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Stabilizing the Border: A Possible Way Ahead in the Post-Galwan Situation

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Summary

An abnormal situation continues to prevail along the India-China Line of Actual Control (LAC) three years after the Galwan valley incident despite bilateral talks to resolve the matter. Although progress is being made, the force levels on both sides and the close proximity in which they are deployed increase the chances of a deadly mishap or an unintended encounter. Even after a mutually satisfactory resolution is achieved, it may still take several months to build back a broad political understanding at the state-to-state level and reverse the erosion in trust.

This paper examines why the existing agreements and measures to preserve peace and tranquility along the LAC were not entirely successful in mitigating the military face-offs between the two sides since 2013, including in the Galwan valley in 2020. It also explores whether the three-stage formula¹ that is being talked of as a way of resolving the issue—disengagement, de-escalation, and de-induction² of forces—especially the de-induction of forces, could practically work given the absence of trust as well as the geographical and climatic conditions in which the two sides operate. The paper concludes that unless political trust exists, the de-induction of forces may not be achievable. India should be ready for a prolonged state of military preparedness by establishing a credible deterrence along the LAC and adequate reserves in the rear to respond to fresh aggression, while simultaneously engaging China to negotiate a modus vivendi in the border areas. Specific options both on negotiating a new balance with China and building deterrence are suggested.

The first section of the paper looks at ways in which both sides created the building blocks of border management in the 1990s. The objective is to determine which elements succeeded in achieving peace and tranquility and why this framework has shown stress in more recent times. This section highlights that the border management framework, as originally envisaged, encompassed immediate measures to both stave off unintended conflict and longer-term ways and means to maintain peace and tranquility along the entire border region through mutual force reduction. It explores the possible reasons as to why the longer-term objective of mutual force reduction was not pursued. The paper concludes that peace and tranquility could not be sustainably maintained because the focus was on short-term management of situations to the detriment of long-term measures that would reduce the risks.

The second section of the paper looks at how both sides might deal with border stabilization in the post-2020 scenario and, more specifically, whether mutual reduction of forces is still a feasible option. It seeks to draw lessons from the Sino-Russian experience in this regard, which shows that mutual force reduction happens when state-to-state engagement deepens and both sides feel comfortable with the level of trust and their own capacity for deterrence. The paper concludes that political trust is a prerequisite for meaningful mutual de-induction of forces. Presently, such conditions do not exist in the India-China context. This section of the paper also looks at how the growing infrastructure gap between India and China in the border areas since 2000 also makes it difficult for the two countries to replicate the Sino-Russian model.

The final section of the paper looks at the options that might be available to India to build back a framework for peace and tranquility along the border areas. It also outlines the actions that India might consider adopting unilaterally as well as in the negotiations with China with the objective of creating the conditions for restoration of peace and tranquility in the border region. It suggests a three-pronged approach of negotiating with China to stabilize the border region, building deterrence on the LAC, and holding adequate reserves in the rear.

Building a Stable and Predictable Border Region (1988–2012)

After the Cold War ended, India required a stable and peaceful environment to develop its economy and adjust to the fundamental changes in the world. A peaceful and predictable situation in the India-China border region became a primary goal. China was also keen to stabilize its southwestern frontier. The troubles in Tibet in 1988–89, the restive situation in the Sino-Soviet border regions, and the Chinese Communist Party's fear that it was a target of Western subversion after the collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union

were matters of concern. It suited both sides to defuse the tension along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) so as to reduce the possibilities of conflict. India and China thus approached the question of peace and tranquility in the border region with a common sense of purpose.³

But a shared purpose was not, in and of itself, adequate to jointly agree on the mechanics for establishing peace and tranquility in the border region on a sustainable and long-term basis. It became clear that there were differences on where the “working border” lay in several parts of the border region. Patrolling limits overlapped in such places.⁴ The armed “stand-off” between border-guarding forces in the northern Sumdurongchu valley that had begun in 1987 was still unresolved because the two parties could not agree on the precise alignment of the border in that area. According to the Chinese side, the river valley lay on their side of the so-called “LAC of 7 November 1959.” The Chinese map depicting such a notional LAC had been appended to the letter of November 15, 1962, that Premier Zhou Enlai had written to the leaders of Asian and African countries, but this map was neither to scale nor was it accompanied by a detailed description of the alignment.⁵ India had rejected the idea of the LAC of 7 November 1959 in 1959 and did so again in 1962.

From 1988 onward, after relations with China were normalized, both sides have discussed ways to stabilize the situation in the border area. India accepted the idea that a mutually defined “working border” was a necessary prerequisite for implementing and supervising agreed measures in order to reduce the possibility of future military conflict between India and China. Without a common point of reference, it might have been practically difficult to ensure the peace. With this idea in mind, the Indian side proposed drawing a distinction between the respective boundary claims of India and China and the actual ground positions of the two military forces in the border region.⁶ This preserved India’s position that there was no agreed LAC and, hence, it was necessary to first mutually agree to a definition. It also preserved the Chinese position that peace and tranquility measures that might be mutually agreed upon would not automatically imply that both sides had also implicitly agreed to the alignment of an LAC other than the one China was claiming (the LAC of 7 November 1959).

Discussion on the first bilateral agreement of any kind specifically relating to the India-China border region commenced in 1992. India provided the working draft. As per the lead negotiator on the Indian side, once the differences on whether or not there was a common LAC had been finessed, the remainder of the negotiation went smoothly and quickly.⁷ The Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, more commonly known as the Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement (BPTA), was signed in Beijing on September 7, 1993.⁸ It enunciated key principles:

1. Mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and mutual non-aggression
2. No use or threat of use of force in resolving matters
3. Determination of the LAC alignment jointly where differences arose

4. Keeping the military forces to “minimum level” in conformity with the requirements of “mutual and equal security”
5. Mutual restraint in the level and scope of military activity that either side could pursue in close proximity to the border

These principles formed the bedrock of arrangements, and their implementation had the potential to prevent unintended military encounters and keep the peace in the border region. After the BPTA in 1993, an expert group consisting of military and civilian officials was jointly established by India and China under the aegis of the Joint Working Group on the India-China Boundary Question that had been set up in 1989, and it was tasked with the responsibility of developing actionable proposals based on these key principles. The BPTA became the basis upon which, over the next two decades (until 2013), the two governments worked out further agreements, mechanisms, and specific confidence-building measures to keep the peace in the border region.

