Many surmises were made at the time on the reasons for China’s sudden invasion and the equally sudden pull-out. A year after the event, the Chinese themselves stated that their aim had been ‘to thoroughly rout the Indian reactionaries and to shatter their plan of altering the border status quo by armed force and to create conditions for a negotiated settlement’. This was stated in an article in The Peking Review of 8 November 1963.

The words ‘altering the border status quo by armed force’ were apparently a reference to India’s ‘forward policy’ in Ladakh. Put in simple terms, the Chinese aim was to bring down the existing Indian Government (its leaders were reactionaries in Chinese eyes on account of their commitment to democracy) and in the conditions that would obtain after a Chinese victory, secure a settlement that suited China.

Chinese successes did not bring down the Indian Government. On the other hand, the whole country placed itself behind Nehru. A patriotic surge swept over the country and people came forward in their thousands to serve in the armed forces.

In the event, China failed to secure her political aim. Chinese successes did not bring down the Indian Government. On the other hand, the whole country placed itself behind Nehru. A patriotic surge swept over the country and people came forward in their thousands to serve in the armed forces.
Even though public clamour for rejecting the cease-fire was great, the Chinese once again made a virtue out of a necessity. They had to withdraw from Kameng before they were enclosed by deep winter on the wrong side of Bum La. Kameng and Lohit were linked politically, so they made a point to vacate both. In Ladakh there was no such compulsion, so they held on to their captured territory. Moreover, they had not brought up any armour and not much in the shape of mechanized transport. It was, in fact, impossible for them to bring mechanized forces across several hundred kilometres of mountainous terrain.

Till their unilateral cease-fire, the Chinese had come up against a small segment of the Indian Army – only about 24,000 out of 400,000. Indian reinforcements had begun to arrive and counter-attacks were sure to follow. The Chinese knew that with their overstretched lines of communication and without adequate transport for logistics, they would not be able to withstand these. There was also the possibility of outside intervention on India’s behalf. Thus, the Chinese decision to withdraw was not a magnanimous gesture on their part, as it was made out to be at the time.

The Indian Government accepted the cease-fire and the Army observed it strictly. The orders to troops were not to fire unless fired upon. The Chinese announcement of cease-fire was accompanied by a statement of how they would carry out their withdrawal; it also contained an invitation for negotiations. They specified that the withdrawal of their troops would commence on 1 December and that they would withdraw to positions 20 kilometres behind the Line of Actual Control which existed between India and China on 7 November 1959.

The country’s anguish was heightened by the fact that it had been led to believe that the Army was strong enough to meet any challenge.

They expected that India would do the same, i.e. keep her armed forces 20 kilometres away from the Line of Actual Control as it was on 7 November 1959. An identical proposal for a withdrawal had been made by the Chinese Premier in a letter to Prime Minister Nehru of that date. The Indian
Government now made it clear that before there could be any discussions, the Chinese must withdraw to positions they held before 8 September 1962, i.e. the date on which their troops had invested the Assam Rifles’ post at Che Dong.

In their cease-fire declaration, however, the Chinese had stated that their withdrawal was not conditional and regardless of the fact that a common ground could not be found for negotiations, they commenced their pull-out on schedule.

The reverses of October and November 1962 were a traumatic experience for India, particularly its Army. The country’s anguish was heightened by the fact that it had been led to believe that the Army was strong enough to meet any challenge. Looking back at the campaign, we find that, except for the odd skirmish, actual fighting between the Chinese and Indian forces occurred only on 13 days. Estimates of Chinese casualties are not available; they in turn inflicted a total of 9,743 casualties: 1,423 killed, 3,078 wounded, 1,655 missing, believed killed, and 3,587 prisoners. The Chinese repatriated the prisoners in time and returned most of the captured equipment.

Considering that about 24,000 officers and men were committed in the two theatres, the casualties worked out to over 40 per cent, quite a high figure. Those who had known the old Indian Army were surprised at its performance in NEFA. However, the reader who has followed the story thus far would have no difficulty in arriving at the causes of the debacle:

1. The professional soldier after 1947 got increasingly isolated from the process of decision-making on defence matters. The situation had deteriorated to such an extent that written orders to the COAS for evicting the Chinese from the border were handed over to him signed by a mere joint secretary in the Ministry of Defence.

2. Both in protocol and in terms of promotions civil servants had improved their position considerably since 1947. The Army, for one reason or another, had been given step-motherly treatment in these spheres. Consequently, there was a feeling amongst Army officers of
being denigrated which led to lack of elan amongst them and to lowering of morale.

