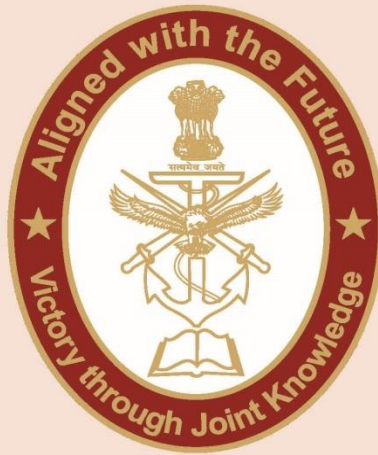


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CHINA'S BLITZKREIG POST COVID: WILL IT WORK



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Opening Narrative. The East Ladakh LAC imbroglio has been written about and discussed in the digital, print and TV media threadbare; with the range of emotions moving from despair a la 'repeat of 1962' to jubilation of an 'all-powerful New India', ready to 'give a bloody nose' to China.

Pragmatic Analysis and Overview of Chinese Actions along the LAC in East Ladakh. There has obviously been an intelligence and military oversight, either in terms of interpretation of Chinese intentions or of carrying out suitable counter measures like moving up formation reserves, forward posturing of artillery and mechanised forces, increasing patrolling and surveillance activities, strengthening of posts, and deploying mobile reserves to fill in the gaps. I would like to add, that hindsight is always easy to predict! Unlike the methodology followed every summer by China and India, this time the Chinese PLA exercised closer than usual to the LAC, and stayed put, which allowed the Chinese troops normally deployed in Tibet, to move forward and occupy previously un-held areas. On the other hand, Indian troops including some formations from outside Ladakh region, ostensibly due to COVID did not carry out corresponding exercises, which normally acted as a countervailing force to prevent exactly such a situation from happening. One must accept that intentions of Chinese movement

forward from their exercise areas to LAC (to some extent it would have been camouflaged under the garb of regular Border troops affiliated to those areas) should have been identified as unusual and alarming. Misreading Chinese intentions and initial hesitant response added to the confusion. China's greatest strength in TAR (Tibet Autonomous Region) lies in his infrastructure in terms of rail link to Lhasa from mainland, numerous airfields, multiple roads of entry from hinterland to forward locations/LAC, his logistical stamina and smooth supply chain, providing capability to deploy large quantum of formations ranging from mechanized/motorized, artillery, army aviation, engineers, air defence, rocket forces, communication and surveillance units and most importantly logistic supply chains, in an operationally quick timeframe. To sum up, his wherewithal to mobilise is truly impressive and vast in scale. Notwithstanding the above, we acted with great alacrity by our expeditious commensurate mirror deployment, mobilization of the IAF, combat hardened formations and troops, terrain familiarization and altitude acclimatisation, and mobilization of additional reserves. Tactically and operationally in East Ladakh our Army and IAF is fully confident and capable of handling all challenges without getting militarily embarrassed. By all accounts his well laid out plans to gain valuable strategic territory and embarrass the Armed Forces and Nation has been stalled atleast temporarily. In fact, he would risk embarrassment if he continues the misadventure, as even a stalemate by India will indicate Chinese loss of face, to which they hold tremendous importance.

The Emerging Operational Story of PLA in Ladakhⁱ. Starting late Jan/Feb 20, the PLA began what was viewed as routine mobilisation for annual exercises in Xinjiang, which borders Ladakh. As brought out earlier, this year in a major departure from the earlier annual exercises, PLA troops for the first time moved closer to the border, while border frontier troops remained in forward areas. There was sufficient visibility and knowledge of PLA moving into TAR. In Jan 2020, Pres Xi Jinping issued a new Training Mobilisation Order (TMO) for strengthening military training in real combat conditions and "to maintain a high level of readiness". The new order updated the 2019 TMO, which was the first such order to be signed by Pres Xi, and had called for implementing new military training guidelines announced by him in 2018 to improve combat readiness. This dramatically altered the pattern of annual exercises and China's forward deployment posture, not just with India but also in other theatres, where tensions have flared this summer including Japan, Taiwan and in the South and East China Sea (SCS and ECS). It called for confrontational training to assess

