

Fortifying Indian Army's response at Tactical Level against People's Liberation Army

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“The challenge for India with China is not to compete for trade and economic growth, but to compete for strategic space”.¹

Abstract

The People's Liberation Army's (PLA) adventurism in Ladakh has been a blessing in disguise in expediting India's war-preparedness and shifting the focus towards sharpening our own forces, and their response against China from strategic to tactical levels. Though Indian Army (IA) is a seasoned soldiers' army, it yet needs to match steps with modern technology while also focusing on the upgradation of its strategies, policies, and tactics. The need of the hour is thus, to focus on enhancing situational awareness, improving operational strategies, tactics and grouping capabilities, exploiting the field of human resource through effective training of troops, and, most importantly, focusing holistically on strengthening the administrative and logistic set-up to sustain in rough, rugged terrains, have effective border-area infrastructures, state of the art medical facilities for troops well within their reach as China specialises in the game of attrition. India is committed to a strategy of deterrence against China and to achieve

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this deterrence IA needs to identify the challenges at various levels vis-à-vis the PLA and, thus, formalise a response system to fortify IA's position against PLA. This article sheds light on the challenges faced by the IA in relation to the PLA and the measures to mitigate the shortcomings and fortifying IA's response against the PLA, limited to tactical level only.

Introduction

From '**Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai**' to '**Hindi-Chini Bye-Bye**', India-China relations have been marked with ambiguity. Amidst series of intermittent scuffles owing to China's 'salami slicing'² tactics in the state of Arunachal Pradesh and Union Territory of Ladakh to full-fledged action in Galwan since May 2020, China today stands as India's primary adversary.

While rumours are rife that Chinese aggressive activities in Ladakh are a ruse to divert India's attention from Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to its Northern borders, the ongoing dispute definitely highlights several inadequacies. The expeditious deployment of troops in the hot bed, necessity-based emergency equipment procurement, and sudden move of several formations to LAC, can all be summed up in one phrase- 'knee-jerk reaction'. The present stand-off is, thus, an eye-opener for all stakeholders to cover lost ground and fortify India's defence forces in a holistic manner through effective policy creation and implementation. Apropos, Indian Army (IA) needs to modernise itself by not just inducting state-of-the-art weapons but also by reorganising its existing tactical formations and fighting units, modernising its administrative and logistic set-up and training methods.

PLA Revolution over the past Decades

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has consistently transformed from a manpower-intensive army to a force-multiplier entity today. The Chinese have long erased the trauma faced at the hands of Vietnam in 1979, and today stand tall as a world-class military. The ruthless implementation of merit-based policies, large-scale Research and Development (R&D) programmes, and indigenous defence industrial base have invigorated and modernised the PLA

through 'mechanisation' and 'informationisation'.³ Post the latest reforms in 2020, PLA now comprises of the following arms:

- PLA Army.
- PLA Navy.
- PLA Air Force.
- PLA Rocket Force.
- PLA Strategic Support Force.
- PLA Joint Logistic Support Force.

With its strategic policy of 'Active Defence', PLA has now been organised into five Theatre Commands, to focus on operations with integrated jointness, as under:

- **Eastern Theatre.** Responsible towards Taiwan and the East China Sea.
- **Southern Theatre.** Responsible towards South China Sea, South East Asian border security and territorial and maritime disputes.
- **Western Theatre.** Responsible for conflict-resolution, with primary focus on India. It includes the military districts of Xinjiang and Tibet and focuses on 'Counter-Terrorism' operations along China's Western borders.
- **Northern Theatre.** Responsible towards Korean Peninsula and Russian borders.
- **Central Theatre.** Primarily responsible for the defence of Beijing as also to provide support to the other four theatres.

