



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG POLICY BRIEF

Lessons from Ladakh and the Way Forward

Author

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Indian T-90 Tanks deployed along the LAC in Ladakh. Source: hindustantimes.com

The Quad Foreign Ministers meeting in Tokyo on October 6, 2020. Source: Ministry of External Affairs.

Air Maintenance in the Ladakh Sector (Source: Indian Air Force -Facebook)

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Lessons from Ladakh and the Way Forward

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Introduction

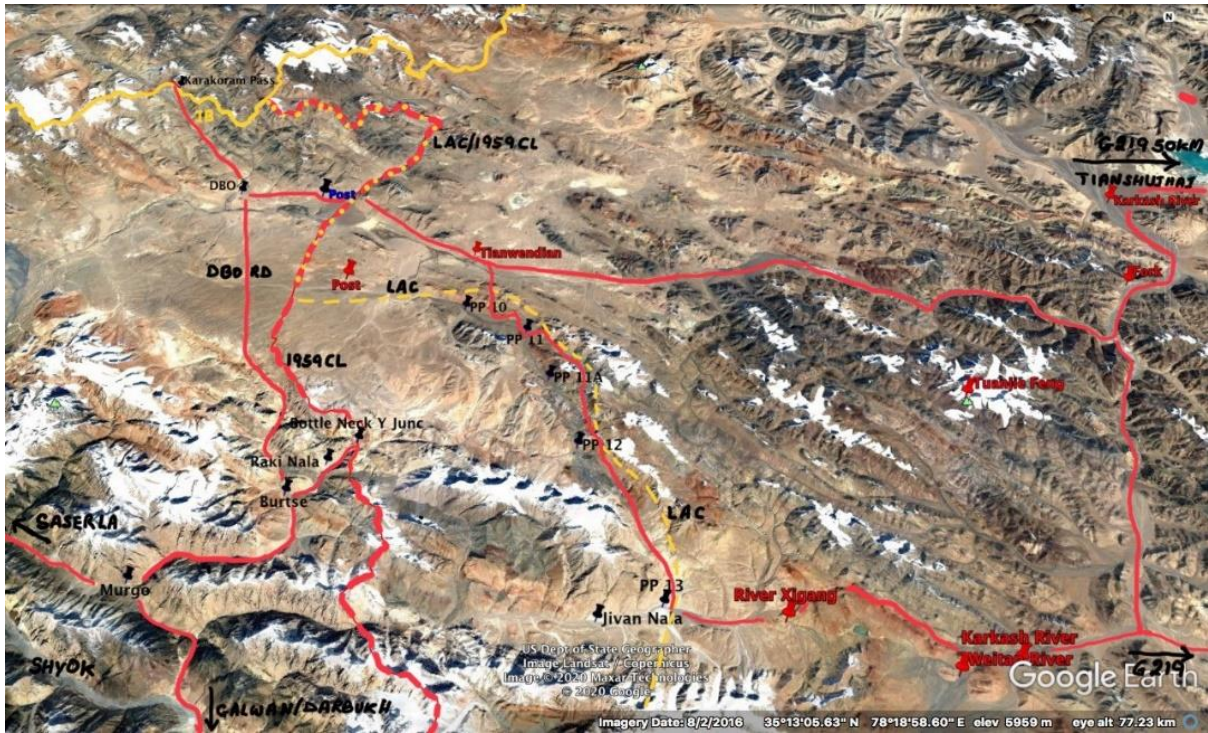
Nearly 50,000 heavily armed Indian and Chinese PLA troops face each other over the contested "Line of Actual Control", unsure whether the coming days will bring more chill or a thaw in the six-month long standoff which could become a permanently contested militarised zone. In a web of realigned military positions, Indian troops continue to hold dominating heights (at around 16000 ft) on the Kailash Range, dominating the south bank of Pangong Tso (Map 1), including the PLA camp at Moldo (which has been the site of border meetings) and the road eastwards to Rudok providing access to the Tibet-Xinjiang highway.



Map 1, showing the area of Pangong Tso and the Chushul sector to its south. The green line marks the LAC.

Source: Google Earth, with annotations by Lt. Gen. H.S. Panag (Retd.).

