

Colloquium

Two-Front War: What Does it Imply?

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There has been much public concern about a potential two-front war provoked by Pakistan or China from the west and north as the strategic alliance between China and Pakistan deepened through the past decade. Persistent terror attacks and armed support by the Pakistani military to jihadi groups and separatists in the Kashmir Valley and the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that runs through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), whose legal sovereignty belongs to India, are deeply disturbing and pose serious strategic threats. The concerns have not dissipated despite the recent improvement in India-China relations and the Confidence Building Measures in place, since Beijing's strategic stakes in Pakistan are rising and it has shown little willingness to restrain Islamabad from pursuing its dangerous course or lower the risks of conflict escalation that may drag it in.

To understand the risks involved in conflict escalation flowing from nuclear armed Pakistan and China's military strategies and alliance operations, in this segment we carry the perspectives of three highest level senior retired officers and strategic thinkers of the armed forces and that of an equally senior civilian analyst. The views are those of the individual experts and do not represent current official thinking. The aim is to better understand the issues, the possibility of such a scenario emerging, and what needs to be done to prevent such an outcome.

Defending the Land Frontiers

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“Let him who desires peace, prepare for war”
Vegetius, De ReMilitari, iii, 378

One of the earliest pronouncements, free India's first Prime Minister Pandit Nehru is reported to have made on assuming office was, “India does not need an army, it needs a police force. We have no enemies...” This view, however, proved to be misplaced and ironically India has been subject to aggressions, once by China in 1962 and four times by Pakistan in 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999. Unfortunately, India does not appear to have learnt its lessons from these five blatant aggressions, unlike other countries of the world.

Security Threats and Challenges

At the global and the regional level the stature of India is on the rise. It has been termed as a pillar of regional security in the Indo-Pacific region by both US Presidents Obama and Trump. The significant role of India in the regional security architecture is also recognised in the latest US Security Strategy. India's intent to take on this role is evident from its continuing efforts towards its economic and military capability development, though the latter leaves a lot of scope for improvement both in terms of quantum and pace. India's quest for 'Make in India' and self-reliance are steps in this direction, but have not yet made notable progress.

The major external threats emanate from Pakistan and China, India's two nuclear armed neighbours.

Pakistan

With Pakistan, India shares a delineated and demarcated international boundary (IB) of 2545 Km and 778 Km along the Line of Control (LoC) in

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Jammu and Kashmir (J&K and 110 Km of Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) in the mountainous and high altitude area of Siachen. India has never had peace with Pakistan, and Kashmir is only a symptom of that problem; the actual problem in Pakistan's case is existential. It cannot bring itself to believe that India has accepted the Partition as a legacy of history and, hence, reconcile to that reality. On Pakistan's part, waging a State sponsored proxy war by using terrorists in J&K is an important part of its strategy to bleed and keep a stronger India tied down. Pakistan has also allowed China to construct a road through Pakistan Occupied Indian Territory in Kashmir and up to the Arabian Sea, as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Besides, this they have virtually handed over the Gawadar Port to China, which solves its Malaca dilemma up to a point.

China

India shares a 4057 Km un-demarcated border with China. Frequent transgressions by both sides are the norm due to differing perceptions regarding the alignment of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). China, at times talks of sharing a border of only 2000 km with India, implying indirectly its non-recognition of J&K as a part of India. India is the only neighbour of China, besides Bhutan, with whom it has an unsettled land border. Although India has been pressurising China to mutually resolve the disputed border, Beijing is keen on leaving this for the future generation. This, therefore, remains a seed of possible conflict at all times.

Forays by PLA Navy (PLAN) ships and submarines into the Indian Ocean are on the increase and China's influence on our neighbours is also on the rise. In the Indo-Pacific region the Chinese have acquired virtually dual purpose sea ports in Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Pakistan and Djibouti, thereby encircling India by what has been called a 'string of pearls'.

