



Chinese Intransigence in Ladakh: An Overview

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Introduction

China and India are heirs to the two oldest civilisations of the world. Both emerged in their present form after World War II. India became independent in 1947 and the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. They share one of the world's longest borders, about 3488 kms, across the Himalayas. Both are nuclear weapon states. China's missiles can reach anywhere in the world. India's latest Agni series missiles can reach Beijing comfortably. On border issues there have been instances where the security forces were facing each other in contested areas and were increasingly indulging in fistfight, pushing and shoving etc in very difficult terrains. On Jun 15 this year in a brutal, savage skirmish when, fists, rocks, rods, baton, spikes, knuckle-dusters and nail-studded clubs and wooden clubs wrapped in barbed wire were used in a post at Galwan on Indian side of Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh sector at an altitude of 4,250 meters. This type of battle used to be fought in medieval times. Armies fight with bayonets and close quarter battles in extreme situations when all other means of fighting ends.

By all means, this incidence of Jun 15 is a watershed event and a game-changer in China-India relations. Even if China realises its blunder and the dangerous consequences and exercises restraint, the damage has been done. It may not be possible to return to the status quo ante for a long time. India, after this, cannot trust China and all the confidence-building measures. India has to think big and change its foreign policy, grand strategy, military strategy and force structuring, deterrence, nuclear and economic policies et al. The incident on Jun 15 has raised a lot of questions. Why did China do this when 'he' is under tremendous pressure in all fronts, it this China's salami slice

tactics being progressed rigorously, what will be the new rules of Engagement, what will be escalatory control mechanism, who has taken this decision, will there be some pressure put by China in India's North-East through insurgency especially by some Naga rebels who are already in China for training, what are India's options? These questions need deliberations.

The Roads of War

China began construction of National Highway G219, the Sky Road, in 1951 connecting southwestern Xinjiang to the western extremity of Tibet. This highway links China's two ultra-sensitive "ethnic frontiers": Buddhist-majority Tibet and Muslim-majority Xinjiang. This highway passes through Aksai Chin historically part of India, for over 160 kms. Director of the Security Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), M. Taylor Fravel said, "China is very sensitive to Indian activity in the western sector and it goes back to the reasons why it decided to fight in 1962 — to defend that road that connected Xinjiang to Tibet.

India has constructed the 255 km Shyok road, known as the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi road (DSDBO) which was completed in 2019. This road connects India's Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) airfield. At 5,065 meters, the world's highest airfield is very close to the Karakoram Highway linking China and Pakistan. Indian transport connectivity to DBO shrinks China's logistical superiority in this tough terrain. In this type of mountainous terrain, there are very limited places like passes, gaps, axes and laterals and river valleys like Chip Chap/Galwan/Cheng Chenmo/ Indus through which movement of troops and in some cases armoured vehicles can take place. China is



Source: Satellite image of Ladakh, with the Chinese claim line marked in yellow and the Chinese road from Yecheng in Xinjiang to Tibet in red passing through Aksai Chin in eastern Ladakh. Image: The Wire/Google Earth

extremely sensitive to these places for movement of PLA from the G219 Western Highway to the Line of Actual Control. It fears that if in a future course of time India decides to wrest back Aksai Chin the same narrow valleys, gorges, defiles and passes will be used by India.

China has shown its hands this time. The figure below clearly indicates where it's interest lies.

China's Salami Slicing Tactics

China has been following salami-slicing tactics in territorial disputes. It involves making small and incremental encroachments into other's territory that don't escalate into war but gives China a strategic advantage. The procedure is simple:



Source:-Stratfor:<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/nature-chinas-military-push-along-indian-border>

- Change ground positions stealthily and move forward using deception, terrain and weather conditions.
- Building infrastructure in contested territories. Establish effective control over that territory.
- When discovered, express outrage, denounce provocations and intrusions by the other party.
- Threaten extreme retaliation.
- Step back in “good faith,” not to the original position but well inside other’s territory. Two steps forward, one step back.
- Offer fresh border management procedures.
- Make sure its territorial creep forward becomes a de facto reality.
- Repeat.

Why China Did this to India at This Time?

