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READJUSTMENT, NOT RESET: IN INDIA-CHINA THAW, TRADE TRIUMPHS OVER RIVALRY

Who blinked first? Analyses have touched on factors that led to the climbdown, mostly attributed to China's economic slowdown. India's top defence brass believes that troops 'standing firm' made China rethink. Ironically, India and China have found a smart way to seize the moment, balancing trade demands with security imperatives

Situation Normalizing at the LAC

1. The disengagement process at **Demchok and Depsang**, which began on October 23, 2024, was completed by October 30. This process has been described as swift and smooth, restoring the “ground situation” to the pre-2020 status quo.
2. **Satellite imagery from December 12** confirmed that Chinese troops dismantled their positions at Rakhi Nalla, signaling a positive step toward resolving the four-year-long standoff.

Historical Context of the LAC Issue

1. **Differing Perceptions of the LAC:**
 - India and China have longstanding disputes over the exact alignment of the LAC in the Depsang region.
 - India claims the LAC is located north of the Lungpa River, whereas China insists it lies south of the Samar-Lungpa area.
2. **Gradual Chinese Expansion:**
 - Since 2009, the PLA has been incrementally encroaching into Indian territory in key areas, including **Chip-Chap River, Trig Heights, Depsang Ridge, Hot Spring, and Chang-lung**.
 - The construction of roads by the PLA, including a 30-km road from Rakhi Nalla and a 20-km road along Jeevan Nalla, allowed deeper Chinese penetration into the Depsang plains and closer proximity to India's Murgo post.
3. **Previous Flashpoints:**
 - The **Burtse standoff of 2013**, when 40 PLA troops camped on Indian territory for 21 days, highlighted the intensity of Chinese incursions.
 - India's response to such incidents primarily relied on diplomatic negotiations due to limited military and economic leverage at the time.

Current Agreement and Its Implications

1. **Restoration of Pre-2017 Status:**



- The disengagement agreement aims to revert to the pre-2017 patrolling and territorial arrangement, although concerns remain about the full extent of Indian patrolling rights.
 - Chinese-built infrastructure, particularly roads constructed after 2010, continues to pose strategic challenges for India.
2. **Cautious Optimism:**
- While India's leadership welcomed the disengagement, they remain cautious, emphasizing vigilance and the need for calibrated responses to future developments.
 - External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar reiterated that economic engagement would not come at the cost of strategic caution.

Reasons for the Disengagement

1. **China's Economic Constraints:**
 - China's slowing economy, exacerbated by domestic and international pressures, likely contributed to its willingness to seek a resolution.
2. **India's Resilience:**
 - Indian troops' firm military presence, combined with coordinated diplomatic, political, and military strategies, played a critical role in compelling China to step back.
3. **Mutual Losses:**
 - Prolonged tensions at the LAC proved costly for both nations, making disengagement a pragmatic choice to address broader economic and geopolitical challenges.

Trade Dynamics Amid Rivalry

1. **Balancing Trade and Security Interests:**
 - Despite border tensions, India and China have continued robust trade relations, demonstrating a pragmatic approach that balances economic cooperation with security imperatives.
 - The disengagement reflects a readjustment in ties rather than a complete reset, with both nations prioritizing stability over rivalry.
2. **Strategic Lessons from the Standoff:**
 - Western military analysts believe that China used the four-and-a-half-year standoff to conduct extensive military exercises, involving 40,000–60,000 troops, to assess Indian military strengths and US-India intelligence collaboration.
 - These exercises were not isolated but aligned with China's broader military mobilization strategy concerning Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Diplomatic Developments and Challenges

1. **NSA Ajit Doval's Beijing Visit:**
 - During the recent Special Representatives (SR) talks, both sides discussed actionable steps, including the resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, trans-border river data sharing, and increased border trade.
 - Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi described the talks as "hard-won and worth cherishing," while India's Ministry of External Affairs highlighted positive progress toward cooperation.



2. US Influence on India-China Relations:

- India-China border tensions are partly influenced by US-backed initiatives in the Himalayas, such as the Tibet project, which Beijing perceives as a threat.
- The evolving **Sino-Russian entente** adds another layer of complexity, making long-term resolution of border disputes challenging.

Strategic Implications for Depsang

1. Military and Governance Challenges:

- Depsang's harsh terrain, extreme cold (-45°C), and sparse habitation make it difficult to maintain a continuous military presence.
- Utilizing **local Ladakhi personnel** for patrolling, as was done in the 1970s and 1980s, could enhance India's control over the area.

2. Development Potential:

- Depsang is rich in flora, fauna, and natural resources, offering opportunities for eco-tourism and sustainable development.
- India could replicate China's **Mount Kunlun Global Geopark model** near Aksai Chin to promote environmental conservation and tourism in areas like Chang Chenmo, Kugrang Valley, and Gogra-Hot Springs.

3. Integration with Ladakh Governance:

- The Ladakh UT administration must implement developmental initiatives to extend governance in these remote regions, ensuring long-term strategic and economic benefits.

Key Takeaways and Outlook

1. Tactical Withdrawal by China:

- Analysts view the disengagement as a tactical decision by China, designed to reduce immediate tensions while retaining long-term strategic advantages.

2. Trust Deficit:

- Despite the disengagement, a lack of trust persists, with both sides remaining wary of each other's intentions.

3. Strategic Vigilance for India:

- India must continue strengthening its border infrastructure, enhancing military readiness, and pursuing a cautious diplomatic approach to prevent future standoffs.

4. Way Forward:

- Promote local involvement in patrolling, extend developmental activities, and leverage international partnerships to safeguard India's strategic interests at the LAC.

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