

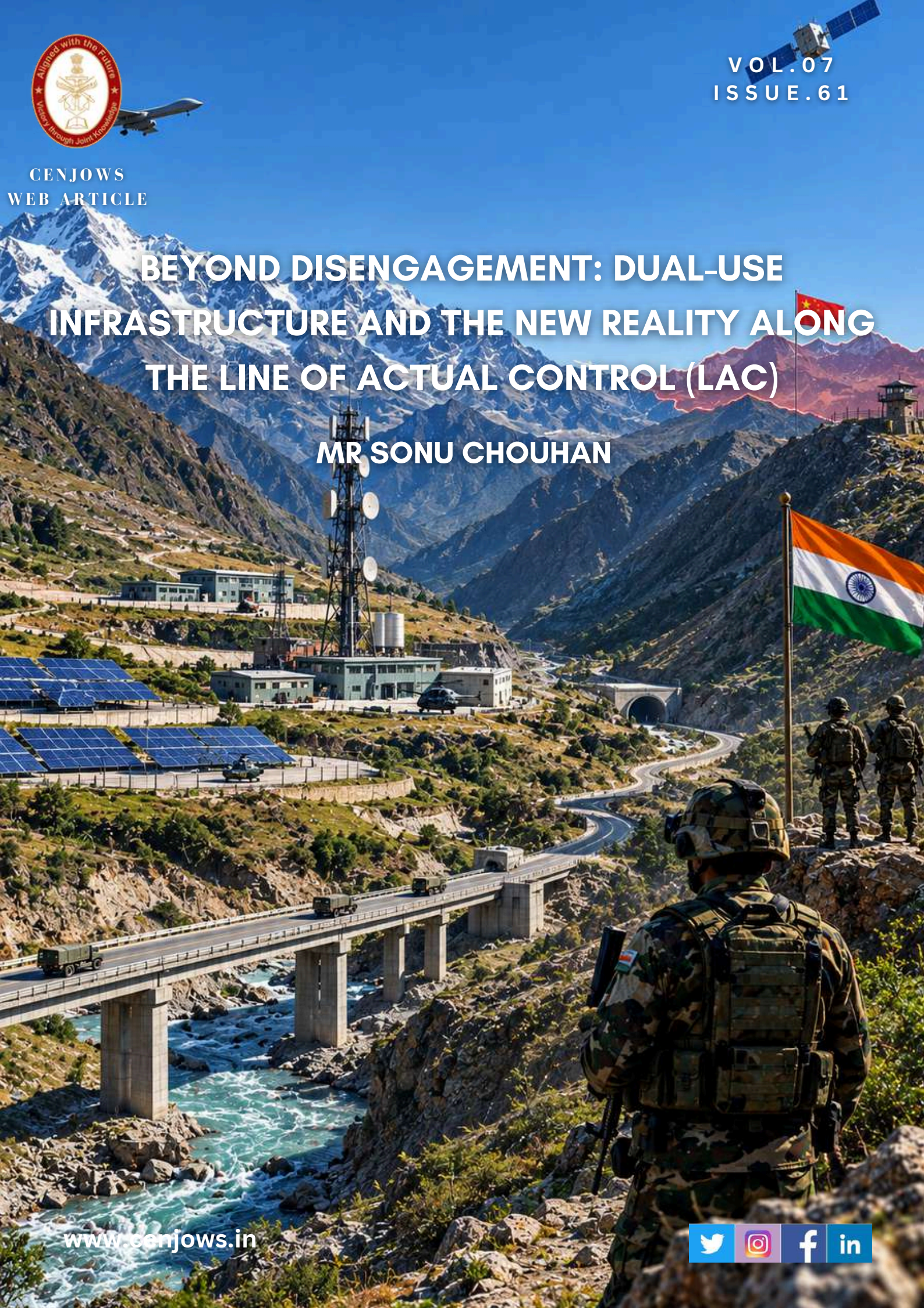


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BEYOND DISENGAGEMENT: DUAL-USE INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE NEW REALITY ALONG THE LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)

