

India–China Boundary Dispute: Progress on Disengagement, but De-escalation Remains Far-fetched

by Amrita Jash

On 13 September 2022, India and China confirmed the completion of their respective disengagements from another friction point along their mutually contested border. The disengagement took place in eastern Ladakh, resulting in the withdrawal of troops from Patrolling Point (PP) 15 in the Gogra-Hot Springs area.¹ This was the fourth disengagement from the area, marking a step towards ending the 28-month stand-off in the eastern Ladakh ongoing since the military clashes of May 2020.

This stand-off has not only been the longest but also one of the most violent confrontations between India and China. On 15 June 2020, the Galwan Valley clash led to multiple casualties, twenty on the Indian side, while less clarity exists on the numbers of Chinese deaths.² All in all the incident

was the bloodiest military clash since the Sumdorong Chu crisis in 1986–87.

Finding a lasting solution to the border dispute is increasingly challenging. This means that armed co-existence has become the new reality in the India–China border regions. What therefore should one make of the recent disengagement agreements and what would be needed to push for broader de-escalation?

A protracted and intractable dispute

India and China share a 3,488 km border which runs from northwest of the Karakoram Pass and ends at Arunachal Pradesh. The border is neither demarcated nor delineated on maps. The absence of an internationally accepted boundary as well as the lack of an agreement over the de facto “Line of Actual Control” (LAC), has transformed the issue into a “territorial dispute” between India and China (Figure 1).

posthumous medals to four of its soldiers, who lost their lives in the Galwan Valley clash.

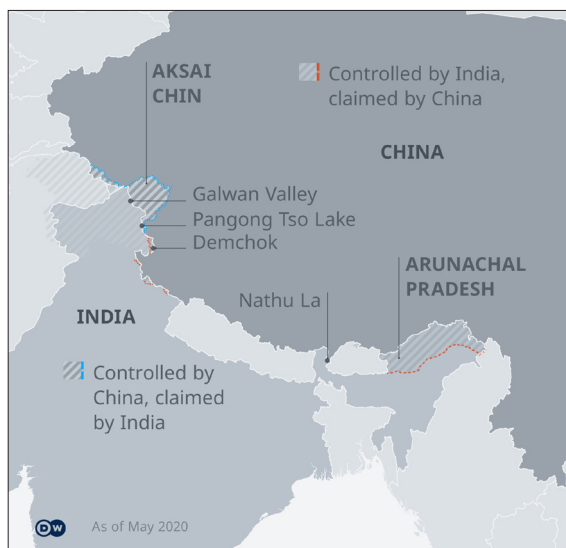
¹ Dinakar Peri, “India, China Confirm Withdrawal of Troops from PP15 in Ladakh”, in *The Hindu*, 13 September 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/article65886827.ece>.

² However, in February 2021, China announced

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Figure 1 | The India–China border dispute



Source: Aditya Sharma, “What Is Next in the China-India Border Conflict?”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 28 January 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-next-in-the-china-india-border-conflict/a-60586745>.

The border is disputed in three distinct areas: the western sector (Aksai Chin), the middle sector (Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand) and the eastern sector (Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh). In pursuit of their territorial claims, India and China have fought a war in 1962 and since then have engaged in periodical escalations. These have impacted all sectors in the disputed areas, with varying degrees of gravity and intensity.

Beginning with the Nathu La and Cho La skirmishes of 1967 in the eastern sector, tensions have risen steadily across the area, with new incidents taking place in this sector in 1975, 1986–87 and 2017. Moving to the western sector, tensions grew with the Daulat Beg Oldie and Chumar stand-offs in 2013, followed by other stand-

offs in 2014 and 2015. Most recently, the Naku La incident in 2020 in the eastern sector and the eastern Ladakh stand-off between 2020 and 2022 in the western sector complete this picture of periodical military clashes between the sides.

