
The Design in China's Actions and Behaviour: An Assessment

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Abstract

On its foundation in 1949, securing its strategic periphery and annexation of Tibet and Xinjiang was one of the primary goals of the People's Republic of China (PRC). With the multiple aims of achieving economic, strategic, and political dominance, China has further enhanced its connectivity with Asia, Africa and Eurasia by its Belt and Road initiative (BRI). Considering the rapidly changing geopolitics and economic challenges, the Chinese, as part of their long-term designs, have whipped up 'nationalism' by multiple means. The military interventions, assertiveness and expansionism to have been based on a design to serve its national interests—especially the economic, political, and strategic ones. The boundary dispute between India and China continues to remain unresolved, due to certain designs of the PRC. It is important to analyse the strategic significance of Eastern Ladakh, especially when additional security personnel have been inducted into Gilgit Baltistan region by China as part of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Despite the border management mechanisms and confidence-building measures (CBMs) in place, and the periodic engagements at different levels, the PLA surprised the Indians by contacting and/or transgressing across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on a wide front in Eastern Ladakh in May 2020. Thus, China's designs call for India to improve its preparedness, and review its policy, to pursue its goals and maintain peace and stability in the region.

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Introduction

“A military is built to fight. Our military must regard combat capability as the criterion to meet in all its work and focus on how to win when it is called on.”

—Xi Jinping, 2017¹

“The era of expansionism is over; this is the era of development. It is this mindset of expansionism that did great harm. [...] India’s commitment to peace should not be seen as India’s weakness.”

—Narendra Modi, 2020²

The defining trend of the 21st century, undisputedly, has been the rise of the People’s Republic of China with sustained economic growth for over three decades. According to the UK-based Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR), released on 27 December 2020, China is expected to be the largest economy by 2028, five years earlier than the previous forecast, and that India is expected to be the third-largest economy by 2030.³ In addition, over the years, China has progressively transformed into a strong military power, with a vibrant defence industrial base which focuses on technology, innovation, autonomous systems, artificial intelligence (AI) and disruptive technology-enabled systems. In the future, it also aims to be the leader in other domains such as cyber, information, and space. Concurrently, it would be prudent to analyse the impact of China’s new concept of Military-Civil Fusion (MCF), which states that the ‘PRC pursues its development strategy to “fuse” its economic and social development strategies with its security strategies to build an integrated national strategic system and capabilities in support of China’s national rejuvenation goals.’⁴

With the multiple aims of achieving economic, strategic, and political dominance, China has further enhanced its connectivity with Asia, Africa and Eurasia by its BRI, covering about 120 countries and 60 per cent of

the world's population. It is well known that China, with its economic strength and military muscle, plans to dominate the Western Pacific Ocean and expand into the Indian Ocean. What is worrisome is that with the ongoing pandemic and the growing instability worldwide, it has been assertive and expansionist in its designs, laying illegal claims to territories both on the continental and maritime domains. Is it in conformity with Sun Tzu's dictum, *'In the midst of chaos, there is also an opportunity?'*

Given the geopolitical considerations of the Indian subcontinent, it was stressed that "[...] India is the heart of Asia, and that the Indian Ocean is India's Ocean, it treated the South Asian subcontinent as its sphere of influence [...]"⁵ As China realised India's geo-strategic location in Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region, its historical, cultural and religious linkages, and its potential, and capability to be a prominent regional cum global power, it has taken initiatives, by design, to balance India's growing power by developing relationship with India's immediate neighbours on the subcontinent, with an 'all-weather friendship' with Pakistan. As part of its long-term vision, it has indulged in 'strategic encirclement' of India by establishing footholds and developing infrastructure in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Maldives, and others. While all this has been possible due to its long-term planning and implementation, it certainly adds to India's security concerns.

The paper aims to briefly analyse the early years of the PRC and its designs to gain strategic advantage by securing its strategic periphery, and the rationale for military interventions at different stages. Besides analysing the build-up and stand-off in Eastern Ladakh, it also examines the India-China boundary dispute, the strategic significance of the Western Sector (Ladakh) in particular, as it experiences maximum incidents along the undemarcated border—the Line of Actual Control. It also attempts to answer the reason as to why China, by design, has not shown any interest to resolve the boundary dispute, and also provide an assessment of India's actions in the future.

Tibet and Xinjiang: The Design

Clausewitz has maintained that “... the only source of war is politics the intercourse of governments and peoples”.⁶ In other words, that war is pursuance of political objectives, with all available means. Therefore, generally, ‘Military Campaigns’ are not planned on a standalone mode. They are intertwined with a suitable combination of political, economic, strategic, and military agendas.

On 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong is known to have stood at ramparts of the Tiananmen gate to announce the formation of the PRC; and on 31 December, the same year India recognised PRC⁷—being the second non-Communist country to do so. Within three months of formation of the PRC, on 1 January 1950, the new Chinese government announced that the ‘liberation’ of Tibet would be one of the principal goals of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).⁸ Sure enough, the Chinese mobilised its 18th Army to move into Tibet on 21 January 1950. By the later part of 1950, they moved from four provinces of China to converge at Lhasa; the PLA defeated the Tibetan Army on 19 October 1950, and the Tibetan leaders signed the “Seventeen Point Agreement” in Beijing in 1951.⁹ It professed to guarantee Tibetan autonomy, and to respect the Buddhist religion, but also allowed the establishment of Chinese civil and military headquarters at Lhasa.¹⁰ As Alfred Rubin affirmed that “China clearly emerged as *de jure* sovereign over the territory of Tibet”.¹¹ Thus, after signing of the Agreement on 23 May 1951, Tibet was annexed and was under the control of the PRC.