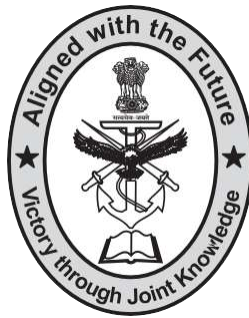
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**BEYOND DISENGAGEMENT: DUAL-USE
INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE NEW REALITY ALONG
THE LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)**

CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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Beyond Disengagement: Dual-Use Infrastructure and the New Reality Along the Line of Actual Control (LAC)



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Abstract

The security environment along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has undergone a fundamental transformation since the 2020 Galwan Valley clash. Although subsequent military and diplomatic engagements have reduced the immediate possibility of confrontation, they have not restored the operational conditions that existed before 2020. The October 2024 understanding on regulated patrolling in the Depsang Plains and Demchok sectors represented an important step toward reducing frontline tensions.¹ However, the broader border environment remains heavily militarised, with tactical disengagement occurring alongside sustained infrastructure development and long-term strategic competition.

China's approach increasingly combines military preparedness with grey-zone methods, particularly through infrastructure expansion, civilian settlement, and legal statecraft. Major transportation projects, including the Xinjiang-Tibet railway and the proposed G695 corridor, are intended to improve connectivity and logistical access across difficult Himalayan terrain. The development of more than 600 Xiaokang border

villages (Dual-Use Infrastructure) has further strengthened China's permanent presence in sensitive frontier areas. Settlements such as Zhuangnan, Majiduncun, Yaroo, and Kuiqiongmen demonstrate how civilian infrastructure and border administration can contribute to a more persistent territorial presence.

China's physical consolidation is reinforced by legal and institutional mechanisms. The 2021 Land Border Law provides a framework for strengthening border management and territorial administration, while the Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) framework facilitates the integration of civilian infrastructure, technology, logistics, and industrial capabilities with defence requirements. Consequently, infrastructure originally designed for civilian purposes can also support military mobility, logistics, surveillance, and mobilisation.

These developments create operational challenges for India. The introduction of restricted-access areas and regulated patrolling arrangements can limit the restoration of India's earlier physical presence in certain sectors. This places greater importance on surveillance, infrastructure connectivity, rapid mobilisation, and persistent situational awareness.

India has responded by strengthening border infrastructure and frontier resilience. The Border Roads Organisation has accelerated the construction of strategic roads, bridges, and tunnels, including the Atal and Sela Tunnels. The Vibrant Villages Programme seeks to improve infrastructure and sustain civilian populations in remote border areas. At the same time, expanded intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities are increasing India's ability to monitor sensitive sectors.

Thus, the post-2020 LAC represents not simply disengagement but a managed and heavily militarised equilibrium. Tactical stabilisation continues alongside long-term infrastructural and technological competition. Future stability will therefore depend on sustained deterrence, effective surveillance, resilient border infrastructure, and continued diplomatic mechanisms to manage persistent strategic competition.

Keywords: Dual-use infrastructure, Grey-zone strategy, Line of Actual Control (LAC), Military-Civil Fusion, Tactical disengagement.

Introduction

The June 2020 border confrontation in the Galwan Valley marked a major break from the earlier assumption that economic engagement and the management of tactical disputes could remain largely separate from the broader strategic competition along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).² For several decades, bilateral mechanisms had sought to contain localised border friction through diplomatic dialogue and confidence-building measures, while preventing such disputes from disrupting the wider relationship.³ The 2020 crisis, however, exposed the limitations of this approach. Subsequent diplomatic negotiations and tactical arrangements, including the troop disengagement and revised patrolling arrangements at friction points such as Depsang and Demchok, have reduced the immediate possibility of a renewed confrontation. They have not, however, restored the conditions that existed before 2020.⁴ The relationship has instead moved towards a more constrained form of stability, in which localised military disengagement exists alongside sustained strategic competition.⁵

This research examines how China uses dual-use infrastructure including Xiaokang border defence settlements, all-weather transport networks, high-altitude communications infrastructure, and Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) initiatives to strengthen its position along the LAC. In this context, China's Grey-zone tactics involve incremental military, infrastructure, legal, and administrative actions that alter the status quo, strengthen territorial control, and exert pressure while avoiding full-scale conventional conflict. These measures are significant not only because of their immediate logistical utility but also because they can create a more permanent state presence in areas where infrastructure, settlement, and security functions increasingly overlap. The study further examines how such infrastructure development interacts with domestic legal instruments, particularly the 2021 Land Border Law, and how these measures contribute to the institutionalisation of China's border posture.⁶ Rather than treating infrastructure as an isolated development activity, the paper assesses its relationship with military mobility, logistics, border management, and the consolidation of territorial claims.