Doklam Flare-up: The 2017 China-India border standoff took place over Chinese construction of a road in Doklam near the Tri-Junction border area in Bhutan, from 16 June - 28 August 2017. Although, both sides have now disengaged and the Chinese road construction has stopped, there will always remain a possibility of a flare-up. This could be used by China to try to coerce India and keep Bhutan under intense pressure.

China-Pak Nexus

It is widely assessed that collusion between China and Pakistan adds another serious dimension to their capability enhancement. It is also assessed that if there is a war-like situation between India and Pakistan, China is unlikely to intervene directly. However, it may carry out some deployments to tie down the Indian troops in the Northern and Eastern Sectors as it has done earlier. If there was to be a war between China and India, Pakistan would almost definitely activate the Western borders with a view to try and seize Kashmir, as Indian troops would be reduced to less than half the normal deployment opposite Pakistan. There will be very little possibility of switching troops and resources from one front to another in case of a war on two fronts.

Nuclear exchange

In case of a war with both China and Pakistan in collusion, there will be a very remote or negligible possibility of a nuclear dimension coming into play. But should ever an India-Pak flare up take place, Pakistan will always threaten with a nuclear response {to start with tactical nuclear weapons (TNW)} to neutralise India's conventional superiority and try to halt India in its tracks. Unfortunately, India has bought this ruse.

Additional 'Half-Front' – Kashmir

Pakistan has been able to create a tense security environment, with radicalisation in the valley, a limited civil unrest and a situation of hybrid conflict there. India has, therefore, to continue to stabilise the situation in J&K through a combination of military domination and good governance. This necessitates heavy commitment of troops and, hence, can be termed as 'Half Front'.

Cyber and Space Domains

In case of collusion between Pakistan and China, rising cyber threats, especially from China, and its growing Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance (ISR), aerospace, artificial intelligence and unmanned weapon systems will add another critical dimension to their capabilities. India has to develop its own capabilities in this field over and above its full preparation for conventional war.

Implications of a Two or Two and a Half-Fronts War

- (a) It will not be possible for India to deal with both the fronts piecemeal; they will have to be handled simultaneously. The only constant factor will be the Kashmir insurgency, but major burden of that will have to be passed on to the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). This, however, imposes a limitation.
- (b) Vast geographical separation also precludes rapid movement of large quantum of troops from one sector to another, not only for the Army but also for the Air Force. This will result in separation of forces: a major disadvantage for India.
- (c) Navy of course will have to be divided into the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal.
- (d) A war on two fronts will also result in much higher degree of ammunition consumption and thus much higher stocks of ammunition and spares need to be available from 'ab initio'.
- (e) Strategically, India may consider adopting a posture of deterrence against Pakistan and dissuasion against China. This will result in optimisation and application of Forces as best-suited for such an operational scenario with available resources. Higher level of inter-theatre mobility will enhance operational options.

Are We Prepared for a Two-Front War?

Presently there are some major limitations, which are listed below:

- (a) **Strategic Direction for the Armed Forces.** The only political direction to the Armed Forces in existence is Raksha Mantri's operational Directive of 2009. It is now dated and hence needs to be revised. It lays down that, 'We should be prepared to fight on both fronts simultaneously a war at 30 days (intense) and 60 days (normal) rates.
- (b) **Are We Prepared?** No Armed Forces in the world, and least of all the proud Indian Armed Forces, will ever raise their hands in case of operations because of their lack of wherewithal. They will fight to the very best of their capabilities. They have made suitable plans to optimise their potential in every scenario. However, it is better for the country to be aware of the actual situation, and for that they need to be guided by the recent Army Vice Chief's presentation to the 'Parliamentary Committee for Defence'. Briefly, Army's thrust was that: (i) 65 per cent of the arsenal is obsolete, (ii) the ammunition

holdings are far below the operationally desirable stocks, and (iii) forces lack artillery, missiles and helicopters which could enable them to fight on both fronts simultaneously.

