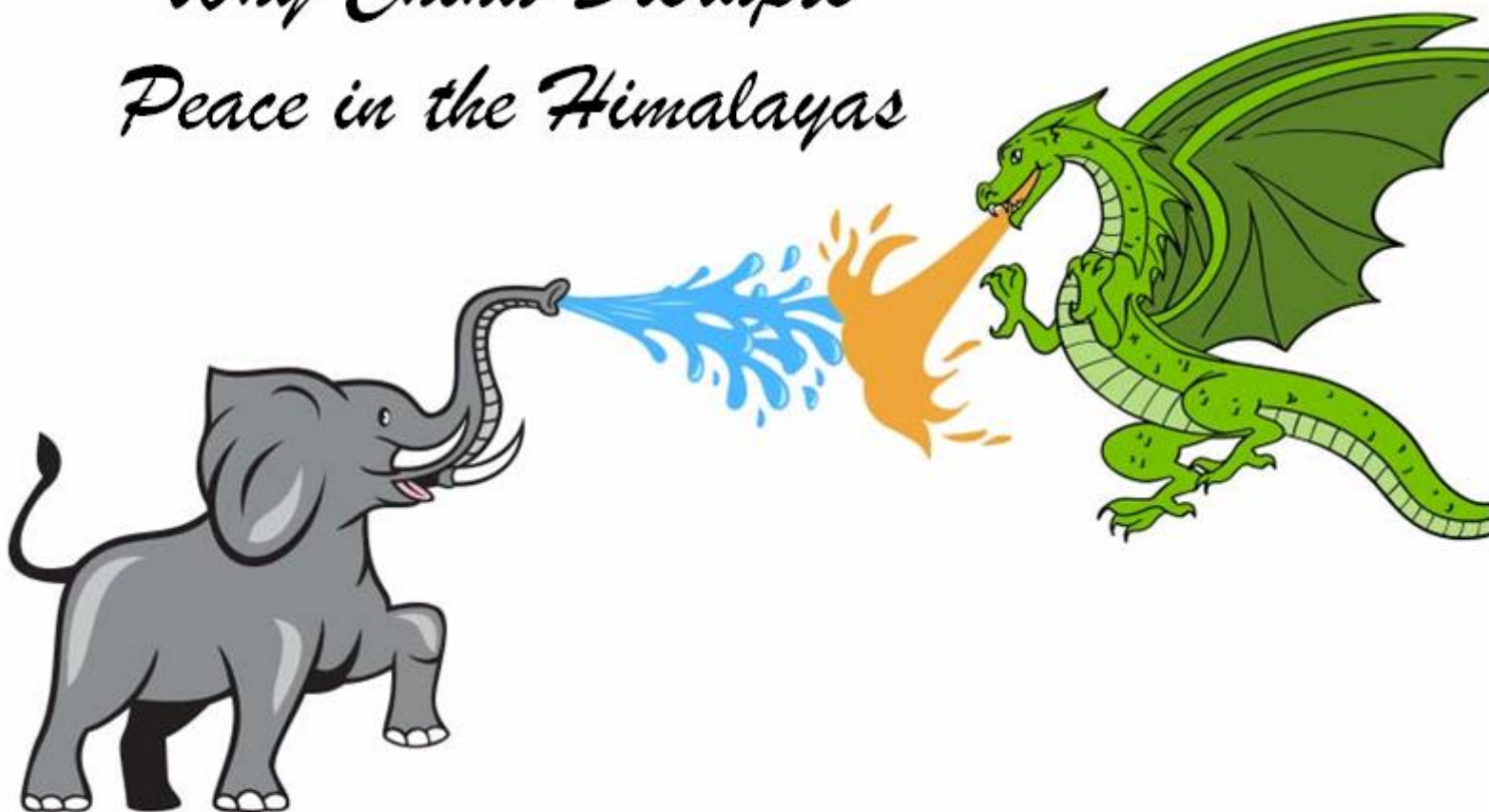


Why China Disrupts Peace in the Himalayas



Picture Credit: Flamingostech

China has never before in its 3,500 years of history been economically and militarily as powerful as it is now. The sheer pace of growth across all aspects of the nation's existence over the past three decades has left the world in a state of awe and fascination. Currently holding the position of the world's second-largest economy and boasting the third most formidable military, China appears unstoppable in its trajectory of growth. Positioned as the powerhouse of Asia, the logical next step is to aim for the title of the world's most powerful nation, a prospect that serves as a stark wake-up call for the United States.