Three further agreements and protocols followed in the wake of the BPTA. The first of these, signed in November 1996, was the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, commonly known as the Confidence Building Measures Agreement (CBMA).⁹ The CBMA outlined specific actions for on-the-ground border management on land and in the air that would reduce the possibility of mishap. These included the prohibition of large-scale (division-strength) military exercises and prior notification for the induction and de-induction of brigade-level exercises. In a nod to the ambiguities in their mutual perceptions of the alignment of the LAC, Article X of the CBMA provided for the exchange of maps indicating the respective perceptions of the entire alignment of the LAC, thereby meeting a key requirement from India’s perspective for maintaining sustainable peace and tranquility in the border region. The CBMA further reiterated the countries’ shared aspiration to work toward the reduction in border-guarding forces and to limit the deployment of certain armaments such as tanks, long-range howitzers, and missiles.

On April 11, 2005, India and China followed the CBMA by concluding the Protocol on Modalities for Implementation of the Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas.¹⁰ This protocol created mechanisms for both sides to engage in the border region and standard operating procedures in case the two militaries came into contact with each while on patrol duties. It elaborated the specific steps that both sides would be required to take in order to avoid escalation in such situations. Specific permanent points along the LAC—Spanggur in the Western sector, Nathu La in the Sikkim sector, and Bum La in the Eastern sector—were designated as Border Personnel Meeting (BPM) points (this was in addition to the flag meetings that either side could seek at short notice at the ground level to resolve LAC violations), with the purpose of providing ready platforms to facilitate disengagement. The two sides also

agreed to broader military-to-military contacts between the higher military commands on either side of the India-China boundary and other measures to build mutual confidence. The Working Mechanism for Coordination and Cooperation on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) was set up in January 2012 to supervise this process at the diplomatic level.¹¹

The most recent document was the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Border Defence Cooperation, commonly known as the Agreement on Border Defence Cooperation (BDCA), signed in October 2013.¹² The BDCA identified additional situations in which the border-guarding forces could engage in information sharing or other mutually agreed forms of cooperation in order to maintain order and stability in the border region.

The four agreements and protocols collectively provided procedures and mechanisms to manage the situation in the India-China border areas at the ground level and through diplomatic channels. Both armies continued to patrol up to their perceptions of the LAC and to improve infrastructure in the border areas. The measures to handle and defuse “face-offs” in case the two patrols came into close contact worked well enough to prevent any major “stand-off” in the border areas between 1993 and 2013.

Along with border management work, the two countries began the task of jointly clarifying the alignment of the LAC on maps on the basis of the modalities agreed to during the visit of former external affairs minister Jaswant Singh to Beijing in June 1999. The exercise was conducted through an expert group headed by a director-level official on the Indian side and a deputy director general-level official on the Chinese side and with the participation of both militaries. The process lasted for four years, until March 2003. Both sides began with the Middle sector (corresponding to the Indian states of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh). They initially showed and then exchanged the maps of agreed scale that depicted their respective perceptions of the LAC alignment.¹³ Following a successful exchange of maps in the Middle sector, the expert group started work on the Western sector (corresponding to the union territory of Ladakh). The two sides were unable to complete this exercise, possibly due to differences that emerged during the map-making process in their respective depictions of the LAC alignment in the Western sector.¹⁴ The LAC clarification exercise was suspended in the spring of 2003 and thereafter never resumed. During the visit of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to China in June 2003, both sides decided to refocus their efforts on finding a political solution to the boundary question through the mechanism of the special representatives (SRs).¹⁵ India's national security advisors and China's state councilors (later the Politburo member in charge of foreign policy) have been invested with this responsibility since 2003.¹⁶

In the BPTA and the CBMA, aside from the tasks of clarifying the alignment of the LAC and establishing protocols to defuse face-offs in the border areas, the two sides, in principle, had also agreed to reducing their forces along the LAC to “minimal levels.” Article II of the BPTA defined the following objective.

Each side will keep its military forces in the areas along the Line of Actual Control to a minimum level compatible with the friendly and good neighbourly relations between the two countries. The two sides agree to reduce their military forces along the Line of Actual Control in conformity with the requirements of the principle of mutual and equal security to ceilings to be mutually agreed upon. The extent, depth, timing and nature of reduction of military forces along the Line of Actual Control shall be determined through mutual consultations between the two countries. The reduction of military forces shall be carried out in stages in mutually agreed geographical locations sector-wise within the areas along the Line of Actual Control.¹⁷

Article VII related to the verification measures for reduction of forces: “The two sides shall agree through consultations on the form, method, scale and content of effective verification measures and supervision requirement for the reduction of military forces and the maintenance of peace and tranquility in the areas along the line of actual control under this Agreement.”¹⁸

The intention in these articles was to move beyond specific incident-related border management to reaching agreement on broader measures that would reduce the overall risk of conflict on a long-term and sustainable basis. In pursuance of this objective, preliminary exchanges of views took place during the expert group meetings in 1994 and 1995. These discussions centered around the possible principles governing mutual force reduction and especially on building a general understanding between the two sides on the concept of “mutual and equal security.” Progress could not be made on definitions. In 1996, the CBMA reiterated that mutual force reduction to minimum levels within mutually agreed geographical zones was a desirable objective. Article III(2) also specified the actions needed.

