

Chinese Military's Perspective on the Indian Military Strategy

Brigadier Iqbal Singh Samyal®

Introduction

Since the 1990s, India and China have invested in a host of confidence building measures, including agreements and protocols, to maintain peace along the disputed borders. The Chinese military, as an important pillar of the Chinese political structure, has considerable influence on Chinese perceptions on India. This has been borne out by the recent developments along the India-China border. In this context, understanding the Chinese military's perspective of the Indian military strategy is an important constituent of interpreting Chinese outlook towards India.

The Science of Military Strategy or *Zhanlue Xue* is an influential military publication periodically published by the PLA's Academy of Military Science (AMS) since 1987. This article is primarily based on the review of Indian military strategy carried out in the *Zhanlue Xue* 2013 (hereafter referred to as ZX 2013), available, as of now, only in Chinese language.

The Overall Context

The Chinese military's perspectives of the Indian military strategy is not divorced from the overall strategic environment. Historical biases and contemporary issues, often termed as six "Ts"¹ by Chinese analysts, coalesce with the Chinese strategic assessment, in which Comprehensive National Power (CNP) plays a major role, to influence Chinese views on India. Though dated, Pillsbury (2000)² contains a short review of Chinese views on India at the turn of the century. In 1990, while comparatively India figured low on the CNP index, Indian military strength was considered significant in comparison to other elements of national power. This is echoed in more contemporary analyses, with one Chinese analyst terming it as India's "unusual enthusiasm for strengthening and upgrading its military capability"³ particularly in the naval and strategic fields. Apprehensions related to India being part of an Asian balance of power system to 'contain' China also play on the Chinese mind.

Even amongst the Chinese analysts, the defence related community is more likely to assume a hard line viewpoint⁴ (probably applicable to all countries) and in some opinions, in comparison the military has a greater say in the policy towards India.⁵ Lastly under the current leadership, Chinese assertiveness and self-perceptions have undergone a sharp change buoyed by the rapid economic rise and the pace of military modernisation. The Chinese perspective on Indian military strategy reflected in the ZX 2013 has to be viewed in this context.

The Science of Strategy (ZX 2013) and Indian Military Strategy

The ZX 2013 briefly analyses the military strategy of the 'contemporary world's big countries' namely USA, Russia, Japan and India.⁶ It traces the evolution of Indian military strategy since Independence and then gives out the prominent characteristics of the strategy.

The ZX 2013 reviews the development of Indian military strategy in three phases from Independence till the end of the Cold War.⁷ It analyses that in the first phase (1947-1960), due to the 'economy first' policy, the military strategy was 'limited offensive' (*youxian jingong*) towards Pakistan, as it was viewed as a direct threat, and 'territorial expansion' (*lingtu*

kuozhang) towards the India–China border. The second phase (1960–1970), after the 1962 conflict, led to defence being given priority. The inflow of aid and support from both the US and USSR and improved military capability led to ‘military expansion thought’. This phase witnessed the formulation of the ‘two front expansion’ (*liang xian kuozhang*) policy and ‘West offensive North defensive’ (*xi gong bei fang*) guideline. The third phase (1970s and 1980s), after the 1971 Indo-Pak War led to the ‘pattern of Indian hegemony in South Asia becoming established’. Changes in the international situation, withdrawal of some powers from the Indian Ocean Region and with the land strategic intent being realised, the strategic orientation increased towards the Indian Ocean leading to the formulation of the military strategy of ‘defend land control sea’ (*bao lu zhi hai*).

The period after the Cold War, in Chinese perception, witnessed change to ‘regional deterrence’ (*diqu weishe*) from ‘regional offensive’ (*diqu jingong*) strategy, implying that from aiming to capture territory or destroying enemy forces, a region covering area from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean and Myanmar to Iran, was sought as a circle of deterrence from outside interference or influence.

According to the ZX 2013, the 21st Century has seen an increase in India’s CNP with military strength surpassing the South Asian nations. The ZX 2013 analysis of this period, somewhat mirror images, the Chinese theoretical military strategic structure on the Indian military strategy.⁸ It states that a large scale total war (*da guimo quanmian zhanzheng*) with either China or Pakistan is less probable and with growing terrorism, separatism and military operations other than war (MOOTW) threats, the possibility of ‘mid to small scale limited boundary conventional war’ becomes more probable. This perception has led to the strategy of ‘regional deterrence’ acquiring a new offensive intent of ‘punitive deterrence’ (*chengjie weishe*). In their view, the Indian strategic intent is to ‘win high tech limited conventional war under conditions of nuclear deterrence’ (*da yinghe weishe tiao jinxia de youxian zhanzheng*). Under this intent, the strategic objectives for India (*zhanlue mubiao*), in their perception are – primacy of politics, flexible military employment and influencing enemy’s anti-India policies facilitating compromise on favourable terms. This strategy (*zhanlue zhidao*) requires adopting a form of preemption or active initiative (*jiji zhudong*) to gain initiative by striking first (*xian fa zhiren*), and not waiting for the enemy to enter borders, thereby seizing favourable position and preventing large scale offensive by the enemy. The operational guidance (*zuozhan zhidao*), in their view, is of joint operations by three services and the strategic deterrence guidance (*weishe zhidao*) is combined nuclear and conventional deterrence with conventional military strength as the offensive ‘spear’ and nuclear strength as the defensive ‘shield’.

