Chinese incursion of April 2013 in Depsang, Ladakh

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Chinese People’s Liberation Army’s incursions into the Depsang plains in eastern Ladakh in April have brought the boundary issue back into focus in India’s relations with China. This brief will summarise what is happening, analyse why and suggest what India could do about it.

In all likelihood, there will be an eventual peaceful resolution of the crisis, even if it takes some time. As the winters set in across Ladakh later this year, China’s tented outpost will have to withdraw. If the PLA replaces tents with permanent shelters before the onset of winter, it will signal a permanent deployment in an all-weather post. That consolidation will change the nature of the crisis and push India’s hand militarily.

That India doesn’t officially know the Chinese version of the LAC lies at the heart of this incursion. India must devote more energies to formalise the LAC at the earliest. India must ensure that China and India exchange maps duly marked with their respective versions of the LAC.

With a new Chinese political leadership in place, India’s reaction to the Depsang incursion will set course for the next decade. New Delhi cannot turn a blind eye towards PLA’s moves to keep it off-balance tactically; and the long-term signals about national resolve, political will and military capability that Indian moves will send. This will set a precedent for the future which India has to guard against.

The Takshashila Institution is an independent think tank on strategic affairs contributing towards building the intellectual foundations of an India that has global interests.

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INCURSION

On April 15th, 2013, a paramilitary unit of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army put up three tents around 19 km inside the Indian perception of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) at Raki Nala in Depsang plains of the Ladakh region on the unresolved India-China boundary, as shown in the above figure. The incursion was detected by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) platoon deployed in the area on the intervening night of April 15th and 16th. The ITBP sent a Quick Reaction Team, which not only prevented the Chinese border guards from further progressing in the area but also pushed them back across the Raki Nala.
The face-off between the two sides across the Nala has since continued even as ITBP jawans have been joined by the soldiers of Ladakh Scouts, an infantry regiment of the Indian Army. While the posture has been largely non-aggressive, Indian and Chinese troops are now standing face-to-face about 100 metres apart.

Chinese troops have hoisted a banner in English outside their camp stating "You are in Chinese side". Responding to the Chinese banner drill, the ITBP also immediately erected flags with a message in Mandarin and English reminding the Chinese troops of the Peace and Tranquility Agreement of 1993 and asking them to return to their side.

The Indian side has further found that besides the four tents—the fourth was put up after April 27th—that are 19 km inside the LAC, the Chinese troops have also set up a temporary administrative base. The temporary base, between the forward Chinese encampment and the LAC, comprises a tent and serves as a logistics camp.

THE LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL

Both India and China have different perceptions of where the Line of Actual Control (LAC) lies. The area where the Chinese intrusion has occurred is claimed by both sides as lying on their side of the LAC. The LAC is supposed to divide the areas that are under Indian and Chinese control since the end of the 1962 war. The line, however, was not mutually agreed upon by the two sides. This is in contrast to similar lines with Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir. Both the Cease Fire Line of 1949 and the Line of Control of 1972 were drawn up by formal agreements between the two countries. There was no such agreement on the LAC both because the war ended with a unilateral ceasefire by China and because subsequent efforts by the “Colombo countries” to mediate ended in failure.

In the Ladakh region where the current incursion has taken place, the differences in perception are owing to China’s occupation of additional disputed territory during the war of 1962. The issue of exactly where the Chinese forces stood after the war remains contested.

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1 Agreement on The Maintenance of Peace Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border, September 7, 1992.

2 “Depsang incursion may crop up at border meet on May 1,” Indian Express, April 30, 2013.
India and China have signed four agreements on the boundary question, on the “Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas”, on September 7, 1993; on “Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) in the Military Field along the LAC”, on November 29, 1996; a “Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Co-operation” on June 23, 2003; and an agreement on the “Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question” on April 11, 2005. Replacing the Joint Working Group, the Declaration of 2003 appointed Special Representatives “to explore from the political perspectives of overall bilateral relationship the framework of a boundary settlement”.

The 1993 agreement admits that both sides have differing perceptions of the LAC. India tried to prefix the LAC with the word ‘existing’ in the draft of the 1993 agreement. But Beijing refused and the pact was eventually signed without the key word³. Moreover, the two sides have been unable to exchange sample maps of the area, leave alone their respective perceptions of the LAC. At the Experts’ Group meeting in June 2002, China refused to accept India’s sample map of the Ladakh Sector as it included Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and the 5,180 sq km, which Pakistan ceded to China⁴.

