

GEO-POLITICAL AND GEO-STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF LADAKH: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The present paper examines geo-political and geo-strategic significance of Ladakh in the light of the ongoing border dispute between India and China. Ladakh has been described as a constellation of villages within the “crossroads of Asia. Ladakh holds immense significance for India from the economic, security and strategic perspective point of view. In Ladakh, India shares borders with two of its unfriendly and aggressive neighbors, China and Pakistan. Its border with China is in the Leh district, and its border with Pakistan crosses through Kargil and the Nubra Valley. India shares a disputed border with China in Ladakh which regularly sees transgressions by the PLA forces in the last many years. Ladakh gained geopolitical significance in the 1940s due to partitioning disputes with Pakistan to the north, and, since the 1960s, China to the east. However, the 1950s marked the beginning of Chinese expansionist designs in Ladakh.

Keywords: Geo-Strategic, Ladakh, India, China, Pakistan, Border Dispute

INTRODUCTION

The present paper sought to make a detailed analysis of the geo-political and geo-strategic analysis of Ladakh from the national security point of India. The study of geo-political and geo-strategic significance of Ladakh holds immense significance for India in light of the recent developments. Ladakh is one of the most important regions of Jammu and Kashmir situated on the northern most point of India. Ladakh, is well known as the Land of Passes is the largest in area among the three main regions of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh with an area of 95,876 km².

Ladakh is a mountainous region strategically situated North of the Himalayas, and South of the Karakoram Range. Bordered by China in the east and Pakistani occupied Kashmir in the west, it is the most northerly part of India. ⁱ The location of Ladakh makes it significant and strategically important for India’s national security point of view over the last many decades. Since ancient times till partition between India and Pakistan, Ladakh remained an important point along the silk route. The passes of Ladakh connected some of the economically significant regions of the world, including Central Asia, South Asia and China. Ladakh’s strategic location can be used to flourish new trade routes to meet India’s economic demands.

ii

The land of Ladakh enjoys the significance of being located at the ancient Silk Route which passes through these regions and played a very vital role in the development of culture, religion, philosophy, trade and commerce in the past. The presence of resources is what makes India, China and Pakistan struggle over Ladakh, in order to gain control over resources in this region.

Pakistan and China are in conflict with India over Siachen and Aksai chin in this region. Ladakh's geostrategic significance has increased in the backdrop of these conflicts.

In Ladakh, India shares borders with two of its unfriendly and aggressive neighbors, China and Pakistan. Its border with China is in the Leh district, and its border with Pakistan crosses through Kargil and the Nubra Valley. India shares a disputed border with China in Ladakh which regularly sees transgressions by the PLA forces in the last many years. The 1950s marked the beginning of Chinese expansionist designs in Ladakh. Although India has always considered Aksai Chin to be part of Jammu and Kashmir, China built a highway, called the western highway or NH219, connecting Tibet with Xinjiang through this region. China today claims Aksai Chin to be part of Hotan County of its Xinjiang province. On March 2, 1963, Pakistan ceded the Shaksgam Valley—part of the Baltistan region north of the Karakoram—to China following the Sino-Pakistani agreement. In the early 1960s, China annexed a substantial area of eastern Ladakh. ⁱⁱⁱ

With the long-standing border standoff with China, Ladakh, a rugged, high-altitude region that is generally far removed from the lives and imagination of most Indians, has become a matter of serious debated in the recent past. Ladakh region has remained vulnerable on all fronts owing to its vicinity to disturbed borders. In eastern Ladakh, the PLA moved forward into areas previously under Indian control and is preventing Indian patrols from accessing patrol points that they have consistently visited in the past in Depsang, Hot Springs-Gogra-Kongka La, near the Galwan River, and around Pangong Tso. ^{iv}

Map 1: Geo-Strategic Location of Ladakh



History of Ladakh

Ladakh has great geostrategic importance since ancient times and the passes of Ladakh region connect some of the politically and economically significant zones of the world like Central Asia, South Asia, China and the Middle East. Historically, the region of Ladakh includes Gilgit, Hunza, Kargil, Leh and Skardo. Ladakh was the part of strategic Greater Central Asia since

ancient times. Despite the harshness of the land and climate, its location made it a desirable strategic location, which led to several wars fought by the then empires including Russian, Chinese, Tibetan, Persian and Indian empires to dominate the passes of the region.

