

INDIA MUST TAKE A FIRM STAND WHILE HOLDING DIALOGUE OVER LAC: HISTORY OF CONFLICT, CHINA'S DEVIOUS MOTIVES AND THE FEAR BEHIND THE CURTAIN

In the year 1913, the United Kingdom (UK), China and Tibet met at Shimla to sign an agreement on the alignment of the international boundary as per the map produced by the Foreign Department of British India. Though China was the one to initiate the proposal, later they backed off citing ambiguities and technical reasons. Henry McMahon, the Foreign Secretary, who had drawn up the proposal, then decided to bypass the Chinese and settle British India's Himalayan border bilaterally by negotiating directly with Tibet. China, however, rejected Tibet's claim of independent rule and maintained that the said treaty had no sanctity without China's endorsement.

In the following decades, the world saw two major world wars followed by the establishment of two new countries in the subcontinent – India and Pakistan, as also establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) after the Chinese Civil War in 1949. The new Indian Government looked at maintaining very cordial relations with China. One year later, PRC took full control of Tibet and built roads and border outposts in Aksai Chin. The Ardagh-Johnson Line as per British India Government, was considered as a formal proposed traditional boundary of the State of Jammu & Kashmir with Xinjiang and Tibet. Aksai Chin was, therefore, claimed by India as a part of Kashmir.

But China refused to accept it saying it was a historic part of Xinjiang. Aksai Chin offered an important road link which connected the Chinese regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. India did protest, but it fell on deaf ears. Therefore, China's construction of this road became one of the triggers of the 1962 conflict.

Later, Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru announced in Parliament that India regarded the McMahon line as its official border. However, it had no effect on China and they continued to insist they had no claims over Indian territory, but in their official map, they continued to show 1,20,000 sq km of Indian territory as theirs. India claimed that the Himalayas were the ancient boundaries of the Indian subcontinent and thus the McMahon line was to run through highest ridges of Himalayas. However, on the map, the McMahon line at places appeared to run South of the highest points which set the roots of differences in perception.





The beginning of the dispute between India and China

In 1954, while Prime Minister Nehru reiterated the Indian position, claiming that historically, Aksai Chin had been part of the Indian Ladakh Region and that the border was non-negotiable. While the Chinese continued to build a road into Aksai Chin, the final jolt in the relationship came in 1959 when Prime Minister Nehru accommodated Dalai Lama after he fled Lhasa. The uprising in Tibet had been crushed and China usurped Tibet completely. Accommodating Dalai Lama by India, badly irked Mao Zedong and thereafter, a slew of border incidents started taking place which also resulted in few deaths and injuries.

In 1960, officials from India and China met to resolve the border issues; but there was no convergence of thought and standing point of view. Prime Minister Nehru then adopted a forward policy and Indian troops started to patrol and construct border outposts. Somehow, the Indian side believed that breaking out of a full-scale war wasn't a realistic possibility. The Indian leadership perhaps failed to read Chinese internal raging anger towards India's forward policy and perceived Indian subversion of the region of Tibet.

Claims and Counterclaims

In the fall of 1962, China launched two major offensives, one in Chip Chap valley in Aksai Chin and the other in Namka Chu. Aksai Chin was easily accessible to the Chinese and was difficult for Indians on the other side of Karakoram to reach. Besides these two major attacks, minor skirmishes took place on borders of Sikkim too. The war lasted for a month and China managed to capture much beyond Tawang up to Brahmaputra plains in the Eastern Sector and in the Western Sector they completely swept across Aksai Chin, captured Chip Chap valley, Galwan Valley and Pangong Tso lake. PLA had captured areas quite deep into Indian territory on both Eastern and Western Sectors.

Thus, if China wanted, they could have easily retained captured territory up to Tawang which has a strong religious sentiment attached with Tibet and over which they always staked their claim. But peculiarly, they did not do so despite the much-publicised dispute related to their claim over Arunachal Pradesh being part of Southern Tibet. They took a unilateral decision to withdraw completely up to its claimed 'Line of Actual Control', but on the other side, they decided to retain over 2000 sq km of the alpine desert in Ladakh.

