

J.N. TO JFK, 'EYES ONLY'

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Forty-eight years have elapsed since the Black November of 1962, when took place the brief but brutal border war with China in the high Himalayas. As is clear, in retrospect, it was a relatively limited clash of arms — that unfortunately turned into a traumatic military debacle and political disaster for us. So, why recall those days and scratch the wounds that have nearly healed?

The reason is the sudden and unexpected availability of two “Eyes Only” letters Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to President John F. Kennedy of the United States informing him that the war situation was “desperate” and asking for “more comprehensive” US military aid, especially in the form of air power “if the Chinese are to be prevented from taking over the whole of Eastern India.”

To the best of my knowledge, the first public mention of these two letters was made in the Rajya Sabha by a member of that House, Sudhir Ghosh, in 1965. The then Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, had flatly denied the existence of such letters, stating that he had conducted a thorough search of the prime minister’s secretariat, as it was then called, and the ministry of external affairs. For its part, the United States, after a lapse of some years, accepted that these letters were received but absolutely refused to reveal them. In the 1980s, copies of these letters were duly placed in the US National Archives, the JFK Library in Boston, the LBJ Library in Austin, Texas and some other places. But every line of each letter was so heavily inked out that no technology could help decipher it. Thousands of applicants seeking access to the “blacked-out” documents under the much older, and far more

effective, American version of India's Right to Information Act were courteously told that "at the request of the Government of India" the letters would not be made public.

Imagine my surprise therefore, when soon after arriving in Washington this time around, I had easy access to these "forbidden" epistles. What surprised me even more is that the copies of these letters have been around for nearly four years — but, as far as I know, haven't yet been published anywhere.

One reason may be that interest in the 1962 war has waned. Another, that only the JFK Library has declassified the Nehru letters; the White House and the State Department haven't.

Let me also confess that for many days I agonised whether I should publish the letters at all, and give the habitual Nehru-haters, of whom there are quite a few in India, another opportunity to malign the iconic prime minister who was the architect of India's secular democracy and its modernisation.

But deep thought dictated that history must never be censored.

Just to publish the text of the two letters one after the other would serve no useful purpose. For the context is essential to comprehend their content and texture.

Moreover, the second letter, sent "within a few hours of the first", is vastly more important. In this, Nehru informed Kennedy that during the short interval, "the situation in NEFA (North-East Frontier Agency, now called Arunachal Pradesh) Command has deteriorated still further. Bomdila has fallen and the retreating forces from Sela have been trapped between the Sela Ridge and Bomdila. A serious threat has developed to our Digboi oilfields in Assam. With the advance of the Chinese in massive strength, the entire Brahmaputra Valley is seriously threatened and unless something is done immediately to stem the tide, the whole of Assam, Tripura, Manipur and Nagaland would also pass into Chinese hands."

"The Chinese have poised massive forces", he added, "(also) in Chumbi Valley between Sikkim and Bhutan and another invasion from that direction appears imminent... In Ladakh, as I have said in my earlier communication, Chushul is under heavy attack and the shelling of the airfield at Chushul has already commenced. We have also noticed increasing air activity by the Chinese air force. (In the earlier letter, Nehru had said that after Chushul there was "nothing to stop the Chinese till they reach Leh, the headquarters of the Ladakh province of Kashmir.")

After pointing out that hitherto he had "restricted our requests to essential equipment" and thanking the US for the assistance "so readily given", Nehru went on: "We did not ask for more comprehensive assistance, particularly air assistance, because of wider implications... in the global context and we did not want to embarrass our friends." The next five lines state what has been indicated above: "The situation that has developed is, however, desperate. We have to have more comprehensive assistance if the Chinese are to be prevented from taking over the whole of Eastern India. Any delay in this assistance reaching us will result in nothing short of a catastrophe for our country".

Remarkably, Nehru's request for comprehensive aid, especially "immediate support to strengthen our air arm sufficiently to stem the tide of the Chinese advance" goes into minute details, and is prefaced by the statement: "We have repeatedly felt the need to use our air arm in support of our land forces but have been unable to do so because in the present state... we have no defence against retaliatory action by the Chinese." In this context his specific demands are for: "[A] minimum of 12 squadrons of supersonic all-weather fighters" and a "modern radar cover (which) we don't have." Nehru added that US air force personnel "will have to man these fighters and radar installations while our personnel are being trained."

More significantly, he spelled out that US fighter and transport aircraft "manned by US personnel will be used for the present to protect our cities and installations from Chinese attacks and to maintain our communications... and if this is possible... to assist the Indian Air Force in air battles with the Chinese air force over Indian areas where air action by the IAF against Chinese communication lines, supplies and troop concentrations may lead to counter air action by the Chinese. Any air action to be taken against the Chinese beyond the limits of our country, e.g. in Tibet, will be taken by the IAF planes manned by Indian personnel."

