



ISSUE BRIEF

No. 301

September 2021

India's Threats: An Assessment of the China-Pakistan Nexus



Brigadier (Dr.) Ashok Pathak (Retd) was commissioned into the Corps of Signals. He holds a PhD in strategic implications of management information systems, which was sponsored through the Chair of Excellence Program of the Army War College, Mhow. He Served in UN Mission as international observer in Angola. The author has many publications to his credit.

Introduction

China considers its relationship with Pakistan as “higher than the highest mountain, deeper than the deepest ocean and sweeter than honey”. As per experts from China, India’s rising international status, since 2014, has contributed to the present India-China crisis. The armed clashes between India and China are likely to continue in the future till they reach their respective redlines and settle the Line of Actual Control. ¹The aim of the paper is to identify the possible joint threats to India’s internal and external security from China and Pakistan and give long term implementable recommendations. For a comprehensive response to actions by the said nexus, we need to look at the internal and external threats that has matured over the last seven decades.

Key Points

- As per experts from China, India’s rising international status, since 2014, has contributed to the present India-China crisis.
- The armed clashes between India and China are likely to continue in the future till they reach their respective redlines and settle the Line of Actual Control.
- Different organs of the state must be on the same page in understanding what constitutes threat to the national security.
- In the context of theory of probability, number, size and perceived superiority of military might of the nexus must not affect our resolve to stand and fight for our national interest.
- The challenge does not lie in our capability to beat the nexus. It is more in the will to fight back. Once the command decision is taken, then a resilient nation like India can always measure up to the situation.

Threats: An Assessment

The Inter- Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan is the first Pakistani organisation entrusted with the responsibility of ‘fanning’ Islamic terrorism in India. The tribal attack in 1948, Operation Gibraltar and Operation Grand Slam in 1965 happened to be the first in a series of such aggressions; apart from Islamic terrorism, ISI also created and sustained the Khalistan movement.

China came into being in 1949 and soon communist philosophy gained foothold. This is evident by the following statement — “China’s Chairman is our Chairman, China’s path is our path”.² However, during the past ten years the Maoist groups have synthesised Islamic terrorist groups.³ This is evident from table 1.1 and 1.2 below, which gives an account of fatalities caused due to terrorism in J&K and the Northeast India.

Table 1.1: Fatalities due to Terrorism in J&K

Year	Civilians	Security Forces	Terrorists	Ratio SF to terrorist	Ratio Civilians to terrorists
1988 to 2000	10320	3520	12396	1:3.5	1:1.2
2000 to 2021	4856	3498	12930	1:3.69	1:2.66
2015	19	41	115		
2016	14	88	165		
2017	54	83	220		
2018	86	95	271		
2019	42	78	163		
2020	33	56	232	1:4.1	1:7
2021	12	17	77	1:4.5	1:6
Total 2015 to 2021	260	458	1243	1:2.7	1:4.78

Source: South Asian Terrorism Portal: J&K

Table 1.2: Fatalities due to Terrorism in Northeast India

year	Civilians	Security Forces	Terrorists	Ratio SF to terrorists	Ration Civilians to terrorists
1992 to 2014	10127	2668	21400	1:8	1:2
2015 to 2019	187	99	235	1:2.37	1:2.5
2015	62	49	162	1:3	1:2.6
2016	61	17	82	1:4.8	1:3.4
2017	34	13	56	1:4.3	1:6.4
2018	18	15	35	1:2.3	1:1.9
2019	159	132	330	1:2.5	1:2
2020	100	106	385	1:3.6	1:3.85
2021	45	63	159	1:2.5	1:3.5

Source: South Asian Terrorism Portal Northeast



The data from both the regions indicates that fatalities to the terrorists are always higher than those to the security forces and the civilians. The best ratio of security forces to terrorists in J&K has been in 2021 (1:4.5). Worst ratio in this comparison has been from 1988 to 2000 wherein for every two terrorists we lost one security personnel. In case of the Northeast, the best ratio SF to terrorists has been 1:8 during 1992 to 2014. Thereafter, this ratio centres around 1:3. There is a definite need to improve our operational efficiency in anti-terrorists operations.

However, it is important to make certain transformational changes to effectively manage the internal threats that are being posed to India.

