

EVALUATING INDIA-CHINA TACTICAL MILITARY STANDOFF THROUGH STRATEGIC LENS

*Dr. Ahmed Saeed Minhas, Dr. Farhat Konain Shujahi and Dr. Raja Qaiser Ahmed**

Abstract

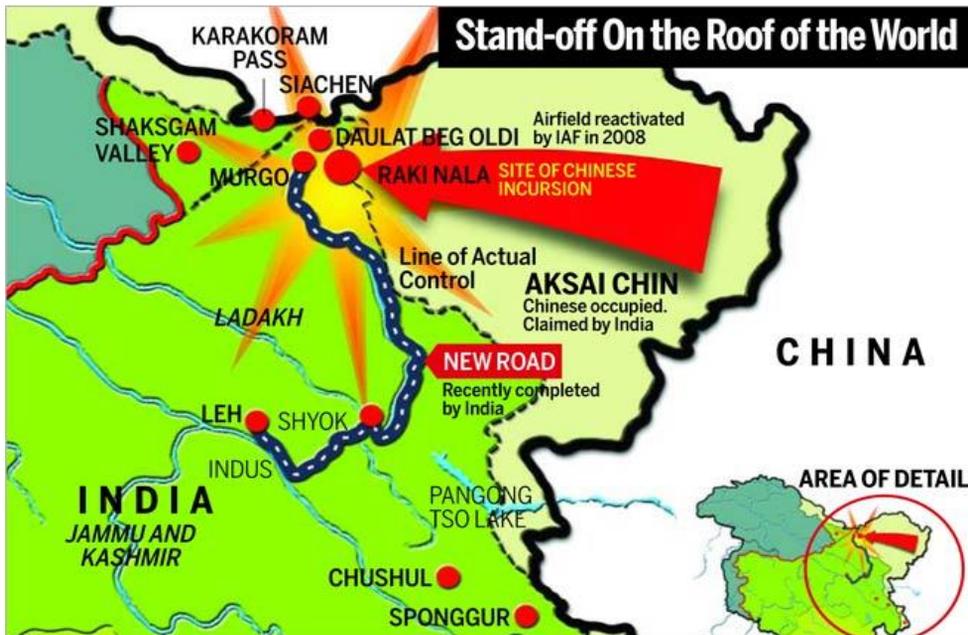
India and China are two big neighbours by all respects, may it be geography, military might, natural resources, leading international engagements, armed forces in terms of quality, aspirations for global dominance, vibrant economy, plausible market and above all nuclear weapons states. India since its inception has not been under normal strategic relations with China. The international border between India and China has yet to be formalized and thus still termed as Line of Actual Control (LAC). In May 2020, the two sides had a face-off in Ladakh area having potential of spiralling up to uncontrollable limits, if not immediately, in future for sure. India under its hardliner nationalist political leadership is looking for regional hegemony with due American political, military and diplomatic support. India by strengthening its military infrastructure at Ladakh in Western Indian Held Kashmir (IHK) is suspected to build a jump-off point to check China-Pakistan Economic Corridor moving through Pakistani Gilgit Baltistan (GB) area. The tactical level Indo-China stand-off in Ladakh has strategic implications for South Asian peace and stability.

Keywords: Kashmir, Line of Actual Control (LAC), India-China Rivalry, China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and Strategic Stability.

Introduction

Indo-China bilateral relations have come to a standstill which over a period of time had remained veiled with limited face valued engagements at different levels. Although, in the past India and China had summit level meetings having main agenda of addressing territorial disputes. However, due to the mistrust and unproductive meetings, there were hardly any joint statements issued after the informal Summit level meetings.¹ The mistrust between the two states started in November 2019 when India in its newly published political map displayed Ladakh as part of Indian Union.² It got further worse when in first week of May 2020, the Chinese military dominated the road Leh-DaSulat Beg Oldi. The area is down south of Indian side of Siachen and west of Chinese controlled Aksai Chin which was taken over by China in Indo-China war of 1962.

¹Professor Dr. Ahmed Saeed Minhas is Pro-Vice Chancellor and faculty member at DHA Suffa University (DSU), Karachi, Pakistan. Dr. Farhat Konain Shujahi is Assistant Professor at Department of International Relations, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan and Dr. Raja Qaiser Ahmed is Assistant Professor at School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR), Quaid-e-Azam University (QAU), Islamabad.



Map - 1

Source: Maj Gen Shaukat, "Perceptions, Options, Strategic Objectives of India and China in Ladakh," DesPardes, June 1, 2020, <https://despardes.com/perceptions-options-strategic-objectives-india-china-ladakh/>.

The recent Indo-China face-off is happening along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between Indo-China at a height of over 14000 feet which is also synonymized as 'Roof of the World'.³ Interestingly, there have been no physical intense clashes between Indian and Chinese militaries since 1962 and in May 2020 suddenly in quick time, the things escalated from tactical military level to political and diplomatic levels along the LAC. The two sides' soldiers have camps pitched close to each other and have been doing cautionary drills as per their mutual border agreement of 1993 in which both agreed to caution each other before physical engagements. It was this agreement that Indians were building roads and other military infrastructure without any fear of Chinese intervention; however, the Indian side perhaps mixed up the thin line between Chinese strategic sensitivities and the 1993 Agreement on Peace and Tranquility.⁴

The LAC between India and China is international border spread over in three main sectors including northern (Aksai Chin, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal), central (Sikkim) and South eastern (Arunachal Pradesh). Each sector is being governed with the 'law of territory' besides acceptable international law's principles of delimitation and demarcation. India largely differs with the border alignment; however, China has been ok with status quo.⁵ India is strengthening its ground forces in these areas in terms

of long range artillery and armor. Besides strengthening the ground forces, Indian side also activated Daulat Beg Oldi airbase having significant operational value.