Similarly, PLA troops continue to dominate and deny Indian troops access to Patrol Points (PP) 9 to 13 (close to the LAC) in Depsang (Map 2) as also Fingers 5 to 8 along the north bank of Pangong Tso (Map 1). The reality is that even as both sides have made some gains, neither can claim an overwhelming tactical and operational advantage to drive home a victor's bargain.



Map 2, showing the location of Indian Patrolling Points along the LAC in the Depsang area. Source: Google Earth, with annotations by Lt. Gen. H.S. Panag (Retd.).



Indian T-90 Tanks deployed along the LAC in Ladakh. Source: hindustantimes.com

Importantly, the “battlefields” differ from “balance sheets” in that it is not the arithmetic of the “square kilometres” lost or gained but it is the significance of the territory captured or dominated that carries strategic meaning. Whereas the

reasons for China's aggression have been speculated at length, India's response to the pre-mediated Chinese intrusions has been that PLA forces cannot expect a "free-run" along the borders with India. Today, the Indian military deployment and capability is adequate to prevent a repeat of 1962.

Indian forces have developed considerable capability for super high-altitude conditions obtaining in Ladakh, which have been honed by years of operational experience. The limitations of winter isolation have largely been overcome through enhanced strategic airlift capability and a well-developed system of winter stocking in this sector, which includes the Siachen Glacier. India also continues to move ahead with developing 24 x 7 connectivity through a network of roads and tunnels, the recently inaugurated Rohtang Tunnel being one such example.

India has clearly indicated its resolve to maintain its present deployment and posture through the winter, whatever be the physical attrition or the economic costs.



IAF Chinook on air maintenance sortie in Ladakh.
 Source: ourbitcoinnews.com



A 155mm FH-77B Artillery gun in action.
 Source: defencestar.in

Possible Trends for De-escalation

The joint statements issued following the meeting of Foreign Ministers¹ in Moscow on September 10, 2020 and after seven rounds of talks between the Senior Commanders², though not suggestive of any concrete resolution, are

¹ Joint Press Statement - Meeting of External Affairs Minister and the Foreign Minister of China (September 10, 2020). September 10, 2020. https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32962/Joint_Press_Statement__Meeting_of_External_Affairs_Minister_and_the_Foreign_Minister_of_China_September_10_2020

² Joint Press Release of the 6th round of Senior Commanders' Meeting between India and China September 22, 2020. <https://www.eoibeijing.gov.in/pdf/Joint%20Press%20Release%20of%20the%206th%20round>

indicative of intent on both sides to de-escalate the situation. Notably, the military commanders "agreed to stop sending more troops to the frontline, refrain from unilaterally changing the situation on the ground, and avoid taking any actions that may complicate the situation".

With agreement on not inducting additional troops, a critical issue is the combat potential of troops already present in the Ladakh Sector. In this context, an Indian strategic analyst has observed that "the 40,000 or so troops mustered by PLA, with supporting weapons and equipment, is a number too small to take Ladakh, and too large to win a border skirmish"³. In other words, the available Chinese force levels are inadequate to carry out any credible offensives in the high altitudes of Ladakh, just prior to the onset of winter, that can materially change the facts on the ground. Thus, it is in the interest of both sides to avoid physical attrition and economic cost of winter deployment of troops and to defuse the situation through disengagement on mutually acceptable terms.

From Agreements to Ground Implementation

Even as we continue to explore prospects for such agreements, these must be based on careful politico-military considerations that are pragmatic, sustainable, politically acceptable and militarily implementable. The operative parts of the Joint Press Statement of the two foreign ministers issued on September 10, 2020 are: "...border troops of both sides should continue their dialogue, quickly disengage, maintain proper distance and ease tensions"; and "...abide by all the existing agreements and protocols on China- India boundary affairs, maintain peace and tranquillity...". The challenge for the military commanders is to translate this intent on the ground in a surcharged environment.

The reality is that following the PLA's transgressions, there is little or no mutual trust between the two sides. All agreements and Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) arrived at from 1993 to 2013⁴ stand undermined. This implies there are

²of%20

Senior%20Commanders%E2%80%99%20Meeting%20between%20India%20and%20China.pdf

³ Menon Raja Admiral. A new strategy, combining diplomatic and military means, is needed to counter Beijing. The Indian Express. September 17, 2020.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-china-border-dispute-galwan-valley-ladakh-6598913/>

⁴ Revisiting Sino-Indian Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) On the Eve of 60th Anniversary of Panchsheel. July 5, 2014. Chennai Centre for China Studies.

