

Ending the impasse

India, China cannot put the distrust of the past behind without resolving the border issue

India's relations with China have been in deep freeze for over a year. The crisis on the LAC remains unresolved, and tens of thousands of soldiers from both sides still remain deployed in forward areas. Against this backdrop, Wednesday's meeting between External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Dushanbe assumes significance. Their last meeting in Moscow, in September 2020, took place in the aftermath of the Galwan Valley clash and at a time of a tinderbox-like situation south of Pangong Lake, with troops and artillery dangerously close to each other on the heights of the Kailash Range. A political agreement then paved the way for both sides to disengage in February, but the agreements in Galwan and Pangong Lake, where both sides have put in place no-patrolling zones, have not been followed at other disputed sites, in Depsang, Demchok, Gogra and Hot Springs.

Will the Dushanbe meeting similarly break the impasse? The initial readouts from both sides do not inspire confidence. Mr. Jaishankar said the unresolved situation was "visibly impacting the relationship in a negative manner" and "assessing the overall relationship", it was peace on the border that provided "the foundation for the development of ties since 1988" when the post-1962 freeze ended. Mr. Wang did not appear to view the boundary dispute with the same seriousness, instead calling for it to be kept "in an appropriate place" while "expanding the positive momentum of bilateral cooperation". Where both sides did agree is in their assessment, as Mr. Jaishankar put it, that "a prolongation of the existing situation was not in the interest of either side". The difference from Moscow to Dushanbe is that China, which last year was equally concerned after India's counter-deployments to take the heights of the Kailash Range where even shots were fired in warning – the first firing since 1975 – now appears to be in no hurry to restore the *status quo* elsewhere. India, having declared that normalcy cannot be possible without disengagement and de-escalation and signalled its intent with measures including scrutiny on Chinese investments – bilateral trade, however, is still booming beyond pre-pandemic levels thanks to huge imports of medical supplies – will now have to stay the course to underline its resolve on restoring the *status quo*. Mr. Wang also said that Beijing's "strategic judgment on China-India relations remains unchanged". Whether China's PLA, which has been dragging its feet on negotiations to restore the LAC *status quo* since February, shares that judgement remains to be seen. The only way for Beijing to demonstrate that is indeed the case will be to resume negotiations on the LAC at the earliest. Unless a full restoration of peace and a de-escalation on the borders happen, the relations in all other spheres will remain cloaked in distrust.