The ZX 2013 summarises four main characteristics of Indian military strategy⁹; strong regionalism (*diyuanxing*) or geopolitics, comprehensive inheritance (*jichengxing*), limited offensive intent and all round deterrence. The first characteristic reflects the Indian geostrategic outlook of being the center of the South Asian sub-continent, and using it as a strategic base for controlling the Indian Ocean. The second characteristic reflects not only the inheritance of British territory but also the British ‘expansionist military thought’¹⁰ with the “India centric theory” (*yindu zhongxin lun*) having Kashmir, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Assam as “Inner line of Indian defence” and Tibet as ‘buffer state’ in its sphere of influence. In present context, the ZX 2013 cites the Nehruvian policy of having a ‘security inner circle’ encompassing the sub continent and Indian Ocean. The third characteristic is based on the premise that Indian national strategic aims are – dominating South Asia, controlling Indian Ocean and striving to be a world class powerful nation (*zhipei nanya, kongzhi yinduyang, zheng dang shijie yiliu qiangguo*; a phrase commonly found in Chinese writings to describe Indian strategy). This makes the Indian military strategy offensive in intent even though it is claimed to

be defensive. The past wars and other developments in the sub-continent, including ‘provoking’ the

1962 India-China conflict, are quoted to substantiate this intent. Further, in their perception, the Indian offensive intent is increasing with increase in national power and military strength. The fourth characteristic of overall deterrence refers to the use of deterrence in every sphere to compensate for the contradiction between hegemonic ambitions and limited national power. India, it states, has strengthened ties with big powers like the USA and Japan after the Cold War. India in their view adopts a ‘dissuasive’ (*quanzu*) deterrence towards China and ‘punitive’ (*chengfa*) deterrence towards other South Asian nations.

Table I summarises the Chinese military perspective on Indian military strategy in various time periods as stated in the ZX 2013. Though the latest doctrinal developments are quoted more often, contemporary Chinese writings when convenient often cite the strategy of previous periods. There are shared viewpoints and phrases in the ZX 2013 analysis and other Chinese military articles reflecting a common military thought process about the Indian military strategy.

Table I : Summary of Chinese Perspective

Time Period	National Strategy Pattern	Military Strategy	Strategic Guidance	Operational Guidance/
1947-60		Limited Offensive (West) Territorial Expansion		
1960-70		Two Front Expansion	West Offensive North Defensive	
1970s & 80s After Cold War 21 st Century	Dominate South Asian Subcontinent, Control Indian Ocean, and Strive to be a world class power	Defend Land Control Sea Regional Deterrence Regional Deterrence with Dissuasive and Punitive Intent Combined Nuclear and Conventional Deterrence	Active Initiative (Strike first to gain initiative) Offensive Defence	Joint operations, Manoeuvre Warfare and Information operations

Other Chinese Military Viewpoints

The ZX 2013 is a publication of the PLA’s Academy of Military Science. At least two other articles by researchers from the PLA’s National Defence University (NDU), an influential military institution, reflect similar viewpoints and phrases indicating a common thread in the military’s perceptions about Indian military strategy. Similar to the ZX 2013, the first article mentions Indian hegemonic designs in South Asia and Indian Ocean while tracing the evolution of Indian military strategy using similar phrases, ‘limited offensive’, ‘two front offensive’, ‘defend land control sea’, ‘regional deterrence’ and ‘punitive deterrence’¹¹. The second article by a Professor in the Research Department of the PLA’s National Defence University¹² reflects some additional concerns while sharing viewpoints with the ZX 2013. It commences with the same phrases, as in the ZX 2013, to describe Indian strategy “based in South Asia, controlling Indian Ocean and striving to be a world class powerful nation”.¹³ It reiterates the formulation of aiming to ‘win high tech limited conventional war under conditions of nuclear deterrence’, ‘punitive deterrence’, active initiative and gaining initiative by striking first. The offensive intent of Indian military strategy is even more pronounced in the second article quoting the ‘Cold Start’ (*leng qidong*) doctrine. It covers in fair amount of detail the strengthening of strategic deterrence in the nuclear and space domains, the modernisation of the armed forces, developments in the individual services and the ever increasing military diplomacy between India and other advanced armed forces. The key aspects highlighted in the article are that in recent years, India is expanding influence towards the Asia Pacific region and the formulation of a combined land sea strategy