Way Forward

Space does not permit a detailed discussion of this aspect. However, very briefly, India need to divide our preparation based on twin approaches of (i) what needs to be done in immediate future (not more than 2-3 years at the most) and (ii) what all must be achieved in next 5-7 years (mid-term). This needs to address all areas warranting attention, (i) organisational issues, (ii) structural issues, (iii) financial aspects and finally, (iv) the aspects of joint-ness among services.

Immediate Future (2-3 years)

(a) Strategic Direction for the Armed Forces:

India must develop a 'National Security Doctrine Strategy' and from that the military will draw out its 'National Military Strategy'. Raksha Mantri's updated and revised operational Directive must be issued which should clearly lay down that the preparedness has got to be related to a 'two-front war' simultaneously and indicate the likely duration. From this our budgetary requirements must be closely established. The anomalous situation, as existing at present, must be removed.

(b) Improving Operational Stocks of Ammunition, Munitions and Spares to Improve Serviceability Rate of Equipment and Preparedness:

(i) At least 50 per cent of the ammunition required (15 days intense) and 30 (Normal) must be stocked over the next one-two years, and for the balance, arrangement must be arrived at with friendly countries for their assured supply at a notice of 15 days.

(ii) Minimum serviceability rate for all types of equipment and armament must be maintained at a readiness level of minimum 70 per cent at all times. For this the assistance of our indigenised companies in the Defence Industrial Base should be taken as a permanent measure.

(c) Refining the Higher Defence Organisation and Inculcating Joint-ness amongst Armed Forces. The report of Group of Ministers on National Security (2001) had recommended the creation of a post of Chief of Defence Staff

(CDS) for (i) Single point military advice, (ii) administering strategic forces, (iii) enhancing effectiveness of planning process, and (iv) promoting joint-ness. Subsequent committees have also forcefully recommended implementation of this report. Joint-ness serves as a force multiplier operationally and will also help in substantial financial savings.

(d) **Budgetary Allocations to be Rationalised.** An appropriate and thus much enhanced allocation of budget is a pre-requisite to attain preparedness and thus security. This will have to be done for a long period. An allocation of around \$200 billion over a period of 10 years will help India attain the desired level of preparedness which will enable it to measure up to the challenges and be seen as a credible security provider in Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Regions. As a starter, the Defence Budget must be raised to 3 per cent of the GDP. The newly-created Defence Planning Committee (DPC) is likely to be a great help in expediting all matters.

Long-Term Measures

- (a) Budgetary allocations need to be increased to 3 per cent of the GDP.
- (b) The Higher Defence Organisation has to be refined.
- (c) Civil-military relations to be improved by posting military representatives in the MoD at key decision making posts.
- (d) Force structure to be refined.
- (e) Expedite the raising of the Mountain Strike Corps to enhance and upgrade dissuasive posture against China to one of deterrence.
- (f) Defence Industrial Base to be strengthened, and procurement procedures refined.
- (g) 'Make in India' – to be given a push.

Conclusion

As far as the three Services are concerned they must try and ensure that the allotted resources are optimally utilised and joint-ness is implemented in letter and spirit. India has to be prepared to fight future wars with due emphasis on Cyber and Space dimensions without sacrificing our capabilities for conventional warfare. A two-front war can be a live possibility.

A Maritime Perspective

R K Dhowan*

India's quintessential maritime character and vital geo-strategic location in the Indian Ocean are twin factors that define her vast maritime interests. The responsibility of protecting these assets fall squarely on the shoulders of men in white uniform, and it is the responsibility of the Navy to ensure that these maritime interests, which have a vital relationship with the nation's economic growth, are allowed to develop unhindered, both in peace and war.

A 'two-front war' is a sub-set of a multi-front 'State-on-State' armed conflict. As the former term indicates, this is an armed conflict on two separate fronts. These 'fronts' could involve armed conflict waged in separate domains (air war and land war, war-at-sea and war-on-land, etc.), or, the conflict could be waged in geographically distinct theatres (for instance, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal). Conversely, the term could indicate a simultaneous conflict of one State against two others. History is replete with examples of each type. For instance, the aim of the 600-ship US Navy of the 1980s was to gain *Command of the Seas* and also fight the Soviets on two maritime fronts, namely the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans.¹ In the Indian context, the 1971 conflict with Pakistan, too, was a two-front campaign, fought in all the three domains – sea, land, and air.

