

# INDIA-CHINA: THE LINE OF ACTUAL CONTEST

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The ongoing military standoffs with China at multiple points along the India-China border has turned the spotlight to the single most important element that has helped keep the peace across the Himalayas: the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Yet, what exactly the LAC is remains a source of much confusion.

One possible reason for the confusion is that in the public imagination, it is sometimes spoken of in the same breath with that other contested three-letter abbreviation that is often in the news: the Line of Control (LoC) that separates India and Pakistan. They are different in one crucial way. With Pakistan, India has an international boundary, which has been agreed upon, and the LoC, which has been delineated on a map by both sides. In contrast, the alignment of the LAC has never been agreed upon, and it has neither been delineated nor demarcated. There is no official map in the public domain that depicts the LAC. It can best be thought of as an idea, reflecting the territories that are, at present, under the control of each side, pending a resolution of the boundary dispute. In a strange irony, if the LAC is far less clear than the LoC, it has remained much more peaceful, with not a shot fired since 1975 at Tulong La.

Where does the LAC run? For the most part, in the western sector, it broadly corresponds with the border as China sees it. There are differences in several points here, including at the very start of the LAC, which India reportedly pegs northwest of the Karakoram Pass, but China further south. In the eastern sector, it broadly corresponds with the border as India sees it, along the McMahon Line that separates Arunachal Pradesh from Tibet. In the middle sector and Sikkim, the LAC is broadly aligned with the borders as India and China see it, with minor differences here.

Following the Tulong La incident, Delhi's China Study Group set patrolling limits that India would stick to, in order to assert its LAC alignment — limits that are still being followed today. The problem is India and China do not agree on the alignment of the LAC everywhere. Differences in perception, particularly in 13 spots in the western, middle and eastern sectors of the border, often lead to what are called "face offs", when patrols encounter each other in these grey zones that lie in between the different alignments. Some of these areas are Chumar, Demchok and the north bank of the Pangong lake in the western sector, Barahoti in the middle sector, and Sumdorong Chu in the east. Both sides agreed to protocols in 2005 and 2013 that describe the rules of engagement to handle such situations, but as the current stand-off at Pangong Tso reminds us, they haven't always been followed. At Pangong Tso, India's LAC runs at Finger 8, and China's at Finger 4. The "fingers" from 1 to 8 refer to mountain spurs that run from west to east on the lake's northern bank. Currently, Chinese troops have erected tents in the Finger 4 area and are preventing India from reaching its LAC at Finger 8, leading to a stand-off.

## Genesis

In a November 7, 1959 letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, then Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai suggested the armed forces of both sides withdraw 20 km, as he put it, "from the so-called McMahon Line in the east, and from the line up to which each side exercises actual control in the west". Yet where exactly each side believed it exercised control was a matter of debate, complicated by the fact that China's alignments kept changing. The "LAC" it referred to in 1960 and 1962 wasn't the same as 1959. When India and China signed the landmark Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement (BPTA) in **1993**, the first legal agreement that recognised the LAC, they avoided this problem by referring to the LAC at the time, and not the LAC of 1959, 1960 or 1962, all of which

had different meanings.

It isn't widely known that many of the ideas in the BPTA had, in part, a Russian genesis. Following Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 visit to China, both sides were optimistic of pushing ahead on talks on the boundary. In this time, they were exploring regimes to maintain peace and tranquillity, and looked at, among others, the ongoing China-Russia boundary negotiations. "It was not that we came to some Nirvana moment," recalls Nirupama Rao, a former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to China who had, in 1991, engaged with the Russians on this question as the then Joint Secretary (East Asia) in the Ministry of External Affairs. "For instance, the concept of mutual and equal security, which we included in the agreement, was a Russian term. This was a borrowed idea, like Eve being born from the rib of Adam."

No other basis besides the LAC suggested itself, writes former National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon in his book *Choices*. "The status quo was the LAC, irrespective of what had been said about it in the past. The reference to the LAC would be unqualified, making it clear that it was the LAC at the time the agreement was signed that would be respected, and not some notional idea of where it was in 1959 or 1962." As Mr. Menon writes, this unqualified reference to the LAC created "the unintended side effect of further incentivising the forward creep to the line by both militaries", a consequence that both sides are currently dealing with at multiple points on the LAC.

### **Clarification**

Both the 1993 BPTA agreement and the subsequent agreement on confidence-building measures in 1996 acknowledged that both sides would ultimately clarify the LAC. That process has, however, stalled since 2002, when China walked away from exchanging maps in the western sector. During a 2015 visit to China, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a pitch to revive the process, saying in a speech in Tsinghua University that "a shadow of uncertainty always hangs over the sensitive because neither side knows where the LAC is in these areas," he said. China rebuffed his request.

Ms. Rao, the former Foreign Secretary, said that it wasn't a surprise, and China had, in several territorial disputes, intentionally left its claims ambiguous. "The Chinese are masters at it. They don't stick to positions, and their actions on the ground constantly defy things they have done in the past. The Chinese line has kept shifting. There is always scope for redrawing, and we have never had the chance to look at their maps."

The current stand-offs, Ms. Rao said, have underlined the challenge India faces on its borders.

"If a problem has lasted so long, and there is no settlement in sight, we may need another generation or two to settle it. The only answer for us is to be prepared, continue to build our roads and improve our infrastructure, keep ourselves ready to deal with these contingencies, and play the game in a way that safeguards our interests." The contest across the line isn't going anywhere.

### ***In Focus***

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***In the east, it broadly corresponds with the border as India sees it, along the McMahon Line***

***In the middle, it is broadly aligned with the borders as both countries see it***

***The LAC can best be thought of as an idea, reflecting the territories that are, at present, under the control of each side, pending a resolution of the boundary dispute***

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