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## **Implication of China's Post-Doklam Military Buildup Near The Indian Borders**

### **Executive Summary**

Since the 2017 Doklam crisis, China has been expanding the logistics network in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) whose primary focus is to facilitate swift movement of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces across the sectors opposite India: from the western (Ladakh) to central sector (Uttarakhand, Himachal) to eastern sector (Sikkim, Arunachal). The network comprises five layers: highways, railways, airports and heliports, new border villages, and big dams, plus a military overlay comprising new military units, sensors and radar/EW nodes. Together, they create a dual-use (civil-military) system that helps China's broader strategy of strengthening its military presence near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India to reinforce its territorial claims. These logistical layers are poised to encroach on disputed territories in future.

China's actions along the India-China border and its military support to Pakistan suggest a long-term strategy. China's military buildup in the border areas and continuous strengthening of its position creates a situation which allows China to undertake offensive military actions against India with minimal preparation and in a short period. The current peace along the border, when viewed together with China's other actions including pressure on economic and other areas, point to it being tactical, tentative and temporary. The evaluation and appointment of younger new Generals by Xi Jinping suggest that China will continue to maintain an offensive posture on the borders.

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The recent diplomatic engagements have not changed this overall trajectory. On the sidelines of the 16th BRICS Summit in Kazan in October 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping held bilateral talks against the backdrop of some progress on border issues. Shortly before the summit, both sides agreed to resume patrolling along certain limited areas of the LAC in eastern Ladakh, towards restoring pre-2020 arrangements as part of de-escalation efforts. As a result, troops were disengaged at Depsang and Demchok, but that did not lead to a broader de-escalation of military capability or deployment. Beijing has continued building and strengthening permanent infrastructure, particularly around Pangong Tso and the Khurnak area. Instead of keeping large numbers of troops right at the front, China started building strong positions behind the front line, with emphasis on rapid reinforcement, survivability, and operational flexibility rather than withdrawal from contested areas.

### **Roads/Highways**

Post-2017, China has been investing heavily in network densification across TAR and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR). In the effort to create a densely connected and efficient logistics system, China is building more feeder roads, bypasses, bridges, and links that connect main highways to areas near the border. Consequently, major highways like G-219, G-318, G-109/G6, and new routes such as G-216, G-4218, and G-695 have been upgraded and extended to improve access to border areas.

These roads facilitate rapid movement and concentration of forces in different areas including towards Ladakh and Arunachal. Roads like G219 (which passes through Aksai Chin), the new G695 route (will pass through areas including the Galwan Valley,

Hot Springs, and Pangong Tso Lake), and G216, which connects Xinjiang to Tibet, all play an important role in furthering China's strategic objective of consolidating border infrastructure. These roads link Xinjiang to western Tibet and then connect to central and eastern Tibet. Additionally, they connect to the Karakoram Highway and smaller roads leading into Aksai Chin.

China has also built roads that connect the Shaksgam Valley to the main highway network in Xinjiang. National Highway G-684, which links the Western Highway (G-219) at Mazar and the Karakoram Highway (G-314) at Ilisu, was being built between 2016 and 2017 as a major Chinese infrastructure project in the Shaksgam Valley. Construction of this road, known as the Shaksgam Valley Road, started around 2016-2017. It is a 'natural surface road' designed to connect the Shaksgam Valley to existing routes in the area. A year later, a 70-km unpaved road along the Shaksgam River, entering from the northwest at Sokh Bulaq, was completed. Additionally, China began building another road from Ilisu (on G-314), heading southeast towards Sokh Bulaq, also in 2018. In 2021, construction of another new road started from Balti Brangsa (on the Xaidullah road in XUAR) and extending to the Karakoram Pass and then to the Shaksgam Pass, which marks the eastern edge of the Shaksgam Valley. Later, in 2023, this road entered the Shaksgam Valley from the north of the Shaksgam Pass. In 2022, China began building another road towards the Shaksgam Valley from the north. This road moves south from Yilike on G-684 and enters the Shaksgam Valley through the Aghil Pass. In 2023, the road had entered the valley and is now being extended southeast along the Shaksgam River towards the Shaksgam Pass. With these roads, China now has access to the Shaksgam Valley from three directions, connecting Aksai Chin to the Karakoram Highway.

