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India's Flailing Influence on South Asia's Crisis Dynamics

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Key Points:

- Spurred on by its economic power and global diplomatic heft, India has tried to pursue hegemonic ambitions and an offensive military strategy in South Asia.
- India's latest military tension with Pakistan (2019) and China (2020) shows that despite military modernisation push and doctrinal changes, the Indian military has its limitations and weaknesses that depreciate operational effectiveness of its forces including operational planning, preparedness, interoperability, jointness and training.
- The Indian military has failed to deliver deterrent messages despite its aggressive action during the latest crises with its neighbours.
- Balakot-Rajouri and Ladakh Crises demonstrate the Indian Army's shortcomings in battlefield performance.
- India's regional assertiveness shows its national approach is likely to work towards a three-pronged strategy of technological modernisation, the threat of a full-scale war, and proxy war.
- Experts believe that the prospects of a false flag operation and India's two-front war theory to acquire political, diplomatic, and foreign military support add more vulnerabilities in the already fragile strategic stability of South Asia.

INTRODUCTION

India seeks to modernise its conventional and strategic forces to gain influence in shaping a favourable regional security landscape. It has engaged in constant efforts to transform its outdated ground-centric army into high-technology forces with an increasing emphasis on the integration of tri-services.¹ The launch of the offensive "Land Warfare Doctrine (LWD)-2018" validates the changes in the strategic thinking of the Indian Armed Forces that focuses on joint operations for naval, land and air power

¹ Gurmeet Kanwal and Neha Kohli, *Defence Reforms: A National Imperative* (Pentagon Press and Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, 2018).

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projection.² Its offensive posturing and technological advancements reinforce New Delhi's objectives to build a modern military.³

India's latest military tension with Pakistan⁴ and China⁵ shows that despite military modernisation push and doctrinal changes, the Indian military has its

² "Indian Army, Land Warfare Doctrine 2018," Indian Army, 2018, <http://www.ssri-j.com/MediaReport/Document/IndianArmyLandWarfareDoctrine2018.pdf>.

³ Harshajit Sarmah, "Army Chief Bipin Rawat Says India Should Focus on AI and Big Data Computing," *Analytics India Mag*, last modified January 21, 2019, <https://analyticsindiamag.com/army-chief-bipin-rawat-india-focus-ai-big-data-computing/#:~:text=Chief%20General%20of%20the%20Indian,the%20Indian%20Armed%20Force's%20system>.

⁴ "Balakot 'attack'," *Dawn*, last modified February 27, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1466337>.

⁵ "Indian army says 20 of its troops killed in border clash with China," *Dawn*, last modified June 17, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1563892/indian-army-says-20-of-its-troops-killed-in-border-clash-with-china>.

limitations and weaknesses that depreciate operational effectiveness of its forces including operational planning, preparedness, interoperability, jointness and training. In this regard, it is significant to explore the operational deficiencies in India's vision of an offensive deterrence doctrine and the veracity of its military's operational preparedness in the backdrop of the Balakot-Rajouri crisis (2019) and Sino-Indian Galwan Crisis (2020).

A COMPLEX SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Geopolitics has always been a predominant feature of the South Asian security landscape. Currently, the strategic security triangle between China, India, and Pakistan, the United States (U.S.) power politics in Asia-Pacific, and the Indo-U.S. strategic partnership determine the course of the South Asian security dynamics.

Spurred on by its economic power and global diplomatic heft, India has tried to pursue hegemonic ambitions and an offensive military strategy in South Asia. India's resort to a false flag operation against Pakistan, its territorial expansion in Nepal, and its construction of military infrastructure along the disputed region with China have demonstrated New Delhi's assertive foreign policy in its neighbourhood.

The latest major South Asian crises have been the Indo-Pakistani Balakot-Rajouri Crisis of 2019 and the Sino-Indian Galwan valley clashes of 2020; both of which were outcomes of the Indian military's assertiveness. The former crisis resulted from the Indian airstrikes in the Pakistani mainland, which led to Pakistan's retaliatory airstrikes in the Rajouri town of the Indian-occupied Kashmir. The Galwan clashes were the consequence of India's illegal construction of road infrastructure in the disputed Ladakh region along the border with China. The Chinese and Indian soldiers exchanged fisticuffs in the Galwan valley that resulted in the death of over 20 Indian soldiers.⁶ Notwithstanding the deaths of soldiers, India refrained from escalating the conflict with China militarily, exposing its military incapacity to fight against Beijing.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE BALAKOT-RAJOURI AND THE GALWAN CRISES

Key takeaways from the Balakot-Rajouri and the Galwan crises are as follows. First, India's conventional deterrence is compromised, and there is no space for a limited war

in the region.⁷ Second, operational planning and military preparedness are not about strategic thinking only; they demand functioning on the battlefield.⁸ Third, Indian forces face training and interoperability challenges.⁹ Fourth, India's recent crises indicate that its military planners were unable to manage its offensive deterrence doctrine, and a false sense of superiority might instigate the risk of miscalculations.