The possibility of simultaneous armed conflict between India on the one hand and, China and Pakistan acting either in cooperation or collusion with each other, on the other, is the subject of this analysis.

In an armed conflict against India, China and Pakistan could choose either a collaborative or a collusive approach. The former involves one country openly aiding its partner/ ally, whereas the latter involves more covert

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1. For further reading on the USA's 600-ship Navy in the 1980s please see *Command of the Seas* by John E Lehmann, Naval Institute Press, 2001.

cooperation between the two. These approaches could lead to the following scenarios, among others:

(a) India is engaged in an armed conflict with Pakistan, and China intervenes with actual combat deployments in support of Pakistani forces. The cost of conflict (to China) in such a scenario would be inordinately high, without commensurate gains either in terms of actual combat winnings or gaining and sustaining a favourable global opinion. Consequently, the likelihood of such a scenario is relatively low.

(b) India is engaged in an armed conflict with Pakistan and China offers moral and logistic support to Pakistan. The likelihood of such a scenario is high, as it involves minimal costs and few adverse implications for China.

(c) India and China are engaged in armed conflict and Pakistan supports China by activating India's western front. Given the general leanings of Pakistan, Islamabad is unlikely to have any of the inhibitions as applied to China, and would probably not hesitate in joining hands with China, whether overtly or covertly, as desired by China. The likelihood of such support being extended by Pakistan to China, both overt and covert, is, therefore, high.

It may, therefore, be assumed that an armed conflict primarily with China is quite likely to lead to India facing a two-front war scenario, involving China and Pakistan.

What is to be done?

There is no gainsaying that two Armies do not, by themselves, go to war. Nor do two Navies, or two Air Forces. Two *nations* go to war. In recognition of this truism, a two-front war ought not to be planned-for (and certainly not executed) at the level of individual armed forces. On the contrary, all three Services must meaningfully and synergistically contribute towards the political and military aims of such an armed conflict. India's joint approach should exploit the principle of manoeuvre — not at the Corps level, but at the 'Theatre' one. Basically, rather than confronting the adversary solely at his chosen point-of-attack, India should be in a position to stem or contain such an attack. Simultaneously, it should draw the adversary into an engagement in a geographical area or a domain of our choosing, where India is strong, and the adversary is weak or vulnerable.

In case of China, the maximum asymmetries favourable to India are to be found in the domain of the air and that of the sea in the Indian Ocean Region. Insofar as ground operations are concerned, both terrain and opposing force-levels generate symmetry rather than asymmetry. India must, therefore, maximise its comparative advantages in the maritime and air domains and resist the temptation of expending undue combat potential in other domains and in geographical areas where China is strong.

In the maritime domain, this would imply abjuring conflict in the South China Sea or in areas where China can support its surface combatants by its shore-based aircraft. On the contrary, the Indian Navy and Air Force could aim to draw Chinese maritime forces into areas where Chinese shore-based air power cannot be brought to bear and where the Chinese logistics lines would be severely extended. The Indian military could then exploit its ability vis-à-vis integral air power (Carrier-based air power) to advantageously deal with the Chinese surface combatants.

Further, India could aim to optimally exploit Chinese 'sensitivity' that is centred upon the concept of 'loss-of-face'. For instance, if we were to utilise trade warfare — not so as to disrupt China's economic lines of communication, but to cause a visible 'loss of face,' as might occur if we were to successfully commandeer a Chinese-flagged oil tanker and overtly take it to an Indian port. This would have negligible economic impact upon China, but the perceived loss of face would be enormous. This would, then, force the Chinese to dispatch surface units to 'visibly' protect its merchantmen. However, such surface combatants would be extremely vulnerable to Indian carrier-based attrition. This is a relatively simplistic example showing how India might bring asymmetries in maritime power (that are favourable to it) to bear in a geographical area of its choosing so as to be able to draw China into outcomes that are so unfavourable to it, as to negate any gains that might accrue to China against India on land. Similarly, other avenues favourable to India in the domain of the air should be explored and exploited by the Indian Air Force.