Though it was totally uninhabited with no resources, it connected Lhasa in Tibet and Kashgar in Xinjiang. China later ceded over 750 sq km to Pakistan and in return, Pakistan recognised Chinese sovereignty on almost 800 sq km of land in Northern Kashmir and Ladakh. The 1962 war with India thus ended with a strategic gain for China.

Acceptance of the McMahon Line

Later on, in 1972, Chinese Premier Zhou claimed that the Chinese military had withdrawn North of the McMahon Line in good faith. Thus, in all fairness, it was an admission on his part that the McMahon Line was a reality between India and China. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) is thus the effective border between India and China covering a distance of over 3488 sq km along with Ladakh, Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh. Barring a couple of pockets, China has accepted the border with Sikkim as the International Border.

Notwithstanding the 1962 war and Nathu La conflict of 1967, difference in perception concerning the exact alignment of the McMahon line continues to linger on. This has many times resulted in friction along the border. However, things have drastically calmed down since then and the last bullet between the two countries was fired in 1975 in Yangtse on a patrol party of Assam Rifles. India and China signed several agreements and accords between 1993 and 2013 to prevent any flare-up along the LAC.



China's Approach

Today, China's foreign policy favours 'multi-polarity' and thus seeks to resist domination by any power, especially the US, of not only the world in general but more specifically of the Asian region. China, therefore, extends cooperation with its neighbours through a mix of military capability, economic power and diplomatic nuances. As far as India is concerned, China has already taken away what it wanted during the 1962 war. For the rest of Ladakh, Sikkim and Arunachal, China knows that it is not only impossible to retake these geographical segments but also what do they gain by attempting to do this? This helps them neither tactically nor strategically. Any war with India aimed at capturing territory will only push them back economically by decades in their quest to compete with the US.

Though officially, China will never acknowledge the LAC as an international boundary of permanent settlement between the two countries, in reality, on the ground, the LAC is a boundary to which China has already reconciled except for few pockets where perception differs either due to lack of clarity in deciphering the actual geographical features on the ground through which the alignment of the LAC should be running or where it gives them any tactical advantage locally.

Since the LAC is not an established international boundary, the dispute in the form of friction on the ground, therefore, must continue to not only manage a favourable perception of own countrymen towards CPC but also send a clear message to all neighbouring countries of India as to signal New Delhi's incapability in asserting control over its border. China also undertakes these regular incursions for building facts on the ground to claim the borders as 'disputed' in the eyes of the world.

That is why, for several decades, without fail, every year few face-offs take place building a record of continued dispute. Chinese are known to be working on very long-term objectives and plans. Thus, such a record of disputes built up over several decades, will not only make their claims look stronger, but also give them an upper hand during any negotiations if ever held with the help of international arbitrators. Intrusions, therefore, keep taking place as a never-ending effort to either reach the tactically advantageous geographical segment on the ground along the LAC or to stretch the Indian Army logistically.

The Devious Motives of China

The Doklam face-off was a very different thing that happened to what is happening in Pangong Tso and Galwan Valley today. It had a definite devious motive to get close to India's so-called 'Chicken Neck' bordering with Bhutan. It was projected as settling border issue with Bhutan and supposedly on the face of it had nothing to do with India. It lasted for over two months, but when India finally decided to draw the redline, China blinked.

Is the current ongoing face-off in Ladakh on similar lines of Doklam? The answer is a straight No. Then what is the objective this time? China was very critical of India post abrogation of Article 370 and 35A calling it unacceptable and challenging it at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Both China and Pakistan got rattled with the fear that India has started to look at merging Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) with Kashmir and thus reunite the erstwhile state.

This would have meant the end of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In the garb of calling it a matter of differing perception, China has been trying to slowly encroach upon the territory in Eastern Ladakh by which Beijing intends to slowly choke the possibility of India expanding towards Gilgit Baltistan.

In the current face-off, the aggressiveness in China's behaviour has been outwardly visible since April 20. Seeing the pattern of current intrusion, one can also conveniently assume that China is perhaps looking at pushing the Indian Army West of the Indus and Shyok rivers, essentially giving China partial control over strategically important Shyok and Chang Chenmo rivers. Or is the game bigger than what it seems to be on the face of it?