- Different organs of the state must be on the same page in understanding what constitutes threat to the national security.
- Various government departments must come together to bolster internal security. Efforts have already begun in this field with NSA now heading a multi-ministerial group.⁴
- We also need to modernise our police force at the earliest. A Niti Aayog paper on “policing in India” highlights the deficiencies and monumental indifferences that are present inside the police force— against a UN recommended police to population ratio of 222 policemen per lakh of citizens, India’s recommended ratio comes to 182 policemen per lakh. However, in actual practice we have 139 policemen per lakh. With an almost 37 percent deficiency in police force, we need to recruit 5,42,091 police personnel at the earliest to come somewhat closer to the UN mandated police to population ratio.⁵ The beat officer and the local police are critical assets eliminating crimes including acts of terrorism. In India, the only state where beat policemen have been able to establish effective contacts with the society is Kerala. Incidentally, Kerala was the first state to implement their own police reforms in 1959.⁶ All the committees and commissions on police reforms have unanimously hailed corruption as a main cause of poor performance of police force in India.⁷
- It is extremely important for the centre and state to harmonise their efforts while dealing with the internal security threat. The police needs modern technologies vis. Blockchain, Big Data Artificial Intelligence. It is equally necessary to provide good living conditions to the police force as this will enhance their efficiency.
- The Kargil Review Committee had suggested internal security network. Consequently, Multi- Agency Centres (MAC) and Subsidiary Multi- Agency Centres (SMAC) were established for the purpose of data fusion of inputs received from



different intelligence sources. However, given the current centre-state relation, many states do not share information with the MACs and SMACs.⁸

Military

The first coordinated action by the nexus was launched in 1965 wherein Pakistan launched offensive in Jammu and Kashmir and also expected China to attack India's Eastern borders. However, China restricted its offensive to threats only and asked India to withdraw from Jelep La and Nathu La in East Sikkim. India obliged by withdrawing from Jelep La but refused to withdraw from Nathu La. The India-China war in 1967 was an impromptu event in which China suffered defeat at Nathu La and Cho La.⁹ Thereafter, China refrained from any adventurism at this scale, although small skirmishes like the ambush of Indian patrol at Tulung La in 1975, the Chumar conflict, Operation Falcon at Sumdorong Chu valley in 1987 and the Galwan in 2020 (which later turned to be a massive standoff).¹⁰

The current military situation with respect to the nexus is alarming and in conformation with the strategic approach of the nexus. As per reports, China has stationed PLA units at the Kunjerab Pass in the Gilgit-Baltistan area and PLA officials pay regular visits to the Pakistan's Field Command Headquarters in Gilgit.¹¹ China's Western Theater Command (WTC) stationed at Chengdu, is responsible for more than half the Chinese landmass — 22 percent of the population comprising of one third of the PLA Forces. China has made her intentions very clear. The WTC is likely to have stronger presence in the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) in a reasonable timeframe. This command will have its own Air Force, Rocket Force and Special Support Force (SSF) {that integrates space, cyber war and electronic war (EW) capabilities}. Facing this single theatre command will be three commands of Indian Army vis. Eastern, Northern and Western regional commands. Overall, the WTC will have three army groups, five air force divisions, besides the theatre elements of Technical Reconnaissance Bureau, two mountain and one mechanised brigades, one mechanised division, two motorised divisions and two artillery brigades. The challenges for India will be in the field of synergy, jointness, speed in switching forces from one to another command (most time by strategic airlifts) and countering Chinese IW offensive in cyber and EW domains.¹²

As regards Pakistan, the current economic situation acts as a limiting factor in military spending. However, they have strengthened their armed forces in a limited manner. This includes their main battle tanks— Al-Zarrar, T- 80 UD armoured personnel carriers and J- 17 combat aircrafts. About a thousand tanks less than what Indian Army has but has almost



five times more armoured personnel carriers compared to what India has.¹³ Pakistan spends almost 3.6 percent of their GDP on defence compared to around 2 percent of GDP spent by India.¹⁴

The official response to the military threat from the nexus as enunciated by the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and the Chief is crisp—Indian Forces are prepared to meet these threats.¹⁵ Another view point is based on the number and size of the Chinese economy. This view suggests that India is in no position to fight on two fronts due to the current asymmetry against the nexus and hence the only choice is peace either with one of the adversary—preferably Pakistan, or peace with both China and Pakistan.¹⁶ But the hard truth is that, neither China nor Pakistan would prefer peace with India—unless forced to do so.

