



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



POLICY BRIEF

Stabilising the Line of Actual Control: Need for New Protocols

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The Chinese army conducting a live-fire drill in Tibet in June 2020. Photo: Weibo

Indian soldiers with the national flag in the Galwan Valley in Jan 2022. Photo: Hindustan Times

PLA troops dismantling temporary structures and pulling back from the South Bank of Pangong Tso, Photo: Indian Army

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Stabilising the Line of Actual Control: Need for New Protocols

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Introduction

The India-China standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh has entered its fourth winter. Since May 2020, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) attempted multiple incursions across the LAC, some 50,000 to 60,000 troops remain deployed on each side along the disputed frontier. Infrastructure development has also continued along the border, enhancing the capability to conduct large-scale military operations.

Trust has eroded with the breakdown of the Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) established under bilateral agreements that China has flagrantly violated. There is greater sensitivity in India to any perceived transgressions across the LAC. The risk of escalation because of localised incidents remains real in this tense environment. In fact, such a situation was narrowly avoided in December 2022, when hundreds of Indian and Chinese soldiers had a physical skirmish at Yangtse in Arunachal Pradesh, resulting in severe injuries on both sides.

There have also been a few developments that could be viewed somewhat favourably. Disengagement has occurred at Pangong Tso, Galwan, and the Hot Springs area. Troops facing off in close vicinity have been pulled back, reducing the chances of an inadvertent clash. Military-level talks are continuing at various levels. Recent reports indicate that several agenda-based interactions have taken place at multiple points along the LAC between local commanders at the levels of brigade and below, to ensure adherence to existing border protocols and advance sharing of patrol information and avoid clashes on the ground.¹

The central sticking point remains at Depsang, where People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers are preventing the Indian Army from accessing a large area that was traditionally patrolled by it. India has made it clear that it wants the status quo completely restored along the LAC.² Broadly, this means that the PLA must withdraw to its April 2020 positions and make no attempts to alter the LAC unilaterally.

India-China bilateral ties, meanwhile, remain in an "abnormal state" since the 2020 Galwan clashes.³ Bringing back normalcy could be a long and complex process, as issues of divergence between the two countries go beyond the

disputed border. However, resolving the problems at the LAC could potentially provide a basis for establishing a working relationship that is not entirely dominated by the ongoing military standoff.

This brief will study measures that have sustained peace at the LAC from the 1990s and the reasons for the gradual erosion of CBMs since 2013. This analysis then leads to the suggestion of some practical steps to resolve the current stalemate at the LAC.

The Period of Peace - 1990s to 2013

In 1993, India and China signed the "Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control." The agreement stated that the India-China boundary question shall be resolved through peaceful and friendly consultations. Neither side shall use or threaten to use force against the other by any means. The agreement called on the two sides to reduce their military forces along the LAC in conformity with the requirements of the principle of mutual and equal security.⁴

In 1996, the two countries signed an agreement on "Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas." This agreement laid down 12 Articles that specified various measures to reduce or limit the respective military forces along the LAC, such as ceiling levels, redeployment, notification, verification, and restraint. The agreement also established mechanisms to enhance mutual trust and communication, such as regular meetings, exchanges, consultations, and hotlines between the military authorities and diplomatic channels of the two sides. Article X of the agreement called for the exchange of maps indicating the respective perceptions of the alignment of the LAC.⁵

In 2005, a protocol was signed between the two countries on "Modalities for the Implementation of Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas." This protocol laid down the procedure to be adopted if patrols came face-to-face in an area where there was a difference in the perception of the LAC. The agreement also formalised border meetings at specific points on the LAC.

