



In The Annals of Sino-Indian Relations: Contours across the PLA Intrusion Crises

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Abstract

From rather a brink of hot engagement in the wake of unprovoked Chinese intrusion in the western sector of the India-Tibet border region, the China-India relationship seem to be moving towards a stage of relative thaw, if not sustained cooperative intercourse. Political and diplomatic sagacity, displayed subsequently at the two ends have evidently gone full drive to this end. This is while the dynamics of the issue hitherto remain unchanged. The paper, in its perspective, looks at the plausible contours across the sordid development and dwells on options and recourses for the Indian nation while revisiting the incident.

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ANALYSIS

Introduction

Over just few months, the five and odd decade long estranged Sino-Indian relations seem to turn a new leaf. This is all with a caveat of hardliners in Chinese politico-diplomatic and military establishments do not spoil the broth. A host of positive Chinese media reporting on the outcomes of the 16th Round of special representative level border talks and subsequent high level exchanges lends credence to this summation.¹ Not less important is the spoiler such as the provocative statement of Major General Luo Yuan and his ilk falling wayside.²

As the ground realities bear out, China-India relationship runs through a matrix of two extremes of philia and phobia. In fact, each of the 17 countries having had land and/or marine unresolved border dispute with China has a distinct story to this effect. Zhongnanhai mandarins carry reputations to run 'cost-benefit analyses' before taking a particular stance on a critical issue. As such, unless one gives blindfolded allowance to systems default, Chinese intrusion in the western sector of the India-Tibet border region could be safely hypothesized as a 'strategic move dyed in tactical guise' with unstated military and other objectives. Little different could be said about occasional hawkish statements of the Chinese PLA brass.

The paper, in this perspective, delves into the Chinese 'intent and strategy'. In public pronouncements, both in diplomatic and journalistic channels, the Chinese mandarins have characteristically had kept a wrap over the elements of 'hostility'. For a number of reasons, they got to choose and employ rather 'covert' means. It included 'stock denial' of the incident in open forum while upping the ante in diplomatic discourse. For data support, the analytics draws on open source published materials. Where needed, the study employs interpretive research technique. Schematically, it first, deliberates into the latest PLA intrusions in western sector, examines the scruples and veracity of the Chinese stance, goes into and dwells on the transgression spree of the PLA units in different sectors of the border region, and last but not the least maps out broad options and recourses for the Indian side.

¹ China Daily, "China, India to Find Solutions to Border Disputes", June 29, 2013 http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2013-06/29/content_16688794.htm (accessed on July 3, 2013); China Daily, "China, India to Hold Talks on Border Issues", June 26, 2013 http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-06/26/content_16658898.htm (accessed on July 3, 2013); and, China Daily, "Li's India Trip Helps Build Consensus", May 23, 2013 http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-05/23/content_16521673.htm (accessed on July 3, 2013)

² Subsequent to the diffusion of the DBO stand-off crisis, a Chinese PLA patrol intruded and vandalized the Indian observation post in Chumar on June 17, 2013. It took away the camera, which they returned only on July 3, 2013 after due deliberations in a flag meeting. The Chinese Major General Luo Yuan happens to be the Deputy Director General of the World Military Research Department of the PLA Academy. His articles often find place in the Chinese state media and have large following on Sina Weibo, a Twitter like micro-blog site. He is otherwise known for his hawkish stance.



DBO Intrusion and the Fault Lines

Chinese intrusion of Daulat Beg Oldi (35° 23' 24" N, 77° 55' 30" E) along Indo-Tibet border region in April 2013 was stand out a brazen military action.³ Amidst denials, the intruding Chinese PLA unit continued to hold on for three weeks. Notwithstanding, the Chinese side had put through an array of bargain points. There is then little to gloss over the incident as a one and odd happening.

In over all perspective, this Chinese move fits well the description of 'coercive diplomacy'. While one could doubt the rationale besides the audacity, one can't fail marvelling the sophisticates of the whole operation. Timing of the event is striking. It took place when the Chinese premier was to ink scores of agreements in the course of his first ever junket. In the eyes of Joseph Nye, the success of coercive diplomacy squarely depended upon 'the credibility and the cost of the threat'.⁴ Nevertheless, going by Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, the prime objective of using intrusion as a foreign policy tool was to 'influence the decision of the adversary in a particular way'.⁵ The upper limit of the coercion tool was then logically the calculated use of brute force.

