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? India–China Corps Commander Talks in Arunachal Pradesh Mark Expansion of Border Dialogue Beyond the Ladakh Sector

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Recent Developments:

- India and China recently held their **first-ever Corps Commander-level talks in the Eastern Sector** at the **Wacha-Damai Border Personnel Meeting Point** in Arunachal Pradesh's Kibithoo sector.
- The dialogue focused on reviewing the situation along the **Line of Actual Control (LAC)** and maintaining **peace and tranquillity** in the border areas.
- The Indian side was represented by **Lieutenant General Girish Kalia**, Commander of the **3 Corps (Spear Corps)**, while the engagement marked a significant expansion of the high-level military dialogue mechanism beyond its earlier concentration in **Eastern Ladakh**.
- The talks followed the **25th round of India-China Special Representatives' talks** and came amid reports of heightened activity and tensions in the **Taksing area of Upper Subansiri district**.

Significance of the Corps Commander-Level Talks:

Expansion of the Military Dialogue Architecture:

- Corps Commander-level engagement had become primarily associated with managing the post-2020 situation in **Eastern Ladakh**, particularly after the **Galwan Valley clashes**.
- Extending this mechanism to Arunachal Pradesh creates an additional high-level channel for addressing sector-specific concerns in the **Eastern Sector**.
- It reflects recognition that India-China border management requires **multi-sector communication mechanisms**, rather than concentrating major military dialogue only on Ladakh.
- The development can improve the ability of local and operational commanders to communicate during periods of tension, thereby reducing the risks of **miscalculation, accidental escalation and prolonged face-offs**.

Shift from Crisis Management to Wider Institutional Engagement:

- The new engagement indicates an attempt to institutionalise military communication across different sectors of the disputed frontier.
- Such mechanisms are particularly important because India and China have **differing perceptions of the alignment of the LAC**, and both sides patrol according to their respective perceptions.
- The Government of India has previously acknowledged that the absence of a commonly delineated LAC can result in transgressions and local face-offs.
- Therefore, direct communication between senior commanders complements diplomatic negotiations and helps address operational situations before they develop into larger crises.

Location and Military Context:

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Wacha-Damai Border Personnel Meeting Point:

- The meeting was held at the **Wacha-Damai Border Personnel Meeting Point**, situated in the **Kibithoo sector of Arunachal Pradesh**.
- Border Personnel Meeting Points provide an institutional framework for interaction between military personnel and support communication, confidence-building and local border management.
- The present meeting elevated engagement in the Eastern Sector from routine border-management interaction to the **Corps Commander level**, underlining the strategic importance of the region.

Indian Army Formations in Arunachal Pradesh:

- The Indian Army has two major Corps formations associated with the Arunachal Pradesh frontier, namely the **3 Corps**, headquartered at **Rangapahar near Dimapur**, and the **4 Corps**, headquartered at **Tezpur**.
- The 3 Corps, also known as the **Spear Corps**, was represented by its commander, Lieutenant General Girish Kalia, during the latest dialogue.

Immediate Security Context:

Taksing and Upper Subansiri Tensions:

- The talks occurred amid reports of increased Chinese military activity and tensions in the **Taksing area of Upper Subansiri district**.
- Such localised tensions demonstrate that the restoration of broader diplomatic engagement does not automatically eliminate operational differences on the ground.
- They also highlight the importance of **continuous surveillance, adequate force preparedness, reliable communication channels and rapid de-escalation mechanisms**.
- The Corps Commander-level dialogue can therefore be viewed as both a **confidence-building instrument** and a practical mechanism for preventing a local incident from escalating into a wider confrontation.

India-China Border Management Framework:

Line of Actual Control:

- The **LAC** is the effective boundary separating areas under Indian and Chinese control pending a final settlement of the boundary question.
- It is not mutually and commonly delineated throughout its length, resulting in **differing perceptions** in certain areas.
- Consequently, activities such as patrolling and infrastructure development can generate friction when either side operates up to its own perceived alignment.
- The unresolved nature of the boundary question remains the fundamental structural challenge underlying recurrent border tensions.

Major Bilateral Agreements:

- **1993 Agreement**, focused on maintaining **peace and tranquillity along the LAC** and affirmed that the boundary question should be resolved through peaceful consultations.
- **1996 Agreement**, introduced **confidence-building measures in the military field**, including commitments aimed at preventing the use or threat of force and enhancing military restraint.
- **2005 Protocol**, laid down modalities for implementing military confidence-building measures, while the same year also saw the agreement on **Political Parameters and Guiding Principles** for settlement of the boundary question.
- **2012 Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC)**, created a diplomatic-military framework for consultation and coordination on border affairs.

- **2013 Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA)**, strengthened procedures for communication and cooperation between border defence forces where differing perceptions of the LAC exist.

