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De-escalation in Ladakh

Why in news?

The process of de-escalation has been underway on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh.

What is de-escalation?

- De-escalation is a complex and time consuming exercise.
- It entails navigating an uncharted course in a graduated manner.
- The reasons for the Sino-Indian conflict are the unsettled border issue, divergent geopolitical interests and ideological dimensions.

What is the genesis of the boundary dispute?

- In Ladakh, India considered the border to be along the Johnson Line of 1865, which included Aksai Chin.
- The Chinese initially agreed to the Macartney-MacDonald (M-M) line of 1899, which was west of the Johnson Line.
- In 1960, the Chinese came out with a map laying claim to almost the whole of Aksai Chin.
- The main reason why China went for war in 1962 was to capture the claimed territories in eastern Ladakh, as also to teach India a lesson.
- By the time the Chinese declared a unilateral ceasefire, the PLA had almost secured the areas up to the 1960 claim line.
- At the end of the war, the two sides withdrew 20 km from the positions last held by the opposing forces.
- Subsequently, the LAC came to denote the line up to which the troops on the two sides actually exercised control.
- However, the LAC was neither delineated on the map nor demarcated on the ground.
- Hence, both India and China have different perceptions on the alignment of LAC.

How do both the sides assert claims?

- Over a period of time, **Patrolling Points** (PPs) were identified on the ground, setting the limits up to which the two sides could patrol.
- These PPs became reference points, although these are not bang on the LAC but at some distance on the home side.
- Hence, it is through patrolling boundaries that the Indian and Chinese troops assert their territorial claims.
- There were 23 areas which were contested by both sides.

What are the agreements signed?

- Given the potential for clashes, five major agreements were signed between India and China to ensure peace on the border. They are,
- ‘Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the LAC’ was signed in 1993, which formed the basis for the subsequent agreements.
- Agreement on ‘Confidence Building Measures’ was signed in 1996 along the LAC, denouncing use of force or engaging in hostile activities.
- In the 2005 Agreement, ‘standard operating procedures’ were laid down to obviate patrol clashes.
- The Agreement of 2012 set out a process for consultation and cooperation.
- The ‘Border Defence Cooperation Agreement’ was signed in 2013.
- Its emphasis was on enhancing border cooperation and exercising maximum restraint in case of ‘face-to-face’ situations.

What is China’s aim?

- In the Chinese strategic culture, the **use of force** is considered perfectly legitimate.
- Given the scope and scale, the PLA aggression was well planned.
- In the process, the Chinese violated all of the above agreements, and once again betrayed India’s trust.
- Beijing’s strategic aim was to convey a strong message to New Delhi to submit to its interests.
- It also aimed to send a message to desist India from building border infrastructure.
- The PLA’s objectives in Ladakh would have been to pose a threat to Siachen and ensure the security of the Western Highway.
- Given India’s strong resolve both at the political and military levels alongside favourable world opinion, the Chinese decided to de-escalate.
- But it has achieved their initial aim and to obviate further upsurge.

What is the general process of de-escalation?

- Every conflict has a cycle - it begins with escalation.
- It is followed by contact, stalemate, de-escalation, resolution, peace-building and reconciliation.
- The de-escalation process entails talks at multiple levels, and ground action in various stages.
- On the ground, the first step in the de-escalation process is of **disengagement**.
- This means breaking the 'eyeball-to-eyeball' contact between the opposing troops on the forward line by pulling back to create a buffer zone.
- The next step is the **pulling back** of the troops in the immediate depth, followed by **reserve formations** in the rear

What is the de-escalation process in this case?

- In this case, there have been **three rounds of talks**.
- They happened at the Corps Commander level, simultaneous talks between Joint Secretaries, and at the level of Special Representatives.
- **Disengagement** - This is currently in progress.
- The forward troops on both sides are reported to have pulled back by about 1.5 km in most areas.
- **Pulling back** - The PLA created many intermediate positions, besides staging forward 4 Motorised and 6 Mechanized Divisions.
- Even fighter aircraft have been positioned at the forward air bases.
- India too, has undertaken the requisite build-up.
- Withdrawal of all these elements will require many more rounds of talks at various levels.
- Each move of the opposite party will need to be confirmed and verified on the ground, and complemented by other surveillance means.
- The PLA is in a better position to build up, given the terrain advantage and better infrastructure.
- So, the distance of pulling back cannot be sacrosanct.

What is the conclusion?

- India's bottom line at the negotiation table is to restore the April 20 status quo ante.
- Maj Gen Liu, who represents the PLA in the Corps Commander-level talks, can be expected to indulge in hard bargaining.
- Therefore, the de-escalation process is set to be in for a long haul, marked by the 'going back and forth' phenomenon.

Source: The Indian Express



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