This Chinese intrusion was sighted by the Indo-Tibet Border Police (ITBP) patrol in the early hours of April 16, 2013. The force level of the intruding PLA unit was just a platoon strong. During the three week long stand off, the PLA unit reportedly received supplies from the unidentified Boarder Management Regt., located in the vicinity of Chip Chap valley. In the event of flair up, the intruding PLA unit was expected to draw enforcements from the Battalion of an unidentified Regiment affiliated to 47th Group Army, Lintong. 55th and/or 56th High Land Infantry Brigade, located respectively at Zhengyi, Gansu and Wu Wei, Gansu were supposed to be mobilized once the skirmishes turned into a limited border war. In the backdrop, the Chinese intrusion carried credible threat. However, China's potential to carry out the threat stood circumscribed. The risk of flare up beyond a limit first, meant sounding last post to diplomacy. Nonetheless, it held unimaginable prospect of turning the wheel of history. In normal scenario, the Zhongnanhai mandarins were seldom expected to turn blind eyes to this harsh truth.

As the facts on ground bear out, the intruding Chinese PLA platoon had first, set up four tents. The fifth tent was added subsequently. The penetration was around 19 km off the line of actual control (Fig.1).⁶ It was outright unprovoked and hence, borne of some sorts of strategic motives.

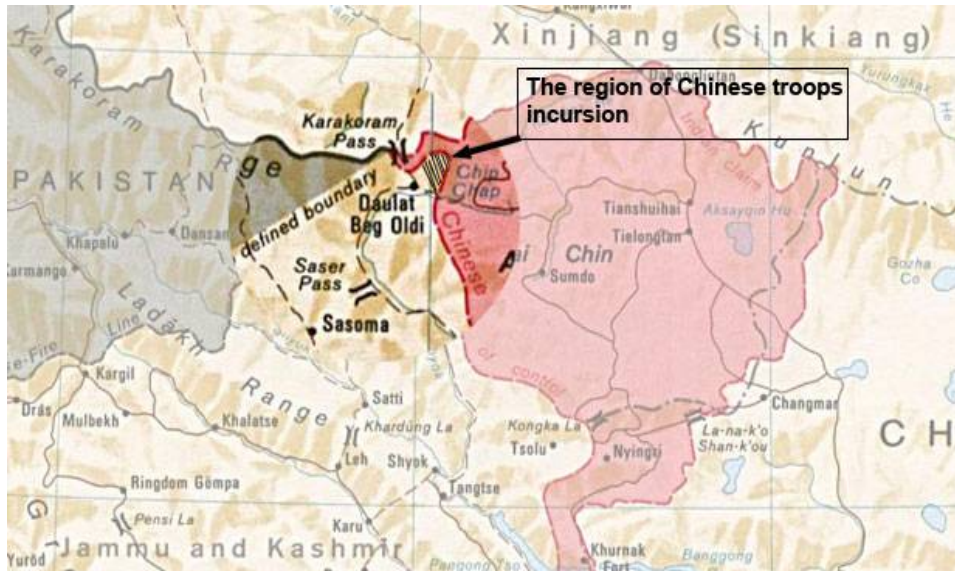
³ The locale of the Chinese intrusion lies at the eastern most point of the Karakoram ranges w hich once served as the trade route of the Indian Ladakhi traders w ith their counter parts in Yarkand, East Turkmenistan (Xinjiang). In this cold desert region, the nearest inhabited tow n is Murgo. The Baltic populace of the locale primarily lives on apricot farming and Yak rearing.

⁴ Nye, Joseph S. (2011). *The Future of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs. p. 45.

⁵ Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman (2002). *The Dynamics of Coercion-American Foreign Policy and the Limits of Military Might*, Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Daulat Beg Oldi eastern most depression of the Karakoram Range, w hich was once used by the trading caravans Yarkand in Ladakh and Xinjiang, then Turkmenistan. The place w as named after 16th century Yarkand nobleman w ho then died w hile negotiating the descent of Karakoram.

Fig. 1: Locale Map of the Chinese Intrusion⁷



In hundreds of transgressions over the years, the intruding Chinese PLA unit normally withdrew once confronted with ground realities. In the case of Daulat Beg Oldi, the PLA unit not only stayed on, it got to put up conditions. In some way, it carried reminiscences of 1986 Sumdorong Chu event. In the backdrop, not until the stand off blew off, it held prospect of a flare up, capable of stalling, if not derailing the positive course, whatsoever.

Scruples and Veracity of the Chinese Stance

This act of intrusion as such first, lay in contravention of an array of protocols brought to bear upon to settle the row. It included: the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the India-China Border Areas, signed on 7 September 1993; the Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, signed on 29 November 1996; the Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation between India and China, signed on 23 June 2003; and last but not the least, the agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question, signed on 11 April 2005.⁸ It did as well override to the spirit of the joint statement of 21 November 2006, issued during the India visit of the then Chinese President Hu Jintao.

