

FROM A STANDOFF TO A STALEMATE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

India's construction of a road to Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) in the Galwan Valley has been suggested as one reason for the [recent standoff between India and China](#) along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). [China has said](#) India was "attempting to unilaterally change the status quo" on the LAC. The Durbuk-Shyok-DBO road was under construction for more than 15 years. As per protocol, local commanders kept informing each other about the construction activities. China never raised any objection against it. In fact, construction work on China's side of the LAC has been of a much higher scale. It appears that current activities by China are meant to put pressure on India, and are not based on any perceived transgression by Indian troops.

China has a history of changing lines. In the late 1950s, the lines kept moving westward, and ultimately led to the 1962 war. More recently, in 2002, when maps were exchanged during the Expert Group meetings, China showed a claim line in the western sector which was different from what existed on the ground since 1962. Again in 2007, China's perception of the border in Depsang in the Ladakh sector, in Sikkim, and in many other places appeared to change. In 2017, China wanted to unilaterally change the boundary and the trijunction with Bhutan and India, which sparked the [Doklam standoff](#). Until 2006, Chinese troops were positioned a few kilometres behind the LAC, except for a few places where they were deployed eyeball to eyeball with Indian troops. From 2007 onwards, we have seen a surge in defence infrastructure development along the LAC. At many locations, troops have been moved to forward areas.

At the same time, bilateral military relations have improved, with annual defence dialogues and joint training. Patrol face-offs have been resolved with existing protocols, and issues resolved at the local commanders' level. After the 1986-1987 Sumdorong Chu incident, it was only more than 30 years later, at Doklam, that Chinese transgression led to both sides moving up a brigade-sized force (around 5,000 troops) to the LAC. The Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement of 1993 has helped limit the number of troops deployed near the LAC by both sides, and necessitates a mutual appraisal of any change in numbers. In Ladakh, both sides have, according to reports, moved up at least a brigade-sized force.

Such disputes should be peacefully resolved, as was done at Sumdorong Chu and Doklam. As a rule, cases of violation are resolved through a meeting of local commanders, which may be arranged through a conversation on hotlines established for that purpose. This arrangement has not been without problems. When a transgression is initiated by China, often the Chinese side does not answer the call on the hotline, as may have happened in this case. During the [2013 standoff at Depsang](#), and the [2014 incident at Chumar](#) which took place when [President Xi Jinping was visiting India](#), the local Chinese commander did not pick up the hotline. It took several days to resolve the crisis, leaving some to ask if President Xi's hold on the People's Liberation Army was not as strong as assumed to be. Now, the situation is different. [Named the 'hexin' or core](#), Mr. Xi has assumed total control. It will be unlikely that Mr. Xi will go against the [spirit of Wuhan](#) and [Mamallapuram](#), in which he has been personally invested.

The standoff in Ladakh is likely to be resolved peacefully. Given the conventional strength of both sides, any skirmish will lead to a stalemate. China will not gain anything. On the contrary, it has much to lose. China is aware it cannot push India to a strategic alliance with the U.S., which will tilt the balance of power against Beijing. This current crisis may, however, have at least one lasting impact. We may see increased permanent deployments by both sides along the LAC, and a further erosion of trust in the agreements that both sides have built, with great effort, since 1993, which has for so long helped keep the peace.

Major General M. Vinaya Chandran (ret'd), who has 36 years of service in the Indian Army, is a PhD Research Scholar at the University of Madras

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