Construction of this defense infrastructure has allowed China to claim the Shaksgam Valley (also known as the Trans-Karakoram Tract). The agreements concluded between Pakistan and China in 1963 when Pakistan ceded about 5,180 sq km of territory in the Shaksgam Valley to China specifically stated "the boundary settlement is temporary and subject to renegotiation after the final resolution of the Kashmir dispute." However, the recent statements of Chinese officials in January 2026 contradict this agreement. In response to objections, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning stated, "The territory you mentioned belongs to China. It's fully justified for China to conduct infrastructure construction on its own territory."

Following the two standoffs: Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020), China has focused on building and realigning roads to significantly reduce travel time to the LAC with India. These infrastructure improvements allow for faster deployment of troops and resources to border areas during contingencies.

The Pai-Mo Highway (also known as the Pai-Metok Highway), completed in 2021, realigns the road from Pai, south of Nyingchi along the Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo) river, to Metok, where the Brahmaputra enters India in Arunachal Pradesh along G-

219. This new route, which includes a tunnel at Doshong La, reduces the distance from 360 km to 175 km, cutting travel time from 11 hours to just 5 hours.

Another important strategic road, the Nyingchi-Medog Highway (Padma Township), was completed in 2021. It links Nyingchi to Medog County, reducing the distance from 346 km to 180 km and cutting travel time from roughly 12 hours to about 4 hours, while also improving access to the LAC.

In late 2023, a new strategic road was built entering Aksai Chin from the north—the third route from Xinjiang after those via Haji Langar and Qaratagh. It bypasses the older 300-kilometre Kangxiwar-Depsang alignment, reducing the distance to approximately 150 kilometres from the Kangxiwar area to the Depsang Plains.

Another example is the bridge over Pangong Tso, which is around 25 km ahead of LAC. Its first bridge (450m, north-south banks) was completed in May 2022, and a second 515m span finished by late 2024, halving transit times. China began constructing it in October 2021 across the lake's narrowest section, which is about 300 metres wide, to link the PLA garrison at Khurnak Fort on the north bank with its positions on the south. It reduces travel time between the two sectors from roughly 12 hours to just 3-4 hours, again for faster mobilisation, an advantage that could prove critical in any future crisis.

Satellite imagery has also shown extensive fortifications on the northern Pangong bank, including interlocking trenches, bunkers, and a newly constructed covered Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) site. China has also built permanent brick barracks in the Galwan Valley and reinforced existing ones with solar-powered perimeter lighting. Since the violent June 2020 clashes, China has continued to assert this claim, describing the Galwan Valley as part of its territory in the disputed Ladakh region, often citing historical rights and asserting its troops have patrolled the area for many years. Pangong Lake was also named an international tourist attraction in 2020, and related projects are underway in Demchok and Shiquanhe opposite Ladakh. Despite disengagement efforts in 2020-2021, the underlying territorial claim by China remains a point of contention in the ongoing Sino-Indian border dispute.

Additionally, China has constructed a new road linking north of Samzungling to the Galwan Valley, a strategically sensitive area along the LAC in eastern Ladakh. This route, built in early 2024, along with other feeder roads such as the Galwan Highway (an upgraded all-weather road completed before 2024), connects to the main G219 (Aksai Chin Road), shortens the approach by about 15 kilometres, from approximately 55 kilometres to around 40 kilometres, allowing the PLA to move troops, vehicles, and supplies into the valley more quickly and efficiently than before. Its construction was part of an intensified effort in the earlier infrastructure development plan that grew more pronounced following the 2020 Galwan Valley clash.

By the end of 2023, China had built strong, paved roads to most border areas in TAR. About 97% of the border towns and 78% of the border villages now have roads with hard surfaces.

Among the major infrastructure initiatives, China launched three significant highway projects along the India-China border. These include construction of the Metok to Chayu section of National Highway G219, the upgrade and renovation of National Highway G318, and the full opening of the Lhasa-Shigatse Expressway (part of G4218 YaYe Expressway, Ya'an in Sichuan to Yecheng in XUAR).

As of 2025, construction has begun on a new section of National Highway G214 linking Gyakha with Bangda Airport in Chamdo in eastern Tibet. This project extends the existing Gyakha-to-Chamdo route, and once combined with an existing 27.1-kilometre segment, it will form a 97.8-kilometre airport expressway connecting Chamdo with Bangda Airport and major national transport corridors, including routes tied to highways G317 and G318. The second phase of the project will cover nearly 71 kilometres, including dozens of bridges, tunnels, and a large spiral tunnel system. The total investment for this phase is 8.48 billion yuan, with a planned three-year construction timeline.

By the end of 2025, the total highway network in the region expanded to over 125,000 kilometres of roads. Implementation of 167 rural road projects improved access for dozens of villages, with nearly all townships and administrative villages now connected by passenger vehicle routes.