A compromised conventional deterrence

The Indian military has failed to deliver deterrent messages despite its aggressive action during the latest crises with its neighbours.¹⁰ Indian aggression in Balakot marked an "abnormal act of breaching the sovereignty of the opponent as a new normal".¹¹ India's attempt to establish a new normal by carrying out a limited war with Pakistan fell flat as the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) conducted a proportionate retaliation inside the Indian occupied territory.¹² Later, owing to the fear of uncertain escalation dynamics, India remained hesitant from launching counter-military strikes and instead threatened the use of nuclear-capable missiles. In essence, India's conventional deterrence failed, and Pakistan successfully reinforced its conventional deterrence credibility.¹³ On the other hand, India's failure to respond militarily against the movement of the Chinese soldiers beyond the previously delineated boundaries along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) underscored India's military inferiority and inability to fight against or deter China.¹⁴

⁷ Rohan Mukherjee, "Climbing the Escalation Ladder: India and the Balakot Crisis," *War on the Rocks*, last modified October 2 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/climbing-the-escalation-ladder-india-and-the-balakot-crisis/>.

⁸ Ejaz Haider, "China Vs India: Geopolitics of a Clash," *Dawn*, last modified June 29, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1565519>.

⁹ Pushan Das, "Indian armed forces joint doctrine: Elusive quest for integration," *Observer Research Foundation*, last modified May 26, 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indian-armed-forces-joint-doctrine-elusive-quest-integration/>.

¹⁰ Raud Shahzad, "Strategic Deterrence in South Asia from the Prism of Balakot and Beyond." *NDU Journal* (2019).

¹¹ Imran Iqbal, "India's 'New Normal,'" *The News*, last modified March 10, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/442019-%20india-s-new-normal>.

¹² Kaiser Tufail "Pulwama—From Bluster to a Whimper." *Defence Journal* 22, no. 12 (2019): 32.

¹³ Mansoor Ahmed, "Risks Of Asymmetry And Future Escalation In India-Pakistan Relations," *South Asian Voices*, last modified May 29, 2020, <https://southasianvoices.org/risks-of-asymmetry-and-future-escalation-in-india-pakistan-relations/>.

¹⁴ Xiaoping Yang, "Chinese Perceptions of India as a Nuclear Weapons Power," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, last modified June 30, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/30/china-s-perceptions-of-india-as-nuclear-weapons-power-pub-63970>.

⁶ "Galwan Valley: India and China downplay reports of soldier release," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, last modified June 19, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53102629>.

Deficiencies in India's operational planning and preparedness

The Balakot-Rajouri and the Ladakh crises demonstrate the Indian Army's shortcomings in battlefield performance. Remarkably, the Indian air defence system, based on the Base Air Defence Zones (BADZ) and Air Defence Ground Environment System (ADGES),¹⁵ was unable to detect or target the PAF aircraft on February 27, 2019, and rendered the Indian Air Force's (IAF) operational readiness ineffective. Additionally, the IAF personnel shot down one of their own Mi-17 V-5 choppers by hitting an Israeli-made SPYDER-MR surface-to-air missile,¹⁶ resulting in killing all six military personnel.¹⁷ Shooting down their own chopper when the IAF was on high alert, exposes the weaknesses of India's Command and Control and the failure of its defense system during a crisis. Similarly, the Indian Army could not detect or collect intelligence regarding China's movement of thousands of troops and military equipment toward the LAC, and was caught off-guard¹⁸, nor could it plan and prepare an effective counter-military response to thwart Chinese troops' advance.

