

China's Defence Minister in India: Raising Military Relations to the Next Level?



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Summary

The Chinese Defence Minister, General Liang Guanglie, is on a three day visit to India as part of a three nation tour which includes Sri Lanka and Laos. This will be his last visit before he retires from the Central Military Commission at the end of this year. Earlier, in 2005, General Liang had visited India in his capacity as Chief of General Staff.

The visit of a Chinese Defence minister to India after a gap of eight years is significant in many ways. Firstly, it comes at a time when defence exchanges and relations between the two nations are on an upswing, recovering from a period of turbulence in 2009-2010. Secondly, it comes at a time when the Chinese leadership is going through a period of transition and this visit would, hopefully, set the agenda and the course for future engagement with the new dispensation. And thirdly, General Liang's visit comes at a time of changing equations with the US rebalancing towards the Indo-Pacific region and gearing up to draw down from Afghanistan. While the Chinese press has not accorded much importance to the visit with the Xinhua and Global Times issuing only a terse one line comment, the Indian press has hailed the visit and expressed keen interest in its likely outcome.

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India-China defence cooperation has seen a number of positive military exchanges in the past one year. Four military delegations visited each other's military establishments including in Tibet. A growing understanding has developed between the two navies operating in the Gulf of Aden; they have begun to combat piracy jointly by establishing an informal understanding over the timings and coordination of escort convoys. An Indian flotilla of four ships visited Shanghai en route to Japan and this was reciprocated by the visit of the PLAN training ship *Zheng He* to India.

The Fourth Annual Defence Dialogue (ADD) between the two countries was held in New Delhi on 9 December 2011. The Indian side was led by Defence Secretary Shashi Kant Sharma, while the Chinese side was represented by General Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of General Staff, PLA. The Annual Defence Dialogue (ADD) was established under the provisions of the MoU for 'exchanges and cooperation in the field of defence', which was signed in May 2006 and has been a functional mechanism of dialogue between the two countries. The ADD is a forum to institutionalize military exchanges, delegation level visits and exercises between the two countries. Naval exercises between the two countries were held in 2003, 2005 and 2007, while Exercise Hand-in-Hand between the two armies was held in 2007 and 2008 before being abruptly stopped post China's denial of visa to a senior Indian Army commander. While the Fourth ADD resulted in the resumption of military delegation visits, the present visit of General Liang could give the necessary push for the resumption of naval and army exercises to inspire confidence and enhance the process of dialogue and communication between the two militaries.

On the border dispute, India would like an early settlement of the issue. There has been an ongoing dialogue on this vexed issue since the historic visit of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to China in 1988. Although these talks have been upgraded to the Special Representatives level since Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to China in 2003, the settlement is still a distant

call. However, increase in confidence building measures between the two militaries is underway. That no major incident has occurred along the LAC after the Somdurong Chu incident in 1986, during which India showed its resolve, will and capability to resist, is indicative of the success of these Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). In January 2012, India played host to the 15th round of China-India Special Representatives Talks on Boundary Question. At the end of the candid two day talks between State Councilor Dai Bingguo and National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon, the two governments signed an 'Agreement on the Establishment of a Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs'. Soon after, in March, the first secretary level meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on China-India Border Affairs was held in Beijing on 5-6 March 2012. This laid the mechanism for building confidence between the two militaries across the LAC and the empowered commanders in the field to resolve any misunderstanding or arrest any flare up consequent to misunderstandings due to transgressions or patrolling by the two militaries by communicating with each other on the LAC. India would like that the momentum of peace and tranquillity be carried to the next level. Maps of the disputed areas of Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh need to be exchanged at an early date to carry the dialogue forward. In addition, India would like to enhance trade and commerce at the designated border check posts on the LAC and improve people to people contact to dispel fears and encourage cultural and religious exchange between the two countries.

China is a victim of terror and has been the target of terror attacks in its Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) Province by the East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), an Islamic group trained, mentored and supported by the Taliban/Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The trail of recent bomb attacks and violence have led to Pakistan, causing fissures in China-Pakistan relations with reports of the Chinese leadership issuing a stern warning to their Pakistani counterparts to rein in the terrorists. This has the potential of escalation. China has deployed a large paramilitary force to control the unrest in XUAR. It would be reasonable to assume that once a Taliban government takes power in Afghanistan, it will shift its focus to spread terror in Jammu & Kashmir and XUAR. The return of a Taliban regime would be a source of insecurity to China's borders regions especially in XUAR; the spread of terrorism and Islamisation of XUAR is something that China is unlikely to welcome. Thus, China and India can work together in the Af-Pak region. While India has already pledged \$ 2 billion towards the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan, China has made a modest contribution of \$200 million. The installation of a popular government in Kabul and the need for peace and stability in post 2014 Afghanistan is in the interests of India and China. China can use its good offices and leverages on Pakistan to contain the spread of terror in the region.

India would like to bring the recent developments in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) on the table. China has been aggressively involved in a number of infrastructure related projects like power, dams and roads in the region. These projects, especially those in the Gilgit-

Baltistan (GB) region, are of great concern to India on two accounts: Firstly, they vitiate the issue of Jammu & Kashmir between India and Pakistan by making China an interested party to the dispute; And secondly, the presence of Chinese paramilitaries/regular military in close vicinity of the Line of Control, deployed ostensibly for security of its assets and work force in these projects, do not inspire confidence of China's peaceful intentions in the region. Although the presence of Chinese paramilitaries/regular troops have been denied by Chinese officials and analysts during interactions and discussions, it continues to remain a matter of concern for India – even the Chief of the Indian Army stated that 4000 Chinese uniformed personnel are present in PoK.

