

Ostracising the Ghost of Namka Chu — Defending Kameng

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Abstract

This article briefly recapitulates the 1962 war operations in the Kameng Sector to bring out the suggested manner in which operations should be conducted against the People's Liberation Army (PLA), should a need arise in the present time. Such threat from the PLA is very real keeping in mind present tensions on the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Introduction

The violent stand-off between the Indian Army and the PLA in

Eastern Ladakh, since May 2020, has once again revived the memories of the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict. The PLA, in violation of all bilateral agreements and confidence building measures (CBMs) in place since nearly three decades, is trying to push the LAC to its 1960 Claim line. Chinese approach is of expansionism and outright domination, not accommodation or co-existence.¹ These developments rule out the possibility of an early border settlement and foreshadow continued tension along the LAC. This calls for a strong border management posture, with a doctrine of offensive-defence, especially in the Kameng Sector of Arunachal Pradesh. While the focus of current stand-off is Ladakh centric so far, the possibility of this extending to other sectors cannot be ruled out. After all, China continues to claim nearly 90,000 sq km of territory in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Tawang in the Kameng Sector stands out as a prominent objective, militarily as well as for the battle of perception.

The Kameng Sector

Kameng Sector of Western Arunachal Pradesh comprises of the districts of West Kameng (HQ at Bomdila), East Kameng (Seppa) and Tawang. Kameng River, from which the sector derives its name, emanates in the upper reaches and flows into the Brahmaputra in the plains of Assam, near Tezpur.



Map 1 : Kameng Sector²

Significance of Tawang. Tawang, a 'natural watershed and shortest route to Tibet'³, remains significant to India due to its strategic and military salience. It is also the key to the defence of the entire sector: from Tawang to Tezpur in the Assam Plains, through Se La, Bomdila, and Tenga. It also secures the Eastern flank of Bhutan, where China stakes claim over areas of Sakteng Sanctuary, in Trashigang Dzongkhag (District) of Bhutan.⁴



Map 2 : Location of Sakteng Sanctuary in Eastern Bhutan⁵

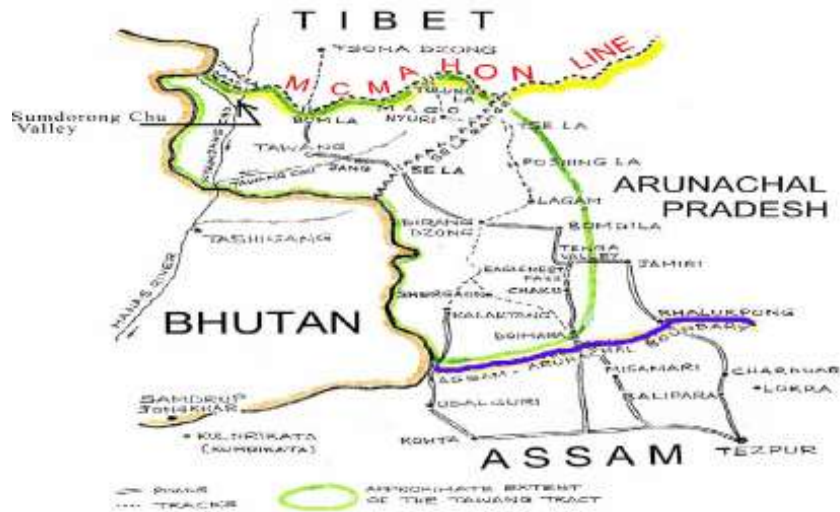
Besides its strategic significance, Tawang also has immense religious significance. Tawang is home to a monastery (*known in Tibetan as Gaden Namgyal Lhatse*), founded in 1680 – 81, which is the only important Tibetan Monastery outside the control of Lhasa (and China). It is also the birth place of the 6th Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso. Chinese fear that this monastery in Tawang can once again play an important role in Tibetan religious affairs, particularly when the time comes to choose the next Dalai Lama.⁶

As the stand-off continues to persist in Ladakh, with little likelihood of restoration of *status quo ante*, it would be appropriate to look back to the Chinese offensive of 1962, in this sector, to draw on the lessons learnt and to prepare ourselves to ensure that, this time, the offensive is carried back into the Chinese Territory, to 'ostracise the haunting ghost of Namka Chu' (and perhaps even of *Sumdorong Chu*)⁷.

