



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

## DPG POLICY BRIEF

### Establishing Military Deterrence against China

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DF-17 missiles at China's 70th Anniversary parade. Source: The Drive*

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## Establishing Military Deterrence against China

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### Introduction

India China's intrusions in Ladakh in 2020 have triggered a major redeployment in the Indian Army. Additional forces have been deployed to defend the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and 1 Corps has been realigned from the western front for offensive operations along the northern borders. The two newly inducted Rafale squadrons are located at air bases that are poised to conduct air operations over Tibet. The Indian Navy will also be keeping a watchful eye on the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) operations in the Indian Ocean.

The steps taken by the Indian military are a result of the breakdown of peace and tranquility that has mostly characterised the situation along the LAC since the major standoff at Sumdorong Chu in Arunachal Pradesh in 1986. There have been some local incidents at Depsang in 2013, Chumar in 2014, and Doklam in 2017, but these had been peacefully resolved. The 2020 actions by the PLA in Eastern Ladakh were completely different from the past; there were brutal clashes leading to deaths of soldiers on both sides and a complete disregard to border agreements. The LAC has now become highly contested and the situation demands a change in our border management protocols.

While attempting to take immediate actions to ensure that there is no repeat of 2020, when the PLA managed to achieve tactical and strategic surprise, the Indian military must also rethink its long-term strategy to deal with the threat from China. This rethink must take into consideration the trajectory and growth of Chinese military power, the character of a future conflict, and the capabilities required to counter any Chinese military intimidation successfully.

### Current Military Thinking in India

Deterring China from using military force to resolve the border problem has been the cornerstone of Indian military strategy. Due to relatively poor infrastructure on the Indian side, which inhibits quick movements and redeployments, the army has always maintained a sizeable presence of soldiers in posts along the LAC. It has planned that this forward deployment will blunt the initial PLA offensives till sufficient reserves are mobilised to join the battle. Geography will play a significant role, as the buildup and employment of large

offensive forces would be constrained by the rugged terrain of the Himalayan watershed.

The thinking in the army is that the prospect of incurring prohibitive costs will deter the PLA from initiating a major conflict with India. While earlier, the deterrence was primarily by means of a strong defensive posture, since the mid-2000s, there has been a gradual change towards deterrence by punishment. The army terms this as a shift from 'defensive deterrence' to 'dissuasive deterrence.'

In 2006, a decision was taken to build 73 strategic roads along the LAC.<sup>1</sup> Although the progress of road building has been slow, the ability of the army to fight a war on the northern borders has been steadily enhanced. There were major force accretions in 2010 with two new divisions raised to strengthen the defences in Arunachal Pradesh,<sup>2</sup> and an armoured brigade was deployed in Ladakh.<sup>3</sup> In 2013, the Indian government sanctioned the raising of a Mountain Strike Corps.<sup>4</sup>



Indian Army tanks in Ladakh. Source: Author

The improvements in infrastructure and the availability of additional forces have brought in a more offensive mindset in the strategy. While major battles will be fought to prevent PLA's ingress into Indian territory, the strike corps will also take the war across the LAC into Tibet. With the new tasking of 1 Corps, two offensive corps are now available to the Indian Army.<sup>5</sup> Two noted Indian

experts have pointed out that the new strategy has shifted from "deterrence by denial" to "deterrence by punishment."<sup>6</sup>

In the last decade, the Indian Air Force (IAF) has also turned its attention to the Northern borders. Su-30 aircraft were deployed at the Tezpur airbase in 2009, and the second squadron of Rafale has been inducted at Hasimara in West Bengal.<sup>7</sup> The acquisition of the C-130, the C-17, and Chinook helicopters has tremendously improved the strategic airlift capability to quickly move additional forces to a threatened sector.

The IAF has traditionally held an edge over the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) as its airfields are in the plains and enable air operations with full payloads. PLAAF, operating from high altitude airfields in Tibet, is forced to operate with reduced payloads. Some of the forward airbases in Tibet, like Ngari-Gunsa and Xigaze, had no hardened shelters or blast pens for their aircraft.<sup>8</sup> China hosts a total of around 101 4th-generation fighters in the Western Theatre Command, of which a proportion must be retained for Russian defense, while India has about 122 of its comparable models, solely directed at China.<sup>9</sup>

