Squaring off again in the Himalayan heights

Beijing seems to have taken the Modi prescription of 2014, of 'inch towards miles', rather literally on the disputed border

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The winter is setting in in the icy cold deserts of Ladakh and there is no respite for In- dian and Chinese soldiers who will remain deployed against each other. Even if it is a period of calm at the tactical level, the raged atmosphere, low temperatures and high altitude take their toll on both men and materiel. In the last 10 months, the Chinese Western Theatre Command has seen four commanders, two of them – Generals Zhang Xudong and Xu Qiling, both 'rising stars' of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) – moved out for serious health issues.

An aggressive focus on India

This ought to have raised wider concerns in the PLA about the health and well-being of its men in the theatre, leading to quick de- induction of its forces from eastern Ladakh. However, going by the ob- stinate Chinese stance in recent weeks, the PLA seems singularly uninterested in ending the pro- longed deployment. The verbal at- tacks have been matched by massive infrastructure construction, induction of a large quantity of modern equipment, and a sharp increase in the number of military exercises directed towards India. These actions are not limited to Ladakh but have also been initiated in the middle and eastern sec- tors of the 3,488-kilometre long Line of Actual Control (LAC).

PLA incursion into Barahoti in Uttarakhand in August was a sig- nificant pointer to the renewed tension. Even though Barahoti is a disputed area between the two sides, it has been a demilitarised zone. No per- sons in uniform enter the area.

This was violated when PLA sol- diers came deep into Indian terri- tory in uniform and damaged some infrastructure. The forays of Chinese patrols in Arunachal Pra- desh have also increased in fre- quency and duration, denoting the PLA’s intention to keep the In- dian military under pressure. Such hostility carries the risk of trigger- ing an unintended escalation, as was the case after 200 PLA sol- diers were stopped by an Indian patrol in Arunachal Pradesh’s Ta- wang earlier this month.

Western scholars with Chinese connections point to two major drivers for the PLA’s aggressive ap- proach against India. The first is its institutional interest as the ‘army of the revolution’ which is now los- ing its primacy to the PLA Air Force and PLA Navy when it comes to Taiwan or the South Chi- na Sea. With China having re- solved its boundary disputes with most countries, the only major ad- versary available for the PLA to reassert its importance is India. Even under President Xi Jinping, the PLA remains a major actor in the Chinese political system and can promote actions that further its institutional interests.

The second driver is the PLA’s view that the Indian military has been registering a greater pre- sence on ‘Chinese territory’ in the border areas in the last 10-12 years. After the United Progressive Alliance government decided to build infrastructure and raise ad- ditional forces for the China bor- der, a larger number of Indian pa- trols have been going more frequently into areas which they would rarely, if ever, visit. The Doklam stand-off of 2017, when In- dian soldiers walked onto Bhutan- ese territory claimed by China, was a turning point in the PLA’s appreciation of Indian designs, reinforcing its apprehensions about territorial losses. Western scholars say that there is a strong constituency in the PLA that wants to put India in its place, evolving an eerie parallel to the discourse in Mao’s China after 1959.

New Delhi’s response

In response to the PLA’s actions on the LAC, the Indian military has also induced more modern military platforms and systems on the Chi- na border which has been backed by infrastructure construction. Despite these accretions, the quantitative and qualitative asymm- etry with the Chinese has widened in the past 20 months. Senior In- dian commanders hope that this gap can be offset to some extent by the vast operational experience of Indian troops in hostile climactic and terrain conditions but recog- nise the very formidable nature of Chinese challenge.

The Indian military always maintained a defensive deterrence against the PLA which worked for nearly three decades before break- ing down completely in 2020. The new troop deployments and equipment inductions, along with infrastructure creation – show- cased extensively to the Indian media – are trying to reconstruct that deterrence. India’s advantage in dissuading a major military con- flict with China is that as a lesser power, it has to only deny an out- right military victory to the PLA for the top Chinese leadership to lose face. China will al- ready be an embarrassing situation and that reconstructed deterrent will work for India but a lot will de- pend on factors that are beyond the remit of the Indian military.