commanders in real-time combat situations and deal with a multi-front situation. This TMO is likely to be in place till at least 2021. If this input is true, it is extremely bold and in keeping with President Xi's hurry to achieve the 'China Dream', and partially explains the goings on. Their aim is to deliberately cause disruption, but emerge with strategic gains whilst showcasing its rising CNP to the World. India especially the Armed Forces needs to prep for a new normal urgently, and has to plan, equip and play accordingly.

The Why? China's military operational movement along LAC is just one vertical of his plan and he has a larger aim. Explanations offered of Chinese apprehensions of our LAC infrastructure build up specially the Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road and our probing actions, for his aggressive actions in East Ladakh are tactical at best and miss the larger strategic picture. He has moved everywhere near simultaneously, from Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, to even Phillipines (against Duarte who was willing to be China's lackey), Nepal, Bhutan and even Russia. He is indicating his willingness to take on the so called liberal democratic world order established by USA and her allies specially in Asia which he considers his strategic playground. His actions also intend to showcase his CNP and demonstrate his domination of Asia; any other power including the superpower USA will need to deal with China. He is showcasing his capability and capacity to move on from COVID and simultaneously engage militarily and provocatively (belligerent actions against 27 immediate and near continental and maritime neighbours) in SCS and ECS, and India, and economical and diplomatic coercion elsewhere (amplified next paragraph)*. This is no 'off the cuff measure', but a planned thought out strategic manoeuvre. China plans to resolve the turbulence created, after making strategic gains/inroads at the time of his choosing indicating his growing stature and CNP to the World. Incidentally, He is not going to implode, as the very large population of middle income citizens support this regime as it has brought them prosperity for the price of sacrificing some freedom. **Specifically, China's raison d'être to move against India**; a direct competitor for strategic space and possible impediment to her aspirations to become a superpower; India's continued opposition to BRI and CPEC which is nothing less than existential for CCP (billions invested) being the gateway to multi-lateral trade and influence, coerce India into accepting the BRI or at best not oppose it ; fear of losing access to Gwadar Port which reduces dependence on Malacca Straits; Abrogation of Article 370 and India justifiable seeking and

announcing its resolve to get back the entire sovereign territory of erstwhile J&K which includes Gilgit Baltistan and Aksai Chin; and the high probability of India becoming the main beneficiary of economic, manufacturing and trade pullout from China; putting India down as also create a unstable security environment will dissuade other countries from re-locating to India.

China's Aggressive Posturing*. While the World is battling COVID 19 and its effects in other domains, China (Chinese Communist Party to be more precise) led by Xi Jinping is changing the global status quo. Like a high-stake gambler, he has rolled the dice, to see what he can win on the security and geo-political front. Muscle flexing has been impressive; intimidating or sinking fishing vessels (Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, even Japan); threatening SE Asia naval ships by locking missiles; conduct exercises to intimidate and develop specific skills needed to invade Taiwan; use belligerent language at all adversaries including stating intent of "reunification of Taiwan" openly; activities in exclusive economic zones of neighbours Japan included; changing status quo along LAC, an already tense unresolved land boundary with India and finally 'wolf diplomacy' a recent phenomenon knowing its adverse impact (perhaps that is the point!).

