



INDIA-CHINA LAC AGREEMENT: A STEP TOWARDS RESOLVING BORDER TENSIONS: PAPER III



India and China, two of the world's largest and most powerful nations, have had a fraught relationship for decades, largely due to unresolved border disputes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

The recent military agreement between the two countries, allowing their respective troops to resume patrolling along certain disputed areas in eastern Ladakh, marks a significant step towards easing tensions that escalated sharply in 2020.

The LAC Dispute Between India and China

The Line of Actual Control (LAC) serves as the de facto border between India and China. However, the two countries have different perceptions of where the LAC lies, leading to frequent disagreements. The LAC stretches across 3,488 kilometers, covering three sectors: the western sector (Ladakh), the middle sector (Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand), and the eastern sector (Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim). The most contentious region has been the western sector, particularly in areas like the Depsang Plains, Galwan Valley, Gogra, and Pangong Tso in eastern Ladakh.

Historically, the India-China border issue dates back to 1962 when the two countries fought a brief but intense war over territorial disputes in these regions. The war ended in a Chinese victory, but the core issues were never resolved, leading to occasional flare-ups over the years.

Evolution of the LAC Problem

Although skirmishes and minor face-offs between Indian and Chinese troops have occurred periodically, the tensions at the LAC have escalated notably since 2020. In May of that year,



Chinese troops made incursions into areas traditionally patrolled by India, sparking a military standoff. These incursions occurred in critical areas like the Depsang Plains, Gogra-Hot Springs, Pangong Tso, and the Galwan Valley.

The incursions created multiple “friction points,” areas where both sides had different interpretations of the border and where Chinese troops occupied territory that India considered its own. Before 2020, these areas had been patrolled by both countries, albeit under contested claims. The rapid military buildup on both sides following the incursions raised concerns about the potential for conflict, and indeed, led to the first deadly clash in decades.

The Galwan Valley Clashes

One of the most significant flashpoints in this standoff occurred in the Galwan Valley in June 2020. Tensions that had been brewing for weeks escalated into a brutal hand-to-hand clash between Indian and Chinese troops. The fight, involving iron rods and rocks, resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers, with China also suffering casualties, although it has never publicly disclosed the exact number.

The Galwan Valley clash marked the first fatal confrontation between India and China in over four decades and plunged bilateral relations to their lowest point since the 1962 war. The violence shocked both countries and led to an increased militarization of the LAC, with both sides deploying thousands of troops, tanks, artillery, and other military equipment along the contested border.

Following the Galwan clash, both India and China engaged in several rounds of military and diplomatic talks, aiming to de-escalate the situation. These talks led to agreements to disengage in certain areas, including the Galwan Valley and parts of Pangong Tso, where buffer zones were established. However, other areas like the Depsang Plains and Demchok remained unresolved.

The 2023 LAC Agreement: A Path Towards Resolution

After more than three years of negotiations, India and China recently made substantial progress towards resolving the standoff along the LAC in eastern Ladakh. The latest agreement, announced in October 2023, allows both nations to restore patrolling rights in the Depsang Plains and Demchok region. This agreement permits Indian troops to patrol points 10 to 13 in the Depsang Plains, while in Demchok, Indian troops will be allowed to patrol up to the Charding Nullah area.

These regions have been a source of significant friction between the two countries. The Depsang Plains, located in the northernmost tip of Ladakh, are of strategic importance due to their proximity to the critical Daulat Beg Oldie post near the Karakoram Pass. The PLA's (People's Liberation Army) deep incursions into these areas had previously blocked India's access to traditional patrolling points, making this agreement a vital step towards restoring the status quo.

The agreement also outlines mutual exchange of patrol schedules between Indian and Chinese forces to avoid any misunderstandings, as well as close monitoring of patrols to ensure coordination. The move is expected to lead to a reduction in the number of troops deployed along the LAC, aligning with the Indian Army's winter plan for Ladakh.



Why This Agreement is Important

The restoration of patrolling rights in the Depsang Plains and Demchok is significant for several reasons. First, it indicates that both India and China are willing to engage in constructive dialogue to resolve long-standing territorial disputes. These areas have been referred to as “legacy issues” that predate the 2020 standoff, and reaching an agreement here suggests that the two nations can resolve even older, more entrenched issues through negotiation.

Second, the agreement reduces the risk of future clashes by restoring patrolling patterns to how they were before May 2020. By coordinating patrols and exchanging schedules, both sides aim to prevent the kind of misunderstandings that have led to violence in the past. The agreement also marks a de-escalation of tensions, with both sides reducing troop deployments, which could pave the way for further confidence-building measures.

The Way Forward in Bilateral Relations

Despite the progress made in the Depsang Plains and Demchok, several challenges remain. Other friction points, such as Pangong Tso and the Galwan Valley, where disengagement has already taken place, remain sensitive areas. Reports indicate that China has fortified its positions in these regions, building infrastructure such as bunkers and bridges that would allow the PLA to mobilize troops quickly.

Additionally, while this agreement is a positive step, it is just one part of a broader puzzle. There is still a significant trust deficit between the two nations. Indian officials, including External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, have cautioned against drawing conclusions too quickly about the broader impact of the agreement on India-China relations, particularly in areas like trade. The path to normalizing relations will require continued dialogue and cooperation on a range of issues, not just military disengagement.

Conclusion

The recent agreement between India and China to restore patrolling rights along the LAC in eastern Ladakh is a significant development in their efforts to resolve the ongoing border standoff. By addressing the long-standing friction points in the Depsang Plains and Demchok, the two nations have demonstrated a willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue and reduce military tensions. However, the broader challenges of restoring trust and ensuring long-term peace along the LAC will require sustained effort and cooperation in the months and years to come.