

THE LADAKH WARNING

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

After downplaying the border stand-off for over two weeks, the government has finally dismissed [China's](#) accusations of the Indian Army crossing the Line of Actual Control. Instead, the PLA has intruded into the Indian side of the LAC, disrupted normal patrolling, and destroyed posts and bridges on the Galwan Nala at Chang-Chenmo.

Looking at the issue only from the LAC angle would be a mistake. Remember, in the wake of the abrogation of [Article 370](#) and 35A, there was a sudden outburst from Beijing over making Ladakh a Union Territory (UT). China described India's move as "unacceptable", undermining its "sovereignty" — even raised the issue at the UNSC. India dismissed China's assertion, termed Ladakh's new status as an "internal matter" having "no implication for India's external boundaries or the LAC with China".

While India has pursued its core national interests in J&K, China's response was strategic — a shift that may have a lasting imprint on geopolitics. We have been harping on the "differing perception" theory of the LAC for decades, but in reality China has been gaining control over a massive "disputed territory" in Eastern Ladakh since the 1980s.

The Chinese first made encroachments into the 45-km long Skakjung pastureland in Demchok-Kuyul sector. This resulted in local Changpas of Chushul, Tsaga, Nidar, Nyoma, Mud, Dungti, Kuyul, Loma villages gradually losing their winter grazing that sustained 80,000 sheep/goats and 4,000 yak/ponies every winter.

Ladakh's earlier border lay at Kegu Naro — a day-long march from Dumchele. Starting from the loss of Nagtsang in 1984, followed by Nakung (1991) and Lungma-Serding (1992), the last bit of Skakjung was lost in 2008. The PLA followed the nomadic Rebo routes for patrolling in contrast to Indian authorities restricting Rebo movements that led to the massive shrinking of pastureland and border defence.

By the 2000s, the PLA's focus shifted to desolate, inhospitable Chip Chap which remains inaccessible until end-March. After mid-May, water streams impede vehicles moving across Shyok, Galwan, and Chang-Chenmo rivers leaving only a month and a half for effective patrolling by the Indian side. No human beings inhabit here, a 1962 war site, an entry point into Ladakh for the Uyghurs and Tibetans. Local Ladakhi personnel manned the posts here, but patrolling in the 972 sq km Trig Height area has been lax.

Easier accessibility allowed the PLA to intrude into Chip Chap with impunity during July-August — its regulars usually spent a few hours before crossing back. But, during the 21-day Depsang stand-off in 2013, when Burtse became a flashpoint, the PLA set up remote camps 18-19 km inside Indian territory.

The Shyam [Saran](#) Report of August 2013 made a chilling revelation of India having lost 640 sq km due to "area denial" set by PLA patrolling. The government denied the report, but Chinese soldiers virtually prevented Indian troops from getting access to Rakinala near Daulat Beg-Oldie (DBO) where the IAF reactivated the world's highest landing strips in 2008. This plus the reopening of Fukche and Nyoma airbases perhaps provoked the PLA's intrusion in Depsang.

The army denied that Ladakh had shrunk. Change in the river course was cited as a reason for the loss of 500-1,500 metres of land annually. India's stepped-up construction activities may

have provoked China into accusing India of altering the LAC position. Despite topographical challenges and corruption, the BRO has lately fast-tracked the 260 km long Shayok-DBO road construction that probably triggered the PLA intrusion in early May sparking the current Galwan stand-off.

Towards the south at [Pangong Tso](#), forces had physical scuffles over area-denial for patrolling at Sirijap on May 5-6 and on May 11. The situation remains tense at Sirijap's cliff spurs and also at the Tso, where troops are chasing each other in high-speed patrol boats. Clearly, intrusions are part of China's never-ending effort to push Indian troops westward of the Indus and Shyok rivers and reach the 1960 claimed line.

Out of the 857 sq km long border in Ladakh only 368 sq km is the International Border, and the rest of the 489 sq km is the LAC. The two traditional disputed points included Trig Heights and Demchok. At eight points, the two sides have differing perceptions — Samar Lungpa 176 sq km, Depsang Plains 972, Hot Spring 38, Changlung 13, Kungkala-Phobrang 5, Sarjap 129, Spanguur 24, and Dhumtsele 25 sq km. But lately, China has raised two fresh dispute points at Pangong Tso 83 sq km and at Chumur where it claims 80 sq km. The old dispute sites were at the end point of Pangong Tso and at Chushul — the 1962 battle-site.

The Sirijap range on the northern bank of the lake remains most contested, from which several cliff spurs jut out — the “finger series” 1 to 8. India's LAC claim line is at Finger-8, but the actual position is only up to Finger-4. The Chinese are asserting further west to claim 83 sq km here. The PLA has built a 4.5 km long road to prevent patrolling by Indian troops. The PLA's road network from here extends to Huangyangtan base located near National Highway G219.

Further south in Demchok, China claims some 150 sq km. The PLA has built massive infrastructure on its side, moved armoured troops into Charding Nalla since 2009. Tibetan nomads pitch tents on Hemis Monastery's land throughout 2018-2019.

In Chumur, China claims 80 sq km and probably wants a straight border from PT-4925 to PT-5318 to bring Tible Mane (stupa) area under its control. For India, holding of Chumur is critical for the safety of the Manali-Leh route. Remember, the PLA demanded removal of India's fortified positions in Burtse (2013) and Demchok and Chumur (2014) for its retreat.

Overall, the pattern shows the PLA's desperate design to snatch the lake at Lukung through a three-pronged strategy of attacking from Sirijap in the north, Chuchul in the south and through the lake water from middle. This is the key chokepoint from where the Chinese can cut off Indian access to the entire flank of Chip Chap plains, Aksai Chin in the east and Shayok Valley to the north, which means that Indian control is pushed to the west of the Shyok river and south of the Indus river, forcing India to accept both rivers as natural boundaries. And once China gets control of the southern side of the Karakoram it can easily approach Siachen Glacier from the Depsang corridor and meet at Tashkurgan junction from where the CPEC crosses into Gilgit-Baltistan.

That would be disastrous for Indian defence, leaving the strategic Nubra vulnerable, possibly impacting even India's hold over Siachen. China's access to Changla-pass through Lukung and Tangtse would threaten the entire Indus Valley. It is quite possible that China is eyeing the waters of the Shyok, Galwan and Chang-Chenmo rivers, to divert them to the arid Aksai Chin and its Ali region.

The writer, a former ambassador, is an expert on India-China affairs

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