Overall, every effort should be made to exploit India's comparative advantages in maritime and airborne combat by forcing China to deploy its naval sea-power and its military air power along extended logistics lines, while keeping its own logistics lines as short as is feasible. The strategy for conflict should be to employ several operational enablers, including Maritime Domain

Awareness, network centric operations and cyberwarfare joint-ness and coordination, flexibility and manoeuvre at sea to gain a favourable maritime environment in India's area of interest for sea control and sea denial.

The first step in conflict preparation is to deter it. Effective deterrence is a qualitative aspect measured in terms of deterrent value, which, in India's case, has been covered in detail in the Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS) 2015, "Strategy for Deterrence" (Indian Navy, 2015, pp 46-59). Further, "the core of India's deterrence, other than against nuclear coercion, will remain centred on conventional deterrence and conventional military forces" (Ibid, pp. 50). Therefore, to maintain a high deterrent value, there is a need to maintain capabilities and numbers. Of course, it is these very same capabilities, and numbers that would be used should the adversary ignore the deterrent value and actively seek conflict instead. The Indian Navy is the principal instrument and manifestation of India's maritime military power. Therefore, there is a need to continuously exercise at sea and hone professional skills and ability to maximise the Navy's combat potential through operational enablers and actions that have been outlined in the IMSS 2015 'Strategy for Conflict' (Ibid, pp. 60-77). As a part of contingency-planning, there would be a need to match missions with capabilities, identify weak areas and gaps, and factor-in methods of addressing them. The aim would be to attain the country's political objectives of war and bring the conflict to an early and favourable conclusion by influencing decisions on land. To do so, maritime operations would focus on the adversary's political, military, economic, informational and psychological paradigms. These issues are relatively easier to achieve than are the larger issues of resources, budgetary allocations, and a unified and integrated approach.

Capabilities and numbers come at a high cost to the Exchequer. However, to maintain a high two-front war deterrence-value and better combat-potential, there is a need to reprioritise the defence budget. The present and future capabilities, and numbers required have been mentioned in the Maritime Capability Perspective Plan. This plan, which is capability based and mission dominated, outlines the requirement for developing the Indian Navy as a balanced, multi-dimensional, networked force, with multi-mission, strategic, operational, and tactical capabilities across the full spectrum of combat power. There is a clear need to continuously re-evaluate requirements, based upon

the adversary's capabilities and the Navy's own operational philosophy. It is important to reiterate that it is the nation as a whole that goes to war and not just a single Service or part thereof. Integration — across the board — both military and civilian, would be an essential component of planning for and addressing the challenges and threats of a two-front war. The cost of preparation may well be high, but the price of failure is utterly unaffordable. The recently constituted Defence Planning Committee, while assessing the arithmetic of a two-front war, should factor these considerations while evaluating the optimal Indian response to a "worst case scenario" of a 'two-front war' involving Pakistan and China acting in concert against India.

The Indo-Pacific Region has emerged as the world's centre of gravity in the maritime domain and there is no doubt that the current century is the century of the seas. As India emerges as a resurgent maritime nation, the importance of the seas to its national interests will continue to increase. The threats to these interests and national security in the maritime domain will need a constant appraisal and joint preparedness to counter their rise.