Official planning for the “15th Five-Year Plan” (2026–2030), adopted toward the end of 2025, places continued infrastructure development — especially transport, logistics, and border connectivity — at the centre of TAR’s economic and strategic agenda, with a focus on integrating digital, green, and intelligent systems into the transport network.

## **Railways**

China’s rail network near India’s northern borders remains limited compared to roads. By end of 2025, TAR had 125,000 km of roads but only 1,359 km of railways. The nearest Chinese railheads to India in western sector are Hotan and Yecheng in XUAR which are about 265 km from Daulat Beg Oldi; in central sector are Milin and Nyingchi in TAR about 20-45 km from Arunachal Pradesh; and in eastern sector is Shigatse which is about 125 km from Sikkim. However, post the 2017 Doklam standoff, China has moved to close the remaining gap as well through new projects such as the Sichuan-Tibet and Xinjiang-Tibet railway extensions.

The rail grid has expanded in three directions:

First, the Qinghai-Tibet Railway (Xining to Lhasa), which is fully operational since 2006, is currently in an active phase of electrification and capacity expansion. Construction began in 2022 and by 2025 the project progressed significantly, including the start of

major power infrastructure works to support full electrification and future increases in train weight, speed, and overall cargo/passenger throughput.

Second, the Sichuan-Tibet Railway (Chengdu-Ya'an-Nyingchi-Lhasa) has two parts already open: Chengdu to Ya'an since 2018, and Nyingchi to Lhasa since 2021. The middle section, Ya'an to Nyingchi is under construction and has aimed for completion around 2030. It is a more direct east-west corridor between Sichuan and Lhasa, reducing travel from Chengdu to Lhasa from 48 hours to 13 hours.

Third, the Xinjiang-Tibet Railway (Hotan-Shigatse-Lhasa) has moved from planning to early construction. It was announced as a major national project; early construction and survey work began 2023-24. It builds upon the Golmud-Ruoqiang Railway (completed in 2020) and the Hotan-Ruoqiang Railway (opened in 2022), which together form a rail loop around the Taklamakan Desert. This will connect western TAR directly with XUAR, providing the shortest rail link between China and the border areas of Aksai Chin and Ngari. The western rail network is projected to include the Sichuan-Tibet Railway and the Yunnan-Tibet Railway in future. A new link, from Hotan to Shigatse and on to Lhasa, is planned. Work is moving into the execution phase.

The fourth one is less discussed publicly, but often cited in Chinese transport plans as the "Southern Access Route" to TAR. The Yunnan-Tibet Railway (Kunming-Dali-Shangri-La-Deqin-Lhasa) is in the planning and partial construction stage. The section from Kunming to Shangri-La was completed in 2023, while construction on the Shangri-La to Deqin segment is underway. It links southwestern China to Tibet through Yunnan Province, adding redundancy to the Sichuan-Tibet corridor. Completion is expected by the early-to-mid 2030s.

### **Airports/Heliports**

Until 2017, Tibet had only five operational airports, namely Lhasa Gonggar, Shigatse Peace, Nyingchi Mainling, Qamdo Bangda, and Ngari Gunsa. All of which have since been upgraded with new terminals, longer runways, larger aprons, and improved military facilities. Around 37 airports and heliports in TAR and XUAR have been either newly constructed or upgraded. The pace of development increased significantly in 2020. In addition, 22 more airfields are planned to be built by 2035. These upgrades have increased capacity for both civil and military aircraft, allowing the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) to operate more efficiently at high altitudes.

Eventually, China launched a new phase of construction under the TAR General Aviation Development Plan (2021–2035). The plan envisions building 14 new airports between 2021 and 2025, of which about 10 are in advanced stages of construction.

After China's failed attempt to capture high-ground positions held by India on the Yangtse Plateau in the Tawang sector of Arunachal Pradesh, which led to a skirmish in December 2022, Beijing solidified its intent to assert control over disputed areas

along the LAC. Reports soon surfaced about the construction of a Chinese helipad opposite the Kameng area of Arunachal Pradesh as part of China's infrastructure expansion along the LAC. In 2024, China built a new heliport featuring a 600-meter runway and multiple hangars at Zayul county in Nyingchi. The construction is just 20 kilometres from the 'Fish-Tails' sector in Arunachal Pradesh.

The PLAAF has also built several new heliports and upgraded multiple existing ones across the plateau, starting from Rutog in western Tibet to Nyingchi in the east. In 2024, China allocated RMB 80 billion to improve its air transportation infrastructure that includes building 10 new airports and 47 Advanced Landing Grounds (ALGs) for military use.

