

India's Envoy to China 1961–63

P K Banerjee's China Days

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Introduction

This essay is based on P K Banerjee's (1917–2003) book, *My Peking Memoirs of the Chinese Invasion of India* (Banerjee 1990), published 14 years after he retired from the Indian Foreign Service (IFS).¹ I have my own connection to the story as I reached Beijing in August 1963, spending five months under his leadership, till he left China in December 1963.²

In 1947–48, when the Ministry of External Affairs was under formation, around a score of young, well-connected people were taken into the IFS; some princes, a few armed forces officers, and others from diverse vocations. The choice was made by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, concurrently minister of external affairs till his death in June 1964. Direct IFS recruitment, through Union Public Service Commission examinations, also commenced in 1948. The rationale for the ad hoc appointments was that it brought in people with diverse experiences; most acquitted themselves well.³

P K Banerjee (PKB) joined the IFS in 1948, via that ad hoc track; he had studied at Calcutta (MA), and then in the US: law at New York (LLM) and Harvard (PhD). Possibly, PKB enjoyed political support that brought him to the Prime Minister's notice.⁴

In mid 1961, when tensions between China and India had escalated to a new high, New Delhi decided to withdraw Ambassador G Parthasarathy (1912–95) from Beijing; having been there since 1958, he was at the end of his term, but this was a political gesture. In diplomatic usage, such action signals displeasure. But unless the issue is resolved rapidly, it leaves the embassy bereft of senior leadership. In a deliberate move, PKB, Counsellor at the Indian Embassy in

¹ The book is difficult to locate, and out of print.

² I have written about my two Beijing assignments (the second one in 1970–72) in my 2016 memoir. *Diplomacy at the Cutting Edge*, Chapters 2 and 4. This book is now available for free download at:
<https://www.diplomacy.edu/resources/books/diplomacy-cutting-edge>.

³ For more elaboration, see Rao (2002).

⁴ A confidential source indicated that PKB had a "godfather;" that might have been Bidhan Chandra Roy, the first Chief Minister of West Bengal (1948–62), a freedom movement associate of Nehru. That might also partly explain MEA's resentment of PKB, and the latter's personal access to Nehru.

Tokyo since 1959 (also Chargé d'affaires for some time), was instructed to go direct to Beijing (via Hong Kong, the only air route available) and take charge. PKB had no experience of China. The ambassador in Tokyo protested at losing his deputy head of mission, but to no avail. PKB arrived in Beijing in July 1961. Ambassador G Parthasarathy departed about a fortnight later.

Even in the normal course, Indian diplomats, regardless of rank, make embassy-to-embassy transfers via New Delhi, to acquaint themselves with the new assignment requirements, read political and other reports, and consult officials in the territorial division and others, at business chambers, and academic experts.⁵ MEA provides guidance to the official, the more so with a major assignment. PKB was bitter that he was forced to go directly to China, and that he was not called to Delhi even once during the build-up to the 1962 war. He made his first visit to Delhi only in January 1963. PKB writes about his missed briefings, adding “but the tin gods of MEA had little understanding of these matters” (Banerjee, 1990: 10).

R K Nehru's July 1961 Visit

MEA Secretary General, R K Nehru (RKN) visited Beijing in July 1961, reaching the Chinese capital, just as PKB reached there. PKB wrote about airport arrival drama, as RKN felt he was not received at the proper level; he refused to travel in the Chinese official vehicle. He was also upset that only President Liu Shaoqi was initially slated to receive him. He later travelled to Shanghai in a Chinese special aircraft with Ambassador GP, to meet Premier Zhou En Lai and Foreign Minister Chen Yi, who were visiting Shanghai.

Former MEA Historical Division Expert A S. Bhasin's (2018) five-volume collection, *India-China Relations 1947–2000: A Documentary Study* has no Indian document on RKN's China visit. The only known outcome of those talks was that Ambassador GP and the Chinese Foreign Ministry's Director Asia Zhang Wenqing held detailed talks. The Bhasin collection contains the full text of the two rounds of discussions held in Shanghai, on 17 July, and a third and final

⁵ Thanks to an excellent method that dates to the 1950s, all officials are required to undertake a tour of Indian cities and regions that are connected with their assignment country, a fully-paid tour of 10 to 15 days. Rather few countries follow this excellent practice.

round held in Beijing, on 19 July 1961.⁶ These are China's transcripts, which Beijing gave to the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington DC.

