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Boundary Dispute of Barahoti Bowl in Central Sector: An Assessment



Lieutenant General (Dr.) VK Ahluwalia, PVSM, AVSM, YSM, VSM (Retd)**, is presently Director, CLAWS. The General superannuated as Army Commander, Central Command in March 2012. Thereafter, he served as a Member, Armed Forces Tribunal (AFT). The General commanded an Infantry Brigade in Uri-Baramulla, a Mountain Division in Kargil and Corps in Leh-Ladakh sectors. He has also served in Northeast India and in the states critically affected by the Maoist insurgency in India. He has authored and co-edited many books.

Introduction

According to the media reports, about 100 soldiers of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), most of them on horseback, had transgressed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) from Tunjun La, an important pass along the watershed, in the Barahoti sector in Uttarakhand on 30 August 2021. Having patrolled and stayed in the Barahoti Bowl, they returned to Tunjun La after about two hours, before the Indo-Tibetan Border Police Force (ITBP) could reach the Bowl. It has a post in a high-altitude area at Rimkhim, which is about 3 km away from the Barahoti Bowl. China has been laying claim to this area since June 1954. Although the disengagement between the Indian and PLA troops in the two segments of the LAC in Eastern Ladakh has been completed, standoff continues to persist in certain other friction areas. With this backdrop

Key Points

- Boundary disputes are generally analysed based on historical records, cartographic evidence, geographical layouts, habitation in the disputed areas, history of revenue collection, customs, and usages.
- China has been developing its military capability - forces, fire power systems, air defence systems, developing infrastructure including airfields and heli bases, training in high altitude with units and formations, turnover of troops – across the entire stretch of the LAC.
- With Galwan experience of 2020, it appears that the PLA has now decided to operate in larger numbers to the areas south of Tunjun La in Barahoti Bowl.
- In the Central Sector, with the current capabilities, connectivity, and terrain friction, ISR and battlefield transparency be given highest priority for both short- and long-term requirements, to get real time information.
- As the frontages are large and the terrain is extremely difficult, there is a need to build infrastructure, customised forces, improve firepower, ISR capability, and logistics.
- Whole of government approach must continue, with the aim to resolve the border dispute in least contentious Central Sector first.



and the recent increase in infiltration across the Line of Control (LoC) on the west with Pakistan, the recent transgression, with reported enlarged strength in the Central Sector, merits attention.

It may be appropriate to briefly look at the historical perspective of the Central Sector in general, and the trend of transgressions over the years, with special reference to the Barahoti Bowl – the case in point and thereafter, suggest measures to improve India's capability and to prevent such incidents.

Brief Historical Perspective

Out of the three sectors, the most contentious part of the boundary cum territorial dispute between India and China are the Western and Eastern Sectors. The dispute in the Middle Sector (opposite Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh) has been the least contentious. In fact, both India and China had exchanged maps of the Central Sector during the 14th annual session of a Joint Working Group (JWG) in New Delhi in end of November 2002.¹ It was subsequently withdrawn by the Chinese. However, the dispute revolves around a few areas close to the mountain passes, along the watershed in Uttarakhand. This part of the LAC is about 365 km long. It is broadly divided into three sub sectors: Harsil, Mana-Malari, and Tawaghat.

The boundary disputes are generally analysed based on historical records, cartographic evidence, geographical layouts, habitation in the disputed areas, history of revenue collection, customs, and usages. As it is a subject by itself, some of the essential aspects have been covered briefly. According to Claude Arpi, an expert on Tibet and India-China boundary dispute, on 20 November 1950, during a Parliament session, Prime Minister Nehru was asked: "Will the Prime Minister be pleased to state whether India has got any well-defined boundary with Tibet?" To which, Nehru's answer was:

"The border from Ladakh to Nepal has probably not been the subject of any formal agreement between India, Tibet and China but it is well established by custom and long usage. The Historical Division are investigating if there are any formal agreements. There have been a few boundary disputes in this area, but they have been peacefully settled".²

It is a historical fact that till the early 1950s the Indo-Tibet frontier had been peaceful, with trade flourishing through select number of passes.