⁷ Courtesy: <http://www.firstpost.com/India/china-ladakh-intrusion-twomaps-tell-this-dangerous-story-73813.html> (accessed on July 4, 2013)

⁸ The phrase Line of Actual Control (LAC) connotes effective border between India and Tibet. Chinese premier Zhou Enlai used the term for the first time in his letter to the Indian premier Jawaharlal Nehru on October 24, 1959. This 4057 km long border line traverses three areas of northern Indian states: western ([Ladakh](#), [Kashmir](#)), middle ([Uttarakhand](#), [Himachal](#)) and eastern ([Sikkim](#), [Arunachal](#)). The term gained legal recognition in Sino-Indian agreements signed in 1993 and 1996. As per the agreement, "No activities of either side shall overstep the line of actual control".



First three flag meetings at the level of Brigadier of the Indian Army and his Chinese counterpart Senior Colonel didn't produce any result. In the first flag meeting on April 18, 2013 at Spaggur gap (33°31'60" N, 78°55'0" E), as it is now a history, Chinese Senior Colonel Ayan Yanti had bluntly denied the transgression.⁹ Couple of days later on April 21, 2003, Chinese PLA helicopters came to hover around Chumar (32° 39' 0" N, 78° 35' 0"E) area in Nyoma sector of eastern Ladakh and dropped food cans, cigarette packets and hand-written notes.¹⁰ In the second flag meeting on April 23, 2013, the Chinese side upped its ante. Instead of agreeing to withdraw and resolve the issue amicably through the set mechanism, it called upon the India side to destroy its bunkers and beat a retreat. The third flag meeting held on April 30, 2013 at Chushul (33° 33' 21.6" N, 78° 43' 19.2" E) was as well a wash out. The Chinese side remained cold. They wanted India to remove its tents.¹¹ On the contrary, in the public domain, particularly as far as the diplomatic channel was concerned, China displayed calculated reticence. Notwithstanding, the Chinese print media, in particular People's Daily and China Daily got to blame the Indian media for whipping public sentiments.

China's stand and stance as such has been quite puzzling. Scholarship in the field wondered as to why China should pour cold water when the two sides had crossed the critical level diplomatic warmth in most shades of bilateral and multilateral relationships. It included Ma Jiali of China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, Beijing, Lei Guang, director of the 21st Century China Programme at the University of California, San Diego and several others. In their write ups, they had earlier noted an 'upswing' and 'burst of goodwill'. There were then soothsayers who found Xi Jinping led new Chinese leadership positively disposed to better Sino-Indian relationship. Those who looked at the incident differently included Li Mingjiang of S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore. While he looked at 'run-ins' of the armed forces as usual affair, he found the PLA posture this time 'more aggressive'. In his studied view, it was borne of 'assertive stance' of the new Chinese leadership. He referred a statement of the Chinese President Xi Jinping exhorting the Chinese armed forces not to spare any effort to 'defend China's territorial integrity and core interests'. In his opinion, the statement of the Chinese president as such served as a signal to act tough.¹² Ashley Tellis, Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace did as well believe likewise. To him, the Chinese move was precisely aimed at 'upping the stake' in the area where India was since 'attempting to ramp up its defense'.¹³

The fourth and fifth flag meetings were held respectively on May 4 and May 5, 2013. The locale of the meeting remained the same Chushul sector. The Chinese side had set preconditions for withdrawal, which included dismantling of existing Indian facilities in the Fukche and Chumar regions. It included an odd numbers of forward observation posts, bunkers and shelters. Notwithstanding, the Chinese side articulated its concern about Indian infrastructure build-up, including reactivation of two advance landing grounds (ALGs), one here in Chumar and the other at Nyoma in the eastern sector. Hectic diplomatic efforts at both ends perhaps worked and the Chinese PLA Platoon withdrew to its base across the LAC.

⁹ Qin Zhongwei, "China Denies Border Spat with India", People's Daily, April 26, 2013
<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/8223124.html> (accessed on July 5, 2013)

¹⁰ <http://www.theasianconnectionnewspaper.com/chinas-copters-violate-india-airspace/> (accessed on July 5, 2013)

¹¹ In the face of the Chinese incursion, the ITBP unit had come to set up a camp, approximately 300 meters opposite the intruding Chinese PLA unit position. Ladakh Scouts, the Infantry Regt. did as well move closer.