The Geo-Political Shift

Since over the last two decades, the world has started to experience China's growing aggression, interference, control, subversion or plunder and ambition for global hegemony, but in the temptation of achieving some economic gain through cooperation, many have ignored it. Way back in 1998, India's then Defence Minister, Late George Fernandes, had the foresight of declaring China as being India's Number One Enemy in times ahead.

Notwithstanding, like other Nations, India too moved ahead building diplomatic and economic ties with China. With the passage of time, China not only became India's largest trading partner, but also both the countries started to cooperate on a range of international issues like trade, climate change, unfair regulations of WTO towards developing nations and reform of global financial order.

As China grew economically and militarily, so also grew China's hegemonic nature which gradually started to lead to not only territorial conflicts, but also a conflict of interests with the West. Over time, China started to appear as a bully on the international arena. However, today, China seems cornered.

The Chinese attempt at imposing a strict national security law over Hong Kong has not only been opposed by the common people of Hong Kong but has also resulted in an unprecedented display of solidarity by Australia, Canada, Japan and the UK with people of Hong Kong. This new legislation would have expanded China's ability to monitor and oversee Hong Kong's security operations and target people seeking to undermine China's authority.

Tensions between China and the West have been heightening over a range of issues including but not limited to WHO investigating the true origin of corona virus pandemic, new legislation issued in Hong Kong being condemned by the world, China imposing steep trade tariffs on Australia and calling Australia a "US dog", as also a close confrontation between Chinese Navy and the US Navy in the South China Sea.

Further, increasing arms sales by the US to Taiwan as also repeatedly highlighting Taiwan's distinct national identity has upset China. Recently, on May 19, 2020 China was miffed to notice the presence of two Indian MPs at Taiwanese President's swearing-in ceremony. China immediately conveyed a message to India to refrain from supporting Taiwan. This clear signal by India in recognizing Taiwan's sovereignty could have also played a factor in sudden increase in military activism along the LAC.

Cornered China

One of the biggest losers of India's stated policy of achieving self-reliance is the Chinese manufacturers and technology services companies. As India is one of the biggest markets, any anti-China policy or sentiments would increase the threat to the Chinese economy. Since going to war suited neither China nor India, it has been observed that China has always resorted to adopting aggressive postures on the borders under the garb of LAC disputes, the latest being the ongoing face-off at Pangong Tso and Galwan Valley.

This is a smart but cheap tactic by China to stir the emotions of the Indian masses making the Indian Government look weak and unable to defend the territorial integrity and, in the bargain, coerce India into agreeing to their demands through interaction at the diplomatic level. Adopting the current standoff in Ladakh, objecting to infrastructure development by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), supporting the anti-India communist government in Nepal headed by Prime Minister Oli, supporting Pakistani covert actions in Kashmir and fanning anti-India flames in the Middle East appears to be a multi-directional approach to pressure India to accommodate to certain critical interests of China at stake in the present.

India's close relations with the US as also with other Western Nations and the Indian Health Minister now being tasked with a major role at the World Health Organization (WHO), has in all probability created a panic in the Chinese hierarchy. Beijing is apprehensive that India to please the US could use this platform to implicate China of being responsible for spreading Covid-19 virus. It is possible that the current face off could also be related to diverting the internal pressures being faced by Xi Jinping due to mishandling of Covid-19 spread and worsening of the economic situation.



There are also unconfirmed reports of an internal struggle going on between Military Theatre Commanders in China. The desire of World Trade Center (WTC) and STC Commanders to become a member of CMC in 2021, could also be driving the current ongoing situation against India and Taiwan respectively. Both may be trying to establish their relevance and trying to project themselves as a more competent and dynamic potential candidate for CMC.

Fear Behind The Curtain

It has been observed that over the last decade, there has been a gradual shift of PLA training activities and building up of a cluster of military infrastructures towards the Western side apart from building major road access and townships on the pretext of encouraging tourism and promoting Buddhism.

In reality, it is a big façade perpetrated by Beijing over the remote province. Their major concern is centred around protecting POK and especially the area of Gilgit Baltistan from where the CPEC enters Pakistan. Someday, India capturing this area will not only choke the CPEC but will also provide India with a land route access to mineral-rich Central Asia.

At present, Gilgit Baltistan has started to see growing internal strife much to the worry of both Pakistan and China. The Indian Government beginning to talk openly about reclaiming POK has only added to their anxiety levels. This could be why suddenly out of blue China suggested a need for Tri-lateral negotiation involving Pakistan to resolve the current ongoing standoff?

