Praise for the Book

'This is a thriller-like account of two battles at Nathu La and Cho La between India and China in 1967 that did not get the pride of place in military history and public memory that they deserved. They occurred at a particularly difficult time for India.

'This engagingly written page-turner of a book tells the forgotten story of the 1967 battles of Nathu La and Cho La and brave soldiers like Sagat Singh, Bishan Singh and P. S. Dagar who banished the ghosts of the 1962 defeat and of diplomats and spies engaging in a tit-for-tat intrigue.

'India didn't gain new territory in 1967 and lost 100 lives. But it gained something far more important – its self-esteem and an era of peace. This is a valuable addition to the still thin genre of military historiography in India.'

Shekhar Gupta, chairman and editor-in-chief, *Print*

'*Watershed 1967* is an exhilarating narrative of a set of high-altitude battles at Nathu La and Cho La in September 1967 that marked the revival of India's military confidence in its dealings with China. Meticulously researched amidst the backdrop of the 1965 India–Pakistan conflict and rising tensions between India and China over the status of Sikkim. Probal DasGupta is a gifted storyteller with a real feel for battle.'

Air Vice Marshal Arjun Subramaniam (retd),
author of *India's Wars: A Military History, 1947–1971*

'Major DasGupta sheds valuable light on some of the lesser-known military interactions between India and China – his focus being the 1967 battles of Cho La and Nathu La where the tricolor prevailed. Written with distinctive verve this book braids battle narratives with

international politics, intrigue and insightful authorial reflections. A must-read for the specialist and the lay person alike.'

Commodore C. Uday Bhaskar (retd), director, Society for Policy Studies

'India vis-a-vis China must not be seen through the prism of the 1962 war as a sore reminder. The bravery of Cho La and Nathu La of 1967, provided the impetus and strength for recent eye-ball confrontations at DBO, Demchock, Chumar and Doklam. Probal DasGupta's *Watershed 1967* is that breath of fresh air which recounts Indian victories, boosts self-esteem and confidence, and lays a new narrative for the 21st century. A welcome addition to the discourse.'

Lieutenant General Rakesh Sharma (retd), former adjutant general, Indian army

'A book that should forever emblazon 1967's victory against China in India's public consciousness as much as 1962's defeat. A wonderful account of an operation that has never received its due, filled with delectable granularity, both in the political offices and the battlefield.'

Shiv Aroor, co-author of *India's Most Fearless: True Stories of Modern Military Heroes*

'Sheds light on little-known facts . . . Vignettes of intrigue playing out like moves on a chessboard . . . make Probal DasGupta's book critical for anyone following the India–China competition.'

Husain Haqqani, former Pakistan ambassador to the US and author of *India vs Pakistan: Why Can't We Just Be Friends?*

Watershed 1967

Watershed 1967

India's Forgotten Victory Over China

Probal DasGupta

juggernaut

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For Baba,
who will inspire me forever

Contents

Introduction

India and China are neighbours with much in common. Big land masses, crowded cities, large populations. Between the two countries lives one-third of the human population on earth, histories of many hundreds of years of invasions, brutal oppressions and famines and, of course, Buddhism and the Dalai Lama. They share crucial differences too: ideological distinctions being one (one is a communist dictatorship and another a democracy) and the choice of friends being the other (Pakistan is an all-weather friend to one and foe to the other). Much of their history of the last sixty years though centres around the bitter war the two countries fought in the Himalayas.

The 1962 war, which China won, is a significant event in the relationship and a sore memory for Indians. The dismal defeat dealt a cruel blow to the pride of a grand old civilization and a newly independent country born

fifteen years earlier. The impact of that defeat still lingers in Indian thinking about the dangers of antagonizing China.

But unremembered by most people is an equally significant event that took place five years after the 1962 war. India and China fought again in 1967, on two Himalayan passes called Cho La and Nathu La at the China–Sikkim border. This book traces the story of that incredible but forgotten victory over China.

The narrative in this book has been divided into three parts. The story begins in Part 1 three years after the India–China war of 1962. India was still recovering from the damaged morale of its political and military leadership. After the defeat of 1962, India began to acquire weapons and equipment, besides raising multiple army divisions to strengthen its defences. Such rapid developments caught the attention of Pakistani leaders who believed that a better armed and prepared India would be difficult to overwhelm in the future. An alliance against India was entered into between Pakistan and China which suited both countries. For Pakistan, the unresolved issue of Kashmir was a motivation to corner India when it was down, while for China a natural ally such as Pakistan, given the historic India–Pakistan animosity, could be used to fight a convenient proxy war to further establish its dominance over India. In 1965, two vulnerable points – Kashmir in the north and Sikkim

in the east – presented an opportunity for China and Pakistan to stretch India's military deployment on both flanks and demolish its defence capabilities. On both fronts there existed narrow geographical corridors whose capture could end up dismembering India.

The book begins with a story of international intrigue and the resultant devious plan hatched by Pakistan and China to attack India in 1965. This well-crafted plan was shrewdly shared with a prominent Kashmiri politician to try to acquire local support for a Pakistani attack against India. Around the same time, American spies and the CIA, aware about the turn of events, were gazing at a potential war involving the three countries – India, China and Pakistan.