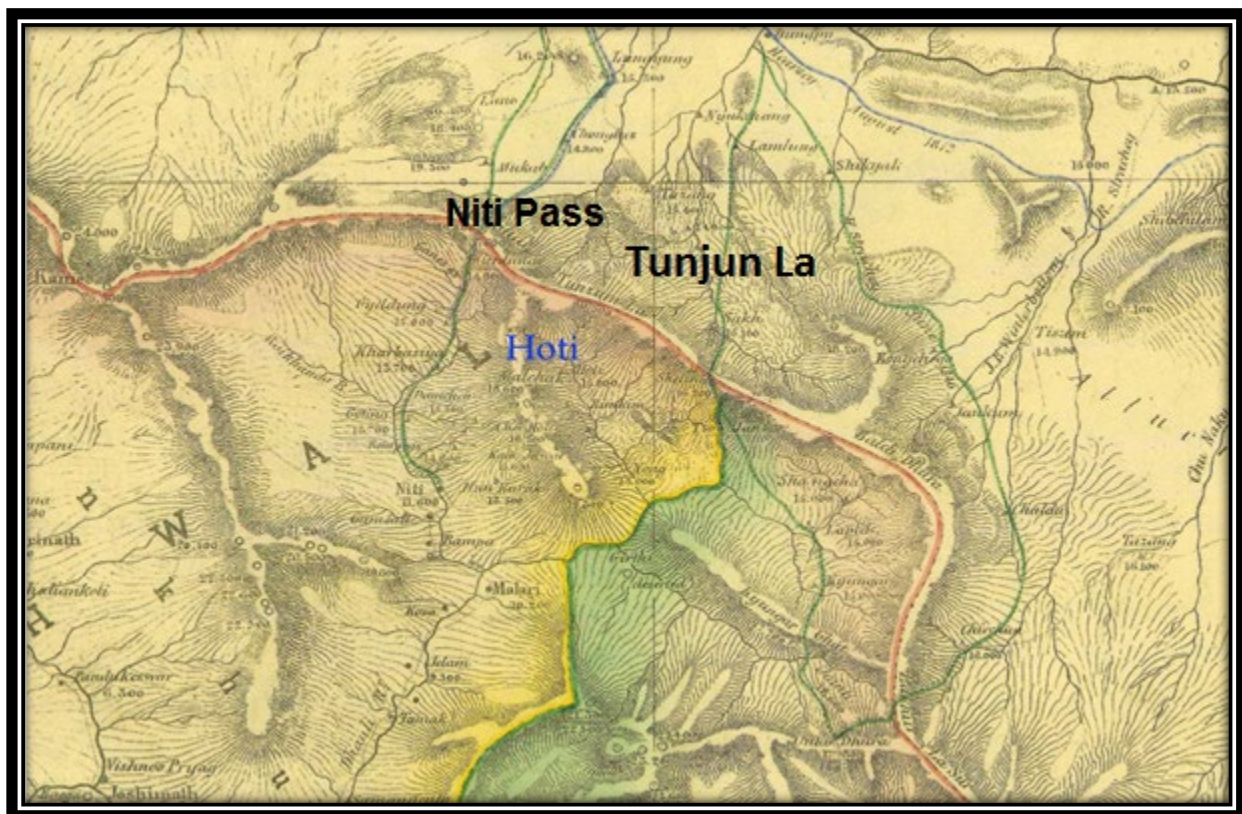
While in July 1952, a report by India's Intelligence Bureau (IB) stated that during the end of the 19th century, the Tibetans had been establishing customs post at the Hoti Plain. In 1890,

the British got the Tibetans to remove the post. Sensing that Tibetans may lay claim to the Hoti Plains, the IB had recommended to the Government of India, that:

“It is, therefore, essential that the Govt. of India should make it clear to the Govt. of Tibet and its Dzongpon that the Hoti Plain is Indian territory and the Tibetans have no right to establish any Customs post there; nor can they exercise any authority in the area”.³

In fact, in 1850, the map clearly showed Hoti to be part of British India, being south of the watershed.

Map 1: Map of 1850 showing Barahoti in British India's territory



Source: Claude Arpi, <https://claudearpi.blogspot.com/2020/08/the-history-of-barahoti-plain.html>
Annotated by the Author

Agreement of April 1954

An Agreement between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India was signed in Peking on 29 April 1954. In Article IV, it was pointed out that ‘some passes and routes which traders and pilgrims may use are: Shipki La pass, Mana pass, Niti pass, Kungri Bingri pass, Dharma pass, and Lipulekh pass.’⁴ It also stated that these six mountain passes (called Border Passes) would be open to the nationals of both countries. The Indian Government bases its



claims on an agreement concluded with China in April 1954; however, the Chinese claim that the 1954 Sino-Indian Treaty was purely a bilateral trade agreement and as such was devoted to commercial relations only.⁵