Presently China has picked fights with almost everyone. It has no friend except countries like North Korea and Pakistan. In most of the territorial disputes, China has upped the ante and even provoked new ones. In the year 2020, China has carried out the following offensive actions:

- A Chinese coast guard vessel sank a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea on April 3.
- It sent vessels to hover around the coasts of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam.
- It repeated its maritime claims in the South China Sea.
- Stepped up its patrols near the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, it harassed Japanese vessels in the East China Sea in May. Conducted aerial reconnaissance near Taiwan. Took increasingly hostile stance toward Taiwan and America’s naval presence.
- Effectively ended Hong Kong’s semi-autonomous status by forcing a draconian national security law on Hong Kong.
- Engaged in a diplomatic row with Australia, bringing relations to an all-time low.
- Ordered the closure of a US consulate in the country’s southwest Chengdu.

- Engaged into a bitter rivalry with the US that is forcing other countries to choose sides. Increasingly, they are choosing the US.

Any one of these moves by China might not be surprising on its own. But all these actions together demand further introspection. The attack on Indian troops at Galwan in Ladakh is the People’s Liberation Army’s first use of force abroad in 30 years, even if it is without firearms.

Some of the reasons for China’s recent surprising behaviour are given below.

- China has been able to contain the Covid-19 outbreak at home. Its economy is on the upswing and recovering fast. In comparison, other economies of the world are still struggling with the effects of pandemic and have no idea when they will be able to recover. China has gained the upper hand over some of its rivals. China’s leadership may have inferred that the United States is in terminal decline. It is now certain that the correct time is right to act decisively while the West is reeling from the pandemic.
- Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is well aware of its deteriorating grip on power. It realises that it needs to deflect the attention of China’s citizens from the country’s economic ills. One of the ways to draw attention away from the economy is to initiate disputes with other countries and portray those as requiring a nationalistic response. CCP has been aggressively asserting its territorial claims throughout the corona virus pandemic. China’s actions indicate this stratagem¹.
- India has forcefully opposed China’s flagship “Belt and Road” initiative. India has supported an independent international inquiry into the origins of the corona virus pandemic. China feels India is a major stumbling block to China’s road to greatness. Hence the need to humiliate India in the high Himalayas.

Views from Chinese Strategic Community

There has been a rising opinion among the strategic community in China that Indo-China relations hold no great prospect in the current international situation. They feel that India is leveraging China’s weaknesses in creating distractions and overextension in its foreign policy

to make territorial gains in the disputed region. They feel that India has put China in a dilemma between responding to India's road construction and being labeled "aggressive and provocative", or accept India's position and lose territory².

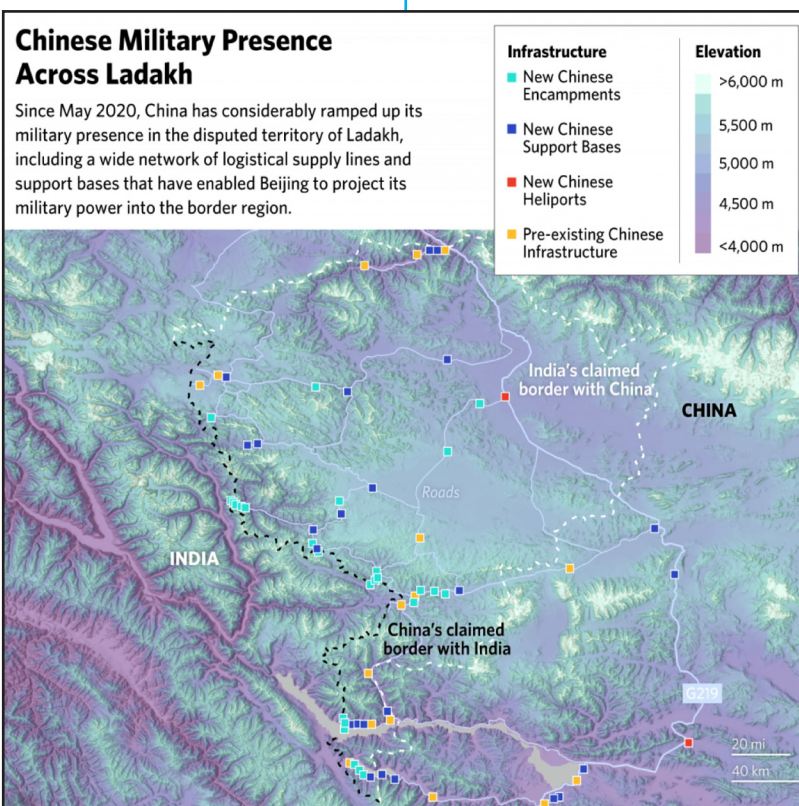
There is a renewed interest in the Chinese strategic community to reclaim Indo-China border territories since the declaration of a unilateral ceasefire on November 21, 1962. They feel that China won the 62 war but lost territory and India lost the war but gained a state. China feels that it was "costly mistake", which requires to be undone in the present time. Some Chinese scholars argue that recent Chinese activities on the China-India border are a part of this larger game-plan. In fact, a handful among these hardliners are unrelenting on their attempts to humiliate India, make it apologise or dismember it so that it ceases to pose any challenge to China in the future³.

