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Pursuing Peace
Through Strength

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Introduction

The October 2024 agreement between India and China on disengagement and patrolling in Depsang and Demchok has presently calmed the tense situation on our northern borders. The Galwan clash in 2020 was an inflection point in India-China relations, which were recovering slowly from the Doklam standoff of 2017. Following many rounds of military-diplomatic talks over four years, the agreement was worked out amidst a frosty atmosphere. However, the trajectory of future relations remains hard to predict. Given such circumstances, how does India ensure that such an adverse situation does not repeat itself? With a long, unsettled border, this issue becomes a focal point for our national security.

The Nature and Outcome of the Clash

When the Galwan clash occurred, some analysts felt that against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese leadership wanted to project strength to indicate its resolve on territorial claims.¹ A former Indian NSA described it as more assertive behaviour and ultra-nationalism by China, which could be attributed to internal and external reasons.² The Chinese response was to quickly castigate and blame India for a deliberate provocation that led to casualties at a location that was in 'its territory'.³ The incident resulted in a complete breakdown of trust between the two nations as China breached the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreements by showing an absence of restraint and using lethal force during the encounter.

Was it a 'peacetime employment of military force' by the Chinese? Xi Jinping's speech in Oct 2020 commemorating the 70th anniversary of China's entry into the Korean War endorsed this concept. "It is necessary to speak to invaders in the language they know, that is, use war to prevent war....and use a (military) victory to win peace and respect."⁴ Since the Chinese believe they are the sole leader in Asia, they intend to reinforce this point in most interactions with India. Further, their perception that Tibet is a matter of their sovereignty and territorial integrity (based on their claims) might have also led to hostilities in mid-2020 as they occupied certain spaces hitherto patrolled by both sides in Eastern Ladakh.

To characterise the 2020 clashes would be pertinent at this stage. Some analysts felt this was an intense confrontation, reasonably short of an armed conflict. The PLA had carried out what it calls the “506 Special Mission,” involving rotational deployments of forces to the Sino-Indian Border, since the 2013 Depsang standoff. The 506 Mission escalated in June 2020 when Chinese and Indian soldiers clashed in Galwan with lethal results. Despite the limited number of deaths and lack of sustained combat operations, this was judged to be a higher-intensity military confrontation than the 2014 China-Vietnam oil rig crisis.⁵ Such attempts indicate that China is willing to disregard existing border peace agreements at an opportune time and militarily seek an advantage whenever possible.

The Chinese actions on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) over the last decade could also be pieced together as gradual intrusions, resolved to some extent only after India has responded firmly. Thomas C. Schelling had foreseen such behaviour: “if there is no sharp qualitative division between a minor transgression and a major affront, but a continuous gradation of activity, one can begin his intrusion on a scale too small to provoke a reaction and increase it by imperceptible degrees, never quite presenting a sudden, dramatic change that would invoke the committed response.”⁶ Thus, after Galwan 2020, the interplay between Indian and Chinese armed forces changed, resulting in a protracted standoff, and exacerbating tensions.

Did the Chinese present us with a *fait accompli*? Or were they looking at coercing us? Dan Altman, in a well-researched piece, writes, “*Fait accompli* make gains unilaterally, imposing a change to the status quo without the adversary’s consent. Coercive threats, in contrast, pressure the adversary into consenting to a concession, however reluctantly.”⁷ The PLA achieved a *fait accompli* in restraining our movement to locations we used to patrol earlier by speedily positioning their forces. In Dec 2022, they made another attempt to intrude at Yangtse in the Eastern Sector, which was beaten back by our military.⁸ We might witness such attempts in the future, notwithstanding any interim agreement, which must be a prime factor for our national security consideration.

The Chinese Posture on the LAC

Our decision-making must also account for two facets of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Army posture after mid-2020. The first is the quantum of troops deployed by the PLA Army opposite Eastern Ladakh. There are conflicting reports, with one assessment indicating the presence of almost 60,000 PLA Army troops⁹ while another points to around 20,000, with

certain overflows during the rotation period.¹⁰ Irrespective of the figures, the potential of the PLA Army to indulge in a misadventure will remain high throughout the year till any verified de-induction takes place.

The second aspect pertains to inputs that the Chinese are building combat infrastructure in Tibet at a rapid pace. A CSIS report points out that many new roads and highways are being built to connect major regional hubs to remote areas on China's borders. In western Xinjiang, China is constructing at least eight roads stretching from the major G219 national highway toward the China-India LAC.¹¹ Similarly, a lot of dual-use airfields are being progressed with utmost urgency. Thus, a substantial differential exists between the PLA and the Indian military's mobilisation resources.

