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Xi's bid to replicate Mao merits review to obviate past miscalculations

MAJOR GENERAL
D. GG DWIVEDI (RETD)

CHINESE THINKING since ancient times advocated the need of a conducive periphery, that is a 'subdued neighbourhood', to be an essential prerequisite for its prosperity. Communist leaders are known to have a deep understanding of their nation's history and tend to make comparisons between present and the past, driven by conviction: "Further you look back, farther you look ahead". Therefore,

Chinese President Xi Jinping's bid to replicate (Chairman) Mao Zedong's Aksai Chin play book some six decades later merits a review to obviate past miscalculations in defeating Dragon's misadventure.

Aksai Chin 1962-Mao's Game Plan

Henry Kissinger's book 'On China' begins with Mao briefing his top commanders on the eve of the 1962 war wherein he recalled that China and India had fought "one and half" wars earlier. The first one in 649 AD, when Sino-Tibetan combined force rallied against rebellious successor following King Harshavardhana's death. This followed centuries of religious and economic exchanges till Timurlane ransacked Delhi in 1398, what Mao referred to as "Half War". Lesson Mao sought to drive home was: "Two neighbours could enjoy long period of peace, but to do so China had to use force to knock India to the negotiating table".

By the summer of 1961, People's Liberation Army (PLA) had advanced almost 112 km south-west of positions it held in

1958. In the end of 1961, the Chinese leadership realised that its policy to prevent India from establishing forward posts without bloodshed was not delivering. Consequently, on October 6, 1962, Mao decided on a large-scale invasion to severely punish India. A directive from Mao as the chairman of Central Military Commission (CMC) to General Lou Ruiqing, Chief of Staff PLA laid out broad strategy for the projected offensive. While the main assault was to be in the Eastern Sector to cause maximum destruction of Indian forces, coordinated operations were to be undertaken in the Western Sector to capture areas up to 1960 claim line which included complete Aksai Chin, to ensure security of the Western Highway, linking Kashgarh in Xinjiang to Lhasa in Tibet.

General Zhang Guo Hua, a Korean War Veteran was made the overall operational commander. The timing of offensive was selected with due deliberation. At the 10th Plenum of the 8th Central Committee of Communist Party of China (CPC) held in September 1962, Mao faced severe criticism due to the disastrous outcome of 'great leap forward'. World attention at the time was focussed on 'Cuban Missile Crisis'.

PLA offensive commenced on October 20, 1962, simultaneously on the Eastern and Western Fronts, taking the Indian leadership by complete surprise. The operations in Aksai Chin were executed in two phases. During phase one (October 20-28, 1962) PLA went on to clear Indian posts in DBO, Galwan, astride both banks of Pangong Tso and Dugnti-Demchok areas. Phase two was

launched after a tactical pause of three weeks on November 18, 1962, to secure Kailash Range including Gurung Hill and Razangla. PLA faced stiff resistance here and suffered over 200 casualties. Having secured areas up to the claim line, China declared ceasefire on November 21. PLA employed 4 Division and few local units for the operations under Xinjiang Military Region.

The Chinese victory helped Mao restore his position and dent India's image in the global polity. He had expected the effect of India's debacle to last for a decade; apparently it sustained far longer. Over the years, India's approach to buy peace by adhering to 'One China Policy', high-level exchanges and signing series of agreements obviously did not work. On the other hand, Beijing was able to legitimise its claim over 38,000 km our territory illegally occupied and consolidate its position along the LAC by pursuing "nibble and negotiate" (Canshi he Tanpan) tactics, part of 'bulletless war' strategy. While border issue remained on the backburner, economic ties emerged as the key component of bilateral relations, tilted heavily in favour of People's Republic of China (PRC).

Xi's Grand Design 2020-India's Response

Soon after assuming power in 2012, Xi initiated the process of path-breaking military reforms in consonance with China's expanding role. This entailed a major shift in the military strategy incorporating combined "offshore waters defence with open sea protection" and "inter-theatre operations". Post Doklam, China apparently reviewed its strategic objectives, evident from the massive upgrade



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of infrastructure in Tibet, with number of airbases, air defence positions and heliports near the LAC almost doubling over last three years.

As a sequel to reorganisation of military regions in to theatre commands, the 'Western Theatre Command' was assigned the operation responsibility of entire border against India. Its order of battle included the key Tibet and Xinjiang Military Regions, (both corps size formations), besides 768/76 Corps, six air divisions and missile base at Qinghai. Even Theatre Commander Gen Zhao Zongqi and Political Commissar Gen Wu were handpicked, former being Vietnam War Veteran and latter a rising star.

Given the timing, locations and force level of over three divisions, including 4 motorised and 6 mechanised divisions of South Xinjiang Military Region (SXMR), it is obvious that operation was planned at the CMC. President Xi being its chairman and commander-in-chief of PLA. The political intent was punitive to convey a strong message to Delhi to kowtow Beijing's interests and desist from undertaking development of infrastructure in Ladakh, apprehending change in status

quo. The military aim was to make swift territorial gains by occupying unheld contested areas astride the LAC and secure the 1960 Claim Line-de facto border for the final settlement. The status of new LAC was to be legitimised through prolonged negotiations, from position of strength. Coincidentally, DBO, Galwan and Pangong Tso are the same areas which the PLA had addressed during 1962 war.

