

# Challenge of a Two Front Threat

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## Introduction

Though India has been vulnerable to a two front threat since the late nineteen fifties, it is only in the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century that the possibility of such an eventuality was taken seriously. Seen from a different perspective, freshly Independent India's political leadership propounded the philosophy of peaceful co-existence based on Gandhiji's idealistic viewpoint of the world. Pandit Nehru, the first Prime Minister of free India, is reported to have expressed the view that since India had no enemies, it could do without having a standing army. While Pakistani incursions in the state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947-48 put paid to this line of thinking, the military was still viewed with disfavour and seen as a relic of the British Imperialism.

Reality struck with force when in 1962, the Chinese inflicted a humiliating defeat both in Arunachal Pradesh and Eastern Ladakh. Sensing India's weakened position and possibility of a victory, Pakistan started the 1965 War. However, the Indian military responded admirably and ended up with sizeable gains. This was followed by the Indo-Pak war of 1971, wherein India achieved a historic victory resulting in severance of East Pakistan and creation of a free Bangladesh. In addition, the Indian Army took approximately 94000 Pakistani soldiers as prisoners. Kargil war in 1999 was the last misadventure by the Pakistan Army for which it paid heavily in terms of casualties and loss of face.

## Pakistani Mindset and Presumptions

From the above historical perspective, a few facts emerge clearly. Firstly, Pakistan's military has always looked forward to inflicting a major defeat on India. This is obvious from the fact that on all these occasions, the hostilities were initiated by Pakistan. While not resulting in success, such a stance has enabled the Pakistani

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military to remain popular and occupy a dominant space within the Pakistan polity. It indeed is the sole arbiter of Pakistan's foreign policy vis-à-vis India, despite there being a popularly elected civilian Government in place.

Secondly, defeat in successive wars with India has driven home the point that Pakistan cannot win a bilateral conflict between the two, anytime in the future as well. If anything, considering the size and economy of the two countries, the gap between the two is likely to keep increasing in India's favour over time.

Thirdly, since the likelihood of it defeating India in a bilateral confrontation is diminishing rapidly, Pakistan would not hesitate to fish in troubled waters and attack India, should we be involved in a conflict with China. In fact, the growing closeness between China and Pakistan in both economic and military fields during the last decade clearly points to a synchronised approach vis-à-vis India by the two. Indications of this strategy are visible during interactions in various multilateral forums. Support for Pakistan's attempts at getting waivers as granted to India by Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), development of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), upgradation of Gwadar port at a massive cost of US \$18 billion and a common anti-India stance in forums like ASEAN, SCO, ARF etc. are manifestations of this strategy.

### **China's Growth and Emergence of Two Front Threat**

China has grown rapidly in the last four decades. Simultaneously with the growth of its economic power, its military power too has grown. It has gradually moved away from Deng Hsiao Ping's policy of the nineteen eighties of 'hiding capabilities and biding time' to assertiveness and thence on to 'controlled aggression' in dealing with its territorial claims in South China Sea, Tibet and East China Sea. As its military power grows and increases its ability to flex its muscles, its posture appears to be hardening.

China-India boundary dispute is nowhere near resolution. Despite seventeen rounds of Special Representative level talks having taken place, a mutually agreeable solution is not in sight. Going back on some of the agreed upon principles in the earlier rounds, is indicative of planned Chinese procrastination on the issue. Sun Tzu's dictum of achieving victory without fighting seems to be at work as China hopes to be militarily so powerful as to deter India from standing up to it and giving in to its demands.

It is often argued that there is enough economic space for both China and India to grow simultaneously and, therefore, healthy competition between the two would benefit both countries. This line of thinking advocates strong bonds of friendship and cooperation between the two. However, it is also a fact that seeds of confrontation are inherent in any competition. The race for raw materials, domination of lines of communication and markets for finished products can turn ugly despite best intentions. Thus, the possibility of a two front threat to India is strong. The moot question that we need to address is whether India has the capability to defend itself in such a scenario, and if not, what steps it must undertake to prepare itself to face this eventuality.

