

## Looking Back at Four Years of Galwan

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### Introduction

15 Jun 2024 marks the fourth anniversary of the incident that took place on the icy heights of Galwan in Eastern Ladakh when troops of both China and India clashed in a barbaric manner. Indian soldiers were attacked with iron rods and clubs, resulting in deaths on both sides. India lost 20 soldiers, including Colonel B Santosh Babu.

The physical clash without a round being fired came amid growing skirmishes between Indian and Chinese soldiers at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the preceding months. On the night of 05/06 May 2020, Indian and Chinese soldiers clashed at Pangong Tso in Ladakh. Another skirmish followed four days later at Naku La in Sikkim.

The clashes emerged amid China's attempts to unilaterally alter the status quo along the LAC. Beginning in early Apr 2020, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had been massing thousands of soldiers and war waging equipment along the LAC in Ladakh. This massing of troops in violation of multiple agreements was done when India was under COVID lockdown. In early Jun, amid rising tensions, military Commanders of the two sides agreed to pull back to create a buffer zone at Galwan Valley.

On 14 Jun when Indian troops went to check if the PLA had indeed withdrawn, they came under attack from Chinese soldiers. The violence unleashed that night has cast a long shadow on bilateral relations marking a significant deterioration in ties and affecting the strategic calculus of both nations.[\[1\]](#)

### Border Agreements

China continues to be in illegal occupation of approximately 38,000 sq kms in the Union Territory of Ladakh. In addition, under the so-called Sino-Pakistan 'Boundary Agreement' of 1963, Pakistan illegally ceded 5,180 sq. kms. of Indian territory in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir to China. China also claims approximately 90,000 sq. kms. of Indian territory in the Eastern Sector of the India-China boundary in Arunachal Pradesh.

There is no commonly delineated LAC in the border areas between India and China and there is no common perception of the entire LAC. The 3488 km long LAC is neither delineated on the map nor demarcated on the ground and lies in one of the most inhospitable high-altitude terrains and icy cold climatic conditions. Therefore, in order to ensure peace and tranquility in the border areas, especially along the LA, the two countries have concluded a number of agreements and protocols.[\[2\]](#)

Under these agreements, both sides agreed to maintain peace and tranquility along the LAC without any effect to their respective positions on the alignment of the LAC. It was due to this that overall relations also saw considerable progress since 1988. However, while bilateral relations can continue to develop in parallel with discussions on resolving the boundary question, any serious disturbance in peace and tranquility along the LAC in the border areas is bound to have implications on the positive direction of ties.

A key element of both the 1993 and the 1996 Agreements is that the two sides will keep their military forces in the areas along the LAC to a minimum level. These agreements also mandate that pending an ultimate solution to the boundary question, the two sides strictly respect and observe the LAC. Furthermore, India and China also committed to clarification and confirmation of the LAC to reach a common understanding of the alignment.

Thus, in late 1990s and upto 2003, the two sides engaged in an exercise to clarify and confirm the LAC. However, thereafter the Chinese side did not show a willingness to pursue the exercise. As a result, there are some areas where the Chinese and Indian perceptions of LAC overlap. In these areas, as also with other sections of the border areas, the various agreements govern the manner in which troops of both sides should operate and deal with situations of face-offs to maintain peace and tranquility.

In the meantime, the lag between India and China with regard to their economy widened considerably and this also reflected in their military capabilities and development of infrastructure along the LAC.

The last one decade has been a decade of military confrontations between India and China, whether it was the Depsang incident in 2013, or Chumar incident in 2014, stand-off in Doklam in 2017. The confrontations were largely resolved at the ground level, till the incident at the Galwan happened in 2020. The unresolved LAC underscores the challenge in achieving lasting peace and stability.[\[3\]](#)

As per Jaydev Ranade, President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy the action was caused by “China’s interest in asserting its dominance as it felt challenged by India’s rapid rise”. While Professor Srikanth Kondapalli, Dean of School of International Studies and a Professor of China Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University has stated that “The Chinese are punishing India for closer ties to the West but added that India too has failed to garner appropriate support from Western and other nations to counter China”.[\[4\]](#)

### **The Galwan Crisis**

Since April 2020, India had noticed a buildup of troops and armaments by the Chinese side in the border areas adjacent to Eastern Ladakh. In early May, the Chinese side had taken action to hinder the normal, traditional patrolling pattern of our troops in the Galwan Valley

area, which resulted in a face-off. Even as this situation was being addressed by the Commanders as per the provisions of bilateral agreements and protocols, in mid-May the Chinese side made several attempts to transgress the LAC in other parts of the Western Sector. This included Kongka La, Gogra and North Bank of Pangong Lake. These attempts were detected early and consequently responded to appropriately.<sup>[5]</sup>

India made it clear to the Chinese side both through diplomatic and military channels that China was, by such actions, attempting to unilaterally alter the status quo. It was categorically conveyed that this was unacceptable.

