

MANAGING THE LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)

India and China share a 3488km long disputed border, 1597km in Eastern Ladakh, 545km in middle sector of Himachal Pradesh and Uttrakhand, 226km in Sikkim and 1126kms in Arunachal Pradesh. China claims a little over 100,000 Sq kms of India's territory. 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 October 25th, 1975. A fragile peace exists ever since , with the disputed border 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, intrusions are a common occurrence on account of differing perceptions of the line of actual control (LAC). These intrusions often lead to a 'face-off' between own Army and ITBP troops and the PLA, which last from a few hours to a few weeks, like the recent ones in the month of Sept 2014 at Chumar and at Depsang Plains in Apr / May 2013. Till August this year 334 transgressions by PLA had already been reported, these have doubled since 2011, wherein 213 transgressions were reported. With the PLA demonstrating an assertiveness , deploying additional surveillance radars supported by an enviable infrastructure along the LAC, it is envisaged that the frequency and scope of transgressions will increase, leading to more prolonged "face offs" . The situations are likely to get critical, specially so in view of a firm and fair stance being adopted by the present Indian Government in guarding our territories .

The ongoing peace and tranquility is ensured on account of the

established mechanisms and CBMs based on the four border agreements of 1993, 1996, 2005 and 2013, which have proved effective till date as also the professionalism, discipline and maturity displayed by the Indian Army and ITBP on one side and the PLA on the other.

The ITBP, a force conceived on 24 October 1962, as a knee jerk reaction to the Chinese aggression is undoubtedly one of the most hardened, experienced and effective Central Armed Police Force. The 45 battalion strong ITBP is mandated to "*Maintain vigil on the Northern Borders (China) ,detection and prevention of border violations, and promotion of the sense of security among the local populace.*" The Army too is deployed in strength along the India- China border to ensure the territorial integrity of our borders. ITBP over the years has proven equal to the challenge and in concert with the Army and ensured effective domination of the disputed border, maintaining peace and tranquility along the LAC. However, the vast and varied Northern borders with China are managed jointly both by the Army and ITBP, leading to two channels of reporting and issues of accountability. This dual command and control structure leads to conflicting directions and guidelines emanating from the two controlling ministries i.e. MHA and MOD and intermediary headquarters. On the other hand China has a single well defined command structure wherein the Border Defence Regiments are directly under command the PLA. The ITBP on its own is not capable of either managing the borders or the "Face Offs" with the PLA. The ITBP has deployed only five battalions along the 1597km long sensitive border in Eastern Ladakh . These battalions are controlled by a DIG Headquarter located at Srinagar, compared to a much larger deployment of Army troops with a Corps Headquarters

located in situ. Irrespective of the much needed raising of nine additional battalions and establishing 54 posts, the ITBP lacks the resource, wherewithal and structures to manage the borders on its own and deal with the PLA on equal terms. Invariably the Army given its mandate for defending the borders assumes the responsibility and is accountable to the nation. The thin line between Border Guarding (ITBP) and Border Defence(Army) is near impossible to define along our disputed borders with China, as responsibilities overlap.

The report of the Group of Ministers (GOM) on National Security identified the various problems of border management. Para 5.1 of the report categorically states ***"Multiplicity of forces on the same borders has inevitably led to the lack of accountability as well as problems of command and control."*** The major problem identified, the GOM vide para 5.12 recommends ***"At present there are instances of more than one force working on the same border and questions of conflict in command and control have been raised frequently. Multiplicity of forces on the same border has also led to lack of accountability on the part of the forces. To enforce the accountability, the principle of 'one border one force' may be adopted while considering deployment of forces at the border."*** *The recommendations of the GOM have been been implemented along all our borders with neighbouring countries except the most sensitive and important border with China.*

The PLA over the years has focussed on the "THREE Rs" RADARS, ROADS, and RESERVES. This has given the PLA the capability to dominate their perception of the LAC effectively and intervene with our patrolling activity with ease and impunity. This of

course is a study in itself. Given that there will be an increase in the frequency and scope of transgressions by the PLA, it is an imperative that we build capabilities, enhance capacities and review and refine our structures to ensure Peace and Tranquility along the LAC on equal terms, till we resolve the boundary question. While, capability building is an ongoing process and the much needed impetus has been given by the present government, there is an urgent dictate of the times to resolve the flawed command and control structure as recommended by the GOM. The ITBP needs to be placed under command and control of the Army, in keeping with the successful model along the LC where the BSF operates under the operational control of the army.

Mr Modi's Government has demonstrated an unprecedented will, rational and urgency to take hard decisions with regard to national security. Streamlining of the command and control structure and placing the ITBP under operational control of the army, will ensure a more effective management of the LAC and what is more important, this will, to a large extent, obviate any inadvertent flare up along the LAC as transgressions by China increase.

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