which includes; strong deterrence and deployment towards Pakistan, active involvement in Central Asia, 'infiltrating military strength' towards South West Asia, and striving to get an acknowledged place among big powers. It states that India using the 'Towards East Ocean Strategy' (*dongfang haiyang zhanlue*), wants to control the Indian Ocean as well as have expeditionary capability towards the Asia-Pacific region thereby expanding 'forward defence'. This reflects the rising Chinese concern about Indian military strength in the Indian Ocean as the growing arc of Indian and Chinese interests intersect in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁴

China's rise has changed its self-perception and more significantly its interests, which are expanding outwards bringing new dimensions to the fore including the maritime, network and space domains.¹⁵ Developments in the Indian military are closely monitored particularly in the strategic and maritime domains. Recurring themes in contemporary Chinese articles on Indian military are about increases in defence budget outlay, major defence acquisitions and the fact that India is the largest arms importer in the world, advances in strategically important defence technology fields like missiles and space, military diplomacy and training with other armed forces across the world. Chinese media highlights that India, with comparative ease has access to advanced weaponry and technology and diverse arms/weapons from the USA and Russia.¹⁶ While acknowledging some strengths, the weaknesses highlighted are the defence industry, heavy reliance on imports from various countries and related logistics difficulties, and the inferior infrastructure along India's northern borders.¹⁷

Views on the Chinese Perspectives

The Chinese views on the Indian military strategy are coloured in historical and other biases, hence, do not objectively address Indian security concerns. It is not surprising that growing Chinese military power and its implications in the region are underplayed. The Chinese belief of Indian regional hegemony and expansionism, especially in the light of historical Chinese expansionism and unfolding events in the Asia-Pacific, should be taken as national narrative. ZX 2013 mirror images the Chinese strategic construct on the Indian military strategy, particularly in light of the developments in the 21st Century period. However this approach is not particularly unique to Chinese military writings.

In the 1950s, Chinese concerns were based on Tibet and the India-China border. Currently with growing maritime interests, China is becoming preoccupied with the Indo-Pacific and efforts to 'contain' China's rise. The Chinese concerns are accentuated by Chinese vulnerabilities in the region.¹⁸ The Chinese military's apprehension of India aiming to 'control the Indian Ocean' plays into these fears. So much so that, while considering it a contemporary challenge, Chinese analysts trace India's ambitions in the Indian Ocean far back, ascribing them to Nehru's vision and KM Panikkar's writings.¹⁹

The overall analysis in the ZX 2013, looking at the likely future conflict scenarios, classifies border disputes and maritime conflicts at par, as middle to small scale and medium level intensity conflicts.²⁰ However, on the land borders, at the operational level, two important aspects of the Chinese views are highlighted. The ZX 2013 states that though Indian military posture towards China is overall defensive, but at the same time "is offensive for defence, actively strives for dominance in a part (area), combines continuous nibbling (*canshi*; at the border) during peace and by defence create conditions for offensive during war"²¹. The nibbling (*canshi*) or anti-nibbling (*fan canshi*) of borders is an old term which can be traced to Mao Zedong's time.²² It finds currency even now as articulated by President Xi Jinping²³ and finds mention in the *PLA Military Terms* definition of the Border Defence Forces.²⁴ The second aspect is the marked 'offensive defence' intent attributed to the Indian military strategy in the contemporary period. This outlook has been also echoed in other commentaries²⁵ as some

Chinese analysts posit that 'Indian military could occupy unoccupied areas' to gain favourable negotiating position post conflict. While on land, Chinese views acknowledge that strategically the military outlook towards China is defensive; at the operational and tactical level the view is that the offensive intent is increasing with growing military strength.

Conclusion

The salience of the ZX 2013 analysis is that it reflects a common military framework within the PLA looking at Indian military strategy. Despite its shortcomings, it provides a vital window into the PLA's outlook towards the Indian military. Aside from the strategic and operational implications, the framework provides a basis for identifying aspects which need to be addressed by military diplomacy in order to improve the efficacy of the confidence building measures between the two countries. It also underscores the need for faster military modernisation, both at sea and on land, to balance growing Chinese influence in the region.

Endnotes

¹ "Territorial disputes, Tibet, threat perceptions, trilateral relationships (implying India China Pakistan, India China USA and India China Russia), trade, India's accession to NPT" in Jing Dongyuan, *India's Rise after Pokhran II: Chinese Analyses and Assessments*, Asian Survey, Vol.41, No.6 (Nov-Dec 2001), pp.978-1001.

² Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment*, National Defence University Press, Washington D.C., 2000.

³ Maj Gen Pan Zhenqiang (Retd), *The Rise of India and China-India Relations*, in Dipankar Banerjee & Jabin T. Jacob, eds., *Military Confidence-Building and India-China Relations: Fighting Distrust*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2013, p.31.

⁴ Jing Dongyuan, *op cit*.

⁵ Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox. *New Foreign Policy Actors in China*. SIPRI Policy Paper No 26. p.13. Accessed at http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=410 on 07 Oct 2016.

⁶ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *Zhanlue Xue (The Science of Military Strategy)*, 3rd ed., Academy of Military Science of the People's Liberation Army, Military Science Publishing House, Beijing, 2013, p. 50.

⁷ *Ibid*. pp.64-66.

⁸ As per the *Zhanlue Xue* 2013, the Chinese strategic system, though not fully implemented, consists of three levels and five categories: national strategy- military strategy- service strategy, theatre strategy, significant domain strategy (nuclear, space & network). The theoretical strategic structure varies from text to text but commonly involves some or all of these terms: strategic purpose/aim (*mudi*), strategic tasks (*renwu*), strategic guidelines (*fangzhen*), strategic direction (*fangxiang*), strategic guidance (*zhidao*), strategic means (*shouduan*), strategic layout/deployment (*buju/bushu*). *Ibid*. pp.5-8 & *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Junyu (PLA Military Terms)*, Military Science Publishing House, Beijing, 2011, pp.52-62.

⁹ *Ibid*. pp.66-68.

¹⁰ A point also made before in Michael Pillsbury, *op cit.*, p.147.

¹¹ Abstract of Xiang Ruisheng, *Yindu xiandai junshi zhanlue de yanbian* (Development of Contemporary Indian Military Strategy), Journal of NDU, No.5, 2006 accessed at <http://wenku.baidu.com/view/1aec3fa865ce0508763213b1.html> on 07 Oct 2016.

¹² Xinhua Wang, "guofang daxue jiaoshou: yindu quanfangwei tiaozheng junshi zhanlue (NDU Professor: India All-Around Adjusts Military Strategy)", accessed at http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2008-11/13/content_10351945.htm on 07 Oct 2016.

¹³ The phrase commonly used is *zhipei nanya, kongzhi yindu yang, zheng dang shijie yiliu qiangguo*. Often the term *zhipei nanya* (dominate South Asia) is replaced by *lizu nanya* (based on South Asia).

¹⁴ Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Views of India in the Indian Ocean: A Geopolitical Perspective*, Strategic Analysis, 36:3, 2012, pp.489-500.

¹⁵ Information Office of the State Council, The People's Republic of China. *China's Military Strategy (National Defence White Paper) 2015*. Accessed at <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/> on 08 Aug 2015.

¹⁶ Zhongguo Junwang, "*yindujun gou: zuo-you feng yuan zhong zai pingheng*", 21 November 2015, Accessed at http://www.81.cn/bqtd/2015-11/21/content_6779354.htm on 07 Oct 2016.

¹⁷ Xinhua Wang, "*zhuanjia touxi:yindu junshi shili daodi you duo qiang*, (Expert Analysis: Indian Military Power Finally has many Strengths)"accessed at http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2010-03/31/content_13272946.htm on 07 Oct 2016.

¹⁸ Michael Pillsbury, *The Sixteen Fears: China's Strategic Psychology*, Survival: Global Politics and Strategy, 54:5, pp. 149-182.

¹⁹ Toshi Yoshihara, *op, cit*.

²⁰ Shou Xiaosong, ed., *op. cit.*, p.99.

²¹ *Ibid.* p.67.

²² Wang Qitian, Tian Dongliang & Gong Xiaogang, *Mao Zhuxi Bianfang Sixiang Yanjiu* (Research on Chairman Mao's Border Defence Thought), Mao Zedong Thought Study, Vol 30 No 1, November 2013,pp.71-74.

²³ Zhongguo Junwang, "*Xi Jinping: jiaqiang fan canshi, fan fenlie, fan kongbu douzheng* (Xi Jinping : Strengthen Anti-Nibbling, anti-Separatism, Anti-Terrorism Struggle)",02 January 2014, Accessed at http://www.81.cn/jwgd/2014-01/02/content_5717070.htm on 07 Oct 2016.

²⁴ *PLA Military Terms 2011*, *op.cit.*, p.334.

²⁵ Jing Dongyuan, *op cit.* p.990.

®**Brigadier Iqbal Singh Samyal** was commissioned into the KUMAON Regiment in December 1990. He has served as India's Defence Attaché in the Embassy of India, Beijing from October 2011 to November 2014. Presently, he is commanding an Infantry Brigade.

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