**MEANS OF PEACEFUL RESOLUTION**

*Flag Meetings*

Three flag meetings between the local Indian and Chinese commanders in Eastern Ladakh have been held so far, at Spanggur Gap in the Chusul Sector. The first flag meeting was held on April 18th, the second on April 23rd and the third on April 30th. India asked the Chinese side to withdraw from Depchang and revert to the status quo ante. The Chinese side maintained that the area where they have set up tented posts is part of their territory and denied any intrusion.

In the second flag meeting, China objected to certain Indian defence infrastructure coming up in Chumar and Phukche. It wants their construction

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³ “No brotherly love lost,” Hindustan Times, April 29, 2013.

stopped immediately. It also wants India to refrain from aggressive patrolling before its soldiers consider withdrawing. India refused to accept these terms.

The third flag meeting was held on April 30th. It was set up after lengthy deliberations at the diplomatic level through the working mechanism on boundary management. The Chinese reiterated their demands which include removal of a second tent put up by Indian forces at the face-off site, to stop construction activities at Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO)\(^5\) and at Chumar where a helipad is being built, and to dismantle some tin sheds at Phukche. The Chinese side was also clear that even if all conditions were met, it could consider simultaneous disengagement but was not in a position to assure removal of the tents from their current positions\(^6\).

With the positions taken at the third flag meeting, the Chinese have left little scope for further negotiations at the local level. The matter was not even discussed at the border personnel meeting held on May 1st on the occasion of International Workers' Day at Chushul.

**China Study Group**

The Indian government has given the China Study Group the responsibility of resolving the face-off. The Group is headed by the National Security Advisor and comprises secretaries of Defence, Home, External Affairs, heads of Intelligence Bureau and the Research and Analysis Wing. It is meeting regularly since the reports of the incursion as the coordinating institution to respond to the crisis.

**Working Mechanism on Border Management**

In January 2012, India and China agreed to establish a “Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs”, which “will address issues and situations that may arise in the border areas that affect the maintenance of peace and tranquility”. It is headed by a Joint Secretary-level officer from the Ministry of External Affairs and a Director General-level officer from the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

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5 DBO is an Advance Landing Ground around 80km from Siachen which was reactivated by India in May 2008. It can’t be used through the year for landing and take-off by fixed-wing aircraft, but is used by helicopters and UAVs. It increases the capability of Indian forces to deploy in the region faster and in greater numbers.

6 “Ladakh incursion row set to escalate as third flag meet with China fails,” Indian Express, May 1, 2013.
The working mechanism is mandated to hold consultations once or twice every year, alternately in India and China. Emergency consultations, if required, may be convened after mutual agreement. Although reports suggest that the third flag meeting was due to the efforts of the working mechanism, no official announcement of an emergency consultation of the working mechanism has been made so far.

**Indian foreign minister’s visit to China**

External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid is scheduled to travel to Beijing on May 9th in connection with preparations for Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s visit to Delhi on May 20th. Despite calls from opposition political parties, he has refused to cancel his visit to Beijing in wake of the incursions. The matter is likely to come up in discussions during his visit.

**Chinese premier’s visit to India**

If unresolved, the matter could also affect the visit of new Chinese premier Li Keqiang to India on May 20th. The visit is significant because Li has expressed the wish to make New Delhi first port of call of his maiden foreign tour to send a message of Beijing’s desire to improve relations with India.

**CHINESE MOTIVES**

**New political leadership**

As seen with other disputes with Japan and South Korea, China will remain intractable in its territorial claims. After the recent leadership transition in the Communist Party, an aggressive stance on territorial claims by the new political leadership allows it to strengthen relations with the PLA. President Xi Jinping has publicly urged the PLA to spare no efforts to defend China’s territorial integrity and core interests. Such high-profile political signals would only encourage the army, especially frontier forces, to toughen their own stance in local disputes.

**Keep India off-balance**

Keeping India off-balance in the region serves China’s interests. It is thus now claiming areas that it didn’t claim 20 years ago. This incursion dramatically changes the status quo as the Chinese appear to have physically occupied new territory under Indian control. As seen from the 1987 incident in Sumodoring
Chu valley in Arunachal Pradesh\(^7\), China does not easily vacate the small strips of territory that it has occupied.