Those were the last substantive India–China talks before the outbreak of the 1962 war. That official bilateral dialogue did not resume till Eric Gonsalves, then Secretary (East) in the Indian MEA, visited Beijing in January 1980.⁷

After RKN left China in late July 1961, there was an uproar in the Indian parliament over what the opposition saw as appeasement; RKN told the Hong Kong media (on the way to Delhi) that he had only gone to “inspect the Indian embassy;” he had met Chinese leaders as a courtesy and not to negotiate anything (Banerjee, 1990: 11–16, 23–24). PKB adds: this produced a “very strong protest” by Vice Foreign Minister Keng Piao over “untrue” statements by RKN; China said that RKN had first approached the Chinese Ambassador in Delhi, to make a visit to discuss matters of mutual interest; China invited him on that basis, adding that during his meetings, RKN did not make any claims over the disputed border and conveyed no warning. PKB added that he had no information on subsequent developments and depended on press reports to give a general reply to Chinese interlocutors over what had happened after RKN left China. The incident reflects the India–China distrust of that time.

Some Observations

Another element has received scant attention. Through the period from April 1961 to August 1963, the Indian Embassy in Beijing had no Chinese-speaking official, after Second Secretary S K Bhutani (who had learnt Chinese at Beijing), left the embassy in April 1961, ending his normal term. A K Das (1958 batch) and C V Ranganathan (1959 batch) completed language studies at Hong Kong in July–August 1962; Das was posted to MEA and went to Delhi in August 1962.⁸ Ranganathan was to move to Beijing in October 1962, but that was cancelled, and he also went

⁶ See: Bhasin (2018: 3545–67).

⁷ See: Eric Gonsalves Oral History, ICWA, New Delhi, 2015, <https://www.icwa.in/WriteReadData/RTF1984/1497424125.pdf>

⁸ A K Das (1958 batch), had started Chinese language studies in Beijing, but moved to Hong Kong in 1960 when it became difficult for Indian diplomats to attend language studies at Peking University (as the practice since the early 1950s).

to Delhi. Why neither was sent to the embassy in Beijing is a mystery. It seems PKB did not demand this from MEA, as was his right.

In May 1963 Foreign Secretary M J Desai met PKB during an airport transit halt at Hong Kong (PKB had specially come to Hong Kong to meet this high dignitary). The foreign secretary heard out PKB's complaint about a language-competent official, waved his hand at me, and instructed that I should go to Beijing as soon as my language course ended; he decreed that mine should be a short six to eight month assignment (meaning no home leave), while MEA located someone else. I received no instructions, either from MEA or the embassy setting a time schedule and reached Beijing in mid-August 1963, with First Secretary A K Damodaran and his family.⁹

I was at the Indian Embassy, Beijing, for two years, initially as a third secretary, promoted to second secretary some months later. The first five months were under PKB. As the junior diplomat for the first year (until Bhupat Oza, 1961 batch, reached Beijing in August 1964), I was not privy to all the political information, but at our daily morning meeting (long a custom at this embassy), many issues were discussed in open, collegial fashion. I often joined PKB at his bridge table at post-dinner sessions, at least once a week, when again many issues informally came up, especially when the foursome consisted of embassy colleagues. Many points made in PKB's book figured in those discussions. To me, the book's narrative rings true, in terms of what he understood, as India's man on the spot in China.

⁹ I travelled from Hong Kong, with First Secretary A K Damodaran and his family, including a six-year-old Ramu Damodaran who went on to join the Foreign Service, served as Private Secretary to Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao (1990–94). The Hong Kong–China border was crossed at Shenzhen, then a small, sleepy village, with passengers walking across a steel and wood “Baily” bridge over a small river, baggage trundled across in push carts. After a night in a dowdy hotel in Guangzhou, we took a two-day train journey to Beijing. The other travel option then was a 10-hour flight in a Soviet-built IL-14 aircraft that made three refueling stops.

Banerjee's Story: The Early Phase

[PKB does not specify exact dates of some meetings with Premier Zhou; each is numbered with a hashtag “#” sign].¹⁰

PKB met Premier Zhou for the first time at a dinner for Chen Yi, back from Laos conference in Geneva, and exchanged toasts with him. He was summoned to his first meeting [#1] with Zhou (probably in September–October 1961); a message came in the early evening that day, for a meeting after midnight.¹¹ Zhou told him that he wanted to use PKB for direct communication with Nehru; he praised Nehru in a 40-minute statement. He asked this be conveyed to Nehru and to avoid leaks to Indian newspapers (Banerjee, 1990: 25–26).