Link with Recent Diplomatic Engagements:

Special Representatives' Mechanism:

- The latest military dialogue followed the **25th round of Special Representatives' talks** on the India-China Boundary Question.
- The Special Representatives' mechanism represents the highest-level dedicated framework for addressing the political dimensions of the unresolved boundary dispute.
- The recent sequence demonstrates the need for **vertical coordination**, with strategic political engagement at the SR level supported by diplomatic consultations and operational communication between military commanders.
- A sustainable border-management architecture requires all these channels to function simultaneously because **political settlement, diplomatic consultation and on-ground military stability address different dimensions of the dispute.**

Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination:

- The **WMCC** operates as an important institutional mechanism for addressing border-related issues before or alongside higher-level political engagement.
- Its continued use demonstrates the importance of maintaining communication even when the boundary dispute itself remains unresolved.
- The coexistence of the **SR mechanism, WMCC, Border Personnel Meetings, hotlines and Corps Commander-level talks** creates a layered framework for crisis prevention and border management.

Broader Significance for India-China Relations:

Restoration of Communication after the 2020 Crisis:

- India-China relations deteriorated sharply following the **2020 military standoff in Eastern Ladakh** and the violent Galwan Valley clash.
- Since then, disengagement, de-escalation and restoration of normal border management have remained central concerns in bilateral relations.
- The extension of Corps Commander-level dialogue to Arunachal Pradesh suggests that bilateral efforts are increasingly addressing border stability through a **broader geographical and institutional framework.**
- However, dialogue should not be equated with a final settlement because the **boundary question, differing LAC perceptions and military deployments** continue to pose serious challenges.

Strategic Importance of the Eastern Sector:

- Arunachal Pradesh forms part of the **Eastern Sector** of the India-China boundary dispute and possesses substantial strategic, political and military significance.
- The region's difficult terrain, border infrastructure requirements and proximity to strategically sensitive areas make effective military preparedness essential.
- The latest dialogue therefore reinforces the need to combine **credible deterrence and infrastructure development** with diplomatic engagement and confidence-building measures.

BRICS and the Diplomatic Environment:

- The military engagement also occurred shortly before India was scheduled to host the **18th BRICS Summit in New Delhi.**

- Continued India-China dialogue before major multilateral engagements can help prevent bilateral tensions from overshadowing broader cooperation on issues involving the **Global South, multilateral reform, development and international economic governance**.
- Nevertheless, multilateral cooperation and bilateral competition can coexist; progress in one domain does not automatically resolve fundamental security differences in another.

Challenges to Durable Border Stability:

Unresolved Boundary Question:

- The absence of a mutually accepted final boundary settlement remains the principal source of strategic uncertainty.
- Temporary border-management arrangements can reduce tensions but cannot fully remove the consequences of competing territorial claims.

Differing LAC Perceptions:

- India and China continue to have differing perceptions in several areas, creating the possibility of patrol confrontations and competing assertions of territorial control.
- Effective crisis management requires clarity, communication and adherence to mutually accepted protocols.

Infrastructure and Force Posture:

- Border infrastructure improves connectivity, logistics and operational preparedness but may simultaneously intensify strategic competition if either side perceives changes as altering the local military balance.
- Sustained military deployments and improved capabilities increase deterrence but also make **confidence-building and transparency mechanisms** more important.

Gap Between Agreements and Ground Implementation:

- India and China possess an extensive framework of agreements and mechanisms, yet recurring incidents demonstrate that institutional arrangements require **consistent implementation, operational discipline and political commitment**.
- The key challenge is therefore not merely creating additional dialogue mechanisms but ensuring their **credibility, responsiveness and effective use during crises**.

Way Forward:

Strengthening Multi-Level Communication:

- India and China should maintain regular interaction through the **SR mechanism, WMCC, military hotlines, Border Personnel Meetings and senior commander-level talks**.
- Communication mechanisms should operate preventively and not only after a major face-off has already occurred.

Pursuing Predictable Border Management:

- Both sides should strengthen protocols for patrolling, temporary face-offs and local disengagement while working towards greater clarity on areas of differing LAC perceptions.
- Existing confidence-building arrangements must be updated where necessary to reflect changing **technology, infrastructure, force mobility and surveillance capabilities**.

Combining Diplomacy with Credible Preparedness:

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- India needs sustained investment in **border infrastructure, logistics, surveillance, intelligence, air mobility and all-weather connectivity**.
- Diplomatic engagement is most effective when supported by adequate operational preparedness and the ability to manage escalation without compromising national security interests.

Separating Immediate Stability from Final Settlement:

- Maintaining peace along the LAC and resolving the boundary question are related but distinct objectives.
- Both countries should prevent local incidents from damaging wider engagement while continuing negotiations for a **fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable settlement**.

Conclusion:

- The first **Corps Commander-level talks in Arunachal Pradesh** represent an important expansion of India-China military dialogue into the Eastern Sector and strengthen the broader architecture for managing tensions along the LAC.
- The development is significant because it adds a high-level operational communication channel beyond Eastern Ladakh at a time when local tensions, differing LAC perceptions and the unresolved boundary question continue to create risks.
- However, **dialogue is a mechanism for managing differences, not a substitute for resolving them**. Durable stability will require the simultaneous pursuit of **credible deterrence, effective confidence-building measures, robust communication and sustained political negotiations**.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Possible UPSC Mains Question: *“The expansion of India-China Corps Commander-level dialogue to the Eastern Sector reflects the need for a multi-layered approach to managing an unsettled boundary. Examine.”*