

CHINA'S LAC AGGRESSION, INDIA'S OBFUSCATION

**There are important reasons for the government's confusing claims,
political grandstanding and blurring of facts**

For a political party that never misses out on even a remote opportunity to indulge in aggressive military talk, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the government led by it seem to be sending out confusing signals about the ongoing India-China stand-off on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Media reports about the Chinese aggression started trickling in from April this year, and yet there continues to be little clarity even today either in the country's strategic community or the general public on the exact nature of developments on the China-India border. Did the Chinese soldiers indeed cross the LAC and capture Indian territory? Is the People's Liberation Army (PLA) currently in possession of Indian territory? What exactly are the two sides talking about in their discussions pertaining to 'disengagement'? How does New Delhi plan to retake lost territory?

Unanswered questions

While the Prime Minister had claimed on June 20 that "neither has anyone intruded into the Indian territory nor has anyone captured any military posts", the Ministry of External Affairs' press note of June 17 had said that "the Chinese side sought to erect a structure in Galwan valley on our side of the LAC". Adding to this confusion, India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla said as recently as in early September that it "cannot be business as usual" with China until the status quo is restored on the disputed border. One thing that emerges from these and other contradictory statements is that something is not adding up *vis-à-vis* the government's claims about the LAC. Basic questions continue to remain unanswered.

Soft steps, domestic politics

What is also becoming clear is that the government is seeking soft measures in stitching together a response to China. The government's approach, as the External Affairs Minister stated the other day, is that "a solution to the situation has to be found in the domain of diplomacy". Put differently, the BJP government has, on the one hand, decided not to reveal the exact nature of the situation on the LAC and, on the other hand, is attempting to negotiate Chinese withdrawal from Indian territory rather than using kinetic means or tit-for-tat measures to reclaim its territory.

The BJP government's inability to take a factual and unambiguous position on the LAC flows directly from its domestic political calculations. Acknowledging Chinese possession of Indian territory is bad optics for a party whose hardcore supporters revel in the military bravado of the party. Objective facts about adverse territorial possession matter, but not to everyone. In BJP strongholds in the Hindi heartland, upbeat from the inauguration of the Ram temple and the Article 370 'victory', what essentially matters is 'feel good' optics and high-pitched rhetoric about a strong and unrelenting national leadership; not factual, actual positions on the ground regarding India's national interest.

Therefore, even if the BJP's critics, some 'pestering' quarters in the media, and the Opposition cry foul about the government's handling of Chinese aggression on the LAC, it would hardly make any political difference to the party. The BJP is simply not bothered about how it is perceived other than among its core support base. More so, its rather bold policies in Kashmir and towards Pakistan over the years have created sufficient political cushion to absorb a few misadventures or pushbacks, even if they were to become public knowledge. Obfuscation of facts or confusing signals about the LAC stand-off, therefore, serve an important purpose.

Two-and-a-half front situation

Yet another reason why there is a deliberate attempt to refrain from disclosing full facts of the Chinese action on the LAC to the public is also the recognition within the establishment about the reality of a "two-and-a-half front situation". Not that the Indian military and political leadership

have not spoken about it before; but it is far easier to talk about fighting a two-and-a-half front war than actually fighting, and winning, it.

Today, we are literally facing a “two-and-a-half front situation” — a restive Kashmir, an aggressive China and a Pakistan that never misses an opportunity to get at India — together forming a formidable national security challenge. While Pakistan’s interference in Kashmir is too well-known to be mentioned here, China may have emerged as a third key player in the Kashmir conflict. This has diplomatically emboldened Pakistan, and it would be unwise for us to rule out more China-Pakistan military and diplomatic coordination against Indian interests in the years ahead. Not that the two had not collaborated before, but this might see an increase in the days ahead.

New Delhi’s strategists may have read this situation correctly. If so, it makes perfect sense for the political masters to underplay its gravity and seek a diplomatic solution to address the most dangerous piece in the “two-and-a-half front situation” — i.e. Chinese aggression on the LAC. In doing so, a confusing narrative is certainly helpful for domestic signalling.

