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LOOKING BEYOND DISENGAGEMENT ARMED FORCES NEED TO BE FUTURE READY



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Avoiding war and attaining one's goals is the highest form of strategy by any tradition or book — whether Kautilya, Sun Tzu or Machiavelli. India and China both have apparently followed this old age strategy. As both nations seemingly step back from the brink of war, it is a win- win for India, as stated by India's Gen YK Joshi who leads the Northern Command responsible for the defence of Eastern Ladakh, the site of the nine month old crisis along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

The long awaited thaw between India- China along the LAC started with the synchronised and simultaneous disengagement from Pangong Tso on 10 Feb. The disengagement from the major friction points along either bank of Pangong Tso where tanks, Infantry combat vehicles and armed soldiers faced each other in close proximity stands completed. Pangong Tso was a major flash point with the potential to spiral into a skirmish, of the friction points this was by far the most sensitive. Along the High Himalayas the temperatures are low but the tempers high, the Indian soldiers lovingly call it the 'Hi-Alti' effect, hence the importance of addressing this first. The disengagement process in Eastern Ladakh will be long and tedious as



the next round of Corps commander talks are scheduled to address other sectors, once Pangong is completed. The ongoing mutually agreed upon disengagement process is the beginning and not the end of the changed dynamics of LAC management as also the India - China relations. China's aggressive behaviour and Galwan assault on Indian soldiers in June 2020 marked the end of a four and half decade old 'Peace and Tranquility' albeit a fragile one. The key challenge for India is to deter China's aggressive behaviour. Despite the ongoing disengagement and thaw, the standoffs and transgressions by China will see a spike in intensity, frequency, depth and scope in the near to immediate term and India should prepare an appropriate response mechanism duly supported by requisite capabilities in all domains.

Many questions have been raised as to why and how should India and Indians trust China. Yes, India can't trust China, however, we need to trust ourselves and the armed forces and this trust is best achieved by being future ready, building capabilities, enhancing capacities, focussing on and funding infrastructure development along our terrain fractured sectors, mostly connected by a single axis.

Writing for the Financial express on 26 Jan 2021 India-China LAC Game of Patience: No Blinking No Brinking Manship this author had listed three options for China as under:-

- The first option will be to continue to occupy the existing forward deployment as part of its continued military coercion, showcasing China as the sole Asian giant capable of challenging the US for super power status in a bipolar world. This option has certain costs attached in view of a resilient India capable of protecting its national interests and territorial integrity. China may not like to get detracted from its aim of achieving superpower status.
- The second option for China would be to redefine the LAC in its favour by not vacating the present areas and continue its policy of 'Salami Slicing', testing India's resolve. This will lead to massive PLA deployment all along the LAC. India's defensive deployment along the LAC will need to be matched by China, to deny India options for quid pro quo in areas not held by the PLA, which are vast.
- The third option for China will be to seek a favourable face saving exit from the present impasse, by agreeing to Indian demand of a status quo ante. China while exercising this option is likely to seek strategic concessions mainly in other domains¹.

¹ <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/india-china-lac-game-of-patience-no-blinking-no-brinkmanship/ 2178963/>

China, looking for a face saving exit, has achieved its immediate aim, however, the jury is still out whether or not China has achieved even part of its strategic intent and aims during this misadventure. The disengagement process once completed should be followed by de-escalation and deinduction of all additional troops and finally 'Peace and Tranquility'. As China has not achieved its end aims by its 'Military Coercion', which obviously it has not, a repeat of the aggressive behaviour in future is highly likely, and this time PLA will be better prepared. The armed forces will definitely be carrying out a very comprehensive study to cull out the right lessons and plan the future strategy and requisite capabilities to deter Chinese aggressive behaviour and ensure territorial integrity. It is imperative that India look beyond the disengagement and ensure the armed forces are future ready. Some of the more important focus areas are enumerated.

India's China Strategy

The recommended strategy against China will continue to remain that of 'deterrence', translated to military strategy it will imply a 'War Prevention Strategy' failing which the military should prepare for a 'War Fighting Strategy' based on proactive defence. Proactive defence strategy dictates defensive deployment ab initio well forward, with adequate reserves at all levels retaining viable QPQ options as was planned and executed along the South Bank of Pangong Tso in Aug 2020, which forced the Chinese to agree to 'Status Quo' ante. India will need to optimise all elements of national power and maximise its use of soft power or smart power, to include Diplomatic, Economic, Military, Informational, and Political. It needs to give further impetus to "Act East Policy" despite the recent upsurge in Myanmar, to make it more dynamic and purposeful and ensure initiatives with Japan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Mongolia are carried to their logical conclusion. India needs to 'Bind to Balance' with democratic nations where there is congruence and convergence of interests. The QUAD is an excellent alignment of like minded nations and should be strengthened, a QUAD ++ may also be in order. India also needs to review, refresh and reset its 'China Policy' however, despite the anger and anguish of Galwan the policy should be 'Pro India' serving our interests and not 'Anti China'.