There was no correlation of the country’s foreign policy with its defence capability. The Army was ordered to assert the country’s claims without first ensuring that in the event of China asserting her counter-claims, it would have the capacity for adequate riposte.

1. An officer who lacked the essential background and training, was first elevated to the post of Chief of the General Staff at Army Headquarters merely on account of his political connection and then given command of a corps to fight the Chinese in NEFA. Because of political patronage, Lieutenant General Kaul had become a law unto himself and ignored his military superiors.

2. The Government based its assessment of the intentions of a foreign power on the personal whims and beliefs of certain individuals instead of acting on the advice of successive Army Chiefs.

3. There was no correlation of the country’s foreign policy with its defence capability. The Army was ordered to assert the country’s claims without first ensuring that in the event of China asserting her counter-claims, it would have the capacity for adequate riposte. When Lieutenant General Daulet Singh recommended that the ‘forward policy’ be suspended in Ladakh till the Army had acquired this capability, he was told to carry on regardless of such considerations.

4. There was political interference in the tactical handling of the situation, for example the insistence on holding the indefensible positions on the Namka Chu and the post at Tsangle.

5. There was abject failure of higher command in the field in NEFA. Troops were continuously being reshuffled, no one was taking any
decision in time, and when one was forthcoming it was entirely out of tune with the realities of the ground situation. Sound tactical decisions were replaced by gross interference at the sub-unit level.

We have earlier mentioned how, after the fall of Towang, Defence Minister Krishna Menon had to resign. On 19 November, Thapar put in his resignation on returning from a visit to 4 Corps. He drove straight from the airport that night to Nehru’s residence, and told him that in view of the reverses he was prepared to resign. The next day he was informed that the Prime Minister had decided to make use of his offer. Lieutenant General J.N. Chaudhuri, then serving as General Officer Commanding-in-Chief Southern Command, was chosen to succeed Thapar. He was the next senior but had earlier received his retirement orders on completion of tenure as lieutenant general. A cavalry officer who had seen action during the Second World War in Ethiopia and the Western Desen, ‘Muchu’ Chaudhuri had been an instructor at the Quetta Staff College and had later commanded 16 Light Cavalry. He fought at the battle of Meiktila in Burma. Later, as Brigadier-in-Charge Administration at Headquarters Malaya Command, he had seen many countries in the region.

When Pandit Nehru paid a visit to Singapore in March 1946, Chaudhuri had been assigned the task of receiving and conducting him around. As the General Officer Commanding 1 Armoured Division, he had conducted the police action in Hyderabad and had later served as the Military Governor of the state. In 1961, as the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief Southern Command, Chaudhuri had removed the last vestiges of colonial rule from India by taking Goa, Daman and Diu from the Portuguese in a swift operation.

The Chinese having announced a cease-fire that day, the question of use of the Air Force no longer arose.

On being called to Delhi to officiate as COAS, Chaudhuri met Khera, the Cabinet Secretary, before seeing the Prime Minister. He told Khera that he would take over on three conditions. He should be given the rank of
general straightaway, Kaul should go, and he should be permitted to use the Air Force if necessary.3

It is not known whether these ‘conditions’ were conveyed to the Prime Minister. However, Chaudhuri was appointed COAS in the rank of general on 20 November. The Chinese having announced a cease-fire that day, the question of use of the Air Force no longer arose. Kaul was to retire voluntarily. Chaudhuri’s first orders to the field commanders were that they should take up positions where they believed they could make a stand and then retreat no more.

There is no doubt that the year 1962 saw the Indian Army at its nadir. But that year can also be called its Great Divide. The shock of defeat aroused a powerful reaction, a resolve that never again should such humiliation befall the country.

Kaul came under severe criticism after the reverses in NEFA. Speaking of it in his memoirs, he says: “My critics chanted in chorus a hymn of hate against me and labelled me as the prime architect of the NEFA debacle”.4 He decided that the only course for him was to resign, though he had earlier advised Thapar against taking such a step when the latter had broached the subject to him on 18 November. A few days after the cease-fire, General Paul Adams of the United States Army and General Sir Richard Hull, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, paid a visit to 4 Corps. They were accompanied by Lieutenant General Sen. After Kaul had briefed his visitors on the situation in NEFA, he took Sen aside and gave him his resignation.5

Though Nehru had accepted Thapar’s resignation, he wanted Kaul to continue and tried to persuade him to withdraw his resignation. But Kaul declined to change his mind. In his memoirs, Kaul relates how he went to meet the new Army Chief on 4 December and how Chaudhuri offered to ‘rehabilitate’ him in the Army if he did not press his request for retirement. But the offer did not appeal to Kaul and he stuck to his decision.6 Thus ended the career of one who was only months earlier being considered a
possible successor to Nehru himself. Major General A.S. Pathania also sent in his papers and left the Army in July 1963.

