

# THE ROAD FROM LADAKH IS PAVED WITH DISRUPTIONS

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It has been a year since the news of tensions between Indian and Chinese troops on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh first broke. Dismissed as a “routine” event in the first few weeks by officials, the truth about the extent of Chinese ingress could no longer be hidden when India lost 20 soldiers in a violent clash with soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in mid-June. As has been evident from commercial satellite imagery, sparse official statements and a few interviews, the crisis eventually involved seven places: Depsang plains, Galwan, Gogra, Hot Springs, North bank of Pangong Tso, Kailash range and Demchok.

The situation at Galwan was resolved a few weeks after the deadly clash, and the two sides disengaged from the face-off site. The Indian Army had occupied certain heights on the Kailash range in end-August, where it was in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with the Chinese. In February this year, the two sides agreed to disengage from this location and from the north bank of Pangong Tso. This was announced by India’s Defence Minister in Parliament, where he also said that the two armies will convene the next meeting of the senior commanders within 48 hours after the complete disengagement in the Pangong lake area “to address and resolve all other remaining issues”. The last such meeting of commanders was held on April 9, but the Chinese have refused to even discuss the remaining issues.

Evaluate the Ladakh crisis, keep China at bay

Such an outcome was not entirely unexpected. It was written in this newspaper ([Looking after the Ladakh walkback](#), February 17, 2021) that India had lost its only leverage on the Kailash range for the sake of disengagement on the north bank. This happened after India reversed its position of simultaneously resolving all the flashpoints in Ladakh rather than deal with them piecemeal. India’s military rationale was evident: with soldiers and tanks of the two armies barely a few metres apart, the situation was explosive and could escalate into a major crisis with a minor incident or accident. It was also clear that by restricting itself to its own side of the LAC on the Kailash range, India had not taken control of the more dominating peaks like the Black Top and had a weak hand to play with. Politically, the Narendra Modi government seemed keen to announce a closure of the border crisis by creating the impression of an honourable solution against a major power.

Three months later, no such closure is in sight. With the PLA troops denying India access to territories it controlled by patrolling, the government’s avowed aim of restoring the *status quo ante* as of April 2020 remains unfulfilled. Even on the north bank of Pangong, a new *status quo* has been created where the patrolling rights are yet to be restored. Similarly, the Kailash range has seen neither de-escalation nor de-induction so far.

In each statement, both India and China reiterate the need “to ensure peace and tranquillity” in border areas. Even if there have been no further deaths after June and no firing after early September, the peace on the border is both unstable and unsustainable. Ongoing tensions, with massive deployments on each side, belie any hope of tranquillity. That the security establishment in New Delhi is cognisant of the volatility and risk can be gauged from the fact that the Indian Army has undertaken a major reorientation of its units and formations towards the China border.

Even as the situation on the border poses a tricky challenge for India, its geopolitical concerns have been exacerbated by the devastation caused by the mismanagement of COVID-19. Through its 'Vaccine Maitri' programme, New Delhi was presenting itself as a better alternative to Beijing's vaccine diplomacy, particularly in South Asia. Shaken by scenes of massive suffering and public criticism, the Modi government has backtracked on existing contractual commitments to supply vaccines to its friendly neighbours. Countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have started procuring vaccines from China, further casting doubts on India's reliability as a partner and raising questions about its ability to act as a counter to China. Sensing the opportunity, Beijing also moved in quickly, organising a meeting with all South Asian countries except India, ostensibly to deal with the pandemic.

New Delhi was also the lynchpin of the Quad's pledge to deliver a billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine throughout the Indo-Pacific by the end of 2022, an effort focused on countering Chinese influence in the region. With India now trying to import vaccines for its own population and reneging on its commitments to other poor countries under GAVI's COVAX scheme, the proposal now seems to be on a weak footing. The abysmal failure of the Modi government to anticipate and deal with a public health crisis has diminished India's aura as an emergent power. A Prime Minister tom-tomming the mantra of 'Atmanirbharata' or self-reliance has been forced to reverse a 16-year-old policy to accept global aid has laid bare India's vulnerabilities, further reducing its standing as the Quad's anchor.

A weaker India is not only less attractive as a partner globally, it makes New Delhi more dependent on the United States to deal with China. That India has been acting at the behest of the U.S. has been one of China's presumptions and this would only confirm Beijing's worst fears. It would further strain India-China ties, directly linking them to the vagaries of the China-U.S. relationship. The hypothesis that India can safeguard its land borders by strengthening its oceanic prowess could then be put to test, a scenario New Delhi wants to avoid at all costs.

Also read | [Ladakh villagers lose grazing grounds at Pangong Tso](#)

Meanwhile, the threat of a two-front collusive threat after the Ladakh crisis forced the Modi government to seek peace with Pakistan. The back channel talks, facilitated by the United Arab Emirates, led to the announcement of the ceasefire on the Line of Control which has held so far. But there have been contradictory voices emerging from Islamabad and the process seems to be floundering, as Pakistan awaits the steps on Kashmir promised by the Modi government. No political environment has been created in India for any such step so far.

New Delhi's preoccupation with the pandemic may brook a delay of few weeks but fears of failure, a routine happening in India-Pakistan engagements, loom large. It is hard to predict the Pakistani course of action hence, but if the past is an experience to go by, it has usually been spiteful, reckless and dangerous, especially when India is seen as weak. Coupled with the imminent American military withdrawal from Afghanistan and a win for the Taliban, the signs are ominous. An assertive China and a vengeful Pakistan acting in concert on the land borders is India's military nightmare, which New Delhi will have to avoid at all costs.

Meanwhile, Beijing has made certain significant moves towards New Delhi in the recent days. China's President Xi Jinping sent a message to Mr. Modi to convey sympathy and express condolences over the pandemic, which was the first communication between the two since the border crisis began last year. The Chinese Foreign Minister spoke to his Indian counterpart twice and offered help to deal with the pandemic, which led to an early clearance and approval of cargo flights from China. The Chinese Ambassador to India has been highlighting the supplies

and the material being sent to India.

Also read | [Chinese build-up at LAC clearly visible, says Ladakh councillor](#)

Beijing's efforts have been largely confined to private companies and donations from the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, unlike other countries which have pledged government help to India. Curiously, much of the Chinese media ambiguously frames it as Chinese aid, while India explicitly avoids that framing and lays stress on the point that these are largely commercial contracts between private companies. Even if the Chinese intent is to project itself on a par with other global powers providing relief and aid to India, the fact remains that India is heavily dependent on China for crucial medical supplies. State-owned Sichuan Airlines had suspended cargo flights to India for 15 days beginning last month, but the supply chains have since been kept open by Beijing. This is in tune with the Indian demand from Beijing that the supply chain should remain open but the other demand to ensure stable product prices has not been met.

If the recent weeks during the pandemic provided an opportunity for the two Asian giants to work together, that hope has been lost as both governments have focused on point scoring. That reflects the broader state of bilateral ties, but is also a fundamental difference emanating from the ongoing border crisis. As the talks between India and China have floundered, New Delhi has taken a position that the border issue is central to the bilateral relationship. This runs contrary to Beijing's argument that the boundary question cannot be seen as the whole of the bilateral relationship. In an ideal world, New Delhi can hope for a settlement that delineates and demarcates the LAC in some form but Beijing has ruled out any such proposal. With soldiers of both armies facing each other in Ladakh and a lack of trust between the two countries as the two governments talk past each other in a period of geopolitical churn, it is clear that the China-India bilateral relationship is moving into a zone of increasing disruptions, and attendant risks of conflagration on the disputed border.

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