Map – 2

Source: "Indian Tiered Border Defence Against China," *Indian Defence Review*, Issue Vol. 29, Apr-Jun 2014. <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/tiered-border-defence-against-china/>.

The May 2020 skirmishes between Indian and Chinese troops are not new; however, the timings are of conspicuous nature and need to be understood in totality while linking it with political, diplomatic, social and military happenings at the regional and global levels. Historically, faceoff between the two armies has been of low intensity which at maximum lasted for only a few days less 2017 Doklam faceoff which took 70 days before the issue was settled.⁶ However, the May 2020 faceoff in Ladakh has been of high intensity. Chinese troops have built up unexpectedly with much more aggressiveness in their approach and it appears that China is not in a mood to leave the heights dominating the road Leh - Daulat Beg Oldi.⁷

Feeling the heat of Chinese intentions of sticking to their newly occupied heightened locations beyond the LAC i.e. West of Askai Chin area, Indian military high command has vowed to match the Chinese build-up. The words of war, albeit, not much heated especially on the Indian end, have a potential to spiral up to unacceptable limits including multiple front war 'limited or all-out' all along the LAC.⁸ The paper will dilate upon the mistrust based history of Indo-China bi-lateral relationship, strategic dynamics

behind Sino-India standoff, options available to Pakistan so as to unfold the possible scenarios in post Sino-India Ladakh Standoff era.

Strategic Side of Sino-India Tactical Level Military Build-Up in Ladakh

Indian armed forces build-up in Ladakh part of Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOK) has multi-prong purposes which do not only full fill its military orientation but also supplements its strategic ends using military means. The argument is supplemented by a recent report published by RAND Corporation titled, 'The Future of Warfare in 2030.' While analyzing the trends of likely causes of wars of future, it manifests that the US and China could fight in Asia due to multiple trends inter-alia, increasing pressure on the global trading system, Chinese rising trend, expanding strategic periphery and domestic pressure. The report also identifies that due to the US allies being in flux due to China rise, there would be new alliances coming up and the territorial disputes could provoke confrontations between India and China.⁹ The analysis by RAND Corporation makes it prudent to study the contemporary India-China faceoff using the strategic lens.

A bird eye view of the area where India is developing road infrastructure with substantial capability of bearing tanks and heavy artillery load indicates that India wants to strengthen its main supply route towards up northwest to support its deployed troops over Siachen Glacier (refer Map-1). It may be recalled that during the Kargil Conflict, Pakistani army got hold of Indian Army from their neck when they occupied the heights overseeing the Daras-Kargil Road which was the sole supply route to Indian troops over Siachen Glacier and elsewhere in IOK oriented towards North. Having learnt the lesson in terms of single supply route through the mountainous terrain of Kashmir, it could be logically perceived that the Indian military high command developed the alternate supply route by building road infrastructure far from Pakistani reach i.e. away from Line of Control and close to the Chinese LAC i.e. west of Askai Chin and south of Indian occupied part of Siachen Glacier.¹⁰

Apparently, it looks normal that Indian armed forces intended uninterrupted supply route for its deployed troops in Northern part of IOK especially in Siachen Glacier; however, it is not that simple as it appears. A critical review of the tactical orientation of Indian troops against which Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) troops reacted reveals other angles as well which have significant strategic implications for China and Pakistan in particular and South Asian region in general.

First, while the road Leh-Daulat Beg Oldi acts as supply route to the Indian troops in Northwest of IOK, it also provides an easy access to dominating heights around

Karakorum Pass to oversee the Pakistani Gilgit Baltistan (GB) areas. The subject dominance can provide Indian army with strategic leverage over Pakistan to secure GB areas as trumpeted by the Indian political leadership since October 2019. India also reprinted their political maps indicating GB and Azad Kashmir including Chinese controlled Askai Chin and Ladakh as part of Indian Union.¹¹ Against all political and diplomatic norms, Indian external affairs minister while addressing a meeting organized by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank in Washington DC, expressed Indian claim over GB stated:¹²

My sovereignty and my jurisdiction [are] laid out by my maps. My maps have been there for over 70 years. Now, that's my claim and naturally if I have a claim, as you would have a claim, as anybody would have a claim, you would hope one day that if there are territories in your claim over which you don't have physical jurisdiction, one day you will. It's as simple as that.

Hence, with such an arrogant claim and adamant attitude to get back GB from Pakistan and Askai Chin from China, sooner or later, indicates the Indian expansionist and arrogant mindset of the Hindutva ideology. Indian actions of strengthening its infrastructure duly supported by a recently activated Indian Air Force Base at Daulat Beg Oldi speaks of Indian strategic end to be met by military means of which tactical prong had been operationalized in IOK area of Ladakh.