Lieutenant General Manekshaw succeeded Kaul in the command of 4 Corps. It fell to him to reorganize and refurbish the defences of NEFA. He went round the various units and spoke to officers and men to raise their morale and to listen to their complaints, so that corrective action could be taken.

Manekshaw’s assessment was that NEFA could have been defended. He said, “The only reason for failure was that morale was low, absolutely low. There was no higher direction – from Delhi, or from the Army or corps commanders. . . . The troops were demoralized because of their commanders”.

It was decided to put into effect a plan for the expansion, re-equipment and reorganization of the Army. Its strength was to be doubled in a phased programme over the next few years.

Regarding Lieutenant General Sen’s part, this is what Manekshaw had to say. When I took over, I asked General Sen, . . . “Bogey, why didn’t you come as Army Commander, sack the Corps Commander and take over yourself ?” His reply was: “It is all very well for you to say this, Sam; but do you know what his stature was then? He never talked to me; he would just pick up the phone and talk to the Prime Minister. He never even consulted the COAS. I would have got no support from anyone. Krishna Menon and Bijjy Kaul were running the armed forces of the country”. Even so, I told him that had I been in office, I would have said: “Sorry, out you go! I am taking over”. They could have sacked me. At least there would have been no disgrace for the country’.

There is no doubt that the year 1962 saw the Indian Army at its nadir. But that year can also be called its Great Divide. The shock of defeat aroused a powerful reaction, a resolve that never again should such humiliation befall the country. A new spirit, a new leadership and support from the Government brought into being a new Army. .
It was decided to put into effect a plan for the expansion, re-equipment and reorganization of the Army. Its strength was to be doubled in a phased programme over the next few years. Six new divisions were to be raised; two of them would be standard infantry divisions and the remainder were to be specially equipped and trained for mountain warfare. Some of the existing infantry divisions were also to be switched over to mountain role. The fire-power of infantry units was improved. The 7.62-mm self-loading rifle was introduced and mountain divisions were given preference for the issue of this weapon. Then came the 81-mm mortar and other improved equipment.

Some of the existing infantry divisions were also to be switched over to mountain role. The fire-power of infantry units was improved.

Y.B. Chavan took over as Defence Minister on 21 November. As was to be expected, an enquiry was ordered into the NEFA reverses. The enquiry committee was headed by Lieutenant General T.B. Henderson Brookes and it had Major General (later Lieutenant General) P.S. Bhagat as member. The committee’s terms of reference restricted the enquiry to the military aspect of the operations; even in this field, it was not to concern itself with individual responsibility for the defeat. Certain restrictions were also placed as to the people who could be questioned.

The committee sent in its report in the middle of 1963. Despite its restricted terms of reference, it reviewed comprehensively the operations in Ladakh as well as NEFA, covering the developments and events prior to the hostilities and also the plans, posture and strength of the Army in the theatres of operations. For reasons of security, the report was not published but in a statement made before Parliament, the Defence Minister summarized the recommendations of the report. These emphasized:

1. The need for more realistic battle training, especially in mountain warfare.

2. The urgency of eliminating shortages of equipment.
3. The need for curbing the tendency among senior commanders to interfere in the tactical handling of troops at lower levels.

4. The requirement of preparing troops adequately before committing them to a theatre of operations.

5. The requirement of better communications (surface and signals).

6. The need for a better intelligence set-up.

It was also given out that while the performance of junior officers was ‘fair’, at higher levels of command there had been lapses. The need for improvement in the work and procedures of the General Staff at all levels was also stressed.
During the hostilities, India had appealed to friendly countries for assistance who responded generously. Britain and the United States were the major contributors. After the cease-fire, the two countries agreed to supply, in a phased programme over the next three years, small — arms and other equipment for refurbishing the Army – mainly non-combat equipment and stores for the mountain divisions.