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Letters from the darkest hour

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In the Rajya Sabha on that distant date, Sudhir Ghosh had also alleged that Jawaharlal Nehru had asked JF Kennedy for, among other things, a US aircraft-carrier to be stationed in the Bay of Bengal. But of this there is absolutely no mention in either of his two letters to JFK. What is eminently noteworthy, however, is that despite his exaggerated estimate of the Chinese objectives, Nehru was not at all oblivious of the kind of pressures that would be brought to bear on the US president against extending “comprehensive” military aid to India.

So he wrote: “The Chinese threat as it has developed involves not merely the survival of India, but the survival of free and independent Governments in the whole of this sub-Continent or in Asia. The domestic quarrels regarding small areas or territorial borders between the countries in this sub-Continent or in Asia have no relevance whatever in the context of the developing Chinese invasion. I would emphasise particularly that all the assistance or equipment given to us to meet our dire need will be used entirely for resistance against the Chinese. I have made this clear in a letter I sent to President Ayub Khan of Pakistan. I am asking our Ambassador to give you a copy of this letter.

“We are confident that your great country will in this hour of our trial help us in our fight for survival and for the survival of freedom and independence in this sub-Continent and rest of Asia. We on our part are determined to spare no effort until the threat posed by Chinese expansionist and aggressive militarism to freedom and independence is completely eliminated”.

It is perhaps needless to add that on November 20 the Chinese declared a unilateral ceasefire and phased withdrawal. Consequently, the urgency behind Nehru's correspondence with Kennedy disappeared. But, ironically, the reference to irrelevance of "domestic disputes over small areas or territorial borders between the countries in the sub-Continent" did not achieve the desired result. On the contrary, the US and Britain, represented by Averell Harriman and Duncan Sandys respectively (the latter more than the former), pressured India relentlessly to settle the Kashmir issue with Pakistan. The protracted but pointless six rounds of talks between Swaran Singh and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, adequately discussed in this column already, followed. A trickle of American military assistance did slowly flow into India but it did not amount to much and was, in any case, terminated during the 1965 India-Pakistan War.

There is no point quoting those portions of Nehru's first letter that were either repeated or updated in the second. However, something of significance it underscores merits attention. Saying that a month had elapsed since China's "massive attack on India" Nehru added he thought he should inform Kennedy of further developments since "my last letter of October 29."

He then went on to say: "There was a deceptive lull after the first Chinese offensive during which the Chinese mounted a serious propaganda offensive in the name three-point proposals, which shorn of their wrappings, actually constituted a demand for surrender on their terms. The Chinese tried, despite our rejection of these proposals, to get various Afro-Asian countries to intercede with various offers of mediation. After my clear and categorical statement in Parliament on 14 November rejecting the three-point proposal of Chou en-Lai, the Chinese who had made full preparations to put further military pressure on us, re-started their military offensive... Events have moved very fast and we are facing a grim situation in our struggle and in

defending all that India stands for against an unscrupulous and powerful aggressor.”

Incidentally, after the ceasefire, President Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandarnaike, Ghana’s leader Kwame Nkrumah and some others met and formulated some principles on the basis of which, they said, India and China could resume negotiations for settling the border issue. These came to be known as the Colombo Proposals because the non-aligned leaders had met in the Sri Lankan capital. India accepted the proposals; China rejected them out of hand. Thereafter, New Delhi declared that border talks with China could take place only on the basis of the Colombo Proposals, and this remained Indian policy until New Year’s Day, 1968, when Indira Gandhi, as prime minister, announced that she was prepared to negotiate with the Chinese without any precondition. It took China more than two years to respond. On May Day 1970, Mao Zedong made it a point to smile at the then Indian Charge d’ Affairs in Beijing, Brajesh Mishra. China’s Chairman also said that there was no reason why India and China, both great countries, could not be friends. Nothing came of this, however, because soon enough the Bangladesh crisis, leading to the 1971 war, erupted. China supported the Yahya Khan regime in Pakistan to the hilt. Chou even said that India had picked up a rock it would “drop on its own feet.” It took another 10 years before border talks between the two countries could begin. They are still dragging on.

Back to the two letters, Nehru’s official biographer, S. Gopal, never admitted to having seen them. But he confidently asserted that the letters were drafted by the foreign secretary of the day, M. J. Desai. If true, this is rather strange. For Nehru always wrote his letters himself — sometimes drafting them for his subordinates to sign.

B. K. Nehru, a cousin of the prime minister and an outstanding civil servant who later became the closest thing we had to an elder statesman, was at

that time ambassador to the US. He never made a secret of the fact that on receiving and reading the second letter, his impulse was to not deliver it. But realising that he was a civil servant and it was his bounden duty to obey his prime minister, he immediately headed for the White House. He never discussed the contents of the two letters with anyone but did tell me that he locked them up in the safe that only the ambassador could open. He knew not what his successor had done with the letters he must have seen.

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