Second, CPEC project which is known to be the flagship of Chinese One Belt One Road (OBOR) grand project passes through the Pakistani GB area, which India claims to be its part.¹³ In case India militarily gets established over Karakorum Pass and surrounding heights, it could conveniently influence CPEC road passing through the GB. Moreover, the aerial dominance through Daulat Beg Oldi Air Base makes CPEC critical choke points (bridges and tunnels) vulnerable to Indian Air Force precision air strikes due to the reduced combat radius. Indian military build-up in Ladakh also gels well with the US designs of putting a halt to the CPEC project which can give China a boost in economic terms.

Third, Chinese access to the Indian Ocean through Gwadar Port starts from Khunjab Pass in GB which is approximately 250 km from Karakorum Pass in IHK. With Indian operational level domination in adjacent heightened areas of GB, not only the CPEC road infrastructure will become vulnerable but also the other associated projects of CPEC. For instance, Pakistan's Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) and Chinese Power Yang Jiandu have signed an agreement to construct Diemer-Bhasha Dam in GB of worth Rs. 442 Billion as Joint Venture (JV) to be completed by 2028. The dam is likely to produce 4500 MW cheap hydro-electricity whose affect would trickle down to all development sectors of Pakistan besides creating numerous jobs when economy

flourishes.¹⁴ The Diamer-Bhasha Dam project would naturally increase Chinese stakes and physical presence in GB could dent Indian claim over GB. Any Indian interference with the Chinese stakes inside Pakistan could have severe reaction from the Chinese side which India would never like to confront with. Failing so, the Indian current political leadership could be put to question at domestic level for not being able to stop China-Pakistan JV in Indian claimed area of GB.¹⁵

Four, the Chinese side believes that India is planning to take back its lost territory of Askai Chin which it still claims. China has been suspicious of Indian double game wherein while bridging gaps with China, has been towing its line with the US anti-China sentiments as well. China has been skeptical of India and watches every Indian move in Ladakh area through Indian strategic interests' lens i.e. recovering Aksai Chin and other heights which China captured during 1962 Indo-China war. Chinese insecurities have many reasons to believe. For instance, India being projected as counter-weight to rising China, its claim over GB and complete Kashmir territory by projecting self-perceived Indian union territories, blatant opposition to the CPEC and OBOR project and above all hosting anti-China Tibetan government in exile.¹⁶

The US reaction to the Chinese preemptive action against the Indian military developments in Ladakh area was also a bit over-reactionary. Against the precedence of the US behavior when Pakistan-India skirmishes take place along the LOC, the US gave a strong statement against China and criticized it undiplomatically.¹⁷ "Border disputes with China -- be it in Ladakh or in the South China Sea, are a "reminder of the threat by China. The "provocations and disturbing behavior by China" pose questions about, how China seeks to use its growing power?"

Fifth, the most significant Chinese concern vis-à-vis India military infrastructure development and armed forces' build-up is linked to the territorial status of Chinese controlled Tibet region. Tibet issue will be discussed separately in detail in succeeding part; however, in nutshell it is important to know that India supports Chinese controlled Tibet's independence and prevails in the US camp which strongly voices concern against Chinese subjugation of Tibet. Having strong Indian presence close to Tibet which shares boundaries with Askai Chin is not a favorable preposition for the PLA. In case any action is taken against PLA inside Tibet by the US supported militia or else any anti-China insurgency boils up, a strong Indian Army sitting close to Askai Chin can exploit the opportunity and might cut the Chinese strategic highway (Tibet-Xinjiang) NH 219, thus making Tibet tenancy difficult for China.¹⁸ It is an out rightly unwanted scenario for China and thus she has preempted against Indian buildup.

Sixth, China also anticipates that by securing the Ladakh area and particularly the area south of Askai Chin, India would allow the US and its like-minded countries' forces to get stationed there. The landmark defence agreement of 2016 between the US and India increases the probability of the assumption, according to which the US can use Indian naval and air bases *for logistics only*.¹⁹ The reasons and opportunities could be choreographed by India for the US troops landing in the area. It is a speculation which could materialize only when India loses hope in balancing Chinese influence and in other contingency, when India feels that it might lose more chunk of territory to China south of Askai Chin, as the complete Kashmir is a disputed territory. It may be noted that China refuted Indian act of abrogating articles 370 and 35 A which finished the special status of Kashmir.²⁰

The intense war of words between Indian and Chinese political and diplomatic hierarchy back in August 2019 when Indian Parliament abrogated the two articles from its constitution, had basically paved the way for current situation along the LAC. For instance, while commenting on status of Askai Chin after abrogation of the two articles, Indian home minister Amit Shah said in Indian Lok Sabha, "Kashmir is an integral part of India, there is no doubt over it. When I talk about Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin are included in it."²¹ While the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson did not chew words to rebut Indian claim on Kashmir and stated:

China is always opposed to India's inclusion of the Chinese territory in the western sector of the China-India boundary into its administrative jurisdiction. This firm and consistent position remains unchanged. The re-organization would directly "impede China's sovereignty. Recently, India has continued to undermine China's territorial sovereignty by unilaterally changing its domestic law. Such practice is unacceptable and will not come into force."²²

