

**SHAPING NEW REALITIES:  
UNPACKING THE ROLE OF PERCEPTIONS AND MISPERCEPTIONS IN THE 1962  
SINO-INDIA WAR**

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The craft of nation building is often tasked with the frictions of territorial conflicts. To establish the legitimacy of a nation, control over its borders becomes rather crucial. The 1962 war between India and China is one such example of territorial conflict that shaped Indo-Sino relations. Much of International Relations (IR) scholarship has examined the role of socio-political and economic developments—such as the role of political leaders, civil-military relations, and domestic actors—as the primary causes of the war. Stemming from political psychology, this paper takes a rather unconventional approach in arguing that the key causes of the war were shaped by the perceptions and misperceptions held by the states about each other and themselves. Through a theoretical analysis of historic texts on Indo-Sino relations, the Tibet issue, and domestic actors, the paper brings to spotlight concepts of ‘uncertainty’, ‘misperceptions’, and ‘unpredictability’ in shaping up the war.

**INTRODUCTION**

At the heart of Sino-Indian relations lies the question of territorial disputes. Marked by the memories of 1962, academic spotlight on India and China has extensively engaged in trying to unpack the causes that made this war inevitable. Much of the scholarship holds the notion that socio-political and economic developments such as the role of political leaders, civil-military relations, as well as domestic actors were the causal factors underpinning the war. It is this notion that this paper seeks to puncture. By rooting its analysis in political psychology, this paper shifts the focus to how developments in Indo-China were ‘perceived’ and argues that the key causes of the 1962 war were a result of the perceptions and misperceptions that the states held about each other and themselves. To argue so, the paper has been divided into three broad sections. First, by analysing the historical roots of India and China, it will highlight the role of their colonial past in resulting in misperceptions about the other. Second, by focusing on the Tibet issue, it will bring out the role of unpredictability and uncertainty about the other’s actions as being the breeding ground for misperceptions that make war inevitable. Lastly, the paper will conclude by analysing the role of domestic actors in shaping as well as being influenced by such misperceptions, resulting in actions that shaped new realities which ultimately lead to the outbreak of war.

**I. POST-IMPERIAL IDEOLOGIES AND VICTIMHOOD: MISPERCEPTIONS DUE TO COLONIALISM**

The imperative step to understand the war of 1962 is to trace it to its past. Marked by the experiences of colonialism, both nations had memories of humiliation and sufferings of imperial rule. While India stepped into the international order with a crippled

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political and economic system, the Chinese echoed these sentiments and considered themselves to be out of the Japan's "bainian gouchi" (century of torture) (Miller 2009, 216). Manjhari Miller, in *Recollecting Empire*, argues that the implications of such memories of the colonial past give rise to Post-Imperial Ideologies (PIIs) whose characteristics are two-fold. The first level is the perception of the self. On entering the international order, exhibiting striking scars of the colonial past, both India and China attached notions of victimhood to themselves. Nehru argued that there was an urgency in carving out ways for "relating as equals to the richer powers," and in a similar vein, multiple Chinese accounts emphasised on their "consciousness of suffering" as being the binding glue that brings them together (Miller 2009, 225). The immediate result of this self-victimisation was the increased focus on territory. As post-colonial states, India and China faced territorial loss, leading to actions after the independence that aimed at either preserving newly carved territories, or maximising the territorial reach. Such actions were further accentuated by the template of the Westphalian State which prescribed sovereignty and bounded territory as being the key components of any modern state (Guang 2004, 408). Mirroring this template, both the states could be seen to affirm their sense national-identity by tightening the grip on their territories. Several accounts of the PRC from the 1960s reflect such a post-imperial ideology by insisting on the role of statehood and bounded territory as being the marker of its national identity (Guang 2004, 408).

The second implication of the memories of the colonial past can be conceptualised at the level of the (mis)perception of the 'other'. Brewing from the victimisation of the self, post-imperial ideologies target the existence of any 'other' as a threat to its existence. Such misperceptions are rooted in a 'worst-case analysis' framework (Posen 1993, 29). This framework suggests the identification of the other in terms of the worst possible offence, depending on their capabilities of military strength, political and economic prowess. The implementation of such a framework can be seen in developments much earlier than the 1960s. John Garver, in his analyses of the 1962 war, echoes this framework by highlighting the misperception by China of the 1951 Indo-US agreement. Despite being just a "mutual defence assistance" that transferred military supplies to India, China misperceived the agreement in terms of the worst-case analysis and painted it as a proof for India's alliance with the US (Garver 2004, 17). Such misperceptions, rooted in the worst-case possible framework continued to increase the misperception of India as being the 'threat'— and thus, became the foundational reason that spiralled into the ultimate misperception in 1962— wherein China misperceived India's mere intransigence on the border issue as being a threat to its very identity and existence, resulting in the launch of an attack.

While memories and information about the past play an integral role in shaping perceptions and forming new realities, it is also often the case that the lack of information about other states causes friction, resulting in misperception of the other as a threat and making war inevitable. The Tibet issue is a stellar example of how misperceptions can be formed due to the lack of information.

## II. THE CASE OF TIBET: MISPERCEPTIONS DUE TO LACK OF INFORMATION

Published in the 1990s, Chinese Studies of the 1962 war argue that the root cause of China's attack can be traced back to the issue of Tibet and India's stance vis-à-vis the Chinese occupation of it (Garver 2006, 89). India's approach to Tibet was rather complex and unclear. On the one hand, it offered a helping hand to China's efforts in establishing control. By refusing to sponsor a Tibetan plea to the United Nations in 1950, instead persuading the Dalai Lama to negotiate with the Chinese government and even officially recognising Chinese control, it painted a picture of allegiance and commitment to China (Garver 2006, 89). On the other hand, India also covertly supplied arms to the Tibet government, protested against Beijing's occupation, and upheld the rights of Indians in Tibet such as those on telecommunication and trading missions (Garver 2006, 91). During the Lhasa uprising in 1959, despite the insistence of Chinese officials that India refrain intervening in the region, India did not wash its hands from the matter and was even actively engaged in supporting so-called "anti-Chinese activities"—including granting asylum to the Dalai Lama and thousands of other Tibetans seeking refuge, permitting public and critical commentary about the Tibet issue within the Indian parliament, and refusing to quash negative coverage of China by Indian media (Garver 2006, 89).