<https://www.c3sindia.org/archives/revisiting-sino-indian-confidence-building-measures-cbms-on-the-eve-of-60th-anniversary-of-panchsheel/>

no reference points; all arrangements need to be verified on the ground and through the ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) means.

This requires India to redefine its overall approach towards China, where the boundary issue assumes centrality in bilateral relations, with border delineation and demarcation becoming fundamental to re-establishing and transacting amicable relations. As the two sides negotiate ways to defuse the situation, there are certain operational imperatives which India must consider seriously:

- The continued “physical holding” and domination of the Kailash Range heights on the Indian side of the LAC, in the Chushul sector, should be beyond compromise.
- Restoration of patrolling up to the designated Patrolling Points in the proximity of the LAC in the Depsang plains must be an imperative.
- The nebulous concept of “buffer-zones”, in the context of “disengagement” and “maintaining proper distance”, is fraught with the danger of misinterpretation and being breached. This requires serious re-consideration.
- Continued development of border infrastructure, which has become a serious bone of contention, is an operational necessity for India and beyond the scope of any compromise. The prevailing infrastructural differential requires to be narrowed in the interest of “mutual and equal security”. Any moratorium on this must remain unacceptable.

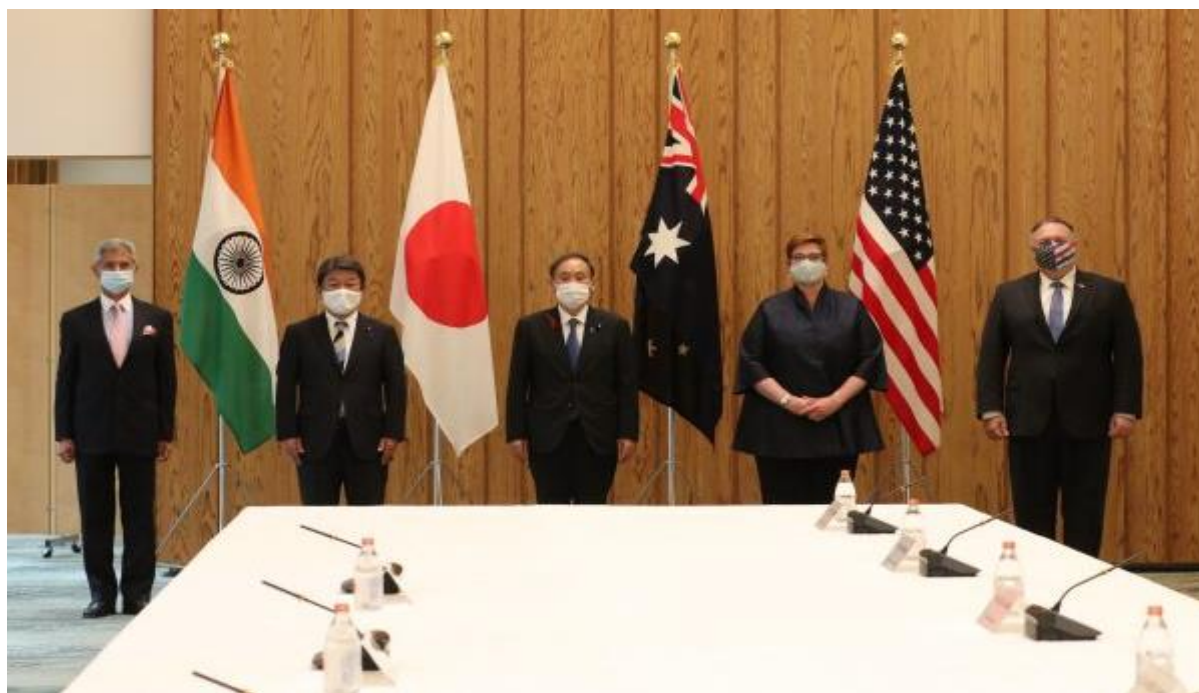
The Chinese Perspective

China falsely claims that the PLA's actions along the LAC are merely a response to India's continuous “encroachment” into Chinese territory and changing facts on the ground through an aggressive infrastructure build-up. It also blames the Indian Army for the violent face-off at Galwan. In its perception, “emboldened” by growing closeness to the United States, India is drifting towards a “de facto alliance”, thereby reducing Beijing's incentives to preserve ties with India⁵. The prevailing discourse in China alludes to “teaching India a firm lesson and giving a fierce response”; there is growing belief that India-China relations hold no great prospect in the current security environment, ruling out an early border settlement.

