



India-China Disengagement

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This article is based on “**Looking ahead after the Ladakh walk back**” which was published in The Hindu on 17/02/2021. It talks about the recent agreement between India and China on disengagement at Pangong Lake.

Recently, India and China have decided to finally reach an agreement on disengagement at Pangong Lake, which has been at the heart of the recent LAC tensions.

Both sides have agreed to a withdrawal of frontline personnel, armored elements, and proposed the creation of a buffer zone that will put a temporary moratorium on patrolling in the disputed lake. China is also asking India to vacate the heights it occupied in an effective countermove in the Kailash Range.

This disengagement process is a promising start towards restoring peace in the border areas. However, there are many other issues that needed to be resolved to establish lasting peace.

Major Issues Associated With Disengagement Process

- **Partial Disengagement:** The current disengagement is limited to two places on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh viz. north bank of Pangong lake and Kailash range to the south of Pangong.

However, there are three other sites of contention on the Ladakh border where the PLA had come in — Depsang, Gogra-Hot Springs and Demchok — and talks will be held to resolve these after the current phase of disengagement is completed.

- **Unresolved Issue of Depsang Plains:** The Depsang plains due to their proximity to the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie road, the DBO airstrip, and the Karakoram Pass holds strategic importance for India when it comes to dealing with China.
 - Moreover, the Daulat Beg Oldie road is critical for India's control over the Siachen glacier.
 - Siachen glacier is the only area on the Indian landmass where China and Pakistan can physically collude militarily.
 - Therefore, the immediate concern is the status of the Depsang plateau where China has acquired a tactical advantage that can jeopardize India's access to Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) and air assets in that region.
- **Issue Regarding Creation of Buffer Zone:** There are worries that the creation of proposed buffer zones would lie majorly on the Indian side of the LAC, thus converting a hitherto Indian-controlled territory into a neutral zone.
 - At best, these buffer zones can provide a temporary reprieve but are no alternative to the mutual delineation of the LAC and a final settlement of the Sino-Indian boundary.
 - Further, for the sake of disengagement at the north bank, China is asking India to withdraw from the important hills it acquired in the Kailash Range.
 - Thus, it raises questions about the wisdom of giving up the only leverage India had against China in Ladakh.
- **Distrust Between India & China:** The events of last year have left enormous distrust, which remains a hurdle, and China's actions on the ground have not always matched its commitments.
 - Further, China is wary of India's attractiveness to the United States and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.
 - Owing to the disputed nature of the border and a lack of trust between the two sides, any perceived violations of 'no patrol' zones can lead to deadly outcomes as seen in Galwan valley in 2020.

Way Forward

- **Clubbing Depsang Issue With Current Negotiations:** The Chinese excuse that the Depsang problem precedes the current crisis on the LAC and thus must be treated separately, is not in India's interest.

Thus, India should pitch hard to club them together and find a holistic solution.
- **Extending Counteraction:** India should not confine its response to managing the border dispute but extend it to attacking Chinese commercial interests in India and aligning itself more closely with its Quad partners, especially in the maritime domain.
- **Playing Taiwan Card:** On the foreign policy front, India should explore diplomatic and militaristic routes to counter China. Apart from colluding with the Quad countries, one such viable option is establishing formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

- **Defense Reforms:** India should look Ladakh crisis as an opportunity to carry out long-pending defense reforms.
 - One such much-needed reform is the military’s internal organization. For instance, one of the biggest sources of concern for India’s military is the pension bill.
 - This rise in the pension expenditure has a significant crowding-out effect on stores and modernization, two major components that determine a nation's war-fighting ability.”
 - The current approach to this problem seems to be two-fold — a farcical three-year “Tour of Duty” to attract the young and an effort to prevent pensionable soldiers from leaving.

Conclusion

The current disengagement process is a welcome move because heightened tensions between the two nuclear-armed Asian powers serve no useful purpose for anyone. However, the success of the new disengagement plan will finally depend on whether it is implemented on the ground in letter and in spirit.

Drishti Mains Question

This disengagement process between India and China is a promising start towards restoring peace in the border areas. However, there are many other issues that needed to be resolved to establish lasting peace. Discuss.



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This editorial is based on **“Death trap: On Labour reforms”** published in The Hindu on February 16th, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.