The two sides shall reduce or limit the number of field army, border defence forces, paramilitary forces and any other mutually agreed category of armed force deployed in mutually agreed geographical zones along the Line of Actual Control to ceilings to be mutually agreed upon. The major categories of armaments to be reduced or limited are as follows: combat tanks, infantry combat vehicles, guns (including howitzers) with 77 mm or bigger calibre, mortars with 120 mm or bigger calibre, surface-to-surface missiles, surface-to-air missiles and any other weapon system mutually agreed upon.¹⁹

Article II(3) stipulated that data would be exchanged on the quantum of proposed force reduction and that ceilings would be determined after taking into account the nature of terrain, road communication and other infrastructure, and the time taken to induct and de-induct troops and armaments. The last point was in recognition of the fact that the nature of the terrain on the Indian side of the border posed a significantly harder logistical challenge in comparison with the conditions prevailing on the opposite side. It was made clear to the Chinese side that there could be no parity because of the disadvantage of terrain.

It was deemed necessary to define the principle of “mutual and equal security” before actual reduction in forces could commence. The Chinese side agreed to this idea and provided for this in the two agreements.

The BPTA and the CBMA had not specified a sequential ordering of the three broad tasks of LAC clarification, risk management in specific face-off situations, and the reduction of forces and armaments at the LAC to minimum levels. In practical terms, however, India gave priority to the work of risk management and LAC clarification (and the SR process from June 2003 onward). No serious discussion on force reduction appears to have taken place after 1998. Subsequent protocols and agreements on border management (in 2005 and 2013) drilled down instead to establish a slew of standard operating procedures for handling face-offs. It even identified relatively lesser concerns for purposes of cooperation such as combating arms, wildlife, and contraband trafficking along the LAC and combatting infectious diseases and natural disasters.²⁰ Between the political-level SR mechanism that was discussing possible solutions to the boundary question and the various military-diplomatic efforts to handle incidents along the border areas, a primary objective of military de-escalation along the entire border through a planned de-induction of forces simply disappeared from the agenda. In the meantime, both sides continued to build infrastructure and augmented military capacities along the border region in consonance with their growing economic capacities. The Chinese side was faster because it had both the advantage of terrain and greater financial and technological capacity to build sophisticated infrastructure in adverse geographical and climatic conditions.

The BPTA and the CBMA worked satisfactorily so long as there was relative parity between both parties. Each had a fair idea of the patrolling patterns and the patrolling points of the other side. Despite the crisscrossing of patrols, both avoided direct contact as far as possible, adhering to mutually agreed procedures when close contact was unavoidable and refraining from establishing a fresh presence in disputed pockets. However, after 2007–08, there were indications of a gradual shift in China’s attitude toward the boundary question.²¹ China began to refer to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as “South Tibet,” denied visas to Indian nationals born there, gave Chinese or Tibetan names to the towns and villages that lay on the Indian side of the LAC, and adopted more forward-leaning patrol positions that increased the number and frequency of face-offs.²² There might have been more than one reason for the changes including, inter alia, the widening economic gap between India and China, the greater diplomatic influence of China in the region, and the enhanced Chinese military capability along the border as a result of infrastructure upgrades.

Since 2013, there have been a series of incidents between the border patrols of the two sides, escalating in scope and scale. Former national security adviser Shivshankar Menon, who had steered the BPTA in 1993, wrote in 2021 that the “face-offs and intrusions along the border, which were handled quietly and managed smoothly before 2012, are now more frequent, publicized by both sides and led in 2020 to the first death of troops since 1975.”²³ The vastly superior Chinese infrastructure in the border region has enabled the People’s Liberation

Army (PLA) to deploy better anti-access/area denial capabilities, thereby obstructing Indian patrol parties from going to areas that they have patrolled in the past. This includes the Depsang, Demchok, Chumar, and Galwan areas in eastern Ladakh.²⁴ This escalation in Chinese patrolling behavior along the LAC has been accompanied by stone pelting and attacks with nail-studded wooden clubs. The PLA's behavior has progressively weakened the framework of peace and tranquility built by the two sides since 1993.

The Current Situation and the Options for India

Since the Galwan valley clash in June 2020, there have been twenty rounds of direct discussion between the two militaries and several meetings of the WMCC on how to disengage in the stand-off areas in the Western sector. Until July 2023, the two armies have successfully disengaged in five places along the LAC—Patrol Point (PP)-15, PP-17, and PP-17A in the Gogra-Hot Springs area, PP-14 in the Galwan valley, and the northern and southern banks of Pangong Tso.²⁵ In Depsang and Demchok, both sides are still in discussion on the way to resolve the stand-off to mutual satisfaction (the two military forces with accompanying armor and artillery remain in a state of close confrontation). No broader discussion appears to have taken place thus far on the de-escalation or de-induction of forces. Therefore, forty months after the Galwan valley incident, more than 50,000 troops remain deployed on either side of the LAC in the Western sector.

China continues to significantly augment force and capacity along the entire LAC. A CSIS China Power Project report in November 2022 showed that a new division-level PLA headquarters and military garrison with hardened shelters for weapon systems, just 6 kilometers from the LAC in the general area of Pangong Tso (one of the face-off areas in 2020 that was resolved), had not been disbanded even after both sides had disengaged in the area of the northern and southern banks of the lake, and that a new radome facility and a major bridge across the Pangong Tso were under construction.²⁶ China has built new outposts in disputed pockets like Raki Nallah in the Depsang area that are intended to block Indian patrols from reaching their patrolling limit.²⁷ New lethal weapon systems are being inducted into the Tibet and Xinjiang military districts including, inter alia, Type 08 armored vehicles, 122-caliber self-propelled howitzers, PHL-03 multiple rocket launchers, and light tanks (ZTQ-15).²⁸

Another CSIS China Power Project report in March 2022 that specifically tracked new Chinese infrastructure activity in areas close to the India-China border region states that the airpower build-up is “sweeping in scale.”²⁹ Although offensive airpower capability differential

between the air forces continues to be in India's favor, recent imagery underscores that China is making every effort to neutralize this advantage.³⁰ The CSIS report identified at least thirty-seven airports and heliports within Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) that were newly built or significantly upgraded since 2017. Three of these airports—Xigaze-Tingri, Lhuntse, and Ngari-Burang—are less than 60 kilometers from the LAC in TAR. The airfield at Hotan (Ketian) in XUAR is also upgraded.³¹ These airfields will serve the dual objectives of enabling rapid troop deployment and facilitating rapid offensive aerial response.