Tibet Autonomous Region – Indian Perceived Strategic Respite vis-à-vis China

Before dilating upon the fact that how India finds strategic respite in Tibet's geographical location vis-à-vis China, it is prudent to comprehend Tibet issue. Geographically, Tibet is located along the western periphery of China which separates India from China. Tibet has historically been a vulnerable strategic Chinese periphery occupying almost 1/4th of total China landmass.²³

On assumption of government in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initiated the process of addressing vulnerabilities attached to Tibet periphery by deploying the PLA troops in 1950. The Chinese military's operation in Tibet led to

creation of favorable environment and from a position of strength China entered into the famous Seventeen Point Peace Agreement with Tibet. The agreement provided legal grounds to China to formally integrate Tibet under its folds and declared it as Chinese administratively integrated region titled, 'Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR)' in 1965.²⁴ The autonomous status of Tibet keeps it under debate within Chinese opposing blocks internationally, especially in India with due support of the US and its like-minded states.

During the 1962 Indo-China war, Tibet came under global attention for Chinese tough policies against Tibetan minorities. China looks at Tibet through security and strategic lenses and not through the cultural lens which Tibetan minorities desire. China believes that for security of Core, periphery has to be secured enough.²⁵ India which was not in favor of Chinese occupation of Tibet since 1949, ironically gave asylum to Dalai Lama in 1959 which Chinese side did not accept and mistrust started growing between the two neighbors.

Due to mistrust and growing skirmishes along the LAC, in October 1962 PLA invaded Ladakh and the McMahon Line in North-East region to avenge Indian provisioning of support to Dalai Lama supporters to conduct anti-China activities. Indian Army was surprised and thus had lost Askai Chin to China.²⁶ The humiliating defeat still haunts India and Indian build up in Ladakh could be a steppingstone towards liberating Askai Chin region²⁷ besides providing an indirect support to Dalai Lama.

At domestic level, Modi's nationalist approach is gaining popularity among majority Hindu population and is being seen as best suited government to dent Chinese rising status which will benefit Indian strategic security concerns. Having controversially snatched the Kashmiris' identity which could affect regional stability,²⁸ India under Modi seems to be all set to win over China which has been an irritant in its way to win status of great power. Indian Prime Minister Modi is globally known for his hardline policies besides being widely acknowledged for adopting Nazi kind of extremist Hindutva ideology which finds its political survival in projecting Hindu nationalism, especially using Chinese and Pakistani hatred cards.

In spite of Modi's irrational and irresponsible diplomatic and political behavior at domestic and international levels, the unprecedented American support to India is alarming which resulted into furthering Indian leadership's arrogant and dismissive behavior towards Pakistan and China alike.²⁹ Although, China has taken required controlled measures against arrogant India's overdoing in disputed territory of Ladakh, yet it could spiral up at any time.

In order to win permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), India is trying its best at diplomatic, political as well military levels, by using

both ethical and non-ethical means.³⁰ On the other hand, India under Modi regime is visibly following the policy of expansionism. It has redrawn its geographical map in which many disputed territories with Pakistan, Nepal and China have been shown as part of Indian Union.³¹ As a sequel to the muted reaction by the world community over its unilateral doing away with special identity of Kashmiris, India is emboldened enough to even challenge China.³² India, under Modi's unethical and blunt leadership has apparently decided to make multi-pronged full-fledged efforts to permanently push back China from its borders and determine LAC into actual established border, not with People's Republic of China but an independent state of Tibet.

India found the opportunity in terms of weakening political position of President Trump, declining American economy and global criticism on China for not being able to control COVID-19 from spreading across the globe besides unrest in Taiwan and Hong Kong to meet its security ends emanating along its eastern borders with Tibet. On the parallel, Modi played his anti-China-Pakistan cards well. The Indian media also played an extremely negative role in building wrong perceptions and created hype among its public to prepare and initiate war against its nuclear armed neighbors.

The US Unprecedented Interference in Chinese Administered Tibetan Region

India is in close liaison with the US over its concerns on Chinese rise at global level.³³ The US is all out to support India in its endeavors to check mate Chinese strategic projects including CPEC, besides relegating Pakistan's constructive role in Indian favor for bringing peace and stability in the region. In last quarter of 2017, the Trump administration while divulging their strategy to deal with Afghanistan and South Asia identified India as the main actor.³⁴ A critical review of the US strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia sufficiently depicts its multi-dimensional approach inter-alia; ensuring position of strategic importance to India for countering China's rise, scuttling the CPEC process and in the process and helping India to win the great power status in contemporary world order.

In February 2020, the US House of Representatives had an unprecedented approval of a bill on Tibet which updated the 2002 Tibetan Policy Act with an overwhelming vote of 392-22. The Tibetan legislation bill sought freedom to choose Tibetan Buddhist leaders, including 15th Dalai Lama i.e. without any interference from the Chinese government besides right of establishing a US consulate in TAR' capital Lhasa. The US legislation also reminded China of respecting human rights in Tibet. The subject Tibetan legislation will become a law after the US Senate's approval and President's signatures. The bill also threatens US led sanctions against Chinese individuals who would be found opposing the US bill.³⁵ Apparently it seems to be part of

a bigger game i.e. blocking Chinese from dominating the surrounding regions and subsequently the world.

