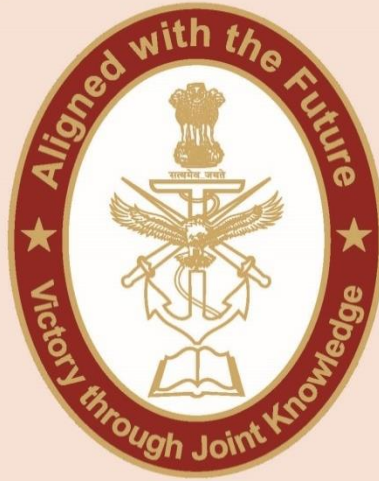


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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MY LADAKH DIARY



Lt Gen SK Singh, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM (Retd) Former Vice Chief of the Army Staff, Army Commander South Western Command and Corps Commander, Ladakh.

I took over the command of the 'Fire & Fury Corps' in early March 2009. During the operational briefings at the Army HQ, I was also briefed by the representative of the Ministry of External Affairs, who appeared to know his job. I remember making a loose comment as to why we keep tolerating the regular bullying by the Chinese. He frankly opined, "What else could we do in view of our weak military strength and lack of infrastructure!"

During my briefings and the Command War Games at Udhampur, I remained a side show, with all the operational focus on other two Corps. Immediately after taking over, I started going around the Sector. Since I had served three tenures earlier in this sector (as a platoon commander in Kargil

Sector in 1975-76, as a Company Commander in Tangtse Sector in 1984-85, and a Brigade Commander in Siachen in 2001-03) and commanded the Kupwara Division in the neighboring Sector, I was fairly clear about the terrain and operational imperatives.

After listening to the briefings and visiting the troops on ground, I observed that our Kargil and Siachen sectors were strongly held, but Eastern Ladakh of over 800 Kms was totally neglected by the Army. Though Karu Division was operationally responsible for this sector, it's complete focus was on Siachen. The other two brigades were being used as the feeder troops for the Glaciers. When I took aerial reconnaissance of this area, I was appalled to see the state of our defences, which had not been maintained since I was a Company Commander there in 1984-85, due to our prime focus on OP MEGHDOOT.

During one of my sorties into Sub Sector North, I noticed a dozer clearing snow on a road on Depsang plateau, a few kms ahead of our ITBP post at Burtse. Since, as per my map, this area fell in our territory, I directed the pilot to fly low, and I took a picture of the dozer. It turned out to be a Chinese dozer doing snow clearing after the winters. I then decided to tour the LAC extensively and was horrified to see well laid out Chinese roads upto all passes leading to LAC, whereas we had very primitive communication, and our troops had to patrol on foot upto the designated points. One of our patrols which went to the Patrol Point further south observed Chinese tents near our designated patrol point at Red Hill. I flew to see for myself, but the temporary camp had been abandoned. When I saw the pictures of recent Chinese camp of Galwan valley in media, it appears to be a much bigger strength with the adjoining heights tactically secured, which could pose a potential threat to Shyok-DBO Road. I donot recollect any patrol clashes in this area. The situation at Finger 4 was that

they had already built a motorable road between Finger 8 and Finger 4, whereas our patrols went upto the patrol points on foot.

To enable Karu Division concentrate on Eastern Ladhakh, Siachen Sector was detached from it and put directly under Corps Headquarters. We realized that two brigades were very less for such a vast sector and bid for extra troops, which were sanctioned. One brigade was moved up from the neighboring Corps sector and assigned responsibility for DBO sector. There used to be one Mechanised Battalion in Karu, but the troops were being employed for Amarnath Yatra during campaigning season, and thus were not rehearsed in their operational role. This was reversed and they were moved upto their operational areas. The terrain favours use of mechanized forces, and as such an Armoured formation was inducted into the sector. A number of infrastructure projects, including the Shyok-DBO road, were sanctioned. The airstrip at DBO was reactivated and a new one was constructed at Nyoma. Strong underground defences along the entire defended sector were planned and started. Joint patrols of Army and ITBP started patrolling upto the designated patrol points more frequently and in strengths. All these measures have enhanced the defence potential of this sector considerably, but it has to remain a continuous process. Even in 1962, our troops under Brig (Later Gen) Raina gave good fight, with epic battles of Rezangla and Sirijap under Major Shaitan Singh and Maj Dhan Singh Thapa. The Indian Armed Forces are much better prepared now.

It is quite clear that China will continue to bully its neighbors, as it continues to enhance her military and economic strengths. Our salvation lies in further enhancing our defensive capabilities and developing an offensive punch quickly. With this aim in view, a decision was taken to raise the **Mountain Strike Corps**, which is progressing very slowly. Another game changer for operations in this sector is the early operationalisation

and induction of **Light Combat Helicopters being developed by HAL**. No other helicopter in the world is designed to function at such altitudes and the Chinese of now have no effective counter to the threats from our LCH.

Now, let us recapitulate as to how a much smaller Vietnamese Armed Forces checkmated the plans of much stronger PLA in 1979. China amassed about thirty Divisions for attack on Vietnamese borders, which was defended by about six divisions of Vietnamese border guards. They were well entrenched and kept a mobile reserve of a Division strength to give a bloody nose to the attacker if he ventured in. The PLA could not penetrate the strong Vietnamese defences, and called off the offensive hurriedly before the Vietnamese reserves could be fully applied.

In our case, terrain allows penetration at many places all along the front in Eastern Ladakh. Our strategy should therefore, be based on teaching a lesson to the bully by making a grave yard of his attacking forces with the help of our air and mobile reserves, while our defensive formations give last man last round fight from well entrenched defences. Having stabilized the battle, we must have the capability to take it into enemy territory to threaten her vulnerabilities. Every battle is like a boxing match, in which the winning boxer must have a good defence as well as a solid offensive punch. We do possess this combination along our western front in the form of defensive and offensive formations. However, the same cannot be said about our northern borders. Thus, the raising of Mountain Strike Corps and Light Combat Helicopter Squadrons must be expedited.

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