

IN HIMALAYAN STAREDOWN, THE DILEMMAS FOR DELHI

The time has come for India to checkmate China's aggression even in the backdrop of maintaining robust economic ties

The growing number of reports about Chinese troops crossing the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India in the Ladakh region — neither acknowledged nor denied by the Indian government as yet — indicate a new age of Chinese territorial aggression against India.

While there are around 400 transgressions/faceoffs each year on an average along the LAC, the recent spate of territorial transgressions by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is unprecedented in its scope and manner. Even as independent accounts point out that Chinese troops are yet to withdraw from the transgressed territories, traditionally considered by both sides to be on the Indian side of the LAC, and restore status quo ante, Chinese officials have gone ahead and stated that the "Situation in China-India border is overall stable & controllable". Is all well between the two nuclear-armed adversaries?

If the mounting evidence of China's territorial aggression against India is even partly accurate, and there is no reason to believe they are not, the Narendra Modi government is left with two basic choices: accept territorial loss as a fait accompli or force or negotiate a reversal to status quo ante, unless of course the PLA unilaterally withdraws.

Either way, China's growing territorial aggression on the LAC signals the end of Beijing's peaceful rise and its traditional desire to maintain regional status quo with India. China under its President, Xi Jinping, unequivocally seeks to demonstrate that it is the preponderant power in the region.

Explaining the aggression :

What baffles most observers is the rationale behind the Chinese escalation on the LAC while the entire world is preoccupied with battling COVID-19, the biggest crisis humanity has faced since the Second World War. While the timing could be explained by the global political distraction caused by COVID-19 and the international pressure on China (including by India) to come clean on the origins of the novel coronavirus, the proximate causes could be several. For one, New Delhi's terse statements about Aksai Chin following the Jammu and Kashmir reorganisation in August last year had not gone down well with Beijing. While not many in India believe that New Delhi was serious about getting back Aksai Chin from Chinese control, Beijing may have viewed it as India upping the ante. More pertinently, in a clear departure from the past, New Delhi has been carrying out the construction of infrastructural projects along the LAC — a long overdue activity — which is something that seems to have made China uneasy.

The Chinese angle to the J&K conundrum deserves more attention here. Home Minister Amit Shah's statement about Aksai Chin in August 2019 might have triggered some anxiety in Beijing about its plans for the larger erstwhile princely State of J&K a part of which China is in possession of. China's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connectivity to Pakistan through the Karakoram and New Delhi's criticism of it, the reported presence of PLA troops in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), India's new-found activism on Aksai Chin, and the PLA's incursions into areas in eastern Ladakh must be viewed in the broader context of a long-term geopolitical world view China has for the region.

It is equally important to appreciate the larger Chinese strategic calculations behind its recent spate of aggressions. Having given up its traditional slogan of 'peaceful rise', China, under Mr. Xi, is beginning to assert itself as the next superpower. Over the years, Beijing has perhaps realised that India is not keen on toeing the Chinese line in the region. So this is Beijing sending a message to New Delhi to fall in line, a message that will not go unnoticed in the smaller capitals around China — from Colombo to Kathmandu to Hanoi.

There is more subtle political messaging in Beijing's LAC aggression. Given that China is currently engaged in what many analysts are describing as a new cold war with the United States, in the middle of a crackdown in Hong Kong along with fighting COVID-19 at home, one would not have expected the Chinese leadership to open another front. And yet, by opening a limited military front with India on the LAC, China is signalling the U.S. that it can handle pressure, and telling India that it has the political and military wherewithal to put pressure on New Delhi notwithstanding its other preoccupations.

Doklam redux?

The 2017 standoff between India and China at the Doklam trijunction was the first major military standoff between the two sides in a long time in which New Delhi demonstrated it was not a military pushover despite China's conventional superiority over India. Since Doklam, however, there have been several reports

that China has continued with its construction activities in and around Doklam. The 2020 transgressions in Sikkim and Ladakh are perhaps Beijing's way of responding to India consistently and militarily.

China's limited scope military expeditions on the long-contested border is cost effective for the PLA given the ever-growing conventional military superiority that it enjoys with India. Moreover, because limited fights or smaller land grabs may not provoke an all-out confrontation or nuclear use, the side with conventional superiority and more border infrastructure would likely carry the day.

