

India's Third Front

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Introduction

The Army has been talking of a two and a half front war for some years now. The Prime Minister had been terming the Maoist insurgency as the biggest threat to India over successive years, despite which, the Home Minister in 2010 said the Maoist problem will be resolved within two-three years. Nothing can be more utopian than the last statement considering the ground situation. There is every indication that the 'half front' comprising plethora of terrorist organisations has the potential to become a 'full front', as being striven by Pakistan and China, aided by our intransigence. Pakistan's proxy war over past two decades is well known but the increasing involvement of China as apparent from periodic intelligence reports, though downplayed by the government, should be a matter of serious concern to us.

Ideological Unconventional Warfare

Chinese are acknowledged long term strategists and to this end, unconventional warfare in the Chinese context can be linked way back to ideological spread of Maoism. The Maoist insurgency in Nepal is but one handiwork of the little known Chinese Ministry of Foreign Liaison set-up in Mao Tse Tung's time that engineered political indoctrination of indigenous cadres through covert operations globally; supporting extremist groups and creating Maoists in Nepal and Myanmar, New People's Army of Philippines, Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, Japanese Red Army and Shining Path in Peru.¹ Links between the Nepalese and Indian Maoists were discovered three years back while cadres of the CPI (M), that spawned the Maoist movement in India, have been known to be visiting China.² This ideological spread gave China irregular allies and an unconventional springboard for enlarging operations behind enemy lines, in line with Sun Tzu's preaching, "*To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill*".

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Indoctrinating Pakistan

Pakistan used tribals in 1947-1948 to grab Kashmir. Her initiation into unconventional warfare was based on Chinese advice. Zhou-en-Lai while visiting Pakistan in early 1960's advised Ayub Khan that Pakistan should prepare for prolonged conflict with India instead of short term wars by raising a militia force to act behind enemy lines.³ Consequently, Pakistan raised anti-India *jihadi* forces much before the Taliban emerged on the scene. These Pakistani proxies, therefore, inadvertently are proxy-proxies of China. These irregular forces embedded behind enemy lines match Sun Tzu's teaching, *"Subtle and insubstantial, the expert leaves no trace; divinely mysterious, he is inaudible. Thus he is master of his enemy's fate"*.

Unrestricted Warfare

The Chinese concept of unrestricted warfare was first unveiled through a book sponsored by the Ministry of National Defence, authored by two serving Senior Colonels and published in 1999, prior to the bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade.⁴ The book was aimed primarily at the United States, it advocated a multitude of means, both military and particularly non-military; hacking into websites, targeting financial institutions, terrorism, using the media, conducting urban warfare and the like – the first rule of unrestricted warfare being that there are no rules, with nothing forbidden. It stated that If mankind has no choice but to engage in war, it can no longer be carried out in the ways with which we are familiar, referring to the terrorist attack on the US embassy by Osama-bin-Laden, gas attack on Tokyo subway by Aum Shinrikyo and havoc wreaked by likes of Morris Junior on the Internet, degree of destruction not being second to war, representing semi-warfare, quasi-warfare, sub-warfare - embryonic forms of another kind of warfare. Significantly, it emphasised that the most modern military force does not have the ability to control public clamour, and cannot deal with an opponent who does things in an unconventional manner. On the battlefields of the future, the digitised forces may very possibly be like a great cook who is good at cooking lobsters sprinkled with butter, but when faced with guerrillas, who resolutely gnaw corncobs, he can only sigh in despair. It also suggested developing weapons that 'fit the fight' and even fancied creating laser images in the sky at opportune time on the battlefield to subdue radically religious opponents.

In terms of 'fit the fight' weaponry, China has the capacity to arm irregular forces from modern assault rifles to hi-tech (like hand-held Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) guns), providing communication and other warlike stores.⁵ Hand held EMP weapons exist and are easily accessible for covert injury and destruction of many types of targets including computer networks.⁶

Assassin's Mace

Assassin's Mace is the Chinese equivalent of the term "Shashou Jian" used in ancient Chinese strategy, linked to "Shashou Jian" - a club with which the assassin incapacitated his enemy, suddenly and totally instead of fighting according to rules, enabling overcoming a far more powerful adversary.⁷ It is part of Chinese military strategy; the capacity to rapidly and decisively seize the initiative and turn the tide to one's advantage when confronting a conventionally superior foe. The assassin's mace is relevant to both conventional and unconventional warfare in Chinese military strategy.

