



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

DPG POLICY BRIEF

Initial Steps towards Disengagement in Ladakh

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Volume VI, Issue 6

FEBRUARY 22, 2021



Delhi Policy Group

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www.delhipolicygroup.org



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DPG Policy Brief Vol. VI, Issue 6 February 22, 2021

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Cover Photographs:

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh addressing the Rajya Sabha on February 11 to provide details of the disengagement process in the Pangong Lake area. Source: Jagran English

Finger 4 and Finger 8 at Pangong Tso. Source: Google Earth/Maxar Technologies

Indian and Chinese armoured vehicles pulling back from banks of Pangong Tso on February 10, 2021. Source: The Print/Indian Army

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Contents

The Background.....	1
Situation Prior to May 2020.....	2
Deconstructing the Disengagement Process.....	4
Looking Ahead	6
Conclusion	7

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The Background

On 10 February, China's Ministry of National Defense put out a brief statement that the Chinese and Indian troops at the southern and northern banks of the Pangong Tso Lake had started "synchronised and organised disengagement." This was the first significant breakthrough in the ten-month-long standoff in Ladakh that had raised fears of a shooting war erupting between India and China.

The Indian Defence Minister's statement in Parliament the next day gave further details of the disengagement process. The Chinese would vacate their deployment at Finger 4 in the North Bank and pull back to the east of Finger 8. Reciprocally, the Indian troops would relocate to their permanent base at Dhan Singh Thapa post at Finger 3. There would be a temporary moratorium on military activities in the North Bank, including patrolling by both sides in the area between Fingers 4 and 8.



Defence Minister Rajnath Singh addressing the Rajya Sabha on February 11 to provide details of the disengagement process in the Pangong Lake area. Source: Jagran English

Similar disengagement would take place at the South Bank. Any military structures built by both sides since April 2020 would be removed. After the complete disengagement in the Pangong Lake area, senior military commanders would meet within 48 hours to resolve the remaining issues. According to a Ministry of Defence statement issued on 12 February, the outstanding problems are at Gogra, Hot Springs, and Depsang.

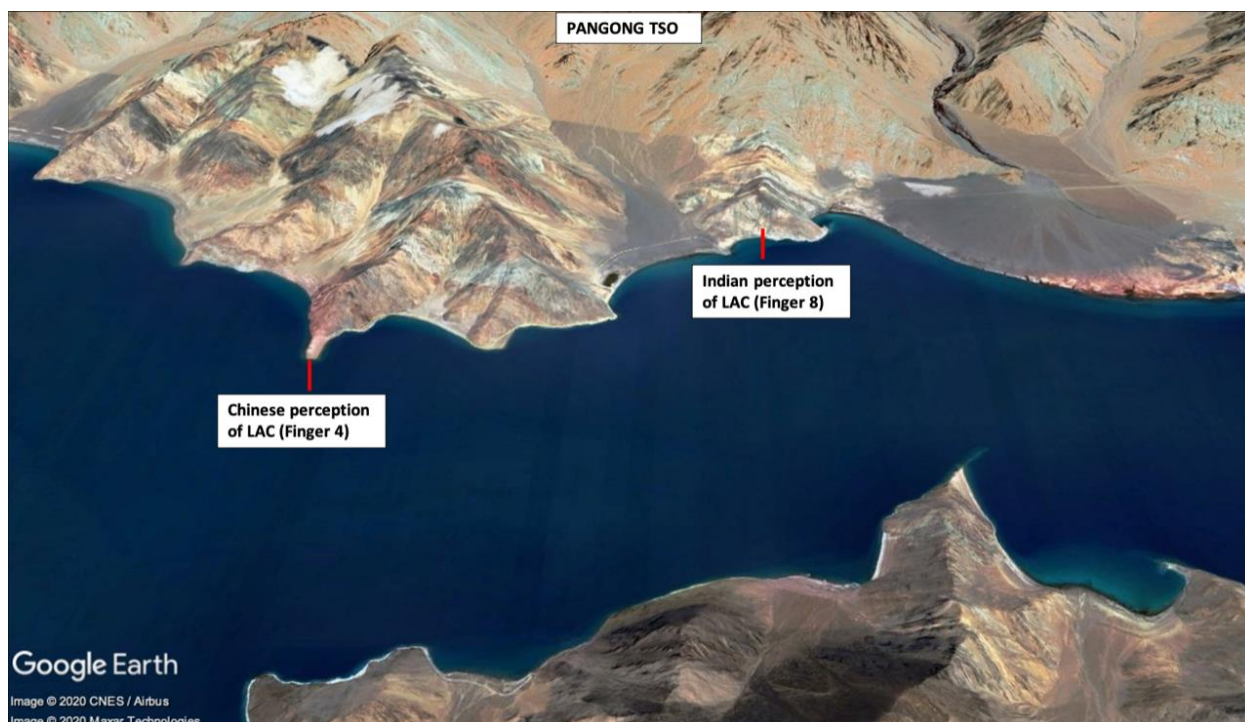
While the disengagement process has mostly been seen as a positive development, there are also opposing voices. The main points of criticism are that India has given up its right to patrol up to its claim line at Finger 8 and that the no-patrol buffer zone created in the North Bank is entirely in Indian territory. It is also argued that in vacating the heights on the Kailash Range in the South Bank, India has lost its most valuable bargaining chip and that the Chinese Army is no longer under any pressure to agree to disengage in the remaining areas, particularly the strategically sensitive Depsang plains.

