

The Challenge of a Two-Front War

India's China-Pakistan Dilemma

Despite statements to the contrary, India's military remains resource-constrained, overstretched, and vulnerable to a two-front threat from China and Pakistan.

By Sushant Singh

Concerns over a two-front military threat from China and Pakistan in the early 2000s led India to develop a strategy based on deterrence and dissuasion to prevent any loss of territory. The military was never resourced accordingly, however, leaving open serious vulnerabilities. Despite recent improvements in India-China and India-Pakistan relations, the two-front military threat remains a formidable challenge with no easy answers. India does not have the economic wherewithal to resource its military to fight a two-front war. The alternative—seeking partnerships with other powers to externally rebalance—will also prove difficult, given that the Quad initiative is still in its early stages and cannot provide reliable protection as of now. The smartest choice for New Delhi, therefore, is to neither fight nor prepare to fight a two-front war. Instead, India should seek durable and enduring peace with one of its adversaries. Since China remains a long-term strategic competitor and permanent peace with Pakistan is at odds with the dominant political ideology in New Delhi, however, the Indian military is likely to remain in an unviable position: resource-constrained, overstretched, and vulnerable.

At his annual press conference this January, Indian Army Chief General M. M. Naravane said that “There is increased cooperation between Pakistan and China, both in military and non-military fields. A two-front situation is something we must be ready to deal with.”ⁱ The two-front threat has been acknowledged by other top Indian military commanders, although the country’s political leadership has publicly stayed silent on the matter. In September 2020, Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat acknowledged, “Chinese economic cooperation with Pakistan, in Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir, along with continued military, economic and diplomatic support mandate high levels of preparation by us. This also poses the threat of coordinated action along the northern and western fronts, which we have to consider in our defence planning.”ⁱⁱ Rawat, however, added that he was confident that Indian troops would be able to thwart any such threat and had already laid out a plan. The key to the plan, he said, was to identify a primary and secondary front to conduct operations.

A month later, the Indian Air Force (IAF) chief, Air Chief Marshal R. K. S. Bhadauria, said at his annual presser that his force was ready for a two-front war, even though he did not supply any details of its conduct.ⁱⁱⁱ These remarks can only be understood as reassuring messages that the top military leadership is bound to give to the country, for they go against the current ground realities. In the case of the IAF Chief, the resources at his command have only depleted since his predecessor warned that “our numbers are not adequate to fully execute an air campaign in a two-front scenario. The probability of a two-front scenario is an appreciation which you need to do. But are the numbers adequate? No. The squadrons are winding down.”^{iv} Along with the IAF, the Indian Navy and the Indian Army are equally incapable of facing a two-front challenge, owing to the lack of resources, absence of a clear strategy, and related structural factors.

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The discussions on a two-front military threat for India started around 2006 and were formally articulated in the defence minister’s operational directive in 2009. The Indian response was to prepare for a primary and a secondary front, and to prevent any loss of territory through deterrence and dissuasion. The response, however, was never resourced for a two-front collaborative threat. This way of dealing with a two-front war is thus based on a best-case scenario where everything goes to plan, so that New Delhi avoids a major loss of territory to China as it is able to sustain Pakistani pressure. The design of such a war and the challenge of military strength, despite the availability of a nuclear option, point to serious vulnerabilities for New Delhi.

The tensions on the Sino-India border have recently lessened and a thawing of ties between India and Pakistan is in the offing, but the two-front challenge remains formidable with no easy answers in the foreseeable future. If the only way India can prevent a two-front war is to be prepared to fight it, the country does not have the economic wherewithal to resource its military for such a challenge. The other alternative for New Delhi is to partner with other powers so that

its military challenge can be externally rebalanced. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue initiative is still too early in its development to reliably provide that option. The smartest option for New Delhi is to neither fight nor prepare to fight a two-front war. For that, India will have to seek durable and enduring peace with one of its adversaries and ensure that the two-front collusive threat does not exist. Since such a decision is at odds with the dominant political ideology in India, the military is likely to remain in an unviable position: resource-constrained, overstretched, and vulnerable.

Evolution of the Two-Front Challenge

Even though India was cognizant of a two-front military threat during the 1965 and 1971 India-Pakistan wars, the recent discussion on such a military challenge started around 2006,^v when the China Study Group recommended construction of border infrastructure in response to massive infrastructure improvement on the Chinese side. The Manmohan Singh-led UPA government reversed a long-standing policy of keeping border infrastructure underdeveloped so as to prevent advancing Chinese troops from using it.^{vi} Headed by then-Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, a task force made three field trips to the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and proposed a plan to build 73 India-China border roads with a length of 4643 km, mostly connecting to the areas where the border was contested by two countries.^{vii}

This pointed to a shift in the Indian mindset where, despite the many border agreements signed with China and a larger peaceful border since the early 1990s, there were worries about the future contours of the relationship. This was in addition to the perennial challenge posed by Pakistan, especially after the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks. It coincided with the only known political direction to the armed forces to prepare for a two-front war, which is the defence minister's operational directive of February 2009: "We should be prepared to fight on both fronts simultaneously a war at 30 days (intense) and 60 days (normal) rates."^{viii}

The proposal to the government is believed to have originated in the Indian Army,^{ix} even though there was no imminent threat of a two-front war. At the end of December 2009, then-Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor confirmed the directive when he stated during a seminar of the Army Training Command that the army must prepare for a two-front war. The defence minister confirmed to the parliament in 2012 that "even as the armed forces prepare for their primary task of conventional wars, they must also factor in the eventuality of 'a two-front war' breaking out."^x