However, amidst this ascent, China is consistently bothered by a persistent concern: its neighbour to the south, India. For decades, India somehow has been a thorn in the eyes of China's communist regime. Despite China's economy being five times larger, it remains wary of India's potential for growth. This attitude of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) may seem somewhat puzzling but they seem to be extremely wary of the words of China's philosopher diplomat, Hu Shih – **"India conquered and dominated China culturally for twenty centuries without ever having to send a single soldier across her border"**.

To be fair, the current Chinese regime's apprehension about India is somewhat justified. India has never shied away from its aspiration to outpace China in the race for growth. Across various domains—political, economic, and military—India harbours a fervent desire to surpass the swift Chinese Dragon with its own Indian Elephant. Such competitive

sentiments are fuelled by a history of adversarial interactions between the two nations, including the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) unwarranted military aggression in 1962.

While it is a long-drawn conflict of interests of both countries spread over decades of tumultuous relationship, the conflict manifests itself through border skirmishes of an unsettled border dispute between the two nations. This write-up is based on recent events which had suddenly aggravated by the movement of two divisions of Chinese troops across the Indian border in Ladakh in April 2020. The study tries to analyse the events and zero down on the real reasons for Chinese aggression and how India plans to counter them.

June 2020 hostilities

The 1962 conflict between China and India primarily underscored China's refusal to acknowledge the McMahon Line delineated by the British, which separates the two nations. This unresolved dispute has persisted, resulting in recurrent incursions by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into Indian Territory, which had been countered with reciprocal actions by Indian troops into Chinese territories. These incursions and ensuing skirmishes are frequent due to differing interpretations of the border or the Line of Actual Control (LAC) by the respective armies, inevitably leading to sporadic tensions. With an unwritten understanding between the two nations, firearms have been abstained from during these encounters over recent decades, averting casualties. Typically, these disputes are resolved through flag meetings between local commanders of the opposing forces. Nonetheless, the PLA persistently attempts land encroachments through unauthorized constructions, some of which are dismantled following Indian protests, while a few others are demolished by Indian forces.

The status quo prevailed until the night of June 15th, 2020, when a significant contingent of Chinese troops attempted to halt Indian forces from dismantling illegal structures erected by the PLA in the Galwan Valley of eastern Ladakh. This confrontation resulted in the tragic loss of twenty Indian soldiers, with unconfirmed reports suggesting up to 45 casualties on the Chinese side. Such severe bloodshed had not been witnessed in over three decades. Soon the consequences of this skirmish reverberated across the entire 2,175-mile stretch of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with over fifty thousand troops from both sides engaged in eyeball-to-eyeball standoffs across various points in the Ladakh area alone.

India was unprepared for this unexpected turn of events at the border, more so because India and the Chinese along with the rest of the world were busy grappling with the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic. Also, a few months before the Indian Prime Minister Modi had talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping to ease tensions between the two countries and bolster trade between the two countries. Despite such progress made in building good relations; the unexpected turn of events was indeed very perplexing for the Indians.

After all, despite years of continuing border disputes, Indo-China relations had continued to flourish at the trade and economic levels. As of 2017-18, Indo-China trade was valued at US\$ 89.6 billion of which Indian imports from China was 62.9 billion US dollars. This massive deficit of 70% in China's favour had always been a bone of contention for Indian policymakers and the export-oriented Indian industries. Many Indian engineering and tech companies had long

been complaining about the opaque nature of China's economy which encourages massive volumes of exports but walled any Chinese imports of Indian goods and services.

Despite such overwhelming trade disparity and a huge difference in economic and military might, Xi wanted to establish complete Chinese hegemony over South Asia. He knew this was imperative as without Chinese superiority in Asia and the Indo-Pacific it would be impossible to challenge the United States. So he came up with a massive seven trillion dollar infrastructure building, One Belt and One Road (OBOR) connectivity plan that would ultimately encompass the whole world. In size and range, this was a humongous idea. At that time most of the world (other than the US) including the European Union had almost venerated Xi's demanding ideas.

But Modi, who so far had been trying hard to ensure good relations with Xi, in June 2018 at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting in Qingdao refused to play ball and said 'mega connectivity projects must respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries.' Until then no head of state had directly challenged Xi's OBOR, and that too Modi had selected the SCO summit on Chinese soil to make his intentions clear.