High-altitude runways are made exceptionally long, for example the runways of Chamdo Airport and Shigatse Peace Airport are 5,500m and 5,000m respectively.

Ongoing construction includes three more helipads in strategically significant locations: south of Aktagh (north of the Karakoram Pass); Kyrmgo Traggar, opposite Gogra Hot Springs and Kongka La; and Ge'gyai county, towards the headwaters of the Indus River.

Moreover, the PLAAF now routinely operates from these high-altitude bases. Satellite imagery (2024) confirmed that the PLAAF's 111th Air Brigade, based in Korla, Xinjiang, was equipped with 28 J-20 fifth-generation fighter aircraft.

Satellite imagery (May 2024) showed six Chengdu J-20 stealth fighters positioned under protective shelters at Shigatse Air Base. The imagery also identified J-10 fighter aircraft and a KJ-500 airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft at the same location. It further confirmed that China has been upgrading and expanding airfield infrastructure in and around Shigatse, indicating sustained efforts to enhance operational readiness in the region.

In XUAR, construction is underway at Yutian (Keriya) and Shache (Yarkant) airports, both positioned about 400-500 kilometres from Pangong Tso. Once completed, these airfields are expected to ease operational pressure on Hotan Airbase.

The original target set under China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) projected that Xinjiang would have 37 civil transport airports by 2025, including those under construction. However, as of July 2025, Xinjiang had 28 operational or under-construction airports, with officials expecting the number to reach 33 by the end of 2025. Xinjiang continues to rank first among China's provincial-level regions in terms of number of transport airports, with ongoing construction on additional sites to meet regional connectivity goals.

As of 2025, at least five new airports, namely, Lhuntse in Lhoka, Ngari-Burang near the Uttarakhand border, Shigatse Tingri near the Nepal border, Tsona and Shannan-Longzi close to Arunachal border were already built or nearing completion. These are part of the Chinese plan to build several "border airports" by 2025 to improve mobility

and defense capability along its borders, especially with India. Each of these sites are located within roughly 60 kilometres of the India-China or Nepal-China border. Groundwork or early construction has also been reported at several other planned locations, including Sernye, Kharo, Dzayul, Tsamda, Gyertse, and Ruthog.

### **“Xiaokang” Border Villages**

In July 2017, the TAR government announced a plan to launch an extensive program to build 628 “Xiaokang” (well-off) border villages in 21 counties stretching from Ngari in the west to Nyingchi in the east. The construction primarily focused on areas bordering India (Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh) and Bhutan, and aimed to establish permanent, dual-use settlements. The first official “well-off” village, Jieluobu in the Jakarlung valley (near Bhutan), was founded in 2016, setting the stage for the 2017 expansion. By the end of 2020, over 600 villages were built in the first phase, with more being constructed after 2020.

Earlier, in 2016-2017, China started building two large-sized settlements at Yilike and Toquzbulaq. Yilike is situated along National Highway G-684, which connects the Karakoram Highway (G-314) and the Western Highway (G-219). It is located to the north of Shaksgam Pass. Toquzbulaq is located to the northwest of Sokh Bulaq, another settlement on the route from Ilisu (near the Karakoram Highway (G-314)) towards Shaksgam Valley. These settlements were part of China’s infrastructure expansion in the Aksai Chin region.

These Xiaokang villages are part of China’s campaign to reinforce territorial claims in disputed regions. Beijing is building more new villages and also continued renaming them in an attempt to reflect Chinese sovereignty. For example, Pangda (庞达) village (27°18’25.1994”N 89°0’28.7994”E) was constructed near the India–Bhutan–China trijunction (Doklam area), with Bhutanese areas being encroached upon despite Bhutanese protests. The Chinese government started building the village in this contested area to assert its control, especially following the Doklam standoff in 2017. The village was completed by October 2020 and Chinese state media *Global Times* confirmed it had about 27 households with 124 residents by 2020.

Of the total 628 planned villages, 427 are located closest to the border (first-line villages), while 201 are slightly further inland (second-line villages). Of the 427 front-line villages, 354 are being built along the borders with India, Nepal and Bhutan. Around 200–220 of these villages are along the India–China border, covering the sectors opposite Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Ladakh. These villages are equipped with power grids, roads, water, and communication networks, changing isolated border areas into permanent settlements.

