

CHINA'S 1959 DEFINITION OF LAC ADDS A FRESH TWIST TO STANDOFF

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NEW DELHI : A fresh dispute erupted between India and China on Tuesday after Beijing said that it had recognized a Line of Actual Control (LAC) proposed in 1959, but New Delhi rejected it as a unilaterally defined boundary it had never accepted.

The move by China to bring up the topic of the 1959 LAC could impact the uneasy calm between the two neighbours following the foreign ministers' meeting on 10 September in Moscow. Indian Air Force chief Rakesh Kumar Singh Bhadauria described the current standoff as a "no war no peace" situation during an aerospace seminar in New Delhi on Tuesday.

India reacted to the statement by the Chinese foreign ministry, which was reported by *Hindustan Times* on Tuesday, saying that Beijing stood by the LAC proposed by premier Zhou Enlai to the then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru in a letter in 1959.

"India has never accepted the so-called unilaterally defined 1959 LAC. This position has been consistent and well known, including to the Chinese side," said Indian foreign ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava.

Several bilateral agreements signed by the two countries from 1993 to 2005 "committed" India and China to clarify and confirm the LAC to "reach a common understanding of the alignment of the LAC. Therefore, the insistence now of the Chinese side that there is only one LAC is contrary to the solemn commitments made by China in the agreements", he said. Srivastava put the onus on Beijing for the lack of progress in clarifying and confirming the boundary.

"In fact, the two sides had engaged in an exercise to clarify and confirm the LAC up to 2003, but this process could not proceed further as the Chinese side did not show a willingness to pursue it," the spokesman said.

Srivastava also referred to an apparent contradiction in the Chinese position on the LAC of 1959, as Beijing had previously said that the ongoing border standoff should be resolved on the basis of existing agreements.

"In the last few months, the Chinese side has repeatedly affirmed that the current situation in the border areas should be resolved in accordance with the agreements signed between the two countries," Srivastava said. This position was reaffirmed as recently as 10 September when foreign minister S. Jaishankar met his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Moscow, he said.

The source of the current tensions was China's attempts to transgress the LAC to unilaterally alter the existing status quo, as defence minister Rajnath Singh had said in parliament, he said.

Analysts said the latest Chinese move is yet again a "diversionary tactic" aimed at keeping New Delhi off balance. "The Chinese aim is to see if India will wilt under pressure which so far hasn't happened," said Srikanth Kondapalli, a professor of Chinese Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Both sides had agreed in the past to arrive at a "fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable" solution to the boundary issue, Kondapalli said, adding that the 1959 boundary was not

acceptable to India. If India were to accept it, China would have to move back from areas it had occupied in Ladakh because the recent intrusions were in violation of Beijing's 1959 claim line at the Depsang plains.

Bilateral ties had plunged to an all-time low after India detected multiple intrusions by Chinese troops in Ladakh in May.

Meanwhile, also on Tuesday, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said that it does not recognize the "illegally" constituted Union territory of Ladakh and added that Beijing was opposed to India building military infrastructure in the border areas.

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