West’s support is limited

India’s inability to clearly articulate, identify and address the Chinese threat is also a function of another sobering realisation within the establishment regarding the limited utility when it comes to Euro-American assistance in checking China in South Asia. In an international system that is preoccupied with the domestic political, economic and public health worries of COVID-19, there is little enthusiasm to resolutely stand by India in pushing back China. The unpredictability of U.S. President Donald Trump adds to Indian woes, and until a new President is sworn in in January 2021, Washington DC’s ability to make up its mind and act on it *vis-à-vis* China-India affairs would be limited. New Delhi does recognise this lukewarm global mood, and so does Beijing. Picking a fight with China, therefore, is not the wisest strategy; obfuscating the exact nature of the China threat is indeed a much better strategy. In democracies, sometimes partisan political interests trump national interests, and a deeply divided political landscape accentuates such partisan considerations.

The BJP’s diplomatic approach to deal with China’s aggressive land grab also stems from a capacity deficit. While a bean counting of the Chinese and Indian military capabilities might lead us to believe that we are not militarily far inferior to China, what might offset this consideration is China’s growing capabilities in domains such as cyber and space. While India’s naval capabilities may be stronger in the Indian Ocean, growing Chinese naval capabilities and its increasing reach in the wider region around India are also likely to dampen India’s enthusiasm about the Euro-Atlantic focus on the Indo-Pacific and the Quad (or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which is an informal strategic dialogue between the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia) as tools to check China in the maritime space.

If India is serious about checking China’s maritime influence in the region, it would need to invest in more resources to improve its naval capabilities. But where will the money come from? The combined effect of a pre-existing economic slowdown and the impact of COVID-19 on the economy means that the government would struggle to meet its basic expenditure needs for the foreseeable future. Defence expenditure is bound to take a back seat, and the China threat is unlikely to make a difference.

A dissonance

The BJP-led government’s confusing claims, political grandstanding and obfuscation of facts have also led to a great deal of elite dissonance within the Indian strategic community on how to address and deal with the China threat. In times of major crises, nations normally stand together and speak in unison, but the LAC crisis does not seem to have brought the country’s political and strategic elites together unlike say during the Kargil crisis or the Mumbai terror attacks. The BJP’s confusing claims, intended to obfuscate the real nature of the threat, have in many ways led to this elite dissonance. This could have lasting implications for the country including for putting in place

coordinated institutional responses to external challenges. No useful theory of victory can be born out of political denials about strategic challenges.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

- ❖ **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).
- ❖ **aggression** (noun) – hostility, belligerence, combativeness, warmongering, hawkishness.
- ❖ **obfuscation** (noun) – making of something obscure or unclear to understand; evasiveness, confusion.
- ❖ **grandstanding** (noun) – a way of speaking or acting to get attention from the spectators (people) and then influencing them.
- ❖ **blur** (verb) – make indistinct/unclear, make vague, unfocus.
- ❖ **indulge in** (verb) – become involved in (an undesirable activity).
- ❖ **aggressive** (adjective) – hostile, belligerent, bellicose, hawkish, combative.
- ❖ **send out** (phrasal verb) – give out, announce, deliver/release.
- ❖ **stand-off** (noun) – deadlock, stalemate, impasse (in a dispute/conflict).
- ❖ **trickle in** (verb) – come gradually, occur slowly.
- ❖ **indeed** (adverb) – in fact, actually.
- ❖ **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.
- ❖ **possession** (noun) – ownership, proprietorship, control, hold.
- ❖ **pertain to** (verb) – concern, relate to, be connected with.
- ❖ **disengagement** (noun) – withdrawal, departure, retreat (of military troops from an area of conflict).
- ❖ **retake** (verb) – retrieve, regain, get back.
- ❖ **intrude** (verb) – encroach, impinge, trespass, infringe.
- ❖ **post** (noun) – border outpost, a military base/camp, command post (for border patrol).
- ❖ **seek** (verb) – try, aim, attempt.
- ❖ **erect** (verb) – create, establish, form/set up.
- ❖ **Valley** (noun) – a low area between hills or mountains typically with a river running through it. Valley is a metonym of Jammu & Kashmir in this context (Metonym is used as an alternative for something else with which it is closely related/associated).
- ❖ **business as usual** (phrase) – routine, regularity, normal pattern.
- ❖ **status quo** (noun) – the present situation, the current state, the existing state of affairs.
- ❖ **contradictory** (adjective) – contrary, contrasting, conflicting, inconsistent.
- ❖ **add up** (phrasal verb) – make sense, seem reasonable, seem plausible, ring true/hold water.
- ❖ **vis-a-vis** (preposition) – in relation to, with regard to.
- ❖ **stitch together** (verb) – join together to create something quickly/roughly.
- ❖ **domain** (noun) – area/sphere of activity; field, area, sphere.
- ❖ **diplomacy** (noun) – international politics, foreign affairs, foreign policy; negotiation, discussion, talks, dialogue.
- ❖ **put differently** (phrase) – express differently, put/express in other words.
- ❖ **rather than** (phrase) – instead of.
- ❖ **kinetic** (adjective) – driving, propelling, impelling, operative.
- ❖ **means** (noun) – method, way, mode.
- ❖ **tit-for-tat** (phrase) – equivalent retaliation; counterattack, revenge, an eye for an eye.
- ❖ **inability** (noun) – lack of ability, incapability, ineffectiveness.
- ❖ **unambiguous** (adjective) – unarguable, undebatable, unquestionable.
- ❖ **flow from** (phrase) – come from, be rooted in, originate from, emanate from.
- ❖ **calculation** (noun) – assessment, judgement; projection, prediction.
- ❖ **acknowledge** (verb) – admit, accept, recognize, realize.
- ❖ **optics** (noun) – (typically in a political situation) the way in which an event is recognized by the public.
- ❖ **hard core** (adjective) – diehard, staunch, dedicated/committed, steadfast, hard-line.