While these villages are officially portrayed as part of “rural revitalization and poverty alleviation”, they serve a strategic purpose. They house people loyal to the Chinese

Communist Party (CCP), enhance surveillance, support military operations, and help reinforce China's control over disputed regions.

By 2020, over 600 of the planned 628 villages had been completed.

Post 2020, many villages were built but not initially populated. By 2023–2024, some of these villages were visibly occupied by residents, especially in areas opposite Arunachal Pradesh and other parts of the LAC. There are reports that the population in some or many of these villages, subsequently converted to Xiaokang villages, rose from between 2-3 or 10 to between 150-200. The population in these villages are mixed and include Tibetans, Tibetan nomads, Hans, Tibetan Muslims etc. to break ethnic cohesion.

Additionally, by 2024, a proposal to develop about 175 more border villages near Arunachal Pradesh was reported, bringing the total number of frontier settlements closer to 900 in the broader LAC region.

## **Dams**

China has also accelerated hydropower development across TAR, particularly along transboundary rivers that flow towards India and Nepal. One of the most notable projects is the new dam near Burang, in southwestern Tibet, which satellite imagery confirmed as completed in January 2024. The dam sits on the Mapcha Tsangpo River, known downstream as the Karnali in Nepal and the Ghaghara or Saryu in India and is designed to regulate water flow through the Himalayas. While officially described as part of China's renewable energy and flood-control strategy, it is capable of regulating water flow into Nepal and northern India, thereby giving China increased hydrological control over these shared waters.

Major existing hydropower projects include the Yamdrok Pumped Storage Station (completed 1998, 112.5 MW) on the Yamdrok Lake tributary of the Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo), the Pangduo Dam (operational 2013, 160 MW) and the Zhikong Dam (operational 2007, 100 MW) on the Lhasa River, the Zangmu Dam (operational 2015, 510 MW) on the upper Brahmaputra. Later in 2020, the Jiacha Dam (360 MW) on the upper Brahmaputra and the Lalho (Xiabuqu) Dam on a tributary near Shigatse were also made fully operational. These existing projects do not currently pose a major hydrological threat to India, but they contribute to incremental upstream control and therefore remain strategically sensitive in the context of India-China relations.

However, China is advancing plans for what is projected to become the world's largest hydropower project on the upper Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo), near the river's Great Bend in Medog (Motuo) County, located just 30 kms from Arunachal Pradesh. The project is expected to form a five-dam cascade on the Great Bend of the Brahmaputra. China formally began its construction in July 2025. Costing an estimated RMB 1.2 trillion, it is projected to generate 60,000 MW of power, roughly three times

the capacity of the Three Gorges Dam. The project would significantly expand China's ability to regulate river flows downstream, carrying far greater hydrological and strategic implications for India than earlier run-of-river installations.

China has also announced dozens of other dams: Dagu Dam (330 MW, operating) and Jiexu Dam (510 MW, under construction), as well as Bayu (800 MW), Lengda (320 MW), Zhongda (320 MW) and Langzhen (340 MW) dams, all planned on the lower Brahmaputra.

These dual-purpose projects support not only regional energy needs but also the power demands of railways, airports, and military garrisons across Tibet.

Additionally, China is financially involved in building large dams on the Indus in Gilgit-Baltistan occupied by Pakistan. Construction of the Diamer-Bhasha Dam officially began in 2018 and is expected to be completed by 2028. Another is the Bunji Dam, construction of which began around 2019 and is projected to be completed by 2027. Both dams are located in Pakistan-occupied Gilgit-Baltistan and could potentially affect the water flow downstream in India, especially into Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, adversely impacting water availability for agriculture and daily use.

This evolving hydro-infrastructure landscape introduces long-term strategic and environmental uncertainties, especially since there is no comprehensive water-sharing agreement covering these rivers. As climate change increases and regional water demand rises, the strategic significance of upstream control over the Brahmaputra and Indus river systems is likely to become even more pronounced.

## **Military**

Since the Doklam standoff, China has steadily expanded and reorganized its military posture along the LAC. What was once a presence largely based on patrols and limited forward deployments has evolved into a more layered presence supported by permanent infrastructure. This build-up includes new units, upgraded bases, advanced surveillance systems, integrated air defence networks, and electronic warfare (EW) capabilities.

A key feature of this expansion is the development and upgrading of high-altitude air bases across the TAR. China now maintains around 16 airfields along the India-TAR frontier capable of supporting fighter aircraft, transport planes, helicopters, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Satellite imagery and photos indicate deployments of advanced platforms, including J-20 stealth fighters, to some Western Theatre Command (WTC) airbases during periods of heightened tension. These facilities enhance rapid troop mobilization, improve logistical sustainment, and strengthen China's ability to monitor and respond swiftly across different sectors of the LAC.