PKB met Chen Yi (date not mentioned) after India's Goa action of 18 December 1961,

Chen Yi listened to me with almost cold indifference ... said that China was a peace-loving country and did not believe in military action to solve international problems ... I included an account of Chen Yi's performance and pronouncements in my daily telegram. (Banerjee, 1990: 27)

PKB had his second post-midnight meeting with Zhou (#2) (date unclear, probably late December 1961). Zhou requested Nehru to stop the exchange of protest notes, saying

they were useless and counterproductive. If Mr Nehru would agree he would also instruct his foreign office to stop sending notes of protest. He seemed most serious and earnest ... He said that Mr Nehru was badly advised and influenced ... he (Nehru) did not know about protest notes sent ... I told him that his analysis was incorrect. (Banerjee, 1990: 28–29)

¹⁰ The book was probably written relying on personal notes and recollections. It does not have an index and has not been professionally edited.

¹¹ Premier Zhou's working hours were odd. He slept till the late morning and commenced meetings with foreign interlocutors in the late evening hours, often well past midnight.

Vice Premier and FM Chen Yi attended the Indian National Day reception on 26 January 1962 (p 33). Some months later Premier Zhou signed the Embassy condolence book at the demise of President Zakir Hussain, in May 1962.¹²

An Indian Initiative, June–July 1962

PKB received a top secret/personal telegram, without the sender's name (unusual in Indian practice; date not mentioned, probably early June 1962), asking him to meet Zhou and inform him that India would be prepared "to send a ministerial-level delegation to Peking to discuss, without preconditions, all bilateral problems and disputes." He asked to meet Zhou, but was informed the next day that Zhou was occupied; Chen Yi would receive him. "Chen Yi said that it was not acceptable unless the Govt. of India unequivocally and publicly withdrew all fictitious and false claims on Chinese territory. The present proposal was ... a trap and therefore not acceptable." PKB sent a telegram to Delhi based on that reply. He never received a response or heard further about this exchange. PKB wrote: "I had fairly clear idea as to who was behind this proposal and playing this game."¹³ Soon thereafter, the Soviet Deputy Chief of Mission called on PKB and asked about the "new proposal," and on hearing about Chen Yi's response, said "have patience and persevere." PKB adds: "I saw Soviet Union's wishful thinking and how they were influencing Mr Menon and company in New Delhi." MEA sent a diplomatic note on 26 July 1962 (through the Chinese Embassy in Delhi), indicating willingness to enter into further discussions, in an appropriate climate. PKB wrote: "I had difficulty in understanding what was in the mind of our policy-makers, in view of the repeated and clear rebuffs" (Banerjee, 1990: 51–52). Nothing further was heard about that effort.¹⁴

PKB's third meeting with Zhou took place 4 August 1962, at one hour's notice (#3). The Chinese Premier referred to PKB's discussions with Chen Yi and the Indian note of 26 July; PKB's assessment:

¹² This is as given in the PKB book; in fact President Zakir Hussain passed away in 1969. PKB evidently refers to some other event, which I could not trace.

¹³ This perhaps refers to pro-Soviet elements in the Indian establishment.

¹⁴ A S Bhasin's compilation includes two notes sent by India to China in July 1962, but no information is available on the genesis of this final, pre-Border War initiative.

they would agree to meet India and hold such talks but entirely on China's terms..India should withdraw from Chinese territory and not make further excuses ...

PKB replied to Zhou in terms of the 50,000 sq miles of area China hoped to get, and evoked the recent history of Indian gestures, including the San Francisco Peace Treaty, 1954 Tibet agreement, Bandung Conference of 1955. Zhou "looked upset." He raised the Tibet issue, adding "India had allowed the installation of modern devices to spy on China." (Banerjee, 1990: 53–54)

PKB decided not to send a telegram on this conversation

because there was every chance of a leakage, even with a top secret/highest security telegram. Instead I decided to send a top secret/personal letter to M J Desai (Foreign Secretary) with a request that it be shown to the PM by himself personally. I never received a reply, though Mr Nehru answered Zhou's allegations at a press conference in Colombo on 15 October 1962. (Banerjee, 1990: 54)

Very little is known about this particular initiative. It was the very last Indian effort to reach out to China before the outbreak of the 1962 Border War. It is likely that by July 1962 the die was cast; China had decided to hit hard across the Himalayan border. This is indirectly corroborated by the information that Henry Kissinger provides in *On China* (2011). Kissinger writes:

Chinese leaders were concerned that the US would use the looming Sino-Indian conflict to unleash Taiwan against the mainland.

