

Peace and Tranquility Are Insufficient

A New Command Is Required for Ladakh

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In May 1999, as soon as the snows began to melt, Pakistan cleverly occupied peaks ahead of India in the Kargil and Dras sectors. Consequently, India had to “fight with what they had” to evict the intruders from what was rightfully Indian territory.¹ After that, India made it a point to be the first back to those peaks, located in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), every summer. Thus, some lessons were learned, but it seems probable that India learns by one mistake at a time—and sometimes not even that. That is because India evidently left peaks in its perceived territory unoccupied in Ladakh and Aksai Chin.² It is also very strange to imagine that Indian forces would construct a road in a forward area along the Shyok River without ensuring that the road is perpetually secured. However, this is exactly what India allowed in the Galwan area—that is to say, India allowed the Chinese to come extremely close to their road, allowing them to occupy adjacent peaks so that the Chinese are now close enough to cut off that road any time and endanger the supply to Siachen Glacier. This time, in summer 2020, though it is hard to say, not only were the politicians sleeping but also possibly the Indian forces. This article discusses Chinese claims over Aksai Chin, Chinese adventurism, India’s stated mission to retake Aksai Chin, the strengths and weaknesses of India’s military in Ladakh, and the requirements to recapture Aksai Chin without losing any ground itself.

China Will Occupy Unoccupied Territory

All responsible parties seemed not to understand a basic principle of warring neighbors—that military planners look for undefended areas to occupy and underdefended areas to attack—such that the Chinese very predictably entered where the peaks and territories were unoccupied by Indians. Other reasons may also explain why the Chinese entered gray areas in Ladakh, among which may be to put India in its place after India redrew the map of Jammu and Kashmir, creating the distinct Union Territory of Ladakh, or that China desires territorial expansion for minerals and resources.

However, India should have learned a lesson in 1953 when it spotted Chinese patrols in Aksai Chin but did little to beef up its own patrolling, signaling, and forward bases. The prime minister at the time, Jawahar Lal Nehru, did not ask the

army to go in and occupy those peaks but instead dismissed Aksai Chin as “a barren land where not a blade of grass grows.” Well, it is from those barren lands that the Chinese can lop off Ladakh from India. And what has not been well explored: Aksai Chin may have valuable minerals in its land.

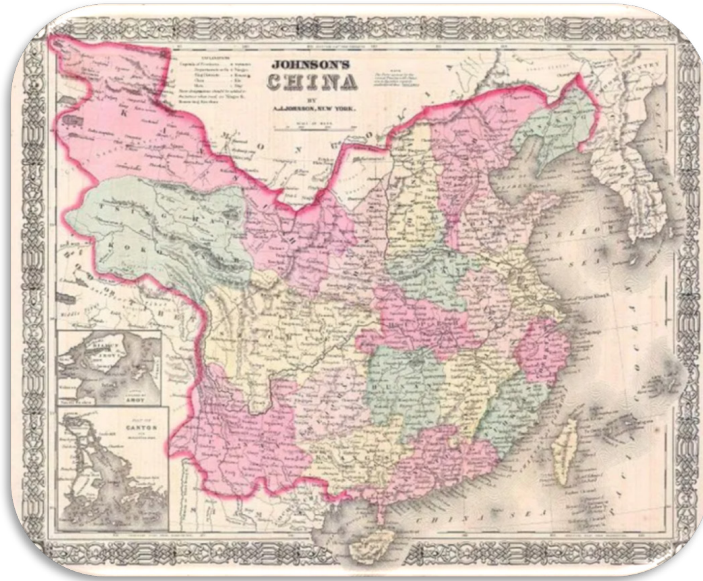
China Will Take Advantage of Unoccupied Lands

Common sense dictates that an unoccupied area will be encroached on by an enemy for any reason—even for the artificial reason of “differing perceptions,” which is applied seemingly daily in Sino-Indian border matters. Such differing perceptions can be misused and misapplied. In fact, one wonders why India is not the first to use these so-called differing perceptions to its advantage but instead is always on the defensive. Given that China makes incursions all the time, why has India not staged an operation by a battalion to ambush the Chinese intruders and capture a platoon of Chinese that do intrude?³ This is not mere rhetoric, as there is a sound case for India to occupy more peaks than required so as to assert its sovereign rights and ensure its dominance. For India to think that a boundary will be respected by an enemy when India has no activity or occupation there is an impractical mind-set.⁴

In its own view, India thought that maintaining a barren distance in Ladakh from the enemy was insurance against intrusion.⁵ If India fears an eyeball-to-eyeball standoff with them, it must know that without a doubt, the Chinese are signaling every intention of confronting Indian forces. Thus, no matter what, India cannot avoid the very confrontation it seeks to avoid. Consequently, India has work yet to do. The Chinese—or anyone else—will respect the Line of Actual Control (LAC) only to the extent it is guarded, manned, and adequately defended.

