.1 — What was signed

On 29 April 1954, in Peking, India and China signed the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India.

Its preamble contained the five principles of peaceful coexistence — mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. In India they were known by their Sanskrit name, **Panchsheel**, and they became the centrepiece of Indian foreign policy for the next eight years.

The agreement was valid for eight years. It lapsed in 1962.

One word in that paragraph carried more weight in Indian politics than any other in the decade, and it is worth being exact about what it meant.

WORD BOX

Non-alignment: the policy of refusing to join either side in the Cold War — neither the American bloc nor the Soviet one — while dealing with both.

It was not neutrality in the Swiss sense, which means staying out of everything. It was an active claim to independent judgment, and it gave India, a poor country with a small army, a diplomatic weight far beyond its material strength.

Its cost was that India had no security guarantee from anybody. A non-aligned country in trouble has friends and no allies.

Why it matters here: Chapter Seven ends with the author of this policy asking Washington for fighter squadrons, and the distance between those two sentences is the subject of this part.

2.2 — What India gave

The list is not disputed by anybody and it is longer than most Indians realise.

The phrase. The title of the agreement itself describes Tibet as “the Tibet Region of China”. This was the first time India had accepted that formulation in a treaty. Whatever the historical argument about suzerainty and sovereignty had been, India had now signed one side of it.

The military escorts at Yatung and Gyantse, inherited from the British, were withdrawn.

The postal, telegraph and public telephone services India operated in Tibet were handed to China.

The rest houses along the trade routes were given up.

The Indian Mission in Lhasa was downgraded to a Consulate General.

And India agreed to a Chinese Consulate General in Bombay.

2.3 — What India asked for

Nothing about the boundary.

That is the whole of section 2.3 and it is the charge in this chapter. The agreement does not settle the border, does not mention it, and does not record a reservation of India’s position on it. The one moment at which India held something China wanted — recognition of its position in Tibet, from the most prominent non-aligned country in Asia — was used to obtain trade arrangements and a statement of principles.

Acharya Kripalani, who had already left Congress by then and whom Part Three met resigning over other things, later described the agreement as born in sin.

IN REAL TERMS

You are selling a house. The buyer wants it badly and nobody else is bidding.

There is an old dispute with the neighbour about where the fence runs. It has never been settled and both families have different deeds.

At the closing you hand over the keys, the garage, the tools in it and the right to use the drive. You do not mention the fence. Your solicitor does not put a line in the contract saying the fence is unresolved.

Eight years later the neighbour has built on the disputed strip, and when you object he points out that you sold him the house without ever saying you thought the land was yours.

None of that is contested by anybody, which is unusual for this subject and worth explaining.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The 1954 agreement is a published treaty, registered and available. Everything in sections 2.1 to 2.3 can be checked by reading it: the title, the preamble, the schedule of what India surrendered, the eight-year term, and the absence of any boundary provision.

This is the highest grade of evidence in the series. There is no need to rely on anybody's account of what was agreed, and no version of Indian or Chinese nationalism can adjust the text.

What it cannot show: what was discussed and not written down. Some accounts of the negotiation describe it as conducted with strikingly little briefing or note-taking, which if true would mean that the absence of a boundary clause reflects the absence of a boundary discussion rather than a decision to omit one. That distinction matters and the papers that would settle it are not open.

Which leaves the question the chapter exists for.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THE 1954 AGREEMENT A BLUNDER?

Part One's test: a charge needs an alternative that somebody proposed at the time, that was politically possible, and that somebody comparable did.

DEFENSIBLE, AND THE ALTERNATIVES WERE WORSE

India had no capacity to defend Tibet and no intention of trying; China was already there and was not leaving. The rights being surrendered were *colonial* rights, inherited from an empire India had just spent thirty years fighting, and holding them would have made India's entire anti-imperial foreign policy incoherent. What India bought was eight years of quiet on a frontier it could not defend, during which it built an economy. And raising the boundary in 1954 would have converted an unspoken disagreement into a formal dispute at a moment when India was in no position to sustain one.

A BLUNDER, AND SPECIFICALLY ABOUT THE BOUNDARY

The surrender of the trade rights is defensible and is not the charge. The charge is that India held a bargaining position for one moment and did not use it. Recognising Tibet as Chinese territory was worth a great deal to Peking and it was given for nothing. At minimum, a single clause reserving India's position on the boundary would have cost nothing and would have transformed every subsequent exchange. Instead India signed a document that, by describing the frontier in terms of trade passes without addressing the line, made its own later assertions look like new claims.

Where things stand: the second side is stronger and the first side's best point survives inside it. Giving up the colonial apparatus was right. Not reserving the boundary was a specific, separable, costless omission, and it was noticed at the time by people including Kripalani. This is exactly the distinction Part One's Chapter Two insisted on: the question is never "was the policy wrong" but which component of it was wrong, and whether the alternative was available.

What would settle it: the negotiating record — whether anybody in the Indian delegation proposed a boundary reservation and was overruled. Some accounts say the talks were conducted with strikingly little briefing or note-taking. The files are not open.

Why people care so much: because Panchsheel was not a treaty clause in India, it was a national self-description, and conceding that it was badly negotiated concedes something much larger about the decade it defined.

One thing to carry forward. The agreement's eight-year term meant it expired in 1962. It was not renewed, and it lapsed a few months before the war — so the framework that had defined the relationship for the whole period simply ran out, quietly, in the year everything happened.

REMEMBER THIS

On **29 April 1954** India gave up its military escorts, its post and telegraph services, its rest houses, and the status of its mission in Lhasa — and accepted the phrase “**the Tibet Region of China**” for the first time in a treaty.

Surrendering colonial rights was defensible. **Not reserving India's position on the boundary was separable, costless and not done.**

The agreement ran for **eight years and lapsed in 1962**, four months before the war. Kripalani called it born in sin.

CHAPTER THREE

The Road

China built twelve hundred kilometres of highway, a hundred and sixty of them across territory India claimed. It was opened with a ceremony and announced in a newspaper. India told its Parliament nearly two years later.

3.1 — What was built

The Xinjiang–Tibet highway runs from Yecheng in Xinjiang to Gartok in western Tibet — about twelve hundred kilometres, of which roughly a hundred and sixty cross Aksai Chin.

Construction ran through the middle 1950s and was completed in the second half of 1957. On **6 October 1957** the road was formally opened with a ceremony at Gartok, and twelve trucks made a trial run from Yarkand. In **January 1958** the China News Agency reported that the highway had opened two months earlier and was in full use.

This was not a covert operation. It was a national infrastructure project, publicised by the country that built it.

3.2 — When India knew

Here is the sequence, and every item in it is separately documented.

1955. The Chief of Army Staff, General K.S. Thimayya, suspected a road was being built across Indian-claimed territory. A British mountaineer, Sidney Wignall, went into Tibet with the knowledge of Indian military intelligence. He was arrested by the Chinese, interrogated, and released — and made it back to India with a report.

1956. The Indian Military Attaché in Peking, Brigadier S.S. Malik, passed information about the road to Military Headquarters.

October 1957 and January 1958. The opening and the completion were announced publicly by Chinese sources.

Early 1958. The Foreign Secretary, **Subimal Dutt**, wrote to Nehru that there seemed little doubt that the newly constructed twelve-hundred-kilometre road connecting Gartok with Yecheng passed through Aksai Chin. He proposed sending a reconnoitring party in the spring.

Nehru agreed to the ground party. He declined air reconnaissance, writing that he did not think it desirable and did not see what good it could do.

1958. Ground patrols went. Some of them were detained by Chinese forces.

August 1959. Nehru told Parliament that the Sinkiang–Tibet highway had been built through Indian territory.

WORD BOX

Air reconnaissance: flying over ground to photograph what is on it.

The difference from a ground patrol is not comfort but certainty and speed. An aircraft covers in an hour what a party on foot covers in a fortnight, at altitudes where a fortnight may not be available, and it returns with photographs — evidence that does not depend on anybody's account and cannot be argued with.

It is also more visible and more provocative, and it can be construed as an overflight of somebody else's territory.

Why it matters here: Nehru authorised the slow method that produces reports and refused the fast one that produces proof. Chapter Four is about what happens to reports.

3.3 — What else happened in 1959

The August 1959 statement did not arrive into a calm year, and this is the context most accounts of the road leave out.

In March 1959 there was a rising in Lhasa. It was put down, and the **Dalai Lama fled across the Himalaya into India**, where he was granted asylum and where he has lived ever since.

That decision was taken by the Indian government and it was, on any reading, the right one. A country that turns away a religious leader fleeing for his life is a country that has decided what it is. India did not do that, and this series will not criticise it for not doing it.

But it had consequences, and they compounded with everything in this chapter.

For Peking, granting asylum was not a humanitarian gesture. It was interference in what China regarded as an internal matter, by a country that had signed an agreement in 1954 whose second principle was mutual non-interference. Relations deteriorated sharply from that spring and never recovered.

And for India, the two things arrived within months of each other. The Dalai Lama came in March. Parliament was told about the road in August. So the Indian public received, inside a single year, the news that Tibet had risen and been crushed, that its leader was now in India, and that Chinese forces had built a highway across territory shown on Indian maps.