While accepting this aid, the Indian Government took steps for the establishment of an infrastructure within the country for the manufacture of such equipment. The Western powers were not alone in supplying arms and equipment to India. She had earlier bought some transport planes from the Soviets and had entered into a contract with them for the supply of MiG-21 fighter aircraft and for their manufacture within the country.

After the UN-sponsored cease-fire had come into effect on 1 January 1949, Pakistan had not complied with the terms of the cease-fire agreement. Also, Pakistan's leaders had taken every opportunity to declare their determination to annex Kashmir, whatever the means.

An important step towards streamlining the field command set-up was the creation of Central Command, with Headquarters at Lucknow. Simultaneously, the Headquarters of Eastern Command was moved to Calcutta, nearer its area of responsibility. The change relieved this operational command of a good deal of administrative work connected with static units and installations located in Central India.
Several measures were adopted to ensure the development of the Army on scientific lines and to improve its effectiveness. Among these may be mentioned the reorganization at Army Headquarters, the expansion and strengthening of the Military Intelligence Directorate, the setting up of a Directorate of Combat Development and the introduction of a Commando Course for officers.

Surface and air communications were improved, and ordnance factories were modernized and expanded. To cater for the officer requirements of an Academy, the Officers’ Training School and the Army Cadet College were expanded. The capacity of the High Altitude Warfare School was also enlarged and steps were taken to impart intensive jungle warfare training to units committed to the defence of the North-East region.

A major change that occurred as a result of the reorganization of the Army was the cutting down of its ‘tail’ to strengthen its ‘teeth’. Speaking of the change, Chaudhuri says: “I exiled all superfluous units from our Order of Battle”. To rebuild morale, Chaudhuri travelled extensively and spoke to the men. He would, at every opportunity, tell them “that there was a big black mark on their faces, which water alone won’t wash out and there was only one thing that could wash it out–blood”.

India’s relations with Pakistan came up for discussion while negotiations were under way with the United States and Britain for the supply of arms and equipment. The two countries suggested a rapprochement between India and Pakistan. There could be no doubt that friendship between the two neighbours would enable them to face external threats more effectively. However, the main hurdle in the way of amity was Pakistan’s attitude towards Jammu & Kashmir. Pakistan had supported the tribal invasion of the state in 1947 and had later sent her regular forces to fight Indian troops engaged in expelling the invader.

The state of Jammu & Kashmir being Indian territory by virtue of its accession, the Indian Government protested vigorously that Pakistan had no right to negotiate regarding territory that did not belong legally to her.
After the UN-sponsored cease-fire had come into effect on 1 January 1949, Pakistan had not complied with the terms of the cease-fire agreement. Also, Pakistan’s leaders had taken every opportunity to declare their determination to annex Kashmir, whatever the means.

Despite all this, India agreed to discuss the question. Several meetings were held between 27 December 1962 and 16 May 1963. However, Pakistan rejected every proposal put forward by India to resolve the dispute and it became clear that she wanted India to present Kashmir to her on a platter.

The failure of the talks led to a worsening of the relations between the two countries. The Hazratbal incident of December 1963 set off serious riots in Srinagar. There was a chain reaction in East Pakistan and later in Calcutta. Many lives were lost and a two-way flight of refugees began. It was estimated that about 700,000 crossed from (East) Pakistan to India in the first nine months of 1964.

There had been a shift in Pakistan’s foreign policy for some years. As the reader is aware, she had entered into two US-sponsored military pacts – SEATO and CENTO – in the mid-fifties. The aim of these alliances was the containment of communist power in the region. However, towards the close of 1959, Pakistan changed her stance and began to woo China, one of the countries against which these alliances had been directed.

The shift came in the wake of the border dispute between India and China; the reason was obvious. In the years that followed, the two countries came closer to each other, though this was initially looked upon with disfavour by the United States. Agreements for trade and cultural relations were followed by large-scale military supplies to Pakistan. These included tanks and aircraft.

Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir and Chinese Sinkiang have a 480-kilometre common border. Early Chinese maps showed a large portion of the Pakistan-occupied territory as theirs. On 23 October 1959, President Ayub Khan of Pakistan announced that his country intended to negotiate an
agreement with China in respect of this border. China, however, ignored
this overture till January 1961, when she agreed to discuss the question.

