

STANDING UP TO A STAND-OFF

By Lt. Gen. Vinod Bhatia (Retd.)

China's latest transgressions across its disputed border with India raise alarm. What's the message Beijing is sending?



RISING TENSION: Screen grabs of a face-off between Indian and Chinese soldiers in Ladakh in 2017

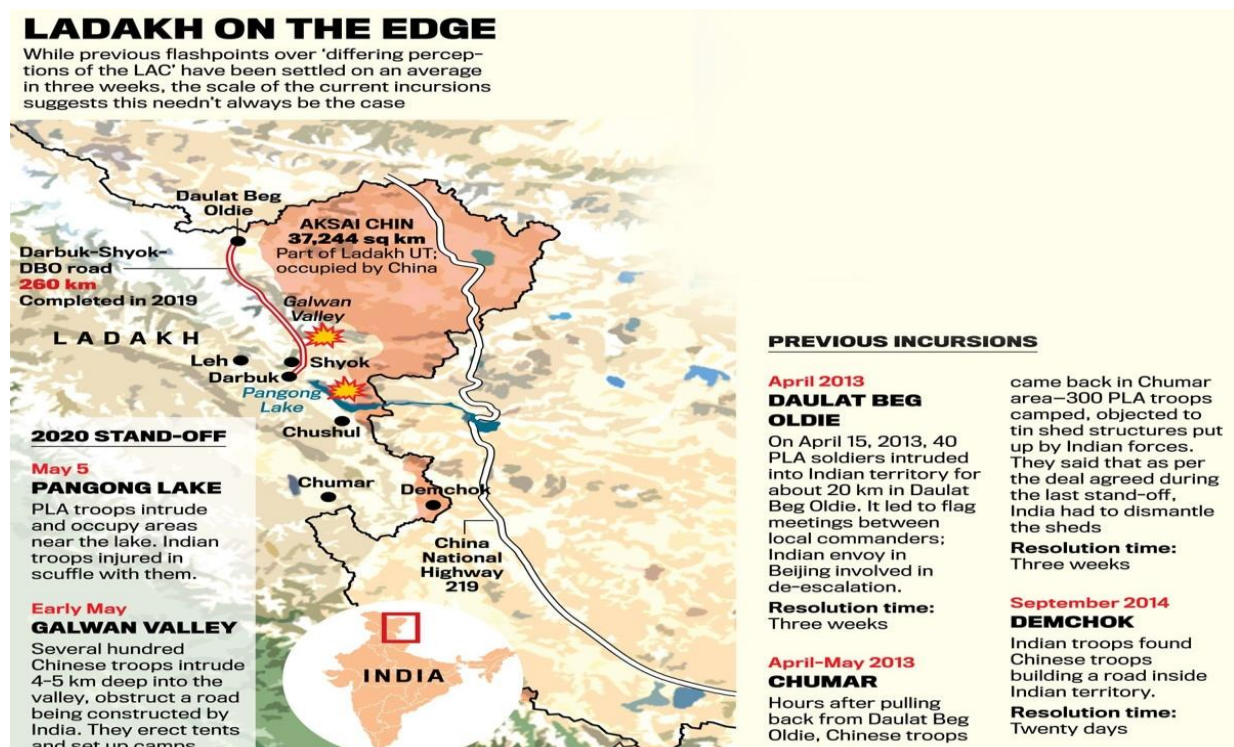
There is a macabre reassurance when soldiers of two nuclear-armed countries choose to clash with clubs and stones. It darkly echoes a quote often misattributed to Albert Einstein about how the fourth world war would be fought. Disagreements on where the 3,448-km-long Line of Actual Control (LAC) lies between India and China have led to fisticuffs and bar brawl-like scuffles, but with soldiers' rifles strapped on their backs and always reversed, the last shots on the world's longest contested border were fired nearly 45 years ago. Even so, the clashes between Indian and Chinese troops in eastern Ladakh in the first week of May sparked concern. The brawl on the banks of the Pangong Tso, a boomerang-shaped brackish water lake on the LAC, was the worst in recent memory, with several Indian soldiers hospitalised. Within days, Indian and Chinese troops scuffled in Naku La area of North Sikkim.

Carefully agreed upon drills on what to do when patrols from both sides run into each other, unfurling of banners in English that tell the other side it has transgressed the LAC and must go back, were given the boot in these incidents. "The banners

have become like regimental flags, rarely displayed,” says an Indian army officer wryly.

In the cold deserts of Ladakh, the clashes have now culminated in a stand-off between the two sides, with several hundred Chinese troops pitching tents in the Galwan Valley, nearly 100 km northwest of the Pangong Tso. The tents have been pitched ahead of the boundary claimed by the Chinese. An equal number of Indian soldiers have pitched their tents roughly 500 metres away.

The Galwan Valley is a painful reminder of the Indian government’s doomed ‘Forward Policy’ in the run-up to its border war with China in 1962. In July 1962, China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) surrounded a newly established Indian army post in the valley and threatened to overrun it. When they did not carry out their threat, it was interpreted as a victory in New Delhi. The post was wiped out by the advancing Chinese later that year. There is, of course, no danger of a shooting war this time, the pattern suggests Galwan is a stalemate similar to recent ones. It is nevertheless the biggest one since the 73-day Doklam stand-off in 2017 when the Indian army crossed over into a meadow in Bhutan to prevent the PLA from building a road. The latest incursions are serious because, as an army official explains, the PLA is camped near a new road to a remote Indian border outpost. Cutting this axis could threaten the vital supply route to the army’s northern defences. New Delhi is in no mood to back down even as it has established multiple levels of communication with Beijing to de-escalate the situation.



Graphic by Tanmoy Chakraborty

WHY NOW?

