

PANGONG BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION IS IN 'OCCUPIED TERRITORY': CENTRE

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Still waters: The bridge will help to cut down time significantly for the movement of PLA troops. APMANISH SWARUP

India is closely monitoring the construction of a bridge by China on the Pangong Tso (lake) in eastern Ladakh, which is in "occupied territory", the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Thursday. Sources in the security establishment stated that a broad bridge was currently under construction, connecting both sides of the lake, which would significantly cut down time for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to move troops and armoured vehicles, while a smaller bridge built early this year was intended to support construction of the main one.

Official sources said the construction of the main bridge had just commenced and the small bridge, of which satellite images had come out in January, was not a "permanent bridge" but a Bailey bridge to support the construction of the main one. "The smaller bridge for which construction started in October 2021 and went on till January this year, recommenced in March and was completed by April. It is a support bridge to support the construction of a bigger and broader one. The height of the earlier one is so low that patrol boats can't pass under it," a source in the security establishment said on condition of anonymity. "This is a pattern they follow in other places as well. So, it cannot be called a second bridge."

Responding to questions on this at the weekly press interaction, External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said, "We have seen media reports on a new bridge or expansion of old ones. This is a military issue so I can't discuss implications. But India has always believed this area is occupied territory. We continue to monitor such developments." On the current status of construction, the source cited above said that construction material were dumped last month and the work on the main bridge had just commenced. "Latest satellite images show piers, construction material and cranes on the site now."

Stating that it doesn't make sense to have two bridges at the same location, the source noted that the main bridge was much higher and broader that would allow the PLA to move troops as well as armoured vehicles. As reported earlier, the bridge connecting the north and south banks of Pangong Tso would significantly bring down the time for the PLA to move troops and equipment between the two sectors.

Earlier, the PLA had to take a roundabout crossing the Rudok county, but now the bridge would provide a direct axis.

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