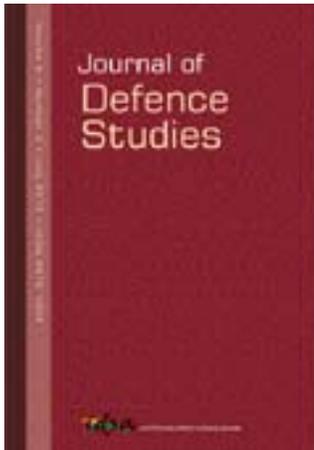


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Chinese Intrusion into Ladakh An Analysis

*Mandip Singh**

The intrusion by the Chinese Army in the Ladakh sector of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) was first reported by the media on 15 April 2013. Initial reports indicated that about 30–40 armed soldiers of the Chinese Army had set up three to four tents in the area of Depsang Bulge, south east of Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO). Subsequently, media reports indicated that the Government had accepted this intrusion to be 19 km from the LAC, inside Indian territory. The Depsang Bulge is east of the River Shyok and close to DBO, an old forward airfield, recently activated as part of the infrastructure development plan of the Indian armed forces in the Ladakh sector. The intrusion became significant because it was the first time that a transgressing patrol had set up camp and indicated its will to continue to stay put and proclaim, by way of banners, the area to be Chinese territory.

In the past, reports of transgressing patrols were common place and stand-offs or face-to-face situations were rare. Realizing the possibility of a mis-calculation or armed confrontation, both countries decided to sign a number of confidence building measures (CBMs). Notable and relevant to the present incident is the 'Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Confidence-Building Measures Along The Line Of Actual Control In The India-China Border Areas', signed on 29 November 1996; the 'Protocol

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between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Modalities for the Implementation of Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas', signed on 11 April 2005; and the 'India-China Agreement on the Establishment of a Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs', signed on 17 January 2012. These agreements lay down the guidelines and procedures to be adopted by both countries in the event of occurrence of such an incident on the LAC.

Box 1 Chronology of Events

15 April	Incursion by 30–40 PLA troops detected supported by two helicopters. Some reports indicate that two vehicles also transgressed the LAC.
16 April	Joint Secretary (East Asia) calls up his counterpart, Director General Border Affairs, in Beijing.
18 April	First flag meeting by field commanders. Chinese refuse to vacate area. Foreign Secretary summons Chinese Ambassador.
23 April	Second flag meeting in Chushul sect inconclusive.
23–24 April	Chief of Army Staff (COAS) visits J&K and meets Governor of J&K and CM.
25 April	COAS briefs National Security Advisor (NSA) and Defence Minister. External Affairs Minister announces visit to China on 9 May.
26 April	Joint Parliamentary Committee on Defence summons Defence Secretary and senior defence officials.
27 April	PM issues a statement.
30 April	Third flag meeting—China demands removal of permanent structures in Chumar and Fukche as pre-condition while India demands full withdrawal from the Depsang bulge first.
1 May	Reports of resupply of Chinese troops by trucks and pitching of additional tents (total 5).
3 May	Media reports that invitation of EAM to China not confirmed. By evening PRC confirms visit of EAM to India on 9–10 May.
4 May	Fourth Flag Meeting. PMO announces extension of PM visit to Japan by a day. EAM tells Iran that India is willing to contribute to upgradation of Chabahar port and North-South trade corridor linking Iran to Russia. DRDO announces activation of nuclear reactor of INS Arihant.
5 May	Fifth flag meeting. Both sides decide to pull back to pre-15 April status.

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THE INTRUSION

There has been much speculation in various media fora on the reasons for this intrusion. There is little doubt that most analysts were 'baffled' by the turn of events. Speculation was rife over the reasons for this intrusion and the Indian media was agog with theories. Listed below are some key theories that did the rounds, based on a study of media reports and briefs, talk shows and discussions with Indian analysts.

The Strategic Encirclement Theory

This theory talks of the larger China-Pakistan nexus of rendering the defence of Siachen Glacier untenable, thereby linking Aksai-Chin to the Shaksgam Valley. It is believed that Pakistan has larger plans of leasing Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) to China and that the resultant 'link-up' of the two regions would facilitate Chinese economic, energy and military interests.