War finally broke out between India and Pakistan in August 1965. Pakistan used a combination of covert and conventional approaches to wage war in Kashmir and then in Punjab, while China threatened India's protectorate state of Sikkim, then under the control of monarchy. The plan was to capture Kashmir and occupy Sikkim and then force India to the negotiating table for a barter exchange involving the two states. But India's successful performance in the 1965 war against Pakistan foiled the Sino-Pakistani plans. China's threat on the eastern border, though, remained unresolved. The war ended with India acquiring an edge over Pakistan but

also resulted in a permanent Chinese presence on the Sikkim border. The stage was set for India and China to face off in Sikkim.

The second part of the book traces the events from the end of the 1965 war and leads into the historic battles of 1967. Sikkim's royals wanted Sikkim to be an independent state, much to the annoyance of the government in New Delhi. And China tried constantly to bully and browbeat India. There were frequent disputes between New Delhi and Peking (now Beijing) in this period on issues such as Bhutan's territory of Doklam and China's support to insurgency movements in India, including the new Naxal movement inside Bengal. These were years when things were constantly on the boil: there were frequent skirmishes on the Sikkim–China border, and even the arrest of two Indian diplomats in Peking and the tit-for-tat mistreatment of Chinese diplomats in New Delhi. Atal Bihari Vajpayee even led a flock of sheep to the gates of the Chinese embassy in Delhi to protest Peking's belligerence.

Relations were on a slippery slope. The armies of the two countries clashed in Nathu La in September 1967 over the laying of a barbed wire fence to mark the Sikkim–China border. The battle lasted a few days. Under the leadership of Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, young officers and soldiers of the Indian army defeated the Chinese at Nathu La. Many lives were lost on both

sides but the Indians finally got their revenge against the Chinese for the humiliation of 1962. Embarrassed and shell-shocked, the Chinese engaged the Indians again fifteen days later in another battle at Cho La, in the same sector. Once again, Sagat's forces proved more than equal to the task. The Chinese were defeated again and this time, the psychological burden of being beaten in two successive battles within a month befell China.

The third part of the book explores the strategic aftermath of the victories at Nathu La and Cho La. The victories of 1967 and Sagat Singh's audacious decision at that time to occupy the border at Nathu La, ignoring the Chinese threat and even defying the orders of his superiors, played a decisive role in China not participating actively in the India–Pakistan war of 1971. The vulnerability of the Siliguri Corridor, the thin strip of land that links the north-eastern part of India to the rest of its land, and which China would have had easy access to had it won the battle of Nathu La, could not have been felt more than during the 1971 war. Had China had control over Nathu La it could have linked up with East Pakistani forces easily and severed India's eastern wing from the mainland. But the victories in the battles of 1967 prevented Chinese interference in the Siliguri Corridor in 1971 – something that saved India from certain disaster.

India's watershed victories are unrecognized turning points in history and helped shape India's approach to later conflicts with China. These battles determined the military template for India's aggressive performance in stand-offs such as in Sumdorong Chu in 1986 and Doklam in 2017. Fifty years after these battles, China and India have never fought a war again. There are many important reasons for this but the role of the 1967 battles in creating a template to grapple with military confrontation cannot be underestimated.

The twin victories at Cho La and Nathu La have only been covered in fragments through articles and papers. This book, based on extensive interviews with the army men who were present at the scene, captures the events truthfully and aims to fix this blind spot in history. This was personally important to me, being a former army officer myself.

Today, Nathu La is a bustling tourist attraction on the India–China border. Thousands of visitors flock the border where Indian and Chinese sentries stand opposite each other. The tales of the soldiers' sacrifices at these Himalayan heights to restore a nation's self-esteem and usher in an era of peace is unparalleled. It is the story of India's forgotten victory over China – the last time they fought.

Part 1

The Road to 1967

1

Secret Games: Spies, Soldiers and the Opening Gambit

It is the first day of October in the year 1967. Debi Prasad and his fellow Indian soldiers are engaged in a fierce battle with the Chinese at the Cho La pass on the Sikkim–China border. Letting out the war cry 'Jai Maa Kali, Ayo Gorkhali', the young Gorkha turns into a raging tiger, and rushes towards the well-armed Chinese soldiers. In a flash, he draws out the deadly khukri from the scabbard, raises it to the sky and brings it down on the Chinese light machine gunner before his forefinger can pull the trigger.

Debi moves like lightning as he swipes, swings and slashes, letting the traditional shiny dagger heave and strike in a fearsome display of hand-to-hand combat. He scythes through the Chinese forward line of defence, lopping off five heads as

soldiers fall around him. The collective might of the enemy front line is not enough to stop this short, sturdy young man. By the time a desperate bullet knocks him dead, Debi Prasad has destroyed the much-vaunted Chinese defensive wall.

Debi's khukri continues to haunt the Chinese. His heroics steered India towards certain victory, an outcome that would change Indo-China relations forever.