This context then leads to the understanding of China’s annexation of Xinjiang. Much before the foundation of PRC and annexation of Tibet, the Chinese leaders had moved their forces in August 1949 against the nationalist forces, which were about 70,000 in strength, to control and annex the Xinjiang province. By the spring of 1950, Xinjiang was annexed and was under the control of the PRC.

These two cases in point make it imperative to ask: What was the Chinese perception in the 1940-50s on securing control over Tibet and

Xinjiang? To note, Mao declared Tibet to be the palm of China; whereas Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and North East Frontier Association (NEFA, now Indian province of Arunachal Pradesh) as the five fingers, and it is China's responsibility to 'liberate' them all.¹² Besides having an eye on the rich natural resources of these regions, the Chinese leaders were certainly looking forward to securing their borders with Soviet Russia and the southern border along the Great Himalayan Mountain Range. Simultaneously, the Chinese also wanted to keep their trade routes open with Central Asia and Eurasia. Today, 72 years later, both these regions provide China with the strategic advantage and connectivity with Eurasia, South Asia (Pakistan in particular), and West Asia by its long-term vision of BRI and one of its offshoots—the CPEC. Wherein, the latter provides access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Thereby, as one can construe and as hindsight suggests, China due to its long-term vision, had achieved both its aims of securing its borders and trade interests in 1949 itself.

Securing Strategic Periphery

In 2000, Michael Swaine and Ashely Tellis emphatically suggested that, as per historical records the:

“Chinese State has employed force against foreigners primarily to influence, control, or pacify its strategic periphery and generally has done so when it possessed relative superiority over its potential adversaries on the periphery”.¹³

What calls for such an impression of Chinese extraordinary concern about its periphery? There are two plausible reasons for it, that is: First, the ancient Chinese had always believed that China was the oldest civilisation—the centre of all civilisations, and that it was the centre of the earth—the “Middle Kingdom”. It also believed that all activities

revolved around China—be it economic, cultural, historical, production, innovation, research, and development. Therefore, to retain its lost supremacy, ensure economic growth and social change, it was prudent to ensure that the Chinese periphery was always secured. Second, the impact of the 20th century, which Chinese perceive as the “Century of Humiliation”, a period of intervention and subjugation of the Chinese Empire and the Republic of China by Western powers, Russia, and Japan between 1839 and 1949.¹⁴ It all began with the First Opium War (1839-42) that resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Nanking (1842), and Hong Kong being ceded to the British.

China and its Century of Humiliation: Whipped up Nationalism

With the end of the Cold War, the world saw a decline in Communism in Russia and Yugoslavia, but China saw this as an opportunity to shift its focus from ‘Communism to Nationalism’. The Chinese have whipped up ‘nationalism’ as they initiated the idea of “[...] humiliation an integral part of the construction of Chinese nationalism”.¹⁵ As William Callahan specifically notes “... there are textbooks, novels, museums, songs, and parks devoted to commemorating national humiliation in China. [...] From 1927 to 1940, in Republican China, there was an official holiday called National Humiliation Day”.¹⁶ These thoughts, when put together in the current environment, are also suggestive of the Chinese vision to foresee the problems likely to be faced by the country due to domestic and international pressures: the slowing economy, post-global economic downturn of 2008 and its impact on unemployment; internal security situation; global pressures on account of assertiveness and expansionists designs and so on. Owing to these issues, the Chinese government has initiated measures to whip up the nationalist sentiments to rejuvenate China.

In November 2012, Xi Jinping became the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and announced a new goal: ‘*qiang*

zhongguo meng—strong nation's dream'. It was the Chinese Dream to be at the centre of the earth, through multiple means. President Xi Jinping is committed to achieving 'the great rejuvenation of China by 2049'—a hundred years after the PRC was formed on 1 October 1949. In this light, with an aim to undo the 'Century of Humiliation', China aims to restore its rightful place by 2049, or even earlier, by economic, military, political and strategic dominance. Xi's dream has been to have a stronger nation with a strong military. Based on the envisaged threats and challenges, Xi had launched military reforms in 2015—with an ambition to achieve mechanisation and informatisation by 2020; military modernisation by 2035;¹⁷ and a world-class military by 2049. Simultaneously, China established five Theatre Commands (TCs) by February 2016, by amalgamating the erstwhile seven Military Regions (MRs). To further have tight control over the restive regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, Xi integrated Tibetan and Xinjiang military commands under the Western Theatre Command. China's paramilitary force, and the People's Armed Police (PAP) which were previously under the dual civilian and military command, have been placed firmly under China's Central Military Commission (CMC), de facto under the Chairman Xi Jinping. Furthermore, China's Coast Guard, which was previously a civilian agency, has been placed within the PAP, and is thus, now a part of the military command structure.¹⁸