Militarily, India will have to seek 'Peace through Preparedness' and keep its powder dry. Peace will come at a cost, which will have to be paid.

Command and Control - Placing ITBP under Operational Control.

One of the foremost and easily doable actions is to streamline the flawed



command and control structure along the LAC by placing the India Tibet Border Police (ITBP) under the operational control of the army. At present the sensitive LAC is managed by both the ITBP as the border guarding force and the army for border defence. There are a number of occasions when both forces operate with a sense of competition with contradictory orders and direction emanating from the two controlling ministries, MHA and MoD as also various intermediary headquarters. The dual responsibility is a recipe for disaster and if it has not occurred till now it is only thanks to the commanders on the ground. Along the Line of Control (LC) the BSF units function under the operational control of the army, a similar arrangement along the LAC will ensure more effective management and optimal deployment of resources. This is also as per the recommendations of the report of the Group of Ministers on National Security after the Kargil conflict, which identified the various problems of border management. Para 5.1 of the report categorically states ***“Multiplicity of forces on the same borders has inevitably led to the lack of accountability as well as problems of command and control.”*** The major problem identified by the GOM, vide para 5.12 recommends ***“At present there are instances of more than one force working on the same border and questions of conflict in command and control have been raised frequently. Multiplicity of forces on the same border has also led to lack of accountability on the part of the forces. To enforce the accountability, the principle of “ONE BORDER ONE FORCE” may be adopted while considering deployment of forces at the border.”***

This basic structural flaw can be easily corrected by the Government, this will, to a large extent, obviate any inadvertent flare up along the LAC, and present a more coordinated response.

Infrastructure Development

China’s ‘Military Coercion’ against India is most likely to manifest along the undefined LAC, a line of perceptions, which gives either side the moral right to assert itself as per their claims and alignment. Hence capabilities along the LAC will have to be accorded the highest priority. After the easily doable action, the focus has to be on the most essential, though difficult, time and resource heavy infrastructure development. The infrastructure differential on either side of the LAC is far in favour of China. This is further compounded by the terrain fractured sectors, sub sector and even sub sub sectors which lack any complementarity and are mostly connected by a single axis vulnerable to adverse weather conditions both in winters and monsoons. In contrast China has gainfully applied its energy and ample resources to create a world

class, state of the art, multi-dimension infrastructure in Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) for over half a century now. This includes a vast road and rail network, airfields, oil pipelines, logistic installations, and warehousing. The infrastructure developed has helped China integrate Tibet, settle its Han majority, thus changing the demographic pattern in this remote and generally hostile region and more importantly enhanced the military might along the Sino - Indian borders.² This gives China the capability of rapid deployment. On the hand as a misplaced strategy India shied away from constructing roads along the India-China Border. In 2010, Defence Minister A.K. Antony while addressing a function organised by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) said, “Earlier the thinking was that inaccessibility in far-flung areas would be a deterrent to the enemies.” He acknowledged that this was an “incorrect approach” and stated that the government has decided to upgrade roads, tunnels and airfields in the border areas.³ There is now an effort to create requisite infrastructure, however this needs a push at the highest levels and can not be left to the Army and the Border Roads alone.

A major recommendation is to prepare an integrated infrastructure development plan for the Northern borders with a new framework. This should be all inclusive with Roads, Airfields, Advance landing Grounds, Helipads, habitat, Logistics installations, Medical facilities etc. The NHAI should be responsible for ensuring construction of main and alternate highways as also the state highways and major arterial roads. The feeder roads to be constructed and maintained by the BRO and the last mile connectivity be undertaken by the Army from the operation works funds and integral engineering resources.⁴ The requisite clearance required to undertake projects in the interest of National Security should not be held hostage to the various environmental clearances required and court rulings. There is hence a need for an Apex body to ensure the timely execution and completion of projects. We do not need to look far, DMRC is a perfect example of project implementation given the will, authority and resource with accountability. In addition to the defence needs, the road – rail – air infrastructure once created will give the much needed impetus to development of our remote border region and contribute to education, health, tourism and economic benefits accruing to the people of our border region.⁵

² https://www.cenjows.in/pdf/CHINAs_INFRASTRUCTURE_IN_TIBET_.pdf

³ Vivek Raghuvanshi, “India to Modernize Road Networks in Border Areas,” Defence News, May 07, 2010, <http://www.defencenews.com/story.php>.

