

Daulat Beg Oldie standoff: An Assessment

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May 22, 2013

Summary

The culmination of the unprovoked Chinese intrusion in the Depsang Sector of Ladakh is a breather and a warning to India. It is a breather because it saves the country the embarrassment of justifying its inaction in dealing with the intrusion. Warning because, it gives yet another chance to set right the existing short comings in border management and deficiencies in the defence operational capabilities.

The logic of Chinese encroachment

Legally speaking China has no business to be in areas beyond its borders. Its border ends at Xinjiang, which was incorporated into the Chinese empire when it was conquered by the Mongol leader Genghis Khan in the 13th century. Known to the Chinese as Xiyu (“Western Regions”) for centuries, the area became Xinjiang (“New Borders”) upon its annexation under the Qing (Manchu) dynasty in the 18th century.¹ The then borders did not include areas of present Chinese claims.

The facts that the China failed to sign the McCartney-Macdonald line proposed by the British in 1899 or even contest the proposed alignment amounts to accepting the alignment. By and large the Chinese have been claiming areas up to this line which also corresponds to the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Even assuming that there are some disputes in the alignment of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) which came into being after the 1962 war, the 19 km thick border line is inexplicable and sounds mischievous. China and India have signed two critical agreements on “Maintaining of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas” in 1993 and “Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in India-China Border Areas” in 1996. These would not have been possible if there were such major perceptual differences.

In this context, Pakistan’s role in enticing China to extend its claim line South of Xinjiang cannot be ignored. It ceded a large chunk of real estate in the Shaksgam Valley, a part of J&K to China illegally. China on its part, has replicated the ‘Delhi illegal colony model’ to regularize her claim by slowly encroaching into the entire area of its interest without firing a bullet and developing infrastructure right from Baltistan in Pakistan in the West to Aksai Chin in the East.

The encroachment in the Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) sector was to test India’s response. Having intruded 19 km inside Indian Territory, the Chinese questioned the validity of the LAC and went on to state, “The Chinese side has confined activities to within the Chinese border and never trespassed across the line”.² This is nothing but deliberate assertion of its right over Indian territory.

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, Xinjiang,, available at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/546118/Xinjiang> accessed on 18 May 2013.

² FM: China-India border troops strictly observe agreements, English. News. on News, 24 Apr 2013, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/24/c_132336965.htm accessed on 19 May 2013

Coming at a politically sensitive moment, India desperately wanted to end the standoff, restore *status quo* and prevent any escalation. India's meekness – studied response for some – provides the Chinese the freedom to consolidate its position in the DBO area. The situation can be compared to the Chinese construction of the road connecting Tibet to Sinkiang across the Aksai Chin in early 1950s. India was ignorant about the development for several years. Having managed to construct the road, the Chinese claimed ownership of the area.

A pattern can be deciphered: Gradually trespass into an area of interest over a period of time and set a routine that evades notice and serious attention thus avoiding any significant protest or challenge. Down play protests or apprehensions if any. Exploit unchallenged border encroachments as an opportunity to consolidate position and stake a claim to the area at an appropriate moment through precipitous military coercion and intimidation. On close evaluation this pattern can be discerned in the construction of dams across Brahmaputra.

Territorial interest and positioning

Indications are^{3,4} that China and Pakistan have reached an agreement to lease the Gilgit-Baltistan area to China for 50 years. China, it appears has already positioned 7000 to 11000⁵ PLA soldiers in the Baltistan area who are working to construct the railway line from Gwadar to Xinjiang which runs parallel to the Karakoram Highway. The highway it is believed is being frantically upgraded. Reports of construction of 22 tunnels⁶ along the route to establish a gas pipeline from Iran to China are abound.⁷ These tunnels can act as a storehouse for missiles. Information relating to construction of huge housing complex in the area and a cemetery at Danyor 10 km across Gilgit river⁸ has also surfaced indicating that the Chinese are planning to stay in the area permanently – a clear indication that *de facto* control of the area has surreptitiously been ceded to China by Pakistan.

