

[Answers to Starred and Un-starred Questions (Both in English and Hindi) are available as Part -I to this Debate, published electronically on the Rajya Sabha website under the link <https://sansad.in/rs/debates/officials>]

The House then adjourned for lunch at one of the clock.

2.00 P.M.

The House reassembled after lunch at two of the clock,

MR. CHAIRMAN in the Chair.

SUO- MOTO STATEMENT BY MINISTER

Recent developments in India's relations with China

MR. CHAIRMAN: Statement by Minister, Shri S. Jaishankar.

श्री जयराम रमेश (कर्नाटक): सर, एक सवाल है। आप यह बता दीजिए कि क्या स्टेटमेंट पर क्लेरिफिकेशन लिया जा सकता है या नहीं?

MR. CHAIRMAN: I will ask Shri Jairam Ramesh. He is a very experienced parliamentarian.

SHRI JAIRAM RAMESH: Sir, it is allowed in Rajya Sabha. That is why I am asking.

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI S. JAISHANKAR): Sir, I rise to apprise the House of some recent developments in the India-China border areas and their implications for our overall bilateral relations. The House is aware that our ties have been abnormal since 2020, when peace and tranquillity in the border areas were disturbed as a result of Chinese actions. Recent developments that reflect our continuous diplomatic engagement since then have set our ties in the direction of some improvement.

The House is cognizant of the fact that China is in illegal occupation of 38,000 sq.km. of Indian territory in Aksai Chin as a result of the 1962 conflict and events that preceded it. Furthermore, Pakistan illegally ceded 5,180 sq. km. of Indian territory to China in 1963, which has been under its occupation since 1948. India and China have

held talks for multiple decades to resolve the boundary issue. While there is a Line of Actual Control (LAC), it does not have a common understanding in some areas. We remain committed to engaging with China through bilateral discussions to arrive at a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable framework for a boundary settlement.

Hon. Members would recall that the amassing of a large number of troops by China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh in April/May, 2020 resulted in face offs with our forces at a number of points. The situation also led to disruption of patrolling activities. It is to the credit of our armed forces that despite logistical challenges and the then prevailing Covid situation, they were able to counter-deploy rapidly and effectively.

The House is well aware of the circumstances leading up to the violent clashes in Galwan Valley in June, 2020. In the months thereafter, we were addressing a situation that had seen not only fatalities for the first time in 45 years, but also a turn of events serious enough for heavy weaponry to be deployed in close proximity of the LAC. While a determined counter-deployment of adequate capability was the Government's immediate response, there was also the imperative of a diplomatic effort to defuse these heightened tensions and restore peace and tranquillity.

Sir, the contemporary phase of our ties with China dates back to 1988, when there was a clear understanding that the Sino-Indian boundary question will be settled through peaceful and friendly consultations. In 1991, the two sides agreed to maintain peace and tranquillity in the areas along the LAC pending a final settlement of the boundary question. Thereafter, in 1993, an agreement was reached on the maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the LAC. Subsequently in 1996, India and China agreed on confidence building measures in the military field.

In 2003, we finalised a Declaration on Principles for our Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation, which included the appointment of Special Representatives. In 2005, a protocol was formulated on Modalities for the Implementation of Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the LAC. At the same time, the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the settlement of the boundary question were also agreed upon.

In 2012, a Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) was established. A year later in 2013, we reached an understanding on border defense cooperation as well. Hon. Chairman, Sir, the purpose of my recalling these agreements is to underline the elaborate nature of our shared efforts to ensure peace

and tranquility in the border areas. And to emphasize the seriousness of what its unprecedented disruption in 2020 implied for our overall relationship.

The situation arising after our counter-deployment called for a multiple set of responses. The immediate priority was to ensure disengagement from friction points so that there would be no further untoward incidents or clashes. This has been fully achieved, as I will explain. The next priority will be to consider de-escalation, that would address the massing of troops along the LAC with associated accompaniments. It is also evident that the management of border areas will require further attention in the light of our recent experiences.

In all of this, we were and we remain very clear that three key principles must be observed under all circumstances: (i) both sides should strictly respect and observe the LAC, (ii) neither side should attempt to unilaterally alter the status quo, and (iii) agreements and understandings reached in the past must be fully abided by their entirety.

Hon. Members would also appreciate that as a result of the sustained tension and specific developments in the border areas, our overall relationship with China was bound to be impacted adversely. In the new circumstances, it was obviously not possible to continue the normal exchanges, interactions and activities as in the past. In this regard, we made clear that the development of our ties was contingent on the principles of mutual sensitivity, mutual respect and mutual interest.