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The View from the Air

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Geography poses a security dilemma for every nation, and needs to be addressed for the preservation of national integrity. While India's neighbour to the West is as concerned about the security situation on its western/north-western border areas as it is on its eastern border with India – a two-front dilemma for India would also have to take into account the possibility of a 'two-front war'. If China were to get into a skirmish with India, would Pakistan seize the opportunity to create trouble on the Western front? This 'two-front challenge' is therefore a concern for the armed forces. While Pakistan might actually take advantage of such an opportunity, the pronouncements by the Chinese of not being opportunistic by opening a second front against India in case of a war/skirmish between India and Pakistan is borne out by their restraint during all India-Pak conflicts in the past -- 1965, 1971 and also the Kargil conflict (1999).

While the Chinese stance of the past might sound propitious for the policy-makers, the defence planners would rather err on the side of caution. National security should never be taken lightly, especially when one is faced with two nuclear-armed neighbours. Moreover, a collusive intent between these two nations – whose friendship has been noted for its rhetoric as being "higher than the mountains, deeper than the oceans and sweeter than honey" – cannot be ignored.

The possibility of India facing a 'two-front war' was articulated at the highest levels in the Indian Government as early as November 2014 when the National Security Advisor, during his address at the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit, said, "India has two neighbours, both nuclear powers (which) share a strategic relationship and a shared adversarial view of India." While the

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national leadership would engage its known adversaries on all fronts – economic, political, diplomatic and military (through joint military exercises to build confidence) – a pragmatic view would be not to let one's guard down. To 'speak softly and carry a big stick' demands that the 'stick' has to be seen as a deterrent – sufficiently lethal to spread fear in the minds of any adversary who steps out of line in its attitude and actions. This would come at a great cost. However, once the Chanakyan missive of resolving conflicts through the adoption of the Dandniti – *Sama, Daama, Bheda, Dand* – is understood, no leadership would hesitate to ensure that its armed forces are adequately armed to carry out the necessary coercion, without ever being at the receiving end.

The reach of the Indian Air Force (IAF) has improved substantially over the years, and as demonstrated during the recently concluded IAF Exercise Gagan Shakti (08-22 April 2018). The Su-30 MKI, flying from the Eastern airbases, was able to fly across the country and 'attack' targets in the Arabian Sea more than 2500 km away and recover at a base in Southern India, covering a total distance of more than 4000 km. This capability of the IAF to undertake offensive action to deter/punish an adversary makes it the natural first instrument of choice – the first responder – in any conflict situation. Also, in case required to defend against a pre-emptive attack by an enemy, while the Army holds on to the nation's territory resolutely on the ground, and the Navy ensures freedom of Sea Lines of Communication while simultaneously enforcing a blockade in respect of the Western adversary, it is the Air Force that would prevent interference by enemy air to India's surface forces.

It is, therefore, necessary that while considering the defence preparedness of the armed forces, adequate consideration be given to ensure that the Air Force remains a potent force, not only as a strong deterrent able to effect punishment on a wayward enemy, but also maintain the required 'dissuasive' posture against an adversary that is modernising its Air Force at a galloping pace. The present manning level of the IAF is a cause for concern. With only 31 squadrons at present, and the likelihood of winding down of all MiG-21 and MiG-27 squadrons by 2024, the IAF would be in a precarious position unless accretions – whether of single-engine fighters (Light Combat Aircraft) or the Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (for which a Request For Information has been

floated in April 2018) – take place by then (2024). The slow pace of production of the LCA does not give reassurance to an IAF that stares at depletion to its fighter fleet in the next six to eight years. And numbers are important.

During Ex Gagan Shakti – where more than 9000 sorties were flown by fighters alone (of the total 11,000 plus sorties flown during the Exercise) – the ‘surge ops’ demonstrated by the IAF during the first phase of the Exercise saw more than 5000 sorties being flown in just 3-4 days. This effort by the IAF was not lost on our adversaries who had been watching the progress keenly, and prompted the Chinese media to praise India’s effort, albeit ‘grudgingly.’

To ensure that the IAF – as the primary instrument of military diplomacy/military coercion – remains adequately potent, urgent steps are needed for preventing a slide in the number of squadrons from the existing 31 squadrons, and after that a gradual build-up to 42 squadrons by 2032. Meanwhile, as has been demonstrated by the IAF during Ex Gagan Shakti, the IAF would remain prepared to fight with what is at its disposal in the highest traditions of the Military – although this may amount to entering the boxing ring with one hand tied behind its back!