Thus, it is logical to conclude that from the perspective of India’s security—if India wishes to stand tall—India would give China a warning: intrusions or changes in the status quo, or stretching the interpretation of “differing perceptions,” will be dealt with firmly beyond the currently established protocol. At the very least, India must aim to force China to go back to the LAC of 1 April 2020. Moreover, India has a rightful claim to the 1959 LOC. Better yet, India has an internal mission and obligation to return to the actual lines that their police patrolled in 1950–51, which is the actual and original border of Aksai Chin between Tibet and India, bequeathed to India in October 1947 by the erstwhile Kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir⁶ (which is further evidenced by Indian Parliament resolutions on the matter).⁷ Note that China has never controlled Aksai Chin: even the East Turkestan government-in-exile recognizes that fact.⁸ See figure 1, from 1865, demonstrating that maps at the time did not show Aksai Chin as part of

China. But it appears that India has not exhibited efforts to reclaim its own territory, even if it has the muscle to do so.



Source: Salih Hidayar, "Aksai Chin (Eastern Ladakh) Is a Part of India Not China," n.d., East Turkistan Government in Exile, <https://east-turkistan.net/aksai-chin-eastern-ladakh-is-a-part-of-india-not-china/>

Figure 1. A. J. Johnson's Map of China, 1865 (does not include Tibet or Aksai Chin).

In fact, the current disengagement and de-escalation activities should come with a warning. Lest we lose the history, let us recall that on July 15, 1962, China withdrew from Galwan.⁹ It was headline news in India's national newspapers. At that time, India patted itself on the back as to how remarkably its diplomatic offensive had succeeded. However, the Chinese came back in force just three months later, on 20 October 1962. India must be alert—now and in the future—because Indians have no idea what China is planning. Note that Chinese president Xi Jinping has been eerily silent on the Sino-Indian border conflict, just as he was silent on Hong Kong for a whole year before revoking Hong Kong's special status when he did speak on it.

China Is Presumably Planning for War

Lately, President Xi has been telling the People's Liberation Army to prepare for war. He has made this statement many times, the latest of which was on October 14, 2020.¹⁰ In fact, during a visit to a military base in Guangdong he asked his troops to "put all [their] minds and energy on preparing for war."

What that really means is best known to Chinese authorities, but neighbors must take this seriously. It is not difficult to understand he could be planning something big in one direction—read: Taiwan—and plans to keep the rest of his territory safe lest other neighbors seek to take advantage of that battle. Moreover, China wishes to make some “statement” to the world at the centennial marking of its revolution, in 2049.¹¹ Arguably, and quite indubitably, China wishes to be the dominant power in the world—and that cannot happen without military might.

But for India, alertness is not only about defending every square inch; it must also factor in what the Indian home minister wants to do (discussed further below).

Warning Signs Should Be Heeded

World nations knew that Adolf Hitler was arming Germany as early as 1934–35, but they sought to ignore Germany for various reasons, not the least of which was a disbelief that a broken Germany in debt could rise so suddenly. However, history proves that ignoring warning signs is egregious. Even in 1939, British prime minister Neville Chamberlain gave away Czechoslovakia for a false promise by Germany under the Munich Agreement, with the illusory hope of preventing war.¹² Consequently, there is a valid fear that Indian diplomats may fall victim to false promises by China. After all, India is known to give away at the table what it won by war—in 1948, 1965, and 1971.¹³ In this respect, “peace and tranquility” should be understood as outdated, and “disengagement and de-escalation” are a risky dream. As Ertugral Bey Ghazi, father of Othman I, father of the Ottoman Empire, said: “I do not dream, I do what is necessary.”¹⁴ Similarly, it is probably time for India to stake its claims on the ground rather than dream of words to be printed in newspapers and broadcast on news channels.

China’s aggressiveness was felt in 2020 across the Taiwan Strait, in the South China Sea, in Ladakh, and in claims against Russia that Vladivostok is a part of China.¹⁵ For realists, none of these can be taken lightly.

Indian Home Minister Wants to Retake Aksai Chin

For those who insist on peace and tranquility on the border, we all know there are different sides to that argument. But note very carefully that when Indian home minister Amit Shah claimed Aksai Chin in 2019 to be a part of India when redrawing the map of Kashmir, he stated that India would take Aksai Chin back, which leaves open the possibility of force and is not limited to diplomacy. He said explicitly: “Kashmir is an integral part of India. . . . When I talk about Jammu and

Kashmir, Pakistan occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin are included in it.” Then he emphatically added: “We will give our lives for this region.”¹⁶

Further, the Indian Parliament passed a resolution on 22 February 1994, asserting Indian authority over all the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, which unambiguously includes Aksai Chin. The resolution categorically spelled out India’s stand:

(a) The State of Jammu & Kashmir has been, is and shall be an integral part of India and any attempts to separate it from the rest of the country will be resisted by all necessary means; [and further]

(b) India has the will and capacity to firmly counter all designs against its unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁷

The previous territories of J&K that are now transferred to the Union Territory of Ladakh are characterized in that resolution as an integral part of India. Use of the phrases “resisted by all necessary means” and “firmly counter” do not exclude use of force. That the incumbent home minister said we would “give our lives for this region” means to regain the area through battle, or else the loss of life does not factor in. Thus, “peace and tranquility” on the border is merely diplomatic parlance that India and China can use at their convenience when they deem necessary, but the actual situation on the ground tells a different story.