Five years of Panchsheel, of official friendship and of a slogan about brotherhood, collapsed in about six months.

This matters for Chapter Nine's argument and it should be stated here rather than saved. The reason no Indian government could contemplate the 1960 package is not simply that concealment had built up pressure. It is that the pressure was released all at once, in a year when the same public was also watching a refugee leader arrive from a country India had signed away. **Any settlement offered after 1959 had to be sold to a country that had just been shown, in one season, that it had been wrong about everything.**

3.4 — The gap

Count it plainly. The army suspected in 1955. The military attaché reported in 1956. The Chinese announced it in 1957. The Foreign Secretary put it in writing to the Prime Minister in early 1958. Parliament was told in August 1959.

Between the government being told by its own Foreign Secretary and Parliament being told, roughly eighteen months elapsed. Between the army's first suspicion and Parliament being told, roughly four years.

Two separate charges live in that gap and they should not be run together.

The first is about telling Parliament. A government that knows a foreign power has built a road across territory it claims, and does not tell the legislature for a year and a half, has made a decision about what its own Parliament is for. This is a democratic charge and it does not depend on any view about China policy.

The second is about what the delay was for. During those months India was still conducting a foreign policy whose central plank was that relations with China were excellent. Announcing the road would have made that position untenable. The delay bought time for a policy, and the policy was the Prime Minister's.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The chronology in section 3.2 rests on sources of quite different weight and it is worth separating them.

SOLID: the road's completion and formal opening, which Chinese state media announced; Nehru's statement to Parliament in August 1959, which is in the parliamentary record with a date; and the detention of Indian patrols in 1958, which appears in the exchanges of notes laid before Parliament.

DOCUMENTED BUT FROM PRIVATE PAPERS: Dutt's note to Nehru in early 1958 and Nehru's reply about air reconnaissance. These come from archival work by researchers on Indian records rather than from a published government release.

ALLEGED: the Wignall episode of 1955 and the remark attributed to Krishna Menon dismissing it. This rests on the mountaineer's own later account and on secondary writing, and no official document confirms it.

What this cannot show: what Nehru believed. A refusal to authorise air reconnaissance is consistent with complacency, with a wish not to provoke, and with a wish not to obtain proof that would force his hand. The document records the decision and not the reason.

The length of that silence deserves converting into something a reader can hold.

IN REAL TERMS

Four years is a long time in a life and a very long time in a government.

A child who started school in 1955, when the army first suspected the road, was in her fifth year when Parliament was told. A conscript soldier would have completed a full engagement. Two general elections were held inside that window, in neither of which the question arose.

And the eighteen months between the Foreign Secretary's note and the statement to Parliament is not an administrative delay. It is longer than the entire period between the Chinese attack and the ceasefire, several times over.

Which raises the question of what the government should have done in early 1958, when it had it in writing.

THE ARGUMENT — WHAT SHOULD INDIA HAVE DONE WHEN IT FOUND THE ROAD?

By early 1958 the government had it in writing from its own Foreign Secretary. The options then were real and none of them was good.

ROUGHLY WHAT IT DID

India had no capacity to remove the road and no capacity to defend Aksai Chin, which it had never occupied and could not reach. Publicising the discovery in 1958 would have produced an immediate domestic demand for action India could not take, destroyed the one framework — Panchsheel — under which quiet negotiation was possible, and hardened Chinese positions before India had any military presence at all. Delay bought time to build roads and posts, and that is what governments do when the alternative is a crisis they cannot win.

TOLD PARLIAMENT AT ONCE AND NEGOTIATED FROM THE FACT

Everything in the first argument is a case for not going to war, and nobody was proposing war. It is not a case for concealment. Telling Parliament in 1958 would have made the position honest, put the fact on the record before China consolidated, and — this is the part that matters — allowed India to negotiate the boundary while it still had something to trade. Chapter Nine describes a package settlement floated in 1960 and rejected. It was rejected partly because by then the Indian public had been told there was Indian territory under Chinese occupation and no government could concede it. **The concealment created the domestic politics that made settlement impossible.**

Where things stand: the second side is stronger and the reason is the sequencing. The first side's case for delay assumes the delay was used to prepare. It was not: almost nothing was built between 1958 and 1961. What the delay actually produced was a later, angrier revelation, arriving all at once, into a public that had spent five years being told relations were excellent — which is the worst possible condition in which to negotiate a compromise.

What would settle it: what was built or authorised in Ladakh between early 1958 and late 1959. Some of this is answerable from published defence estimates and nobody has assembled it.

Why people care so much: because if the concealment closed off a settlement, then the 1962 war was made more likely by an Indian decision taken four years earlier and not by anything that happened in October.

And one point of fairness before the summary. Nothing in this chapter says India could have removed the road, or should have gone to war over it, or that Aksai Chin was defensible. It says a government knew something and did not say so, and that the not-saying had consequences which arrived in 1960 and again in 1962.

REMEMBER THIS

The road was **completed in 1957, opened with a ceremony on 6 October, and announced by Chinese media in January 1958**. It was never a secret.

India's army suspected in **1955**, its attaché reported in **1956**, its Foreign Secretary wrote to the Prime Minister in **early 1958** — and Parliament was told in **August 1959**.

Two charges, not one: **a government decided what its Parliament was for, and the delay bought time for a policy rather than for preparation**. Nothing much was built in Ladakh in those months.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Men Who Were Told

Part One said a bad outcome becomes a blunder only if somebody saw it at the time. Four people saw it. This chapter is about what happened to each of them.

4.1 — The test

Part One set three conditions before anything in this series may be called a blunder. Somebody proposed the alternative at the time. It was politically possible. And somebody comparable did it.

The first condition is the one that does the work, and it is usually the hardest to meet, because most warnings are reconstructed afterwards by people who want to have been right.

This part is unusual. The warnings are dated, the people are named, and in three of the four cases what happened to the warning is also on the record.

4.2 — Four warnings

The Chief of Army Staff, 1955. General K.S. Thimayya suspected a road was being built and arranged, through military intelligence, for a foreign mountaineer to go and look. The man was arrested by the Chinese and released, and got back with a report.

The Military Attaché in Peking, 1956. Brigadier S.S. Malik passed information about the road to Military Headquarters. This is the most ordinary and most damning of the four: it is exactly what a military attaché is posted abroad to do, and it worked.

The Foreign Secretary, early 1958. Subimal Dutt wrote to the Prime Minister that there was little doubt the road passed through Aksai Chin, and proposed reconnaissance.

The reconnaissance pilot, 1960 to 1962. Wing Commander Jag Mohan Nath flew secret missions over Tibet and reported that China had no air force positioned there. Accounts of the period say the Defence Minister did not believe him.

That fourth one deserves a moment, because it is the one with the sharpest consequence. India did not use its air force in the war of 1962. Its aircraft flew transport and supply and not a single strike. One of the reasons given afterwards was uncertainty about Chinese air capability and fear of retaliation on Indian cities.

A pilot had flown over the ground and reported that the capability was not there.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

These four items are not of equal standing and this box exists to say so.

Malik's report and Dutt's note come from archival research on Indian official papers by named historians. They are as good as anything available on a period whose files are not open, and I treat them as **SOLID** for the fact of the warning and **ALLEGED** for anything said in response to it.

The Thimayya–Wignall episode and the remarks attributed to Krishna Menon rest on the mountaineer's own later book and on secondary accounts. Grade: **ALLEGED**. The chapter's argument does not depend on it.

The Nath reconnaissance rests on his own account and on writers working from it. Grade: **ALLEGED**. What is **SOLID** alongside it is narrower and independent: India did not use offensive air power in 1962, and that decision was taken at cabinet level.

What none of this can show: whether any of these reports reached the Prime Minister in a form he registered. A note written is not a note read.

Set out side by side, the four look less like a series of missed signals and more like a system reporting correctly into a vacuum.

WHO	WHEN	WHAT WAS SAID	WHAT FOLLOWED
Gen. K.S. Thimayya, Chief of Army Staff	1955	Suspected a road across claimed territory; arranged for a foreign mountaineer to go and look.	The man was detained, released, and returned with a report. Accounts say it was dismissed at ministerial level.
Brig. S.S. Malik, Military Attaché, Peking	1956	Passed information about the road to Military Headquarters.	Received by a headquarters with no authority over frontier policy, which rested with the Prime Minister as Foreign Minister.

WHO	WHEN	WHAT WAS SAID	WHAT FOLLOWED
Subimal Dutt, Foreign Secretary	Early 1958	Wrote to the Prime Minister that the road almost certainly crossed Aksai Chin; proposed reconnaissance.	Ground party authorised. Air reconnaissance refused. Parliament told eighteen months later.
Wg Cdr Jag Mohan Nath, reconnaissance pilot	1960– 62	Flew over Tibet and reported that China had no air force positioned there.	Accounts say the Defence Minister disbelieved him. India used no offensive air power in the war.

One of those four deserves a note, because it is the one that shows the machinery working perfectly.

WORD BOX

Military attaché: an officer posted to an embassy whose job is to observe the host country's armed forces and report home.

It is an open and accepted role — every country does it and every country knows it is being done. The attaché is not a spy; he reads the local press, attends parades, talks to other attachés, travels where he is permitted, and writes it up.