Chinese negotiator at Warsaw, Ambassador Wang Bingnan was recalled from his vacation, sent back to Warsaw. At a special meeting with his US counterpart; Wang alleged that China had noted preparations in Taiwan for a landing in the Mainland. The US representative replied some days later, after checking with

Washington DC, that “under present circumstances” the US would not support a Nationalist offensive. Wang later noted in his memoirs that this “played a very big part” in the decision on the operations in the Himalayas. Kissinger adds: that no one in Washington asked why the Chinese had sought a special meeting: “It was a difference between a segmented and comprehensive approach to policy-making.” (Kissinger 2011: 159)

Border War

PKB writes (summary): 8 September 1962: A large number of Chinese troops crossed into NEFA for the first time. On 19 September, India expressed its readiness to hold talks, but affirmed also its determination to maintain territorial integrity of India. On 6 October, India again said that no talks were possible unless China at least withdrew forces in eastern sector to their side of the known international frontier (Banerjee, 1990: 62).

PKB was summoned on 24 October 1962 to meet Zhou after midnight (#4). “Atmosphere was definitely chilly” (p 64). Following is the summary of Zhou’s position as one can gather from PKB’s account. According to Zhou, an unfortunate and avoidable war was going on, killing innocent Chinese and Indian troops on an otherwise calm border. He had always tried to prevent such a deplorable situation. The Indian army had launched a massive and surprise attack on the Chinese territories and the Chinese could not just stand back and watch. Nehru, while on his way to Colombo very recently, confirmed in Madras, in reply to the press, that he had ordered the Indian military to “throw out the Chinese invaders.”

He then said that the conflict had to stop, it had to end! He had therefore written a letter to Mr Nehru with three proposals: (1) the two countries should immediately agree to respect ‘the line of actual control’, and their armed forces should disengage and withdraw 20 km from this line; (2) the Chinese troops in the eastern sector would withdraw north of the line of actual control; (3) the Prime Ministers of the two countries should meet to seek a friendly and peaceful

settlement. He added that, through me, he would like to appeal to Mr Nehru. He wanted Mr Nehru to respond in a positive and constructive manner.

PKB gave detailed reply, adding:

China had agreed in 1960, when Zhou had visited New Delhi, to maintain the status quo in the NEFA area. At this point he interrupted me sharply by saying that it was not true; he had never given such an assurance. (Banerjee, 1990: 65)

PKB adds: “I was very annoyed that MEA had not kept me informed about such important press statements and press conferences given by Mr Nehru concerning China and India”. (Banerjee, 1990: 65).

One night (possibly early November 1962), PKB asked MEA for authorisation to send back families and non-essential staff. When the embassy tried to send this cypher telegram (the customary communication method; the Indian Embassy had no radio link), the post office refused, on the grounds that the machinery was not working. PKB adds: “The Chinese Embassy also did not have any direct communication.”¹⁵ PKB writes: he had discussed with the embassies of Britain and Yugoslavia standby arrangements to send urgent and secret telegrams. That worked well until the Chinese ceasefire on 20 November 1962, when the embassy’s telegram links were restored (Banerjee, 1990: 68–69).

The War Ends

On 19 November 1962, PKB received a message that Premier Zhou wanted to see him at midnight (#5). Zhou talked non-stop for 45 minutes:

It was a monologue on the same old themes: his relationship with Mr Nehru, the glorious friendship with India, the fight against imperialism, the Bandung Conference, Asian African solidarity, the effects of the intrigues by imperialist

¹⁵ Comment: probably incorrect, as Chinese embassies have long relied on their own radio links.

countries to separate India and China for their own global interests, Mr Nehru being misled with wrong advice, and how Mr Nehru who had championed the cause of the nonaligned countries, allowed himself to be aligned with the imperialist powers and was receiving vast military aid and advice from them headed by the United States of America. He added that Mr Nehru should realize all this when there was still time to stop the war and negotiate. Zhou wanted me to send his remarks and appeal to Mr Nehru, urgently.

When PKB told Zhou that almost since 20th of October, his embassy had been cut off from telegraph facilities, Zhou looked at him and said: “you are misinformed and misguided, the telegraphic facilities have always been available to you at all times” (Banerjee, 1990: 72). PKB adds: “True enough; the telegram he drafted at dawn was accepted by the telegraph office.”