To grasp the depths of this long-lasting dispute, a two-fold perspective can be adopted: First, under the mechanism of the Special Representative Talks on the India–China Boundary Question, 22 rounds of talks (last held in December 2019) have failed to find a settlement. Constituted in 2003, the mechanism was developed with the two countries signing a “Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation between the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of China”.³ So far, the talks have only been able to establish “political parameters and guiding principles”, signed in April 2005,⁴ but the objective of establishing a framework for a comprehensive settlement that includes the demarcation of the boundary remain pending.

Secondly, as both sides have developed a strong military posture and sharp rhetoric over their respective claims, the territorial dispute has also increasingly

³ See, India and China, *Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation between the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of China*, 23 June 2003, <https://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?7679>.

⁴ See, India and China, *Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question*, 11 April 2005, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6534>.

become intractable in nature. This has raised the stakes further, making a diplomatic compromise harder to achieve.

The tactics of disengagement

Since the Galwan Valley clash in 2020, 16 rounds of Corps Commander Level Talks have been held between the Indian Army and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). This led to disengagements and the creation of "buffer zones" in five areas: PP-14 in Galwan Valley in July 2020; the north and south banks of Pangong Tso in February 2021; PP-17 A in Gogra in August 2021; and PP-15 in Gogra-Hot Springs area in September 2022.

The latest disengagement process in PP-15 was completed in five phases: a halt to "forward deployments"; the return of troops to their respective areas; dismantling of "all temporary structures and other allied infrastructure"; restoring "landforms in the area" to pre-stand-off positions; a halt to forward deployment in a "phased, coordinated and verified manner", and ensuring that structures are "dismantled and mutually verified".⁵

What makes the fourth disengagement process important is that it came after a year-long impasse in the negotiations. In this regard, two external drivers can be highlighted as contributing to the breakthrough.

⁵ Shubhajit Roy, "India, China Complete Disengagement in Hot Springs Region", in *The Indian Express*, 14 September 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-china-complete-disengagement-in-hot-springs-region-8149102>.

First, an effort was made by both sides to improve the diplomatic atmosphere prior to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit held on 15–16 September in Uzbekistan. This was the first multilateral meeting attended by both Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping since the 2020 stand-off and in view of this, the disengagement was a means to "cool" tensions and ease the way for the summit.

To support this argument one can note that unlike previous rounds of negotiations, which tended to quickly lead to disengagement agreements, this latter round took more time to develop. Indeed, the 16th round of talks held on 17 July 2022 did not lead to any immediate disengagement nor did the joint press release make any reference to such disengagement.⁶ Then, one week ahead of the SCO summit, on 8 September, a sudden joint statement was released, announcing the disengagement at PP-15.⁷ Seen in this light, it appears plausible that such sudden movement was primarily motivated by the SCO summit.

Second, this disengagement can also be understood in the context of

⁶ See, India and China, *Joint Press Release of the 16th Round of India-China Corps Commander Level Meeting*, 18 July 2022, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35496>.

⁷ The joint statement noted: "according to the consensus reached in the 16th round of India China Corps Commander Level Meeting, the Indian and Chinese troops in the area of Gogra-Hot Springs (PP-15) have begun to disengage in a coordinated and planned way, which is conducive to the peace and tranquillity in the border areas". See, India and China, *Joint Statement*, 8 September 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1857830>.

China's 20th National Party Congress which began on 16 October. In this respect, President Xi's top priority is to maintain internal and external stability and create room for a successful Party Congress, needed to ensure backing for his third presidential term, setting a new precedent in China's political system.

If one appreciates these two factors, the recent disengagement process in eastern Ladakh tends to appear more as a temporary adjustment, or tactical manoeuvring, rather than a genuine push to resolve the dispute. Lasting de-escalation therefore remains elusive.

Ongoing challenges

While the disengagement is no doubt positive, it would be wrong to assume that this represents a step towards a broader agreement.

First of all, the current disengagement only involves withdrawals on one of the contested border areas, those which set off the skirmishes of 2020. Locations in friction points that predate 2020, such as Depsang in Daulat Beg Oldie and the Charding Nullah Junction in Demchok in the western sector, remain pending. Moreover, while tensions in eastern Ladakh can now plausibly decrease, broader recriminations along the border persist with the consequent potential of new flareups or clashes.