In the maritime domain, India has a tremendous geographical reach into the Indian Ocean. This provides naval dominance over the Sea Lanes of Communication that carry 80 percent of China's oil imports. Since 2008, the PLAN has been sending warships in the Indian Ocean for anti-piracy missions, and in recent years, PLAN deployments in the Indian Ocean Region have averaged seven to eight warships every year.<sup>10</sup> A Chinese military base in Djibouti and the development of ports at Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Payra in Bangladesh, and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar have added to Indian concerns. However, despite the increasing presence of PLAN in the Indian Ocean, it is generally accepted that as of now, "neither China nor Pakistan can seriously threaten India's main axes of maritime approach."<sup>11</sup>

Raja Menon points out that for the PLAN to operate in the Indian Ocean, it will have to overcome its weaknesses in Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), tactical air cover, communication infrastructure, and strategic anti-submarine warfare.<sup>12</sup> With the PLAN also focused on the Western Pacific and the growing strategic competition with the U.S., the odds remain in India's favour in the near term, but perhaps not for long.

## Looking Ahead

Deterring China from military action has primarily been a function of India's conventional military strength – a robust deployment along the LAC, advantages of air operations over Tibet, and a dominant naval position in the



Indian Ocean. However, whether this conventional deterrence will hold in the future is becoming doubtful with the exponential growth of Chinese military power.

Both India and China are focusing on infrastructure development along the LAC. In the last few years, a great push has been given on the Indian side, but there are serious geographical constraints. It is very time-consuming to build roads that move along narrow valleys from the foothills to the watershed of the Himalayan range. Lateral connectivity between valleys, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, is extremely difficult, and the winter snowfall cuts off large parts of the LAC from the rest of the country. India is at least a decade away from getting all-weather connectivity to Ladakh.

The Tibetan Plateau faces lesser constraints in infrastructure construction. Work on a second railway line in Tibet connecting Nyingchi to Lhasa commenced in December 2014. In June this year, the 435-kilometer line entered service running a 160 kilometers per hour train.<sup>13</sup> With very little snowfall in most parts of Tibet, the weather conditions are not as hostile as on the Indian side, and infrastructure building is faster.

Since 2017, and particularly in the last year, military infrastructure development in Tibet has seen a massive acceleration. Most of this is devoted to enhancing the ability of PLA airpower to operate over Tibet. New runways, hardened aircraft shelters, underground facilities, air defence positions, and logistics facilities are being constructed at a rapid pace. A recent report notes that “the expansion is breathtaking in its scale and harkens back to the early 2010s in the South China Sea in terms of how fast Beijing is working to shift the strategic reality in the region on its own terms.”<sup>14</sup>

At more than \$200 billion, China’s official defence budget is three times that of India. With approximately 40 per cent of the budget devoted to ‘equipment’,<sup>15</sup> the expenditure on this head alone is more than the total Indian defence budget. The value of China’s arms imports in 2020 was \$811 million,<sup>16</sup> indicating that it is almost entirely self-sufficient in arms production. These facts make it clear that the conventional forces balance will inexorably swing in China's favour in the coming years.

India claims that the Rafale is a superior aircraft to anything that China has in its inventory. However, in terms of overall numbers, the PLAAF already fields more than 800 4th-generation fighters and will become a majority 4th-generation force within the next several years.<sup>17</sup> It is also developing 5th-generation fighters and new medium and long-range stealth bombers.

The PLAAF has one of the largest forces of advanced Surface to Air Missile systems in the world.<sup>18</sup> Comprising the S-400, HQ-9, and HQ-19 systems, the air defence system looks “vastly superior to that of India.”<sup>19</sup> In space, China has over 350 satellites, second only to the U.S., enabling an effective space-based Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capability. The creation of the PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF) in 2016 has brought in efficiencies and synergy in space warfare operations, including counter-space capabilities.



Illustration of Type 003 aircraft carrier. Source: Weibo image

The PLAN is the largest navy in the world, with a battle force of approximately 350 platforms<sup>20</sup> and could reach 425 battle force ships by 2030.<sup>21</sup> With an impressive shipbuilding capability, old ships are being retired and replaced with multi-mission combatants. The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency estimates that “China’s technological advancement in naval design has begun to approach a level commensurate with, and in some cases exceeding, that of other modern navies.”<sup>22</sup>



China's 2019 defense white paper described the PLAN as speeding up the transition of its tasks from "defense on the near seas" to "protection missions on the far seas."<sup>23</sup> As China's power projection capabilities increase, it will increasingly turn to the Indian Ocean to protect its trade routes. With China's third aircraft carrier due to become operational by 2024, it will not be surprising to see one of them in the Indian Ocean in the next few years.