In addition, Gen. Bipin Rawat, holding the newly created position as India’s Chief of Defence Staff, said: “The next agenda is retrieving [Pakistan-occupied Kashmir] and making it a part of India. The government takes actions in such matters.” There is a clear implication of using force in the J&K area.¹⁸ India is planning for it and, perhaps, simply waiting for the opportune moment, which could be a full-scale attack on India by either China or Pakistan or both. The Apache and Chinook helicopters are presumably a part of this plan, as are the Rafales and the S-400, Mig-29s, and Su-30s. In the interim, Israel sent its own, in-use surface-to-air missile defense system to resist China in Ladakh. T-90 tanks support that mission.¹⁹

“Opportune Moment”

The opportune moment for India to go all-out to retake India’s lost territories can be tricky to understand. The parameters that factor into determining the opportune moment are manifold:

- The foremost is to ensure that India has support from the international community—the major powers in the UN Security Council other than China.

Other international support is also paramount—Germany, Japan, Australia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Israel.

- Next, India must determine that it is actually ready on the ground. Unlike the false analysis made by Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) Gen. J. N. Chaudhuri on 20 September 1965 for a cease-fire with Pakistan—on the basis that India was running out of ammunition when it had consumed only 14–20 percent of its ammunition²⁰—a realistic assessment is necessary. This includes verifiable estimates of strength and ordnance.
- Third, the Indian generals must be ready and feel courageous. In this regard, note that Indian defense minister Y. B. Chavan reported in his diaries that General Chaudhuri appeared to lack courage and would frequently lapse into depression at even the slightest news of a reversal.²¹ In 1962, the good generals were sidelined, and Lt. Gen. B. M. Kaul was elevated, leading to a disaster that is well known. It is not totally incorrect that some generals would rather not see fighting in J&K or Ladakh. Some generals do not even want another mountain strike corps.²²
- Fourth, India must have real capabilities, equipment, and resources. Sentiments and dreams alone do not win battles; neither do false assessments.
- Fifth, the political masters must have the will and courage.
- Sixth, the Indian public must be behind the cause. In a democratic society, this is even more essential.
- Seventh, the politicians and generals must be aligned in their management information system. If the generals always wait for the politicians to tell them what to do, while the politicians think that the generals are doing their job, then there is a serious disconnect.
- Eighth, provided the above are in place, choose a moment when China is engaged in an invasion of Taiwan or heavily engaged in defending its artificial islands in the South China Sea. Alternatively, any moment is fine if it can be recognized that China's supply and logistic lines to Ladakh are much too long, despite their infrastructure buildup, which makes it difficult and expensive for China to defend distant Ladakh. The decisive advantage that China may have in transportation infrastructure is more than belied by the plausible inability of the Chinese to defend their sprawling infrastructure. In other words, with thousands of miles of transportation networks to protect, Indian air attacks have only to break the transportation network at its weakest links. As such, China is vulnerable to Indian air attacks.

Galwan Valley

Note that Galwan Valley was named after an Indian explorer.²³ The Chinese were nowhere near Galwan to ever claim it. At the most, they considered Tibet to be a dependent country. The US Foreign Office had in 1899 recognized Tibet, along with East Turkestan and Mongolia, as Chinese dependencies; see figure 2. But even per that map, Aksai Chin was not viewed as part of China or its dependencies. In addition, even communist China's map of 1945 excluded Aksai Chin.²⁴ It appears that China increases its claims as it expands.²⁵



Figure 2. US Treasury Department map of China and Chinese dependencies, 1899.

The roads through Aksai Chin were under the control of the British Indian government when during the Great Game it sent missions to Khotan, Yarkand, Kashgar, Ferghana, Khiva, and Bokhara, returning via Kunduz and Kabul.²⁶ Consequently, the strategic importance of Aksai Chin as the trijunction and intersection of Central Asia, Tibet, and East Turkestan was engraved on British strategic thinking. But unfortunately, that strategic thinking was lost on the Indians, who ran independent India.

Does India Have Adequate Strength to Retake Aksai Chin?

It is unlikely that diplomatic strategies alone will lead to a unilateral withdrawal of troops by China from Aksai Chin, although a partial withdrawal from the northern and southern banks of Pangong Lake was implemented in February 2021.²⁷ However, India is notorious for losing at the negotiation table what it won in war. For instance, it failed to push ahead in Kashmir in 1948–49, preferring to go to the United Nations instead; India lost at Tashkent in 1965, especially Haji Pir, what it won in hard-fought battles; and India gave away in Simla the 90,000 Pakistani POWs it captured in 1971. But how can India appropriately use force? Is India ready? Does India have adequate force?