China – Pak Collusion

The China-Pakistan collusive unconventional warfare nexus dates back to early 1960s, as mentioned above. Pakistan started inducting armed modules pan-India in 1992-1993 and such cells were identified in the states of Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Kota/Ajmer region of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala.⁸ Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) started sending cadres to Pakistan for training with Mujahideen, Taliban and Al Qaeda. At the same time SIMI also established firm linkages with radical organisations in Bangladesh. Terrorist training was conducted in facilities located inside Bangladesh and under the very noses of Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and Bangladesh Rifles (BDR).

Simultaneous to the above, upsurge began in the Indian Maoists movement with unmistakable links between the CPI (M) and Beijing. When ULFA camps were evicted by the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) from Bhutan, training and arming of ULFA was organised on Chinese soil. The ISI reportedly organised nucleus Maoists training in mines/IEDs/explosives with LTTE. It may be recalled that in the heyday of LTTE, the Al Qaeda - LeT had sent

cadres for training with naval wing of LTTE. LeT representatives have been attending Maoists meetings for the past two years.⁹ Sophisticated Chinese arms and communication equipment started getting noticed with Maoists.¹⁰ This weapon supply has been intensified with China provisioning Maoists with weapon manufacture facilities as also to Kachen rebels in Myanmar through whom assault rifles are being pumped into People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Manipur and further to Maoists.¹¹ Besides links with Maoists in Nepal, India and Myanmar, China was linked to Al Qaeda and Taliban even prior to 2006.¹² China has provided advisers and weapons to Pakistan Taliban.¹³

The Indian Mujahideen (IM) is the creation of ISI, axiomatically integrating the armed modules transplanted by Pakistan who would have acquired Indian identity over the years courtesy administrative intransigence.¹⁴ The LeT is inexorably linked to the ISI as evidenced by David Headley and telephonic intercepts during 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attacks.¹⁵ The ISI has been operating in Kerala for years, if not decades, and has armed Popular Front of India (PFI), with the administration once again remaining complacent.¹⁶ Significantly, four LeT recruits from Kerala were killed in Kupwara in 2008 while exfiltrating to POK. As per R&AW extremists from Kerala terror groups had been going to Pakistan since 1992. Despite such evidence, PFI still does not figure in the 35 terrorist organisations banned by India.¹⁷ China has been tacitly supporting Pakistan's anti-India jihad, one reason being Pakistan's promise to suppress Uighur separatists including some 320 East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) cadres from China hiding in Pakistan.¹⁸

Special Operations Forces ¹⁹

Very little is known about Chinese Special Operations Forces. Their strength is estimated to be about 14,000, specialised in rapid reaction combat in a limited regional war under high-tech conditions, commando operations, counter-terrorism, and intelligence gathering. Separate Special Forces units are stationed in Guangzhou, Chengdu, Beijing, Shenyang, Nanjing and Lanzhou Military Regions besides central reserves and one sub unit each in Hong Kong and Macau.²⁰ Most of these units are capable of air, sea and land operations. Specialisations include surveillance and target designation, sabotage, offensive strikes and emergency evacuation. Equipment includes UAVs, hi-tech explosives and hand

held laser dazzlers. The process of digitisation of Special Operations Forces is on. PLA also maintains separate Marine Corps Special Operations Forces. Interestingly, evacuation of Chinese nationals from North Africa in the event of emergency is the responsibility of the Chinese Special Forces Commander in situ unofficially. This implies that not only the PLA but Chinese Special Forces are deployed as part of various development projects globally in areas of China's strategic interests since PLA / PLA affiliated firms are undertaking such projects. This would be the case in all our neighbouring countries also. For Chinese Special Forces to operate in India merging with locals in border areas is not a problem; and presence in business concerns, development projects and operating through proxies and proxy-proxies is well on the cards. Moreover, illegal smuggling routes provide avenues for developing contacts and unconventional operations.