Kapoor's successor, General V. K. Singh, referred to Pakistan and China as "two irritants" in October 2010, and indicated that the armed forces were planning and preparing for a contingency in which they might have to confront China and Pakistan simultaneously. However, the threat was not seen as real or pressing by most commentators at that time. Writing in 2011, Lieutenant General V. K. Kapoor categorically stated, "Are we anticipating a full-fledged war among the three nuclear armed neighbours? Nothing can be farther from truth."^{xi} Writing in 2016, Manoj Joshi, who had been a member of the Naresh Chandra-led committee on national security, asked,

“Is it possible that any country which possesses nuclear weapons will risk fighting an all-out war with another, leave alone two of them? The chances are remote.”^{xii}

The prevalent institutional belief among the military leadership, captured by Kapoor’s argument, was that placing a “two-and-a-half-front war strategy”^{xiii} as a top priority “will henceforth provide an unambiguous political and military focus on strategic and operational initiatives to ensure readiness.”^{xiv} In essence, the two-front threat justified a larger military with a more modern equipment profile and thus needed greater resource allocation from the government, even though the eventuality of a two-front war might never materialize. The military leadership was confident that the situation on the disputed border with China, ostensibly managed for decades by successive prime ministers, diplomats, and national security officials, posed no immediate military threat.^{xv} It was reinforced until as late as the aftermath of the 73-day Doklam standoff in 2017, where disengagement was followed by an informal summit at Wuhan between the leaders of the two countries, who passed strategic guidance to their respective militaries.^{xvi}

However, in the military leadership’s public pronouncements, it continued to episodically position itself as an institution focused on implementing a strategy to tackle a two-front war scenario. In July 2018, then-Army Chief General Bipin Rawat asserted that “the two-front is a real scenario. Much has changed from before in terms of our capabilities ... The Army, Navy and IAF are now jointly very much prepared for such an eventuality.”^{xvii}

His claim aside, adequate resources were not allocated by the government for modernization of the armed forces,^{xviii} nor was the military leadership willing to go public about its shortcomings, as the gap between India and China had increasingly widened in China’s favor.^{xix} After the border crisis in eastern Ladakh in the summer of 2020, the possibility of a two-front challenge became tangibly real, but India’s military appeared unequal to the task as it committed all its reserves and reoriented units meant for the Pakistan front in Ladakh. A one-time vexed theoretical proposition had transformed itself into a tough living challenge for the Indian military.

Defining the Two-Front Challenge

In simple terms, the two-front challenge refers to a simultaneous armed conflict between India and both China and Pakistan. China and Pakistan could follow either a collaborative or a collusive approach: the former involves one country openly aiding the other militarily, whereas the latter involves covert cooperation between the two. Covert cooperation means that if India is engaged in an armed conflict with Pakistan, China would provide moral, material, and logistics support to Pakistan. In case of a collaborative threat, either of the countries could activate a second front militarily in a coordinated manner. The two are not exclusive options, as the transition from the collusive threat to the collaborative threat could occur seamlessly.^{xx}

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For New Delhi, the collusive threat from China and Pakistan already exists. Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat noted that “Chinese economic cooperation with Pakistan, in Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir, along with continued military, economic and diplomatic support mandate high levels of preparation by us.”^{xxi} Pakistan is the biggest importer of Chinese military equipment, especially high-end platforms like fighter jets, main battle tanks, submarines, and unmanned aerial vehicles.^{xxii} Moreover, their geopolitical alliance has been cemented by the execution of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project under the Belt and Road Initiative. The collusive threat already exists, and does not demand from India an active physical deployment of troops and additional commitment of military hardware simultaneously on two separate fronts. That leaves the collaborative military threat as New Delhi’s real worry.

The collaborative threat could manifest itself in three different ways. First, China and Pakistan could collude to launch a surprise-coordinated attack from both India’s north and west. Second, China could engage in strategic opportunism in an India-Pakistan conventional military engagement. A variation of that could be a scenario in which a significant conventional conflict between India and Pakistan threatens CPEC assets and Chinese citizens in Pakistan, giving China motivation to distract India by starting a separate conflict along the LAC. Another variation could be the use of Chinese naval power to divert and distract the Indian Navy’s efforts to blockade Pakistani ports as part of its coercive strategy.^{xxiii} Third, Pakistan could take advantage of an India-China conflict to mobilize its military against India.

Of these scenarios, the third is the most probable given that China could be hesitant to be seen as either opportunistic or overtly aggressive geopolitically. Moreover, if China were to take on India directly, it could very well do so militarily without Pakistani assistance. But its hand could be forced in case of a threat to CPEC assets or for other geostrategic reasons, such as sending a message to other smaller countries in the region. The more likely possibility is a border war between India and China that Pakistan could exploit to open a front across Kashmir to compensate for its disadvantages versus India.^{xxiv}

Short of joining a war, even a military mobilization by Pakistan could tie up Indian troops on that front. This was not done by Pakistan during the Ladakh border crisis between India and China, a fact acknowledged by Indian military leadership.^{xxv} If a leaked official note^{xxvi} prepared by the Pakistan government is to be believed, Islamabad “continued to counsel restraint in the China-India standoff and did not take advantage of the situation despite sustained Chinese pressure for the same.” This created a conducive environment for the February 2021 cease-fire agreement between India and Pakistan on the Line of Control. It validates the premise, however, that an armed conflict with China is most likely to lead to India facing a two-front war scenario, drawing in Pakistan either of its own volition or under Beijing’s pressure.