The research also considers the limitations of the current normalisation process. Temporary buffer arrangements and restrictions on patrolling may reduce the

likelihood of direct confrontation at particular locations, but they do not necessarily indicate a reversal of the wider military and infrastructural buildup. India has responded through accelerated border infrastructure development, including projects undertaken by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), alongside initiatives such as the Vibrant Villages Programme.⁷ The central argument of this study is that tactical disengagement should not be interpreted as equivalent to comprehensive de-escalation. Instead, the post-2020 LAC environment reflects a longer-term competition over infrastructure, military mobility, territorial presence, and strategic access, producing a form of competitive coexistence in the high-altitude border region.⁸

Research Methodology

The Paper employs a qualitative, analytical methodology utilizing a comparative case-study approach. It synthesizes primary legal texts such as China's 2021 Land Border Law with open-source satellite imagery, high-altitude spatial mapping, and defence policy reports. Furthermore, it integrates empirical bilateral agreements alongside strategic literature to evaluate dual-use infrastructure developments and disengagement frameworks along the LAC.

Sino-Indian Border Dynamics Post-2020

India's China policy scored a success when, on 21 October 2024, the two countries agreed on patrolling arrangements that would lead to a disengagement of their forces in the Depsang Bulge and the charding Ninglung nala junction near Demchok.⁹ The last two of the six areas on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh that had been blockaded by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) in March and April 2020. While the two sides had worked out agreements to deal with four of the areas earlier, there had been a deadlock over these two since mid-2022.

In response to China's blockades and troop deployments in March and April 2020, India countered by mobilising an equivalent military force.¹⁰ Rather than choosing a direct military conflict, New Delhi pursued economic sanctions and diplomatic persuasion to pressure China into retreating. India consistently communicated that normal economic relations could not resume until the border conflict was resolved. Following, ultimately agreed to lift its blockades in the final two disputed sectors,

paving the way for both nations to pull back their forces from the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and begin restoring regular diplomatic ties.¹¹

At the Chanakya Defence Dialogue in Delhi on 1 October 2024, the Indian Army Chief, General Upendra Dwivedi, characterised the ongoing border tensions between India and China as “not Normal”.¹² He said that trust had become the “biggest casualty” of the situation arising from the 2020 Chinese actions, adding astutely that “with China you have to compete, cooperate, co-exist, confront and contest,” thereby outlining the dimensions of what is a challenge not just for India, but for the rest of the world as well managing China.

In the late 2000s, India raised two divisions of the Army to service the Sino-Indian border.¹³ The Indian Air Force also strengthened its capabilities by shifting frontline fighters to the east to deal with the Chinese Challenge.¹⁴ Subsequently, the government established a new mountain strike corps, indicating that India was looking beyond a merely defensive posture against China.¹⁵ Much of this was reflected in the changed official operational directive to the armed forces, directing it to be prepared to meet a two-front challenge to Indian security, involving both China and Pakistan.

The Paradox: Tactical Disengagement versus Permanent Infrastructure

The post-2020 military standoff along the India-China Line of Actual Control (LAC) has altered the character of bilateral security relations. Diplomatic and military mechanisms have facilitated localised troop withdrawals, disengagement arrangements, and the establishment of buffer zones aimed at reducing the risk of immediate confrontation.¹⁶ These measures have contributed to tactical stability in specific sectors; however, they represent only one aspect of the evolving border environment. Parallel to these efforts, both India and China have continued to expand infrastructure and improve logistical capabilities in frontier regions, indicating that tactical disengagement and long-term force preparedness are occurring simultaneously.