Why it matters here: Brigadier Malik's report on the road in 1956 was not a coup or a leak. It was the routine output of a post that exists precisely to produce it, arriving through the channel built to carry it. The system worked exactly as designed, right up to the point where somebody had to act.

4.3 — What happened to them

Now the part that turns a list into a finding.

Not one of the four warnings produced a change of policy. Not one of the four men was disciplined, sacked or silenced. Nobody was punished for being right, which is worth saying because it is the version people expect and it is not what happened.

What happened is duller and worse. The reports arrived, were noted, and did not connect to any decision. Dutt got a reply — he got the ground party he asked for and was refused the air reconnaissance, which is the reply of a Prime Minister engaging with the question and choosing the option that would generate the least conclusive evidence.

Malik's report went into a headquarters that had no authority to act on it, because the boundary was a matter for the Ministry of External Affairs and the External Affairs portfolio was held by the Prime Minister.

That last detail is not incidental and it recurs. Through this whole period the Prime Minister was also the Foreign Minister. There was no separate minister whose department's institutional interest was the frontier and who could take a different view in cabinet.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Everybody who writes about 1962 — and about every intelligence failure anywhere — assumes **that a warning which is delivered has been received.**

Both national accounts run on it. The critical version: they were told and they ignored it, which makes the failure a moral one about arrogance. The defensive version: the warnings were fragmentary and contradictory, which makes it a technical failure of collection. Both are arguments about the quality of the information.

Delivery and receipt are different events and the second one is not automatic. For a warning to be received, somebody has to have (a) the authority to act on it, (b) an incentive to believe it, and (c) a decision it changes. A report that reaches a desk where all three are absent has not been received. It has been filed.

Look at the four warnings against those three tests. Malik had no authority and reported into a headquarters that had none either. Thimayya had authority over soldiers and none over the frontier policy. Dutt had the ear of the Prime Minister and no authority independent of him. Nath had a photograph and no route to anybody who wanted it.

And the incentive test fails everywhere at once, because a warning about the road was a warning that the central plank of Indian foreign policy was mistaken — which no official can deliver upwards without asking the Prime Minister to abandon a position he had personally built.

This is why the “arrogance” explanation, which is the popular one in India, is both satisfying and useless. It locates the failure in one man's character, which nothing can be done about. The structural version locates it in an arrangement where **the same**

person held the Prime Ministership, the External Affairs portfolio, and the party presidency for part of the period — and Part Three showed that by 1954 nobody with an independent base was left to contradict him on anything at all.

The test of the structural reading is whether the same pattern appears elsewhere in this series, on subjects with no connection to China and no involvement from the same man. Part Four found it in 1965, 1967 and 1969, in economics, under a different Prime Minister. It does appear elsewhere. That is the finding.

Hold this chapter beside Part Three's Chapter Eight, which found that between 1950 and 1954 every figure with an independent base who could contradict the leadership had died, resigned or been defeated. That chapter said the discovery that there is no mechanism happens at the moment you need one. This is the moment.

REMEMBER THIS

Four warnings, dated and named: **the army chief in 1955, the attaché in 1956, the Foreign Secretary in 1958, the reconnaissance pilot from 1960.**

Nobody was punished for being right. The reports arrived, were noted, and connected to no decision — which is duller and worse than suppression.

A warning is **received** only where somebody has the authority to act, an incentive to believe, and a decision it changes. **All three failed at once**, because the Prime Minister was also the Foreign Minister and the warning said his policy was wrong.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Forward Policy

On 2 November 1961, four men in the Prime Minister's office decided to push small parties of Indian troops into contact with the Chinese army. One of the four was a soldier.

5.1 — The meeting

The decision that produced the war has a date, a place and an attendance list, which is unusual in this series and is one of the things the army's own inquiry established.

The meeting was held in the Prime Minister's office on **2 November 1961**. Present were the Defence Minister, V.K. Krishna Menon; the Foreign Secretary, M.J. Desai; the Chief of Army Staff, General P.N. Thapar; and the Director of the Intelligence Bureau, B.N. Mullik.

The decision taken was to push forward troops into contact with the Chinese — to establish posts in disputed territory, including in places behind Chinese positions, in order to demonstrate Indian occupation of ground India claimed.

Notice the composition of that room. A politician, a diplomat, an intelligence chief and one general. The question being decided was whether a foreign army would fight. The person in the room whose professional training was in estimating that was the intelligence chief, and the assessment came from him.

5.2 — The theory

The Forward Policy rested on a proposition, and the proposition was not absurd.

It held that China would not respond with force to Indian posts in disputed territory. The grounds were that China had substantial problems elsewhere, that its leaders had repeatedly said they did not want war, and that early Indian probes had been met by Chinese withdrawal rather than resistance.

That last observation was true and it was the trap. When India first pushed posts forward, Chinese units in some places pulled back. The conclusion drawn was that the policy worked. The other available conclusion — that an army withdrawing in front of penny packets is repositioning rather than retreating — was not drawn.

WORD BOX

Penny packets: a military term for splitting a force into small groups scattered over a wide area, instead of concentrating it.

Small posts can watch ground and show a flag. They cannot hold it. A platoon on a ridge with no artillery, no reserve within a day's march and a supply line that runs by air drop is a tripwire, and a tripwire only works if there is something behind it.

Why it matters here: the Forward Policy produced dozens of these, some of them positioned behind Chinese posts rather than in front of them, at altitudes where a man carrying a load moves at walking pace for days.

5.3 — What Western Command said

The army's own inquiry, in the portion that has become public, records that **Headquarters Western Command objected.**

Its objection was not political. It did not say the policy was provocative or that the claim was wrong. It said that a forward move required adequate troop numbers, combat support and logistics, and that these were not present.

That is a professional military assessment of feasibility, made by the formation responsible for the ground, in advance, in writing.

It was overruled by Army Headquarters.

The inquiry describes an Army Headquarters under a weak Chief and pressed by an energetic Chief of General Staff — Lieutenant General B.M. Kaul, appointed to that post at the beginning of 1961 — which accepted the Intelligence Bureau's assessment that the Chinese would not fight, and passed the requirement down.

Grade for this paragraph: **ALLEGED**, in the strict sense of this series. It comes from a document the Indian government has never authenticated, published by a journalist in 2014. Scholars generally treat it as genuine. Chapter Eight is about why that is the best available position.

THE ARGUMENT — WAS THE FORWARD POLICY PROVOCATION OR DEFENCE?

This is the central historical dispute about 1962 and it has a nationalist answer in both countries.

DEFENCE, AND CHINA'S RESPONSE WAS DISPROPORTIONATE

India was placing posts on territory it claimed and had always claimed, inside its own maps, on ground no other state administered. China had already built a road across that same territory without asking. A country that responds to a police post with a corps-level offensive across two fronts, seizing ground far beyond the disputed strip, has not been provoked into self-defence; it has taken an opportunity. And China planned the offensive over months, which is not what a reactive response looks like.

PROVOCATION, AND A MILITARILY ILLITERATE ONE

Chapter One established that no boundary had ever been agreed. In that situation a post is not defence of a border, it is the physical assertion of a claim, and both sides knew it. India asserted its claim with platoons it could not supply, behind an opposing army, having been told by its own Western Command that the numbers and logistics were absent — while simultaneously refusing the negotiation that might have settled the line. That is not defence. It is a bluff, made by people who had been told it was a bluff.

Where things stand: the two sides answer different questions and both answers are correct. On *who escalated*, the first side is right: the Chinese offensive of October and November went far beyond anything the Forward Policy did, and the scale of it was a choice made in Peking. On *whether India's own conduct was defensible*, the second is right, and it is the question this series is about. India is not responsible for China's decision. It is responsible for having placed its soldiers where they were, in the numbers they were, having been warned.

What would settle it: the Chinese decision-making record, which is closed and is likely to remain so.

Why people care so much: because one answer makes 1962 an unprovoked aggression and the other makes it a self-inflicted disaster, and Indian politics has needed the first answer continuously since 1962.

Notice that both of those positions treat the Forward Policy as a question of strategy — good strategy or bad strategy, defensive or aggressive. That framing is shared, and it is wrong.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Both sides of that argument assume **that the Forward Policy was a military decision.**

It is discussed as strategy — posts, lines, deployments, whether it was sound. Its defenders call it a defensive posture and its critics call it a military blunder. Everybody is grading it as generalship.

It was not a military decision and it was not taken by soldiers. It was taken in a Prime Minister's office by four men, one of them in uniform, and its central premise was a claim about *what the Chinese leadership would decide*. That is a political and intelligence judgment. The military content of the meeting was the part that got overruled.

The distinction matters because it changes where the failure sits. If the Forward Policy was bad generalship, the fix is better generals, and India spent the following decade on exactly that — restructuring the army, buying equipment, building border roads. Those were good things and they are Chapter Seven's credit items.

If it was a political bet dressed as a military posture, then better generals fix nothing, because the generals were not consulted on the bet. The fix would have to be a process in which a professional assessment that a plan is not feasible *stops the plan* — and India did not build that, then or since.