For a realistic assessment, let us look at the past trends. In 1971, China did not make any pretention of attacking or threatening India. Same happened during the Kargil conflict (1999) and Operation Parakram when India was on the verge of launching a full scale offensive against Pakistan. However, when the Galwan standoff took place, the WTC was in place. The Chinese became more circumspect after the Galwan standoff.¹⁷

The story is somewhat similar for Pakistan. In 1948 we made a delayed and half-hearted attempt to retake J&K which Pakistan had occupied by force. The ceasefire and transfer of the issue to the UN gave Pakistan an impression that they are a superior force¹⁸; but the 1965 war ended this assumption. The remaining misconception was eliminated in the 1971 War.

Way Ahead

India suffered maximum losses between 1989 and 2008— a period of military inaction and peace efforts.¹⁹ Thereafter, India launched a surgical strike in Uri sector in 2016, and an air strike in Balakot in 2019. Today, Pakistan is more worried about defence against an Indian surgical strike.

In the context of theory of probability, number, size and perceived superiority of military might of the nexus must not affect our resolve to stand and fight for our national interest. Indian military as an institution has passed all the difficult tests in adverse internal as also external situations.

Does this mean that all is well for our military preparations? No. There is a definite need for major improvements. The shortcomings are not in budget allocation, technology, weapon



mix, force structure and doctrines, though these aspects are also important; wherever our performance was suboptimal we lacked optimism and confidence. Our civil-military relations were shaky. Inter- service coordination was average. Recommendations for employment of military for strengthening national security are:

- **Use the Military as a Deterrent.** For this to be effective, the adversary must be convinced that India has the political will and requisite military capabilities. This is where our geopolitical posturing as also civil- military synergy at the highest levels come into play.
- **Enhance Leadership Qualities.** We must address the cognitive capabilities of the soldiers and leadership qualities of the officers. We should analyse our past operations and work on the shortcomings.
- **Fewer Hierarchies.** ICT enabled institutions do not need long chains of hierarchies. Thus, in the information age, the armed forces needs to cut down hierarchies, curb excessive rank and class consciousness, eliminate wasteful and ceremonial activities. There is a need to create transparency within the organisation and high level of collaboration across various participants. Military organisations must be task based, modular, flexible, agile, have capacity to unlearn and relearn.
- **Network Centric Approach.** As we increase the use of ICT in the armed forces, war fighting needs to adopt a network centric approach. This approach should focus on combat power that can be generated by linking the warfighting entities. Geographically, separated forces creates high level of shared battlespace awareness that can enhance the impact on selected target areas.
- **Indigenous Systems.** Modernisation of weapon platforms as also military systems is increasingly becoming a function of embedded and application software with marginal changes in the hardware. Modern force multipliers are in the field of AI, Big Data, Cloud Computing, network attack software weapons, EW systems, data fusion, data integration and so on. All these are susceptible to cyber attacks. Hence, there is a need for much higher percentage of indigenous weapon systems or systems from a reliable supply chain that is open to our close scrutiny whenever required. Besides, induction of our own military specific or dual use systems with increased role of private sector will help our economy. It will also open up another channel of export to friendly countries. China has 4.7 percent global market share for import of arms while Pakistan has 2.7 percent. India, on the other hand, surpasses both China and Pakistan in import of arms with 9.5 percent of global market share.²⁰ We need to learn to fight our wars with greater share of indigenous weapons.



- ***Smooth Transition from Peace to War.*** The nexus has created conditions that make it incumbent on us to remain in high state of preparedness. For the last few decades, we have been continuously at war— high intensity proxy war waged by Pakistan and low intensity skirmishes along the Pakistan and Chinese borders. Hence, our armed forces requires organisational structure, culture, deployments, training, weapon systems and network architecture that allows us rapid changeover from peace to war.
- ***Knowledge Era Armed Forces.*** Knowledge societies are characterised by fast rate of obsolescence, enhanced need for creation of tacit knowledge, organisational capabilities for absorption of new knowledge through a process of ‘learn-unlearn-learn cycle’. We have military institutions at each stage of a soldier’s (officers and personnel) career progression. We need to check whether these institutions are imparting contextual knowledge?
- ***Resource utilisation—Budget, Weapon Systems, Technologies.*** We need to evolve processes for linking defence budget to our war fighting doctrines, building up mutually agreed capabilities, completion of approved programs, reasons for delays in implementation and the way budgetary demands are prepared, scrutinised and approved.

