

De-Ciphering Chinese Intent Behind 'Unilateral Decision to Change Status Quo at LAC' should be the Key to India's Military Response and Follow-Up Strategy

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Abstract

Ever since 05 May 2020, when the Pangong Tso fracas became public, there has been an unending cacophony of news, views, critiques and suggestions. But after the loss of 20 Brave Hearts at Galwan, on the night 15/16 Jun, the Indian blood has been on the boil ! Recommendations spanning from hard-core punitive military action to soft diplomatic resolution have come forth from the academia and strategists. The Indian Government has since banned numerous Chinese apps, and imposed various economic checks, and the common public too has swung into action to shun everything Chinese. But, from what is gradually emerging, the recent intrusions and face offs, backed up by heavy force levels, are pre-meditated, deliberate, People's Liberation Army (PLA) military actions — with a definite aim. It would, therefore, be prudent that instead of knee-jerk response(s), the 'Chinese Intent' be first ascertained / deduced with sufficient clarity to tailor-make a response which not only thwarts its immediate military designs with minimal efforts but also obstructs its larger strategic goals. The article attempts to deduce the PLA's immediate Military Aim(s) and Chinese Intent, and then suggests India's military response and follow up strategy.

What could be PLA's immediate Military Aim(s) and Chinese Intent?

China, one of the oldest and vibrant civilisations of the world, not being able to digest the century of humiliation (1840 – 1945) suffered at the hands of the British and Japanese, has long harboured a dream to re-emerge as the Middle Kingdom to rule over the world. And, to ensure fruition of this ambition, successive Chinese leaders, commencing from Dr Sun Yat Sen in 1924 to Xi Jinping now, ensured ‘continuity of strategic thought and plans’¹ over the past century to make China reach the penultimate pedestal in world rankings, with the required military and economic muscle, to now make the final push for being the foremost superpower.

As regards India, China’s stratagem based on Mao Zedong’s statement, endorsed by Deng Xiaoping, stating that ‘Tibet is the palm of China, and Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and NEFA are its fingers’², appears to be continuing to guide the Chinese strategy. And in Ladakh, with Aksai Chin and Shaksgam Valley already occupied, and reports of increasing Chinese presence in areas of Gilgit Baltistan in the name of China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China may finally be eyeing whole of Ladakh, or at least Eastern Ladakh up to Indus River, as its western boundary. However, there are some chinks in the Chinese armour.

The Chinese Weaknesses

Any global power needs freedom on land, in sea, air and space to freely project and exercise its military power to secure its strategic and economic interests across the globe. While China has sufficient freedom in air and space, because of its geography, its freedom on land and in sea is highly restricted.

Land Frontier

China has a land frontier of about 22,117 km, the longest any single country has in the world.³ However, the following geographical realities severely restrict the utility of land avenues:

- Out of the 14 neighbours, eight countries are totally land-locked, viz. Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Laos, which naturally cannot provide further access to any desired destination directly.

- The balance six neighbours, viz. North Korea, Russia, Pakistan, India, Myanmar and Vietnam, have access to open seas. Passage through North Korea and Vietnam to sea is not required as these are adjacent to Chinese coastline. Russian access is again of little use as it is largely oriented to Arctic North. That leaves only three useful land neighbours, viz. Pakistan, India and Myanmar.
- Since India has boundary dispute and Myanmar is still not relenting (on Kyaukpyu port), China has had only Pakistan to look forward to and has, accordingly, put everything behind CPEC to make it successful.
- CPEC can be the only alternate access available to China, if it is blocked on its eastern seaboard. However, this corridor suffers a major drawback due to closure of Khunjerab Pass for almost five months in a year, from December to April, due to heavy snow.

