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Decoding Ladakh 2020 using China's 'Science of Military Strategy'



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Introduction

Since April 2020, both the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Indian Army managed to surprise each other with the scale and speed of their military buildup in the remote Ladakh region as also in each side's willingness to test the other's threshold. The Chinese did not hesitate in raising the ante by their violent actions in the Galwan Valley in June 2020 and India's preemptive occupation of the Kailash Range, in end August 2020, was an equally brazen response to China's continued belligerence. Despite successive rounds of senior military commander level talks between the Indian Army & the PLA, there appeared to be little headway made. Reports of the PLA continuously fortifying its positions across the Line of Actual Control (LAC)¹ continued to raise doubts on China's true intentions till as late as January 24, 2021, when finally the ninth round of Corps

Commander level talks appeared to have broken the deadlock and the simultaneous disengagement of forces on both banks of the Pangong Tso started on February 10, 2021.

Key Points

- Ladakh 2020 has brought India & China the closest ever they've been to war, since 1962.
- There is a need to analyse in detail Chinese intent, actions & ongoing preparations, to be prepared for all possible future scenarios.
- China's 'Science of Military Strategy' (SMS), published by PLA's Academy of Military Science in 2013 is a relevant theorisation of PLA's current military strategy.
- It offers unique insight into China's perspective of India's military strategy and on how the PLA plans to fight and win modern wars.
- China's SMS helps understanding Chinese responses during Ladakh 2020 and in discerning contours of the true nature of threat taking shape across the LAC.



While the tanks and soldiers could be seen moving back on both sides, the trust deficit, however, continues to linger on.

Is war really a possibility between India and China? Why did Ladakh 2020 happen? Is the current Ladakh standoff finally headed towards a genuine resolution or is the current agreement merely a ruse by China to lure India into lowering its guard? What should we expect in the coming days from our tiresome neighbour?

This article analyses China's *Science of Military Strategy*² (SMS)—one of the principal doctrinal military publication of the PLA on the study of war—for answers to these questions. Compiled in 2013 by the prestigious Academy of Military Science, PLA's highest-level research institute, which employs both academia and researchers from the PLA³; it is widely considered the most relevant theorisation of PLA's current military strategy & thinking and is studied extensively by scholars, researchers and military analysts worldwide.⁴ The relevance of the document in the Indian context is amply brought out by the fact that, Chapter 2 of the document - 'Evolution of Military Strategy', has a dedicated section on India's military strategy— a privilege not granted to any other country, not even the likes of the US, Russia & Japan which are discussed together under a single section.⁵

Is War a Possibility between India & China?

Perspectives matter. While a segment of Indian analysts tend to rule out the possibility of a full-blown out war between India and China for a number of reasons, ranging from economic to geo-political, the SMS emphasises that “there will inevitably be a local war in the future”⁶ and it offers an excellent perspective on why China possibly feels a war with India in the future is “inevitable”.⁷

As Indians, we remain firm in the notion that ours is a benign nation, struggling to maintain regional peace despite China's constant predatory antics. The SMS offers us the Chinese version of India — that of a hegemon, a nation constantly attempting to bully its neighbours into towing its line, on establishing its dominance in South Asia and claiming the Indian Ocean for itself. It details India as having inherited its “military expansionism” from the British and cites the three wars with Pakistan, the “provoked” Sino-Indian war of 1962, the “annexation” of Sikkim and the Indian Peace Keeping Force' (IPKF) interventionism in Sri Lanka as all examples of this expansionist culture.⁸ The SMS, thus, paints the picture of an India whose belligerence is expected to continue to increase as it becomes stronger, continuing to clash with Chinese interests, unless checked.



The SMS lists local war with its neighbours over unresolved border issues as one of the four categories of wars that China was likely to face in the future.⁹ Having resolved its land border issues with all its neighbours but India, there is little doubt as to who falls into this category. The July 2013 article, published by the PRC national news agency *Zhongguo Xinwenshe* which listed the war to recover southern Tibet, in the time period 2035-40, as one of “the Six Wars China Must Fight in the Coming 50 Years”¹⁰, echoes the SMS assessment.