Besides being mineral-rich it is also a well-established fact now that Central Asia is slowly turning into a crucial hub not only in China's BRI project but majorly in China's national security-related to Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan sharing a 3300 km long boundary with restive Xinjiang Province in the West.

The people of these three countries have always felt cheated, deprived and persecuted at the hands of the Chinese historically. The recent rise in mass anti-China protests due to growing distrust towards Chinese intentions, therefore, has become a matter of major concern for China. Any major flare-up in times to come will attract the attention of world powers adding to the ongoing discomfort of China related to Hong Kong and Taiwan at present. India's direct access through land route will only further worsen their problems.

India's Approach

There is no straight jacket solution to current predicament in Ladakh. A multi-pronged approach needs to be adopted, having first drawn a redline in clear terms. India must make it clear in a subtle way that India is not going to blink first at any cost. In the current Covid-19 scenario, China is fully conscious that the entire international community seems to be against them.

China, therefore, cannot afford to take the risk of even a skirmish as no one can guarantee that it would remain confined to just the India-China border. A war now between two regional powers would get the entire world involved in one way or another and would give the West and President Trump, in particular, a legitimate reason to engage China militarily. The Indian military, therefore, must continue firm on ground moving reserves to cover the vulnerable pockets and call China's bluff.

Besides enhancing round-the-clock surveillance, India must also actively get down to perception management by conveying good intentions to resolve the issue through international media. The building of infrastructure must also continue as before. As quoted in *Hindustan Times* e-paper India's Defence Minister Shri Rajnath Singh has already made it clear that while talking with China at both military and diplomatic levels, the Government will not allow India's dignity to be hurt under any circumstances.

At the diplomatic level, using the Chinese philosophy of Wolf-Warrior Diplomacy, India must convey that when it comes to push versus shove, India may be compelled to revisit the Panchsheel agreement under which India had conceded recognition of Tibet as part of China. Therefore, it would be in the best interest of both the nations to settle the traditional boundary disputes, trade deficit, China's unnecessary call for tri-lateral negotiations involving Pakistan concerning India's stand on ongoing contentious issues like Hong Kong, Taiwan, WHO at mutual one-to-one level without drawing undue international attention.

Summary

It will not be out of place to assume at this stage that perhaps a new cold war has begun. Has China committed the error of overtly and directly competing with the western powers, both economically and militarily rather prematurely? A massive anti-China wave seems to be building up around the globe. A few days ago, President Xi Jinping ordered PLA to scale up the battle preparedness to protect the country's sovereignty. However, he did not define any specific threat.

A study of the western region of China reveals that China is deeply concerned about the porous western borders and rising Uyghur insurgents. With ongoing unrest against China especially in three Central Asian countries bordering with China as also in Gilgit Baltistan, PLA, therefore, needs to consolidate their presence in the western region to ensure that at no stage any situation in Xinjiang gets out of control. China also needs to exercise economic influence over both Pakistan and Central Asia. Thus, any strengthening of the position of India's military in Ladakh region as also a demonstration of Government's resolve to merge POK back in Kashmir comes as a vulnerability for China in this region.

To sum up, therefore, it will be apt to quote Mr Ram Madhav's views when he said, "As the new cold war clouds gather over the horizon, countries like India have to weigh their options carefully. Non-Aligned Movement(NAM)-type 'neither here, nor there' neutrality is no longer feasible because the new cold war is going to play out in India's immediate neighbourhood. Instead, India could become the fulcrum for countries in the Indo-Pacific region," . Therefore, under the prevailing geopolitical situation today, India, must adopt a firm stand drawing a red line at all levels while progressing with any dialogue over LAC with China. ■

This article has been (printed with permission) ,authored by Lt Gen Abhay Krishna, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM, (Retd). Former Army Commander South Western Command, Eastern Command and Central Command.

First published <https://www.opindia.com/2020/06/china-india-ladakh-standoff-conflict-history-strategy-all-you-need-to-know/>

AUTHOR



**Lt Gen Abhay Krishna,
PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM, (Retd).**

(The author is a former Army Commander South Western Command, Eastern Command and Central Command.)