

INDIAN ARMY GETS NOD TO RESPOND APTLY TO ANY PROVOCATION ALONG LAC WITH CHINA

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NEW DELHI: India on Sunday hit the reset button on the rules of engagement with Chinese troops along the entire stretch of the 3,488-kilometre long border, with the Indian Army given the green signal to respond appropriately to any provocation.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Sunday gave his go-ahead to the new tactical approach to be adopted, a person familiar with the development said, which came against the backdrop of the 15 June "violent faceoff" between Indian and Chinese troops on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Singh's approval was conveyed in a meeting he held on Sunday with Chief of Defence Staff Bipin Rawat and the three service chiefs. Singh also reviewed the situation in eastern Ladakh, a day before his departure on a three-day visit to Moscow for ceremonies to mark the 75th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Germany in the Second World War.

The new tactical approach to be taken up by the Indian Army may include staggered movement of patrols in key areas of the LAC besides holding some high position or feature to give Indian troops tactical advantage.

The Indian Army has also been given the freedom to deal suitably with any aggression by China along the LAC, the person cited above said. It is not clear whether this means Indian troops will no longer be bound by the long-held practice of not using firearms in faceoffs.

According to the terms of an agreement signed in 1996, it was agreed that "Neither side shall open fire or hunt with guns or explosives within two kilometers from the line of actual control."

During the 15 June "violent faceoff" in Galwan region of Ladakh, Chinese troops attacked an Indian army group with stones besides sticks wrapped with barb wire. There were also sticks embedded with nails that were used against the Indian troops.

The accounts of the attack drew questions from various quarters as to why the Indian soldiers were "unarmed." Indian foreign minister S Jaishankar last week in a Twitter post said: "Let us get the facts straight. All troops on border duty always carry arms, especially when leaving post. Those at Galwan on 15 June did so. Long-standing practice (as per 1996 & 2005 agreements) not to use firearms during faceoffs."

India has already put all troops along the LAC on high alert as well as Indian Air Force stations close to the borders with China. Reinforcements have also been sent to areas seen as sensitive with orders to be "extra vigilant." The Indian Air Force has also moved a sizeable number of its frontline Sukhoi 30 MKI, Jaguar, Mirage 2000 aircraft and Apache attack helicopters to several key air bases including Leh and Srinagar in the last five days, a PTI report said. India is to hold ground and not cede territory to the Chinese, a second person familiar with the matter said adding New Delhi had no doubts about whether the LAC lay.

In his remarks during an all-party meeting on Friday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said that the Indian army had been given the freedom to take necessary steps along the border and that India had informed China of this decision through diplomatic means.

The clash in Galwan Valley, seen as the worst flare-up of tensions between the two sides in 45

years has significantly frayed ties between the two countries. Another 76 Indian soldiers were also injured.

A statement from the Chinese foreign ministry on Friday had sought another meeting at the senior commanders to defuse tensions that have been simmering since early May when troops of the two countries clashed on the banks of the Pangong Tso lake in Ladakh.

The Pangong Tso incident was followed by another in Sikkim on 9 May. It is unclear whether India will accede to the demand given that India says that China has not kept to the understanding reached at the first meeting of senior commanders on 6 June. But the two countries could hold a meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) – led by senior diplomats – maybe as early as this week to cool tensions between the two countries. Indian foreign minister S Jaishankar is to attend a trilateral meeting with the foreign ministers of Russia and China this week with the Indian foreign ministry saying that bilateral issues are not on the agenda of the Russia-India-China meeting.

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