

Challenge of a Two Front War with India

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Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the threat of two front war to India from China and Pakistan on the Indo-China border and the Line of Control/ Line of Actual Control. It contends that the possibility of launching a collective attack is dependent on key variables such as the worsening China/ India bilateral relationship. The following conclusions have been drawn from this study:

- India will employ hybrid warfare against China if its interests such as expansionism in Asia or tackling perceived Chinese aggression are threatened. Strategies include using trade/economic bans.
- Indian kinetic and non-kinetic operations can be employed against Pakistan which will have more deleterious effects given Pakistan's conventional and economical inferiority Vis a Vis India.
- The possibility of a two front war between China, Pakistan and India rests on the precondition that collective attacks against both Chinese and Pakistani projects are launched by the Modi regime such as terrorist attacks on CPEC projects.
- The multidimensional Chinese/ Indian bilateral relationship however renders any possibility of launching a two front war against India, remote unless both China and Pakistan are targeted systematically by New Delhi.

Issue to be analyzed

The 2020-2021 skirmishes between China and India near the Pangong Lake in Ladakh, the border in Sikkim and along the Line of Actual Control could have stressed deterrence stability in the region given that the combat was between two established nuclear powers.¹ The conflict involved troop deployment which was complemented with bellicose media campaigns launched by India against China with the aim of discrediting Beijing's perceived advances and economic strategies involving boycott of Chinese products such as applications like Alibaba, Tencent and Bytedance.² Pushing and shoving each other doesn't constitute kinetic actions) aimed at decimating the adversary on numerous fronts.³ Such strategies also have implications for Pakistan given the long standing rivalry with India and Islamabad's close bilateral relationship with China. There is thus, a need to explore palpable challenges posed by Indian aggression which may result in the launch of a multipronged war. It is equally imperative to ascertain the exact impact of hybrid warfare techniques on Pakistan's security apparatus, economic wellbeing and sovereignty and whether it can jointly respond with China to tackle India's economic, political and military aggression.

Analysis

In the aftermath of the 2020-2021 skirmishes with China, the BJP government in India employed variegated techniques to demoralize its adversary which includes imposing trade boycotts and launching smear campaigns as hyperbole on media channels.⁴ The crisis in Ladakh remains unresolved with China not favoring the usage of the term '*Line of Actual Control*' given lack of demarcation.⁵ Furthermore, the Western sector continues to be a potential flashpoint with the Depsang Plains divided between both countries. The Line of Control (LOC) with Gilgit Baltistan in Pakistan is 80 kilometers west of the Plains with the

¹ BBC News report "India-China dispute: The border row explained in 400 words" January 2020, accessed, August 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53062484>.

² Coco Liu, "India Blocks Several Alibaba Apps in Widening Chinese Blacklist", *Bloomberg*, 24 November, 2020, accessed August 23, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-25/india-blocks-several-alibaba-apps-in-widening-chinese-blacklist>.

³ Andrew Mumford (2020) Understanding hybrid warfare, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33:6, 824-827, DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2020.1837737.

⁴ Times Now Digital, "China attacks Indian media over PLA death toll in Galwan Valley, says its failure to understand kindness", *Timesnownews.com*, February 20, 2021, accessed August 25, 2021. <https://www.timesnownews.com/international/article/china-attacks-indian-media-over-pla-death-toll-in-galwan-valley-says-it-s-failure-to-understand-kindness/722879>.

⁵ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference, July 29, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1896083.shtml, accessed November, 15, 2021.

Siachen Glacier saddled in between.⁶ An escalation of conflict between China and India can also potentially operationalize the Thoise Airbase in the Western Air Command which has the capacity to enable a quick inflow of personnel from the Indian interior into Siachen.⁷ It can also bring the Daulat Beg Oldi military base into the equation which is located in the middle of the Karakoram Range (Refer to Annex A). The geographical proximity of the conflict has resulted in renewed interest in the possibilities of a two front war with India by both China and Pakistan.

India on the other hand has employed a combination of techniques to decapitate Beijing. These techniques led to a souring of diplomatic ties which has regional implications given that the stability of the China/India binary is interlinked overall with regional stability for which Pakistan is no exception. Pakistan's ongoing rivalry with India in light of egregious human rights violations taking place in Indian Illegally Occupied Kashmir and the suspension of bilateral dialogue has meant that similar strategies can be employed by New Delhi as well.⁸ Disruption in the form of sabotaging Pakistan's cyber infrastructure has already taken place with the Federal Board of Revenue's websites hacked in 2021.⁹ Similarly, the terrorist attack at Dasu targeting Chinese workers was also aimed at destabilizing the China Pakistan Economic Corridor which is a symbol of the close economic relationship between the two countries.¹⁰

The challenges of hybrid warfare from India to both Pakistan and China also fit into the definition first proposed by Frank Hoffman of being a blend of conventional, irregular, cyber and diplomatic techniques.¹¹ In Pakistan's case, India's cross border firing along the Line of Control coupled with sustained diplomatic pressure at international forums is an example of combined strategies with the Narendra Modi government imploring the global community to designate Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism. Evidence of the Research and Analysis Wing's involvement in terrorist attacks which have targeted Chinese contractors also

⁶ Peter van der Hoest, 'Deconstructing the "China Threat": An Inquiry Into Changing Perceptions in India and Japan', *Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies*, pp. 36-68. Accessed November, 15, 2021.