Military Interventions and Designs

At the global level, China has intervened militarily in various regions and places since 1949, a few of which are discussed briefly, which are as follows:

- *Korean Campaign (1950)*: After a long spell of the civil war and subsequent formation of the PRC on 1 October 1949, the CPC and the PRC were in the process of consolidating and stabilising themselves. The Korean War (1950-1953) began when the North Korean Communist

Army crossed the 38th Parallel and invaded the non-Communist South Korea. The United States intervened to help South Korea. General Douglas MacArthur, who had commanded the Southwest Pacific in World War II (1939-1945), was in command of the US forces to hold off the North Koreans at Pusan perimeter, at the southernmost tip of Korea. After the famous amphibious assault on Inchon; Seoul, the capital of South Korea, was recaptured, and the US and UN forces crossed the 38th Parallel and the Yalu river.¹⁹ According to Akshat Upadhyay, the Chinese had set Yalu River as the boundary for the UN forces, the crossing of which brought the Chinese to intervene.²⁰ The US and UN forces were surprised to find that the Chinese had secretly moved in 300,000 volunteer force, predominantly ethnic Korean PLA veterans, primarily to address their own security concerns. Although China was militarily weak and was itself in the process of stabilising itself, it intervened militarily with a design to secure its borders in the northeast. However, in doing so, it perhaps lost an opportunity to pursue its own 'One China policy' with Taiwan.

- *India-China War (1962)*: It is generally believed that Chairman Mao Zedong had decided to launch an offensive against India on 20 October 1962, on both the eastern (North-East Frontier Agency-NEFA) and western (Eastern Ladakh) sectors simultaneously. A few would argue that his larger aim was to 'teach India a lesson'. It is not entirely true. Demographic evidence indicates that during 1958-62, an estimated 30 million people died of starvation in China, due to Mao Zedong's programme 'Great Leap Forward'. The deaths were more than any other single famine in recorded human history.²¹ Adding to it, in the spring of 1962, China faced renewed ethnic unrest in the frontiers, especially Xinjiang, during the economic crisis following the failure of the Great Leap Forward.²²

Therefore, more than the reasons for the alleged forward posture by the Indian Army in 1961, one of the main reasons for China's

attack on India was to divert people's attention from its internal conditions and low popularity of Mao Zedong in the late 1950s.²³ Having launched a major weight of his offensive on the eastern sector (NEFA), and achieved success, the Chinese withdrew to their side of the McMahon line in NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh), on their own on 22 November 1962. However, they did not withdraw from the Western Sector (Ladakh region). The Chinese had apparently advanced up to their '1960 Claim Line',²⁴ from which they did not withdraw. Did it really mean that the Chinese had no claim on NEFA, as they withdrew without any pre-conditions? Or, was it primarily on account of its inability to sustain itself logistically, having stretched themselves on extremely difficult terrain?²⁵ It is to note that China in fact does not have any claim on any territory in Arunachal Pradesh. However, in hindsight, the success in the said war gave the Chinese political, territorial, strategic, and military advantages.

- *Sino-Soviet Border Conflict (1969)*: It was a seven-month undeclared military conflict between the Soviet Union and China in 1969. On the border of China with the Soviet Union, the primary areas of conflict were the two islands of Qiliqin and Zhenbao on the Wusuli (Ussuri) river, and a part of Bolshoy Ussuriyski Island. As noted, in early March 1969, the Soviets and the Chinese troops were engaged in a conflict,²⁶ and that the main aim of Mao Zedong was to trigger a massive internal mobilisation of his country's resources, population and patriotic sentiments, which had been fractured completely in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. According to the US Annual Congress Report of 2020, China's contested border with the Soviet Union during the 1960s raised the possibility of a nuclear war.²⁷ With the 1991 Sino-Soviet Border agreement, both sides resolved most of the border dispute between the two countries.
- *Vietnam (1979)*: China intervened with a design to support the Khmer Rouge. It had political, strategic objectives, as also to look

after the ethnic Chinese minorities in Vietnam. In the end, China did not really succeed in dissuading Vietnam from its involvement in Cambodia, as the Vietnamese troops remained in Cambodia till as late as 1989.

- *Taiwan Strait Crisis (1995-96)*: China has never agreed to compromise over the sovereignty of Taiwan. It has provocatively demonstrated its military muscle on several occasions to integrate and unify the island with the mainland. On 23 March 1996, Taiwan was set to vote for the presidential elections, with the focus on the democratic process. The PRC conducted a series of military exercises and missile tests in and around the Taiwan Strait from 21 July 1995 to 23 March 1996, to send a message to the Taiwanese electorate that voting for presidential elections would mean war.²⁸ Going by the fact that the PRC conducted a near similar type of activation of the Taiwan Strait in 2020, it reinforces its design that even the 1995-96 crisis in Taiwan Strait was primarily to coerce and intimidate Taiwanese with their ‘One China Policy’. This area remains a flashpoint, which could trigger a conflict in the future.

