



MILITARY CONTAINMENT
OF CHINA
A STRATEGY FOR INDIA

POLICY PAPER I

SPECIAL ISSUE I
"EVASION TO ACCEPTANCE: INDIA'S
APPROACH TO CHINA 2020-2030"

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Summary

- The rise of Asia as an economic powerhouse has its fair share of challenges, most notably the rivalry between India and China. The deterrence posture exhibited by the Indian military will play a major role in containing an assertive China.
- Xi Jinping unveiled ambitious military reforms in 2015, with a view of “winning informationized local wars”; and, in terms of military strength, China is far ahead compared to India. However, there are geographical and political challenges that restrict China's aggressive military aspirations.
- Developments in India’s military capability have led to offensive strategic planning. The significant shift from "deterrence by denial" to "deterrence by punishment" could restrain China's military capabilities.
- China's use of military force would be pedagogic, asserting the power differential between the two countries and attempting to establish psychological dominance. Despite China's disadvantages in Tibet and the Indian Ocean, the PLA could seek to achieve a sharp victory in selected areas.
- Developing a military force development strategy to contain China will require a certain realignment in the capabilities needed for a future war with China.

About the author



Lt. Gen. Hooda was commissioned into the 4th Battalion of the 4th Gorkha Rifles in 1976 and initially served in Nagaland during the peak of insurgency. As a Major General, he was responsible for counter-insurgency operations in Manipur and South Assam. From 2012 to 2016, Lt. Gen. Hooda was stationed in Jammu and Kashmir and retired as the Army Commander of Northern Command in 2016. In 2019 Lt. Gen. Hooda authored a comprehensive National Security Strategy document. He is one of India's foremost commentators on India's national security.

About this Special Issue

Recent events have brought home the realisation that China's rise is bound to have serious implications for India and other smaller states in the region. It is now clear that India-China relations may be at an inflection point. An increasingly aggressive China is pushing at its peripheries to announce its arrival at the global stage. While this has been happening for quite some time in the South China Sea, India is its most recent victim in South Asia. It is therefore necessary that India recognises this geopolitical reality and puts together a coherent strategy to balance China. To this end, this special issue consists of articles that make policy prescriptions for India for the next decade.

The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council for Strategic and Defense Research. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.csd.org), together with additional information on the subject.

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Introduction

We are truly in the Asian century. By 2040, the Asian region could account for more than half of global GDP, about 40 percent of global consumption, and define the next phase of globalization. In large part, this rise of Asia will be driven by China, but in this economic growth also lie the seeds of conflict as an increasingly powerful China becomes more assertive in the region.

India sees itself as a potential global power, propelled by a growing economy, demographic potential, and an important geostrategic location astride the Indian Ocean. Two neighboring rising powers will inevitably compete with each other, and this rivalry has now manifested itself in the unprecedented transgression by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh. Even if the current crisis is peacefully resolved, the nature of India-China relations will, in the near future, be marked by suspicion and hostility.

In view of the growing disparity in economic and military power, containing China will require a deft approach that combines all elements of national power. One key component of India's strategy will be the deterrence posture exhibited by the military. This is a serious challenge as the Indian military has been saddled with inadequate budgets and slow-paced reforms and modernization. In the decade ahead, these issues will have to be addressed with greater seriousness if India's military power is to play a role in protecting our sovereign interests from an assertive China.

This paper will briefly look at the focus areas of recent reforms carried out by PLA and the India-China military balance. It will then analyze the warfighting strategies of both countries before finally suggesting a force development strategy for India's armed forces.

PLA's Military Reforms

China's Defence White Paper of 2006 outlined a three-step development strategy in modernizing its national defence and armed forces. The first step was to lay a solid foundation by 2010, the second was to make major progress around 2020, and the third to basically reach the strategic goal of building informationized armed forces and being capable of winning informationized wars by the mid-21st century.