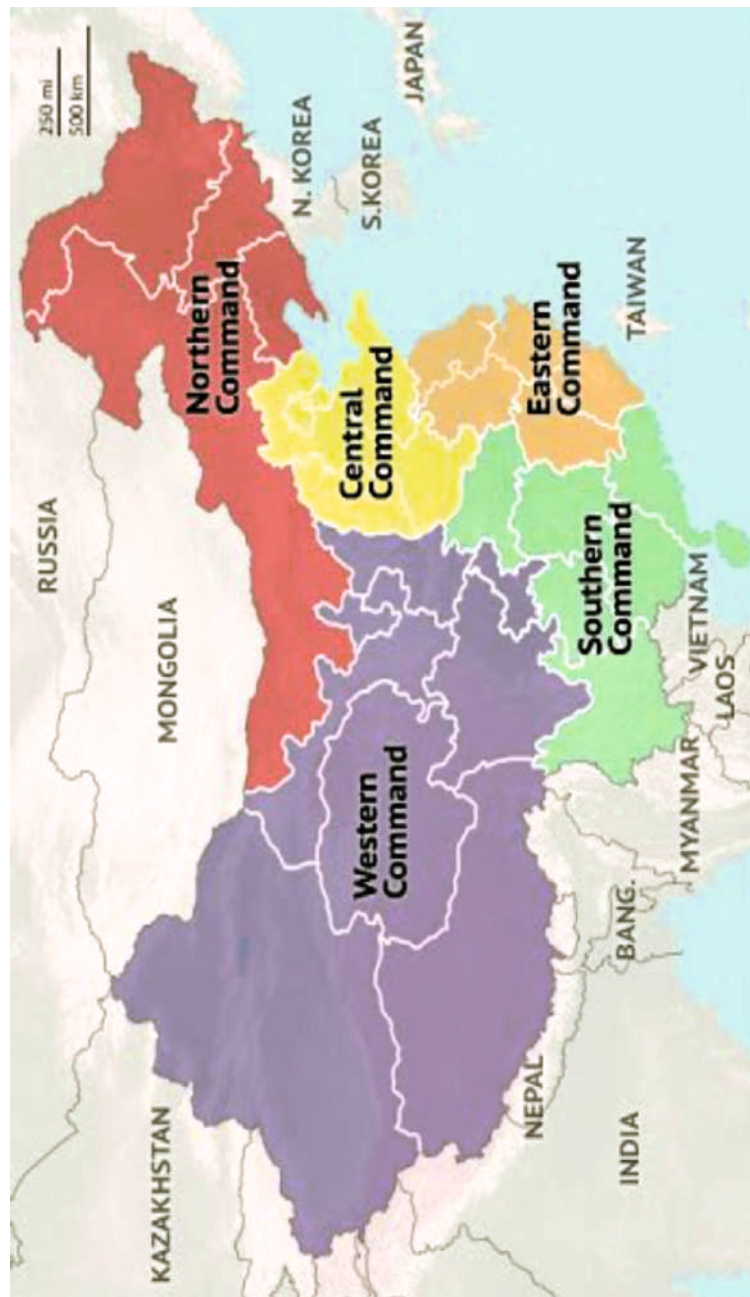


Figure 1 : China's Theatre Commands

Source: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2020, Annual Report to Congress, Office of the Secretary of Defence, 2020.⁴



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Challenges ahead of IA

IA is a professional army, with battle-hardened soldiers. However, amidst the race for modernisation, induction of ultra-sophisticated equipment worldwide, and changing character of warfare, numerous challenges are staring in the face of IA today, highlighted in the Land Warfare Doctrine 2018 of the IA, and are enumerated as under:

- 'Two and a half front'⁶ war in wake of collusive threat from China and Pakistan, in addition to non-conventional counter-insurgency warfare in Kashmir.
- Ambiguity of operations with nations neither at peace nor at war, or in 'Grey Zones', with expansion of domains of warfare from conventional to cyber/space/non-contact warfare.
- Limited defence budget allotment vis-à-vis ambitious modernisation plan.
- Exploring combined options of diplomatic, political, military and economic responses to avoid future confrontation.

It is, thus, imperative for the IA to re-align its policies and strategies from strategic to tactical levels, to strengthen itself against the PLA, by inducting modern weaponry, enhancing advanced professional training of personnel, tailor-made administrative and logistic support, improving connectivity channels, expeditious technical upgradation, self-sustenance and refining existing tactical procedures to adopt fresh tactics, tailor-made for tackling the PLA.

Moreover, two colluding belligerents require focused and speedy formulation of response mechanisms, with perspective plans, increased budgetary support, and induction of modern weaponry. IA should understand that PLA respects strength and to this end, its own response systems need to evoke adequate caution in the minds of local PLA commanders, lest they plan any adventurism. Simultaneously, the organisational structure and equipment prowess must aid in fortifying the theatre of response, to ensure inter-theatre operability.

