



## **Would JFK have nuked China?**

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I admire the United States for one reason: Official documents are scrupulously made available to the public, whether after the 30-year classification period is over or when a reasonable demand is made to the Administration under the Right to Information Act.

Further, there are several organisations or lobby groups in the US whose only work is to make sure that the law is followed in its letter and spirit.

India has recently armed itself with a similar legislation, but one can be certain that the babus will ensure that nobody will access files locked in the Nehru Library or in the almirahs of South Block. We will be told that India's security and integrity will be endangered if these precious documents are shown.

History lovers were recently delighted by the announcement made by the John F Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum that a tape recording of a National Security Council (NSC) Meeting of May 9, 1963, was available for research.

Though the minutes of the meeting, already published in the Foreign Relations of the United States (1961-1963), were available since 1996, the tapes revealed an aspect which appeared to be innocuous: The possibility of using nuclear power against Communist China in case of a new Sino-Indian conflict.

As pointed out by Maura Porter, the Kennedy Library Archivist: "When one listens to this recording, (we get to know) first-hand how critical

national security matters were debated and discussed... (The tapes) offer listeners a far more accurate account of this moment in history, and allow for the extraordinary experience of being present in the room."

In one tape, one can hear General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff saying: "Mr President, I had hoped before we get too deeply (involved) in the Indian question, we take a broader look at where we are coming, the attitude we're going to maintain versus Red China..."

This is just one spectacular aspect of the overall problem of how to cope with Red China politically and militarily in the next decade... I would hate to think we would fight this on the ground in a non-nuclear war."

President Kennedy did not respond directly to the General, but remarked that India would obviously take a firmer stand towards Communist China if the US committed itself to India's defence.

Defence Secretary Robert McNamara intervened to bring back the nuclear question: "Mr President, I think General Taylor is implying that before any substantial commitment to defend India against China is given, we should recognise that in order to carry out that commitment against any substantial Chinese attack we would have to use nuclear weapons..."

Any large Chinese Communist attack on any part of that area would require the use of nuclear weapons by the US, and this is to be preferred over the introduction of large numbers of US soldiers."

Kennedy came back to his main focus: India's air defence. His point was, if the US was prepared to defend Korea and Thailand, "Why should we not be prepared to commit ourselves to defend India?" Under Secretary of State George Ball returned to the use of nuclear

weapons.

He was worried that if the US decided to use the bomb against the Chinese: "We are going to inject into this whole world opinion the old bugaboo of being willing to use nuclear weapons against Asians when we are talking about a different kind of strategy in Europe.

This is going to create great problems with the Japanese - with all the yellow people."

This exchange took place at the end of the NSC meeting held in the Cabinet room of the White House, some six months after the Chinese invasion of North India. The main topic of discussion was the aid to be provided to India.

Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State, had circulated a memorandum a day earlier on 'Air Defence for India'. The question, which is still relevant today, was: How to help India without provoking a violent reaction from the 'privileged partner' and military dictator (Ayub Khan) in Pakistan.

Rusk's first recommendation was: "The United States should commit itself, by executive agreement, to consult with the Government of India, in the event of a Chinese Communist attack on India, regarding the possible use of United States military air forces to strengthen India's air defences."

Kennedy was not too sure about the Executive Agreement which could trigger unnecessary discussions in the US Congress (and in India) but he said that it was obvious that Washington should defend India if it is attacked.

His idea was that the US should cover the defence of India's large cities, the defence of the frontiers on the ground could be left to the Indian forces.

The second recommendation was that "the US and the UK-

Commonwealth should be prepared in the event of such a Chinese Communist attack to deploy three squadrons of air defence aircraft for use in the air defence of the Delhi and Calcutta areas".

In support of the squadrons, permanent radar and communications facilities were to be installed. Finally, peacetime air defence exercises could be conducted as a rehearsal in case of an attack.

All the participants, whether from the State Department, the Department of Defence or the CIA, essentially agreed with the proposal, but the discussion turned around how to present the proposal to the US Congress and the Indian leadership (the Indian Defence Coordination Minister TT Krishnamachari was expected in Washington a few days later).

Paradoxically, the issue at stake was not the quantum of US military aid (or even an eventual use of nuclear weapons) but the Kashmir issue. The British Government and some in the US Administration had decided to take the opportunity to corner a wounded India and extract important compromises on Kashmir.

Let us not forget that Averell Harriman, the Assistant Secretary of State and Duncan Sandys, the British Secretary for Commonwealth Relations, had visited India the day Beijing declared its unilateral ceasefire (November 22, 1962).

They had "made clear their governments' willingness to provide military assistance to India but pointed out the related need for negotiations to resolve the Kashmir dispute."

Six rounds of talks on Kashmir between Pakistan and India followed the US and UK envoys' visit. The above quoted NSC meeting occurred before the last round, when it was already known in the Western capitals that the exercise had failed: Ayub Khan had already begun a dangerous flirtation with China (and offered Beijing a large chunk of

Kashmir territory).

In any case by May 1963, the Chinese threat had slightly lessened and Delhi was not ready to be bullied anymore.

In Rusk's words: "The absence of further overt Chicom (Chinese Communist) belligerency, Western reluctance to proceed with military assistance on the scale desired by India, and continued pressure for a Kashmir settlement, have caused the Indians to cool off somewhat from their position of last November."

But President Kennedy had decided to go forward with a programme of substantial military assistance to India despite the possible impact on US-Pakistan relations: "Let's not let them get into a position where they feel that they can't cope with the Chicoms and Paks on top of their other problems."

The main dilemma remained, as Dean Rusk explained: "If we give too little, we might lose India and if we give too much, we might lose Pakistan." More than 40 years later, the debate continues in the US Administration. The irony is that today it is the US which needs India to contain a China growing richer and more powerful by the day.