

DAYS OF DISENGAGEMENT: ON INDIA-CHINA LAC STANDOFF

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After [two months of stand-off along the LAC](#), news that [India and China are discussing a full disengagement](#) must be welcome relief. But it must be tempered by caution until all details of the plan to de-escalate troops and tensions are clear. The conversation between the Special Representatives, [India's NSA Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi](#), on Sunday, which led to the announcement, has given hostilities a necessary pause. While the statements made in New Delhi and Beijing were not identical in language, they largely conveyed a consensus to restore peace and tranquillity at the LAC. The next step will be to see their agreements carried out and to ensure that Chinese troops withdraw as promised on each of the three points discussed: Galwan, Hot Springs and Gogra. This is easier said than done, as it was during a disengagement verification operation by the Indian troops that the Galwan clash is believed to have occurred. After this, similar exercises will have to be undertaken for other points along the LAC. Disengagement and de-escalation must be accompanied by defined “end-points” for troops to withdraw to, to ensure they do not reoccupy positions vacated. Monday's statements have also set out a course of engagements — these include diplomatic and military parleys, meetings of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs, and further talks between the Special Representatives. The government should inform the country about the progress as well as considered measures such as “buffer zones”, the patrolling-free period, and the reasons for the decision to pull back Indian troops in the areas of disengagement. The government must also continue to work towards its stated goal of restoring the “status quo ante” or the position of troops to the situation in April, before the mobilisation began. Else, Prime Minister Modi's strong words at Leh last week will have little meaning.

With disengagement under way, there are other important steps to consider. This was the first time the LAC has seen such casualties in over four decades, and the governments cannot put aside the violent Galwan clash. For this a full inquiry is needed of the build-up to the clash and the circumstances surrounding the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers. The government must consider whether it will continue its course of economic counter-measures against China, including the banning of apps, investment restrictions, and an import slowdown. There is also the question of whether high-level contacts, such as the informal summit between Mr. Modi and Chinese President Xi will be resumed; the leaders have not communicated directly during this crisis. As a process to restore peace begins, restoring “status quo ante” in bilateral trust may be more difficult for the foreseeable future. But, in small steps over time, India and China must return to a more balanced relationship.

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