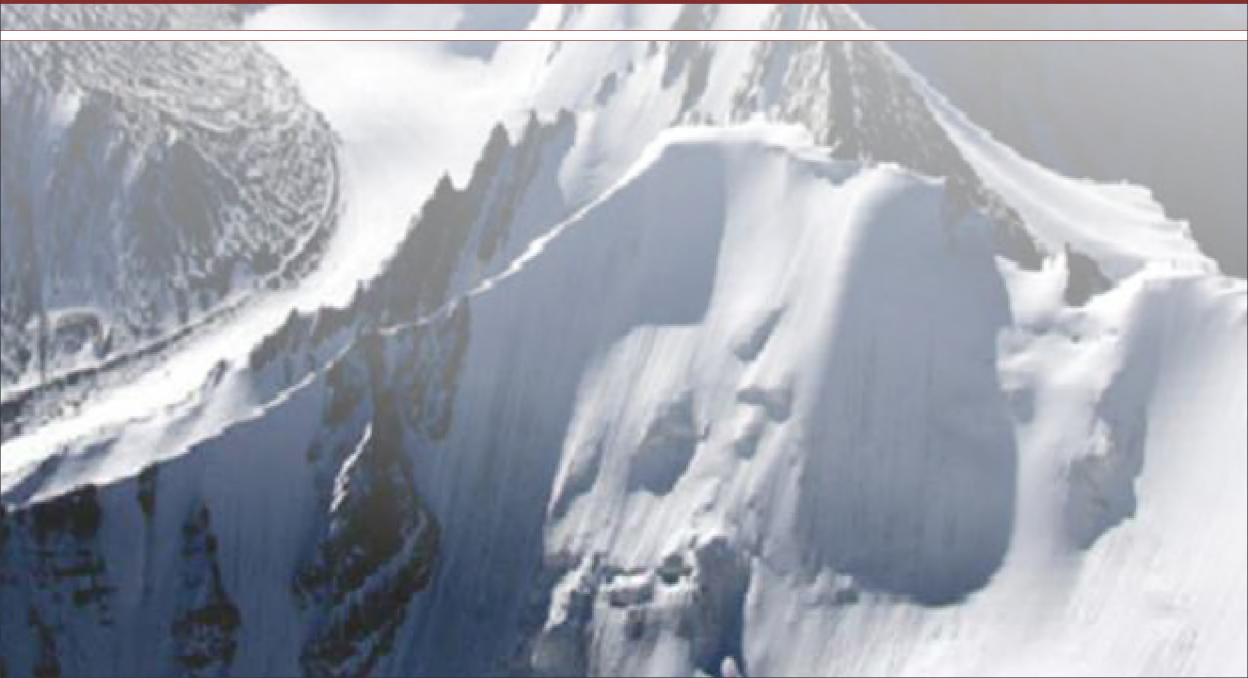




VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION



**Sino-Indian Boundary Dispute and
Indo-Centric Reflections on
China's Military Capabilities, Thoughts
and Options in the Near Future**



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Sino-Indian Boundary Dispute and Indo-Centric Reflections on China's Military Capabilities, thoughts and Options in the Near Future

Major General V. K. Shrivastava, VSM (Retired)



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Foreword

At the outset, let me compliment Major General V K Shrivastava, VSM (Retired), for producing this excellent monograph on a topic which is contemporary and of great relevance.



Admittedly, China has been studied in great depth over the years, but I dare say, the need to study and to understand it is far greater today than at any other time in the history. Such an assertion stems from the fact that the 21st Century is going to be the “Asian Century” in which China will play a major role.

Interestingly, China presents a study in contrast. Take for example the fact that it sees itself as a challenger to the US dominance in the world affairs while it is still struggling to establish regional supremacy. Also note that its claims of a “Benign Power” and of “Peaceful Rise” are belied by its increasingly aggressive stance with all its neighbours on the eastern board. Not surprisingly therefore, and this yet another one of the paradoxes, China remains part of all the major global organizations and yet it refused to abide by the ruling of the Hague based Permanent Court of Arbitration’s judgment regarding the illegitimacy of the “Nine Dash Line” in the South China Sea.

All these contradictions are intricately linked to China's military might and, in that context, three points need to be taken note of. One, over the last two decades or more, China has systematically modernized its armed forces – conceptually, organizationally and technologically. Two, unlike Deng Xiaoping's philosophy of the 80s to “Bide Time”, the present leadership feels that the time has come. Three, whereas China's immediate concern and priority may be Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea, it surely never overlooked the fact that it has a disputed border with India. Not surprisingly therefore, it has zealously been improving its infrastructure and force projection capabilities in Aksai Chin-Tibet areas and has increasingly been assertive along the Line of Actual Control.

Admittedly, India and China share many similarities, and remain strongly

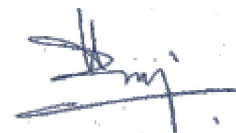
engaged as trading partners, while also grappling with their differences and aspirations. Therein, the vexed and unresolved boundary dispute cannot be wished away and therefore a scrutiny of China's military might would surely be in order.

Against this backdrop, the author has attempted an original research work which has tackled this important topic from a completely different perspective. He has attempted an Indo-Centric assessment of Chinese military capabilities and possible military options that China could exercise against India, in the next decade or so. He has presented this analysis through five well researched lucid parts which are backed by extensive and elaborate footnotes, which are a testament of the detailed research undertaken by him. I compliment him for the same.

At the end of his exhaustive research the author has urged the necessity of an Indian response that must stand scrutiny on three counts - urgency, political will and the military means. I could not agree with him more. I endorse the author's recommendations and feel that this excellent paper would awaken the interest and curiosity of the academia towards exploring this important subject further. I am confident that this work by Major General V K Shrivastava, VSM (Retired) would be of great value to the strategic community and would prove to be an invaluable source of knowledge on a contemporary topic.

New Delhi

16 November 2016



General N C Vij
PVSM, UYSM, AVSM (retd)
Director - VIF
Former Chief of the Army Staff
&
Founder Vice Chairman, NDMA

Author



Major General V K Shrivastava, VSM (Retired)

An alumni of the National Defence Academy, Kharakvasla, Major General V K Shrivastava, VSM was commissioned in December 1962. He was in J&K during the Indo-Pak conflict of 1965 and in the eastern theatre in 1971.

With two tenures in Ladakh and one in the high altitudes of Arunachal Pradesh, he is well versed with the terrain and the operational situation along the disputed Sino-Indian border.

A graduate from the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, he also attended the prestigious National Defence College, New Delhi. During his service he held a number of coveted command, staff and instructional appointments.

Post retirement he had a stint as the Executive Editor of the 'Indian Defence Review'. Later, as a Senior Fellow with the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, he led many delegations for interactions with strategic think tanks abroad and was also a member of the Indian team invited by The National Defence University, USA, for bilateral talks.

Over the years his articles on national security issues and on matters military have appeared in a number of journals and defence year books. He also has a prize winning essay and four coffee table books to his credit.

Preface

India and China share many similarities. They both rejoice in, and relate to, the inheritances of their continuing civilizations. Both are nuclear power states with ever increasing military capabilities. Alongside the benefits of their rising economies they are also grappling with the internal contradictions and upheavals of their billion strong populations. In pursuit of their national aspirations they are both jostling for their rightful places in the world order. If China's rise remains under close scrutiny in India, that of India does not go unnoticed in China. While remaining strongly engaged as trading partners they both view each other as a strategic challenge and, on that count, are often on a collision course in their global dealings. Their relationship can be best described as 'purposeful and stable' despite frequent military face offs, and flashes of tensions, along their long and disputed land border.

Kautilya's Arthshastra, a treatise on statecraft written in the fourth century BC, asserts that the states are in a perpetual conflict and that, for a king with growing power, it becomes necessary to subdue his neighbours. Nearly two and a half millennia later the opening sentence of 'The Use of Force: Military Power and International Relations', a well researched work by Robert J Art and Kenneth N Waltz, reiterates that "Military power plays a crucial role in the international politics because states co-exist in a condition of anarchy". In that context it is noteworthy that China, while harbouring ambitions of global primacy, is surely striving to acquire military pre-eminence in the Asia-Pacific region to start with. Further, unlike Deng Xiaoping, who subscribed to the philosophy of "Hide our capabilities and bide our time" the present leadership prefers to be more practical and assertive about their military might.

Recall the Chinese challenge of air power in the context of the disputed Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands towards end 2 013, or the display of their naval

power and intent through a large scale exercise, with live firing by Second Artillery, in the South China Sea in July 2015. Only a month later, and of direct concern to India, Chengdu Military Area Command conducted "Joint Action 2015 D" in Sichuan province close to Sino-Indian border, involving more than 140,000 troops to test digitized command and fire control systems. To crown it all, in early September 2015, Chinese military parade, commemorating 70th anniversary of Japan's defeat in World War II, displayed for the first time, a range of sophisticated weapon systems to include several nuclear and conventional missiles.

In their efforts to retain the moral high ground, Chinese leadership prefers to proclaim their rise as "peaceful and mutually progressive". However, noticeable belligerence in their attitude and behavior belie such assertions. Not surprisingly therefore, there are serious ongoing debates amongst the China watchers about the intricacies and the implications of such flexing of military muscles on the regional security. Think tanks and military minds in India are no exceptions.

With that as the backdrop, this paper attempts an Indo-Centric assessment of Chinese military capabilities and of their possible military options against India in the immediate future of the next decade or so. Admittedly, any such venture will be prosecuted within the overarching influences of the global setting, politico-diplomatic endeavours and the socio-economic compulsions. However, the study essentially retains its focus on the issues under examination and forays into these arenas only where unavoidable - that too in the passing.

To orient a lay reader, as also to act as a quick recall for the more informed one, text of the initial parts sets the stage by recounting the essentials of the boundary dispute, describing terrain along our far flung frontiers, giving details of Chinese infrastructural developments and military capabilities in Tibet alongside a comparative resume of the situation on the Indian side. Subsequent parts then attempt a critical

assessment of China's strategic interests in Tibet, an assessment of the Peoples Liberation Army and of its emerging military thoughts, and finally, of possible Chinese impulses and options for force application - all this through the smoke screen and reflectors of the well guarded Chinese transparency.

I am thankful to General N C Vij, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM (Retired), Director Vivekananda International Foundation, for initiating and sustaining this topical study. My most sincere thanks are also due to all the participants - former military commanders, diplomats and security experts - for their views articulated during the Round Table Discussion on the subject, held in VIF on July 13,2015.

The end result is now in your hands. Inaccuracies and shortfalls in factual details, as indeed also in the interpretations and assessments herein, are all mine. The effort will have served its purpose even if it provides only a reference point for disagreements leading to discussions and to more deliberated inferences.

Now read on.

Noida
25 August 2016



V K Shrivastava
Major General

List of Abbreviations Used

AR	Assam Rifles.
ASBM	Anti Satellite Ballistic Missile
AWACS	Airborne Warning and Control System.
C4ISR	Command, Control, Communication, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance.
CBM	Confidence Building Measures.
CMC	Central Military Commission.
CPC	Communist Party of China.
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
DBO	Daulat Beg Oldi.
FM	Force Multiplier.
GA	Group Army.
GOI	Government of India.
GIS	Geo-spatial Information System.
HQ	Headquarters.
ICBM	Inter Continental Ballistic Missile.
J&K	Jammu and Kashmir
JWG	Joint Working Group.
KKH	Karakoram Highway.
Km	Kilometers.
LAC	Line of Actual Control.
MAC	Military Area Commands.

