

Sino-Indian Border Skirmishes Towards a Limited Confrontation?

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India's Northeast and Ladakh have become the focal point of Sino-Indian diplomatic wrangling over the past few months. Until recently, Beijing seemed quite content to 'leave things to future generations' when it came to settling both countries' 4,057km-long border. The recent flurry of diplomatic spats and an upsurge in Chinese incursions (some sources have claimed that there have been over 150 this year alone) seem to indicate a growing Chinese intolerance for the status quo.

Is there a larger design behind these Chinese skirmishes? How strong is the Indian response? Is there a likelihood of a limited India-China border confrontation?

India's Northeast & Sikkim: New Chinese Tensions

In the recent months, there have been reports, that the PRC had been attempting for months to block a 2.9 billion dollar loan to India from the Asian Development Bank on the grounds that it contained a 60 million dollar package for funding water management projects in Arunachal Pradesh, which is disputed territory. In July 2009, Indian External Affairs Minister S.M Krishna confirmed these rumours in the Rajya Sabha, declaring that "China did not endorse the Country Partnership Strategy (CPS) 2009-12 for India in the Board of the ADB on the ground that the proposed India CPS involved technical assistance funding for the Flood and River Erosion Management Project in Arunachal Pradesh which China claims is its territory." He also stated that the Indian government had reacted by conveying "to the ADB member nations including China that Arunachal Pradesh is "an integral part of India and its status is not negotiable." According to MP Kiren Rijju, Chinese incursions increased fourfold during 2007-08.

When former Prime Minister Vajpayee visited Beijing in 2003, he made a significant gesture

towards China by reasserting its sovereignty over Tibet. In return, or so it was thought by some at the time, the PRC gave up its claim over Sikkim. Although there was no official declaration to such effect by the authorities in Beijing, for some time it was thought that the Sino-Indian 'barter' had indeed taken place, as official Chinese maps began to show Sikkim as part of India.

Unfortunately, China seems to have reneged on its 'informal promises' by frequently sending troops to probe Indian defences over a small tract of Northern Sikkim referred to as the Finger Area, and threatening to destroy ancient stone cairns in the area. Last year, Indian surveyors were alarmed to discover that China was quietly building a new East-West road that cut through the Finger Area. Construction grounded to a halt once Delhi strenuously raised their objections. For the time being, the Indian government has been reluctant to broach the topic of these incursions in front of the media, but Union Minister of Defence A K Antony has confirmed that the event took place, even though he and other high-ranking army sources prefer, for the time being to downplay them, characterizing them as "misconception over the LAC" on the part of China.

The Sikkim imbroglio brings to mind certain episodes during the optimistically named 'Hindi Chini bhai bhai era', in the 1950s, when Chinese officials would show their Indian counterparts maps laying claim to vast tracts of Indian territory and brush off their concerns by stating that they were merely outdated Kuomintang maps. Indian policymakers need to realize once and for all that in the absence of a formalized, signed declaration, informal 'promises' from the Chinese are worthless.

For the time being, India's response to the rise in Chinese hostility seems to have consisted of curious blend of diplomatic timidity and military assertiveness. The Indian armed forces' response to PLA incursions has been swift and forceful in nature. General J J Singh, the Governor of Arunachal

Pradesh announced in June that India would be deploying two extra divisions of approximately 25,000 to 30,000 each to the region, and that this military presence on the ground would be supplemented in the air by a newly inducted squadron of 18 Sukhoi Su-30MIK Aircraft which would operate from the Tezpur airfield in Assam. In Sikkim, Delhi has decided to re-induct the 27 Mountain Division, while strengthening defensive positions along the northern border and deploying T-72 heavy battle tanks.

After these announcements, China almost immediately expressed its dissatisfaction via an exceptionally shrill editorial in the *Global Times* in June, an English tabloid edited by the People's Daily which is, in turn, controlled by the CCP. In the short but hard-hitting piece, titled "India's Unwise Military Moves", China rails against India's recent military moves, declaring that officials in Delhi are "engaging in wishful thinking" by believing that they can compete with China or force the latter "to compromise in its border disputes with India".