Sea Frontier

China has a total sea frontage of about 14,500 km.⁴ However, its freedom for naval operations is again highly restricted:

- The Yellow Sea is almost blocked by the Korean Peninsula in the North and Kyushu Island of Japan in the East.
- The East China Sea is blocked on the East by Japanese Islands of Kyushu and Ryukyu, and in the South East by Taiwan.
- The South China Sea is hemmed in by Vietnam in the West, Philippines in the East and by the Indonesian and Malaysian archipelagos in the South. It is, possibly, for this reason that China wants to secure various natural and artificial islands in this area to create a buffer for its mainland.
- China's most important sea passage to the South suffers a bottleneck at the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar Straits, and then faces surveillance from Indian

Islands of Andaman and Nicobar, before it has clear access to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

- These sea passages, even if secured, would require multiple Logistic Support Bases enroute. Hence the Chinese quest to secure various ports/bases, viz. Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Gwadar in Pakistan and Djibouti in Africa. Its hunt for newer locations, especially in Africa, continues. Only one sea passage for an emerging global power, that too with so many constrictions, is definitely inadequate for its strategic needs.

New Emerging / Anticipated Threats

With India being vocal in its claims to Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), Gilgit, Baltistan and Aksai Chin in 2019 (at the time of abrogating Article 370 and subsequent creation and de-lineation of the Union Territories (UTs) of J&K and Ladakh), China would definitely be worried on following two counts:

- **CPEC.** Any physical attempt by India to regain Pakistan occupied areas will directly impact availability and functionality of CPEC.
- **Chinese National Highway (G 219).** G 219⁵ is a lifeline for Tibet from both western (Xinjiang) and eastern (Sichuan) ends. From Karghalik in North to Shiquanhe in South i.e. through its entire stretch in Aksai Chin in between, G 219 is a solitary axis with no alternate connectivity through any other road, and, therefore, its blockage / disruption in Aksai Chin can be a major strategic vulnerability. Moreover, it is from this vulnerable patch of G 219 in Aksai Chin, five westwards lateral roads have been developed to the Line of Actual Control (LAC), viz. to Depsang Plains (areas of PP 10, 11, 11A, 12 & 13), Galwan Valley (PP 14), Hot Springs / Gogra (PP 15 & 17A), Pangong Tso North Bank (till Finger 4) and Pangong Tso South Bank (almost till opposite of Finger 4, and where an additional road from Rutog to Spanggur-Chushul also exists). As per rough estimations from various maps, the length of all these axes is varying

between 100 to 125 km (in addition, Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) itself is only about 10 km west of LAC, and the crow flight distance from DBO to Karakoram Pass is also about 10 km only).⁶ The military capability and sustainability of all these five axes has been well proven by the current Chinese build up to the LAC. Initially (from 1962 to early 2000s), a comparatively weaker India was hesitant to carry out border area developments near the LAC fearing Chinese usage during any hostility. However, now the resolve of a stronger India to develop air and all weather multiple road connectivity to LAC in Ladakh, (especially activation of DBO airstrip, near completion of Darbuk–Shyok-DBO (DSDBO) road and even some of its eastwards connectivity across River Shyok towards LAC), is bound to raise apprehensions in China because they see the roads as a threat and not as long overdue developmental activity.

PLA's Probable Immediate Military Aim(s)

The above mentioned geographical constraints, and related security needs, are pushing China to lay claims in the East China and South China Seas and in areas of Ladakh adjacent to its corridors on land.

The One Belt One Road (OBOR) project, now known as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, a venture with masked strategic dimensions⁷, is primarily aimed at securing land corridors with discrete priority accorded for access into the Arabian Sea at Gwadar through Pakistan, and into Bay of Bengal through Myanmar (through Kyaukpyu, whenever feasible). Moreover, with continuing pressures for independence of Tibet, and fresh traction gaining prominence regarding atrocities on Uyghurs in Xinjiang, China would also naturally be concerned about strategic connectivity of these volatile areas at the time of fresh emerging situations. So logically both, security of CPEC and G 219 naturally emerge as strategic priorities. And, since there would be numerous opponents to Chinese claims on the eastern seaboard and it could lead to long drawn hostilities, it makes pure military sense to first secure a backdoor land corridor for sustenance.

