



Strategic Crystal Ball Gazing: India-China Standoff, What Happens Next?

Webinar Summary Report

Publishing date : 2020

Published by : CASA

Acknowledgements:

The Webinar “Strategic Crystal Ball Gazing: India-China Standoff, What Happens Next?” held on 24 October 2020 at 1700 hours IST, was organised by The Current and Strategic Affairs Forum (CASA). We would like to thank our keynote speakers for sharing their comprehensive analysis, past experiences and candidly expressing their views:

- Lt Gen (Dr) Prakash Menon, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)
Director of Strategic Studies Programme, Takshashila Institute &
Former Military Advisor to the NSCS
- Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM & Bar
(Retd), Member NDMA & former GOC 15 Corps
- Lt Gen PR Kumar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd), Former DGMO

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We would also like to thank the many other distinguished attendees including many senior veterans, business leaders, professors, think tank researchers & contributors, analysts and others, from India, Australia, USA, Japan, Europe who took time out of their busy schedules to attend and shared their inputs with views, including some very relevant questions through the interactive Q&A and chat sessions.

We would like to thank Lt Gen Gautam Moorthy, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, ADC (Retd) as founder of CASA for his motivational role in guiding the CASA Core Committee, Mr Manoj Mohanka, our anchor moderator and Mr Mahadevan Shankar for co-moderating & contributing towards organising the webinar.

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Presentation:

Introductory comments by Lt Gen Gautam Moorthy, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd) in his capacity as Founder, CASA:

General Moorthy introduced the keynote speakers and attendees by sharing a precis of the ongoing LAC standoff between India and China. He highlighted the constantly moving goal posts of the Chinese on the actual border locations.

Moderator's Introductory Talk:

Mr Mohanka as Moderator for the Webinar shared a broad overview by outlining historical Chinese transgressions, lack of trust and their unwillingness to negotiate and finalise the border issue. Indo China relations have now entered a defining moment in history after the Galwan incident of 15 June 2020.

The Chinese proposals are geared only towards leveraging their positions. To quote a reliable source - "The matter is under consideration by the top hierarchy and is confidential. Similarly, we have also moved proposals for reducing tensions." Meanwhile, the navies of the US, India, Japan and Australia are carrying out the Malabar 2020 Exercise next month, transforming it into a QUAD maritime drill from its present India-US-Japan trilateral format.



This far, the border dispute remained an Army affair. But post Galwan, the Indian Air Force and Navy have been actively involved. Whilst in 1962 there was not much economic ties, this time India has blown the bugle through decisive economic sanctions, ban on certain Chinese imports, Chinese contractors on infrastructure projects and valuable digital apps.

1. Views of Lt Gen P Kumar, PVSM, AVSM VSM (Retd), Former DGMO:

The major issues that are impacting the current standoff and possible scenarios ahead are outlined below:

- a) The Philip Tetlock study on forecasting geo-political events suggests that even seasoned political and strategic experts had trouble outperforming “dart-tossing chimpanzees” (random guesses) when it came to predicting global events. The experts fared even worse against amateur news junkies. Uncertainty approach with curiosity and openness is called for in this scenario.
- b) No major operational continental manoeuvre expected. India will bide its time and should negotiate on equal terms. Predicate other components of bilateral relationship on settlement of the boundary question.



- c) China is equally wary of Indian probability of offensive manoeuvres at operational & tactical levels. Localised and demonstrative posturing/actions are not ruled out.
- d) Pakistan unlikely to get directly involved. Hybrid Warfare is expected to continue, and mobilization can be expected following any major move by China.
- e) Delineation and Demarcation of LAC/IB should be the only objective and this is a golden opportunity for GoI to negotiate.
- f) India as a nation & its Armed Forces are well prepared for all multi-domain contingencies. The Indian Army is specialized in HAA/LC/LAC management.
- g) China would aim at attaining a comprehensive and overwhelming geo-political and strategic advantage vis-à-vis India, which cannot be altered by war. The likely four possibilities are:
 - i. China dream achieved (Triumphant)
 - ii. Almost there (Ascendant)
 - iii. Status Quo (Stagnant)
 - iv. Fading & disturbed internally (Imploding)
- h) The Chinese view is that animosity by West and rest of the global community demonstrates that its (China's) brand of governance is superior to that of the West, and consequently, it deserves greater say and political influence over international affairs. Hardening of



stance and siege mentality amongst Chinese leaders, especially Xi. Currently its USA vs China = Existential struggle.

i) Core elements of ongoing Chinese grand strategy:

- i. Ensure CCP legitimacy (80mn/factionalism/paradox within), no elections in China whereby material prosperity and economic growth remain central to the population. Portray the liberal perception externally and deploy illiberal controls internally.
- ii. Widen international support base (BRI/economic statecraft) and increase isolation of Taiwan.
- iii. Influence global rules through control of key institutions.
- iv. Negate US influence in the SCS & the Indo-Pacific region which is witnessing a significant pivot from Asia-Pacific to a free Indo-Pacific region.

