GEOPOLITICS

JAISHANKAR SAYS THE CHINA BORDER IS "MORE ALIVE". HE IS RIGHT

By **Kamlesh Bhagatkar**, *Politician, Author & Geopolitical Analyst · 14 November 2026*

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said on Saturday, 14 November, that our border with China now needs far more soldiers, for far longer, than it once did. "What has happened today is the border with China has become more alive in a way. It has required a much greater commitment of troops on a sustained basis," he said at an interactive session at the HT Leadership Summit in New Delhi, according to PTI.

He tied this to roads and tunnels. "Just think about the last few years. How often do you now read: a new tunnel has been built, some new bridge has been built, another airfield has been commissioned. You're getting this news with greater and greater frequency," he said. "The fact is that the work we had already done allowed that kind of numbers to be deployed out there, and the work we continue to do will maintain those numbers." He also said border infrastructure "was really neglected till about a decade ago", and that India's ability to deploy troops on that frontier has seen "a very marked" improvement.

The words are measured, as Jaishankar's usually are. I think they are also the clearest official admission so far that the thaw with Beijing has not changed the ground on the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

A thaw on paper, tents on the ground

Look at what has happened since the Galwan clash of June 2020, in which at least 20 Indian soldiers were killed. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping met in Kazan in October 2024 and relations began to mend. Direct flights and visas were eased, the BBC reports. Xi came to India for the 18th BRICS Summit, held from 11 to 13 September this year, his first visit in seven years.

Then, on 22 October, the Director General of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), Shatrujeet Singh Kapur, spoke at an ITBP awards ceremony in Alwar, Rajasthan. "In the past few-days, a situation arose where face-off happened at several locations in Arunachal and it still continues," he said, as quoted by Outlook. According to the BBC, Kapur said the confrontations began in July, both sides first pulled back, and Chinese troops then returned in larger numbers and pitched tents "around six-to-seven

kilometres inside India's perception of the Line of Actual Control". Outlook, citing a report in The Hindu, placed one stand-off at Asaphila, near Taksing in Upper Subansiri district, going on since late July.

New Delhi did not deny it. MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said "the situation in the border areas gets disturbed from time to time when Chinese forces diverge from established patrolling patterns", and that military and diplomatic channels were being used, the BBC reported. Beijing's foreign ministry said China had "consistently and strictly adhered to relevant agreements" and carried out "normal patrol and management activities". The two accounts do not match, and I have no way to settle the details from outside. The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, a body of the US Congress, wrote in its 10 November bulletin that PLA troops have set up encampments "roughly four miles inside of India's claimed border in Arunachal Pradesh" since late July.

So when Jaishankar says the border is "more alive", I read it alongside this. An official dialogue can go on in Beijing and New Delhi while patrols face each other in Upper Subansiri. Both are happening at once.

What a manned frontier means for Bharat

The LAC runs for about 3,440 km, by the BBC's count, and Jaishankar himself says its infrastructure was neglected for decades. A frontier that needs "a much greater commitment of troops on a sustained basis" is a permanent cost. Soldiers have to be housed at altitude through the winter, supplied, rotated and kept fit. Every road and tunnel Jaishankar listed makes that possible, and every one of them has to be maintained.

I see three things in his remarks for us.

The first is that roads and tunnels are now the core of our China policy, and talks sit on top of them. A government that admits the border is busier is telling its own people to expect this spending to continue.

The second is economic. Jaishankar was frank that India "simply missed the bus" in the 1980s, when China pushed industrialisation. "Remember, when around the time when Rajiv Gandhi went to China in 1988, the Indian and Chinese economies were about the same size," he said. His answer was not to copy Beijing: "In asymmetry, you don't go toe-to-toe on every issue. You pick the issues where you feel you have the ability to make a big change." I agree with the approach, but the numbers show how far we have to go. Bilateral trade reached $151 billion last year, the BBC reports, and about $131 billion of that was Chinese exports to India. China also announced curbs on exports of tunnel-boring machines in October. They were not aimed at India, but they touch the very tunnels Jaishankar was praising.

The third is about candour. When a serving ITBP chief speaks publicly about face-offs and a minister then speaks of a "more alive" border, the government is preparing the country for a long, armed coexistence rather than a settlement. I think that is more honest than the hopeful language that followed Kazan.

What to watch next

Watch whether the Arunachal stand-offs are resolved through the military and diplomatic channels the MEA mentioned, and whether either side says so on the record. Watch the next round of India-China border talks and whether "patrolling patterns" appear in the readout. And watch the trade side: any new Chinese export curb on machinery or materials India needs for its border and metro projects would tell us how Beijing means to use the asymmetry Jaishankar described.

Sources

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