

Implications and Learnings for India Amid China's Military Modernisation

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Introduction

Military modernisation has long been a key factor in assessing national power and the shifting dynamics between global and regional blocs. Economic growth provides nations with the means to enhance their military capabilities, shaping strategic goals, and geopolitical influence. Both India and China have undergone significant transformations in response to evolving global dynamics. In recent years, China has aggressively pursued military modernisation, raising concerns among strategic analysts who view its expanding defence capabilities as a potential challenge to the existing global order.

This article examines the implications of China's military modernisation for India and highlights key lessons that India can draw from China's efforts to enhance its defence capabilities.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has systematically modernised the People's Liberation Army (PLA), a process rooted in the country's sustained economic growth, which accelerated under President Xi Jinping. These reforms go beyond merely upgrading outdated military systems; they aim to transform the PLA into a technologically advanced, highly coordinated, and globally influential force. Key objectives include strengthening land, air, and naval forces, improving inter-service coordination, and projecting China's military strength on a global scale.

Nature of Modernisation

Military modernisation can be broadly categorised into four key areas: the Army, the Air Force, the Navy, and Cyber and Space Technology. The PLA has long been central to China's defence strategy, with President Jinping's reforms significantly enhancing its operational efficiency. These reforms included restructuring military regions into theatre commands and expanding force size to align with China's evolving geopolitical ambitions and national aspirations.

In pursuit of its goal to develop a 'World-Class' military, the PRC has made substantial investments in advanced weaponry, including sophisticated rifles, grenades, artillery, cannons, next-generation tanks, and modern commercial vessels. These upgrades reflect China's commitment to strengthening its military capabilities to assert strategic dominance on regional and global fronts. Complementing the investment in purchase, it has also made army personnel learn about new techniques and dynamics, which include firepower, greater joint operation, assault capabilities, and any kind of non-war military operations outside the country.¹

The other category of military modernisation talks about the advancements in air force, which in China's case is known as the PLA Air Force (PLAAF). After fielding its fifth-generation fighter aircraft, China is already on the path to develop the sixth-

generation multirole stealth fighter jet. The J-20, also known as the 'Mighty Dragon', introduced previously, represented a substantial leap in China's air combat capabilities.²

The capabilities of such aircrafts allow the PLAAF to counter an enemy's radar detection, initiating surprise attacks that can potentially alter the balance of power in air. This also equips China to compete with aircrafts of other countries, notably the American F-22 Raptors and F-35 Lightning II fighters.³ This capability enables China to project power beyond its borders, influence outcomes in regional disputes, and send strategic signals to countries across the globe and its neighbours including India.

China's air force modernisation extends beyond fighter jets to significant investments in drone technology. The development of advanced unmanned aerial vehicles has not only bolstered its air security, but also extended operational capabilities across land and sea. These drones, equipped for precision strikes, surveillance, and electronic warfare, have reshaped battlefield dynamics, compelling neighbouring nations to reassess their defence strategies and countermeasures.

Beyond aerial advancements, China's naval modernisation has been equally aggressive. The navy has been progressively equipped with state-of-the-art warships, designed for a wide range of missions. Recognising the strategic importance of naval power in the evolving geopolitical landscape, China has prioritised the expansion of its maritime strength to deter threats and project influence globally. This has resulted in increased investment in modern aircraft carriers and advanced surface combatants, further solidifying China's naval dominance in the 21st Century. These include Liaoning (2012), Shandong (2019), and the advanced surface combatants like Type 055 destroyers and Type 052D destroyers, which can give China a strategic advantage on the high seas.⁴

According to the news reports in 2024, the PLA has also launched the first of its next generation of amphibious assault ships used for ensuring advanced warfare capabilities, allowing China to leverage naval power significantly when confronting adversaries or securing its marine claims.⁵

In addition to improving traditional military capabilities, China has significantly focused on cyber and space technologies, which have become a prominent part of modern-day warfare. The state-sponsored groups like APT31 or APT41 are allegedly at the forefront of China's cyberwarfare operations.⁶ Similarly, PLA Unit 61398 has been involved in cyber espionage campaigns targeting governments, corporations, and critical infrastructure globally.⁷

China has increasingly leveraged cyber tools to disrupt, influence, and destabilise adversaries through tactics, such as targeting power grids, spreading misinformation, and conducting cyber espionage. In parallel, its strategic investments in space technology have expanded its capabilities in both kinetic and non-kinetic operations. Western security analysts view these advancements as a move toward

space militarisation, raising concerns about the potential for escalating geopolitical tensions and the broader implications for global security.

