

### Deciphering Inscrutability: The Depsang Intrusion

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Following his victory at Zela in Asia Minor Julius Caesar wrote “Veni, vidi, vici,” meaning “I came, I saw, I conquered.” The Chinese troops who intruded into the Depsang Valley in Ladakh on April 15, erected five tents, stayed for three weeks, and went back on May 5, and could perhaps write, “We came, we squatted, we returned.”

Salman Khurshid described the incursion as ‘acne’ on the fair face of Sino-Indian relations, a remark that is difficult to fathom but does not explain why China should have engaged in this pointless exercise. No doubt, incursions by both sides across the Line of Actual Control are not uncommon--the difference this time is that the Chinese troops stayed on for three weeks despite New Delhi’s protests. But, Indian troops positioned opposite the Chinese made no efforts to evict or isolate them, reminiscent of the Sumdorong Chu standoff in Arunachal Pradesh in 1986.

Why the Chinese came, why they squatted for three weeks, and then withdrew remains a mystery. It is argued, that they went back after making their point. But, what point? Was it an “error of judgment”? Or, over-reaction by a local commander without orders from higher headquarters? Such errors do occur in India where a multiplicity of individuals and organizations are involved in the higher direction of defense. But, is this true of China? It prides itself on “politics being in command, and “the gun being under the party”.

Did China wish to dissuade India from supporting the US pivot towards Asia? If this is true the Chinese were taking a huge risk, since such strong-arm tactics could drive India closer to the US, which is troubling Beijing after India and the United States entered their nuclear deal in 2008. Several more prosaic reasons have been speculated upon like China promoting its territorial claims, putting India on notice to desist from strengthening its defenses in Ladakh, raising China’s profile in India before the Le Keqiang visit and so on. All these are inadequate explanations. Officially, China has described the Depsang intrusion to be an “isolated” incident, while commending the maturity of both countries in not letting this incident “contaminate” their bilateral cooperation.

Apparently, one telephone call from National Security Advisor, Shivshankar Menon, to his counterpart, State Councilor Yang Jiechi, resolved the impasse in ground level and diplomatic negotiations to mutual satisfaction. Established hotlines were functioning, therefore, as intended. Why, then, did three weeks elapse before this crisis could be defused, despite its engaging national and international attention? Some economizing of the truth seems evident. At the end of the day, however, no permanent solution was reached, and similar incursions could recur. During the crisis, incidentally, the Chinese media only published Indian press reports. But the *Global Times* proffered the gratuitous advice that India should ponder over this incident and mitigate damage to future Sino-Indian relations.

It is true that several such incursions have occurred in the recent past, and in all these cases China agreed to either compromise or stand down. The question arises: why does China indulge in these border confrontations from time to time? Perhaps the most likely reason has escaped notice, which is explicable on the principle of Occam's razor viz. "If you have two theories that explain the observed facts, then you should use the simplest until more evidence comes along." Is the PLA, indeed, under the control of the political leadership? Did the Depsang incident occur because over-zealous PLA officers decided to show initiative?

There are several instances of the PLA acting independently in the past like launching China's anti-satellite missile in January 2007, which surprised the United States, and led to great international outcry; it was apparently undertaken by the PLA without reference to the foreign ministry that was caught by surprise. Similarly, the PLA decided to test-fly its J-20 stealth fighter in January 2011 when the US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, was visiting Beijing, with predictably adverse results for the totality of Sino-American relations. Earlier, in consequence of the PLA pursuing an independent foreign policy, the Chinese navy sank three Vietnamese vessels in 1988, resulting in the deaths of 74 sailors. It seems the PLA Navy wished to assert China's sovereignty over the South China Seas. The Chinese political leadership endorsed this operation, ignoring the reservations expressed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Several lessons might be learnt from the Depsang incident to guide India's Sino-Indian border policy. The appreciation must accrue that China enjoys a terrain advantage since the Tibetan plateau allows its road and rail communications to be extended easily up to the Sino-Indian border, But, India must negotiate treacherous and unstable terrain over the Himalayan ranges to connect with the border. Therefore, China is content to let this issue fester, since it sees advantage in keeping India off-balance, while serving Pakistan's strategic objective to checkmate India. Beijing consciously divorces its policies on trade and commerce from security and political imperatives. Its assertive maritime policy towards its economic partners in East Asia and Southeast Asia can be highlighted here. On the same analogy, China's two-way trade with India, projected to reach \$ 100 bn. by 2015, is unlikely to moderate its intransigence on the border dispute.

A news item on 13 May informed that: "Concerned at how it would be perceived by Beijing, India last month suddenly withdrew from the planning of a naval exercise with the US and Japanese navies off the US Pacific island of Guam" Another news item informed that the India Navy is concerned over the increasing presence of the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean. The Depsang incident reveals that China has no desire to resolve the border dispute, but means to keep it alive to place India on the defensive. This reality should inform its interminable dialogs with China at different levels.