

THE BREAKDOWN WITH CHINA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

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On Monday night, India repelled — yet again — a possible attempt by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) to intrude into Indian territory across the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This comes a week after India successfully resisted such attempts, and held on to strategic positions on the southern banks of the Pangong Tso. The escalation in tensions in eastern Ladakh is not surprising. With both armies, mobilised in large numbers and staring at each other in close proximity, it is but natural that skirmishes will happen — especially when one army, PLA, wants to change the facts on the ground and force India to accept a new reality. It is also natural because over the past fortnight, there has been a sharp uptick in rhetoric on both sides.

All of this indicates that the India-China relationship has broken down at two levels. The first is with regard to the border management framework that has been in place for close to three decades. It is clear that China no longer sees the advantage of maintaining peace and tranquility on the border — and is keen to maintain this peace only on its terms, after wresting territory over which it has no legitimate claim. This is unacceptable to India, and rightly so. The second is with regard to the broader framework of the relationship. For years, India has convinced itself that the dynamic with China has both a cooperative and competitive element — and while this was true, it is also now clear that the competitive dynamic is on the ascendant, and is becoming sharply adversarial.

With external affairs minister S Jaishankar scheduled to meet his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, in Moscow on Thursday, it is this breakdown that must be the focus of the discussion. Is it the case that China has decided that it is comfortable with a hot LAC, and an outright adversarial relationship with India? If that is so — and the conversation will give the Indian establishment a sense of Beijing's mood — India has no choice but to prepare itself in the military, economic, diplomatic domains and respond accordingly. Or is it the case that China has read Indian motivations wrong, that apprehensions can be allayed, and Beijing can be persuaded to disengage and de-escalate? If that is so, it will help tackle the immediate crisis — even though the long- term orientation of the relationship will still be troubled.

India must hope for accommodation, even as it prepares for confrontation.

END

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