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POST WUHAN - IMPERATIVE TO ENSURE PEACE AND TRANQUILITY ALONG THE LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL(LAC)



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“Strategic guidance to the respective militaries to strengthen communication to build mutual understanding and enhance predictability and effectiveness in managing borders”

Outcome of Wuhan Informal meeting between PM Modi and President Xi Jinping- 28 Apr 2018

The informal meeting at Wuhan on 27 and 28 April, between PM Modi

and President Xi Jinping, two of the worlds most powerful leaders is indeed historic in many ways. Wuhan provided the perfect setting and optics for the two leaders, both endowed with extraordinary communication strategies, to reset the stressed India-China relations in an effort to create conditions for the Asian Century, global peace, progress and prosperity.

There were eight significant take aways from the meet, however, two of



them directly relate to the longstanding vexed “Boundary Question”. This is the key issue and the primary concern of the two leaders and the two nations. India and China share a 3488 km long disputed border though as per China’s stated stance the disputed border is only 2000 Kms. China also lays claim to a little over 110,000 Sq kms of India’s territory. The Sino-Indian border is a peculiar set of contradictions, being the longest disputed border in the world as also the most peaceful disputed border, with the last shot in anger fired in October of 1975. A fragile peace exists ever since, with the disputed borders being the ever present potential driver for conflict between the two nuclear armed neighbours - home to one third of humanity.

The 73 day Doklam standoff between the Indian Army and the PLA and the subsequent build up of infrastructure and deployment by PLA in North Doklam led to the world’s two largest armies mobilizing part of the forces ostensibly to conduct large scale training exercises including ‘Gagan Shakti’. There is thus an urgent need to lower the temperatures and ensure continued peace and tranquility along the 3488 km India-China border. A definite political compulsion for both leaders, a win-win situation for not only India and China but also for the

two leaders personally. Both PM Modi and President Xi should be more than content in having ensured continued peace and tranquility along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with the two leaders agreeing to issue **“strategic guidance to the respective militaries to strengthen communication to build mutual understanding and enhance predictability and effectiveness in managing borders”** as reported in Times of india of 29 April.

The ongoing P&T over the last four decades is the result of the Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) based on the five agreements between the two nations. It is an imperative for the Indian army and the ITBP to ensure an effective border management posture. It is important to understand, reiterate and reinforce the existing agreements and CBMs. As a first step of understanding the existing CBMs which have been effective in ensuring P&T are reiterated in succeeding paras.

As the borders are disputed, there is a constant and continuous effort by the border guarding forces of China and India to lay claims to their claimed territories. The India-China border is defined by disputed and imaginary lines. The first being the disputed international border, a



legacy of British India and the treaties with Tibet. The second is the Line of Actual Control (LAC). India has its perception of the LAC whereas China has its own perception. To compound the confusion as there is no common understanding of the LAC, India has its own perception of China's perception as China too has its perception of India's perception of the LAC. There are number of pockets which are disputed and hence both Indian Army and the PLA patrol these areas. On account of differing perceptions of the LAC, transgressions/intrusions by PLA in Indian territory is a common occurrence. These intrusions often lead to a "face off" between Indian Army and ITBP troops and the PLA. The "face offs" generally last a few hours, but a few like the one in Doklam last year, Chumar in September 2014 and Depsang Plains in Apr/May 2013 have carried on for longer, threatening peace and tranquility (P&T), and were finally resolved by negotiations at various levels. These "Face offs" are a potential flash point and can lead to a skirmish and spiral into a conflict, and thus need to be prevented. In addition to these frequent "Face Off", patrols of the two armies often meet and interact along the LAC. These interactions and meetings are mostly cordial and professional, however

there are occasions wherein certain contentious issues crop up which need maturity and discipline on the part of the leaders and troops on the ground, who operate within the parameters enshrined in the various agreements. Thus it is important especially for all military commanders and staff officers to understand the existing CBMs, structures and various mechanisms which continue to contribute to P&T.

The India-China relationship is one of the most fascinating relationships between two major powers in spite of major differences on the Boundary Question between the two countries. The way they have managed the relationship ever since the war of 1962 is a remarkable achievement. The border between the two countries, notwithstanding occasional intrusions, remains peaceful and tranquil and this speaks of the salience of the CBMs between the two countries. Ensuring P&T along the LAC is one of the most difficult though least recognised task undertaken in hostile and adverse weather and terrain conditions. It needs to be factored that the LAC lies at heights varying from 4000m to 5500m, with poor or nonexistent infrastructure on the Indian side, forcing ab initio deployment of forces for both border guarding and border defence. **The credit in major part is**



due to the discipline, commitment and maturity of the leaders and soldiers of the Indian Army, as also the PLA who man these disputed borders.