Passing the Tibetan Policy and Support Act (TPSA) has been noted with concern by the Chinese Government and while cautiously condemning the US, it stated that it is interference in Chinese domestic issues and threat to the Chinese sovereignty.³⁶ The US House of Representative; however, is continuously increasing political and diplomatic pressure on China by issuing strong statements.³⁷

Why Does India Want Tibet to be an Independent State?

India was never comfortable with Chinese occupation of Tibet as it brings the dragon right into its backyard. In simpler terms, had Tibet enjoyed a sovereign and independent status, it would have been under the Indian influence for obvious geographical advantage like Nepal and Bhutan. However, Tibet under Chinese rule is like nightmare to the Indian leadership who dreamed of 'Greater India'. In nutshell, an independent Tibet without Chinese interference favors Indian strategic interests as it will have Tibetan region in between China and India as buffer i.e. no direct interference of China with Indian geography, settlement of the LAC into actual international border i.e. free of any disputed territories and above all denying China an exponential reach into South Asia.³⁸

China's Counter Strategic Military Card – Strangulation of Siliguri Corridor

China, having sensed the Indian expansionist designs with the US support made several strategic military, political and diplomatic moves to checkmate any Indian armed forces' adventure. China eyed on the Sikkim area which lies between Nepal and Bhutan (Refer Map 2). The PLA planned and executed military domination of the LAC passing over Sikkim which oversees the Indian supply route to its eight states in North Eastern region i.e. Assam, Annuchal Pardesh, Sikkim, Nigaale, Nagaland, Mani Pur, Tiripura and Mizzuram through Siliguri Corridor.

The area in South of the Chinese LAC oversees the Siliguri Corridor- a bottleneck - which can effectively be blocked by China by mere conventional military engagement. If the Siliguri Corridor gets blocked, the eight Indian states would be cut from Indian mainland and thus a political dilemma could be created. It further gets pronounced for the Indian side due to the fact that all the eight Indian states in its North Eastern region are seeking independence from Indian Union and insurgency is at its peak. The Chinese support to the separatists in these states could thus be disastrous for keeping the Indian Union intact.³⁹ Hence, it is kind of paradox for the Indian arrogant

nationalist political leadership. That is why; India has sought political and diplomatic support from the US.

India having sensed vulnerability of its Siliguri Corridor has maintained cordial relations with Nepal and Bhutan duly augmented by coercion and trade (stick and carrot). India believes that Nepal and Bhutan would act as shock absorbers against any Chinese incursion. However, China played smart and included Nepal in its strategic valued One Belt One Road project and thus heavily invested in Nepal in terms of constructing new roads and railway infrastructure making trade easy between the states so as to meet the strategic end of re-orientating Nepal toward China instead of India.⁴⁰ Chinese interests with respect to Nepal got further strengthened when India declared some of the Nepalese areas as part of Indian Union in their new political map in November 2019 inter-alia *Kala Pani* area. It was like firing into own feet. The Nepalese People, who were already resisting against arrogant Indian attitude towards Nepal, started anti-India movement which further spoils Indian position in the region.⁴¹

Bhutan, being the second important actor also came under luring-in exercise by China and India alike. Bhutan has dominating heights in areas adjoining India which if occupied by China could easily cut Indian mainland from its North-eastern states. China played smart here as well. Historically, China and Bhutan have multiple status-quo territorial issues and are needed to be resolved. One of the most important disputed territories is of Doklam Plateau. China offered Bhutan to settle the territorial disputes by handing over larger disputed territories to Bhutan and in lieu demanded Doklam Plateau.⁴² China knew that the one who controls Doklam Plateau would control the Siliguri Corridor. India and China were on brinks of an all-out war back in June/ August 2017 when Indian army tried to limit Chinese influence on Doklam Plateau.

Handing over of Doklam Plateau to China by Bhutan was an alarming strategic disadvantage to the Indian existence and thus India used its influence on Bhutan leadership to cancel any such settlement with the Chinese side. The Bhutan government which has a security agreement with India since 1949 could not take the Indian pressure and withdrew from its commitments with China on Doklam.⁴³ In reaction, India and China had a long face-off of over 90 days in 2017 over Doklam Plateau, an area under Bhutan control. The two sides were on brink of war; however, the situation steamed out due to restraint from both sides and under international pressure.⁴⁴

Pakistan and India-China Ladakh Stand Off

Pakistan is an equally important stake holder as far as Kashmir territorial dispute. However, India is apparently taking solo flight in projecting its self-perceived

stance on Kashmir while both China and Pakistan seem to be on same page with regard to resolving Kashmir dispute i.e. as per the wishes of people of Kashmir.

The best advantage for Pakistan out of Indo-China Ladakh face-off could be the internationalization of the Kashmir dispute. The US President Trump even offered mediation between India and Pakistan which was declined by the Indian leadership.⁴⁵ With new wave of claims and counter claims over Kashmiri territory along the LAC, the Kashmir issue has come into limelight against the Indian wishes. The involvement of three nuclear weapons states over Kashmir issue might condition an international political environment that could lead to mutually acceptable solution to the Kashmir issue.