⁷ Frank O' Donnell and Alex Bollfrass, 'The Strategic Postures of China and India, A Visual Guide', *Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, Report, March 2020, pg. 28.

⁸ Zain Ul Abiden Malik, He Zhilong and Rafay Mubeen, "Human Rights Violations in Kashmir", *International Journal of Political Science*, Vol.6, Issue 2, 2020, ISSN 2454, pp.17-23.

⁹ Sohail Sarfraz, "Indian hackers behind attack on FBR website: Tarin", *Business Recorder*, 10 September 2021, accessed 28 August 2021. <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40119330/indian-hackers-behind-attack-on-fbr-website-tarin>.

¹⁰ Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi quoted in Dawn, "Indian- Afghan nexus behind Dasu bus attack: Qureshi", *Dawn News*, August 12 2021, accessed August 29 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1640278>.

¹¹ FG Hoffman, "Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars", *Potomac Institute for Policy Studies*, Arlington VA, 22203, 2007, PP.11-16.

demonstrates that India is averse to all weather cooperation between Beijing and Islamabad with the entire ideology of the Modi regime focused on dismantling Pakistan's economy by attacks on national databases, crippling telecommunications networks, promoting anarchy through dissension and fomenting unrest against the ruling civilian government.

Dissimilar to the India/ Pakistan case however, is the India/ China binary on hybrid warfare which is far more complicated. Despite long standing tensions between the two countries, both countries have not been embroiled in bilateral strategic rivalry. Their status as two major economic powers with strong trading ties has resulted in DGMO level talks taking place in China aimed at defusing the tensions.¹² China has repeatedly expressed a desire towards de-escalation which shows that both leaderships understand the implications of war. This includes the 12th corps commander level meeting held in July 2021 and multiple rounds of special representative meetings taking place such as Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on China-India border affairs.¹³ Hence, the prolongation of the conflict has not resulted in a suspension in dialogue or souring of ties beyond border disputes as has been the case with Pakistan.

There is evidence that India has been employing punitive tactics against China. This includes Indian Railways cancelling contracts with the Chinese and the Department of Telecommunication notifying BSNL to refrain from using Chinese products during up gradation efforts.¹⁴ The BJP transport minister, Nitin Gadkari in 2020 announced that Chinese companies will not be involved in the Indian domestic construction market.¹⁵ Such tactics were aimed at pressurizing the Communist Party of China by suspending state sponsored corporate agreements unless reparations were made over perceived Chinese aggression at the Galwan Valley. Additionally, the ban of 59 Chinese social media applications such as WeChat and Tiktok was to undercut Chinese soft power which has

¹² Arunima, "Ladakh Stand Off: India and China Likely to Hold Ninth Round of Military Talks Today", *News 18*, last updated, January 24 2021, accessed August 29 2021. <https://www.news18.com/news/india/ladakh-stand-off-india-china-likely-to-hold-next-round-of-military-talks-tomorrow-3329276.html>.

¹³ Media Center, "Joint Press Release of the 12th round of India-China Corps Commander Level Meeting", *Ministry of External Affairs*, Government of India, August 02, 2021, accessed August 29 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34092/Joint+Press+Release+of+the+12th+round+of+IndiaChina+Corps+Commander+Level+Meeting>.

¹⁴ Avishek G Dastidar, Ravish Tiwari, "Chinese firms to lose India business in Railways, telecom", *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, Updated June 18 2020, accessed August 29 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/business/economy/border-dispute-chinese-firms-india-business-railways-telecom-6464148/>.

¹⁵ Press Trust of India, "No Chinese Firms in Road Projects, Not Even Joint Ventures: Nitin Gadkari", *NDTV*, Updated July 01 2020, accessed August 29 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/wont-allow-chinese-partners-in-road-and-highway-projects-says-nitin-gadkari-2255255>.

penetrated deep into the Indian population.¹⁶ As one of the largest cellular markets in the world, the decision of the Indian government was aimed at leveraging India's demographic advantage to damage GDP growth rate figures of China which had otherwise registered impressive trends. However, the size of the Chinese economy with its multifaceted global market base ensured that the damage to the national economy was minimal.