Joint planning and joint training would always remain the cornerstones of an effective and efficient armed force that would be able to meet the demands placed on it by the nation’s polity in times of crises.

Two Front War: Myth or Reality?

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There is a growing debate in India's strategic community about the possibility of India having to fight an all-out two-front war. Presumably, the experts are alluding to the possibility of joint or coordinated military action by China and Pakistan against India. In view of the gravity of such a scenario it is necessary to carefully evaluate the probability of the presumption from various angles.

Cross Border Confrontations

India and Pakistan gained independence in 1947 and China established itself as a People's Republic in 1949. Since 1947, India and Pakistan have fought three wars (1965, 1971 and 1999), not counting the 1947 armed aggression in Kashmir. China's military aggression in 1962 still bedevils India-China bilateral relations. China's official position during India-Pakistan conflicts in 1965 and 1971 was one of military restraint and limited military manoeuvres in Tibet, while expressing diplomatic support and supply of conventional weapons and equipment to Pakistan. During the Kargil War in 1999, however, reports of Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) deployments in POK came to notice.

While China has engaged in wars with India (1962) and Vietnam (1979), in a border conflict with the former Soviet Union in the Ussuri sector (1968-69), and in the wars in Korea (1950-53) and Vietnam, it has been reluctant to get involved in military confrontations where its security is not directly at stake. Pakistan, barring its active involvement in the Afghan Jihad as part of the US-led alliance, has also not fought any war in an alliance or as a partner. In recent times Sino-Pak relations have acquired substantial military-to-military joint activities, including joint military exercises involving the PLA and

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the Pakistan army/rangers conducted in their border areas/region. Involvement of the Air Force, Navy or the Strategic Forces in a bilateral or integrated way in such joint exercises has not yet come to notice.

At the bilateral level between India and China, other than the 1962 conflict, the 1967 border skirmishes in Sikkim, the Sumdorong Chu incident in 1987 and the recent 2017 Doklam standoff, the situation along the border has been largely peaceful. Not a single bullet has been fired over the past 50 years.

Perceived border violations by the Chinese troops, however, have continued unabated and pose risks. There is also ample evidence of an anti-India nexus between China and Pakistan and both open and covert supply of sophisticated military equipment and nuclear technology, abetment of Pak-based terrorists/terrorist groups, fomenting insurgency, support to militancy and subversion through financing/funding of terror/militant groups and provision of logistic facilities with the common objective of destabilising India or keeping it off balance. The common objective manifests in interference in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and the North-East as well as in support to the Left Wing Extremism (LWE) in India.

Current Developments

The PLA, as part of its drive to secure its sovereignty and territoriality and to insulate itself from separatist elements, has significantly strengthened its presence all along the Indian border. The region has witnessed increase in PLA and People's Armed Police Force's numerical strength and capability by way of induction of advanced weapons, state-of-the-art communication networks, upgradation of infrastructure, and augmentation of logistic bases and a heightened vigil on any movement on the Indian side of the border. In the backdrop of the enhanced capability of the PLA, underlying tension in the border areas remains with increasing incidents of transgressions by both sides in identified pockets of dispute across the India-China boundary. The concern here, of course, is the increasingly aggressive and assertive postures of the Chinese PLA in the areas of contention, which has occasionally led to "pushing, shoving and fisticuffs" between patrols of the two sides.

Some experts may argue that these developments are aimed at preparations for an offensive against India or to snatch territory it claims in the region through a limited surgical operation. These are, however, isolated

incidents many of which have been initiated by local commanders, most likely with tacit blessing from higher formations. But, no coordinated action at several places along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) at one time has ever occurred. Such incidents, therefore, indicate a hesitation on the Chinese side to escalate tension or provocation beyond local geographies. Further, in order to prevent a misadventure or misunderstanding that could lead to an unintended military clash with burgeoning consequences, the two sides have put border management mechanisms into place to maintain peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control. Since the 2013 Chumar incident, these are being regularly reviewed and enhanced to be more effective.