However, the seeds of India's battles with China in 1967 had been sown two years earlier, in 1965, when signs of a sinister design had begun to show, far, far away.

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Jeddah, the ancient port city in Saudi Arabia, off the Red Sea, is a window to the trading world and a staging post for pilgrims. Since the seventh century CE, it has been a major port for Indian Ocean trade routes. The setting of the *Arabian Nights*, Jeddah is a land of mysteries and secrets.

Sometime in early 1965, Duane Ramsdell Clarridge flew into Jeddah from Washington, DC to meet a man who had promised him a dangerous secret.[1] Duane knew it could be a wild goose chase. He was no stranger to disappointments. Yet there he was on this unpredictable trail.

While waiting for his source in the old city, Duane hoped it would be worth the long flight. After all, it was the culmination of a pursuit that had begun a few years ago when he lived in India. When the source finally appeared and revealed the secret, Duane was left quaking in his boots. Little did he know that this would become a decisive point in history.

Born to a dentist father, Duane grew up in a staunch republican family[2] in Nashua, New Hampshire. A neighbour nicknamed him Dewey, after Thomas E. Dewey, the New York governor who ran for president against Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944.[3] Handsome and articulate, he attended Brown University and then the Columbia School of International and Public Affairs before joining the CIA in 1955[4] hoping for a chance to fight communists. Instead, he found himself posted in India where much of his time was spent socializing, playing polo in Delhi and cultivating new informants in Madras.[5]

Having developed a bulldog tenacity and sharp instincts when it came to gathering intelligence, Dewey had his eye on Sheikh Abdullah, a charismatic but controversial politician. The government in New Delhi, headed by Jawaharlal Nehru, viewed him as a political dissident, a Kashmiri rebel. Abdullah had become the prime minister of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in 1948.

In 1953 he was deposed and imprisoned without charges being brought against him. He was released briefly in 1958 but arrested again, this time on charges of being a Pakistani agent. When finally released on 8 April 1964, he was greeted by a throng of twenty-odd-thousand people, and that's when he had Dewey's full attention. He was rangy and statuesque with the magnetic appeal of a beloved community leader. He bared an unusually large set of teeth every time he smiled. He was warm and impulsive at the same time, the kind of source the CIA liked to cultivate. Upon his release from prison he left for Paris.[6] That's how, later that year, Dewey found himself walking down a dingy lane on the left bank in Paris which brought him to the nondescript hotel where Abdullah was staying.

'I am from the US government. I'd like to come and speak with you,' he said into the house phone at the reception by way of an introduction.[7] Soon, a nervous and tentative Dewey was rushing up the rickety hotel stairs to finally come face to face with Abdullah. Unfortunately, the meeting turned out to be a damp squib and ended with Abdullah promising to meet again with crucial information, this time in Jeddah.

Dewey was certain this wasn't a fruitless pursuit, for he had sensed Abdullah was no ordinary fellow – he was likely in on a huge international secret.

Abdullah had been touring several countries after his release and his remarks on Kashmir had stirred up a controversy. An article he had written in an American magazine advocating self-determination for Kashmir had attracted in equal measure approval from Pakistan and criticism from India. His actions had put him on the radars of the Chinese and Pakistani authorities. It was in their interest to cultivate a dissident Kashmiri leader with mass support whom India was wary of.

A few months after meeting Dewey in Paris, Abdullah was in Algiers in February 1965 to attend the second Asian African Conference where he met the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai.[8] Zhou, an otherwise discreet politician, revealed a plan that Pakistan and China were hatching in concert. While he was on Haj around the same time that year, Pakistani emissaries approached him and confirmed the news. They sought his response to a potential Pakistani and Chinese stratagem of attacking India. Abdullah's reaction was said to be favourable,[9] which would have assured the Pakistani leadership that military action taken by its army against India in Kashmir would be supported by the local population.

The news Dewey brought back to the CIA headquarters from Jeddah was sensational: Pakistan was going to attack Kashmir in the late summer of 1965.[10] The details he provided were exhaustive: Pakistani guerrilla units would

quietly infiltrate Kashmir and instigate a popular uprising. Kashmir would burn and while the Indian authorities were occupied there, regular Pakistani troops would launch a full-blown conventional attack. The aim was to cut off Kashmir from the rest of India. After occupying the state, Pakistan would force India to give up Kashmir. Supporting them militarily in this plan was China.

While the news made Dewey's hair stand on end, the response from Langley was anticlimactic. The young, ambitious spy's excitement was quelled by a seemingly routine, phlegmatic indifference. Sure as he was about his information, he was still relatively new in the headquarters and intimidated by the chain of command.[11] The CIA had suspected that a military arrangement was evolving between China and Pakistan, which could include a plan to attack India. Dewey's information confirmed this and also revealed that a guerilla attack would precede the conventional war, which was news to the CIA.

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February mornings at the government-supported think tank Institute of Defence Analyses in Arlington, Virginia, were usually slow and relaxed. However, one Thursday morning in February 1965 the institute was unusually busy, with a motley group of scholars, analysts