Based on the above trends, it is clear that the BJP government in India employed a systematic campaign to damage China. Similar policies can be employed against Pakistan, which is a weaker adversary and has both conventional and economic inferiority Vis a Vis India. The successful sponsorship of domestic terrorism in Pakistan and the ability to penetrate into its cyber infrastructure during the crackdown in IIOJK demonstrates that damaging strategies are already being employed by the BJP government. The Pakistani case however, is dissimilar to India's strategies against China and China's overall response to Indian hybrid warfare.

The possibility of a two front war with India by both China and Pakistan must be viewed in the context of the India/ China bilateral relationship as well as China's strict adherence to the five principles of peaceful coexistence when dealing with disputes.¹⁷ While India's disputes have continued with China, Beijing has been the first to call for de-escalation and dialogue with India and is desirous of a normal relationship with New Delhi. Pakistan's relationship with India on the other hand is based on hostility, suspicion and massive distrust with any Indian adventurism and runs contrary to calls for restraint as has been the case with China. Hence, a border conflict with Pakistan will result in a more disproportionate response from the Modi government which involves the probable deployment of the Cold Start Doctrine which entails punitive strikes on Pakistani territory with quick mobilization of its troops.¹⁸ China's response on the other hand would be to ensure that India and Pakistan deescalate when it comes to bilateral disputes given its standing principle of non-interference.

The only caveat however, is a situation where China and Pakistan are both attacked through a systematic and variegated campaign which targets domestic infrastructures in both countries. In this case Beijing and Islamabad can jointly mobilize forces along the Line of Control and the Line of Actual Control which can be complemented with tit for tat economic sanctions on India. The precondition of such a scenario to materialize is for the BJP to restrain Chinese influence in the region and sustain its attacks against CPEC projects and BRI initiatives such as in the BCIM corridor as well which involves India.¹⁹ Furthermore, this needs to coincide

¹⁶ Abi- Habib Maria, "India Bans Nearly 60 Chinese Apps, Including Tik Tok and WeChat", *The New York Times*, 29 June 2020, accessed August 31 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/world/asia/tik-tok-banned-india-china.html>.

¹⁷ Wen Jiabao, "Carrying Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in the Promotion of Peace and Development", *Chinese Journal of International Law*, Volume 3, Issue 2, 2004, pp.363-368.

¹⁸ Brigadier General (Retd) Naeem Salik, "The Evolution of Pakistan's Nuclear Doctrine", *Center on Contemporary Conflict*, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, pg. 80.

¹⁹ Roshan Iyer, "BCIM Economic Corridor, Facilitating Sub-Regional Development", *IPCS Special Report No. 187*, May 2017, pp.1-2.

with the Modi regime pursuing aggression against Pakistan akin to the 2019 air skirmishes which can prompt Islamabad to launch a multipronged war which combines military power with sabotage of India's infrastructure.

The absence of such a scenario however, would result in a bilateral response to be managed between the two states despite Pakistan's close strategic partnership with China. These considerations and the aforementioned factors have rendered in the possibility of launching a two front war against India remote. However, in the eventuality of India employing hybrid warfare against both countries, following policy recommendations are offered:

Policy Recommendations:

The following recommendations are proposed in order to operationalize a two front war situation with India:

- Pakistan must understand that the Chinese/ Indian relationship is multidimensional despite ongoing hostilities. Bilateral dialogue is still open between the two sides to defuse tensions at the Line of Actual Control and China would refrain from band wagoning with Pakistan in operationalizing hybrid warfare against India if its own interests are not threatened.
- India is assuming a role of a strategic counterweight against China while pursuing the ‘Indo- Pacific Strategy’, which means increased competition in the maritime domain between New Delhi and Beijing. However, this does not involve possibilities of joint Pakistan-China military strategies to be employed against India.
- Pakistan must capitalize on a scenario where Indian reckless adventurism affects both China and itself such as New Delhi launching punitive strikes on Pakistani territory in the form of the Cold Start Doctrine as well as creating discord on its disputed border with China simultaneously.
- Pakistan and China should discuss and coordinate response on likely scenarios of Indian aggression against Pakistan and China simultaneously.

Annex A: China India border infrastructure

Key infrastructure along India-China border

Projects completed or under construction



✈ INDIA

- 1** Daulat Beg Oldi
- 2** Fukche
- 3** Dharasu
- 4** Tuting
- 5** Pasighat

✈ CHINA

- 1** Hotan Airport
- 2** Ngari Gunsa Airport
- 3** Shigatse Peace Airport
- 4** Lhasa Gonggar Airport
- 5** Nyingchi Mainling Airport

Source: BBC Research