Ladakh as an integral part of India has never been isolated or cut off from the neighbors. It was until 1947, the center of a network of trade routes whose immediate destinations included Skardu, Srinagar, Hoshiarpur, Kulu and through these the wide plains of India, Lhasa, and Yarkand notwithstanding the problems of high altitude and mountainous terrain. ^v There are several principal links for regions in and beyond India via Ladakh. They includes –

- a) Kashmir-Yarkand road: This is the principal high road to Yarkand, via Kargil and Leh.
- b) Kullu-Yarkand road: This road enters Ladakh Tehsil from Lahol in the Government territory and is the favorite resort of trader from Hoshiarpur, Amritsar etc. The above two roads form what is called the ‘Treaty High Road’ and are kept in proper repairs by the British Joint Commissioner.
- c) Khalsi-Chorbat road: leaves the Treaty road near Khalsi and joins the Kargil-Skardu road near Kiras. This road remains open only in summer.
- d) Tanktse- Lhasa road: reaches Rodak via Man Pangam and Shushal - closed for about three months in winter.
- e) Giah- Damchok Lhasa road - closed in winter for about two months. ^{vi}

As Ladakh lay along the primary line of communication between India and China, Tibetan expansion in mid600 CE threatened this important trade route, leading to a Tibetan-Chinese struggle that lasted for nearly three centuries. In 722 CE Chinese aid to Baltistan prevented Tibetan domination of the passes into Turkistan. ^{vii} In modern times, Ladakh assumed strategic significance with the rise of British Empire in India during 19th century. Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab established Dogra rule in Jammu and Kashmir by recognising the strategic importance of the region. Gulab Singh a Dogra ally and subordinate of Ranjit Singh further recognised the strategic importance of Ladakh and with the help of his soldiers under the leadership of Zorawar Singh made a campaign to Ladakh and finally occupied it. After the fall of the Sikh empire in Punjab, the British too continued the policy of Sikhs in respect of these regions. Moreover with the extension of Russian power into Central Asia, during 19th century and the start of Great Game in Central Asia increased the geostrategic importance of this region for the British Government of India in the context of a European power reaching north-western borders of their empire in India. British increased their power in this region by establishing agency at Gilgit and commission at Leh. With the partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947 and the tribal raiders attack from the Pakistani side, the Dogra King Raja Hari Singh asked for help from the Indian government who in turn asked the king to sign a treaty of accession. Henceforth the erstwhile J&K became part of India. ^{viii}

The geo-political change took place in and around Ladakh after 1947 as large areas of the state were occupied by Pakistan and then by China. In fact it led to the disintegration of Ladakh. With the emergence of Commonwealth of Independent States after disintegration of the Soviet

Union in 1991 and the start of New Great Game in Central Asia this region is once again regaining its geostrategic importance because of the existence of geographical access with greater Central Asia and disputed region. As we know that the interest of different nations like USA, China, Iran, Turkey, Russia, India and Pakistan into Central Asian is immense in order to get access to the rich natural resources of these states by expanding their trading interests as the region has huge unexploited natural resources reserves. In fact India has geographical proximity in Central Asia only through this region as Tajikistan is just 20 km from greater Ladakh. But the border dispute among China, India and Pakistan in this region hampered the infrastructural development lessening the accessibility to outside region particularly in Indian side. Chinese succeeded to access in this region by constructing the Karakoram Highway in northern area.

