

## Déjà vu Standoffs in Eastern Ladakh

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### Abstract

*This article is derived from contents on the blog of the author titled 'Cavalier's Take' which was also carried on the USI of India's Strategic Perspectives as a shorter article titled 'Catching up With the Dragon: A Personal Account'. The author gives details of the nature of standoffs in Eastern Ladakh based upon his intimate knowledge of the terrain and handling the 2013 standoff in the Depsang Plains area. He explains the terrain, the Chinese intent and gives recommendations for the future. He ends by stating that in wake of the current standoff, which saw more violence than ever before, China should be aware of the reality that India's China policy is increasingly confident to meet the challenges, posed by the Dragon, on its own.*

### Introduction

**A**t close to mid-day on 15 April 2013, the author, who was then

General Officer Commanding (GOC) 14 Corps at Leh, was informed about the Chinese transgression at Raki Nala in the Depsang sector. No sooner had all the immediate military counter measures and reporting drills been done that the full weight and glare of the Indian media was focussed on the area. Since the area of the transgression was located in the 'No Thoroughfare' zone for civilians, media was not permitted to go beyond Leh. Many reporters, who arrived at Leh despite knowing this, had to be picked up at the airport itself and lodged in hotels. This in no way mellowed their enthusiasm, zeal and zest. Soon the media started claiming live coverage from forward areas which were otherwise out of bounds for them. They were showing old video clips of army convoy movement including artillery guns being staged forward etc. Fast forward to 2020, as soon as reports on the Chinese

transgression in the Pangong Tso, Galwan Valley and Hot Spring areas had been confirmed, the reporting on the existing operational situation in the Galwan Valley by our media started on similar lines as it had done in 2013. So many variations of the terrain dynamics were given by anchors from various TV channels that comprehension for the lay person became extremely difficult. This article attempts to give a clearer picture.

### **Chinese Chequers**

Contrary to popular belief, 'Chinese Chequers' is not a Chinese game. It is a game of German origin called 'Sternhalma'—renamed to 'Chinese Chequers' as a marketing ploy in the USA. The ploy worked. The Chinese, intrigued by the name, also learnt it calling it 'Tiaoqi' (Jump Chess). The game involves moving all your 10 pieces fastest to the opposite side jumping over opposing pieces where possible. This is not too different from the mobilisation that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) practises, moving formations over long distances on their well-developed road and rail infrastructure in Tibet. This is what the Chinese did in 2020. Reportedly, they stepped up two Mechanised divisions from closer areas and two more from as far away as 2000 km.<sup>1</sup> It may not be out of context to state that the Chinese are capable of starting a conflict with reasons and logic that suits them. Therefore, most are kept guessing on their motives and intentions in this game of Chinese Chequers. Whatever be their aim for the present adventure, they apparently have a far bigger agenda this time around. The simultaneous transgressions in a number of areas bear witness to this fact.

The standoff in 2013, however, was localised with limited troops. There was no aggression from either side, despite soldiers from the two armies standing guard merely 50 meters apart by day and by night at an altitude of approximately 16000 ft above mean sea level. The author can state with personal knowledge that our troops fared far better — mentally, emotionally and physically. Unlike the PLA, the Indian Army never had men falling sick with cold, cough and fever. Nor did they exhibit fear of being ambushed at night, unlike the PLA who would use search lights which lit the sky for most part of the night.

In the 2013 standoff, the professional courtesy at the battalion level between the two armies was heartening and reassuring. The battalion commanders could ask for a meeting at the Border Personnel Meeting (BPM) hut at any time of the day or night and it was always honoured. One night during the standoff, there was a call from Delhi that something urgent was required to be known from the Chinese side. This call came at 2.30 am and the requirement was conveyed to the Chinese battalion commander immediately. Needless to state that our request was honoured with the desired urgency. This time, the Chinese intent is definitely more malicious. The multiple transgressions, large strength of troops, weapon resources, creation of infrastructure including defence works at various places and, above all, the brutal physical offensiveness was glaring and disturbing. It may be prudent to deduce that this time the Chinese motive is an amalgam of military and diplomatic issues. The Chinese wanted to coerce India over infrastructure development and force accretion in Ladakh. They also intend to convey their displeasure on our stance on the Belt and Road Initiative (RI); statements with regard to Aksai Chin post abrogation of Article 370, and supporting the move to hold China accountable for suppressing information of the Covid-19 outbreak.

### **The Areas of Conflict**

There are distinct areas in Eastern Ladakh which can be exploited by the Chinese with offensive intent. All these avenues commence from the Western Highway (NH 129), located further east of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). To the extreme North lies the Sub Sector North (SSN) which includes Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) and the Karakoram Pass.

Depsang Plains is a high-altitude plateau with average height of 16000 feet, yet it is conducive for the employment of mechanised forces. The area South of Depsang Plains and North of Pangong Tso is characterised by narrow ingress valleys along small rivers / *nalas* which meet the Shyok. These include Galwan, Raki etc. The confluence of Galwan with Shyok is vital and needs to be held with adequate strength, failing which the Darbuk-Shyok-DBO (DSDBO) road can get threatened by ready domination and may, thus, cut off the land route to SSN through the Shyok valley. Thus, the Sasoma - Murgo road across the Karakoram Range becomes vital and needs to be completed at the earliest.

