

BEYOND DOKLAM - IS THE ARMY FUTURE READY?



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The 73 day old Doklam standoff has been peacefully resolved at the politico-diplomatic level. Before the dust settles down on the unconstructed road in the Doklam Plateau, the key question that needs to be asked is “Is the army future ready?”. It will be prudent to analyse the relevant lessons and chart out an implementable and pragmatic action plan to ensure continued peace and tranquility along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). On account of differing perceptions of the LAC, an assertive and aggressive China and a growing new India, the peace and tranquility along the LAC will be constantly and continuously under stress, with increase in frequency, intensity and depth of transgressions, leading to more and more ‘Stand Offs’. The Doklam is likely to be the new normal.

The standoff at Doklam has once again been peacefully resolved ensuring Peace and Tranquility along the 3488 km long India-China Line of Actual Control (LAC). The two nations agreed to ‘Status Quo’ for the present, moving back to the pre 16 Jun 2017 positions. The credit for the peaceful resolution is due in equal part to India and China as also to Bhutan, at the politico-diplomatic and military levels. At ground zero it was

the two armies who stood face to face, eyeball to eyeball without either blinking or raising the ante. It needs to be understood that at high altitudes and Doklam is over 4000 meter, the temperatures are low and tempers high and hence a major part of the credit is due to the soldiers and military leaders of Indian Army and the PLA for ensuring peace under the most difficult and challenging of circumstances which also included an exceptional case of stone throwing between the patrol parties North of Pangong Tso in Eastern Ladakh.

The 3488 km long India China border is a set of contradictions. It is the longest disputed peaceful border in the world, with the last shot in anger fired in Oct 1975. There is no common understanding of the LAC and China lays claims to a little over 1,10,000 sq kms of Indian territory, some of which is occupied by China. Doklam was neither the first nor the last 'stand off' between the two nuclear armed Asian giants, home to one third of humanity. It is an imperative that structural and organisational infirmities are corrected and systematic changes initiated to further peace tranquility and equilibrium along the India - China border. The disputed border is a potential driver for conflict. China respects strength and India will need to enhance capacities and build capabilities to be future ready. Key issues need to be addressed immediately and urgently post Doklam.

The vast and varied Northern borders with China are manned and managed by the Army and ITBP often leading to competition and conflict with coordination and cooperation between individual commanders based on personalities. There are also two channels of reporting and issues of accountability, as the ITBP is under the Ministry of Home Affairs. This dual command and control structure is a recipe for disaster as conflicting directions and guidelines can emanate from the two controlling ministries i.e. MHA and MoD and more often than not by intermediary headquarters. There is an urgent dictate to resolve the flawed command and control structure as recommended by the Group of Ministers (GOM) report on "Reforming National Security" post Kargil in 2001. The major problem identified by the GOM vide para 5.12 was "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." The recommendations of the GOM have been implemented along all borders with neighbouring countries except the most sensitive and important border with China. The ITBP should to be placed under command and control of the Army, in keeping with the successful model along the LC where the BSF operates under the operational control of the army.

The approach to border guarding and border defence between India and China are at two extremes. India has always believed in ab initio deployment of the Army along the LAC in all sensitive and disputed pockets, incurring avoidable resource costs. China on the other hand has successfully evolved the concept of 'Three Rs' - Roads, Radars and Reserves. This gives the PLA battlefield and tactical mobility to dominate the LAC and patrol the borders effectively. China has not only developed a multi dimensional, multi modal state of the art infrastructure in Tibet, but also has a vast network of roads and tracks all along the border connecting most passes on the watershed. The attempt to change the 'Status Quo' in Doklam was part of the PLA modus operandi and tactics to connect all passes including Chelela Pass on the Jampheri Ridge, which of course is a core security concern for India as it directly threatens the NH 31 C, the link through the Siliguri Corridor connecting eight and half states and five crore people. India too can replicate this model and chart out a focused approach to Infrastructure Development. India shied away from constructing border roads till 2005. In a shift from policy the government sanctioned 73 India China border roads to be completed by 2012. Forty six of these 73 roads are still in various stages of completion and contract. The aspect of Infrastructure Development needs a multi pronged focused approach to address the security concerns and development of the border areas. This will also contribute to the integration and development of our border areas and people, facilitating better education, health care and economic activities including tourism. The government needs to be decisive

and act fast. As the first step the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (LARR) should be amended to exempt all areas falling within 100km of the India-China border from its purview, this will enable time bound land acquisition leading to inclusive infrastructure development. The PM Modi led government did attempt to amend the LARR 2013 soon after assuming power, but failed as it did not have the majority in Rajya Sabha. It is near impossible to acquire land in the border regions in an acceptable time frame even for construction of defences in depth.