The Rogue General Theory

This theory suggests that the intrusion has been forced by a group of individuals who are averse to Xi's and Li's policy of engaging India. This clique sees India as pro-US, was inclined to sabotage Li Keqiang's visit to New Delhi, and is motivated and influenced by an 'anti-US' lobby within the PLA.

The Early Settlement Theory

This group believes that the border dispute needs an early settlement in Aksai Chin. They quote Xi's meeting with Manmohan Singh in Durban on 27 March 2013, where he stated that he was for the settlement of the border dispute 'as soon as possible'. This intrusion is a way of bringing India to the table for an early negotiated settlement.

The Party-PLA Control Theory

This view has been quite popular and suggests that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) may be screening or testing the loyalty of the PLA by activating the frontiers. Some believe that commanders in the Coastal Military Regions (MRs) have been hogging the limelight and earning brownie points with the Party bosses over the Diaoyu and South China Sea, disputes leaving some commanders in the interior regions 'out of the loop'.

The Core Interest Theory

China has clearly enunciated its policy of no compromise on sovereignty issues. It qualifies this by designating Tibet, Taiwan and South China Sea as its 'core national interests'. With Taiwan and South China Sea already 'activated', there is a view that Tibet also needs to be given similar attention. The theory suggests an India hand in the disquiet in Tibet, self-immolations by monks and nuns, and the Dalai Lama's reincarnation tangle. Through this intrusion, the message is that Tibet is China's 'core interest' and that there would be no compromise on the border dispute.

The Testing Resolve Theory

This theory looks at testing the will and resolve of the Indian nation to respond to crisis situations. It analyses the Indian states political, military and diplomatic response to incidents, and aims at 'humiliating' the Indian state into submission without the use of force.

UNDERSTANDING CHINESE STRATEGIC THOUGHT

Whatever may have been the actual reason, it is important to understand Chinese strategic thinking and responses to similar incidents in the past. The Chinese have tended to observe certain well-established norms in their strategic discourse over a period of time. These give a fair idea of Chinese strategic thinking and need to be revisited while shaping a response strategy. These are discussed in some detail below.

The first is the CCP's absolute and unquestioned 'control over the gun'. The Party's control has been demonstrated time and again in recent incidents like the dispute over the Scarborough Shoal with Philippines and the ongoing stand-off at Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, which saw an exchange of water cannons between the Chinese and Japanese coast guards. All these have the blessings of the Party leadership. Keeping this in mind, it would be prudent to conclude that this operation had the full approval and sanction of the highest office in the Party.

The CCP leadership is in the process of establishing its control over the PLA. Ongoing operations in the South China Sea, the Diaoyu islands, and tensions on the North Korean Peninsula and the Sichuan earthquake have activated at least five out of the seven MRs: Shenyang MR and Beijing MR in Korean Peninsula, Nanjing MR in Diaoyu islands, Guangzhou MR in the South China Sea, and Chengdu MR in Sichuan earthquake. Since Jinan MR is designated as a reserve, the only inactive MR was Lanzhou

MR. With the Ladakh incident, this too has been activated. With as many as seven out of 10 new uniformed Central Military Commission members, five out of seven new Military Region Commanders and, by extrapolation, at least 11–12 new Combined Corps Commanders out of 18, the Party needed to separate the ‘horses from the mules’¹, testing the loyalties and capabilities of the entire new generation of commanders at all levels.

‘Winning without fighting’ continues to dominate the strategic discourse in China. China has seen three wars in Mao’s time and experienced victory only in those times: Korea (1950-54), India (1962) and Russia (1966). (These are ‘victories’ heralded in Chinese discourse.) Thus Mao’s dictums, his strategies and thought are likely to predicate the options exercised by the new leadership.

The Chinese have a propensity to ‘wait it out’, as was evident in the Sumdorong Chu incident, which stretched from June 1986 to November 1987.² A similar situation being played out at Depsang was very much a possibility.