¹² Li Mingjiang, "Amid Improving Sino-Indian Ties, Border Standoff Baffles the Expert", South China Morning Post online, 30 April 2013 <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/spotlight.htm> (accessed on July 5, 2013)

¹³ Seminar with Ashley Tellis, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Watson Institute for International Studies, "Dragon Rising: The Implications of China's Ascendancy for India's Security", April 25, 2013
http://www.watsoninstitute.org/events_detail.cfm?id=2072 (accessed on July 5, 2013)



As a face saver to the Chinese side, pending final outcome of future engagements, the Indian troops did as well withdraw to its original position along LAC. Benjamin Carlson of GlobalPost (May 6, 2013), as others wondered why the Chinese troops should have, in the first place, crossed the *de facto* border, and then stood down after initial protestations.

Transgression Spree and the Plausible Future Flash Points

The number of PLA transgressions along the 4057 km long LAC has been on rise right since 2008. In the first three months of 2013, there were over 75 incursions.¹⁴ Beginning 2010, there have altogether been over 750 incursions. This is besides numerous airspace violations. Subject to the effectiveness of institutional safety valve, each incursion theoretically stands a time bomb. In over all dynamics of post-1962 Sino-India relationship, the DBO incident of April 15, 2013 thus, rightly got strained Indian nerves. The incident served as a grim reminder of the 1967 Nathu La and 1986 Wang Dung incidents.¹⁵ Of the 17 most transgression prone areas along the LAC, this Depsang valley rubs shoulder with Daulat Beg Oldi, Trig Heights, Pan Gong Tso Lake, Samar Lungpa, Chusul and Dem Chok in the western sector. Chumar has since been added to the list.

In form and shape, the military posture of the intruding PLA unit could be rated 'mild'. Notwithstanding, but for few dispatches, most media reports struck conciliatory notes. Featured articles of the Chinese columnist more often than not blamed the history and geography of the locale for incidents of the kind. For one and all, the Indian media was the villain for hype. However, in diplomatic exchanges, beyond public glare, the stance of the Chinese mandarin was rather strident. It called for activation of 'crisis communication channels'.

It fitted well with China's new found tryst with 'coercive diplomacy'.¹⁶ On face of it, a platoon size intrusion was but a message. The real strength of the threat quite clearly stood conveyed in the robust military infrastructure build up in the rear of the locale of the stand off. It included 14 major air bases and a score of tactical airstrips in the Tibetan Plateau, railway line from Germu to Lhasa and its extensions to different special areas in pipeline, in particular Shigatse, 58,000 km of all weather road networks, hosts of command and control nodes and the like that could possibly facilitate induction of 30 Infantry Division in just a month's time. Battle testing of J-10 Strike Fighters to hit targets in high altitude terrain of Tibet and hosts of other military activities in the recent past carried no different intent. Unusually low media tirade clearly demonstrated fair understanding of the limits of coercive diplomacy against a comparable power.

The manoeuvre did meet partial objectives of the Chinese mandarin. In the flag meetings, the Chinese side wanted a roll back of Indian plan to bolster its defense infrastructure and facilities. It included construction of bunkers and other developmental works in the area. It was broadly intended to blunt India's defense preparedness in the sector. In the eyes of scholarship in the field, China's concerns obliquely stemmed from its fear of 'India using the locale to set booby-traps to snap Sino-Pak road links'. There were then quite a few others who

¹⁴ <http://www.sunday-guardian.com/news/army-accessed-china-war-game-plan-did-not-enhance-security>

¹⁵ In a strategic move to give proxy war support to Pakistan in its 1965 adventures against India, China w antonly asked India to vacate Jelep La and Nathu La that then hosted observation post. These tw o passes lay on w atershed and hence, stood as natural boundary. Besides using loud speakers to malign India, the Chinese troops indulged in threatening postures. It used to advance in large number, and w ould w ithdraw on reaching a point. Strong Indian deployment served as a deterrent. In a show dow n at Nathu La tw o years later in September 1967, the Indian troops called the Chinese bluff. Jelep La slipped out as the Indian forces had shown magnanimity in vacating the position in 1965 to give diplomacy a chance.

¹⁶ Alexander George, *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1971; Barry Belchman and Stephen Kaplan, *Force without War: US Armed Forces as Political Instrument*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1978



looked at the development as rather classic Xún Zi (Hsün Tzu) ploy to browbeat and shame India. Notwithstanding, the locale otherwise served a virtual guard post for Indian defence of the eastern flank of Siachen glacier.