MBRL	Multi Barrel Rocket Launcher.
MD	Military District.
MEA	Ministry of External Affairs.
MOD	Ministry of Defence.
NEFA	North East Frontier Agency.
ORBAT	Order of Battle.
PLA	Peoples Liberation Army.
PLAAF	PLA, Air Force.
PLAN	PLA, Navy.
PLARF	PLA, Rocket Force.
PLASSF	PLA, Strategic Support Force.
PM	Prime Minister.
POK	Pakistan Occupied Kashmir.
PRC	Peoples Republic of China.
R&D	Research and Development.
SAC	Second Artillery Corps.
Sq	Square.
SRBM	Short Range Ballistic Missile.
TAR	Tibet Autonomous Region.
TC	Theatre Command.
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle.
UN	United Nations.
US	United States.

PART -1

AN INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND TO THE DISPUTED SINO - INDIAN BORDER

Traditional Boundaries

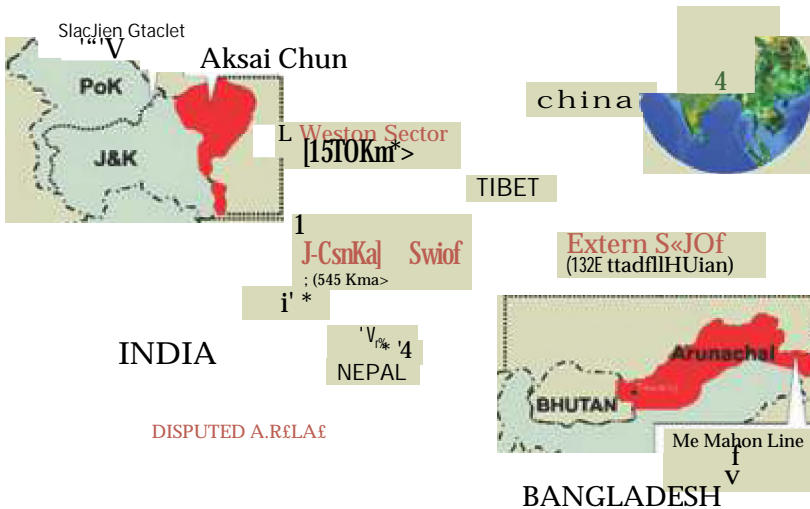
Throughout history, India and China, the two neighbouring Asian giants, separated by the mountain ranges spinning out of the Pamir Knot and the mighty Himalayas, had coexisted peacefully under different dynasties and rulers. For centuries, traders, travelers and preachers, notwithstanding the vagaries of the terrain and the weather conditions, had criss-crossed this seemingly impassable land barrier along well beaten trade routes going over high mountain passes - La in Tibetan language. Borders between the two, though delimited, had never been demarcated.

Since "Boundaries are first expressions of a modern state", on coming into being as nation states both India and China commenced the process of political consolidation of their territories. Their far flung frontiers had to be formalized as boundaries. On its part, the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), renounced all the previous border treaties and agreements as 'unequal' and belonging to the 'Century of Humiliation'. It then started afresh the process of renegotiating and redrawing of boundaries. [1] However, their land border with India, despite the war of 1962, continues to remain disputed.



For better understanding of the details that follow, it must be noted that Xinjiang and Tibet, the two far flung western and southern provinces of mainland China, had enjoyed self governance and independence for most part of the history. Indeed, addressing the Kuomintang Congress in August 1945, Chiang Kai Shek had indicated his willingness "To grant Tibet autonomy, and that, if the people of Tibet expressed an aspiration for independence, the government would not hesitate to accord them full autonomous status". [2]

Be that as it may, the Sino-Indian border, from the Karakoram Range in the west to the forested mountains of Myanmar in the east, skirting Tibet along the Himalayan massif, has a total length of 3440 kilometers (kms). No section of this border, at any stage, had been formalized or marked. Traditionally the entire stretch is divided into three sectors as shown on the Map-2 below - Western Sector (from the northwest of Karakoram Pass to Demchok), Central or the Middle Sector (from Demchok till the border with Nepal) and the Eastern Sector (from Skkim up to the border with Myanmar). Accordingly, the following text also records the essentials of the disputed territories in three separate parts. Without being dismissive of the facts, the details have been kept bereft of the clutter.



Map - 2 : Showing the Three Sectors of the Disputed Border

The Western Sector.

In 1841, Sikh forces under General Zorawar Singh, having assimilated Ladakh into the state of Jammu, had ventured into Tibet. In December that year General Zorawar Singh was killed in action and the Sikh forces suffered reverses. Soon afterwards, in September 1842, Lahore Darbar signed a treaty not to violate the border as it existed then. Consequent to the Anglo-Sikh wars and the British victory, the control over these areas came under the British rule. The arrangement however, remained in place.

Whereas Karakoram Pass in the north and Pangong Lake in the south were well defined, the large inhospitable landmass of Aksai Chin, [3] measuring some 38,000 square kms, at altitudes 14,000 to 22,000 feet, had not been delineated. By 1865, the British claimed the limits of their empire along what came to be known as the 'Johnson Line', that showed Aksai Chin as part of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Much later, in 1892, Chinese put up boundary markers at the Karakoram Pass. However, no other markers or outposts came up along the unsettled stretch of some 1570 kms nor was the area patrolled by either side.

Consequent to the surveys in 1897, British redrew the boundaries and, in their effort to formalize the borders, sent a proposal to the Chinese government in 1899. It came to be known as the Macartney-Mc Donald Line. The proposal was never responded to by the Chinese government and the matter rested there. Notably however, Peking University Atlas of 1925, and the Postal Atlas of China till 1933, continued to show Aksai Chin as part of India.

In the 1950s, the slogans of Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai and the well meaning principles of Panchsheel notwithstanding, the border issue could not be resolved. Not only were the Chinese claiming whole of Aksai Chin but, by the end of 1957, had also constructed the Western Highway, connecting Xinjiang and Tibet, cutting across Aksai Chin.

Despite personal correspondence between Nehru and Chou En-lai, and their reciprocal state visits, the shadows over the disputed territories steadily darkened. Stands hardened further when, in October 1959, Chinese ambushed a police patrol near Kongka La well inside the Indian

territory. Such like incidents, together with the happenings in the Eastern Sector, eventually led to the armed confrontation in 1962.

Things as they stand in the Western Sector, China is in occupation of 38000 square (sq) kms of Indian territory. Besides, as part of the Sino-Pak boundary agreement of 1963, Pakistan had also illegally ceded 5180 sq kms of Indian territory - Shaksgam Valley in the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK)-to China.

The Central Sector

This stretch of 545 kms runs along the states of Himachal and Uttar Pradesh. Though least complicated of the three sectors, it nevertheless has disputed portions. Here the Chinese claims account for some 2000 sq kms in eight small separate blobs.

Though comparatively more stable, in this sector too China keeps asserting its presence and the claims from time to time. As a result, this segment also has its share of occasional 'incidents'. As recently as in July 2015 for example, Chinese troops drove away Indian shepherds from grazing grounds close to the border near Barahoti. Their makeshift shelters were also dismantled. "This is not the first time they have done this. Last year too they had indulged into something similar in this area" said a Home Ministry official. [4]

The Eastern Sector

It is only consequent to the British victory in the Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824-26), leading to the annexation of Assam, and their further eastward expansion into Burma (now Myanmar), that the British government in India came to have border with China.

British soon established their boundary arrangements in Burma. However, the tribal areas north of Assam extending up to Tibet remained largely unexplored and autonomous. The system of 'Inner Line Permit' that came into effect in 1873 prevented tribal forays into the tea plantations of Assam and restricted 'British Subjects' from entering into these 'Prohibited Areas'. [5]

British efforts to establish boundary in this political subdivision called the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), commenced only after they realized

the importance of Tawang - a border trading town with an old monastery considered second in importance only to the one in Lhasa.

To resolve the boundary issue, a tripartite conference was held in Simla in April 1914. It was attended by the representatives of the governments of India, China and Tibet. For a stretch of some 900 kms, starting from Bhutan in the west and going beyond the 'Great Bend' of river Brahmaputra in the east, Sir Henry McMahon, the then Foreign Secretary of the British government in India, proposed the boundary on the principle of 'Watershed'. The alignment came to be known as the 'McMahon Line'.

To start with there was general agreement. The Tibetan representative even initialed the marked map. Later however, the Chinese plenipotentiary, Ivan Chen, declined to sign the agreement declaring the Simla Convention and the tripartite arrangement illegal on grounds that the local government of Tibet could not be a party to a treaty.



Map - 3 : Showing Alignment of McMahon Line

Later, after failed negotiations in 1938, the then governor of Assam famously asserted that "Tawang was undoubtedly British, but was controlled by Tibet". [6] Bethatas itmay, itwas only in February 1951thata column of Assam Rifles [AR) established control over Tawang. Soon afterwards China declared that it did not recognize the McMahon Line.

Mounting tensions on the border issue in the late fifties need no recounting. Failed rebellion in Tibet and Dalai Lama's arrival in India in March 1959 - his entourage having crossed over into India had first camped in Tawang - further complicated the matters. Chinese attack on the AR post at Longju in August 1959 (see Map-3 above), led to the deployment of army along the disputed borders. The battle lines were getting drawn.

Nehru's stand on the boundary issue was "Not open to discussions with anybody" and the unfolding events led to what is commonly referred to as the 'Forward Policy'. For him "McMahon Line was the de facto as well as the de jure boundary there". [7]. China objected strongly to the on goings through diplomatic channels. Their protest note in November 1961 stated that "The Chinese government would have every reason to send troops across the so called McMahon Line and enter the vast area between the crest of the Himalayas and their southern foot". [8] A year later, in 1962, China did just that - Indian intelligence agencies and the government had miscalculated the Chinese threat. The rest as they say is history.

In Sum

The Sino-Indian boundary, from the Wakhan Corridor on the Indo-Afghan-Tibet border in the west to Diphu on the tri junction of Indo-Myanmar-Tibet border in the east, is disputed at many places. Essentially however, the disputed territories are Aksai Chin in the west and Arunachal Pradesh in the east. Competing claims are based on historical records, administrative controls, cultural linkages et al. Therein, China refuses to accept Indian claims, calling them based on the days of the British Raj, and India does not accept Chinese claims based on their obscure and inconclusive imperial controls.

In an effort to resolve the dispute, the two sides initiated official level talks in 1981. Joint Working Groups (JWG) were set up in 1988 - they have held some 20 meetings so far. Confidence Building Measures (CBM) in the military fields have also been in place since 1993. However, any greater peace, clarity or resolution continues to elude.

Be that as it may, the next chapter attempts a terrain brief of Xinjiang and Tibet in general and of the areas along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in particular. It also takes in its stride some details of the infrastructural

developments on both sides of the LAC. In the context of this study the contents have military orientations.

End Notes

- [1] Between 1960 and 2000 China had settled land borders with 12 of its 14 neighbouring states. For details see Fravel M Taylor, *International Security and Cooperation : Explaining China's Compromises in Territorial Disputes*, International Security, Fall 2005
- [2] Aitchen K Wu, *China and the Soviet Union*, New York: John Day, 1950, p 250.
- [3] Aso Akayaquin' or Aksai Qin' meaning 'Desert of White Stones'. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sino-Indian_border_dispute.
- [4] Deeptiman Tiwari, PLA troops razed Indian shepherds' sheds a month ago. *Times of India*, New Delhi, August 3, 2015, p 12.
- [5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/inner_line_permit. whereas the word 'British Subjects' was later replaced by 'Indian Citizen', the system, intended to safeguard the interests of the tribals, continues to be operative even now.
- [6] For details see Tawang and Un-negotiated Dispute, T S Murty, Maxwell, *The China Quarterly*, No 46 (April - June 1971), pp 357-62.
- [7] Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, AVSM, VrC, VM (Retired), *India's China War : Revisiting the Key Elements*, in Jasjit Singh (ed), *Essays on China*, Knowledge World, New Delhi, 2012, p 14.
- [8] Major K C Praval, *Indian Army After Independence*, Lancer Paperbacks, New Delhi, 1993, p 176.