⁴ https://www.cenjows.in/pdf/CHINAs_INFRASTRUCTURE_IN_TIBET_.pdf

⁵ Ibid



Capability Building

As China respects strength it is imperative to have a balanced and optimal deployment of well synergised combat power, hence the urgent need to build capabilities and enhance existing capacities. The raising of the accretion forces including the Mountain Strike Corps is a long overdue capability, the government must ensure the financial outlays to raise full compliments including the much needed logistics support units. The strategic rebalancing which is reportedly initiated should be carried to its logical conclusion. As China has an advantage of rapid deployment, India too needs to designate, organise, equip and train brigade size 'Quick Reaction Forces' for each sector/Corps Zone, which are light and agile to preempt China occupying unheld areas along LAC and failing which react with speed and alacrity.

The superior Indian Air Force enhances our war prevention strategy as it has a qualitative edge over PLAAF. The focus and financial allocations for acquiring the requisite air assets for the Indian Air Force including rotary wing and UAVs is a must. These assets act as a deterrence and provide the much needed surveillance capabilities, strategic, operational and battle field mobility in addition to the logistic support.

The Indian Navy with its blue water capability and ability to control and dominate the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) is again pivotal to deter China's aggressive behaviour along the LAC with the ability to dominate and the threat in being to block the SLOCs is a credible deterrence. China's 'Malacca Dilemma' and vulnerabilities in the Indian Ocean are well acknowledged and need no elaboration. The Indian Navy will need the requisite additional platforms and systems, that too in a reasonable time frame. India will also do well to invest in the strategically important Andaman & Nicobar Islands, as they provide a viable counter pressure point.

Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR)

There can be no denying the fact that China did manage to surprise India with its rapid build up and forward deployment, both at the strategic and operational level. ISR capabilities have to be enhanced and synergised between various agencies, this is the most critical domain of the changed dynamics of LAC management and border defence. The ISR grid exploits new age technologies including space domain, satellites, UAVs, electromagnetic spectrum, a 24 by 7 eye in the sky and Early Warning radar coverage even during adverse weather. Equally important is a smooth system of analysis and dissemination. China has adapted the three 'Rs' Roads, Reserves and

Radars for manning the LAC. This is a concept which the army can and should replicate.

Integration and Jointness.

The Indian armed forces as yet are by far the least joint as far as structures and systems are concerned, the jointness achieved is more on account of individual military commanders. Fortunately for India the long overdue corrective process was set in motion in Jan 2020, with the government tasking the newly created CDS in its 24 Dec 2019 order to bring about jointness in operations, logistics, transport, training, support services, communications, repairs and maintenance etc of the three Services within three years of the first CDS assuming office. With a view to safeguard India's national interest, be able to translate its chosen strategy to practice, to optimize its combat potential and also transform itself from a military force to a military power, India is required to adopt best military practices suitable in the Indian context. The concept of jointness and integration manifesting itself in the form of Integrated Theatre Commands is now a security imperative. The appointment of the CDS came at the most opportune time, just prior to the Chinese violating the LAC. The effect on the three services planning and operating in concert with a singular mission and zeal duly coordinated by the CDS was visible and contributed to the effective resolve and response demonstrated by the armed forces. The military needs to transform effectively and in good time with Integrated Theatres synergising the strengths of the three services. The CDS duly supported by HQ Integrated Defence Staff has a critical and crucial role in ensuring a smooth transformation as the armed forces are to be both present relevant and future ready. The transition will be a challenge to be managed well.

Multi Domain Capacities

Chinese have taken a quantum leap in new domains of warfare. Future wars will be fought in multiple battle spaces, both overt and covert in all domains. The Cyber, space, special operations and the Information domain are key domains where India will have to invest its resources and energies, building and enhancing capacities both defensive to safeguard our interests and assets as also deterrence capabilities.

Exploiting New Age Technologies

The Armed forces will be tasked and asked to do '**More and More in Less and Less**' on account of the China threat and the economic challenges



posed by the Pandemic. The only option for the armed forces is to identify, induct, absorb and exploit new age technologies both as a force multiplier and a force substitutor. The Armed forces need to define a 15 year vision, a seven year strategy and a three year action plan to chart out a pragmatic, implementable cost effective technology development plan.

Conclusion

China will do well to realise and recognise that they now deal with a risen, resurgent, responsible India and military coercion in any form or domain, is not going to yield results and may only backfire. Peace and tranquility along the borders is win - win for both nations as in future China may need India more than India needs China. In the post COVID emerging world order as the balance of power shifts from West to East, China can not afford enmity and adversarial relations with India and nor can India with China. The two nuclear armed asian giants, home to over one third of humanity do have mutual concerns and shared interests and will do well to strengthen the relations based on 'Mutual and Equitable Security'.



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