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## INDIA-CHINA LAC GAME OF PATIENCE: NO BLINKING NO BRINKMANSHIP

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**India surprised China with its resolute response and resilience along the LAC to China's aggressiveness in Eastern Ladakh**

**By Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia (Retd)**

The 16 hour long marathon 9th Corps Commanders level talk between Indian army and PLA at Moldo are indicative of two equals negotiating from a position of strength, both unwilling to either blink or resort to any brinkmanship. The joint press release as usual speaks of “a candid and in depth exchange of views on disengagement along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the western sector of China- India border areas”. The joint press release goes on to amplify and say that the meeting was positive, practical and constructive, as also the two sides agreed to

maintain the momentum of dialogue and hold the tenth round of talks. The Indian delegation was led by Lt Gen PGK Menon, a highly experienced and professional military leader.

The talks were never expected to resolve the nine-month-old standoff along the LAC, initiated by China as part of its strategy of 'Military Coercion'. India's aims and intent is clear, one not to escalate the present sensitive situation and two seek an honourable solution in the near to mid-term based on the principle of mutual and equitable security, translated it implies a 'Status Quo Ante'. China on the other hand would possibly be seeking a favourable face-saving exit, as it may have bitten more than it can chew.

Both the Indian Army and PLA are deployed and prepared for the long haul, and hence no one really expected a resolution. The fact that the talks continue is a positive, despite the recent report of PLA transgressions on 20th January leading to a clash at Nakula, Sikkim, which is being attributed as minor and due to local dynamics by both the ADGPI and Global Times. As the two statements downplay the patrol clash, it is again indicative of an intent to resolve issues by dialogue. Both sides avoid unnecessary friction in additional areas.

India surprised China with its resolute response and resilience along the LAC to China's aggressiveness in Eastern Ladakh. The on-ground situation along the LAC is one of a stalemate, a draw, with China occupying certain areas as part of its forward deployment on North bank of Pangong Tso and Depsang, whereas India occupies certain operationally important heights on own side of LAC, along the Kailash ridge dominating the important Chinese garrison of Moldo. The preemptive occupation of the heights on South bank of Pangong Tso, has created dilemmas for the PLA preventing any further escalation. India's considered stand of 'status quo ante' apparently is not acceptable to China at present as it insists that India first withdraw from Kailash Ridge, whereas India. China has overextended itself not only along the LAC with India but also in Taiwan, South China Sea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan and Malaysia. China will wait and factor in President Biden's policy changes and its impact, and hence China is buying time till at least the spring of 21 to review the situation and stance.

In addition, China is already preparing for the long term by constructing 600 villages along the 3,488 km border (a village every five Kms), which will be populated by Hans, thus changing the demography. These inhabitants will also act as the eyes and ears of the PLA, providing logistics and manpower support in a conflict situation. The Indian army is well supported by the people residing along our borders.

### **China's India challenge gives it three main options:**

The first and preferred option will be to continue to occupy the existing forward deployment as part of its continued military coercion, showcasing China as the sole Asian giant capable of challenging the US for superpower status in a bipolar world.

This option has certain costs attached in view of a resilient India capable of protecting its national interests and territorial integrity. China may not like to get detracted from its aim of achieving superpower status.

The second option for China would be to redefine the LAC in its favour by not vacating the present areas and continue its policy of ‘Salami Slicing’, testing India’s resolve. This will lead to massive PLA deployment all along the LAC. India’s defensive deployment along the LAC will need to be matched by China, to deny India options for quid pro quo in areas not held by the PLA, which are vast.

The third option for China will be to seek a favourable face-saving exit from the present impasse, by agreeing to Indian demand of a status quo ante. China while exercising this option is likely to seek strategic concessions mainly in other domains.

India will need to negotiate from a position of relative strength at the military, diplomatic and political level. Hence India will need to invest in military capabilities, infrastructure development, new-age technologies and logistics. At the political-diplomatic level, India will need to “Bind to Balance” with like-minded nations wherein there is a convergence and convergence of interests. In essence, it is a game of power and patience.

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