



CASS Webinar Series

“China-India Standoff: Implications for Regional Security”

June 18, 2020

Introduction. Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies (CASS) hosted a webinar titled “China-India Standoff: Implications for Regional Security” on June 18, 2020. The event was organized to analyse the evolving crisis between China and India and its impact on regional security. President CASS, Air Chief Marshal Kaleem Saadat (Retd) chaired the session. The panelists included Mr Shashank Joshi, Defence Editor, The Economist, Professor Shen Dingli, Fudan University, Lt. General (Retd) Naeem Khalid Lodhi, Former Defence Secretary, and Ambassador (Retd) Jalil Abbas Jilani, Former Foreign Secretary, Director CASS. Senior Research Associate Ms Sitara Noor moderated the session.

Opening Remarks by the President CASS Air Chief Marshal Kaleem Saadat (Retd)

President CASS provided an overview of the situation and stated that the Chinese incursion on 5th May came as a surprise to everyone but it was an unpleasant one for the Indians. For Pakistan, it appeared to be not an unpleasant one, not because we derived any satisfaction from it, but because it diverted India's attention away from Pakistan for a while. He said that people were doubtful whether a new great game had started and asserted that now there was no doubt that it had. China had been moving in parallel on four fronts. Such as South China Sea, Hong Kong, Macmohan line and Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Aksai Chin or Ladakh. Many people think that China had taken advantage while the world had been preoccupied with COVID-19. But the Chinese had, once again, demonstrated a planned strategy to attain its strategic objectives, discreetly and deliberately. They had categorically rejected Indian action of 5th August, 2019. He added that we in Pakistan were surprised at the muted response of the world at large to the same and the measures that the Indian Govt took in locking up 8 million Kashmiris. Now it was evident that the Chinese had a plan and chose the right time to strike. This year the Indians

relaxed their patrols on the north bank of the Pangong lake. The Chinese took advantage and not only continued their patrols but they fortified their positions along an 8 km stretch of the lake and occupied reportedly 60 sq km of territory which Indians claimed as their own. The Chinese had their own claims and also occupied the dominating heights astride the Galwan valley. He added that the Indians were left red-faced by the Chinese actions and tried to blame it on the “differing perceptions of the location of the LAC.” All analysts have concluded that India finds itself between a rock and a hard place. The clash on 15 June added to the complexity of Indian predicament and now questions are being asked, like

1. Why were the Indian soldiers not armed when they went to confront the Chinese troops?
2. Were the troops equipped and acclimatised for the anticipated or likely battle?
3. How long will this tussle last?
4. What will it take to restore peace in the conflict zone?
5. What would be the reaction of Russia and NATO countries to this problem?
6. How will Pakistan be affected by the same and more importantly, what should Pakistan do?

He shared his hope that the panelists of the session would explore those questions and present their prognosis about what can or will happen? What’s being conjectured is that Chinese have linked the vacation of the occupied territory to the restoration of the status quo ante 5th August 2019. Needless to say that Indians have very few options and Mr Modi is liable to lose face with Indian citizens, who had come to believe him to be a strong leader guiding them to future glory. A spanner has obviously been thrown in the works.

Shashank Joshi - Defence Editor, The Economist

Providing an overview of the rapidly evolving crisis, Mr Joshi acknowledged that the situation was very bleak, and the majority of the analysts did not have first-hand information. He contended that when the crisis happened neither side thought that the escalation would jump up to this level of severity. He also believed that the situation escalated due to the extremely worrying deterioration of protocols from both sides. He argued that in the past two months, there were three different occasions on which Indian and Chinese troops had indulged in serious violence. To understand the standoff in broader terms, he stated, one had to know that the issue in terms of area. Since the past two months, on and off fights had happened at three different locations which are Galwan river valley, hot springs area, and the north of

the Pangong lake between finger 4 to finger 8. Regarding the potential causes of the crisis, he said that there were competing hypothesis. Firstly, he argued, the Chinese actions were a response to India's unilateral decision to make Ladakh a union territory. Secondly, the construction activities close to the LAC region had a high capacity to trigger the Chinese move.

