

Fifty Years After the 1962 Debacle

Lieutenant General S Patabhiraman,
PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM (Retd)*

Introduction

There has recently been, a debate in informed circles of how five decades after the humiliating defeat in the 1962 War with China, the Indian state and particularly the Indian Armed Forces stand with regard to facing upto China again, particularly the PLA(Army), should a confrontation be thrust upon India; given the growing asymmetry between a resurgent China and PLA on the one hand and the niggardly progress on modernisation of the Indian Armed Forces and poor state of infrastructure on our northern borders. I shall put forth for consideration certain pointers towards a rational understanding of the current state of India-China relations from the stand point of a possible worsening of relations leading to a military confrontation.

Past Legacy and the Unresolved Border Problem

For most of us, the underlying causes that led to the unpreparedness of the Indian Army to adequately defend its northern borders against China, the latter's full scale attacks against Kameng Sub-division and Walong in the eastern sector of the India-Tibet border and against Chushul / Ladakh in the western sector and the resultant humiliation suffered in the month long war are well known. The plethora of articles in the print media including in premier English magazines such as *India Today*, *The Week* and the *Outlook* commemorating the 50 years after, have once again brought the focus on late Pandit Nehru's ill advised (by Mr Krishna Menon, the then Defence Minister) order to the Army to establish forward posts and throw out the Chinese from the unilaterally declared border, as having been responsible for the debacle that followed. The failure of the higher military leadership of the time in not being able to firmly advise the Government of

*Lieutenant General S Patabhiraman, PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM (Retd) was commissioned into the Corps of Engineers on 25 December 1966 and is also a paratrooper. He retired as Vice Chief of Army Staff on 31 December 2006. After retirement, he was consultant to DRDO for two years. The General was appointed to the Armed Forces Tribunal Chennai Bench on 22 June 2009 and retired from there in Dec 2011.

executing such an order against sound military judgement is also well known. Amongst numerous articles that have been written recently on the subject, the ones by Mr BG Verghese¹ and Lieutenant General Sinha² provide great insight into how the infamous trio of Mr Menon, Mr GB Mullick and Lieutenant General Kaul helped Pandit Nehru in precipitating the crisis leading to the debacle.

This time around a redeeming feature has been the official recognition granted to nearly 3000 officers and men who laid down their lives in the war, doing their duty against impossible odds. The most telling example of course was the laying down the lives, after fighting to the last man and last round, by 114 men of "C" Company of 13 KUMAON at Rezang-La in the Chushul / Ladakh sector.

Another example of redoubtable courage of launching perhaps the only recorded attack on Chinese positions was at Walong in the eastern most sector of the Indo-Tibet border. Details of gallant actions on part of the Indian Army at places where we stood our ground as also the background to the 1962 battle have been revisited in a detailed manner by Mr Shekhar Gupta in the Indian Express³ Newspaper and by Major General Raj Mehta, AVSM (Retd) in the Sentinel magazine.⁴ What then is the legacy?

Very briefly, the formation of Peoples Republic of China in 1949, was followed up by Mao Tse Tung in annexing Tibet in 1951. India under Nehru accepted Tibet to be a part of China in return for cementing everlasting friendship with the new Chinese republic and coined the phraseology of *Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai* as the foundation of friendly relations between the two new post World War II neighbouring Asian republics. Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959, was granted asylum in India and many generations of Tibetans have since been assimilated in India without official nationality status. Pandit Nehru's penchant for grandstanding on the international stage on the platform of non-aligned grouping of nations and disdain for what he considered a fledgeling Communist state of China made him overnight issue orders to unilaterally firm up India's border with China and Tibet along inherited but not demarcated lines. In the Western Sector also known as the Ladakh Sector, it ran along the watershed of the Kunlun mountains and in the Eastern Sector it followed the McMahon line. The Chinese, on grounds of their representative not being a signatory to the 1913-14 Shimla Convention presided by Sir Henry McMahon, never