The Chinese movements along the border with India and its seeking closer political and security cooperation with India's neighbours Nepal, Bhutan Bangladesh and Myanmar to an extent also appears to be a response to its strategic fear of encirclement by the US in concert with India that would undermine the security of its soft underbelly — Tibet and Xinjiang. As such, its pro-active stance appears to be part of a series of measures of active defence and deterrence rather than part of a nefarious plan for an all-out offensive directly or in conjunction with Pakistan against India.

Finally, it is difficult to believe that even as China asserts and expands its influence and territorial claims in the South China Sea (SCS) and its periphery, it is preparing itself to fight a multi-front war with the US and its allies. The enormity of such an eventuality in pure military terms might itself be a restraining factor against domestic or military pressures for war with any country on its periphery.

China's Foreign Policy and Two-Front War

China's foreign policy goals are to carve out an expanding sphere of influence regionally and globally. As part of this effort it is asserting claims on the South China Sea and promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). But it also needs to continuously show itself as a 'responsible' power engaged in a 'peaceful rise' internationally rather than push the envelope beyond brinkmanship that paid dividends in the past. The countries opposed to China's unbridled quest for super power status are coalescing and challenging it. China needs to diffuse such coalition formation rather than indulge in a military adventure with a large democratic and peaceful nation that has adequate mili-

tary capabilities, economic strength and a skilled population. Any military action against a recognised benign, democratic and emerging trans-regional power, on the side of a country that has questionable credentials and that is on the verge of being named as a state sponsor of terrorism, is incongruous with China's world image.

The possibility of Pakistan starting a war with China's active support too is small as this has not been done before. Given the military, economic and political costs inherent in such a venture, the possibilities of such a scenario emerging appears remote. Going by the recent experience of the Doklam crisis and the posturing and moves in the SCS, it appears China does not seek a direct large military conflict. It calls an area 'disputed' and then tries to occupy it gradually and surreptitiously by claiming it as Chinese territory with the belief that the other side will not put up a major military resistance.

A two-front war would imply a failure of Indian strategy and diplomacy at multiple levels, simultaneously—not a very realistic possibility. A two-front war among nuclear weapon states cannot remain conventional. It would ultimately engulf the region and spark off the Third World War.

Unconventional War

Notwithstanding all the perils inherent in an all-out two-front war with India, an unconventional war initiated by China and Pakistan in conjunction is a possibility. China with the galloping advances in artificial intelligence (AI), robotics and cyber capability can help Pakistan through technology transfers and intelligence sharing to carry out asymmetric warfare against India. China will not come out in the open to fight, but is likely to play a covert role, as it has been doing fairly successfully. It is also successfully nibbling away at India's influence in its periphery, and therefore, why wage a war?

From India's point of view, to deter a two-front war waged by China and Pakistan, it is not only imperative to further modernise and strengthen its armed forces, but also equally imperative to strengthen India's internal security and cyber security apparatus. The real threat to India in the foreseeable future is not war waged from a China- Pakistan combine, but internal security threats inspired and supported by external forces.

Conclusion

Fuelling perceptions of a two-front conventional war may be an attractive prospect for those in the sale of weapons and arms business, but its chances are very small. The evolving trends in India's diplomatic efforts and its rapidly advancing military strength and preparedness make a two-front war a very remote possibility in the foreseeable future. What can be conceded, however, to the proponents of a two-front war is that India is indeed likely to confront such a scenario not by way of an all-out war with the two adversaries, but continued military tension and exchanges with Pakistan supported by China through unstinting diplomatic support, transfer of advanced nuclear and military equipment, intelligence sharing and asymmetric warfare on the external front and China-Pakistan efforts to inspire and support the proxy war in India on the domestic front. One can accept the realistic possibility of a two-front war in this context.