On future trajectory of events, he explained that we do not see a heightened escalation at least for now although the political pressure in India would grow significantly. He concluded his presentation on three significant points; First, the standoff was not over yet, the disengagement agreement would be a hard task to implement as it only covered Galwan valley and the Hot spring area, leaving behind the Pangong lake. He predicted that the recent standoff could soon exceed the time of the Doklam crisis. Secondly, he believed that the recent crisis was a watershed moment in India-China relations. He believed that from now on India and US would share a closer relationship, tightening of the Quad countries, intense defence acquisitions by India, and the reallocation of the resources from LOC towards LAC. Thirdly, he argued that the current crisis would substantiate many geopolitical shifts which had been restrained for the past several years.

Responding to a question about the role of article 370 revocation and China's positioning vis-à-vis Kashmir dispute, Mr Joshi noted that since Kargil, China had disappointed Pakistan as it did not play any active or prominent role to help Islamabad primarily because it did not want to further push India to the American side, likewise in the current situation, China had raised concerns over Ladakh and might pressurize India diplomatically, but it was highly unlikely that China would force India to reverse and undo the abrogation of article 370 and 35-A. In his view, this was a very high political priority for India. Answering to the question of how this was a watershed moment, he added that China and India had been very cautious to not to antagonize each other, but this would change now and we might witness reprioritization on both sides.

Professor Shen Dingli – Fudan University

At the outset, Professor Dingli shared his opinion on the nature of the crisis and stated that the fight between Chinese and Indian soldiers was a surprise and very unfortunate incident that resulted in casualties on both sides. The distinguished speaker argued that the area was disputed and India had been trying to extend its control over the area by building roads and infrastructure, which China also claimed as its territory. Referring to the example of the Doklam crisis, he stated that China stopped building roads infrastructure in a disputed territory when India objected to

that, therefore, India should also do the same in the current situation. He added that China had to assert its control on the claimed territory because if LAC turned into a permanent border, both sides shall retain control on the areas they already control. Professor Dingli further elaborated that there was a difference of opinion on where the actual LAC lay. Both sides did not share the same views; China believed that it had not intruded on the Indian side of LAC, in fact India had moved beyond the Chinese perception of the LAC.

He underlined the importance of negotiation and stated that some sensible adjustments could take place. He expressed that for the past 20 years various rounds of talks had happened without any concrete resolution, leaving LAC to be a disputed area. Citing the news sources and the Chinese government's viewpoint, he stated that Indian forces, either locally or at the order of Prime Minister Modi, had intentionally violated the recent agreement of June 6. Indian aggression had led to the death of many soldiers on both sides. He added that China was not isolated, and it could withstand the American pressure. He warned that India could face another major humiliation if it followed the same pattern. He argued that Xi Jinping had made a great effort for free-style exchange of thoughts by inviting PM Modi to Wuhan but his efforts were not reciprocated by the Indian government. In the end, while recognizing the dearth of official sources of information, he added that China had left room for disengagement by not sensationalizing the public opinion, but India also needed to do the same.

Responding to a question on India boycotting Chinese products, professor Dingli reiterated that the Indian public needed to understand that India violated an agreement, if they still wished to boycott Chinese products, they would be at loss because then they would opt for expensive but low-quality stuff just because they misunderstood the situation. He added that China was a big economy and it could live with that, it would in fact harm the Indian economy. On the question of Chinese expectation from Pakistan in case of a war with India, Professor Dingli postulated that while china fully trusted Pakistani help, it may not require it as China did not want a war and would want to resolve this issue amicably by finding a peaceful resolution.

Lt. General (Retd) Naeem Khalid Lodhi - Former Defence Secretary

Lt Gen. Lodhi started his talk by highlighting three distinct underlying political factors, that in his view, played an instrumental role in instigating the crisis, in addition to other reasons already highlighted by the previous speakers. Firstly, the abrogation of article 370 was considered to be a unilateral action of India, which

Chinese did not like. Secondly, growing Indo-US strategic partnership as both countries shared a very profound nature of agreements including; logistic agreement, sharing of intelligence agreement, and interoperability i.e. using each other's facilities). Thirdly, India was objecting to the alignment of CPEC that it was passing through the disputed territory. However, he noted that India itself did the same, the development of the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) road held a very significant part in this dispute. He particularly highlighted the significance of building an airbase at the Daulat Beg Oldie base which was initially a battalion base and later converted into a Brigade base, linked with the all-weather road. Commenting on the current Chinese position, he stated that China was well within their perception of LAC and they had not violated anything. By capturing heights in Galwan Valley, the Chinese had gained a strategic edge and could neutralize the road link India wanted to establish to the Daulat Beg Oldie and also interdict any Indian movement at their will. Likewise Chinese advancement from Finger 8 to Finger 4 in the Pangong Tso was significant in his view.