Watch which version each country's account needs. India's needs the military framing, because it locates the failure in an institution that was subsequently reformed. China's needs it too, because a military provocation justifies a military response and a political miscalculation does not.

One last thing about that meeting, and it is the detail that makes it more than a bad decision. It produced no written military appreciation of what the policy would require if the assessment turned out to be wrong. There was no contingency, because the premise was that the contingency could not occur — and the one body that said otherwise had been overruled before the question reached the room.

REMEMBER THIS

2 November 1961, in the Prime Minister's office: Menon, Desai, Thapar and Mullik. The decision to push posts into contact rested on an **intelligence assessment that China would not fight**.

Western Command objected in writing — not on politics but on numbers, combat support and logistics — and was overruled by Army Headquarters.

It was **not a military decision**. It was a political bet whose military content was the part that got overruled, which is why better generals afterwards fixed nothing about how it was taken.

CHAPTER SIX

Twenty Days in October

The soldiers were not the problem and this chapter says so early. They were sent up a mountain in canvas shoes to hold a position their own command had said could not be held.

6.1 — Thagla and Namka Chu

On 8 September 1962, about six hundred Chinese troops occupied the Thagla ridge, which sits north of the Namka Chu river in the eastern sector — ground India read as inside the McMahon Line.

7 Infantry Brigade, of 4 Infantry Division, was moved down to the Namka Chu and ordered to evict them. The operation was given a name, Leghorn, which is a good indication of how it was being thought about in Delhi.

The brigade was at the bottom of a valley, overlooked from the ridge, supplied over a track that took days, and at an altitude to which its men had not been acclimatised. A force of about fifty or sixty from 9 Punjab attempted to work around the Chinese positions in early October and was driven back by a much larger force.

The position was militarily hopeless and the officers on the ground said so. The order to evict was not withdrawn.

6.2 — The twentieth

At dawn on **20 October 1962** the Chinese attacked, in the east and the west simultaneously, opening with an artillery barrage and following with infantry.

Reported strengths vary and should be treated as approximate, but the disparity is not disputed: Chinese forces in the theatre are usually given at around eighty thousand against an Indian deployment a fraction of that, scattered in the posts described in Chapter Five.

7 Infantry Brigade's positions on the Namka Chu were overrun within hours.

The equipment position has become a national memory and it is accurate. Bolt-action rifles of a First World War pattern. No winter clothing at altitudes where the night temperature is far below freezing. Canvas shoes. Supply by air drop onto slopes, much of which was not recovered.

6.3 — Tawang, and the ones who held

By 22 October the Chinese were advancing on Tawang along two axes. On a third, at Bum La, a platoon of 1 Sikh held them for more than eight hours and inflicted heavy casualties before being overwhelmed.

4 Infantry Division vacated Tawang on 23 October. It fell the next day.

In the west, at Rezang La above Chushul, a company of 13 Kumaon under Major Shaitan Singh held its position to the last, in one of the actions by which the Indian Army remembers this war. He was awarded the Param Vir Chakra posthumously.

This series is a prosecution brief about governments and it is worth being exact about who is being prosecuted. Nothing in this part is a charge against the men on those ridges. The record of the fighting at Bum La, at Rezang La, at Walong and elsewhere is not in dispute and does not need defending. What is being examined is the chain of decisions that put a platoon on a ridge with a rifle designed in 1895 and told it to hold.

IN REAL TERMS

Fourteen thousand feet is roughly two and a half miles straight up. At that height there is about sixty per cent of the oxygen available at sea level.

An unacclimatised man arriving there cannot think clearly for several days and cannot work hard for longer. Carrying a load, he moves at the pace of a walk on the flat, and stops often. A wound that would be survivable lower down is frequently not.

Troops were flown and marched to these positions and put into action within days, some of them from garrisons in the plains. The Chinese had been in Tibet for twelve years.

That is not a detail about logistics. It is the difference between a soldier and a casualty, and it was known to every officer in the Indian Army.

One physical fact underlies all of this and it is not a matter of courage or training.

WORD BOX

Acclimatisation: the physical process by which a body adjusts to thin air. It takes weeks and cannot be hurried, trained for at sea level, or replaced by fitness.

Until it happens, a healthy soldier at high altitude is short of breath, slow to think, unable to sleep properly and liable to collapse under load. Wounds bleed longer and heal worse. Every army that operates in mountains knows this and builds its schedules around it.

Why it matters here: Chinese troops had been in Tibet for twelve years. Indian units were flown or marched up and put into action within days, some from garrisons in the plains — which is not a supply failure but a decision about time.

6.4 — The offer on the twenty-fifth

On **25 October 1962**, having taken Tawang and having achieved everything the first phase was designed to achieve, China halted.

It offered a ceasefire and a mutual withdrawal of both sides to twenty kilometres behind the line of actual control, together with talks.

India rejected it.

Three weeks later the second phase began, and the second phase was much worse than the first.

THE ARGUMENT — SHOULD INDIA HAVE ACCEPTED THE OFFER OF 25 OCTOBER?

This is the least discussed decision of the war and one of the most consequential.

REJECTING IT WAS RIGHT

The terms were China's terms, offered from a position it had just seized by force, and mutual withdrawal from a "line of actual control" meant accepting China's version of where that line was — which was the whole substance of the dispute. Accepting would have ratified the seizure of Aksai Chin and rewarded an invasion, and no government could have survived doing it three days after losing Tawang. The offer was not a peace proposal; it was a demand for capitulation with a ceasefire attached.

REJECTING IT COST MORE THAN ACCEPTING

Every objection above is about terms, and terms are what negotiations are for. What rejection actually bought was the second phase — in which India lost far more ground, far more men, and the whole of its remaining military credibility, and after which China imposed a unilateral ceasefire on terms no better than those on offer in October. India ended in November approximately where it would have started in October, having lost a month and a great many soldiers. And the reason rejection was politically compulsory is Chapter Three: a public that had been told for five years that relations were excellent, and then told all at once in 1959 that territory was occupied, could not be asked to accept anything.

Where things stand: the second side is stronger on outcome and the first is right that the terms were bad. The decisive point is what the second phase achieved, and the answer is nothing India wanted. This is the clearest case in the part of Part One's rule that a charge needs an alternative: here the alternative was on the table, in writing, from the other side, and was refused.

What would settle it: the cabinet record of 25–27 October 1962. It is not open.

Why people care so much: because almost no Indian account mentions this offer at all, and a war remembered as an unprovoked invasion is a different thing from a war in which a ceasefire was available at the halfway point and was turned down.

Before that, a word about how firmly any of the last three sections can be established, given that they describe a rout.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The military chronology in this chapter is among the best-evidenced material in the series, for an unusual reason: **the two sides agree about it.**

Indian and Chinese accounts of 1962 differ violently about cause, blame and intention. They differ very little about dates, places and sequence — when Thagla was occupied, when the attack came, when Tawang fell, when the halt began, when the second phase started, when the ceasefire was declared. Where two hostile parties with every incentive to disagree describe the same sequence, the sequence is about as safe as history gets.

The Indian official history of the war is the source for the casualty figures and for unit movements.

What it cannot show: what the fighting was like, and what individual decisions were taken on which ridge. Official histories are written from war diaries, and war diaries at the losing end of a rout are incomplete, because the people keeping them were killed, captured or running.

Which leaves one decision from those twenty days that Indian accounts almost never mention.

REMEMBER THIS

7 Infantry Brigade was sent to the bottom of a valley, overlooked, unacclimatised and unsupplied, and ordered to evict a force on the ridge above it. **The officers on the ground said it was hopeless. The order stood.**

Nothing in this part is a charge against the soldiers. Bum La, Rezang La and Walong are not in dispute. The charge is against the chain that put them there with 1895 rifles and canvas shoes.

On **25 October China offered a ceasefire and mutual withdrawal. India refused.** The second phase followed, and it was worse. Most Indian accounts do not mention the offer.

CHAPTER SEVEN

What It Cost

Almost no territory changed hands. That is the fact most accounts of 1962 get wrong, and understanding it changes what the war was.

7.1 — The second phase

After the pause that began on 25 October, the Chinese resumed on **14 November** and the second phase ran for a week.

It was worse than the first in every respect. Indian positions in the eastern sector collapsed across a broad front. By the middle of November Chinese forces had come down out of the hills and were within reach of **Tezpur**, in the Assam plain.

What happened at Tezpur is the part that lodged in the national memory. The town was partially evacuated. The treasury was burned. Prisoners were released from the jail because there was nobody to guard them. The administration left.

Nothing prevented a further advance except a Chinese decision not to make one.

7.2 — The letters

On **19 November 1962**, Nehru wrote to President Kennedy. There were two letters that day and the second was the one that mattered.

He asked for American combat aircraft — squadrons of fighters, with radar and, in effect, American crews to fly them until Indian pilots could be trained — to defend Indian cities and to be used against Chinese forces.

Set that beside everything in this series so far. The architect of non-alignment, eight years after signing an agreement whose preamble was the five principles of peaceful coexistence, asking the United States for fighter squadrons in a letter written at night.

The request was overtaken by the ceasefire two days later. The letters were declassified decades afterwards and their existence was not publicly known in India at the time.