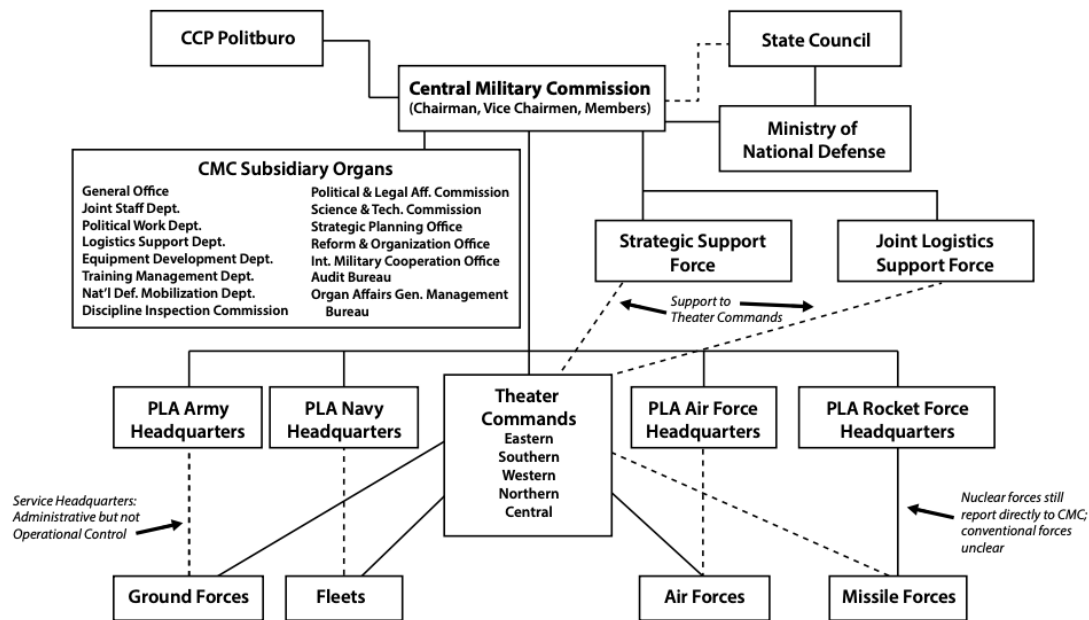
At this time, the PLA was organized into seven Military regions, seven air Commands, and three navy fleets. The PLA Army did not have its own headquarters, and its administrative functions were carried out by the four General Departments that were largely dominated by the army. One major weakness in the PLA structure was a lack of integration and joint operational planning.

In 2015, President Xi Jinping unveiled the most ambitious of military reforms with the objective of "winning informationized local wars." The reforms included restructuring the seven military regions into five joint theatre commands and the reorganization of four General Departments into 15 Central Military Commission (CMC) departments and offices.

A separate Army headquarters was **established**, and China's Second Artillery Force was upgraded to a full service by establishing the PLA Rocket Force. A newly raised Strategic Support Force unified China's space, cyber, electronic warfare, and psychological warfare, and a Joint Logistics Support Force was created to provide strategic and operational logistics support to the new joint theater commands.

China's navy has surpassed the U.S. navy in numbers of battle force ships, meaning the types of ships that count toward the quoted size of the U.S. Navy.ⁱ China's naval modernization efforts include the acquisition of anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles, submarines, surface ships, aircraft, unmanned vehicles, and supporting C4ISR (command and control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) systems.ⁱⁱ

PLA Structure Post Reform



Source: *Saunders and Wuthnow, 2016*

In addition to these reforms, organizational changes have included converting divisions to combined arms brigades, the expansion of Special Operations Forces and the Marine Corps, and placing the People's Armed Police under the CMC.

In his work report to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, Xi Jinping set **three developmental benchmarks** for the PLA, including becoming a mechanized force with increased informatized and strategic capabilities by 2020, a fully modernized force by 2035, and a worldwide first-class military by midcentury.