China's "Wolf Warrior" Actions and Consequences

China's actions in Ladakh fit into a pattern of diplomatic, military, trade and "wolf warrior" aggressive postures in East Asia, the South China Sea, the Indo-Pacific and globally against European and US criticisms and decoupling measures⁴. China strategically is in no hurry to resolve the

border disputes as China sees the unsettled border as leverage to bog down India in the region and undermine its global potential.

A protracted war with India will demand China's full commitment and resources. U.S. may up the ante in South China Seas it is already doing, by some signaling with two aircraft carriers in South China Sea. Japan will also take this opportunity along with other countries. China is wanting to form a joint front with Russia against the U.S. however, Russia has very good relations with India. China is aware that at this point of time he has no friends. Internal secessionist movements may further weaken China from the inside. They feel, "even if China wins a local war with India, it will lose the overall situation" Mature and rational political thinkers and professors such as Zheng Yongnian and Yu Longyu among others, have been critical about China's policies towards India. After analysing the Galwan Valley incident, they are of the opinion that operations are mostly tactical, of a "reactive nature" and are characterised by a "tit-for-tat" approach without any clear strategic intent. They feel that this incident encouraged extreme nationalism in India and unites the nation against China. This might eventually lead China into an untimely military conflict.



Peace & Tranquility and Rules of Engagement.

Over the years there have been a number of occasions when patrols from both sides faced each other in the disputed territories. Earlier, there used to be no shoving or pushing. Placards showing that the territory belongs to either party were shown. The placard drill was fine tuned. Another way was when a patrol from one party came, the other party did not confront them. The party used to leave some telltale signs. After the party had left, sometime thereafter the other party used to follow the same procedure.

China started to flex their muscles since 2013. In 2013, the PLA intruded across the line and pitched tents in Depsang, 30 km south of Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO). The Depsang plains lie south of DBO in a strategic area that the military calls Sub-Sector North (SSN). The SSN, including Depsang area, is of huge strategic significance. DBO is situated on a finger of land west of the Karakoram range, at only 13 kilometres from the Karakoram

Pass and a little more than 200 kms from the Khunjerab pass through which the Karakoram highway, which links China to Pakistan now, passes. It is 120 kilometres from G219, China's strategic link road between Xinxiang and Tibet. India retaliated with its own encampment. The 20-day standoff ended when China and India both dismantled their camps and both sides withdrew. In September 2014, over a thousand PLA troops entered Chumar. PLA vacated the area three weeks after Xi Jinping's visit to India. In 2017, the PLA entered and stayed on the Doklam plateau. Indian and Chinese vacated after A 72-day standoff between them.

The intrusions in Ladakh this year are a significant escalation, for they occurred at multiple points along the LAC at Depsang, Galwan, Hot Springs and Pangong Tso areas. The 2020 standoff began on May 5 with physical confrontations near Pangong Lake in Ladakh between 250 Chinese and Indian soldiers. The scuffle at the lake left several soldiers injured. Tussles between another 150 soldiers at Naku La along the Sikkim-Tibet



A Typical Patrol Interaction Following Laid Down Protocols

border followed four days later. These were ominous signs. Then came the 15 Jun 2020 bloody scuffle at Galwan. Post this scuffle, the situation has changed dramatically. It will be very difficult for the government to get back to the earlier Rules of Engagement. The media and nationalistic fervour will not allow that to happen. It will be very difficult for any government to deescalate as

the media and the country will be in a frenzy. If in due course of time status quo ante is established, what will be Rules of Engagement? What happens if another Galwan happens? These are difficult questions that do not have easy answers. But these are to be thought of in advance.

