

A bridge that will drive India and China further apart

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The most recent news shadowing the India-China relations is the proof of the 400-meter-long bridge built by China connecting the northern and southern parts of the Pangong Lake in Ladakh. New satellite images have confirmed the news. The bridge will help in the smooth and faster movement of Chinese troops near the border, and provide Beijing with an edge over New Delhi across the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The bridge is built just 25 km away from the LAC and will reduce the travel time for the Chinese troops from 12 to just four hours.

India has released no new statement and has been consistent with its earlier response. The Ministry of External Affairs has argued that “This bridge is being constructed in areas that have been under illegal occupation by China for about 60 years. India has never recognised this illegal occupation”. Till 1958, the area was under India’s control with an observation post present. However, China illegally occupied it in 1958.

India, on the other hand, has been trying to push for the growth of infrastructure (all-weather roads and bridges) on its side of the LAC. The latest was the construction of the Sela Tunnel in Arunachal Pradesh. In addition, the Government of India has also undertaken the construction of around 87 bridges in the Ladakh region and allocated around Rs 2,000 crore for more, with the primary goal of improving the troops’ movement and effectiveness. Such

actions make it clear that the push for infrastructure stems from the need to establish military and official control over the regions which have been disputed. Infrastructure development will boost the economic growth of the region, and will be crucial when there is a conflict. What is unnerving for New Delhi is that the situation across the LAC has continued to be challenging since the June 2020 Galwan attack. It was the first violent clash between the neighbours in four decades which resulted in a complete breakdown of the Confidence Building Mechanisms (CBMs) and the hope for any progress in the border negotiations. Even after 21 rounds of commander-level talks and 30 rounds of talks under the China-India Border Affairs Consultation and Coordination Working Mechanism (the latest held on July 31), the border situation continues to be tense. This bridge is going to further push the neighbours apart.

The bridge has the potential to derail the delicate balance both sides have been maintaining since 2020. Some reports suggest that it will help in the smooth movement of the Chinese Type 15 light tank which was added to the People's Liberation Army in 2018. To counter this, India has unveiled the 25 tonne Zorawar light tank in July. Such attempts to match technologies have the capacity to escalate the situation further. Both India and China are nuclear powers and the Galwan clashes have worsened ties and the little goodwill between the two nations.

In July, Jaishankar met Wang Yi twice (on the sidelines of the SCO meeting and the ASEAN meeting). During their interactions, the focus was the resolving the border issue. After the second meeting with Wang, Jaishankar wrote on his X account, "Continued our ongoing discussions about our bilateral relationship. The state of the border will necessarily be reflected on the state of our ties. Agreed on the need to give strong guidance to complete the disengagement process. Must ensure full respect for the LAC and past agreements."

However, the status of the relationship was rightly summarised by Jaishankar at the Quad's foreign ministers meeting. He said, "The relationship right now with China is not good, not normal. As a neighbour, we hope for a better relationship, but that can only happen if they respect the LOC and respect agreements which they have signed in the past".

China's continued aggression across the LAC has derailed any improvements in ties made over the past few decades. The bridge can also intensify the stance of the Indian government given the history of conflict and mistrust between the two sides. The failure of the talks and Beijing's unilateral push for strengthening control and positioning troops on disputed territories further adds to Indian unease.

India today cannot appear to be weak as it feels betrayed by Beijing consistently. Even when Wang is calling for talks and Beijing has pushed for restarting of direct flights, the Chinese actions have betrayed their words. One cannot ignore the fact that after the 2020 clashes at Pangong Lake both sides had agreed to create a demilitarized zone to ease the tensions.

China had even demolished some structures there. However, the bridge today stands in complete contrast to Chinese claims for looking for a peaceful way to resolve the border issue and will further push the relations to the edge, with reducing any hopes of thaw.

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