

A CASE FOR QUIET DIPLOMACY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

On June 9, sources in the Indian Army said Indian and Chinese troops began a [partial disengagement](#) from some of the standoff points along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh, which has seen tensions since early May. That was the first official confirmation that there were ongoing multiple stand-offs along the LAC.

The government has come under fire from the Opposition for its silence on the month-long stand-offs. “The Chinese have walked in and taken our territory in Ladakh,” Congress leader [Rahul Gandhi tweeted](#) on June 10. “Meanwhile, the PM is absolutely silent and has vanished from the scene.”

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The picture that emerged on June 9 indicated we are at the beginning of the process to resolve the situation, and not at the end. Both sides have agreed on a broad plan to defuse four of the five points of discord. The situation at the fifth, Pangong Lake (in photo), remains uncertain, as also in Galwan valley and north Sikkim. At Pangong Tso, the Chinese have entrenched their positions with tents and remain on India’s side of the LAC. There is a major point of difference which will not be easy to resolve.

The pattern of resolution of past stand-offs underlines the key role played by quiet diplomacy in unlocking complicated stand-off situations. Both the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and National Democratic Alliance (NDA) governments have followed an approach that has coupled quiet diplomacy with a strong military posture, while at the same time allowing the adversary a way out. This has been the broad strategy in dealing with challenges from China across the LAC. And this strategy has generally worked.

Consider 2013, when Chinese troops pitched tents on India’s side of the LAC on the Depsang plains, similar to Pangong Tso. The UPA government was under fire, both for being weak on China and for its reticence. Former National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon recently explained how the stand-off was resolved. While the government was being publicly attacked for doing nothing, it had privately conveyed to China that if the stand-off didn’t end, an upcoming visit by Premier Li Keqiang would be off. If that demand had been made public at the time, China would have only dug in its heels, even if the government may have won the headlines of the day. “The key to arriving at a successful outcome,” Mr. Menon wrote in *Choices: Inside the Making of India’s Foreign Policy*, “was keeping public rhetoric calm and steady, displaying strength, and giving the adversary a way out, which was our preferred solution.”

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The NDA government adopted a similar strategy during the 2014 stand-off at Chumar, which coincided with President Xi Jinping’s visit to India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi then was criticised by the Opposition for sitting on a swing with Mr. Xi in Gujarat while Chinese troops had crossed the LAC. Mr. Xi’s visit went ahead, while India quietly but forcefully stopped the Chinese road-building and deployed 2,500 soldiers, outnumbering the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The PLA withdrew, and as then Northern Army Commander Lt. Gen. D.S. Hooda (retd) explained recently, both sides disengaged and followed a moratorium into patrolling into contested areas, which was observed for many months thereafter.

If the government had publicly announced in 2014 it was following a moratorium on patrolling up to India's LAC to ease tensions, there would have likely been an uproar, just as there was in 2013 after Depsang. Then, Mr. Modi, who was the Gujarat Chief Minister, slammed the government, asking at the time: "What are the reasons we have pulled back from our own land?" Ultimately, in both cases, the objective was achieved. China, faced with firm resistance, was prevented from changing the status quo.

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In 2017, the government came under particularly intense fire because it stayed studiously silent through a 72-day stand-off at Doklam, amid a barrage of threats from Beijing. Indian troops crossed over into Bhutan to stop a Chinese road construction on territory India sees as Bhutanese but China claims. By extending the road, India argued, China was unilaterally altering the India-Bhutan-China trijunction. Beijing demanded an unconditional withdrawal. When both finally disengaged, neither divulged the terms. It would later emerge that the deal struck involved India withdrawing first. China then stopped construction, and the status quo at the face-off site was restored.

Politics over border stand-offs is not new. One only needs to go back to the intense public debates in the early 1960s. The Opposition and the media are certainly right to hold the government to account. Indeed, neither the Opposition nor the media would be doing its job if they weren't. As Mr. Modi's comments from 2014 remind us, this is par for the course. And if questions weren't being asked last month, perhaps we may still be in the dark.

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The tensions on the LAC are neither the first nor likely to be the last. With every incident, they are, however, getting increasingly politicised in an environment where there is a 24/7 demand on social media for information — and unprecedented capacity for disinformation. Rather than wish away this reality — and adopt a stand that it is above questioning — the government needs to come to terms with it. First, it needs to keep the Opposition informed, which it is clear it hasn't. Second, it needs to proactively engage with the media, even if that may be through low-key engagement as was the case on June 9, that does not escalate into a public war of words. The media cannot be muzzled. India, after all, is not China. So it is in the government's own interests to ensure what's reported is well-informed, and not speculative or exaggerated.

At the same time, expectations of having a public debate about the intricacies of every border stand-off — or for the Prime Minister to weigh in even while negotiations are ongoing — need to be tempered. This will only risk inflaming tensions, and reduce the wiggle room for both sides to find an off-ramp. The broader objective shouldn't get lost in political debates. That objective is to ensure India's security interests remain protected — and that the status quo on India's borders isn't changed by force. Past incidents have shown that quiet diplomacy, coupled with strong military resolve that deters any Chinese misadventures, has been more effective than public sabre-rattling, even if we may be inhabiting a media environment that misconstrues loudness as strength, and silence as weakness.

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