



All Quiet on the LAC

The border between India and China has been mostly peaceful and tranquil

INDIA AND CHINA SHARE A 3,488 km long disputed border. China also lays claim to a little over 1,10,000 sq km of India's territory, and as per China's stance the disputed border is only 2,000 km. 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 on 25 October 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.

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 territo-

ries. 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); of which, both India and China have their own perceptions.

To compound the confusion, as there is no common understanding of the LAC, India has its own perception of China's perception and China too has its perception of India's perception of the LAC. There are number of pockets which are disputed and hence both the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) patrol these areas. On account of differing perceptions of the LAC, transgressions/ intrusions by the

PLA in Indian territory is a common occurrence. These intrusions often lead to a 'face off' between Indian Army/ Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) troops and the PLA. The 'face offs' generally last a few hours but a few like the one in Chumar in September 2014 and Depsang Plains in April-May 2013 have carried on for longer, threatening peace and tranquillity (P&T), and were finally resolved by negotiations at various levels. These 'face offs' are a potential flash-points and can lead to a skirmish or spiral into a conflict, and thus need to be prevented. In addition to these frequent 'face offs', patrols of the two armies often meet and interact along the LAC. These interactions and meetings are mostly cordial and professional, howev-

FOSTERING TIES Author (standing on the extreme left) during Exercise Hand-in-Hand



er 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 Confidence Building Measures (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 substantive differences on the Boundary Question between the two countries. The way they have managed the relationship 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-in that the LAC lies at heights varying from 4,000m to 5,500m, with poor or non-existent 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 and the ITBP, 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 Nathu la (Sikkim), where the Indian troops stood their ground and the PLA came out second best. After the restoration of 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 coopera-

tion 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 Principles of Panchsheel and five treaties between India and China which detail the CBMs and military engagements contributing to the on-going P&T.

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The Panchsheel Agreement

The Panchsheel Agreement was basically a trade pact between China and India streamlining their bilateral trade in Tibet and, therefore, at the time of signing it was not visualised as a CBM, though it does in a matter of speaking lays down the framework for later agreements of 1993, 1996, 2005 and 2013. The essence of the Panchsheel agreement is:

'The two sides emphasised that the five principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence, constitute the basic guiding principles for good relations between states.'

The lasting significance of this agreement lies in the fact that this was the first document where both India and China enunciated the famous 'Five Principles' of peaceful coexistence which today form the very basic framework of present CBMs.

P&T Along the LAC

The agreement of September 1993 was the first to focus 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's to India in December 1991 and by President R. Venkataraman to China in May 1992.

The path-breaking 1993 P&T agreement was signed during Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's visit to Beijing in September 1993. This agreement in a major way contributes to P&T. A Joint Working Group (JWG) 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 contentious issues at the tactical level and led to the better understanding of each-others' perspectives. 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.

Military CBMs, 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.'

April 2005 Agreement

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 lay 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, its Article VII says, '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 LAC 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.

BDCA, October 2013

The Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) signed on 23 October 2013 during the visit of the then Indian Prime Minister 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 April-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 generals 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

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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 September 2014 visit by President Xi, followed by Prime Minister Modi's May visit to China, 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 national security advisor (NSA) on the Indian side and the state councillor on the Chinese side. A total of 18 rounds of talks have been held, with the last one at New Delhi between NSA Ajit Doval and state councillor Yang Jiechi on 23 March 2015. This was the first round of SR talks after the Modi government assumed office.

As per the press release, the SRs undertook a comprehensive review of earlier rounds of the talks, and expressed satisfaction on the progress made in the negotiations and emphasised commitment to the three-step process to seek a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable resolution of the border question at an early date. The major departure from the past is the agreed stance of a resolution to the boundary question at an early date, a change first mooted by President Xi, in September 2013, when he met the then Prime Minister on the side-lines of the BRICS summit.

The next structure for defence cooperation and CBMs is the annual defence dialogue (ADD) headed by the defence secretary. Seven rounds of dialogues have been held. 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 structures to ensure P&T is the working mecha-

BELOW & FACING PAGE Indian and PLA soldiers during Exercise Hand-in-Hand





nism 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 cannot 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 Spanggur (eastern Ladakh), Nathu la (Sikkim) and Bum la (Tawang/Arunachal). A fourth such point was established just prior to the PM's visit to China at Kibithoo (Anjaw district) in eastern Arunachal Pradesh on the banks of the Lohit river. One more has been agreed upon to be established at the contentious Depsang

plains, which has witnessed increased transgressions and face-offs, since April-May 2013. These hotlines and Border Personnel Meetings (BPM) are conducted as and when either side seeks it 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' be held annually. Regional and military commanders need to visit and engage with each other, non-contact 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 few years, 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 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 CBMs in the nuclear dimension have not been deliberated as these are a topic in itself, suffice it to say that both believe in 'no first use' and 'non-use against non-nuclear powers.' Indeed they are today the only nuclear weapon powers that have a declared policy and congruence on this issue.

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 writer is former director general military operations, director general infantry and colonel of the parachute regiment)