Trends in arms acquisition and interoperability challenges

Interoperability is vital in achieving tactical, operational, and strategic goals. Specifically, it plays a key role to boost operational readiness and effectiveness. It is defined as an ability of two or more militaries to operate together or among multiple units/systems in order to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of military operations as a component of the joint force. It can be achieved through joint military exercises, training, joint military planning and demonstrations.¹⁹ Trends in India's arms imports from multiple arms suppliers and its acquisition of state-of-the-art foreign weapons and technology highlight the emergence of interoperability challenges in adapting these capabilities and undertaking joint operations in its area of strategic interest. In the last five years, India has signed more than 20 defence agreements or Memorandums of

Understanding (MOUs) with the U.S., France, Australia, United Kingdom (U.K.), and Israel to acquire military hardware and cybersecurity infrastructure (See Table 1). India's acquisition of wider assorted military technologies with advanced capabilities have instigated integration and jointness issues, including technological disparities, lack of training initiatives, and bureaucratic challenges. To address the slow acclimatisation, India is increasingly conducting "joint military drills, tabletop exercises, and defense dialogues with the U.S...(sic)" However, the sclerotic process of the Indian forces to induct new military hardware prevents its forces from performing an effective operation and limits the desired scale of interoperability.

¹⁵ R. Chandrakanth, "Global Air Defence Scenario," *SP's Land Forces*, last modified April 2014, <http://www.spslandforces.com/story/?id=321&h=Global-Air-Defence-Scenario>.

¹⁶ Ahmed, Mansoor, and Maimuna Ashraf. "The Pulwama-Balakot Crisis." *CISS Insight Journal* 7, no. 1 (2019): 01-24.

¹⁷ Abhishek Bhalla, "Budgam Mi-17 crash: IAF chief admits big mistake, says our own missile hit chopper," *India Today*, last modified October 4, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/budgam-mi-17-crash-iaf-chief-admits-big-mistake-1606217-2019-10-04>.

¹⁸ Anbarasan Ethirajan and Vikas Pandey, "China-India border: Why tensions are rising between the neighbours," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, last modified May 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52852509>.

¹⁹ Terry Moon, Suzanne Fewell, and Hayley Reynolds. "The what, why, when and how of interoperability." *Defence & Security Analysis* 24, no. 1 (2008): 5-17.

Table 1: Key Defence Agreements and MOUs signed by India

| PARTIES TO THE AGREEMENT | DEFENCE AGREEMENT/ MOU | DATE SIGNED |
|---------------------------------|---|----------------------|
| India-US | Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) | October 27, 2020. |
| India-Japan | MoU in the field of cybersecurity | October 07, 2020 |
| India-Japan | MoU in order to achieve cooperation to provide training to their armed and self-defence forces, to improve interoperability between armed forces. | September 11, 2020 |
| India-Nigeria | MoU for cooperation in the outer space | August 13, 2020 |
| India-Israel | India-Israel Defence Deals: Barak-8 MRSAM missile kits, HAROP Suicide Drones, Light Machine Guns | July, 2020 |
| India-US | India-US Extend MOU for Cooperation in Nuclear Energy for 10 more years | June 04, 2020 |
| India- Australia | Implementing the arrangement concerning cooperation in Defence Science and Technology to the MoU on Defence Cooperation. | June 04, 2020 |
| India- US | Both states finalised defence deals worth \$3 billion, including choppers, six AH-64E Apache Helicopters, and 24 MH-60R Sea Hawk helicopters to India from the U.S. | February 24-25, 2020 |
| India-UK | MoU to strengthen defence collaboration | February 2020 |
| India -Brazil | MoU for defence cooperation | January 24-27, 2020 |
| India -Finland | MoU for defence cooperation | January 15, 2020 |
| India -Russia | MoU for the procurement of AK-203 rifles | January 06, 2020 |
| India-UK | Establishment of an Aerospace and Defence Industry Group | November 2019 |
| India-UK | MoU to strengthen defence ties to combat the emerging threats | April 15, 2019 |
| India-Russia | S-400 Air defence missile system deal | October 05, 2018 |
| India-US | COMCASA: The Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement. | September 2018 |
| India-US | Military-Intelligence-Sharing Agreement | September 06, 2018 |
| India-US | India was granted the Strategic Trade Authorization-1 (STA-1) status. | July 30, 2018 |
| India-France | 14 inter-governmental agreements were signed including agreements on defence and security cooperation, space cooperation and civil nuclear cooperation. | March, 2018 |
| India-France | The Rafael Deal | September, 2016 |
| India-US | LEMOA: Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement | August, 2016 |

Source: Information is taken from the press releases of Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India²⁰

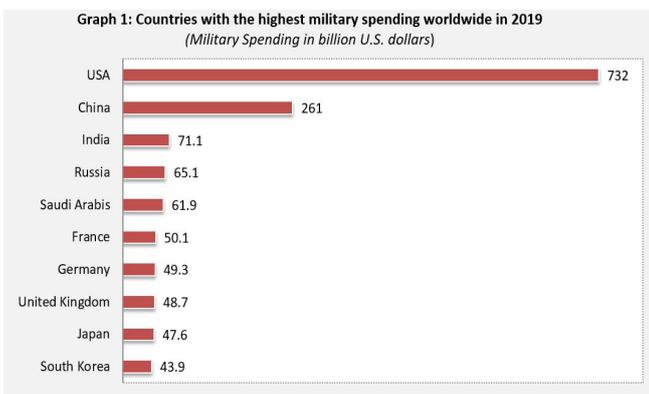
²⁰ Press Release, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/advanced-search-list.htm?keysrch>.