Order of Battle (ORBAT) and Outline Plan of PLA Operations in Kameng Sector (October – November 1962)

Indian Deployment - October 1962. The tiered Indian deployment as it emerged progressively, post adoption of forward posture and in the run-up to the 1962 conflict, is summarised below:

- **Border Posts.** Posts established along the border, as part of the 'Forward Policy', were held by the Assam Rifles. These included Dhaula and Bumla in the Kameng Sector.
- **Namka Chu and the Zimithang Sector.** 7 Infantry Brigade (Ex 4 Infantry Division) with four infantry battalions, a Heavy Mortar Battery (less a troop) and a Troop of Para Field Battery.
- **Tawang.** Ad-hoc Brigade of two battalions, under Commander Artillery, 4 Infantry Division.
- **Se La.** 62 Infantry Brigade of 4 Infantry Division, having five infantry battalions supported by a field regiment and a troop of heavy mortars, with other combat support elements deployed in general Area Se La – Senge Dzong (Between Se La and Dirang to the South).
- **Dirang Dzong – Nyukmadong.** 65 Infantry Brigade of 4 Infantry Division with two infantry battalions and other administrative elements.
- **Bomdila La – Thembang (Northeast of Bomdi la).** 48 Infantry Brigade of 4 Infantry Division having three infantry battalions with a field battery.
- HQ 4 Infantry Division with HQ 4 Artillery Brigade and other administrative elements having a total strength of approximately 5000 troops were re-deployed in general area Dirang Dzong, after the fall of Tawang (25 October onwards).
- 67 Infantry Brigade was located at Misamari as reserve.



Sketch 1 - Kameng Sector and Rough Layout of Tawang Tract⁸

Chinese Force Level opposite Kameng Sector⁹

The operations were undertaken and coordinated by the Tibet Frontier Military Region. Following PLA formations were employed for operations:

- 55 Infantry Division with 163, 164 and 165 Infantry Regiments (Brigade equivalent), under command.
- 11 Infantry Division with 32 and 33 Infantry Regiments, and possibly a battalion ex 31 Infantry Regiment, under command.
- Tibetan Division (TD) / Force 419 with 154, 155 and 157 Infantry Regiments, under command.
- Four infantry companies from Shannan Military Sub-district (SMS).
- Three Artillery Regiments (306, 308 and 540).

- 136 Engineer Regiment (five companies).
- Other services elements.

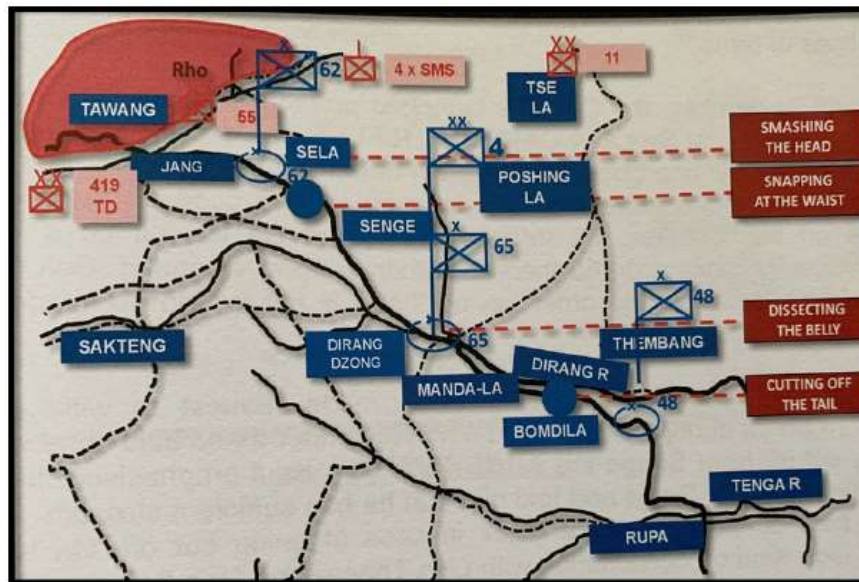
PLA Plan of Operations: Se La - Bomdila ¹⁰

According to the Chinese accounts, the main thrust was to be in the Eastern Theatre (NEFA). The PLA forces in the Western Theatre (Ladakh) were to 'coordinate' operations. The offensive (*called counter-attack*) was aimed at 'evicting' Indian troops from the areas north of the '*traditional and customary boundary*' (i.e. China's Claim Line) at the Southern foothills of the Himalayas in Brahmaputra Plains.

