

# SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT PUT OUT A WHITE PAPER ON LADAKH?

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Army vehicles moving towards the LAC in Leh in September 2020. | Photo Credit: PTI

A report prepared for a security conference in Delhi set off a controversy by stating that India has lost access to 26 of 65 patrolling points along the [Line of Actual Control \(LAC\)](#) since the [Galwan Valley clash in April 2020](#). External Affairs Minister S. [Jaishankar emphasised](#) again that no territory has been ceded to China, while the Opposition has called for the government to clarify matters on the LAC. In a conversation moderated by **Suhasini Haidar, Satish Dua** and **Manoj Joshi** discuss whether the government should put out a white paper on Ladakh. Edited excerpts:

How do you see the report, prepared by a senior police officer in Ladakh, that says India has lost patrolling access to 26 of 65 patrolling points since 2020?

**Satish Dua:** The Superintendent of Police in Leh would have very little experience, or exposure, to the border patrols and patrol points. If the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), which does some of the patrolling, as the Army does in those parts, had brought out the report, I would have found that more credible.

**Manoj Joshi:** I see it in the context of the fact that the government has not been telling us much about the situation at the LAC. If a police officer has brought out a report for a conference of the Director Generals of Police, sponsored by the Intelligence Bureau, the officer would have spoken to many people, including the ITBP, to write it. The report gives specific numbers of patrolling points, and I see no error in them. For example, if you look at the Depsang bulge, the report has named each of the patrolling points there. I would call the report credible. It shows that the situation in Ladakh along the LAC appears to be more serious than has been disclosed by the government.

Looking back at all that has happened since 2020, how do you judge the government's response to China's actions as distinct from the military's response at the LAC?

**Manoj Joshi:** Military sources have actually been more forthcoming than the government. The government has been fudging the issue right from the point when the Prime Minister said no one has entered [Indian territory], and no post is lost. The fact is that the entire Depsang bulge has been blockaded by the Chinese, and remains blockaded. And there seem to be other areas

where Chinese soldiers have occupied our patrolling points. Some of the points are, of course, denied to us by mutual agreement, as we have agreed to create these buffer zones along parts of the LAC. And I think all this must be acknowledged.

**Satish Dua:** One must distinguish between the government's response and the military's response. The government could have done better in terms of the information provided by official sources. There is a value we place on confidentiality of operational matters, and obviously those details can't be shared. But some more information could have been provided on the patrol points and buffer zones that have been created. The buffer zones have been created by mutual agreement. And the purpose of these zones is to avoid any confrontation and escalation.

I would also like to say that apart from the incidents at Galwan and Kailash ranges, we have not seen any action between the two armies for over half a century. This means that our responses, military-level talks, and WMCC (Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs) talks have helped to ensure that the situation does not escalate whenever the patrols come face to face. That is saying a lot, considering that both India and China are nuclear countries.

So, do you think the government should review its communication strategy? Should it consider, for example, publishing a white paper on China's actions at the LAC and the Indian response thus far?

**Satish Dua:** If there is lack of information in today's era of information wars, somebody will fill up that space. Either that space will be filled up by the other side [China] or by the disruptors in India — armchair strategists who have less knowledge of the ground position. I think we should have put out a little more information from official sources without disclosing any details of an operational nature.

Look, we don't have a national security strategy or a national defence strategy guidance document in our country. Compared to the Line of Control (LoC), the LAC has multiple agencies and forces working without unity of command. The responsibility for border security is with the ITBP, which is under the Home Ministry. In recent years, the Army also patrols; it is under the Ministry of Defence. There are special frontier force units deployed at the LAC, which are under the Cabinet Secretariat. The WMCC is driven by the Ministry of External Affairs. There is a high-level military dialogue as well. And there is a China Study Group which takes some tactical-level decisions such as patrol points.

Contrast this to the LoC, where we have the Border Security Force deployed, but under the operational control of the Army. That system has been working fine for decades. So, whether you call it a policy directive or a white paper, we need to have better clarity on the operational and administrative aspects of the LAC.

**Manoj Joshi:** More than a white paper, the government needs to re-strategise its border policy. After the Galwan incident, the government has authorised soldiers, at least those operating in Ladakh, to use guns to defend themselves. But we don't know what the instructions are in the east (Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim), because in the December 9, 2022 Yangtse incident, the Chinese tried to overwhelm our posts by physical force, not with guns. So, I think we need to re-strategise the way we handle the LAC. Maybe we need to create a 5-km buffer zone on either side of the LAC, so that Indian and Chinese soldiers never meet physically. In a white paper, the government would have to reveal a lot of things that it doesn't want to reveal. And I think sometimes the government has to be given some latitude to formulate policy in a confidential manner when it comes to national security.

Should the government consider publishing a paper on the ground position or a map delineating India's claims, even if China refuses to?

**Manoj Joshi:** The Chinese agreed to clarify the points of differences on the LAC in 1993, but subsequently they have stopped. They use the imprecise LAC to keep us off balance. The root of the problem is Chinese intentions with regard to the LAC. In 2014 and 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi tried to call openly for a clarification of the LAC. So, I agree that we should simply go ahead and publish a map detailing our notion of the LAC and tell the Chinese, this is it.

**Satish Dua:** Yes, we should have a precise LAC. The Chinese had, in a couple of meetings earlier, agreed that we will exchange maps on the 22 identified flashpoints between us and them at the LAC, but they balk at actually exchanging maps — although they did once in the central sector give some maps. To that end, it is a good idea for us to publicly put out our version as a map. But we must continue this process of dialogue, because then we are able to sort out technical problems at the ground level. In fact, if anything, we must raise the level of talks, including to the summit level. We must keep exploring those opportunities rather than always thinking of confrontation.

**Manoj Joshi:** What we lost in 2020 was trust [in China]. We had built up that trust since 1993 all the way to 2020. There were even the two summits in Wuhan and Mamallapuram. Everything was going well. The issue is, metaphorically speaking, how can you put the toothpaste [trust] back into the tube [relationship]? You know, despite all the 2020 events, Indian and Chinese officials communicated 1,500 times with military officials through various hotlines and meetings. So, there is a process. War would be a catastrophe between two nuclear-armed powers. I think we need to do some blunt talking with China. And yes, Prime Minister Modi could tell President Xi [Jinping] that the trust has collapsed after 2020, and it is for China to restore it. And let us both together now try to work out some new processes and procedures to maintain peace and tranquility.

Are there lessons for the government from previous stand-offs such as the 1986 Sumdorong Chu stand-off or the 2013 Depsang stand-off on how to manage its public communications?

**Manoj Joshi:** If the government had disclosed more, the revelations in the police report would not have been such a shock. Most Indians don't know that access to the huge area in Depsang bulge, about 900 sq km, is being denied to us. The government should always err on the side of more information than less. In any case, since 2020, many foreign agencies and trackers have put out satellite information of what has happened. Satellite imagery has given us more information on Yangtse. So, I don't understand why the government should hide information that is already widely available.

**Satish Dua:** Sumdorong Chu taught us that patience is the name of the game, as it took seven-eight years to sort out. But times have changed since then. This is not the mid-1980s. In this information age, more information is required. We will have to leave the question of how much to share to the government and the military. But yes, if the government puts out information from its perspective, it restricts speculation.

**Lieutenant General Satish Dua, former Corps Commander of the Kashmir-based Chinari Corps, retired as Chief of Integrated Defence Staff; Manoj Joshi is Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation and author of Understanding the India-China Border: The Enduring Threat of War in the High Himalayas**

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