In analyzing the PLA restructuring, a recent RAND Corporation study has concluded:

“When fully implemented, the restructuring will mean that the PLA will have a more centralized C2 structure and streamlined bureaucracy...Operationally, the restructuring should also improve jointness and enhance PLA power projection capabilities; and it likely will render by 2035 (if not before) a PLA that is more capable of increasing the risks and costs of U.S. and allied contingency responses in the Indo-Pacific region. The PLA in this time frame likely will be capable of

contesting all domains of conflict—ground, air, sea, space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic environment.” (Scobell et al. 2020)

Despite its impressive reforms, the PLA faces some institutional challenges in transforming into a world-class military. The PLA's traditional culture is hierarchical, and decision making is top-down. This inhibits individual decision making and mission delegation. The PLA needs to effectively integrate new technologies and processes in the execution of dynamic joint military operations and manage the cultural shift from a traditional ground-force-centric model towards joint operations.

India-China Military Balance

Type of Equipment	China	India
Total Aircraft	3210	2123
Combat Aircraft	1232	538
Transport Aircraft	224	250
Attack Helicopter	281	23
Combat Tanks	3500	4292
SP Artillery	3800	235
Field Artillery	3600	4060
Rocket Projectors	2650	266
Aircraft Carrier	2	1
Submarines	74	16
Destroyers	36	10
Frigates	52	13
Mine Warfare	29	3

Source: *Global Firepower 2020 Military Strength Ranking*

The chart shows the military balance between India and China. However, it would be simplistic to draw direct conclusions from the number of platforms. China's threat perceptions are not limited to India and include disputes in the East and South China Seas, the problem of Taiwan's independence, instability on the Korean peninsula, and a contest against U.S. dominance in the Pacific Ocean.

Along the LAC, the PLA will face significant challenges in the application of military forces. The Himalayan watershed that forms a large part of the border is a formidable obstacle, and the

Indian Army has deployed a considerable number of acclimatized soldiers in well-constructed defences. Logistics and terrain difficulties will limit the number of soldiers that can be employed by the PLA. Operating from high-altitude airfields in Tibet will restrict the payload capabilities of PLA Air Force (PLAAF), and limit sustained high-tempo air operations.

In the maritime domain, India has dominance in the Northern Indian Ocean over the Sea Lanes of Communication that carry 80 percent of China's oil imports. While there is growing concern in India over the increasing presence of PLA Navy (PLAN) in the Indian Ocean, it is generally accepted that currently, "neither China nor Pakistan can seriously threaten India's main axes of maritime approach." However, this could change in the future with the rapid expansion of the PLAN.

With this background, let us turn to the Indian and Chinese warfighting strategies in case of a conflict along the Northern borders. While studying these strategies, it is essential to look at both the continental and maritime domains. Airpower will play a crucial role, but it will generally be in support of winning the battle on land and at sea. A comparison of the strategies will also throw up a force development strategy for the Indian military to construct a strong capability that acts as a deterrent to China's use of military force against India.

India's Military Strategy against China

India's military strategy is based on a realistic appraisal of The PLA's ability to conduct large-scale offensive operations along the difficult terrain of the Northern borders. After the 1962 war, India's deployment along the LAC was fairly sparse and primarily to guard against any surprise attack. Large forces were held in reserve.

The Sumdorong Chu incident of 1986 saw a significant change in the Indian deployment along the LAC. In response to an intrusion by the PLA in the Tawang sector, the Indian Army airlifted a brigade to the intrusion area and, over the next one year, strengthened its forward deployment.

Although the situation at Sumdorong Chu took several years to stabilize, the standoff, as mentioned by Shivshankar Menon in his book *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy*, "served a political purpose." It led to a diplomatic rapprochement with the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to Beijing in 1988, and the signing of the "Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control" in 1993. However, this

period of calm lulled India into some complacency, and infrastructure development on the LAC was neglected.

During this period, China was engaged in carrying out massive infrastructure improvements in Tibet, including the operationalization of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in 2006 that significantly reduced the time required for PLA's mobilization into Tibet. It was in the mid-2000s that India took note of the growing mismatch in infrastructure on both sides of the LAC. In 2006, a **decision** was taken to build 73 strategic roads along the LAC, and in 2010, **two new divisions** were raised to strengthen the deployment in Arunachal Pradesh.