The concept of operations was to: advance along multiple axes, envelope (outflank) Se La and Bomdila, and reduce these subsequently. The plan was as follows:

- 55 Infantry Division (comprising three infantry regiments and three artillery regiments) was to advance along Axis Tawang – Se La and launch the main attack against Se la. The division was given the task of '*smashing the head*'.
- Simultaneously, 419 Tibetan Division (three infantry regiments) was to advance from the West, through the narrow corridor between Se La and India-Bhutan border, to assist in the capture of Se La from the South and capture Dirang Dzong in concert with troops of 11 Infantry Division advancing from the East. This was aimed at '*dissecting the belly*'.
- Four companies of SMS were to carry out an outflanking move from the East and position themselves North of Dirang Dzong along the road to Se La; their task being to '*snap at the waist*'.
- In coordination with the attack against Se La, 157 Infantry Regiment ex 419 Tibetan Division was to carry out a further outflanking move (from the West) to capture Senge Dzong (South of Se La and North of Dirang) and link-up with four infantry companies of SMS which were carrying out a similar outflanking move from the East, in order to cut-off the Road Se La – Dirang completely.

- 11 Infantry Division (comprising two infantry regiments) was to carry-out a wide outflanking move along route Rho – Tse La – Poshing La – Thembang and cut-off Road Dirang Dzong – Bomdi La (*cutting-off the tail*). Thereafter, in concert with 1 or 2 infantry regiments of 419 Tibetan Division, to capture Dirang Dzong, and develop further operations for capture of Bomdi La.
- 164 Infantry Regiment ex 55 Infantry Division was to act as reserve and was tasked to clear the road axis to Bomdi La.



Sketch 2 - Outline Plan of PLA operations against Indian Defences at Se La, Dirang and Bomdila

Conduct of Operations

Phase 1 (20 October to 25 October 1962) up to Capture of Tawang: Battle of Namka Chu (Sketch 1 Refers)

On 8 September 1962, the Assam Rifles post at Dhaula, near Namka Chu (*below the Chinese held Thagla Ridge*), was encircled by the PLA troops. As a result of this, 7 Infantry Brigade was

ordered to move hurriedly to this sector, on the western extremity of the Tawang Sector. Operational actions were ordered, to be taken by 9 Punjab, to support the encircled Assam Rifles troops and to 'make Chinese vacate the Indian Territory'. Following this, 7 Infantry Brigade was deployed to defend Hathung La (Hathonga Ridge) and Tsangdhar (*these two ridge lines are located South of Namka Chu, behind Dhaula Post*), and to capture Thagla Ridge, by 10 October 1962, as part of Operation Leghorn. In a surprise move, however, Chinese attacked forward Indian localities, south of Namka Chu on 10 October halting Operation Leghorn.

The main offensive across Namka Chu was launched by PLA on 20 October 1962 at about 0630 hrs after a heavy preparatory bombardment. Located on the valley floor, and having been totally surprised, the formation was unable to fight a defensive battle. The brigade lost 493 men [besides many injured and taken as Prisoners of War (PWs)]. The troops were ordered to withdraw south to the Hathonga Ridge at approximately 1100 hrs. The cohesion of the formation had completely been broken due to the heavy casualties suffered. The battle of Namka Chu finished the day it began. After this debacle, HQ 4 Infantry Division re located at Tawang by the evening of 22 October 1962.

Battle of Bum La and Tawang. Overall Chinese plan for capture of Tawang entailed move of Force 419 (Tibetan Division) from West (Lumla), a battalion of 31 Regiment from T Gompa, from the Northwest, and 32 Regiment (plus) of 11 Infantry Division from the North through Bum La – Tong Pen La – Mila, across the 'Inner Wall of Tawang (IWT)'; and 33 Regiment was tasked to infiltrate south to the Jang Bridge, to block the withdrawal of Indian troops across the only bridge on Tawang Chu (Sketch 3 refers).