Whereas the Indian government has been firm in its military management of the border dispute, it remains remarkably timid on the diplomatic front. Manmohan Singh's visit to Arunachal Pradesh last year was a surprisingly low key affair; the Prime Minister did not even visit the Tawang Monastery for fear of provoking Chinese ire. Similarly, there have been unconfirmed reports that the IAF was urged to cancel or downplay its planned induction ceremony for the Sukhoi aircraft in Assam in order, once again, to not upset the powerful neighbour.

II A LIMITED BORDER CONFRONTATION?

The deterioration of the security situation along the LAC has led some preeminent Indian analysts such as Bharat Verma, the editor of Indian Defence Review, to issue dire projections on the probability of a Chinese attack on India's Northeast by 2012 or 2017. (For some reason, these are the two dates that pop up each time)

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The motives for such an aggression are multiple. Arunachal Pradesh, which is still stubbornly referred to by the PRC as 'Southern Tibet', has immense strategic and symbolic significance for the Chinese, especially with regard to Tibet. The epicentre of Chinese claims over the 90,000 sq. km. state is the 327 year-old monastery of Tawang, which was the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama, and which is considered by many to be one of the most powerful bastions of freely practiced Tibetan Buddhism in the region.

In 2008 the current Dalai Lama, who is ageing and suffering from unspecified health problems, gravely alarmed Beijing by declaring that his successor would most likely be born outside of Chinese occupied Tibet. In the event of the demise of the religious leader, the PLA could be tempted to preemptively quash any Tibetan dissent by launching a lightning strike against the Tawang tract, and by taking over the monastery. The young Dalai Lama could then be whisked away by the Chinese authorities and moulded into a perfectly compliant cadre of the Chinese Communist Party. Occupation of the monastery would not only forestall the reincarnation of the next Dalai Lama in Indian administered territory, it would also be a colossal moral blow to the Tibetan independence movement.

Strategically speaking, occupation of Arunachal Pradesh holds many advantages. Unlike the Tibetan Autonomous region, Arunachal Pradesh is a richly forested area. Furthermore, it is also rich in minerals and natural gas, and would enable China to establish a trijunction with Myanmar, a country in which it has been steadily shoring up its influence over the past twenty years. If Chinese armed forces were to establish a presence in the state, they would strategically overlook the Brahmaputra valley, which would in turn enable them to overrun the plains of Assam. In the case of Sikkim, a Chinese invasion would allow the PRC to absorb some of Tibetan Buddhism's largest remaining monasteries, and, in the event of a protracted conflict with India, to swoop down on the narrow Siliguri corridor and effectively cut off Delhi from the entirety of its north-eastern provinces. China would also be able to encircle the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan and forcibly drag it into an arc of Chinese influence spreading from Nepal to Bangladesh.

Indian commentators pursue their analysis by stating that a successful lightning border war against India would greatly strengthen Chinese prestige in Asia and ensure Beijing's supremacy in the continent for the rest of the century. It would also enable China to divert attention from its growing internal unrest, whether it be due to increasingly restive minorities or soaring

socioeconomic disparities, by instrumentalizing ever vivacious Han nationalism.

Dire projections and apocalyptic simulations put aside however, what is the real likelihood of such an event actually taking place in the near future? Both countries' armed forces have apparently envisioned such a possibility. D.S Rajan, in a recent report for the South Asia Analysis Group, discusses some of the more worrying aspects of recent Chinese strategic thought.

There have been discussions, amongst some Chinese military analysts, in institutes like the China Institute of International Strategic Studies, of the tactical benefits of launching what they call a 'partial' or 'limited' war; and the Indian military recently engaged in a war scenario codenamed 'Divine Matrix', which attempted to predict the outcome of a lightning high-tech Chinese assault before 2017. It is natural, though, for a country's armed forces to partake in such simulations in order to heighten their state of awareness. It does not mean that such a conflict is a foregone conclusion. There remain many obstacles to the materialization of this doomsday vision.