³ European Strategic Intelligence & Security Center, Gilgit – Baltistan, P – 3, available at <http://www.esisc.org/upload/publications/briefings/gilgit-baltistan-essential-link-of-the-pakistan-china-strategic-axis/Gilgit-Baltistan.pdf> accessed on 18 May 2013.

⁴ IDSA, Resources, RAJYA SABHA QUESTION NO 44 Handing over of Gilgit Baltistan areas to China available at <http://www.idsa.in/resources/parliament/HandingoverofGilgitBaltistanareastoChina> accessed on 18 May 2013

⁵ R N Das, IDSA, Manograph series No 19 May 2013, India China Relations – A New Paradigm available at <http://www.idsa.in/system/files/Monograph19.pdf> accessed on 18 May 2013

⁶ R N Das, IDSA, Manograph series No 19 May 2013, India China Relations – A New Paradigm available at <http://www.idsa.in/system/files/Monograph19.pdf> P - 73 para 4.4 accessed on 18 May 2013,

⁷ R N Das, IDSA, Manograph series No 19 May 2013, India China Relations – A New Paradigm available at <http://www.idsa.in/system/files/Monograph19.pdf> P - 73 para 4.4 accessed on 18 May 2013

⁸ The Express Tribune, 05 Apr 2013, accessed on 18 May 2013 available at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/531177/pak-china%20friendship-chinese-cemetery-to-be-rebuilt-in-gilgit/>,

With its physical presence in all the four cardinal directions and India being in the South, China's interest clearly is in closing the gaps in the areas bounded by Gilgit – Baltistan in the west, Xinjiang in the North, Aksai Chin in the East and India to its South. That will facilitate free movement within the area. Securing the Karakoram heights along with this action will thwart any threat from India. There lies the Chinese interest in the Saltoro ridge in Siachen.

Strategic interest

What are the strategic interests of China in securing the areas under discussion?

Besides providing freedom of movement, logistics and security, the area also provides the much needed buffer between India and the Chinese mainland. The Karakoram Highway which passes through this area connects China and Pakistan. The highway that connects Pakistan to Tibet and Xinjiang is also significant in that it opens up the strategic possibility of an alternative shorter route for uninterrupted energy supplies from the Gulf through Gwadar Port avoiding Afghanistan and the Chinese Muslim majority Uyghur dominated Kashgar area. Importantly, it also guarantees access to Afghanistan and Central Asia where China has invested heavily in energy and copper. In nutshell, with Gwadar port under their control, this area has become the key to China's access to the Arabian sea through Karakoram Highway and their investment opportunities in Afghanistan.

The Indian confusion

The missing strategic culture

The Indian leadership has for long been lulled into complacency over deterrence capability of nuclear weapons. Nuclear deterrence was viewed as the sole savior of the country against external aggression. No one would ever dare a nuclear power was the perception. Two nuclear power nations getting engaged in a military conflict too was inconceivable. Resultantly conventional military capability was overlooked and currently a state of helplessness exists which has taken the country back to 1962. While China continuously upgraded its military and built military infrastructure in Tibet and elsewhere, India continued to put all its eggs in the nuclear deterrence basket.

Border management

The Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), a Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) mans the LAC. The ITBP does not come under the Indian Army or its operational control. When an incident of this nature occurs, whom does the ITBP report to? What is the Army supposed to do? Who will issue the orders, the MHA or the MOD? Who will coordinate the situation on the ground? Dual control of critical forces deployed right at the border is a great folly. The ambiguity and the consequences of such vague command and control set up are clearly visible. These are areas where turf wars are unacceptable.

Lack of road communication

The Sub Sector North (SSN) is connected to the rest of Ladakh by two axes. The one along Nubra valley to Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) traverses through Saser La Pass at a height of approximately 5200 meters. It is a foot track and would require 3 to 4 days to cover. The second route runs along the Shyok River to Depsang Plains passing through Depsang La Pass at a height of about 5450 meters. It would take anything from 15 to 20 days to negotiate the distance.