India's Plan

The Indian military plan for dealing with a two-front conflict revolves around identification of a primary and a secondary front, a line of thinking articulated by several military commanders in the past decade. In his first annual press conference after taking over as India's army chief in January 2020, General M. M. Naravane reiterated that in the case of a simultaneous two-front threat on the country's northern and western borders, there would be a primary front and a secondary front: "Most of our aggression will be concentrated on the primary front and we will adopt more deterrent posturing on secondary front. We have formations which can quickly be moved from the east to west or vice-versa. In this manner, we will be able to deal with both fronts to ensure territorial integrity is not compromised."^{xxvii}

Naravane's explanation leads us to three significant conclusions about the Indian strategy in case of a two-front war: one, no territorial loss is politically acceptable on either front; two, there will be a primary front and secondary front for the military; and three, there will be a major deployment on the primary front while the secondary front will only have a deterrent posture. Put simply, the Indian military would assume a more offensive posture against one adversary (in all likelihood, Pakistan) while holding the defenses, and a simultaneous threat of limited military punishment against the other (China) to prevent a loss of territory.

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However, many of Naravane's predecessors hold views which are at variance with his prescription: they do not see India capable of aggression on even one front. Former Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor argues that "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."^{xxviii} This is closely aligned with the view of General N. C. Vij that, strategically, India may consider adopting a posture of deterrence against Pakistan and dissuasion against China. It means that India would have to coercively preclude an attack from Pakistan by threatening an effective military reprisal causing unacceptable losses. Against China, a posture of dissuasion means that New Delhi would be urging Beijing not to become a real military rival or fight a war. Dissuasion would not be achieved solely by threats of war and destruction from India but through the logic of geostrategic realities in a wider context.^{xxix}

While Vij proposed dissuasion against China, the army was talking in July 2018 of having transformed the "dissuasion" posture against China into "deterrence," which in turn was being upgraded to "credible deterrence."^{xxx} Deterrence means that India will prevent China from initiating a two-front threat by means of threat of reprisal, but as the Ladakh border crisis demonstrated, the deterrence is not credible yet.^{xxxi} A former director general of military operations argues that India ideally seeks to adopt "a credible deterrent against China and a punitive deterrent against Pakistan."^{xxxii} The difference between the two was not made clear.

As seen above, there has been a proliferation of poorly defined terminology surrounding India's strategy for a two-front war. More than a lack of clarity of thought, it reflects the military's limitations in dealing with such a challenge. Dissuasion, deterrence, and credible deterrence all acknowledge that India does not have the military capacity to wage a war with China while simultaneously facing a military threat from Pakistan. For a long time the premise had been that the military would hold the line with China to prevent any loss of territory while taking a more offensive posture to defeat Pakistan. After the 2020 Ladakh border crisis, that premise has been questioned as the Indian Army has initiated a rebalancing strategy, under which it will refocus troops from the Pakistan front against China.^{xxxiii} It is converting one of the three existing strike corps — offensive fighting formations launched in enemy territory — meant to operate along Pakistan into a China-facing mountain strike corps. While this will give the army its desired plan of two mountain strike corps against China, one in Ladakh and another in Arunachal Pradesh, it will leave it with reduced offensive power against Pakistan.^{xxxiv}

This has, however, not altered the Indian Army's template of a primary and a secondary front. After the disengagement started in Ladakh, Naravane said, "These are threats in being. Whether they manifest or not, only time will tell. With the whole-of-government approach, such a worst case scenario should not be unfolding. But as a military, we are prepared"; he added that plans are in place to defend the primary and secondary front.^{xxxv} By banking on a "whole-of-government approach" to avoid "such a worst-case scenario," Naravane acknowledged that India is militarily incapable of dealing with the two-front threat. New Delhi has to diplomatically convince China not to fight a war and deter Pakistan by credible threat of massive military punishment. This would result in the optimization and application of forces by New Delhi best-suited for the operational scenario, within the available resources.

In the pre-Ladakh crisis era, the army had identified Siachen as the likely place of physical collusion between China and Pakistan. In January 2020, Naravane said that "We must not lose sight from where collusion between China and Pakistan can take place. We need to hold it. Though it can take place at any level, Siachen and Shaksgam Valley are the places where territory of these two countries meet. ... Therefore, it is important to be on guard and keep that area in our possession." This is the area where the Ladakh border crisis with China occurred in the summer of 2020, and as of the end of March 2021, the standoff between the two militaries in Depsang plains, abutting the area Naravane referred to, remains unresolved.^{xxxvi} But the more significant point to note is that, apprehensive about a physical collusion between China and Pakistan, the Indian Army will steadfastly oppose any move to vacate the Siachen Glacier.

Design

How would the most likely scenario of a two-front war play out? In the likelihood of a Sino-India conflict attracting Pakistan to open a military front, the war would be launched by China at a time and place of its choosing.^{xxxvii} China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), after mobilizing its forces into Tibet, activating its airbases, deploying missiles, and moving its navy into the

Indian Ocean, could limit the conflict to only one theater, say Ladakh, or could undertake conflict all along the LAC.^{xxxviii} Pakistan would have the option to enter such a war simultaneously, or could choose to commit itself militarily only when India appeared to be under severe military pressure. It could attempt to take advantage by opening up a front along the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The XI corps of the Pakistan Army, located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, could be moved across J&K and tasked with taking offensives in selected areas. Depending on the progress of PLA operations in the Daulat Beg Oldi sector — if China-Pakistan military collusion in the Karakoram Pass region is considered the most likely scenario^{xxxix} — Pakistan could also execute plans for the capture of the Siachen Glacier from India. The rest of the Pakistan military would go into a defensive posture all across the international border in Punjab, Rajasthan, and Gujarat.

