

5. India-China WMCC Talks – Navigating Border Stability and Strategic Competition

India and China held the 35th round of the Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination (WMCC) talks on border affairs, marking the first high-level diplomatic engagement on the border situation since July 2025. This resumption of talks follows the 2025 Special Representatives (SR) dialogue where Indian NSA Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi agreed to establish an expert group exploring possibilities of achieving an "early harvest" in boundary delimitation in specific border areas. The talks represent a cautious diplomatic thaw after years of border tensions, reflecting both countries' recognition that border stability is fundamental to their broader relationship.

1. About the Line of Actual Control (LAC)

Definition and Geographic Extent

1. The Line of Actual Control is the de facto boundary separating India and China, stretching about 3,488 km across Ladakh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh.
2. It is not a formally agreed boundary but a result of differing territorial perceptions held by India and China regarding legitimate borders inherited from colonial era agreements.
3. The LAC emerged as a practical line of demarcation following the 1962 India-China War but lacks formal delineation and mutual acceptance.

Western Sector (Ladakh, ~1,597 km)

1. Dispute centers over Aksai Chin region, claimed by India but controlled by China.
2. Site of the Galwan Valley clashes in 2020, the most severe military confrontation since the 1962 war.
3. Characterized by high-altitude terrain with sparse population, making logistics and military deployment challenging.
4. India maintains significant military presence in response to Chinese activities.

Middle Sector (Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, ~545 km)

1. Least disputed segment with limited patrol incidents and territorial disagreements.
2. Relatively greater agreement on ground positions compared to other sectors.
3. Comparatively stable with lower frequency of military confrontations.

Eastern Sector (Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, ~1,346 km)

1. China claims Arunachal Pradesh as "South Tibet," refusing to recognize Indian sovereignty.
2. Flashpoints include the Doklam standoff in 2017 between Indian and Chinese military forces.
3. China continues attempts to rename locations in the region, creating diplomatic friction.
4. Reflects most acute territorial dispute with sovereignty directly questioned.

2. Key Highlights of the 35th WMCC Talks

Progress in Border Peace and Stability

1. Both countries expressed satisfaction over the progress achieved in maintaining peace and tranquillity in the border areas.
2. India emphasized that sustained border stability has created conditions for the gradual normalization of bilateral relations.
3. The talks were described by both sides as "constructive and forward-looking," indicating a cautious but positive movement toward rebuilding mutual confidence.

Focus on Boundary Delimitation and Border Management

1. India and China discussed a wide range of issues related to boundary delimitation, border management, mechanism building, and cross-border cooperation.

2. These discussions reflect efforts to institutionalize mechanisms for long-term stability along the LAC.
3. Both sides agreed to undertake substantive preparations for the next round of the Special Representatives (SR) dialogue, which remains the principal political mechanism for resolving the boundary dispute.
4. The emphasis on "early harvest" suggests focus on low-hanging fruit in specific border areas rather than attempting comprehensive settlement.

Trans-Border River Cooperation

1. India highlighted the importance of convening an early meeting of the Expert Level Mechanism on Trans-border Rivers.
2. This emphasis underlines the significance of hydrological cooperation and information sharing between the two countries.
3. Shared river systems including Brahmaputra and Sutlej present opportunities for functional cooperation.

Broader Bilateral and Strategic Context

1. Although bilateral relations have occasionally witnessed public tensions over issues such as Arunachal Pradesh and China's close strategic ties with Pakistan, the overall relationship has remained relatively stable.
2. Diplomatic engagement has expanded through multilateral platforms, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi visiting China for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit.
3. India is expecting Chinese President Xi Jinping to participate in the upcoming BRICS summit, reflecting growing importance both countries attach to multilateral cooperation.

3. Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination (WMCC)

Institutional Framework

1. The WMCC is an institutional diplomatic mechanism established in 2012 between India and China.
2. Mandate – To manage issues related to the border areas and maintain peace and stability along the Line of Actual Control.
3. The mechanism enables regular coordination between diplomatic and military officials.

Relationship Between WMCC and Special Representatives (SR) Talks

1. WMCC – Operational and diplomatic mechanism focusing on border management dealing with immediate tensions conducted by diplomatic and military officials.
2. SR Talks – Political-level negotiation mechanism focusing on final boundary settlement dealing with long-term resolution led by top political representatives.
3. WMCC serves as preparatory mechanism enabling SR talks at higher political levels.

