

# A PINCER IN LADAKH

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

While India has long considered the potential of a two-front war with Pakistan and [China](#), it was only in 2009 that a keynote address at a seminar in Delhi, by the then Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor, forced a serious re-evaluation. The debate regarding India's capability to fight a war in which there is full collusion between China and Pakistan has generally remained inconclusive. Most detractors of the belief regarding China's military-operational support to Pakistan, in the event of latter's the adventurism against India, have leaned on the argument that China will adopt a policy to suit its interests. Both in 1965 and 1971, it made some promises to Pakistan but chose to stay away. Of course, that was during the Cold War — a completely different international strategic environment.

From 2005, the process of rapid military modernisation saw China pursue its strategic interests, including border management on land and sea, more aggressively. Limited and fairly benign experiments with “walk in” operations across the [Line of Actual Control](#) (LAC) began after 2008. An expression of the mutuality of strategic interests with Pakistan came with the reported presence of 11,000 PLA troops in Gilgit-Baltistan in 2011. Post 2013, Pakistan ramped up its proxy campaign in J&K almost in sync with two China-related trends: First, enhanced PLA assertiveness in Eastern Ladakh. Second, the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — Xi Jinping's ambitious, and almost personal, project. A progressively altering Chinese attitude towards the Kashmir issue started to take shape as early as 2008-09, with the issue of stapled visas to Indians residing in J&K. The denial of a visa to the Northern Army Commander in August 2010 was with the clear intent of expressing increasing diplomatic support to Pakistan. This support was also witnessed on issues like the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), Pakistan's involvement in global terrorism and the abrogation of [Article 370](#).

The BRI was probably long in the making. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a part of the BRI that is less economic in orientation than strategic. It is described by many as the flagship of the BRI. The corridor is also a part of China's Indian Ocean strategy and in its current avatar, it is little more than a shaky communication artery with some additional projects thrown in. The BRI is a far more ambitious project, the survival of which in the post [COVID-19](#) setting has been questioned by experts.

Yet, China's long-term strategic vision is not something that the international strategic community is adept at assessing. Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s observation on expansionism having no place in the modern era was an indirect message to China. We are about midway through the period that China has set for itself to rise to a position of greatness — beginning in 1978 — for which it is increasingly employing coercion. It is seeking that milestone on a faster track, post the devastation due to COVID-19.

It is no longer Pakistan seeking Chinese support for its adventurism as much as it is the other way around. The mutuality of interests has increased and military coordination has become a larger part of the overall strategy. China may force further escalation this season depending upon how the world responds to its expansionism. Yet it could also adopt a posture which prepares it, along with Pakistan, towards a future “pincer approach” in Ladakh. This does not presuppose the limitation of Chinese intent to just Ladakh — Arunachal, Sikkim and the Central Sector very much under the scanner as part of the expanded collusive strategy. However, it is Ladakh where the effect is intended most and it is there that the pincer approach may prove more challenging for India.

Currently, India may not be optimally prepared for such a contingency but the Chinese may not be either. This is because they have tried setting the stage too early in their eagerness to spring a surprise — in turn, the Chinese could be surprised. That is where Pakistan comes in as a force multiplier to keep the options open as far as timing is concerned — the current campaigning season or a postponed one. In postponing, the Chinese will seek greater Pakistani activity in J&K and Ladakh, including attempts to keep the LoC alive along with terror in the hinterland to dilute Indian optimisation in Ladakh.

Assuming that confrontation with the Sino-Pak combine is inevitable now or later, one of the ways for India to offset this is to project sufficient capability. The diplomatic and military domains have to play this out effectively. India cannot be seen to be alone or militarily weak. It has tremendous support internationally which must translate into a higher level of strategic support. Militarily, Pakistan should never be able to perceive that it will be allowed to fight as per choice and conceived strategy.

China's success or failure in such adventurism will set the course of its future strategy against its multiple adversaries. That is the psyche which India must exploit to prevent escalation and win this and impending standoffs without fighting. This needs a rapid and all-out national effort with highest priority accorded to it, including budgeting. China has made the major mistake of creating a face-off that it thought it could win without fighting but it is now mired in a situation that it did not think through.

Extending this face-off will be a logistics nightmare for both countries. On its part, India cannot afford to focus only on the northern borders. A firm and full strategy to deal with Pakistan in all contingencies has now become imperative.

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