This would put India under pressure, as it would not be possible for India to deal with both fronts piecemeal; they would have to be handled simultaneously. This would pose a huge challenge, as New Delhi has so far developed its military strategy for dealing with Pakistan and China individually, and this approach would have to be abandoned in favor of a new strategy.

Following the lessons learned from Operation Parakram in 2001,^{xl} India settled on a proactive strategy against Pakistan, often characterized informally as the Cold Start strategy. It has led to reduced mobilization timings and the placement of formations closer to the border, and envisages the employment of forces across the border for quick gains before the strike corps come into play. The IAF would execute a parallel strategy, and its ability to dominate the Pakistan Air Force — a big “if” after the experience at Balakot — would be a key to the success. With its overwhelming superiority over its Pakistani counterpart, the Indian Navy would play an important coercive role in making its effect felt on ground operations.

In the case of a single-front war with China, India’s plan is to make it prohibitive for the PLA to achieve major territorial gains across the LAC. The additional reserves and the partly raised Mountain Strike Corps have given the Indian Army additional depth in its defenses as well as a limited capability to undertake a counteroffensive across the LAC. This would be supported by the Indian Air Force and the Indian Navy; the latter could put the PLA Navy under pressure in certain maritime areas.

In the case of a two-front war, the Chinese front is likely to become the primary front because of the sheer disparity in military power. Without a two-front challenge, India could respond to Pakistani moves in J&K by opening up along the international border with its strike corps, but that would not be possible with commitments on the China border. India would try to deter Pakistan, but if the war were joined on the western front, India’s options would be limited to only preventing any loss of territory.

The second challenge emanates from the fact that vast geographical separation also precludes the rapid movement of a large number of troops from one sector to another, not only for the army but also for the air force. This would result in a separation of forces, a major disadvantage for India. Although a higher level of intertheater mobility could enhance operational options, India

has some formations designated as dual-tasked which are supposed to be moved on to the active front but would have to be committed much earlier, especially in the high-altitude border areas against China, where troops would need acclimatization and their movement at a later stage could be indicted by PLA forces. The move of these dual-tasked formations would reduce the potency of India's strike corps, further reducing the offensive military options against Pakistan.

A war on two fronts would also result in a much higher degree of ammunition consumption, and thus much higher stocks of ammunition and spares would have to be available from the beginning. This is one of the biggest weaknesses for India, which has done little to improve its ammunition stocks. Even though the government directive is to prepare for the expenditure of ammunition at 30 days at intense rates and 60 days at normal rates — a total of 40 days at intense rates — the government took a decision in 2016 to stock only 10 days of ammunition to fight a war against Pakistan.^{xli} In late 2019, then-Army Chief General Bipin Rawat confirmed that he had focused on building up stocks for only a 10-day war, and a war against China would need ammunition for 30 days of intense warfighting.^{xlii} He also mentioned that arms and ammunition could be easily moved from one front to another if a threat developed on the China front. This is an impossibility in the case of a two-front war.

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It is not the army alone that would be under pressure. The IAF would also be challenged to fulfill its mandate, as it currently holds no numerical advantage over Pakistan. It has only 30 squadrons of fighter aircraft while it requires at least 50 combat squadrons — if not 60 — for a possible two-front war.^{xliii} The IAF's numerical superiority versus the Pakistan Air Force is less than 2:1, down from 3:1 in the 1980s. Many observers point to the last exhaustive IAF training exercise, Gagan Shakti, in the first half of 2018, where the IAF demonstrated its capability and reinforced its concept of tackling a two-front war. But the IAF had adequate time to plan the entire orchestrated effort for the exercise over a two-year period, a luxury it would not have during actual conflict.^{xliv}

Moreover, the challenge posed by China's PLA Air Force (PLAAF) alone is formidable, and goes beyond aerial combat, as noted by Ashley Tellis: "By integrating highly accurate missile forces, supported by sophisticated electronic and information warfare capabilities, into their air operations, PLAAF commanders aim to utilize these weapons to seize the operational initiative at the onset of a conflict. Through intense first strikes executed by ballistic and cruise missiles aimed at an adversary's command and control centers, early-warning facilities, critical air bases (and especially the aircraft, ammunition, and petroleum, oil, and lubricant storage bunkers at these facilities), ground-based air defenses, electrical power grids, and field logistics centers, the PLAAF seeks to degrade its opponent's airpower on the ground so as to mitigate the

shortcomings or amplify the advantages of its own aviation combatants prior to any other conventional air superiority operations.”^{xlv}

In a two-front war, India would be most confident about its maritime domain, where it has naval dominance in the northern Indian Ocean over the sea lines of communication that carry a majority of China’s oil imports. Although India has noted the increasing presence of the PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean, “neither China nor Pakistan can seriously threaten India’s main axes of maritime approach.”^{xlvi} As per a former navy chief,^{xlvii} the Indian Navy and Air Force could aim to draw Chinese maritime forces into areas where Chinese shore-based air power cannot be brought to bear and where Chinese logistics lines would be severely extended. The Indian military could then exploit its ability vis-à-vis integral air power (carrier-based air power) to advantageously deal with Chinese surface combatants. It also has an overwhelming superiority over the Pakistan Navy, and could aim to control the Arabian Sea for a coercive influence on the land battle. The chief noted that the Indian Navy has been preparing for the two-front challenge in its training exercises over the past decade.^{xlviii}

India’s approach to a two-front war is based on a best-case scenario where everything goes to plan, so that it avoids a major loss of territory to China as it is able to sustain Pakistani pressure. The robustness of the plan will have to be validated in high-level war games, and then the forces prepared, equipped, trained, and rehearsed. To bank only on political and diplomatic leadership to avert a two-front challenge, as the military now seems to be doing, could surprise New Delhi at an inopportune time.