At least two important articles bring out India's inadequacy to achieve its goals on Ladakh,²⁸ although it is easy to understand how the odds are stacked against Indian troops in the rugged mountains of the Karakorum. Against 60,000 Chinese soldiers in Aksai Chin, two Indian divisions in the Fire and Fury Corps are simply unable to push the Chinese back, although they may be adequate to somewhat hold the line, albeit with some give-and-take. However, it was later reported that India had matched the Chinese troop strength of 60,000.²⁹ In fact, as the ground situation stands at present, China is positioned favorably at Hot Springs; in Depsang, China virtually overlooks the road to Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) from the plateau it has occupied; and unfortunately for India, the Chinese are no longer within the crosshairs of Indian troops at Spangur Lake after the recently announced disengagement from the Pangong Tso and Spangur Lake areas.³⁰

India gained a partial upper hand at the Pangong Tso Lake area after it occupied six strategic heights between 29 August and mid-September 2020.³¹ But that advantage is now gone after a partial withdrawal. Thus, China can now slowly advance into other areas in a low-intensity fashion, mountain by mountain and turn by turn, with only a company or platoon at a time. Such an operation would not set off alarm bells in Leh or New Delhi, though that nibbling at Indian territory by China has for now been forestalled by Indian forces, as well as by the diplomatic agreements, albeit a bit late in the game. However, each time the Chinese take territory that is not theirs, New Delhi is told there is no invasion, so the Fire and Fury Corps simply holds its fire and fury.³²

So close have the Chinese come to the Indian positions that, through artillery fire alone, China can conceivably cut off India from Siachen Glacier and DBO without ever invading Indian territory. This is the greatest fear at present among military planners and analysts because such an action could exhaust Indian forces, eventually allowing China to capture Siachen Glacier. If India does not do something now to safeguard itself while the battle intensity is low, India could conceiv-

ably lose DBO at some point, although the Indian media and military chiefs constantly reassure the Indian public that Indian forces are prepared for any eventuality, which has yet to be proven in battle.³³ There can come a time when the preparation may not be enough.

A New Corps Is Needed

If India does not want to incur further encroachments by the Chinese, it must physically occupy in strength as many forward areas, posts, and hundreds of peaks in their own territory as possible. Even peaks far from roadways need to be occupied because mountaineer-soldiers from the Chinese army can manage to climb and cross those peaks. India did that a few years ago under an aggressive commander when it secretly climbed the mountains from Finger 4 all the way to Finger 8, thereby taking the Chinese by surprise one morning; the Chinese awoke to Indian machine guns and RPGs staring down at them from the peaks.³⁴

In the area of Ladakh, building strength will necessarily require a whole new corps, at the least, if six Chinese divisions of 10,000 troops each are to be put to a disadvantage. Essentially, in mountain warfare, infantry might and logistics at location are the highest priorities, no matter the GDP of the country. This corps will have to improve upon the Indo-Tibetan Border Police. This corps will need light and heavy armaments and mortars, missiles of various types, light and heavy tanks,³⁵ light and heavy artillery, signals and surveillance equipment including satellite support, antimissile missiles, coordinated networking, personnel vehicles and carriers, warm clothing, snow goggles, constant air patrolling, and at least 50–60 attack helicopters. A strong presence will have to be maintained during the winter.

This corps will need all the engineering support for infrastructure works, including roads, bridges, tunnels, and warm housing, as well as equipment and computer maintenance, to mention a few items. Adequate air transport is essential, as are supported and protected supply lines. Soldiers will need to be heavily trained in mountaineering skills, in which India has excellent capabilities, having invested substantively in mountain warfare since the 1960s. A sizable horse cavalry—at least one additional battalion in each brigade—is recommended in those difficult mountainous areas. I also advise having military dog squads that can smell the enemy at close quarters.³⁶ Soldiers will need battery-heated clothing and protection, oxygen masks, medical services, and solid nutrition and mess services, complete with a half-dozen eggs a day and meat for those who want it.³⁷

As recently as October 2020, former Indian COAS Gen. J. Singh also recommended that one additional Ladakh strike corps be created, calling it the need of the hour, although there are also other senior retired generals who wish for better

equipment, more modernization, improved technology, and increased firepower instead of another corps.³⁸

But, going from the experience in the Eastern Sector, it has taken the Indian government 12 years to raise the Panagarh Corps, and the job is yet incomplete.³⁹ Such a timeline is not acceptable from a force readiness perspective. In the next 12 years, the Chinese could be eyeball-to-eyeball with Indian troops at all their current locations, and China's technology and intelligence gathering could be far superior to India's. By then, India could have lost a large chunk of additional territory to the deceptive and aggressive Chinese.⁴⁰ But know this: the Chinese respect only power and resistance. If India fights back, it is possible that China could be completely stopped, which is all the greater reason for India to shore up its military above and beyond the probability of defeat to secure the probability of victory. In that sense, it is better for the Indian tiger to face up to the Chinese dragon now rather than later.