Although India had prepared a long list of passes for the meeting, the Chinese authorities did not allow more passes to form part of the Agreement in Article IV. The important Passes like Tsang Chok La and Tunjun La also did not form part of the Agreement. Apparently, missing out Tunjun La in the Agreement of 1954 emboldened the Chinese to claim areas south of the watershed – the Barahoti Bowl. Within two months of the Agreement in April, the Chinese, for the first time, transgressed the border into the Barahoti Bowl, south of Tunjun La in June 1954. While shepherds from Niti valley have been grazing their cattle in the Barahoti Bowl, the Indian villagers also worship the Parvati Kund, a pond located in the same area. 'However, in the Central Sector, the Chinese Government has changed its assertions. In 1959, the Chinese claimed that Indian maps of the border did not conform to reality. [...][Subsequently, the statement was retracted also'.⁶ Although it then implied that the boundary proposed by India was acceptable to China, it continued to lay claim to certain areas. Going by the Indian Army's experience in Eastern Ladakh in May-June 2020, it is important to know that the Chinese have not adhered to the provisions and guidelines of the agreements and protocols signed by the two countries, especially between 1993 and 2013.

Barahoti Sector

Given the historical claims, and the fact that the Great Himalayan Range had huge geographical potential to demarcate areas, the British had worked on the 'principle of the watershed' to demarcate boundaries between India and Tibet. It is one of the universally accepted principles to demarcate borders. For instance, in the Report of the Officials of India and China in 1960/61, it is mentioned:

"In the Middle Sector both sides had referred to the watershed boundary and were clear as to where the watershed lay. In fact, the two alignments coincided for the most part along the main watershed. The Chinese alignment departed from it only at Gyund Kaurik, Shipki, Nilang-Jadhang, Barahoti, Lapthal and Sangchamalla. All these departures from the watershed were also the points of divergence from the Indian alignment, and were, curiously enough, to the south and west, so as to include Indian territory in Tibet, and in no case the other way round...[.]".⁷

It appears that as an afterthought, the Chinese have laid claim to the area South of the Tunjun La, as it was falling to the south of the lines joining the passes mentioned in the Agreement.



Trend of Transgressions and Domination of Passes by the PLA

The PLA has been transgressing the LAC into the Barahoti Bowl during July to September, at an average 4-5 times every year. They would generally come mounted on horse/pony back, armed with weapons, with a strength of about 15-25 persons. They would move back to Tunjun La within two hours of staying in the Bowl. According to an understanding, the revenue officials, along with security escorts, from India also visit the same areas regularly. It is again an area with differing lines of perception, where the LAC is neither delineated on the map nor demarcated on the ground.

It has been observed that China has been developing its military capability - forces, fire power systems, air defence systems, developing infrastructure including airfields and heli bases, training in high altitude with units and formations, turnover of troops – across the entire stretch of the LAC. In addition, a 2019 report in the official TAR news portal stated that the government plans to build 624 “well off” villages and farms on Tibet’s borders.⁸

The moot question is: Why did the PLA come in such large numbers this time – on 30th August? While it could possibly be a routine movement like earlier times, three more reasons could also be considered in that order, especially due to abnormally large numbers that were reported.

First, India response capability has improved in this sector, as it now has a road connectivity to Rimkhim, the last ITBP Post on the Barahoti axis, which is about three km away from Barahoti Bowl. Due to the Physical scuffles and Galwan experience of 2020, it appears that the PLA has now decided to operate in larger numbers to the areas south of Tunjun La (Barahoti), to protect itself.

Second, to ensure that additional Indian troops are tied down to the Northern Borders in all sectors, and not opposite Eastern Ladakh alone. This could be a part of its deception, and grey zone tactics to tie down more troops on border management.

Third, it was well known that the ‘first in person meeting of the Quad Summit’ was scheduled to be held at the White House on 24 September. Perhaps, China wanted to send a message that it will continue to dominate its claimed areas on the land borders with India, as also increase its air activity across the Taiwan Strait against Taiwan.⁹ Simultaneously, there has been an increase in the infiltration attempts on the LoC on the western border with Pakistan.



With a much easier terrain as obtaining in Tibet, especially to the north of the watershed, and phenomenal capability to develop infrastructure, China has developed good road connectivity to important passes on the watershed (Niti, Mana, Tunjun La, Lipulekh, etc), created billeting facilities at different places, signal communications, and logistic storage facilities. The PLA has mastered the manner of dominating the passes by specialist vehicles (wheeled ICVs), which used to appear at the passes to show their presence even a decade ago. With Combined Arms Brigades, and Border Defence Regiments (BDR) in place, they have adequate mechanised elements to rush to the passes. It is also evident by the classification of roads, bridges, and the turning radius on the roads connecting the passes from China's side. According to the recent reports, China has started recruiting Tibetans in PLA for deployment at LAC (to be able to operate in difficult high altitude mountainous terrain). It has been made mandatory for every Tibetan family to send one member to the PLA.¹⁰

Although there are 18 passes along the LAC in the Uttarakhand sector, 6-7 passes have huge significance due to their connectivity from the north to the watershed, proximity to the Char Dhams, and important places in the immediate hinterland.