Airborne Forces ²¹

China's 15th Airborne Corps is part of PLAAF comprising three airborne divisions with roles similar to the US 82nd Airborne Division. It is part of the Rapid Reaction Forces which are primarily designated for airborne and special operation missions. Only one of the three airborne divisions can reportedly deploy to any part of China within 48 hours – 11,000 men with light tanks and self-propelled artillery. Reports claim that a 10,000 man airborne division was transported to Tibet in less than 48 hours in late 1990s. This capability may have gone up though details of the recent airborne exercise in Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), in proximity of Line of Actual Control (LAC) during 2012 are unavailable. While in 1962, the PLA went for outflanking land manoeuvres by ground troops, the same outflanking manoeuvres may be expected through airborne / rapid reaction forces, preceded by Special Forces coupled with proxies acting as vanguard in the event of a conflict. Significantly, the recent PLA exercise in border areas practised capture of passes in very high altitudes – a contingency certainly not in terrain adjoining Taiwan!

Threats ²²

China is strategically playing its ancient game Wei qi, seeking strategic edge by encircling opponent's pieces. In Wei qi, strategy unfolds gradually as the game progresses. Chinese thinkers developed strategic thought that placed a premium on victory

through psychological advantage, avoiding direct conflict. Chinese 'string of pearls' beefed with 'ring of Islamic radicalism' is part of the same policy. In the Chinese concept of Comprehensive National Power (CNP), both soft and hard power are equally relevant. While China professes peace and friendliness, its strategic aim remains marginalising India through overt engagement and covert containment. Capitalising on India's neglect of border areas, China has built roads right up to the LAC and is covertly providing rations and money to villagers in selected areas including in East Sikkim. Such areas would facilitate deployment of Chinese Special Operations Forces through the spectrum of conflict. Chinese nationals with fake Indian documents apprehended in Indian territory few months back were most likely Chinese Special Forces operatives.

The biggest threat to India is the China-Pakistan anti-India nexus that will enlarge further with China wanting to establish military bases in North Waziristan and FATA.²³ Baluchistan is likely to become a Chinese administered province by 2030²⁴ and Pakistan may even lease Gilgit - Baltistan to China for 50 years.²⁵ This unholy nexus is already engaged in collectively integrating terrorist organisations in India (Maoists since enlarged operations to Assam in 2012) and promoting sophistication of terrorist acts in Indian hinterland. Particularly the Maoists anti-aircraft weapons, mortars (already demonstrated), anti-tank missiles, hand-held Electro Magnetic Pulse (EMP) weapons (China has already conducted EMP tests on mice, rats, rabbits, dogs and monkeys, causing eye, brain, bone marrow and other organ injuries), WMD's of dirty bomb, biological agents, gas etc. are clear indications of this nexus. Already a 1.5 kg uranium IED has been recovered by the army in Assam.²⁶

On balance, China in conjunction Pakistan is working towards creating an Afghanistan like situation in the Indian hinterland (progressive game of Wei qi), inadvertently aided and abetted by India's intransigence.²⁷ LeT, covert arm of ISI, will remain the main external player, already being acknowledged as a threat to the US.²⁸ Should conventional war occur, the envisaged half front in our hinterland can explode into a full front. The deployment of China - Pakistan's Special Forces, proxies and proxy-proxies will be ambiguous under full cover of deniability and in line with Sun Tzu's ancient teaching, "The ultimate in disposing one's troops is

to be without ascertainable shape. Then the most penetrating spies cannot pry in nor can the wise lay plans against you." This is likely in addition to the asymmetries we have in the space, cyberspace and electromagnetic domains with respect to China.

Conclusion

The fully State controlled media in China will continue to portray China's benign face but are its real intentions obfuscated? There is little doubt that unconventional warfare including terrorism is here to stay in the foreseeable future with increased lethality and intensity. The requirement for India to establish a deterrent against irregular / unconventional warfare was never more, given the dim prospects of break-up of China-Pakistan anti-India nexus, China giving up covertly marginalising India and Pakistani Military - ISI combine allowing India - Pakistan peace.

Unconventional warfare is here to stay. India must deny its own fault lines through forging a joint civil - military approach.²⁹ Additionally, there must be frank and open dialogue on the issue with China, including on Pakistan's generation of global terrorism. With Chinese Communist Party continuing in power, China's policies may not easily change. However, it may be hoped that there would be a realisation within the PLA that Pakistan is fast becoming a liability.

Endnotes

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