Throughout the Indo-China face-off, Pakistan has demonstrated responsible attitude towards the issue and urged both sides to exercise maximum restraint and tolerance.⁴⁶ However, India is subjected to an embarrassing situation at global level. India conducted a failed aerial mission in general area Balakot in February 2019 and had put a spin on it by calling it a surgical strike whereby calling Pakistan's nuclear bluff. Now that the shoe is on the other foot, should Pakistan not extend the same February 2019 Indian illogic and conclude that with an outstandingly successful and lightening surgical strike in Ladakh, China has called India's nuclear bluff? Pakistan did not do so as it could further fuel the strategic instability in the region. However, International strategic critiques are surprised to compare Indian responses to China vis-à-vis Pakistan. For instance, international scholars have noted an entirely passive response by the Indian political leadership, public messaging, social media, muted war mongering media and anchors who would establish their on-set war rooms vis-à-vis Pakistan.

Pakistan foreign office; however, is skeptical of Indian political leadership. Pakistan diplomatic core have forewarned the world community that India having pressure built along its eastern border and becoming helpless to undertake any tangible response against China, might try to play it down by dragging Pakistan into Ladakh issue. It is perceived on Pakistan's end that in order to have an international intervention for face saving for domestic audience, India can stage some false-flag operation in IHK to find a reason for launching limited war or surgical strike against Pakistan.⁴⁷

Pakistan; however, has been steadfast in its stance about lockdown in IHK and intelligently adopted the wait and see policy. The Indian side is made to keep guessing about Pakistan's reaction if in case China escalates the situation. Pakistan will use its diplomatic and political cards to the utmost in order to settle Kashmir issue; however, will remain ready for befitting response to Indian military misadventure.⁴⁸

Unfolding the Possible Scenarios in Post Indo-China Stand-Off Era

The India China standoff in Ladakh region has been observed with concern around the globe. The fear of escalation between the two nuclear armed states having history replete with mistrust, border skirmishes and 1962 war is alarming and needs to be addressed with passion and maturity. The multi-dimensional possible scenarios which could emerge in post Indo-China stand-off are covered in succeeding paras.

First, the Indian response to the Chinese aggressive move in Ladakh region was much below the US expectations. It could take the steam out of the US blind support to the India along military, political and diplomatic fronts. The US can attach strings to the US military cooperation with India wherein the cooperation could only actualize provided Indian armed forces demonstrate relative potential to face the PLA and thus indirectly meet the US strategic ends inter-alia putting a check on rising China. In simpler terms, if India does meet the US expectations in terms of Indian armed forces professionalism vis-à-vis PLA, it might dilute the US unprecedented political, diplomatic and military investments in India.

Two, Indian military's half-hearted reaction to the Chinese aggression against Indian provocative border infrastructure build-up might discourage Bhutan and Nepal to bank on security assurances provided by the Indian armed forces, especially Bhutan. In that case, Bhutan and Nepal could strategically tilt and re-orientate themselves towards China which will be a huge dent to the Indian regional influence.

Three, India has been ambitious of winning great power status in world order. Indian armed forces' weakness for not being able to check Chinese incursion into its claimed Ladakh territory, albeit disputed in nature, has resulted into huge embarrassment at domestic and international levels. Moreover, despite Chinese aggressive maneuver, astonishingly India could not muster international political support of requisite standards. The muted or calculated reaction by the world community has exposed Indian much trumpeted influential international stature. In addition, the border face-off could also weaken the Indian quest for winning permanent seat of UNSC.

Four, Indian domestic audience has also been demoralized by the passive natured reaction of their army against China in Ladakh. It could affect the pseudo popularity of Indian nationalistic hardliner government under Modi. The Hindutva ideology might see the door vis-à-vis Indian past image of being secular. Indian political scene which was being dominated by the rightists might re-project the progressive leftists.

Five, China could come up with exponential speed and stature. As contemporarily debated and much anticipated, the Indo-China face-off could become a catalyst for the beginning point of Asian Century. The world powers might toe their strategic economic and political interests with China instead of the US. The well-known phrase of 'look east' might see the day light.

Six, although, less likely but have sufficient probability that India might face a triple front scenario. In case situation in IHK boils up, it can lead to Chinese offensive in Ladakh further down south and towards west. In such an eventuality, India would like to drag Pakistan into it and there could be possibility that Pakistan also opens up in Kashmir which is likely to be augmented by the Kashmiri youth seeking independence in IHK. As brought out earlier, China will not think to choke Siliguri Corridor and cut India in two halves. At this point and time, Indian north eastern states are likely to rise to the occasion and attack demoralized and weak Indian armed forces. In addition, Nepal may also join Chinese military prong to avenge being territorially coerced by the Indian side for long.⁴⁹ The painted scenario is not very likely though; however, if situation even starts heading towards the anticipated scenario, India might succumb to the international pressure and opt to sit on negotiating table trilaterally or at UN forum to settle the issue of Kashmir.

Seven, India and the US might not accept their humiliation and react back forcefully involving the nuclear factor. The use of nuclear weapons in South Asia could result into the end of the world. The nuclear winter preposition, if gets deployed, will finish the life and it would be a doomsday scenario. The US announcements of withdrawal from Open Skies, New START and ABM Arms Control Treaties reflect the US intent of building up its military muscles. In addition, the US President's announcement of resuming nuclear weapon testing is yet another fearful arms race pledge that could have unimaginable global level strategic stability consequences. If the US sets such precedence for signaling its might, India will not hesitate to repeat the same in South Asian setup.

