

Admiral Arun Prakash on

“What Delhi must do to make sure it isn’t caught off-guard by China again”

The nation heaved a collective sigh of relief as the Indian and Chinese armies commenced a process of “synchronised and verifiable disengagement” on banks of the Pangong Tso in eastern Ladakh. This mutual climbdown came after 10 months of a tense and sanguinary armed confrontation, punctuated by talks between respective military commanders. It marks the beginning of a process that should lead to disengagement at other “friction points” along the line of actual control (LAC) in Hot Springs, Gogra and Depsang and eventually, to a state of “de-escalation”, wherein, both armies will revert to pre-April 2020 force-levels and deployments.

Even as political analysts rack their brains about the motivation underlying China’s blatant territorial incursions, and its equally perplexing withdrawal, this traumatic event calls for deep reflection in South Block. Clearly, India’s swift military response, backed by firm political resolve, came as an unpleasant surprise to China,

and influenced its eventual decision to disengage. Possible “loss of face” in Beijing may see some in the Party and/or the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) pay the price for miscalculation. But even in the (unlikely) event that the status-quo ante is restored, China’s periodic transgressions have imposed costs on India which cannot be ignored. While the political consequences of these intrusions are being managed through legerdemain, it is the price being paid in terms of economic and security penalties, which calls for attention.

The expenditure demanded by an unanticipated redeployment of 50,000-60,000 soldiers and their sustenance in the high-altitude, arctic conditions of Ladakh would be substantial. While the rapid troop build-up is testimony of India’s newly acquired, strategic airlift capability, it will extract a price in terms of wear and tear on the IAF’s transport and helicopter fleets. The cumulative costs of this military confrontation could, therefore, impose a

significant burden on an already stressed defence budget and will impact on force modernisation plans. Relief at the ongoing disengagement must be tempered by the fact that this is just the latest act in the ongoing drama being played out by China along the LAC.

The notional LAC was described by the then Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai in 1959, as conforming to “the so-called McMahon Line in the east and the line, up to which each side exercises actual control in the west”. In 1962, the PLA advanced to this claim line, before withdrawing, unilaterally, 20 km behind it. This left China in occupation of 38,000 sq km of the Aksai Chin plateau. In the east, China now claims, as part of ‘Southern Tibet’, 84,000 sq km of Arunachal Pradesh, which is well to the south of the McMahon Line.

Having neglected for 59 years post-bellum to negotiate conversion of the 3,500 km disputed Sino-Indian boundary into an international border, India continues to