Prof. (Dr.) Sriparna Pathak argues that border management along the LAC increasingly reflects a dual-track reality.¹⁷ Mechanisms such as the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) and Corps Commander-level talks have focused on disengagement and the management of friction points, including

Depsang and Demchok.¹⁸ At the same time, both sides have continued to strengthen their operational capabilities through infrastructure development and improvements in military mobility. In the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China has expanded transportation networks, logistics infrastructure, communications systems, and other dual-use facilities, including all-weather roads, rail connectivity, and hardened support structures.

India has pursued a comparable strategy of strengthening border infrastructure and enhancing year-round connectivity. Projects implemented by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), including the Atal and Sela Tunnels, have improved year-round connectivity and can facilitate the movement of personnel, equipment and supplies in strategically important border regions.¹⁹ Enhanced infrastructure can support faster movement of personnel, equipment, and supplies, thereby contributing to infrastructure resilience and sustained operational readiness.

These developments suggest that the relationship between disengagement and de-escalation is more complex than conventional understandings of border stabilization imply. Reduced troop contact in particular sectors has occurred alongside continuing investment in transport networks, logistics systems, and supporting infrastructure. The resulting environment is better understood as a managed but competitive equilibrium rather than a restoration of the pre-2020 status quo. Infrastructure development influences military mobility, logistics, force sustainability, and operational access, all of which shape the long-term strategic balance along the frontier.

From this perspective, the contemporary LAC reflects an emerging “new normal” characterised by persistent military preparedness, infrastructure competition, and ongoing diplomatic engagement. Although disengagement arrangements lower the risk of accidental escalation, the continued expansion of infrastructure on both sides suggests that the border will remain an area of sustained strategic competition in the foreseeable future.

Patrolling and Disengagement in Eastern Ladakh

The October 2024 bilateral breakthrough concerning troop disengagement and coordinated patrolling in the final eastern Ladakh flashpoints of the Depsang plains and Demchok marks a pivotal turning point in post-2020 India-China relations.²⁰

Following years of deadlocked negotiations through the Working mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) and military commander channels, this framework successfully addressed the remaining friction areas where Indian access had been obstructed since early 2020.²¹

The agreement enabled the resumption of structured patrolling rights up to traditional points such as Patrolling Points 10 through 13 in Depsang while concurrently establishing localised buffer protocols to prevent direct combat contact.²²

Sector /zone	Disengagement status	Primary Border management mechanism
Depsang Plains (western sector)	Complete disengagement; coordinated patrols active.	Advanced schedule exchange to avoid patrol overlaps.
Demchok (Charding Nullah)	Friction points cleared; historical grazing access resumed.	Local military communications and verifications.
Galwan, Pangong Tso, Hot Springs	Buffer zones maintained; no frontline troop presence.	Periodic aerial drone surveys and satellite monitoring.
Eastern Sector (Arunachal Pradesh)	High alert; routine patrols along Mc Mahon Line.	Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC).

Table 1: Sector-wise disengagement **Source:** Author

Strategic analysts and scholars Amb. Shyam Saran (former Foreign Secretary of India) views the agreement as a necessary and pragmatic step to prevent unwanted escalation.²³ Optimists view the agreement as a vital diplomatic triumph that de-escalates immediate friction, reduces the risk of accidental tactical skirmishes, and creates space for broader economic and diplomatic normalization.²⁴ Conversely, critical realists argue that the agreement relies on heavily restricted, tightly regulated "coordinated patrolling" modalities, including mandatory advance notifications, caps on troop numbers, and limited frequency, rather than an absolute restoration of the

pre-April 2020 status quo.²⁵ Furthermore, because this diplomatic breakthrough did not trigger a simultaneous de-induction of forces or a rollback of deep-seated logistical footprints, troops remain stationed within supporting distance in the rear.²⁶ Consequently, the October 2024 pact operates less as a complete return to historical baseline security and more as a regulated tactical stabilisation that coexists alongside permanent, high-readiness infrastructure.

