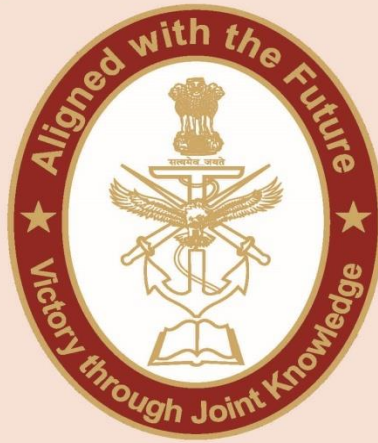


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**INDIA CHINA
STANDOFF: WILL
PAKISTAN OPEN THE
SECOND FRONT?**



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The Pakistan Question. While India and China are engaged in a tense standoff along the LAC in East Ladakh, security experts around the globe, the region and the citizens of India are keenly watching the dethroned Adversary No 1, Pakistan. What will Pakistan do; how will she react; will she join in if it escalates to a shooting war; could Pakistan initiate a conflict independently and proactively even if Chinese refrain, or open a second front at opportune moment; and if so will she restrain it to Union Territories (UT) of J&K and Ladakh; or only UT of J&K which is what most analysts opine. The probability of Pakistan expanding the conflict/or initiating it beyond the erstwhile state of J&K in the IB Sector is low, as the implications for Pakistan including global reactions would be very severe. Will China herself restrain Pakistan as some reports indicate, because she wants to achieve its geo-political aim without resorting to actual conflict, and showcase/demonstrate its comprehensive national power (CNP) to India and the world. Pakistan getting involved by starting a shooting war along the LC would most certainly expand/aggravate the conflict and also take away the spotlight from China as a unilateral action of a global power to achieve its geo-political and strategic objective of retaking its traditional

territories. That Pakistan is a collusive partner of China (some would say client state) is a foregone conclusion, and is not neutral in the crisis, and will certainly leverage the situation to its advantage in all domains is a natural deduction. There has been a perceptible increase in border standoffs almost leading to a shooting war in the last decade; serious standoffs at Depsang (2103), Chumar (2014) and Doklam (2017), where Pakistan except for some bluster to support China, deliberately chose to stay neutral. The focus of this article is to analyse Pakistan's game plan in the current East Ladakh standoff.

One of the appreciated reasons for the standoff is the major concern of China (Pakistan too has protested vehemently) to stop India from building road infrastructure and increasing military concentration along the LAC, which could pose a threat to the strategic highways. Aksai Chin is an important connector between Xinjiang and Tibet for China (NH 219). The strategic Karakoram Highway which is also the surface pathway of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which in turn is a pivotal constituent of BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), runs through Aksai Chin and Gilgit Baltistan (GB) resting at Gwadar Port. Success of BRI is existential to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as it's a trade, economic, geo-political and influence generating pathway, to provide opportunity to resolve China's internal and economic challenges, while concurrently spreading its geo-political dominance globally.

Pakistani Perceptions and Utterings. From the sidelines of the ongoing confrontation, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmud Qureshi stated that China cannot remain ignorant towards India's illegal constructions of roads in Ladakh, and warned about India's aggressive behavior towards its neighbors that could put regional peace and security at stake. PM Khan also criticized the Modi government and said (paraphrased) 'Hindutva ideology and expansionist policies of India, and aggressiveness is a threat to India's neighbors. India has border disputes with Nepal and China, and Pakistan is being constantly threatened with false flag operations. Such continuous arrogant behavior will not be tolerated. India is being encrusted with embarrassment at every level and the best policy it has adopted to divert attention from all these issues is to act against Pakistan, to win hearts of

Hindu nation through anti-Pakistan policies and hide their failures'. DG ISPR stated that "Indian aggression aimed towards Pakistan will be responded with full capacity and no one should have doubt about this. We are ready to respond in any situation that India might create". Beyond these largely defensive utterances, there has not been much spoken both in Pakistan media and by the leaders, and their relative silence is noticeable. While intently following the ongoing conflagration, Islamabad's contribution has not extended beyond the ceasefire violations and some significant ratcheting up the temperature at the Line of Control. If anything, there is the concern that New Delhi may initiate some form of fighting to assuage any domestic concerns regarding the Narendra Modi government's inability to strongly stand up to China. Pakistan feels that dealing with China will be a long haul with likely embarrassing outcomes for the Modi Govt, which can be minimised by increasing temperature with Pakistan. Concurrently, it is highly probable that within the Pak military, given the concentration of Indian forces in Ladakh, Pakistan's main concern is about the security of Skardu in Gilgit-Baltistan, an area that may be on India's focus, especially after the abrogation of Article 370. The idea of India starting a limited conflict with Pakistan was presented in two articles published within a week of each other from sources that have the ears of the military establishment. This probably indicates how the military either sees the situation or would like the people to understand it.