In parallel, China has expanded its surveillance architecture along sensitive friction points such as Pangong Tso and Gogra Hot Springs. This includes the installation of

cameras, ground sensors, radar systems, and hardened observation posts to track troop movements. EW stations have also been deployed to intercept communications, jam signals, and enhance battlefield awareness, giving the PLA an information advantage in contested high-altitude terrain. The use of UAVs has increased appreciably since 2017, supported by new high-altitude testing and operational facilities in TAR.

The PLA information and communications support infrastructure is present in the Shigatse area, particularly near key transport corridors and riverbank zones linked to major military and logistics hubs. Following the 2024 restructuring of the PLA, such installations would now fall under the Information Support Force (ISF), which inherited relevant network, communications, and information operations functions from the former Strategic Support Force (SSF).

In 2023, prior to the restructuring, the former SSF was reported to have expanded electronic and signals-related facilities in Nyingchi, approximately 30 km from Arunachal Pradesh. These facilities are to support electronic warfare, signals intelligence, and network operations along the eastern sector of the LAC. After the 2024 reforms, these capabilities are administered under the ISF framework.

### ***Sector-wise PLA deployments near the India-China border***

Post-Doklam, the PLA has moved to a formation-centric posture, particularly in Ladakh and Arunachal. The PLA now maintains forward-facing brigades in the east, with other forces and Special Operations Forces (SOF) in the west, and reserves in central Tibet. The focus is on reinforcement, speed, sustainability, and flexibility, rather than permanent massing of troops at the LAC. This new posture allows China to exert grey-zone pressure, escalate quickly, and sustain prolonged standoffs without needing early strategic mobilization.

After the 2015-16 military reforms, the Western Theatre Command (WTC) (headquartered at Chengdu) controls the PLA's main border troops. It has two Group Armies (GAs): the 76th GA (Xining in Qinghai) and 77th GA (Chongzhou in Sichuan). Neither GA is based in Tibet or Xinjiang, however, both supply brigades to the frontier. The Xinjiang Military District (XMD) and Tibet Military District (TMD) both include an army aviation brigade, an air-defense brigade, an artillery brigade, a special operations forces (SOF) brigade, a chemical defense brigade, an engineer brigade, along with information support brigade, communications brigade, and intelligence and reconnaissance brigade.

Moreover, since 2017 the 77th GA has reassigned three Combined Arms Brigades (CABs) into the TMD. The 52nd CAB (light infantry, based at Bayi/Shigatse), the 53rd CAB (light infantry, at Nyingchi), and the 54th CAB (armoured/mechanized, at Lhasa). Notably, the 52nd CAB was relocated from Nyingchi to Yadong after 2017, close to the site of the Doklam crisis.

In contingencies, the 76th and 77th would likely be reinforced by units from China's Central Theatre Command (headquartered in Beijing) and Southern Theatre Command (headquartered in Guangzhou).

**Western Sector:** Key formations include the 4th Combined Arms Division (CAD) in Kuqa (Kucha City), Aksu Prefecture and the 6th CAD based in Kashgar (often associated with Hotan/southern Xinjiang deployment for border patrol), which covers the Aksai Chin (northwestern LAC) sector and surrounding areas. These divisions, along with other specialized units like the 84th Special Operations Forces Brigade ("Kunlun Sharp Blades") in Kashgar (Kashi), have a significant presence in the Kashgar-Kargilik region near the Indian border. Its location, one of the major towns in Xinjiang closer to Aksai Chin and the Ladakh sector, makes it a strategically important base for rapid-response operations along the western LAC. The SOF Brigade is specialized for mountain warfare, desert operations, and high-altitude combat, making it ideal for the Karakoram and Ladakh regions. The four Divisions in Xinjiang (4th, 6th, 8th and 11th) were restructured and redesignated as CADs in late 2020 or early 2021, after the Galwan crisis. All the Divisions include mechanized infantry, armoured elements, artillery, air defence, and logistics units.

The Hotan Border Defence Regiment, based in Hotan under the XMD, conducts frontier patrols across the Depsang Plains and Galwan Valley areas. The regiment is part of the PLA's South Xinjiang MD (Nanjiang MD), which has operational responsibility for the areas of Aksai Chin disputed with India. The regiment is part of a standing force that has been reinforced over time, particularly following China's military operations in 2020.