Covert Cyber War

India is one of the top target of cyber threats from China-Pakistan-North Korea nexus. These threats involve hacking of Indian websites— government agencies, discoms, news organisations.²¹ Cyber threats from the nexus are in three critical domains. *Firstly*, at the level of propaganda, perception management, psychological warfare and deception through social media platforms, public domain of internet, print and electronic media embedded with paid agents/experts/opinion leaders and media houses. *Secondly*, by covert cyber attacks on India’s public networks such as railways, banking, power grids, and government departments. *Thirdly*, cyber attack on military systems, weapon platforms, command and control nodes. There has been an increase in Denial of Service and Distributed Denial of Service since 2016 and advanced cyber weapons are being increasingly used since 2017.²² Hence, there is a need for major investments in indigenous military systems, cyber security organisations and creating cyber deterrence through a strategy of defensive offence.

India’s policies should be based on monitor, deny, detect, analyse, attribute, launch focussed attack, monitor impact, and modify attack till desired effect is achieved. Monitoring and reporting would involve continuous scanning on the cyber space especially the social

media, pick up clues and report to relevant organisation. Detection analysis and attribution are the most complex jobs which naturally are undertaken by highly trained multidisciplinary teams. Counter attack if found necessary after attribution. It works at two levels— *first*, for the internal or insider offenders/criminals. This would involve quick detection, attribution framing of charges and conviction in such a manner that the punishment acts as a deterrent for other criminals. The *second* level of cyber deterrence would be directed specifically towards the external aggressors such as China. Since, a large part of the visible cyber attack is through social media or generic media platforms, therefore, we need to work on the evident weaknesses of China and Pakistan where media war and social media offensive can be easily launched. Denial involves cyber security.

Conclusion

Until very recently, the Indian policy makers were quite satisfied playing the ‘second player’ of game theory with respect to China and the nexus. With China as the first mover, the Indian efforts were directed to minimise the losses whereas China, with the help of the nexus, played to maximise the gains. This has changed since 2017. There is enough evidence to infer that India is keen to wrest the initiative from the nexus and is ready to play the first mover. If this be so, then we need to take into account the entire range of internal and external threats posed by the nexus and remove our weaknesses, beef up our strengths take advantage of the opportunities that come our way to gain and sustain initiative.

The challenge does not lie in our capability to beat the nexus. It is more in the will to fight back. Once the command decision is taken, then a resilient nation like India can always measure up to the situation. Historically, we have shown that when pushed to the wall we surpass our own expectations and surprise the adversaries.

End Notes

¹Jayadeva Ranade, “China- Pakistan Strategic Nexus: Implications for India”, *VIF India*, 16 April 2021. Accessible at <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2021/april/16/china-pakistan-strategic-nexus-implications-for-india>. Accessed on 10 August 2021.

²Niranjan Sahoo, “India China and the Ironies of Maoism”, *ORF*, 18 May 2017. Accessible at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indian-china-ironies-of-maoism/> . Accessed on 10 August 2021.

³Uddipan Mukherjee , “Is There Alliance Between ISIS and India’s Maoists”, *The Diplomat*, 27 July 2016. Accessible at <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/is-there-an-alliance-between-isis-and-indias-maoists/>. Accessed on 12 August 2021.

⁴Ashok Pathak *India’s Strategies for Information War & Cyber Deterrence* (New Delhi: Vitasta Publishing Private Limited, 2020). ISBN 78386473875, p.56.



⁵Suparana Jain and Aparajita Gupta, "Building Smart Police in India: Background into the Needed Police Force Reforms", *Niti Aayog*. Accessible at https://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document_publication/Strengthening-Police-Force.pdf. Accessed on 12 August 2021.