Recommended Measures to mitigate the Shortcomings and Fortify IA's response against PLA at Tactical Level

In order to develop a cutting-edge response against China, few suggestions for IA are enumerate, for due implementation at battalion, brigade, and division levels, and for honing the IA in countering PLA:

- **Improving Situational.** Awareness Learning from Kargil, the field of intelligence gathering needs to be effectively exploited with the use of men and equipment, combined with modern day technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI). Hence, to holistically improve situational awareness capabilities of IA, the following steps, at each tactical level, are recommended:

- **Battalion Level**

- Human Intelligence (HUMINT) will always remain quintessential despite any leap in technology yet, it may be suitably backed-up with modern technologies, like Raytheon's FoXTEN⁷ (an open intelligence platform being used by US Army).
- The surveillance devices presently available with a Battalion Commander offer very limited verticals for intelligence gathering. Thus, procuring additional surveillance devices like passive Battle Field Surveillance Radars, short-range surveillance drones, increasing the number of Quadcopters, increasing the scaling of surveillance equipment like Night-Vision Devices, Passive Night Vision Goggles and devices, Hand Held Thermal Imagers, provision of Pan-Tilt-Zoom cameras etc., will greatly accentuate intelligence-collection capabilities at battalion level.
- Focus on unmanned/remote-intelligence collection methods and devices like Drones, Micro-UAVs, Long-Range Reconnaissance and Observation System (LORROS), high-tech sensors, etc.

- **Brigade Level**

- Inducting components of Electronic Warfare (EW) and Information Warfare (IW) in brigades.
- Making Brigade Headquarter the first stage agency for effective intelligence analysis and collation, by sieving out non-essential information, and passing the rest to next higher level.
- Shortening the gap between requisitioning of satellite imagery and its receipt to 24 hrs or less in both peace and hostilities, for better reaction time.

- **Division Level**

- Achieving synergy between other intelligence agencies at the division level, like Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF), local police and various agencies of the Ministry of Home Affairs for holistic information collection and collation.
- Creation of a separate branch on the lines of Joint Operations Centre (JOC) at division level for intelligence collection, collation, analysis, segregation, dissemination and action.
- Procurement of 'Big Data Analysis' software like Memex⁸, RapidMiner, coupled with Artificial Intelligence (AI) for enhanced surveillance and effective processing of gathered intelligence for gaining upper-hand in Non-Contact Warfare.

- **Improving Operational Strategies, Tactics and Grouping Capabilities**

- **Operational Strategies and Tactics.** IA soldiers stand at an advantage against PLA in terms of superior training and regular combat exposure. Also, in view of present confrontation, IA is already altering its strategy by vigorously changing its Order of Battle (ORBAT) along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh. In addition, IA needs to exercise 'end to end credible deterrence' against PLA through:
 - Disproportionate and visible troop build-up along LAC in Ladakh.

- Combination of selectively-overt deployment of Special Forces/Scouts.
- Visible conduct of military exercises to boast own capabilities.
- Conceptualising proactive 'Simulation Wargame Plan', with terms of reference to trickle down from strategic to tactical level, with effective timelines, based on seasonality of events and other eventualities.
- 'Fighting China, the Chinese way', through:
 - Training of own troops in PLA tactics of surprise, bluff, deception, and hand-to-hand combat.
 - Excessive display and deployment of force in the hot-bed and appropriate propaganda through media-management.
 - Overcoming PLA strategy of outflanking the enemy by engaging PLA on multiple frontages.
 - The 3488 kms long LAC comprises of mainly three types of terrains - High Altitude Area (HAA), mountainous terrain, and jungles. Apropos, basing IA's operational strategy against PLA on a single or a combination of following strategies:
 - ✓ **Terrain-Specific Strategy.** For operations in HAA, jungle and mountainous terrains.
 - ✓ **Arm-Specific Strategy.** To include Infantry, Artillery, Special Forces, Special Frontier Forces (SFF), Mechanised Forces and Air Defence elements.
 - ✓ **Synergised Strategy.** A combination of both the above strategies.

