

# SHADOW FORCE APART, INDIA NEEDS A CHINA PLAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

The mystic, celestial snow lion, 'Gang Seng Ge' in local lore, derives its name from the Sanskrit *Simha*. It is the emblem of Tibet showcasing its eternally snow-covered mountains and glaciers, even as it symbolises power, strength, fearlessness and the joy of living. It is also the symbol and the flag of the intrepid, fearless warriors of the '[Special Frontier Force](#)', or the [SFF](#), which has figured so prominently in the recent clashes in eastern Ladakh.

Towards the end of April this year, 4 Motorised and 6 Mechanised Divisions of the Chinese Western Theatre Command, having completed their exercises on the edge of the Gobi Desert, took to the Xinjiang highway. In a well-planned and rehearsed move, they branched off onto a series of feeder roads on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh. Once the troops were in position, they initiated multiple incursions across the LAC into what had been "No Man's Land" patrolled by both sides (India and China). This included areas in the Depsang plains threatening the forward airstrip of Daulat Beg Oldie as also the north and the south of the expansive Pangong Tso salt water lake.

Special Frontier Force | [They came, they fought, they stayed](#)

The world watched in horror, as soldiers of two nuclear armed Asian giants engaged each other in a slug fest on the snowy summits of the Himalayas. In the melee that followed, they went at each other with clubs studded with barbed wire, machetes and rocks, resulting in serious injuries. Not a shot was fired, but the Indian Army which was initially surprised, reacted swiftly and with bravery and courage inflicted casualties to the Chinese side.

The inevitable fallout of these actions was both sides jostling for heights, leading to a stalemate. Suddenly, on the night of August 29-30, in a surprise move, the [Indian Army turned the tables on China](#) by occupying heights that were not only of great tactical importance north and south of the Pangong Tso lake as also dominating the Spangur Gap. It was now looking into the innards of the Chinese depth localities at Moldo including China's armour, guns and reserves. This amazing feat was accomplished primarily by a Ghost Army, the Special Frontier Force. Who are these super human troops? What are their antecedents? They are the dreaded shadow warriors of the SFF.

During the era of the "Great Game", the British employed natives to patrol their own lands, which included Tibetans. It was the Mustang Base in the Northern Border Range that escorted the 14th Dalai Lama to safety to India during the 1959 rebellion. As a consequence of the 1962 war, the Jawaharlal Nehru government ordered the raising of an elite Commando Force called the Special Frontier Force comprising among others, Tibetans who had sought refuge in India along with the Dalai Lama.

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My father, Major General Sujun Singh Uban, was a natural choice for this based on sheer merit and his being a legendary war veteran of the British Army famous for his daring exploits with the Long Range Desert Group in the Middle East, and the Guerrilla Wars in Burma during World War II. He was tasked with raising, training and commanding this nascent Force; as also moulding them into a well-oiled fighting machine.

To enhance their inherent fighting capabilities its members were given airborne training in

addition to acquiring expertise in mountain and jungle warfare. Initially aided and equipped by the United States, they quickly indigenised and were soon on their own feet. The opportunity to display their mettle as also to repay their host country came during the India-Pakistan war of 1971. As the Indian Army moved in with its major thrust into East Pakistan, the SFF, while supporting the flank of the Indian Army, in a blitzkrieg cleared the Chittagong hill tracts, as also the Kaptai dam, and encircled and prevented the escape of the Pakistani 97 (Indep) Brigade and No 2 Commando Battalion, all of whom were taken prisoners. The SFF was poised for the capture of Chittagong port when a ceasefire was declared; a daring move which paid handsome dividends. This earned them the *nom de guerre*, the 'Phantoms of Chittagong'.

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It soon became my turn to serve the SFF, enabling me to fulfil a family commitment. Having performed exceedingly well in the Indian Army (including being awarded the Vishisht Seva Medal (VSM) and based on my record of service) I was promoted as Inspector General to command the SFF and was privileged to command it during the Kargil war in battles fought at heights of 14,000 feet and above in subzero temperatures; actions which were lauded in the Ladakh and Kargil sectors. That year, the security for the Amarnath Yatra was provided by the SFF.

The strategic importance of Tibet cannot be overemphasised. It is the roof of the world, with vast mineral and natural resources. The mighty rivers that emanate from its expansive glaciers — such as the Brahmaputra, the Yangtze, the Yellow river, the Mekong, the Salween and the Indus — together with thousands of their tributaries have nurtured civilisations in peripheral countries for centuries. The Kailash Mansarovar, which is centered in this region and with its spiritual overtones, tugs at the heart strings of every Indian. In an act of naked aggression, China occupied Tibet in 1959.

A buffer was eliminated, and the de facto boundary of China became contiguous to that of India, a boundary deliberately left undemarcated to enable further expansion. Mao Zedong declared, "Tibet is the palm that we shall occupy and then go after the five fingers, Ladakh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh." Consequently, in 1959, China committed the naked act of aggression, to which India acquiesced, and our dream of "Hindi Chini *Bhai Bhai*" was rudely shaken in 1962.

Comment | [A phantom called the Line of Actual Control](#)

India is dealing with a bellicose neighbour, with its obsession for asserting its rights over land which its predecessors may have acquired through conquest or guile. China has land borders with 14 neighbours covering an estimated 22,100 kilometres. Post independence, and as its economic status burgeoned, so did its military muscle. China embarked on claims based on perceived imbalances of treaties forced on countries when they were weak.

Some of these have since been resolved after bloody clashes such as with Russia and Vietnam, while others have been resolved using a combination of lucrative offers of money, trade and guile. In most cases, the end result has been such that victory can be claimed by both sides.

Russia accepted half of China's claim, Kazakhstan was given lucrative economic deals, Kyrgyzstan retained 70% of the land, ceding just 30%, and so on.

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It would be fallacious to surmise that there will be any resolution to the on-going stand-off

between India and China in the near future. Let us assume that both countries wish to avoid a full-scale war considering the nuclear backdrop, the COVID-19 pandemic and also the economic downturn. The road ahead will have to be evolved and based on a study of the manner in which China has negotiated its boundary disputes with 12 of its neighbours and the results achieved.

There can be little doubt that the [actions by the People's Liberation Army, or the PLA, in Ladakh were pre-meditated](#), planned and executed with precision. The Chinese were fully aware that they were transgressing into "No Man's Land". With a pre-determined aim in mind they proceeded to secure tactical heights and gained access to the areas which would forestall a counter-offensive by the Indian Army. To expect them to vacate these areas at this juncture would be naive. At the same time, the PLA, in its present configuration and posture, has immense weaknesses which they would be aware of, and which should make them uneasy.

Under the prevailing circumstances, it has become imperative to form a group of experts from among retired professionals, who have a proven track record with the Indian Army, the Indian Navy, the Indian Air Force, diplomats, the intelligence services, cyber technology and cartographic services, who will plan and prepare, short-, medium- and long-term goals to achieve them within a suggested time frame. Let us play down the rhetoric and adopt a pragmatic approach. It can no longer be a part-time issue to be addressed only when a crisis occurs. The crisis is upon us now.

*Gurdip Singh Uban is former Inspector General, Special Frontier Force*

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