That is the question being asked by pretty much everyone in the army and the government. The India-China LAC seemed to be on an even keel since Doklam. That stand-off was followed by two informal summits between Prime Minister Narendra

Modi and Chinese president Xi Jinping, in Wuhan (April 2018) and Mamallapuram (October 2019). Both leaders sought to delink the bilateral relationship from border disagreements and ensure peace and tranquility on the boundary. A first-of-a-kind hotline between the Indian army's Director General Military Operations (DGMO) and China's Western Theatre Command based in Lanzhou will be operationalised soon. The three-year hiatus in stand-offs had even led a senior army officer to hint that a permanent border settlement was on the cards.

The LAC has yet to be demarcated on the ground and delineated on military maps. It is segmented into the western sector, comprising eastern Ladakh; the central sector, covering the border along Himachal and Uttarakhand; and the eastern sector, with Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. Without delineation, the LAC remains a cause of tension. Indian and Chinese patrols walk up to the LAC, as they perceive it, to reiterate their claims. Chinese patrols have often camped on territory claimed by India to protest against infrastructure building (see Ladakh on the Edge). Indian officials for these disagreements accommodate the Chinese view, they arise out of 'difference of perception'. "But in Galwan," as one army officer says, "there was never any difference of perception."

The latest incursions grimly echoed a 2017 forecast by Lieutenant General Vinod Bhatia, a former DGMO. In a paper written for the Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS), a defence ministry think-tank he heads, Lt Gen. Bhatia predicted: 'On account of differing perceptions of the LAC, an assertive and aggressive China, and a growing new India, peace and tranquility along the LAC will be constantly and continuously under stress, with increase in frequency, intensity and depth of transgressions, leading to more stand-offs.'

On May 19, an editorial in the Communist Party of China-owned Global Times painted India as the aggressor. On May 21, the ministry of external affairs (MEA) debunked suggestions that Indian troops had undertaken activity across the LAC. "Indian troops are fully familiar with the LAC alignment and abide by it scrupulously," an MEA spokesperson said.

There are, however, multiple global factors at play. The annual meet of China's parliament, the National People's Conference, under way in Beijing, saw Xi Jinping vow support for the PLA with a 6 per cent hike in military spending. Post its relatively unscathed emergence from the COVID-19 pandemic, China has flexed its muscles, especially in territorial disputes. It sank a Vietnamese fishing vessel in the disputed South China Sea in early April. Beijing has brought in a harsh new law suppressing dissent in Hong Kong and has warned Taiwan against secession. Adding to this plethora of events, Indian commentators say, is China's angst over the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir and the abrogation of Article 370 last August. Lt Gen. D.B. Shekatkar, head of a panel that submitted a report on India's military reforms, says the flashpoints are 'neither incidental nor accidental'. "It would have required several months of planning and is in response to our creating a Union territory of Ladakh and reiterating our claim on (Pakistan-occupied) Gilgit-Baltistan and (Chinese-occupied) Aksai Chin," he says.

According to Claude Arpi, who holds the Field Marshal KM Cariappa Chair of Excellence at the United Services Institution of India, “The Galwan region and Naku La have not been in dispute, and this pattern of incursion indicates that the Chinese seem to be opening up multiple new fronts along the LAC.” The stand-off even evoked a comment from the United States, which rarely speaks on India’s border disputes with China. Alice Wells, the outgoing US principal deputy assistant of state, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, remarked that border flare-ups were “a reminder that Chinese aggression is not always rhetorical”. On May 27, US president Donald Trump tweeted: “We have informed both India and China that the US is ready, willing and able to mediate or arbitrate their now raging border dispute.” The tweet may have mortified Beijing, which is wary of close Indo-US ties. Its foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian signalled that a de-escalation seemed to be under way and that the “border area situation is overall stable and controllable”. New Delhi will no doubt be looking to see what a post-pandemic China looks like in two major bilateral events due later this year, the third informal summit between PM Modi and President Xi and the 23rd edition of boundary talks between the special representatives of India’s national security advisor Ajit Doval and Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi.



REMOTE ACCESS: Bikers on the Darbuk- Shyok-DBO road that was opened in 2019

THE GAME-CHANGING ROAD

For decades following the 1962 war, eastern Ladakh continued to be India’s Achilles’ heel and a military planner’s nightmare. It was remote and isolated, with no road connectivity. Parts of the region were marooned in winters when snow blocked mountain passes. The rapid build-up of infrastructure on the Tibetan plateau in the 1990s, which meant China could swiftly rush its forces in, saw an alarmed Indian

government appoint the 'China Study Group'. In 2003, the group recommended beefing up border infrastructure by building all-weather roads. A burst of construction over the past six years has seen the completion of a majority of the 73 roads recommended by the group.

The immediate point of conflict is one of those roads, the 260 km Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie road linking Leh with DBO, the army's northern-most outpost just a few km south of the Karakoram Pass. The all-weather road was completed last year. Supplies can now be driven up to this post. Earlier, it used to be a 10-day-long mule ride or flown in by air force aircraft operating at the edge of their envelope. In April last year, the army tactfully announced the road's completion by flagging off a motorcycle expedition as part of the 20th anniversary celebrations of the Kargil War. The message might not have gone unnoticed. In 2019, the number of border transgressions by Chinese troops nearly doubled to 536, most of them in the western sector, in Ladakh.

Some army officials now see Galwan as payback for Doklam. In 2017, the Chinese road led to the vital Jampheri ridge overlooking 'Chicken's Neck', the narrow Siliguri corridor connecting the northeast with India. The new Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road is not very far from China's strategic highway connecting Xinjiang with Tibet. The border infrastructure building is set to continue and all the roads are set to be completed by 2023. Border deadlocks like Galwan will be minor irritants at best.