PART - 2

DETAILS OF TERRAIN AND OF INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENTS ALONG THE LAC

A Brief on the Xinjiang and Tibet Regions

India's disputed border touches two political sub divisions of China - Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the area of Aksai Chin and Tibet Autonomous Region in the remainder portion. Following passages briefly introduce these two regions and then go on to record essential details about the infrastructural developments on both sides of the LAC.

Xinjing Uyghur Autonomous Region, the largest political sub division of China, has a number of extremely rugged mountain ranges as also vast stretches of Taklamakan desert. Ancient silk trade route passed through this extremely inhospitable terrain. Sparse population of the area consists of two main ethnic groups - Turkic Uyghur and Han. Uyghur separatist movement claims that their land was illegally occupied by PRC in 1949. That apart, the region is rich in minerals and is estimated to hold over 20 percent of China's coal and fossil fuel reserves.

Located at height of around 1400 meters Kashghar is the westernmost important town and is well connected by air and surface communications. It is the railhead and is also the starting point for the Karakoram Highway (KKH) that crosses over the treacherous Khunjerab Pass at a height of little over 15000 feet and goes up to Abbottabad in Pakistan. As an important artery of the China-Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC), the highway is being broadened and upgraded to nearly triple its carrying capacity. Alongside a rail link is also proposed to be constructed beyond Kashghar up to Abbottabad.

Further to the south of Kashghar, and located at about the same height, is Hotan; another important oasis city and a communication center in these parts.

Disputed Aksai Chin forms part of the heavily glaciated Karakoram Range in the southwestern part of this autonomous region. As may be recalled, the Western Highway, connecting Xinjiang and Tibet, cuts across this disputed territory. For most part the highway remains within 50 to 100 kms of the LAC.

Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR,) having some amazing geographical

features, is a vast windswept tableland located in the southern part of China. At an average height of around 14,800 feet, it is the highest plateau on earth and is therefore rightly referred to as 'Roof of the World'. Its snow capped peaks and glaciated regions boast of largest volume of ice outside the Polar Regions. Catchment areas of the melting snows sustain some of the major river systems flowing into the neighbouring countries - Indus, Ganges, Sutlej and Brahmaputra that flow into India for example. [1]

Tibet is served by three major highways - Western Highway cutting across Aksai Chin as mentioned already, Central Highway coming down from Gormo and the Eastern Highway from Chengdu - all converging on Lhasa. Of these the Central one is the lifeline of Tibet sustaining close to 80 percent of the to and fro traffic from mainland China. Capabilities and the carrying capacities of these highways are further augmented by subsidiary axes besides laterals and link roads acting as the bypasses. Garr-Amdo road is a good example of a lateral connecting the Western and the Central highways just as Qamdo-Bangda-Nagqu provides a good link between the Eastern and the Central highways. (See Map-4 below).



Rail link to Lhasa, laid over permafrost and commissioned a decade ago, has been an engineering feat. It is already operational beyond Lhasa up to Xigaze and is to be extended beyond up to Kathmandu in Nepal [2]. Two other rail projects are also planned to be completed by 2020 - due south to Yadong in Chumbi Valley, and to Nyingchi in the east.

Over the years a number of large capacity airports have either come up, or have been upgraded, both in Xinjiang and in Tibet. Another ten, of differing specifications and capacities, are under varying stages of readiness. Whereas some of these in the habited areas of central and southern Tibet may have civilian usages, the ones closer to the border, and in areas devoid of any habitation, cannot but have military purposes.

Oil pipeline from Gormo to Lhasa has been functional since 1977. However, all through its four decades of existence, it has remained prone to breakdowns and has generally performed below its designed capacity. Latest reports indicate that its up-gradation and further extension is in the offing.

Fast paced developments in the field of communication networks merit a specific mention in context of their military relevance - the central theme of this paper. The web of the network, with its hub based in and around Lhasa-Nagqu, radiates due west upto Ngari and to Nyingchi in the east. Satellite stations, optical fiber highways and Geo-spatial Information System (GIS) are either already in place or are in advanced stages of completion. All these are essential for the Command, Control, Communication, Computer, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities to wage a modern war. Thus, the matrix to sustain PLA's stated concept of prosecuting 'Local Wars Under Informationized Conditons' along its troubled borders, is fast becoming a reality.

With that as the backdrop, areas along the disputed border are being subjected to an analytical scrutiny in the three parts conforming to the three sectors of the border described earlier. Each one dilates on the alignment of the LAC, recounts military oriented infrastructural developments on its either side and also highlights inter se importance of some of the areas.

The Western Sector

Tri-junction of Afghanistan (Wakhan Corridor), India (J&K) and China (Xinjiang) is the start point of the border in this sector. From there it runs due south over high Crestline and mountain passes of Karakoram Range up to Shaksgam. This stretch falls under POK. [3].

The all important Karakoram Pass thereafter is under the Indian control. Beyond that runs the contentious LAC - a tacit arrangement of limits of control and patrolling that has come into being over a period of time after the war of 1962. Running further south it divides Depsang Plains on the Indian side with Soda Plains in Aksai Chin, crosses Chang Chenmo Range, cuts across Pangong Tso and then follows Kailash Range till it joins the border near Demchok.

Vast stretches of the rugged mountain ranges in these parts are interspersed by equally vast undulating plains that are motorable almost everywhere. Depsang Plains signify one such expanse and the other one is in the area of Chushul-Demchok. Both these plains sweep deep across the LAC and have forward landing strips on them. Indeed, at an altitude of little over 16,600 feet, Depsang Plains boasts of the highest airstrip in the world. [4]. High velocity winds prevent accumulation of snow on these plains but add biting 'wind-chill' factor to the already extreme cold conditions. This stretch of the LAC accounts for a total of 14 passes - each in turn is flanked by lesser tracks and trails crossing over.



All infrastructural developments in Xinjiang and Tibet have military connotations and the emphasis is even more pronounced closer to the border areas. Accordingly, from the Western Highway start roads reaching out westwards to some of the far flung Tibetan settlements. Most others however each out to the passes tapering off as gravel tracks towards the end. Some of these also have connecting laterals - in the area of Qijil Gilga and Garr for example - ensuring better border management in peace and operational advantages in war.

Chinese have three forward air bases in this sector - the ones at Kashghar, Hotan and Garr.

On the Indian side both the roads upto Leh - over Zoji La and Rohtang Pass - are closed for nearly six months in a year. Roads beyond Leh to Chushul over Chang La, and to Nubra Valley over Khardung La, are similarly prone to disruptions during the winter months. The one leading from Leh to Demchok, and the forward lateral from Chushul to Demchok, face no such problems.

Besides the well established airfields at Leh, and the one at Thoise in the Nubra Valley, forward landing strips exist on the Depsang Plains near DBO and at Chushul and Fukche near Demchok. In addition, a new one has come up at Nyoma that lies close to both Demchok and Chumar - the later one remains in the news for frequent Chinese incursions in its vicinity.

The Central Sector

Starting from the tri-junction of Ladakh-Himachal Pradesh-Tibet border this sector stretches up to the junction point of Uttarakhand-Nepal border in the east. Five main passes in this segment have military significance and, on the Tibetan side, all of them are connected by roads emanating from the Western Highway leading up to the passes.

Main terrain features of this stretch leave little or no scope for challenging the line of the watershed. Even so, in some places, it is contested by China. Essentially the disputed portions are small patches of grazing grounds in areas Harsil and Rimkhim (near Uttarkashi and Joshimath respectively) which, though well on the Indian side, are claimed by China. However, both sides have mutually agreed to share their perceptions of the border in this sector.

Communications on the Indian side are both long and tenuous. Distance from the Gangetic plains to the line of the watershed is anywhere between 300 to 400 kms. Therein, the initial stretches of forested foothills give way to the mid segment of the rugged mountains and end up on the snow clad crest line. The sector is served by three national highways. The first one is from Kalka to Shipki La, the second one runs from Rishikesh to Mana Pass and the third one terminates at Pithoragarh which is just short of Dharchu La. [5]. All three roads, the first two in particular, are prone to frequent disruptions due to floods and landslides.

Whereas China enjoys a clear advantage in terms of road communications in this sector, India, with a string of air bases in Bareilly, Allahabad, Lucknow and Gorakhpur, has an edge in the skies.



The Easter Sector

This sector consists of two distinct segments separated by Bhutan in between. The first one, Sikkim-Tibet border, lies to the west and the Arunachal Pradesh-Tibet border along the disputed McMahon Line to the east. Succeeding paragraphs deal with these two separately.

The first segment, Sikkim-Tibet border, is a small stretch of 350 kms. Starting from Nepal it first runs eastwards before turning south to terminate at the Bhutan border. In this segment China has good road links up to the border town of Yadong and its road ending at Nathu La is far superior to the one on the Indian side. Karen Plateau in the north, Lachung ridgeline on the northeast and the group of three passes - Cho La, Nathu La and Jelep La - are militarily sensitive areas in this sector. The border alignment, creating the narrow Chumbi Valley salient, has strategic importance because of its proximity to the 'Siliguri Corridor' which connects northeastern states to the rest of India. [6].

The second and the larger segment of this sector starts from the Bhutan border in the west, runs east along the McMahon Line and, towards the end, turns southwards to terminate at the junction point of India-Myanmar-China border. Across the border is the rolling Tibetan plateau. There are a number of passes on the watershed. Fifteen of these, at altitudes ranging from 13,500 to 16,500 feet, have military significance. Each of these important ones is either connected by the road taking off from the Eastern Highway or has a road head close by. That apart, the network of the roads closer to the LAC is comparatively better developed on the western and the eastern extremities of this segment. [7].

On the Indian side the broad belt of some 350 kms, from the foothills of Assam to the snow capped McMahon Line, signifies the state of Arunachal Pradesh. The state gets divided into five separate valleys by the rivers flowing down from the watershed and draining into Brahmaputra. Cross movement between these valleys - Kameng, Subansari, Siang, Dibang and Lohit - is severely restricted by the high intervening ridges.

Kameng in the west is the most important of the five sub divisions and has a black top road that meanders its way across Se la - at height 13,700 feet - to Tawang. There are roads radiating beyond Tawang towards the LAC - right



Map - 7 : Showing LAC Along Arunachal Pradesh

up to Bum La for example. Similarly, Lohit in the east is also connected by road and has a landing strip as well, close to the border, at Walong. However, the three valleys in between are far more desolate. Roads in these terminate 60 to 80 kms short of the border areas and only well beaten mule tracks lead beyond up to the far flung passes along the watershed. Existing advanced landing grounds in two of these, at Menchuka and at Tuting, are being upgraded. [8]. Progress on both these is slow

In these parts China has its air bases at Chengdu, Bangda, Nyingchi and at Qamdo. On the Indian side the major ones are at Bagdogra, Tezpur and at Chhabua.

This part must conclude with an important observation. That being, viewed in its totality, India lags far behind China in its efforts to create infrastructural facilities near and along our disputed border facilitating military buildup. In May 2015 even Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence took note of this 'matter of great concern'. [9].

