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India and China, Four Years into Their Standoff: A Reality Check

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SYNOPSIS

*For the fourth consecutive winter since the outbreak of skirmishes between the forces of India and China in May 2020, over 100,000 soldiers from the two sides remain deployed in close quarters along what is known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh, up in the Himalayas. **DINAKAR PERI** looks at the changing contours on the ground and the implications.*

COMMENTARY

In a reference to the May 2020 skirmishes and continuing standoff between Indian and Chinese forces, India's Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane said on 21 February 2024 that the "possibility that we may encounter a similar situation to what we faced in 2020 is keeping us active all the time." He was speaking at the second India-US Defence Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) [summit](#) alongside Admiral John Aquilino, the commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM).

Mr. Aramane went on to say: "India is giving a faceoff to our neighbour in almost all the fronts we have with them. Wherever there is a mountain pass, we are stationed there to face the eventuality. Wherever there is a road we have to be ready there. So that way we are there, we are standing against a bully in a very determined fashion."

Acknowledging support from the United States during the early days of the standoff, Mr. Aramane said the one thing that helped India very quickly was the "intelligence, the situation awareness, which the US equipment and US government could help us with", further adding that, "... we expect that our friend, US, will be there with us in

case we need their support.” In addition to intelligence support, the United States has provided high-altitude clothing to India.

The candid comment from a top official encapsulates how much the situation has changed on the ground between India and China and how much India has deepened its cooperation with the United States, especially since 2020. The biggest repercussion between the two countries due to the standoff is broken trust, as the contours on the ground have significantly altered, with little incentive for either side to fully undo them.

Talks for Resolving the Standoff

Meanwhile, senior military commanders from the two sides met on 21 February for their 21st round of talks, a mechanism established to resolve the standoff through disengagement and de-escalation in Eastern Ladakh. The talks ended without any progress. A [statement](#) issued by India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) after the talks said that the “discussions [were] built on the previous rounds, seeking complete disengagement in the remaining areas along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh as an essential basis for restoration of peace and tranquillity in the India-China border areas.”

The MEA, India’s army chief, and other Indian officials had stated on several occasions that five friction points have been resolved following disengagement from them, though two others – Demchok and Depsang – still remain, over which there has been fundamental disagreement between the two sides. China has refused to discuss disengagement from the two areas, insisting that they predate the current standoff and so should not be included in the negotiations.

The five friction areas from which disengagement has been undertaken so far are: Galwan after the violent clash in June 2020, the North and South Banks of Pangong Tso in February 2021, Patrolling Point (PP) 17A in the Gogra-Hot Springs area in August 2021, and PP15 in the same area in September 2022. The rationale behind disengagement of troops and equipment from the friction areas is that it will allow for the overall withdrawal of troops, built up after April 2020, from the LAC as part of de-escalation to end the standoff and restore normalcy.

However, the situation on the ground has changed far beyond the realities of April 2020, prior to the initial skirmishes. There is a new normal on the ground as both sides have undertaken significant infrastructure and capability development along the 3,488-km-long LAC, with India belatedly catching up to even the scales and China trying to keep its edge. Even for the larger bilateral relationship, the standoff is an inflection point, which New Delhi asserts cannot continue for the good of the relationship and which Beijing has been trying to de-hyphenate.

Massive Deployments and Infrastructure Upgrade

In response to the ingress by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) into Eastern Ladakh in violation of existing boundary agreements in end April and early May 2020, the Indian Air Force (IAF) [airlifted 68,000 troops](#), 330 infantry vehicles, and over 90 tanks to the area in addition to artillery guns. In total, the IAF had airlifted over 9,000 tonnes

in the initial phase, officials stated. The PLA's move and the Indian response give a sense of the magnitude of the standoff between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

It is important to note that the phrase "restoration of status quo ante" of positions pre-May 2020 is heard less and less in official statements from India, and even in reality there is very little room to turn back the clock completely. There have been massive infrastructure upgrades on both sides, not just in Eastern Ladakh but also along the entire LAC, which is divided into three sectors: Western (all of Ladakh), Middle (Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand), and Eastern (Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim).



An Indian K9 SPH at Ladakh during the Indo-China clashes, May 2021. While negotiations to end the 2020 standoff are under way, the possibility of restoring the situation on the ground to its pre-May 2020 status remains bleak, with heavy upgrades and construction undertaken by both sides. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Since the standoff, India has forward deployed its entire range of military hardware, including tanks and artillery guns, amid extreme weather conditions in the high-altitude terrain. A massive infrastructure upgrade is also under way along the LAC to cater to these deployments. For instance, in Eastern Ladakh a new landing strip in Nyoma, about 30 km from the LAC, is now being converted into a full-fledged base, with its runway being extended to handle fighter jets. Similarly, in Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as South Tibet, the Indian army has not only [strengthened its defences](#) but also deployed [offensive firepower](#), which includes long-range rocket systems and BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles with a range of over 300 km.

China, on the other hand, is on a build-up spree, upgrading airfields and bases and setting up new habitats, ammunition dumps, and related infrastructure close to the LAC. Learning from the experience of the pre-emptive moves undertaken by the Indian army in August 2020 along the southern bank of Pangong Tso, referred to as Kailash ranges, China is now building a [bridge](#) over the Pangong Tso river, connecting the two banks at an altitude of around 4,225 m. All these facilities are unlikely to be dismantled by either side when they focus on de-escalation.

The standoff has also had a cascading effect on the nature of patrols in other areas. The PLA's [patrols have grown](#) significantly in size, a development that officials say is due to infrastructure on the Indian side being much stronger now and Indian troops being positioned closer to China. The PLA [does not want to get caught](#) on the back foot in case of another scuffle.

Need for New Agreements

Several agreements had been in place between the two countries to maintain peace and tranquillity along the LAC.

The agreement on [Confidence Building Measures](#) in the Military Field along the LAC in the India-China Border Areas, signed on 29 November 1996, states that “the two sides shall exchange data on the military forces and armaments to be reduced or limited and decide on ceilings on military forces and armaments to be kept by each side within mutually agreed geographical zones along the LAC in the India-China border areas.” It further states that “the ceilings shall be determined in conformity with the requirement of the principle of mutual and equal security, with due consideration being given to parameters such as the nature of terrain, road communication and other infrastructure and time taken to induct/deinduct troops and armaments.”

Such agreements had largely held the peace, only for it to be shattered by the 2020 standoff and the especially violent clash at Galwan in June 2020, which resulted in the deaths of 20 Indians and at least four PLA soldiers. The Galwan clash was the first combat deaths on the unsettled India-China boundary since 1975. Prior to this, the last incident of firing and fatalities occurred on 20 October 1975, when a patrol team of Assam Rifles, an Indian para-military force, was ambushed by PLA troops at Tulung La in Arunachal Pradesh, resulting in the death of four personnel.

Both countries now need to work out new patrolling norms, remove the buffer zones set up during the disengagement process, and also renew and update the existing protocols on conduct during face-offs and stand-offs to avoid a repeat of Galwan-like incidents. This can happen only after disengagement is fully complete and both sides agree on some manner of troop withdrawal from the frontline.

Reaching such an understanding is essential as the current deployments are untenable both in terms of expenditure – although both sides would remain deployed if need be – and, even more so, fatigue on the part of troops deployed in the high-altitude region. However, a complete restoration to the status on the ground as it was four years back is a mirage. It will take some tough negotiations between the two sides to find a midway acceptable to both sides.

Dinakar PERI is a Senior Assistant Editor with The Hindu newspaper, covering defence and strategic affairs. This is an updated version of a talk he delivered as a Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) from 18 to 22 September 2023.