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disadvantage. It gave China increased influence over the strategic
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The state of Jammu & Kashmir being Indian territory by virtue of its
accession, the Indian Government protested vigorously that Pakistan had
no right to negotiate regarding territory that did not belong legally to her.
China deferred negotiations for a year thereafter, obviously to avoid giving
offence to India. However, when her attempts to settle the border dispute
with India (on her own terms) failed, she sought an agreement with
Pakistan. Negotiations began in the spring of 1962 and the signing of a
treaty was announced on 2 March 1963.

To assuage international opinion, the treaty was made ‘provisional’ and
subject to renegotiation after the settlement of the dispute over Kashmir
between Pakistan and India’. All the same, the treaty gave China physical
possession of territory of great strategic value. She got 6,475 square kilo
metres of Hunza lying in Kashmir South of Mintaka Pass. In return,
Pakistan was given 1,942 square kilometres of grazing land and salt mines
in an area that had been under Chinese occupation.12

The treaty altered the geopolitical situation in the region to India’s
disadvantage. It gave China increased influence over the strategic
Karakoram Pass and in Hunza she acquired a position deep within
Kashmir, from which she could exert military pressure over the rest of the
state. The ceded territory brought the Chinese close to the Gilgit airfield, an
area from which Pakistan had sent columns to Leh via Skardu and towards
Srinagar by way of the Gurais Valley, during the 1947–48 operations. The
possibility of China exploiting her position in Hunza for similar moves was a
matter of serious concern to India.

The breakdown of negotiations over Kashmir came within weeks of the
signing of the Sino-Pak border treaty. The effect of the two events and the
turmoil created by the Hazratbal incident brought relations between the two
countries to a crisis. Pakistan added to the ill-feeling by mounting a propaganda campaign against India for the measures she was taking to improve her defences.

We have till now not made a mention of the effects of the Chinese invasion on Nehru. To the man who had played a major part in India’s struggle for freedom and had led her through thick and thin after Independence, the events of 1962 brought shock and disillusionment.

However, China’s invasion proved his assessment of that country to be wrong and India suffered a reverse in consequence. His sorrow was great. Some of the non-aligned nations which tried to mediate between China and India failed to show a proper understanding of this country’s case. This deepened his sorrow. All the same, he showed his mettle by refusing to negotiate with China under duress. But 1962 left its mark on Nehru. He was never the same man again; his health failed and he died on 27 May 1964.

In an earlier chapter a parallel was drawn between Ashoka and Nehru. Through his highly moral policy of dharma, Ashoka is accused of having neglected the military and contributing to the downfall of the Great Mauryas. Similarly, the policy of non-alignment and ignoring the requirements of defence brought about the debacle of 1962. Yet, despite these facts, both Ashoka and Nehru are among the greatest figures of Indian history for their incorruptible moral fibre and their cherishing and practising the higher values of life.

Notes

1. Figures from Red Coats to Olive Green, by V. Longer, pp. 396–7.
2. General Thapar was later appointed India’s ambassador to Afghanistan.
5. Ibid., p. 446.
6. Ibid., p. 448.

7. Some of the changes at Army Headquarters did not bring the improvement that was expected. Commenting on these, Lieutenant General I.S. Gill (retd), who was Director of Military Operations during the Indo-Pak conflict of 1971 and was later General Officer Commanding-in-Chief Western Command, had this to say: “The abolition of the appointment of the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) and the creation of the appointments of Vice Chief of the Army Staff (VCOAS) and Deputy Chief of the Army Staff (DCOAS) have had continuing adverse effects on functioning. The intention was to take the load off the COAS but instead it has increased it. Since Operations, Intelligence and Training (and previously Combat Development) are under the VCOAS and the Directorates of Staff Duties and Weapons and Equipment under the DCOAS, the COAS has also to perform the functions of the CGS. I made the Field-Marshal [Manekshaw] and [General] Bewoor understand this, but although they agreed with me they did nothing about it. The Directorate of Combat Development was wound up quite a few years ago. Having taken this idea from the USA we found that we did not know what to do with it”.


9. The Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar has a sacred relic of Prophet Mohammad, a hair (bal), which is held in great veneration by the Muslims, and is well-guarded. The riots of December 1963 resulted from the disappearance of the relic under mysterious circumstances. Its subsequent recovery was as mysterious.

10. The Indo-Pakistan Conflict, by Russell Brines, p. 213.

11. International relations shift with a change in the interests of nations. A time was to come when the USA would use the good offices of Pakistan for a rapprochement with China.

12. The Indo-Pakistan Conflict, by Russell Brines, p. 203.