End Notes

- [1] Writing for the April 2010 issue of National Geographic, Brook Lamer has recorded that "All told some 2 billion people in more than a dozen countries - nearly a third of world's population - depend on rivers fed by snow and ice of the plateau region".
- [2] Nepal PM signed agreement for Tibet rail link to Kathmandu. Saibal Dasgupta, 'Nepal signs trade deal with China, to get first rail link'. The Times of India, New Delhi, March 22, 2016, pp 20.
- [3] Shaksgam Valley, an integral part of J&K, was illegally bartered away by Pakistan to China in 1963. In return PRC withdrew its claim on the rest of Baltistan-Hunza region.
- [4] Fairchild Packets first landed here in 1962. Reactivated in 2008 even a Super Hercules has successfully landed here in 2013.
- [5] The old traditional trekking route to Kailash-Mansarovar goes over Lipu Lekha Pass located further north of Dharchu La.
- [6] Hemmed in between Nepal and Bhutan in the north and Bangladesh in the south, the 'corridor', at its narrowest, is only 23 kms wide and carries all the rail and road arteries to the northeastern states. For details see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siliguri_Corridor.
- [7] The two main Chinese thrusts in the 1962 war had also exploited these very areas.
- [8] In October 2009 China had objected to Indian efforts to upgrade these airfields.
- [9] Rajat Pandit, 'India lags China in border infra'. Times of India, New Delhi, May 2, 2015, p. 14.

PART - 3

A RESUME OF CHINA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN TIBET

Strategic Stakes in General Terms

Even in the imperial times Tibet had figured prominently as part of the peripheral security concerns of the then rulers of the 'Middle Kingdom'. Ming dynasty for example had made repeated forays into Tibet to establish a semblance of suzerainty over it. Manchu rulers (their kingdom collapsed in 1911) were convinced that "Tibet is the buttress on our national frontiers - and the hand, as it were, that protects the face" [1]. With the coming into being of the PRC, and the events as they have unfolded, Tibet has become even more central to the strategic game plan of the Chinese government. It is apparent from the fact that, of the total thirteen White Papers released by them on the nationality issues, nine are Tibet related.

Geopolitics of Tibet demands its territorial unity and its political consolidation. Therein, upheavals of the Tibetan unrest continue to be a serious cause of Chinese concern. [2]. A firm hold over Tibet, and internal stability there, is also important in the context of the large and restive Muslim population in the Xinjiang province next door. Further, Tibetan plateau is estimated to hold almost 40 percent of the Chinese mineral deposits and the significance of the water resources of the region has already been mentioned earlier. Understandably therefore, through planned development of communications and connectivity, backed by initiatives of the social justices, China is well on its way to bring Tibet fully in its fold.

In step with that vision, President Xi Jinping wants "to rule Tibet by law; make the Tibetan people prosper and Tibet's economy thrives; undertake the long-term development of Tibet; consolidate the hearts and minds of the Tibetan people; and build a solid foundation." [3]

Foregoing strategic considerations apart, China's Tibet policy is also guided by the overarching influences and compulsions of their strained relations with India. In that context, and based on the various indicators, succeeding paragraphs highlight specific Chinese impulses and interests in the disputed border areas to include those in the area of Aksai Chin. As before, the assessments and the inferences address the three sectors separately - starting from the west.

The Western Sector

In this sector the disputed area of Aksai Chin arguably holds the center stage of China's long term strategy in western Tibet. There are enough indicators, both obvious and obscure, to infer from. Following paragraphs contain assessments of their interests and commitments in these desolate parts.

To start with, first, in this sector India lays claim to what China holds. Surely the setting by itself rankle China. Needless to say that, the occupied area must be held and defended by them to ensure its territorial integrity. Besides, a strong defensive shield is also necessary to ensure the security of their Western Highway passing through the disputed Aksai Chin. The Highway, as may be recalled, helps in sustaining Tibet and acts as the main artery for the move and deployment of troops along the LAC.

Second, their strong defensive posture must also dissuade Indian offensive options in areas where the surface communications and forward airfields on the Indian side can sustain such ventures to exploit the terrain along and across the LAC. A set of open and manoeuvrable expanses, stretching across the LAC in Chushul-Demchok area for example, offer multiple offensive options for deep thrusts with sizeable employment of mechanized forces.

Third, China subscribes to the doctrine of 'Active Defence' which implies 'Adherence to the strategy of strategic defence and operational and tactical offense'. [4]. Not surprisingly therefore, its dissuasive defensive posture has strong offensive contents. In consonance with the concept, their aggressive patrolling results in frequent intrusions and face offs along the LAC. This low key option well serves the Chinese purpose of showing their forceful presence in sensitive areas. These 'incidents', well orchestrated in terms of area(s) and depth, keep the LAC alive. Historically too, China is known to have resorted to "The frequent yet limited use of force against external entities, primarily for heartland defence and periphery control (emphasis added), and often on the basis of pragmatic calculations of relative power and effect". [5]

Fourth important point of Chinese interest in this sector stems from their security concern of the ambitious China-Pak Economic Corridor which

would give China an access to the Arabian Sea. For this 46 billion dollar project Pakistan has already made available 2000 acres of land for the development of the Gwadar Port. Chinese desire for added depth to this Kashghar-Gwadar connectivity of strategic importance, having a series of industrial hubs enroute, needs no elaboration [6].

As a digression it would be appropriate here to point out that the aforesaid Economic Corridor passes through the Indian territory presently under Pakistan's control. Therefore, the anomaly of the POK, as and when resolved, will have wide geopolitical ramifications. [7]. That apart, this sector has another strong 'Pak Factor' as the following paragraph will highlight.

Returning to the point of digression to record the fifth and the last facet of the Chinese interest. That being, deeper and stronger Chinese military presence in the area of Depsang Plains, besides providing the desired additional security to the 'Economic Corridor', will also threaten the flanks of the Indian deployments on the Siachen Glacier where an undeclared Indo-Pak war has been raging on for over three decades now. Apparently therefore, repeated and deep intrusions in the area of DBO are a part of a well conceived and well orchestrated Chinese politico-military strategy to 'nibble away' Indian territories. [8]. These forays, coupled with frequent incursions in the Chumar salient further to the south, keep the whole of Western Sector simmering.

The Central Sector

An analytical assessment of the Chinese actions and initiatives in this sector indicate a two pronged approach. One, by laying claims to the 'pockets' of undulating areas across the watershed, China apparently seeks to have a toehold for greater domination across the crest line. With better accessibility to the passes, preemptive occupation of select few of these, and of some tactical features beyond, is surely a lucrative option. It would require formidable Indian effort to be rid of such occupations. However, any such Chinese venture must take note of the daunting task of maintaining forces across the passes that remain closed for six to eight months in a year. Their tenuous lines of communication, with limited bridges over Sutlej River, can easily be interdicted and that, Indian shortfalls in land communications are, to an extent, offset by the IAF's edge in this sector.

Two, it may be recalled that it is only in this sector that China has chosen to share its perceptions of the LAC (emphasis added) alignment. It must be remembered that the term LAC is linked to the tacit arrangement of deployment and patrolling limits that has come into being consequent to the 1962 conflict. Since there was no fighting in these parts, the use of this term in this sector may well be a ploy to confuse the border issue. In any case, the initiative helps them in maintaining the facade of a reasonable neighbour who is ready to resolve the boundary issue.

The Eastern Sector

To start with, Chinese interests in this sector must take note of the unfinished agenda of the Sino-Bhutan border dispute. Negotiations since 1984 have resolved most of it except 270 sq kms of territory in the northwestern Bhutan that China is forcefully bargaining for. China has offered almost 500 sq kms of territory in exchange in central Bhutan to fully settle the dispute. The impulse behind the Chinese trade off is to gain Doklam Plateau and the adjacent areas overlooking the Chumbi Valley which would give them a foothold and a launch pad to threaten the Siliguri Corridor.

That the above mentioned Chinese exchange offer has serious implications for India needs no explanation. Also that, the frame work of the Indo-Bhutan 'Treaty of Friendship' of 2007 would restrain Bhutan from agreeing to the Chinese proposal. However, what need to be noted are the unrelenting Chinese efforts at strategic enhancements against India. [9].

Further to the east, China neither recognizes McMahon Line nor Arunachal Pradesh and lays claims to 90,000 sq kms of Indian territory up to the foothills of Assam. It is noteworthy that, China was initially willing to accept McMahon Line as the boundary if India were to give up its claims on Aksai Chin. A proposal to that effect, was apparently made by the Chinese Prime Minister (PM) during his visit to New Delhi in April 1960, but was not agreed to by Nehru. [10].

Even today, this disputed part eminently serves the Chinese purpose of countervailing the Indian claims. However, unlike in 1960, their stand has progressively hardened. From 2006 onwards they have started referring to this area as 'Southern Tibet'. [11]. China has also adopted the policy of



Map - 8 : Disputed Areas and the Chinese Claim Line in the Eastern Sector

issuing only a 'Stapled Visa' to the Indian citizen of Arunachal Pradesh. [12]. Similarly, China unfailingly objects to the visits of the Indian dignitaries, even that of Dalai Lama for that matter, to this state - Tawang in particular - in their effort to drive home the point of 'disputed territory'.

Summative Remarks

Politico-diplomatic initiatives and military moves, along with a mix of Pak factor, reflect the aggressive Chinese strategy towards India in Tibet. All three sectors of the border experience these multi-prong pressures. Even so, as part of its overall game plan, China perhaps uses the Eastern Sector more for politico-diplomatic coercions, Western for military provocations, and overtures in the Central Sector to give impressions of 'on-going negotiations' to the world at large - JWG meetings, CBMs and the semblance of border trade completes the picture.

Present state reflects a situation where, despite strategic rivalry, military face offs along the border do not lead to conflicts. An uneasy stability prevails. In January 2016, the Chinese defence ministry spokesman told reporters that—"the two sides have dealt with the differences properly" [13]. Be that as it may, is the immediate future of the vexed border dispute promising or threatening? Even if it is not promising to be threatening, it

certainly holds prospects of a threat. More so, since "Democratic countries tend to resolve their disputes by peaceful means and non democratic countries tend towards non-peaceful means." [14]. In that context, next chapter assesses PLA's strength and weaknesses in general and military capabilities in Tibet in particular.

End Notes

- [1] 'Geopolitical Importance of Tibet' at www.tibet.net/2012/09/geopolitical-importance-of-Tibet.
- [2] For China Dalai Lama's presence in India is a constant irritant. Beijing considers him as an Indian puppet and routinely protests about Indian complicity.
- [3] For details see www.newindianexpress.com/columns/China-Sticks-to-Its-Guns-on-Tibet/2015/09/03/article3007791.ece
- [4] For full text of China's Military Strategy, May 2015, see www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_208206.htm
- [5] Michael Swain, Ashley Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future*, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif, (USA), 2000, pp 21.
- [6] 'China gets 2000 acres in Pak port city' *Times of India*, New Delhi, November 13, 2015, pp 17.
- [7] The objectionable point regarding the Chinese involvements and developments in the POK was raised by India's Home Minister with his counterpart during his visit to China in November 2015.
- [8] Most recent and notable Chinese intrusion, some 19 kms inside the Indian territory near DB0, was in April 2013. It took 20 days of firm Indian stand before status quo ante could be restored.
- [9] For more details see 'China-India : An analysis of the Himalayan Dispute', Commodore Katherine Richards, CSC, RAN, *Indo-Pacific Strategic Studies*, Feb 2015, pp 5-6.
- [10] *Asian Recorder*, (New Delhi), VI, No 19, pp 3302.
- [11] Belatedly though, as a quid pro quo, in November 2015, after a meeting between the External Affairs Ministers of India and Philippines, South China Sea was referred to as the West Philippines Sea for the first time by India in any official document.

