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INDIAN ARMED FORCES NEED TO STRATEGIZE THEIR FUTURE OPTIONS

By

Maj Gen Harsha Kakar (Retd)

The de-escalation process has commenced along the LAC. It would be long drawn, carefully monitored with equal force levels maintained at similar distances. Chinese intentions could again undergo a change, as it occurred in 1962, or a pullback in Ladakh could result in a build up elsewhere along the LAC, as its entirety remains disputed. The trust deficit is high and cannot be reset early. Talks may continue but would always remain under the shadow of Galwan. The premeditated attack at Galwan has displayed the Chinese intent of breaking agreements and understanding reached over decades.

The Chinese propaganda machine led by its Global Times continues to blame India for being the initiator of the current crisis, while demanding control over the Galwan Valley. China has also stated that while its troops would pull back, its weapon platforms, currently deployed in the region, may remain. The Global Times stated on 08 Jul, 'China would welcome talks and de-escalation, but the Chinese military would remain prepared if the Indians again make any provocative moves.' Evidently, the Chinese appear to be aiming to keep India under military pressure.

With the pullback being monitored, the Indian armed forces at some stage would need to war game their futuristic plans. For the army, they include, as to who should be responsible for maintaining sanctity along the LAC, army or ITBP, command and control of forces in the region, reassessing permanent deployment in Ladakh and when additional forces, currently inducted, should be reverted. The navy and air force need to reassess their futuristic modernization plans. These would be based on India's overall strategic thoughts of similar incidents being repeated or expanded in scope and growing possibility of a Pak-China collusion.

Currently, the LAC is being jointly patrolled by the army and the ITBP. However, with no weapons being the norm, as per existing agreements, there is a discussion, currently in progress, on whether responsibility of patrolling should be solely that of the ITBP. The army, while operating in the region is being compelled to change its concepts by moving its soldiers in a manner which is against their ethos and training, as they are not police forces. The Home Ministry is also considering deploying additional ITBP companies into the region by relieving them from tasking within the country to enhance force levels.

This change of policy with responsibility of patrolling being that of the ITBP would be effective, provided the force is placed under command of the army. This would imply that the IG and DIG HQs of the ITBP at Leh should be a part of the army's 14 Corps and HQ 3 Division, responsible for operations in the region, rather than under the new ITBP Command HQs in Chandimandir. In a sensitive region having forces under multiple ministries responsible for security is meaningless and ill-conceived.

The patrolling on the Chinese side of the LAC is being done by their Border Defence Regiment (BDR), equivalent to the ITBP, and not the PLA. However, in their case, the BDR operates under the PLA and is almost similarly equipped. This makes placing the ITBP under the army even more necessary.

There is no doubt that Chinese threat would remain in the region. As compared to other areas of the LAC, Ladakh would witness more standoffs, due to its strategic location and better availability of infrastructure. This would imply that the army may need to reassess its current deployment and determine if it needs larger acclimatized forces in the region, to thwart any future attempted misadventures.

There may be a need to permanently ensure deployment of additional mechanised elements and additional fire power resources in Ladakh. Any additional infantry elements which are to be considered should be locally

raised from the region. This may lead to enhancing battalions of Ladakh Scouts.

Apart from them being sons of the soil they would provide the army with acclimatised troops aware of terrain configuration. An early decision on enhanced deployment is essential as greater forces implies construction of accommodation, provision of winter clothing and equipment as also additional winter stocking, especially when time is at a premium.

A similar reorganization exercise was conducted post Kargil, a division inducted, and made responsible for the Kargil heights. HQ 14 Corps, currently managing the Ladakh standoff, emerged from the same reassessment. The analysis should also consider whether a separate formation HQ is needed for the Chinese frontier in case troop levels are increased.

De-inducting reserve formations also needs deliberation, though these would be partially dependent on Chinese actions. China faces similar logistic and climatic issues, though their road connectivity is less impacted by weather constraints. If they commence construction of billets for troops currently brought into Ladakh, then they are evidently planning on continuing deployment of these forces through the winters. It could also imply that the Chinese are seeking to tie down Indian reserves enabling them to enhance pressures in other regions.

With the breaking of the trust deficit, the army needs to war game options and evolve a suitable deployment, to enable availability of forces across the entire front. At the same time, priority must be given for recommencing the raising of the mountain strike corps. The importance of a strike force also capable of reinforcing defences cannot be ignored.

Ladakh will always remain a bone of contention as it will permanently pose a threat to Chinese connectivity to the CPEC. Hence, alternate all weather road connectivity, including construction of tunnels, presently proceeding at a slow pace, must be speeded up.

The air force also needs to reconsider its current additional deployment in Leh. That the Chinese would continue probing and testing Indian resolve along the entire front is a reality. The nature of resources essential for countering such actions, the need to create requisite landing strips, in vicinity of the LAC, for troop movement need to be war gamed.

Pressure on land frontiers are aimed to distract development of naval capabilities, where key Chinese interest lie. The construction of Gwadar, Djibouti and possibly Hambantota may provide China with berthing facilities, but its main bases remain thousands of Kms away on the mainland.

Chinese naval power can only be effective in distant regions if Indian naval power development is ignored. India needs to consider this as it seeks to enhance the army's staying capability.

Developing alliances to challenge growing Chinese threats are a reality and cannot be ignored. Like minded nations facing similar Chinese pressures should be brought together on a similar platform.

Simultaneously, the CCS needs to reconsider the overall concept of responsibility of borders and command and control of forces deployed across them. The ITBP must be placed under the army. It is time to be realistic rather than sticking to primacy of control of ministries over forces.

Future defence budgets need to cater for emerging threats. At some stage, the Chinese may need more than just diplomacy as a deterrent. The lessons learnt from the current incident needs a holistic review rather than a piecemeal consideration.

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