Strategic Implications for India

The modernisation of the PLA has significant ramifications for India's security landscape, especially as both nations continue to assert themselves as regional powers. Despite ongoing military competition, trade relations between India and China have remained functional. However, given the history of border disputes and strategic competition, India must remain vigilant and continuously strengthen its defence capabilities.

Military modernisation can be interpreted differently by various stakeholders. While China's rapid advancements may be perceived as a direct threat to India, Beijing justifies its military buildup as necessary preparedness, particularly in response to the United States. The parallel military advancements of two neighbouring powers often create a cycle of competition, contributing to regional instability. This dynamic is evident in the India-China rivalry, where both nations are vying for influence, especially among smaller states in their periphery.

A deeper analysis of China's military modernisation highlights its growing cooperation with other Indian adversaries, raising concerns about potential technology and logistical sharing among these nations. Such alliances could present additional strategic challenges for India. Furthermore, China's advanced military assets—including submarines, spy ships, and air power—are increasingly being deployed in contested regions such as the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. These developments underscore the necessity for India to counterbalance China's growing military footprint and protect its strategic interests.

Lessons for India from Chinese Modernisation

The rapid pace of PLA modernisation has significant implications for India's defence preparedness, necessitating a reassessment of military strategies. The post-Galwan clashes further reinforce the urgency for India to accelerate its own military modernisation efforts.

Several key lessons can be drawn from China's approach:

- **Enhancing Indigenous Defence Capabilities.** India's continued dependence on foreign suppliers for defence equipment, weaponry, and aircraft has hampered domestic manufacturing growth. Strengthening indigenous defence production is critical to reducing reliance on external suppliers and achieving strategic autonomy. The 'Make in India' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' initiatives provide a strong foundation to advance military modernisation.
- **Investing in Emerging Technologies.** China's military transformation highlights the importance of cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, and space capabilities in modern conflicts. Given the increasing role of information

warfare, India must significantly invest in these domains to protect critical infrastructure and counter emerging threats. Recent cyberattacks on Indian power grids and sensitive government networks underscore the need for a more robust cybersecurity strategy.

- **Streamlining Defence Procurement.** The bureaucratic delays in India's defence acquisition process often slow down modernisation efforts, impacting operational readiness. Adopting a more agile and responsive procurement framework will help accelerate decision-making and ensure the timely deployment of advanced military platforms.

By drawing insights from China's rapid military expansion, India can refine its own defence strategy, focusing on self-reliance, technological advancements, and streamlined procurement processes. These measures will be crucial in maintaining a strong and balanced security posture in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment. There have been concerted efforts in the last few years, wherein India has developed significant platforms, for example the Agni series, Prithvi series, the operationalisation of INS Arihant, INS Vikrant, and the recent INS Arighaat, have set examples that prove India's capability in developing niche technologies and platforms.⁸

Secondly, significant investments in emerging technological domains like cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, and space capabilities are crucial in an anarchic world where 'Information' has become a silent weapon. These tools are no longer supplementary but critical to national security. The attacks on Indian power hubs back in 2022 or Chinese hackers stealing information and data from the Indian government raise serious concerns that need to be dealt with the same frequency by investing more in cyber technologies.⁹

Thirdly, there is a need to improve the rate or swiftness of procurement processes. Delays due to bureaucratic obstacles can stall modernisation efforts and hinder readiness. Adopting a more flexible defence acquisition framework will result in quicker decision making.

Conclusion

China's military modernisation presents a multifaceted challenge for India as it strives to establish itself as a major power in the 21st Century. The rapid advancements in China's defence capabilities necessitate a reassessment of India's strategic priorities, particularly in strengthening indigenous production and making substantial investments in Research and Development (R&D) to maintain a competitive edge. The choices India makes today will shape its future military preparedness, ensuring readiness for emerging threats while fostering regional stability.

Despite internal challenges, such as a weak manufacturing sector and limited R&D capabilities, China's relentless military modernisation offers India valuable insights into future warfare trends. By addressing these gaps and accelerating its own

modernisation efforts, India can strengthen its strategic posture and enhance its long-term defence capabilities.

Endnotes

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