For Xi Jinping, this was an affront, which called for mandatory retribution.

A year later Modi had won a thumping majority in the Indian Parliamentary elections even bettering his 2014 performance. Clearly, with Modi in his seat, Jinping knew there was no way that OBOR could have smooth sailing in Asia. So he instructed his PLA generals to start exercises of two divisions (more than twenty thousand soldiers) of the Chinese Army in February of 2020, close to the Indian borders in eastern Ladakh. These exercises were ostensibly meant to get the Chinese troops to acclimatize during the severe winter months on some of the highest mountains of the world and the Tibetan Plateau. The Chinese soldiers unlike their Indian counterparts were never acclimatized to fight long sustained battles on the Himalayas.

Strangely the Indian intelligence and the government failed to read the real motive of these PLA exercises. Anyway, Indians had their hands full dealing with an economic downturn and a raging pandemic. So when the same Chinese troops post-April 2020 started making large-scale incursions into Ladakh and the Galwan incident happened, the Indian polity and military were least prepared for the situation. However, India's national security machinery responded swiftly and decisively to the Chinese challenge. Armed with unrestricted freedom of decision-making powers at the field commanders' level, the Indian Army made rapid troops induction of division strengths into the conflict zones.

Within a week the PLA was matched soldier for soldier. The speed and intensity of Indian countermeasures stunned the Chinese. They were not prepared at that time for a protracted border engagement. But as days turned into weeks and weeks into months, it became abundantly clear to the PLA that they would be challenged effectively by the Indians. For the troops to disengage, India demanded that the Chinese move back to their pre-April, 2020 positions. For the Chinese, this was an impossible demand to accede, as they wanted to hold on to the positions they had occupied (some of them several miles within the Indian perception of the LAC). Multiple marathon meets between the corps commanders between the two armies failed to break the logjam.

Then in late August 2020, the Indians made a sudden tactical move that caught the Chinese unaware. On the intervening night of August 29th and 30th, Indian Special Forces moved fast and occupied the Kailash Ridge Line. This ridgeline though falling within India's perception of LAC had never been occupied by Indian soldiers. The main reasons are, that it's very uncomfortable, unimaginably cold (-30 degrees during winter), and it's very difficult to maintain supply lines to the troops stationed there. However once occupied, the Kailash Ridge Line offered massive tactical advantages. For instance, Indian troops gained a direct line of view into the Chinese Moldo Garrison. Understandably the Chinese were confused by this bold Indian move and furious as they had lost their tactical advantage. Soon some sort of agreement was forced on the Chinese. In early February 2020, they started disengaging their troops from the north banks of Pangong Tso Lake and moved into depth areas. However, since then all disengagement activities have come more or less to a halt. As of now, more than fifty thousand troops on both sides are facing each other, cautiously eyeing each others' moves for any further aggression.

By his military move in April 2020, Jinping wanted to drive home the fact that China like in 1962 would call the shots, and make the Indians accept Chinese superiority. The result was the exact opposite. While the PLA came across the stubborn Indian Army and the 24X7 aggressive patrolling manoeuvres by the Indian Air Force, Modi swiftly went for the Chinese jugular— the economy and trade. Within days numerous Chinese apps including Tik Tok were banned in India. These were raking in billions of dollars in business in India. This was followed by the outright refusal of business rights to Huawei to operate in India. Huawei is one of the largest Chinese multinationals engaged in the manufacturing of telecom equipment but these are also suspected of having inbuilt spyware. It is to be noted that India was the first country to do this, as no country in the world had then banned Huawei from selling its pieces of equipment.

To make matters worse, India, the US, Japan, and Australia have teamed up together to ensure the launching of alternate supply chains for the manufacture of technological equipment, microchips, bulk drugs, and pharmaceutical intermediates bypassing China. The idea is to put in place a China plus One system in place where there are alternative manufacturing hubs to China. The lucrative business offers to world-class manufacturers of electronic items are motivating top-end brands to shift their manufacturing bases from China to India. A case in point is Samsung which invested 650 million dollars in the city of Noida in India, having shifted their plant from Huizhou in China, turning it into a ghost city. Apple has also started shifting its manufacturing base to India from China. In 2021 the Indian manufacturers of Apple had produced USD 359 million worth of iPhones.

In 2024 the company's Indian manufacturers have so far turned out USD 14.4 billion worth of smart phones.