Given the growing friction along the LAC, the Senior Commanders of the two sides in a meeting on 06 Jun 2020 agreed on a process of disengagement that involved reciprocal actions. Both sides also agreed to respect and abide by the LAC and not undertake any activity to alter the status quo. However, in violation of this the Chinese side created a violent face off on Jun 15 Jun 2020 at Galwan.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Indian response was calculative and assertive and the strength and resilience of the Indian Armed Forces was visible by their occupying dominating strategic heights, both in the Chushul Sub-Sector (South of the Pangong Tso) and in North of Pangong Tso- thus, strengthening India's position to negotiate and diffuse the prevailing tension). Further this has led to a rebalancing of forces.

## **Conclusion**

Four years after the night of savagery, relations remain strained, and troops remain deployed in a tense standoff as the main issue regarding Chinese intrusions into territory under Indian control is yet to be resolved but also because the fallout of mutual suspicion is creating new cycles of tension.

Military and diplomatic talks at the Corps Commanders level have been going on over the past four years. The talks have led to disengaging of troops from some 'Friction Points', but mutual suspicions continue to run deep. These negotiations have yielded some results, such as disengagement at five friction points: the Pangong Tso's North and South banks, Patrolling Points 15 and 17A at the Gogra-Hot Springs area, and Galwan. However, the stand-offs in critical areas, including the Depsang Plains and Demchok in Eastern Ladakh, remain unresolved. China is unwilling to discuss these two areas, claiming that these are 'Legacy Issues' as they predate Apr 2020 and therefore do not come under the ambit of the current talks.

Further, the two armies have not reduced their troop presence at the LAC – which has been built up, even during the freezing winter months the deployment of heavy weaponry and equipment has also seen significant inductions in the region. In addition, land and air connectivity infrastructure is being improved along the entire LAC.

To quote Lieutenant General Rakesh Sharma (Retd), a former Corps Commander in Eastern Ladakh; “The Chinese now know that post Galwan they have to fight for each and every inch of land unlike the past when they would salami slice our territory”. He goes on to say “The border has changed from benign to active where both nations have deployed a considerable amount of manpower and equipment”. The External Affairs Minister Mr. S Jaishankar recently said "India responded by counter deployment of forces" and for four years now, forces have been deployed ahead of the normal base positions at Galwan. "This is a very abnormal deployment along the LAC. Given the tension between the two countries... As Indian citizens, none of us should disregard the security of the country...it is today a challenge".

There is a huge trust deficit regarding China, due to the major standoffs on the LAC. Over the last two decades, with economic differential continuing to increase between India and China, it may become more aggressive and expansionist on both continental and maritime domains

For India the lesson is clear till a resolution on the territorial dispute is resolved we need to build on our hard power which is reflected not only in troop strength but also technology, capability and operational readiness backed by doctrines and resolve, we cannot afford to lower our vigil.

## End Notes

[1] Sudha Ramachandran, ‘3 Years After the India-China Face-Off at Galwan Valley’, 14 Jun 2023 <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/3-years-after-the-india-china-face-off-at-galwan-valley/>

[2] Ananth Krishnan, ‘Line of Actual Control ; India-China: The Line of Actual Contest’, The Hindu, 13 Jun 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/line-of-actual-control-india-china-the-line-of-actual-contest/article31822311.ece>

[3] Shibani Mehta, ‘Impasse at the LAC: An Examination of the 2013, 2014, and 2015 Standoffs’, Carnegie Endowment, 31 Aug 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/10/impasse-at-the-lac-an-examination-of-the-2013-2014-and-2015-standoffs?lang=en>

[4] ‘Four Years Of The Galwan Clashes: The Road Leading To And From Galwan; A Snapshot Of Grand Chinese Miscalculation’, BharatShakti, 14 May 2024, <https://bharatshakti.in/four->

[years-of-the-galwan-clashes-the-road-leading-to-and-from-galwan-a-snapshot-of-grand-chinese-miscalculation/](#)

[5] PIB, Text of Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh Statement in Rajya Sabha on 17 Sep 2020, Ministry of Defence, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleseDetailm.aspx?PRID=1655521>

[6] Ibid

Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd) is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armoured Division.

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