Given the strategic criticality, very little has been done to improve the communication in these areas in the last 50 years. The very fact that soldiers were deployed at such locations without proper road communication amounts to abandoning them with scant regard for their safety and well-being. How are these troops expected to survive in the event of an enemy attack? How quickly will they be reinforced or withdrawn? Incidentally, these are not positions with any worthwhile tactical significance to fight a defensive battle from. Ladakh is too far and events in these areas do not directly affect the rest of the country or the vote bank. Loss of territory, deplorable infrastructure or the pitiable quality of life which the people of this area are forced to suffer are invisible to public eye and thus get ignored. The situation along the LAC in other sectors is equally bad.

Operational fitness of the Army

Two mountain divisions were raised for operations in the mountains. The government, however, decided that there was no need for a Corps HQ. The state of weapons and equipment in these two newly raised mountain divisions and their state of operational preparedness is not up to mark.

The terrain configuration in our northern borders adjoining China lacks the space for manoeuvre and the lateral communication needed for diversion or redeployment of troops. Considering the fact that penetration by a determined enemy into any defensive position is a possibility, India needs to keep its options open to limit penetration at certain level and take the battle into vulnerable areas of the offender. This alone will provide deterrence and a bargaining advantage in the event of an intrusion.

A cursory assessment of troop requirement indicate a minimum of two divisions with a Corps HQ as contingency reaction force and an additional two divisions with a Corps HQ to handle the counter offensive if and when required. The formations could be switched to take each other's role if necessary. These formations need to be equipped appropriately and most urgently without any delay.

Terms for withdrawal

What were the terms of withdrawal?

The Government has not come out with the terms of the agreement which culminated in the Chinese agreeing to withdraw from the area of its occupation. Having said that the

Chinese were 19 km inside India's territory it is not clear as to why India had to withdraw from its own territory. Media reports during the crisis indicate that Chinese had made similar probes in three other areas. Further reports point to India demolishing its bunkers in the Chumer area which would *ipso facto* incapacitate Indian troops patrolling areas up to our claim line⁹. The country needs to know the terms of agreement and the truth. The Chinese message is clear - notwithstanding India's nuclear power capability, Beijing will take the offensive to secure its interests, as, when and where it chooses.

Did India succumb to Chinese pressure?

Even if a proper agreement had not been reached in the matter yet, knowing the Chinese, such withdrawals would not have been settled without an undertaking or at least an understanding to accept China's interests in the area. The question is, having invested huge capital in developing infrastructure in and around the area; the Chinese are unlikely to give it away - they are there to stay.

Turning a blind eye to the Chinese encroachment and activities in the area will allow the Chinese to develop infrastructure in this area and keep the option open to rekindle the issue again at a future date. The Chinese are likely to use their ground position as leverage and a bargaining chip.

What would constitute an equitable ceasefire agreement?

The agreement between India and China in this dispute needs very careful study. It is imperative that both sides have access to areas up to their respective claim lines. India cannot afford to give away areas, which are of strategic importance. India also cannot provide an avenue for future intrusion by China or Pakistan. India needs to retain its freedom for developing infrastructure in its chosen areas. If China could develop infrastructure in disputed territory, it is time India did so too.

Siachen – an inconvenience to the Chinese

The domination and the location of the Saltoro ridge is a threat to the security and Strategic interests of China in this area. Apparently, Pakistan's efforts to negotiate with India to vacate Siachen in the recent past and their effort to influence the track two dialogues in that direction were at the Chinese call. It may also be of interest to know that during the Siachen talks in India between India and Pakistan on 30 and 31 May 2011, the Pakistani delegation had demanded that the Chinese be invited for the talks as the Shaksgam area is with them¹⁰. The Chinese interest in this area is clear.

⁹ 'India to give up Chumer Post for Chinese withdrawal?' The Economic Times, 07 May 2013, available at http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-05-07/news/39091189_1_chumar-indian-army-bunkers accessed on 18 May 2013

¹⁰ R N Das, IDSA, Manograph series No 19 May 2013, India China Relations - A New Paradigm, available at <http://www.idsa.in/system/files/Monograph19.pdf>, P - 74, accessed on 18 May 2013.