- [12] This objectionable practice continues though the point was raised by two successive Indian PMs during their visits to china in 2010 and 2015.
- [13] 'Before Doval visit, China says border situation is stable', Times of India, New D elhi January 2,2 016, pp 10.
- [14] Jean-Mar Blanchard and Paul K Huth quoted in Hongyi, 'Explaining Chinese Solutions to Territorial Disputes with Neighbors', pp 491.

PART -4

AN INDO-CENTRIC ASSESSMENT OF PEOPLES LIBERATION ARMY: ITS STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND MILITARY CAPABILITIES IN TIBET

Introduction

Nation states the world over spend considerable time, resources and sustained efforts in trying to gauge the ever changing contours of their potential adversary's military capabilities and intentions who, in turn, strives as hard to obscure it if not deny it altogether. Such an endeavour is harder still when it comes to evaluation of China's military might - well screened as it remains behind the 'Yellow Curtain' protected by the Chinese penchant for secrecy and deception.

Admittedly 1998 onwards, when China first published its Defence White Paper, there has been a degree of transparency for better assessments. Now, besides the official sources, there are also professional articles by the Chinese military thinkers and the scholars alike to go by. In the recent past, some of their sophisticated missiles and weapon were also on display during the military parades. Even if some of these are intended as part of their 'calculated disseminations' to confuse rather than to clarify, some others do give insight into China's growing military prowess. There are also periodic reviews and updates by the 'China Watchers' painstakingly monitoring the situation. It transpires that most of them are of US origin and essentially concentrate on their own concerns.

With foregoing as the backdrop, the following text addresses three issues from the Indian perspective - an overview of the PLA's present state and the strengths, few analytical assertions about its weaknesses, and some reflections on its capabilities in Tibet. The write up, while striving not to be heavy on opinions and short on facts, also avoids clutter of too many details.

The March of the PLA: Indicators of Its Strengths

Red Army, under the leadership of Chairman Mao, came into being in 1927 as the sword arm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). With the emergence of the PRC in 1949 it was designated as the PLA. [1]. Well versed in the 'People's War' this five million strong force was neither well equipped nor well trained. Demobilization and restructuring of the force, assisted by the Soviet advisers, started soon after. Over the next three decades it was

well blooded in Korea, Tibet, Burma, against India and the Soviet Union, as indeed also while supporting the Vietnamese against the US. In between, in 1964, it went nuclear and declared the policy of 'No First Use'. Soon thereafter, in 1966, Second Artillery Corps - the rocket force of the PLA - was also raised.

Defence was one of the pillars of the 'Four Modernizations' set in motion in the late 1970s. Over the next one decade, PLA's modernization programme had notched up four main achievements. Those being, one, strict professional orientation of the force by taking away commercial and non military duties from its charter, two, restructuring of the Military Area Commands (MAC) [2], three, force reduction by a million strong, and lastly a doctrinal shift away from the 'Peoples War'.

If the Gulf War kick-started serious debate about PLA's ongoing modernization programmes, the crisis in the Taiwan Straits of 1995 gave further impetus to their purpose and zeal. China realized the inadequacies and inferiority of an army against a technologically superior one. President Jiang Zemin issued a set of directions to 'win local wars under modern hi-tech conditions'. [3] Thus, the decade of 1995-2005 must be noted for the following:-

- (a) Four fold rise in the defence spending during this period.
- (b) Force reduction from 3 million to 2.3 million.
- (c) Doctrinal re-orientation to fight 'local wars under informationalized conditions' as against 'under modern high- tech conditions'. [4]
- (d) Inventory upgrades across the three services.
- (e) Recasting of training standards with emphasis on automation and joint operations.
- (f) Modification of the recruiting system to ensure intake of more qualified manpower.
- (g) Streamlining of the operational logistics.
- (h) Revised roles and tasking of the reserves and the militias.
- (j) Makeover of the defence industry to equip and sustain the transforming PLA.

The next decade, 2005 - 2015 was even more eventful. In 2007, as a powerful display of its technological achievement, China successfully destroyed one of its own aging satellites with its Anti Satellite Ballistic Missile (ASBM). That apart, the Chinese defence budget doubled during this period. Indeed, some strategic think-tanks and 'China Watchers' assess defence spending to be significantly more than the reported figures. [5]. Be that as it may, changes in PLA's force structuring saw emphasis on mechanization, creation of rapid reaction forces, air defence brigades and amphibious forces. Apparently, all these were efforts to sustain the strategy of 'Active Defence'. Not surprisingly, "Movement towards more offensive military doctrine and rapidly increasing and non transparent budget are said to differentiate China from other rising powers" [6].

As to the PLA Navy (PLAN) is concerned its process of transformation can be traced back to the 90s when China started thinking in terms of power projection beyond its coastal waters. A series of research and development (R&D) projects for the construction of naval crafts - notably aircraft carriers to have floating air power at sea - were set in motion alongside examination of doctrinal precepts for a blue water navy. In 2007 and 2009, as a participant in the Pak initiated 'Aman' set of exercises in the Arabian Sea, with navies from Southeast Asia and a number of western countries, PLAN was exposed to intricacies of large scale naval maneuvers. Soon afterwards, for the first time, PLAN deployed a naval task force for anti piracy operations off the east coast of Somalia signifying China's arrival as a 'sea power'. By 2009 China had made clear its ambitions by suggesting to the US "You, the United States, take Hawaii East and we, China, will take Hawaii West and the Indian Ocean". [7]

China's immediate and high priority maritime concerns revolve around Taiwan, ongoing tensions in the South China Sea and the Japanese assertions over Diaoyu Islands. These have led to Asia-Pacific military alliances and increasing US presence in the region. Understandably therefore, China's recently commissioned first aircraft carrier has joined the South China Sea Fleet. Plans are afoot to construct and commission two nuclear powered aircraft carriers by 2020. Acquisition of Kilo class submarine from Russia and construction of Jin and Shang class submarines have greatly enhanced PLAN'S capabilities. However, nuclear powered submarine(s) with intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) on board is

still a distant dream. To that end, White Paper of 2015 lays great emphasis on maritime security and PLAN, in terms of budgetary allocations for modernizations, is on high priority.

It must also be remembered that, over the years, China has relentlessly participated and assisted in construction of port facilities in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan and is also interested in developing Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka - 'String of Pearls' to extend its operational reach. Latest reports indicate that Maldives may allow China to build a port at Gaadhoo in the southern atoll [8]. In some relief to India however, Bangladesh appears to have stepped out of the Chinese proposal to develop Sonadia project next to Cox's Bazar [9].

PLA Air Force (PLAAF), with a humble beginning as an 'Aviation Section' in 1944, formally came into being as a separate force in November 1949. For the first four decades it had essentially remained a tactical air force ensuring territorial air defence. Indeed, till mid 80s, all senior PLAAF appointments were held not by the aviators but by the army officers. However, towards the late 80s, just as the CMC members were debating concepts of land-air warfare and PLAAF's offensive role, happenings of the gulf war came to them as a wakeup call. Next decade saw major shift in the doctrinal approach and in the revision of training manuals, backed by a concerted drive to improve the production facilities with upgraded technologies.

Replacement of the obsolete J series of aircrafts [10] commenced with the acquisition of SU-27s. Towards the turn of the century, aided by Israel, China started producing multi-role J-10s (a copy of the US F-16) in large numbers. Chinese stealth fighters, J-20 and J-31 - comparable to Raptor and F-35 Lightning respectively - flew for the first time in 2011 and 2012 in that order. These are expected to be inducted, and be fully operational, in the next couple of years. In the mean time, negotiations have been on for the last few years for the purchase of SU-35s. To fully exploit the potentials of these state of the art aircrafts, China reportedly has IL-76 based Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) in place and also limited air refueling capabilities.

Thus, with ever increasing numbers of the fourth and the fifth generation aircrafts, early warning capabilities, command and control systems, data

links and the likes, PLAAF is fast catching up with other modern air forces. PLAAF's modernization is also consistent with the key appointments and assignments of the air force officers in the higher echelons of the military hierarchy. Not surprisingly therefore, Pentagon's Annual Report for the year 2014 finds "China's Air Force Modernization: Unprecedented in History" [11].

Lastly, a word about the PLA's Second Artillery Corps (SAC) is necessary. On 1 July 1966, within two years of becoming a nuclear power, China had established PLA's SAC. This force, under the direct command of CMC, was to control all conventional and nuclear missile systems. Over the years, this elite force, with progressively improving delivery systems, increasing ranges, better payloads and greater accuracy, has steadily become more important and central to the PLA. It is noteworthy that, despite PLA's successive force reductions in the 90s, it was only SAC that gained in numbers and expanded.

Sticking to its agenda of restructuring and modernization, in January 2016, China announced its latest tranche of initiatives. Therein, manpower is planned to be reduced across the board to make PLA leaner and meaner. There is also a mention of a new force, called the PLA's Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), to specifically address the entire gamut of cyber and space warfare. [12]. Speaking on the occasion of its inaugural ceremony, President Xi Jinping stated that it was "A new type combat force to maintain national security and important growth point for PLA's combat capabilities". Lastly, SAC has been rechristened as PLA's Rocket Force (PLARF) and is likely to control triad of China's nuclear missiles. [13]. It is not clear if PLARF has been granted the full service status.

Foregoing passages give enough insight into the fact that all branches of the PLA have come a long way from their humble origins. During its journey it has also occupied centre stage in PRC's political consolidation and dispensations. In due course, having been relieved of its non military commitments, it has started developing a more professional ethos. There has been continuity in the process of its conceptual refinements, restructuring and modernizations. Above all, and it is important to note that, the entire progression of the PLA was, and continues to be, backed by a

strong political will, budgetary allocations and well orchestrated infra structural developments.

PLA's Weaknesses: Some Assertions

The march of the PLA has indeed been impressive. To crown it, the use of modernization induced new terms tend to give it a larger than life image. However, a closer scrutiny of professional parameters of the force reveals that it suffers from a number of weak spots, shortfalls and limitations if not outright weaknesses. Analytical assertions in the following paragraph reflect on some of these macro issues so that PLA, sans prejudices, is not allowed to punch above its weight. Temptation to delve into the details of manpower and hardware - an exercise into bean-counting so to say - has been avoided since there is more to a force than the sum of its parts.

To start with few organizational fault lines are being addressed so that the over- arching influences of their limitations are not lost sight of.

PLA is a 'Party Army'. Indeed, it is the sword arm, and the final guarantor, of the Party. A sizeable force remains garrisoned in and around big cities as 'stand by' to quell Tiananmen Square like challenge to the Party. Its ranks and files swear their allegiance not to the PRC but to the CCP. Political Commissars posted at all levels of command ensure strict Party control. They enjoy same warrant of precedence as the one in command, share command responsibilities with him, and even have a say in matters of promotions. They enforce an exacting schedule of ideological training to keep officers and men oriented to the Party line. Importance of all this can be gauged from the fact that, the Chinese President Xijiping, in his address to the newly formed CMC in February 2016, impressed upon the military leaders to "Obey political discipline.....with firm political faith". Viewed in its totality, the political slant surely eats into the military ethos and professionalism of the force. [14]

PLA's utilization of budgetary allocations and defence spending are by and large free of bureaucratic checks and balances. Not surprisingly therefore, higher echelons of the PLA are often blamed for rampant corruption. There are also reports of bribery for promotions and such like favours. Whereas it is not possible to sustain such allegations with any degree of accuracy, there is no smoke without fire. Many PLA officers are known to have faced

charges of corruption and have been sacked. Fallouts of sleaze and dishonesty in the profession of arms erode its moral and physical fighting abilities.