WORD BOX

Unilateral ceasefire: one side stopping on its own terms, without agreement from the other.

It is not a negotiated peace and it is not a surrender. It is a statement that the party doing the stopping has got what it came for, and that continuing is now optional for it and not for anybody else.

Militarily it is the position of strength. Politically it is humiliating for the other side, because there is nothing to sign, nothing to concede in return, and no way to describe the ending as mutual.

Why it matters here: India did not agree to the ceasefire of 21 November. It was informed of it.

7.3 — The ceasefire, and the count

On **21 November 1962** China declared a unilateral ceasefire. Its forces withdrew in the eastern sector, broadly back behind the McMahon Line. In the west they retained Aksai Chin.

The casualty figures from the Indian official history are approximately: **1,383 killed, 1,047 wounded, 1,696 missing, and 3,968 taken prisoner.** Chinese losses are given at roughly 722 killed and 1,697 wounded.

Note the shape of those numbers. The missing and the captured together are far larger than the dead. That is the signature of positions being overrun rather than of a fighting withdrawal, and it is the arithmetic of Chapter Five: penny packets, no reserves, no line to fall back to.

7.4 — What changed, and what did not

Now the fact that is usually lost.

The territorial outcome of the war was close to nil. China withdrew from what it had taken in the east. It kept Aksai Chin — which it had occupied and built a road across before the war started, and which India had never administered, never garrisoned and never physically held.

If you drew the map on 19 October 1962 and again on 22 November 1962, the difference is small.

What the war actually produced was political, and it produced a great deal.

Defence spending rose sharply and stayed risen. The army was expanded, mountain divisions were raised, and equipment was bought. This is a credit item and Chapter Nine gives it its weight.

Non-alignment as a practical policy ended. India took American and Soviet arms. The doctrine survived as language for decades; the behaviour changed in November 1962.

Krishna Menon resigned as Defence Minister. General Thapar resigned on 22 November, the day after the ceasefire.

Nehru never recovered. He suffered a stroke in January 1964 and died in May. The dominant political fact of independent India's first seventeen years ended here.

IN REAL TERMS

Take the casualty figures apart. Roughly 1,383 killed and roughly 3,968 captured.

In most wars the dead considerably outnumber the prisoners. Here nearly three men were taken for every one killed, and a further 1,696 were never accounted for at all.

That ratio is not a measure of how hard the fighting was. It is a measure of **position**. Men are captured in large numbers when a unit is surrounded, cut off from any line of retreat, out of ammunition and out of supply — which is the exact description of a platoon on a ridge with no reserve behind it and a track that takes four days.

The arithmetic of Chapter Five arrives here, in a number, in November.

All of which sits underneath a way of describing this war that both countries share.

7.5 — The ledger for this part

Part Five opened a running record of which states were affected by the material in each part, and committed every part from there to carry it. Here is the entry for 1962.

WHERE	WHAT HAPPENED
NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh)	The eastern theatre. Overrun in October and November and then vacated by Chinese forces. Administered directly from Delhi through the Ministry of External Affairs rather than as an ordinary state, which is why it had almost no roads to defend it with. The border-road programme that followed is the largest single thing the Indian state has ever done there.

WHERE	WHAT HAPPENED
Assam	Tezpur partly evacuated, its treasury burned and its prisoners released, with the administration withdrawing. The memory of having been written off is a live political fact in the state and appears again in Part Thirteen.
Ladakh (Jammu and Kashmir)	The western theatre. Aksai Chin was never administered from Leh and was not reachable from it; the road-building and post-building that followed transformed a region that had been left alone since 1947.
The north-eastern states generally	The war converted the region from an administrative afterthought into a security frontier, and much of the apparatus that governs it today — the road network, the troop presence, the special legal provisions — dates from the response to 1962 rather than from any decision about the people living there.

Note the shape of that table against Part Five's. There, central decisions made some states poor by removing an advantage. Here, a central failure made a whole region into a garrison — and both are cases of a place being permanently altered by a decision taken elsewhere about something else.

7.6 — What the correction bought

The rebuilding after 1962 deserves more than the one line it usually receives, because it is the strongest item on the credit side of this part.

Defence spending roughly doubled as a share of national income and did not fall back. The army was expanded substantially, and specialist mountain divisions were raised, trained and equipped for exactly the terrain where it had failed. A programme of border roads was pushed hard in areas that had been deliberately left roadless on the theory that roads help an invader more than a defender — a theory 1962 destroyed.

Intelligence arrangements were reorganised, and the practice of a single civilian agency supplying the military assessment on which operations would be based was ended.

How well it worked is measurable. The same army fought Pakistan to a standstill in 1965, three years later, and won decisively in 1971.

What the correction did *not* touch is the subject of Chapter Eight. Every reform above concerns capability — soldiers, roads, equipment, formations. None of them addresses the process by which a professional assessment that a plan was not feasible was overruled by people without that expertise, because the inquiry into the defeat was forbidden from examining that, and its report has never been published.

India fixed the army. It did not fix the thing that sent the army.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Everyone who writes about 1962 assumes **that it was a war about territory**.

The Indian version: China seized Indian land. The Chinese version: China taught a lesson and returned what it had taken. Both are accounts of ground changing hands, and both countries' school textbooks are maps.

Almost no ground changed hands. The one substantial piece China retained is the piece it already occupied, had already built a road across, and had held for at least five years before a shot was fired. India did not lose Aksai Chin in 1962. It lost it somewhere between 1955 and 1958, in the manner described in Chapters Three and Four, without a casualty.

What the war transferred was not land. It was **information** — about India's military capacity, about the value of its declarations, and about the relationship between what its government said and what was true. That information went to China, to Pakistan, to the non-aligned states India led, and above all to Indians.

This is why the territorial framing is so comfortable for both sides. A war about land has a winner, a loser and a map, and it is finished. A war whose output was a demonstration that a government's public position bore no relation to its private knowledge is not finished at all, because the question it raises — how did that happen and has it stopped happening — has never been officially answered. Chapter Eight is about the document that would answer it.

And that is why the next chapter is about a document rather than a battle. If the war's real output was information about how a government handled what it knew, then the most important thing produced in its aftermath was the inquiry into exactly that — and the most important fact about the inquiry is that nobody has read it.

REMEMBER THIS

The second phase began **14 November**. Tezpur was partly evacuated, its treasury burned and its prisoners released. Nothing stopped a further advance but a Chinese decision.

On **19 November** Nehru asked the United States for fighter squadrons. On **21 November** China declared a unilateral ceasefire, withdrew in the east and kept Aksai Chin. Roughly **1,383 killed and 3,968 captured**.

Almost no territory changed hands. India did not lose Aksai Chin in 1962; it lost it between 1955 and 1958 without a casualty. What the war transferred was information.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Report That Was Never Published

Two officers wrote it in 1963. Two typed copies were made. Sixty-three years later it is still classified, and the reason given is that its contents are of current operational value.

8.1 — What it is

After the war the Indian Army commissioned an operations review. It was conducted by **Lieutenant General Henderson Brooks** and **Brigadier P.S. Bhagat**, then commandant of the Indian Military Academy and a holder of the Victoria Cross.

They submitted their report to the government in **April 1963**. Only two typewritten copies are believed to have existed — one with the office of the Defence Secretary and one in the Army's Directorate of Military Operations.

It has never been published. The Defence Minister of the day, Y.B. Chavan, summarised what he described as the lessons of it to Parliament, and that summary is the only official account of its contents that exists.

8.2 — The questions they were not allowed to ask

Part One set out a rule about commissions of inquiry: they are controlled not by pressuring the investigator but by writing the questions. Read the terms of reference before the findings, every time.

Here they are.

The functioning of Army Headquarters was outside the review's purview. So was the civilian direction of the army.

Consider what that excludes. Chapter Five's central finding is that Western Command's professional objection was overruled by Army Headquarters, and that the Forward Policy was decided in the Prime Minister's office by a group in which the army had one voice. Both of those sit precisely inside the two areas the inquiry was forbidden to examine.

The review was permitted to ask why the operations failed. It was not permitted to ask who had ordered them or why the order had been given.

And it still produced a document damaging enough that no government of any party has released it in sixty-three years.

WORD BOX

Declassification: the formal act of removing a secrecy marking from a government document so it can be released.

The important feature is that it is an *act*. Classification does not expire on its own in India; there is no automatic rule releasing papers after thirty years as there is in Britain, and no equivalent of an American mandatory review. A document stays secret until a named official signs to say it should not.

Why it matters here: this means the default is silence, and silence requires nobody to decide anything. Chapter Eight's hidden assumption is entirely about what that default produces over sixty-three years.

8.3 — The reason given

In April 2010, the Defence Minister A.K. Antony told Parliament that the report could not be declassified because its contents were not only extremely sensitive but were of current operational value.

Take that statement seriously for a moment, because it deserves examination rather than mockery.

There is a real version of the argument. The report describes terrain, deployments and approaches along a frontier that is still disputed and still patrolled. Some of that geography has not changed. A detailed account of how particular positions were taken could, in principle, have present value.

