

# SLOW STEPS TO INDIA-CHINA BORDER TRANQUILLITY

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India and China appear to be moving towards a new modus vivendi to maintain peace and tranquillity along their disputed 4,000 kilometre border. In 2020, the older arrangements, shaped by the agreements of 1993, 1996, 2005 and 2013, came apart in Ladakh after the Chinese massed troops in Tibet and established blockades at six points on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to prevent Indian troops from patrolling the border.

A [clash at Galwan in June 2020](#) led to the deaths of 20 Indian and four Chinese soldiers, the first such losses on the LAC since 1975. The [Sino-Indian clash, in December 2022](#), at Yangtse, north-east of Tawang, suggests that new measures may be needed across the LAC, and not just in Ladakh.

There are reported to have been important discussions that took place when Shilpak Ambule, Joint Secretary of the East Asia Division of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and the Office of the External Affairs Minister, and Hong Liang, Director-General of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, met in Beijing for the [26th Meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination \(WMCC\) on China-India Border Affairs](#), on February 22, 2023. This was the first in-person meeting of the WMCC that had held the previous 11 rounds since the 2020 events by video conference.

In the last three years, through patient negotiation, the two sides managed to disengage in four of the six points — Galwan, Pangong Tso, Gogra Post and near Jianan Pass (PP15). But two key areas remain unsettled, i.e., the Depsang Bulge and the Charding Ninglung Junction in the Demchok area involving nearly 1,000 square kilometres.

The Indian press release after the meeting said the proposals for disengagement in the “remaining areas” were discussed “in an open and constructive manner” which could “create conditions for restoration of normalcy in bilateral relations”.

The Chinese release, which was slightly more forthcoming, spoke of the “achievements made in the disengagement of border troops of the two countries at four locations including Galwan Valley” and that the two sides would work along “established lines” and settle the remaining issues on the western boundary. But, more significantly, it said that “the two sides discussed

other measures to further ease the border situation, and agreed to make efforts in promoting the border situation to the phase of normalized management and control”.

What could these “other measures” be that could restore a measure of normality to the situation so badly roiled by the events of 2020?

While several proposals have been discussed, the most likely one (based on the experience of the last three years) is about converting other parts of the LAC into similar no-patrol zones. Immediately, this could lead to a package settlement in the two remaining areas of Depsang and Charding Nala. The discussions have also reportedly taken up the issue of upgrading the border management means to replace the WMCC with a mechanism that will have both military and civilian officers.

The entire range of confidence-building measures since 1993 was premised on the belief that both sides largely accepted the lay of the LAC, though they had differences that related to some 18-20 points on it. The 1993 and 1996 agreements specifically spoke about the importance of identifying and resolving these differences. But as the decade wore on, the Chinese walked back on the task of defining a clear LAC without providing any good reasons; the result was that Indian and Chinese patrols sometimes ended up resorting to pushing, shoving and even fisticuffs and stone-throwing. And then there was 2020.

It is likely that the no-patrol zones could be confined to the places where the two sides have overlapping claims. Till 2020, both sides patrolled till the limit of these contending claims and there was a protocol that if the two patrols met, they would stop and display banners to ask the other side to go back to their area. Thereafter, the issue was dealt with through meetings at one of the five designated border meeting points.

In an article in an Indian publication in 2020, Chinese journalist-scholar Qian Feng suggested that the concept of the “zone of actual control” could replace the “line of actual control” in some areas that had no obvious geomorphological features or population. Other areas, too, could be delimited as a “border belt” if they did not require population adjustment. But whether or not the idea works will depend on the intentions of the two interlocutors. If the Chinese seek to use the lack of precision of the LAC to keep India off balance, little will change.

The idea is actually an echo of the original proposal by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai following a similar set of circumstances we are experiencing today. In October 1959, an Indian police party was ambushed at Kongka La leading to the deaths of 10 personnel and the capture of another dozen.

There was an uproar and to quieten it, Zhou proposed to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in a letter of November 7, 1959 that both sides withdraw 20 kilometres from the “so called” McMahon Line, as well as the “line up to which each side exercises control in the west”.

Just to which point the Chinese exercised “control in the west” at that time, or even now, has never been clear as no detailed maps have ever been made available. And that has been at the root of the problem. Over the years, the Chinese have been able to shift goalposts at will, especially in relation to the Ladakh border.

Despite tensions, Indian and Chinese Ministers and officials have been meeting with each other regularly; India’s External Affairs Minister [S. Jaishankar met his Chinese counterpart Qin Gang](#) earlier this month on the sidelines of the G-20 Foreign Ministers meeting in New Delhi.

In March 2022, Mr. Qin’s predecessor, [Wang Yi, visited New Delhi](#), ostensibly to discuss issues

relating to Ukraine. In his meetings with Mr. Wang, Mr. Jaishankar emphasised the point that there could be no normality in India-China ties until the eastern Ladakh situation was resolved. Last week he said that the Chinese inability to deliver on what the two sides had agreed on in 2020 had left their ties “fragile” and “quite dangerous”.

In 2014 and 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi tried his level best to persuade the Chinese to clarify the LAC at the points where there were differences. The Chinese ignored his proposals. Events in 2020 have destroyed the trust that was built up with patience between 1993 and 2020. The bar for normality in China-India relations is now much higher.

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