Next set of parameters being reflected upon relate to the much hyped aspect of China's force modernization. There too some glaring shortfalls affecting PLA's combat capabilities stand out.

First, it must be noted that all modern armed forces are evolving all the time to remain ready and relevant for the visualized threats. Therein, there are times when, for a variety of internal and external factors, their structural transformation becomes necessary. PLA is in the midst of such an endeavour - structurally, conceptually and technologically. Therefore, whereas the sheer size and the pace of PLA's modernization continue to be commendable, the institutional adaptations of the resultant changes will take quite some time.

To fully exploit the advantages of new weapons and concepts, men have to acquire fresh skills, and the fighting formations proficiency in innovative operational methods. Mastery on both these counts takes time. With the ground forces reconfiguring from 'divisions' to the 'brigade groups', and PLA's switch to the high-tech environment, this process can only be harder and longer. Therefore, the present status of the force modernization can be best described as 'Work in Progress' and is far from finished..

Second, despite having initiated steps to foster tri services synergy in 1999, PLA's progress on that count has been slow. CMC and the General Departments of the PLA continue to be army dominated with only a sprinkling of officers from PLAN or PLAAF. MRs have also been under the ground force commanders with an officer from the navy or the air force as the deputy. This has resulted in predilection for the ground forces and has restricted the culture of jointness. Even the so called 'joint exercises' conducted in TAR appear to have promoted more of 'inter arms' rather than 'inter services' integration.

The existing seven MACs have since been reorganized into five Theatre Commands (TC) and "are being touted as better suited to command joint operations" [15]. Further, since the mechanized and the informationized operational situations have a degree of fluidity, and since the present rigid

command structures do not promote initiative in such situations, PLA has announced plans to select and train officers for joint operations. In the meantime, for the present lot of commanders and the staff, there is much to assimilate, imbibe and to practice before they can grasp the complexities of a modern battlefield. It may take a decade or so before even a semblance of genuine jointness is achieved.

Aforesaid issues of structural modernizations also adversely impinge on PLA's ability to engage in network centric warfare. It would be fair to assume that the Chinese efforts in this regard in Tibet may take even longer where the network architecture tends to get degraded by the terrain and the weather conditions.

Third, all armies strive for standardization. However, PLA is currently saddled with military hardware of different types, diverse origins and of the rather old vintage. Admittedly, there is a sense of urgency in refurbishing and introducing new weapons and equipment. In the interim however, there are problems of inter-operability and of maintaining an assorted inventory. Incidentally, units and formations with operational roles in Taiwan Straits and South China Sea reportedly enjoy higher priority for upgrades over those assigned to the TAR.

Fourth, in a modern high-tech battlefield, besides "the man behind the weapon" it is also "the software behind the hardware" that counts. That implies access to frontier technologies. Therein, China is handicapped by the embargo of technology transfers from USA and the European Union and, in its stand-alone mode, faces delays and difficulties in the process of modernizations.

Time to shift to a new set of observations by first recalling that, at any given point in time, armed forces must either be waging a war or must be training and preparing for one. In that context, following passages record some critical observations on PLA's combat experiences, training standards and on their manpower.

The present generation of the Chinese armed forces has not been blooded in trials of combat. Their last military venture, a border war with Vietnam in 1979, was also essentially an army affair. There too, whereas the Chinese did make some gains and claimed victory, most military analysts are of the

opinion that the Vietnamese army out-performed PLA. Lest it is lost sight of, it is noteworthy that PLA's experience of fighting in the high altitudes is even more dismal.

In the last four decades, whether in Taiwan Straits, South China Sea or in Tibet for that matter, PLA has been involved only in posturing and brinksmanship - testing and pushing the limits of their military muscle flexing. Some have referred to this lack of combat experience as 'peace disease' - implying eroding professional health of the force - while some others have expressed it, in a lighter vein, as 'emperor without clothes.'

Aforesaid apart, PLA is also short of learning experiences of operating with other modern armies of the world, in war like conditions - as part of the coalition forces combating terrorism for example.

Incidentally, of the roughly 1.6 million army, only about 850,000 ranks and files reportedly form part of the combat units - the cutting edge of soldiering. Therefore, the 'teeth to tail' ratio of the force also appears to be rather skewed.

It also transpires that, just like their ranks and files, the entire range of PLA's weapons and equipment, whether imported or indigenously produced over the last few decades, has not been war tested either - J 10 fighters for example.

Some weak spots can also be identified in PLA's training standards. The distraction of ideological training - 25 percent of the training time is taken up for that - and shortfalls in joint training have already been commented upon. Those apart, their field exercises have also been faulted for their 'mere formality', for 'setting low goals' and for 'stage managing' to ensure a 'win situation'. This may have generated a false sense of superiority - a weakness that cannot be wished away. Not surprisingly therefore, in October 2014, Shanghai Daily carried a front page news article reporting that PLA's General Staff HQ had sent out a letter to all the three services, listing weaknesses in training standards that "affect and hinder our army's ability to go to war". [16].

As to PLA's human component is concerned, military service is mandatory in China and it follows a two year conscript system. Whereas it is rarely required to be enforced - pressure of the population takes care of that - the

policy does result in large scale annual turnover. Recruiting standards are often clipped on counts of educational qualifications and/or physical standards. Many of them, serving in technical arms such as SAC, are often found lacking in their technical aptitudes. Some human resource experts also feel that, the pampered young men of the 'One Child Policy' era do not easily take to the hardships of life in the barracks.

To conclude this discussion on PLA's weaknesses, following four summative comments merita mention:-

- (a) It is not to suggest that PLA is 'mass without substance', but certainly to suggest that presently it is far from attaining its desired degree of proficiency.
- (b) PLA has certainly graduated from merely defending territory to deter an offensive.
- © Whereas PLA's ability to project and sustain military power beyond mainland China is surely a suspect, its ability to do so along its disputed border with India is not.
- (d) PLA's existing shortfalls may not necessarily result in mission failures, but will surely limit the degree of their military accomplishments and will raise the military cost of such ventures.

In sum therefore, PLA's steady strides towards modernization must remain a cause of concern, but its present capabilities must be rated a few notches below what numerous write ups and the Chinese propaganda would have us believe.

PLA's Military Capabilities in Tibet

Details of the Chinese interests, and of their infrastructural developments in Tibet, have already been covered. So have the strength and weaknesses of the PLA been reflected upon. Following paragraphs briefly review PLA's military capabilities in Tibet.

Till the recent reorganization of the erstwhile seven MACs into five TCs, the western and the central sectors of the Sino Indian border were under Lanzou MAC and the entire eastern sector under the Chengdu MAC. Both had two group armies (GA) each with full complement of combat support arms - Army Aviation and Electronic Warfare regiments for example - on

their orders of battle (ORBAT). The former, with motorized divisions and a strength of 2,20,000 was heavier than the later which, with a mechanized division also on its ORBAT, had an estimated strength of 1,80,000 personnel. For administrative and logistic support, both the MACs had control over four military districts (MD) and the border defence regiments grouped under those MDs were guarding the borders.

Two missile bases, having three missile brigades each, have their well prepared deployment areas in the two MACs. Similarly, launch sites are also reported to have been surveyed for the road mobile missiles and for the multi barrel rocket launchers (MBRL). Besides engaging counter force and counter value targets in depth, these should also be expected to act as deterrence.

Consequent to the coming into being of the TCs the whole of TAR will now fall under the Western TC. [17] The specifics of the regrouping of the forces in the new dispensation are still not known. Nevertheless, it would be fair to assume that, without unduly unhinging the present arrangements, the existing formations may steadily be augmented by high-tech force multipliers (FM). Command and the staffing patterns may also be modified for better integration of land-air battles. This endeavor will take some time before it stabilizes in its new avatar.

Tibet has a total of 14 air bases for PLAAF to operate from. Of these only the ones at Kashghar and Hotan are at altitudes around 1500 meters. All others, at heights of 3500 meters and above, suffer from payload penalties and also from the general drop in performance of both the men and the machines. However, PLAAF does enjoy advantage in terms of ground based air defence assets and unarmed aerial vehicles (UAV).

Three air divisions of the fighter aircrafts are reportedly assigned to the Lanzou MAC and two to the Chengdu MAC. [18]. One bomber air division is also known to be located in Tibet and is assessed to have its operational bias towards Ladakh. Move and relocation of additional air assets into Tibet would be an inherent part of the overall inductions. In readiness for such contingencies, Sukhoi-27s from other MACs are known to have practiced operations from five different bases in Tibet. Recently, China has also constructed two of the world's largest helicopter bases in Aksai Chin. [19].

As to the mobilization and induction of additional forces into Tibet is concerned, it has been assessed that the existing air, rail and road capacities would enable PLA to induct up to two rapid reaction force formations within 48 hours, five GAs in about a fortnight and a total of twelve GAs (30 divisions plus) over a period of a month. This time duration would also account for the move and redeployment of air assets into Tibet. These theoretical calculations may have to be moderated a little by the practical difficulties of actual execution. Also that the total force, if and when inducted, may well take much longer - anywhere up to two weeks - to be fully acclimatized, operationally deployed and oriented, and to be ready for action.

In the light of such mobilization capabilities, three points of interest stand out. First, at the cost stating the obvious, China enjoys a clear edge in the buildup of its forces in Tibet against India. Second, deriving from that, it would be possible for PLA to undertake small scale tactical operations - to occupy some important features or to secure a pass in the disputed areas for example - with the situational advantages of surprise, initiative and of escalation control. Third, historically, China prefers to bide its time and be deliberate in its actions. Since full scale mobilization and induction into Tibet would de facto signify preparations for war, China should be expected to be more surreptitious and circumspect about its build up - take longer time while hiding military preparation behind politico-diplomatic initiatives and strategic deception measures.

In the ultimate analysis, a soldier must be equipped, trained and fielded at the right time and at the right place. Just as a point of interest, the cost of doing that in Tibet is four times that of sustaining one anywhere else in the mainland China.

Not to be dismissive about China's nuclear options, following aspects of its policies and capabilities are being brought on record before closing this chapter:-

- (a) China has a declared policy of 'minimum deterrence posture' which gives no clear indication of its nuclear arsenal. [2 0].
- (b) China has also pledged to 'no first use'. National Defence White Paper of 2015 clarifies that the Chinese nuclear weapons are only intended

to serve the purposes of strategic deterrence and for nuclear counter attack'.

- (c) PLARF now has an array of missile systems - from the Short Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs) to the Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) - with land, sea and air based delivery systems that can mete out crippling blows.
- (d) If latest reports are to be believed, China is well on its way to develop 'hypersonic glide vehicle' that can twist and lurch to out-manoeuvre missile defences. [21].

With that, the stage is now set to reflect on China's possible military options against India in the near future.

End Notes

- [1] Addressing the Communist People's Political Consultative Conference in September 1949, Chairman Mao had stated that "We will not only have a powerful army but also a powerful air force and a navy".
- [2] 11 MACs were reorganized into 7.
- [3] Chinese President, as Chairman of the CMC, is Commander in Chief of all Chinese forces.
- [4] See White Paper of 2004.
- [5] In the last one decade Chinese military spending has increased by 441% and that of India's by 147%.
- [6] 'Chinese and Indian Strategic Behaviour: Growing Power and Alarm', George J Gilboy, Eric Hegin Botham, South Asia Edition 2012, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, India, pp xvi
- [7] "China proposed division of Pacific, Indian Ocean, we declined: US Admiral" Indian Express, May 15, 2009.
- [8] 'China may build port in southern Maldives', The Times of India, New Delhi, April 11, 2016, pp 13.
- [9] For details see Indrani Bagchi, 'Dhaka cancels port to be built by China, India eyes another', The Times of India, Delhi edition, February 8, 2016, pp 1.
- [10] China uses 'J' for ground attack aircrafts, 'H' for bombers, 'Y' for transport and 'Z' for helicopters.