One of the favoured arguments of the ‘No Sino-India War Possibility’ theorists remains the argument of China’s East coast and the US being China’s main strategic direction and that a war with India would only deflect attention and effort, which China would not desire. The SMS, however, clearly summarises that the “possibility of military conflict & war” in other strategic direction exists and which may in fact be the cause of a bigger “chain reaction”. It cites the examples of the 1962 and 1979 wars with India & Vietnam respectively as wars in other strategic directions thrust upon it and hints at the need for China to be prepared for the eventuality of a military threat from India, at such time when China is possibly already militarily engaged in its main strategic directions— those being the re-unification of Taiwan and the East China Coast. It exhorts the need for China to be prepared for “high-intensity military conflicts that may occur in other directions” and summarises the need for tailor-made strategies, operational guidelines and objectives for each specific theatre to include the use of “actual innovative tactics”.¹¹ We may thus, even now be unknowing witnesses to the PLA’s tailor-made strategy for the Indian theatre in Ladakh.

Why did Ladakh 2020 Happen?

Why did China respond with such an exaggerated military deployment in response to a routine LAC faceoff, thereby precipitating an equitable Indian buildup and gradually the Ladakh 2020 crisis itself? The best explanation is offered by PLA’s ‘Active Defense Strategy’, China’s principle “national defense strategy”¹² which is elaborated by the SMS.

When seen from China’s perspective, in which it possibly analysed India’s attempts to develop the Shyok-DBO road close to the LAC as India’s unilateral attempt to change the status-quo and as a development with definite future military negatives, China has responded exactly as per the prescribed “Preventive Deterrence” tenet of its Active Defense Strategy. China has attempted “creating a high-strength deterrent, demonstrating strong resolve and strong reality to force opponents to pull back from the ‘cliff’ and make full preparations for war”.¹³ The large-scale deployment of the PLA along the Ladakh border was



probably intended as a 'high-strength deterrent' to force India to walk back from the 'cliff' of war and stop its activities considered inimical to China's security and military interests. The Indian Army's occupation of heights on the Kailash Range in end August 2020 was also consequently reported in the Chinese state media as India having "crossed all lines" and India now "standing awkwardly on the edge of a cliff".¹⁴

So what next? The Indian response to the PLA's high-strength show of force was far from compliant. The SMS legislates that if the show of force does not have the desired effect, then "take appropriate action, if necessary, to a degree of warfare at the edge, through the use of limited and effective warning firepower strikes and information attack (*thus*) forcing the enemy to retreat from jeopardy".¹⁵ This implies that, given India's refusal to succumb to Chinese pressure tactics, we should have expected China to further raise the ante by resorting to information attacks or even direct military attacks across the LAC. Why are we witnessing disengagement instead? This leads us to the next segment of this study.

PLA's Strategic Guidance for Winning Local Wars

The SMS is deliberate in laying out the roadmap for PLA to win local wars. A scrutiny of the prevailing situation, however, highlights that some of the essential conditions, as detailed by the SMS for such a Chinese victory in a conventional all-out war against India, are not being met in Ladakh.

- **Right to Speak – A Favourable World Opinion.** The significance of attaining the 'Right to Speak' is defined by the SMS as the need for establishing a good national image and winning the support of the international community before venturing into modern wars.¹⁶ COVID's negative impact on China's global image possibly dents China's ability to justify launching an all-out war against India over a minor border tussle.
- **Diplomatically Isolating the Enemy.** The SMS emphasises use of "clever diplomatic means to isolate the enemy to deny outside support", especially in terms of weapons and equipment, before waging war.¹⁷ While the subtle ongoing diplomatic maneuverings of China, be it with Russia, Iran or even in our immediate neighbourhood may be read in this light, it is evident to China that isolating a resurgent & powerful India diplomatically to such an extent is not possible and in the event of a war with China, there would be a bevy of allies standing on the Indian corner as well.



- **Attaining Surprise and Ensuring Victory.** Militarily, the SMS emphasises the need for initial rapid attacks to break the enemy's will to resist in “one fell swoop” and to snatch initiative in the operational zone from the outset of operations by catching the enemy by surprise. The SMS urges the need to show patience and not to be in a hurry to declare war without an absolute certainty of victory – “we must avoid stalemate”.¹⁸ The large mass of alerted Indian Army that has hunkered down in Ladakh opposite it, denies China both the opportunity of a surprise rapid attack as also an absolute certainty of victory.
- **Properly Ending the War.** The SMS is categorical in the need for a well-defined war termination strategy which averts the quoted botched examples of US entanglements in Iraq and Afghanistan. The SMS repeatedly reiterates the need to ensure a smooth transition from war to peace — “Hold the theatre safe and stable (after the war)... winning situation in the field and turn it into a strategic victory, from the state of war to a state of peace favourable to oneself”.¹⁹ Given that China is today dealing with a far more powerful India, viz 1962, China's ability to win such a decisive victory over India today, which guarantees peace for decades, is also bleak.