Analytically speaking, it would have been better for India to take on the dragon in 1975, and even in 1990, when Chinese forces were arguably weaker than India's. That China was weaker was evidenced by the fact that it refrained from attacking India during the 1971 war despite urgings from Pakistan and Henry Kissinger.⁴¹ Moreover, Indian forces had taken adequate steps to guard its China border in 1971.⁴² The only advantage China had was psychological, which should have been solidly dispelled by 1975 after the drubbing China received at Indian hands at the Nathu La Pass in 1967 in the Sikkim-Tibet border. The only problem then was that a powerful United States was supporting both Pakistan and China, which is why India's arm was twisted by the United States in 1972 to return Pakistan's 90,000 POWs, after which it supported the Chinese through the 1970s as it tried to rein in the Soviet Union and end the Vietnam conflict. In the 1980s, the United States needed Pakistan to fight the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, so India and Indians' concerns were put on the back burner. But, in only about a quarter-century, it is a totally different world—with new alliances, new economies, new technologies, and new behavior.

Rotation, Acclimatization, and Health

For a new corps in Ladakh, we realize the cost, commitment, logistics, funding, and preparation necessary. The management of health is critical. A set rotation of troops must be established to bring them into Ladakh, complete with two to three weeks of acclimatization, to ensure manning and defense year-round. Even as troops are being rotated out, others will have to be rotated in. The Army Medical Corps will have to step in to design the rotation flow, regime of activities, and exercises for soldiers being acclimatized. Adequate iron and magnesium supple-

ments, including mineral supplementation of zinc, iodine, and selenium, will help to boost the immunity of soldiers and protect muscular and mental strength at those high altitudes. Appropriate accommodation and facilities will be needed for soldiers and officers being acclimatized, as well as those at the peaks and forward areas. The rotation schemes will probably need to be planned a full year in advance. This will have to be a dedicated effort to the hilt. Military defense is not a walk in the parks and bungalows of Lutyen's Delhi. Neither are military battles won by words alone, such as "peace and tranquility."

Lack of Money Is No Excuse When It Comes to Defending the Nation

Unquestionably, defending a nation requires the government and people to spend. If the Indian government will always begrudge the extra money, as it does, and complain about being poor, then India stands to lose the next encounter and more.

It is evident that war planning can spur industrial production, get India out of the economic depression it is in, and improve national pride.⁴³ India must prepare for a prolonged war of six months, for which adequate ammunition, spare equipment, spare parts, and oil supplies must be secured.⁴⁴ Many do not want such in the lure of peace. But there is no choice because war is virtually being thrust on India. If India does not rise to the occasion now, it could be too late later.

The expense of war must not be exaggerated, but it must be seen in perspective, even if war is not desired. Contrary to fears, war can be an industrial and economic stimulant. Germany recovered from Depression in the 1930s with its war buildup; the United States convincingly emerged from the Depression in World War II. After the 1962 and 1965 wars that India fought, it saw a spurt in industrial activity. Thus, defense expenditures being high is by itself not a convincing argument to not build up the country's military.

Further, hoping that the United States and Russia will physically intervene on India's side in a war with China is simply wishful thinking with a lot of uncertainty. The only certainty is fighting with your own resources. So, it is already surprising that India has not spent another \$500 million to triple the production of the Tejas fighter aircraft and advance the agenda on the indigenous Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft.⁴⁵

With the defense budget at 1.45 percent of GDP, there is immense room for doubling and tripling this budget in the interest of India's honor. But this expenditure should start now on the same scale as after the 1962 invasion. From a defense perspective, seeing the dangers confronting India from a belligerent China, it is surprising that India has not ordered any new assets beyond what were already in the pipeline, and beyond an additional US\$1 billion that was authorized by

Prime Minister Narendra Modi for essential purchases such as ammunition. Arguably, India should have already planned since the Galwan incident to spend an additional \$25 billion, at the very least, for the expedited inflow of military equipment needs from fighter aircraft to nuclear submarines, helicopters and howitzers for its mountain warfare, drones, missiles, antimissile missiles, and fundamental training of personnel. While nonmilitary expenses such as health, education, industry, and infrastructure are necessary for the well-being of any country, one can argue that the current military expense is insufficient for a serious future conflict.

