

Two borders, two disputes

The two major disputed borders India has are with China and Pakistan. With Pakistan, the disputed border falls in Jammu and Kashmir, a legacy of the 1948 war. When India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire on January 1, 1949, the two sides agreed to a ceasefire line (CFL). This line was not just marked on a map but was also agreed upon by the two sides on the ground with a joint survey by the two armies. The CFL, with minor variations, was converted into the Line of Control (LoC) during the Simla Agreement, following India's victory in the 1971 Bangladesh War. Agreed upon both on the ground and on the map, the new nomenclature was meant to show that J&K was a bilateral dispute and some kind of final answer for the Kashmir problem would be found around the LoC.

The LoC was, by and large, peaceful for nearly two decades thereafter but degenerated into an active shooting match between the two armies, following the deterioration of the internal security situation in Kashmir that owed much to Pakistani intervention. Kargil and the following years saw a peak in hostile activity between the two sides on the LoC, with soldiers and civilians on both sides losing limbs and lives as a result of unrestrained heavy firing. Things became peaceful with the ceasefire of 2003 but by late 2015, the LoC started heating up again. Last year was particularly bad: India recorded 860 ceasefire violations and lost 32 soldiers on the LoC.

In contrast is the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China. India and China couldn't agree on international borders and after the 1962 Sino-India conflict, China was able to assert its control over disputed territories, particularly in Ladakh. Thus came the concept of the LAC, mentioned in a bilateral agreement of 1993. But the two sides have no agreement on the position and location of the LAC; in fact, they don't even agree upon its total length. India says it is 3,400-km long while China believes it to be just half of that. Even then, the last shot that was fired in anger was on the Nathu la border in 1967, more than 50 years ago. In October 1975, an Assam Rifles patrol was ambushed and killed at Tulung La. Besides clashes between patrols, India and China have had tense border standoffs since — Sumdorong Chu valley in 1987, Depsang in 2013, Chumar in 2014 and Doklam in 2017. How is it that an unreconciled LAC doesn't see a shot fired in anger while a fully demarcated LoC sees thousands of rounds and shells fired by each side?

Military commanders say that even though there is no agreement on the LAC, both sides understand and clearly agree on either side's perception for 95 per cent of the LAC. Then come the mechanisms for border management between India and China, which are well defined and formalised. For example in 2015, there were more than 50 border personnel meetings between India and China in the Ladakh sector alone, including six to eight ceremonial meetings, which are attended even by the family members of the military personnel. Moreover, there is a lot that happens quietly on the LAC where military commanders at various levels can have unscheduled meetings once a week — a former army commander gave me this piece of information. There is more engagement in terms of visits of military delegations to either country and participation by military contingents in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief training exercises.

While these factors do make a difference, the underlying cause for the difference in behaviour between the two borders lies elsewhere: The atmosphere of active and deep-rooted hostility towards Pakistan and its army. It is hard to be friendly to a country which has been behind multiple acts of terrorism in India. Moreover, the cultural and historical portrayal of Pakistan as an enemy has been reinforced by the current narrative espoused by the political leadership, some military veterans and media warriors. This is now being internalised at the lowest levels of the army. When a soldier sees his comrades dying in the Kashmir Valley because of militants being sent across the LoC by Pakistan, he considers it his personal duty — mixed with the professional task — to sort out the Pakistanis. Each incident stokes anger on either side, and an unending cycle of

retributive violence is set in motion. The situation is similar on the Pakistani side, and there is no incentive for either side to break this narrative of hatred.

Considering that both India and Pakistan are nuclear weapon states, the trigger-happy situation between the two armies on the LoC is a potentially dangerous one. This mixing of the personal with the professional for soldiers is not a healthy characteristic. An Indian patrol clashing with a Chinese one on the LAC doesn't look to "sort out" the Chinese soldiers. They look at the matter as a border problem to be handled at the highest-level in the military, and follow the non-violent protocol of a banner drill. That is how matters are resolved professionally between India and China.

India and Pakistan need to reach the same state of professional dealings. That would need reversing the prevalent narrative of enemy-country, bringing calm on the borders and ensuring both armies are invested in peace. It is not an easy task but someone needs to make a beginning.

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