An increased risk of miscalculations

India's offensive actions and posturing underline the risk of an accidental escalation or miscalculation that may spark a more serious conflict due to its false sense of superiority. Despite having the third highest defence expenditure²¹ in the world, India suffered a military defeat in the aerial clashes with Pakistan and border confrontation with China. A false sense of superiority raises the cost of conflict for India and lowers the threshold for the use of force in South Asia.

Unfortunately, the Indian military officials tend to pursue various courses to send warning signals by conducting missile tests, contemplating missile strikes, deploying ballistic missiles, policy and public statements, and high official meetings to counter "collusive threats" from the neighbouring states.²² These aggressive threats of use of force against Pakistan and China may trigger misunderstandings regarding India's intentions among its adversarial state and could lead to intense clashes.²³ Thus, signalling the use of force, while negating the adversary's resolve to retaliate, raises the risk of a miscalculation that could be seriously destabilising for South Asia's strategic stability.

Graph 1: Countries with the highest military spending worldwide in 2019



Source: SIPRI Yearbook, 2019²⁴

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Indian national approach is likely to work towards a three-pronged strategy of technological modernisation,

²¹ Amin Ahmed, "India has world's third biggest defence spending now," *Dawn*, April 28, 2020.

²² Rahul Bedi, "With New China Faceoff, India's Nightmare of a Two-Front War May Be Coming True," *The Wire*, last modified August 31, 2020, <https://thewire.in/security/india-china-pakistan-two-front-war>.

²³ Naveed Siddiqui, "FO reminds India of its 'defence limitations' in response to Indian air chief's remarks," *Dawn*, last modified October 09, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1584120>.

²⁴ SIPRI. "SIPRI yearbook," 2019, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/yb20_summary_en_v2.pdf.

the threat of a full-scale war, and a proxy war against Pakistan.

India's technological modernisation along with the rearmament program

India is pursuing military modernisation to expand the scope of military operations and counter the presumed two-front "collusive threat" from China and Pakistan. India's military modernisation focuses on three domains, including air, sea, and land. However, the country's military planners are more concerned with enhancing its air power to counterbalance its capabilities. This was evident in the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statements regarding the IAF's disadvantage of not having French Rafale aircraft in the wake of the PAF's Operation Swift Retort.²⁵ Later, in the backdrop of its tension with China, India received the first batch of five Rafale aircrafts in July 2020, and the second batch arrived in November 2020. India's technological modernisation along with rearmament, growing missile forces to conduct counterforce roles, and cyber and anti-satellite (ASAT) programs have drawn Pakistan's threat parameters broad and fuelled an arms race in the region.

India's offensive designs and the dangers of war

India's unilateral decision of the illegal annexation of the internationally disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir and the provocative statements of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) ministers against Gilgit-Baltistan have strained the India-Pakistan relations and suspended the diplomatic dialogue altogether. In an inflammatory statement, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar stated that India expected to have "physical jurisdiction" over Pakistan-administered Kashmir one day.²⁶ Also, the Indian state-run television and radio channels started broadcasting weather updates of Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan regions. The Indian Army also has intensified ceasefire violations along the Line of Control (LoC) and pursued the rhetoric of "launch pads" to conduct a false flag operation against Pakistan to justify the allegations of terrorist infiltrations.²⁷ To counter such offensive designs, Pakistan has declared

²⁵ "Accepting defeat from Pakistan, Modi whines over Rafale aircraft's shortage," *Dunya News*, last modified March 02, 2019, <https://dunyanews.tv/en/World/480811-Accepting-defeat-Pakistan-Modi-whines-Rafale-aircraft>.

²⁶ "India expected to have 'physical jurisdiction' over Pakistan occupied Kashmir one day, says EAM S Jaishankar," *Financial Express*, last modified September 17, 2019, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/india-expected-to-have-physical-jurisdiction-over-pakistan-occupied-kashmir-one-day-says-eam-s-jaishankar/1709153/>.