Add an Extra Strike Corps: Make It a New Command

If India wants to liberate Aksai Chin, as stated by Home Minister Shah, then India will need to do more than just wait for the world to rein in China, much as has been expressed that the Biden administration served as a catalyst for China to withdraw behind Finger 8 in the Pangong Tso area. An additional strike corps will be needed for India to liberate Aksai Chin; otherwise, it is difficult to conceive of China unilaterally withdrawing from there. India's force strength will have to be greater than China's in the region for India to liberate Aksai Chin. Notwithstanding China's greater economic prowess, even it has a limit to the number of high-tech military assets it can effectively introduce into Ladakh. Moreover, boots on the ground matter. Besides, the high-flying Chinese military technology, if present, can always be thwarted by well-entrenched Indian defenses. Thus, an additional strike corps will be absolutely necessary to penetrate deep into Aksai Chin to sever the main road between Tibet and Xinjiang and to recover the original borders the British legitimately bequeathed to India, which were a part of the former Kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir (and the Sikh Kingdom of Punjab before that). Since 1962, China has advanced its boundaries westward beyond the LAC. This is egregious by all accounts.⁴⁶

However, what matters is the objective. If the Indian objective is only to defend Ladakh, then an additional strike corps is probably unnecessary. Many retired generals give an opinion based on their perceived objectives and mission, without spelling it out. Therefore, many people appear to talk past each other because they get their objectives mixed up. If the objectives were clarified, one would likely find more people on the same page.

What would it mean to add this extra strike corps? It would simply mean that, with a total of three corps, a new command headed by an army commander will be required for Ladakh.

No one should think twice about adding this additional command if the liberation of Aksai Chin is desired. Until 1965, only a single Western Command defended India from Ladakh to Rajasthan. Lt. Gen. Harbaksh Singh, the army

commander, had a lot of territory to cover and defend during the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war. In 1972, the Northern Command was carved out of the Western Command. The Northern Command was responsible for the LOC with Pakistan and Ladakh, headed by Lt. Gen. Prem Singh Bhagat. Western Command headquarters was moved down from Simla to Chandimandir in the 1970s. And, in 2005, the Western Command was further broken down with the creation of the South Western Command, formed to take care of Rajasthan. Thus, the original Western Command has changed dramatically since 1947. Until 2020, when Jammu & Kashmir was reorganized, all the states belonging to the original Western Command had their own independent army command—Rajasthan, Punjab, and Jammu and Kashmir. Now that Ladakh has Union Territory status, it can be argued that it is time to give the defense of Ladakh prominence by assigning a full theater to the defense of that new territory: even name it the “Ladakh Command.” With that concept, the Northern Command can focus like a laser on Skardu, Baltistan, and Azad Kashmir. In its own theory, it is necessary for India to wrench Gilgit and Baltistan from Pakistan to sever the land connection between China and Pakistan—both mortal enemies of India.

The main purpose of this new Ladakh command would be to defend and strike deep. Two corps could serve as the anvil that would blunt Chinese attacks, while one strike corps would take the battle into Aksai Chin.

Air Capabilities in Ladakh

Currently, India claims to have the ability to defend itself in Ladakh—both in the air and on the ground. For all its rhetoric and size, the Chinese air force is still relatively backward compared to India’s smaller air force. An analysis done of the major air force assets of China in Hotan and Kashgar reveals that the Indian air force has more than adequate capability to defend against any air encroachment by China.⁴⁷

Hotan was seen in July 2020 to have 56 fighters and four AWACS; the fighters were mostly Su-27 or equivalent copy (J-11), which are only air defense fighters and cannot operate 24/7, leaving gaps in air cover; and Mig-21 copies (J-7) that can be used only for air defense since they do not have the range to reach Ladakh and return; they also have six J-8s, which are known to be trouble-prone aircraft.⁴⁸

Kashgar carries six H-6 bombers, a copy of the old Tu-16 bomber. As such, the H-6s are World War II relics. They are slow and have a fat radar signature. The bomb load that six H-6 bombers can carry can be delivered by only three Jaguar aircraft in the Indian inventory. Without a doubt, the H-6s can be intercepted very quickly and destroyed if they try to enter Indian airspace. Kashgar also has 15 JH-7 aircraft, which is somewhat equivalent to the Jaguar. Though it has modern

avionics, the JH-7 has a limited range carrying a full load and can just about make it to the Ladakh border, rendering it ineffective for deep strikes. The JH-7s, as well, can be easily intercepted by the Su-30s fielded by India.

The Chinese built up Ngari Airport close to the Uttarakhand border and placed J-11s there. This airport will have to be knocked out by the Indian air force as a matter of priority.⁴⁹ Another, smaller civilian airfield in Yarkhant cannot accommodate more than 12 fighter aircraft.⁵⁰

The J-20s, known to be stealth aircraft, could possibly be overrated. For one, their stealth is not efficient, and Indian fighters have reported picking up J-20s on their radar. This also means that the J-20 has been operating close to the Indian border, which requires India to be on alert. But China's bark sounds more ominous than its bite because the J-20 uses an underpowered engine of the Su-27. Next, the J-20 is more of an air defense fighter than a multirole fighter like the Rafale. Further, China has only 13 to 20 such aircraft. Thus, the threat from China on account of its J-20s is very limited.⁵¹

Significantly, the Chinese airfields in Xinjiang and Western Tibet can accommodate only 162 aircraft, even though China has 755 aircraft in the Su-27, J-20, J-11, J-10, and J-20 categories. Thus, even though the Chinese air force is numerically larger than India's, China cannot field more aircraft than India for battles in Ladakh and Aksai Chin.⁵²