Time Frame

Even though the government directive mandates the armed forces to be prepared for a war which would expend ammunition and stores for 40 days of intense warfighting, the Indian military is banking on a shorter war with both adversaries. This is based on two factors. The first is the geopolitics of conflict between two nuclear-armed states like India and Pakistan. New Delhi envisages an international intervention in a short period of time in a military conflict with Pakistan and hopes for early gains to hold good on the negotiating table before nuclear weapons come into play. The second is the practicality of its stocking ammunition and spares, which it hopes to build for 10 days of war against Pakistan and 30 days against China. The defence ministry believes that any stocking beyond 15 days is neither economically viable nor logistically feasible.^{xlix}

These parameters hold good in case of a single-front war, but in the event of a simultaneous threat from China and Pakistan, sustaining an offensive battle for 10 days with Pakistan will be tough as it will not be possible to shift ammunition and stores from one front to the other. This is likely to lead to a more defensive battle design on both fronts, where the Indian military’s sole aim will be to prevent any loss of territory.

Nuclear Option

There is no clarity about the use of nuclear weapons by New Delhi in the case of a two-front threat. Under the current Bharatiya Janata Party government, New Delhi has not been shy about promising a rethink on its No First Use policy.^l In case the lack of conventional superiority with the Indian military creates a scenario where the loss of territory to Pakistan is imminent, New Delhi could be forced to threaten the use of the nuclear option against Pakistan as deterrence. The redline for India's threat of using the nuclear weapons could be different in the case of Siachen (where the border is not agreed upon), Kashmir (where the border is the mutually agreed cease-fire line), and elsewhere (the international border). Nuclear weapons are not military weapons in India; their employment is decided at the highest political level, and thus they do not figure in any military plans for dealing with China and Pakistan.

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Moreover, with all three countries being nuclear powers and China and Pakistan acting in collusion, a threat to use nuclear weapons against Pakistan would draw in China as well, a possibility India would be keen to avoid. Also, it will be tough for India to get international approval for any threat of using nuclear weapons against Pakistan. As this would be at a time when India would want maximum global support and help against the simultaneous Chinese action, the nuclear option becomes a self-defeating one.

Numbers

The 1.2-million strong Indian Army currently has 38 divisions in its orbit, organized under 14 of its corps, with 40 percent deployed either on the China border, the Pakistan border, or in counterinsurgency duties in Kashmir and the northeast.^{li} The current force structure of the Indian Army is 14 corps and 38 divisions. As per one of the calculations^{lii} arrived at by simple planning figures of 1:3 for conventional attack and 1:8 for mountain warfare, the force structure needed for a two-front war demands 43 divisions just for defence on both the borders, with no capability of launching even a limited offensive. For ensuring both defensive and offensive capabilities, the army needs 54 divisions, while to regain lost territory and attain a solid victory, calculations point to a requirement of 72 divisions.

The situation is no better with the Indian Air Force, which is down to 30 squadrons of fighter jets when it needs at least 50 squadrons; or with the Indian Navy, which has only 18 diesel submarines, one nuclear-powered attack submarine, and one ballistic missile submarine in its fleet, compared to China's 50 diesel electric attack submarines, six nuclear-powered attack submarines, and four ballistic missile submarines.^{liii} Technologically, China is competing with

the United States in artificial-intelligence-driven warfare along with cyber, space, and electronic warfare, while India is still taking fledgling steps in these domains.

Essentially, the force levels needed for a decisive edge over Pakistan while aiming for an effective parity with China require upgrading the military, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Considering India's anemic economic growth and burgeoning expenditure on military salaries and pensions,^{liv} such an exercise is not within the realm of a realistic possibility. As the low level of defense budget allocation over the past few years demonstrates,^{lv} the government cannot afford the vast sums needed to build the military.^{lvi} The situation has been further worsened for the IAF and the navy by the Ladakh border crisis, which has intensified the military's land-border focus, and the political imperative to prevent any loss of territory is going to weaken the conventional warfighting ability. The ongoing military reform, which calls for the existing 17 single-service, geographically distant commands of the three services to be merged into just five "theaters," may provide an answer, but a period of flux and the feared dominance of a numerically superior army over the other two services could exacerbate the problem.

Assessment

The distinct nature of threats posed by two dissimilar adversaries, China and Pakistan, means that India does not have any effective solutions to the possibility of a full-fledged war on two fronts simultaneously. Although all three defense services have been planning for such a contingency, their constrained budgets and sluggish acquisition programs have so far forced them to operate as if a future subcontinental conflict will likely involve major combat against only one adversary, with the other serving principally as a threatening distraction intended to tie down Indian combat forces from being committed exclusively to the primary front. It may not hold for long as a valid assumption, as was hinted in General Rawat's strong words meant to deter Pakistan during the Ladakh border crisis.^{lvii} Because this constraint limits the possibility of any internal balancing, the answers will have to come from external factors.