Lessons

Diplomacy and Friendship

Diplomacy especially with China does not work without military power, economic robustness and a strong leadership. The effect of DBO like incidents and the lack of firm response will have very adverse effects on India's influence on its smaller neighbours.

Considering the Chinese military strength, economic prowess and the investments made by them towards the development of infrastructure in the disputed areas, it would not be very easy to recover territory illegally occupied by them. Soft options are therefore unlikely to work.

As a matter of rule, India has adopted a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign countries. However, if the burden of a country's human rights violations falls at its own doorstep as had happened in 1971 in erstwhile Pakistan, India may have no option but to provide moral, material and financial support besides highlighting and promoting the cause of the affected in various international bodies and institutions.

India has sheltered over 120,000 Tibetan refugees. These refugees are in India because their political aspirations and demands have remained unanswered even after 60 years. It may be recalled that China invaded the *de facto* independent Tibet in 1950 resulting in the incorporation of Tibet as a part of Republic of China. Since then, human rights violations have been perpetrated against the Tibetans to suppress their claims for independence. The number of Tibetan Buddhist self-immolation cases in the recent past stands testimony to the fact. It is time China learns to respect the sensibilities of people.

The unrest in the Uyghur dominated Xinjiang Autonomous region and in the Gilgit-Baltistan areas too open up a number of options for India. Chinese calculations of economic prosperity through Gwadar Port in Baluchistan can be nullified by providing moral, material and financial support to Baluchistan independence movement.

China is India's second-largest trading partner and their combined trade was \$50.9 billion in the April-December period, according to Indian government figures,¹¹ India may have to provide incentives to countries like Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Philippines, and other western countries to promote their trade interests in India while restricting entry of Chinese goods and services through various measures.

DBO like incidents will prompt the Indian people to demand that India align with countries which are subjected to similar provocation. India may also have to weigh its options of

¹¹ 'Indian Foreign Minister to visit China to reduce tensions', Bloomberg, 25 Apr 2013, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-04-25/indian-foreign-minister-to-visit-china-to-reduce-border-tensions.html>, accessed on 18 May 2013

supporting the US and other countries to limit Chinese influence and hegemony in the region. The US Asia pivot too may need a relook.

While accusing the US of trying to forge anti-China alliances, China should take a close look at its own aggressive show of strength which are forcing countries to go in for countervailing alliances. If indeed such alliances are formed, China cannot blame anyone but itself.

Exchange of maps indicating the perception of LAC on both sides should be expedited. India needs to work out its strategy to force Chinese to accept an equitable and a reasonable solution to the border dispute at an early date, failing which India should not hesitate to work on hard options suggested.

White Paper on illegal occupation of Indian Territory

It is time the entire issue of illegal occupation of Indian territory by Pakistan and India is investigated by a Committee consisting of a panel of judges, military professionals and a White Paper prepared for placing the facts before the Parliament.

Border Management

Effective border management entails unified command with integrated surveillance, intelligence, and communication network. Rules of engagement should be spelt out while the border management agency needs to lay down its Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for dealing with border violations and skirmishes.

Operational preparedness

There is an urgent need to go into the state of operational readiness of the Defence Services. The Government needs to spell out its National Security Strategy and the Defence Strategy to enable the services to lay down their respective strategies. The aspect of collusion between China and Pakistan and the assessment of force structure requirements to face up to such challenges will emerge out the exercise.

Restructuring MOD

Ministry of Defence (MOD) in consultation with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) is meant to handle situations of the kind as witnessed in DBO recently. In contrast, based on some media reports, the China Study Group (CSG) consisting of the NSA, and bureaucrats from other ministries including heads of Central Security Agencies took control of the situation. 30-odd Chinese soldiers are too insignificant a number to derail the normal processes of Government functioning. The need for restructuring the Integrated Headquarters of the MOD with a professional bureaucracy consisting of experts from strategic, military and diplomatic community rather than the present generalist should be given traction.