By highlighting the unmarked nature of the disputed India-China boundary, China is reasserting and signalling its claims over territory in Indian control. This is particularly important in the context of Arunachal Pradesh, which it claims as Southern Tibet.

**Internal disturbances in China**

Beijing is under pressure due to the renewed disturbances in Tibet and Xinjiang (the worst violence to erupt in the province since major riots in 2009). It wants to distract domestic and international attention away from that turmoil. The eastern Ladakh sector falls under the PLA's Lanzhou Military Region, which is also responsible for the security of the restive Xinjiang province.

**India’s border infrastructure**

India recently reversed an ultra-defensive policy of not building infrastructure along the border lest it provides easy access to enemy forces. New Delhi is now laying roads and activating airfields in border areas to catch up with robust Chinese infrastructure across the border. The latter give China a far greater advantage in troop mobilisation should a conflict break out. Beijing is likely to have been concerned over India’s efforts to ramp up infrastructure in the past five years. As demanded during the second and third flag meetings, the bargain for Chinese withdrawal could include dismantling of infrastructure along the LAC.

**Restrict Indian armed forces**

During Chinese Defence Minister Liang Guanglie’s visit in March 2013, while negotiating a defence cooperation agreement, the Chinese side proposed to India that they should share details of patrolling programmes and schedules by Indian troops on the border. India refused, and is not keen to go through with the proposal. The current action by Beijing is possibly a way to push New Delhi to the table on this agreement.

As part of the same agreement, China has also mooted proposals to freeze the military deployment of both countries at the border, which has been rejected.

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\(^7\) The crisis started with the Chinese occupation of a post in Sumodorung Chu valley in Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. It led to massive deployment of troops from both sides and was eventually resolved in 1994 when both sides agreed to keep the area unoccupied.
by India. This move could lead to a revival of that proposal of immediate mutual cap on military deployment by both sides. India will not accept the suggestion at this time as it has plans for a major expansion effort, including plans to raise a new Strike Mountain Corps for the China border.

**Local moves**

The incursion could be a move by the PLA, driven at field level for local tactical gains—as opposed to a top-down act of aggression as part of a grand strategy. Ashley Tellis, a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, argues that this is not a “co-ordinated Chinese plan to establish a new presence” and “the PLA does often pull in different directions from the civilian administration.” Moreover, a coordinated military-civilian manoeuvre by China is not likely as India figures too low in Beijing’s strategic priorities to merit such a venture. Srinath Raghavan, of New Delhi’s Centre for Policy Research contends that there may even be a disconnect between the local Chinese military units and those at the top, not just between the PLA and the foreign office.

**What it means**

Unlike in the case with Japan or other east Asian neighbours, China has been eschewing anti-India rhetoric and pursuing a policy of active engagement with India. Chinese newspapers, individual bloggers, security think-tanks, and even officially blessed websites have not been ratcheting up an “India threat” scenario after the incursion. This lowers the chances of the incursion being a coordinated military-civilian manoeuvre, driven by a grand Chinese strategy.

It also explains the odd timing of the incursion. China at this moment does not have anything to gain from asserting itself against India. The timing of the incident, following the disputes in the East and South China seas, only feeds the notion of an assertive China. If anything, China needs to pivot to Russia and India, while it adopts a more assertive attitude towards Japan and Southeast Asia. Driving India into America’s arms makes little sense for China.

It is more likely that the PLA, concerned by recent Indian efforts to upgrade its border infrastructure, decided to establish a physical presence in the area. So

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8 “Experts baffled by China-India border standoff amid improving ties,” South China Morning Post, April 30, 2013.

9 Ibid.

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even as the PLA demands that India stop developing military infrastructure on the border, the Chinese civilian leadership continues to stress that it seeks a comprehensive strategic partnership with New Delhi. President Xi has reiterated former premier Wen Jiabao’s assertion that the resolution of the India-China boundary problem is not easy and therefore the two sides must concentrate on other areas like the burgeoning bilateral trade. This could result in China keeping India engaged strategically while keeping it off-balance tactically.