Past Misadventures by China

That there is a pattern to Chinese intransigence with its neighbours becomes clear when one examines previous standoffs or limited wars with its neighbours. Let us examine the Ussuri issue with Russia and China's desire to teach Vietnam a lesson. This backfired in a manner that China cut a sorry figure and announced its incompetence in handling mechanized forces at tactical and operational levels. A brief overview is given below.

1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict. By 1969 Soviet Union was a well-established nuclear power and China had acquired rudimentary nuclear capabilities. The 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict started on the Zhenbao Island on the Ussuri River. China was the weaker power in initiating the conflict. Mao Tse Tung ignored Soviet nuclear capabilities since he believed that there were no concentrated Chinese targets to be hit by the Soviet forces. Mao also discounted Chinese nuclear capabilities due to inadequate delivery mechanism.⁵ On the Chinese side of the Ussuri River there was an uninhabited islet which marked the border between China and Russia. This little islet, called Damansky in Russian and Zhenbao Dao in Chinese was the stage for a game-changing encounter during the chaotic spring of 1969.⁶

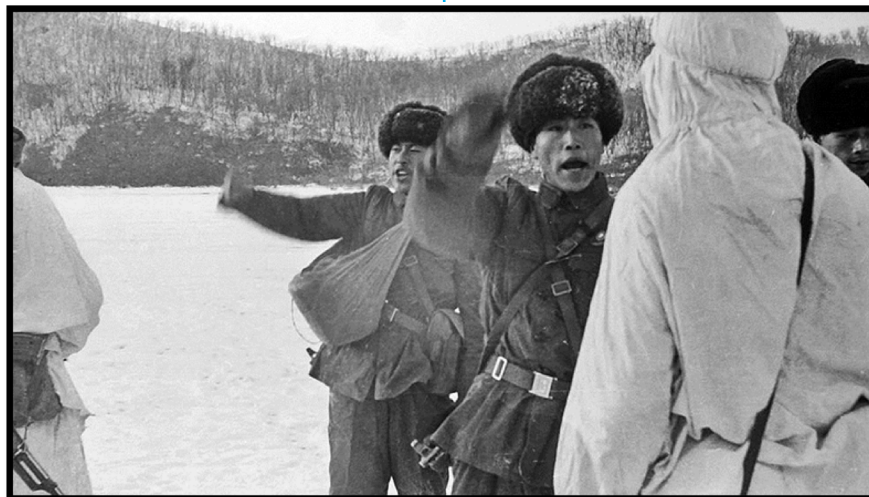
This is an indication that the skirmishing may have taken place there as a result of Chinese planning under the supervision of the Central Military Commission (CMC). Mao Zedong's: "Choose the battlefield"; "Fight no battle unless victory is certain." dictum was followed by PLA. On 2 March 1969, under direct orders from Mao's government

in Beijing, Chinese border guards and soldiers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) ambushed a unit of Soviet border troops. Appearing unarmed, the Chinese threw aside their winter coats and gunned seven of them down at close range on the disputed Zhenbao/Damansky Island in the frozen Ussuri River. Instantly, around 300 more PLA soldiers burst out of foxholes and opened fire on the remaining Soviets. The Chinese captured the island. In the process 59 Soviet soldiers were killed.

The firefight may have begun either when the Soviet troops, having fallen into a trap, sprung it by opening fire; or when the Chinese side, having lured the Soviets into the trap, sprung it themselves by opening fire. This was closely analogous to the "counterattack in self-defense" they had launched against India in October 1962.

Two weeks later the battle resumed. The Soviets employed tanks and BM-21 rockets and bombarded the Chinese positions. As per Soviet estimates approximately thousand Chinese troops were killed. On Aug 13 after several months of uneasy quiet, another skirmish broke out along the Western section of the border, in present-day Xinjiang. Twenty-one Chinese and two Soviets lost their lives⁸. During the Damanskii/Zhenbao conflict the Soviet losses are fully accounted for and documented. The Soviet side lost 58 soldiers between 2 and 22 March 1969. As to Chinese losses, information about them is very scanty. Chinese officials hide the true figures.