²⁷ "Pakistan asks UN to seek proofs from India about 'terror launch pads'," *Dawn*, last modified May 03, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1554144>.

the policy of Quid Pro Quo Plus²⁸ to deter conventional attacks and reduce the space for war in the region.

Sub-conventional warfare to destabilise Pakistan

India's high-tech conventional power advantages have been neutralised by China and Pakistan, over the years. Due to Pakistan's Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD), Indian policymakers are drifting away from their notions of limited war to asymmetric warfare against Pakistan. Evidently, India has remained involved in sponsoring terrorist and insurgent groups in Pakistan by providing funds, weapons, ammunition, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to disrupt the internal security and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). India's Security Advisor Ajit Doval, furnished a "grey-zone strategy" based on the offensive defence to boost terror and subversive campaigns against Pakistan.²⁹ Later, former Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar, in a statement endorsed the use of proxies against Pakistan. Indian national Kulbhushan Sudhir Jadhav's arrest from Pakistan's Balochistan province further stamped the role of Indian assistance in the low-intensity insurgency in Balochistan.³⁰ Pakistan recently publicised a dossier containing the evidence of Indian destabilising activities in Pakistan to the international community to draw attention toward India's terror-sponsorship in the country.³¹

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As the future challenges are explored, the following key recommendations are made for consideration:

- i. India's shift from the traditional defensive posture to a more offensive posture against Pakistan compels it to formulate an unconventional countermeasure to avoid the arms race in the region. In such dynamics, Pakistan should remain committed to relying on its policy of full spectrum deterrence to counter external aggression instead of engaging itself in a tit-for-tat competitive cycle of missiles and arms race.
- ii. Pakistan and China should enhance their bilateral economic and strategic cooperation to become

²⁸ "Pakistan's Policy of 'Quid Pro Quo Plus': Remarks by Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai (Retd) at the IISS London," *Strafasia*, last modified February 07, 2020, <https://strafasia.com/gen-kidwai-speech-iiiss-ciss-workshop-london-6-february-2020/>.

²⁹ "From 'Defensive' to 'Offensive Defence': The Doval Doctrine in Action," *Voice of the Nation: Organiser*, last modified March 05, 2019, <https://www.organiser.org/Encyc/2019/3/5/From-Defensive-to-Offensive-Defence.html>.

³⁰ "Timeline: How the Kulbhushan Jadhav saga unfolded," *Dawn*, last modified July 18, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1493236>.

³¹ Anwar Iqbal & Naveed Siddqui, "Pakistan shares dossier on India's 'terror campaign' with UN secretary general," *Dawn*, last modified November 25, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1592313>.

more effective in countering the Indo-U.S. strategic partnership. Having bilateral engagement in three domains including advance air, land and maritime cooperation, joint military exercises, and joint ventures for military equipment production can serve as a stabilising force to neutralise India's attempts to emerge as a dominant force in the region.

- iii. Pakistan has suffered immensely at the hands of terrorism. Irrefutable proofs of the terrorist activities in Pakistan by sponsored terrorist organisations are contrasting to India's self-portrayal as the victim. Growing antagonism to internally destabilise Pakistan requires a multi-pronged risk management strategy to counter the risk of terrorist activities. Though statistics show a decline in terrorist activities in Pakistan, however, its counter-terrorism strategy needs to be further recalibrated in a way that prevents terrorist groups from spreading their ideology. It is important to choke their finances, and reform the criminal justice system.
- iv. Signalling is viewed as a unique deterrence posture used many times with undeclared and declared nuclear weapon capability by India and Pakistan through different indirect means and styles. India's threats of use of force during a crisis increase the risk of inadvertent escalations and miscalculations. Thus, under such circumstances, there is a pressing need for an institutionalised mechanism to de-escalate tensions instead of sending strategic signals of military power or resolve. Regional powers should inspire Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) or preventive diplomacy to diffuse tensions and reduce the risks of miscalculations among the conflicting parties.

CONCLUSION

The border standoff between China-India in Ladakh and India-Pakistan tension on the Pulwama incident underscores Indian forces' difficulties in adopting technological advancements and incorporating military strategies as defined in its military doctrine. Prospects of a false flag operation and India's two-front war theory to acquire political, diplomatic, and foreign military support adds more vulnerabilities in the already fragile strategic stability of South Asia. Thus, Pakistan-China's expanding military and strategic relations comprising naval and military exercises, civil nuclear power cooperation, and growing economic ties under the CPEC is a viable strategy to counterweight destabilising impacts of the Indo-U.S. strategic partnership and maintain stability in the region.