Against that: the report concerns operations conducted in 1962 with bolt-action rifles, no helicopters to speak of, no satellites, no drones, no night vision and no modern communications, by armies that no longer exist in that form. The journalist who obtained a copy in the 1960s stated that the text nowhere touches on matters of current strategic or tactical relevance, and that the reasons for withholding it must be political.

8.4 — What happened in 2014

On **17 March 2014**, Neville Maxwell — an Australian journalist who had been the Delhi correspondent of *The Times* during the war, and who had used the report as a source for a book published in 1970 — posted the first part of it on his personal website.

Within hours the site was inaccessible in India.

The government has never authenticated the published text. Scholars who work on the subject generally treat it as genuine, and this part has used it on that basis, marked at each point.

So the position in 2026 is this. A report on a national defeat, written by two Indian officers, exists in a version that anybody outside India can read and that the Indian state will neither confirm nor release, having blocked access to it and having offered a reason that its own contents do not obviously support.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

Everything in sections 8.1 to 8.4 is documented and none of it depends on the report's contents.

The authorship, the April 1963 submission and the two-copy custody are on the public record. The exclusion of Army Headquarters and civilian direction from the terms of reference is documented in the scholarly literature. Antony's statement was made in Parliament in April 2010 and is in the record. Maxwell's publication on 17 March 2014 and the blocking of his site are contemporaneous news events reported at the time in Indian newspapers, including editorials complaining about the block.

What this cannot show: what the full report says. Only Part One has been published. Whether a Part Two exists in the same form, and what it contains, is unknown outside the two offices holding the typed copies.

This is the reason every claim in Chapter Five sourced to the report carries an **ALLEGED** grade. It is the best evidence available and it is not authenticated evidence, and this series does not promote a source because its contents are convenient.

Which brings the question that has been asked in the Indian Parliament, in the courts and in the press for six decades without moving an inch.

THE ARGUMENT — SHOULD THE REPORT BE PUBLISHED?

Every government since 1963, of every party, has declined. That is a striking unanimity and it deserves the strongest possible statement of both cases.

KEEP IT CLOSED

An army's internal operations review is written on the understanding that it will be candid because it will be confidential. Publish one and you have destroyed the institution's ability ever to examine itself honestly again — every future review will be written for the archive. The frontier is still disputed and still live; some of the terrain assessments retain value. And the practical benefit is small, because the substance has been public since 1970 in Maxwell's book and since 2014 on his website. Publishing gains little and costs an institution's willingness to be honest with itself.

PUBLISH IT

The candour argument is the strongest one available and it fails on the facts: the report is already public in the form that matters, so the confidentiality it protects is already gone — everywhere except in India, where citizens are the only people prevented from reading an assessment of a defeat their own soldiers died in. The operational-value claim cannot survive sixty-three years and a change of weapon generation. And the terms of reference already excluded the civilian direction of the army, so the state is refusing to release a document that was forbidden in advance from examining the politicians.

Where things stand: the second side is stronger and the first side's institutional argument is real and is the only serious obstacle. The decisive point is the unanimity: every government since 1963, including several with every political incentive to embarrass the Nehru era, has kept it closed. That is evidence *against* the simple partisan explanation and *for* the institutional one — which is more interesting and more troubling, because it means the state's disinclination to publish an account of its own failure is not a Congress habit but an Indian one.

What would settle it: publication. Nothing else.

Why people care so much: because Part Two of this series found a commission report on Hyderabad withheld for sixty-four years, and this is the second time the same pattern has appeared in six parts.

Both sides of that argument, though, are doing something the evidence does not support: they are assuming somebody has been deciding.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Everybody arguing about this document — those demanding release and those defending secrecy — assumes **that a secret is kept for the reason given.**

The demanders say the stated reason is a pretext concealing embarrassment. The defenders say it is genuine. Both are arguing about whether the official reason is true, and both accept that *a reason is what is doing the work.*

Often nothing is doing the work. A classification decision made in 1963 has a default: it stays. Reversing it requires somebody to take a positive decision, sign their name, and own whatever follows. Maintaining it requires nobody to do anything at all.

That asymmetry explains the unanimity better than any theory about protecting Nehru. Six decades of governments have not each independently concluded that release would harm the nation. Most of them have simply never had a minister for whom opening it was worth the afternoon, and the officials briefing each new minister inherit a file that says classified and have no reason to propose otherwise.

Which means the phrase “current operational value” should not be read as a lie. It should be read as **the sentence produced when somebody is required to give a reason for a decision nobody actually took.**

The consequence matters more than the diagnosis. If secrecy were sustained by a reason, it could be ended by defeating the reason. Because it is sustained by inertia, argument does nothing, and the document will stay closed until somebody’s political interest in opening it exceeds the cost of the signature. Sixty-three years suggests that has not yet happened to anybody.

This is the second time in six parts that a government-commissioned inquiry into a national catastrophe has turned out to be unavailable. Part Two found the Sunderlal report on Hyderabad withheld for sixty-four years. Part One’s rule was that when a state which counts everything has no count of something, somebody decided that. The corollary now needs stating: **when a state which investigates everything will not publish the investigation, that is the finding.**

REMEMBER THIS

Two officers, **April 1963, two typed copies.** The terms of reference excluded **Army Headquarters and the civilian direction of the army** — precisely where Chapter Five’s findings sit.

The stated reason for withholding it is “**current operational value**”, for a report on a war fought with bolt-action rifles. Maxwell published Part One on 17 March 2014 and his site was **inaccessible in India within hours.**

Every government since 1963, of every party, has kept it closed. That is evidence against a partisan explanation and for an institutional one, which is worse.

CHAPTER NINE

What Would Have Prevented It

The defence, at full strength. One of these four arguments is very strong indeed, and there is a settlement that was on the table in 1960 and refused.

9.1 — Four arguments for the defence

A book that cannot state the case against itself is an advertisement. Here are the four strongest arguments a serious defender of the Indian government's conduct would make.

One. China decided, and India could not have decided for it. The offensive of 20 October was planned over months, launched on two fronts simultaneously, and executed with a competence that does not come from improvisation. Whatever India did or did not do with its posts, the decision to attack at that scale was taken in Peking by people pursuing their own purposes. Blaming the victim for the burglar's decision is a category error, and much writing on 1962 — including some by the journalist whose leak this part relies on — commits it.

Two. The comparison is unfair. India in 1962 was fifteen years old. Its army had been physically divided in 1947, had fought in Kashmir, and had spent the intervening years on internal security. China's army had fought a civil war, then fought the United States to a standstill in Korea, and had been operating in Tibet at altitude for twelve years. These were not comparable instruments and no amount of Indian policy would have made them so by 1962.

Three. The territory was never held. Chapter Seven established it: the map barely moved. Aksai Chin was never administered by India, never garrisoned, never reachable. Calling 1962 a loss of territory describes the loss of a claim, which is a real thing and a much smaller thing.

Four, and this is the strong one. The correction was made and it worked. The army that was broken in 1962 fought Pakistan to a standstill in 1965 and won decisively in 1971. Mountain divisions were raised. Border roads were built. Equipment was bought. Intelligence was restructured. A country that suffers a catastrophic defeat and

rebuilds its military capacity inside a decade has done something most countries do not manage, and the government that did the rebuilding was the same party that had presided over the defeat.

That fourth argument is genuinely strong and this part concedes it. The failure was answered. The answer worked. Whatever else is in these chapters, the Indian state learned this particular lesson faster and more completely than it has learned most others in this series.

9.2 — The settlement that was available

Part One requires that a charge name an alternative that somebody proposed at the time. Here it is, and it is the most consequential item in the chapter.

In April 1960 Zhou Enlai came to Delhi. What was floated, in outline, was a package: China would accept the McMahon Line in the east, and India would accept Chinese control of Aksai Chin in the west. It was in that period that Zhou first used the phrase “line of actual control”.

Look at what that trade actually was. India would have received formal Chinese acceptance of the boundary in the sector containing people, towns, agriculture and a case built on the watershed and on a signed convention. It would have given up a claim to an uninhabited plateau it had never administered, which the other party already physically held and had built a road across.

India rejected it.

The reason was domestic and it traces directly to Chapter Three. By 1960, Parliament and the public had been told — all at once, in August 1959, after four years of silence — that Chinese forces occupied Indian territory. No government that had made that announcement could then sign it away. The concealment of 1958 produced the politics of 1960, and the politics of 1960 closed the settlement.

Grade: the fact of the 1960 discussions and the substance of what was floated are **SOLID** and well documented. Whether a formal offer would have been made had India signalled interest is **ALLEGED**, because it was never tested.

HOW WE ACTUALLY KNOW THIS

The 1960 talks are documented from several independent directions: Zhou's visit is a matter of record, the substance of what was discussed appears in the officials' reports published afterwards, and the phrase "line of actual control" enters the diplomatic vocabulary at exactly this point and can be dated from the correspondence.

The strongest evidence is the last of those. A phrase invented to describe a compromise position appearing in 1960 and surviving to the present day is a fossil of a negotiation that took place.

What it cannot show: whether China would have signed a formal agreement on those terms, or held to it. India did not test the proposition, so the record contains an outline and no offer. Any claim that a settlement was *available* in the strong sense is **ALLEGED** and this chapter marks it so.

Which leaves the hardest question in this part, and the one on which its whole charge rests.