New border villages (*xiao kang cun*) are being built in very close proximity to the LAC, which will help strengthen Chinese border defense.³² Major rail and road links (Xigaze to Hotan and G695, respectively) are being planned and will traverse the entire length of the Aksai Chin region. The new G695 highway will run even closer to the LAC than the G219 built in the 1950s, parallel to the LAC up to Lhuntse in Arunachal Pradesh.³³ This is besides the upgradation of highways G219 and G318 that run parallel to the LAC near Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, respectively.³⁴ The China Power Project report says that in western XUAR, China is building at least eight roads that stretch from highway G219 toward the LAC. Troops and equipment can thus move more rapidly to remote areas like the Galwan valley. Likewise, in the Eastern sector of the India-China border region, China's ability to project military power directly onto the LAC has been enhanced by the road and tunnel system connecting Nyingchi to Medog county.

The significant physical changes that have occurred on the Chinese side of the LAC makes a return to status quo ante, as of 2019, unlikely. The CSIS report opines, and other evidence also suggests, that “Beijing is not contemplating a broader retreat from the border.”³⁵ The existing peace and tranquility arrangements may not be able to guarantee that a mishap along the LAC will not happen in the future.

In December 2022, the two militaries clashed in Yangtse (Tawang subsector, Eastern sector), a stand-off that deserves closer scrutiny. Despite the Indian army holding the ridgeline, the infrastructure built by the PLA on its side of the LAC enabled it to rapidly mobilize forces and challenge the Indian side. Since India's control on the heights may not be impregnable because the terrain it holds is disadvantageous, a recent analysis on the Yangtse incident by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) using geospatial tools has concluded that “durable transport infrastructure and associated surge capability that the PLA has developed could prove decisive” in a future India-China stand-off in this area.³⁶ ASPI's report contends that China's strategy seems to be to engage in successive intrusions that might allow the PLA to strategically position any subsequent “retreat” to a higher location (closer to the LAC) until it wrests control of the Yangtse heights from Indian border forces.³⁷

Going forward, the PLA is more likely to engage in such kinds of gray-zone warfare in other parts of the LAC as well, a point that the chief of India's army, General Manoj Pande, had flagged in his address at the Savitribai Phule Pune University on March 27, 2023. He

cautioned that “transgressions remain the potential trigger for escalations.”³⁸ The LAC in the Middle sector and in the areas east of Tawang in the Eastern sector (also referred to as Rest of Arunachal Pradesh or RALP) are particularly vulnerable. Unless Indian infrastructure can match China’s in the very near future, Beijing might revisit the “noose” strategy. During the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis, Mao Zedong ordered the bombardment of the offshore islands of Jinmen and Mazu that lay close to the mainland (within 12 nautical miles) but were under Taiwanese military control. China’s goal was to test how sincere and committed the Americans were in defending these offshore islands from attack. The thinking was that were the Americans to commit forces for the defense of the offshore islands on a prolonged basis, it could become a “burden on their backs,” like a noose around their necks that China could tighten or loosen at will (by escalating or de-escalating tension) so that “whenever we [China] wanted to kick them [the United States] we could do so.”³⁹ The intention was to “trap” the American military into keeping a permanent vigil and incurring heavy expenditures over relatively inconsequential pieces of real estate and suffer constant concern that unilateral de-escalation by them could strategically compromise the larger game. The Galwan and Yangtse stand-offs seem to follow this pattern.

In sum, China seems to be comfortable with the new status quo. It is rapidly adding to strategic infrastructure in Tibet and Xinjiang. It also appears to still want to pursue gray-zone warfare in order to gain tactical or strategic advantage in the India-China border region. New technologies are being deployed along the LAC, including drone swarms and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), autonomous weapon systems, and cyber and electronic capabilities, that did not exist in the 1990s and could upset the peace.⁴⁰ The existing protocols will not adequately address the current requirements for peace and tranquility. Therefore, when the current face-offs in Depsang and Demchok are resolved, the question that arises is what both sides need to do to restore a stable and predictable regime in the border region that works for both parties. Both sides have spoken of a three-step process: disengagement, de-escalation, and de-induction. China and the Russia did it in the 1990s. It is, therefore, worth briefly examining whether the Sino-Russian experience can be usefully applied to the India-China theater.

Russia reengaged China on the boundary question in the early 1990s with similar intentions of resolving pending disputes and ensuring peace and tranquility. China and Russia (then the Soviet Union) signed the Agreement on Guidelines for Mutual Reduction of Forces and Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Soviet-Chinese Border Areas in April 1990.⁴¹ Between 1990 and 1996, they also rebuilt political trust and understanding and recalibrated their strategic approach.⁴² This helped both sides to conclude an agreement on confidence-building measures (CBMs) with China in the military field in the border region in April 1996 and, thereafter, an agreement on the specific reduction of force levels in May 1997 (Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in the Border Areas). The latter established a geographical zone of 100 kilometers within which both sides set limits on the ground and air forces as well as quantities of armaments. The mutual de-induction from and

limits on forces within the 100-kilometer zone became the basis for a stable, predictable, and peaceful border between Russia and China. One important learning from the Sino-Russian case is that the mutual reduction of forces was not used to enhance political trust; rather, the trust that they built in the 1990s created the required political condition for them to conclude a mutual reduction of forces agreement. A Chinese scholar concludes that without this pre-condition of improved political trust and confidence, attempts at force reduction would probably not have progressed very far between China and Russia.⁴³ Hence, sequentially, the building of sufficient trust and understanding is a prerequisite for mutual force reduction. Absent the political dialogue and normal state-to-state relations between India and China, conditions for such political trust-building do not as yet exist in the India-China context.