International Reactions. Aggrieved and angry about COVID 19, which added to the frustration and growing realization of a challenger in the global order, USA followed by her allies mainly from the Western World have reacted with alacrity and alarm at China's belligerent actions which threaten to change the global power equation. Many other nations are watching from the sidelines as China's CNP, and economic might (considerable) and hold on their sovereignty could get strengthened if China gets away relatively unscathed. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has stated that China's pursuit of off shore resources in parts of the South China Sea is "completely unlawful". In its latest Annual Defence Report/White paper, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government criticized Beijing for "relentlessly" attempting to undermine Tokyo's administration of the Senkaku Islands in the ECS, even at a time when international coordination is required to contain the virus. The document rebuked China over its persistent attempts to "unilaterally change the status quo" in the ECS. The white paper also referred to China's unilateral creation of two administrative districts in the SCS, in which Beijing has overlapping claims with Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan. The two districts are named Xisha and Nansha, using the Chinese names for the disputed Paracel and Spratly

Islands, respectively. Concurrently, a comprehensive Pacific Deterrence Initiative is being formulated. US has announced and is currently rebalancing and redeploying its forces to counter future threats emanating from China, which includes increasing 'freedom of navigation' patrols in Taiwan Straits, more military and economic aid to Taiwan, and deploying two aircraft carrier battle groups to SCS. Aligned countries are coalescing either bilaterally or through groupings like QUAD (and Plus) to meet the Chinese challenge. Chinese strengths in IT, hardware, manufacturing, infrastructure are being weakened using multiple fronts. India's ban on 59 Chinese apps, as also resolve to ban Chinese participation in sensitive sectors (including Huawei and ZTE) has been applauded and has acted as a catalyst for others to emulate. China will be justified if it feels it is 'strategically isolated by the liberal democratic West'. The jury however, is still out regarding the outcome, as most nations are finding out to their dismay, that China has considerable economic and political clout and has enmeshed itself so intimately into others nations economic fabric, that it will be very difficult to exorcise it, and it will come at great cost.

The Indian Elephant through Chinese Eyesⁱⁱ.

India's resolve and response, coupled with the 15 Jun bloody clash between Indian and PLA troops appears to have surprised the Chinese strategic community. Their utterances/debates instead of bringing consensus has widened the differences on 'how to deal with a more confident India and a professional battle hardened Armed Forces'.

The Hawk School. This school headed by India watchers Lin Minwang and Zhang Jiadong, from Fudan University, and Li Hongmei from the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS) among others, believe that the present conflict is an "inevitable result" of what they perceive as "India's long-standing speculative strategy on the China-India border". Beijing getting wary of India's pronouncements (Article 370, taking erstwhile J&K back including Aksai Chin), growing alliances and infrastructure surge all along our Northern borders was "fed up" and "had to teach India a lesson". They feel our growing alignment with USA and China's adversaries (Japan, Australia, Vietnam etc) is taking India further away from rapprochement, becoming a 'quasi ally of USA with no reversal, and possibility of border settlement getting grimmer. Within this unstable global

security environment and a paranoid USA, the earlier system of effective management of bilateral differences has crumbled beyond control, periodic violent conflicts, they predict, are the “new normal” in China-India ties. To deal with a resurgent India, Chinese hardliners suggest a policy of “three nos”: “no weakness, no concession and no defensive defence”. In other words, China should take all opportunities to crack down on India, take the initiative to hit it hard whenever possible. This, they feel will make relations more stable like after 1962. They interpolate that China must be ready for belligerent moves across the entire LAC, from the McMahon Line in the east to the Aksai Chin area in the west; take the initiative to attack and seize territories under India’s control from Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh, and weaken India internally, by supporting the cause of Maoists, Naga separatists and Kashmiris.

The Moderate School. This school which has political thinkers and professors such as Zheng Yongnian and Yu Longyu among others, have opined that Chinese actions and reactions in places like Galwan have remained mostly tactical/reactive and without any clear strategic intent. This has stoked nationalism in India and united the otherwise divided nation against China, harming China’s interests and might even draw China into an untimely military conflict. If China-India ties are damaged beyond repair, they warn, India alone or in association with other countries will cause “endless trouble for China”. For instance, an openly hostile India will use every possible means to prevent China from reaching the Indian Ocean. They feel that strategically, it is not advisable to launch proactive military conflict against India, “a big country with comparable military strength”, at this point in time. While China enjoys superiority in most fields like weapon systems and logistical strength, India too enjoys some strengths in war experience, acclimatization, shorter supply lines, and terrain familiarity. They predict that if the conflict ends in a short period of time, it will benefit China. But if it is prolonged, China will be disadvantaged.