To overcome its power deficit when confronted with a two-front challenge, New Delhi can look to forge partnerships with global powers. The only global power that can be of help in such a case is the United States, but even under Narendra Modi, India has valued its strategic sovereignty over becoming a treaty ally of the superpower. This policy has shifted recently,^{lviii} after Modi attended the March 2021 leaders' summit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, with his counterparts from the U.S., Australia, and Japan. Even though the joint statement eschewed a mention of China, it figured prominently in the discussion, which also referred to the Ladakh border crisis.^{lix} During the Ladakh standoff, Commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Philip Davidson had provided "some information to India in that crisis, cold-weather clothing, some other equipment, some things like that."^{lx} But a similar last-minute SOS call to the U.S. is no substitute for a long-standing military and strategic relationship where cooperation, support, and technology transfer are routine activities. If India were to fully align with the U.S. in order to amplify its readiness, it might risk increasing the likelihood of

conflict with China owing to Chinese threat perceptions. It still remains to be seen if New Delhi is willing to fully walk on the path of being an active security partner.^{lxvi}

As the only member of the Quad which is not a treaty ally of the U.S. and shares a land border with China, India will still be constrained by the threat of a two-front war. The only viable diplomatic solution then is for India to seek peace with either Pakistan or China. There has been no progress on Indian offers of boundary settlement with China, and Beijing remains a long-term strategic adversary, a fact acknowledged globally. Arguing that “the India-China relationship is today truly at a crossroads,” Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has noted that “far from mitigating differences, the events of 2020 have actually put our relationship under exceptional stress.”^{lxvii} His views do not sound optimistic when he leaves questions about “what the Chinese posture signals, how it evolves, and what implications it may have for the future of our ties” unanswered.

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The alternative for New Delhi is to seek peace with Islamabad. Pressure from the two-front military challenge, along with the changing geopolitical landscape with the Biden administration in place in the U.S., has led to some moves toward seeking peace with Pakistan.^{lxviii} These have resulted in the reiteration of cease-fire on the LoC, but progress has been slow. The official Indian response, compared to Pakistani enthusiasm, has been tepid, and skeptical voices about the engagement are now being raised in Pakistan, too.^{lxix} In India, there are apprehensions that this may be a move made for tactical reasons to give respite from a Pakistan-supported and -backed armed militancy in Kashmir,^{lxx} besides creating time and space to address the complications of dealing with a belligerent China and the Biden administration’s strong response to Beijing.

If averting a two-front military threat is the strongest reason for India to seek peace with Pakistan, the chances of a permanent peace are slim under the prevailing Hindutva ideology in New Delhi. This approach centers enmity with Pakistan, and “teaching it a lesson” at the core of its majoritarian political and electoral agenda.^{lxxi} Having whetted the “nationalist” appetite with the cross-LoC surgical strikes of 2017 and Balakot airstrikes of 2019, any terror incident could easily bring the two countries to the path of a confrontation. The risks to the peace process emanate from structural factors, which have been historically embedded in the national narratives on both sides. For the current political leadership in India, a permanent reversal of the Pakistan narrative seems unlikely as it goes against its ideological foundations^{lxxii} and political motivations. The Pakistani threat may thus be minimized or suppressed for a short duration, but it will remain a serious military challenge for which New Delhi will have to prepare.

Former National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon says that the only way to prevent a two-front war is by being “prepared to fight and win it.”^{lxxiii} But the kind of military resources

eventually required to prevail in the high-intensity two-front war that India is likely to face are simply not available. The peacetime costs that accrue to India in having to plan and prepare for a two-front war, which will push defence spending beyond 3 percent of GDP, are unaffordable. While poor planning has played a part in putting India in this spot, the larger problems are structural and go beyond the remit of the military leadership.

India must and should do everything to avoid getting trapped into preparing to fight such a war. If not, the Indian military is likely to be bogged down in an unviable position: resource-constrained, overstretched, and vulnerable.

A two-front war will put India under huge pressure and places New Delhi at risk of losing both territory and global prestige. As an army commander publicly said in 2018, “It is never a good idea, never a smart idea to fight a two-front war.”^{lxix} India must and should do everything to avoid getting trapped into preparing to fight such a war. If not, the Indian military is likely to be bogged down in an unviable position: resource-constrained, overstretched, and vulnerable.