The PLA has also realized, they will be facing very tough opposition from the Indian military. So it has started opening other areas of friction on the LAC in North Eastern India putting pressure on the borders of the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. Anyway, during the start of the Ladakh crisis, the Indian army and air force had vastly reinforced their positions in the North-Eastern sector, to block any Chinese misadventure.

With all efforts to get India to submit to Xi's lofty geopolitical ambitions failing, China has a sizzling hot potato on its hands. On one hand, it has raised the stakes and tried to force India into submission. Unfortunately for it, India called its bluff. On the contrary, Xi has forced India's hand to raise its defences, build border infrastructure and start massive

spending on the military, the things that he never expected India to do. His calculations of a weak India, perpetually short of developmental funds being forced onto the OBOR table by the Chinese military had gone haywire.

Without India falling in line, how can China be expected to take on the United States of America? This is a dilemma that Xi Jinping seems to have forced on China and as of now doesn't seem to have an immediate foreseeable solution. But the PLA seems to have resorted to its age-old tactics of nibbling ungarded territories, setting up military villages in remote places of Arunachal Pradesh. The CCP knows very well such tactics are futile in the long run, and they are only aggravating the situation to India's advantage. Such nibbling activities will only ensure further heightening of security apparatus and plugging of all gaps in the LAC by the Indian border guards. Anyway, during the next border skirmish, these villages will become sweet targets for the Indian artillery.

The Chinese dilemma does not end here. The need for military incursions by the PLA in the Himalayas has a far deeper rationale for the Chinese. The real reason is a Chinese vulnerability that predates Xi Jinping and which India may not hesitate to exploit if pushed to the corner.

At least Indian preparations in the last ten years point in that direction.

Choke Points

Like all nations, China has its strengths and vulnerabilities. But unlike all nations, the vulnerabilities of China, for some reason have never attracted due attention. Maybe the high-pitched publicity and the associated hubris with China's growth had made the free world media overlook at least a couple of its major inherent weaknesses. If these inadequacies of this great Asian nation are viewed through the strategic prism, one can spot two gaping holes in China's growth story.

First is the country's rapacious appetite for oil. Since 1998, with the economy growing in leaps and bounds, China's demand for oil has more than trebled. From nearly 4 million barrels of oil consumed per day in 1998, the Chinese were consuming more than 14.8 million barrels daily in 2023. To meet the gargantuan demand for petrol, China has to import at a colossal rate of more than 11.3 million barrels per day in 2023, and the remaining it manages from its resources. Compare this to India's approximate rate of import of 4.5 million barrels a day.

The second and more serious vulnerability of China is its centuries-old problem of food shortage. The country always had far more mouths to feed than the food it was able to grow for its people. The main reason for this is that China has only 12.7% of its total land that is arable. (India is blessed with 52.6% of total arable land). China has only 7% of the world's total arable land to feed 22% of the world's population. Over the centuries Chinese rulers have grappled with this problem, employing various means at their disposal. Of course, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had resorted to more drastic methods, like restricting the population growth through crude methods notably the enforcing of the law of one family and one child, resulting in some disastrous consequences which are noticed only now after 50 years.

With growing economic resources, the country has also employed other methods like purchasing (or leasing) huge swathes of arable land in foreign countries like acquiring land in Australia for farming barley amongst other

cultivations. Barley is a staple diet for pigs which in turn makes China the world's largest consumer of pork meat. As of June 2019, it was reported that China owns nearly 2.4% (9.2 million hectares) of Australia's agricultural land. Similarly, Chinese food companies with the backing of the Chinese government have targeted many third-world countries in Africa, South Asia, and South America to take agricultural lands on a mortgage against liberal loans. Several poorer countries were not able to repay loans on time, resulting in numerous cases of land grabbing by Chinese food companies. It seems that these companies have taken a leaf out of the methods employed by the 18th-century European countries through their infamous East India Companies to start the scourge of colonization.

Thus it is clear that China has a huge import requirement of petrol and food grains to sustain the growth it has achieved in the last three decades. That brings us to the basic issue of logistics and transport of oil and food from Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, South America, and Australia. Also, the second-largest economy based on exports needs free and secure sea lanes for the shipping of its goods and materials. It is like the English East India Company was completely dependent on the British Navy to protect its merchandise from pirates and adversaries on the high seas. But for that to happen can we compare the present Chinese People's Liberation Army- Navy (PLAN) to that of the 19th-century British Navy in its reach and range? The answer is no –not yet. Though the Chinese Navy is the largest in terms of vessels, it is yet to spread itself out of the South China Sea to challenge the technologically far superior self-proclaimed guardian of the world sea lanes – the United States Navy.