4. Historical Background of the India-China Boundary Dispute

Origins of the Dispute

1. The India-China boundary dispute is rooted in differing perceptions regarding the alignment of the LAC and unresolved territorial claims across the western, middle, and eastern sectors.
2. British colonial legacy created ambiguous boundaries inherited by both countries upon independence.

Major Areas of Dispute

1. Western Sector – Aksai Chin region covering approximately 37,000 square kilometres claimed by India but controlled by China.
2. Eastern Sector – Arunachal Pradesh, particularly Tawang region where China refuses to recognize Indian sovereignty calling it "South Tibet."

3. Middle Sector – Relatively less contentious areas in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh with greater mutual understanding.

Severe Deterioration Points

1. 1962 India-China War – Resulted in Chinese occupation of Aksai Chin and further militarization of border regions.
2. Depsang incident (2013) – Showed persistence of confrontation despite diplomatic engagements.
3. Doklam standoff (2017) – Demonstrated escalation risks and intense military mobilization.
4. Galwan Valley clashes (2020) – Most severe confrontation since 1962, with 20 Indian soldiers killed and significant Chinese casualties.

5. Significance of the Current Diplomatic Thaw

Restoration of Border Stability

1. Maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the border is critical as the overall India-China bilateral relationship is fundamentally linked to border stability.
2. Prolonged tensions lead to heavy military deployment costs, economic strain, and reduced diplomatic cooperation in other sectors.

Prevention of Military Escalation

1. Continuous diplomatic engagement through mechanisms such as the WMCC and SR Talks helps reduce risks of accidental clashes and troop confrontations.
2. Regular communication prevents misunderstandings triggering unintended escalation.

Pragmatic Economic Engagement

1. Despite persistent strategic rivalry, China remains one of India's largest trading partners with both economies interconnected through manufacturing supply chains, electronics imports, pharmaceutical intermediates, telecom equipment, and renewable energy components.
2. Economic interdependence creates mutual interest in stability.

Importance of Multilateral Platforms

1. India and China continue engagement through forums such as BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, G20, and climate negotiations.
2. These platforms allow coordination on Global South concerns, promotion of multipolarity, and demands for reforms in global governance institutions.

Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms

1. Continuation of WMCC meetings, military commander-level talks, and diplomatic consultations reflects growing importance of institutionalized dialogue mechanisms.
2. Regular engagement prevents relationship from becoming solely adversarial.

Strategic Significance for Asia

1. Stable India-China relations are essential for ensuring broader regional stability in Asia.
2. Tensions between the two major Asian powers can adversely affect regional security, trade flows, and connectivity initiatives.

Space for Functional Cooperation

1. Border stability creates opportunities for cooperation in areas such as trade, climate change, trans-border rivers, public health, and multilateral development initiatives.

Support for India's Strategic Autonomy

1. Improved diplomatic engagement with China enables India to pursue its policy of strategic autonomy, balancing competition with cooperation.

6. Persistent Challenges in India-China Relations

Trust Deficit

1. Deep strategic suspicion persists from post-Galwan Valley clashes atmosphere with sustained military preparedness along the LAC.
2. Concerns regarding China's long-term geopolitical intentions make trust deficit the single biggest obstacle to complete normalization.

China-Pakistan Strategic Nexus

1. India remains concerned over China's growing strategic and economic support to Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and infrastructure development in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.
2. China's military support including J-10C fighters and PL-15 missiles enhances Pakistan's operational capabilities, intensifying India's perception of two-front security challenge.

Arunachal Pradesh Issue

1. China's repeated territorial claims and attempts to rename locations continue to create diplomatic friction and challenge India's sovereignty.

Competition in the Indo-Pacific

1. India's expanding QUAD engagement and Indo-Pacific partnerships are viewed cautiously by China.
2. India remains concerned about Chinese naval expansion and strategic presence in the Indian Ocean Region.

Infrastructure Race Along the Border

1. Both countries rapidly expand border infrastructure including roads, tunnels, airstrips, and logistics facilities near the LAC.
2. While improving military preparedness, this increases risks of faster mobilization and heightened tensions.

Asymmetry in Economic Relations

1. India faces widening trade imbalance – bilateral trade reached US\$127.7 billion with India's exports at US\$14.3 billion versus imports at US\$113.5 billion, creating US\$99.2 billion deficit.
2. Dependence on critical imports in electronics, active pharmaceutical ingredients, and renewable energy supply chains creates vulnerabilities.