The distance between China and Arab world, which used to take months of travel, is now being covered in days. It is generally believed that the presence of NATO and a war like situation in Afghanistan has increased the importance of Ladakh including Gilgit Baltistan for China and this importance will continue to rise. The Pakistani incursion into Kargil in recent past, the Chinese presence in Gilgit Baltistan and the recent incursion into Indian part of Ladakh is testimony to this fact. But the people of Ladakh does not want to see their land as place of confrontation instead Ladakh his want to see their land geo-strategically important in terms of cooperation, trade hub, peace and prosperity. The land of Ladakh should be the land of connectivity like it was in ancient times and want to enjoy the significance for being located at ancient Silk Route which passes through these regions and played very vital role in the development of culture, religion, philosophy, trade and commerce in the past. The passes of Ladakh region connect some of the politically and economically significant zones of the world like Central Asia, South Asia, China and the Middle East. The neighbours of Ladakh regions include China in the north, Tajikistan and Afghanistan in the west, Pakistan in the south. On the other hand, the south Asian countries can reach Central Asian markets through this region. Countries like Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are rich in uranium, cotton, oil and gas resources. In future, the oil and gas pipeline from Iran to China can pass through this mountainous corridor. India's energy needs can also be met by constructing pipeline from Central Asia via this region as the already proposed pipeline project of Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India can pass through region. China and India can use this region for energy connectivity. However, neither China nor India nor Pakistan shows such any interest of cooperation in this region may be because of security reasons. But the fact is that the benefit of cooperation is highly greater than the cost of confrontation. In the age of globalization and interdependence, no country can survive alone and every nation is dependent on each other and therefore one should look for means of cooperation and integration despite whatever political difficulties may be involved. Given India's growing energy needs, it has become imperative for it to tap the huge energy reserves of Central Asia, whether in competition or in cooperation with the other major powers involved in the region. Therefore, positive development in this region will further led to the positive development in relation among India, China and Pakistan and once again Ladakh could become the gate way to Central Asia. Thus the entire Ladakh region including Gilgit Baltistan needs to be perceived

as land of contact with three regions - Tibet in the east, Xinjiang in the north, Pakistan in the west, and Afghanistan and Central Asia in the north-west.

Climatic Condition of Ladakh

Ladakh has an extremely harsh environment and one of the highest and driest inhabited places on earth. The region of Ladakh has a 'cold desert' climate owing to its combined features of arctic and desert climates. These include wide diurnal and seasonal fluctuations in temperature ranging from -40°C in winter to $+35^{\circ}\text{C}$ in summer, and extremely low precipitation, with an annual 10cm to 30cm primarily from snow. Due to high altitude and low humidity, the radiation level is one of the highest in the world (up to 6- 7Kwh/mm). The soil is thin, sandy and porous making the region almost devoid of vegetation, with the exception of valley floors and irrigated areas.^{ix} Over centuries, Ladakh has evolved by a process of constant refinement of response to the existing climatic and environmental conditions.^x

Geo-Strategic Significance of Ladakh

In order to understand the standoff, it is important to understand the geostrategic significance of its location. Lying between the Kunlun mountain range in the north and Himalayas to the south, Ladakh was originally inhabited by people of Indo-Aryan and Tibetan descent. Located at the crossroads of important trade routes since ancient times, Ladakh has always enjoyed great geostrategic importance. From a strategic point of view, Ladakh is situated at important trade routes connecting Kashmir with China and Central Asia. In the words of Jacqueline Fewkes, the various routes crossing Ladakh provides a spectacle to gaze into the history of the region and its relation with its neighbours.^{xi} The importance of Ladakh to both India and China is rooted in complicated historical processes that led to the territory becoming union territory in 2019 (earlier it was part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir), and China's interest in it post the occupation of Tibet in 1950. Ladakh is strategically important for a number of reasons – economic, security and strategic.

The region of Ladakh is Rich in natural resources. Ladakh is situated within the upper reaches of the Indus watershed, which in total supports about 120 million people in India (in the states of Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab and Rajasthan) and about 93 million in the Pakistan province of the Punjab. Careful management of water resources within Ladakh is therefore vitally important, not only for the livelihoods of Ladakhis and the ecosystems of Ladakh, but for the health of the whole river system.

It is one of the most abundant natural resources in Ladakh, with annual solar radiation exceeding averages for other areas of India with high insulation. Number of surveys has identified a geothermal resource at depths suitable for exploration and development. This resource could be developed to provide grid connected power to small settlements and army bases sited on the national highway. The region of Ladakh is also known for significant potential in Tourism industry. Popularly known as the Lama Land or little Tibet, Ladakh lies at altitudes ranging between about 9,000 feet and 25,170 feet. From trekking and mountaineering to Buddhist tours of various monasteries, Ladakh has it all. Besides, the passes of Ladakh region connect some of the politically and economically significant zones of the world like

Central Asia, South Asia, China and the Middle East.

Besides, the South Asian countries can reach Central Asian markets through this region. Countries like Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are rich in uranium, cotton, oil and gas resources. In future, the oil and gas pipeline from Iran to China can pass through this mountainous corridor. India's energy needs can also be met by constructing a pipeline from Central Asia via this region. The presence of resources is what makes India, China and Pakistan struggle over Ladakh, in order to gain control over resources in this region. Pakistan and China are in conflict with India over Siachen and Aksai chin in this region. Ladakh's geostrategic significance has increased in the backdrop of these conflicts.