In 2013, the Indian government sanctioned the **raising** of a Mountain Strike Corps for the Northern border. Although the Mountain Strike Corps is only **partially raised** (due to financial constraints), and infrastructure development has been slower than planned; there has been a change in strategic thinking.

The thought process in the Indian Army is to make it prohibitive for the PLA to achieve significant territorial gains across the LAC. The additional defensive reserves and the Mountain Strike Corps have provided strength in the deployment along the LAC, as well as a limited capacity to undertake a counter-offensive into Chinese territory.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) has traditionally held an edge over PLAAF as its airfields are located in the plains enabling air operations with full payloads. PLAAF, operating from high altitude airfields with rudimentary facilities, would be forced to operate with reduced payloads.ⁱⁱⁱ

Along with the Indian Army, the IAF has also enhanced its presence along the Northern borders. In 2009, Su-30 aircraft were **deployed** at the Tezpur airbase and Hasimara, in West Bengal, is being readied for Rafale aircraft. There has also been an increase in strategic airlift capability. The induction of the C-130, the C-17, and the Chinook helicopters has significantly improved the ability to airlift additional forces to a threatened sector rapidly.

Its geographical location influences India's maritime strategy. The 2016 Maritime Security Strategy document states:

“India’s central position in the IOR, astride the main International Shipping Lanes (ISLs), accords distinct advantages. It places the outer fringes of the IOR and most choke points almost equidistant from India, thereby facilitating reach, sustenance and mobility of its maritime forces across the region. India is,

therefore, **well positioned** to influence the maritime space, and promote and safeguard its national maritime interests, across the IOR.”

The Indian Navy has a good maritime domain awareness capability through its P-8I Poseidons that is now supplemented by Su-30 aircraft armed with the BrahMos missiles **based at Thanjavur** in Tamil Nadu. The navy also has an ambitious plan to build three aircraft carriers and six nuclear attack submarines for sea control and sea denial.

Currently, India has a huge geographical advantage. The PLAN’s entry into the Indian Ocean is through a number of narrow straits that can be dominated by the Indian Navy. In addition, the Indian Navy could engage in commerce warfare by interdicting Chinese trade through the Indian Ocean. The **interdiction** is aimed at “applying strategic leverage, including psychological pressure, against the adversary by disrupting his freedom to use the seas for military purposes” and hindering “his efforts for movement of commodities required by his national strategy.”

These developments in India’s military capability have led to a more offensive mindset in strategic planning. Two noted Indian experts have pointed out that the new Indian military strategy has shifted from "deterrence by denial" to "deterrence by punishment".^{iv}

China’s Military Strategy

China’s 2013 Defense White Paper outlines four different kinds of conflicts that China must prepare to face in the future:

- A large-scale, high-intensity defensive war against a hegemonic country attempting to slow down or end China’s rise.
- A relatively large-scale, relatively high-intensity anti-separatist war against Taiwan independence forces.
- Medium-to-small scale, medium-to-low intensity self-defense counter operations in case of territorial disputes or if the internal instability of neighbors spills over Chinese borders.
- Small-scale, low-intensity operations intended to counter terrorist attacks and preserve stability.^v

China does not visualize fighting a high-intensity war against India. Although China is often called an expansionist power, it is unlikely that it will risk a major conflict with India to stake its

territorial claims that are mainly in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Such a war would be too bloody for the PLA, and victory uncertain.

China's use of military force would be pedagogic in nature, asserting the power differential between the two countries and attempting to establish psychological dominance. The Chinese war aims would be to present India with such adverse military conditions that she is forced to sue for peace on Chinese terms. The PLA would not seek to occupy large tracts of territory but achieve a sharp victory over the Indian Army in selected areas. The Chinese military would exploit its advantages and shield its weaknesses by using superior technology in the areas of cyber, space, electronic warfare, and missile warfare.

Since the initiative in most contingencies would be with China, the PLA would carry out adequate preparations before launching operations. These preparations would be aimed at nullifying its disadvantages in airpower over Tibet and in the Indian Ocean. Additional forces would be inducted into Tibet by both rail and road. There would not be an open declaration of hostilities at this stage, and therefore, the mobilization of forces into Tibet would not invite cross-border retaliation.