Indian Media Speculations. Many in the Indian media are hyping the probability of physical collusion between Pakistan and China in Ladakh, by reporting forward movement and deployment of about 20,000 troops (two divisions) in GB, and frantic consultations with Chinese generals. This speculation has got a further boost from an article by Pakistan's retired Lt General Asad Durrani, former DG of ISI, in which he talks of combined China-Pakistan effort against India with the hope of solving the Kashmir issue.

Ground Inputs. There are no open source inputs regarding any extraordinary/special /additional movement of troops closer to the Line of Control, apart from the two divisions worth into GB in the month of Jul 20. However, no inputs of troops withdrawing from the area have been

received. The probability of additional troops in GB and in PoK could be to ramp up the defensive posture in the area given the tension (some reckon that they came initially to ensure smooth conduct of elections in GB in Aug 20). As of date of writing, given the mountainous terrain along the LC, troops required to indicate an aggressive intent is missing, and most defence experts would point out that additional reinforcement so far forward near the LC come at a cost of reducing flexibility to exercise options. The possibility of collusive operations along Depsang/DBO by China and Siachen by Pakistan has been vectored in by India with suitable counter deployments. Along the LC and AGPL (Actual Ground Position Line at Siachen) the Indian Army always remains on high alert specially to thwart any localized raids/attacks, activation by increased incidents of firing including artillery, and increased attempts to infiltrate terrorists to ferment trouble in the hinterland. Along the IB, the BSF will obviously be on heightened alert for any untoward activity, concentration of troops, infiltration attempts, and even localised firing, with an aim of pinning down/fixing troops along the Western Borders of Pakistan and prevent movement to the Northern Front. Along the Northern Borders against China apart from East Ladakh, requisite mobilization and beefing up of the LAC along the middle sector (Uttarakh and Himachal Pradesh) and Eastern Sector (Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh) has been set in motion. However, one cannot deny the excitement amongst the Pakistani establishment and public at perceived discomfiture of Modi Govt and India due to this serious flare up in India-China relations.

The International and Global Dimension and Implications for Pakistan.

Even the most ardent China fan would agree that the global atmosphere is apprehensive, angry if not hostile to Chinese COVID role and increasing belligerent actions in all domains resorted to by China, be it bullying global institutions and nations (UN, WHO, Australia, South and East Asian nations, Taiwan), aggressive military actions in the China Seas, Taiwan, Indian Ocean Region, India-China LAC and wolf diplomacy. The security situation in the maritime domain in the East and South China seas and Taiwan is precarious and very similar to the LAC, where one conflagration, firing or incident can escalate to a full-blown war. While Pakistan is strategically important to USA as regards the end game in Afghanistan, is the entry point

into the Central Asian Republics and the strategic backyard of Russia, the primacy of focus especially given the upcoming US Presidential elections in Nov 20 is a no holds bar USA-China confrontation which even in isolation can lead to a War. The complex security situation is worsened due to absence of agreements/protocols/SOPs to resolve a crisis; Indian and Chinese military commanders, bureaucrats, diplomats and politicians are at least still talking to cool down and resolve the situation. USA and most of its allies have openly supported India and warned China against escalating a deteriorating situation in East Ladakh. A stern warning from USA to Pakistan, a la beginning of GWOT, is a most likely scenario, which should dampen any existing enthusiasm within Pakistan to engage in opportunistic adventurism.

Pakistan's Strategic Reasons and Restraints. Powers like USA, China and Russia no longer play a zero-sum game in South Asia. Beijing had remained neutral even during Kargil when it encouraged Islamabad to withdraw its troops. Pakistan is quietly watching events from the sidelines as it provides a strategic opportunity to weaken India, and keep it engaged along the LAC almost like the LC for some time to come (given the trust deficit) at great economic, human and military cost. It would be happy to allow China to fight this battle alone and do the heavy lifting, while carrying out tactical actions to keep the LC and hinterland volatile but below India's red lines (as she has been doing for decades). Pakistan may be happy visualizing a volatile, uneasy 3844 km long LAC between China and India, which will provide Pakistan strategic space to indulge more freely in its geo-political obsession and objective of being more pro-active on the Kashmir issue. A study of news/views/ analysis emanating from Pakistan provides a surprising picture of low key activity and strategic discussions. This could also be due to focus of everybody including politicians, media, think tanks and public in the internal situation. The Pakistan Army is also seemingly sucked into the internal political (ineffective unpopular Imran Khan) and economic abyss as it is deeply involved in the functioning of the hybrid military/civilian Government. Let us not forget its limitations because of the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) growing pressure on Pakistan. Finally, Pakistan is also aware that even a fairly large-scale offensive in the LC Sector is highly unlikely to provide any operational gains, which by itself

is a clincher regarding opening of a second front (difficult terrain, dense Indian deployment, no element of surprise, and requirement of much larger ratio of forces of at least 6:1 being the aggressor).

