

INDIA NEEDS A ROBUST LADAKH POLICY: CASE FOR A SEPARATE STATE OF LADAKH

P. Stobdan*

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the geopolitical environment in India's immediate vicinity especially China's new aggressive economic and connectivity policies under the One-Belt-One-Road (OBOR) idea plus China's \$46 billion infrastructure spending plan through PoK that could transform the security landscape around India's northern borders. The Chinese activities in PoK cannot be seen in isolation without the backdrop of its historical tag with this region. Once China's hold over PoK gets tighter, it would inevitably have implications for Ladakh as well. The paper examines the conferment of "full Statehood" to Ladakh after taking on strategic consideration, drawing on a newly expansive Chinese foreign policy, aggressive Pakistani design for sponsoring terrorism, emerging new Islamic region north of Ladakh and growing opportunities for engagement with the Eurasian region.

Keywords: Corridor, *kikisoso-laargalo*, Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), One-Belt-One-Road (OBOR), Pangong Lake, Tibetanization

INTRODUCTION

Ladakh is the thicket piece of highland fallen from the sky to India. But for Ladakh, the Chinese PLA would have been sitting on the southern foothills of the Himalayas to co-support the Pakistani Army to snatch Kashmir from India.

But this strategically most critical part of the country has received little or no attention as compared to the Northeast and Kashmir. India's primary interest and policy actions for Ladakh have mainly been driven by security concerns and they are being dealt with robust defence preparedness.

*P. Stobdan is a national security thinker and Honorary President of Ladakh International Centre, Leh. Some of his select publications are " *India and Kazakhstan: Civilizational Explorations*" (Heritage Publication, 2003)", " *The Last Colony: Muzaffarabad-Gilgit-Baltistan*" (India Research Press, New Delhi, 2008), " *Central Asia: Democracy, Instability and Strategic Game in Kyrgyzstan*" (2014) , " *India and Bhutan: The Strategic Imperative*"(IDSA Occasional Paper, 2014).

For most Indian political and intellectual class, Ladakh still remains a *Lost Horizons* - the tendency now is to view it from touristic angle-reducing it to Pangong Lake, Khardong-la, 'Three Idiots' etc. The complete lack of a political interest and overlooking of Ladakh's unambiguous regional personality as one of the erstwhile Himalayan Kingdom may have cost India heavily. Ladakh's vast borderland is vulnerable to encroachment by adversaries. It is not a good statecraft.

India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru made a blunder by spurning Ladakh's popular demand for complete merger in India and be a part of then East Punjab. Instead, he left Ladakh's fate be decided by Sheikh Abdullah.

This cruel irony of Ladakh's current politically adjunct status to J&K, completely incompatible to its glorious history as well as to its geopolitical importance, is somewhat becoming critical and untenable in the 21st century.

Ladakh has showed no irredentist tendencies and there still isn't any ambiguity about its choice to be with India but for India's own neglect. Soldiers of the most decorated wing of Indian Armed Force *Ladakh Scouts* continue to battle cry *kikisoso-laargalo* to defend the land of *Buddha & Dhamma*.

Answers for the prolonged neglect of Ladakh are hard to come by; the most convenient alibi cited is Ladakh's demographic deficiency thus no importance for electoral politics; it holds no importance to national economy as its copious water resources are benefited only by Pakistan. Article 370 may have come in the way of investment flow. Tourism remains unsustainable due to absence of land connectivity. Ladakh's lack of political articulation apart, its rhetorical perspective vis-à-vis Kashmir plus the Chinese aggressive destruction of Buddhism in Tibet may have afforded India to ignore Ladakh. But will these approaches work anymore?

New Delhi continues to view Ladakh's destiny linked with and complicated by the Kashmir dispute. It sees Ladakh's elusiveness providing a contrasting case to debilitate the Kashmiri Azadi call. This may not be the correct assessment though and deserves further analysis.

The current arrangement of a two separate Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) for Leh and Kargil has certainly helped diminish anti-Kashmiri sentiments among people, but the concept is unlikely to remain a magic option for solving national interests.

The LAHDC was simply taken as a sop. The sabotaging of the Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF) in 1997 proved to be death knell for Ladakh movement. Such a handling is not a good sign for mature democracy and would backfire sooner or later. The BJP promised abrogation of article 370 to facilitate UT status for Ladakh. Obviously this was not to be so and this leaves the UT case for Ladakh in limbo.

The situation in Ladakh seems changing rapidly. A semblance of serenity by no means should be mistaken for peace. Retrospections seem fast underway and the old model simply may not be working. Not apparently visible yet, a pent up frustration may be simmering; divisive elements are already creeping in to fuel internal divisions. Meanwhile the local angst against Kashmir is waning; instead incidents of stone pelting on non-locals, often tourists are increasing year by year. A simmering undercurrent of tension between the locals and the Army

over land could have implications in other areas.

The change in mood is evident from complete silence among people over PLA's incursions in Eastern Ladakh. More seriously, the Tibetanization of Ladakh surely not happening without a reason and without supports coming from external sources is not a good portent. Assertion by high Tibetan Lamas could threaten the peace in Ladakh. In the final analysis, Tibetanization of Ladakh could only benefit China and not India.

The evolving situation in this sensitive region could potentially create a string of political electrons, threatening peace in the Himalayas.

Ladakh's call for separation from J&K has antecedents and can no longer be ignored under the pretext of Kashmir problem. It is not a choice but a necessity for there are far bigger strategic imperatives for India to advance its interests beyond the Himalayan frontiers.