Although every article of the three agreements was not followed through in its entirety (in particular, the mutual consultations to reduce forces along the LAC and clarification of the LAC), these accords set the stage for a period of peace along the LAC. The behaviour of the two militaries during this period can be characterised as follows:



- An understanding that military actions along the LAC should not result in a vitiation of ties between the two countries. Therefore, there was a high level of restraint and a desire on both sides to keep the LAC calm.
- Both sides adhered strictly to the CBMs regarding not using force, particularly when patrols came face-to-face in disputed areas along the LAC. Both patrols peacefully withdrew in such situations after stating they were in their own territory.
- Regular meetings took place between local military commanders to resolve incidents on the ground, like patrolling limits, construction of infrastructure close to the LAC, behaviour of troops, and the like. While both sides clearly stated their positions, the meetings were constructive and looked for a way forward. The establishment of hotlines facilitated the quick arrangement of meetings.
- There was a spirit of accommodation regarding patrolling up to each other's perception of the LAC. At the North bank of Pangong Tso, Indian troops patrolled Finger 8 while the PLA came up to Finger 4. In the Depsang plains, Indian patrols regularly reached Patrol Points 10 to 13. There was, however, a commitment that while patrolling in disputed areas continued, neither side would permanently position any troops or build any infrastructure in the disputed areas.

Gradual Erosion of CBMs

On April 15, 2013, a small platoon of around fifty soldiers from the PLA crossed the LAC in the Depsang area and pitched tents at the 'Bottleneck'. This was the first time since the Wangdung incident of 1986 that Chinese troops had permanently stationed themselves in a disputed area. During the 20-day faceoff, the Chinese complained about an Indian bunker constructed in the Chumar disputed area, some 300 km south of Bottleneck. PLA troops pulled back on their side of the LAC on May 5.⁶

On September 10, 2014, PLA soldiers with heavy machinery attempted to construct a road across the LAC in the Chumar area. The Indian Army blocked them, and a standoff ensued with almost 1000 soldiers on each side facing off at a distance of a few meters. This continued even as President Xi Jinping was on a three-day visit to India. After political, diplomatic, and military talks, both sides disengaged on September 30, and a temporary moratorium on patrolling within the disputed areas was agreed upon.⁷

A more serious incident occurred in 2017 in Doklam, an area where the China, Bhutan, and India borders meet, and which is disputed between China and Bhutan. On June 16, 2017, Chinese troops began extending a road in the Chumbi Valley southward toward a Bhutanese post on the Jampheri ridge. Indian troops crossed the border and stopped the road construction activity.

The Indian government pointed out that “the two Governments had in 2012 reached agreement that the tri-junction boundary points between India, China and third countries will be finalised in consultation with the concerned countries. Any attempt, therefore, to unilaterally determine tri-junction points is in violation of this understanding.”⁸

A Chinese official statement called this incident “fundamentally different from past frictions” as there is a “clear and delimited boundary” in this area. It went on to state, “The Indian border troops ‘crossing of the already delimited boundary is a very serious incident, as it violates China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.”⁹

The 73-day standoff ended on August 28, 2017, after both sides announced that they had agreed to pull back their troops. However, Hua Chunying, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, said that the PLA would continue to patrol the Doklam region and “China will continue to exercise sovereignty rights to protect territorial sovereignty in accordance with the rules of the historical boundary.”¹⁰

In October 2013, India and China signed a “Border Defence Cooperation Agreement” that called on the exercise of “maximum self-restraint,” additional sites for border meetings, and no following or tailing of patrols of the other side in areas where there is no common understanding of the LAC. However, this agreement had little impact on the ground, as existing CBMs were already weakening.

The gradual erosion of CBMs can be attributed to the following reasons:

- As infrastructure improved on both sides, more areas of the LAC became accessible to patrols. On the Indian side, there was an accretion of forces deployed along the LAC in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh as new formations were raised for the Northern borders.¹¹ The frequency of patrols to the LAC increased, leading to more face offs. The number of transgressions across India’s perception of the LAC by the PLA increased from 213 in 2011 to 663 in 2019.¹² The increase can only partly be attributed to enhanced surveillance on the Indian side, as there was a definite pattern of escalation by the PLA in its patrolling behaviour.