An aggressive PLA action in eastern Ladakh could address all concerns and requirements together, viz. give PLA a chance to recce and practice mobilisation into Aksai Chin up to the LAC, study and upgrade defensive and logistic layouts along all five axes, push as far forward astride LAC as possible to lay fresh claims or gain territory, gain vantage positions to overlook DSDBO road to make it redundant during operations, and, in the bargain, secure G 219 and impose caution on India. Pakistan, which is now almost a vassal state of China, too could be easily roped in to facilitate this operation by not only remaining on guard for 'Indian occupied territories' and further facilitating Chinese ingress into Gilgit-Baltistan in the name of securing CPEC, but more importantly to announce to India that hereafter, because of commonality of interests, both China and Pakistan will stand together to militarily defend territorial aspects related to erstwhile state of J&K, raising a spectre of a 'Two Front War' to deter India.

Since 2013, China has been facing an ever-increasing resistance from India to its 'Salami Slicing' tactics. And, with the enhanced pace of border area development by India, and its ever improving international stature, the PLA seems to perceive that only an early operation (of strategic land grab) may succeed. Learning from Doklam that India may use force to resist Chinese designs in future, Chinese PLA has, this time, come well prepared with adequate strength, back up reserves and ready for a long haul. So as step 1, PLA, as per a pre-meditated surprise plan, has moved in at the beginning of the campaigning season under the ruse of an ongoing exercise, unilaterally changed the status quo at LAC abrogating all previous agreements, and has secured areas right up to their perception of the LAC, gaining local tactical advantages all across. Going back on disengagement terms agreed upon during the meeting of 06 Jun 2020, and bringing in special troops in to the Galwan area leading to a face off on night 15/16 Jun, could also be a pre-planned affair to gauge Indian resolve and create an excuse for lengthy negotiation processes to have an alibi for continuing the stay at LAC.

Later, agreeing only for phased disengagement (or just giving its semblance) but retaining / increasing force levels in the rear areas, mobilisation of Pakistani Reserve Forces into Gilgit-Baltistan areas and reports of Chinese aircrafts landing in Skardu including

H-6 bombers in Tibet) reasonably point towards a likely Chinese design (with direct / indirect collusivity of Pakistan) to possibly make a push for securing territory in Galwan and Depsang areas later in the campaigning season. Even if planned operations are somehow not possible to progress this year, largely due to growing international support for India, PLA could remain content with present gains, lie low and launch afresh in Mar / Apr 2021 by when China may be able to dilute the happenings on eastern seaboard and change (or negate) the international sway. This land grab could either be a part of its larger ploy to connect to Pakistan over a wider land corridor (connect Gilgit Baltistan to Aksai Chin) or an initial step to grab entire Ladakh.

The perception in some quarters that China is only undertaking an action of 'Coercive Diplomacy' to make India retract from anti-China actions, viz. declaring new UTs of J&K and Ladakh, laying claims to Aksai Chin, Gilgit, Baltistan and PoK, supporting World Health Organisation (WHO) inquiry on COVID-19, and joining of US led Quad, is a big fallacy. PLA, the world's second largest Army with massive resources, will not undertake a planned offensive posture against India just to retreat later on a verbal assurance from India that it will behave in future. We need to remember that the Chinese, who are so sensitive to Mianzi (meaning 'keeping Face'), may never venture into any empty rhetoric. And, also need to recall that Chinese planning for this operation probably started around 2006 when a Google Image showed a 1:500 Model of Aksai Chin area created in Yinchuan (capital of Ningxia Autonomous Region)⁸ for practice by PLA.

Probable Chinese Intent

By this purported PLA achievement, the following Chinese strategic aims may be facilitated which are in sync with the much talked about Chinese intent of teaching India a lesson and relegating it to a subordinate position in the Asian power structure (thereby enabling China to compete unhindered with USA for the global leadership):

- The CPEC will be secured for posterity as no outside power would ever come physically to fight India's land battles with China and Pakistan, across LAC and Line of Control (LoC) respectively, and India alone will never be

able to militarily win back these areas. It would later also facilitate re-alignment of CPEC to an all-weather route meeting the requirement of China. It would, thus, deny India a major leverage against China in the long run.