There exists, what may be called, a persistent security dilemma between India and China. Although, there have been no major conflicts between the countries after 1962, there have been reports of border incursions from time to time, and tension has also built up across the border. In the post-1962 period, there was a major skirmish in 1967 at Nathula (Sikkim), where the Indian troops stood their ground and the PLA came out second best. After the restoration of the diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1976, the prevailing P&T was threatened when the Sumdorong Chu incursion occurred in 1986. This incident brought the two countries almost to the brink of war, which in turn impelled the two sides to explore ways and means for defence cooperation and military engagement. It is in this backdrop that it is significant to revisit the working of the CBMs between India and China in the field of defence cooperation and military engagement particularly at a time when there is, as mentioned earlier, a security dilemma and some degree of trust deficit between the two countries, which can be discerned from

the bolstering of defence capabilities of both the countries.

The prevailing equilibrium along the LAC is enshrined in the Five Treaties between India and China which detail the confidence building measures (CBMs) and military engagements contributing to the ongoing P&T.

Maintenance of P&T Along the LAC In The India China Border Areas- Agreement of September 1993

This is the first agreement which focussed on evolving a framework of CBMs between India and China. This spirit towards expanding mutual understanding and cooperation is the result of the historic visit by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in December 1988 to Beijing. This visit was followed by Chinese Premier, Li Peng, to India in December 1991 and by President R. Venkataraman, to China in May 1992. The pathbreaking 1993 P&T agreement was signed during Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao's visit to Beijing in September 1993. This agreement in a major way contributes to P&T. A Joint Working Group was set up on the Boundary Question, which in its Eighth Round in New Delhi (August 1995) agreed to dismantle four closest military posts on the border, thus reducing tension and setting up four border trade posts and border

meeting points between the military personnel. Interactions along the border meeting points resolved many a contentious issue at the tactical level and has led to better understanding of each others perspective. Meetings are generally very cordial though formal affairs but the post meeting meals have known to last many hours where informal engagements and discussions facilitate bridging the trust deficit.

AGREEMENT ON CONFIDENCE BUILDING MEASURES IN THE MILITARY FIELD ALONG

THE LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL - November 1996

Signed during the visit of President Jiang Zemin to New Delhi, this agreement carries forward the positive process of evolving Sino-Indian CBMs and charts out various CBMs specific to the military deployed along the LAC, covering a whole range of issues from deployment of troops for training exercises to air violations, and more importantly defines the process of resolution of differences. Defence analysts on both sides describe this agreement as the first “No War” Pact between India and China. The strength of this agreement lies in its being very specific in pointing out the areas of agreement, something which is normally not possible amongst

former adversaries who continue to have disputed borders. Article 1 of the agreement reads:

“Neither side shall use its military capability against the other side. No armed forces deployed by either side in the border areas along the line of actual control as part of their respective military strength shall be used to attack the other side, or engage in military activities that threaten the other side or undermine peace, tranquillity and stability in the India-China border areas.”

Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question - April 2005.

This agreement defines the way forward to resolve the boundary Question based on the **principle of mutual and equal security**, on the basis of the Five Principles of Panchsheel. It also lays down the need to qualitatively upgrade the bilateral relationship at all levels and in all areas while addressing differences through peaceful means in a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable manner. More importantly for India it also includes at Article VII *“In reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in*



the border areas.” The two sides also agreed that references to the line of actual control in this agreement do not prejudice their respective positions on the boundary question, thus paving the way for defining the LAC. It is another issue that no progress has been made to arrive at a common understanding of the LAC, a core issue addressed by Prime Minister Modi during his visit to China in May.

Border Defence Cooperation Agreement - October 2013.