However, it is not to be underestimated that Chinese Su-30s can be brought into the combat theater within a few hours from the eastern coast. These can be refueled in air while still northeast of Ladakh to enable them to strike at the airfields in Srinagar, Leh, Chushul, and DBO, as well as army cantonments in all those locations. It is all the more important that India finds an opportunity to take on China in Aksai Chin to preempt Chinese adventures.⁵³ China also fields a larger and better array of rocket artillery, and it has already deployed the S-400 surface-to-air missile suite into service. The counter to this can be provided by the Rafales, but India has few—and all 36 Rafales are not expected from France until 2023. For India, every bomb and payload it drops on China will therefore have to count for something: precision bombing will be crucial, and the Indian pilots will be tested as never before.

China's Missile Threats

Possibly, the greatest threat is China's rocket and missile forces, which are much larger than India's. They could quickly fire a salvo of rockets and missiles at the Srinagar, Leh, Chushul, and Ambala airfields. Those rockets could reach their target within 3–5 minutes. If Indian pilots are not sitting in their cockpits ready

for takeoff on a warning signal, India could lose its top-line fighter aircraft within minutes.

China's missile threat is more ominous. It is estimated that China has 1,300–1,900 missiles of all ranges. Of course, China will not use all of those in one limited battle in Ladakh and will definitely not use its ICBMs, which it would rather reserve for Guam, Hawaii, and San Diego. Realistically, China can afford to use perhaps 600 missiles against India. These are the DF-11, DF-15, DF-21, and WS-2 types. However, these missiles can carry only about 500 kg of bombs and could destroy only a 150-square-meter area (22,500 sq. m) with conventional payloads. This is nothing significant, given that a typical airfield is 5 million square meters. Moreover, the accuracy varies, and by the time the Chinese destroy a whole airbase, it will need anywhere upward of a few dozen missiles. This is not economical. Even the US cruise missile attack on Syrian bases failed to put the airfields out of commission.⁵⁴

India's countermeasures against Chinese attack are in effect. Reports indicate that India has deployed adequate missile forces along the Tibet border.⁵⁵ These missiles can intercept incoming aircraft, launch their own barrage against airfields in Kashgar, Khotan, Yarkhand, and Ngari, and target military garrisons and camps across Tibet.

Despite the massive importance of the subject, there seems to be insufficient discussion in literature of India's capabilities to intercept incoming missiles aimed at airfields and deep inside Indian territory—all the way to industrial factories in Bengaluru and Hyderabad. However, the S-400s are important precisely for this reason.

Of course, if China escalates its attack to Indian industrial sites, then the game is thrown wide open, and India can retaliate by attacking Chinese industrial destinations, naval bases, and military and production facilities all the way to Chengdu, Hainan, Fuzhou, and Dalian. The question of destroying the Three Gorges Dam will also come up, notwithstanding international treaties on the matter of not attacking hydroelectric plants. The destruction of the Three Gorges Dam would make the overall Chinese defense and economy suffer a great deal. At this stage, the question of numbers will come into play, because India does not reveal how many long-range missiles it has and what payloads it can carry. One can only hope that India is not deficient on this count.

It is noteworthy, in this respect, that a systems analysis of strategic defense needs was conducted back in 1969 and showed that a strategic missile program could cost only 8 percent of the defense budget.⁵⁶ If the program had been started then, India would be more advanced today.

Land Capabilities in Ladakh

India has matched the 60,000 troops that China has brought to Ladakh. First, it must be appreciated that the supply lines of Chinese forces are spread long and thin, coming from Chengdu and Golmud.⁵⁷ But the Chinese have built roads along the northern bank of Pangong Lake and southern bank of Spangur Lake with the sole intention of an assault on Chushul. They have reinforced these with boat harbors on Pangong Lake, able to ferry troops and materials. But Chinese encampments beyond Finger 8 at Rimuchang, where an old Indian fort once existed, can be very quickly destroyed in air raids by India. The Chinese can scarcely maneuver or disperse there, while Indian aircraft can bomb them where they are, especially with cluster bombs. The Chinese have actually trapped themselves by coming so far west along a mountainous region in the high altitudes of the Himalayas. Even their positions are unsustainable.⁵⁸

If India can knock out Chinese barracks and garrisons at those altitudes, the Chinese troops will attrite from natural causes. However, this does mean that India shall have to place greater emphasis on its air force. The limited squadrons it has delays the objective of defeating the Chinese army. But India must possibly live with the knowledge that it will not have 38 squadrons until 2030. This is ironic knowing that, even in 1965, India had more operational squadrons than 38.

Other Chinese encampments and garrisons in the region include Rutog, a major military garrison town. These cannot withstand aerial bombardment by India save with the SAMs the Chinese have. Hence, the SAM launch trucks shall have to be specially targeted for India to dominate airspace all over Ladakh.