On 20 November, while PKB was at a Swedish party he received a phone call at 10 pm that Zhou wanted to meet him at half an hour past midnight (#6). PKB went in the company of First Secretary K B Row. Zhou conveyed to him China’s declaration of the unilateral ceasefire starting at midnight of the 20th, and his three-point proposal. When PKB asked for a copy of the document, (it was almost 2 am), Zhou said that the proposal had been announced to the press just before midnight. Zhou added that it was important for PKB to send to Nehru the text of his remarks (Banerjee, 1990: 74).

Banerjee’s Analysis

PKB’s then narrates his analysis of China’s motivation for the attack, and subsequent exchanges on the three-point proposal, and Colombo Proposals (Banerjee, 1990: 76–83).¹⁶

I have often thought, discussed, and read about the possible reasons for the Chinese attack on India and the subsequent withdrawal and ceasefire ... Mao’s

¹⁶ In this chapter PKB also writes of national day receptions, where from August 1962 till late 1963, speeches by Chinese dignitaries “would attack India without fail ... I suggested to the MEA that I should leave the reception as soon as such attacks were made on India and the Indian leaders ... but this was turned down on the grounds that politeness was part of Indian diplomacy ... I guess what my masters in New Delhi meant was that shamelessness was in their concept of diplomacy!” (p 70).

historical success proved that, unlike the Russian interpretation of Marx and Lenin, his revolution's success was not dependent on an industrially associated urban base; the masses from the backward and oppressed rural community brought about the glory of success ... he knew better than Krutchev (sic) and the Russian Communist party the future plans and military strategy to convert the world over to communism. (Banerjee, 1990: 77)

He further adds:

Attack and doctrinal subjugation were the first steps in Mao's master plan. If and when India fell, the other countries of Asia would, out of fear, follow the same pattern. India did not fall, but during the period of the India-China conflict, all the immediate neighbours of India were neutralised and drew closer to China. So far as India was concerned, Mao's first experiment was made when the Chinese forces invaded Tibet in October 1950, under the Sino Indian agreement, India relinquished her special treaty rights over Tibet, inherited from the British as the successor state, under international law. China declared Tibet an autonomy. Of course, the expression "autonomy" was interpreted differently in Peking and New Delhi. (Banerjee, 1990: 77)

PKB is critical that India not only looked on complacently, but went about canvassing at the United Nations and elsewhere in favour of China as a peace loving and friendly nation. Thus, Mao's first experiment to become the Asian Super Power was a success.

A few years later Mao decided to end China's "honeymoon" with India and gradually created a situation in which he could later make a major and massive military attack on India, destroying her prestige, influence, image, and politico-economic organisations. (Banerjee, 1990: 78)

Mao generally believed that the right time had come. With a sudden and surprise attack, the government of India would crash and approve Chinese communist

party in India would take power. Instead of the downfall of the Nehru government and the seizing of power by the communist party of India, the Chinese invasion united the people of India in an unprecedented manner. (Banerjee, 1990: 78–79)

PKB's analysis is written in hindsight, and since he was continually at foreign assignments after leaving China at the end of 1963, till he retired from the Foreign Service in 1976, he had no exposure to official thinking on China. Clearly, his analysis is conditioned by his own experiences in Beijing in 1960–63. The notion that Mao was motivated by an expectation that Indian communists might seize power after the 1962 war is not supported by any other source or supporting information.

Banerjee's Visit to Delhi

The foreign secretary instructed PKB to come to Delhi for the visit by Sri Lanka Prime Minister, S Bandaranaike.¹⁷ On 7 January 1963, just before his departure for Delhi, PKB was asked to meet Premier Zhou "alone at midnight" (#7).

He was in a pensive mood and somewhat tired, and said that as I was soon to return to New Delhi for consultations, he would like me to carry his very personal and verbal message only for Mr Nehru's ears. He continued that war never solved any problems but only created new ones. The recent conflict has brought loss and tragedy to so many families. China stood firmly behind the unilateral declaration of 20 November 1962 and accepted the Colombo proposals. Both were important. But more positive steps were urgently required besides public declarations and political statements. Mr Nehru, a man of high philosophy and great vision, and he

¹⁷ Sri Lanka had taken the lead with five other non-aligned countries (the six: Burma (now Myanmar), Cambodia, Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was called), Ghana, Indonesia and the United Arab Republic); they met in Colombo, 10–12 December 1962; India went on to accept these in toto, while China voiced two "reservations;" on 12 January India rejected the two "reservations" that Beijing voiced to the Colombo Proposals. About a year later Beijing quietly dropped one of the two reservation, but by then these proposals had become irrelevant, to what froze into a prolonged India-China impasse. Today the Colombo Proposals are a forgotten footnote in history.

