



CHINA'S OMG MOMENT: END OF THE DOKLAM STAND-OFF?



Air Marshal KK Nohwar (Retd.)
Additional Director General, CAPS

23 September 2017

The end of the stand-off at Doklam (Donglang), ongoing since mid-June, was not without the persistent chatter from China's mouthpiece – 'People's Daily' – which gave one the impression that China was never on more unsure footing ever before; for it is only when one is on a weak wicket that such rhetoric begins to flow. China's designs to alter the status quo in the Sikkim sector was seen by India as posing a direct threat to the gateway to the North East – the Siliguri corridor. Given the Chinese propensity to ape everything Soviet in early years – and Russian more recently – their attempt at propaganda through a News and TV blitz reminding India of the 1962 conflict was just such an attempt at unsettling the Indians.

The Chinese, however, cannot be faulted to think that "If the Russians carried out a successful intervention in Ukraine – and annexed Crimea to boot – why can't we do the same in areas that will give us a strategic advantage vis-a-vis our 'weak' neighbour". That, unfortunately (for the Chinese), was where the similarity with the Ukrainian scenario ended, for today India is no longer the 'push-over' State that the Chinese confronted in 1962 (they were lucky then that the IAF fighters were not used, otherwise the outcome could have been decidedly different). We now have almost 12-14 Divisions arrayed against the 14-16 Divisions of the PLA in the Eastern sector – certainly not the 3:1 force advantage that the Chinese are seeking for conventional operations against a well-entrenched Indian Army in the mountainous terrain obtaining in the North-Eastern sector. That the Chinese can quickly induct forces into the theatre – having practised the same through Ex STRIDE 2009 – will not be without a corresponding 'induction' on the Indian side; the infrastructure on the Indian side – ALGs in the Arunachal sector – has since been completed, facilitating a quick inter-theatre induction of troops. All this was well known to the Chinese leadership when they agreed to the "expeditious disengagement" of troops to end the impasse of over ten weeks. The tough stand taken by the Indian

1 | www.capsindia.org

Army in not giving in to the mind games being played by the Chinese deserves as much appreciation as the unflinching stand taken by the Indian MEA.

What about the PLAAF? Was the Chinese leadership not confident of using its air arm to enforce its political will in the current situation? Let us understand this in the correct perspective.

Steeped as the Chinese leadership (Mao Zedong) was during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in appeasing the masses in a bid to reassert control over the Communist Party, one of the biggest casualties was the PLAAF, where training was deliberately ordered to be stopped (with books containing training syllabi being burnt) as the leadership felt that training was a luxury enjoyed only by Capitalist countries; and everything capitalist was meant to be the object of hate. The PLAAF pilots, as a result, barely managed to carry out minimum flying to maintain currency in those days. By the time things warmed up on China's Southern border with Vietnam in 1979, the Chinese leadership was unwilling to pitch its 'untrained' and 'less experienced' air force – as compared with the recently 'victorious' and better trained Vietnamese Air Force – into a battle that they felt they would have certainly lost. The resultant shame would have been too much for the Chinese to bear – worried as they are about 'losing face' – especially at a time when its journey towards becoming a regional power under the new leadership of Deng Xiaoping had just begun.

The 1991 Gulf War gave the PLA a rude shock, for it realised just how antiquated its military – particularly the PLAAF – was to fight a modern hi-tech war. To be fair to the leadership within the PLAAF, the changes instituted post the 1991 Gulf War have seen the emergence of a force that has the trappings of a modern fighting force, although its ability to prosecute a high intensity, high tech war against an evenly matched/superior adversary is questionable; not the least because the last war fought by the PLAAF was the Second Taiwan Straits crisis in 1958 (in its attempt to wrest Quemoy and Matsu islands from the Republic of China by force). The current breed of Chinese pilots lack operational experience – period! To overcome this lack of operational experience, China has begun the training of its combat pilots in the art of modern warfare through a replication of concepts borrowed from the West, notably the US, where the Red Flag series of Air Exercises are considered the toughest regimen for participating combat air forces from across the world. The 'Red Sword'/'Blue Sword' training for PLAAF units is carried out at the Air Force Test Training Base set up at Ding Xin in 1999, where more than one hundred aircraft of different types, radar units, communication units and ECM units participate in exercises whose mission is (likely) similar to that set out at the USAF Nellis AFB (for the Red Flag series of exercises) and by the IAF during its bi-annual 'Akraman' series of Exercises. This training is carried out for three months, and sometimes extends even longer. All units of the

2 | www.capsindia.org

PLAAF are expected to undertake this training in rotation. Also, the PLAAF has exercised with the Turkish Air Force and the PAF in recent years to learn more about Western air tactics. All this indicates that the PLAAF of the eighties and nineties is slowly being replaced by one that is a little more aware of the way its western adversary – read USA – fights in the air.

However, keeping the ground realities in the Arunachal/Sikkim sector in mind – most importantly the decided advantage enjoyed by the IAF, both due its location in the plains of Assam as well as its operational state of readiness – the Chinese would be loath to venture into a conventional confrontation against India. The apparent defusing of the situation at Doklam should still not be taken as a call to let our guard down. It is too early to breathe easy at the end of a long standoff, as the Chinese have been brought up on teachings that profess that warfare is based on deception. This could just be a ‘feint’ in their shadow boxing with India.

The IAF, however, understands all this and is well prepared.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Keywords: India-China relations, Doklam stand-off, Border Disputes, PLAAF, Indian Air Force