⁶"The Padmanabhaiah Committee on Police Reforms: A Critical Analysis of Some Important Recommendations", *Human Rights Initiative*. Accessible at https://humanrightsinitiative.org/programs/aj/police/india/initiatives/analysis_padmanabhaiah.pdf. Accessed on 12 August 2021.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ N.4.

⁹ Probal Das Gupta, *Watershed 1967: India's Forgotten Victory Over China*, (New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2020). ISBN 9353450934.

¹⁰ Sakshi Prashar, "A History of Sino-Indian Feuds: Times When China had to back down, *The Economic Times*, updated on 13 June 2020. Accessible at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/a-history-of-sino-indian-feuds-times-when-china-had-to-back-down/articleshow/76357150.cms?from=mdr> and "India-China Border Tensions: Key Dates in Decades Long Conflict, *Aljazeera*, 17 June 2020. Accessible at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/17/india-china-border-tensions-key-dates-in-decades-long-conflict>. Accessed on 12 August 2021.

¹¹Gurmeet Kanwal and Neha Kohli (Eds), *Defence Reforms: A National Imperative*, (New Delhi: Raj Publication, 2018). ISBN 9789386618344.

¹² Ibid.

¹³Usman Ansari, "Government Report Reveals Pakistan's Progress on Military Acquisitions amid Financial Woes", *DefenseNews*, 20 September 2019. Accessible at <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2019/09/19/government-report-reveals-pakistans-progress-on-military-acquisitions-amid-financial-woes/>. Accessed on 13 August 2021.

¹⁴SIPRI Fact Sheet, "GDP spend on defence India, China, Pakistan, April 2021. Accessible at https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/fs_2104_milex_0.pdf. Accessed on 13 August 2021.

¹⁵ Special Correspondent, Army Prepared for a two and a half front war: Gen Rawat", *The Hindu*, updated 08 June 2017. Accessible at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/army-prepared-for-two-and-a-half-front-war-gen-rawat/article18867921.ece>. Accessed on 13 August 2021.

¹⁶ Sushant Singh, "The Challenge of a Two-Front War: India's China-Pakistan Dilemma", The Stimson Center, 19 April 2021. Accessible at <https://www.stimson.org/2021/the-challenge-of-a-two-front-war-indias-china-pakistan-dilemma/>. Accessed on 13 August 2021.

¹⁷ Ashok Pathak, "Nathu La September 1967 and Galwan Valley June 2020 Lessons and Future Strategies for India", *CLAWS Issue Brief No 252*, 20 October 2020. Accessible at <https://www.claws.in/publication/nathu-la-september-1967-and-galwan-valley-june-2020-lessons-and-future-strategies-for-india/>. Accessed on 14 August 2021.

¹⁸ Amarjit Singh, "It took Pakistan three defeats to understand the flaw in its war strategy against India", *The Print*, 21 October 2020 <https://theprint.in/opinion/it-took-pakistan-three-defeats-to-understand-the-flaw-in-its-war-strategy-against-india/527531/>. Accessed on 14 August 2021.

¹⁹ N.4.



²⁰“Market Share in the Import of Major Arms between 2016 and 2020 by country”, *Statistica*, 20 April 2021. Accessible at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/267134/share-of-individual-nations-in-the-import-of-conventional-weapons/>. Accessed on 14 April 2021.

²¹ Mohit Sharma, Digital India under attack from Pak-China backed terrorists : Report” *TimesNowNews*, updated on 24 November 2020. Accessible at <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/article/digital-india-under-attack-from-pak-china-backed-cyber-terrorists-report/686069#:~:text=New%20Delhi%3A%20Digital%20India%20is,been%20taking%20interest%20in%20Inda>. Accessed on 15 August 2021.

²² Ashok Pathak, “India’s Cyber Deterrence Against China”, *VIF India*, 12 March 2021. Accessible at <https://www.vifindia.org/2021/march/12/india-s-cyber-deterrence-against-china>. Accessed on 15 August 2021.

The views expressed and suggestions made in the article are solely of the author in his personal capacity and do not have any official endorsement. Attributability of the contents lies purely with author.



CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010

Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, CLAWS Army No. 33098; Email: landwarfare@gmail.com

Website: www.claws.in