

A PHANTOM CALLED THE LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

At the heart of India's and China's continued inability to make meaningful progress on the [boundary issue](#) are four agreements — signed in [September 1993](#), [November 1996](#), [April 2005](#) and [October 2013](#) — between the two countries. Ironically, India and China keep referring to these agreements as the bedrock of the vision of progress on the boundary question. Unfortunately, these are deeply flawed agreements and make the quest for settlement of the boundary question at best a strategic illusion and at worst a cynical diplomatic parlour trick. Here's how.

According to the [1993 agreement](#) (on the maintenance of peace and tranquility along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the India-China border areas), “pending an ultimate solution”, “the two sides shall strictly respect and observe the LAC between the two sides... No activities of either side shall overstep the LAC”.

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Further, both the 1993 and the [1996 agreement](#) (on confidence-building measures in the military field along the LAC) say they “will reduce or limit their respective military forces within mutually agreed geographical zones along the LAC.” This was to apply to major categories of armaments and cover various other aspects as well, including air intrusions “within ten kilometres along the LAC”.

The specification of this phantom LAC as the starting point and the central focus has made several key stipulations and articles of the four agreements effectively inoperable for more than a quarter of a century. In fact, many of the articles have no bearing on the ground reality. Article XII of the 1996 agreement, for instance, says, “This agreement is subject to ratification and shall enter into force on the date of exchange of instruments of ratification.” It is not clear if and when that happened.

Astonishingly, nowhere in the 1993 agreement is there the provision to recognise the existing lines of deployment of the respective armies, as they were in 1993. The agreement does not reflect any attempt to have each side recognise the other's line of deployment of troops at the time it was signed. That would have been the logical starting point. If both armies are to respect the LAC, where is the line? The ambiguity over the LAC has brought a prolonged sense of unease and uncertainty and thus exponentially contributed to the military build-up in those areas. The absence of a definition of this line allows ever new and surreptitious advances on the ground.

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Had the wordsmiths of the 1993 agreement begun the exercise with the phrase “pending an ultimate solution, each side shall strictly respect and observe the line of existing control/deployment” instead of the “LAC”, it would have been more possible to keep the peace. In such a case there would have been two existing lines of control on the map — one for the physical deployment of the Chinese troops and the other for the physical deployment of the Indian troops. This would have rendered the areas between the two lines no man's land, and would have ensured that the two armies were frozen in their positions.

In effect, in the eastern sector, where the Chinese have not accepted the loosely defined

McMahon line which follows the principle of watershed, and the western sector, which is witnessing another episodic stand-off, the LAC is two hypothetical lines. The first is what Indian troops consider the extent to which they can dominate through patrols, which is well beyond the point where they are actually deployed and present. The second is what the Chinese think they effectively control, which is well south of the line they were positioned at in 1993.

Now consider para 4 in Article II of the [2013 agreement \(on border defence cooperation\)](#). It enjoins the parties to “work with the other side in combating natural disasters or *infectious diseases* (emphasis mine) that may affect or spread to the other side”. Given this serious intent, how do we read the latest round of fisticuffs and intense physical scrimmage between Chinese and Indian soldiers that left at least 70 Indian soldiers injured and hospitalised in Ladakh? It could have exposed some of the Indian soldiers to a local Chinese mutation of COVID-19. Forget physical distancing, were they even wearing masks?

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It is in this theatre of the militarily absurd that we should look at the outcome of the attempted exchange of maps in the western sector where this round of confrontation continues between India and China. This came after the exchange of maps in the middle sector where divergences were the least, i.e., the existing line and the Chinese and Indian idea of the LAC were more or less the same (in 2002). Kanwal Sibal, who was the Foreign Secretary then, and Wang Yi, the head of the Chinese delegation, met in New Delhi in 2003 for this purpose. It had been agreed that both sides would exchange maps to an agreed scale on each side’s perceptions of the location of the LAC in the western sector. The idea was to superimpose the maps to see where the perceptions converged and, crucially, where they diverged. Due to the contentious nature of the sector, it would provide a starting point, not the end point, to discuss how to reconcile divergences presumed to be significant, given Chinese military behaviour on the ground there.

Each side handed over its map to the other. Mr. Wang took the map, gave it a long, hard look, and wordlessly returned it. He provided no reason for his action. The meeting effectively ended there. Had he been instructed not to accept any map the Indian side provided? Or did he make a spur-of-the-moment decision that this exchange was not in China’s interests? In hindsight, it is obvious that Mr. Wang didn’t think the map was in Chinese interests, because if he had, the Chinese would have with them, officially, New Delhi’s claim with regard to the LAC in the western sector where they wanted the most territory. That meant that their hands would have been tied because New Delhi could subsequently say that the Chinese were intruding into India’s LAC.

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By disregarding the map, China is not bound in any way by New Delhi’s perception of the LAC, and therefore does not have to limit liberty of action. This was evident then and is especially evident now. Because the nature of the terrain, deployment, and infrastructure and connectivity asymmetries in the border areas continue to be so starkly in China’s favour that it is clear that the Chinese are in no hurry to settle the boundary question. They see that the cost to India in keeping this question open suits them more than settling the issue.

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