It is imperative to note that, while India's initial support for the Chinese government's actions was rooted in the assumption that it would eventually respect Tibetan autonomy, India's inconsistent actions resulted in a general lack of clarity and misrepresentations regarding what India really stood for. It is this misinformation and lack of clarity over India's position that resulted in the misperception that India was a threat to China. Janice Stein, in *Threat Perception in International Relations*, employs the concept of 'signals' to describe the role of clarity (or the lack thereof) in making states go to war (Stein 2013, 2). Her concept suggests that, when actions are undertaken using information that is unclear (or, in this case, inconsistent), they act as incomplete signals that can be (mis)perceived as a threat by the agent receiving the information because incomplete information constitutes within itself every possibility—even that of an attack (Stein 2013, 4). In the case of the Sino-India dispute, India's lack of clarity was misperceived as being a 'signal' of India's intention to overpower China. The penultimate result of this misperceived threat was the wrongful perception of India and its leaders (e.g., Nehru) as the "complete successors" of the British who aimed to colonise or control Tibet (Garver 2006, 88). This misperception was bolstered by the implementation of the Forward Policy, which cemented the image of India as a threat to China's existence, resulting in further escalation under uncertainty.

At this juncture, it is important to consider one argument against the applicability of the framework of perceptions and misperceptions to determine the causes of war: that it conveniently strips agency from high-ranking officials and leaders who in fact have massive influence in shaping the developments leading up to war. While drawing on the role of leaders and their actions in shaping state behavior, Stein

describes domestic and bureaucratic actors as capable of producing pathologies that shape their problems in a way that advances their own interests (Stein 2013, 5). One such process of domestic actors shaping their problems in a self-serving way is ‘projection.’ As outlined by John Garver, projection is the process of transferring responsibility from one individual onto another, highlighting the difficulty and discomfort of dealing with the consequences of one’s actions (Garver 2006, 89). Puncturing the strength of the perception-misperception framework, the concept of ‘projection’ could thus be used to argue that the Tibet issue was a mere projection on India by Chinese leaders who had their own anxieties and fear regarding their inept control over Tibet, ultimately resulting in the construction of India as a threat to China that could have only been mitigated through war.

However, to establish the strength of the perception-misperception framework, especially *vis-à-vis* domestic actors, it is imperative to trace the actions of these domestic actors across both sides of the border—to assess whether the rationale that underpinned their decisions was a function of projection or misperceptions.

### III. THE ROLE OF DOMESTIC ACTORS: PROJECTION OR (MIS)PERCEPTION?

To understand the robustness of the perception-misperception framework in explaining the outbreak of war, the following two considerations are necessary. First is understanding that domestic actors (e.g., bureaucratic leaders, high-ranking officials) do not exist in a vacuum, but are in fact deeply embedded and influenced by their context. Second, due to this embeddedness of actors within their contexts, the actions of highly influential domestic actors (e.g., China’s Mao) are not isolated from misperceptions due to colonialism or a lack of information but are instead reflective of such phenomena. John Garver, while laying out the causes of the 1962 war, focuses on the tendency of Mao to ‘perceive’ his opponents (especially Nehru) as having malevolent intentions (Garver 2004, 11). Such an attribution, which incorrectly ascribes individuals’ actions to their perceived ‘intentions’—as opposed to the characteristics of the situations in which they are placed in—is a form of ‘fundamental attribution error’ culminating in misperception (Garver 2006, 88). Mao’s misperception of Nehru led to him falsely concluding that Nehru was seeking to seize or colonise Tibet was one of these fundamental attribution errors; Mao erroneously perceived Nehru’s critique of China’s occupation of Tibet as reflective of Nehru’s interest in the territory as opposed to the situation in which Nehru was placed.

The story of misperceptions can be seen playing out in India as well, specifically in terms of their (mis)calculations of Chinese actions. In one example of its fundamental attribution error, the Indian leadership did not ascribe actions of attack, and violence to China because it failed to attribute China’s actions to the situation in which it was placed. Rather, India attributed it to China’s shift leftward on the political spectrum and its weak grounds on the use of violence to believe that China would never retaliate against India’s forward policy (Niu 2005). Had this misperception and miscalculation of the fundamental attribution error not occurred, the “surprise at-

tack” that India ultimately faced on the 20th of October could have been predicted in early-September through a proper analysis of Peking’s behaviour and the situation at hand (Whiting 1985, 803-804).

## **V. CONCLUSION: NAVIGATING MISPERCEPTIONS AND CARVING PATHS OF COOPERATION**

To believe that states ‘perceive’ the developments around them in objective terms would be a false claim. By unpacking the key causes of the Sino-India war in 1962 under the framework of perception-misperceptions, this paper argued that the way states perceive themselves, and (mis)perceive others shapes narratives, stories, and realities that push for actions like that of the war in 1962. As rising powers, the cooperation of India and China is essential for regional as well as global stability. As this paper suggests, misperceptions that prevent cooperation have their roots deep in history that trace back to colonialism. While that implies that misperceptions may remain conspicuously present, it is imperative to carve out areas of reducing the anxieties it germinates through dialogue, policies and initiatives that are aimed at navigating our way out of the web of misperceptions.

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