See <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/the-colombo--compromise-/860792/2> and <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/11946>. The full text of the Colombo Proposals: <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/int-lm2&div=27&id=&page=>

had known each other personally over a period of many years (sic). He understood Mr Nehru's current political predicaments but Mr Nehru should try and understand his position as well. Mr Nehru should help a hand extended in friendship and corporation. In order to do this, he suggested two steps for Mr Nehru's consideration: (1) for the next 3 months, Mr Nehru and he would stop making negative statements about each other's country although this may not stop others from making statements of counter-productive nature. (2) Mr Nehru and he should meet as soon as possible with only a small entourage, away from the press and publicity, in an agreed place, in order to exchange ideas for an agreed and joint action to defuse the current situation. This meeting in total privacy should last no longer than two days. (3) After this meeting, which would further ensure in every way the strengthening of the cease-fire line, the two governments would draw up a program where they could jointly cooperate in areas like trade, science, culture and technology. What was needed was a climate of trust and understanding. When the climate for mutual trust had been created, then the border disputes would be discussed, on a sector-to-sector basis, by the two countries. He requested me again to give this strictly private and personal message directly to Mr Nehru and on my return to Peking to bring him Mr Nehru's response. (Banerjee, 1990: 85–91)

When PKB reached Hong Kong on way to Delhi, he was surprised that the local media knew he was carrying a message.

The press, radio, and TV representatives wanted to know what the message was about, which I, naturally, refused to divulge. In New Delhi, many people, including MJ Desai, asked me about the message but I just said it was a message of "warm greetings." Of course, I conveyed to Mr Nehru the full message from PM Zhou, and my own views. At first (sic) he expressed no interest but after a few days, when I was alone with him he wanted to know more. In a footnote, PKB adds that when he returned to Beijing he found that the Chinese Foreign

Ministry had briefed the Reuter's correspondent about the message. (Banerjee, 1990: 86)

In Chapters 23 and 24 (Banerjee, 1990: 87–101), PKB recounts at length what happened in Delhi during that visit. He met Nehru at the airport ceremonials for the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka; who told him that he wanted to see him as soon as possible. He was called to meet the Prime Minister that afternoon (probably 9 January 1963). They discussed the Colombo proposals; Zhou's message was not discussed.

At that next meeting with Nehru, PKB gave his views on the Colombo proposals and said:

I told him the present Chinese leaders headed by Mao did not believe in peace but the Colombo proposals almost compelled them to give up war for some time to come. Mr Nehru, while smoking, was listening attentively. He said, "Excellent" and wanted me to go with him to his office in South block. In the car, he kept aloof and was mumbling to himself, "What went wrong, where did I go wrong?" During my stay in New Delhi, I was with Mr Nehru a number of times, and used to hear this type of monologue. I realized that the Chinese attack had hurt him in a devastating manner. He was a brilliant intellect which would cope with any situation (sic) that required the reason and logic, but the Chinese, the treachery had blacked out reason, logic, pragmatism and tolerance.

Prime Minister advised PKB to meet other Indian leaders, and he met several, including Jaiprakash Narayan; PKB also attended sessions of the conference of the Colombo Powers, besides meeting diplomats of the great powers (Banerjee, 1990: 93–98). PKB met Prime Minister 'every day, sometimes several times'. He was called to meet Prime Minister at his residence one evening (no date).

'He asked me about the message sent by Zhou Enlai. I repeated that Zhou Enlai had stressed that it was a personal message, which immediately after the meeting with Zhou, I had myself typed out so that no point might be missed ... I gave him