In attempting a dispassionate analysis, it would be appropriate to outline the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh as it existed before the Chinese transgressions in May 2020 and study how far the current disengagement process goes towards restoring the status quo ante (a consistent Indian demand). In the backdrop of the current crisis, a brief look is also necessary on the approach to be adopted for dealing with any future challenge from China.

Situation Prior to May 2020

The LAC that defines the de facto border between India and China is neither delineated nor demarcated. However, contrary to popular opinion, most of the LAC alignment is uncontested and respected by both sides. There are only a few areas where there is a difference in perception about the alignment of the LAC, and in Ladakh, these include Depsang, North Bank of Pangong Tso, Demchok, and Chumar. For ease of description, these areas will hereafter be called 'disputed areas.'

In the disputed areas, both sides retained the right to patrol up to their perception of the LAC. An easily comprehended example is the North Bank of Pangong Tso, where the Indian soldiers patrolled to Finger 8 (India's perception), and the Chinese patrolled to Finger 4 (China's perception). In case patrols of the two sides encountered each other in the disputed areas, their conduct was guided by the agreements signed between the two countries.



Finger 4 and Finger 8 at Pangong Tso. Source: Google Earth/Maxar Technologies

The 1996 Agreement on 'Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas' states, "If the border personnel of the two sides come in a face-to-face situation due to differences on the alignment of the line of actual control or any other reason, they shall exercise self-restraint and take all necessary steps to avoid an escalation of the situation." A similar statement is recorded in Article VIII of the 2013 'Border Defence Cooperation Agreement'.

There was also an unwritten acceptance that neither side would build any military structures or attempt to establish a permanent presence in the disputed areas as this would amount to a forcible change of the status quo. These written and unwritten understandings largely ensured calm along the LAC, though there have been increasing incidents of disregard to the agreements and protocols in the last few years.

In 2013, the Chinese intruded into the Depsang Plains and in 2014 at Chumar. Although both incidents were resolved peacefully, physical brawls and forcible stopping of patrols became more frequent. An August 2017 incident at the North Bank of Pangong Tso, where soldiers from both sides clashed and pelted stones at each other, was caught on camera. At Depsang, there were instances of patrols from both sides being prevented from patrolling up to their respective claim lines. This is reflected in the recent statement of the Northern Army Commander, Lt. Gen. Y.K. Joshi, that the situation at Depsang "predates the present situation."