Even Pakistani analysts and scholars have been quoted as saying that China's intentions in PoK are not in the interest of the people of GB either. Mumtaz Khan, Director of the Toronto-based International Center of Peace and Democracy, says that "[t]he current involvement of China in Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan administered Kashmir consists of more than just providing military and diplomatic support to Pakistan. Soon, Pakistan will swap its role to take the backseat as China exerts itself as a major player in the Kashmir issue".¹ During a seminar organised on 31 March 2011 by the Democracy Forum in the UK House of Commons, Dr. Shabir Chaudhary said the following in his speech: "I acknowledge we have one of the best Polo grounds in Gilgit-Baltistan and people like to play and watch Polo matches, but believe me Chinese are not there to play Polo game. Their game is very dangerous and needs to be understood". And he added: "They (the people of Gilgit-Baltistan) were treated like colonised people; and their resources were looted and plundered; and in this regard government of China is also helping Government of Pakistan and their proxies are trying to make China a part of the Kashmir Dispute. To me and my colleagues this is very dangerous move and could endanger peace and stability of Gilgit-Baltistan and South Asia".² According to Dr. Rashid Ahmad Khan, *Dean, Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences and Law, University of Sargodha-Pakistan*, Chinese companies are currently working on 250 projects in Pakistan as of 2011.³ Of these, at least 17 projects involving about 122 Chinese companies are in Gilgit Baltistan alone. During the recent visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to Pakistan, he was accompanied by 260 Chinese business executives and deals worth \$35 billion were reportedly signed.⁴ The widening of the Karakoram Highway

¹ Kristiina Ojulang, MEP, 'The dangerous presence of Chinese troops in Gilgit-Baltistan', 21 February 2012, available at <http://www.neurope.eu/blog/dangerous-presence-chinese-troops-gilgit-baltistan>

² Dr. Shabir Choudhry, 'Gilgit Baltistan A Battleground For A Future War', *Speech at a Seminar held in the UK House of Commons organised by The Democracy Forum on 31 March 2011*, *Countercurrents.org*, 1 April 2011, available at <http://www.countercurrents.org/choudhry010411.htm>

³ Dr. Rashid Ahmad Khan, 'The Pakistan-China Strategic partnership', 20 May 2011, available at http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2011-05/20/content_22605398_2.htm

⁴ Ibid.

into an all weather road and the recent report that China is proposing to build a railway line through the Kunjerab Pass to connect to the Pakistani city of Havelian only exacerbate India's security concerns. In 2001, China had moved M-11 Silkworm missiles to Pakistan along the Karakoram Highway. India would like to seek assurances of China's commercial interests in PoK and a commitment of non-interference in the issue of Jammu & Kashmir.

The feverish pitch with which China is developing relations with Nepal and Bhutan is also a source of concern to India. China's concerns about sealing and controlling trans-border migration along its borders with Nepal are well understood. India also welcomes the development of trade and commerce between the two countries. China has provided Nepal with Nepal Rupees (NR) Rs. 1.42 billion (US \$19.8 million) in military aid. Two agreements to this effect were signed by Nepal Army chief General Chatraman Singh Gurung and visiting Chinese Army chief General Chen Bingde in March 2011. China had earlier provided \$5.6 million aid for procurement of non-lethal military aid and communication equipment. The latest Chinese largesse will include heavy construction vehicles, medical equipment to the Nepalese Army, a military hospital in Kathmandu and logistics for rescue operations. In January 2012, Premier Wen Jiabao paid a 5 hour visit to Nepal and offered a bonanza of \$140 million for infrastructure development as well as support for the early settlement of the peace process and modernisation of the Nepal Police. On its part, India would like China to appreciate its sensitivities vis-à-vis Nepal with which it shares an unarmed open border. The Indian Army shares a very close and historic relationship with the Nepalese Army and a large number of Nepalese nationals are enrolled in various arms and services of the Indian Army. India would not like any misunderstanding in this traditional relationship. India would also seek China's cooperation in bringing about a peaceful settlement to the impasse in Nepal's political system. Being Nepal's neighbours, both India and China have a stake in ensuring harmony, peace and stability in that country.

India is appreciative of the development of relations between the fledging democratic government of Bhutan and China. The 20th round of Border Talks between China and Bhutan concluded last month in Bhutan on a positive note. China is seeking to establish diplomatic relations with Bhutan. India's security concerns on the border issue between China and Bhutan relate to the sensitive Chumbi Valley region at the trijunction of India-Bhutan-China. China's claims to this sensitive region would increase the vulnerability of India's narrow 'chicken neck' area, which is a vital communication link to its North Eastern states. Any settlement of the Bhutan-China border would need to take India's sensitivities into consideration.

General Liang and his 23 member delegation are scheduled to meet his Indian counterpart on the last day of the visit. The Indian Defence Minister could do the following:

- Use the opportunity to increase confidence building measures and improve the atmospherics between the militaries of the two countries.

- Initiate a strategic dialogue in the context of imminent changes in the geo-political environment in Afghanistan and Asia-Pacific region. This meeting could be the precursor of a lasting India-China Strategic Dialogue (ICSD) on military and strategic issues.
- While it is understandable that differences cannot be resolved overnight, the importance of continued engagement and considerations of India's security concerns on issues of PoK, its Himalayan neighbourhood and the border issue can be reiterated.

It is hoped that the meeting results in a better understanding of each other's concerns on a myriad of defence related issues. The fact that the Chinese leadership is under transition does not suggest that there are likely to be major changes in policy with the ushering in of a new political dispensation. The Chinese policy of 'going by the script' and adhering to the adage of avoiding 'rocking the boat' is well documented. Towards that end, this visit could see the emergence of a fresh agenda in military cooperation, one which can set the course for a more meaningful and positive interaction between the two militaries in the future.