

# DEALING WITH INDIA'S TWO-FRONT CHALLENGE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

Till recently, any mention of a two-front war evoked two contrasting opinions. India's military was firmly of the view that a collusive China-Pakistan military threat was a real possibility, and we must develop capabilities to counter this challenge. On the other hand, the political class in general and the mainstay of the country's strategic community felt that a two-front threat was being over-hyped by the military to press for additional resources and funds. They argued that historically, China has never intervened militarily in any India-Pakistan conflict and that the economic, diplomatic, and political ties between India and China rule out any armed conflict between the two countries. As a result, Indian strategic thinking was overwhelmingly focused on Pakistan and the security considerations emanating from there.

In the Indian military's thinking, while China was the more powerful — and therefore strategic — foe, the chance of a conventional conflict breaking out was low. The reverse was true of Pakistan, with a greater likelihood of conflict along the western border possibly triggered by a major terror attack emanating from Pakistan. The Chinese intrusions in Ladakh in May this year, the violence that resulted from clashes between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army, and the deadlock in negotiations have now made the Chinese military threat more apparent and real. The direct result of this, then, is the arrival of a worrisome two-front situation for New Delhi.

Even if the current India-China crisis on the border is resolved peacefully, China's military challenge will occupy greater attention of Indian military planners in the months and years to come. This comes at a time when the situation along the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan has been steadily deteriorating. Between 2017 and 2019, there has been a four-fold increase in ceasefire violations. Some media reports had indicated that Pakistan had moved 20,000 troops into Gilgit-Baltistan, matching the Chinese deployments in Eastern Ladakh.

For sure, the Sino-Pakistan relationship is nothing new, but it has far serious implications today than perhaps ever before. China has always looked at Pakistan as a counter to India's influence in South Asia.

Over the years, the ties between the two countries have strengthened and there is a great deal of alignment in their strategic thinking. Military cooperation is growing, with China accounting for 73% of the total arms imports of Pakistan between 2015-2019 (<https://bit.ly/37V6FWq>). In his remarks on the (recently concluded) Shaheen IX Pakistan-China joint exercise between the Pakistan Air Force and People's Liberation Army Air Force, the Pakistan Chief of Army Staff said, "The joint exercise will improve combat capacity of both air forces substantially and also enhance interoperability between them with greater strength and harmony."

It would, therefore, be prudent for India to be ready for a two-front threat. In preparing for this, the Indian military needs to realistically analyse how this threat could manifest itself and the type of capabilities that should be built up to counter it.

In a two-front scenario, the larger challenge for India's military would come if the hostilities break out along the northern border with China. In such a contingency, there is a likelihood that Pakistan would attempt to take advantage of India's military preoccupation by limited military actions in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), and attempt to raise the level of militancy in Kashmir.

It is unlikely that Pakistan would initiate a large-scale conflict to capture significant chunks of

territory as that would lead to a full-blown war between three nuclear armed states. In such a contingency, the damage to Pakistan's economy and military far outweighs the advantages of capturing some pieces of ground. Pakistan would prefer the low-risk option of pursuing a hybrid conflict that remains below the threshold of war.

A two-front conflict presents the Indian military with two dilemmas — of resources and strategy. Ashley J. Tellis, in his 2016 article, "Troubles, They Come in Battalions: The Manifold Travails of the IAF" (<https://bit.ly/3hoZ3i7>) estimates that about 60 combat squadrons are needed to deal with a serious two-front threat. This is double the number of squadrons currently with the Indian Air Force (IAF). Obviously, it is neither practical nor feasible to build a level of capability that enables independent war fighting on both fronts.

A major decision will be the quantum of resources to be allocated for the primary front. If a majority of the assets of the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force are sent towards the northern border, it will require the military to rethink its strategy for the western border. This is the second dilemma. Even though Pakistan may only be pursuing a hybrid war, should the Indian military remain entirely defensive? If it does so, it may encourage Pakistan to continue with its actions in J&K with a level of impunity and even raise the level of its involvement on the western front. Adopting a more offensive strategy against Pakistan could draw limited resources into a wider conflict.

It is impossible to define with any certainty the contours of a two-front conflict and how it would actually play out. However, what is certain is that the threat cannot be ignored and therefore we need to develop both the doctrine and the capability to deal with this contingency. Developing a doctrine will require close interaction with the political leadership. Any doctrine that is prepared without a political aim and guidance will not stand the test when it is actually to be executed.

Capability building also requires a serious debate, particularly in view of the fact that the country's economic situation will not permit any significant increase in the defence Budget for the foreseeable future. There is too much focus on major platforms such as aircraft, ships, and tanks, and not enough on future technologies such as robotics, artificial intelligence, cyber, electronic warfare, etc. The right balance will have to be struck based on a detailed assessment of China and Pakistan's war-fighting strategies.

Diplomacy has a crucial role to play in meeting the two-front challenge.

To begin with, New Delhi would do well to improve relations with its neighbours so as not to be caught in an unfriendly neighbourhood given how Beijing and Islamabad will attempt to contain and constrain India in the region. The government's current engagement of the key powers in West Asia, including Iran, should be further strengthened in order to ensure energy security, increase maritime cooperation and enhance goodwill in the extended neighbourhood. New Delhi must also ensure that its relationship with Moscow is not sacrificed in favour of India-United States relations given that Russia could play a key role in defusing the severity of a regional gang up against India. Even as the Quad, or the quadrilateral security dialogue (India, Australia, Japan and the U.S) and the Indo-Pacific seem to form the mainstay of India's new grand strategy, there is only so much that a maritime strategy can help ease the Sino-Pakistan pressure in the continental sphere.

Politically, the stark military reality of a two-front challenge, one that is likely to grow stronger over the years, must serve as a wake-up call for the political leadership in New Delhi, and encourage it to look for ways to ease the pressure from either front. Easing pressure on the western front requires political will more than anything else. From a long-view perspective, therefore, a well-choreographed political outreach to Kashmir aimed at pacifying the aggrieved

citizens there would go a long way towards that end.

This could also lead to a potential rapprochement with Pakistan provided, of course, Rawalpindi can be persuaded to put an end to terrorist infiltration into Kashmir. It is important to remember that China, a rising and aggressive, superpower next door, is the bigger strategic threat for India, with Pakistan being a second-order accessory to Beijing's 'contain India strategy'. New Delhi would, therefore, do well to do what it can politically to reduce the effect of a collusive Sino-Pakistan containment strategy aimed at India.

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (ret'd.), a former northern army commander, and Happymon Jacob, an associate professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, recently co-founded the 'Council for Strategic and Defense Research', a New Delhi-based think tank. The views expressed are personal

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