The real problem for China, however, is not the US Navy. US Navy never posed any threat to Chinese maritime interests, unless of course challenged (as currently in the South China Sea). The trouble for China is that more than eighty percent of its shipping line passes through the Indian Ocean which hangs between the Strait of Bab el-Mandab (connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden) in the West and the Strait of Malacca in the East (connecting the Indian Ocean in the West to the Pacific Ocean in the East). All ships carrying oil and goods have to traverse through these straits to sail into (or out of) the South China Sea to reach the Chinese ports. There is nothing wrong with this arrangement, except that sea lanes in the Indian Ocean are extensively patrolled and dominated by the Indian navy. (China is exploring alternate shipping routes through the Arctic, but sea lines are open in this sector only in the summers).

On multiple international platforms, India makes no secret of its desire to dominate the shipping traffic through the Indian Ocean. India considers the Indian Ocean as its backyard, prompting the Chinese diplomats to snap back saying the Indian Ocean is not India's ocean. India on its part in the last ten years has done everything to exert a lot of influence on the Indian Ocean littoral countries. A unique Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) was set up by the Indian Navy in the city of Gurugram in 2018. This centre seeks to collect and collate information on all ships and vessels passing through the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, and the Andaman Sea and provide real-time data to Indian Security Agencies. Besides this, the navies of the US, UK, Australia, France, Japan, South Korea, and seven other nations have permanently posted their liaison officers to the IFC-IOR. Indian Navy not only shares data with these countries but also exchanges with them real-time shipping data in the Indian Ocean. This exchange of information ostensibly helps in the control of piracy, but it no doubt helps the Indian Navy to closely

monitor and track Chinese merchant and naval ships the moment they come into the Indian Ocean through the Bab el-Mandab and Malacca straits.

For China, these straits of Bab el-Mandab and Malacca had been a perpetual headache. These extremely narrow straits may help the passage of ships, tremendously shortening their journey time, but the Indian Navy considers them as choke points. The Global Fire Index rates the Indian Navy as the seventh most powerful navy, way behind the Chinese Navy, which is rated as the third most powerful navy. But the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean has geography



on its side, whereas, in times of attrition, Chinese vessels will find themselves far from their supply bases in the South China Sea. To make matters worse all Chinese shipping vessels (and submarines) have to pass between the Indian Island of Great Nicobar and Banda Aceh the capital of Aceh

province of Indonesia in the mouth of the Malacca Strait. The aerial distance between the Indian Navy airbase, INS Baaz, in Campbell Bay of Great Nicobar Island, is just 140 miles from Banda Aceh.

The Chinese had all along been aware of this deep vulnerability of their Navy. On the contrary, India seems to be waking up to strategies to exploit this Chinese weakness only now. For instance, India along with Russia had in the last 15 years developed the supersonic cruise missile Brahmos. These are supposed to be the world's fastest cruise missiles travelling at more than three times the speed of sound. They were earlier made to be launched from land and ships. But in 2017 India has tweaked these missiles so that they can be launched from the Indian Air Force Sukhoi MKI fighters. The latter are air superiority fighters and not meant for ground attacks, like the bombing of ships. But IAF engineers worked on fusing the Brahmos to these aircraft thus giving the Indian military a massive tactical advantage. Now IAF Sukhois armed with Brahmos can easily take off from Campbell Bay to target Chinese ships coming through the Great Nicobar – Banda Aceh corridor. The sea-skimming capability of the Brahmos missiles can make them extremely difficult to be detected by Chinese radars.