After India captured the six strategic peaks on 30 August–1 September, the Chinese were at a definite disadvantage in the Pangong and Spangur Lake areas. With domination of those heights, Chinese camps at the bottom of those peaks, such as Finger 4 and Sirijap, were easy targets for Indian mortars, grenade launchers, light artillery, antivehicle missiles, and machine guns. The single-file access roads the Chinese built south of Spangur Lake could be choked off by Indian forces from those dominating heights. And from the Rezung La and Rechin La Heights that India occupied, the Indian army had commanding views over Chinese encampments, such that the Chinese were sitting ducks for Indian forces.⁵⁹ Without a doubt, China will lose Moldo if it decides to become aggressive or if India decides to go on the offensive. However, there are hundreds of other peaks in the area that India can occupy but has not as of yet. To make the battle easier for the Indians, those peaks must be occupied.⁶⁰

However, all this is only for defending the existing peaks and areas. The additional strike corps is necessary to successfully evict the Chinese from Aksai Chin, otherwise the Indian home minister's plan is only a dream.

Conclusion

India's stance is currently only that of defending existing positions. If it wishes to do so convincingly, another corps is needed to occupy strategic peaks, though the cost may be substantial. This is because China has aggressively nibbled away Indian territory and will likely continue to do so each time it gets an opportunity. But then, if India's objective is to evict China from Aksai Chin—a noble cause supported and backed by the Indian Parliament resolution of 1994—and the new government maps released in 2019, then India unquestionably needs an additional strike corps.

India's position on the ownership of Aksai Chin is supported even by 1945 maps of communist China that did not show Aksai China as part of its territory. Thus, China's claims post-1949 are disingenuous.

With some likelihood, China is planning for a war—if not now, then soon—given how much it is acting up in the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and Ladakh. There is strong evidence for this through President Xi Jinping's own statements asking the PLA to prepare for war. In this respect, both China and India are probably looking for an opportune moment to attack each other. But the appropriate time for India to assert itself will require eight requisites to be fulfilled, among which are political will, support of the public, courage of generals, and overall readiness. Moreover, if China is busy in a war with Taiwan, it may be a convenient time for India to initiate offensive operations in Ladakh, given that war is virtually inevitable between China and India. China will find it difficult to sustain operations in Ladakh in such a situation.

As this article demonstrates, India has the advantage in Ladakh over the air and land despite current deficiencies and even after considering the missile threat. However, India must make up its mind what it wants as a nation: Defend its territory, or retake Aksai Chin?

If the latter, then without a doubt it must boldly face the Indian public and explain it needs to spend money on raising necessary military assets for the defense of Ladakh and the recapture of Aksai Chin. In this case, India must not worry about the money, or else India shall need to worry about its honor. Not only that: someone should also wield a whip to raise two new corps for Ladakh at a galloping pace—a mountain corps to hold existing positions and territory, in which India is deficient; and another to strike deep into Aksai Chin, and probably

also Tibet and Xinjiang. Consequently, a new military command, which normally consists of three corps, is necessary to defend Ladakh and recapture Aksai Chin.

No doubt this does not come easy, for raising two new corps and creating a new command comes with immense space and logistics planning at every step of the way. But this is the only feasible path for India to recapture Aksai Chin. 🌟

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Notes

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34. The Chinese then negotiated the withdrawal of Indian troops.

35. Interestingly, Indian military planners discovered that “heavy” tanks would tilt a tank battle in the user’s favor in certain areas such as the Depsang Plains, where China had already moved a large number of tanks. The Depsang Plains are expected to be a future tank battle area. Heavy tanks will also deliver a punch east of Chushul before the terrain hits the higher mountains.

36. In any hand-to-hand combat, man’s most faithful friend will always jump into the battle to defend its master. This can be critical, on occasion. If Colonel Babu’s men had dogs with them at PP14 in the Galwan area, their casualties would likely have been less, and more casualties would have been inflicted on the Chinese.

37. Go slow on the XXX Hercules rum, I’d say, because consuming alcohol at high altitudes is not a good idea. Just to add, for the extra-strong soldiers, eight chapattis per meal is normal, unless you want your soldiers to fight on a hungry stomach, which does not make for a good soldier. In mountain patrolling, remember the Hindi adage *kadam choti, haath mein soti, and pait mein roti* (“take small steps, have a walking stick in hand, and food in the stomach”).

38. “Why 2nd Strike Corps Is Required in Ladakh.”

39. XVII Corps, headquartered in Panagarh, West Bengal. Strangely, it is responsible for strike abilities across the entire Sino-Indian border from Ladakh to Arunachal. It has been argued that this does not bring operational efficiency when the corps is not more focused regarding its area of operations.

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50. “PLAAF Weakness over Ladakh,” Cybersburg Shiv’s Channel, n.d., <https://www.youtube.com>.

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60. The author sometimes wonders whether there is lack of will here on the part of Indian generals or on the part of the politicians in New Delhi or both.