- [11] For details, see www.thediplomat.com/2014/06/chinas-air-force-modernization-unprecedented-in-history.
- [12] For details see 'DRAGON ARMY TURNS INTO A LEANER, MEANER FORCE', The Times of India, Delhi edition, February 4,2016, pp 26.
- [13] www.eng.mod.gov.in/ArmedForces/second.htm
- [14] www.english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-01/16/content_6852853.htm
- [15] 'China Reorganizes Military', The Times of India, Delhi edition, February 2, 2016, pp 26.
- [16] [www.china.org.cn/china/2014-10/13.content_33744615.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2014-10/13/content_33744615.htm).
- [17] 'Parrikar to get a view of China's military might' The Times of India, Delhi edition, April 14,2016, ppl5.
- [18] Each air division with three to four air regiments holds 70 to 120 combat aircrafts including maintenance spares.
- [19] 'China's Military Power: A Net Assessment', Major General G D Bakshi, SM, VSM, Knowledge World Publishers, New Delhi, ppl82.
- [20] According to the assessment of the Federation of American Scientists, China has about 260 nuclear weapons in its arsenal.
- [21] 'Race for latest N-arms threatens to revive Cold War', The Times of India, Delhi edition, April 18,2 016, pp 16.

PART - 5

REFLECTIONS ON CHINA'S MILITARY THOUGHTS AND ON THEIR POSSIBLE MILITARY OPTIONS AGAINST INDIA

The Backdrop: The Relevance of War and Its Changing Nature

All through the recorded history of mankind, war has arguably been the most arduous and deliberate activity of the human beings. It is a matter of life and death for those engaged in the trials of combat. At the very least, a war may change the history and the geography of a nation. At its worst, it may turn out to be a poser for its very existence or extermination. In any case, at the end of it, both the victor and the vanquished stare at large scale death and destruction. And yet, it remains *dernier argument des rois* - last argument of kings.

Therefore, much as the votaries of peace may desire and strive for, outlawry of war will remain an elusive hope. Since war, as an instrument of the state policy, has both relevance and a future, it would be in order here to take note of its changing nature. That will help in better understanding of the discussions that follow.

The process of globalization and interdependence has made the politico - economic cost of waging wars increasingly prohibitive. Not surprisingly therefore, 'total' wars have made way for the 'limited' ones. While some of these find their origins in the vested interests of the great power (s) - issues of energy security for example - failed states, ethnic strife and/or refugee exodus lead to some other inter or intra-state wars. Notably however, wars have become less territorial.

Because of the technical advancements "Armies are increasingly being thought of as information systems embedded in networks of relationships". [1]. In this high-tech environment of cybernetics, robotics and space based capabilities, there also exist non state actors who, with their global connections, are resorting to asymmetric wars. To crown it all, the glare of media brings all military operations in the public domain and raise concerns of human rights violations, co-lateral damages, environmental degradations and the likes.

Lastly, the very concept of victory has undergone a change. Doctrines of deterrence and arrangements of CBMs are often relied upon since conflict terminations do not necessarily signify victory or defeat in the absolute

terms of black and white. There are many shades of grey in between. A nation state may therefore use only minimal force and play out the end-game with politico-diplomatic initiatives with the prospects of negotiations held in reserve. [2].

All these issues will weigh in on China's decision making and therefore provide the right backdrop to examine their military options.

Reflection on China and its Strategic and Military Thoughts

In the recent past scores of books and research papers have focused on China's rise, its global quests, strategic military thoughts and so on. Following paragraphs have taken note of those views in general terms to derive from, and to interpret them, in the Sino-Indian context. To retain focus, only a select few facets have been reflected upon. Similarly, brevity has been retained while discussing these weighty issues that defy simple explanations or solutions.

China's spectacular rise needs no elaboration. In the changing world order it has 'arrived'. It wishes to have a say in setting the global agenda and also to clip the rules of the game to its advantage. Over the years therefore "China has sought to participate in all international organizations and regimes where consequential policies adverse to China's interest might be engineered as a result of Beijing's absence". [3]. It is also a member in a number of regional forums some of which it steers.

USA figures prominently in all Chinese calculations. Though not yet in a position to challenge USA, or even to lay claim to regional hegemony, China has increasingly been assertive in its international dealings while assuring the world of its 'peaceful rise' and of its benign intentions. While the opinions remain divided "China could reasonably be expected to pursue most, if not all of the core elements of those assertive grand traits pursued by major powers in the past". [4].

Be that as it may, it is generally agreed that strategic thoughts and behaviour of a nation are influenced by its own cultural heritage. Some of these Chinese inheritances of statecraft from the days of the yore have come to the fore in the present and are in evidence now.

To start with, first, historically China may have been aggressive and apt in

the use of its military power, but is not known to have shown undue territorial ambitions. While dealing with its smaller peripheral neighbours it often showed accommodation in settling minor disputes - demanding only due deference from them in return. By so doing it did not allow marginal issues to distract it from pursuing its larger goals. In the present Sino-Indian context too, despite the fact that India is neither a small neighbour nor is the dispute a minor one, China, by design, has not allowed it to come in its path to global prominence.

Second aspect is an interrelated one. In that, as an intrinsic part of its strategic culture, China has often used time as an ally to wait and to exploit the inherent potentials of the situation as may evolve later. Therefore, "If the dispute in question is significant but cannot be resolved rapidly to China's advantage, Beijing has advocated postponement----- at least until the balance of power changes substantially in favour of China". [5]. In the existing Sino-Indian milieu that appears to be the case.

Lastly, influenced by its imperial legacy of the 'Middle Kingdom', China considers itself in a superior league of its own and prefers to treat India as a mere pretender seeking higher international role. Even so, it finds India as a strong competitor and its presence in the immediate neighbourhood as discomfoting. Not surprisingly, "China's leaders and strategic thinkers do not hold warm or positive views of India for China's future". [6].

Therefore, to keep India restrained and confined to South Asia, China continues to play its 'Pak Card' with great finesse. Through economic inroads and military assistance it is also trying to wean away India's smaller neighbours. China's recent initiative, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, with some sixty countries on board, is sure to enhance its geopolitical footprints in these parts. To top it all, China unfailingly resists and undermines India's global aspirations in all international organizations. All these years for example, China has resisted India's bid for permanent UN seat and, in June 2016, during the Annual Plenary Session of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, China openly opposed and successfully blocked India's entry to it.

Surely, Chinese military minds are also influenced by the writings of their scholarly general Sun Tzu. To that end, some of the pronouncements from

his famous treatise 'The Art of War', and their application by China in their modern context, need to be taken a note of.

Sun Tzu was a firm believer of military power. Establishing political significance of war he had written that, "Warfare is the greatest affair of the state" and had advocated its application only "after all efforts of reconciliation and compromises failed". The importance of these tenets was not lost on the Chinese leaders and all previous Chinese Presidents, as the Chairman of the CMC, had exercised effective control over PLA. However, the present one, by formally declaring himself the Commander-in-Chief, has taken direct command of the armed forces. [7]. Thus, with complete hold over the Party, the state and the PLA, President Xi Jinping will be most advantageously placed to orchestrate all constituents of national power to address this "greatest affair of the state".

Second, according to Sun Tzu, the supreme the art of war is "To subdue enemy without fighting" and has advocated stratagem of diplomacy, deception and other ploys to achieve it. China has been relentless in its efforts on this count all along. The guiding impulse of this noble thought has ensured China's unity of policy, attitude and action in all its dealings with India. Whether it is their military posture in Tibet, the dubious 'Pak Hand' or their politico-diplomatic moves to impede Indian aspirations - recall these details from the earlier chapters - China's ultimate aim appears to be to delay and limit India's rise to such an extent that it ceases to be a challenge altogether.

A digression to record a point of clarification is necessary here. The quote and the content of the last paragraph are not intended to give an impression that China views India as an enemy, or vice versa for that matter. There is unease between the two because of their disputed borders.

Returning to the point of digression to make the third observation; arguably the Chinese leadership also derives its inspiration for 'The String of Pearls' initiatives, and for their economic engagements in India's neighbourhood, from their ancient game Weiqi - a board game for two, played with black and white pieces, wherein idea is to surround and grab maximum spaces of the opponent.

Lastly, China's military doctrine of 'active defence' surely finds its

inspiration from Sun Tzu's conviction that "Defence may be the strongest form of manoeuvre but the possibility of a victory lies only in attack". Three finer aspects of this operational dictum must be appreciated. Those being, one, the policy has a streak of deterrence built into it, two, it holds out veiled threat of pre-emptive action and, lastly, it champions the option of offensive action to 'gain mastery' and to win a war.

Sino-Indian Points of Dispute

To over simplify a rather complicated set of issues involved, essentially there are four points of dispute. The first one relates to the conflicting territorial claims and therefore to the unsettled borders between the two - the specifics of the dispute have already been narrated earlier. The second bone of contention emanates from the illegally seeded chunk of territory in POK by Pakistan to China. The third one arises as a spinoff of the CPEC which marks China's permanent presence and assets in POK on large tracts of land leased out to it by Pakistan - illegally yet again. The last one finds its origin in Dalai Lama's presence in India which de facto signifies Headquarters of Tibetan separatist movement in India. [8].

Collectively all these act as the fountainhead for all the face offs, tensions and conflicts of interests between the two giants.

What May Restrain China from Using Military Force Against India

As an emerging power, China sees itself competing with USA. However, unlike the sole superpower, China has a troubled neighbourhood. Consequently, before it can be a global player, China must secure its regional security environment. Therein, a war with India does not come across as a viable option. Such a venture would discredit China of its lofty claims of 'peaceful rise'. The stakes are high and the political cost will be far in excess of the possible gains.

Process of globalization has resulted in interdependence and interlinked economies. It also creates centers of powers and points of economic vulnerabilities. With China's deep engagement in the US and the European markets, an armed conflict with India, may lead to restrictions, blockades and/or sanctions by the international community - energy related for example - that will adversely affect, if not ruin, the Chinese economy.

Its rise notwithstanding, China faces serious challenges of political consolidation and stability within. In the east, democratized Taiwan poses threat of secession and of separate identity. Liberal Hong Kong follows a different political system. Individually and collectively they also exercise considerable economic clout. In the west, the Tibetans have long since resisted Beijing's control. Their last uprising in 2008 was serious enough to necessitate large scale move of forces from the Chengdu MC. Uyghurs, the non-Han Muslim population in the Xinjiang province, have become increasingly violent. China's White Paper of 2014 also mentions that "China faces formidable task of maintaining political security and social stability". Therefore, China should be expected to address contradictions within, and to remain focused on its national goals, rather than initiate a war.

For quite some time now, China's main concern has been on the eastern board. A complex set of issues of many nations are at play there and have led to increased US presence in these parts. In the recent past, China's efforts to have its way through flexing of its military muscles were severely challenged. Two recent developments have further complicated the matter for China. First, Tsai Ing-wen, the newly elected President of Taiwan - she assumed office in May 2016 - belongs to the political party that is historically pro Taiwanese independence. This is a serious challenge for Beijing's "One China" visions. Second, on July 12, 2016, Hague based Permanent Court of Arbitration in its judgment demolished the Chinese claims of "Historic Rights" in the South China Sea, ruled that China's "Nine Dash Line" was illegitimate and that China had violated Philippine's sovereign rights. China has rubbished the judgment but a severe blow has been delivered to it nevertheless. Presently therefore, a resolution of troubled Sino-Indian border through an armed conflict must be a distant blip on the Chinese security radar.