Let me unpack this argument. Picking a direct fight with India which might lead to an undesirable military escalation with India does not suit Beijing's interests, but carrying out minor military expeditions with the objective of inflicting small-scale military defeats on India is precisely what would suit the Chinese political and military leadership; they are cost effective, less escalatory, and the message gets conveyed. More so, India's military response would depend a great deal on how far the regime in New Delhi is willing to acknowledge such territorial losses due to domestic political constraints: if New Delhi acknowledges loss of territory, it would have to regain it, but doing so vis-à-vis a conventionally superior power would not be easy.

Put differently, growing conventional imbalance and domestic political calculations could prompt New Delhi to overlook minor territorial losses on the LAC, the manner in which Pakistan refused to acknowledge the 2016 surgical strikes carried out by India. But let us be clear: the more New Delhi overlooks them, the more Beijing would be tempted to repeat them. These considerations lie at the heart of India's China dilemma.

Limits of adventurism :

And yet, there are limits to China's LAC adventurism. There are several places along the several thousand kilometre long LAC where the PLA is militarily weak, the Indian Army has the upper hand, and, therefore, a tit-for-tat military campaign could be undertaken by New Delhi. Second, while China enjoys continental superiority over India, maritime domain is China's weak spot, in particular Beijing's commercial and energy interest to which the maritime space is crucial. Finally, and most importantly, would Beijing want to seriously damage the close to \$100 billion trade with India with its military adventurism on the LAC?

In any case, for India, the age of pussyfooting around Chinese intimidation strategies is over. The time has come to checkmate Beijing's military aggression even as we maintain a robust economic relationship with our eastern neighbour. It is also a reminder for us to get more serious about finalising a border agreement with China: the bigger the power differential between India and China, the more concessions Beijing would demand from New Delhi to settle the dispute.

There is little doubt that China is our neighbour and that we have to live next to the larger and more powerful China. However, India should not accept Beijing's attempts at land grabs, or military intimidation. That China is a rising superpower located next door to us is a reality, but how we deal with that reality is a choice we must make as a nation.

Meanings of Difficult Words :

- ❖ **staredown** (noun) – an act of looking fixedly at someone (in a threatening way); confrontation, face-off, conflict.
- ❖ **dilemma** (noun) – quandary, predicament, difficulty.
- ❖ **checkmate** (verb) – frustrate, thwart, prevent, counter, foil completely.
- ❖ **aggression** (noun) – hostility, belligerence, combativeness, warmongering, hawkishness.
- ❖ **backdrop** (noun) – situation, scenario, context.
- ❖ **robust** (adjective) – strong, powerful.
- ❖ **tie** (noun) – bond, association, relationship.
- ❖ **Line of Actual Control (LAC)** (noun) – the de-facto (effective) border between India and China. The LAC is a 4,057-km border running through three areas-Western (Ladakh, Ladakh (Kashmir)), middle (Uttarakhand, Himachal) and eastern (Sikkim, Arunachal).
- ❖ **acknowledge** (verb) – admit, accept, declare, realize, confess.
- ❖ **as yet** (phrase) – so far, thus far, still, until now.
- ❖ **territorial** (adjective) – relating to a specific territory (area/region); geographical.
- ❖ **transgression** (noun) – breach, violation, infringement.
- ❖ **face-off** (noun) – conflict, confrontation, encounter, fight/clash.
- ❖ **spate** (noun) – series, flurry; a large number of something (taking place at the same period).
- ❖ **People's Liberation Army (PLA)** (noun) – People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the armed forces of the country of China and Communist Party of China (CPC). It is one of the largest military forces in the world.
- ❖ **unprecedented** (adjective) – not done or experienced before.