## China's Conventional Missiles

The PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) has been upgraded to a full service on par with the army, navy, and air force. China has a well-developed missile capability, including the ability to target large naval vessels with long-range ballistic missiles. In 2019, China launched more ballistic missiles for testing and training than the rest of the world combined.<sup>24</sup> The 600 Short-Range Ballistic Missiles held with the PLARF could be used to target Indian airbases, communication centres, and other strategic targets in a battle from afar. India has successfully tested its Ballistic Missile Defence programme, but it is yet to be fielded.<sup>25</sup> Even after it is fielded, the system's effectiveness will be tested by advancements in hypersonic technology and missiles like the DF-17 that are already operational with the PLARF.<sup>26</sup>



The Chinese army conducting a live-fire drill in Tibet. Source: South China Morning Post/Weibo.

Apart from the impressive ongoing modernisation of conventional weapons platforms, the SSF is a significant force multiplier. The SSF has brought space operations and information operations (which include cyber, electronic, and psychological warfare), under direct control of the Central Military Commission.<sup>27</sup> The development of an effective cyber force, combined with psychological operations, is aimed at achieving information dominance, both during war and peace.

## Implications for India

Realistically viewing the trajectory of military capability development over the next decade, it is quite clear that the differential in conventional power between India and China will only widen at a rapid pace. Even if there is a desire to close this gap, the economic situation in India over the next few years may not permit any significant increase in the defence budget.

The offence-defence theory lies at the heart of the security dilemma and contends that “as the advantage of offence increases, the security dilemma becomes more severe, arms races become more intense, and war becomes more likely.”<sup>28</sup> Geography, technology, and overall national power also play a part in assessing the offence-defence balance. In the India-China context, infrastructure developments on both sides have already flattened the Himalayan geography, and China’s increasing presence in the Indian Ocean could gradually nullify India’s maritime advantages. In technology and national power, China is currently moving at a much faster pace than India.

A situation of perceived asymmetry in military power could encourage China to undertake a short, swift offensive with limited aims to pressurise India over territorial claims along the LAC or to protect trade interests in the Indian Ocean. China’s use of military force in the Ladakh standoff of 2020 indicates that the Indian military deterrence has already weakened to a certain extent.

A narrow concept of deterrence looks solely at the threat of military response to prevent a state from taking action. On the other hand, a broad concept of deterrence keeps its focus on the military threat, but also includes the threat of economic sanctions, diplomatic exclusion, or information operations.<sup>29</sup> Deterrence also has to be tailored against specific adversaries as there is no “one size fits all” solution.

Therefore, deterring China from military action will require India to assess its national strategy in a holistic manner. However, this paper is primarily looking at the military aspects of India’s deterrence strategy. How India’s military capability fits into an overall strategy of deterrence is a subject of further study.

## Reestablishing Conventional Military Deterrence

In measuring military power, the four major components that are normally included are:<sup>30</sup>

- Force structure - The numbers and composition of the units.
- Modernisation - The technical sophistication of the military.
- Unit readiness - The ability to provide capabilities required to execute the missions.
- Sustainability - The ability to maintain the necessary level and duration of operational activity.

To these components, we should add a nation's military strategy and concepts that would guide how the forces are structured and employed. This is the first area that must be addressed as we look to create a capability for credible deterrence. The absence of a national security strategy has hindered the preparation of a national defence strategy, but the Indian armed forces could still go ahead to prepare a joint war fighting strategy for future conflicts.

The joint war fighting strategy would help bring clarity to both organisational structures and the capabilities that are required. Much of the debate around the shape of Integrated Theatre Commands would be put to rest if the three services can agree on a joint strategy. This would also give a direction on the type of capabilities to be developed and the force structure of the three services. The joint strategy would also look at domains like information, cyber, and space, which often do not get the required attention as the service headquarters are focused on traditional military hardware like aircraft, ships, tanks, etc.

India's military modernisation is constrained by a number of factors like poor planning, inadequate budgets, an underdeveloped military-industrial complex, and the slow adoption of new technologies. Some of these factors like the budget and the indigenous industry are unlikely to change in the next few years. However, the adoption of new technologies like Artificial Intelligence, autonomous systems, robotics, and networked systems only requires a mindset change in the services and the Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO).