What China may eventually try to achieve. I agree with Antara Singh who concluded in her article in The Hindu, that China would aim at attaining a comprehensive and overwhelming geo-political and strategic advantage *vis-à-vis* India, which cannot be altered by war.

Anticipating Round 2. It will be wise to acknowledge that China’s moves along the LAC (even in Sikkim) is part of a larger strategic game plan. He

has mobilized a large force, and possibly had more devious designs of altering the status quo permanently along the LAC in his favour. For this China may have been willing to use limited force with a very effective and formidable non-kinetic campaign prior, during and after the larger tactical actions. He would have employed his fairly new Strategic Support Force for conducting information and psychological, network centric, electronic and electro-magnetic spectrum operations while concurrently using his CNP to provide a legal, economic, diplomatic narrative. As stated earlier, while our robust tactical response by our brave soldiers at the tactical level and expeditious mirror deployments by Army and IAF at operational level, has surprised and stymied the Chinese temporarily, we MUST plan for the worst case contingency ranging from a localized conflict to a full scale war. **The trust built up over decades by abiding by the CBMs (confidence building measures) and border management agreements (barring the odd one-off incidents) has been permanently broken.**

India's Future Roadmap. The Chinese respect strength and resolve. It is time to build our National Multi Domain capabilities as that is how he will fight a larger scale war. You can ignore his asymmetric superiority in comprehensive national power (CNP), infrastructure capacities, military capabilities, cunning and deceit, diplomatic and political clout at your own peril. Numerous China watchers have rightly asserted that China has managed to alienate the youth of New India, which is a very large percentage of Indian population. While we continue strengthening and cementing other domains of diplomacy, economy, strategic balancing through alliances and bilateral agreements and increase our CNP, our focus must be 'atmanirbharta' and ensuring a potent, visible, modern, multi-domain operations capable Armed Forces including Strategic Forces Command (full spectrum capability). For this; expeditious raising of Theatre commands; placing all forces (ITBP) along LAC under Army; rapid growth of our Navy to manage our 'Maritime Policy' of dominating the IOR region (the domain of vital importance); IAF capability for a multi-front role; re-energised mountain strike corps; strategic lift capability; potent C5ISTAR system (command, control, communication, computer, cyber, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance); are the main ingredients. We also need to carry out a more realistic threat assessment of a probable two and a half front conflict scenario, leading to fresh realignment, redeployment and repositioning of our entire Armed Forces, with a stronger bias towards our Northern Borders. This act, will in itself

send a strong military and deterrent message, may prevent any misadventure, as also strengthen our defensive and offensive response. We must build our deterrence capabilities to ensure fulfillment of our National vision and goals

To conclude, the LAC imbroglio will serve as a defining moment in our country's history, and India will emerge strong, resilient, resurgent and confident to take its natural place as the pivotal balancing power amongst the comity of Nations in the World.

About the Author: Lt Gen PR Kumar (Retd) served in the Indian Army for 39 years, He was the DG Army Aviation, before superannuated from the appointment of Director General of Military Operations in end 2015. He continues to write and talk on international and regional security and strategic issues. He can be contacted at prkumarsecurity.wordpress.com and perumo9@gmail.com

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.

ⁱ Paraphrased from 'LAC stand off/ Xi Jinping's mob order, months of planning preceded border moves; The Hindu, 13 Jul 20

ⁱⁱ Inputs taken from numerous digital articles in Foreign Affairs, The Diplomat, Economist, Stratfor, and other security and international affairs articles before and after India-China standoff, closer home from 'The standoff and China's India policy dilemma', by Antara Ghosal Singh; The Hindu, dt 15 Jul 20; Link - <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-stand-off-and-chinas-india-policy-dilemma/article32083539.ece>