- With increasing face-offs and the incidents of 2103, 2014, and 2017, a trend emerged towards less restraint in the conduct of military personnel along the LAC. When patrols came across each other in disputed areas, disengaging became longer and more difficult. Some constructions came up by the PLA in disputed areas – the Indian Army demolished one watchtower constructed by the PLA in the Depsang area in September 2015.¹³ The spirit of accommodation regarding patrolling up to each other's perception of the LAC weakened. In August 2017, Indian and Chinese soldiers clashed on the North bank of Pangong Tso, exchanging blows and pelting stones, causing injuries.
- The incidents of 2013, 2014, and 2017 were framed as victory or defeat for one side. Social media played an active role in this, particularly in the Doklam crisis. In 2017, Beijing stoked nationalist sentiments among the Chinese public by running inflammatory (and in some cases explicitly racist) stories in the state-controlled press and social media.¹⁴ This was a departure from the past, when negotiations were conducted mainly outside the public gaze. The victory/defeat narrative also prevented a reasoned assessment of how such crises could be prevented in the future.
- In all the military jostling at the LAC, the larger geopolitical picture cannot be ignored. China views India's growing ties with the United States with deep suspicion, and as part of US attempts to check the rise of China. Meanwhile, China is pursuing a more aggressive policy of territorial expansionism, seeking to establish its regional domination. An unsettled border with India provides an opportunity for China to carry out limited military actions to maintain coercive pressure on India. But this strategy is clearly not working, as India robustly resists the PLA's moves along the LAC. China is not having its way.

The complete breakdown of CBMs occurred when the PLA unilaterally carried out multiple encroachments in Eastern Ladakh in May 2020. The events that unfolded subsequently are by now well-known. The present situation at the LAC can be characterised as one where there is lack of trust and deep suspicion of China's intentions on the Indian side. At the same time, we cannot merely rely on the hope that this standoff can continue indefinitely, without the risk of some local incident spinning out of control. Uncertainty is not sustainable over the long term; some way of moving forward to resolve the impasse on the LAC and prevent future incidents needs to be found, if both countries find merit in it.

Resolving the Impasse

This is hardly an opportune moment for the quick normalisation of bilateral relations. China is currently focused on stabilising its ties with the United States while also engaging in a confrontation in the South China Sea. India is facing a general election in the next six months. Therefore, it may be more realistic to expect a more limited and measured approach where the two countries can look at calming the military situation at the LAC with quiet political endorsement. If this works, it could set the stage for a better working relationship in bilateral ties in the future.

First and foremost, China must resume full compliance with existing bilateral agreements, in word and deed, to restore a basic modicum of trust. Practical steps towards disengagement and de-escalation would then have to consider measures that have worked well in the past, the reasons why CBMs have weakened, and the new reality of the LAC. Some suggestions are:

- **Identify and Fix the Disputed Areas**
 - While the LAC is not delineated, the entire length of it is not contested. There are only a few disputed areas with differing perceptions of where the line lies. Both sides are aware of each other's claims due to their patrolling patterns and discussions held during border meetings. In the 1990s, the India-China Joint Working Group had identified eight "agreed disputed areas" along the LAC.¹⁵ Over a period of time, with the increase in patrolling and greater accessibility to the LAC, the number of disputed areas rose to 23.¹⁶ During the 2020 Chinese transgressions in Eastern Ladakh, Galwan, and Hot Springs further emerged as new disputed areas.
 - With greater troop deployment along the LAC, there is a likelihood that more areas along the LAC could become contested. There is, therefore, a need for both sides to mutually discuss and fix the disputed areas. The ideal solution is to clarify the entire LAC, but this exercise appears unlikely anytime soon. Identifying and fixing the disputed areas would at least ensure that new flashpoints do not suddenly emerge.
- **Protocols in Disputed Areas**
 - In the mutually accepted disputed areas, clear protocols of military behaviour must be established. Two models are feasible. First is the

establishment of buffer zones in which there is a moratorium on patrolling. This is a practical arrangement for small areas that can be kept under constant surveillance by both sides. For example, troops on the South Bank of Pangong Tso can easily detect any violation of the buffer zone currently in place at the North Bank and vice versa. As part of the disengagement process, buffer zones have also been established at Galwan and the Gogra-Hot Springs area.