⁵ Krishnan Ananth. As ties with India plunge, Chinese scholar calls for hard-line ‘reset’. The Hindu. September 26, 2020. Quoting Liu Zongyi, a scholar at the Shanghai Institute of International Studies (SIIS) and fellow at the Renmin University in Beijing. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/as-ties-with-india-plunge-chinese-scholar-calls-for-hard-line-reset/article32703629.ece>

With this mindset, China's policy makers apparently believe that it is important to keep India strategically off-balance through coercive intimidation. Hence, the boundary dispute is "too valuable an instrument for China's coercive diplomacy to give up"⁶, unless India completely subscribes to China's world view and conforms to Chinese expectations⁷.

One might expect that amidst growing geopolitical competition with the US, China might temper its aspirations. The "not so glorious" performance of the PLA in Ladakh except in initial surprise actions, coupled with a firm Indian response, has limited China's operational options. In the prevailing environment, it might be prudent for the Chinese leadership to acknowledge ground realities and defuse the current standoff, setting the stage for a settlement of boundary dispute.



The Quad Foreign Ministers meeting in Tokyo on October 6, 2020.

Source: Ministry of External Affairs.

The "De-escalation Ladder"

All conflicts are prone to de-escalation or significant transformation if the costs of escalation are deemed by the aggressor as both militarily and politically high and not commensurate with the perceived gains. In the evolving situation, it is

⁶ Kalha Ranjit Singh. India – China Boundary Issue. Indian Council of World Affairs. Pentagon Press, New Delhi. 2014. Pg.250

⁷ Ibid.

clear that any significant escalation will be cost-prohibitive in men and material and strategically unfavourable for China.

With the five-point agreement between the foreign ministers on September 10 providing a starting point, a four-step de-escalation ladder could be as follows:

- (i) **Defuse the Standoff** (through disengagement and de-escalation, with or without de-induction).
- (ii) **Review Rules of Engagement and Border Tranquillity Measures** (taking cognisance of the mistrust now sown).
- (iii) **Boundary delineation leading to boundary demarcation.**
- (iv) **Review of Trade and Economic Relations and Other Bilateral Issues**

Defusing the Standoff

Given that in the present standoff no side can impose its military will, nor does the situation allow for an all-out conflict, as a first step it would be best to accept the reality by agreeing to disengage. Frontline troops deployed dangerously close to each other need to disengage, with a clearly demarcated line between them. This would be without prejudice to each side's claim or stated position on the boundary. Critical conditions on the Indian side would be retention of deployments on the Kailash Range, restoration of patrolling up to designated points in Depsang, uninterrupted movement along the DS-DBO (Darbukh-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie) Road, and unhindered utilization of the DBO landing ground. The Chinese side could be assured that India will not obstruct the G 219 Highway, cross the Karakoram Pass, or threaten the PLA camp at Moldo and the road to Rudok opposite the Chushul Sector. Verification mechanisms would concurrently be required to be drawn up. Unequivocal military commitments by senior military commanders on the ground, pending political and diplomatic negotiation of the boundary question, can help defuse the current volatile situation.

With the level of mistrust that prevails and considering difficulties of terrain on the Indian side, it would not be prudent to de-induct Indian troops across the Ladakh Range, particularly the mechanised forces and artillery. Similarly, attack helicopters and UAVs will need to remain operationally deployed against any surprise offensive. Should the PLA desire to retain a similar deployment profile, this should be acceptable. The infantry deployments on mountain tops could be mutually thinned out by both sides, without vacating vital areas. The idea must be to ease eyeball to eyeball confrontation and mitigate logistical constraints of both sides.

To those concerned about the LOCisation of the LAC, the answer would be that there definitely is a requirement of retention of inducted troops in the winter-isolated Ladakh Sector. The deployment pattern should, however, be terrain specific.

