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Chinese Drones in East Ladakh and India's Response

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Background

The Line of Actual Control (LAC) covers a distance of 3500 km running between India and China through the Himalayan range, consisting of three disputed sectors. East Ladakh is a part of the Western Sector of the LAC. For the untoward incident of June 15th, 2020, in the Galwan valley, the Chinese infrastructure in the Tibet and Xinjiang region and the issue of LAC trespassing by the Chinese can't be the cause. Therefore, examination of events happening outside the LAC is required to understand the longest stand-off at the LAC in recent years¹. The growing relations between India and the US especially under the Trump administration has only toughened Beijing's response and stand to test the Indo-US bonhomie in recent years. Carving of a new Union Territory of Ladakh by the Indian government in 2019, China viewed it as a repeat of the Senkaku episode of 2012-13. Further, China's lackadaisical response to the initial Covid-19 outbreak impacted its global image, and it saw an opportunity in the Galwan valley to signal defiance and project itself as a strong and tough Government. With military build-up taking place in the western sector of the LAC, recently China deployed its advanced armed, unarmed, and secretive hypersonic drones at the Malan airbase in the Xinjiang region to strengthen its Air Power capability against India in the Himalayan region².

Chinese drone facing the East Ladakh region

Indian Air Force (IAF) enjoys a geographical advantage as compared to China due to the proximity of airfields on the Indian side of LAC. In recent years under Xi Jinping's leadership, China invested heavily in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) modernisation and development of high-tech and advanced military assets to protect the country's national and territorial interest. As per an article in Global Times, during the Galwan valley skirmish, drones developed by Shenzhen Kewetai Enterprise Development Co were used to transport supplies to outposts in East Ladakh⁴. In the wake of the operational challenges the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) faces with its airbases being located at higher altitudes in the Himalayan region as compared to India, China deployed small drones in East Ladakh and is considering using a significant number of its sophisticated large armed and unarmed drones in the border region⁵.

This raises an issue of efficient border security and control in East Ladakh which now becomes a top priority for India and China. To address them, the PLA has pitched for GJ-1 and GJ-2 large fixed-wing armed reconnaissance drones with the ability to carry sophisticated payloads for airborne operation in East Ladakh⁶. Satellite images obtained by The Drive dated June 1st, 2020, showed a fleet of the Wing Long drone series, Sharp Sword drones and other drones being deployed at a secret test base – currently leading the development of unmanned air combat capabilities of China – near the Malan Airbase in Xinjiang region⁷. It further showed the presence of a secretive black triangular

unmanned hypersonic drone and an upgraded J-16 fighter. Assembling such drones and fighters at the airbase enhances China's Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities against India in East Ladakh⁸.

Option for India

With disengagement from the northern and southern Pangong Tso lake, Gogra Hot Springs and the Kailash range, Chief of Army Staff General Manoj Mukund Naravane recently stated that the situation in East Ladakh remains normal⁹. The presence of drones at the LAC became a serious challenge for the IAF and to address the problem and upgrade its armoury, the IAF recently invited a bid for the counter-unmanned aircraft system (CUAS) and Laser-Directed Energy Weapons (Laser-DEWs) to take down drones efficiently¹⁰. Presently, the Indian Army and National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO) are using surveillance drones including Israeli Heron unarmed drones to conduct the ISR operations in East Ladakh. Now with the development of swarm drones or suicide drones by China's China Electronics Technology Group (CETC) and the ability to deploy it quickly, the IAF Twitter handles showcased its capability to counter such new aerial threats India will face in the near future¹¹. Concurrently to address the micro drone threat India is currently facing, the DRDO recently developed its D-4 anti-drone system which is capable of both soft (by jamming the signal of the drone) and hard (destroying using laser method) kill and thwarting any drone attacks on India's military assets and airbases¹².

Recently India deployed its second squadron of Rafale at Hasimara airbase – a relevant and strategic airbase – in West Bengal to further strengthen the IAF capabilities in East Ladakh. Further, the Rafale squadron stationed at Ambala is conducting sorties in East Ladakh regularly¹³. To enhance the drone capability of the Army, Navy and IAF, recently India agreed to purchase 10 MQ-9B armed drones – a variant of Predator drones – each for its armed forces from the US. Being part of the High-Altitude Long Endurance family for an unmanned aerial system, the MQ-9B armed drone can carry varied missile or weapon systems with a payload capacity of 2 tons. Regarding small drones, the DRDO has developed 'Bharat', an unarmed small drone capable of conducting surveillance operations in high-altitude and extreme conditions which will be deployed by India in East Ladakh¹⁴. With the latest drones in the basket, it will strengthen the IAF operational capabilities against the PLAAF and infrastructure China built in the Tibet and Xinjiang region in recent years in East Ladakh.

Conclusion

With drones and an anti-drone system being placed in East Ladakh, both India and China are currently focusing to enhance their respective ISR and CUAS operation capability to secure their national interest and territorial claim in the disputed region. The deployment of drones is only a part of the IAF

and PLAAF aim to succeed in their military strategy to establish themselves as dominant Powers in the Indian sub-continent. With talks going at the Ministerial and Military level to reduce tension in East Ladakh, it is speculated that the current stand-off in the Galwan valley will remain. Meanwhile, India should strengthen and prepare itself for a two-front war-like situation in the coming years. Further, China is trying to address challenges it faces in East Ladakh, and drone becomes an important part of its military arsenal and strategy.

With India and China competing for Air Power dominance, a well-articulated statement by General Billy Mitchell 'with us being air people the future of a country is indissolubly attached with the development of its Air Power' fits perfectly. Thus, now is the right time for India to harness the full potential of a vast multi-billion-dollar drone industry to secure its national interest, security interest and territorial claims and thwart any drone-related attacks or surveillance by our adversary in the near future¹⁵.

Notes

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