- o A second model can be considered for areas with a large geographical spread, e.g., Depsang, where buffer zones are impractical. Here, patrolling patterns could be agreed upon with a specified periodicity to avoid face-offs between opposing troops. When deciding on patrolling limits, there must not be an attempt from the Chinese side to exaggerate claims, but to stick to traditional patrolling limits.
 - o There is a need to agree on the use of technology to monitor the buffer zones and larger disputed areas. Overflights by drones and helicopters must be permitted in the disputed areas to ensure that there is no violation of the protocols. The placement of long-range day and night cameras could be mutually decided at pre-set points. Greater visibility in disputed areas will enhance confidence and trust.
- **Infrastructure Development**
 - o Some experts wrongly attribute India's road-building activity near the LAC as one of the reasons for the 2020 crisis. This is simply an excuse by the Chinese side to limit India's military capability development, and the issue must be squarely discussed between the two sides. China has superior infrastructure across the length of the LAC, and India has every right to build roads and assets to support both the civil population and its military requirements. With the current pace of infrastructure development on both sides of the LAC, this activity is unlikely to be rolled back.
 - o In the past, China has objected to projects like the construction of a water channel and pipeline for the villagers of Demchok.¹⁷ Such unrealistic demands by China on India's border infrastructure development are entirely unhelpful and lead to unnecessary tensions. The Indian side must firmly state that these cannot be accepted.



- **Increased Hotlines and Meeting Points**
 - Currently, there are six hotlines for local commanders between the two armies - two in Eastern Ladakh, two in Arunachal Pradesh and two in Sikkim. Both sides could consider increasing the number of hotlines to report and resolve local incidents quickly.
 - There are five Border Personnel Meeting (BPM) points along the LAC – two in Eastern Ladakh, two in Arunachal Pradesh, and one in Sikkim. More meeting points can be identified in the vicinity of disputed areas. Local commanders, with more intimate and real-time knowledge of their area, are in a better position to prevent any flare-up that could occur.
- **Reduction in Troop Levels**
 - After the crisis erupted in 2020, both sides moved an estimated 50,000 additional troops into the area. Defensive deployments were also enhanced. In these circumstances, local incidents could rapidly escalate with the ready availability of large forces in the sector.
 - Ideally, limits on force deployment should enhance peace and tranquility along the LAC. However, with the breakdown of trust, it is unlikely that India would be willing to reduce its force levels. If disengagement is successful and confidence is established that protocols are being strictly followed, some thinning out of forces in close contact may be possible in the future.

There is a new reality at the LAC. Positions have hardened, and enhancement in military capability and infrastructure development will continue. The Indian Army's realignment of forces to the northern borders is now permanent and unlikely to undergo significant changes. In these conditions, some fresh measures as outlined above should be considered and adopted to ensure that troops on both sides do not get into a situation that can develop into a larger conflict.

Conclusion

The situation at the India-China LAC in Eastern Ladakh reflects a complex interplay of deteriorating trust, increased military capability, and aggressive posturing by China, with the potential for minor incidents to escalate into larger conflicts. The historical agreements intended to maintain peace and



tranquility have gradually eroded due to various factors, mainly the Chinese actions at the LAC since 2013.

Resolving the impasse at the LAC requires political will and pragmatic steps. While a high-level political push appears unlikely at this stage, efforts can focus on calming the situation at the military level. Suggestions made in this brief include identifying and agreeing on disputed areas to prevent new flashpoints, establishing protocols for military conduct in these areas, creating buffer zones in limited areas, utilising technology for monitoring compliance, and enhancing communication through additional hotlines and meeting points.

Although troop reductions are obviously ideal for long-term peace and stability, this may not be feasible in the current climate of suspicion and mistrust generated by years of Chinese actions violating bilateral agreements and undermining established CBMs. The reality is that India must continue to enhance its military capability and strength along the entire LAC in order to establish greater deterrence against future Chinese incursions.

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