From the India's security point of view, Ladakh is critical for maintaining Indian presence on the Siachen Glacier as it provides physical approach to the frozen battlefield, connecting to the rest of the country. To the west of Siachin Glacier, across the Salto Ridge lies Pakistan occupied Gilgit and Baltistan. To the east of it lies China occupied Aksai Chin. The presence of Siachin Glacier can really help India to prevent China and Pakistan from linking up. As rightly pointed out by the former Research and Analysis Wing chief, Vikram Sood that, 'if Pakistan is in possession of Siachen then it would have access from Skardu through to the Karakoram near the Aksai Chin and eventually linking with Shahidullah on the Kashgar-Xigatse road that runs parallel to the Tibet-India border.'^{xii}

India-China Border Dispute in Ladakh

The prolonged border problems between India and China are also focused upon Ladakh, which was previously located along the eastern district of Kashmir State. The unsolved border dispute between India and China has its roots in the colonial construction of states and their boundaries in the Himalayan region.

From the very beginning, China has shown strategic interests in Ladakh. China's forays into the region began after the 1949 Communist Revolution, when Chairman Mao Zedong, a veteran of guerrilla warfare, began consolidating China's periphery as part of his expansionist designs. Once PLA occupied Tibet in 1951, then they began to eye Ladakh because the road connecting Kashgar in Xinjiang to Lhasa in Tibet had to pass through Aksai Chin, which was held by Indians but was seldom patrolled by them. Since then there witnessed several rounds of border tensions between India and China at Ladakh over the last many decades. In a strategic move that created a mutual distrust, China had constructed 1,200 km long highway between Xinjiang and Tibet, of which about 179 km passes through Aksai Chin. In response, India not only claims Aksai Chin as an integral part but also accused China of violating the territorial integrity of India. These had resulted in mounting tensions between two countries by the late 1950s.^{xiii} China had on July 1958 violated Ladakh territory near Khurnak Fort. Similar events took place in summer of 1959 in Migyitui and Pangyong lake area in Ladakh. China had on 23rd January 1959, officially disputed the boundaries in Aksai Chin and called then as it a wrong marking.

The crisis in Sino-Indian relations that emerged in the post 1959 revolt in Tibet has inevitably enhanced the importance of the Aksai Chin area in the eyes of both governments. It was not

merely coincidental that the only serious clashes between Chinese and Indian military units have occurred here or that possession of this bleak, isolated plateau has been the principal obstacle to the settlement of the border disputes presently disturbing relations between the two countries.

An attempt to provide a basis for negotiations on border disputes occurred in 1960 when a series of talks took place in New Delhi, Peking, and Rangoon. The proposed talks sought to specify the exact claims made by both sides on the basis of the historical, documentary and other materials upon which these claims were based. However, border talks made no perceptible contribution to the lessening of tension along the frontiers of Ladakh with Tibet and Sinkiang.^{xiv}

The border skirmishes between India and China over the demarcation of the Himalayan frontier began on 20 October 1962, when a massive Chinese offensive was displayed both in the Ladakh area of north-east Kashmir (claimed by China as part of Sinkiang province) and across the McMahon Line in the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). As in Ladakh sector, the Chinese did not advance beyond the areas claimed by them as part of Chinese territory, at the eastern end of the Himalayan border powerful Chinese forces made a 100-mile advance into the NEFA which brought them almost to the plains of Assam before hostilities finally ceased on 21 November, when the Chinese announced a unilateral cease-fire and the withdrawal of their troops to positions “12 miles beyond the line of actual control which existed between India and China on 7 November 1959.”^{xv}

The India-China standoff in Ladakh began at the banks of the Pangong Tso lake: 30 percent of the lake belongs to India, and 70 percent to China. China has taken on a project to massively develop infrastructure and troop presence in and around the Pangong Tso. Chinese incursions in this region are aimed at shifting the Line of Actual Control (LAC) westward, enabling them to occupy strategic heights both on the north and the south of the lake and granting them advantage over the Chushul Bowl. The narrow Chushul valley, which lies on the road to Leh with Pangong Tso to its north, was an important target for the Chinese even during the 1962 war. It was here that the Battle of Chushul was fought.