While we do enjoy a conventional edge over Pakistan, against China we are certainly at a disadvantage. The Chinese annual Defence Budget is almost three times that of India. As time is passing, the gap between the two is increasing in China's favour. To defend ourselves against a combined threat from China and Pakistan, we need to institute a series of measures immediately as the gestation period for achieving effective results could be 10-15 years. Some of these measures are discussed in the subsequent paras.

#### **Enhancement of India's Defence Budget**

For the current financial year, the Defence Budget is 1.72 per cent of the GDP. In fact for the last 10 years, the average annual Defence Budget works out to less than 2 per cent of the GDP. From a national security perspective, this is grossly inadequate when we compare with our potential adversaries and with the other advanced countries of the world. The immediate need is to enhance it to at least three per cent of the GDP, lest the comparative gap keeps increasing. Coupled with this is the need to streamline our procedures so that the allocated budget is expended fully on projects which are crucial for national security. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has a definitive role to play in accomplishing this, fixing accountability and cracking the whip if necessary.

#### **Involvement of Indigenous Private Sector**

We have a thriving private sector which unfortunately has not been involved with defence equipment manufacture in an appropriate manner. Excessive dependence on Ordnance Factories Board

(OFB) and eight Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs) has resulted in just about 30 per cent of the Nation's requirements being met indigenously. Policy of protectionism and pressure of trade unions has resulted in private sector being kept out of defence manufacturing. On one hand, this has led to monopoly by the OFB and the DPSUs with consequent time and cost overruns and on the other, heavy dependence on imports wherein costs are prohibitive.

Thus, today India has the dubious distinction of being the largest importer of arms in the world. Yet, because of high costs, we are able to import much less than the requirement within the limited budget. What is more worrisome is that excessive dependence on imports makes national security hostage to whims and fancies of the exporters who may stop supplies anytime based on their national policies.

It is, therefore, imperative that indigenous private sector is brought into defence equipment manufacture in a big way quickly. Recent emphasis on 'Make in India' has not come a day too soon. In fact, it should have happened 50 years ago.

### **Improvement of Infrastructure in Border Areas**

Post Independence, a conscious decision was taken not to develop infrastructure in forward areas along the border on the premise that an attacking adversary would only be able to advance forward after building the requisite infrastructure, thus providing us with reasonable time to respond to his aggression. In hindsight, it is clear that it was a faulty strategy. On one hand, it accepted initial loss of territory as unavoidable and on the other, it placed constraints on our own forces in being able to fight the aggressor and defend our territory successfully.

This policy underwent a change in the end nineteen eighties when it was decided to defend every inch of territory aggressively. However, in the process, we lost 40 precious years to develop infrastructure in our forward areas. As a result, till date, we have a situation where most of our sensitive areas along the Indo-China border are dependent on one single, tenuous road axis which if blocked either due to natural causes or due to enemy action would jeopardise successful defence of those areas. In Arunachal Pradesh, the sensitive area of Tawang, in Sikkim the areas ahead

of Gangtok, the state capital; and in Uttar Pradesh, areas up to Barahoti and beyond fall into this category. In Ladakh, the road connectivity to the vital area of Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) is yet to be achieved.

The Indian Army boasts of excellent soldier material that has proved its worth in many a battle that he has fought for his Country since Independence. However, the best of soldiers can deliver only if the requisite operational and logistic support is provided to them.

There is need for expediting land acquisition, obtaining environmental clearances and hastening construction of road infrastructure in all forward areas. National security cannot be shackled and compromised due to laws enacted by our own Parliament and State legislatures to guard against indiscriminate degradation of forests by unscrupulous elements. Resources of the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), the sole construction agency for development of infrastructure in forward areas need to be properly channelised and augmented in terms of funding, manpower and equipment.

