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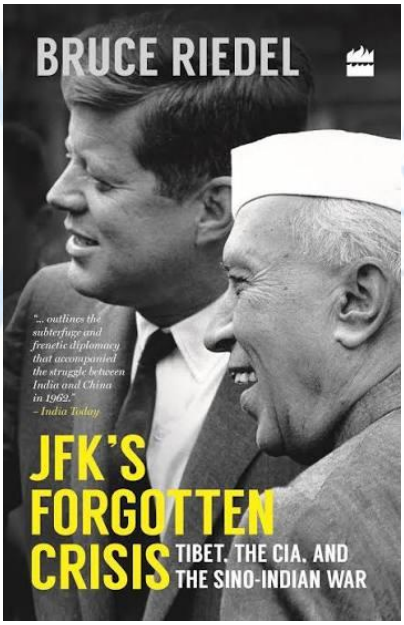
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Book Reviews

JFK'S FORGOTTEN CRISIS - Tibet, the CIA and the Sino-Indian War

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Bruce Riedel | Brookings Institution Press and Harper Collins Publishers India | 2015

Authored by former CIA analyst Bruce Riedel, JFK's Forgotten Crisis offers a nuanced synthesis of pivotal geopolitical events. Bruce Riedel spent over three decades in the CIA and brings his experience to the fore in this analysis. The book examines the 1962 Sino-Indian War within the broader Cold War context of the Kennedy presidency, viewed from an American vantage point. The book's central contribution lies in foregrounding how the conflict was

perceived in Washington—as a strategic episode intertwined with global concerns about Communist expansion and U.S. credibility.

This review argues that although the book offers valuable insight into American strategic thinking, it remains analytically uneven. Its reliance on a U.S. intelligence perspective leads it to reproduce contested interpretations, particularly on India's role in the escalation of the conflict.

Kennedy, the CIA and Strategic Perception

Riedel effectively traces the evolving relationship between President Kennedy and the CIA, highlighting how intelligence assessments shaped U.S. responses to global crises. The establishment of institutional mechanisms such as the White House Situation Room reflected the growing importance of coordinated intelligence analysis during this period.

The book shows that India's appeal for assistance during the war was taken seriously in Washington, revealing a moment of potential strategic convergence between India and the United States. However, this convergence remained limited and contingent, shaped by broader Cold War priorities.

The author's narrative, however, explores how Kennedy and Nehru, despite their lack of personal rapport, were brought together by shared democratic principles to confront China's aggression. Riedel employs logic and evidence of Kennedy's 1962 support for India to argue that, if Beijing had not withdrawn its troops from Indian territory in December 1962, Kennedy would have agreed to Nehru's plea for the US Air Force to deploy fighter jets to protect Indian skies, enabling the Indian Air Force to target Chinese positions. Riedel offers an alternative explanation for the question: "Why did China retreat from occupied Indian territory in 1962?"

The author traces the relationship between the CIA and Kennedy during his presidency through a series of revealing incidents. Kennedy's effort to establish himself as a credible statesman and a world leader was centred on making foreign policy a major part of his 1960 presidential campaign. When Kennedy won the election with a 0.17% margin against Nixon, he signalled bipartisanship by retaining Allen Dulles (a Republican) as the Director of the CIA.

The book consistently underscores how the positions of the CIA and the US government diverged during the Kennedy era, particularly regarding the urgency and perceived threat, most

notably during Operation Mongoose and the Cuban Missile Crisis, when Kennedy remained reluctant to deploy the US military in covert operations. Despite the Bay of Pigs failure and Dulles's termination, Kennedy continued to seek expertise to further his interests in Asia. Another indication of Kennedy's reliance on intelligence in his foreign policy was the establishment of the White House Situation Room (WHSR) in the basement of the West Wing of the White House. The irony, as the author notes, is that the CIA, which had already warned the White House about the Sino-Indian skirmishes in 1959 in its National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), was nevertheless too late to address the same when the outcome of the Bay of Pigs operation turned out to be disastrous. By highlighting Nehru's appeal to the White House for assistance during the war and Kennedy's openness to supporting India, the author illustrates the dynamics of India-US relations during the Kennedy era while pointing to the strain placed on the ideal of non-alignment.

Asia as a Strategic Theatre

A key strength of the book is its treatment of Asia as a central theatre of Cold War competition. The opening chapter foregrounds Kennedy's perception of Asia during the Cold War as a theatre that demanded more calibrated diplomacy rather than overt military engagement. Kennedy's determination to contain communism in Asia extended to Tibet, where the CIA supported the Khampa rebels against the Chinese occupation from bases in India and then East Pakistan. While Riedel situates this within Kennedy's broader Asian strategy, this reader finds it a telling exposure of the fragility of Nehru's 'Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai' aspirations, which were shattered by the Sino-Indian war that followed.

At the same time, this dimension raises important questions that the book does not fully address. Covert operations in Tibet may have contributed to China's threat perceptions, complicating India's position as a non-aligned actor. The implications of such covert engagement for regional stability remain underexplored.

Regional Fault Lines: India, Pakistan, and China

A recurring theme throughout the book is how Kennedy wanted to support India in the Indo-Sino war, despite the mounting dissatisfaction from Ayub Khan, even at the possible cost of jeopardising the US air base operation in Peshawar. The author highlighted that this, in turn, made Pakistan put India under pressure of a two-front war, in Kashmir with Pakistan and in NEFA with the Chinese, though it did not fully unfold. The author's observation precisely conveys India's precarious position amid two neighbouring countries aligned against it.