- ❖ **scope** (noun) – intention, purpose, object (of the exercise).
- ❖ **account** (noun) – narrative, report, explanation, interpretation.
- ❖ **point out** (phrasal verb) – identify, mention, recognize, draw attention to.
- ❖ **transgressed** (adjective) – infringed, breached, contravened, violated.
- ❖ **status quo ante** (phrase) – a Latin phrase meaning “the state of affairs existing before” (or) “the way things were before”.
- ❖ **go ahead** (phrasal verb) – proceed, continue to do something, to start doing something.
- ❖ **adversary** (noun) – rival, enemy, nemesis/ opponent, competitor.
- ❖ **mounting** (adjective) – increasing, growing, escalating.
- ❖ **fait accompli** (noun) – (from French) an accomplished fact, something that has already occurred and cannot be changed.
- ❖ **reversal** (noun) – turnaround, change, backtracking.
- ❖ **unless** (conjunction) – expect that.
- ❖ **of course** (phrase) – needless to say, as you would expect, naturally/certainly.
- ❖ **unilaterally** (adverb) – used to indicate something done by a person/country without approval/agreement from other people/countries involved in the situation.
- ❖ **peaceful rise** (noun) – “China’s peaceful rise” or sometimes referred to as “China’s peaceful development” was an official policy in China under the leadership of Hu Jintao, Former General Secretary of the Communist Party of China. The term generally suggests that China seeks to avoid unnecessary international confrontation.
- ❖ **status quo** (noun) – the present situation, the current state, the existing state of affairs.
- ❖ **unequivocally** (adverb) – undeniably, indisputably, unambiguously.
- ❖ **seek** (verb) – try, attempt, work towards.
- ❖ **preponderant** (adjective) – predominant, more powerful, superior.
- ❖ **baffle** (verb) – confuse, perplex, mystify.
- ❖ **rationale** (noun) – reason, basis, logic, principle.
- ❖ **escalation** (noun) – intensification; an increase in the intensity of something.
- ❖ **preoccupy** (verb) – occupy, concern, obsess.
- ❖ **humanity** (noun) – humankind, the human race, people.
- ❖ **distraction** (noun) – disturbance, intrusion, interference, obstruction, hindrance.
- ❖ **come clean** (phrase) – tell the truth, be completely honest, tell all about something.
- ❖ **proximate** (adjective) – nearest, closest, next to, close. (proximate trigger/cause is an event which is closest to, or immediately responsible for causing, some observed result).
- ❖ **for one** (phrase) – (few people) agree/do something even if all others disagree/ don’t do.
- ❖ **terse** (adjective) – to the point, short, brief, concise, succinct, abrupt.
- ❖ **Aksai Chin** (noun) – a territory in Ladakh, is under illegal Chinese occupation.
- ❖ **go down well** (phrase) – be successful, triumph, make an impression, have an impact.
- ❖ **get back** (phrasal verb) – regain possession of, win back, recover, take back, reclaim.
- ❖ **raise/up the ante** (phrase) – to increase demands (in a tough condition) even though it has risks.
- ❖ **pertinently** (adverb) – relevantly, suitably, appropriately, germanely.
- ❖ **departure** (noun) – deviation, divergence, digression; change of direction.
- ❖ **carry out** (phrasal verb) – conduct, perform, execute.
- ❖ **overdue** (adjective) – long-delayed, not on time, long-pending.
- ❖ **angle** (noun) – perspective, viewpoint, standpoint, position, approach.
- ❖ **conundrum** (noun) – problem, difficulty, quandary/dilemma.
- ❖ **trigger** (verb) – give rise to, cause, invoke, bring about.
- ❖ **anxiety** (noun) – concern/stress/tension, unease, apprehension, disquiet.
- ❖ **erstwhile** (adjective) – old, previous, former, then.
- ❖ **princely state** (noun) – Native States under a local or regional ruler, existed in India before the partition of India in 1947.
- ❖ **possession** (noun) – having something in control, hold, custody.
- ❖ **new-found** (adjective) – newly established; recently discovered.
- ❖ **activism** (noun) – involvement; campaigning, championing/supporting (to cause political or social change).
- ❖ **incursion** (noun) – attack on, assault on, invasion of.
- ❖ **context** (noun) – circumstances, conditions, situation.
- ❖ **geopolitical** (adjective) – relating to the study of the geographical factors (a country’s position on the earth, size, climate, and natural resources & etc..) in world politics and inter-state relations.
- ❖ **give up** (phrasal verb) – abandon, forgo, renounce.