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- ⁱ Dinakar Peri, “Will Hold Our Ground along LAC: Gen. Naravane,” *The Hindu*, January 12, 2021.
- ⁱⁱ *The Federal*, “Amid LAC Row, CDS Warns of Two-Front Threat from China, Pakistan,” September 4, 2020.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Elizabeth Roche, “Air Force Fully Prepared for Two-Front War, Says IAF Chief Bhadauria,” *Mint*, October 5, 2020.
- ^{iv} Express News Service, “IAF: Don’t Have the Numbers to Fully Fight a Two-Front War,” *The Indian Express*, March 11, 2016.
- ^v At the Combined Commanders Conference in October 2004, India’s military and security establishment first took note of the growing military challenge from Tibet, increased Chinese incursions across the LAC, overall heightened Chinese belligerence, and close ties with Pakistan. The 2006 report and the discussion on a possible two-front threat emerged from the same shift in thinking.
- ^{vi} Amitabh Dubey, “How True is the Claim that Modi Govt is the Architect of the Border Roads Project?,” *The Wire*, July 3, 2020.
- ^{vii} These roads were to be completed within six years but have still not been completed.
- ^{viii} General Nirmal Chander Vaj, “Defending the Land Frontiers,” Vivekananda International Foundation, *National Security* 1, no. 1 (August 2018): 5. This directive, in all likelihood, has not been updated to date, even though the formation of the Defence Planning Committee in 2018 was supposed to lead to a national security strategy document and, consequently, a revised directive.
- ^{ix} The idea then was that even as the armed forces prepare for their primary task of conventional wars, they must also factor in the eventuality of a two-front war breaking out.
- ^x Ashok Mehta, “Two-Front Plan Should Factor In Diplomacy,” *The Tribune*, September 22, 2020.
- ^{xi} Lt. Gen. V. K. Kapoor, “Fighting a Two-Front War,” *SP’s Land Forces* 4 (2011).
- ^{xii} Manoj Joshi, “Is India Prepared for a Two-Front War with Pakistan-China?,” *Mail Today*, March 14, 2016.
- ^{xiii} The half front refers to the military commitment toward fighting the insurgency in Indian Kashmir.
- ^{xiv} Kapoor, “Fighting a Two-Front War.”
- ^{xv} Rahul Bedi, “With New China Faceoff, India’s Nightmare of a Two-Front War May Be Coming True,” *The Wire*, August 31, 2020.
- ^{xvi} Rajat Pandit, “Post Wuhan, Guidance from Highest-Level Cut LAC Tiffs,” *The Times of India*, December 21, 2019.
- ^{xvii} Rajat Pandit, “Two-Front War is a Real Scenario, Says General Bipin Rawat,” *The Economic Times*, July 13, 2018.
- ^{xviii} Snehash Alex Philip, “Modi or Manmohan, India’s Military Needs Haven’t Been Met under Either for 10 Yrs, Data Shows,” *The Print*, March 9, 2021.
- ^{xix} Pravin Sawhney, “China’s Big Defence Plans,” *The Tribune*, July 31, 2019.
- ^{xx} Gen. V. P. Malik, “A Comprehensive Response Strategy to a Collusive and Collaborative Threat from China and Pakistan,” 30th USI Security Lecture, The United Service Institute of India, December 3, 2014.

- ^{xxi} *The Federal*, “Amid LAC Row, CDS Warns of Two-Front Threat from China, Pakistan,” September 4, 2020.
- ^{xxii} SIPRI data shows that between 2014 and 2019, Pakistan accounted for 35 percent of Chinese arms sales. These made for 73 percent of Pakistani arms purchases during the period.
- ^{xxiii} The Indian Navy’s coercive strategy is to blockade Pakistani ports – if India makes such an attempt, the PLA Navy could divert and distract the Indian Navy by drawing it into a different sector.
- ^{xxiv} Abhijnan Rej, “The Sobering Arithmetic of a Two-Front War,” Observer Research Foundation, July 10, 2018.
- ^{xxv} Vivekananda International Foundation, “Vimarsh on Role of the Indian Army in Dealing with the Contemporary National Security Challenges by General Manoj Mukund Naravane,” February 24, 2021, <https://www.vifindia.org/event/2021/february/15/Vimarsh-on-Role-of-the-Indian-Army-in-dealing-with-the-Contemporary-National-Security-Challenges>.
- ^{xxvi} South Asia Press, Twitter post, March 22, 2021 (10:34 p.m.), <https://twitter.com/SouthAsiaPress/status/1374187730339512350>.
- ^{xxvii} NationalDefence, “Gen MM Naravane’s Full Press Conference Ahead of Army Day 2020 (Get Back PoK),” Youtube Video, 1:18:00, January 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGkcc8zajXU>
- ^{xxviii} Gen. Deepak Kapoor, “Challenge of a Two Front Threat,” *USI Journal*, January-March 2016. He was referring to the increased forced levels after the raising of the new mountain divisions and the Mountain Strike Corps.
- ^{xxix} Sushant Singh, “Can India Transcend Its Two Front Challenge?,” *War on the Rocks*, September 14, 2020.
- ^{xxx} *Ibid.*, 6.
- ^{xxxi} A threat is considered credible if India possesses both the military capabilities to inflict substantial costs on China in an armed conflict, and China believes that India is resolved to use its available military forces for it.
- ^{xxxii} Lt. Gen. P. R. Kumar, “Two and a Half Front War: Continental Strategy & Scenario,” *News Intervention*, June 2020.
- ^{xxxiii} Sandeep Unnithan, “The Two and a Half Front War,” *India Today*, January 17, 2021.
- ^{xxxiv} Nitin Gokhale, “More Troops for China Frontier as India Rejigs Deployment,” *StratNewsGlobal*, January 15, 2021.
- ^{xxxv} Snehes Alex Philip, “China Realised Its Habit of Creeping Forward Will Not Work with India, Army Chief Says,” *The Print*, February 24, 2021.
- ^{xxxvi} China has blocked Indian patrols from reaching five patrolling points in the Depsang plains for over a year. Reports suggest an augmentation of the Chinese military infrastructure in the area during the crisis, further putting pressure on India.
- ^{xxxvii} Prior to the Chinese infrastructure enhancement in early 2000s, it was believed that China would need one winter to build up its stores and supplies for a war. That premise no longer holds true, as seen by rapid mobilization during the summer of 2020 in Ladakh.
- ^{xxxviii} A chapter in the forthcoming anthology titled *Securing India’s Rise*, edited by Lt Gen Kamal Davar, published by Bloomsbury India. The chapter envisages this war scenario.
- ^{xxxix} Shaurya Karanbir Gurung, “Threat of collusion between China, Pakistan maximum in Siachen, Shaksgam Valley: Army Chief General Manoj Naravane,” *Economic Times*, January 13, 2020.
- ^{xl} Lt. Gen. H. S. Panag, “Operation Parakram: The War That Wasn’t but Could Have Reined in Pakistan,” *ThePrint*, January 3, 2019.