Assertive and Expansionist Designs

Over the last three decades, and the last decade, in particular, China has grown in power and strength. The PRC has built its Comprehensive National Power (CNP), which is evident from its sustained economic growth, military strength, technology-enabled systems, ISR capabilities, information warfare, outer space and cyber capabilities. With all these, China, during the last decade, has been far more assertive and expansionist. As primarily evident from China moving into the South China Sea (SCS) for exploration of oil, but, as part of the long-term plan, it created artificial islands and built field fortifications in the SCS. As China’s nine-dash line claim is central to the territorial dispute in the resource-rich waters of the SCS, China has used grey zone aggressive tactics against other claimant

countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines, by employing the maritime militia, and survey vessels to lay claims. Most recently, the foreign affairs department of the Philippines accused China of “belligerent actions” against their boats near the Scarborough Shoal.²⁹

Apart from this, the PRC also declared Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea with effect from 23 November 2013. Such a unilateral declaration by China drew reactions from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the US. It has been argued that the creation of the new ADIZ can be compared to a condition similar to the creation of the Sansha military garrison in the South China Sea—an attempt to seek de facto control of claimed territories.³⁰

India-China Boundary Dispute: An Assessment

Historically, with the ‘Great Game’ at play in the nineteenth century, British India’s aim was to secure a buffer zone between British India and both China and Russia to maintain peace in the region. In doing so, after the collapse of China’s Qing dynasty in 1911, Sir Henry McMahon, Foreign Secretary to British India, drew the boundary between Tibet and British North East India in 1913-14, primarily based on the ‘principle of Watershed’. With McMahon in the chair for the Tripartite Convention, and the representatives of Tibet (Lonchen Shatra Paljor Dorje, Dalai Lama’s experienced Prime Minister) and China (Ivan Chen) had attended and initialled the proceedings of the Convention at Shimla on 27 April 1914. Ivan Chen, the Chinese representative, explained that due to the conquest of Genghis Khan, Tibet had become a part of the Chinese Empire.³¹ China rejected the legal standing of the Shimla Convention, on the grounds of ‘Imperial legacy’. It also stated that Tibet was not a sovereign state to sign any treaty. Mao Zedong was aware of the significance of the geo-strategic location of Tibet with other countries that border it. It was in conformity with Ginsburg and Mathos who said, “[...] he who holds Tibet dominates the Himalayan

piedmont; he who dominates Himalayan piedmont, threatens the Indian sub-continent [...]”.³²

The seeds of the boundary dispute between India and China were sown when PRC annexed and controlled Tibet after ‘the Tibetan delegates were imposed a 17-Point Agreement’³³ on 23 May 1951. It further worsened with the Tibetan uprising in 1959 and Dalai Lama’s flight from Lhasa to Khinzemane in NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh) in March 1959.

Historically, the Western Sector has remained most contentious, with several claim lines being referred to by both India and China. In this sector, Aksai Chin is claimed by both India and China. India considers it as a part of the Union Territory of Ladakh (erstwhile part of Jammu and Kashmir). While China claims that it has been a part of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and Tibet Autonomous Region. History draws reference to 1831 when the Sikh empire had annexed Ladakh, which was followed by the Dogra—Tibet War and a Treaty in 1842.³⁴ Thereafter, several claim lines were propagated: the Johnson Line (1965), the Foreign Office Line (1973), the Johnson-Ardagh Line (1897), the Macartney-MacDonald Line (1899), and many more till the India-China War 1962. While maintaining its claim on Aksai Chin, China quotes historical presence of territorial occupation to justify its claims. China considers the MacDonald Line (1899) as the correct border with India. Among many other rationales, India considers Johnson Line (1865) as the legally correct national border with China, as it was shown as a part of Jammu and Kashmir (Ladakh is a part of it). The Maharaja of Kashmir had accepted this and even constructed a fort at Shahidullah, nearby Karakoram Pass in 1865.³⁵ In fact, the Postal Atlas of China in 1933 showed Aksai Chin as part of J&K.³⁶ More notably, upon signing the Instrument of Accession on 26 October 1947, entire territories of the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir legally and undisputedly became an integral part of India.

Why the dispute? The India-China border is a notional cease-fire line between India and China after the 1962 War. As the India-

China boundary is neither delineated on the map nor demarcated on the ground, both countries have different lines of perceptions of the boundary. The 3,488 km border is broadly divided into three prominent sectors: the Eastern Sector which covers Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim; the Middle Sector in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh; and the Western Sector in Ladakh. The term 'Line of Actual Control' is said to have been used by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in a 1959 note to Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.³⁷ The alignment of the border as suggested in the said letter of 7 November 1959 was not accepted by the Indian Prime Minister. In the Agreement of 7 September 1993, the term 'Line of Actual Control (LAC)' was used in a formal bilateral agreement, called 'Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the LAC in the India-China Border Areas'. While ground transgressions across the LAC have been taking place in all three sectors, it has been observed that the western sector, from where the Chinese troops did not withdraw after the cease-fire in 1962, continued to witness maximum violations across the LAC. The situation is precarious in the Western Sector because, unlike the Central and Eastern Sectors where the boundary runs predominantly along the watershed, the LAC in the Western Sector does not follow any well-defined geographical features.