General Kumar concluded his comprehensive presentation stating that it is time for India to emerge with enhanced status on the global stage. India should continue to focus on building its Comprehensive National Power (CNP), and vitally, its military vertical to ensure that relations with China remains in the cooperative & competitive domain.



2. Views of Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM & Bar (Retd), Member NDMA & former GOC 15 Corps:

It is important to understand what exactly was China's intent which has got all major Indian agencies still trying to interpret the "why?" of China's actions of the past five months since May 2020. Few possible reasons include:

- a) Contain India's strategic confidence.
- b) Humiliate an arrogant rising power in China's perception.
- c) Boost the PLA standing – no victories but just standing.
- d) Enhance the President's prestige in the eyes of the world.
- e) Stop Indian infrastructure development along the border.
- f) Protect Chinese interests in Gilgit Baltistan (GB) and PoK.

None of the above have been achieved except for possible projects in GB. In this ongoing standoff, the nuclear dimension has not arisen at any stage. One needs to look at what are the options for China in Ladakh:

- a) Ratchet up the threshold of military engagement with no guarantee of any positive outcome given the response from India. China has opened too many fronts and looking at attempting to taking it to a victory stage is highly improbable.
- b) Wait and watch for an exit.



- c) Demobilisation and Status Quo Ante. This looks unlikely. Status quo ante looking improbable given Indian action to occupy strategic positions on the Kailash range which will not change soon. The seven points of friction will continue, and the IA is not in any hurry to withdraw soon.

The above indicates the second option is only possible ie the wait and watch option throughout winter, escalated through some form of Chinese hybrid action to keep India on tenterhooks:

1. Keeping LAC active and try to capture a post.
2. Low level skirmish during winter like a patrol or tactical level to get moral ascendancy.
3. Cyberattacks like what happened in Mumbai electric grid collapse - which had the possibility of being such a State sponsored cyberattack. Probing with such experiment attacks in different parts of India in different domains.
4. Supporting Pakistan to escalate Kashmir issues.
5. Information and media war with doses of psychological warfare like QUAD or Australia joining Malabar exercises.
6. Opportunity to exploit the disaffected in India like the North East insurgency being revived by Chinese support to separatists based in China.
7. Intervene in the social political environment. Grey zone warfare like how Russia interfered in the USA.
8. Collusion with Pakistan expected to be of higher order subject to Pakistan's ability to remain stable.



As such, the above analysis indicates China has not thought through its strategy to exit. China has demonstrated it is vulnerable to irritants and pinpricks in its sensitive areas of Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan. As such, India will need to be careful while dealing with these issues without necessarily holding back engaging in these areas.

China is looking at enhancing its maritime power in the long term and they have undertaken exercises in the IOR with plan to undertake similar exercises to the west of the Malacca Straits. China also plans to significantly enhance PLA-AF strength.

On the international scene, India should seek strategic partnerships but maintaining strategic sovereignty all the time. The QUAD has emerged thanks to quick decisions by GoI, but we need to work towards a QUAD Plus to include Russia, Vietnam, Korea and even France, which is a maritime power in the South Pacific region.

Finally, India needs to be watching its neighbourhood and make it a part of our strategy. We can expect Pakistan to undertake some activity to in collusion with China. In June 2021 there could be still ongoing talks which is comforting as there is no increase in troops levels.

In a post COVID scenario no major change in Ladakh is expected and no Siachenisation of Ladakh is possible. Launching of India's own hybrid war against needs to be seriously considered leading to a comprehensive review of our overall National Security Strategy.



**3. Views of Lt Gen (Dr) Prakash Menon, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)
Director of Strategic Studies Programme, Takshashila Institute &
Former Military Advisor to the NSCS:**

Crystal Gazing into the 10 years horizon, first question that we need to answer is - what is the world order we are looking at in this time frame? China sees itself as number one in the world by 2049 and it is not in India's interest having a China dominated world or regional order. India should work towards the next ten years of the world becoming as a multipolar order. China's presence in this order must be balanced and only through cooperation.