In May 2020, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) intruded in large strength in the areas of North Bank, Galwan, Gogra, and Hot Springs. There was unprecedented violence, and a clash in the Galwan Valley left 20 Indian soldiers dead, including a commanding officer. Eight months after the incident, the PLA admitted that it had lost five soldiers in the clash, though most observers believe that the casualty figures were much higher. The deepest Chinese intrusion was in the North Bank of Pangong Tso, where the PLA reached their LAC claim line at Finger 4 and established posts and defensive positions.

After the first five rounds of Corps Commander level meetings did not yield any results, the Indian Army, in a swift manoeuvre, occupied dominating heights on the Kailash Range in the South Bank. Lt. Gen. Joshi described this action in August 2020 as the "biggest turning point." He has also stated that in subsequent flag meetings, "China was looking for a face-saver." It is widely felt that the occupation of Kailash heights was the reason for China accepting the current disengagement.

Deconstructing the Disengagement Process

There is a need to objectively analyse the disengagement process, which is currently restricted to the North and South Banks of the Pangong Tso. By agreeing to relocate east of Finger 8 in the North Bank, the PLA is pulling back from what the Chinese Ambassador to India had described in July 2020 as their "traditional customary boundary line." This is not a minor concession and is in line with India's consistent demand to restore the status quo ante of April 2020.

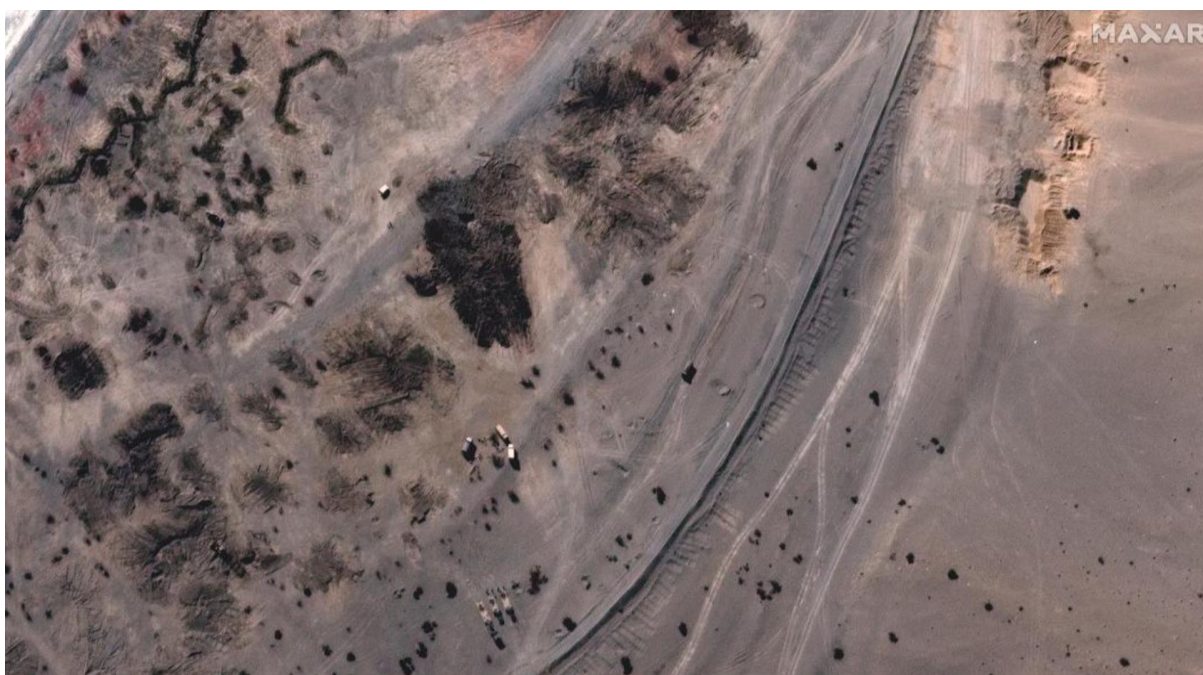
Regarding the buffer zone, India's claim is at Finger 8, and so the buffer zone could be seen as being entirely on the Indian side. However, based on China's claim, a buffer zone extending eastward from Finger 4 could be considered entirely in Chinese territory. The advantages or disadvantages are similar for both sides. A temporary moratorium on patrolling is essential if we do not want to see a repeat of the Galwan incident which resulted from a patrol clash after disengagement in the area had been decided.