There is little focus in the services to look beyond traditional weapon platforms, and the DRDO appears satisfied to meet these demands. The DRDO has developed traditional systems like tanks, artillery guns, helicopters, Light Combat Aircraft, missiles, etc. In addition, the range of products on the DRDO website shows items like anti-riot helmets and shields, anti-mine boots, anti-

toothache solutions, and cattle development.<sup>31</sup> These are a complete waste of resources, and both the service headquarters and the DRDO need to become razor-sharp on future technologies.

The marrying up of strategy, objectives, and military capability is absolutely essential. The Joint Doctrine: Indian Armed Forces lists the first national security objective as maintaining a “credible deterrent capability to safeguard National Interests.”<sup>32</sup> Creating a deterrent capability will require us to look at the two fundamental approaches to deterrence – deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment.

Deterrence by denial seeks to “deter an action by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed, thus denying a potential aggressor confidence in attaining its objectives.”<sup>33</sup> In the case of the Chinese threat, this denial has to come mainly in the continental domain along the LAC because that is the most likely place where the PLA will attempt to apply its military force for a political aim that can be achieved with minimal cost.

However, deploying more and more Indian Army soldiers at the LAC is not a winning strategy. The geography dictates that the PLA can easily mass troops in the Tibetan plateau to overwhelm the Indian defences at selected points. The answer lies in our ability to swiftly move additional forces to threatened locations. This translates to leaner organisations being transported by strategic and tactical airlift. The Indian Army has to relook its entire structure of World War 2 type mountain divisions and mountain strike corps and shift towards smaller and more flexible units and enhance its surveillance, battle awareness, and lethality. The Indian Air Force has to invest much more in its helicopter fleet to support the army’s operations.

The PLA will look to exploit its technology advantage by employing long-range missiles to target military airfields, logistics centres, and other strategic locations, conduct cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, and electronic warfare to degrade the command and control networks. These are areas that must be hardened to minimise the damage caused by PLA attacks. Future wars will be characterised by a confrontation between operational systems, and the PLA is already preparing for such a conflict.<sup>34</sup> Indian military planners must incorporate system warfare in their strategy.

Deterrence by punishment extends the costs of the conflict to an aggressor by threatening penalties beyond the immediate area of conflict. There is a view that India’s military strategy to counter China’s coercion should be centred on

denial, not punishment.<sup>35</sup> However, considering China's growing conventional power, deterrence by denial will become increasingly difficult.

While the PLA can be strongly contested at the LAC, the threat of penalties also has to be applied in the other domains. India currently enjoys a strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean, and pressure must be applied at sea to threaten China's maritime trade. However, as brought out earlier, the PLA Navy is swiftly closing the capability gap. To maintain our advantage, the Indian Navy would need further strengthening with a clear focus on the type of capabilities required.

The Indian Maritime Security Strategy of 2015 states, "The strategy for deterrence is the foundational strategy for India's defence. Prevention of conflict and coercion against India is the primary purpose of India's armed forces."<sup>36</sup> Despite this clear assertion, doubts are often expressed about the Indian Navy's role in deterring the PLA's coercion on the LAC, particularly in situations short of war. The role of the navy in these circumstances requires deep thought.

Other areas where penalties can be imposed are in the domain of cyber, space, and long-range missiles. A strong offensive capability in these domains could threaten soft targets in the Chinese hinterland, the railway network in Tibet, critical national infrastructure, and navigation and communication satellites. It could be argued that employing these weapons would expand the scope and scale of war, but it is precisely this threat that could deter China from military action.

Can India afford the defence spending required to support these capabilities? The military can undoubtedly do with a larger budget, but it must also be conscious that India is the third-largest military spender in the world.<sup>37</sup> The three services cannot continue with an approach that emphasises traditional war fighting systems and manpower over new technologies. The government must also get more invested in defence planning, and budgets should not become a table-thumping opportunity in the Parliament but be based on a long-term capability development plan in line with a national strategy.

## Conclusion

The Indian military is a highly efficient and professional force and has proved it on numerous occasions. However, strategies must be dynamic and tailored to the realities of the adversary's capabilities. Fighting the last war has rarely succeeded.



The Indian military is committed to a strategy of deterrence against China. Two critical components of a deterrence strategy are credibility and capability. Credibility will come with a clarity of doctrinal and strategic thought that defines how we intend to defend our national interests. Capability development must be planned with a clear-eyed view that attempts to match the PLA in conventional weaponry are unlikely to succeed. We must exploit our advantages in geography and take the battle to the non-conventional and asymmetric domains.

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