- ❖ **assert** (verb) – declare, announce, state (confidently).
- ❖ **superpower** (noun) – a nation which is very powerful and possesses military, political or economic might (power) with dominant status on the globe. (like the Soviet Union (erstwhile) or United States of America).
- ❖ **perhaps** (adverb) – maybe, possibly.
- ❖ **keen on** (adjective) – interested in something.
- ❖ **toe the line** (phrase) – do things as per someone else’s expectations; to adhere to the expectations/rules; meet/conform to a standard.
- ❖ **fall in line** (phrase) – conform with others.
- ❖ **given** (preposition) – considering, taking into account, bearing in mind.
- ❖ **Cold War** (noun) – a state of conflict between nations that does not involve direct military action but is pursued primarily through economic and political actions, propaganda, acts of espionage (spying) or proxy wars (war through a representative/ agent).
- ❖ **crackdown** (noun) – getting tough, severe/ stern measures, restriction, suppression/ repression, clampdown.
- ❖ **front** (noun) – a particular situation.
- ❖ **telling** (adjective) – striking, revealing, significant, important.
- ❖ **wherewithal** (noun) – resources, means.
- ❖ **notwithstanding** (adverb) – nevertheless, nonetheless, anyway, at any rate.
- ❖ **preoccupation** (noun) – concentration, obsession, concern, thinking of other things.
- ❖ **redux** (adjective) – brought back; revived, restored.
- ❖ **standoff** (noun) – deadlock, stalemate, impasse (in a dispute/conflict).
- ❖ **pushover** (noun) – weak-ling, unworthy/feeble opponent.
- ❖ **superiority** (noun) – advantage, lead, primacy.
- ❖ **military expedition** (noun) – a military campaign designed to achieve a specific objective in a foreign country.
- ❖ **conventional** (adjective) – non-nuclear; traditional.
- ❖ **all-out** (adjective) – intense, aggressive, vigorous, powerful.
- ❖ **confrontation** (noun) – conflict, fight, face-off.
- ❖ **carry the day** (phrase) – win, gain, be successful.
- ❖ **unpack** (verb) – analyse, access (components/ elements in something).
- ❖ **interest** (noun) – benefit, advantage.
- ❖ **objective** (noun) – aim, intention, purpose.
- ❖ **inflict** (verb) – cause, force, thrust, burden someone with.
- ❖ **precisely** (adverb) – exactly, absolutely, squarely.
- ❖ **escalatory** (adjective) – relating to something which make something else more intense or serious.
- ❖ **more so** (phrase) – to a greater degree; to a greater extent.
- ❖ **constraint** (noun) – restriction, limitation, restraint.
- ❖ **vis-a-vis** (preposition) – in relation to, with regard to.
- ❖ **put differently** (phrase) – express differently, put/express in other words.
- ❖ **imbalance** (noun) – disparity, variation, disproportion, unevenness, lopsidedness.
- ❖ **prompt** (verb) – give rise to, bring about, cause, trigger.
- ❖ **overlook** (verb) – miss, fail to notice; disregard, neglect/ignore.
- ❖ **surgical strike** (noun) – the military attack aimed to cause damage on a particular target with small/no collateral damage to surroundings.
- ❖ **consideration** (noun) – attention; a factor, point, concern, matter (taken into account while judging something).
- ❖ **lie** (verb) – be present, exist.
- ❖ **at the heart of** (phrase) – at the most important part of.
- ❖ **adventurism** (noun) – the inclination/ readiness to take risks in business or politics.
- ❖ **upper hand** (noun) – a dominating position.
- ❖ **tit-for-tat** (phrase) – equivalent retaliation; counterattack, revenge, an eye for an eye.
- ❖ **undertake** (verb) – begin, start, commence, embark on.
- ❖ **continental** (adjective) – intercontinental; belonging to a continent.
- ❖ **maritime** (adjective) – of or related to the sea.
- ❖ **domain** (noun) – field, area, sector.
- ❖ **pussyfoot** (verb) – be evasive, be non-committal, dodge/evade/sidestep the issue, beat about the bush.
- ❖ **intimidation** (noun) – frightening, threatening, coercion, browbeating.
- ❖ **differential** (noun) – difference, disparity, discrepancy, imbalance, inequality, gap.
- ❖ **concession** (noun) – compromise, adjustment, modification.