Another important prerequisite for successful mutual de-induction is the setting out of geographical limits for a zone of peace and tranquility. This was possible in the Sino-Russian case because of the similarity of terrain on both sides of the border, which enabled both sides to de-induct without either gaining advantage. Applying the Sino-Russian model, *mutatis mutandis*, to the India-China context is not feasible since India faces problems in terms of both terrain and climate. The base height of the Himalayan watershed is approximately 4,000 meters above mean sea level (except in RALP). On the Indian side, the mountains are fragile and prone to landslides and the rock-faces are steep, making building infrastructure an engineering challenge. On the Chinese side, the plateau is mostly sandy and flat and allows for easier infrastructure construction. The Indian side is also disadvantaged by the north-to-south alignment of the ranges and ridgelines from the main Himalayan watershed, which makes inter-valley (lateral) movement quite difficult in the Middle and Eastern sectors. On the Chinese side, the flat terrain allows for roads to be built parallel (and in close proximity) to the LAC practically all along the India-China border region.

Added to the challenges of terrain are the problems of climate. During the winters, there is heavy snowfall and danger of avalanches on the Indian side, whereas in the summers, there are concerns about flooding causing damage to infrastructure. On the Chinese side, there is comparatively much less snowfall and not much flooding, although other climatic factors like permafrost and low oxygen content do pose a challenge to humans and equipment. On balance, therefore, geography and climate are significant disadvantages for India in terms of both infrastructure construction and troop augmentation. Even if, theoretically speaking, China was to agree to different geographical limits for the two sides in order to adequately compensate India for geographic and climatic disadvantages, a withdrawal by the PLA even to a considerably greater depth on their side of the border region would still permit them to remain deployed on the Tibetan plateau, thereby ensuring that their troops are fully acclimatized and equipment can move rapidly to forward positions when required. On the Indian side, de-induction of forces, even to lesser depth than the Chinese de-induction of forces, might still mean that Indian troops may not be fully acclimatized, and both terrain and weather could make it difficult for Indian forces and equipment to rapidly redeploy to forward positions when needed. Therefore, both infrastructure and geography place India at

a military disadvantage. In short, the Russia-China model may be difficult to replicate in the India-China case given the prevailing political atmosphere and existing geography.

Looking ahead in 2024, there are three possible routes for India to consider.

The first option is to stay the present course even after the disengagement process in eastern Ladakh is completed. Infrastructure building by both sides continues apace, and the two armies remain in combat positions along the LAC. A similar approach was adopted with respect to the Sumdorongchu (Wang Dong) stand-off in the Tawang subsector from 1987 until 1994. India controlled the ridgeline and deployed the necessary backup forces close to the LAC until both sides worked out a *modus vivendi*. However, there are significant differences in the two situations. China has much greater and easier access along the entire LAC today as compared to the early 1990s due to massive infrastructure building in the intervening thirty-five years. It also has augmented force levels with regular PLA troops and the accompanying accommodation, supplies, and equipment to sustain prolonged stand-offs in the border region as compared to the 1990s. It will require significant additional military, financial, and technological commitments from India to match China's capabilities along the LAC in order to maintain sizeable additional forces in close proximity to the LAC on a more or less permanent basis. The military approach is feasible but only at a very substantial cost to the national exchequer.

The second option is to reestablish regular political contact, rebuild understanding (trust might take longer), and recommit to finding a political resolution to the boundary question (by resuming the SR process) while working on measures for de-escalation. This is a sustainable way to resolve outstanding boundary issues between the countries, but a precondition for this will be the building of mutual trust and understanding. India made sincere efforts to build this political understanding, including through informal summits (2018–19), but efforts to overcome the trust deficit were not successful. The more recent events along the LAC have set back the political process. It may take more time for understanding to develop again after the high-level political contacts are restored. A political breakthrough as was achieved between China and the United States between 1971 and 1979 or between China and Russia between 1989 and 1998 cannot be ruled out, but in both cases, it was a multi-year process. In these cases, it was also the “bigger” power that took the initiative and made the bigger adjustments. China as the bigger power has not displayed magnanimity in the current situation. Therefore, China is unlikely to make unilateral gestures with respect to their force deployment along the LAC. This option could be pursued by India over the medium to long term provided the other party is receptive and sincere. In the short term, however, the assertive posture that China is displaying across geographies makes it less likely that China will be prepared for political compromises on the India-China boundary. Meanwhile, the uncertainty on the LAC will continue.

The third and final option is to pursue disengagement in the Depsang/Demchok face-off points in parallel with de-escalation in other parts of the Western sector where both sides have, *de facto*, already arrived at a common perception of the “no-contact” zone. In the

present circumstances, the most likely course of action for India would be to pursue this option. This approach allows India to deal with the immediate problem through negotiation while affording it the freedom to also pursue military rebalancing until a long-term and sustainable resolution of the boundary question can be found through a process of political dialogue.

This option has three components: negotiating with China to stabilize the border region, building dependable deterrence on the LAC, and holding adequate reserves in the rear. This option could consist of the following elements:

1. Military-to-military talks could be held to mutually disengage (but not de-induct) in the Depsang Bulge and the Demchok areas of eastern Ladakh.
2. In the areas of eastern Ladakh where disengagement has already taken place, both sides (through the WMCC) could pursue de-escalation (but not de-induction) measures, involving a mutual pull-back from the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation, thereby reducing the possibility of a mishap. It may require both sides to designate “zones-of-no-contact” along the LAC.
3. Consultations could be held on a new agreement that replaces or upgrades the BPTA and the CBMA to account for the prevailing ground situation and the deployment of new forces, armaments, and technologies.
4. Regular political dialogue, including the resumption of the SR process, to simultaneously reduce misperception and build mutual confidence at the political level, could be started. This process should be in tandem with the military and diplomatic talks in order to give them direction.
5. Military-to-military contacts could be restored.