Likewise, the rail connectivity to forward areas has to be achieved to ensure rapid movement of troops to threatened sectors. Over the last two decades, the Chinese have built excellent rail and road infrastructure as well as storage facilities in Tibet, thereby gaining a tremendous strategic advantage over India. In view of the long lead time involved in upgradation and construction of rail projects in mountainous areas, there can be no further delay in undertaking these projects. The time being taken to achieve rail connectivity to the state of Jammu and Kashmir is indicative of the delay and complexities of rail construction in such areas.

### **Force Accretions**

There has been an ongoing debate in the media whether force accretion of additional four divisions, approved during the UPA 1 regime in 2008-09 and being implemented thereafter, was a step in the right direction. It has been suggested that the same funds could have been better utilised for developing capabilities in the Indian Ocean and in the air. Such an approach displays shallow understanding of a two front threat. For ensuring territorial integrity of the Country, the importance of 'boots on ground' can hardly be underestimated.

The flexibility of shifting troops from one front to face threats on the other is negated in case of a two front scenario. Inadequacy of troops on either front would be a sure recipe for disaster. In fact the best we can do even with increased force levels is to defend resolutely against the Chinese and avoid any loss of territory while dealing with the Pakistani aggression. Planned accretions would provide us that necessary defensive capability.

### **Jointness**

None of the Services can fight a war on its own. Optimisation of available resources and their timely utilisation would be a major factor in winning a war in the future. Most modern militaries have taken steps to ensure a high degree of integration of the three Services. Jointness is invariably accorded prime importance in all their promotional structures and operational planning.

Unfortunately, we in India have paid lip service to jointness so far. Turf protection and resistance to change have been constraining factors in achieving integration of the three Services. A service centric approach delays decision making at crucial times, results in duplication and does not make optimum use of scarce national resources. In case of a two front threat, such an approach would lead to catastrophic consequences.

Greater jointness requires a long gestation period. It is imperative that we commence the process of integration in a serious manner immediately. For the integration to succeed, all three Services will have to give up a part of their turf. This is unavoidable and would be in the interest of national security in the long run.

### **Nuclear Dimension**

A conventional conflict escalating to the nuclear dimension is a distinct possibility, especially if a threshold is crossed. However, the likelihood of such an eventuality in case of a two front threat to India is reduced in view of the nuclear policies of the countries involved. Let us examine this prognosis in greater detail.

Any country deciding to initiate use of nuclear weapons runs the risk of worldwide condemnation and perhaps retaliation since the effect of such use would be felt across the globe. India's 'No First Use' (NFU) policy will remain in force till one of its adversaries

decides to take recourse to nuclear weapons. The probability of China using nuclear weapons against India would be negligible since China enjoys a significant conventional advantage over India, thus enabling it to achieve its aims through conventional means.

Pakistan is conventionally inferior to India. Additionally, it has an ambiguous nuclear policy which seeks to address its conventional weakness concerns through the deterrence aspect. However, its nuclear weapons would come into play only if a certain threshold in its conventional confrontation with India is crossed. In the light of a two front threat to India, it is unlikely that India would be in a position to cross any major thresholds in Pakistan.

The nexus between China and Pakistan has been growing consistently for the last 50 years. Of late, their linkages have become much stronger. Their combined conventional superiority is more than adequate to preclude the necessity of using nuclear weapons for achieving their aims against India.

### **Conclusion**

Till our boundary differences with both or one of our neighbours get resolved, the possibility of a two front threat to us would remain. With growth of stronger ties between China and Pakistan, this threat is likely to get accentuated. The challenge for us is to develop capabilities to enable us to defend ourselves against such a threat.

Alternately, we have the option of continuing to keep ignoring reality and glossing over the envisaged threat, hoping that it would go away with passage of time. This ostrich like approach would only make us more vulnerable in the long run. In fact, it can threaten India's economic resurgence which is currently underway.

Some steps to meet the threat have been suggested above. The list is by no means exhaustive. A lot more needs to be done. However, time is of essence. We need to get on with development of capabilities on an urgent basis considering the lead times involved. National security must remain our primary concern.