- a) China's ongoing actions using its military on the LAC must be situated in that context where there is a global and regional contestation for power. China cannot exert absolute power on LAC because it has many other considerations. China's military strength cannot be directly compared with India's military strength because more than weapons, there is geography and CNP of China is an enumeration only of the material. It does not count what matters – the intangibles including military power, geography, fighting spirit, experiences, etc. As such, India needs to find the means to fight a stronger military using asymmetrical means. Plan for the worst and be ready against the PLA.
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- b) India's strategy requires targeting vulnerabilities for which India has the power, especially the maritime domain, including QUAD.
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- c) India should work towards a regional and global multipolar order if CCP is in power. There will be a change in China's ruling party based on its historical culture but that does not seem likely soon. As such, China's greatest fear is India could tilt the balance against its aspirations to be number one in the world order. It has been using Pakistan for a long time and is now trying the northern border. If the larger contestation continues, China will endeavour to contain India in the regional order.
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- d) We also need to look within India. Imagine a triangle where on one side of the base is the political economy of India and on the other side, we have the social compact of India, where both sides are generating domestic and Indian politics. These interactions will decide how India can strengthen itself internally to rise up from the devastation of COVID on the economy, build our defence industrial base, improve our education, health, poverty alleviation and that will determine how we deal with China to find our place in the multipolar world. These internal factors will be the main determinants of India's future. Political economy is challenging as we cannot predict what is going to happen, but it is important.
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- e) Hard decisions will need to be taken and the challenge is about executing these decisions on the ground, which has been an issue historically within India. The social compact includes two factors –



one is the growing level of unemployment of our youth and second is friction on religious lines. Both these are a deadly combination which can affect our social compact.

- f) The combination of political economy and social compact will determine India's political power, both to get its reforms done internally and its ability to deal with the rest of the world.
- g) The last layer is the Sino Indian crisis itself. Militarily, India is prepared for the worst and we need to send the message to China that we will not hesitate to open the maritime front, if required, because of their actions on our land borders. It is a strategic message we need to give them as we have more power than China in the maritime domain. We are not talking of closing the Malacca Strait, which will happen only if US & China go to war. We are talking about using our capabilities in A&N islands on Chinese flagged vessels or the trade routes going around Trivandrum. The fact that India can do it will be a deterrent to China. The Chinese are not here to use force for which India is prepared for, but they are using force to mentally affect our political leadership about the larger confrontation between US & China. They are attempting to influence India's posture in that realm. Therefore, to judge whether Ladakh is a success for them or us will depend on what India does in terms of that larger confrontation. The heartening signs are that the Chinese actions on LAC are having the opposite effect. India has made it clear that its reticence to cooperate with the rest is growing



stronger and not weaker. Chinese attempts to influence that seems to be not working.

- h) It would not be likely for the Chinese to have an agreement on the LAC and go back as they have cultivated this northern border issue over time as a pressure point and as such they have no intention of solving the border problems. They are using the pressure point to greater extent and do not intend to solve the border issue. Therefore, what we have to do now, and this is the challenge, how do we balance the fact that we actually need to keep up a higher state of battle preparedness on the Northern border and yet grow to be a maritime power of some consequence? That is the challenge of statecraft and our military. Both will have to be done. Now resources are scarce and going into the future that will continue into next five years, if not more.

It is what nobody is saying but that is the fact is that others are ganging up against China's power push. As such, the problem for the Chinese is how do they get out of LAC issue, with having to save their face.

Q & A session:

- 1. Question** from a Researcher at Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) - **How do we reconcile ambitions to turn the Quad into an Asian NATO (and become a real deterrent) with India's traditional inclinations of strategic autonomy? India is only**



outlier there as the other members of Quad are alliance-bound already.

General Kumar – Just as there is ambiguity in geopolitics, the aspect of strategic autonomy of India can be used on a mission or task or time-based action. The meeting of the QUAD Ministers is more of intent and signaling as it has not reached a stage of any action to be taken. When it comes to a decisive action stage, India will have to take a call based on what is happening in the continental domain that is in East Ladakh and India will align itself depending on how China reacts.

General Hasnain –At the moment, the requirement of the situation has brought the QUAD countries together. It is at India's initiative the meeting took place in Tokyo and the decision to bring Australia into the meeting plus into the Malabar exercises strategically conveys the intent. As such, its going in the right direction but it is not the NATO of the East. An attack on one is an attack on everyone is the principle to flow towards. Nobody can deny the fact that India holds the key as far as the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is concerned. The USA, Japan and Australia will be able to absorb and retain the required flexibility in this military alliance. The earlier point of QUAD Plus including Vietnam and France also needs to be factored in this growing alliance.