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- ^{xli} Maj. Gen. Harsha Kakar, “The Impact of Enhanced Ammunition Reserves,” *The Statesman*, July 16, 2019.
- ^{xlii} Snehesh Alex Philip, “Arsenal for Pakistan Prepped, Army Now Focuses on Ammo Reserves to Deal with China,” *ThePrint*, September 25, 2019.
- ^{xliii} Anil Chopra, “IAF in a Two-Front War,” *Geopolitics*, October 2020. Ashley Tellis assesses it to be 60 squadrons.
- ^{xliv} Amit Ranjan Giri, “India’s Two-Front War: Myths and IAF’s Capability to Fight,” *Financial Express*, June 7, 2020.
- ^{xlv} Ashley J. Tellis, *Troubles, They Come in Battalions: The Manifold Travails of the Indian Air Force* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016).
- ^{xlvi} CNAS, *Imbalance of Power: India’s Military Choices in an Era of Strategic Competition with China*, Daniel Kliman, Iskander Rehman, Kristine Lee, and Joshua Fitt, October 23, 2019.
- ^{xlvii} Admiral Robin K. Dhowan, “A Maritime Perspective,” Vivekananda International Foundation, *National Security* 1, no. 1 (August 2018): 8-12.
<https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/national-security-vol-1-issue-1-colloquium.pdf>
- ^{xlviii} NDTV, “Indian Navy War Games Focus on Two-Front War, Fast Deployment,” March 5, 2018.
- ^{xlix} As told by a senior defence ministry official. The ministry was insistent on ensuring 10 days of stocking and eventually agreed to building up of 15 days of reserves after a hard negotiation with the military leadership.
- ^l Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, “India’s Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities,” *International Security* 43, no. 3 (2019): 7-52.
- ^{li} It is estimated that at least a fourth of the army’s infantry and armour divisions and artillery units are deployed along the border on the two fronts.
- ^{lii} Ravi Rikhye, *Analysis of India’s Ability to Fight a 2-Front War 2018* (Independently published, September 2018).
- ^{liii} Roby Thomas, “Nuclear Attack Submarines: The Elixir for a True Blue-Water Navy,” *Journal of Defence Studies* 14, no. 4 (October-December 2020).
- ^{liv} IDSA, “Bang for Buck: India’s Defence Expenditure in Wider Perspective,” Laxman Kumar Behera and Madhulika Baniwal, July 10, 2020.
- ^{lv} Snehesh Alex Philip, “Modi or Manmohan, India’s Military Needs Haven’t Been Met under Either for 10 Yrs, Data Shows.”
- ^{lvi} IDSA, “Examining the Feasibility and Affordability of Raising the Share of Defence Expenditure to Three Percent of GDP,” Laxman Kumar Behera, August 20, 2018.
- ^{lvii} *The Tribune*, “Gen Rawat Gives Warning to Pakistan; Says Country Will Suffer ‘Heavy Losses’ If It Attempted Any Misadventure against India,” September 3, 2020.
- ^{lviii} Adm. Philips Davidson, commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, told the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, on March 7, 2021, that “India has long had an approach called strategic autonomy, you know, a nonaligned approach with others, but I think certainly the activities along the Line of Actual Control with China has opened their eyes to what cooperative effort with others might mean for their own defensive needs.”
- ^{lix} Sriram Lakshman, “U.S. NSA Sullivan Implies China-India Border Was Discussed at Quad Summit,” *The Hindu*, March 13, 2021.
- ^{lx} Adm. Philips Davidson to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, March 7, 2021.

^{lxi} Beijing believes that India had dispensed its nonalignment and sees Indian actions through the prism of the ties with the United States. This could lead to gross misperceptions.

^{lxii} S. Jaishankar, keynote address, 13th All India Conference of China Studies, January 28, 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33419/>.

^{lxiii} Sushant Singh, “To Get to the Negotiating Table, India and Pakistan Had Help,” *Foreign Policy*, March 4, 2021.

^{lxiv} Ejaz Haider, “Don’t Let India Control the Narrative,” *The Friday Times*, March 26, 2021.

^{lxv} *The Wire*, “‘India Seems a Critical Part of Biden’s Response to China Threat’: Ex Foreign Secretary,” March 11, 2021.

^{lxvi} *Hindustan Times*, “Pakistan Must Be Taught a Lesson in a Way It Understands, Says Modi,” February 26, 2009.

^{lxvii} *The Hindu*, “‘Akhand Bharat’ Will Usher in Peace: RSS Chief,” February 26, 2021.

^{lxviii} *India Ahead News*, “Will Face Off with China Impact India’s Economic Growth? Here’s Ex-NSA Shivshankar’s Take,” December 24, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SaM8DLSOoI&feature=youtu.be>.

^{lxix} Man Aman Singh Chhina, “Two-Front War Not a Good Idea, Says Top General,” *The Indian Express*, March 1, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/two-front-war-not-a-good-idea-says-top-general-5082346/>.