- Maintaining a proactive posture, rather than being predictably reactive. The success of this change in strategy was witnessed during the Ladakh standoff in Aug 2020.
 - PLA has been consistently undergoing heavy mechanisation. While PLA has deployed its 3rd generation Type-99 Main Battle Tanks (MBTs) and light-weight Type-15 tanks in Ladakh, IA too needs to build and induct mountain-friendly, light-weight tanks for gaining superiority.
 - Employment of tanks would further imply support from tactical drones for dead-ground visibility as well as carrying out EW, closely supported with attack helicopters.
 - Chinese trend of intrusion suggests that their confrontations are not short and swift, but those of long duration. Apropos, IA will have to be geared for prolonged deployment in a state of high alert and master the game of attrition against the PLA.
 - Inclusion of Light Combat Helicopters custom-made for HAA.
- **Grouping.** A compact, well-balanced, and self-contained force is the key to fighting quick and decisive battles. Hence, there is a need to revamping own fighting units as under:
 - **Creation of Special China Cell (SCC).** Creating a special cell with quintessential elements of intelligence, IW, interpreters, personnel with military employment experience in China, and a team of Nuclear- Biological-Chemical (NBC) qualified troops. This specialised cell may be made a permanent entity of infantry battalions facing China.
 - **One Border, One Force.** During peace time, Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) forces are deployed as first line of defence on LAC and come under direct command of IA only during hostilities. It is recommended to place ITBP permanently under the command of IA formations, to avoid

duplicity of forces at LAC and for better coordination and cohesion between dissimilar services.

- **Implementation of Integrated Battle Groups (IBG-isation).** IBG-isation is the need of the hour to achieve optimum utilisation of resources, increase mobility, reduce reaction time in deployment of units and formations to achieve maximum advantage in future operations.

- **Integral Aviation Elements.** IA aviation units have three roles-recce and surveillance, casualty evacuation, and weapon system integration in the form of attack helicopters. However, there are no dedicated aviation units under command, even at Corps level. But, given their wide utility, aviation units can be made integral to each division facing China, with dedicated efforts available for each brigade, for accentuating own strength against the enemy.

- **Improving Human Resource Capabilities.** Human capital and its rational management through effective and relevant training has always yielded transformative results for any force. Hence, to achieve optimum capabilities of personnel, following is recommended:

- **Thoughtful Selection of Personnel**

- Schematic planning and advertisement for attracting talent from civil institutes of excellence.
- Motivating Tibetan youth towards SFF recruitment which has died down in recent decades. Contrarily, PLA was recently in news for motivating Tibetans for joining their Army.
- Composition of China-specific formations to be from Ladakh/North-East/ Mountain-heavy population, for better acclimatisation and training of troops.

- **Focused Training**

- Imparting detailed teaching for all ranks on China, on the lines of 'Know Your Enemy', be it through Junior Leadership Course or Young Officers' Course or even Higher Command Course.

- Chinese language be made compulsory in basic training of all ranks and identifying, and training, such personnel who show aptitude towards the language in initial training.
- Technology is the order of the day. Hence, keeping present soldiers abreast with technology, and recruiting tech-savvy manpower for force modernisation.
- Mandatory cyber education for all ranks, rather than barring its use, as China specialises in cyber warfare.
- Regular exercises and wargaming with maximum participation from junior leadership and young officers, being key elements on ground.

■ **Specialisation**

- Building pool of 'Domain Specialised' China-experts and provide them repeated exposure of postings and assignments at Chinese fronts.
- On the lines of Pre-Induction Training Schools for troops in Jammu and Kashmir, training schools and long courses/cadres to be facilitated for troops due for deployment on the China fronts.

■ **Motivation**

- Sending Chinese-specialist troops to United Nations missions to understand PLA soldiers, their cultures and functioning, thus serving dual-purpose of rewarding own troops and gaining first-hand information about the adversary.
- Coveted postings to Chinese embassies or knowledge-hubs like Institute of Chinese Studies (New Delhi) to enhance motivation levels of troops for out-of-domain experiences.