‘Saving Face’ is a key part of the exit strategy. Chinese are unlikely to accept loss of face, and any solution that is not ‘in keeping with its international standing’ resulting in ‘loss of face’ may not be acceptable to them. The fact that other smaller nations, particularly in their neighbourhood, were observing China’s reactions to this incident would not have been lost to the leadership.

The Chinese respect force or the display of it. They are practical and back off if the losses in a situation outweigh the gains. The stand-off in Ussuri River with the Russians in 1966, Nathu La in 1967, and Somdurong Chu in 1986–87 forced Chinese to back off when they sensed ‘will and resolve’ by the adversary.

One of the key strategies adopted by the Chinese to shape the battlefield is the ‘three warfares strategy’. This involves use of psychological warfare, media warfare, and legal warfare to ‘pre-condition key area of interest in its favour’. Surprisingly, this strategy was not played out in the Depsang incident, suggesting that China was not particularly serious in pushing the issue further.

HOW DID THE CHINESE REACTIONS PLAY OUT?

The Chinese reactions were muted. Except for official statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson, there was no statement by the Chinese leadership or the PLA. The Chinese media too has played down the incident and, except for the official statement, very little was carried in

the Chinese media. The official statement by the MFA spokesperson, Hua Chunying at the beginning of the stand-off was:

I will like to reiterate that Chinese troops have always acted in strict compliance with relevant treaties and protocols between two countries regarding protection of peace and security of areas along the LAC, and China is committed to protecting peace and stability of border areas as well as a negotiated settlement of the boundary issue left over from history...*China's troops have never crossed the line* (author's emphasis).³

The Chinese English press did not cover the incident. Except for reproducing the official statement in a few papers, no editorials or reportage was noted suggesting that the Chinese media had been kept out of the loop or deliberately misinformed. However, the MFA spokesperson welcomed Indian Prime Minister's statement of 27 April 2013 and said:

We believe that China and India are wise and capable enough to handle the existing differences and problems while boosting friendly cooperation between the two countries.... What is important is that the two sides should resolve the problems by friendly consultation through the mechanisms and related channels.⁴

There was no display of aggression by the camping troops nor any indication of offensive intent. Except for a banner proclaiming the area to be Chinese territory, there was no other exchange of words or fire. There were reports in the Indian media that the PLA had resupplied and replenished the troops in the camp by trucks along an existing track. There were, however, no further reports on any details in any of the Chinese print or electronic media.

ACTIONS BY THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT

Diplomatic Action

Once the intrusion was detected, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) activated the procedures laid down in the two Agreements of 1996 and 2005 to control the situation. The Joint Secretary (East Asia) spoke to his counterpart in Beijing raising India's concerns over the intrusion. A flag meeting was called on 18 April 2013 between the field commanders, which failed to elicit any reaction from the Chinese. On the same afternoon, in an unprecedented step, the Indian Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai (in a break from protocol wherein the Joint Secretary would normally do the job), summoned the Chinese Ambassador to convey the Indian Government's

grave concern over the issue. This underlined the serious concerns of the Government. A press briefing by the MEA spokes person was forthcoming, although the contents were limited and restricted. Owing to lack of pictorials and details, the media was left with little option but to speculate.

On 25 April 2013, even as the Chinese troops continued to stay put in Indian territory, External Affairs Minister (EAM) Salman Khurshid announced his visit to China, raising hopes that a solution would be found within the existing mechanisms. The MEA strategy hinged on finding an amicable and peaceful solution before the first outbound visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to India in end-May. Meanwhile, there was no indication by the Government of any cancellation or postponement of the scheduled visit of the Indian Defence Minister to China. About the same time, an Indian military delegation led by a brigadier was in China from 22–25 April, 2013 to finalise details of Ex Hand-in-Hand, an army company level anti-terrorism exercise, agreed to be resumed in 2013 between the two armies. This delegation was not recalled.

It was apparent that the Indian Government was looking at hedging the incoming visit of the Chinese Premier to seek a withdrawal of the Chinese from Depsang.