Firstly, India's strategic thinking failed to draw on Ladakh importance; its vast swathes of territory and its political history was never factored in defining equation with China. India needed to have a robust Ladakh policy rather than a Tibet policy. India's priority has been to neutralize Tibet from China rather than securing vast track of Eastern Ladakh extending up to Purang covering Rudok, Guge and Kailash that were once captured by the troops of the 5th Dalai Lama in the 17th Century. But for Aurangzeb's military assistance to Ladakh King in 1679-1684, the entire Ladakh would have been captured by Tibet thereby China today. In fact, who controls Lhasa should not have been India's concerns; priority should be to retrieve area up to Kailash Mansarovar from China. The Dalai Lama while he is still alive should be pressed to make a statement that his previous incarnation did commit atrocities on Ladakh and the grabbing of Eastern Ladakh to incorporate in Tibet was a gross mistake.

Secondly, Ladakh and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) despite constituting over 82 per cent of J&K's territory never factored in India's strategic calculus in dealing with Pakistan. Imagining a *Smart Ladakh* policy would have limited Kashmir gaining the traction that it has acquired currently. At least, Pakistan has for whatever reasons separated GB from 'Azad Kashmir' to call it Northern Areas. In contrast, India continues to tag Ladakh with J&K without understanding the long term consequences.

Thirdly, the geopolitical environment in India's immediate vicinity especially China's new aggressive economic and connectivity policies under the One-Belt-One-Road (OBOR) idea plus China's \$46 billion infrastructure spending plan through PoK could transform the security landscape around India's northern borders. The Chinese activities in PoK cannot be seen without the backdrop of its historical tag with this region. But, the current context is more about preventing Islamic threat to Xinjiang. But, once China's hold over PoK gets tighter, it would inevitably have implications for Ladakh as well. India is faced with a difficult option to either accept China's presence in PoK or it remains a stranglehold of terrorists.

Fourthly, newly emerging Islamic region extending from Chechnya, Ferghana to Xinjiang in close vicinity of Ladakh should be a concern. Against this backdrop, India's engagement with Eurasian region under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has become critical. A reason why, combating terrorism and including the threat from the Islamic State (ISIS) was a

major theme of Prime Minister Modi's discussion with Central Asian leaders. India is unlikely to succeed in achieving its goal in Eurasia with the current mess in Kashmir.

Sixthly and therefore, India needs to untie the most difficult J&K knot that remains unresolved despite diplomatic, military and economic efforts. The only way out left is to unknot the distortions borne out of history and take a bold political step to separate Ladakh from J&K and give it a separate State status on the lines of Arunachal Pradesh. This could be a masterstroke or a *coups de maître* in India's long-term home and foreign policy to finally overcome the internal contradictions as well as external security challenges.

Internally, Kashmir could be better counterbalanced when Ladakh enjoys a stronger political weight and leverages. To meet the external challenges, New Delhi needs to stop looking at Ladakh only from defence prism. The region offers far bigger strategic perspective for India to be a key player in High Asia. Restoring Ladakh's lost trade linkages with the Silk Route could be the kernel to India's strategic outreach; it could unfold a historic opportunity for the country to physically connect with markets in China, Eurasia, Europe and beyond.

India's counter strategy to China's Silk Road should thus envisage offering China an alternative transport, energy, trade and communication corridor originating from a port in Gujarat running across Northern India to connect Kashgar through Indus valley in Ladakh. The proposal would have multiple advantages for India, a) Chinese investment will boost jobs and economic opportunities, b) India could earn billion from pipeline transit fee, c) China would be nudged to depend on India for energy corridor thereby buying guarantee against misadventure across the border, d) India can bargain with China for getting long-distance energy pipelines from Russia and Central Asia to India, e) and finally a corridor to China through Ladakh will offset and blunt the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project. For China, a corridor through India would be less hazardous and more reliable than risking investments in terrorism-plagued Pakistan. India could also offer other outlets nearer to Chinese growth centres.

If pushed forward, it could become a grand splurge by India for its economic engagement with China and something akin to how Russia and China started two decades ago. This could pave the way for strengthening trust between the two countries and eventually towards the solution of the boundary problem.

The ultimate divisibility of J&K is a political reality; the status quo is unendurable and is against the democratic aspirations of the people who wish to escape the strange paradoxical identity crisis. Certainly, Ladakh does not have the requisite political and economic bargaining strength. Certainly it does not enjoy either the intellectual support base needed for internal and external lobbying nor are the people ready to take a violent path.

But these can't become reasons for not taking Ladakh seriously. Reordering of J&K can also be a keystone for regional stability. Severe glacial attrition from global warming implies future water scarcity. Protection of Ladakh glaciers and a possible plan for diverting the Indus River water should become the underpinning factor. An amicable divorce of Ladakh from J&K is arguably desirable despite many constitutional hurdles. However, non-realization of it would entail more disorder at home and vulnerability from outside.

Statehood for Ladakh should be based on assessment of history, national interest and not driven by rhetoric. A strong Ladakh is in the interest of Kashmir as the first defence line against any threat to Islam in Kashmir – not an impossible scenario though given the current fate of Muslims in Xinjiang. Most critically, State of Ladakh must be taken on strategic consideration, drawing on a newly expansive Chinese foreign policy, aggressive Pakistani design for sponsoring terrorism, emerging new Islamic region north of Ladakh and growing opportunities for engagement with the Eurasian region. India should quickly lay the platform for long-term solution for Kashmir crisis as well as for nurturing the strategic utility of Ladakh for India's national interest.