Impact on modernisation

The foremost amongst them is the sharp decline in the Indian econo- my after demonetisation, further battered by the Government’s poor handling of the novel corona- virus pandemic. It means that New Delhi is unable to generate enough resources for military modernisa- tion. Ashley Tellis had calculated in 2016 that the Indian Air Force (IAF) would need about 60 fighter jet squadrons by 2020 for a serious two-front threat from China and Pakistan but it is down to 30 and los- ing numbers sharply. The Indian Navy Chief’s pleas for another air- craft carrier have been rebuffed by want of funds. The parliamen- tary standing committee on de- fence has repeatedly warned about the abnormally high share of vintage equipment in the Indian Army’s profile. So rapidly is the technological asymmetry with the PLA increasing, that in a few years it is feared that India and China will be fighting two different gen- erations of war.

The second factor is the increas- ingly divisive majoritarian politics practised by the ruling party that has left India vulnerable. The rul- ing ideology has also held captive the country’s foreign policy in the neighbourhood, adversely affect- ing Indian interests. The United Arab Emirates-brokered back- channel deal with Pakistan fell through apparently because of New Delhi’s policies in Kashmir, reactivating the challenge of a two- front collusive military threat. The ceasefire on the Line of Control is barely holding up, with infiltration from the Pakistani side adding to the local Kashmiri youth will to pick up the gun, opening another half-front for the military. The re- cent fracas with Bangladesh on the treatment of religious minorities or the ongoing turmoil over the in- flux of Myanmar refugees in Mizo- ram has left India, internally unba- lanced, weaker in the region to deal with China. The third is the geopolitics arising out of the great power competition in the Indo- Pacific. Many strategic commenta- tors in India had pinned their hopes on the external rebalancing via the Quad (India, the United States, Australia, Japan) but the grouping does not have a ‘hard power’ agenda yet. That role of the Quad will also mean that the AUKUS (the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States). Closer ties between Washington DC and New Delhi, short of an al- liance, leave the questions of ac- tual support during a Sino-India military crisis unanswered. With the Chinese border assertions, is it now that India needs the U.S. more than the U.S. needs India?

The executive’s shadow

Finally, the lack of institutional checks and balances on the politi- cal executive, which imposes an even bigger cost in decision-mak- ing on national security issues. In the Ladakh border crisis, the Gov- ernment and its supporters were in denial about the Chinese ingress into Indian territory for months, including the Prime Minister’s statements that no such incursion had occurred. Indian territory. Use of euphe- misms like ‘friction points’ for places of Chinese ingress or the re- moval of an official report about Chinese presence across the LAC from the Defence Ministry’s web- site or non-acknowledgement of Indian soldiers in Chinese captivi- ty after the Galwan clash have been done to evade political ac- countability. Parliament has not been allowed to ask questions or seek clarifications; nor has the par- liamentary standing committee deliberated upon the issue. Large sections of Indian media have been complicit in this cover up, keeping the public in the dark and blocking the feedback loop that keeps democratic governments honest and responsive. The costs and consequences of a govern- ment taking decisions after buying its own spin on national security issues will be inconceivable for India.

Looking ahead

The amplitude of New Delhi’s stance on the Sino-India border crisis in the last 20 months has oscil- lated between denial and blus- ter. Dimming the oscillations, New Delhi’s averted aim is to re- store the status quo on the LAC in Ladakh that existed before May 2020. That has not happened so far. In areas of disengagement, a new status quo has been created which curtails Indian patrolling rights while the PLA remains en- sconced on Indian territory in Depsang, Hot Springs and Dem- chok. Having publicly rebuffed Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s 2015 offer to delineate the LAC, Beijing seems to have taken his 2024 prescription of ‘inch towards miles’ rather literally on the dis- puted border. India now has no choice but to be prepared for all eventualities on the Sino-India border.

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