Military Activity

The Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) and the Army set up tents 500 m from the Chinese tents on 16 April 2013. The soldiers were in eye contact with the Chinese and refrained from use of force or aggressive actions. The aim was to prevent any further expansion and contain the situation by 'localizing' it. Simultaneously, 5 Ladakh Scouts, an infantry battalion was moved to the area as a precautionary measure to react to any escalation of the situation. Unarmed aerial vehicles (UAVs) were activated to monitor movement and build-up of Chinese forces while units of the Ladakh-based 14 Corps were placed on high alert. Helicopter resupply was resumed by the Indian Air Force in the DBO airfield to the troops deployed in the sector.

The Army Chief visited Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) and reviewed the situation on 23–24 April 2013, almost a week after the detection of the intrusion. He met the State Governor and Chief Minister. On his return, he briefed the National Security Advisor (NSA), the Defence Minister and the Prime Minister. The Army and Air Chiefs also reviewed the situation with their respective commanders. It would be correct to assume that all options to end the intrusion would have been discussed at the highest level in the event of failure of diplomacy. The advantages of evicting an intrusion

in the shortest possible time, before the adversary has time to coordinate his defences and secure the area occupied, is obvious.

Political Activity

The political activity was subdued initially. But as the days wore on, the Opposition raised the ante in the Parliament. The Joint Parliamentary Committee on Defence summoned a hearing on 26 April 2013, in which the Defence Secretary and senior defence officials deposed before the panel. It was reported by the media that the Defence Secretary informed the Committee that the Chinese had intruded 19 km into Indian territory from the LAC. There was no official release of any statement or media briefing confirming the proceedings of the Committee's meeting.

After days of studied silence, the Prime Minister's statement on 27 April 2013 was noteworthy and had a salutary effect. It was widely carried by the official Chinese media and the Indian media. The Prime Minister said:

We do have a plan. We do not want to accentuate the situation. We do believe that it is possible to resolve this problem. It is a localised problem. Talks are going on [with China].⁵

Meanwhile, a large delegation of opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) met and petitioned the President of India on 3 May 2013, seeking a strong Government response to the Ladakh intrusion. They handed over a memorandum to the President seeking action by the Government to resolve the intrusion in Ladakh. 'We would like to remind the Government that silent acquiescence in the face of fait-accomplis, whether of Pakistan or China is unforgivable pusillanimity. This is simply not acceptable', the NDA memorandum said.⁶

THE RESOLUTION OF THE STANDOFF

The stand-off ended on 5 May 2013 at the fifth border meeting between the two field commanders. By 7 pm on the same day, both sides had pulled back from the area. In the entire duration of 20 days, not a shot was fired nor any confrontation reported by both sides.

The Chinese MFA spokesperson said on 7 May 2013:

Since the occurrence of the incident, China and India, with the larger interest of bilateral relations in mind, have taken a constructive and cooperative attitude, exercised restraint and maintained close communication and consultation through the border-related mechanism, border defence meetings and diplomatic channels. Maintaining peace

and tranquility in the China-India border areas serves the common interests of both sides. China is ready to work with India to seek a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution to the boundary question at an early date.⁷

The statement suggested that both sides exercised restraint by avoiding escalation and effectively utilised the existing CBMs to resolve the impasse peacefully. The statement also said that the stand-off was resolved 'with the larger interest of bilateral relations in mind', thereby ensuring that the first ever outbound visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, which was under a cloud of being called off by India, was salvaged.

The response in the Indian media was mixed. Since the stand-off terminated abruptly over the weekend, most papers and media channels continued with the 'buckling in' theory, some even charging that India had succumbed to pressure and surrendered tamely.⁸ Since the terms or conditions have not been released into the public domain, speculation continues.

OVERALL ANALYSIS

The DBO incident, as it came to be known, was a serious challenge for Indian diplomatic, political and military planners. It was the first time a routine transgression had the potential to escalate to a conflict situation, and such a possibility had not been anticipated.