The Border Defence Cooperation Agreement signed on 23 Oct 2013 during the visit of the then Indian PM Mr Manmohan Singh to Beijing is a contemporary and comprehensive agreement. This agreement though on the drafting board earlier was given the much needed impetus by the 20 day long “standoff” at DEPSANG, between the Indian army and the PLA in Apr-May 2013. This standoff threatened the lasting P&T and is an indicator of occurrences of more such sensitive face offs. The BDCA reiterates and reposes confidence in the four earlier agreements and resolves to ensure P&T along the LAC and the need for Cooperation between the world’s two largest armies especially along the borders. Some of the highlights of the agreement being “NO TAILING”

by patrols, establishment of a hotline between the Director General of Military Operations, Flag meetings, meetings of regional commanders, Border personnel meetings in all sectors, joint control of smuggling, exchange of cultural programmes and non contact games, and most importantly gives a new and positive direction as enshrined in Article VII

“In case a doubtful situation arises with reference to any activity by either side in border areas where there is no common understanding of the line of actual control, either side has the right to seek a clarification from the other side. In such cases, the clarification shall be sought and replies to them shall be conveyed through any of the mechanisms established under Article III of this Agreement.”

Many defence analysts and strategists are very critical of the BDCA, little analysing the need and the various provisions in the Articles which not only reiterate the existing mechanisms but chart out a positive way forward, opening up fresh avenues, meeting points and channels for continued P&T.

CBM - Structures and Mechanisms

The historic informal meeting at Wuhan is a sure indicator of the will of the two strong and pragmatic

leaders to strengthen the strategic partnership, and continue with bilateral engagements, without the Boundary Question retarding the spirit of cooperation. Among the existing mechanisms at the apex level is the Special Representative(SR) talks , headed by the NSA on the Indian side and the state councillor on the Chinese side. 20 rounds of talks have been held, with the last one held at New Delhi between Shri Ajit Doval, National Security Advisor and Mr. Yang Jiechi, State Councillor on 22 December 2017.

The next structure for defence cooperation and CBMs is the Annual Defence Dialogue (ADD) headed by the Defence Secretary. The ADD is a platform for extensive talks between the two militaries on defence cooperation, LAC management, military engagement and sharing of perspectives about the evolving regional security situation.

One of the most important structure to ensure P&T is the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) on India-China Border Affairs. Headed by a Joint Secretary(East Asia) , it has a military representative from the Army and the ITBP. From the Chinese side it is headed by the PLA, who can

not comprehend the Indian systems wherein important military to military matters are not headed by the army. WMCC is the primary mechanism for management of boundary affairs at Delhi/ Beijing. DGMO level hotline once functional as recently agreed during the PM's visit will become the primary mechanism for ensuring P&T.

In addition to the Delhi - Beijing based mechanisms, there are equally important military -military CBMs at the level of the border forces. There are hotlines and established procedures for formal Flag Meetings between the sector and brigade commanders at Border personnel meeting (BPM) points at Spanggur (Eastern Ladakh), NathuLa (Sikkim) and Bum La (Tawang/Arunachal). Additional BPMs points at Dualat Beg Oldi (Ladakh-Depsang) and Kibithoo (Anjaw district) in Eastern Arunachal Pradesh on the banks of the Lohit river have further strengthened this mechanism. These hot lines and Border Personnel Meetings (BPM) are conducted as and when either side seeks to resolve certain issues. In addition there are formal meetings which are laid down like on India's independence day and PLA day. These have proved to be of immense value and over the years have been the prime contributor to the existing P&T.

Military - military contacts are of



immense value and need to be taken to the next level. India- China Joint exercise 'Hand- in- Hand' should be held annually. Regional and military commanders need to visit and engage with each other, noncontact games and joint tactical exercises at the tactical level coordinated at the BPM points will enhance the CBMs. More number of visits by either side especially of young officers will further understanding at all levels.

Over the last year and early 2018, there has been a considerable increase in the number of incursions and as the surveillance means and the Infrastructure along the borders improves, so will the incursions and consequent "FACE OFF's" increase, both in frequency, intensity and scope thus putting a continuous and constant strain on the border guarding forces to maintain equilibrium, patrol their respective claimed areas and at the

same time ensure P&T. An additional factor is the ever increasing demand of the local population on land and grazing areas, leading to the intervention of troops from both sides to protect the locals and stand by their viewpoint.

The India - China strategic partnership is contingent upon peace and tranquility along the borders. How the CBMs contribute to P&T, till a final and mutually acceptable resolution of the Boundary Question, will be the key factor in determining the future path of Sino-Indian relations. The two leaders PM Modi and President Xi Jinping at Wuhan have demonstrated a political will to strengthen the strategic partnership and ensure P&T along the India- China border. It is now incumbent on the Indian Army and the PLA to ensure that the political directions are implemented in letter and spirit.

The views expressed are that of the author. Part of this paper has been published earlier in the FORCE Magazine of July 2015.

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