The Ngari Border Defence Regiment (identified as 361st Border Defence Regiment, Unit 69310), headquartered at Shiquanhe (Sengge Khabab/valley) in the TAR, is responsible for securing the Pangong Tso and Spanggur Gap sectors. The 361st BDR in Zanda County in Ngari commissioned a new Garrison headquarter in October 2020.

Further depth is provided by the logistical hubs in Qinghai, notably around Golmud, which is an important logistical hub and home to new military facilities, including a major new PLARF missile base which was discovered by satellites in 2025. This facility, which includes multiple launch pads and shelters, is believed to host a new missile brigade under PLARF Base 64. The base is just 900 kilometres from the Indian border and can potentially deploy missiles including DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missiles.

By the end of 2020, following the border standoffs that began in April-May 2020, China had constructed thousands of prefabricated trenches and bunkers (some reaching 60kms behind the LAC) to support the CADs on alert in Aksai Chin. Significant acceleration in construction was noted between late 2021 and 2023, turning temporary forward locations into permanent, hardened, "winter-ready" bases.

Additionally, since 2020, the PLA has maintained a presence on the strategic north-south ridgeline of Gurung Hill (Ladakh), utilizing it for surveillance of the Chushul area.

New air defense complexes are being built in Gar County, facing Ladakh, with radar systems and surface-to-air missiles (like HQ-9) that can be hidden under retractable roofs.

At Lake Mansarovar, satellite images from 2024 showed upgrades to a radar/EW site, with a new large radome and solar arrays.

Since 2021, Ngari Gunsai Airbase has hosted multiple UAVs, including armed CH-4 systems. Furthermore, satellite imagery from December 2022 indicated the presence of a WZ-7 “Soaring Dragon” high-altitude, AI-enabled reconnaissance UAV at Shigatse Airbase.

In September 2025, a new high-altitude Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) test centre was built in Ngari, approximately 10 kilometres southeast of Shiquanhe and near the existing Ngari PLA Logistics Centre. The centre is at an elevation of 4,300 meters, featuring a 720-meter runway and hangars to support air capabilities near the LAC with India.

Satellite imagery from 2025 revealed that the PLA is constructing a new, advanced air-defense complex near the eastern banks of Pangong Lake (Gar County), Tibet, featuring specialized, hardened shelters with retractable roofs. These structures, designed for long-range HQ-9 SAM systems, are located in proximity to several areas where standoffs occurred in 2020 in eastern Ladakh and approximately 65 km from India’s Nyoma airfield, providing concealment and protection for launchers.

Around Pangong Tso, especially near the Finger 6-8 area, satellite imagery has identified new radome structures, electronic warfare equipment, and temporary deployments. Air defence systems linked to radar networks have also been reported in areas facing Ladakh.

**Central Sector:** The PLA posture at central sector remains dominated by border defence units and patrols, operating under the TMD.

However, the sector is supported by rear-based reserve formations in central Tibet, particularly around Lhasa and Shigatse. These formations, while not permanently stationed in the central sector, can be quickly redeployed toward the central LAC if needed. Since Doklam, the PLA's approach in this sector has focused on deterrence through infrastructure depth and rapid redeployment capability, rather than permanently stationing major combat formations at the forward positions.

After the 2017 standoff, infrastructure upgrades have occurred within the jurisdiction of the 356th Border Defense Regiment in the Yadong (Yatung) County of Shigatse Prefecture. Rapid construction of new road alignments such as the G694 that connects

Jiru further south into the Chumbi Valley up to Yadong, directly enhance the PLA's ability to rapidly mobilize troops toward the Sikkim border and the Siliguri Corridor ("Chicken's Neck"), a critical 22km-wide stretch of land connecting India's Northeast to the rest of the country. Construction of new bridges and hard-top roads in the Shigatse/Yadong sector significantly reduce the PLA's induction time for armoured columns and heavy artillery.

The concern in this sector is that China's ongoing road-building (including the planned toll road to Lipulekh) will facilitate force movement.

**Eastern Sector:** Infrastructure upgrades and modernization, including the deployment of new weaponry, have taken place within the 354th and 355th Border Defense Regiments under the TMD. The 354th based in Lhunze County and the 355th based in Tsona County, both are located in areas of Lhoka (Shannan) facing Tawang opposite Arunachal, have undergone significant reorganisation particularly after the 2017 Doklam standoff and 2020 Galwan clash. The regiments have received advanced equipment, including third-generation Dongfeng Mengshi (DM) assault vehicles (lightweight, multifunctional, capable of acting as command or weapons platforms). The units have been equipped with updated light tanks (such as Type-15), self-propelled howitzers, and rocket launcher systems specifically designed for high-altitude operations.

