The road from Galwan, a year later

China is now in a different league, competing with the U.S., and New Delhi faces the task of living with an uneasy calm

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On June 15 last year, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) witnessed its first deaths after 1975 when 20 Indian soldiers were killed by China at at least four soldiers of China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) died in a violent clash in Galwan in Ladakh. An Indian news report (https://bit.ly/3w6Ehff) mentioned that around 50 Indian soldiers had been taken captive by the PLA during the clash and released in batches over three days. Although both countries have given courtesy awards to the fallen soldiers, details about the violent incident have not been officially made public so far.

Political accountability

This is in keeping with the broader approach of the Indian Government where no official briefing or press conference about the situation in Ladakh has taken place in the last 11 months. The Indian press in Parliament were monologues with no questions allowed from other representatives of the party. The external security, but the actual reason was to avoid political embarrassment for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the Galwan clash, Mr. Modi addressed an all-party meet where he unequivocally stated, “Na koi wahan hamari seema mein ghunghataya hain, na hai hamari koi pas dup kar ke kaise mein hain.” (No one has intruded and nor is anyone intruding, nor has anything been captured by someone). A huge public outcry led to an official clarification by the Prime Minister’s Office which said the military council is the Chinese control of Depsang Plains. With official sources trying to palm it off as a legacy issue, despite evidence to the contrary from many retired military officers, the Indian Army has only weakened its negotiating position during the talks with the PLA. In any case, there has been no progress in talks after the disengagement at Pangong lake and Kailash range in February.

Outside of Ladakh, the Indian Army remains in an alert mode all along the LAC to prevent any Chinese misadventure. The biggest change has been its reorientation of certain forces from Pakistan border towards the India border. The basis of this shift was articulated by the Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat when he recently said that India is a bigger security threat for India than Pakistan. The LAC crisis has also exposed India’s military weakness to tackle a colossal threat from India and Pakistan. To avoid such an eventuality, the Government opened back channel talks with Pakistan which led to the reiteration of the ceasefire on the Line of Control.

Military situation

The current situation is not militarily precarious in Ladakh. With a continued deployment of 30,000 to 40,000 troops, the Indian Army has been able to hold the line to prevent any further ingress by the PLA. The Chinese presence on the Indian side of the LAC in Gurla Mandhata, Chang Tang, has been a significant change from the PLA in the discussions. The Chinese have not been able to maintain their positions. The Chinese presence on the Indian side of the LAC in Gurla Mandhata, Chang Tang, has been a significant change from the PLA in the discussions. The Chinese have not been able to maintain their positions.

External rebalancing

The Ladakh crisis has also led the Indian Government to look for external partnerships, particularly with the United States. After his meeting with the American Secretary of Defense, the US has significantly reduced its military presence in the region, but senior Indian military officials have earlier spoken of the intelligence and logistics support provided to the Indian forces in Ladakh, while the Indian military has sought to learn from the American experience of implementing the Multi Domain Operations (MDO) doctrine to wage a war of the future against a technologically superior PL.

That China is a larger neighbour, which has got a better force, better technology, was acknowledged by General Rawat recently, to argue that India will “obviously prepare if a larger neighbour”. The military importance of the Quad remains most, with India reportedly refusing to do joint naval patrolling with the U.S. in the South China Sea; the treaty allies of the U.S., Japan and Australia, also refused. Moreover, India’s focus on its land borders and the limited resources for military modernization in a period of economic decline impinge on its maritime ambitions in the Indo-Pacific.

Balancing act

Despite this, India has tried to tackle this via a series of multilateral steps. Beijing and Shanghai have discussed the Quad over the issue of the South China Sea, and the two plans could be in line with their desire to not be repressed by China. India and Beijing will have a significant impact on the future of global geopolitics.

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