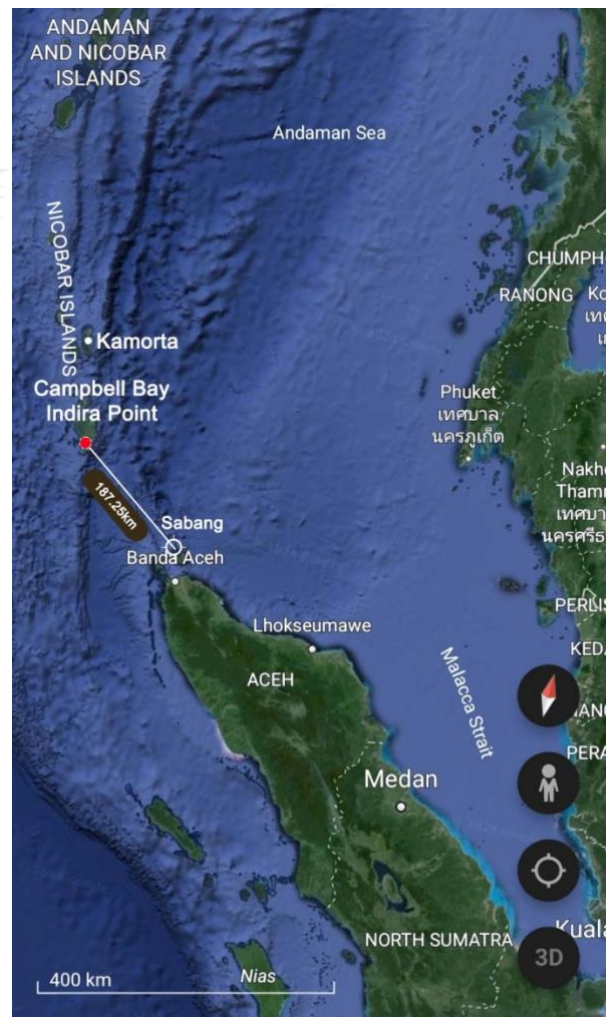
Not only this, India recently has secretly agreed with Mauritius, to develop their Agalega Island as a military base. Satellite pictures have shown that in the last two years, a whole new runway has been built by the Indian military on Agalega Island capable of landing large jets. It is expected that the Navy will be basing some of its Boeing Poseidon 8I flights on this island. These are the world's most advanced surveillance and anti-submarine warfare aircraft. All

activities at the Chinese military base in Djibouti in the Gulf of Aden are expected to come under the Indian Navy scanner. Presently real-time intelligence sharing between US and Indian navies is keeping the Indian military updated on the Chinese activities in the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Bab el-Mandab.

In addition, India is notching up bilateral military agreements with the US, UK, France, Japan, and Australia at a frantic pace. One can come across the Indian military conducting frequent exercises including naval ones with these countries. These along with other developments in the Indian Ocean have completely put the Chinese on their toes. Any naval blockade by the Indians at the choke points at Malacca and the Gulf of Aden would be disastrous for the Chinese. It is estimated that a three-day blockade of the choke points by the Indian Navy will throw the shipping industry totally off

gear and can delay oil and food shipments to China by more than three weeks. China can be brought to a grinding halt by this Indian move. Such a probability is very low; nevertheless, the possibility still exists.

It is this nightmare that Xi Jinping wants to mitigate. The sudden Himalayan move in Ladakh was calculated to put pressure on the Indian Army. This was supposed to compel the Indian government to shift the focus of its meagre military budget away from purchasing platforms for the capital-intensive navy towards the Chinese aggression in the Line of Actual Control (LAC). After all, maintaining more than a hundred thousand Indian troops across the entire LAC during the tough winter months can be very daunting. To put things in perspective, it takes nearly two thousand litres of non-freezing kerosene to keep each Indian soldier warm for five winter months in the Himalayas. The cost of maintaining battle-ready soldiers in such adverse conditions can be mind-blowing. Whereas on the choke point at Malacca Strait, just one squadron of 18 Indian Sukhois can be a real danger for the entire Chinese Navy. On the other hand in the



Himalayas, the Indian Air Force will require a multitude of squadrons just to support the defending Indian troops.

Whatever were Xi's intentions exactly the opposite happened. At the height of the June 2020 clash in Ladakh, India had shed all its reservations and ordered its Navy to be prepared to block the choke points in case the situation gets out of control in the Himalayas.

Change the geography and the whole equation changes.

For the Chinese, a constantly disturbed LAC is always advantageous as it diverts Indian attention from its Achilles' heel in the Indian Ocean. But Xi failed to reckon the depths of the Indian resolve, the swiftness with which India, the US, Japan, and Australia joined hands to strengthen Quad shocked the Chinese. At the same time, India has speeded up the development of border infrastructure and building comfortable warm winter quarters for troops at 14,000 feet in Ladakh. Also, the development of the defence infrastructure in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands has been fast-tracked. The islands are being converted into a permanent aircraft carrier in the middle of the Andaman Sea by developing three forward air force bases on the island.

The Indian dilemma for Xi Jinping has just become more acute.