agreed to the then British proposal. On the other hand, in the Western Sector China put forth its own claim line to substantiate its de-facto occupation of areas running south and east from the Karakoram pass including vast tracts of the Aksai Chin plateau, strategically important to them as their western highway to Tibet runs through Aksai Chin. Aggressive diplomatic efforts by Nehru in having frequent meetings with Chinese premier Chou-in Lai did not have any effect and the Chinese in fact warned India in 1960 that India must not territorially alter the status quo on ground. But, a young Indian Nation perhaps buoyed up by the growing confidence in the post Independence Indian Army by its actions in the war with Pakistan in Kashmir in 1947-48, police type actions in Hyderabad in 1948 and Goa in 1960, performance in Congo in 1960 as part of the UN mandated force and having successfully formed a part of the international armistice and truce arrangements after the Korean War in 1953, unwisely asked the unprepared Army to move forward and establish posts without tactical consideration and defend them against all cannons of military wisdom.

The Army under General PN Thapar and a politically favoured Lieutenant General Kaul obeyed these orders and the Chinese with their warnings unheeded, launched offensives in three sectors, initially, against Kameng and Walong in the East on 20 October 1962 and thereafter against Chushul in the West. After conducting a month long campaign, the Chinese unilaterally announced ceasefire and withdrawal back to its starting positions, except in Ladakh, on 21 November 1962. The politically and emotionally charged atmosphere was such that India failed to consider using the Indian Air Force offensively despite having numerous airfields and landing grounds close to the border as disused ones since World War II. The Chinese had little infrastructure to support air operations in Tibet. Notwithstanding the humiliating defeat, the boundary question remains unresolved till today. China has solved its land boundary disputes with all its neighbours except, India and Bhutan. Even though India lost the war, the patriotic fervour generated in the generation of young men of the late 1950s and early 60s has been of great benefit to the Armed Forces particularly, in the officer cadre resulting in commissioning of a large number of officers in the Emergency Commission (EC) and Short Service (SS) streams, apart from Regulars who did the Nation proud in the successful wars of 1965 and 1971 against Pakistan.

Five Decades After Border Management and Military Confidence Building Measures (CBMs)

China took advantage of India's situation resulting from the military defeat and negotiated a treaty with Pakistan in 1963 for the latter to cede to China a 5180 sq kms⁵ swath of territory of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) in Shaksgam valley adjacent to Sinkiang province. India could only lodge a protest. This was followed up by China building the Karakoram highway over Kunjerab pass to connect Kashgar in Xingiang to Gilgit region in POK. The Indian Army which ordered an internal inquiry into its worst defeat, very quickly ordered massive reorganisation and training. New mountain divisions were raised and equipped rapidly with Soviet military hardware. The war in fact set the stage for modernisation of all three wings of the Armed Forces that helped us fight the next war creditably in 1965 and the next one in 1971 with greater finesse. With China we did well in a stand-off in Nathu-La in Sikkim in 1967, weathered the Chinese protests over grant of statehood to Sikkim; and in 1986, in the Tawang Sector, matched a Chinese attempt at establishment of a new camp at a place called Wangdung with rapid build-up of own troops on the heights surrounding the camp. This was followed up by the Army adopting a well planned defensive strategy in strengthening of our defences all along the (Line of Actual Control) LAC.

The Chinese took notice of the strong and effective Indian responses and this set the stage for thawing of tensions on the border helped by a pathbreaking visit by Mr Rajiv Gandhi as the Prime Minister. Subsequently, in the time of Mr Narasimha Rao and later Mr Vajpayee, diplomatic efforts further yielded to a decision to appoint special emissaries in the form of National Security Adviser (NSA) and a high ranking Chinese counterpart to discuss and resolve the boundary issue. Pending that, the militaries were given freedom of action to put in place a slew of CBMs to include regular border meetings, exchange of greetings on national days, exchange of high level delegations and joint training at lower level of troops. The CBMs are working well and help in diffusing tension in awkward face-off situations. Both India and China try and avoid occurrence of any awkward situation. However, the LAC being subject to each other's perceptions, a potential for a conflagration is always there.