- ❖ **revel** (verb) – enjoy, delight in, love/like, take pleasure in, glory in.
- ❖ **bravado** (noun) – boldness, bold manner, boasting/bombast, daredevil.
- ❖ **objective** (adjective) – impartial, unbiased, unprejudiced, neutral.
- ❖ **adverse** (adjective) – unfavourable, disadvantageous, bad.
- ❖ **stronghold** (noun) – bastion, hotbed; fortress, fort.
- ❖ **heartland** (noun) – the most important part of a field of activity; the central part of something.
- ❖ **upbeat** (adjective) – optimistic, positive, hopeful.
- ❖ **feel good** (adjective) – causing a feeling of joy & comfort.
- ❖ **high-pitched** (adjective) – high/sharp, penetrating, piercing.
- ❖ **rhetoric** (noun) – the art of speaking or writing effectively & persuasively or impressively (but, often lacking substance); bombast, loftiness, hyperbole/extravagant language.
- ❖ **unrelenting** (adjective) – resolute, determined, inflexible, uncompromising.
- ❖ **on the ground** (phrase) – in a situation/place where things are happening really/practically.
- ❖ **interest** (noun) – benefit, advantage.
- ❖ **critic** (noun) – fault-finder, censorer, attacker.
- ❖ **pestering** (adjective) – annoying, bothering, harassing, troubling.
- ❖ **quarter** (noun) – a particular group of people.
- ❖ **cry foul** (phrase) – to protest against/complain about something done by someone is wrong (or) not fair.
- ❖ **perceive** (verb) – discern, recognize, understand, observe, regard, view.
- ❖ **more so** (phrase) – to a greater degree; to a greater extent.
- ❖ **cushion** (noun) – protection, shield, defence.
- ❖ **misadventure** (noun) – misfortune; problem/difficulty, mishap/setback.
- ❖ **pushback** (noun) – resistance, opposition, disagreement, force back, repulse drive.
- ❖ **front** (noun) – a particular situation (or) front line, vanguard, combat zone.
- ❖ **Two-and-a-half front situation** (noun) – it means a coordinated aggression by Pakistan in the West, China in the North and internal insurgencies.
- ❖ **deliberate** (adjective) – intentional, planned, conscious, purposeful.
- ❖ **refrain** from (verb) – stop oneself, abstain, desist from, hold back.
- ❖ **recognition** (noun) – acknowledgement, acceptance, admission.
- ❖ **the establishment** (noun) – the powers that be, the authorities, the system, the ruling class.
- ❖ **literally** (adverb) – exactly.
- ❖ **restive** (adjective) – restless, agitated; rebellious, insurgent; uncontrollable, unmanageable.
- ❖ **get at** (phrasal verb) – criticize, pick on, find fault with (someone repeatedly).
- ❖ **formidable** (adjective) – strong, powerful, mighty.
- ❖ **interference** (noun) – intervention, meddling, unwarranted involvement.
- ❖ **well-known** (adjective) – familiar, widely known, common, usual, conventional.
- ❖ **diplomatically** (adverb) – in a way that involves ambassadors/diplomats between countries.
- ❖ **embolden** (verb) – give courage, make brave, encourage, strengthen, fortify.
- ❖ **unwise** (adjective) – injudicious, ill-advised, ill-considered.
- ❖ **rule out** (phrasal verb) – eliminate, reject, dismiss.
- ❖ **diplomatic** (adjective) – (delicate & sensitive) consular, foreign-policy.
- ❖ **collaborate** (verb) – join, cooperate, team up.
- ❖ **underplay** (verb) – downplay, understate, de-emphasize.
- ❖ **gravity** (noun) – seriousness, importance/significance, severity.
- ❖ **address** (verb) – tackle, deal with, attend to, try to sort out.
- ❖ **narrative** (noun) – a representation of a particular situation; portrayal/account.
- ❖ **signalling** (noun) – the idea that one party convincingly conveys some political information (ideologies) to another (only to show off selfishly, instead of making better society).