the one-page typed message, which I had carried constantly with me inside my wallet. He started reading it and, as he held the page, I thought he was not only reading it carefully but also going over it a few times. He then put down the paper on the table near him and seemed lost in thought. It was all so quiet and yet tense while he remained in deep thought. I was dying for a cigarette. He returned from his thoughts, looked at me and said that it was not possible since matters had gone too far. He added that during my stay I had met members after government and the opposition, press people, as well as ordinary citizens, and surely, I must've reached the same conclusion that no one in India would stand anymore the Chinese bluff and all nonsense. He briefly recalled his efforts to help China with goodwill and friendship, and his close association with Zhou Enlai, whose betrayal had led to fraudulent territorial claims by China and the invasion off India ... It was a melancholy monologue. I could feel his sense of desolation due to the betrayal and collapse of his vision of peace, friendship and coexistence with China. He stopped and looked sad and tired ... He looked at me and with a small smile said let us have some tea ... Mrs Gandhi came in ... After the tea was over Mrs. Gandhi got up to leave and asked me to drop by to see her. Mr Nehru was now more relaxed but soon he became somber again. He picked up the paper and looked at it for a few minutes almost as if he was examining it rather than reading it ... Mr Nehru asked me what game Zhou Enlai was playing. I told Mr Nehru that recently an Albanian diplomat, whom I knew well, told me in confidence that Zhou had in the Chinese Politburo expressed doubts and opposed the plan to launch the attack on India but had been overruled by Mao and other leaders. I did not know how credible his source was, but it was a fact that, in my view, it was chairman Mao who was playing his game, and Zhou Enlai probably only had a role ... He asked me if I had mentioned or shown the substance of Zhou Enlai's message to anyone. I said that I had not. He struck a match, and held the paper to the flames and burnt it over a large crystal ash-tray. He said that from the Indian side it would take more than a quarter of a century to return to any substantive negotiation, provided the Chinese refrained from another attack on India ... The

next day, as usual, I reported to MJ in general terms about Mr Nehru's discussion with me. (Banerjee, 1990: 99–100)

Return to Beijing

PKB returned to Beijing on 28 January 1963.

A few days later I received a message from Zhou Enlai and went to see him at the usual place and time, midnight (# 8). He asked whether I had given his verbal message to Mr Nehru personally and wanted to know the response. I told him briefly about the current atmosphere in India, and gave him an outline of Mr Nehru's reply, namely, that as a first step, China should, like India, except the Colombo proposals in toto. India had announced her acceptance on 27 January. After China's acceptance in toto and after the required implementation was completed by both countries, the second step would be to discuss other matters. Zhou Enlai was visibly excited, if not angry, and said he had done everything within his power and that India would be responsible for future stalemates and complications. He said that he would now write formally to Mr Nehru on the matter.

On 3 March, PKB received a message to meet Zhou Enlai (#9). "He said that as Mr Nehru had turned down his personal message, he would like to send a letter through me for Mr Nehru. He requested me to send it to Mr Nehru directly and urgently" (Banerjee, 1990: 111) Prime Minister's reply was given on 5 March (the two leaders repeated their positions on the Colombo proposals and related issues).

Final Days in Beijing

On 5 April, PKB met Zhou Enlai (#10). That was his last substantive meeting with the Chinese Premier. He describes the meeting as follows.

He appeared cold and tense. There was no trace of his good humor while at the Bandung cocktail party a week before. He said that he had read Mr Nehru's letter of the 5 March many times and the more he read it the more he was convinced that Mr Nehru had lost his sense of reality. The Colombo proposals were only recommendations for further discussions and negotiations. They were not meant to be means of mediation or arbitration. He added that Mr Nehru was practicing distortion and displaying contradictions. For example, Mr Nehru wrote in his letter that, as a positive response to the Colombo proposals, he had given up India's demand for the restoration of the 3 September 1962 status quo; at the same time he assured the Indian Parliament that in accepting the Colombo proposals, India was not giving up anything from the 8 September 1962 status quo claims. Which of these was true? ... Zhou added that Nehru's affirmations of peace impressed no one when he was in fact preparing for war, and then handed me a letter addressed to Mr Nehru. The letter, as well as his words, were fiery stuff. I told Zhou politely but firmly that China's misunderstanding of India had increased manyfold owing to the war. The allegations he had made to me and in his letter to Mr Nehru would be answered in due course but his harsh and unjust comments about Mr Nehru were without foundation and therefore unacceptable. I sent the letter immediately to New Delhi with the gist of Zhou's observations and my firm rebuttal. Within a few weeks, Mr Nehru replied to Zhou in equally fiery terms. (Banerjee, 1990: 119–20).

On 17 December 1963, Zhou Enlai received PKB for a farewell call (#11) (he had earlier called on Foreign Minister Chen Yi; the latter quizzed PKB on India's state mourning at the assassination of President Kennedy) (Banerjee, 1990: 135–36).