General Chen Xilian, area commander in 1969, years later told an interviewer that the PLA had been preparing for a decisive clash on the rivers for months and as the Soviets increased their



Reminiscent of the India-China Standoffs, Chinese border guards jostle with their Soviet counterparts on the disputed Zhenbao Island, 1969⁷

pressure in the Zhenbao area, China had deployed crack PLA troops to confront them there. Direct communications were sent to Beijing from what would become the battlefield so as to give the national leadership ultimate control. “When the Soviet troops attempted their provocation on 2 March,” General Chen recalled, “they actually were hopelessly outnumbered by us. We won a clear victory on the battlefield.”⁹

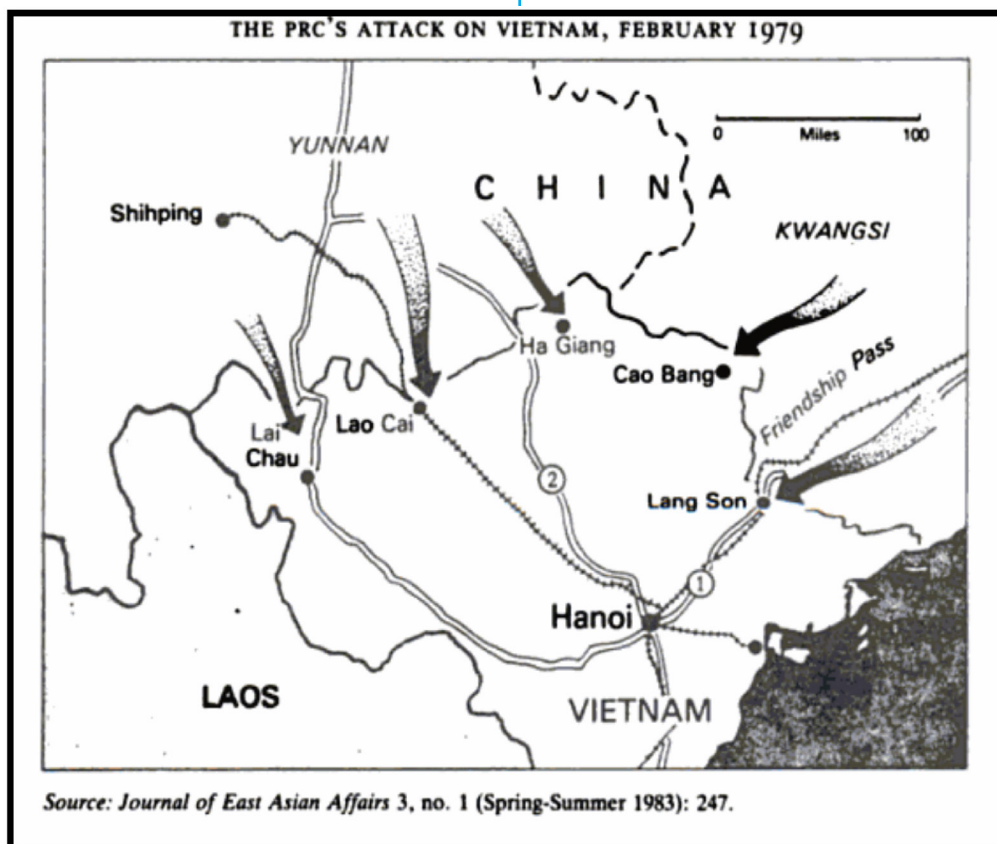
There are some similarities with the conflict fought 31 years back and the ongoing conflict at LAC. Some of them are:

- There used to be pushing, shouting and shoving each other for years when troops faced each other during patrolling. PLA changed the rules of engagement suddenly to their advantage to their unsuspecting adversaries.
- The terrain was extremely inhospitable.
- In a well-planned move additional crack troops were brought in to give the hammer blow. Complete surprise was maintained.
- The savage brutality displayed by PLA was unprecedented.
- Operations were controlled from CMC.

Sino Vietnam War 1979, China’s “Teaching a Lesson” to Vietnam.

Between February 17 to March 16, 1979, a brief but large-scale, war with heavy casualties broke out between China and Vietnam. On February 17, 1979, some 300,000 PLA troops, including thirty infantry divisions supported by 400 tanks and large concentrations of artillery, attacked border defenses and cities along the Vietnam-China border to “teach Vietnam a lesson”. The border towns and provincial capitals of Lao Cai on the Red River in the west and Cao Bang in the central sector were the key initial Chinese objectives. The PLA then pushed toward Cam Duong and Dong Dang to gain position for a further assault on Lang Son—the gateway to Hanoi. Seizure of Lang Son and posing a clear threat to Hanoi and the regime there was the ultimate operational objective of the PLA assault.

