



Special to Express: ‘Two years after Chinese aggression in Eastern Ladakh, time to change the narrative’

There is a pressing requirement to have a single professional Rashtriya Border Guard by amalgamating central armed police forces, with the entire gamut of border management coming under the Army, and building partnerships is a strategic imperative to effectively checkmate future Chinese misadventures.

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China's sudden act of aggression in Eastern Ladakh was a sequel to the Galwan face-off on June 15, 2020. (Representational)

It was towards early May 2020 that the Chinese undertook a sudden act of aggression in Eastern Ladakh. From the timing and scale, it was evident that the operation was well planned with specific politico-military objectives. Although the Indian Army went in for swift counter-deployment, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), having secured the first-mover advantage, was well poised to engage in prolonged negotiations to consolidate the gains. Obviously, there was no breakthrough during the opening rounds of Corps Commanders-level talks as the Indian side lacked countervailing leverage.

It was as a sequel to the **Galwan face-off** on June 15, 2020 that the Chinese agreed to mutual disengagement at PP14, creating a buffer zone. The PLA delegation was once again adamant to move forward. The occupation of the Kailash Range by special forces on August 30, 2020 caught the PLA by surprise, forcing it to negotiate in the **Pangong Tso** area. Consequently, in February 2021, the Chinese withdrew to Finger 8 while Indian troops vacated the Kailash Range and pulled back to Finger 3. The intervening area between Fingers 8 and 3 was deemed a buffer zone.

Current impasse

While the disengagement process should have ideally been concurrent across all the friction points, intriguingly, a sectoral approach was adopted. The Changchenmo-Galwan sub-sector was taken up to give a push to the military talks. However, despite numerous follow-up rounds, the last being the fifteenth one held on March 12,

2022, there has been no breakthrough. Even the diplomatic exchanges between the defence and foreign ministers of the two nations have not yielded results.

The main reasons for the impasse is the tactical importance of the Changchenmo-Galwan area, home to multiple routes of ingress, via Kong La, along the Kugrang river-Changlung nalla—PP17/17 and through Jianan Pass-PP15/16 for undertaking operations. Incidentally, it was on October 21, 1959 that at Kong La, a Central Reserve Police Force patrol was ambushed by the Chinese Frontier Guards, killing 17 of our personnel and injuring a few others. This area saw bloody action again, on October 19/20, 1962. When attacked by the PLA, a company of 5 JAT deployed in the area of Galwan, Hot Spring and Tsogtsalu put up a heroic fight, leaving 32 dead and 36 injured or taken prisoners.

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As our troops had used some of the above approaches, particularly in the PP-15 area in 1962, for forward deployment, the PLA wants to deny the Indian Army launch pads for any future offensive actions. Hence, it is insisting on creating a buffer zone between PP15 and 16, a stretch of almost 25-30 km, which India has rightly opposed. More so as Hot Spring- PP15 was never disputed earlier by the PLA. With respect to PP 17 A, an understanding has been reached, with both sides agreeing not to patrol this area. As regarding Depsang, where the PLA has transgressed beyond the PP10-PP13 patrolling line; Chinese are unwilling even to discuss this sub-sector, contending that it predates the current standoff. In Demchok too, disengagement and patrolling issues remain unresolved.

The PLA, meanwhile, has gone in for a major infrastructure upgrade in Eastern Ladakh. A bridge across Pangong Tso in the area of the Khurnak Fort has reduced the distance between the PLA positions on the Northern Bank and the base at Rutog on the Southern side by around 150 km, cutting down movement time to barely three hours. Another strategic road connecting Tibet with Xinjiang-G 216 is under construction. The PLA’s game plan is to gradually push the **Line of Actual Control** westwards by creating buffer zones. Its negotiation strategy encompasses Three Nos—“No weakness, No concession, No defensive defence”.

Dragon’s grand design

Over the past two years, many important developments have taken place across the Chinese side of the LAC, opposite Arunachal Pradesh. During his maiden visit to Lhasa in July last year, Chinese President Xi Jinping gave directions to make Tibet a formidable shield. Alongside infrastructure development, the PLA has been moving troops closer to the LAC. The amended “Chinese defence law”, which came into force on January 1, 2021, empowers the state to mobilise manpower and resources to counter any threat to national security and “development interests”. It also lends itself to greater “military-civil fusion”, combining the defence and civilian resources for dual use. One of the key “military-civil fusion” initiatives is the creation of 640 model villages (xiaokang) in Tibet. These villages are envisaged to act as the border outpost, forming the first line of defence. One such village was reported to have come up in the Longju area.