In the area Pangong Tso-Lukung, Fingers 1 to 8 are located on the Northern banks of the lake and the road along this bank starts from Finger 5 and runs eastwards to meet the Western Highway.



Map 1 - The Depsang Plains- Galwan Valley Area<sup>2</sup>



Map 2 - The Galwan – Shyok Confluence<sup>3</sup>



Map 3 - Area Fingers, Chushul, Dungti and Demchok<sup>4</sup>

The Chinese had come with requisite preparations in the above area and now seem to have attained their tactical objectives at the Pangong Tso, leaving them with no hurry to restore status quo ante. Sirijap, located further east of Finger 8, was lost by us in 1962 but now they are claiming till Finger 5. Even after extensive disengagement talks, as of writing of this article they yet remain on Finger 5. Such salami slicing has been the hallmark of Chinese aggressiveness.

The area north of the lake is sensitive to them due to the ingress routes coming to these areas along roads and tracks emanating from the Western Highway; an Indian presence could interdict it. This time they have fortified their defences, sited on dominating Finger heights. Evicting them by using force would mean paying rather heavily for favourable results, thus, the situation could well result in a new status quo / realigned LAC. The Dragon has now got used to defying the laid down rules of engagement involving international protocols, thereby keeps changing its stance unilaterally even in cases where formal negotiations and agreements had been reached. Galwan, for instance, had never been disputed earlier and they are now claiming it to be theirs. It is high time that we put an end to such deplorable behaviour, unmindful of the cost.

### **Recommended Actions**

**Infrastructure Development.** We should continue with our infrastructure development as planned. DSDBO and Sasoma - Murgo roads are lifelines for our troops in SSN and must be completed soonest. Feeder roads going towards the LAC could always wait for a while. Vital road axes which are vulnerable to interdiction should be provided the requisite protection, even if certain areas have to be physically held. The criticality lies in the timely induction of our forces earmarked for SSN, including mechanised forces. Building up own forces in other areas of Eastern Ladakh is not as challenging as the one for SSN.

**Intelligence.** Unified intelligence inputs are essential for such formations, including aerial, space and ground-based resources which complement the desired area coverage, for timely decision making. We may need to review our operational philosophy to

include the desired force levels to be maintained for physical occupation of vital areas and these should be placed on the order of battle (orbat) of these formations.

**Quid Pro Quo (QPQ).** It may not be prudent to necessarily fight the enemy every time you encounter him. At times, it may be better to exercise the QPQ option. Therefore, QPQ can be undertaken in pre-selected options in Eastern Ladakh, or even in the other sectors, to pressure their vulnerabilities in response to such adventurism.

**Economic Measures.** Chinese rise towards superpower status is premised on its economic strength. Considering that the Chinese are creating turbulence for many nations around the world, it may be time for a collective economic boycott which should accrue overwhelming consequences for her. This would need widespread cooperation around the globe since the Chinese economy is the second largest in the world and growing.

**Status Quo Ante.** Finally, we must settle for the status quo ante as it existed in late April 2020. During this standoff, one is proud to notice the national unity, fervour, steadfastness, and the offensive intent. We must not forget the political constraints, and allied compulsions, in a democracy as compared to the communist system of governance. The Chinese must be conveyed in persistent and unequivocal terms on the requirement for a mutually acceptable border delineation or else to maintain status quo ante.

## **Conclusion**

It is quite possible that the situation in Eastern Ladakh may not attain status quo ante even after the onset of winters. Even if it does, such 'incursions', 'transgressions', and clashes are déjà vu along the disputed Sino-Indian boundary. The border agreements of 1996 and 2005<sup>5</sup>, between India and China, prohibiting the use of firearms during face-offs seems to have been seriously eroded post the current tensions. Consequently, the chances of a future armed clash escalating have since risen, unless new bilateral military confidence-building measures (CBMs) are put into place with a new agreement. At the moment that seems unlikely. China's India policy is slowly becoming more aggressive to stymie India's rise. It, however, has to keep in mind that its aggressiveness, which is also

a consequence of improvement of Indo-US strategic relations, could drive India deeper into a strategic alliance with the US. China should also be more aware of the reality that even on its own, India's China policy is increasingly confident to meet the challenges posed by the Dragon.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mandeep Singh Bajwa, "Chinese order of battle in Aksai Chin: What are we up against?", The Indian Express, Jun 11, 2020. Accessed Aug 10, 2020 from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/chinese-order-of-battle-in-aksai-chin-what-are-we-up-against-6500207/>

<sup>2</sup> Blog *Cavalier's Take*, "Blow Hot, Blow Cold for Mech Forces", Accessed Aug 11, 2020 from <https://cavalierstake.wordpress.com/>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Salient details of these agreements are given in a subsequent article in this issue of the USI Journal.

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*Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CL, No. 621, July-September 2020.