At the South Bank, the Indian Army has indeed given up tactical advantage. However, as Lt. Gen. Joshi has clarified, "This disengagement is happening because we had taken the dominating position on the Kailash range. So, now the purpose has been achieved, we are going back to status quo ante April 2020."

The principle of restoring status quo ante cannot be selectively applied only to the North Bank and not to positions occupied by Indian soldiers on the South Bank after April 2020. For any negotiation to succeed, there must be some

alignment of interests, and both sides must feel that they are better off coming to an agreement as opposed to continuing with a tense stalemate.

Viewed in an overall context, the disengagement process at Pangong Tso can be seen as fair and equitable and in line with the Indian demand for restoration of status quo ante.



A close-up satellite image of Finger 6 as on January 30, 2021 (top) and February 16, 2021 (bottom) indicating compliance by the PLA with agreed disengagement process.
Source: Maxar Technologies/CNN

Looking Ahead

With the Pangong Tso disengagement complete, the immediate focus will now shift to Gogra, Hot Springs, and Depsang. The last could prove to be the trickiest of these areas because of its strategic value, legacy issues, and the vast difference between the two sides on the perception of the LAC alignment. It is often stated that by vacating the Kailash Range, India has lost its most vital bargaining position, and there is no incentive now for the Chinese to resolve Depsang. This is perhaps a narrow view, as any final agreement will depend on the larger question of whether the Chinese leadership feels that there is any worthwhile objective to be achieved by continuing with tensions along the border. The timing of China's release of videos of the Galwan incident and acknowledgement of casualties is intriguing. Whether the wave of nationalism and anti-India sentiment that this has aroused will be taken as an excuse to stall further disengagement remains to be seen.

As negotiations continue on the disengagement along the LAC, the Indian military and political leadership must resist any declaration of success and take a long term-view on dealing with the China challenge. Even if the current standoff is peacefully resolved, the geopolitical competition between India and China looks set to intensify in the future. China's attempt to establish hegemony in Asia as a part of its global power ambitions will be resisted by India, particularly in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. An unsettled border provides China with the opportunity to militarily coerce India when they feel the need to apply pressure. Such instances could become more frequent in the future as the military power differential increases between the two countries.

The first step in countering China's challenge is to articulate a National Security Strategy for India clearly. This would lay down the national objectives, core interests, foreign policy direction, and desired military capabilities. There must be clarity on how India views the role of the United States and the Quad in dealing with an aggressive and assertive China. India will also have to take a much more nuanced approach in its desire to maintain strategic autonomy at a time of great power competition between the United States and China that will increasingly play out in the Indo-Pacific region.

In crafting a military strategy against China, the temptation to push in more and more soldiers along the LAC should be avoided. The cost of maintaining soldiers on the Himalayan watershed would only deplete funds from the Capital head and adversely impact modernisation. A serious doctrinal debate should be carried out to draw up a warfighting strategy in which the three services can complement each other's military efforts on land, sea, and air.

Apart from conventional weapon systems, the military must build capabilities to neutralise the PLA's current dominance in missile technology, space, cyber, and electronic warfare. India will continue to see a period of stressed military budgets, and unless the three services shed their stovepipe approach, capability development will remain skewed.



Indian and Chinese armoured vehicles pulling back from banks of Pangong Tso on February 10, 2021. Source: The Print/Indian Army

Conclusion

The current disengagement process is a positive development in easing the ten-month-long standoff at the LAC, and criticism that India has ceded territory does not appear to be justified, at least at this stage. The Indian leadership deserves high marks for standing firm in resisting China's coercive actions. However, even if the current crisis is resolved peacefully, the level of mistrust will remain high, and restoring normalcy in bilateral ties will take a long time. The Chinese military threat is a clear and present danger, now and in the future, and overcoming it will require a holistic national strategy.



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