Even between the 1950s and 1962, and thereafter, China continues to incrementally transgress westwards of the LAC—referred to as salami slicing—and thus, create yet another claim line. A few cases in point are the major incidents of Nathu La (1967), Sumdorong Chu (1986-87), Depsang (2013), Chumar (2014) and Eastern Ladakh (2020).

Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in China between 1966 and 1976 to reassert his authority over the Chinese government, which created huge internal turmoil and chaos, and negatively impacted its economy. In hindsight, it appears that the border skirmish between India and China at Nathu La in 1967 was triggered to divert the attention of its people from the chaos and killings that took place at the peak of the

Cultural Revolution, as also the tension building up on the border with Soviet Russia on Ussuri River.

In this perspective, as the study of the settlement of border disputes would suggest that generally, China has not offered undue concessions where it saw economic and strategic advantages.

During the preparations for the 19th National Congress of the CPC in 2017, the PLA ventured to construct a road in Doklam—at the tri-junction of India, China and Bhutan. It resulted in a standoff for 72 days (18 June 2017-28 August 2017). Such a move would have given China the strategic advantage, as Doklam is located between Tibet's Chumbi Valley to the North, Bhutan's Ha Valley to the East, and to India's state of Sikkim to the West, as also would give access to the strategic Siliguri Corridor. What is noteworthy is that soon after the Doklam standoff, to realise the Chinese Dream, Xi announced on 18 October 2017 stating the “ [...] we have developed a strategy for the military under new circumstances [...]”.³⁸ In this regard, with the growing influence of China in the IOR and in India's strategic periphery, New Delhi needs to take note of China's three warfare strategy : media, psychological and legal warfare.

Incidents at the LAC

Although the 3,488 km border had remained without any incidents of firing since the border skirmish at Nathu La in 1967 and the firing at Tulong La in 1975, it has continued to witness incidents/transgressions across the LAC and standoffs. The tensions on the LAC are caused by three major factors: one, differing perception of the non—delineated and non-demarcated border; two, development of infrastructure close to or when perceived to be across the border; and three, movement of additional force levels and training exercises in proximity of the borders without informing the opposing side. While China has continued to build its infrastructure (roads, rails, bridges, airfields, heli-bases, oxygen stations, logistic warehouses, power, and communications networks) over the past two decades, surprisingly, it

does not want India—which started much later—to build even the essential infrastructures on its own side of the border.

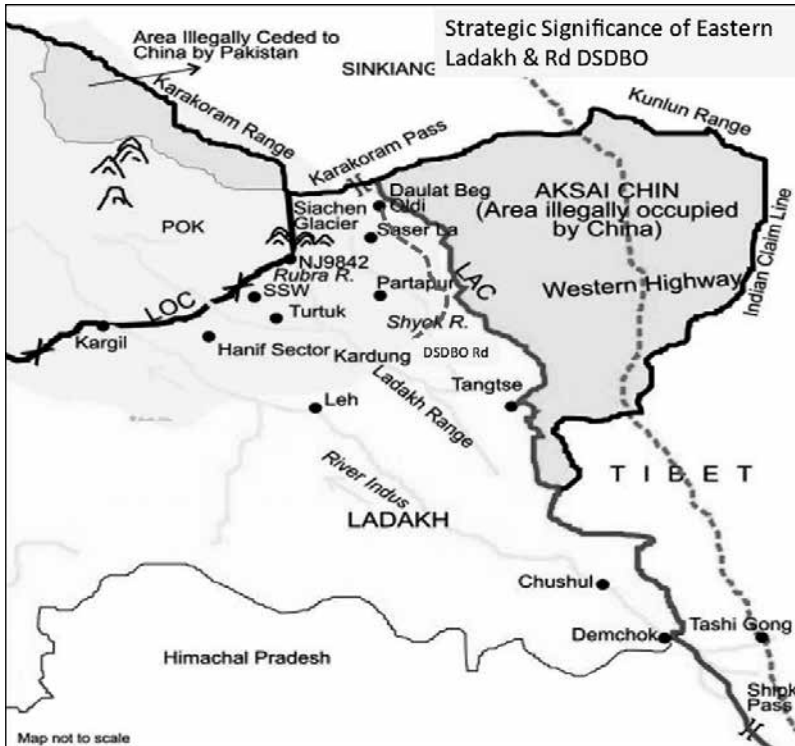
Strategic Significance of Eastern Ladakh

According to the recorded statistics, there has been an increase in the incidents at the LAC since 2019, of which majority of them were in Eastern Ladakh (Western Sector). Therefore, it makes it imperative to analyse the strategic significance of Eastern Ladakh.