Terrain on the Indian side is extremely difficult, with steep ridgelines, deep valleys (difficult to dominate the valley floor from the heights of the Ridge lines). There are numerous valleys, running north to south, which makes inter valley move difficult and time consuming, even if all other conditions are normal.

Based on the analysis of threat in the sector, India has earmarked additional formations for operational purposes. However, a lot more needs to be done to develop infrastructure to connect different valleys, connect important passes, develop infrastructure to move troops forward rapidly, provide heli lift capability, deploy them, and to sustain them logistically.

Contingencies

Recently, India's Raksha Mantri had announced that 'India wants a solution to the border dispute with China through dialogue and asserted that the government would never allow the sanctity of borders to be violated.'¹¹ However, based on the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, extraordinary close relations between China and Pakistan, and the conditions prevailing on the disputed borders, it is fairly certain that the LAC will continue to remain active with frequent standoffs in the foreseeable future. These standoffs, if not controlled, could trigger a limited conflict to begin with.



PLA has built its capability to dominate the passes. Whenever a major standoff or a conflict takes place, the PLA may resort to certain actions in the Central Sector to assert China's claim. Thereby, as the threat remains live, it would be prudent to examine various contingencies in this sector and plan accordingly.

Recommendations

Although certain actions are at hand to improve India's capabilities, the following aspects be considered:

- As a part of the government initiative, political, diplomatic, and military level efforts must continue to resolve the dispute. India may insist on resolving the least contentious Central Sector first. To resolve the long drawn border dispute with China, India must incorporate subject matter experts on India - China boundary dispute, such as historians, cartographers, and revenue & trade officials.
- Simultaneously, villages close to the LAC should be connected, developed and facilities provided so that they continue to stay put and not migrate to the plains. Connectivity thus developed would also be useful for the armed forces. China, on the other hand, has been building villages along the LAC to bolster its contested territorial claims. It has combined a policy of building villages close to the LAC from Xinjiang to Bhutan with simultaneously bolstering military facilities and dual-use infrastructure.¹²
- In the Central Sector, with the current capabilities, connectivity, and terrain friction, it would be difficult to occupy passes at a short notice. Therefore, ISR and battlefield transparency should be given highest priority for both short- and long-term requirements, to get real time information. Different types of drones / UAVs should be available to be employed in multiple roles – surveillance, reconnaissance, intelligence gathering, and communications. Also, armed drones, and loitering munitions to hit identified targets with precision at appropriate times.
- Preparations of additional heli bases to facilitate inter valley mobility. Additional helicopter resources should be allotted.
- Additional fire power resources, including long range vectors, to be deployed to cater for various contingencies.
- Air power would have a vital role in the sector. The land and air force elements must be interoperable and synergise their efforts to achieve operational effectiveness. Also, conduct training exercises with air, and all other elements deployed in the sector to improve readiness.



- As the frontages are large and the terrain is extremely difficult, it requires adequate troops to manage the border. Additional local scouts (Garhwal and Kumaon) could also be raised, to be employed in classical scout roles.
- Given the terrain imperatives, logistics be catered to facilitate operations.
- The ITBP, border guarding force, should be integrated with the Army for operational requirements to maintain situational awareness and operational readiness – intelligence gathering and dissemination, surveillance, streamline command and control of all elements deployed, and ensure compatible communication arrangements.

Conclusion

It is expected that the 13th Round of Military Commanders talks between India and China is likely to take place soon in Eastern Ladakh. It would be prudent to highlight our security concerns and take positive actions to disengage from the friction points at Depsang, Hot Spring, and Demchok in Eastern Ladakh, and maintain stability in the other sectors as well. To strengthen our response in the Central Sector, there is a need to develop capability in terms of infrastructure, customised force structures, ISR & battlefield transparency, fire power and logistics, and synergise operations with the air assets.

“Strategy is style of thinking, a conscious and deliberate process, an intensive implementation system, the science of insuring future success”.

—Pete Johnson

End Notes

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⁴ Surya P. Sharma, The India-China Border Dispute: An Indian Perspective, *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (Jan., 1965) ,Yale Law School, p 25.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 59.

⁷ N.2.

⁸ Sutirtho Patranobis, Rezaul H Laskar, “China built villages near LAC, boosted military infra to keep up pressure on India”, *Hindustan Times*, updated on 21 May 2021. Accessible at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/china-built-villages-near-lac-boosted-military-infra-to-keep-up-pressure-on-india-101621607030306.html>. Accessed on 02 October 2021.

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¹² N.8

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CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010

Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, CLAWS Army No. 33098; Email: landwarfare@gmail.com

Website: www.claws.in