- ❖ **read** (verb) – interpret, understand, analyse.
- ❖ **articulate** (verb) – express, voice, communicate.
- ❖ **sobering** (adjective) – serious/sensible, thoughtful; logical/realistic, pragmatic.
- ❖ **utility** (noun) – use, usefulness, advantage, benefit.
- ❖ **check** (verb) – restrain, contain, control.
- ❖ **preoccupy** (verb) – occupy, concern, obsess.
- ❖ **enthusiasm** (noun) – eagerness, warmth, interest.
- ❖ **resolutely** (adverb) – firmly, determinedly, purposefully.
- ❖ **stand by** (phrasal verb) – support, stand up for, uphold/defend.
- ❖ **push back** (phrasal verb) – force back, repel, fight off.
- ❖ **unpredictability** (noun) – riskiness, changeability.
- ❖ **add to** (phrasal verb) – make something stronger/greater.
- ❖ **woes** (noun) – trouble, difficulty, problem.
- ❖ **make up one's mind** (phrase) – decide, be decisive, come to a decision, make/reach a decision.
- ❖ **affairs** (noun) – concerns, matters, activities.
- ❖ **lukewarm** (adjective) – unenthusiastic, unresponsive, half-hearted, indifferent, dispassionate.
- ❖ **partisan** (adjective) – biased, prejudiced, one-sided.
- ❖ **trump** (verb) – surpass, outdo, outperform, outshine, eclipse.
- ❖ **deeply** (adverb) – seriously, intensely, strongly, awfully, terribly.
- ❖ **landscape** (noun) – the distinctive features of a field of activity.
- ❖ **accentuate** (verb) – highlight, underline, focus attention on.
- ❖ **land grab** (noun) – a process of obtaining land unethically & self-seekingly (selfishly).
- ❖ **stem from** (phrasal verb) – originate from, arise/come from, emanate from.
- ❖ **deficit** (noun) – shortfall, deficiency, shortage, lack, failure.
- ❖ **bean counting** (noun) – concerning only with number/figures/statistics. (A bean counter is usually an accountant or someone who focuses on figures, statistics and spreadsheets, rather than the bigger picture).
- ❖ **inferior** (adjective) – lower in status, lower in quality, lesser, minor.
- ❖ **offset** (verb) – even up, counterbalance, equalize, neutralize; make amends for, compensate for.
- ❖ **dampen** (verb) – decrease, diminish/lessen, reduce.
- ❖ **Euro-Atlantic** (adjective) – encompassing all of Europe, Central Asia, and North America.
- ❖ **Quad/Quadrilateral** (noun) – The 'Quadrilateral' is described as four democracies (the United States, Japan, Australia and India) with a shared objective to ensure and support a "free, open and prosperous" Indo-Pacific region.
- ❖ **maritime** (adjective) – of or related to the sea.
- ❖ **pre-existing** (adjective) – previous, earlier/prior foregoing/preceding.
- ❖ **slowdown** (noun) – economic decline, recession, slump/depression.
- ❖ **foreseeable** (adjective) – unsurprising, predictable, expected, anticipated reasonably.
- ❖ **bound to** (adjective) – certain, sure, very likely, guaranteed.
- ❖ **take a back seat** (phrase) – take a less important role.
- ❖ **dissonance** (noun) – incongruity, disagreement, disparity, discrepancy, contradiction.
- ❖ **elite** (noun) – high society people; the group of most powerful people in a society.
- ❖ **unison** (noun) – simultaneously, at the same time, at once, together.
- ❖ **lasting** (adjective) – long-lasting, long-term, permanent.
- ❖ **implications** (noun) – consequence/outcome, ramification, repercussion.
- ❖ **put in place** (phrase) – initiate, usher in, bring in.
- ❖ **born out of** (phrase) – happening as the result of something.