The crisis in Eastern Ladakh also raised the spectre of a two-front war. Ananth Krishnan, a reporter based in China for many years, writes, "Chinese analysts after the Galwan clash were ascribing India's abrogation of Article 370 and changing the status of Jammu and Kashmir-which saw the creation of a new union territory of Ladakh that included within its boundaries Aksai Chin-as a challenge to the sovereignty of both China and Pakistan, language that has never been used before and suggested that the countries could intervene on the other's behalf in the event of a conflict."¹² Therefore, such a situation calls for a multidimensional effort to progress any settlement and put it in effect using an integrated political, diplomatic, economic, military, and technological approach.

Some experts have pointed out that "disengagement and agreements on patrolling could stabilise military tensions on the border. However, Beijing has the potential to carry out aggressive actions whenever it wants to influence India's posture in the larger geopolitical tensions."¹³ The Chinese propensity to use the LAC as a pressure point, combined with the PLA's building of its mobilisation infrastructure and speedily modernising its military, requires that we relentlessly strengthen our deterrence.

The situation on our northern borders makes it imperative for India to counter threats at two levels: intrusions that could present us with a *fait accompli* and, on the other hand, a series of clashes that occur at different places and erupt into a limited or even all-out border war. We must be prepared for both eventualities while looking after our land borders and vast maritime frontiers. The recommendations that follow focus solely on the military measures to prevent a *fait accompli*.

Strengthening Measures

Building deterrence against a fait accompli requires multiple efforts. Events of the last decade have challenged the status quo on our northern borders. After 2020, we have accelerated our efforts and resorted to force rebalancing and infrastructure consolidation. What more can be done?

(i) Improving ISR

Firstly, we must improve our Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) framework. For this, a mix of satellites in multiple orbits that can keep our borders under surveillance is mandatory. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has announced plans to launch 50 satellites over the next five years for geo-intelligence gathering. This initiative involves deploying satellites in various orbits to monitor troop movements and capture images of extensive areas.¹⁴ Having 26 satellites for military purposes is grossly inadequate for a nation with adversaries on two fronts.¹⁵ These must be enhanced, on priority, with suitable sensors to serve our vast ISR, electronic intelligence and communication needs.

Unarmed aerial vehicles (UAVs) and drones can be employed over various altitudes that exist along our borders to fulfil ISR requirements. All weather capabilities would be essential and necessitate incorporating optical, thermal, and synthetic aperture radar and hyperspectral sensors. India's agreement with the United States to acquire 31 Predator high-altitude, long-endurance drones from General Atomics will significantly boost India's ISR capability.¹⁶

(ii) Ramping Up Infrastructure

The next area of concentration must be the mobilisation and communication infrastructure along our borders. While we have developed the roads and rail communications towards our West, the necessary impetus on the northern borders is only manifesting now. The allocation of funds for the Border Roads Organisation has seen a significant increase in the past few years.¹⁷ A year-round capability to mobilise troops and equipment backed by alternative avenues is needed. Enhancing our bridging and tunnelling capacities and creating airfields, advanced landing grounds (ALG), and helipads are imperative. Increasing telecommunication connectivity to all forward posts through optical fibre and other means would also be inescapable.

(iii) Accelerating Jointmanship

Tri-service synergy on the borders employing surveillance means such as radars, signal intelligence resources, surveillance aircraft, drones and mobilisation assets, e.g., transport aircraft and helicopters of all services for a common task, should be the norm. “India's "Eastern Prahar" tri-service exercise, held in November 2024, focused on Army, Navy, and Air Force coordination in the northeastern border region, enhancing operational readiness amid tensions with China.”¹⁸

Such exercises, preceded by well-crafted brainstorming and wargame sessions, will provide all services and linked civilian functionaries' with ideas and opportunities that can help achieve military readiness. This also mandates an urgency in creating and operationalising theatre commands. Otherwise, lessons learned in such exercises could quickly dissipate.

(iv) Employment of Special Forces

In the future, should a 2020-like crisis scenario escalate to a more significant skirmish, the employment of Special Forces trained in high-altitude combat could be considered. The utilisation of the tri-service Armed Forces Special Operations Division, suitably geared with specifically modernised Special Forces, air and technical resources, will indeed act as a force multiplier.

The military has indicated that the integration of the special forces' troops of the Army, Navy and the Air Force is in its mature stage to reach the specialised levels. In March 2024, the Army carried out a couple of airborne exercises covering various terrains, including the sensitive Siliguri Corridor.”¹⁹ Joint planning, training and equipping for operations in the rear of enemy lines needs to be undertaken. The requisite air assets would need to be dedicated for such purposes.

(v) Innovative Application of Drones

Given the versatile combat capabilities of drones, the Army and the Air Force would do well to employ them at high altitudes. Operational and tactical purposes could include battlefield ISR, as well as telecommunication relays and logistics. While drone capabilities at lower altitudes would remain akin to those used in the Ukraine and Gaza wars, adequate power, range, ceiling, and manoeuvre requirements at high altitudes would impose design and performance constraints.