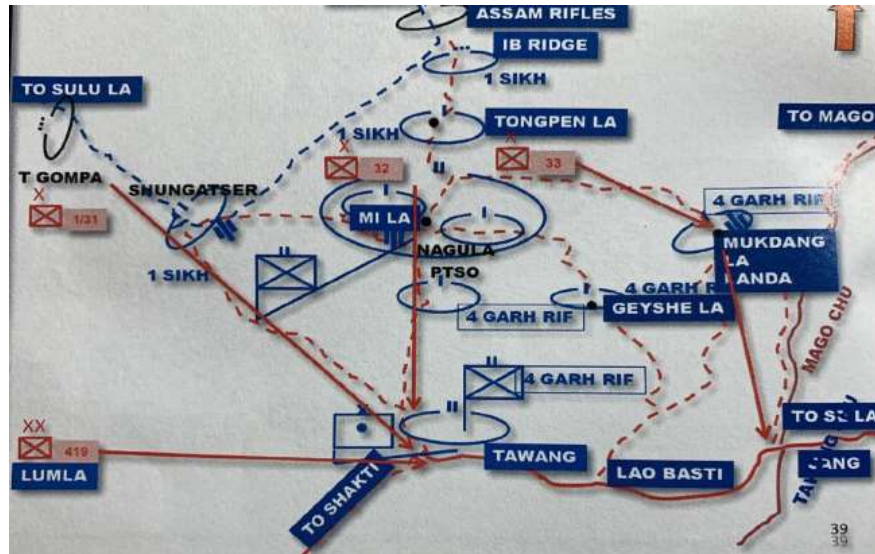
Battle of Bumla (Sketch 3 Refers). The attack was launched on the Assam Rifles post at Bumla, early morning on 23 October 1962. After overrunning the post, PLA contacted a Platoon locality of 1 SIKH at the IB Ridge at approximately 0700 hrs. Fighting till last round, and with only two wounded survivors, the platoon was finally overrun. Subedar Joginder Singh, who was seriously wounded, was taken a PW. He died of his wounds in Chinese custody and was awarded the highest war time gallantry award of Param Vir Chakra (PVC), posthumously. After the capture

of IB Ridge, PLA troops tried to bypass the main defences of 1 SIKH but failed. They then decided to approach Tawang from the West, from Nyamjang Chu Valley and Lumla. At this stage, the options available to 4 Infantry Division were to either give a battle at Tawang or to withdraw South of Tawang Chu and give a fight at Se La and/or Bomdila. Opting for the latter, withdrawal from Tawang started on 23 October and the bridge over Tawang Chu, at Jung, was blown in the face of the enemy. Chinese occupied Tawang unopposed on 25 October 1962. This phase was followed by a period of 'pause' for political messaging / negotiations up to 17 November 1962.

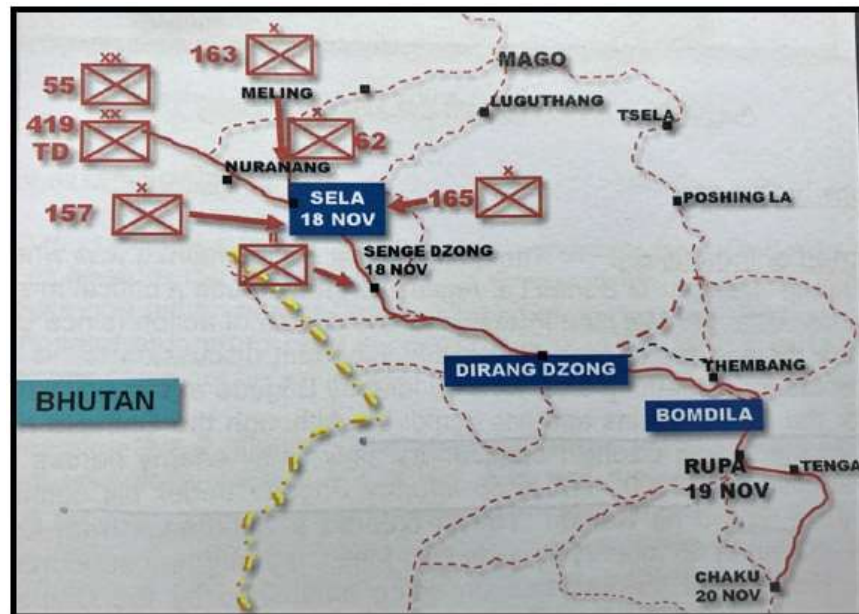
Phase 2 (17 Nov - 21 Nov 1962) - Operations South of Tawang Chu