Eastern Ladakh is a sharp wedge with Gilgit-Baltistan to the west (Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir, POJ&K), through which passes the CPEC linking Xinjiang to deep-sea harbour at Gwadar (Balochistan). China has a huge stake in the security of the CPEC. To safeguard its newly created strategic assets, China has positioned its security personnel at all important segments of the CPEC, especially in the Gilgit-Baltistan region. Also, Pakistan has raised Special Security Division (SSD), from Its regular and paramilitary forces, to provide security to the CPEC in its entirety, not confined to the Gilgit-Baltistan region alone. On the east lies the contentious Aksai Chin, about 38000 sq km, which is under the occupation of China. It falls both under the administrative jurisdiction of Xinjiang and TAR. China had also constructed a strategic road through Aksai Chin connecting Kashgar (Xinjiang) with Lhasa (Tibet), with 179 km road running through the northeast portion of Aksai Chin. In addition, there are lead and zinc mines in parts of the Aksai Chin.³⁹ Given India's claims to the Aksai Chin, China is sensitive to any development that threatens the security of the strategic China National Highway—G219. Immediately to the north of DBO—an airstrip at an altitude of 16,550 feet (Eastern Ladakh)—lie two important communication nodes cum choke points: first, the Karakoram Pass (5,540 m or 18,176 feet) about 18 km north of the DBO; second, the strategic communication network that connects Xinjiang with US\$ 62 billion CPEC Project in Pakistan, and the National Highway G219 (2,342 km). On completion of the latter, it will be the longest National Highway

(over 10,000 km). Therefore, while Eastern Ladakh separates China and Pakistan by this sharp wedge, it also provides certain strategic options to India, and depth to our politically sensitive area of Chushul and other areas in the hinterland, as noted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Strategic Significance of Eastern Ladakh



Source: Adapted from Chinoy (2020) and annotated by the author (rough alignments).

The strategic Darbuk-Shyok-DBO (DSDBO) road has been in the news as it has been constructed in about 18 years (2001-19), traversing some of the most inhospitable terrains and weather conditions. The 255 km road runs almost parallel to the LAC, being closest to the Galwan Valley. It provides access to the areas adjoining Hot Spring, Galwan Valley, Raki Nullah, Jiwan

Nullah and Chip Chap river. Given the altitude and difficulties experienced earlier by the Indian Army, it would certainly facilitate regular maintenance of troops, and strengthen India's posture, both operationally and logistically. During the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), in Moscow in September 2020, China declared that it does not recognise the Union Territory of Ladakh and any infrastructure being constructed (meaning closer to the LAC) in it. Interestingly, China did not raise any objection to the preparations and landing of an AN-32 on the airfield at DBO on 31 May 2008, after a gap of 45 years. Apparently, the Chinese have now felt threatened with the completion of the strategic road DSDBO, which was still under construction in 2008.

China's strategic interests are also evident from its increasing transgressions at the LAC. For instance, during a reply to an unstarred question (No. 1577) in the Lok Sabha on 27 November 2019,⁴⁰ India's Minister of State for Defence gave a year-wise details of the transgressions that entailed: 2016-273, 2017-426 and 2018-326. Concurrently, some details of incidents at the LAC (that includes post abrogation of Article 370 on 5 August 2019) are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Chinese Transgressions at the LAC

Incidents on Line of Actual Control				
Year	West	East	Mid	Total
2019	497	138	28	663
2018	284	89	31	404
2017	337	119	17	473
2016	208	71	17	296
2015	342	77	9	428

(Western, Eastern, Middle Sectors)

Source: Adapted from Singh (2020).⁴¹

Owing to the trend, it is noted that the incidents in the Western Sector of the LAC increased by about 75 per cent between 2018 and 2019; while the Eastern Sector (Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim) witnessed almost one-fifth of the Chinese transgressions.⁴² Most notably, in the first four

months (January 2020-April 2020), post abrogation of Article 370 on 5 August 2019, the number of incidents at the LAC were 170 (including 130 in Ladakh) against 110 such instances in the same period in 2019.⁴³ Despite the spread of COVID-19 across the world, the Western Sector remained the focus of transgressions that finally resulted in the PLA's premeditated transgressions at multiple points along the LAC in early May 2020. This further elucidates the design in China's military posture.

Strategic Design towards Transgressions and Non-Resolution of the Boundary Dispute

Despite the border management mechanisms and confidence-building measures in place, and the periodic engagements at different levels, including the meeting between the heads of both India and China at Wuhan (May 2018) and Mammalapuram (October 2019) respectively, India and China met with a standoff at Naku La in Sikkim and Eastern Ladakh in early May 2020. It was a clear breach of the agreements and protocols by the Chinese. Further, the incidents at the LAC in May 2020—during the peak period of the pandemic COVID-19—were marked by increased assertiveness and transgressions especially at multiple points in Eastern Ladakh, physical scuffles, and casualties on both sides; standoffs backed by build-up of large force levels including tanks, infantry combat vehicles, artillery and air defence guns, radars, and communication setups; and activation of the air bases closer to the LAC.

What was noteworthy was India's resolve and response mechanism against China on five counts: First, robust mobilisation and deployment of Indian forces to check the PLA's designs and aggressiveness; second, occupation of strategic heights on the Kailash Range to the South of Pangong Tso, in the Chushul subsector in end August 2020; third, to build up and maintain logistics balance during the severe winters of Ladakh; fourth, to continue with the development of infrastructure on own side of the borders; and fifth, there was tacit support of all elements of national

power—political, economic, diplomatic, trade, investment, information—to counter the Chinese’ designs. These actions had certainly changed the narrative and the equation between the two opposing forces that were deployed eyeball to eyeball. Given India’s political and military will to stand up to the Chinese designs, it has bolstered the confidence and morale of the Indian troops. India has sent a clear message that China must not indulge in incremental aggressive actions to lay claim to illegal territories, and that it would never be able to get any additional territory in Ladakh, as also in Arunachal Pradesh, as claimed by it, by use of force or otherwise. In other words, winning without fighting would be impossible!