China Dual-Use Infrastructure and Legal Architecture:

China is actively expanding strategic dual-use infrastructure along and near its borders to gain significant operational and tactical leverage over India. In July 2017, the government of China's Tibet Autonomous Region announced plans to construct hundreds of border villages and accompanying infrastructure as part of a major push to develop China's remote border regions. Between 2018 and 2022, Tibet reportedly developed 624 border villages, according to open-source and satellite-based analysis, with further construction continuing thereafter. Many of these are clustered along the eastern sector of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the de facto border separating China and India.²⁷ Cases such as Zhuangnan, Majiduncun, Yarao and Kuiqiongmen demonstrate how civilian settlements can be combined with roads, communications and other infrastructure in sensitive frontier areas.²⁸



Fig 1: Majiduncun villages Source: CSIS

Complementing these border settlements is the ambitious Xinjiang-Tibet Railway Project, overseen by the officially launched Xinjiang-Tibet Railway Company.²⁹ This massive infrastructure initiative connects Hotan in Xinjiang with Lhasa in Tibet, running directly through the disputed Aksai Chin region near the critical Ladakh border. The proposed Xinjiang Tibet railway represents a major connectivity initiative across high-altitude terrain. Its strategic relevance lies in its potential to improve transport connectivity and logistical access in western Tibet, although its specific military utility requires further assessment.³⁰

Furthermore, the strategic G-695 Corridor has been discussed as an emerging component of China's broader efforts to improve connectivity across Tibet and the India-China border region.³¹ The highway network has been reported to connect areas of strategic relevance, including Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, Pangong Tso Lake, and Tibet, potentially improving regional connectivity and logistical access. Alongside these theatre-specific projects, cross-border initiatives such as the Ganqmod–Gashuun Sukhait Railway on the Mongolian border have also been discussed in the context of China's broader Military-Civil Fusion strategy.³² Although primarily intended for mineral extraction, energy transportation, and cargo movement, the capacity of such infrastructure could also provide potential logistical and mobility benefits during contingencies.³³ Together, these infrastructure developments can be examined as part of China's wider approach to integrating economic connectivity with border management and potential strategic requirements.

Infrastructure as a Strategic Instrument

Infrastructure along the LAC has evolved from a connectivity requirement into a strategic instrument of military mobility, logistics and territorial presence. In the high-altitude environment, roads, bridges, airfields, communications networks and logistics facilities can reduce movement constraints and improve the ability to sustain forces near forward areas. China's infrastructure expansion across Tibet and Xinjiang illustrates this relationship, with road, rail and air networks potentially improving PLA mobility and logistics. Border settlements can similarly combine civilian habitation with connectivity and security infrastructure, strengthening state presence in sensitive frontier areas. For India, infrastructure development serves a parallel function by improving access, mobilisation and resilience along the frontier.

China's Land Borders Law provides a formal framework for border defence, administration and infrastructure development, while establishing responsibilities for civilian and military authorities in border management.³⁴ Rather than treating territorial defence as the exclusive domain of the armed forces, the law legally mandates that local governments, civilian organisations, and border residents coordinate directly with the People's Liberation Army and the People's Armed Police to safeguard national sovereignty.³⁵

A core mechanism of this framework is the institutionalisation of civil-military fusion and the formal authorisation of "mass defence" groups, which enlist everyday citizens to participate in local patrols, maintain social order, monitor frontier zones, and protect border infrastructure.³⁶ Furthermore, the legislation strategically leverages socioeconomic development and dual-use infrastructure as instruments of state security. It legally commits the state to accelerating infrastructure development, including transportation, energy grids, and communication networks, alongside the construction of well-populated, moderately prosperous border villages (*Xiaokang*).³⁷ By financially and legally backing these civilian settlements and commercial economic projects, the Chinese state effectively utilises population density and dual-use logistics to solidify territorial claims, populate remote frontier regions, and establish a permanent presence in disputed or sensitive areas.³⁸ Ultimately, the 2021 Land Borders Law blurs traditional boundaries between civilian and military responsibilities, establishing a legal framework where economic expansion and dual-use infrastructure habitation function as vital, active components of national border defense.³⁹