The PLA troops advanced along four different axes, (refer Sketch 2), and split 4 Infantry Division into three pockets: Se La, Dirang and Bomdila, isolated from each other. Isolation of HQ 4 Infantry Division in the Dirang Valley made the command and control structure completely ineffective.

Operations at Se La (Sketch 4 Refers). On 16 November, the PLA launched probing attacks along Northeast and Northwest approaches to Se La. 4 Garhwal Rifles, deployed at Nuranang as 'Covering' troops, repulsed four successive attacks inflicting heavy casualties. Attack was launched on Se La on 17 November. On persistent recommendations of GOC 4 Infantry Division, 62 Infantry Brigade was withdrawn from Se La, on night 17/18 November, without giving a fight. Se La was, thus, lost to PLA on 18 November 1962.



Sketch 3 - Battle of Tawang



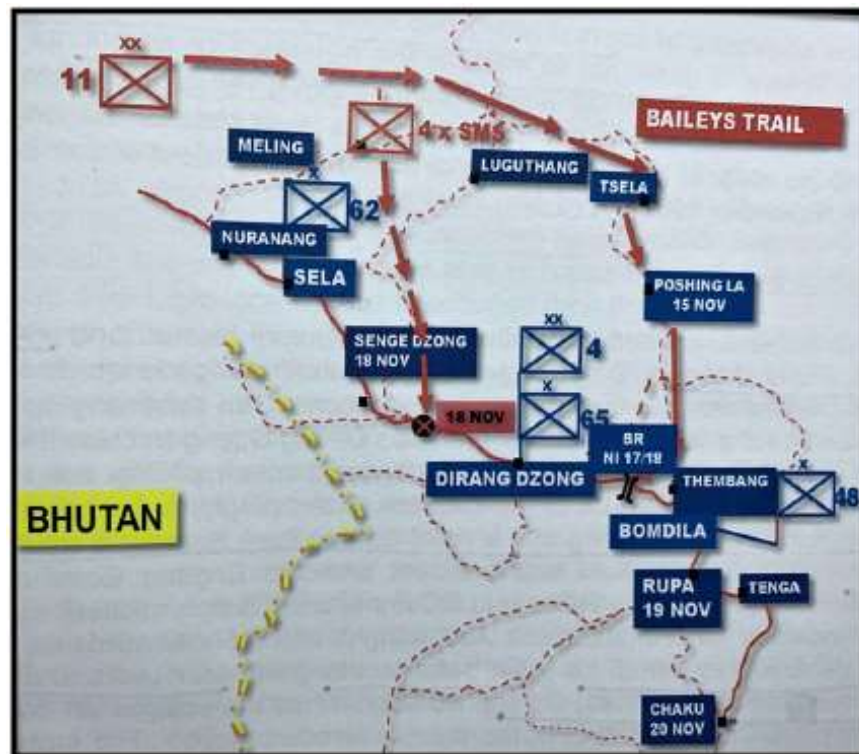
Sketch 4 - Operations at Se La

PLA Advance on the eastern Flank. The advance of 11 Infantry Division, with 32 and 33 Infantry Regiments, was the most audacious and imaginative part of the Chinese offensive which unhinged Indian defences completely. 11 Infantry Division, with 33 Infantry Regiment leading, commenced its advance from its Concentration Area on 10 November and carried out a wide outflanking move from the East, passing through Tse La and Poshing La (also called Bailey's trail). Poshing La was captured on 15 November. The formation moved on man pack basis and was supported by approximately 1000 porters, recruited locally. The Division marched approximately 160 km in six days and nights, and secured Thembang (Northeast of Bomdilla) by last light 17 November. On night 17/18 November, they cut-off HQ 4 Infantry Division at Dirang from the South. While the above manoeuvre was in progress, four companies from SMS, guided by locals, marched for three days, outflanking Se La from the East, and reached Nyukmadong in the early hours of 18 November. They interdicted the road North of Dirang Dzong.