Bilateral Engagement in Trade, Education and Multifarious Areas

Bilateral trade between India and China is likely to touch US \$ 100 billion by 2015. Exchange of people to people and travel is to the tune of five lakhs Indians and one lakh Chinese in a year. Common ground in multinational forums, such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) and otherwise competition for resources and investments in Africa, and elsewhere provide for constructive engagement between the two countries. The recent visit by former President Kalam at the invitation of China Forum, a State Institution, is an example of growing exchanges in science and technology. All this precludes any sudden worsening of relations.

Growing Asymmetry

As part of its assertiveness in the last decade, Chinese official military spending increased from US \$ 30 billion in 2000 to US \$180 billion in 2012. India on the other hand, is to spend only US \$ 41 billion in 2012. China has undertaken phenomenal accretion in force levels in the military districts in Tibet and neighbouring province of Sichuan, and in capacity building of all weather airfields and logistics installations in Tibet. Railway line to Lhasa, itself an incredible feat is being extended to Shigatse, North of Sikkim. All weather four lane roads connect the highways in Tibet to their Border Regiment camps and have been extended by all weather motorable roads to the Indian border in all the sectors. As against this, Indian Armed Forces (particularly the Army), suffer from lack of modernisation and prognosis for future looks bleak. Infrastructure development towards border is also delayed on account of environmental concerns and lack of seriousness on the part of the Central Government to coordinate efforts of concerned departments and ministries.

Doctrine and Force Restructuring

The official Chinese white paper on National Defence issued by China in 2004 had stated that the objective of the PLA was to win local wars under conditions of informationalisation.⁶ Development of weaponry and equipment, building joint operational capabilities and making full preparation in battlefield effectiveness were priority areas. Holding of exercises in the Tibetan plateau at altitudes of 5000 m involving tanks, mechanised infantry, paratroopers,

helicopters and fighter aircraft have been reported since 2008. Adoption of a War Zone concept to synergise command of troops in more than one Military Region (having two or more Group Armies which are equivalent to our Corps) and committal of three tiers of troops to deal with an escalatory situation on the borders has been publicised to great effect. Rapid reaction units (regiment size) are permanently stationed in Tibet and rapid reaction formations (RRFs), either of a brigade or a division size are available to be moved from elsewhere.

Sino-Pak Collusion

Despite frequent attacks on Chinese personnel in restive Baluchistan province of Pakistan the all-weather friendship between China and Pakistan continues to flourish. Gwadar-Pasni naval base stands completed, Karakoram highway is being widened to four-lane specifications and survey work on a parallel railway line is underway. Presence of PLA troops in POK for guarding Chinese or Chinese assisted infrastructure projects is no longer a secret. Supply of military hardware by China to Pakistan at friendship rates continues unabated and programmes related to joint development of aircraft, tanks, missiles and transfer of nuclear technology are being systematically upgraded. The Uighur/East Turkmenistan militant movements in the restive Xinjiang province are being put down ruthlessly by the Chinese Interior ministry troops, dismissing Pakistan based militant support as a mere irritant. Deceitful occupation of a portion of J&K (as mentioned earlier in the text) with Pakistan's complicity in 1963 by way of an illegal treaty has been systematically buttressed by China in its policy of building-up Pakistan as a potential threat to India. On our part, we will have to factor in the dimensions of this collusive support depending on prevalent geo-political and geo-strategic situation at the time of any worsening of relations with China.

Does China have any Intention to Go to War?

There is no reason for China to go to war with India. Given the close engagement at multifarious levels between the two countries there is little likelihood of a *casus belli*. They already have what they want in Aksai Chin and in POK (Shaksgam). The question then arises; as to why is it that China, with little intention to go to war with India, is enhancing multifold PLA's high altitude specific

force levels in Tibet and is engaged in capacity building of infrastructure in terms of airfields, logistics areas and communications, in both Lanzhou and Chengdu military regions bordering India? Answer perhaps lies in the stated aim of fighting a modern war with high technology. This would mean capacity building to prepare for all possible contingencies from handling a minor stand-off involving border patrols or an accidental shooting in the high seas or in the air or to a border skirmish or an escalating diplomatic row. Teaching a lesson at an appropriate time could be referred to as waging war by other means. Geopolitical and strategic posturing may call for being able to calibrate responses to emerging situations. In order to be able to ratchet up the response, true deterrence lies in a credible 'threat in being' which is what China is building-up in Tibet and we can no longer adopt an ostrich like mentality and ignore this reality.