In this context, the key query remains: Why did China choose to indulge in such aggressive actions in May 2020, especially when the pandemic COVID-19 was spreading at an alarming speed worldwide?

More often, such actions are a result of the cumulative effect of many factors that continue to build up over a period of time, but get triggered by an incident. As Anath Krishnan suggests that as per a report authored by a senior figure at an influential Chinese think-tank, it has linked the current tensions along the LAC to India’s move in 2019 to abrogate Article 370 and change the status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir—a decision that China had voiced opposition to.⁴⁴ It may also be prudent to draw some inference from the following statements:

- In a rare interview that Xi Jinping, then Governor of Fujian (1999 to 2002), gave in August 2000 to a Chinese Journal stated: “If you want to become a General you must be able to win a battle ... [...]. Only if there are battles, there are opportunities”.⁴⁵

While attending a plenary meeting of the delegation of the PLA and PAP during the parliament session on 25 May 2020, 20 days after the continuing military standoff in Eastern Ladakh, Xi ordered the military to think about worst-case scenarios, scale up training and battle preparedness, promptly and effectively deal with all sorts of complex situations.⁴⁶

- While cautioning the US against a faltering China, Michael Beckley posited that, “China’s economic conditions have declined steadily since 2008 Financial Crisis [...]. When rising powers have suffered such slowdowns in the past, they become more repressive at home and more aggressive abroad”.⁴⁷

China had been under pressure both on the domestic and international fronts: China’s economic slowdown,⁴⁸ high rate of unemployment, internal security conditions especially with the persistent unrests in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, relationship with Taiwan, global resentment against China towards its aggressive actions in the South and East China Seas, and investigation of the origin and spread of the coronavirus. To support Pakistan, China had objected to India’s actions of abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir and declaration of Ladakh as a Union Territory. China needs to know that the abrogation of Article 370 is India’s internal matter, and ever since then, the security and governance situation has certainly improved in Jammu and Kashmir. What can be construed is that more than any military aims, China perhaps wanted to send a strong message of it being a world power: that it can take all domestic and international pressures in its stride, and that India’s tilt towards the US would not be of much help.

Agreements, Protocols and Visits

To maintain peace and tranquillity along the borders, both India and China have signed five important agreements and protocols between 1993 and 2013. Out of the five such agreements, the agreement of 2005 on “Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question” has been most significant.⁴⁹ In this, Article III mentions “[...] meaningful and mutually acceptable adjustments to their respective positions on the boundary question.... Boundary settlement must be final, covering all sectors of India-China

Boundary”.⁵⁰ While Articles VII and VIII mention “[...] safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas” which mainly has reference to Tawang.⁵¹ Despite this agreement, the transgressions in the LAC continued, predominantly by the PLA.

On 23 November 2006, the then Chinese President and General Secretary, Hu Jintao was expected to visit India, and also discuss the boundary dispute. However, a week before his arrival, the then Chinese Ambassador to India, Sun Yuxi, categorically issued a statement saying: “In our [China’s] position, the whole of Arunachal Pradesh is a Chinese territory. And Tawang is only one of the places in it. We are claiming all of that. That is our position”.⁵² This can be interpreted as a Chinese design, wherein such a statement aimed at sending a message that India should not expect any meaningful discussion on the subject.

Interestingly, in early 2013, there was a great amount of publicity over the forthcoming visit of the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to India. Unsurprisingly, a month before the visit, on 15 April 2013, the PLA established a temporary camp at Depsang Plains on the Indian side, about 20 km across the LAC, due to which the tensions remained for three weeks. Again, the message was quite clear that any discussions on the boundary dispute were unlikely to yield any results. Similarly, in the event of President Xi Jinping’s visit to India on 18 September 2014, that marked the visit by a Chinese President after eight years, eight days prior to the visit, there was a serious incident at Chumar—shifting the focus on the LAC. India must be careful of China’s such a practice, as Shiv Shankar Menon argues the Chinese transgressions across the LAC is a “classic case of two steps forward one step back, which leaves China with a net gain of one step”.⁵³

Also to note, since ancient times, the Himalayas have been an active bridge between Indian and Tibetan civilisation. However, post-Sino-Indian War of 1962, this important civilisational link has been broken. While the land border extends over 3,488 km, there are only three land

ports across the entire stretch of the border; namely Shipki La (Himachal Pradesh), Lipulekh (Uttarakhand), and Nathula (Sikkim). Despite several traditional trade routes that existed between India and Tibet, the Chinese have not opened any land ports either in Ladakh or Arunachal Pradesh, which form over 80 per cent of the land border. Such actions are nothing but a design.

