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Disengagement Agreement in Eastern Ladakh

Why in news?

Chinese and Indian troops on the southern and northern shores of Pangong Tso began “synchronized and organized disengagement.”

What is the significance?

- The move comes as the first major breakthrough in talks to resolve the nine-month military standoff along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh.
- The disengagement began in line with the consensus reached at the 9th round of China-India Corps Commander Level Meeting.
- The agreement is a promising start towards restoring peace in the border areas.

What is the new disengagement plan in eastern Ladakh?

- Troops from both sides have started disengaging from the Pangong Tso area in eastern Ladakh.
- As of now, the disengagement process seems restricted to the north and south banks of Pangong Tso.
- The process has started with the pulling back of certain columns of tanks from the south bank region by both sides.
- At the moment, there is no pullback of troops from the friction points and the heights they are positioned on.
 - That will happen in a phased and verified manner.
- The ground commanders have started meeting, to figure out the nitty-gritty of the process.

What does this disengagement process entail?

- Both sides will remove the forward deployment in a phased, coordinated and verified manner.
- China will pull its troops on the north bank towards the east of Finger 8.
- Similarly, India will also position its forces at its permanent base at the Dhan Singh Thapa post near Finger 3.

- Similar action will be taken by both the parties in the south bank area as well.
- Both sides have also agreed that the area between Finger 3 and Finger 8 will become a no-patrolling zone temporarily.
 - This will be till both sides reach an agreement through military and diplomatic discussions to restore patrolling.
- Further, all the construction done by both sides on the north and south banks of the lake since April 2020 will be removed.
- It is expected that this will restore the situation to before the standoff of 2020.
- The process, as announced, will send Indian and Chinese troops back to their traditional bases on the north bank.
- While India has its traditional base at the Dhan Singh Thapa Post, just west of Finger 3, China has had its base east of Finger 8.

Why is this area important?

- The north and south banks of Pangong Tso are two of the most significant and sensitive regions when it comes to the current standoff in the Ladakh.
- The clashes here marked the beginning of the standoff, which makes the areas around the shores of the lake so sensitive and important.
- It is one of the areas where the Chinese troops had come around 8 km deep west of India's perception of the LAC.
- China had positioned its troops on the ridgeline connecting Fingers 3 and 4, while according to India the LAC passes through Finger 8.
- Further, in the south bank of the lake, Indian forces in an action in late August 2020 had gained strategic advantage by occupying certain peaks, outwitting the Chinese.
- Indian troops had positioned themselves on heights of Magar Hill, Mukhpari, Gurung Hill, Rezang La and Rechin La, which were unoccupied by either side earlier.
 - Since then, the Chinese side had been particularly sensitive.
 - This is because these positions allowed India to dominate Spanggur Gap.
 - The Spanggur Gap is a two-km wide valley that can be used to launch an offensive, as China had done in 1962.
 - The positions also allow India a direct view of China's Moldo Garrison.
- After this action India had also re-positioned its troops on the north bank to occupy heights overlooking Chinese positions on the north bank as well.

Why has an agreement taken so long?

- Since September 2020, China has insisted that India first pull its troops back

from the south bank of Pangong Tso, and the Chushul sub-sector.

- However, India has been demanding that any disengagement process should include the entire region.
- It also insisted that the troops should go back to their April 2020 positions.
- However, it seems that for now both sides have agreed to first disengage from the Pangong Tso area only.
- In the earlier military and diplomatic discussions with China, India had told that it wanted a solution to the issue on the basis of three principles:
 1. LAC should be accepted and respected by both the parties.
 2. Neither party should attempt to change the status quo unilaterally.
 3. All agreements should be fully adhered to by both parties.

Does the agreement resolve the standoff?

- The Pangong Tso region is just one of the friction areas.
- There are other friction points, all north of the Pangong Tso, where the troops have been face-to-face since last year (2020).
- So, there are still some outstanding issues that remain regarding deployment and patrolling on LAC.
- Reportedly, India's attention will be on these issues in further discussions.
- Both sides agree that complete disengagement under bilateral agreements and protocols should be done as soon as possible.
- Both sides have agreed that within 48 hours of complete disengagement from Pangong Lake, senior commanders-level talks should be held.
 - And the remaining issues should be resolved.

What delays a permanent resolution?

- Two of the main hurdles in finding a permanent resolution are lack of trust and lack of clarity on intent.
- The events of 2020 have notably left enormous distrust.
- Any permanent resolution will include -
 - i. disengagement of troops from the frontlines from all friction points
 - ii. de-escalation that will entail sending the troops from the depth areas to their original bases
- Both sides have around 50,000 troops in the region, along with additional tanks, artillery and air defence assets.
- As the standoff progressed in the months of May, June and July of 2020, there was a mirrored military build-up from both sides.
- So, a resolution has to include sending these troops and military equipment where they came from on both sides.
- But neither side had been willing to take the first step to reduce their troop or military strength, as it does not trust the other side.

- Moreover, China's intent for diverting its troops in May 2020 from their traditional exercise in the region to the LAC, which led to the standoff, is not known.
- Also, the situation in Depsang Plains continues to be a concern.

What is the way forward?

- The success of the new disengagement plan will finally depend on whether it is implemented on the ground in letter and in spirit.
- Both sides should keep in mind what is at stake for the broader relationship between the two most populous countries, which ultimately hinges on peace on the border.

Source: The Indian Express, The Hindu



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