

## JAISHANKAR-WANG TALKS RAISE HOPES FOR DEFUSING INDIA-CHINA TENSION AT LAC

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The five-point framework that emerged out of a “frank and constructive” conversation between External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, on the margins of an international conference in Moscow has certainly raised hopes, if tentative, for defusing the extended military crisis on the Ladakh frontier. But Delhi must keep its fingers crossed amidst the badly shaken trust in Beijing since the People’s Liberation Army’s surprise aggression during April-May. Jaishankar and Wang agreed that the two armies, now staring at each other at many points in Ladakh, must “quickly disengage” and “ease tensions”. Sceptics in South Block will note that this is not the first time in the last few months that Beijing has promised to stand down. In various telephonic conversations between the foreign ministers, Special Representatives on border negotiations, senior diplomats as well as in direct and continuous dialogue between military commanders on the ground, [China](#) raised expectations only to dash them quickly.

The context for the talks between Jaishankar and Wang, however, has been somewhat different. In the first few months of the crisis, China appeared to have convinced itself that India had no option but to accept the new facts on the ground. This confidence was reflected in Beijing’s refusal to pull back its forces to peacetime locations, its dismissive diplomatic tone and the aggressive military actions to consolidate its territorial gains from the aggression. India’s repeated demand for restoration of the status quo ante on the frontier seemed empty rhetoric, until the Indian army ramped up its mobilisation and boldly seized some high ground to challenge Chinese military positions. These moves on the frontier were matched by a series of economic measures against China unveiled by Delhi. India’s demonstration of the political resolve to escalate the conflict and the military capability to back it may have probably convinced Beijing that it needs to rethink its approach to the current crisis.

Although the change in China’s political tone is welcome, there is no missing the deep differences that continue to complicate the path towards comprehensive military disengagement and de-escalation. If the joint statement issued after the Jaishankar-Wang talks is a bare-bones agreement, the separate explanatory comments from Delhi and Beijing reveal the challenges ahead. While India insists that the objective of the exercise is to “restore” the status quo ante, there is no explicit Chinese commitment to that goal. While Beijing wants to separate the border conflict from the rest of the relationship, Delhi says the two are inextricably interlinked. As the military commanders and diplomats try and turn the five-point consensus on principles into tangible outcomes on the ground, there will be problems — including over the nature of the steps and their sequencing. While Delhi must negotiate in good faith, it cannot again mistake Beijing’s diplomatic words for the PLA’s deeds.

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