Conclusion

India started building its infrastructure in Ladakh to strengthen its military dominance in surrounding areas. China's reaction was swift and the skirmishes between Indian and Chinese troops created political and military panic as the two are nuclear powers. All those who know Chinese way of dealing with the international and bi-lateral disputes, can sufficiently believe that China will not let the situation to escalate and instead prefer to maintain the status quo but from a position of strength for meeting its strategic comforts, inter-alia, forestalling any threat emanating from Indian side to cut

Chinese strategic highway NH 219 running between Tibet and Xinjiang, which could only be possible provided Askai Chin remains under Chinese control. In addition, China will not let strategic environment to favor US-India consortium which could affect Chinese control over Tibet. Thus, a prudent and unbiased evaluation by the international political and strategic community is a must. The Indian build-up along LAC and the Chinese reactionary military action need to be evaluated using the strategic lens so as to foresee and plan preemptive corrective responses at regional as well global level.

References

- ¹ Suhasini Haidar and Dennis S. Jesudasan, "Trade, Border Dispute Likely to Dominate Narendra Modi-Xi Jinping Talks," *The Hindu*, October 10, 2019, sec. National, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/trade-border-dispute-likely-to-dominate-narendra-modi-xi-jinping-talks/article29650029.ece>.
- ² Ankit Panda, "China Issues Statement Condemning Indian Decision to Bifurcate Kashmir," *The Diplomat*, August 07, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/china-issues-statement-condemning-indian-decision-to-bifurcate-kashmir/>.
- ³ "China and India's Clash on the Roof of the World," *Time*, October 23, 2012, <https://world.time.com/2012/10/23/the-sino-indian-conflict-1962-when-china-and-india-fought-a-war/>.
- ⁴ Mihir Bhonsale, "Understanding Sino-Indian Border Issues: An Analysis of Incidents Reported in the Indian Media," *Observer Research Foundation Paper No. 143* (February 2018): 11.
- ⁵ Ahmer Bilal Soofi, "LAC and LOC," *Dawn*, June 07, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1561898>.
- ⁶ Krishn Kaushik, "Face-off Along LAC in Ladakh: Chinese Build-up Will Be Matched, Says NSAB Member," *The Indian Express*, May 29, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/face-off-along-lac-in-ladakh-chinese-build-up-will-be-matched-says-nsab-member-6432174/>.
- ⁷ Muhammad Saleh Zaafir, "China Unlikely to Back down in Ladakh in Dispute with India," *Geo News*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/292210-despite-peace-talks-with-india-china-shows-no-signs-of-backing-down-in-ladakh>.
- ⁸ Michael Kugleman, "The Pakistan Factor in the India-China Standoff," *The National Interest*, June 06, 2010, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/pakistan-factor-india-china-standoff-161021>.
- ⁹ Raphael S. Cohen et. al. "The Future of Warfare in 2030," *RAND Corporation* (2020): 46.
- ¹⁰ What Musharraf Could Not Achieve Against India, China Is Trying To Do It For Pakistan: Experts," *The Eurasian Times*, June 06, 2020, <https://eurasianimes.com/what-musharraf-could-not-achieve-against-india-china-is-trying-to-do-it-for-pakistan-experts/>.
- ¹¹ Soofi, "LAC and LOC."
- ¹² Sriram Lakshman, "Jaishankar reiterates India's claim over Pakistan-occupied Kashmir," *The Hindu*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/jaishankar-reiterates-indias-claim-over-pok/article29578523.ece>
- ¹³ "Official Spokesperson's Response to a Query on Participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, May 13, 2017, <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28463/>
- ¹⁴ Khaleeq Kiani, "Rs442bn Accord for Construction of Diامر-Bhasha Dam Signed," *Dawn*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1556951>.
- ¹⁵ Xavier Francis, "Another Massive Dispute Brewing Between India-China-Pakistan Over Diامر-Bhasha Dam?," *The Eurasian Times*, May 25, 2010, <https://eurasianimes.com/another-massive-dispute-brewing-between-india-china-pakistan-over-diامر-bhasha-dam/>.
- ¹⁶ H S Panag, "China Believes India Wants Aksai Chin Back. PLA Has Likely Secured 40-60 Sq km in Ladakh," *The Print*, 28 May, 2020. <https://theprint.in/opinion/china-believes-india-wants-aksai-chin-back-thats-why-it-has-crossed-lac-in-ladakh/430899/>.
- ¹⁷ Anindita Sanyal, ed. "'Disturbing Behavior By China': US On Chinese Activity Along Ladakh Boundary," *NDTV*, May 20, 2020. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/disturbing-behaviour-by-china-us-on-chinese-activity-along-ladakh-boundary-2232329>.
- ¹⁸ Vinod Bhatia, "CHINA's Infrastructure in Tibet and POK - Implications and Options for India," *Research Paper*, Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS), New Delhi (2016): 7, 24, 25-26.
- ¹⁹ Sebastien Roblin, "Deepening Alliance between United States and India Faces Headwinds in 2020s," *Forbes*, December 31, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sebastienroblin/2020/12/31/deepening-alliance-between-united-states-and-india-faces-headwinds-in-2020s/#2b07fec17f2c>.
- ²⁰ Antara Ghosal, "What Chinese Discourse Reveals About Beijing's Reaction to Article 370," *South Asian Voices*, August 30, 2019. <https://southasianvoices.org/what-chinese-discourse-reveals-about-beijings-reaction-to-article-370/>.
- ²¹ "Article 370: On Day 2, India-China in Diplomatic Spat Over Ladakh," *The Wire*, August 6, 2019. <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/article-370-india-china-diplomatic-spat-ladakh-kashmir>.
- ²² Ibid
- ²³ Abanti Bhattacharya, "China and its Peripheries Strategic Significance of Tibet," *Issue Brief No. 220, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies* (May 2013):1.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Bhattacharya, "China and its Peripheries," 10.
- ²⁶ "India-China War of 1962: How It Started and What Happened Later," *India Today*, November 21, 2018. <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/india-china-war-of-1962-839077-2016-11-21>
- ²⁷ Panag, "China Believes India Wants Aksai Chin Back."
- ²⁸ Ahmed Saeed Minhas et. al. "Seizing Kashmir's Identity: Implications for the Global Peace and Stability," *NDU Journal* (2019): 69.
- ²⁹ "Disappointed at the Arrogant and Negative Response by India,' Says PM Khan," *Dawn*, September 22, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1434318>.
- ³⁰ Iftekhah Ahmed Chowdhury, "India's Race For The Security Council: Will She Reach the Finishing Line?," *ISAS Insights*, No. 552, March 20, 2019: 1-2.