THE ARGUMENT — COULD A SETTLEMENT HAVE BEEN REACHED IN 1960?

This is the alternative on which the whole charge in this part rests, so it gets the hardest scrutiny.

NO, AND THE PACKAGE IS A MIRAGE

China's position hardened continuously through this period and there is no reason to think a 1960 agreement would have held. Peking's actual objective was not a boundary but a demonstration of relative standing in Asia, which is why the offensive went far beyond the disputed strip. And no Indian government could have signed away Aksai Chin: it would have fallen, and the successor would have repudiated the agreement. An option that cannot survive the domestic politics of either party is not an option.

YES, AND THE DOMESTIC OBSTACLE WAS SELF-CREATED

The trade was rational for both parties, each was to receive the sector it cared about, and China proposed it rather than India. As for the domestic obstacle — it was manufactured in 1958 and 1959 by a government that concealed a fact for eighteen months and then released it into a public with no preparation. A Prime Minister who had told Parliament in 1958 that the road existed, that Aksai Chin was uninhabited, and that a negotiated line was the sane outcome would have had an entirely different country to negotiate in front of in 1960.

Where things stand: the second side is stronger and the first side's best point stands unrefuted — nobody can know whether China would have held to it. What can be established is that the option existed, was raised by the other party, was rejected, and was rejected for reasons the Indian government itself had created two years earlier. That satisfies Part One's test and it is the charge.

What would settle it: the record of the 1960 talks on both sides. India's is closed; China's is closed and likely to remain so.

Why people care so much: because the boundary as it stands today is approximately the package that was refused. India holds the east and China holds Aksai Chin. The difference is that in 1960 it was available by agreement and since 1962 it has been held by force, and every death on that frontier since has occurred inside the gap between those two things.

9.3 — What I would have to retract

Three things would break the argument of this part.

If the Henderson Brooks report, published in full, showed that **Western Command made no objection** to the Forward Policy, Chapter Five loses its central fact and becomes a much weaker chapter about hindsight.

If the cabinet record of late October 1962 showed that **the Chinese offer of 25 October carried conditions** making it unacceptable in a way public accounts do not capture, Chapter Six's argument box tips the other way.

If the record of the 1960 talks showed that **no package was ever on the table** and that Indian accounts have inflated a courtesy into an offer, then Chapter Nine's alternative disappears and with it Part One's test for calling any of this a blunder.

All three of those depend on files the Indian government holds and has not opened. I have written down what would prove me wrong before those files are opened, which is the only circumstance in which writing it down means anything.

THE HIDDEN ASSUMPTION

Everybody who argues about 1962 — his defenders, his critics, and the Chinese — assumes **that it was a failure of Nehru's China policy.**

The critical version: he was naive about China. The defensive version: he was right about China and betrayed. Both treat “China policy” as the unit that failed, which makes 1962 a specialised event about one relationship and one man's judgment of one country.

Look at the components. A warning that was delivered and not received. A professional assessment that a plan was not feasible, overruled by people without that expertise. A public position maintained after the private information contradicted it. An inquiry whose terms of reference excluded the decision-makers. A report kept closed for six decades.

Not one of those is about China. Every one of them is a property of how the Indian state processed inconvenient information, and this series has now found the identical pattern in three other places with no connection to each other: the Hyderabad report in Part Two, the Kerala dismissal in Part Three, and the licensing committees of 1965, 1967 and 1969 in Part Four — the last of these under a different Prime Minister, on a subject with no foreign policy content at all.

Which means 1962 is not a story about a man being wrong about a country. It is **the most expensive single test of a mechanism that was failing everywhere**, and it is only remembered as a China story because the failure happened to be measured by an army.

This weighs on my own book as much as on anybody's. It is much easier to write nineteen parts about people who made bad decisions than about a machine that could not be told anything. The first has villains. The second has a design flaw, and design flaws do not resign.

That is the case against this part, made as well as I can make it, and one of the four defences — the fourth — I think simply wins. The rest do not touch the specific charges: an agreement that reserved nothing in 1954, a fact concealed from Parliament for eighteen months, four warnings that were delivered and not received, a policy adopted against a professional assessment, and a ceasefire refused on 25 October. None of those depends on what China intended.

REMEMBER THIS

Four defences: **China decided and India could not decide for it; the armies were not comparable; the territory was never held; and the correction worked.** The fourth is strong and is conceded — the army that broke in 1962 won in 1971.

In **April 1960 a package was floated:** the McMahon Line in the east for Aksai Chin in the west. India refused, for domestic reasons its own concealment had created in 1958.

Today's boundary is approximately that package — held by force rather than agreement. Every death on that frontier since has occurred inside the gap between those two things.

CHAPTER TEN

An Honest List of What We Do Not Know

This part leans harder on a single unauthenticated document than any other in the series. Here is exactly how much weight that can bear.

10.1 — Genuinely unknown

Six things in this part cannot be established, and five of the six are unknown because a file is closed rather than because the question is hard.

What the Henderson Brooks report actually says in full. Part One of it has been published by a journalist and is generally treated as authentic. Whether the published text is complete and accurate, and what any further part contains, is not known.

Why it is unknown: two typed copies, both in government custody, closed for sixty-three years. This is the *decided* category in its purest form, and Chapter Eight argues the decision is inertia rather than a reason.

What Nehru believed about the road between 1958 and 1959. The record shows he received the Foreign Secretary's note, authorised a ground party and refused air reconnaissance.

Why it is unknown: a document records a decision and not a state of mind. The refusal is equally consistent with complacency, with not wishing to provoke, and with not wishing to obtain proof that would force a public position. I have deliberately not chosen between those and no honest account can.

Whether the four warnings reached him in a form he registered. Chapter Four establishes that each was made. It does not establish that any was read.

Why it is unknown: the Prime Minister's office files for the period are not open.

What was said in cabinet on 25 to 27 October 1962. The Chinese offer of a ceasefire and mutual withdrawal was rejected. By whom, on what advice, and against what internal objection, is unknown.

Why it is unknown: cabinet records closed. This is the single gap that would most change Chapter Six.

Whether the 1960 package would have been formalised. The discussions happened and the shape of the trade is documented. Whether China would have signed, and held, was never tested because India did not explore it.

Why it is unknown: it is a counterfactual, and additionally the Chinese record is closed. Part One's warning about counterfactuals applies, and Chapter Nine's charge is deliberately built on the *existence* of the option rather than on its outcome.

What China intended. Whether the offensive was a limited punitive operation from the outset, or an operation whose scope was decided as it went, is not established.

Why it is unknown: the Chinese decision-making record is closed and is likely to remain so indefinitely. Every confident Indian statement about Chinese intentions in 1962 is an inference.

10.2 — Solid

The 1954 agreement. Signed 29 April 1954, valid eight years, lapsed 1962. Its text describes Tibet as “the Tibet Region of China”. It surrendered the military escorts, the postal, telegraph and telephone services, the rest houses, and the status of the Lhasa mission. It contains nothing about the boundary. All of this is a published treaty that anybody can read.

The road. Constructed through the mid-1950s, completed in the second half of 1957, formally opened at Gartok on 6 October 1957, and reported by Chinese state media in January 1958. Roughly 160 kilometres of a 1,200-kilometre highway crosses Aksai Chin.

Nehru's statement to Parliament in August 1959 that the highway had been built through Indian territory. Parliamentary record, with a date.

The Forward Policy meeting of 2 November 1961 and its attendance — Menon, Desai, Thapar and Mullik, in the Prime Minister's office.

The war's chronology. Chinese occupation of Thagla on 8 September 1962. The attack on 20 October. Tawang vacated on 23 October and taken on the 24th. The halt and the ceasefire offer of 25 October. The resumption on 14 November. The unilateral ceasefire of 21 November, with withdrawal in the east and retention of Aksai Chin.

The casualty figures from the Indian official history: approximately 1,383 killed, 1,047 wounded, 1,696 missing, 3,968 captured.

The letters of 19 November 1962 from Nehru to Kennedy requesting American combat aircraft. Declassified, and their existence is not disputed.

Everything in Chapter Eight about the report's existence and status. Authorship, April 1963 submission, two copies, the exclusion of Army Headquarters and civilian direction from the terms of reference, Antony's statement to Parliament in April 2010, Maxwell's publication on 17 March 2014, and the blocking of the site — reported at the time in Indian newspapers.

10.3 — The one file

Five of the six unknowns in section 10.1 sit in Indian government custody.

The Henderson Brooks report is the smallest of them and the most consequential, because it is two typed volumes in two known offices, written by two Indian officers, about a war fought sixty-four years ago with weapons no army now uses, and it has already been read by anybody outside India who wanted to.

Everything this part says about what the army knew and said internally carries an **ALLEGED** grade because of that single decision. Publish the report and roughly a third of this part moves up two grades or is refuted. Either outcome would be an improvement on the present position, in which the only people who cannot assess their own country's account of its own defeat are its citizens.

I would rather end a part by naming the document than by pretending the grade does not matter.

REMEMBER THIS

Genuinely unknown: **what the full report says, what Nehru believed, whether the warnings were registered, what was said in cabinet on 25–27 October, whether the 1960 package would have held, and what China intended.** Five of those six are closed files, not hard questions.