The PLA planned a war of “quick decision,” but it had failed to make progress against the better trained and more experienced battle-hardened Vietnam Army. By March 16, three weeks and six days after the beginning of the assault, Chinese forces had completed their withdrawal. Beijing proclaimed the operation over.



Casualty figures have never been released. An acceptable figure is given below.

WAR LOSSES

	Chinese	Vietnamese
Killed	26,000	30,000
Wounded	37,000	32,000
Prisoners of war	260	1,638
Tanks, Armored Vehicle	420	185
Heavy mortars and guns	66	200
Missile Stations	0	6

Source: Tongzhi. P.2; Pouhsi Pao-kao. P. 16; Chan-cheng chih Yen-chiu. P.2; FBIS. May3. 1979.p E1; NYT. March 5.27.28 April 9 and May 3 1979; CSM, March7.1979; and Cheng Ming. April 1, 1979 . p. 10.

Generally the west sees the Sino-Vietnamese war as humiliating for Chinese forces. The PLA sustained heavy casualties, took longer than it expected to achieve its objectives and demonstrated the obsolescence of its equipment, doctrine and organization. What is important for observers of China's border battles is that China continued to engage Vietnam in a war of attrition until the early 1990s, regularly shelling targets in the Vietnamese border region and fighting major border battles as part of a policy of "bleeding" Vietnam. China used the border conflict as a test bed to evolve the PLA from an antiquated fighting force to a modern one, by testing new doctrines and equipment on the border¹⁰. Massive restructuring of organization, modernisation of weapons and equipment, new concepts of warfare, modern training methodologies, leadership changes were tried out. In the present Ladakh situation it is a great opportunity for Xi Jinping to try out his transformed PLA in a limited war scenario at Ladakh.

India's Options

During the ongoing crisis in Ladakh questions are being raised about India's capabilities in strategic leverage in terms of coercion, dissuasion or deterrence against the Chinese in a limited war scenario. In any negotiations across the table, it is a game of give and take. Unfortunately, as of now, India does not have much leverage to extract anything from China. China is in an advantageous position on the ground along the LAC. Their infrastructure and logistical chain are superior to ours. At best, India can expect the Chinese to pull back, but only after they have extracted major concessions from India. Occupation of some key un-held areas on the other side of LAC may have been an option, but time for that, it seems, has

passed. In case nothing tangible is available, is the nuclear threat an option? To create deterrence, India can signal capabilities and a doctrine that enables it to degrade targets deep inside Tibet and in China's continental heartland in eastern China. This includes leveraging India's missile capabilities including nuclear missiles and its air force capabilities. For this India has to give a fresh look at her nuclear doctrine and missile capabilities. This is a serious and complicated issue and needs deliberation. It would be analysed separately.

How could India develop deterrence options against China¹¹?

India could strengthen the strategically key passes and avenues of ingress across the LAC by enhancing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. It requires to buildup logistics and heavy-lift capabilities and increasing the ability to move forces towards these key passes quickly. Because of logistical and connectivity inadequacies, and lack of infrastructure and technology based ISR India, has to depend on forward patrolling of disputed posts on the LAC. This makes India hostage to a situation of a Chinese fait accompli on the LAC. Deterrence can be obtained by escalating the levels of violence vertically and horizontally. China is logistically capable of amassing a large volume of forces and firepower to any sector of his choosing at short notice. We need capabilities to do the same.

A strategy of *quid pro quo*. There are several areas where the local tactical and operational advantage rests with us. These areas are already identified and earmarked for limited offensive operations on our part. This has been done in the securing of tactical heights in late August along the southern bank of the Pangong Tso lake. There can be other locations

and opportunities also. Point to be noted is that after the surprise factor is over, the chances of this being successful recede.

Conclusion

The present state in Ladakh continues to be tense and volatile in spite of talks at various levels. A lot may happen in times to come. While it is easy to find faults when an incident has already happened, question arise as to why this has happened and what could have been done. This is not the time to point fingers. In time, surely there will be bodies appointed to find out details and what lessons should be learned. However, there are certain issues which merit immediate attention.