Evolution of LAC Security Dynamics Before and After 2020

Dimension	Before 2020	After 2020
1. Military Posture	LAC forces operated under established confidence-building mechanisms. Face-offs were generally periodic and localised.	The 2020 crisis resulted in large-scale troop deployments and a sustained higher level of military readiness along the LAC.
2. Patrolling	Both sides patrolled according to their respective perceptions of the	Patrolling was restricted in several areas following disengagement arrangements. The October 2024

Dimension	Before 2020	After 2020
	LAC, with mechanisms intended to manage face-offs.	understanding enabled resumption of patrolling in Depsang and Demchok.
3. Friction Points	Localised face-offs occurred at various points but were generally managed through existing mechanisms.	Galwan, Pangong Tso, Gogra–Hot Springs, Depsang and Demchok became key areas of post-2020 contention.
4. Border Management	Focus remained on maintaining peace and tranquillity through military communication and diplomatic mechanisms.	Greater emphasis was placed on disengagement, verification, access arrangements and preventing renewed confrontation.
5. Diplomatic Engagement	Dialogue mechanisms primarily sought to prevent border incidents from affecting broader bilateral relations.	Military and diplomatic talks became focused on resolving the post-2020 crisis, disengagement and restoring stability along the LAC.

Implications for India

The most significant strategic consequence of the recent border agreements is the operational shift favouring separation over assertion in specific areas of the LAC. The creation of permanent buffer zones in areas like Galwan and Gogra means both sides pulled back from land they previously patrolled up to their own perceived border line, a tactical arrangement scholars argue converts historically contested ground into neutral, inaccessible territory.⁴⁰ Compounding this territorial shift, the ban on physical patrolling severely restricts India's ability to assert its territorial claims through ground presence. Consequently, these disengagement terms have fostered the view that China has successfully imposed a "new normal" along the border by dictating the terms of disengagement, thereby altering the status quo entirely in its favor.⁴¹

The strategic implications of this disengagement framework are deeply complex because tactical de-escalation creates safer buffer zones but permanently restricts India's historical access, formalising structural territorial losses. While localised disengagement successfully mitigates the immediate risk of accidental clashes, the forced creation of inaccessible neutral zones and patrolling halts creates a severe asymmetry. India loses continuous visual and physical access to regions it historically monitored, effectively freezing territorial losses into a permanent structural disadvantage.⁴² By locking in these buffer zones, China leverages its massive dual-use infrastructure buildup to institutionalise a new baseline of control, challenging New Delhi's strategic autonomy and compelling India to rethink how it deters creeping territorial encroachment without triggering full-scale escalation.

Conclusion

While recent diplomatic and military talks averted direct armed conflict along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the resulting stability remains deeply fragile. The October 2024 disengagement in Depsang and Demchok successfully separated frontline troops, but this came at a steep strategic price. Mandated buffer zones and restricted patrol guidelines altered local geography, turning historically monitored grounds into inaccessible spaces and limiting India's traditional ability to assert its presence on the ground.

Beyond the frontline, China's post-2020 posture relies on locking in territorial gains through dual-use infrastructure and legislative statecraft. China has integrated heavy logistical grids like the Xinjiang-Tibet Railway with over 600 fortified Xiaokang border villages in sectors like Zhuangnan and Kuiqiongmen. Backed by its 2021 Land Border Law and Military-Civil Fusion policies, China seamlessly blends civilian settlement with military power projection.⁴³

Consequently, border management is shifting from physical human patrolling toward high-tech surveillance and permanent fortification. To prevent further strategic imbalance, India must aggressively push its own counterprojects through the Border Roads Organisation and the Vibrant Villages Programme.

The study reveals that post-2020 disengagement along the LAC provided tactical stabilisation without strategic de-escalation. While frontline pullbacks in Depsang and Demchok reduced immediate clashes, mutual buffer zones restricted India's historical

patrolling access. Meanwhile, China cemented territorial gains using dual-use infrastructure such as *Xiaokang* villages and the Xinjiang-Tibet Railway and its 2021 Land Border Law. Consequently, India is countering through accelerated border infrastructure and high-tech surveillance.

Ultimately, current agreements serve as temporary crisis management rather than a true political settlement. Future peace will depend on India's capacity to sustain long-term deterrence against China's steady infrastructural pressure.

DISCLAIMER

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