

BEHIND NEW INCIDENTS, A CHANGED DYNAMIC ALONG INDIA-CHINA BORDER

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On vigil: A file photo of an Army patrol in sub-sector North along the Line of Actual Control with China. Dinakar Peri

A greater capability by India to patrol up to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) coupled with an increasingly assertive Chinese posture is fuelling new tensions along the border, according to former senior Indian officials.

Indian and Chinese troops have been involved in as many as four incidents in recent weeks along the undefined LAC. On Monday, Chinese state media said the People's Liberation Army was "tightening control" in one of the flashpoints in Galwan Valley in the western sector, after it accused India of "unilaterally" changing the status quo by "illegal construction". A build-up has also been reported in Demchok in Ladakh.

Separately, troops from both sides were involved in fisticuffs that led to injuries following stand-off incidents on May 5 near the Pangong Tso lake in Eastern Ladakh and on May 9 in Naku La in North Sikkim. Army Chief General Manoj Naravane said on May 14 the two incidents were not related and there had been "aggressive behaviour and minor injuries on both sides". Both sides had since disengaged at these two spots.

Face-off incidents occur routinely in the summer months when both sides are able to more frequently patrol up to their respective perceptions of the LAC. Detailed protocols are in place for troops to handle such incidents. According to the 2005 protocol on modalities for implementing confidence-building measures, neither "shall use force or threaten to use force" and "both sides shall treat each other with courtesy and refrain from any provocative actions".

The 2013 Border Defence Cooperation Agreement said patrols "shall not follow or tail patrols of the other side in areas where there is no common understanding" of the LAC. It called for both sides to "exercise maximum self-restraint, refrain from any provocative actions, not use force or threaten to use force against the other side" in face-offs.

"With more intensified patrolling on both sides, the open space available has shrunk, so face-to-face situations will occur; what is different is the aggressive manner in which Chinese troops behaved and prevented Indian troops from patrolling," said Ashok Kantha, Ambassador to China from 2014 to 2016. Jostling and fisticuffs were a cause for concern because they could lead to unintended consequences or escalation, he said. "There is a larger pattern that the Chinese are becoming more assertive in pursuing their territorial claims in contested areas, that is happening both in the South China Sea and along the India China border."

India has been upgrading its infrastructure along the border, thereby allowing troops to patrol with greater depth and frequency into areas where the Chinese had, by virtue of favourable terrain and better infrastructure, established a more frequent presence. That is now being challenged.

By December 2022, all 61 strategic roads along the border, spread across Arunachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, will be completed, adding up to 3,417 km in length.

On-the-ground dynamic

These incidents were more likely fuelled by the on-the-ground dynamic than other geopolitical factors or tensions, such as India's tightening of FDI from China or the COVID-19 pandemic, said Gautam Bambawale, who was India's Ambassador to China from 2017 to 2018.

"I don't see a link between FDI tightening and these incidents, it does not work that way," he said. "What is happening is both sides are patrolling more aggressively. As a result of that, it is more than likely that you will run into each other, because of better connectivity and roads on both sides."

Clarifying perceptions of the LAC could help, but China has stalled the process. "They are afraid the LAC will become the boundary," Mr. Bambawale said. "Our point is we don't have to negotiate one common line, but negotiate a line that they don't cross, and another line that we don't cross."

If tactical imperatives are driving recent incidents, they could have strategic consequences, said Zorawar Daulet Singh, adjunct fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies. "India is seeking to restore a balance, to the extent that it is possible given enduring advantages of terrain and logistics on the Chinese side, by creating road and air connectivity to the LAC," he said. "The PLA is rattled by this. With both sides now engaged in forward policies and convinced of their right to do so, it makes for an explosive mix."

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