It may be recalled that, as of now, PLA is still some distance away from its transformation into a modern force - conceptually, organizationally, technologically and functionally - to wage a high-tech integrated war. Further, besides the operational inadequacies and logistic vulnerabilities of prosecuting a war along the desolated stretches of the disputed borders, the restive internal situation in Tibet and Xinjiang will also weigh heavily on the Chinese leadership against an armed conflict.

Lastly, as a strategy, the low key option of not resolving the dispute for the time being helps China in keeping India anxious if not threatened - particularly so with a ready helping hand from its all weather friend, Pakistan.

What May Persuade China to Use Military Force Against India

Admittedly, each of the "restraining" points raised in the preceding paragraphs can be contradicted equally forcefully. Take for example the assertion that 'unstable situation within' may restrain China from going to war can be questioned. After all, with similar set of instabilities China unhesitatingly took on the US military might in Korea in the fifties and in Vietnam in the seventies. It took on USA again in a forceful display of missile firing in Taiwan Strait in 1994-1995. Similarly, the point regarding 'economic interdependence', and alluding to the possible 'sanctions', can be countered by maintaining that such a step may not be possible against the economic power house that China is. [9]. Therefore, independent of those possible "restraining" factors, the ones that may "persuade" are being reflected upon now.

The discussion must start with the article, titled "Six Wars China is Sure (emphasis added) to Fight in the Next 50 Years", that appeared in the Chinese language news paper, Wenwiepo, on July 8, 2013. All six wars relate to the territories that China believes and claims to be its own. Therein, "Re-conquest of Southern Tibet" appears at serial three with a possible date line of 2035-40. The text elaborates how China may ensure this by engendering disintegration of India with help from Pakistan. Incidentally, the news paper is reportedly pro PRC. [10].

Further, China's White Paper of 2015, without naming India, refers to the "smoldering issues of territorial disputes" as also to the "threat of small scale local wars". Could there be any clearer indication of what China is preparing and remaining ready for? Such explicit official written statements must be taken a serious note of.

The said White Paper also mentions Chinese concerns of the "emerging arrangements and equations". The observation surely alludes to the growing Indo-US strategic co-operation. As the events have unfolded, India has allowed the use of its bases to the US air and the naval crafts for

refueling and repair facilities [11], and the US categorization of India as "major defence partner" has allowed India to acquire state of the art weapon systems and the cutting edge technologies. Besides, India's entry into Missile Technology Control Regime in early June 2016 could not have been very comforting for China. Further, the conduct of a high profile naval exercise in mid June 2016, involving frontline ships from India, Japan and US, close to the disputed Senkaku Islands off coast Japan, must have also irked Beijing. Surely, China realizes that such accords and developments can only restrict its freedom of options in the military space and may therefore be tempted to exploit the existing window of opportunity before it closes altogether.

China is aware of the present rather reduced state of India's defence preparedness. Professional articles and news papers routinely report alarming state of India's aging military equipment and of critical deficiencies - IAF is down to only 31 fighter squadrons as against the authorized strength of 45 for example. There are extreme shortages in ammunition holdings too. Less said the better about the dynamic lethargy of the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) projects.

Ongoing frantic efforts of the Indian government to strike quick defence deals, and to cover some of the lost ground, are no secrets. Similarly, ongoing efforts to speed up the infrastructural developments along the borders are also in the public domain. Therefore, with a clear lead in this catch-up game, China may well decide to take the advantage of its current military edge over India before the edge gets blunted.

Lastly, this discussion is being closed with a poser. To defend the disputed borders, and to keep the Tibetan nationalist movement suppressed, the presence of some forces in Tibet can be justified. So also the development of the population centers can be justified. However, sustained large scale military buildup over the years, with no reckonable threat from India, cannot be. Is the driving impulse behind the undertaking not the aggressive designs for a possible armed confrontation with India? In due course?

Admittedly, there exists the Sino-Indian agreement to maintain peace and tranquility along the LAC on the principle of 'Mutual and Equal Security', but then all such agreements, and so also the treaties, are broken on one pretext or the other at some point.

An Assessment of China's Military Options

China's military options are being examined in general terms - sans the clutter of thrust lines, force levels, objectives and so on. For better grasp of the discussion, following clarifications will serve as the right backdrop

- (a) All Chinese options will have to remain within the confines of the nuclear deterrence already in place.
- (b) China will enter into a military venture only after it is reasonably sure of managing the international environment. Also only after having set in motion its strategic deception plan.
- (c) China would try to stage manage incidents along the troubled borders and then blame India for provocations triggering the outbreak of hostilities
- (d) In a local war, China's aim would be to "Assert ones stand point and will through limited military action". [12].
- (e) Operational concepts of 'active defence', and 'winning war under informationized condition' will guide PLA's missions in Tibet.
- (f) Pakistan should be expected to exploit a Sino-Indian conflict to its advantage. Indeed, such an effort may well be synchronized by China covertly.

First option could be to adopt a strategic defensive stance in the west, with a full scale offensive in the east to reclaim 'Southern Tibet' - Arunachal Pradesh. The option implies a prolonged war, waged across high mountain passes, fought against mounting Indian resistance, in segmented valleys - some of these have no roads - with logistics stretched over tenuous lines of communications. The war will have to be prosecuted under a variety of extreme, if not prohibitive, international pressures. China may not find this option as viable.

As may be recalled China has many strategic interests at stake in the Western Sector - indeed so has India. Therefore, the second option could be a scaled down lateral reversal of the first one. In that, China could maintain a strong dissuasive defensive posture in the Eastern Sector and mount an offensive in the west in the area of Depsang Plains for limited gains in the areas of its interests. The option offers many strategic gains and, with collusive support from Pakistan, stands greater chances of success.

However, China may not find this option feasible on two counts. One, an Indian riposte in Chushul-Demchok area may escalate the situation beyond what China may have bargained for. Two, with little or no territorial claims at stake in this sector - in fact, in this sector it is holding what India claims - China may not be able to justify initiation of hostilities and may find the politico-diplomatic cost of this option far in excess of what it stands to gain.

Next possible option may be to launch an all out offensive to capture the all important Siliguri Corridor to choke India's life line to the northeastern states. It would belittle India and enable China to negotiate from a position of advantage. However, with no points of dispute along the Sikkim border, China would be hard pressed to justify such an offensive to the world at large. Besides, attractive as the option may be, China may find strict confines of the mounting bases, and full play of IAF in these parts, largely discouraging.

Lastly, under the garb of differing perception of the LAC, China may take the recourse of nibbling away parts of disputed territories. Many such opportunities are available in the areas of DBO and Chumar in the Western Sector, in parts of disputed pockets in the Central Sector, and at a number of places in the Eastern Sector - notably in the 'Fish Tail' area. The depth of penetration could vary at different points of ingress. Through such staging forward China could secure some passes, dominating tactical features, create operational opportunities and in the process also close some of the Indian options for possible offensives.

In the exercise of this option, it would be Chinese endeavour to gain initiative by striking first and then aim to terminate hostilities quickly - before India gets its act together - by holding out offers of negotiated settlement from a position of advantage. In the process China would also try to capture the moral high ground through its 'reasonableness' and 'appeal for peace'.

China may well consider delivering such a sharp demonstrative military rap on the Indian knuckles for a variety of good reasons. One, with the mobilization differential and the operational advantages on its side this appears to be the most viable option. Two, with initiative on its side, China would be well placed to control escalation. Three, it would help China in establishing its authoritative regional presence. Lastly, as an added advantage, the option would also enable China to test the efficacy of its

entire war machinery - men, material, concepts, organizational strength and whatever else - in an actual conflict. In due course, the experience would come handy for China in facing more complex military challenges on its eastern board.

In sum therefore, in the immediate future of a decade or so, despite its clear military edge and the infrastructural advantages along the LAC, China's priorities and compulsions would rather restrain, and not encourage, a war with India to settle the boundary dispute. However, because of those very advantages, possibilities of a short intense conflict, limited in its scope, space, force level and duration, do exist.

End Notes

- [1] Christopher Coker, *The Future of War*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell publishing, 2004, pp34.
- [2] For more detailed discussion on 'The Changing Nature of War' see Major General V K Shrivastava, 'On Matters of Principles', *CLAWS Journal*, Winter 2009, pp201-203.
- [3] Michael Swaine, Ashley Tellis, *Enterpreting China's Grand Strategy : Past, Present and Future*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif, (USA), 2000, pp 135.
- [4] *Ibid*,ppxii.
- [5] *Ibid*, pp 132.
- [6] Kevin J Cooney and Yoichiro Sato (ed), *The Rise of China and International Security*, Routledge, London and New York, 2009, pp 181.
- [7] 'Xi takes title of China's commander-in-chief, *The Times of India*, New Delhi, April, 22,2016,pp20.
- [8] For fuller discussion see Ye Zicheng, Edited and Translated by Steven I Levine and Guoli Liu, 2013, *Inside China's Grand Strategy : The Perspective from the People's Republic*, Knowledge World, New Delhi, India, pp 166-174.
- [9] US trade deficit with China is currently at all time high of \$ 365 billion for example.
- [10] www.indiandefencereview.com/news/six-wars-china-is-sure-to-fight-in-the-next-50-years/
- [11] 'Indian bases open doors to US warships, planes' *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 13 April 2016, pp 1.
- [12] Monica Chansoria, 2011, *China : Military Modernization and Strategy*, Knowledge World, New Delhi, India, pp 110.

EPILOGUE

"PRC has become, after the United States, the world's most important country because of its enormous population, growing economic and military power and newly assertive foreign policies". [1]. Even so, opinions remain divided whether China is still a moderately developed country struggling with its internal upheavals and manifold security concerns, or is already a fire spitting dragon. Professor Jaeho Hwang of South Korea once concluded his China presentation by raising a question addressed to China "We don't know who you are, do you know who you are?" [2].

While the jury is out, and we may reserve our judgment on the subject, we would be well advised to err on the safer side.

Fast pace of China's rise is posing multifaceted challenges for us - notably amongst them the military ones. In that, PLA has stolen a march on us. Over the years it has modernized to acquire capabilities that can safeguard China's territorial interests and can also deter any aggression. Indeed, it is readying itself to project military power beyond mainland China. Next decade or so will be crucial within which either China will race away or, in the catch up game, India will close the gap sufficiently.

Disputed territories and other conflict of interests may not be threatening enough to be pessimistic about Sino-Indian relations but then these festering issues cannot be wished away either. War clouds may not be building up, but the skies do remain overcast. Therefore, while the assertions of Chinese threat may not be politically correct, real politic points to the contrary.

A wise quip by Edward R Murrow, an American broadcast journalist, appears appropriate to this setting. To quote "The obscure we see eventually. Completely obvious, it seems, takes time".

What should India do? The answer is neither easy nor within the purview of this study. Even so, to put it cryptically, Indian responses must stand scrutiny on three counts - urgency, political will, and the military means.

In the meantime 'Mind the Gap'.

End Notes

- [1] Richard Weitz, *Global Security Watch: China*, Praeger, Cal, USA, 2013, ppl.
- [2] Major General P J S Sandhu, (Ed), *China's Quest for Global Dominance: Reality or Myth*, Vij Books India Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, India 2011, pp 43.

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17. Eric C Anderson, 2012, *China Restored*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, India.
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21. Professional journals and news paper articles as cited.
22. Internetsites as quoted.

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