

Jawaharlal Nehru sought US assistance during 1962 Indo-China war: Book

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Washington: Former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru had sought American assistance and wrote to the then US president John F Kennedy to provide India jet fighters to stem the Chinese tide of aggression during the 1962 Sino-India war, according to a new book.

The main objective of Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People's Republic of China, to attack India in 1962 was to "humiliate" Nehru who was emerging as a leader of the third world, it said.

"India's implementation of the Forward Policy served as a major provocation to China in September 1962," Bruce Riedel, a former CIA official, wrote the book titled 'JFK's Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA and the Sino-Indian War'.

"Mao's focus was on Nehru, but a defeat of India would also be a setback for two of Mao's enemies: (Nikita) Khrushchev and Kennedy," Riedel wrote.

As India was losing its territory to China fast and suffering heavy casualty, Nehru in a letter to Kennedy in November 1962 said India needed "air transport and jet fighters to stem the Chinese tide of aggression."

"A lot more effort, both from us and from our friends will be required."

Nehru wrote another letter to Kennedy in quick succession, Riedel writes.

This letter written by Nehru in a state of panicky was hand delivered by the then Indian Ambassador to the US BK Nehru to Kennedy on November 19.

"Nehru was thus asking Kennedy to join the war against China by partnering in an air war to defeat the PLA (Peoples Liberation Army of China). It was a momentous request that the Indian Prime Minister was making. Just a decade after American forces had reached a ceasefire with the Chinese Community Forces in Korea, India was asking JFK to join a new war against Community China," Riedel wrote in his book.

Ahead of Nehru's letter, the then US Ambassador to India Galbraith sent a telegram to the White House giving the President an advance notice that such a request was coming from Nehru.

In the letter, Nehru asked for 12 squadrons of US air forces, Riedel told the Washington audience during the preview of the book at an event organised by the Brookings Institute, a top American think-tank, yesterday.

"A minimum of 12 squadrons of supersonic all weather fighters are essential. We have no modern radar cover in the country. The United States Air Force personnel will have to man these fighters and radar installations while our personnel are being trained," Nehru wrote in the letter, which has been quoted by Riedel in the book.

In addition, Nehru also requested "two squadron of B-47 Bombers" to strike in Tibet, the author says quoting the letter.

In the letter, Nehru assured Kennedy that these bombers would not be used against Pakistan, but only for "resistance against the Chinese".

The stakes were "not merely the survival of India", Nehru told Kennedy "but the survival of free and independent

Governments in the whole of this subcontinent or in Asia".

Riedel said in the second letter Nehru was, in fact, asking Kennedy for some 350 combat aircraft and crews, 12 squadrons of fighter aircraft and crews. 12 squadron of fighter aircraft with 24 jets in each and two bomber squadrons.

"At least 10,000 personnel would be needed to staff and operate jets, provide radar support and conduct logistical support for the operation," Riedel said, adding this was a substantial forces, large enough to make it a numbered air force in the American order of battle.

The British Prime Minister received a similar letter from Nehru, the American scholar writes.

Referring to the subsequent instructions passed by Kennedy to his administration, Riedel described them as the one that of a president preparing for war.

But before the US would take further steps, China announced unilateral ceasefire.

After making major advances and being in a strong position to annex entire of North East and reach as far as Kolkata, the Chinese leadership surprised the world by announcing a unilateral ceasefire fearing that both Britain and the United State were getting ready to provide material support to India in the war.

"Of course, we will never know what the specifics of American assistance to India would have been if the war continues," he wrote in the book set to be officially released in the first week of November.

"We can be reasonably certain that America, India and probably Great Britain would have been at war together with China," Riedel concludes.

The book also notes that Kennedy played a "decisive role" in "forestalling a Pakistani attack" on India, even as Islamabad then was clearly capable of initiating war with India and taking advantage of the situation - New Delhi's vulnerability.

Nehru, Riedel argues, ignored the advice of his general on the scene and instead listened to the top brass in New Delhi.

"This was a serious mistake. Having surrounded himself in New Delhi with 'courtiers' who told him 'only what his top military advisors believed he wished to hear', Nehru took their bad advice," he wrote.

Riedel writes that Mao probably finalised the decision to go to war in a meeting in Beijing on October 6, 1962 with his senior generals. Mao told them that China had defeated Chiang Kai-Shek and the Nationalists Imperial Japan, and the United States in Korea, he wrote.

Responding to a question, at the Brookings panel discussion, the former CIA official said, "The People's Liberation Army was ordered to impose a 'fierce and painful' blow on India and expel India from the territory of China claimed in Kashmir west of the Johnson Line and in NEFA South of McMahon Line."

According to Riedel, on October 8 the Chinese Foreign Minister informed the Soviet Ambassador in Beijing that a massive attack by Beijing was eminent.

"Because the Soviets were engaged in their own high-stakes gamble in Cuba, Moscow did not discourage the Chinese, despite Khrushchev's close relationship with Nehru," he said in the book.

"At the same time defeating India would answer the question Kennedy had raised in his 1959 speech in the Senate about which country, democratic India or communist China, was poised to win the race for great power status in Asia.

Â For Mao the conflict with India provided a surrogate for his rivalry with Moscow and with Washington," Riedel wrote in his book.

"On October 28, 1962, the day before Nehru asked for American military help, the US Ambassador in Pakistan, Walter McConaughy met with the then Pakistani ruler Ayub Khan.

"The Ambassador urged him to send assurances to Nehru that Pakistan would not take advantage of India`s war with China," he wrote.

In response Khan proposed that "the Americans and Pakistanis work together to to seek the surrender of Indian territory just as Chinese were grabbing land".

This the US considered as "blackmail", Riedel said.

Galbraith immediately sent an "alarming telegram" to Washington and Karachi "asking for God?s sake that hey keep Kashmir out" of any American message to Pakistan, Riedel said in the book, adding that Washington sided immediately with Galbraith on Kashmir.

At the advice of the US, Nehru then wrote a letter to Ayub Khan.

"Pakistan was clearly capable of initiating war with India, but decided in 1962 not to take advantage of India`s vulnerability," Riedel writes.

According to Riedel, the Americans played a decisive role in forestalling a Pakistani attack on India.

"Kennedy`s message to Ayub Khan, reinforced by similar message from Prime Minister Macmillan, left little in doubt that the United States and the United Kingdom would view a Pakistani move against India as a hostile and aggressive action inconsistent with the SEATO and CENTO Treaties. The Americans told Pakistan that the Chinese attack was the most dangerous move made by Mao since 1950 and that they intended to respond decisively," he wrote.

Riedel, a well-known American expert of South Asia and advisors to four successive US presidents including Barack Obama, is a senior fellow and director of the Brookings Intelligence Project.

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