As one can rightly point, most of the incidents narrated are more by design than by default. While Sun Tzu's strategy of 'deception, concealment and surprise' remains central to winning without fighting, Graham Allison highlights that the Chinese have strategic patience and 'taking a long term view comes naturally to them'.⁵⁴ These are in line with Henry Kissinger's thoughts, as he suggests "[...] Chinese style of dealing with strategic decisions: thorough analysis; careful preparations; attention to psychological and political factors; quest for surprise; and rapid conclusion".⁵⁵ However, contrary to these views, China has adopted an aggressive three-pronged strategy to counter global resentment against it in recent times, as witnessed in the form of—Debt Trap, Wolf Diplomacy and Military Coercion.

Since it is difficult to know the exact reason for the Chinese aggression and escalation in May 2020, it was equally intriguing to see the PLA disengaging and withdrawing with speed, as per the timelines of the agreement. The question that needs an answer is: Would the India—China boundary dispute be resolved in the near future? China considers India as one of its competitors in economic, political, and strategic space. Therefore, to stymie India's ambition of becoming a regional cum global power, China would continue to resort to: First, exploit India's vulnerabilities; second, keeping the boundary unsettled as it is of great advantage and a bargaining chip to China; third, ensure that India remains embroiled with the border disputes with Pakistan in the west, and China in the north, and thus, dilute India's focus on the maritime domain (Indian Ocean Region) which is the battlespace of the future.

Besides, with an uncertain and volatile environment, it also ensures that India continues to support China on myriad issues at the global forums.

Due to the sequence of events of the standoff, leading to casualties on both sides, there is a huge 'trust deficit' between the two countries. One cannot ignore the latest report of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) which states that China's military expenditure, the second-highest in the world, is estimated to have totalled US\$ 252 billion in 2020, a rise of 1.9 per cent from the previous year. Chinese military spending has risen for 26 consecutive years.⁵⁶ Also, considering the 'all weather friendship' between China and Pakistan, and with the work on the CPEC being executed on the ground in POJ&K, India must be wary of the China-Pakistan nexus. China has been building up its military preparedness in the Western Theatre Command—the largest theatre command covering the geographical areas of the two erstwhile military regions, namely Lanzhou and Chengdu. Considering the tension on the borders with China, while speaking at the 'Hindustan Times Leadership Summit' on 26 November 2020, India's Minister of Defence, Rajnath Singh said, "the government has given a free hand to the armed forces to counter any changes across the LAC with China, with full force".⁵⁷ While India's endeavour has been to resolve the boundary question to maintain peace and stability, it cannot be intimidated and coerced by the nuclear-armed rival. Notwithstanding the differences, it is also to note that during the standoff on the Western Sector, both India and China have displayed realistic maturity in maintaining dialogue at different levels to defuse the tensions, disengage and eventually de-escalate.

Based on a series of talks between the senior military-diplomatic leaders of India and China, and Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC), both the militaries have completed the withdrawal of troops, weapons and other military hardware from the north and south banks of Pangong Lake areas as part of an agreement. Both sides had agreed to continue with their discussions and negotiations

to ensure that a similar exercise of disengagement takes place at Gogra, Hot Spring, Galwan and Depsang Plains. However, it appears from the 11th Round of Senior Military Commanders level talks that both sides could not reach an amicable process of disengagement and de-escalation for the remainder friction points. Apparently, the Chinese have reportedly hardened their stance regarding disengagement at other friction points. Therefore, unless the process of disengagement, de-escalation, and de-induction of additional troops takes place by both sides, the situation would continue to remain tensed at the LAC.

Way Ahead

“China has made it clear that she doesn’t see the rise of India as being in her interest, whether it’s UN Security Council or NSG membership.”

—Shiv Shankar Menon

Former Indian National Security Advisor⁵⁸

Due to China’s aggressive designs, the biggest casualty in the relations between the two countries has been the ‘trust factor’. To face the challenges posed by China, India must be strong: economically, militarily, and technologically. It is well known that deterrence is a function of ‘capability, resolve and communication of the resolve on crossing of the threshold of tolerance’. Therefore, to address its security concerns, India needs to review its policy involving political, economic, trade and investment, military and information, public perception related Issues. Militarily, India should review its military strategy pertaining to building intelligence and surveillance capabilities, streamlining command and control systems, better management of disputed borders, development of infrastructure, building indigenous technology-enabled systems, and cyber and Information warfare systems. With the allocation of additional budget, India should aim to build its capacity

and capabilities and improve its hard, soft, and demonstrated power to address its security concerns. India should be prepared for a long haul with the Chinese on the LAC.

To build bridges of understanding and trust, both India and China would have to adhere to the agreements and protocols, and remain transparent and sensitive to each other's requirements. Both countries should also gradually build positive perception among the populace by various measures at different levels. China must realise that India, given its potential and resolve, would certainly take its place as a regional and global power in the near future. As noted, in March 2021, China called for India and China "to create enabling conditions for the settlement of the boundary dispute".⁵⁹ Therefore, to do so, it is time that both countries must act with a sense of urgency to restore the status quo on the LAC of April 2020, by disengaging and deescalating the situation. As the neighbours and two prominent nuclear-armed states of Asia, both countries should engage at all levels and work towards the resolution of the boundary dispute in an early timeframe to bring peace and stability in the region. The earlier the better!

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