Aside from these bilateral efforts, India should continue to build a credible deterrence on the LAC and adequate reserves in the rear. Such efforts involve:

- Fresh investments in the border region—accelerating infrastructure building in alpine conditions, including deployment of tunneling technology for building lateral roads and advanced landing grounds or airfields to support the rapid deployment of forces in case of emergent situations
- Enhanced induction or application of technology for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR)—outer space, over-the-horizon, and on-ground sensors—to reduce financial and manpower costs

The third part looks at these in further detail.

The Way Ahead

The way ahead consists of actions and activities that India might engage in bilaterally through negotiation with China as well as those that require unilateral action from the Indian side.

So far as bilateral action is concerned, improving the existing peace and tranquility regime should be an early step in the process of rebuilding normalcy along the LAC. The resumption of political dialogue is necessary for this task to move forward. The existing protocols and measures to peacefully resolve face-offs in areas of the overlapping perception of the LAC will continue to remain useful and valid but need to be complemented with new and additional measures to address the changed circumstances as well as new technologies and systems that have become available to both sides after the 1993 and 1996 agreements were concluded. But without synchronized political direction from both parties, there is unlikely to be any significant movement in making the necessary changes to the existing treaties so that it is effective in maintaining stability, peace, and tranquility in the border region.

Restoration of peace and tranquility through bilateral action will be a step-by-step process.

1. As a first step, both sides could take specific mutually agreed measures to de-escalate at the five points in eastern Ladakh where disengagement has already taken place, by moving the main force on both sides to designated areas behind the face-off points and retaining pre-determined forces at minimal level along the LAC. Since there is disagreement on the precise LAC alignment, a “line of no-contact” might not be practicable. If it is deemed important to preserve the peace in the areas where disengagement had taken place, both sides might, therefore, need to be open to the idea of “neutralization zones” (no-contact zones). This could be a mutually agreed area between the two lines along which the two forces are currently deployed. It is necessary to proceed with care while doing this, so as to avoid ending up in a situation where no-contact zones exist only on the Indian side of the disputed LAC. The area of the no-contact zones should span both sides of a disputed point along the LAC.
2. In such neutralization zones, both sides could implement “coordinated patrols” (but not joint patrols). Such coordinated patrols should be of pre-designated periodicity in order to bring predictability and to remove the scope for confusion. Use of remote surveillance in such no-contact zones could also be helpful in detecting any changes to the status quo by the other side. This will allow each side to preserve their LAC claim without prejudice and minimize the possibility of face-off situations at the same time. This could provide a working model for de-escalation in other parts of the LAC.

3. If progress is made on the two aforementioned points in eastern Ladakh, which is the site of the current stand-off, the WMCC could hold talks to jointly identify other segments on the LAC (outside eastern Ladakh) where clearly overlapping perceptions exist. Once the task (of identifying neutralization zones) is completed, the specific modalities for disengagement or de-escalation could, thereafter, be worked out at the military-to-military level talks by the ground forces. It is important for China to give due regard to the geographical conditions that prevail on the Indian side if this exercise is to have any chance of success.
4. The BPM points designated by both parties along the LAC have been highly beneficial in deterring face-offs as well as in managing them since they focus on improving dialogue and communication between local commanders. The number of BPM sites across the entire LAC, and more particularly in contentious areas, could be substantially increased to allow ground forces to deal with face-offs in an expeditious way, especially in areas where mutual disengagement or de-escalation has not yet happened. The absence of an agreed LAC or even an agreed neutralization zone might make such a task more complicated, but the location of respective BPM points could be well within the areas of respective control. BPMs serve a dual purpose—confidence-building and conflict-avoidance. Hence, there is no requirement for them to be located right on the LAC, and neither side should be unreasonable and inflexible in terms of their location, with the explicit understanding that it does not prejudice their respective claims.
5. Hotlines could be established between theatre commands on both sides as well as at the field level. This mechanism may not have worked effectively in the past since Beijing did not consider hotlines to be a decisionmaking tool but only a medium for communication. After the Galwan confrontation, there is value even in the latter proposition. It is also possible that Beijing may now be more receptive to the idea of hotlines as conflict-avoidance mechanisms to deter escalation in the case of unintended encounters.
6. If the Ladakh model works, in time, it could lay the groundwork for a systematic and negotiated de-escalation (but not de-induction) of forces along the entire LAC to mutually agreed locations in order to reduce possibility of sudden confrontation and conflict.
7. The situation along the LAC since 2013 culminating in the Galwan incident has established that the existing CBMs failed to create the desired conditions and trust between the two sides. This calls for a need to revisit and revise the existing CBMs in keeping with changed ground realities. While the ground-level negotiations on reducing the possibility of mishaps are underway, both sides could also explore ways to augment provisions in the existing protocols for purposes of dealing with

new realities. The 1993 and 1996 agreements lack specific provisions to limit the activities of drones, UAVs, and other intrusive technologies in close proximity to the LAC. Additional CBMs that deter activities by new technologies that might upset peace and tranquility are desirable. The Indian side should propose specific usage and distance restrictions on such new technologies close to the LAC or neutralization zones. The idea of mutual and equal security could also be expanded to cover missile deployment.