The MEA was successful in negotiating a peaceful end to the stand-off with its counterpart in Beijing. However, it would be naïve to assume that the Chinese 'backed off' without extracting or achieving something substantial. It emerged that China had formally proposed a Border Defence Cooperative Agreement (BDCA) in March 2013 during the visit of the Deputy Chief of General Staff, Lt Gen Qi Jianghuo to India. According to a news report, 'The Chinese side had discussed these proposals informally during the Annual Defence Dialogue (ADD) also but India had then asked it to submit these points in a formal manner at a later stage.'⁹ The ADD was held in January 2013 in Beijing. The Indian response was not forthcoming and the MEA handed over its version of the BDCA to the Chinese only on 10 May, five days after the stand-off terminated at Depsang. It appears likely that the Chinese were keen to nudge India to agree to sign the BDCA during Li Keqiang's visit. To that extent, they succeeded in bringing the issue on the table. The details of this proposal have not been disclosed, nor was the BDCA signed during Li Keqiang's visit from 19–21 May 2013.

The incident also highlighted the absence of a coherent diplomatic-military-political response. While the MEA played the lead role, the turn of events did not reflect negotiation from a position of strength. The pacifist behaviour was evident from the huge importance that the Government seemed to give to Li Keqiang's visit. Whether a threat of cancellation was ever made will never be known, but statements by the EAM that 'both countries could not put in jeopardy years of investment and years of contribution we have made to this relationship because somewhere one little spot something goes wrong...that acne can be addressed by applying ointment'¹⁰, seemed to suggest that the response was cavalier and submissive. The entire strategy appeared to hinge on salvaging the Chinese Premier's visit to India. An indication of our weakness was that instead of the Chinese Foreign minister coming to India to coordinate his Premier's visit, in a break of protocol the Indian EAM went to China to coordinate the visit instead. While some quarters tom-tom that the Chinese withdrew due to successful Indian diplomacy, there are others who question India's decision to pull back at all if the intrusion was within what is considered Indian territory.¹¹

The military option requires serious consideration. At what stage would the option be exercised? Are local commanders empowered to take *suo moto* actions to remove such intrusions? In case military action is contemplated after diplomacy fails, the scale and level of use of force may be such that it may risk conflagration spreading to other parts of the LAC. Should India declare a pro-active policy on dealing with intrusions which attempts to change the status quo of the LAC? These questions may require to be debated. During the recent meeting of Li Keqiang and Manmohan Singh, both agreed that 'Pending the resolution of the boundary question, the two sides shall work together to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border areas in line with the previous agreements'¹², tasking their Special Representatives to work towards reviewing the existing agreements to ensure peace and tranquillity on the LAC. There are lacunae in the existing agreements which need to be reviewed.

One of the major lessons from this incident was India's inability to exploit the 'illegitimacy' of the intrusion by China. India was the victim, and even as attempts were made to follow the rules of the game, it was unable to get international opinion and support to rally behind it in condemning China actions. China prides itself in being righteous, just and fair, and shuns 'loss of face', whereas this incident does not lend any credibility to its international standing. This attempt by China to change the status quo could have been exploited to India's benefit.

The media has a major role in shaping perceptions. In the absence of regular media briefings or updates, the media resorted to speculation. A foreign analyst informed this author that the lack of proof of the intrusion provided by the Indian Government kept the foreign media away.¹³ In the absence of any rebuttal or statements to China's denial of the intrusion, there was hardly any mention in the international media. In fact, China had almost blanked out the incident in its own media. A study of seven English papers from China revealed that except for the official statement by the MFA spokesperson, no other news was reported in Chinese media for a large part of the stand-off. It is only after the Indian Premier's statement on 27 April 2013 that it found some coverage in the Chinese media. Keeping the media informed, even if it is selective, is advisable in moulding perceptions.

In sum, the Depsang intrusion took the Indian establishment by surprise. While it was resolved amicably, by use of diplomacy and tact, it raises questions about China's intentions in achieving a settlement of the border dispute. It also calls to question our responses at the strategic and tactical level. Clearly, the incident called for a tactical level response although it had strategic ramifications. Lack of a politico-military response, micro management, curbing initiative at the field commanders level, and suppression of information will not augur well for a rising power like India to respond to such intrusions in the future.

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