At long last, the Chinese side romped home at the end with India abandoning its encampment built in the wake of the Chinese intrusion.¹⁷ Besides, India conceded the Chinese demand to destroy a number of live-in-bunkers in the Chumar sector. The Chinese side was otherwise hammering hard for demolition of Indian listening and observation posts. The Chinese side did as well gun hard for India to commit against undocumented LAC passage of nomadic shepherd. Modernization plan of Daulat Beg Oldi and Nayoma airfields has literally been an eye shore for the Chinese. When all said and done, the Chinese manoeuvre ended up in a status quo ante.

Options and the Recourses

While difficult to foretell the future road map of the happenings of the kind, it is but pertinent for the South Block mandarins in the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to take stock of the constants and variables of its relationship with China of tomorrow in bilateral as much as multilateral strategic perspectives. There is objective necessity to read Chinese words and deeds in letter and spirit, and respond to every Chinese move, irrespective of the one stemming from the words and action of the state or non-state entities. As longitudinal study would suggest, the two are hands in glove and the latter act convenient tool to the agenda setting objectives of the former.

The India-Tibet border region stands more or less porous for geographical factors with relative differences in all the three sectors, namely western, middle and eastern. Lanka La, Niagzu Stream, Demchok, and Tashigong through the Emis pass constitute the major locale of the western sector of what is known as Aksai Chin and that of western boundary area of Ladakh. In the middle sector, one side, the area extends up to Spiti Valley and Shipkila Pass and the other side in the Garhwal area of Uttarakhand, the Satlui-Ganga watershed. In the eastern sector, the Indian Territory consisted of locale such as Tawang, Zemithang and Bumla of Arunachal Pradesh. Namkachu, Sumdrong Chu Valley, Asa-Pila-Maya area, the Athu-Pupu range region and certain other areas part of Dibang Valley and Kurung Kumey districts of Arunachal Pradesh now under illegal command and control of the Chinese PLA constituted the inalienable Indian Territory.

While the diplomatic means has proved its worth in diffusing the stand-off for an array of factors including China's limited military objective, the viable option for India remains to upgrade its military strategy to the avowed level of deterrence. It has to begin with putting in place all weather surveillance and reconnaissance system, constituting of sophisticated satellite, aerial and electronic means besides extensive use of UAV and electronic eavesdropping were the plausible options at the end of the Defense Ministry. Notwithstanding, the least that it could do is to raise and put in place one strike corps capable of responding to the Chinese Rapid Reaction Units, in particular 61st Motorized Infantry Division and 149th Motorized Infantry Division forming respectively parts of Lanzhou and Chengdu Military regions besides the border defence units in Tibet. There has to be identical thrust in upgrading capabilities of the Indian Air Force and the Indian Navy to call China's plausible bluff, as and when required. India can't afford to ignore the capabilities of the Chinese strategic missile force (SMF) units, deployed in its vicinity, in particular either of the three Brigades of 53 Base, cover desig-

¹⁷ Following detection of the intrusion, the ITBP unit had set up encampment of eight tents opposite the Chinese position.



nate 96201 unit with Headquarters in Kunming, Yunnan and two Brigade of 56 Base, cover designate 96351 unit with Headquarters in Xining, Qinghai. It could perhaps help India to respond effectively to China's stated and unstated defence and foreign policy objectives, which succinctly boil down in commoner's parlance to 'defend (*fáng wèi*), hold on (*jiān chí*) and foster (*zhù zhǎng*)' its core interests at all costs in the ultimate go. All talks and debates in the Chinese intellectual space on the merits of 'comprehensive national power' (*zōnghé guóli*) ensued and found flip since 1990s just to this finer ends.

Here on, as in the past to some extent, the MEA component of the South Block decision makers has to acquit well in both track II and track I diplomatic endeavours. The odds included working through Chinese well laid strategic traps while weathering storms at home front. As of now, the mechanism at work at the diplomatic-bureaucratic level comprised of the agreement on confidence building measures (CBM) of 1996, additional protocol of 2005 and the joint mechanism set up in 2012 to address the fallout of transgressions and other issues. Remedial measures included flag meetings (initiated at Chushul in 1978), border personnel meetings (typically four or five a month), courtesy calls on national days, hot lines between local commanders, etc. The DBO stand-off and latest incident at Chumar exposes their vulnerability. But for high end diplomatic and political manoeuvres, it was hard to break the ice. It leaves an operational imperative for Indian the institutional and individual think tanks to organize conjointly to know and understand the minds of new dispensation of the Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping, and call the bluff, if any.

Remarks:

Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the authors.



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