Concurrently, in the depth areas, high levels of air, ABM and cyber defences must be maintained, along with the readiness of strategic assets. This would be an assurance against any unforeseen contingency. Dedicated strategic airlift and strong operational logistics capabilities are essential to sustain a firm ground posture.



Air Maintenance in the Ladakh Sector. Source: Indian Air Force - Facebook

Review of Rules of Engagement and Border Tranquillity Measures

The border agreements and confidence-building measures (CBMs) in the military field along the India-China border areas were based on the premise that maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the LAC is in the fundamental interest of the two countries and will contribute to the ultimate resolution of the boundary question. They also affirmed that neither side shall use/threaten to use force, or seek unilateral military superiority. These existing agreements and protocols now stand completely compromised and negated. There would thus be a requirement to redefine the norms of border management and lay down revised rules of engagement to be followed along the LAC (or the line adopted for defusing the border standoff). Violation of these norms should be made subject to punitive retaliation, as would be expected along a live border.

Boundary Delineation

Despite 22 rounds of boundary talks between the Special Representatives of the two countries, the LAC remains unclarified and undefined. In fact, the areas under dispute have been increasing and the ambiguous boundary has become a recurring flashpoint – and a tool for China to keep asserting its ever-expanding claims. The Chinese rhetoric of core interests, which first appeared in its diplomatic discourse around in the context of Taiwan in 2003-2004, is becoming shriller and is most pronounced in the domain of territorial claims.

For far too long, the narratives of keeping the boundary question separate from developing other facets of the relationship, not allowing differences to become disputes, of India and China sharing long-term strategic relations and the need to look at the “big-picture”, have lulled us into the temptation of seeking short-term fixes to what are in fact bilateral disputes. The current and unprecedented Chinese transgression needs to be seen as a watershed moment, where the fundamental dichotomies in the relationship must be addressed in the best interest of long-term relations. Settlement of the boundary question must become fundamental to the normalisation of bilateral relations.

Action needs to be initiated expeditiously to exchange marked maps of all sectors and to spell out each side’s perception of the LAC/boundary. Thereafter, the boundary negotiations can be held under political guidance, in the spirit of mutual understanding and accommodation and in keeping with agreed parameters. While the boundary delineation should be undertaken in a stipulated early time frame, demarcation can follow over a longer period of time. Understandably, this is an ideal construct, which is predicated entirely on China’s willingness to resolve the boundary question.

Review of Trade and Economic Relations and Other Bilateral Issues

Since the LAC standoff began in early May 2020, India has responded to Chinese aggression by counter-escalation in multiple domains. Besides the military mobilisation in the Ladakh Sector, actions were taken to ban Chinese digital applications, restrictions were imposed on Chinese companies participating in infrastructure projects, greater scrutiny of Chinese investments was instituted and further actions are in hand for calibrated economic decoupling from China, including through alternative and resilient supply chains.

A detailed analysis of measures to reduce economic dependency on China needs to be carried out, in consonance with actions in the military and diplomatic fields. This aspect, however, is beyond the scope of the paper.

Strategic Partnerships

The Ladakh stand-off, coming at a time when India is facing the twin challenges of a raging COVID-19 pandemic and a stressed economy, has highlighted the necessity of India strengthening its strategic partnerships with the US and other like-minded regional powers. This process must continue and gather momentum, despite China's admonitions and threats of "tangled ties" if India leans towards the US.

In the context of the Quad, China is attempting to create a narrative that the grouping is targeting the interests of a third party (implying China). In reality, the Quad has continued to make headway precisely because of China's assertions for regional dominance. India must continue to stand firm along the borders while augmenting its overall power and regional balance in consonance with its strategic partners.

Defence Capability

China's border challenge in Ladakh has highlighted the necessity of defence capability development for a multi-domain, two-front threat. The cost inherent in building this capability has to be paid by the nation. We must also be prepared for long-term deployments of Indian troops along all critical segments of the India-China border until the boundary issue is finally resolved.

Conclusion

Chinese aggression along the LAC is a watershed moment which must fundamentally change the manner in which India transacts relations with China. Our experience of decades has shown that China understands the language of power and defers only to power. We must stand resolute along our borders and pursue the build-up of comprehensive national power with an all-of-nation effort to create prospects of lasting stability in our relations with an assertive and expansionist power.



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