- ³¹ "India's Flirting With Maps Triggered Border Dispute With China?," *The Express Tribune*, May 29, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/223175/3-indias-flirting-maps-triggered-border-dispute-china/>.
- ³² Harsh V. Pant, "The Growing Complexity of Sino-Indian Ties," *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College* (2014): v.
- ³³ Dhruva Jaishankar, "India and The United States In The Trump Era: Re-evaluating Bilateral and Global Relations," *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, Policy Paper No 37 (June 2017): 9, 11.
- ³⁴ Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, "Trump's 'New' Afghanistan and South Asia Strategy & India-US Strategic Partnership," *ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security*, Issue No. 526, December 2017. <https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/ISPSW-526%20D'Souza.pdf>
- ³⁵ "House approves new US policy bill on Tibet issue," *Tibetan Review*, February 2, 2020. <https://www.tibetanreview.net/house-approves-new-us-policy-bill-on-tibet-issue/>.
- ³⁶ "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Remarks on the US House of Representatives Passing the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2019," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs The Peoples Republic of China*, January 29, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1737084.shtml
- ³⁷ "Engel Statement on Chinese Aggression along India China Border," *Press Release, The US House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs*, June 1, 2020, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/2020/6/engel-statement-on-chinese-aggression-along-india-china-border>.
- ³⁸ Satish Kumar, "Chinese Annexation, American Access and Leverage for India," *Organiser*, December 31, 2018. <https://www.organiser.org/Encyc/2018/12/31/Chinese-Annexation-American-Access-and-Leverage-for-India.html>.
- ³⁹ Shaurya Karanbir Gurung, "Behind China's Sikkim Aggression, A Plan to Isolate Northeast From Rest of India," *The Economic Times*, July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/border-face-off-why-china-tries-to-break-chickens-neck-to-isolate-northeast/articleshow/59420472.cms>
- ⁴⁰ Rohit Kumar and Sagar Narayan "China's One Belt One Road Initiative in Nepal," *South Asia Journal*, December 19, 2017, <http://southasiajournal.net/chinas-one-belt-one-road-initiative-in-nepal/>.
- ⁴¹ Tapan Bose, "The Kalapani Imbroglio: Has India Pushed Nepal Too Far?," *The Wire*, May 26, 2020, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/kalapani-india-nepal>.
- ⁴² Medha Bisht, "Sino-Bhutan Boundary Negotiations: Complexities of the 'Package Deal'," *IDSAs Comments*, January 19, 2010, https://idsa.in/idsacomments/Sino-BhutanBoundaryNegotiations_mbisht_19010
- ⁴³ Prashant Kumar Singh, "Resurfacing of Divergence in India-China Relations," in "China's Rising Strategic Ambitions in Asia," (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2018), 39-41.
- ⁴⁴ Ishfaq Ahmad Akhoo and K. Senthil Kumar, "Doklam Stand-off 2017: A Geopolitical Rivalry between India, China and Bhutan," *Adalya Journal* (September 2019): 1259-60.
- ⁴⁵ K. Alan Kronstadt, "Kashmir: Background, Recent Developments, and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report No. R45877*, anuary 13, 2020: 12.
- ⁴⁶ "India's Aggressive Policy towards Neighbors Putting Regional Peace at Stake: FM Qureshi," *The Tribune*, June 0, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2229457/1-india-fuelling-insurgencies-ladakh-blaming-china-fm-qureshi/>.
- ⁴⁷ "FM warns India of Befitting Response to False Flag Operation," *The Nation*, May 19, 2020, <https://nation.com.pk/19-May-2020/fm-warns-india-of-befitting-response-to-false-flag-operation>.
- ⁴⁸ "DG ISPR Warns India of 'Uncontrollable' Consequences in Case of Military Adventurism," *Dawn*, June 03, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1561083/dg-ispr-warns-india-of-uncontrollable-consequences-in-case-of-military-adventurism>.
- ⁴⁹ Kugleman, "The Pakistan Factor in the India-China Standoff."