If the pre-requisites for an all-out-war are not being met fully, then a hint of the alternative available with China is found in the SMS's reference to “degrees of warfare” and “limited and effective warning firepower strikes and information attacks” mentioned above. China, in the military domain, has the ready alternative available to calibrate hostilities by limiting its responses to actions such as a short-sharp campaign of rocket strikes on the Indian Army, now openly arrayed in the barren plains of Ladakh, under the constant and precise scan of China's satellites continuously orbiting the earth. As the SMS states— “The long-range precision strike has become a decisive combat style”.²⁰ Despite the availability of such options, China has *apparently* opted for the ‘disengagement’ option over the ‘escalation’ option. The last section of this paper summarises the possible reasons for China's current choice.

Decoding Ladakh 2020

With the disengagement process now underway between the two sides, Ladakh 2020 is uncanny in its growing resemblance to the Doklam 2017 crisis, albeit at a much larger scale and intensity - a border incident aggravated by Chinese actions, met by a resolute and



strong response by India and the Indian Army, which apparently again surprised the Chinese with its intensity and caught them ill-prepared to escalate to the next level. If this assessment is correct, then it would be fair to presume that war in Ladakh was never the original intent of China in 2020. What has been witnessed was in fact, most possibly, China's translation of the SMS postulate of— 'high strength deterrence' to pressurise India to curtail its development activities along the LAC in Ladakh by a large show of strength. Since the deterrence has evidently failed, the SMS now postulates escalation and not disengagement and therefore China's disengagement should be seen as openly circumspect.

When analysing current Indian military strategy, the SMS decries that "offensive colour (*is*) strong in India's (*current*) military strategy" and that India has abandoned the concept of "wait for enemy to reach its territory and kill it" and evolved to proactive and preemptive strategy to "make war in enemy lands".²¹ It is evident that China has assessed Indian Army's predominantly Pakistan oriented 'Pro-Active Strategy (PAS)' as equally applicable against it and today possibly views the Indian Army's operations in Ladakh through this prism. The re-balancing of the Indian Army to the Northern Borders, ordered in January 2021, would have only helped further reinforce this assessment of the Chinese.²² The spectre of a rapid Indian Army counter-offensive in response to a PLA rocket attack or other escalations of such sort, which, given the near complete absence of defences on the Chinese side of the LAC would definitely hurt more than just China's pride— is probably driving China's current mechanisation in Ladakh.

Deliberate preparations by the PLA, for a conventional war, are warranted when preparing to escalate to that magnitude against an opponent— the size and capability of the Indian Army. The inputs, thus, of China building defences along the LAC, initially being perceived as a possible intent of protracted deployment, may simply have been a misreading of its actual intent i.e. to prepare his firm base against the eventuality of an Indian Army counter-offensive if hostilities were to start. The repeated inputs of PLA conducting extensive exercises and live-fire training in the Xizang region and the ongoing fast-track construction in the Tibet region of PLA heliports and airfields, capable of hosting advanced fighter jets, are also additional indicators of preparations which are under way at break-neck speed but still possibly some notches below the desired levels.²³ The continuation of defence preparation across the LAC by China, if witnessed in coming days despite the disengagement, should trigger red flags at all levels as indicators of continued preparation for a higher grade escalation in the very next crisis – be it inadvertent or staged.



A segment of Chinese strategists believes that “the PLA is actually buying time, building strong defences and fortification so as to launch a more severe counterattack in a more appropriate time”²⁴ and a macro view of all these enmeshed developments does point to the setting up of a grand stage from which China would probably be finally ready to impart what it feels is now a long overdue lesson to India.

Conclusion

A *Global Times* survey held in China in July 2020 found that 70 percent respondents wanted strong retaliation by the Chinese Government against the Indian provocations.²⁵ There is a perceptible undercurrent of dissatisfaction amongst the Chinese population about the terms of the February 10, 2021 disengagement as well, which is being discussed as one in which China has got the short end of the stick despite being the stronger party.²⁶ How far detached from its public sentiment can one expect the Chinese government’s policies and intent to be?