While discussing what could happen from now onwards, he added that apparently, it was a tactical move as a few kilometres extension or reversion by the forces did not count especially where the border was not well defined, but this was not the case in this situation because China had virtually cut the road with operational level consequences, even if the move was tactical in nature. He believed that the Chinese army was well equipped with modernized weaponry, but in comparison, the Indian army was relying on traditional equipment such as tanks etc. But in this situation India could have fared better and, in his view, India's inability to contain China in this theatre was an indication of their weak planning.

On elaborating the future implications for the region, he said that the supplies to Daulat Beg Oldie would be interdicted by the Chinese troops and with that the threat to Gilgit Baltistan and CPEC had been lowered. It would stress Indian force posture as well as it had exhibited Chinese assertiveness to their sovereignty as well.

General Lodhi highlighted that the Indian forces had been embarrassed twice; Firstly, in their view, they were moving forward in a very imperceptible manner and they did not expect such a massive Chinese response. The second embarrassment was their actions and Chinese response on June 15 skirmish. According to him, Indian image had been tarnished and they could not retrieve it vis-a-vis China and it would be even worse if they tried to do something against Nepal. Another embarrassment for India was its inability to prove its worth to the US as a net security provider in the region. This, however, may lead to more arms supply to India. He also lamented the fact that

India might try to do something against Pakistan for face-saving. Adding another political implication, he asserted that China could also become part of the overall Kashmir resolution. To conclude, he said that the Chinese will retain Galwan Valley and area up to finger 4 over the Pangong Tso Lake thereby overlooking the developments on Daulat beg road and base, cutting the lifeline for the Indian troops and securing the Karakorum Pass.

Responding to a question on probability of India attacking along the LOC and on Pakistan, General Lodhi stressed that India could not assimilate Kashmir unless it would embarrass Pakistan through a surgical strike of some sort and multiply the advantages through the media hype. He added that Kashmiri people were a primary party in any resolution of the issue. Nonetheless, he added that it was not a right time for India to attack Pakistan at least not before the US election or before it could get advanced military equipment such as S-400 or Rafale jets.

Ambassador Jaleel Abbas Jillani - Former Foreign Secretary, Director CASS

Ambassador Jillani added his perspective to the discussion and argued that the Chinese strategic framework was informed by history and a long-term strategic outlook. It was also firmly grounded in principles and high values. To that end, he believed that the Chinese gesture for peaceful cooperation had not been adequately reciprocated by India. He explained that from the Chinese perspective several factors led to the current situation. He argued that the current standoff had become more complex and more of a serious nature, with implications not only for India-China but also for the entire region including Pakistan.

He shared his concern that the hopes of an amicable settlement appeared remote for the time being. He argued that contrary to Indian claims, the recent activities at border reflected that the military commanders of the two countries had not reached a common understanding on June 6 meeting. The speaker added another point that the Indian expectations of solid support from the US and other international actors had not seen any result. He further elucidated the point that the Indians had to contend with a statement by President Trump saying that the US would be happy to mediate between the two countries something that was not taken seriously by either of the two countries. He also observed that the statement from the US state department did not generate any enthusiasm in India because it only expressed regrets over the loss of lives on both sides, urging the two sides to settle these issues through negotiations. Additionally, the important trilateral meeting between Russia China and the Indian foreign minister scheduled on June 22 had been called off.

Amb Jilani asserted that the options for PM Modi were limited, as they carry military, economic and psychological implications. He explained that militarily China was too strong and in case the theatre of conflict was expanded, it would certainly have devastating effects on India. Moreover, India's economic outlook seemed bleak due to COVID-19. He alluded to some psychological pressures for India as it had revived embarrassing memories of the 1962 war.

He opined that in the days to come India would find a face-saving formula to generate a favourable narrative in its public and opposition. The speaker presented the view that many factors that led to current standoff were relevant to Pakistan. The unilateral decision of revoking article 370 and declaration of Ladakh a union territory, for instance, concerned both China and Pakistan, respectively. Additionally, the border infrastructure development near Karakoram Pass also concerned the two parties. He also added that Amit Shah's statement to retake Aksai Chin and Gilgit Baltistan soon after August 5, 2019 action was also concerning for the two neighbours.