Sir, throughout this period, hon. Members would also be aware that the Government had publicly maintained that India-China relations cannot be normal in the absence of peace and tranquility in the border areas. The combination of a firm and principled stance on the situation in the border areas as well as our clearly articulated approach to the totality of our ties have been the foundation of our engagement with China in these last four years. We have been very clear that the restoration of peace and tranquility in the border areas would be the basis for the rest of the relationship moving forward.

Since 2020, our engagement was, therefore, focused on that objective. This took place at various levels involving different arms of the Government. I myself have had many meetings with my Chinese counterpart, as indeed has my senior colleague, Raksha Mantri ji. Our NSA had also engaged his Chinese counterpart, both being the special representatives on the boundary question.

More detailed discussions were conducted by the Working Mechanism for Cooperation and Coordination, (WMCC), in India-China Border Affairs at the

diplomatic level. Its military counterpart was the Senior Highest Military Commanders Meeting Mechanism (SHMC). The interactions were naturally tightly coordinated with the combined presence of both the diplomatic and military officials. Since June 2020, 17 meetings of the WMCC were held and 21 rounds of the SHMC have taken place.

So, in that background, Sir, I would like to inform the House today about the agreement reached on 21st October 2024 regarding Depsang and Demchok. The twin considerations of an unstable local situation and an impacted bilateral relationship were clearly the drivers for the most recent endeavors to conclude the disengagement. These two areas have been the focus of our discussions in WMCC and SHMC with the Chinese side since September 2022, when the last disengagement agreement was concluded at Hot Springs area. In the lead up to the October 21, 2024 agreement, I had discussed both the specific disengagement issue as well as the larger relationship with my counterpart, Foreign Minister, Wang Yi in Astana on 4th July and Vientiane on 25th July. Our National Security Advisor and his Chinese counterpart also met in St. Petersburg on 12th September. The problem in these two areas pertained primarily to obstructions of our long-standing patrolling activity. In Demchok, there was also the question of access by our nomadic population to traditional grazing grounds, as well as to sites of significance to local people.

As a result of this recent understanding arrived at after intensive negotiations, resumption of patrolling to the traditional areas is underway. It was initially tested by sending out patrols for verification of disengagement on ground and is being followed up by regular activities as per the agreed understanding.

Following the October 21 understanding, Prime Minister and Chinese President, Xi Jinping, had a meeting on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Kazan on October 23, 2024. They welcomed the understanding and directed the Foreign Ministers to meet and stabilize and rebuild bilateral relations. The Special representatives were also to oversee the management of peace and tranquillity in the border areas besides exploring a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution to the boundary question.

In pursuance of that, I held discussions with Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, again on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro on November 18, 2024.

Sir, Raksha Mantri ji has also met the Chinese Defence Minister, Dong Jun, at the ASEAN Defence Ministers' (ADMM+) Meeting in Vientiane on November 20, 2024. The two Ministers discussed progress on the recent agreement on

disengagement, the need to address de-escalation along the LAC, and the requirement to strengthen Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). They agreed on the importance of continuing meetings and consultations at various levels.

The House will remember that the October 21, 2024 Agreement is the latest in a series of understandings in regard to the resolution of the situation in various friction points in Eastern Ladakh. In the aftermath of the events of May-June, 2020 and the initial disengagement in Galwan Valley in July, 2020, there was a Foreign Ministers' meeting in Moscow on 10th September 2020.

At that time, the Government's position was underlined that the immediate task was to ensure a comprehensive disengagement of troops in all the friction areas. It was also emphasized that the large concentration of troops along the LAC was not in accordance with the 1993 and 1996 Agreements, and that the Indian side would not countenance any attempts to change the *status quo* unilaterally. We also expected that all agreements and protocols, pertaining to the management of the border areas would be scrupulously followed.

Sir, the disengagement has now been achieved in full in Eastern Ladakh through a step-by-step process, culminating in Depsang and Demchok. With the task of disengagement completed, it is now our expectation that discussions would commence in regard to the remaining issues that we had placed on the agenda.

For the benefit of hon. Members, I wish to flag for your attention the previous positions articulated in Parliament previously by the Government on this issue. On 15th September, 2020, *Raksha Mantriji* had made a detailed statement on Chinese attempts to transgress the LAC and the appropriate response given by our armed forces. On 11 February, 2021, *Raksha Mantriji* again briefed the House about the agreement on disengagement in the North and south banks of Pangong Lake.