Possible Flash Points or Conflict Triggers?

Attempts by Indian oil companies to explore oil and gas, at the bidding of Vietnam in South China Sea, wherein the maritime boundaries between littoral states remain contentious are being objected to already by China which is extremely sensitive to any possible loss of influence in the numerous islands in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Given the friendly ties between Vietnam and India, this issue has the potential for escalation in the future.

An adverse border incident resulting from a face-off going wrong between border patrols of the ITBP / Indian Army and PLA border guarding troops, once again has scope for spiraling out of control, particularly since there is no mutual agreement on the LAC on ground.

Current Prognosis and Future Scenarios

Presently, we are at a disadvantage to confront China on level terms since our force levels including modernisation and infrastructure development are way behind schedule and unlikely to be made up even till 2022. We have, therefore, no other choice but to accelerate modernisation taking recourse to extraordinary political initiative and forging a consensus at national level to fast-track capacity building, overriding bureaucratic hurdles on a war footing.

Till such time we are in a position to effect our planned accretion in force levels and build-up the network of roads, railways, airfields and communications, we would have to rely on the following measures to deal with any emerging crisis situation;-

- (a) Carefully calibrate diplomatic response including placing reliance on the growing scope for military diplomacy, to any sign of rupture in the normal friendly relations with China.
- (b) Have a credible dissuasive policy and incrementally upgrade the same depending on emerging geo-strategic situation in our neighbourhood, particularly on our western borders and the Pakistan-Afghan border.
- (c) In the event of having to effect mobilisation take advantage of interior lines of communication for speeding up own deployment and deny logistics build-up to the Chinese operating on exterior lines of communication.

Finally, what about the boundary question? A recent comment attributed to official Chinese media saying that the border issue does not define the whole of the bilateral relationship and should not, therefore, affect the development of Sino-Indian relations is significant. Is this pacific statement meant to lower our guard against what has been perceived to be a hardening of the Chinese position on Arunachal Pradesh and Tawang as has appeared in the media in recent times and as demonstrated by China in its policy of denial of visa to Indians from the state of Arunachal Pradesh? More importantly, Chinese military capabilities in Tibet need to be watched carefully as intentions can change based on geo-strategic imperatives.

Conclusion

Irrespective of the progress or non-progress in the boundary talks and increased bilateral engagements between China and India, the Indian Armed Forces, particularly the Army can no longer ignore the growing asymmetry in the capacity to conduct operations between the PLA and the Indian military on our northern borders. The Government will have to be pushed into taking extraordinary steps to clear hurdles both in modernisation of all three wings of the military and in the build-up of planned infrastructure in our border areas neighbouring China. In any case, a robust military

capacity is the best insurance against sudden threats to national security or when national interests are endangered.

Endnotes

1. Book, *'50 Years After 1962 : A Personal Memoir'* by Mr BG Verghese (Then Assistant Editor and War Correspondent, the Times of India).
2. Two parts article titled *'The Himalayan Blunder'* by Lieutenant General SK Sinha, PVSM (Retd), former VCOAS and Governor, J&K as part of his regular feature articles as appeared in the Asian Age group of daily papers in Oct-Nov 2012.
3. Article titled *'1962, a Different Story'* by Shekhar Gupta, Editor-in-Chief, on 20 Oct 2012, Indian Express.
4. In the October 2012 issue of the Sentinal monthly magazine published from New Delhi.
5. Article titled *'India's North West, The New Great Game'* by Lieutenant General Kamalleshwar Davar, PVSM, AVSM, (Retd) appearing in USI Journal, Jul-Sep 2012.
6. *"China's National Defense in 2004"*, White Paper, at <http://english.people.com.cn/whitepaper/defense2004/defense2004.html>. See Chapter III, Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese Characteristics.