

Forthcoming Show Down in Asia? Some Brief Notes

Prof.Dr.Klaus Lange
(Founding member of INIS, Belgrade, Serbia)

Copyright: Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr)

Publication date: 22 August 2020

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS)

What a change: From 26 of April 2018 until April 28 the so called “informal meeting” between the leaders of India and China, Modi and Xi, had taken place in Wuhan.

This meeting was not only supposed to rule off the so called “Doklam – crisis” which manifested itself in a two - month standoff in summer 2017 but also to prevent possible aftershocks once and for all.

Even if the Doklam – conflict was special insofar as India felt obliged to take care of the interests of a third party, namely Bhutan, it can be assigned to the host of disagreements regarding the course of the so called “line of actual control”(LAC) which demarcates the Himalaya – border between India and China. Since the LAC was never clearly defined by both countries, it is not surprising that again and again patrols by both armies confronted each other and gave rise to a multitude of minor and major conflicts.

The most interesting result of the first “informal” meeting which was followed by a second one in Mamallapuram (Tamil Nadu/India), was an agreement on “strategic guidance” the meaning of which in a nutshell was that in future confrontation in whatever section of the LAC was supposed to be addressed reciprocally by the highest political bodies and not any longer be left to the behaviour of local military commanders. “Strategic guidance” was supposed to minimize the danger that local confrontation could get out of hand and develop into a hardly controllable spiral of military escalation.

Subscribing to the principle of “strategic guidance”, could be seen as expression of the will by both sides to provide a safe mechanism for to stop any military escalation at the earliest possible stage.

“Strategic guidance” seemed to have worked in the sense that whatever confrontation had taken place in some sections of the LAC, the danger of escalation was always blocked at an early stage and military conflict looked an extremely removed possibility.

But then out of the blue the situation changed: Violent clashes erupted in some disputed sections along the line of demarcation between Ladakh and Aksai Chin and geographic names such as Pangong Lake, Galwan Valley and Hot Springs figured prominently in the headlines

which focused on the possibility that India and China could bicker with each other in those regions with the nightmare of major military escalation making an appearance.

Although the Indian side reported ca. 20 casualties as result of the violent clashes with no figures given by the Chinese it is worth mentioning that the casualties were not the effect of shots being fired but were results of attacks with stones, iron rods etc. In other words: although casualties were conceded as result of physical skirmishes, “strategic guidance” still preserved some significance in the sense that it blocked the use of firearms. What is all that supposed to mean?

A brief look at the situation as it looks at the beginning of August:

Without going very much into details the following facts which taken together are forming a writing on the wall which heralds a new and protracted era of uneasy relations between the two Asian giants:

1.: Although the so called “WMCC” (Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India – China Border Affairs) on 24th July agreed on “early and complete disengagement” and although the Indian Ministry of External Affairs stressed the readiness of both sides to deescalate, the situation becomes more and more alarming as both sides are busy to strengthen their military potential in the regions adjacent to the places of recent clashes to a degree which was not seen since decades.

2.: On July 20 units of the Indian navy conducted manoeuvres together with an US carrier strike group off the Andaman/Nicobar - islands. This can be seen as a warning to China that India is considering to use the so called Chinese “Malacca dilemma” (stopping Chinese imports from going through the Malacca – sea lane) and to make this option to look more credible by involving the US navy).

3.: India has based its first 5 “Rafales” (out of 36 to be delivered by France) at the Ambala air base, which is situated at only ca. 300 miles from the Ladakh conflict theatre. In a conflict Indian “Rafales” would make the situation of the PLAAF a very precarious one.

4.: According to reports by Indian media India is increasing its efforts to improve militarily usable infrastructure along the LAC. This can be seen as an indication that the role which is assigned to Indian forces at the LAC is about to change: From providing a mere trip wire with relatively short survival time to a force which would be capable to block any advance by the PLA for a fairly protracted period of time.

5.: There are indications that Delhi considers an upgrade of its relations with Taiwan. This can be interpreted as another warning to Beijing that any major conflict at the LAC, could change India’s commitment to following a one China – approach.

6.: And finally there are signals from Delhi that serious Chinese actions which would question the status quo at the LAC could influence Delhi in such a way that Indian resistance against becoming part of a military component of the so called “Quad” (USA, Japan, Australia, India) could vanish.

On July 30, an article by Lt. Gen. PR Kumar (retd.) was published in Indian "Defence News" ("Chinas Blitzkrieg: What`s The Real Intent?") in which we can find the following consideration:

" ...the LAC imbroglio will serve a defining moment in our country`s history, and India will emerge as strong, resilient, resurgent and confident to take its natural place as the pivotal balancing power amongst the comity of nations in the world."

If this statement reflects more or less the thinking of the Indian political leadership and there are quite a few indications that this is the case, not at least the military assertiveness Delhi shows at the LAC, then there are good reasons for Beijing not to overplay military action there and not provoke Indian reactions as anticipated in the above 6 points.

Taking all this into consideration the following predictions regarding development of the situation at the LAC appear as realistic:

1.: Apart from cases of small confrontations which can never be ruled out due to the partly differing views of how exactly the LAC is supposed to run, there will be no major military conflict. In terms of cost/benefits a major conflict would be to the detriment of China and particularly conjure up the Chinese nightmare of an Indian/American military alliance.

2.: Despite this the military build - up on both sides will continue for some time to come. The reason for this has a lot to do with domestic politics: While the Indian leadership would like to show to the domestic audience that the vision of India as a balancing pivotal power is not too farfetched the Chinese military build up is supposed to demonstrate strength in times when the waters of Chinese foreign politics have become more choppy.

3.: Even if a major military conflict at the LAC remains extremely unlikely, the military build – up will continue for some time to come and with this the temptation of pre-emptive strikes might grow as well as the danger that "strategic guidance" will fail at one point in time.

In conclusion I would like to say that the conditions are not yet there for a major military conflict to erupt. But all in all, we can expect that the uneasy relationship between India and China will become increasingly difficult to handle.

In this sense the "spirit of Wuhan" looks more and more a thing of the past.