So far, the modus operandi of the PLA has been to patrol the Indian side of the LAC. If they come face-to-face with Indian troops, a standoff ensues. The current situation has a few historical antecedents. Nonetheless, this is the first time that the PLA and the Indian soldiers used pointed wood and iron metals in a fist fight that resulted in the death of soldiers on both sides - earlier face-offs had ended in fist fights and push offs. This is also the first time analysts have consistently spoken of the possibility of India facing a two-front war—one from Chinese side of the border and another from Pakistan, China’s “all weather friend.”

In recent years, to make the matter related to border dispute worse, China has constructed a bridge across Shyok River in October 2019, which facilitates the Military Tanks movement much closer to the LAC. Besides, the construction of a 3.5 km long airstrip at Anantnag and the renovation of military airfield at Daulat Beg Oldi should have provoked China to violate status quo. There are two principal causes of the developing conflict and the Chinese aggressive

stance. The first is India’s construction of a 255 km-long strategic Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) road including eight bridges. The highway passes the villages near the LAC—Darbuk and Syok at southern Shyok Valley— and runs parallel to the Chinese border. From posts along a completed DSDBO road, troops on the Indian side can oversee Pakistan-occupied areas of Gilgit Baltistan—west of the DSDBO and an entry point for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The second is India’s decision to grant Union Territory Status to Ladakh in the aftermath of the scrapping of Article 370 on August 5, 2019. China considers Ladakh part of the Kashmir dispute and does not recognize the Indian decision to separate it and make it an official part of the country. In occupying the Galwan valley, the Chinese aim to counter the tactical advantage India gained in constructing its all-weather DSDBO. ^{xvi}

Map 2: Border Dispute between India and China in Ladakh



Source: Arzan Tarapore, “The Crisis after the Crisis: How Ladakh will Shape India’s Competition with China”, Lowy Institute, 6 May 2021, available at <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/crisis-after-crisis-how-ladakh-will-shape-india-s-competition-china>>.

In the post Galwan incident, both sides hold high level military talks wherein they have decided to step back the forces of both the countries from the LAC at Galwan Valley - 2 km by Chinese forces and 1 km by Indian forces. It was also decided to avoid further clashes and maintain a status quo. India also demanded to restore the status quo in the LAC as it was in April 2020. Further, India demands complete withdrawal of Chinese forces from the areas where Indian military carry out routine patrolling and also from the northern part of Pangong Tso, a territory for which China had never made any claims before. In reply, China also demanded India to stop all constructions, including the construction of roads, in the border areas in general and Western Ladakh in particular. The discussion was a useful one in easing tensions and negotiations at the diplomatic and political levels are still on between the two countries. ^{xvii}

Table 1: Border Incursions/Transgressions/Incidents on the LAC

Year	Western Sector	Middle Sector	Eastern Sector	Total
2019	497	28	138	663
2018	284	31	89	404
2017	337	17	119	473
2016	208	17	71	296
2015	342	9	77	428

Source: Srini Sitaraman, “Are India and China Destined for War? Three Future Scenarios”, p. 292, available at <<https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/19-Sitaraman-25thA.pdf>>.

Border incursions from the Chinese side have been a regular feature along India-China border. India’s defensive posture has been exploited so far by China along the border. According to data collected and released by the Indian government, the PLA transgressed the boundary area 1067 times between 2018 and 2019 (see Table 1). From January to April 2020, India has recorded 170 border transgressions across the LAC, of which 130 incidents have occurred in Ladakh alone. ^{xviii}

Table 2: Major Military Clashes between India and China in Recent Years

Year	Location	Outcome
2013 (15 April – 5 May)	Daulat Beg Oldi, Ladakh	Stand-Off (Hand - to - Hand Combat)
2020 (May-June 2020)	Pangong Tso, Galwan Valley and Hot Springs	India and Chinese Casualties (Hand-to-Hand Combat)

Source: Srini Sitaraman, “Are India and China Destined for War? Three Future Scenarios”, p. 284, available at <<https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/19-Sitaraman-25thA.pdf>>.