● **Improving Administrative and Logistic Capabilities.**

Future wars will be short and intense and will demand prompt logistic support. Hence, one needs to keep evolving logistics

support concept, while matching steps with latest technological advances, through the following:

■ **Administration and Logistics**

- Administration and logistic chains to be custom-made for specific area and terrain, on the lines of assault echelons ahead in the area.
- Provision of palatable functional foods (Mushroom-based foods developed by DRDO), clean water facilities (DRDO's water-deferrisation units), fiber reinforced plastic-based insulated accommodations, bio-toilets, comfortable extreme climate clothing, etc., for good health and high morale of troops in difficult terrain against China.
- Establishment of mobile towers in forward areas for better coordination and connectivity, more so as a morale booster.
- Establishment of underground storage facilities, on the lines of PLA's Underground Facilities (UGF) to conceal military targets from adversaries, especially in vast open areas of Ladakh. Also, duplicity of stocking at such locations for continued sustenance in contingencies.
- Resource mapping by static elements of the formation for contingencies.
- Construction of adequate numbers of NBC shelters.

■ **Medical**

- Establishment of a 'state-of-the-art' hospital facility in Leh due to quantum of forces present, as nearest advanced evacuation facilities are located in Delhi and Chandigarh.
- Integration of medical services with existing civil hospitals in proximity.
- Exploring feasibility of use of drones for forward delivery of critical medicines, blood etc.

- **Enhancing Infrastructure and Connectivity.**

Connectivity and infrastructure development will play game-changer against PLA deployments in the inhospitable terrains of HAA. Further improvements may be carried out as under:

- In view of poor road connectivity on own side during winters, more airstrips be added for consistent air maintenance. Also, railway line construction in Sichuan, Chengdu, Qinghai, etc., in Tibet suggests that such construction activities despite inclement terrain are feasible and be emulated by IA to improve its lines of communication.
- China's super-connectivity by road to its forward-most posts on LAC presents a sharp contrast to maintenance of Indian posts with inadequate connectivity of roads, tracks and rails. Thus, to increase axes of maintenance for year-round sustenance.
- Creating vertical and horizontal connectivity between forward sectors and sub-sectors for better coordination and utilisation of available resources and for economy of logistic efforts.

Way Ahead

The PLA adventurism in Ladakh has been a blessing in disguise in expediting India's war-preparedness and shifting the focus towards sharpening own forces and their response against China from strategic to tactical levels. Some additional recommendations are entailed below:

- **Disproportionate Response When Provoked.** IA needs to develop unpredictable and graduated response against China. One example may be to choke China in the Malacca any time it creates turbulence in Ladakh or any other land border.
- **Rapidly Enhancing Technical Warfare Capabilities.** IA needs to further develop its technical domain through initial import of modern weaponry, coupled with indigenous production in future.

- **‘Sons of the Soil’ Battalions.** The operational-readiness state of Scout battalions seen against the PLA in the bizarre weather of Ladakh implies raising more such specialised battalions on China front.
- **Trial-Based Employment of SFF with IA.** Acknowledging the crucial role of VIKAS battalions, by grouping their company each with battalions deployed on China front, on a trial basis, may yield excellent results.
- **Theatre Specific Employment.** The forces against their respective adversaries can be custom-designed and equipped to increase awareness about the enemy, and his modus operandi, to boost confidence and morale of own forces.
- **Identifying Potential Commanders in Chain.** Identifying and gainfully employing officers qualified in three-dimensional knowledge about PLA its methodology, Chinese language, and capable of formulating plans of action against them.

Conclusion

While the de-escalation between IA and PLA has long started, India's efforts of force build-up and permanent infrastructure development in Ladakh should not lose steam, because while modern-day dimensions of war are evolving and expanding to cyber and space domains, the importance of a tactical level battle will always remain critical; for as long as a nation is fighting to safeguard even an inch of its sovereign soil, its soldiers will have to give up their gaming consoles and fight in a real battlefield that no amount of technology can ever prepare them for. As eventually, it is the grit of real soldiers and not expensive weapons that wins war. In the words of a soldier- "I am the weapon, everything else is just accessory".

Endnotes

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⁷ FoXTEN- Force Multiplier Tactical Edge Note is a fully open intelligence platform that gives the US Army the ability to rapidly incorporate new capabilities, from any developer, as soldiers in the field require them. Low power, lightweight, intuitive to use and easy to deploy, FoXTEN enhances decision-making when and where the mission demands. <https://www.raytheon.com/capabilities/products/foxten>

⁸ Memex is an indigenous hi-tech internet tool, developed by DARPA (Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency), which stands for a combination of 'memory' and 'index' and is being used for internet crawling, internet searching, data aggregation, data analysis, data visualization, data extraction and image analysis.

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