Solid: **the 1954 treaty text, the road's construction and announcement, the August 1959 statement, the meeting of 2 November 1961, the war's chronology, the casualty figures, the Kennedy letters, and everything about the report's status.**

One document would move a third of this part up two grades or refute it. It is two typed volumes in two known offices, about weapons no army now uses.

REFERENCE

Timeline, 1950–1963

Dates only. The arguments are in the chapters.

DATE	WHAT HAPPENED
1950	Chinese forces enter Tibet. India's northern buffer ends and it acquires a long frontier with a large unified state for the first time.
29 Apr 1954	The Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India. India gives up its escorts, post and telegraph services, rest houses and mission status. The boundary is not mentioned. Valid eight years.
1955	General Thimayya suspects a road is being built. A British mountaineer goes to look with the knowledge of military intelligence, is detained by the Chinese, and returns with a report.
1956	Brigadier S.S. Malik, Military Attaché in Peking, passes information about the road to Military Headquarters.
6 Oct 1957	The Xinjiang–Tibet highway is formally opened with a ceremony at Gartok. Twelve trucks run from Yarkand.
Jan 1958	The China News Agency announces the highway has been open for two months and is in full use.
Early 1958	Foreign Secretary Subimal Dutt writes to Nehru that the road almost certainly crosses Aksai Chin, and proposes reconnaissance. Nehru authorises a ground party and declines air reconnaissance.
1958	Indian ground patrols enter the area. Some are detained by Chinese forces.
Mar 1959	The Dalai Lama flees to India. Relations deteriorate sharply.
Aug 1959	Nehru tells Parliament the highway has been built through Indian territory — eighteen months after the Foreign Secretary's note.
Apr 1960	Zhou Enlai visits Delhi. A package is floated: the McMahon Line in the east for Aksai Chin in the west. Zhou first uses the phrase "line of actual control". India does not pursue it.
Early 1961	Lieutenant General B.M. Kaul is appointed Chief of General Staff.
2 Nov 1961	In the Prime Minister's office, Menon, Desai, Thapar and Mullik decide to push forward posts into contact with Chinese forces. Western Command's objection on numbers, support and logistics is overruled by Army Headquarters.

DATE	WHAT HAPPENED
Jun–Jul 1962	Dhola Post established. Chinese forces surround an Indian position in the Galwan valley; a clash follows near Pangong.
8 Sep 1962	About 600 Chinese troops occupy the Thagla ridge. 7 Infantry Brigade is ordered to evict them.
20 Oct 1962	Simultaneous Chinese offensives east and west, opening with artillery. 7 Infantry Brigade is overrun within hours.
22–24 Oct 1962	Advance on Tawang. A platoon of 1 Sikh holds at Bum La for over eight hours. Tawang is vacated on the 23rd and falls on the 24th.
25 Oct 1962	China halts and offers a ceasefire with mutual withdrawal twenty kilometres behind the line of actual control, plus talks. India rejects it.
14–21 Nov 1962	The second phase. Indian positions collapse across a broad front. Rezang La is held to the last by a company of 13 Kumaon. Chinese forces reach the edge of the Assam plain; Tezpur is partly evacuated.
19 Nov 1962	Nehru writes twice to President Kennedy, asking for American combat aircraft.
21 Nov 1962	China declares a unilateral ceasefire, withdraws in the east and retains Aksai Chin.
22 Nov 1962	General Thapar resigns. Krishna Menon has already left the Defence Ministry.
Apr 1963	Lieutenant General Henderson Brooks and Brigadier P.S. Bhagat submit their operations review. Two typed copies. It is not published.
Apr 2010	Defence Minister A.K. Antony tells Parliament the report cannot be declassified because its contents are of current operational value.
17 Mar 2014	Neville Maxwell publishes Part One of the report on his website. The site becomes inaccessible in India within hours.

Part Seven starts here. It leaves China and takes the other frontier — the wars with Pakistan of 1947–48, 1965 and 1971, the Simla agreement, and the governing of Kashmir up to the point at which it stopped working.

REFERENCE

Glossary

Every hard word used in this part, in plain English.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Aksai Chin	A high cold desert of about 38,000 square kilometres between Ladakh and Xinjiang. Claimed by India, held by China, and the only practicable road route between Xinjiang and western Tibet.
Chief of General Staff	A senior post at Army Headquarters responsible for operations and planning. Not the head of the army, but close to the centre of what it decides to do.
Forward Policy	The decision of 2 November 1961 to establish small Indian posts in disputed territory, including behind Chinese positions, to demonstrate occupation of ground India claimed.
Line of actual control	Where the two armies are, as opposed to where either says the boundary is. The phrase was first used by Zhou Enlai around 1960 and is still the operative term today.
McMahon Line	The eastern boundary agreed at Simla in 1914 between British India and Tibet, broadly following the Himalayan watershed. China never ratified the convention.
NEFA	The North East Frontier Agency, the administrative name for what is now Arunachal Pradesh, and the eastern theatre of the 1962 war.
Panchsheel	The five principles of peaceful coexistence set out in the preamble to the 1954 agreement, and the centrepiece of Indian foreign policy for the eight years that followed.
Penny packets	A military term for splitting a force into small scattered groups rather than concentrating it. Such posts can watch ground; they cannot hold it.
Simla Convention 1914	The conference at which the McMahon Line was agreed between British India and Tibet. Its status turns on whether Tibet was competent to conclude treaties, which China denies.
Sovereignty	Full authority over a territory: you govern it, its foreign relations are yours, and nobody else has a standing claim.
Suzerainty	A weaker authority: the outside power controls external affairs and defence while the territory runs itself internally.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Terms of reference	The written list of questions an inquiry is appointed to answer. The quietest way to control an investigation is to draft these carefully, and Chapter Eight is the clearest example in this series.
Watershed principle	The idea that a mountain boundary should follow the highest ridge, where water begins flowing one way rather than the other. India's strongest argument in the east; irrelevant to Aksai Chin, which is a plateau.

ABOUT

About the Author

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I write long-form research on Indian history, society, belief and public life, and publish it at misterlove.in under the name The Living Archive. Before this series I completed a fourteen-part history of Punjab and a sixteen-part study of the rules societies place on women.

Two things about this part need declaring. The first is that a substantial share of its most useful material comes from a leaked document published by Neville Maxwell, whose own book on this war argues a case considerably more favourable to China than I find defensible, and Chapter Nine says so. Using a source does not mean adopting its conclusions, and I have tried to take the document's factual content while rejecting the frame its publisher built around it.

The second is that this is a war Indians are taught about as children, and I was one of them. The version I grew up with had an unprovoked invasion, a betrayed friendship and heroic soldiers. The third of those is true and Chapter Six says so at length. The first two are more complicated than I was told, and the specific thing I did not know until I researched this part is that a ceasefire was offered on 25 October and refused. If any chapter here is wrong because of what I wanted to find, it will be Chapter Six.

THE RULES OF THIS PROJECT

The Living Archive

Everything published under this name follows three rules.

Plain language, undiminished content. The words are as simple as I can make them. The argument is not simplified with them.

Show the evidence, and show what it cannot prove. Every serious claim names what it rests on, and every source is described honestly, including what it is blind to.

Give every side its strongest case. Where people who know the material disagree, both positions appear at full strength, and I say when the evidence does not settle it.

PLEASE READ THIS

A Word on Sources

This part carries no footnotes. It rests on the 1954 treaty text, the white papers of notes exchanged between India and China laid before Parliament, the parliamentary record of Nehru's statements, the Indian official history of the war, the declassified Nehru–Kennedy correspondence, contemporaneous newspaper reporting of the 2014 publication, and archival research by historians working on Indian records.

The grading in this part matters more than in any other. The diplomatic record is published and solid. The military record is closed, and everything sourced to the army's own inquiry is marked **ALLEGED** — not because I doubt it, but because the state that holds it will neither confirm nor release it, and a series that grades its evidence cannot make an exception for a document whose contents suit its argument.

Corrections. If something here is wrong, write to me. Later editions will say what was changed and who caught it.

Lovepreet Singh

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NEXT

What Comes Next

Part Seven — Pakistan, Kashmir and the Wars

Part Seven takes the other frontier, from 1947 to 1989. It asks:

- Part Two left the Kashmir plebiscite as an open promise. When exactly did it stop being live, what was said at the time, and was the change ever announced?
- Article 370 was placed under a heading containing the word “temporary”. What was done to it, order by order and amendment by amendment, and by whom?
- Sheikh Abdullah was made head of the state’s administration in 1947 and imprisoned in 1953. On what grounds, on whose decision, and what did that do to the politics of the Valley?
- India won in 1971 as completely as any country has won a war. What did it ask for at Simla in 1972, and why did it not ask for more?
- The 1987 state election is widely described as rigged. What is the actual evidence, who were the losing candidates, and what did they do next?
- Part Six found a warning delivered and not received. Does the same pattern appear on this frontier, and if so in which years?

Questions, not topics. If any of them is answered badly, you will be able to tell.

END OF PART SIX OF NINETEEN · THE CONGRESS RECORD · THE LIVING ARCHIVE · MISTERLOVE.IN