



**THE KOOTNEETI**

**The article published in The Kootneeti June 24, 2020, is given below:**

**Roads are tactical, Chinese moves are part of the  
large strategic picture**

**By**

**Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia**



The Indian development of feeder roads branching off the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) Road towards the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has brought the Chinese National Highway 219 (G219) connecting Tibet and Xinjiang within a hundred kilometres of the Indian roads, allowing Indians a quicker induction into China-held territories, The Kootneeti has learnt through open-source satellite imagery analysis.

The experts The Kootneeti interviewed are, however, divided in their views on whether this infrastructure development is the reason for the Chinese aggression in the region and how potent are the prospects of an Indian induction towards China-held territories through this border infrastructure.



Mr Abhijit Iyer-Mitra, a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, believes the development of feeder roads towards the de-facto border allows Indians a quicker induction towards China-held territories but cautions the edge is only tactical.

He says, “It gives the Indian side an advantage at the tactical level but it is strategically not wise to take on the Chinese on the ground where they overwhelmingly hold the heights. The correct response to China is an air-centric response as our fighter planes operating from the much lower altitudes of the Indo-Gangetic plains have a significant advantage over the Chinese fighters operating off the 15,000 feet at the Tibetan plateau. Combating them on land is playing to their strengths.”

Lieutenant General (Retired) Vinod Bhatia, a former Director-General of Military Operations of the Indian Army and presently the Director at the Centre for Joint Warfare Studies, does not agree with the assessment that the Indian development of border infrastructure is behind the Chinese aggression. He says road construction is a tactical move whereas the Chinese actions at the LAC are part of a much larger strategic posturing.



Image source: The Hindu

Despite the violence at Galwan Valley, it is the Pangong Lake that has emerged as the main point of concern for the Indians where the Chinese have firmly positioned themselves up to Finger-4, one of the eight mountain spurs called “Fingers” on the lake’s northern bank, numbered one to eight.

Mr Abhijit says, “The Chinese are attempting to have a quid pro quo of sorts where they move back from Pangong Lake and Indians tone down their border infrastructure, but the Indians are not relenting.”

About the Indian non-commitment to such an arrangement, he says, “These tangibles-for-intangibles arrangements, like the Israeli-Palestinian “land for peace” arrangement, never work. The Chinese are proposing a “no-infrastructure for non-intrusion” but this is not workable because, even with this, we can never guarantee that they will not intrude.”

About the Chinese aggression at the strategic level, Gen. Bhatia says it’s the Chinese signalling at India with a post-COVID world-order in mind and several aspects need to be looked at while studying the situation.

“You have to look at the shift in the world from West to East, the rise of India as a balancing power, India’s increasing engagement with the United States and institutions like the Quad, and the Indian ability to interfere in Tibet, the South China Sea, and Taiwan,” says Gen. Bhatia.



Gen. Bhatia suggests the Chinese are trying to force India into a quid pro quo at the strategic level too. He says, “China does not want India to be part of the nations that would come after it in a post-COVID world. India is the leader of the developing world and the Asian and African countries are behind India. That is something China cannot afford. So what better way to seek concessions on India’s global leadership role and India’s emergence as a challenger to China’s rise than by putting pressure in Ladakh? Galwan Valley is therefore just a pressure point, part of a much larger picture to deter India.”

New Delhi is not agreeing to the Chinese attempts at striking a quid pro quo. In response to the situation, it needs to be looked at how New Delhi should deter the Chinese. The Indians have increased their capacity over time and they have also worked on increasing their political and diplomatic boldness. These are both key reasons for the tensions and keys to a resolution, say experts.

Mr Abhijit says that mono-causality should certainly not be inserted into the situation, but says India’s recent aggressive posturing regarding Kashmir and Pakistan-Occupied-Kashmir has added to the Chinese angst.

“The scrapping of Jammu and Kashmir’s special status and the aggressive posturing regarding the Pakistan-Occupied-Kashmir has certainly not mono-causally rattled the Chinese, but the move on Article 370 in conjunction with massive border infrastructure development has led to unease in China because it’s seen as a new decisiveness on part of India,” says Mr Abhijit.

Gen. Bhatia says India today has a better comprehensive national power, better reach, and India and China should not get into an action-reaction mode but work diplomatically.

“The *kootneeti* (diplomacy) should tell you to not fight a war, but to win a war without fighting. Such a *kootneeti* is good *kootneeti*. You should work on deterring Chinese aggressive behaviour and this cannot be done by targeting a highway at 100 kilometres because we have to look at their retaliation too. There are other more effective strategies” says Gen. Bhatia.

About the future course of action, Gen. Bhatia says de-escalation has to be the first priority.

He says, “The first thing to do for any responsible country in such a situation is to deescalate. Neither can India afford an escalation nor China. The two countries here have a congruence of interest.”



Image source: Defence Aviation Post

But the onus of de-escalation is on the Chinese. Gen. Bhatia adds, “They made the first move, so they have to start the de-escalation as well. Everything has to be mutually agreeable. China has to understand that India will safeguard its territorial integrity and sovereignty at all costs.”

Mr Abhijit believes the Galwan Valley clash on 15 June marked a paradigm shift in the episode that makes predictions for a future trajectory difficult. He says, “What happened on 15 June has destroyed all previous prognostications. While it was not deliberate and was rather a freak episode, a series of unfortunate events, it has changed the paradigm. Now all bets are off.”

The gains for the Chinese may not be immediate as it’s a strategic move at their end. As Gen. Bhatia says that the Chinese too don’t want an escalation, one may then wonder what is the point of the entire episode if China has to deescalate after a certain point as it cannot afford escalation? Gen. Bhatia says the point is the Chinese strategic signalling to India. Apparently, the Chinese did not expect militarily a strong stance from India along the LAC.

“The Chinese have given the Indians the signalling that they can come in and trouble them whenever they want. That is their signalling to deter the Indians from growing into a challenge to China’s rise in the post-COVID world-order, which is not likely to work as they have gone too far,” says Gen. Bhatia.

