

Opinion | Three Years Post Galwan, LAC Bound to be Increasingly Contested

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Given the tardy pace of disengagement and over 50,000 PLA troops deployed astride the LAC, de-escalation is unlikely in the near future. For any tangible progress on the border issue, the Chinese will insist on instituting new protocols on favourable terms

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It is three years since China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) undertook major transgressions in Eastern Ladakh to unilaterally alter the status of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), blatantly violating bilateral agreements to maintain peace and tranquillity on the border. Unprovoked hostile action in May 2020 came as a shock for the Indian politico-military leadership, given that the strategic guidance mechanism evolved by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping during 'one on one' meetings at Wuhan (China) in April 2018 and Mamallapuram (India) in October 2019 seemed to be working well between the two armies.

From the scale of aggression, it was evident that the operation was cleared by the Central Military Commission (CMC), the highest military body headed by Chairman Xi. Having gained first mover advantage, the PLA was well entrenched in marathon negotiations to formalise gains through its "nibble and negotiate" strategy. A bloody skirmish at Galwan on June 15, 2020, marked a new low, wherein the Indian Army suffered 20 fatal casualties while the PLA took far more, although officially claimed only four. The Corps Commander-level talks were stalled in the initial stages as the

Chinese side was unwilling to yield ground. It was only when the Indian Army occupied the strategic Kailash range towards the end of August 2020 that PLA agreed to the disengagement process, albeit adopting a sectoral approach.

Consequently, as a quid pro quo, in the Pangong Tso sub-sector, the Indian Army pulled out from the Kailash range and the PLA moved back to its original position on the Northern Bank, with a buffer of approximately 10-12 km between the two sides — a no patrolling zone. In the Gogra-Hotsprings area too, a similar pattern of disengagement was followed from Patrolling Point 15 (PP15) to 17A, with buffer zone of varying dimensions. As per Mr Konchok, the traditional head of the Phobrang border village, traditional grazing grounds now remain inaccessible to the locals due to the configuration of buffer zones.

During the senior police officers' annual conference last year, the issue of restrictions on patrolling by the Indian Security Forces in areas between PP 15-17, 24-32, 37, 51-52 and 62 had been raised. The PLA remains evasive to discuss ingress in the Depsang area, deeming it to be an old issue dating back to 2013. Even with regard to Demchok, there has been no progress. The 18th round of Corps Commander talks held in April this year made no headway.

During the past three years, the Chinese have gone in for massive military infrastructure development all along the LAC. Major projects include twin bridges over Pangong Tso, a second national highway — G 695 — through Aksai Chin, the Lhasa–Nyingchi railway line and the upgradation of all airports in Tibet-Xinjiang regions. During his visit to Lhasa in July 2021, Jinping gave directions to the PLA to transform Tibet into a formidable shield. To this end, the model villages (Xiaokang) project has been launched, wherein some 640 villages are to be constructed. Around a third of these villages are to be located in close proximity to the LAC to act as the first line of defence. New Defence Law was enacted in 2021 to ensure better 'civil-military' fusion. Alongside, Border Defence Law was passed a year later; which entails marking the border with a view to consolidate control over the occupied areas.

Giving Mandarin names to places in Arunachal Pradesh which Beijing claims as South Tibet (Zangnan) and 'Indian Ocean Region' is part of China's 'Three Warfare

Strategy' to legitimise its claims. PLA's 'Science of Military Strategy-2020' perceives that the scope of the "Competition Continuum" i.e., 'mix of competition and cooperation below the armed conflict' has widened, necessitating a shift in its policy form 'coercion to compellence'. Keeping the disputes unresolved facilitates the Communist leadership to rally home support while drawing the attention of the international community. To ensure a conducive periphery with a subdued neighbourhood, China's consistent effort is to keep India contained and marginalised.

While India has repeatedly reiterated that border dispute remains the prime issue between the two neighbours, China on the other hand has deliberately downplayed it. In fact, the Communist leadership claims the border situation to be stable and insists that the issue must be put in perspective; implying it should be dealt with separately and not impact the bilateral relations. Beijing has succeeded in delinking the trade from the border issue, evident from bilateral trade figures, which in 2022, stood at \$135 billion, a net deficit of \$73 billion in China's favour.

With the introduction of buffer zones, the status of LAC stands altered. Given the tardy pace of disengagement and over 50,000 PLA troops deployed astride the LAC, de-escalation and de-induction are unlikely in the near future. For any tangible progress on the border issue, the Chinese will insist on instituting new protocols on favourable terms. An immediate challenge for Indian Security Forces is to maintain the sanctity of the LAC in the wake of Chinese aggressiveness. Grab actions by the PLA, like the one at Twang on the night of December 9, 2022, are set to be the new normal. The situation is further compounded as the Chinese 'border defence regiments' are at par with the regular units and part of the PLA.

In view of the above, institution of a well-defined border management strategy needs to be accorded the highest priority. The current mechanism of border management with ITBP as the lead agency under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) merits serious review. It is only an integrated 'border defence force' equipped with state-of-the-art systems under the operational control of the Army that can effectively guard the borders. Given PLA's evil design, the LAC is bound to be increasingly contested in the coming times.

The author is a War Veteran; former Assistant Chief, and currently Professor Strategic and International Relations. Views expressed are personal.