In addition to ground forces, PLAAF would activate its 14 airbases in Tibet with 4th generation aircraft like the J-10, J-11, and Su-30MKK. An extensive air defense umbrella would be set up, comprising medium-range Surface to Air missiles like the HQ-12 and HQ-16, and area defense systems like the S-300 and HQ-9, supplemented by the newly acquired S-400.

It is estimated that the PLA Rocket Force has about 1,200 short-range ballistic missiles in its inventory (DF-11, DF-15, and DF-16), a number of which could be moved into positions from where they could strike Indian strategic targets.

During this period, additional PLAN assets, particularly submarines, would be sent to the Indian Ocean. Surface vessels could be positioned at Djibouti and Gwadar, and anti-ship ballistic missiles like the DF-21D and DF-26 would be deployed in their operational locations.

The war could begin with the launch of ballistic missile attacks against strategic targets and Indian military airfields. In 2015, RAND Corporation carried out a study that included the Chinese capability to attack U.S. airbases in the Western Pacific with ballistic missiles. It was estimated that if the PLA employed 36 ballistic missiles against the Kadena Airbase at Okinawa (12,000 feet, twin runway), it could close the airbase for fighter operations for four days. Indian

airbases have shorter runway lengths and currently have a limited capability to defend against attacks by ballistic missiles.

The PLA would extensively use its electronic warfare and cyber capability, combined with psychological operations to achieve information dominance and degrade India's Command and Control (C2) networks. A **C2 system** is seen as "the heart of information collection, control, and application on the battlefield. It is also the nerve center of the entire battlefield." The PLA believes that **future battles** will not be based on the destruction of enemy forces but will be a confrontation between operational systems like C2, intelligence, and firepower systems. If these can be degraded, the enemy loses the will to fight.

Limited ground offensives would be launched to capture key terrain under cover of massive artillery barrages and precision strikes against choke points like bridges and to cut off key roads to delay the arrival of army reinforcements. A large-scale airborne offensive is unlikely as the PLAAF will be unable to achieve a favorable air situation that is an essential condition for such an operation.

PLAN is conscious of the significant advantages that the Indian Navy enjoys in the Indian Ocean and the vulnerability of the Chinese maritime trade route. PLAN would attempt to push in maximum naval assets into the Indian Ocean before the start of the conflict. The maritime contest would hinge around India's maritime domain awareness and its success in preventing a surge of PLAN assets into the Indian Ocean.

It would be risky to hazard a guess as to the ultimate result of an India-China conflict, but an understanding of the Chinese warfighting strategy could provide pointers for a force development strategy to be pursued by India.

Force Development Strategy

Developing a military force development strategy to contain China will require an understanding of the type of capabilities required for a future war with China. While seeking to maximise our geographical advantages along the Himalayan watershed and in the Indian Ocean, we must be conscious of areas where the PLA has been focusing its efforts. It is likely that the PLA would want to minimize bloody, physical battles along the LAC. They will engage in war from afar, employing long-range missiles to target strategic locations, cyberattacks on India's critical infrastructure, electronic warfare to degrade the battlefield command and

control networks, all with an attempt to achieve information dominance. There will be battles fought at land, sea, and air, but these could be limited both in scope and impact.

India's capability development must be based on the type of war that could be forced upon us and not the one that we necessarily wish to fight. After the recent **Chinese intrusions** in Ladakh, there are calls to complete the stalled raising of the Mountain Strike Corps. Keeping in mind that significant accretions in the defense budget are unlikely, the cost of adding more boots on the ground with a desire to undertake offensives across the LAC should be weighed against the building of more essential capabilities.

Organizational Restructuring

The appointment of the Chief of Defense Staff has put in place a plan for creating joint structures and ensuring integration in defense strategy. The raising of joint theatre commands must be carried out after a thorough review by all three services and as part of an overall plan for restructuring the armed forces. Piecemeal raisings, starting with those that appear to be "**low-hanging fruit**", could showcase progress but leave significant capability development unaddressed.