Intelligence. It is not believable that India did not have information or intelligence about the movement of PLA troops in Tibet. India has its own satellite imagery capabilities, Aviation Research Center of the external intelligence agency, Defence Image Processing and Analysis Centre (DIPAC) and Defence Intelligence Agency under Chief of Defence Staff, excellent photo reconnaissance capabilities of Indian Air Force, USA intelligence and satellite images on request and satellite images provided by private firms. An example is satellite images provided by an American company Maxar Technologies showing China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) bases at Galwan near LAC as shown below.

Surely there is something missing in intelligence analysis and prediction. A plethora of organisations exist in National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS), External Intelligence Agency, DIA, service headquarters down to command and corps level. We cannot keep saying that there has been an intelligence failure after every debacle. Responsibility for wrong analyses must be fixed.

Strategy. For a long time, the foreign ministry and the armed forces have been using jargons like coercion, compellence, dissuasion and various forms of deterrence. What is our policy on this? What have we done to achieve that capability? This strategic policymaking cannot be left to foreign or defence ministries or service headquarters. Policymakers at the national level must get involved, own responsibility and give necessary directions. What is our deterrence strategy: deterrence-by-denial or deterrence by punishment? These should be enunciated as a policy statement.

Defence Budget. In every budget, the share of defence as a percentage of GDP has been falling. This year it is at the lowest. When this happens and an emergency like the present crisis happened, we are left to purchase immediate needs on an emergency basis. When we are facing two real adversaries with whom we had been at war, this budgetary allotment will lead to a national calamity.



Conventional War Vs Counter Insurgency/ Counter Terrorism Operations (CI/CT Ops).

An impression was given that the days of conventional war is over; it is the time for CI/CT Ops and proxy war. That was why the emphasis on the preponderance of increase of Central Armed Police Forces or Para Military Forces. No country has fought so many conventional and limited wars after the second world war than India. With the unresolved border issues with China and Pakistan, conventional war is always round the corner and there is no scope of any complacency.

Force Restructuring. Twenty-one years back the then Defence Minister announced that China is India's enemy number 1. Indian armed forces, especially the army, continue to remain Pakistan centric. The number of formations facing east and north is totally at variance with the threat perception. Even in the Northern Command of the army there is only one division which is responsible for the border with China. Policymakers must direct the army to do the restructuring within an acceptable timeframe. Post the 2020 Galwan crisis additional forces have been moved up. It needs to be considered whether they should be permanently deployed in Ladakh, at least till the boundary issue with China is resolved.

Development of Niche Technologies. China has appreciated its threat from the USA correctly and developed its *Anti-Access/Area Denial* (A2/AD) strategy accordingly. It has put emphasis on cyber, space, electronic warfare, missile technology and electromagnetic domain. It understands the importance of emerging technologies and is taking the lead in Artificial Intelligence and Quantum Computing for use in armed forces. At least in these fields, with the type of talent pool we have, India should have taken the lead. Today China is

competing with USA and India has an asymmetric disadvantage here with China. This needs to be corrected.

Proactive Stance. Against China, Indian Armed Forces cannot always be on a defensive stance. Indian Army has to be proactive. It should provide options for diplomatic engagements to succeed. Indian Army cannot expect diplomatic solutions to military problems. China is consistently pushing the envelope, feeling the water, observing the Indian response. If we don't take any action now, tomorrow it will again carry out further ingressions. What will be our option then? PLA has to be stopped now.

Continental Power. India must decide whether she is a continental or maritime power. The defence budget is not bottomless. Priority has to be laid down by the policymakers. The enemy is at the gate. If we cannot evict him from the ingressions, then all the talk of the Indian military having the capability of being an expeditionary force, capable of out of area contingency, net security provider etc would look hollow. War, always, is won on land.

Nuclear Issue. India has to seriously consider revising its nuclear doctrine for enhanced deterrence effects.

Command and Control of Indo Tibetan Border Police(ITBP). Ladakh is not a settled international border. For effective command and control on the LAC, ITBP must be put under operational control of the Army. The present arrangement is not satisfactory. The example already exists where Border Security Force is put under operation control of the army in Line of Control (LC) with Pakistan.

End Notes

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