

THE LAC CRISIS AND THE DANGER OF LOSING WITHOUT FIGHTING

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'India is under pressure on the border, and it needs to find a way to transfer that pressure back to China' | Photo Credit: AP

It was in the first week of May 2020 that news broke of [ingress by China's People's Liberation Army \(PLA\) in multiple areas](#) across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh. Three years later, some of those areas have [witnessed disengagement](#) — pulling troops apart by a few miles of buffer zones — while two of them, [Depsang and Demchok, remain unresolved](#). Indian soldiers [cannot touch 26 of the 65 patrolling points](#) in Ladakh.

Neither diplomatic meetings nor talks between corps commanders have elicited any progress since September last year; regular meetings between Indian and Chinese Ministers, Foreign and Defence, have not yielded results either. Beijing has ignored Delhi's talking points, even after they have been watered down so much that India no longer demands a return to the status quo of April 2020. Verbose non sequiturs in Indian statements can hardly cover up the government's failure in handling the current China crisis.

During the 2013 Depsang crisis, the United Progressive Alliance was in power, the current External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar was India's Ambassador to Beijing and the current Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, Lt. Gen. K.T. Parnaik (retired) was the Northern Army Commander. The PLA had then blocked Indian patrols at Bottleneck or Y-Junction, the same place where it has now blocked them in Depsang since 2020. Within three weeks, the PLA had been forced to lift the block after the Indian Army, as per Lt. Gen. Parnaik, launched a quid pro quo operation on the Chinese side in Chumar. Negotiations followed, including in Beijing, and the status quo as it existed before PLA's block was restored.

The criticism of the government over those three weeks was deafening. Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat, argued that the problem was not on the border but in Delhi. He also asked why our soldiers were vacating the area after disengagement if they were on Indian territory.

Most media reports were strident in criticising the government then, but the same journalists have been silent when the very same spot has been blocked by the PLA for over three years. Their constant labelling of Depsang as a legacy issue disconnected with the current crisis so offended former Ladakh Corps Commander, Lt. Gen. Rakesh Sharma (retd.) that he was

compelled to pen a strong rejoinder. However, misleading claims about Depsang continue to be regurgitated.

Unlike mainstream media, the military brass (this includes the Indian Army chief General Manoj Pande, and the Northern Army Commander, Lt. Gen. Upendra Dwivedi) has been more forthcoming about the ground realities. The cover up emanates from the political leadership, in the silence of the Prime Minister and the Home Minister or by way of the deceptive euphemisms of the External Affairs Minister. The reason is known even to watchers in Washington DC. A White House official until 2021, Lisa Curtis, wrote recently that the government of the day “might not want its public to know the full extent of PLA activities in disputed areas as this might become fodder to protest government incompetence or inaction”.

Incompetence may be a function of capability, but inaction seems to be driven by fear — a fear of military escalation in case India were to attempt a proactive move in disputed border areas to unsettle Beijing. If negotiations are about ‘give and take’, New Delhi must militarily take something that its diplomats can then give at the table. Devoid of that, Beijing holds all the cards. No one can deny that China is a much bigger economic, military, industrial and geopolitical power than India, but the gap shrinks considerably when it comes to local balance on the LAC. If Russia is unable to vanquish Ukraine, Chinese President Xi Jinping knows that China cannot militarily walk over India.

The decision rests with the Prime Minister but he seems haunted by the ghost of 1962. Many officials believe that Jawaharlal Nehru was pushed into a military confrontation with China then because of domestic pressure created by the likes of the Swatantra Party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The Prime Minister does not wish to fall into that trap. They are right. Mr. Modi is no Nehru. Nehru faced Parliament and answered questions regularly, even during the 1962 conflict. Unlike Nehru’s time, the public relations and propaganda machinery now has fabricated such a hyper-nationalist narrative that more than 70% Indians contend that India can militarily defeat China. The pressure on Mr. Modi to militarily deliver, when the ruling party’s political campaigns have ridden the hype of so-called ‘Surgical Strikes’ and Balakot airstrike, is even greater.

Over nine years, Mr. Xi seems to have got the measure of Mr. Modi. Mr. Xi sent PLA soldiers to Chumar even as there was intense media focus and the hyped optics during the Xi visit to Ahmedabad, Gujarat, in 2014. The Chinese leader rebuffed the Indian leader’s plea in Beijing in 2015 to delineate the LAC, has blocked India’s entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and has remained vague about the outcomes of informal summits. Satellite imagery shows that the Chinese were already building massive military infrastructure in Ladakh by the time the Second Informal Summit was taking place in Mamallapuram, off Chennai, in late 2019. However, Mr. Modi’s faith in the force of his personality and personal charm to win over the Chinese leader, such as by offering a handshake and having a chat in Bali last November, did not result in even a telephone call, let alone a breakthrough on the Ladakh border.

India is under pressure on the border, and it needs to find a way to transfer that pressure back to China. Beijing has never compromised unless it has been forced into an uncomfortable spot — a tactic India has deployed since Nathu La in 1967. This warrants India to be proactive, which calls for the political leadership to boldly use its imagination. If the political leadership is timid and fearful, the military on the China border will remain in a defensive posture. If strategic thought in Delhi lacks boldness, tactical actions on the LAC will not be daring. After all, the military is used as an instrument by states to pursue policy ends, to try and impose its will upon the adversary.

India’s failure to impose its will upon China is a direct consequence of its fear of military

escalation, in the backdrop of the ghost of 1962 that hovers over the top political leadership's thinking. Three years after the border crisis began, a status quoist approach can no longer be the answer. India will have to wrest the initiative from China; else things will happen only at a time and place of Beijing's choosing. Mr. Modi's personal success may lie in avoiding another 1962 but it would be a national failure for India. Unlike 1962, China would have now won without fighting.

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