Rakove on Riedel, 'JFK's Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA, and Sino-Indian War'

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The Other October Crisis

“Does anybody know the mystery of the Communist system?” a baffled President John F. Kennedy asked aloud, in the early evening of October 26, 1962. “What is their reason for doing this?”[1] He spoke not of the nuclear crisis between the United States and the Soviet Union, set into motion by the deployment of Soviet missiles to Cuba. Simultaneously, on the other side of the world, the People’s Republic of China had launched a devastating military offensive against Indian positions on the fringes of Kashmir and in the remote northeast. In this moment of profound anxiety, Kennedy appears to have entertained the notion that some little-known facet of communism, properly elucidated, could explain both crises.

Bruce Riedel has written the first book that expressly addresses Kennedy’s response to the Sino-Indian War. *JFK’s Forgotten Crisis* is briskly and entertainingly written, and offers an engaging narrative account of the Kennedy administration’s approach to South Asia. To the extent that it promotes further interest in this often overlooked facet of Kennedy’s foreign policy, it is a welcome addition. It boasts a rich cast of characters: John Fitzgerald Kennedy, his wife Jacqueline, Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and the irrepressible John Kenneth Galbraith, who served as US ambassador in New Delhi. A quick glance at this book’s Amazon page suggests that it has found a welcoming audience.

Unfortunately, however, *JFK’s Forgotten Crisis* has serious limitations. Listing these may run somewhat contrary to the spirit of the enterprise, as this appears to be a book intended largely for a popular audience, and much less so for an academic one. It is structured as a general chronicle of the Kennedy administration, with a particular interest in South Asia, rather than as a tightly focused regional study. The book proceeds in a mostly chronological fashion, but with digressions. In addition to narrative depictions of events in the US-Indian relationship, readers are also treated to sizable sections on the Korean War, the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. The author’s analysis of lessons offered by the crisis in the fifth and final chapter suggests that the book is intended for use in policy school classrooms.

While this is the first book expressly dedicated to its topic, it is far from being the first to examine the US response to the Sino-Indian War. Critical pioneering work on the Indian-American relationship was undertaken during the 1990s by Robert J. McMahon, Andrew J. Rotter, and H. W. Brands.[2] None of these works appear in the bibliography. Major recent books by Paul McGarr and Srinath...
Raghavan are also absent.[3] Each of these works deals significantly with the 1962 war or the events preceding it. Some may, in fact, equal JFK’s Forgotten Crisis in their respective coverage of the war itself, were a curious reader to start counting words (I did not). If popular memory of the Sino-Indian conflict has faded, this should not be conflated with a lack of attention from other students of history.

The titles mentioned above retain their value because they make extensive use of primary and archival sources: documents published in the Foreign Relations of the United States series, and the records available in College Park and Boston. Declassified audio recordings of the Kennedy White House are another potential gold mine. These sources make, at most, a cameo appearance in JFK’s Forgotten Crisis and are substantially overshadowed by the author’s overwhelming use of published memoirs and a select group of secondary works. This is a lost opportunity: patient consultation of the records available within Record Group 59 at College Park could have introduced fundamentally new evidence on the day-to-day observations and actions of Americans in India and the United States, speaking both to policy choices and the war as they experienced it.

In the absence of serious consultation of the current scholarship, the broader significance of the war, beyond the Himalayan region, remains unclear. The author makes strong use of the extensive scholarship of John Garver, but here again, the research base could have been wider. An entire 2006 special issue of the Journal of Cold War Studies explored Tibet’s place in the early Cold War, shedding considerable light on its global significance. Of particular relevance here is Chen Jian’s exploration of the Tibet question as a factor in Sino-Indian and Sino-Soviet relations.[4] Both Chen and Lorenz Lüthi draw attention to the role of the Himalayan conflict in exacerbating the worsening divide between Moscow and Beijing. It does not suffice, at this point in time, to describe Soviet policy during the war as pro-Chinese (pp. 112, 120). Soviet equivocation during the initial flaring of the Tibet dispute had profoundly deepened Mao’s distrust of Khrushchev. Moscow’s support of the Chinese position during the war was lukewarm at best. Khrushchev postponed a sale of MiG-21 fighter jets to India on the eve of the Chinese offensive, but then reauthorized it in the following month. China reciprocated by accusing him of practicing “capitulationism” in the Caribbean.[5]

