

A DISENGAGEMENT DEAL BETTER THAN EXPECTED

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

The year 2021 has begun on an optimistic note for reduction of military tensions between India and China. Both sides announced on February 11, the [simultaneous disengagement](#) of their massive forward deployments in the Pangong Lake area, cheek by jowl for the past 10 months in Eastern Ladakh. India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh delivered a carefully worded statement in Parliament about the breakthrough which envisages [a pullback by both sides](#) in "a phased, coordinated and verified manner". The headway in the impasse, achieved after lengthy talks between the two sides, surprised the doubting Thomases who questioned India's will and capacity for a military counterpoise that is essential for restoration of the [situation as it prevailed before April 2020](#). It also caught off guard those who scoff at the notion of a peaceful resolution of territorial differences in keeping with the longer-term interests of both Asian giants.

Tracing the genesis of the problem since April-May 2020, when the Chinese side had suddenly positioned a large body of troops and armaments along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the Indian Defence Minister also paid rich tribute to the armed forces and lauded their valiant sacrifices. Indeed, the intentions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) were thwarted by India's robust military response guided by a resolute Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Editorial | [Order at the border: On disengagement at the LAC](#)

Relations between India and China suffered a dramatic setback following the violation by China of the bilateral agreements and protocols, which ruptured peace and tranquillity. The bloody incident at Galwan on June 15, 2020, the first involving casualties since 1975, brought about the collapse of the prevailing consensus that bilateral ties could develop in parallel with efforts to resolve the boundary question and the maintenance of peace and tranquillity. Since June last year, India has consistently highlighted the view that peace is a fundamental prerequisite for the normal conduct of relations. The stand-off at the Pangong Lake was but one of several in Eastern Ladakh, but undoubtedly among the most significant. After China took steps to alter the ground situation between Fingers 4 and 8, the Indian Army had carried out daring manoeuvres to take up advantageous positions along the Kailash range on the southern bank, thereby dominating the key Chinese garrison at Moldo across the Spanggur Gap. Even on the northern bank, the Indian Army succeeded in offsetting any initial advantage that the PLA may have had along the spurs.

Having acquired powerful leverage, Indian troops dug in for the long haul and mirrored the PLA's deployments. On its part, the government left no stone unturned to ensure that they were provided with the necessary wherewithal to deal with any real or perceived asymmetry. The message was unambiguous. India was not going to cave in and stood ready to impose a harsh penalty if China engaged in any act of adventurism. The endurance of the Indian Army through the harsh winter months has been extraordinary. China appears to have realised that a prolonged stand-off, hardly a part of its original calculus and of little avail militarily or politically, was permanently impairing bilateral relations. The uncertainty associated with the law of unintended consequences, the high reputational costs to itself, and the forward momentum in India-U.S. relations and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (India, the U.S., Japan and Australia), better known as the Quad, may also have proved to be factors for China.

The disengagement at Pangong Lake is certainly a welcome development. This is an area in which the patrols of the two sides have been encountering one another for decades, whether on

land or on the lake. The construction of a road by China from Finger 8 towards Fingers 5 and 4 many years ago had led to a spike in face-offs and gradually reduced access for Indian troops to their traditional patrolling point at Finger 8. Meanwhile, India too built better infrastructure all the way to its permanent presence at the Dhan Singh Thapa Post near Finger 3.

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The disengagement deal is perhaps better than one might have expected under the circumstances. The Chinese have agreed to pull back forward deployments to their permanent base at Sirijap, east of Finger 8, and to dismantle all infrastructure created after April 2020. India's tough negotiators, both diplomatic and military, have ensured that our troops retain their presence at the permanent Indian post at Finger 3 even though China had earlier demanded that India fall back further. Moreover, all the Chinese posts atop the high spurs on the northern bank will also be dismantled, including those that overlooked the Dhan Singh Thapa Post. Of course, India will also fall back from its recently held positions along the Kailash range to earlier positions.

With trust badly shattered after April 2020, one expects the Indian side to tread warily in implementing the deal at Pangong. Carrying out simultaneous disengagement in a phased and coordinated manner, with proper verification, is key to its success. There is little doubt that cautious diplomatic and military planning and hawk-like vigil will be called for throughout the implementation.

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The government of Prime Minister Modi has amply demonstrated its willingness to take tough calls on matters pertaining to sovereignty and territorial integrity. It has demonstrated boldness in the face of a major military challenge. It has shown equal courage in grasping the nettle of peace. More importantly, the government has reposed full faith in its armed forces and negotiators. Mr. Singh's statement, containing just the right blend of steel and velvet, generously acknowledged the unity of purpose among all departments of the government and highlighted the consistency with which India's unwavering position was put across. Both he and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had engaged their Chinese counterparts last September and drawn the red lines. This no doubt strengthened the hand of the senior commanders and foreign ministry officials who hammered out the deal.

The progress at Pangong notwithstanding, the doubting Thomases will continue to raise questions. They run the risk of doing so without sufficient familiarity with either the facts or the military complexities on the ground. The truth is that India's tough military and diplomatic posture has paid off, resulting in an honourable disengagement. If tensions could be defused at Galwan, where much blood was shed, and at Pangong, it should be equally possible to fashion mutually acceptable terms for disengagement at Gogra/Hot Springs as well as the resolution of patrolling issues in Depsang.

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Over the next two to three weeks, both sides should be given a chance to implement the agreement. The temporary moratorium on military activities by both sides along the north bank, including on patrolling up to the traditional points, will improve the situation. That patrolling will be resumed only consequent to an agreement being reached in future diplomatic and military talks is also a step forward. Naturally, the pullback will prove to be a complex exercise involving meticulous planning of intricate details and scheduled withdrawals that must factor in the local terrain, the disposition of troops and a vast array of armaments. No doubt, one must also keep

the powder dry.

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