Referring to the statement of Chinese ministry of Foreign Affairs, he argued, that China was unlikely to vacate Galwan valley or the other positions in the other two sectors as China linked sovereignty of Galwan valley to the territorial integrity of China. He added that Pakistan, as a matter of fact, has followed a very prudent and sober policy in the face of this crisis. He opined that the recent issue had brought back the focus on the illegal Indian action of August 5, 2019, which was disappearing from the radar screen because of the COVID. India had forced China into the Kashmir dispute and with that resolution of India-China boundary dispute had become more difficult. He agreed with Mr Shashank Joshi's assessment that India and China were moderating their competition for the last one decade. But lately, the competition had increased. To reinforce this viewpoint he added, that India was part of anti-China allies in the shape of Quad, it was also a central pillar of the Indo-Pacific strategy, opposing Belt and Road and CPEC initiative, and it also opposed the South Asian countries' overtures to China on economic and security fronts. On the flip side, the communication, compatibility, and security agreement between the US and India in 2018, held a grave concern not only for Pakistan but China as well. Finally, he concluded that India was ought to see China as a partner under the Wuhan spirit but India's recent actions stand contradictory to what it had committed to.

Commenting on the question of India boycotting the Chinese products, Amb Jilani stressed that it was a decision by few individuals and added that when last year India stopped trade with Pakistan it was a net loss for India to the tune of 2.2 billion dollars

because Pakistan was gaining only 20% share whereas India was taking 80% share of the bilateral trade. Likewise, India- China trade balance was almost the same and India would be a net loser if it took such a step. He added to the question of the probability of Indian attack on Pakistan and said that it would depend on what kind of face-saving India would get as a way out of its current crisis with China, if Indian government faced massive criticism internally, from both public and opposing political parties, for its stance against China, it may try to divert attention by opening a new front against Pakistan. Adding to the question of Pakistan's role in a likely China-India war, Amb. Jilani stressed that China was strong enough militarily and economically to take care of Indian aggression on its own and added that Pakistan would wholeheartedly extend moral and diplomatic support to China at all international forums.

Closing Remarks by the President CASS Air Chief Marshal Kaleem Sadaat (Retd)

President CASS asserted that India wanted to keep the spotlight away from the tussle. They were attempting the same tricks which were applied after February 27, 2019. He argued that the difference was that the Indians could only show their bravado to Pakistan and make their people believe in the fiction of shooting down Pakistani F-16 but here they had lost territory and that could not be denied. In this case, the Chinese boots were on the ground on "perceived Indian territory" and India had lost 20 soldiers so neither the media nor the government could deny that. The challenge was how to find an amicable way out? How to persuade the Chinese to retreat as their conditions were not easy. He believed that whatsoever, India would do against Pakistan as a face-saving tactic, that would not eliminate its problem with China. He also added that India had been working on isolating Pakistan diplomatically, but the recent crisis and other border clashes of Indian troops with its neighbouring countries had isolated India in the region.

He shared the key takeaways from the presentations of the distinguished speakers. He agreed with Mr Joshi's point that the clash appeared to be unintentional and the standoff was not over yet and it was indeed a watershed moment. He added that there was no going back to the old ways because this conflict had created a rupture in the relationship between China and India and that the damage was irreversible.

He appreciated Professor Shen for bringing clarity on Chinese stance in the entire standoff and what China had been looking for. Supporting his argument, he said that China did not want war neither wanted to escalate but it was determined to not give in to the Indian demands. President CASS referred to the perceptual gap between

China's and Indian position as India believed its border with China was around 3340 km but in China's view it was not more than 2000 km and the rest was LAC. He stressed that for peaceful coexistence, this aspect had to be negotiated. Reinforcing Professor Shen's claim, President CASS stated that China and Pakistan's relationship was strong and shall remain so and both will mutually support each other in good and bad times. He also reiterated the argument of Professor Shen that any provocation from the Indian side would be answered in a befitting manner.

Supporting Lt. Gen Lodhi's argument, President CASS expressed that the conflict may appear to be tactical but its implications were operational. He also believed that the Indian image had suffered in both ways i.e. political and military. President CASS appreciated Ambassador Jillani's statement that China wanted a peaceful coexistence and cooperation with India however, in the recent standoff things were moving in opposite directions.

Lastly, President CASS expressed his concern that there was a challenge for Pakistan what he termed a day of reckoning. He observed that Pakistan had to choose sides in this new cold war He believed that India has chosen the side with which it wanted to move ahead but Pakistan stood undecided.