Such an act of aggression would engender widespread international condemnation, and throw years of painstaking work in favour of Sino-Indian normalization to wreck and ruin. Furthermore, the PRC's strategic vision remains, for the most part, trained on its sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea and on the Taiwan issue. The border squabble with India, while important, remains somewhat peripheral when compared to these concerns. The government in Beijing also has to deal with rising internal unrest and fissiparous movements in Xinjiang, Kham and the TAR. This means that Beijing's attention will most likely be focused elsewhere.

While China holds a sizeable advantage in terms of conventional power in the Himalayas, India is still very much capable of giving the PLA a military response in select areas along the LAC, such as Ladakh. Recent upgrading by the IAF of high altitude airstrips and the presence of highly decorated mountain troops such as the Ladakh 'Snow Tiger' Scouts unit, place India in a relatively strong position. Nobody in China's strategic community wants a repeat of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war, which was meant to be a 'swift lesson' and which instead saw the Chinese advance falter and then get bogged down due to unexpectedly heavy Vietnamese resistance. All these elements, when combined, severely mitigate the likelihood of such a war taking place.

One major issue that could definitively remove the Sino-Indian border issue from China's strategic

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backburner - is the question of the Dalai Lama's succession and the fear of further unrest in Tibet after his death. If the security situation in Chinese controlled Tibet was to rapidly deteriorate, chances of a border conflict occurring would be heightened.

As Mohan Malik, from the University of Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu points out in an interview to Asia Times Online, the probability of an all-out conflict is extremely low, but the prospect that some of India's road building projects in disputed areas could lead to tensions and skirmishes with Chinese border patrols cannot be completely ruled out. An upsurge in such border clashes could then spiral into a conflict, which would most probably take the form of a blitzkrieg PLA assault on Arunachal Pradesh, with the ultimate goal being the seizure once and for all of the Tawang Tract.

III

PREPARING FOR A WORST CASE SCENARIO

Although some of the projections of an imminent border conflict may seem overblown, India cannot afford to remain unprepared. Despite recent efforts in terms of troop deployment, the balance of power along the LAC still is firmly in China's favour. The PRC has been massively building up infrastructure in Tibet over the past few years, and the 2008 riots in Lhasa provided Beijing with the perfect excuse to flood the region with additional military personnel.

Chinese forces in Tibet now consist of at least two entire mountain brigades (the 52nd and 53rd), of the 149th Mobile Division of the 13th Group Army, and of elements of the Second Artillery. Infrastructure, whether in terms of the construction of highways, all-weather roads or the extension of the Golmund Lhasa high altitude railway, has been vastly improved.

Infrastructure on the Indian side of the border, however, remains woefully inadequate in comparison. In many places along the LAC,

Chinese soldiers can simply drive up to the border while Indian jawans sometimes have to trek more than 10 to 15 km through steep mountainous terrain. Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim are both states with amongst the lowest road density per square km in India.

For a long time, New Delhi's policy towards its border regions seemed to be one of 'masterly inactivity'; either in order not to heighten its overbearing neighbour's suspicions, or, as some have advanced, in order to deny Chinese military forces the use of Indian transport infrastructure if and when they crossed the border. Whatever be the reason, the Indian government seems to have finally decided to do away with its traditionally passive mindset.

Over the past three years a bevy of road and other infrastructure projects in the border areas have been given the green light. More than 3 billion dollars have been set aside to address the dearth in roads in the Northeast, and their construction, which was until recently confined to military engineers, has now been opened up to the private sector as well.

IV CONCLUSIONS

It will take time and a considerable amount of additional funding in order to address the glaring strategic deficiency along India's borders.

Until then, the Indian Air force has been opening and upgrading airstrips all along the border, not only in Assam, but also in West Bengal, Ladakh, and Bihar. The deployment of additional divisions to Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim is only the premise for a major reorientation of India's armed forces to its northeastern borders. The future of this redirection rests in large part on the evolution of Indo-Pakistan ties. If, in time, tensions in-between both South Asian states subside, India will be able to refocus more effectively on the border it shares with China.

In the meantime, India must pursue the difficult task of continuing to strengthen its presence in the region, while maintaining its efforts to normalize ties with an increasingly susceptible and expansionist neighbour.

Albert Einstein once said that one cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war. Unfortunately, that is exactly what India will have to do.

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