General Menon –No diplomat would support such nomenclature of NATO of the East. The countries are aiming to keep it less than



an alliance but more than a partnership, to fashion it in such a way that the central message is, that this is aimed at China. The QUAD would naturally expand as looking at the map, one can see French positions in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, owned islands and considerable part of its Navy in this region. So would be the UK who have a Naval presence in the region besides Vietnam and others. The expansion of the QUAD is a natural progression, but the hesitancy is what we must be watchful about so that it does not stop us from that cooperation.

Question – General Rajeshwar inquired that with its intent being unclear, especially when China does not want to delineate the LAC, India has to be prepared for operations on the Northern Borders for a long time. How then can we increase our overall conventional deterrence from here on?

General Kumar – China wants to send a message for its domination of Asia and that it is unlikely to struggle defending its borders. It is high probability that if not this winter, then next year China's forces will go out. As such, India will need to ensure we do not have the same situation as we have on the LAC, but project larger strength with mobile reserves and formations. Whilst our economy is the key, we need to focus on the maritime and air domains where we have to prioritise with focus on smart formations of non-kinetic nature, including psyops, as we will continue to have the devil at our doorstep.



General Hasnain added that besides capacity building and the economy, it is the ability to convey our intent of the ability to take tough decisions. The first intent of China's ongoing actions is to dent India's strategic confidence which started from the surgical strikes, the handling of Doklam, Balakot (Jabba top) strikes, abrogation of Article 370 on 5 August 2019 – all of which conveyed that India is now capable of taking strong strategic decisions. This psychologically tough decisions have deterred India's adversaries.

General Menon in agreeing with both the speakers, simply stated that deterrence is a psychological phenomenon and therefore all deterrence is self-deterrence.

Question from Dr Tara Kartha - What have we got to offer Russia, Vietnam, etc vis-a-vis China? Our foreign development budget is likely to be slashed for the foreseeable future. What exactly are our leverages?

General Hasnain –India's foreign policy or capacity to influence foreign powers is not entirely dependent on the foreign development budget, which is miniscule. Its dependent on our geostrategic location, geopolitical position in the world and the potential we hold for the future. Nobody would want to create an adversary out of India having 1.4bn population. Historically India has had very good relations with both Vietnam and Russia, since the Soviet Union days. India has recently signed the US\$5bn deal for purchasing the Russian S400 missile defence system. As such,



Russia knows India considers it as a very important strategic partner. At the same time, Vietnam and India have common histories, (1979 for Vietnam and 1962 for India), the two countries who suffered Chinese aggression wherein Vietnamese defeated the Chinese. India has recently given maximum military support to Vietnam with the Brahmos missile system and the potential remains high wherein both countries have been in constant contact on strategic matters.

Summary:

Lt Gen PR Shankar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd), Former DG Artillery summarized the proceedings with below key points:

1. We have shaken off the bogey of 1962 and what we are looking at is a confident India having multiple options along the LAC, beyond the LAC and in the maritime domain.
2. We are looking at a multipolar world together with multilateralism of our own with one purpose to contain China and keep China off our backs whereby we can also keep Pakistan also off. That is the message we are looking at.
3. We are well on our way to do it. We are going to have a bumpy ride and so we have to look at multiple ways to fight through our economy, our CNP, our military but these are challenges in



which India has done well in the past. It might seem ragged, but we do get there eventually.

4. From a different perspective, we are in for a long haul wherein we are not looking at going back to status quo ante, but we will need to look at status post ante. We might be looking at a hybrid LAC & LC situation for some time to come as General Menon rightly pointed out, the Chinese are not interested in delineating the LAC or LC anywhere or anytime soon.
5. We do not expect any major action. Right from day one, China has not come to do this tactically or operationally – they have come to do it politically. They have still not got their tents, guns, and vehicles in line. Just political posturing.
6. While it was noted that it may not be possible for China to break down internally, it is time for India to ensure China focuses inwards. Pakistan as an example is focused inwards and Kashmir is off the boil. Similarly, China can be made to look inwards from international perspective and lot of things will fall in place.
7. What we have seen along the LAC is that China is at the danger of losing the war with little fighting compared to their philosophy of trying to win wars without fighting. Let us not give too much to China and let us not take away too much from

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China the way the western democracies have done. We need to have and maintain a balanced approach.

General Moorthy in his closing comments sincerely thanked the eminent speakers, the moderators, Mr Manoj Mohanka and Mr Mahadevan Shankar as well as General Shankar for his succinct summing up, the audience from different countries for their patience and taking time off on a Saturday evening to attend the Webinar that had wonderful searching questions and suggestions from the audience for the speakers.

The Webinar closed at 1830 hours IST with a vote of thanks to all of CASA Core Team members for successfully organizing this webinar.