The recent military clashes between the forces of the two countries in the Galwan Valley in the Ladakh region along the LAC has resulted to the loss 20 Indian soldiers and 43 Chinese PLA were presumed killed in action. ^{xix} In future too, such military clashes can be expected given the fact that China sought to alter the shape of the LAC by changing the facts on the ground like the military standoff as it did in Daulat Beg Oldi in 2013, in Doklam in 2017, and in Pangong Tso, Galwan Valley, and Hot Springs in 2020. ^{xx} China is very much interested in Galwan because it would help it to neutralize the tactical advantage India gained by building the all-weather Durbuk-DBO road over the last two decades. But the fact is that recent PLA’s Ladakh incursions are a clear abrogation of decades of painstaking political compromises and confidence-building. China’s recent actions is in contrary to the agreements signed between 1993 and 2013 whereby it provided guidelines for maintaining “peace and tranquility” on the frontier. ^{xxi} In the words of India’s External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, the Ladakh crisis have profoundly disturbed the relationship”, and placed it under “exceptional stress”. ^{xxii} In the same tune, Indian Ambassador to China and National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon, has lamented that, “political relations will now be more adversarial, antagonistic, and contentious... there is no grand bargain, no modus vivendi, no accepted rules of the road to be had.” ^{xxiii}

Tourism in Ladakh

Ladakh is a one-of-a-kind combination of nature, spirituality, and adventure. The union territory is surrounded by the Karakoram and Himalayan mountain ranges to the North and South while Leh, the joint capital and the largest town is located at an altitude of 11,400 feet. It is tailor made for tourism with the tourism industry accounting for half of Ladakh's GDP and employing a large number of people in allied industries such as automotive, hotels and catering and cottage industries. The sector was expected to be roughly worth INR 600 crore (US\$ 84 millions) in 2020. The diverse topology comprising of cold deserts located at high-altitudes in the Great Himalayas coupled with the picturesque locations make it a favourable spot for both domestic and international tourism. It boasts of key tourist attractions such as the Khardung La Pass which is the highest motorable pass (at 18,350 feet) in the world and the gateway to Nubra Valley; the crystal blue Pangong Tso Lake and many world renowned monasteries. It would be fair to say that a visit to Ladakh is high up on many a travellers' bucket lists.

In the year 2019, the total number of tourists that arrived in the UT were 2, 79, 937 out of which 38,652 were foreign tourists. In 2020, the total number of tourist arrival fell to 6,079 (5,019 domestic and 1,060 foreign) owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. To bring to fore the beauty of Ladakh, the Ministry of Tourism conducted a webinar titled “Ladakh: Explore the Unexplored” under its webinar series “Dekho Apna Desh”. Despite having so much to offer, only a miniscule of the tourism potential of Ladakh has been tapped as of now. The time is now ripe for tourism to take off in Ladakh.^{xxiv}

CONCLUSION

Ladakh is being bordered by the Chinese Tibet Autonomous Region to the east, the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh to the south, both the Indian union territory of Jammu and Kashmir and the Pakistan-administered Gilgit-Baltistan to the west, and the southwest corner of Xinjiang across the Karakoram Pass in the far north. With the scarping of Article 370 from Jammu and Kashmir and its bifurcation into two union territories (UTs), Ladakh finally gained a separate identity from J&K. India has long viewed the erstwhile J&K through the prism of the Kashmir conflict, hence most of its policies were Kashmir-centric. The basic issues (socio-cultural, political, and economic) of the people of Ladakh, on the other hand, never received the same attention.

Historically, Ladakh's strategic importance in the post-independence was neglected and the North Eastern part of Ladakh was considered as the world's bleakest stretches, wherein Nehru describes, “no people live and no blade of grass grows.”^{xxv} Nevertheless the area involves the question of national security for both China and India. The strategic location of Ladakh, as the part of trans-Himalayan trade route is ignored, and no serious attempt to explore this significant geopolitical location has been done.

Ladakh has the potential to act as a vessel to feed India its required energy resources. For this peace in Ladakh is a condition. For peace, equal unbiased development is mandatory. Therefore, India's policymakers, while drafting their policies for Ladakh, should consider its

geographic location, fragile environment, resource potentials and its people's aspirations. In such a strategic location, it is crucial to keep all these aspects in harmony to take advantage of it to its fullest.

The importance of Ladakh will continue to improve as the year progresses for India in the light of the ongoing border dispute and the ever increasing border incursions from the Chinese side. Keeping in mind increasing Chinese military presence along the Ladakh side and in particular after the Galwan incident, the government of India have decided to increase the number of divisions from 12 to 16 along the Ladakh front. As Ladakh is strategically important, the Indian military maintains a strong presence in the region.

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