Technological and Cyber Concerns

1. India remains cautious regarding Chinese involvement in telecommunications, digital infrastructure, surveillance technologies, and cyber networks citing national security concerns.

Competing Regional Influence

1. Both countries increasingly compete for strategic influence in South Asia, Indian Ocean Region, and Global South through connectivity projects and infrastructure investments.

Lack of Final Boundary Settlement

1. Absence of clearly demarcated and mutually accepted border continues to remain the core structural issue.
2. Differing perceptions of the LAC result in recurring military confrontations.

Divergence in Global Strategic Outlook

1. India's emphasis on free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific contrasts with China's expanding regional assertiveness.

7. India's Strategic Approach Towards China

Competition Without Uncontrolled Confrontation

1. India's evolving China policy reflects strategy of "competition without uncontrolled confrontation," protecting strategic interests while preventing escalation into open military conflict.
2. Recognition that both are nuclear-armed powers requiring responsible competition management.

Military Preparedness Along the LAC

1. India has significantly strengthened military preparedness through enhanced troop deployment, modernization of armed forces, improved surveillance capabilities, and rapid mobilization infrastructure.
2. Credible deterrence maintained through continuous infrastructure and capability upgrades.

Infrastructure Development in Border Areas

1. Accelerated construction of roads, tunnels, bridges, airstrips, and logistics networks improves connectivity and strategic response capabilities.
2. Border development serves both civilian and military purposes.

Strategic Partnerships with Like-Minded Countries

1. Expansion of cooperation with countries sharing similar strategic concerns through QUAD and Indo-Pacific partnerships.
2. Defense collaborations aimed at ensuring free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

Continuation of Diplomatic Dialogue

1. Despite military tensions, India continues engagement through WMCC, SR Talks, military commander-level meetings, and multilateral platforms.
2. Maintaining communication prevents relationship from becoming purely adversarial.

Diversification of Supply Chains

1. Focus on economic resilience through promoting domestic manufacturing and reducing overdependence on Chinese imports in critical sectors.
2. Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative addresses supply chain vulnerabilities.

Balancing Deterrence and Engagement

1. Broader objective remains maintenance of strategic deterrence alongside diplomatic engagement.
2. Managed competition prevents destabilization of regional peace and security.

8. Way Forward

1. **Strengthening Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)** – India and China must enhance existing confidence-building mechanisms through expansion of military hotlines, greater transparency in troop movements, and regular commander-level meetings to reduce misunderstandings and prevent accidental escalation along the LAC.
2. **Accelerating Boundary Negotiations** – Both countries should prioritize operationalization of expert groups on boundary delimitation and promote sector-wise confidence-building arrangements to gradually move toward fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable resolution.
3. **Enhancing Border Infrastructure** – India must continue strengthening border infrastructure through development of roads, tunnels, advanced surveillance systems, air connectivity, and logistics networks ensuring effective border management and credible deterrence.
4. **Expanding Functional Cooperation** – Despite strategic differences, both sides should deepen cooperation in areas such as climate change, trade stability, trans-border river management, disaster response, public health, and reforms in global governance institutions where mutual interests converge.

5. **Maintaining Strategic Autonomy** – India must continue balancing diplomatic engagement with strategic deterrence while preserving long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy and independent foreign policy decision-making.
6. **Institutionalizing Crisis Management Mechanisms** – Regular engagement through WMCC, military dialogue mechanisms, and SR Talks should be institutionalized further ensuring timely conflict management during periods of tension.
7. **Reducing Economic Vulnerabilities** – India should pursue greater supply-chain diversification, promote domestic manufacturing, and reduce excessive dependence on critical Chinese imports in sensitive sectors like electronics, telecom, and pharmaceuticals.
8. **Promoting People-to-People Engagement** – Encouraging greater interaction through academic exchanges, tourism, cultural diplomacy, and think-tank dialogues can reduce mistrust and improve long-term societal understanding.
9. **Balancing Competition with Cooperation** – Both countries must recognize that while strategic competition may persist, it should not escalate into uncontrolled confrontation, especially given their importance for Asian stability and multipolar world order.

Source – https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/41241/35th_Meeting_of_the_Working_Mechanism_for_Consultation__Coordination_on_IndiaChina_Border_Affairs_May_27_2026