PKB writes:

“He looked very tired ... He did not want to miss the opportunity of seeing me as he was soon leaving on a tour of African countries. He added that he was sorry to see me leave China. I thanked him for his kind and sympathetic attitude towards

me during almost three years ... (when PKB said that one of his regrets was that he had not been to any Chinese home)” Zhou said earnestly, “You have been to my residence many times, I’m your friend.” I thanked him for his warm and kind sentiments ... We got up and he came to the door to say goodbye and shook hands. He said that whenever I had time I should return on a visit as his personal guest. A perfect performance! He was a remarkable man!” (Banerjee, 1990: 136–37).¹⁸

After leaving Beijing, P K Banerji was conferred the Padma Shri in January 1964.¹⁹ He served as High Commissioner to Kenya in 1964–66; then a Latin American post (1966–69), Ambassador to Thailand (1969–71), and Permanent Representative at Geneva (1971–73); he did not serve at MEA. He retired in 1976 and lived in New York and Kolkata. Besides this book, he wrote another, *Assignment Americas: Perspective of a Partnership in Values* (Bibhasa, Kolkata 2002). He passed away in 2003.

Banerjee’s Book: An Assessment

PKB’s under-studied book gives unique insight into the post-August 1961 events leading to the October 1962 India–China War, and its immediate aftermath. The central point: for reasons unknown, PKB was used by China as the primary channel for communication with New Delhi, in a way that has no precedent in modern bilateral diplomacy. We see this through three key elements: First, China’s efforts, always on its own terms, to seemingly attempt to avoid an outbreak of war. But China simply did not understand the mood in India, including New Delhi’s reaction to its efforts on many fronts, including China’s cultivation of Pakistan, commencing 1961. Were the moves towards India aimed at lulling New Delhi into complacency? Second, China’s blunt rejection of India’s effort in May–June 1962 to send a special emissary to Beijing. Some narratives suggest that around April 1962, India had decided to confront China’s new military posts on the Himalayan frontier, and on 2 May 1962, Pandit Nehru had spoken of a

¹⁸ My account of that meeting is in *Diplomacy at the Cutting Edge*, pp 64–65. First Secretary A K Damodaran (1994) also wrote about it.

¹⁹ This ranks fourth in India’s national honours. An award, even of this kind, was rare for a serving official in those times.

“forward” military policy. Was the emissary proposal at Soviet prompting? Third, barely three months after hostilities ended in the high Himalayas, Zhou’s abortive move, in January 1963, to start a reconciliation process. This has received little attention.

Premier Zhou Enlai dominated China’s foreign affairs.²⁰ He developed via PKB a communication channel that operated from September 1961 to April 1963. This has no parallel in Indian diplomatic history. PKB’s counterpart, Chinese Charge d’Affaires in New Delhi, was never received by Nehru, and perhaps rarely met the Indian foreign secretary. Is it possible that the fact of Premier Zhou using PKB to convey Chinese views might have engendered doubt at home that he might not be reliable? No Indian archival document of those years, 1961–63, has been opened.²¹

One may conclude tentatively that there might have been doubt over the complete veracity of his reports; he went alone to some of his meetings with Zhou.²² Yet, as PKBs account of his visit to Delhi in January 1963 shows, he enjoyed comfortable access to Prime Minister Nehru. PKB does not speak of personal friction with the MEA hierarchy. Bits of indirect information suggest that he was held in low esteem, and he reciprocated that sentiment. PKB often spoke to us at the Embassy of Delhi’s pro-Soviet lobby.

Premier Zhou evidently expected his statements of appeasement, right up to the outbreak of the 1962 war, to resonate in Delhi. But there were no matching actions. For instance, MEA Secretary General R K Nehru’s June 1961 visit to Beijing was abortive. Nor was there any response to India’s final effort at dialogue in June–July 1962, literally on eve of the outbreak of war.

Any envoy in such a situation might have faced similar problems at home. During fraught bilateral relations, ambassadors walk a tightrope; diplomats face both ways, as noted scholar

²⁰ In 1949, Marshal Chen Yi was appointed Mayor of Shanghai—this is a misleading rank for those accustomed to Western governance systems. In China, the mayor of the FIVE leading cities that are treated as provinces, holds the rank of Province Governor—that is, highest authority in his assigned territory; in 1954 Chen Yi also received the additional rank of Vice Premier. As we see from PKB’s book, Chen Yi was always blunt and hawkish in his dealings with him, a contrast to Premier Zhou.

²¹ A S Bhasin’s important compilation of archival documents, has no material covering these years.

²² PKB also mentions that at some meetings with the Chinese Premier he was asked to come by himself.

Richard Faber has written. In times of bilateral tension, stories spread easily in the home capital that one's envoy is 'soft' in dealing with the country of assignment. We know instances where an Indian envoy has deliberately opted to act tough, to strengthen credibility at home. Was that a viable option for PKB? Perhaps, he was not harsh or blunt enough in responding to Premier Zhou's overtures, but was that expected of him?

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