Thereafter, in August 2021, a third phase of disengagement took place in the area of Gogra, whereby troops would henceforth be in their respective bases. The next step took place in September, 2022, which pertained to the Hot Springs area. Again, forward deployments ceased in a phased, coordinated and verified manner, resulting in the return of troops to their respective areas. The most recent October 21, 2024 agreement comes in the wake of the earlier disengagements. It completes the first phase that was agreed to in Moscow in September, 2020.

As Members are aware, there is a long history of frictions, transgressions and face-offs in several sectors of the India-China border. This goes back to Barahoti from 1954, to Longju in 1959, to Sumdorong Chu from 1986 to 1995, and Depsang in

2013, amongst others. In the past, earlier Governments have agreed to a range of steps to diffuse situations that have arisen at different times, including offers from our side, to create demilitarized zones, limited non-patrolling zones, relocation or withdrawal of posts, disengagement of troops and dismantlement of structures. Different locations have seen different solutions being examined.

Where the October 2021 understanding is concerned, our objective has been to ensure patrolling, as in the past, to the relevant patrolling points, as well as the resumption of grazing by our civilians, as per long-standing practice. This is indeed what we have agreed upon in regard to Depsang and Demchok.

In a few other places where friction occurred in 2020, steps of a temporary and limited nature were worked out, based on local conditions to obviate the possibility of further friction. This, I must stress, applies to both sides and can be revisited as the situation demands. In that sense, our stance has been resolute and firm and serves our national interests fully.

The ensuring of our national security in this manner is the result of cumulative and coordinated endeavors of many parts of the Government, obviously centred around defence and security forces. Indeed, the competence and professionalism of our services in this period was displayed in our speedy and effective counter-deployment. In the negotiations with China, the defence and diplomatic arms worked in lockstep to ensure that our national interests were comprehensively met.

In that context, the House would also recognize that there has been a significant improvement in the border infrastructure, which has made such effective counter-deployment possible. This is reflected, amongst others, in the increase of border infrastructure allocations in the last decade. The Border Roads Organization alone has incurred three times the expenditure level of that a decade ago. Whether it is the length of the road network, of bridges, or of the number of tunnels, there has been a substantial increase over the earlier period.

Notable milestones in recent years include the Atal Tunnel to Lahaul Spiti, the Sela and Nechiphu Tunnel to Tawang, the Umling La Pass Road in Southern Ladakh, and the extended opening of the Zojila access. Work is progressing on some strategically important roads and airfields in Ladakh. The adoption of new technologies in high-altitude, remote, inaccessible, and permafrost areas has also been significant. All of this, Sir, reflects the Government's firm commitment to protecting our borders and ensuring that the Armed Forces get the facilities and the logistical support that they deserve.

Finally, let me share with hon. Members our expectations regarding the direction of ties with China in the near future. Our relationship has progressed in many domains, but was obviously negatively affected by recent events. We are clear that the maintenance of peace and tranquillity in border areas is a prerequisite for the development of our ties. In the coming days, we will be discussing both, de-escalation as well as effective management of our activities, in the border areas.

The conclusion of the disengagement phase now allows us to consider other aspects of our bilateral engagement in a calibrated manner, keeping our national security interests first and foremost. In my recent meeting with Foreign Minister Wang Yi, we reached an understanding that the special representatives and the Foreign Secretary-level mechanisms will be convening soon.

So, Sir, let me conclude by thanking hon. Members for their attention and, I am confident that the Government has the full support in addressing the complexities of this important relationship.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Shri Piyush Goyal to move a motion for consideration of the Boilers Bill 2024. ...*(Interruptions)*... Piyushji, just one second. ...*(Interruptions)*... Hon. Members, would you listen to me now, please? I am saying that there are some issues that have special attention; so, there need not be anything like this. Rule 251 of Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Council of States, evolved by us, says, "A Statement may be made by a Minister on a matter of public importance with the consent of the Chairman, but no question shall be asked at the time the Statement is made." ..*(Interruptions)*... I am fully aware that there are instances but in this case I find it expedient. ..*(Interruptions)*... Because I feel so. Now, hon. Minister, Shri Piyush Goyal. ..*(Interruptions)*...

SHRI JAIRAM RAMESH (Karnataka): Sir, clarifications. ..*(Interruptions)*...

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Piyush Goyal. ...*(Interruptions)*... Nothing else is going on record. ...*(Interruptions)*... Nothing is going on record. ..*(Interruptions)*...

(At this stage, some hon. Members left the Chamber.)