While negotiating a new border management regime with China, it is good to bear in mind that for Beijing, negotiation and gray-zone warfare are not incompatible objectives. They are two sides of the same coin of “political warfare.” A recent reprieve in *Foreign Affairs* on the lessons for the United States from the U.S.-China talks during the Korean war concluded that China does not negotiate to achieve peace but simply to buy the time to strengthen its case on the ground. By offering negotiation, China hopes to either gain at the negotiating table what they were unable to secure in the field or wishes to exploit pauses in the battlefield to dig deeper into the earth around its own frontlines, thus rendering the possibility of dislodging them significantly more difficult if hostilities resume.⁴⁴ In the case of the India-China border region, it is evident that China sought to leverage the peace and tranquility along the LAC between 1996 and 2019 to create new military capacities by conflating military training, the building of border villages, and infrastructure upgrades in a way that did not specifically violate the letter of the 1993 and 1996 agreements. Therefore, the possibility of China similarly utilizing the current round of discussions as a means to buy time or to further augment infrastructure and force levels should be worked into the Indian side’s negotiating strategy along with the deployment of capabilities that can demonstrate to the Chinese side that there is a credible willingness on part of India to respond in the field to any fresh aggression or unacceptable behavior on the LAC. A credible deterrence is, thus, required to be built along the entire LAC with adequate capacities positioned in the rear (as reserves) for a sustainable counter-response. It is as much the robustness of India’s military posture and the quality of its deterrence as the new framework for border peace and tranquility that India and China work out post Galwan that will ensure the peace and stability on the border between them.

Building a credible deterrence along the LAC and adequate reserves in the rear might involve the following steps.

1. The elements for robust deterrence along the LAC that can be sustainably maintained in the prevailing geographical and climatic conditions need to be identified. Logistics (transport, vehicles, supply lines, accommodation, and communication) need to be pre-positioned and reinforced. Forces and assets need to be climate-proofed and well-provisioned. For example, it is reported that in 2022, the Ministry of Defence erected a model post for troops at 10,000 feet above mean sea level in the Tawang sector by using a quick-setting compound, ultra-high

performance cement plates, and bamboo-reinforced concrete frames, which reduced construction time and enhanced the portability besides ensuring stronger protection.⁴⁵ If the design and engineering of such posts can be made robust, it could be replicated in other parts of the LAC. There are also reports that to meet its requirement of armored vehicles, the Indian army has ordered and inducted vehicles such as the Kalyani M4, which has been deployed in eastern Ladakh.⁴⁶ The M4 is also supposed to be upgraded with anti-tank guided missiles at the request of the army.

2. Aside from the technical aspects of this exercise, greater coordination is desirable between the government's border development programs (such as the Border Area Development Programme and, more recently, the Vibrant Villages Programme) and military requirements in proximity to the LAC. Civil-military integration in the border areas could, therefore, be further prioritized. An expert group consisting of the ministries of home affairs (lead agency), external affairs, finance, and defense (including the Department of Military Affairs), representatives of the state governments of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and the union territory of Ladakh, and the armed services should be entrusted with the work of drawing up short- and medium-term plans for civil-military fusion across sectors. A welcome statement in this regard came from Arunachal Pradesh's chief minister in October 2023, who said that 453 out of 665 villages in the first phase of the Vibrant Villages Programme were to be developed in Arunachal Pradesh.⁴⁷ He further stated that the army and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police had a major role in developing these villages and that roads and advanced landing grounds are also being developed, with infrastructure for troops also being upgraded.
3. Infrastructure deficiencies in India's border region is a well-recognized shortcoming that is already being addressed. Rapid all-weather mobility on the Indian side could be the key to neutralizing China's terrain advantage. Two issues need to be tackled on a priority basis. First, the plans for new infrastructure proposed to be built in the border region should be synchronized with military requirements in the expert group (proposed above) before the actual work commences. It is essential to bring the military into the planning process at the inception of the project in order to ensure that the infrastructure to be built serves developmental as well as national security needs. Second, the deployment of financial, material, and high-technology resources on a priority basis in the border regions for building the infrastructure should be done with the appropriate adaptation of government procurement and payment rules along with environmental regulations. The Border Roads Organization cannot address the infrastructure deficit all on its own. Attracting large private players is essential to fulfil the strategic need of accelerating infrastructure building, especially in the Middle and Eastern sectors, with a special focus on the construction of lateral roads using latest tunneling and roadbuilding technologies. For this to happen, exceptions will need to be carved out in the General

Financial Rules and in government procurement procedures, and financial incentives might also have to be offered in order to attract private players to undertake projects in difficult terrain and under inhospitable conditions.

4. Although the “new normal” on the India-China LAC will from now on entail higher levels of military deployment on a more or less permanent basis than was the case before 2019, the deployment of sophisticated ISR capabilities could significantly enhance border security and reduce the wear-and-tear on personnel and equipment. This involves developing a variety of detection capabilities that can observe movements not merely in the vicinity of the LAC but also further inland. This would involve capabilities including, but not limited to, the electromagnetic spectrum—radio waves, microwaves, thermal imaging, optical imaging, ultraviolet waves, and hyperspectral imaging. Then, these payloads need to be made deployable on a variety of platforms that also need to be developed—ground-based (wheeled and tracked vehicles and stationary mounts), aerial (drones, aircraft, helicopters, aerostats, and pseudo-satellites), spatial (satellites in low-earth orbit and beyond), and where applicable, such as in Pangong Tso, naval and subsurface platforms. Thereafter, the data gathered from these multiple layers of capabilities also needs to be combined, analyzed, processed, and presented in a holistic manner in real time to commanders at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. At this stage in the intelligence cycle, technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine-learning algorithms, and even quantum computing have a significant role to play in extracting actionable intelligence from collected information and assisting human operators in this process. Simply put, computers can be trained to conduct and assist threat detection, analysis, and presentation. Finally, the transmission and communication of all this information need to be made as less susceptible to jamming, spoofing, and interception as possible.
5. The PLA has deployed formidable capabilities in all these areas and has made significant advances in emerging technologies. Most of these technologies are under various stages of development and induction by the Indian Armed Forces, but the gap is a long way from being comprehensively bridged. According to anecdotal evidence, China has high-resolution cameras deployed along the entire LAC that can take photographs to a depth of 30 kilometers with a dependable power source. Several new radome facilities that can detect aerial activities on the Indian side of the LAC have been constructed. They have a constellation of satellites in low-earth orbit (LEO) to cover the entire area of the LAC. It is believed that Chinese LEO satellites make up to seven to eight passes daily, whereas Indian satellite coverage of specific areas along the LAC might be limited to a single pass-over every thirty-six to forty-eight hours. India requires a constellation of LEO satellites with high-resolution cameras that have sub-metric resolution. This is especially important in areas where there is no direct line-of-sight capability, such as in the area between the Kailash range and the western highway in the Ladakh sector, where several new

Chinese assets and camps are located after the Galwan incident. An LEO constellation will also bring better broadband internet connectivity to troops in remote border regions, facilitating data exchange and coordination. Additionally, geostationary communication satellites can enhance communication infrastructure along the border, ensuring that troops and command centers can stay connected even in remote areas.