In matters of national security, an ‘over-cautious’ approach is recommended, particularly when dealing with China. The 2020 Ladakh standoff brought India and China closer to war than they have ever been since 1962 and despite a possible recent thaw in the sentiments between the two sides, the ‘cat may yet not be out of the bag’. The SMS exposes the Chinese perspective on India and the sooner India realises that a war with China is ‘inevitable’ and that only strong diplomacy backed by a stronger military can possibly avert it, the better prepared India will be for it. A study of the SMS casts a suspicious shadow on the ongoing disengagement process itself and even if peace is mutually arrived at in the coming days, we should not fool ourselves about the outcome of a similar flare-up in the future. *Forewarned is forearmed!!*

End Notes

¹ Shishir Gupta, “China is fortifying defences across Ladakh border, not preparing to disengage”, *The Hindustan Times*, November 22, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/china-is-fortifying-defences-across-ladakh-border-not-preparing-to-disengage/story-yNM2E5GOX3RzhqilOBSPwJ.htm>

² Academy of Military Science, Beijing, *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013 (English translation by 4th Watch Publishing Co, 2018).

³ Mingda Qiu, “China’s Science of Military Strategy: Cross-Domain Concepts in the 2013 Edition”, *CDD Working Paper*, UCSD, La Jolla, CA, September 2015, p. 2.

⁴ The document finds reference in numerous studies, papers and analysis of the PLA post 2013, such as the 2015 book “The People’s Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China” by Andrew Scobell et al, the RAND 2017 Research Report “People’s Liberation Army Operational Concepts” by Edmund J. Burke et al and the RAND 2018 paper on “Systems Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare – How Chinese People’s Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare” by Jeffrey Engstrom.



⁵Academy of Military Science, Beijing, The Science of Military Strategy, p. 64. Section 4 of Chapter 2 of the SMS is dedicated to Indian Military Strategy while the military strategies of other countries, namely the US, Russia & Japan, are discussed together under Section 3 of Chapter 2 titled Contemporary World Powers Military Strategy.

⁶Ibid., p. 111.

⁷The use of *italics* in the document has been done with an intent to emphasise content and may not necessarily have been so presented in source texts.

⁸Ibid., p.66.

⁹Ibid., p. 99, Local wars should not be confused with the 'War for Unification of Taiwan' which is listed in a separate category as "Large Scale, Higher-Strength Anti-Separatist War".

¹⁰IDR News, "Six Wars China is Sure to Fight in the Next 50 Years", *Indian Defence Review (IDR)*, June 19, 2020, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/six-wars-china-is-sure-to-fight-in-the-next-50-years/>

¹¹Academy of Military Science, Beijing, The Science of Military Strategy, p.117.

¹²Ibid., p.104.

¹³Ibid., p.119.

¹⁴Antara Goshal Singh, "Is China avoiding conflict or secretly planning a counterattack against India?", *India Today*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/china-avoid-conflict-secretly-planning-counterattack-india-ladakh-standoff-1722957-2020-09-18>, Accessed on November 18, 2020. The original Chinese article of September 11, 2020, from the Chinese online site 'First Gold Network', containing the text, can be found at <https://m.dyhjw.com/gold/20200911-48925.html>,

¹⁵Academy of Military Science, Beijing, The Science of Military Strategy, p.119.

¹⁶Academy of Military Science, Beijing, The Science of Military Strategy, p. 131.

¹⁷Academy of Military Science, Beijing, The Science of Military Strategy, p. 131.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁹Ibid., p.116.

²⁰Ibid., p. 94.

²¹Ibid., p.66.

²²Rajat Pandit, "Army Chief says India fully prepared for the long haul in eastern Ladakh with China, even as forces rebalance to LAC", *The Times of India*, January 13, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/army-chief-says-india-fully-prepared-for-the-long-haul-in-eastern-ladakh-with-china-even-as-forces-rebalance-to-lac/articleshow/80237152.cms>, Accessed on February 17, 2021.

²³PTI, "China carrying out development work in Tibet, India ready for any eventuality: CDS Rawat", *News18*, December 14, 2020, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/china-carrying-out-devpt-work-in-tibet-amid-ladakh-standoff-india-ready-for-any-eventuality-cds-rawat-3177380.html>, Accessed on December 15, 2020.

²⁴Antara Goshal Singh, "Is China avoiding conflict or secretly planning a counterattack against India?"

²⁵Global Times, "Indian troops illegal crossing of LAC will escalate tensions", August 31, 2020, <https://www.gobaltimes.cn/content/1199462.shtml>, Accessed on December 08, 2020.

²⁶Chaoji Dabenying Junshi Forum, [chaojidabenying.com, https://lt.cjdy.net/thread-2700629-10-1.html](https://lt.cjdy.net/thread-2700629-10-1.html), Accessed on February 17, 2021.

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