The Indian Army has already taken a big step towards developing drones for such terrain. The HIM-DRONE-A-THON 2, held at Leh in September, 2024 brought together over 25 indigenous drone manufacturers to demonstrate their capabilities in real high-altitude battlefield conditions, at elevations ranging between 4,000–5,000 meters.²⁰ The offensive use of drones to take out targets might pose challenges at the outset but must be pursued in the long run. As our drone capabilities develop, the doctrine for their application will also have to evolve.

Indigenous drone manufacturers are enhancing our defence resilience by growing in size and scale. Big Bang Boom Solutions Private Limited has secured an order worth more than Rs 200 crores from the Indian Air Force and the Indian Army for counter-unmanned aerial systems technology.²¹ The services might consider offering test ranges to drone and counter-drone manufacturers in suitable areas where users can be closely involved and work on their combat applications.

(vi) Rapid Reaction Force

What the last four years have brought to the fore for India is that our armed forces must resolutely defend the border areas. Keeping adequate reserves in depth and close to deployed troops on the northern borders becomes paramount. Prudence demands that disengagement be followed by de-escalation, but de-induction should be deferred in every sector until we build the infrastructure and capacities to respond rapidly to crises. Some suggest that a doctrinal focus on denial will give the Indian military greater capacity to thwart future land grabs across the LAC.²²

Pre-emptive actions can thwart PLA moves and serve as a bargaining chip. Operation Snow Leopard, to occupy the heights on Kailash range in August 2020, shows that effective and well-planned responses push the Chinese to negotiate in such situations, whereas inertness does not help deter them. Another factor to guard against would be the Chinese ability to deny substantial Indian forces access to a theatre of operations should the PLA have gained an initiative.

(vii) Cyber and Information Security

Protecting our cyberspace, digital, and information networks from intrusion, interference, and sabotage is a critical determinant. While such activities may be ongoing, the Chinese are bound to exploit any adverse situation caused during a crisis. Even in peace, apart

from the networks of the armed forces, our government bodies, scientific establishments, telecommunication and power infrastructure, defence and aerospace research and industrial outfits, banking and commercial entities will be lucrative targets. Disruptions would result in second-order effects on field forces and hamper our military responses. Therefore, cyber defence and a measured retaliation capability must be worked upon at the national level. All this will bolster military effectiveness.

(viii) Data Analysis and Swift Dissemination

As our ISR systems improve in the future, a surfeit of data will need to be managed, analysed, and converted to decisions before being disseminated rapidly to those who need to act on it. Like in all spheres of life, Artificial Intelligence's (AI) role in military decision-making will likely increase.

A sound database created for mapping and monitoring adversarial movements can, by using AI, help military units and formations respond better. Further, data collection from satellites and dissemination to various entities are bound to be interfered with by the Chinese, who have already built up formidable counter-space and offensive cyber and electronic warfare capabilities. Hence, India needs to work on its space manoeuvre, quantum computing, and quantum communication know-how.

(ix) Maritime Augmentation

All these measures will no doubt help us build deterrence on the LAC. However, we must not lose sight of bolstering the combat profile of the Indian Navy as the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean is gradually increasing. China's geopolitical and economic grey zone activities include use of BRI infrastructure projects to gain influence with nations in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China's maritime activities against India include use of civilian fishing vessels and PLAN warships to engage in illegal activities inside India's EEZ.²³

The PLA Navy possesses more ships than everyone else and is developing niche capabilities. Projecting naval power into our area of influence in the Indian Ocean might seem to be a remote possibility today, but this can change within a decade once the PLA Navy acquires confidence in operating its aircraft carriers in far-off regions. Its submarines, research, and survey vessels have already increased their presence in the IOR. Coupled with the use, through strategic arrangements, of naval bases in our vicinity, it could pose more significant challenges on our maritime front. We must build our maritime domain awareness and anti-

submarine capabilities to counter these factors while increasing cooperation with like-minded neighbours.

Conclusion

India's relationship with China has frayed during the last decade. The agreement on patrolling and disengagement in Ladakh provides some respite, and the political meeting at the highest level bodes well. Neither China nor India can benefit from an all-out war. However, Chinese intentions to effect a *fait accompli* in the future cannot be ruled out. Accordingly, measures to strengthen the Indian military have become imperative. While further negotiations to improve upon the recent agreement must continue, much work lies ahead to restore mutual trust.

As former foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale points out, "It is as much the robustness of India's military posture and the quality of its deterrence as the new framework for border peace and tranquillity that India and China work out post Galwan that will ensure the peace and stability on the border between them."²⁴

It would be prudent to follow a multi-pronged approach, wherein we strengthen ourselves militarily, perform well economically, and build diplomatic partnerships with like-minded nations in the Indo-Pacific. Pushing back on the Chinese footprint in our immediate neighbourhood will remain essential for India over the long term.

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