Indeed, while the disengagement has taken place in the western sector, signs of tensions are building up in the eastern sector in Arunachal Pradesh. China claims the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh under the pretext of

"Zangnan" – the southern part of Tibet – and hence, Beijing calls it "South Tibet".

Chinese efforts to legitimise its claims over this area have further heightened tensions. For instance, in October 2021, amidst the eastern Ladakh stand-off, China's top legislature adopted a new law on the protection and exploitation of the country's land border areas, which came into effect from 1 January 2022. The law stipulates that China will take all necessary measures to "safeguard territorial integrity and land boundaries and guard against and combat any act that undermines territorial sovereignty and land boundaries".⁸ It is important to note here that China has settled its land borders with 12 neighbours, while only India and Bhutan remain unresolved. It is thereby apparent that this law has direct bearing on the India–China boundary dispute.

Moreover, in December 2021, China's Ministry of Civil Affairs "standardised" the names of 15 places (comprising eight residential areas, four mountains, two rivers and one mountain pass) in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.⁹ Beijing has also been building "xiaokang" villages in the contested areas. This was noted by the 2021 US Department of Defense report, which mentions that China

⁸ "China Adopts Land Borders Law", in *Xinhuanet*, 23 October 2022, http://www.news.cn/english/2021-10/23/c_1310264570.htm.

⁹ See, Liu Caiyu and Cao Siqi, "China Standardizes Names of 15 More Places in Zangnan 'Based on Sovereignty, History'", in *Global Times*, 30 December 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1243788.shtml>.

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had built a 100-home civilian village “inside disputed territory between the PRC’s Tibet Autonomous Region and India’s Arunachal Pradesh state in the eastern sector of the LAC”¹⁰ (located on the banks of the River Tsari Chu, along the disputed border in Upper Subansiri district in Arunachal Pradesh).

At the same time, China is also upgrading its civil and military infrastructure along the Line of Actual Control. As evidenced by satellite imagery, China has constructed two bridges capable of accommodating armoured vehicles in Pangong Tso in 2022.¹¹ Owing to China’s growing assertive posture, the Indian Army, while completing the disengagement process, also brought into effect a major “reorientation” and “rebalancing” of its troops in the strategically sensitive areas along the dispute border in Arunachal Pradesh.¹² This move is aimed at boosting the overall combat readiness of the Indian Army amidst the ongoing stand-offs in western sector.

Taken together therefore, one would be naïve to consider the recent

disengagement as a step towards de-escalation or a full resolution of the decades long India–China border dispute. While some improvements can be expected in the western sector due to the disengagement, other areas retain much potential for future eruptions. The risk of miscalculation remains high and this could catapult yet another military clash along the border, an event that would be detrimental to both sides.

Hence, the bigger question remains unaddressed: What can be done to avert future flareups and promote actual de-escalation? Answering this question remains tricky. Both India and China consider the border dispute to be an internal issue and are thereby opposed to external mediation efforts. At the time of writing, therefore, it seems that the most likely outcome will be for the two sides to find some form of mutual deterrence and accommodation across the disputed border area, managing the conflict by stabilising the militarised status quo in the area.

This unsatisfactory outlook is likely to endure, with all the risks and implications for a possible renewed flareup, until both sides embrace the inevitable need for compromise and concessions to resolve the dispute, a scenario that unfortunately still appears far-fetched today.

25 October 2022

¹⁰ US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments involving the People’s Republic of China 2021. Annual Report to Congress*, November 2021, p. 159, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=860519>.

¹¹ Rezaul H. Laskar and Rahul Singh, “China Starts Building Another Bridge across Pangong Lake”, in *Hindustan Times*, 19 May 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/china-starts-building-another-bridge-across-pangong-lake-101652899724246.html>.

¹² “Army Cranking Up Combat Readiness along LAC in Arunachal Pradesh Sector”, in *The Times of India*, 7 September 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/articleshow/94057127.cms>.

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