



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

India Has Few Options to Thwart Chinese Aggression

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,773, October 12, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Despite military and political parleys between India and China to reach an understanding on their border dispute, the situation is careening toward a flashpoint. An estimated 50,000 Chinese PLA troops now control a combined area of about 1,000 square kilometers in India's eastern Ladakh. India has few options with which to confront China's unilateral redrawing of the LAC.

In what is the most serious dispute between India and China since they went to war in 1962, over 50,000 Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers have breached the *de facto* border called the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to overrun numerous strategic areas in India's eastern Ladakh.

The situation is growing increasingly dangerous. Indian intelligence estimates that through its sustained push, China now controls a combined area of about 1,000 square kilometers in this border region. Beijing has thus unilaterally redrawn the LAC.

China's military offensive in Ladakh is not merely tactical, but has the strategic object of realizing specific long-term objectives. The PLA's moves are, after all, being directed by the top leadership: the Central Military Commission (CMC), which is chaired by Chinese president Xi Jinping.

Chinese Han culture is goal-oriented. Its military might well believe that if it invades a territory at will and meets little resistance, it is under no obligation to retreat on request.

India's fears that the Chinese would not retreat were quickly proved justified. Reports emerged of PLA troops laying optical fiber cable in areas they had

occupied. Such a network will facilitate secure lines of communication between forward troops and bases in the rear, as well as enable data transfer of images and documents.

On top of the worrying situation in Ladakh, there are apprehensions that China might open another front in India's eastern sector. Beijing has long claimed the entire 83,743 square kilometer area of Arunachal Pradesh, which it calls "South Tibet." Ladakh is on the western fringe of the 3,488 km LAC that divides the two nuclear powers; Arunachal lies to the east.

China's adventurism in India might be explained by its pique at Delhi's completion last year of the 255 kilometer Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) road, which improved connectivity along the 1,147 kilometer LAC in eastern Ladakh. The carriageway leads to the world's highest airstrip and to India's military base at DBO, which is just 12 kilometers south of the strategic Karakoram Pass. A mere seven kilometers north is the post of Shenxianwan, considered the toughest PLA posting in China.

China, in turn, has built a 36 kilometer road in the 5,163 square kilometer Shaksgam Valley, which was illegally ceded to it by Pakistan in 1963 despite the fact that India disputed its claim to the territory. New Delhi believes Beijing will link the G-219 Lhasa-Kashgar highway to the Karakoram Pass through the Shaksgam Pass, and use that link to pressure DBO from the north. Karakoram Pass lies to the north of the 38,850 square kilometer, high-altitude desert of Aksai Chin, which China appropriated from India in the 1962 war. India still claims Aksai Chin as part of Ladakh.

China was also provoked by Indian home minister Amit Shah's statement in Parliament a year ago, soon after the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A of the Constitution that ended special status for Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). "I want to make it absolutely clear that every single time we say Jammu and Kashmir, it includes Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), including Gilgit-Baltistan, as well as Aksai Chin," he said. "Let there be no doubt about it: the entire J&K is an integral part of the Union of India."

Gilgit-Baltistan in PoK connects to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is being financed through a \$60 billion Chinese investment. India says the CPEC violates its territorial sovereignty as it passes through the disputed Gilgit-Baltistan.

From Beijing's perspective, any Indian attempt to take over PoK or Gilgit-Baltistan would undermine the CPEC. This is unacceptable because President Xi has staked his personal prestige on the initiative, which is

intended to provide China access to the Indian Ocean through Pakistan's Gwadar Port.

China's aggression was clearly timed to extend into the harsh six-month winter that sets in in October in this desolate high-altitude border region. Temperatures can plummet to -35 degrees Celsius, with wind chill adding another -10 degrees, testing the limits of human endurance. Beijing will presumably advocate for maintaining the status quo on the grounds of the severe cold, which will impede mobility and impair logistics. When the snow melts in the spring, Beijing will be able to cite other challenges to movement.

Indian citizens have been looking to their leadership to lift the threat of war. Many are frustrated that while the government unhesitatingly pursues dissidents and political opponents by branding them "anti-national" and "seditious," it sidesteps confrontation with external aggressors. Delhi has offered no resolute response even as a vast territory of the country stands forfeited and its battle-scarred soldiers are killed and maimed. India is being outmaneuvered militarily, diplomatically, and politically by China, which appears to be striking almost at will.

In what was either a grievous misreading of the threat of war or an astute ploy to disarm the Chinese, PM Narendra Modi appeared on television—four days after 20 Indian soldiers were killed and as the nation awaited information on developments—and flatly denied that an invasion had taken place or that any Indian posts had been violated. As he has done consistently throughout the crisis, he avoided mentioning China by name.

There were concerns that Modi's denials had the effect of emboldening the occupying force and demoralizing the Indian troops battling the PLA. If no infiltration occurred, then how—and more importantly, why—had the clashes occurred? Is there an implication that the territory where the clashes occurred is neither disputed nor India's, but China's? Should it be inferred that it was Indian troops who breached the LAC, provoking a Chinese reprisal?

In the ongoing military-level talks, Beijing has leveraged the PM's stance to not only consistently deny any Chinese invasion but to accuse the Indian side of provocation.

It is increasingly felt that the border conflict could have been defused in the initial stages if the PM had reached out to President Xi. The questions that arise are whether Modi lacks such access, or does not enjoy the confidence of the Chinese hierarchy, or if there is a communication gap between the two leaders that impedes agreement.

India's options are limited. A counterattack to evict the PLA could spark a war that neither country, especially India, can afford. India is severely maladministered, and has officially entered a recessionary phase. Its COVID-ravaged economy has shrunk by 23.9%, the worst collapse worldwide.

India still has the option of taking the issue of China's unwarranted aggression to the UN, as Article 35 of the UN Charter allows any member state to bring any dispute to the attention of the Security Council or the General Assembly.

India cannot look to any country to intervene militarily against China on its behalf in the event of an outbreak of hostilities. The country will have to fend for itself.

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