- It would secure Gilgit, Baltistan and PoK for Pakistan, and would thereby naturally facilitate a tighter strategic embrace of Pakistan. Even continued occupation of Siachen Glacier by India may then become untenable.
- It would militarily disgrace India, give an image-makeover to PLA, and China would still continue to have strong leverages over India across LAC in the Middle and Eastern sectors.
- If India has to continuously be on the back foot to China, Nepal and Bhutan may, over time, acquiesce to Chinese demands as a fait accompli. The Tibetan Government-in-Exile may also lose faith and momentum.
- Lastly, and most importantly, having lost its main territorial leverage against China in Ladakh and J&K, India may gradually lose its importance from being counted as an important country in the western designs for 'containing China', which could then lead to side-lining of India from both Western and Eastern alliances / groupings.

India's Military Response and Follow-up Strategy

India's Military Response

The Indian Armed Forces, in their current state, can definitely give a bloody nose to the PLA in a short confrontation, in a chosen area. However, considering the challenges of ongoing corona pandemic, a foreseeable economic downturn and the possibility of Pak collusivity, an all-out confrontation could best be avoided. Judging from the PLA activities and response, which has unfolded till now, the following may be the best military response during the ongoing disengagement process:

- Maintain eyeball to eyeball deployment with PLA in Eastern Ladakh and maintain sufficient reserves to thwart any PLA attempt to gain territory towards CPEC.

- Strengthen Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), and build up matching resources wherever PLA or Pakistan Army brings in additional troops and support elements. Also keep track of any PLA and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) move into Pakistan occupied areas.
- Maintain preventive deployment all along LAC and LoC to avoid any loss of territory.
- Maintain sufficient reserves in critical areas of Central and Eastern sectors, viz. Siliguri Corridor, to deny any bargaining chip to China in case of a limited show down. Rather, some plans need to be kept ready for quid pro quo too.
- Make adequate logistic preparations to support forward deployments through the winters, to avoid getting surprised as the same may definitely be maintained by the PLA along LAC and Pak Army along the LoC.
- Utilise the current favourable international opinion for making up all deficiencies and requirements of military hardware on a fast track basis and may create a reserve for a few years as this situation is likely to prevail.

China is known for its 'two steps forward and one step back' policy during negotiations. Therefore, any reneging on reversion to status quo ante, in totality, should be taken as an act of continuing aggression, and dealt with accordingly. Being content with mere disengagement at the face off points will tantamount to accepting and giving tactical ascendancy to PLA in these strategic areas, lowering of morale of Indian Army, and making their positions untenable, and also negating years of efforts taken to develop strategic communications to safeguard our territory.

Conclusion

International relations are always energised and guided by congruity of 'National Interests'. Fortunately today, while facing the Chinese onslaught, India is well placed with US and other major players who too are equally concerned and impacted by Chinese aggressions. Having stemmed the PLA tide in Eastern Ladakh just

in time and with military help now pouring in from all corners, India needs to take concrete, pro-active, steps to stop China from continuing to pursue its' designs. The following are felt to be the minimum essential during the short term:

- Add to military capacity on priority.
- Retain the emerging leverages of threat to CPEC and G 219 (and fan the Tibet leverage too as required).
- Bring to bear all diplomatic and economic pressures (both national and international) at the ongoing parleys with China to insist and force PLA to revert to status quo ante in toto and agree to delineate LAC in an earliest specified timeframe, to acquit itself honourably from the tag of a 'Revisionist and Expansionist Power'.
- Streamline operational responsibility along active borders by placing Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) under operational control of Indian Army).

Peace and harmony on the frontiers is the basic requirement for sustained growth of any nation. Since a powerful China will only respect a strong India, India needs to quickly build capacity in these favourable times and then use all the leverages to bargain for mutual accommodation on equal terms. There is a definite need to stem perpetual 'military confrontations' in the region and change focus to 'development and well-being of masses' by ushering in mutual faith and boosting healthy intra-regional trade.

Endnotes

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⁸ Lt Gen P C Katoch, SPS Land Forces Issue 2/2013, Anatomy of China's DBO Intrusion (Accessed on 09 Jul 2020 from <http://spslandforces.com/story/?id=251&h=Anatomy-of-Chinas-DBO-Intrusion>)

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