Nehru's Military Unpreparedness and the "Forward Policy"

One of the most debated aspects of the book is its implicit alignment with the argument that India's Forward Policy provoked the conflict, like earlier works such as Neville Maxwell's "India's China War" (1970). Like Maxwell, Riedel argues that India's Forward Policy and the establishment of outposts along and beyond the Line of Actual Control "pulled the trigger" and provoked China.

Riedel suggests that the swift reclamation of Goa from the Portuguese somewhat inflated confidence in Nehru and created a false impression of the Indian Army's capacity to fight a war with China (Pages 74-75). This was poor analysis. Riedel's assumptions and linkages were superficial and lacked analytical depth. The fact that the Indian Army was not in a position to implement the 'forward policy' was true, and this was due to a complex set of factors; Nehru's defensive foreign policy and its impact on national security; the Indian Army's ill-equipped status, with WW II-vintage, obsolete weapons and a lack of winter clothing; and the fact that the PLA was not only well equipped but also battle-hardened, having emerged from a gruelling three-year war in Korea less than a decade ago.

Riedel's view that China was provoked is seriously debated. A counter-view holds that the Chinese were already consolidating their hold on the Aksai Chin and were prepared to strike India at a moment when the USA was preoccupied with the Cuban missile crisis. This perspective later finds resonance in Bertil Lintner's book, "China's India War: Collision Course on the Roof of the World", where he suggests that Mao had prepared for this war well in advance to assert China's dominance in international politics, particularly after his setback in the Great Leap Forward Movement. While Riedel acknowledges these perspectives, the book does not sufficiently evaluate their relative strength, leaving the analytical balance incomplete.

Riedel is critical of Jawaharlal Nehru, emphasising strategic miscalculation and military unpreparedness. While these critiques are significant, they risk oversimplifying a more complex reality.

India's challenges in 1962 were not solely the result of leadership decisions but were also shaped by:

- Institutional weaknesses in a newly independent state
- Limited military modernisation

- The constraints of non-alignment

A more nuanced analysis would integrate these structural factors alongside leadership choices.

The chapter on the Indo-Sino War concludes with reference to remarks in the Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report, which noted that the Fourth Division was virtually destroyed during the war and that the Chinese had almost captured 30,000 sq. km of the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) region.

What remains strikingly consistent even today is the Chinese reluctance to provide an official accounting of casualties or injured PLA personnel, a pattern that reflects the opacity of its military conduct and was repeated in the Galwan Valley Clash of 2020.

Mao's unilateral ceasefire

The book's analysis of Mao Zedong's unilateral ceasefire is one of its strongest sections. Riedel convincingly argues that the ceasefire was politically calibrated, combining strategic signalling with practical considerations such as logistical constraints in the Himalayan theatre.

This interpretation moves beyond a purely military narrative and highlights the interplay between political objectives and battlefield decisions.

USA-India Strategic Relations

Riedel's assertion that Kennedy and US allies would have supported India against China is supported by plans from Harriman's 1963 visit for an air defence exercise in India, involving US, British, Canadian, and Australian pilots defending Indian airspace before Kennedy's death. Riedel notes how close Washington and New Delhi came to a military alliance, but circumstances halted this. A five-year, $500 million military aid programme was devised by Kennedy's administration, set for approval on November 26, 1963. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas four days earlier affected this. Lyndon B. Johnson faced Pakistani pressure against aiding India, with President Ayub Khan threatening to deny US access to the Peshawar air base. A White House meeting was scheduled for May 28, 1964, to approve the aid, but Nehru's unexpected death the day before delayed it. His successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, continued negotiations but signed a larger agreement with the Soviet Union in August 1964.

US Ambassador Chester Bowles called this "a lost opportunity" in Indo-American relations.

Conclusion

JFK’s Forgotten Crisis is a valuable contribution for readers seeking to understand how the 1962 war was perceived within the United States. It provides insight into intelligence assessments, strategic anxieties, and policy responses during the Kennedy era. Overall, the book offers an engaging and detailed account of the 1962 war and briefly beyond that, through an American lens. The author’s sharp and wry observations on the personalities of Nehru and other leaders lighten the tone of an otherwise intense account of conflict and diplomacy.

Nonetheless, the book lacks a thorough analysis of the conflict. Its U.S.-centric view repeats disputed interpretations and limits other perspectives. Significant editorial mistakes detract from the book. The author lacks knowledge of the history of the Sino-Indian border conflict. He claims China's October 1962 attack "led to China occupying 14,500 square miles of territory claimed by India in Kashmir known as Aksai Chin..." However, China already controlled Aksai Chin before the conflict, having built a highway through it. Riedel fails to recognise that Ladakh is separate from Kashmir, leading to inaccuracies like stating: "All of the territory that China gained in the Sino-Indian War in 1962 was part of Kashmir." More concerning is Riedel's assertion that the boundary between Tibet and Jammu & Kashmir — the Johnson Line — was established in 1914, along with the McMahon Line. In reality, the

Johnson Line (never officially recognised) originated in 1865, nearly fifty years before the Simla Conference, where the McMahon Line was defined. These mistakes are embarrassing even for a novice. It is astonishing that a CIA veteran could make such errors and that editors could overlook them. For much of the American public, the Sino-Indian War was lost in the fog of the Cuban crisis. For Indian readers, the 1962 war was never a “forgotten crisis.” It remains a defining moment in the country’s strategic history—one that continues to shape its security thinking today.

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