But tactical actions can always be exploited for strategic gains and India must exercise all options to deny China any strategic advantage. Even if it is a local PLA move in Ladakh, China can gauge India’s resolve to meekly accept the incursion in Depsang as Delhi tries to ensure a successful visit by Li Keqiang. This could set a precedent for the future, which India must guard against.

**WHAT INDIA CAN DO**

*Diplomatic options*

A team of senior officials from Indian’s foreign ministry will be in Washington DC in May for a bi-annual dialogue on East Asia. Their Japanese counterparts will join them in Washington for the next round of their trilateral dialogue. India must use the two forums to signal a coordinated front of like-minded powers in the region. It could also engage other countries in East Asia, which are wary of China’s hegemony in the region.

India can put pressure on China by pushing it on the conflicts in Tibet and Xinjiang. This is best done by unofficial institutions like think-tanks, NGOs, human rights groups and media organisations.

India must raise the issue with polite yet firm warnings of a diplomatic escalation. Indian government should highlight that the political compulsions on it to act decisively are much greater in a democracy. This is not only because the incident is seen as unacceptable within the country, but with elections around the corner, the government would also not want to be seen capitulating under Chinese pressure.

*Military options*

The military importance of Depsang plains is limited and the territory is thus lightly held. The nearby area of DBO and its airstrip are held by India because
it offers India a means to monitor to keep a watch on the Karakoram pass and
the Khunjerab pass through which the Karakoram Highway runs between
China and Pakistan. It also guards the eastern approach to the Siachen glacier.
This doesn’t mean that India can allow the Chinese incursion in Depsang to
continue. India’s reaction here will allow the PLA to draw lessons about
India’s stance and resolve which could be a guide for its future action.

Raising direct military tensions with China make little sense for India. By
stress on the ‘local’ aspect of the crisis, Indian foreign minister Salman
Khurshid has ensured that the border face-off does not "spill over into the
larger spectrum" of bilateral relations. India has further allowed the joint
military exercises with China to proceed as planned, even after the reports of
the incursion.

New Delhi does not want to precipitate a fight but there are actions that India
can take short of war to send the right signals: redeployment and movement
of troops in Eastern Ladakh, an increased logistics footprint, aggressive and
regular air and foot patrolling in the sector, and probes that mark Indian
presence up to Indian perception of the LAC. Indian defence minister, AK
Antony has signalled a harder military stance on the incursion in his speech to
the army commanders on April 30th but this needs to be followed up by
resolute action on the ground.

In the medium-term, India must give an impetus to the pace of infrastructure
construction in the border areas, in both Ladakh and in the Eastern sector. This
includes construction of roads, and activation and upgrade of airstrips in the
region. Providing a greater flexibility in deployment, this will allow India to
achieve relative military parity with China on the border.

Beyond focusing on the land borders, India must get its modernisation plans
for the Indian Navy on track. The qualitative superiority of the Indian Navy
over the Chinese navy must be maintained to redress the imbalance on land
borders.

CONCLUSION

In all likelihood, there will be an eventual peaceful resolution of the crisis,
even if it takes some time. As winter sets in across Ladakh later this year,
China’s tented outpost will have to withdraw. If, however, the Chinese
replace tents with permanent shelters before the onset of winter, it will
signal a permanent deployment in an all-weather post. That consolidation
will change the nature of the crisis and push India’s hand militarily. With
the general elections looming, the Government will be further impelled to act strongly.

That India doesn’t officially know the Chinese version of the LAC lies at the heart of this incursion. This has allowed China to increase its territorial claims while frequently changing its patrolling patterns and schedules. Even if the international boundaries between India and China remain disputed and are unlikely to be resolved in the near future, India must devote more energy to formalise the LAC at the earliest. Despite repeated requests from New Delhi since December 1981, when the first round of boundary talks took place, China has refused to give out its perception of the LAC. Under Article 10 of the 1996 agreement, "the two sides agree(d) to speed up the process of clarification and confirmation of the Line of Actual Control." To prevent a replay of the Depchang crisis in the future, India must ensure that China and India exchange maps duly marked with their respective versions of the LAC.

With a new Chinese political leadership in place, India’s reaction to the Depchang incursion will set course for the next decade. As India engages strategically with China, it can’t turn a blind eye towards PLA’s moves to keep it off-balance tactically.