Noises from the Valley: a Disturbing Trend. Soon after the Galwan incident on night 14/15 Jun 20 ex CM of J&K Mr Omar Abdullah tweeted “Those Kashmiris tempted to look towards China as some sort of saviour need only google the plight of Uighur Muslims. Be careful what you wish for.” He deactivated his account after widespread trolling campaign (deluge of criticisms, ridicule, harsh words, hyperbole denouncing his stance) indicating sentiments of the people in the Valley, which the Government would be wise to take note of. It appears that Kashmiris and even sections of the population in Jammu Region have used the standoff as a means of catharsis. Using humour, satire, and sarcasm memes the local population is mocking the Govt and PM Modi. In the valley “cheen kot woat?” (where has China reached?), appears to be a common greeting and some digital memes are showing Xi Jinping dressed in Kashmiri attire, some even show him cooking Wazwanⁱ. While the public sentiment showcases their angst and is enjoying the perceived dent to the image of PM Modi and his Govt, it may not really indicate that the Kashmiri is indifferent to losing parts of Ladakh region for this chimera of retaliation. Even amidst the slow network it is the most widely followed event, unlike in the Rest of India where the death of SSR is holding forth in most media channels! Screenshots, weblinks of Chinese state media, particularly the Global Times, are spreading like wildfire on WhatsApp. Stone pelters at the 23 Jun 20 Srinagar counter terrorism action kept shouting ‘cheen aya, cheen aya’ to mock the security forces deployed.

There is an attempt to link the Chinese aggression with the constitutional changes, and new status of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. The people in the valley think that whatever China is doing is a well thought out plan between Islamabad and Beijing to occupy territory and teach the BJP a hard lesson. Inputs after pouring over the online frenzy and from sources on the ground indicates that while the reaction to the border stand-off has been mostly to lampoon and rub salt on injury, the offline conversation suggests that the people are well aware of Chinese mistreatment of minorities and

their hatred for Muslims. They are also aware that if LAC situation escalates, the biggest impact negatively (trade, tourism, jobs) will be felt by citizens of the UT of JK and Ladakh. Emotionally it is possible that still a large number feel that China's aggression is a lesser evil, which once again demonstrates how far we have to go to absorb Valley into the mainstream. Not surprisingly, mainstream leaders have used the current situation to lash out at the central government on the abrogation of Article 370. The border standoff has given wings to mainstream parties who have got a boost to question the policy of the Modi government openly. Former CM Mehbooba Mufti launched a sharp attack on the Modi government and tweeted "Illegal abrogation of Article 370 was done to take over land & disempower locals. Today China has grabbed Galwan valley & GOI isn't even acknowledging it. Was J&K dismembered to gift territory to China." The National Conference demanded the restoration of erstwhile state of J&K. The DGP of UT of J&K has already sounded alarm bells suggesting that Pakistan may use the opportunity to provoke violence within Kashmir valley and other parts of J&K.

While the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) are fully capable of handling the situation, even while the Army is busy along the LC and LAC, the security establishment would be wise to anticipate a surge in terrorist attacks, mass protests and an attempt to return to agitational tactics. A very deliberate and carefully coordinated 'counter narrative' needs to be put on fast track. Sentiments of locals and in the mainland must be addressed, and it must be ensured that casual clubbing of anti-national card to one and all Kashmiris be avoided, as it has always proved counter-productive and given a handle to rival opposition political parties. Unfortunately, first COVID and now the Chinese standoff has put the brakes on any developmental and other facilitating works in UT of J&K, which was already painfully slow and had not taken off to the desired levels.

Pakistan Prognosis. The current security situation India faces along the LAC and LC is probably the gravest crisis with myriad challenges which India is facing in some decades. It should certainly make the cynics of the 'Two Front War' scenario, sit up and take note, as its probability cannot be ruled out. Depending on the escalation along the LAC, or some major

violent incident along the LC/Kashmir valley or hinterland India (with or without Pakistan establishment's knowledge), can result in a full-scale war. As discussed, there are many cogent reasons why Pakistan will not enter the fray, but Pakistan has defied prediction before, prides itself in irrational/rogue actions, and alarmingly is not in control of one establishment. **The Indian Armed Forces undoubtedly has plans and must have already activated contingencies for any eventuality including a two-front war. They are quite capable and have the capacity to handle the challenge.** The Government, bureaucracy and people of India must be ready for the challenges which lie ahead. It is time to stand tall and firm, and ensure our red lines will not and cannot be crossed.

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

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'Where Has China Reached?' Kashmir's Odd Reaction to the Border Standoff in Ladakh, News18 online on 27 Jun 20; Link- <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/where-has-china-reached-kashmirs-odd-reaction-to-the-border-standoff-in-ladakh-2689999.html>