Operations at Dirang Dzong. Having reached the eastern flank of Indian positions at Dirang Dzong – Bomdila, PLA 11 Infantry Division decided to launch an attack on Dirang Dzong on the morning of 18 Nov, coinciding with the attack on Se La. They employed 32 Infantry Regiment to attack from the East and South East. That day, despite availability of approximately two battalions of infantry, a squadron of tanks and a battery of artillery, the Divisional HQ ordered withdrawal towards Mandala. An uncoordinated 'retreat' took place from Dirang. The area was thereafter occupied by 32 Infantry Regiment of PLA, without resistance.

Operations at Bomdila. While the capture of Dirang was underway, 33 Infantry Regiment moved further South to interdict any reinforcements coming from Bomdila. Contact was established with Bomdila defences on the noon of 18 November. The Chinese expected Bomdila to be held strongly and had made extensive preparations for the attack. 48 Infantry Brigade, holding defences at Bomdila, was, however, denuded of approximately two companies of infantry, some tanks and artillery guns to support the Divisional HQ and troops at Dirang. The reinforcing column got ambushed en route. Consequently, the weakened defences at Bomdila fell and

the brigade withdrew on 18 November (AN), to re-organise itself for a defensive battle at Rupa.



Sketch 5 - Operations at Dirang - Bomdila - Chaku

Withdrawal / Pursuit. Having secured Bomdila, 33 Infantry Regiment of PLA, on 19 November, commenced 'pursuit' South towards Rupa and Chaku. While this was underway, HQ 4 Infantry Division ordered two battalions of 67 Infantry Brigade (Reserves) to reinforce Bomdila and to move further North to extricate troops isolated at Dirang Dzong. However, on coming across retreating troops of 48 Infantry Brigade North of Tenga, it was realised that Bomdila had fallen. A strong reconnaissance party was sent to ascertain the situation at Bomdila. This party, however, ran headlong into the leading elements of 33 Infantry Regiment advancing southwards, at about 1230 hrs, on 19 November. A

sharp engagement ensued. Finally, bulk of the reinforcing troops from 67 Infantry Brigade (about 300 men) was surrounded in the valley from all sides without any fire support. They gave a gallant fight and inflicted some casualties on the Chinese. In one such action, the PLA battalion commander was killed. The battle was over by 1500 hrs 19 November 62.

After this short and sharp engagement, the 2nd Battalion of 33 Infantry Regiment resumed 'pursuit' southwards towards Rupa / Tenga Valley and Chaku. Chaku defences were contacted by about 0200 hrs on 20 November and a speedy night attack was launched. The Indian defences were not well organised. The Chinese had also cut-off withdrawal routes to the South. The defences fell by 0700 hrs, 20 November. Subsequently, a unilateral ceasefire was declared by China commencing midnight 21 November 1962.

Salient Points. The operations of 1962 bring to fore two aspects. Firstly, the PLA's expertise in carrying out outflanking moves through very difficult terrain. Secondly, Indian forces not being doctrinally and organisationally prepared to hold ground if in danger of being bypassed. The succeeding part of this article examines this in the present context.

Evolving Contemporary Concept of 'Offensive-Defence'

Planning Offensive-Defence. India raised two additional divisions (56 and 71 Infantry Divisions) in 2009-2010 to strengthen posture against China in the Northeast, in Arunachal Pradesh.¹¹ The limitations of terrain, altitude, extreme cold climate which preclude use of high technology weapon systems, precision munitions and restrict the use of air power, give rise to the temptation to commit increasingly large number of troops on ground for border management. The lesson of 1962 should be lesser troops to hold ground and more reserves to be applied as operations develop, especially through perceived low threat areas. The development of infrastructure, enhanced tactical mobility and fire power now facilitates a change in doctrine from the antiquated positional

concept of holding ground, fighting a battle of attrition, and launching counter attacks to regain lost territory. The requirement is to change to the concept of offensive-defence, where Quid Pro Quo (QPQ) / riposte / counter offensive operations are conducted to make the attacker recoil and commit his reserves prematurely.