6. Deployment of high-altitude, long-endurance UAVs and medium-altitude, long-endurance UAVs or other long-endurance aircraft with over-the-horizon surveillance capabilities should be integral parts of the early warning system. Presently, most drones (be they fixed-wing, vertical takeoff and landing, or hybrid) manufactured by Indian startups have an average maximum operational ceiling of 4,500–5,000 meters. In the Western sector, the terrain itself is of such altitude. For instance, Demchok is at an altitude of 4,200 meters, Daulat Beg Oldi at 5,084 meters, and Rezang La around 5,200 meters. This is discounting the rapidly rising peaks and mountains around these areas, which any aircraft would need to avoid. Thus, investment is needed for increasing the operational ceiling of these drones, so that they are deployable in these geographies.
7. So far as high-resolution cameras and sensors are concerned, China might object to these being set up in proximity to the LAC on the specious grounds that these are in violation of the BPTA and the CBMA. However, they already have cameras with a dedicated power source in these areas. Mutual concurrence to both sides setting up non-lethal surveillance capabilities at equal distances from the LAC or neutralization zones should be part of the negotiating process. Satellites equipped with synthetic aperture radar could provide all-weather, day-and-night imaging capabilities, but it will be necessary to have ground-based sensors as well.
8. Intelligence gathering based on the concept of layered surveillance (ground, air, space, and cyber) can be effective only if all real-time data from diverse sources is integrated onto a single platform (aggregator) for analysis and interpretation and can be communicated to all concerned parties (especially at the ground level) on a real-time basis. Information aggregation platforms that integrate hardware and software are key requirements for enhancing vigilance in the border region and will help reduce the costs and wear and tear. The Indian private sector's software and platform design capabilities must be leveraged to leapfrog in this area. Harnessing the capabilities of the Indian private sector will significantly enhance vigilance and security preparedness along the LAC, provided the government creates the right environment that ensures data security and incentivizes the private and public sectors to work together to build and implement technological solutions. One possible way to do this is for the government, armed forces, and defense industry to work with third-party organizations and experts to foster innovation in defense beyond the

immediate requirements of the armed forces, especially in technologies that could help to narrow the gap between the two sides along the border region. Innovations for Defence Excellence could also contribute to this particular challenge by facilitating collaborations between the military, research institutions, and private sector, including on the development of AI-driven solutions for analyzing data from multiple sources in order to provide actionable (real-time) intelligence.

9. A successful de-escalation exercise will mean that the main force withdraws from the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation along the LAC to predetermined staging areas in the rear from where it is still possible for India to make a rapid response to aggression. To support a de-escalation exercise that ensures that adequate reserves with proper staging areas, logistics depots, troop accommodations, and transport facilities are available to allow for effective response if provoked by the PLA, the border development and infrastructure programs need to be integrated with the military order of battle. This means that locations need to be identified and developed to sustain forces up to division strength with equipment in high-altitude conditions.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to analyze the deficiencies in the current border peace and tranquility arrangements and to suggest ways of augmenting them so that the objective of having a stable, predictable, and peaceful situation in the border region can be realized. This is premised on the assumption that early progress in resolving the boundary question is not likely, nor is China likely to forgo the option of resorting to gray-zone warfare tactics in order to maintain pressure on India along the entirety of the LAC. In such circumstances, the paper suggests that negotiation with China is an important measure in rebuilding and reinforcing the arrangements for peace and tranquility. Specific ideas have been proposed in this connection, including possible new models for reducing the chances of mishap or conflict in the disputed areas of the LAC. At the same time, it is also proposed that the Indian side take other measures to build credible deterrence along the LAC (both on the LAC itself and in the rear) to counter any fresh Chinese aggression or intrusions. Some of these measures include the construction of logistics, the enhancement of ISR capabilities, and the creation of civilian and military coordination mechanisms for both developmental and military-related activities on the Indian side that will permit the military to counter-react to Chinese action on a real-time basis. Post disengagement, as a long-term measure, there is a need to renew focus on a political resolution of the dispute rather than only managing the borders. Military engagements can at best manage short-term stability at the borders, and is not a long-term and permanent solution for a matter that has bedeviled relations for seventy-five years.

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Prior to his term as foreign secretary, Gokhale had served as India's high commissioner to Malaysia from January 2010 to October 2013, as ambassador of India to the Federal Republic of Germany from October 2013 to January 2016, and as ambassador of India to the People's Republic of China from January 2016 to October 2017. He has served as head of the India-Taipei Association, in Taiwan, from July 2003 to January 2007. During his time in the headquarters of the Ministry of External Affairs, he has also worked in key positions in the East Asia Division, including as the joint secretary (Director General) for East Asia from March 2007 to December 2009.

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Notes

- 1 The three-stage formula is part of the public debate but has not been officially endorsed by the Indian side.
- 2 These terms can be defined as follows: **disengagement** is the disentangling of forces on both sides from eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation on the LAC; **de-escalation** is a mutually planned pull-back of forces to designated areas that are at some distance from the area of dispute, along with relevant procedures or protocols to avoid another eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation in the same area; and **de-induction** involves a mutual agreement to limit or restrict the number of forces and armaments that each side can deploy within a larger and specifically defined geographical zone, as well as the permanent removal of additional troops and equipment from said zone.
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