The operations launched towards the beginning May 2020 went as planned, with PLA gaining 'first mover' advantage. Indian Army's robust mirror deployment and Galwan incidence on 15 June 2020 which led to abrupt escalation had not been anticipated by the PLA. With Indian Army's preemptive action on the 29-30 August 2020 of occupying strategically important Kailash Range took the Chinese leadership by complete surprise. With this move, Indian Army gained tremendous tactical advantage in the Pangong Tso sector. However, PLA had managed to gain a definite edge in DBO, Galwan and Hot Spring areas.

Obviate Past Miscalculations to Defeat Dragon's Misadventure

Of the major reasons for India's defeat in 1962 were twin presumptions; China's inability to undertake offensive and Communist leadership commitment to honour the agreement. This misjudgement proved disastrous. After declaring unilaterally ceasefire, PLA pulled back to positions which could be administratively sustained. However, Chinese continued building military infrastructure to enable forward deployment of forces at a short notice.

Ironically, even six decades on, realistic assessment of rapid accretion in Chinese war waging potential and holistic strategy to meet the challenge still remains a work in progress. Even reactions to PLA's periodic transgressions across the LAC since 2013 have been more by way of crisis management rather than calibrated responses. 'Strategic Guidance' format evolved mutually by PM Modi and President Xi, was taken as an 'iron clad guarantee' that Chinese military will cooperate in maintaining peace and tranquility on the LAC. Ironically, we misread China's intent and capability yet again.

PRC's assertive behaviour has a definite correlation with the internal situation as was in case of Mao in 1962. PLA's current incursions coincided with Xi facing criticism for mishandling the Corona virus, besides slowing down of economy and world attention on battling COVID 19 pandemic. Two forth coming events; Communist Party's Centenary in 2021 and 20th Party Congress in 2022 are decisive for Xi's future. Hence, it is imperative to keep a close watch on China's internal power dynamics scene.

Chinese are known to be hard-nosed negotiators, proved once again from the manner de-escalation talks remain deadlocked over last five months. It is primarily due to PLA's rigid stance on Indian Army to disengage first, while denying its role as an aggressor. Post eighth rounds talks between the two Corps Cdrs on November 6, 2020, there are unconfirmed reports of phased disengagement in the offing. PLA has been pressing hard for Indian Army to pull back from Kailash

Range and as a trade-off willing to fall back from Finger 8 from Finger 4. Chinese are well aware of the criticality of the situation as India's current deployment on the South Bank makes PLA positions at Maldo and beyond virtually untenable. Hence, vacating Kailash Range will be a strategic blunder, more so when the Chinese are silent about their ingress especially DBO-Depsang sector.

It is evident that Xi's misadventure has failed to achieve political aim and military objective. In fact, over rated PLA is finding it hard to sustain through harsh winters. Its effort is to stage a selective pull back to get through the winters. India ought to be wary of Chinese ploys and avoid falling into PLA's trap of sector wise disengagement. Our bottom line should be restoration of April 2020 status quo and disengagement process based on 'confirm and verify' principle. Any move to sign yet another agreement (with five already in place and sixth just signed last month) should be vehemently thwarted as Chinese are known to violate agreements at will.

Even if the current standoff crisis is resolved, the sanctity of LAC in future can only be ensured if it is well defended and not merely patrolled, which implies robust border management mechanism. The current system of multi-organisational complex set up needs to be replaced by single nodal agency with a unified command structure, wherein all elements are brought under operational control of the Army. Border militias based on 'home and hearth' concept can be a major asset. Besides, current efforts for massive upgrade of our infrastruc-

ture must be given further impetus to ensure calibrated timely responses.

Chinese traditionally respect strength (li), ranking nations as per their 'Comprehensive National Power' (CNP) and exploiting asymmetry to coerce the weak. India's approach of exercising restraint in the wake of Chinese assertiveness has been perceived by Communist leadership as weakness. Hence, there is no option but to narrow down the prevailing power differential to deal with China on level footing. India needs to formulate long term pragmatic China policy based on hard ground realities and not on wishful assumptions. Institutionalising of strategic partnerships like 'Quad' and initiatives such as 'Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor' ought to be accorded highest priority.

Given the conflicting national interests coupled with unresolved border issue, India-China relations will continue to be marked by complexities and contradictions, defined more by "Competition-Confrontation" rather than "Competition-Cooperative". It is only the audacity of our leadership to take bold decisions and courage to stand ground to safeguard strategic interests that will obviate disputes turning into conflict. After all, Chinese traditionally believe in sitting across the table only with the equals.

(The writer is war veteran, commanded units and formations on the LoC/LAC, served as Defence Attaché in China, North Korea and Mongolia, and is currently Professor, Strategic & International Relations, Distinguished Fellow at USI).

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