China’s new “border law” came into effect on January 1 this year. Beijing has renamed 15 places in Arunachal Pradesh, which it deems to be South Tibet (Zang Nan). The new law seeks to legalise Chinese military incursions and transgressions by setting up boundary markers. While Beijing claims that it will abide by the existing treaties on the land borders, given its past record, it cannot be taken at face value.

China is increasingly employing a “three warfares strategy” (*San Zhong Zhanfa*) encompassing propaganda, psychological and legal warfare. This strategy is customised to the Chinese authoritarian system, as is evident from its payoffs in the South China Sea, where marine militia forces—referred to as “little blue men” complemented by the Chinese Coast Guard—are playing a key role in furthering Beijing’s strategic interests. Both during the Doklam standoff and the current standoff, the PLA has effectively employed the “three warfares strategy”. The LAC’s future profile is likely to be hybrid. The Chinese militia operating from Xiaokangs, duly supported by the PLA regular units, could be the “new normal”.

As per China’s Science of Military Strategy-2020, the PLA perceives that “competition continuum” (mixture of cooperation and competition below armed conflict) has widened and its strategic thinking favours compellence vis-à-vis coercion. The PLA’s strategy of “active defence” entails seizing a moral high ground and gaining

politico-diplomatic advantage to justify the “use of force to stop war”. Keeping disputes “hot and active” facilitates the communist leadership to achieve multiple objectives—raising the nationalism pitch at home, constraining adversaries and sensitising the international community to China’s concerns.

The crux of China’s India policy has been strategic containment and settlement of disputes on its own terms. Beijing seeks to delink the boundary dispute from bilateral relations. It has succeeded partially; despite the ongoing standoff, India-China trade in 2021 recorded an all-time high turnover of \$125.6 billion and trade surplus of \$69.4 billion in the latter’s favour.

Change the narrative

India’s China policy has been dictated more by expediency rather than long-term vision. Consequently, Delhi has been yielding ground to Beijing in the hope of a political settlement, which, ironically, has not happened. Of late, India’s stance towards China is indicating a shift, as is evident from the recent statement of External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar that there cannot be business as usual amid the border tension. Even the cold reception accorded to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang yi during his transit visit to India on March 26 is a case in point. It is time to sensitise Beijing that its “one-China policy” is contingent on the “one-India policy”.

India’s immediate concern is to thwart China’s aggressive design on the borders. General Manoj Pande, the new Army chief, has categorically stated that “no loss of territory along the India-China border will be permitted”. To this end, our traditional concept of border management requires a drastic makeover. The Chinese border-guarding force, the People’s Armed Police, is a homogeneous entity, operationally under the PLA. On the other hand, our border guarding agencies, central armed police forces including the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, are heterogeneous, inadequately trained and equipped, and controlled by the home ministry. There is a pressing requirement to have a single professional Rashtriya Border Guard by amalgamating central armed police forces, with the entire gamut of border management coming under the Army.

Besides, there is an urgent need to prepare a “national security policy” and formulate a “limited-hybrid war” doctrine in the realm of a “two-front” scenario entailing strategic rebalancing. The tri-service structures like the theatre commands, integrated logistics and state-of-art infrastructure are prerequisites towards war preparation and prevention. It is heartening that under the present government, these issues are being addressed on priority.

China’s aggressive stance towards India is primarily due to the glaring differential in the comprehensive national power (CNP). Addressing this asymmetry entails fast pace of economic growth, optimal utilisation of national resources, self-reliance and fine-tuning of institutional mechanisms. Building coalitions and partnerships is a strategic imperative to effectively checkmate future Chinese misadventures.

A tangible change in the situation on the LAC is unlikely given the Chinese policy of “what I occupy is mine”. Therefore, armed forces should not just stand firm but should also act firmly, duly backed by an audacious political leadership to safeguard the sovereignty and national interest of our country.

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