Reserves. For conduct of offensive-defence, there is a requirement of reserves from within available resources, which are positioned appropriately, supported by medium lift helicopters (Chinooks, MI-26, MI-17V), additional fire power resources in form of Ultra-Light Howitzers (ULH), Tanks, Infantry Combat Vehicles (ICVs) (where required), Attack Helicopters and armed UAVs (suited for high altitude) to manoeuvre and turn the flanks with agility or alternatively stop and evict enemy troops trying to outflank our defences. Employment of Special Forces (SF) and Arunachal Scouts would have a force multiplier effect in interdicting offensive forces. These troops could be employed to operate effectively in areas with sparse surface communication and population from where the PLA troops infiltrated in 1962, such as Bailey's Trail. These areas, placed under effective surveillance, should serve as the 'chosen killing grounds' without physical deployment.

Employment of Long-Range Vectors. Certain limitations of terrain in deployment of long-range vectors, tactical medium range missiles and Multi Barrel Rocket Launchers (MBRLs), are progressively being overcome with the development of better infrastructure. Employment of these weapon systems by selection of suitable deployment areas, in conjunction with air, will be extremely useful for conducting degradation and depth battle opposite Kameng Sector.

Strategic Deterrence. The conventional defence of this area needs to be complemented with operations in strategic domain for the deterrence to be effective. While China professes minimum deterrence and No First Use (NFU) unless attacked, it retains doctrinal leeway for 'launch on warning' or 'use under attack'. Military commanders along the Sino- Indian border need to incorporate this threat in doctrinal thinking. Further, to counter it, India needs to develop full spectrum deterrence by synergising conventional and strategic response. The resolve can be signalled

by clearly indicating red-lines, which in Kameng Sector would be 'well forward'.

Cyber and Electronic Warfare (EW). Operations in cyber and EW domain, though conducted in support of the operations of theatre or Corps, would be part of integrated cyber and EW operations at national level executed through the Cyber Agency (or Command, when raised). Appropriate target lists would need to be prepared akin to the lists for degradation operations. The formations would be required to prepare themselves to switch from cyber to physical conflict domain should the situation so develop. These aspects would need to be incorporated in the operational directives and operating procedures.

Battle of Perceptions. Border States like Arunachal Pradesh are prone to being targeted by inimical neighbours in battles of perception (Information Warfare). This can be done by generating a perceived sense of discrimination / deprivation. There are many issues related to infrastructure, employment, tribal status etc. which can be exploited to lower the faith in government. It is, therefore, imperative for the government and local formations to lay adequate emphasis on the aspect of 'battle of perceptions' (Information Warfare), more during peace than actual conflict.

Conclusion

From the ongoing stand-off between the Indian Army and PLA in Ladakh it is evident that China is signalling its geopolitical intent to restrain and intimidate India by forcible alteration of the LAC. Recent developments also rule out an early border settlement and suggest prospects of continued tensions. Spilling over of this to the Eastern Theatre, where Kameng Sector presents most significant politico-military objectives, is a distinct possibility. This calls for revisiting the past which has left permanent scars on India's 'national psyche' (perspective towards China). This article suggests that the Indian posture in this sector is adequate not only for its defence but to even carry the offensive back into the Chinese territory, ostracising the Ghost of Namka Chu, and perhaps even of Sumdorong Chu.

Endnotes

¹ Hemant Krishan Singh and Arun Sahgal, "A Moment of Reckoning", DPG Policy Brief , Vol. V, Issue 24, Delhi Policy Group, June 21, 2020.

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⁴ Haidar Suhasini. China doubles down on claims on eastern Bhutan boundary. The Hindu. July 06, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/days-after-demarche-china-doubles-down-on-claims-on-eastern-bhutan-boundary/article31993470.ece>

⁵ Source: Mapcarta https://mapcarta.com/Sakteng_Wildlife_Sanctuary

⁶ Op.cit. Kalha.

⁷ Claude Arpi. The Sumdorong Chu Incident: a strong Indian stand. May 04, 2013. Indian Defence Review.

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¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ New division of Army on India-China border. DNA. July 2, 2010. <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-new-division-of-army-on-india-china-border-1404108>