After the India-China skirmish in Tawang (2022), China has continued to reinforce its military infrastructure along the LAC opposite Arunachal. In 2023, two posts were constructed on the Chinese side of the LAC opposite Tulung La (Kameng). The same year, China started building an underground storage depot near Siyom in Arunachal Pradesh, about 30-40 km from the Line of Actual Control (LAC), on the Chinese side. This depot is a big complex with tunnels, warehouses, and a labour camp. Another storage depot, located about 50-60 km inside China, opposite Dibang (near Arunachal Pradesh), has already been completed. In addition, China has been strengthening its positions in other areas, like the Gongkar airbase in Tibet, where it has set up a surface-to-air missile site, jammers, radars, and other weapon systems.

Around 2019-2020, advanced "hot eyes" and "golden eye" (portable) EO/IR camera systems and electronic warfare equipment were reported at high-altitude locations near the border in Arunachal Pradesh, specifically near Bum La Pass (Tsona County, Lhoka). These aligned with the increasing border infrastructure development. These systems provide 24/7, all-weather surveillance (360° rotational sensors) with a 5-8 km range, feeding data directly to PLA command centres to monitor Indian troop movement. Additionally, GPS jammers have been used along the LAC to disrupt Indian surveillance drones and precision-guided weapons.

From 2018-2023, villages like Zhuangnan and Majiduncun just north of Tawang were rapidly expanded into large complexes with PLA barracks, radome, helipads and

garrisons. In Oct 2023 alone, four new villages near the Tawang–Bomdila border were reported. Roads have been built from these villages to the forward LAC (e.g. a concrete road from Tangwu village toward Yangtse), and Chinese maps now mark these as “settled areas.”

In North Sikkim, China has also built roads in the Sherathang-Rinchengang area to match India’s Nathu La road. PLA command posts and helipads exist in Demchok (near Ladakh) and at remote points in Arunachal. Nearly every valley in Arunachal facing Tibet now has a Chinese road or outpost for “last-mile” connectivity.

Near the Doklam plateau and Sikkim border, radar sites and SAM systems have been reported at Pagri and near Kyarang La. Additionally, new radar sites have been identified at Nyingchi and Ngiti. These installations support continuous monitoring of Indian airspace and high-altitude troop movements. EW nodes in this sector are reportedly capable of intercepting communications and jamming signals.

## Conclusion

China has changed the way it manages the border with India since 2017. Instead of only keeping large number of troops near the front line, Beijing has built transport, settlements, and energy systems all over TAR and XUAR for rapid movement and longer periods of stay in high-altitude areas for PLA troops.

After the talks between PM Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping in Oct 2024, a marginal number of PLA troops were removed only in certain areas. Construction of military infrastructure including roads, storage sites, strong buildings, surveillance systems, and air defence positions continued.

Additionally, India’s “Operation Sindoor” against Pakistan (May 7-9, 2025) highlighted China’s expanded support for Pakistan. For the first time China was directly involved in assisting Pakistan in military operations. Pakistan deployed Chinese-origin J-10C fighters armed with PL-15 long-range air-to-air missiles, marking one of the first reported combat uses of the PL-15. Chinese provided intelligence via direct satellite feeds, allowed the Pakistan Air Force and air defense access to its satellites, and Chinese PLAAF AWACS guided Pakistan Air Force pilots in combat. China assisted, if not crafted, Pakistan’s propaganda narrative. For example, a May 20 report by the Chinese think tank *Spark* claimed that Pakistan’s J-10CE aircraft shot down six Indian fighters—including Rafale, Su-30MKI, MiG-29, and Mirage-2000 jets—during the three-and-a-half-day conflict, describing a “6:0” outcome. The report highlighted Pakistan’s integrated “four-in-one” combat system comprising J-10CE fighters, PL-15 missiles, ZDK-03 AEW&C aircraft, and air-defense radars. China also put out Pakistani propaganda via *Reuters* in Tokyo.

China’s actions along the India-China border and its military support to Pakistan suggest a long-term strategy. China’s military buildup in the border areas and

continuous strengthening of its position creates a situation which allows China to undertake offensive military actions against India with minimal preparation and in a short period. The current peace along the border, when viewed together with China's other actions including pressure on economic and other areas, point to it being tactical, tentative and temporary. The evaluation and appointment of younger new Generals by Xi Jinping suggest that China will continue to maintain an offensive posture on the borders.

