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CHINESE PROVOCATIVE ACTIONS ALONG THE LAC

By

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There has been a spurt of Chinese provocative actions along the LAC, propping up in areas where there were no such incidents earlier. Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia, who commanded the Sukhna Corps stated, 'These are all over. From the first of its kind in Naku La in North Sikkim to more frequent ones at Pangong Tso and Galwan River. Transgressions are a normal occurrence, but what is different this time is the intensity and activity including helicopters.' India has enhanced its troop deployments to counter Chinese force levels presently in the region.

Talks, as per laid down norms, continue though not much progress has been made, yet restricting physical altercations. A statement by the Indian government mentioned, 'Galwan is not a disputed area between India and China, unlike Pangong Tso. Both sides agree on the LAC and patrol accordingly. There was no transgression by Chinese patrols in the area in the past two years. The issue is the construction of the road, which is well inside our territory, and, therefore, their objection is hard to comprehend.'

Chinese incursions, attempting salami slicing, have been increasing over the years. Figures published in the media state that total incursions increased from 404 in 2018 to 663 in 2019. Upto Apr this year there have already been 170 incursion incidents along the LAC. The emphasis remains

Ladakh where incidents rose from 284 in 2018 to 497 in 2019 and already 130 this year.

The Global Times, a Chinese government mouthpiece sought to blame India in an op-ed on 18th May, 'The actions by the Indian side have seriously violated China and India's agreements on border issues, violated China's territorial sovereignty and harmed military relations between the two countries.' It added, 'Galwan Valley is not like Doklam because it is in the Aksai Chin region in southern Xinjiang of China, where the Chinese military has an advantage and mature infrastructure. So, if India escalates the friction, the Indian military force could pay a heavy price.' Evidently, China is repeating media pressure, it attempted during Doklam.

During the Doklam standoff, the same Global Times published on 18th Aug 2017, 'India's global influence cannot compete with China's, even in South Asia and if China has identified India as a rival, the difficult times for India are just beginning.' Another op-ed on 03 Sep the same year, post the end of the standoff, stated, 'The settlement of the Doklam standoff was undoubtedly a victory for China after it pressured India into ending its speculative tactical intervention in the border region via military, diplomatic and other means.'

Chinese media continued to warn of similar incidents even after the standoff ended. A piece on 15 Jan 2018 stated, 'China should stay alert and prepare for possible disputes like the Doklam one, as India is strengthening its military deployment in the border areas.' China always desired to keep India under some form of pressure, aware that India is no longer the same which it encountered in 1962 and hence hostilities

The current standoff, with no specific trigger, has possibly few reasons. The first is the threat of move of international supply chains from China, which would adversely impact the Chinese economy. It is evident that China is wary of India's rise as an economic power. A Chinese op-ed stated, '(Indian) conceit has gone beyond economic issues to reach the military level, which has led some to mistakenly believe they can now confront China with border issues.' Another stated, 'intensified Sino-Indian (economic) competition lies ahead.' It has been repeatedly questioning the Indian government's capabilities to woo companies walking out of China.

Secondly, could be to convey to India that any localised Indo-China dispute would not bring the US into picture. India would need to handle it by itself. Hence, India should reconsider its strategic alliance with the US, especially in the current scenario, when the US continues exerting economic and military pressure on China. The hint is that India should not

back the US on its anti-China stand and stay neutral on the South China Sea dispute, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Thirdly, could be sending a warning to India to stop questioning Chinese participation in projects in Gilgit Baltistan, including their obtaining rights to construct the Daimer Bhasha Dam. Indian objections had earlier compelled International funding agencies from withdrawing financial support to the Daimer Bhasha Dam, forcing Pak to approach China. China too may seek some international funding at much lower interest rates than what it may demand from Pak and would not desire similar protests from India.

Fourthly, the internal pressure on Xi Jinping, including a failing economy, increasing unemployment and poor handling of the Coronavirus, all of which need to be deflected. Standoffs with India, economic actions against Australia and offensive actions in the South China Sea invoke feelings of nationalism and hence, suits Xi. It conveys to his detractors that Xi's power remains unchallenged and replacing him should not be contemplated.

Finally, in a message to adversaries, China demands they back off from accusing it on the Coronavirus and its strong posturing in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan and Tibet. This is being further projected by 'Wolf warrior' actions of Chinese diplomats in other parts of the globe, and strong counterstatements to the US, all projecting that Xi will challenge threats with equal vigour despite losing credibility and allies.

Alice Wells, the senior US diplomat for South and Central Asia stated last week, 'There's a method here to Chinese operations and it is that constant aggression, the constant attempt to shift the norms, to shift what is the status quo. It has to be resisted.' It could be just pushing forth US views, but the thought process is logical. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian termed her remarks as 'just nonsense.'

Chinese army strength is increasing at standoff locations and so is India's. Both nations maintain a safer distance than they did during Doklam and fisticuffs in the initial stages of the current standoff. Posturing continues and both sides claim the situation is tense. Ongoing military talks have prevented further escalation. This is the commencement of the transgressing season and therefore enhancing and maintaining additional force levels is possible.

China is aware of capabilities of the Indian army and hence would avoid increasing frictions levels, if possible. It is aware that if it attempts further escalation and India does not back down, it may lose global face. Its

aim was to convey a message. It knows that India possesses requisite force levels and developed infrastructure to enable further deployment with the ability to administratively support it.

While India has no offensive designs, it has strengthened its defensive capabilities. India has also been displaying maturity in handling the current standoff and avoiding escalating from its side. The Indian spokesperson stated over the weekend, 'Any suggestion that Indian troops had undertaken activity across the LAC in the Western or Sikkim sector is not accurate. Indian troops are fully familiar with the alignment of the LAC in the India-China border areas and abide by it scrupulously.'

India cannot be pushed beyond a point. China would continue with its needling actions, aiming to establish temporary posts. It may attempt to do so, till India decides to pay back in the same coin, which would damage Chinese prestige, while prolonging the standoff. India is restricting its actions, seeking Chinese withdrawal and restoration of normalcy.

The final solution would come through diplomacy, not military talks, as these actions have been initiated on directions of Beijing. It would conclude with time, only to recommence elsewhere. The priority for China is currently not the standoff, as there was no mention of it in the annual press conference of their foreign minister.

Aggressive patrolling and standoffs should now be considered the new normal, especially with India developing its communication arteries in border areas and reacting faster to Chinese transgressions. The intensity would increase whenever global pressure builds on China and it seeks Indian silence. India needs to be prepared.

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