Did the Kennedy administration fathom just how brittle Sino-Soviet solidarity was that autumn? There is little evidence to suggest that it did. This myopia, in turn, calls one of the book’s key points into question. Riedel writes confidently that Kennedy would have committed US aircraft to defend India against China, had Mao decided to press his offensive (pp. 145-146). While I agree that Kennedy invested great importance in India and was loath to see it face further reverses, one should not consider this objective in isolation. At least a passing glance should be directed back toward the Caribbean, where Kennedy was concurrently seeking the removal of Soviet bomber aircraft from Cuba (a late addition to the deal he had struck with Khrushchev at the end of the missile crisis). Having just extricated himself from one nuclear crisis, Kennedy’s hypothetical willingness to plunge into another potential confrontation with Moscow is, at the least, questionable.[6] As Secretary of State Dean Rusk wrote, in a November 20 cable approved by Kennedy, “There are strong reasons why the United States should not appear to be the point of the spear in assisting India in this situation. The most impelling of these is that our role might force Moscow to support Peiping.”[7]

Overreliance on memoirs, a dearth of primary source research, and the aforementioned neglect of existing scholarship steer this book off course in several other significant ways. Eisenhower-era policy toward India, the subject of the first chapter, does not emerge clearly. There is a narrative...
recounting of Nehru’s December 1956 visit to Eisenhower’s Gettysburg farm, but this is followed by a section on the Korean War and not situated into a broader argument about the arc of the relationship in the preceding decade. Subsequently, Eisenhower is termed “ardently pro-Pakistan,” a description that does not do his evolving South Asia policy justice (p. 52). Understanding the Kennedy period requires grappling with the ambiguous record of his predecessor, particularly the thaw in US-Indian ties that occurred toward the end of the decade.

Even when studying the Kennedy administration, this reliance upon memoirs elevates some historical actors at the profound expense of others. Memoirists John Kenneth Galbraith and Chester Bowles emerge with relative clarity here. Less concerned with posterity, but at least equally influential, was an energetic, acerbic NSC staffer named Robert William Komer. Komer never found the time to get a memoir into print and his peers wrote little about him (although a 2013 biography by Frank Leith Jones has helped to fill this void). Here, he is mentioned incidentally on a couple of pages, and his critical importance to the US-Indian relationship is omitted entirely. Komer played an indispensable role in the autumn of 1962 and the following year, reconciling the lofty, often infeasible proposals made by Galbraith in New Delhi with domestic and geopolitical realities.[8] In another instance, the author relies upon Chester Bowles’s account when explaining the sidelining of US military aid to India after Kennedy’s death (p. 162). Bowles was often a trenchant critic of US policy, but he was far less adept at reading bureaucratic politics. He was also in India at the time.

Similarly, heavy use of Galbraith’s published journal perhaps leads to the book’s most curious assertion: that it fell to Jacqueline Kennedy to “get the relationship back on track in 1962,” after public Indo-American disagreements over Nehru’s December 1961 invasion of the Portuguese colonies of Goa, Daman, and Diu (p. 75). Whatever the positive effects of her visit to South Asia, treating it as a major event surely trivializes the array of problems confronting both governments in 1962.

There is inherent hazard in describing a significant event as “forgotten.” Doing so can easily obscure the extent to which it has already been explored, thereby limiting an author’s opportunity to make a new and distinct contribution to our shared historical knowledge. That said, Riedel is surely right to note that the choices made on both sides of the world in the dangerous autumn of 1962 remain consequential to this day. Contemplating the meager stakes, appalling human cost, and lasting bitterness associated with the Sino-Indian War, one can empathize with Kennedy’s bafflement.[9]

Notes


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