Some suggestions for restructuring, based on the military threat from China, are enumerated below:

- Create two joint theatre commands for the Northern borders. There have been some suggestions to have a single theatre command to deal with China, but with our current state of C2 and surveillance networks, controlling the battle over the entire border with China by one command could prove difficult.
- Integrate the Eastern Naval Command (ENC) and the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) into one command. South-East Indian Ocean will be the most critical area of maritime operations, and the current arrangement of the ENC under the Navy Chief and the ANC administered by the Chief of Defense Staff is not an appropriate arrangement for integrated operations. It also prevents the full utilization of the geographic potential of Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- Enhance the Defense Cyber Agency to a full-fledged Cyber Command capable of deterrence and offensive operations in the field of cyber and information warfare.

- Carry out a review of the role of Special Forces with a focus on operations across our borders. Tibet is the soft underbelly of China but cannot be exploited in war unless preparations are made in advance.

Capability Development

Our excessive reliance on manpower and the number of major platforms will need to be replaced by capabilities that maximize our geographical advantage and neutralize PLA's superiority. Some areas of focus are:

- All three services must look at technology enhancement in the area of robotics, networked unmanned systems, Artificial Intelligence, surveillance, and C2.
- Carry out greater investment in Electronic Warfare, Cyber, and Space as these are the realms in which future wars will be fought. If we are unable to neutralize China's advantages in these areas, deterrence cannot be achieved.
- India's intelligence shortfalls have been routinely exposed. There must be a strengthening of both technical and human intelligence capability across the Northern border.
- Improve capabilities to enhance maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean, coupled with long-range precision strike capability by air and naval assets.
- The Indian Navy must carry out a vigorous debate on whether it wants to invest more in an undersea fleet rather than surface vessels.
- The Indian Air Force should acquire greater capability for standoff attacks against strategic targets in Tibet through both manned and unmanned aerial systems. There should be greater attention towards the procurement of unmanned systems that complement and support fighter aircraft.
- Strategic and tactical airlift capability must be enhanced. The ability to quickly move troops to threatened sectors will lessen the requirement to ab initio deploy a large

number of soldiers on the ground and could lead to an overall reduction of manpower in the Indian Army.

- The Indian Army must improve its battle awareness and lethality by downsizing its numbers and diverting the funds saved towards greater modernization.
- The military must find ways to counter China's conventional missile threat. This will require a building of both a robust missile defence and an offensive capability comprising short and medium-range ballistic missiles. The Strategic Forces Command needs to be suitably reorganized and tasked for this purpose.

Conclusion

The India-China strategic rivalry has roots in history and geography, but this rivalry has been buried under a benign narrative of China's peaceful rise and India's hopes of managing a powerful neighbor through diplomacy and political chemistry. These myths now stand exposed.

While all aspects of India's relations with China will need reexamination, it should also trigger a deep introspection about the value of military power in containing China. John. J. Mearsheimer, the architect of the 'offensive realism' theory, writes, "In international politics, a state's power is ultimately a function of its military forces and how they compare with the military forces of rival states."

Looking at the current trajectory, it appears that the power differential between India and China will only increase in the future. However, with military reforms, selective capability development, and a sound strategic approach, the Indian military can be a strong deterrent to China's coercive use of force. This will require one decade of extremely focused effort.

ⁱO'Rourke, Ronald. "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," n.d., 42.

ⁱⁱIbid

ⁱⁱⁱBhatia, Vinod K. "Airpower Across the Himalayas: A Military Appreciation of Chinese and IAFs," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

^{iv}Mukherjee, Anit and Joshi, Yogesh. "From Denial to Punishment: The Security Dilemma and Changes in India's Military Strategy Towards China," *Asian Security*, 15 no. 1 (2018), 25–43.

^v Scobell, Andrew, Edmund J. Burke, Cortez A. III Cooper, Sale Lilly, Chad J. R. Ohlandt, Eric Warner, and J. D. Williams. "China's Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition." Product Page. RAND Corporation, 2020.