

THREAT REMAINS IN EASTERN LADAKH: ARMY CHIEF

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As India and China held the 14th round of Corps Commander-level talks on Wednesday, Army chief Gen. Manoj Naravane said that while there has been partial disengagement in eastern Ladakh, the threat has by no means reduced and the Army has bolstered its position “manifold” in the last year and half.

He also said the new Chinese border law that came into effect on January 1 is unlikely to have any military ramifications and if any, the Army is adequately prepared to handle them.

“Force levels are more or less the same and from our side enhanced. Threat assessment and internal deliberations have resulted in re-organisation and realignment of forces, in keeping with the Army’s mandate, of ensuring our territorial integrity. And this also caters for the major augmentation that has taken place in the PLA forces and their infrastructure,” Gen. Naravane said at the annual press conference ahead of Army Day which was held in virtual format for the first time.

On the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) going forward, Gen. Naravane said the deployment of a large number of PLA forces by the Chinese in eastern Ladakh was the root cause of the situation which developed.

“Now that they are there and have made a lot of infrastructure, it remains to be seen whether they will permanently station themselves there or whether they will be amenable to some kind of de-induction in the times to come,” he said.

Steps for de-induction

He said any de-induction will have to follow a few laid-out steps, which first comprises disengagement in the friction areas along the LAC, confidence building, followed by de-escalation which is moving back to the depth areas and de-induction can take place “only after that”, which is when troops would move back to their permanent locations.

“Whatever we decide to do, will be based on the principle of mutual and equal security. Till we reach there, we will have to be prepared to stay there for as long as required.”

Gen. Naravane said that in the last year and half since the standoff, the forces’ capabilities on the northern borders have gone up manifold and they are better prepared to meet any challenge.

“This also gave us an opportunity to review our operational plans and based on that a lot of activities were undertaken to augment our capabilities not only in eastern Ladakh but all along the northern front,” he said.

Response to attempts

He said it was clear that the Army’s response to Chinese attempts to unilaterally change the status quo was robust and India was able to thwart this design. “Re-orientation of additional forces to the northern borders has been carried out while retaining our capability for punitive strikes on the western front.”

Stating that it was not only augmentation of forces but also of infrastructure, weapons and equipment, Gen. Naravane said they had inducted additional troops, made various infrastructure and billeting facilities for 25,000 additional troops which had gone into that area in addition to roads, tunnels and storage facilities for ammunition and fuel.

On the possibility of a conflict, he said they are prepared for whatever is thrown at them.

“War or conflict is always an instrument of last resort. But if resorted to, we will come out victorious,” he asserted. To questions on the 14th senior military commander level talks, Gen. Naravane said it was a good thing the talks are going on which shows that we can resolve our differences through dialogue.

14th round of talks

Stating that expecting every round of talks will have an outcome was unreasonable, the Army chief said talks help both sides understand each other’s viewpoints, perceptions and differences go down with each meeting. “Then, we reach an agreement, which is based on mutual and equitable security and is acceptable to both sides and is a win-win for both,” he said.

A number of rounds will be required to deal with the situation and resolve them one at a time, he said adding, once the remaining issues at Hot Springs are resolved they will “look at other issues which predate the current standoff”.

On the new Chinese border law, the Army chief said the Ministry of External Affairs has also made it clear that this it will have no bearing on the bilateral relations between India and China and India does not accept it as such.

“We have many other agreements and protocols which predate this law and any law which is not legally tenable and not in keeping with the other agreements we’ve had in the past, obviously cannot be binding on us,” he said.

Military ramifications

As far as military ramifications are concerned, he said they are still looking into that aspect. “Should there be any likely fallout in the military domain, we are more than adequately prepared to deal with it with whatever steps we have taken and rebalancing we have carried out.”

Asked about the demilitarisation of the Siachen glacier, Gen. Naravane said the situation on the world’s highest battlefield has occurred because of Pakistan’s unilateral attempts. We are not averse to demilitarisation of the Siachen glacier, but a precondition is acceptance of Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) in the process, he added.

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