

Indo-China Border Dispute: Challenges in Defining the LAC

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Indo-China Border Latest News

- The India-China border dispute, after decades of talks and agreements since 1993, has failed to define the Line of Actual Control, keeping tensions unresolved.

Introduction

- The India-China border dispute remains one of the most complex territorial issues in Asia, shaped by history, geopolitics, and national security concerns.
- Despite decades of dialogue, agreements, and attempts at confidence-building, the **Line of Actual Control** (LAC) remains undefined, leading to recurring face-offs and clashes.
- This article traces the evolution of negotiations since the late 1980s and highlights why the inability to formalise the LAC has kept the dispute alive.

Early Efforts and Diplomatic Engagements

- India-China border negotiations gained momentum after **Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 visit to Beijing**, which marked a turning point in bilateral relations.
- Subsequent political changes in India initially slowed progress, but by the early 1990s, both nations recognised the necessity of peaceful engagement.
- Six rounds of the Joint Working Group (JWG) meetings between 1988 and 1993 laid the groundwork for military-to-military engagement and the resumption of border trade.
- India's Defence Minister Sharad Pawar's 1992 visit to Beijing further expanded cooperation in academic, military, and scientific exchanges.

The 1993 Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement (BPTA)

- In September 1993, Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's visit to Beijing resulted in the signing of the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement (BPTA).
- This landmark nine-article agreement committed both countries to peaceful consultation and the non-use of force. It was the first document to explicitly refer to the LAC.
- **Key provisions included:**
 - Both sides are to refrain from crossing the LAC and withdraw if cautioned.
 - Minimal troop deployment along the border.
 - Reduction of forces on the principle of "mutual and equal security."
- The agreement aimed to freeze the status quo and promote cooperation in other areas of bilateral relations.

Expansion Through the 1996 Agreement

- The 1996 agreement, signed during **Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit to India**, expanded on the BPTA by introducing detailed military confidence-building measures (CBMs). It emphasised:
 - Limits on the deployment of heavy weaponry, missiles, and large-scale exercises near the LAC.
 - Restrictions on military exercises facing the other side.
 - Mutual agreement on ceilings for forces in sensitive sectors.
- However, the agreement also acknowledged that successful implementation depended on a common understanding of the LAC's alignment, something both sides failed to achieve.

Attempts at Clarification and Collapse of Map Exchange

- Between 2000 and 2002, India and China exchanged maps of the central and western sectors.
- However, the process collapsed almost immediately, with both sides rejecting the maximalist claims presented.
- Disputes persisted over areas such as Depsang, Pangong Tso, Demchok, and Chumar. By 2005, the mapping exercise was abandoned altogether.
- This failure institutionalised ambiguity around the LAC. Many of the same disputed areas later witnessed face-offs, including the **2020 Galwan Valley clash**.

Structural Problem in Defining the LAC

- The central issue is that neither India nor China is willing to concede ground in strategically sensitive areas.
- China's infrastructure advantage, roads and logistics in Tibet, contrasts with India's more difficult terrain in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. This imbalance complicates negotiations.
- Without a common definition of the LAC, both armies continue to patrol up to their perceived lines, increasing the likelihood of accidental confrontations turning into violent clashes.

Current Implications and Lessons

- While the 1993 and 1996 agreements temporarily reduced tensions, their failure to resolve the core issue of defining the LAC has kept the border volatile.
- India and China have invested in mechanisms to prevent escalation, but the lack of political will to finalise the boundary has undermined peace-building efforts.
- The recurring standoffs highlight the urgency of either clarifying the LAC or developing stronger mechanisms to prevent patrol confrontations from spiralling into conflict.

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