There is also a need to evolve an integrated infrastructure development plan where in the NHAI is responsible for constructing the main arteries, a revamped Border Road Organisation mandated to construct the feeder roads and the army to ensure last mile connectivity through its integral resources of operational works. In addition to the plan the government should constitute a National Infrastructure Development Board under the Niti Aayog comprising of all relevant ministries including the representatives from the Army and Navy, fully empowered and accountable to execute and monitor time bound development. The Border Roads Organisation be reconstituted and reorganized from a work charge organization to a corporation on the lines of Delhi Metro Rail Corporation. Reforms in established systems and organizations which have failed to deliver is a must to enable them to perform.

In July 2013, the government sanctioned a strength of over 90,000 troops at an estimated cost of approx 64,600 crores, including the Mountain Strike Corps, as part of the accretion forces for the Northern Borders. Reportedly the sanctioned money has not been allotted and the Army continues to raise and equip the accretion forces from within its own resources. This leads to avoidable voids and hollowness, sharing poverty only degrades the operational and logistics efficacy of other formations. The sanctioned funds should be made available immediately for early operationalisation of the mountain strike corps and making up of voids in the border management posture.

During the Doklam standoff a few domain experts compared the strengths of the forces and concluded that the Indian Air Force has an edge over the PLA Air Force on account technology, terrain and training. The Indian Navy too enjoys relative superiority over the PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean as also the ab initio deployment and defence preparedness of the Indian Army was strong enough to hold its own ground and possibly teach the PLA a lesson. While these assessments may stand scrutiny to an extent and may not be all rhetoric, but the days of a linear war alone are over. The future wars will be multi-domain wars , all elements duly integrated to achieve laid down military objectives. Linear wars are only a subset of future multi domain warfare. Doklam was definitely different from the earlier stand offs at Chumar (2014) and Depsang (2013), as China resorted to an information war, exploiting both the Chinese media and also investing in the Indian media. Informational warfare is an essential element of national power. India on the other hand ensured a very mature and steady stance ensuring strategic communication without resorting to rhetoric. However, India and the Indian military in particular should raise a Director General of Information Warfare (DGIW) functioning under the Director General Defence Intelligence Agency, to synergise and jointly strategise and execute this all important domain of future wars. The DGIW will have three verticals, Public Information, Social Media and Psychologies Operations. This organization is a must in today's changed environment for external and internal threats. The multi domain warfare also includes the all important Cyber, Space and Special Operations commands. Though these were recommended by the Naresh Chandra Task Force in 2012 and Chiefs of Staff Committee in 2013 detailed the charter and structures, till date the approvals are pending. The 57,000 odd manpower savings as recommended by the Shekatkar committee and approved by the Raksha Mantri on 30 Aug can be redeployed to raise these commands.

As is well known the PLA is in the process of carrying out major reforms, reorganising the erstwhile military regions into Integrated Theatre Commands. Prime Minister Modi in his address to the Combined Commanders in Dec 2015 onboard INS Vikrant and again in Jan 2017 at Dehradun has asked the senior military leadership to challenge their

military beliefs and evolve integrated command structures based on theatres leading to jointmanship and optimizing resources. To be future ready the transition to integrated theatre commands is an imperative. The Shekatkar committee has made very comprehensive and all encompassing recommendations. As of date only 65 of the 188 recommendations have been approved by the government, most of the macro issues are still under consideration and analysis. It is time the MoD under the new Raksha Mantri approves and implements the defence reforms as per Shekatkar committee and transforms the Indian military power to a military force capable of addressing future security challenges effectively.

The peace and tranquility along the disputed border is a result of five agreements based on the five principles of Panchsheel. The confidence building measures between India and China have stood the test of time even under severe stress like in Doklam. These CBMs needs to be consolidated and reinforced. Additional Border Personnel Meeting points can be established at mutually agreed places for better understanding and cordial relations among commanders and troop facing each other. At the regional level the troops could engage in non contact games in the border region. The 'Hand in Hand' joint exercise between the two countries could be enhanced taking it to the next level. Increased visits of Naval ships to each other ports and even joint military drills whether bilateral or multilateral is a good step forward. The hotline between the Indian and Pakistan DGMO has been an effective mechanism for crisis management and exchange of information. This should be replicated with China.

China respects strength and it is a must for India to not only demonstrate strength but also build capabilities, enhance capacities and improve upon the inadequate infrastructure. It is an imperative for the two Asian giants to resolve their difference peacefully and arrive at a common understanding of the LAC till a resolution to the boundary question can be worked out. Peace and tranquility along the LAC is a must for both countries to ensure long term peace, stability and development. The Army is effective, however they need infrastructure development and certain

structural changes to be future ready to ensure continued peace and tranquility along the LAC.

The Immediate tasks for the new Raksha Mantri are cut out. China respects strength and the MoD has to invest in capability building and capacity enhancement to be future ready and ensure continued equilibrium, peace and tranquility along the India China border.