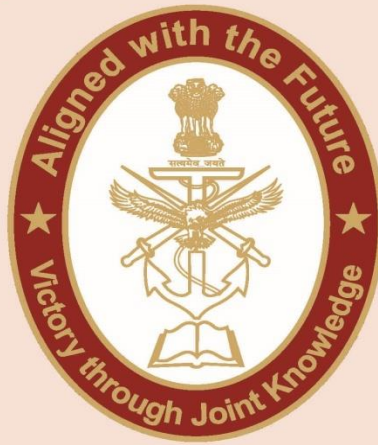


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

**DETERRENCE
PARADOX
NORTHERN
BORDERS**



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"A nation has security when it does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war, and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by war."

- Walter Lippmann, 1943

General

The recent turn of events on our Northern Borders and immediate neighbourhood have raised more questions than answers. The official information dissemination trickles have led to ambiguities, contradictions and inconsistencies, obscuring the clarity of conflict situation, conflict resolution and strategic outcomes. The average countryman thus derives his perceptions viewing endless debates, which may be devoid of on-ground realities. Indeed, as a nation, we need to invest a lot more in the Information domain as a strategic tool of national security. ***However, what stands as a matter of critical concern and immediate introspection at the operational and strategic level, is the resilience of our conventional deterrence on the Northern Borders.*** The key question thus being addressed in this article is - “Has deterrence failed on our northern borders resulting in the recent Chinese unprecedented aggressive trans LAC actions”? Or, “Has the dissuasive deterrence held firmly to stymie escalation into a bigger conflict”? Or, “Has the lack of credible deterrence and failure to execute time and place sensitive “Quid Pro Quo” actions, resulted in a compromised conflict de-escalation outcome”? The central theme and reality thus remain that expansionism and revisionism by our adversaries on our borders remain undeterred, which is a matter of concern for the nation.

National Security and Deterrence

National security is an amalgam of political stability and democratic maturity, human resource optimisation, decisive national leadership, economic resilience, technological competence, indigenous industrial base, availability of natural resources and finally a dynamic defence capability leading up to a strong state of art military deterrence. Information warfare and strategic communications remain important tools for conveying this intent. ***More importantly, the emergence of the multi-domain threat spectrum, escalating internal vulnerabilities and***

an overarching condition of strategic volatility, under which national security is now required to operate, mandates a nation to invest on credible deterrence against future threats and build up time-sensitive desired capabilities to counter them. This would add resilience to the national security strategy and the responsibility of the state as a net security provider. The bottom line most relevant in the Indian context is that the intentions of our adversaries can change very fast while building our capabilities take a long time. The wise must never be found wanting.

The pendulum of war and peace on our turbulent disputed borders will continue to have its dynamics in terms of competing challenges of gaining ascendancy in the strategic space, time, force and information domain. The probability of our nuclear-armed neighbours to engage in a decisive full-scale war is low. To achieve their political aims they are likely to exploit a combination of the plethora of options available lower down in the spectrum of conflict. The threat manifestation on our Western and more significantly on our Northern borders recently are witness to the same. This translates into the imperative of honing our conventional deterrence against the revisionist strategic culture of our adversaries, ranging from brewing proxy war to incremental territorial expansion. Deterrence in the Indian strategic security construct is thus aimed at punitive deterrence (offensive) on the western front and dissuasive to credible deterrence (defensive) on the northern front. Punitive deterrence is based on the premise of assured retribution and making the cost prohibitive than the benefit of proxy war or territorial aggression. Dissuasive deterrence or deterrence by denial aims to deter aggression by convincing an adversary that the aggression would fail to achieve its operational and strategic aims. Thus, status quo will be construed as a victory by the defender. Credible deterrence in its more dynamic form includes a limited offensive capability for a quid pro quo gain and the dilution of the aggressor's offensive capacity by forcing him

to divert resources to his defence, thereby generating ability to take the war to the enemy and increasing the political cost of aggression. This would cause strategic embarrassment and de-facto defeat to the aggressor. ***However, while our deterrence has been repeatedly put to test in the recent past, it has also led to the exposure of strategic and operational voids, vulnerabilities and response mechanisms, in our deterrence capabilities. These need to be addressed expeditiously before the next round, which may well be around the corner.*** At the tactical level, the courage and valour of our brave hearts have given the aggressor more than a nightmare. Deterrence, particularly on our Northern Front, thus needs to keep pace with the realism of evolving geopolitics and emerging threats to national security.

Deterrence, Coercion and Compellence

Deterrence. In military parlance, wars are fought to ensure lasting peace and deterrence is an instrument towards the furtherance of that peace. Today's changing strategic environment remains volatile and uncertain, but deterrence remains fundamental to national security. However, the ***application of deterrence concepts and capabilities require formulation in the context of adversaries behaviour and strategic culture.*** There are many concepts and functional aspects of deterrence, but generally, deterrence involves three essential components which are capability, credibility and communication.

> **Capability.** Deterrence can only be effective if the threat on which it is based is militarily capable and sufficiently large to deter. Capability is a factor of both tangibles of modernization, technology empowerment, joint force capability, and intangibles include superior strategy, superior tactics, troop morale, battle inoculation, training, and military leadership. Thus it relates to possessing the desired multi-domain military capability to carry out plausible

military retaliatory threats, backed by resolute diplomacy and decisive political leadership. Traditional assessments of the capabilities by aggressor are of only limited predictive value unless accompanied by a sound understanding of what the deterrer's national values and culture, how it perceives the conflict, and how it makes decisions, just to name but a few of the critical variables. Military capability is also communicated through joint force posturing, operational readiness, technology empowerment, and indigenous warfighting and war endurance capacity. The milder the capability, the more willing and bold the aggressor will be for coercion. ***In real geopolitics, only strength is respected and weakness exploited. A fact borne by the unprecedented Chinese aggression across the LAC.*** Another undisputed fact is that deterrence lies primarily in the cognitive domain. ***Thus, operational readiness must aim to effectively detect, deny, degrade, and defeat any decisive advantage the aggressor may seek. The ability for "Quid Pro Quo" operations would add teeth to this deterrence capability and thus must be an integral part of our demonstrated capability.*** The notion of military victory on our Northern borders, should it escalate into conflict, would thus rest on ensuring status quo denying China its military and political objectives, while retaining the ability to execute limited offensive operations in selected areas. While the strategy must aim at a credible deterrence, the acme of skill would lie in winning by deterring, without fighting. ***Negative signalling such as dwindling defence budget, absence of a strong indigenous defence industrial base, operational hollowness and rethink on Mountain Strike Corps, create chinks in deterrence capabilities.***

> **Credibility.** Relates to declared intent and plausible resolve to protect national interests. It's a function of decisive political will, agile diplomacy and above all a demonstrated joint force military

capability to ensure territorial integrity. It's beyond the rhetorics of petty party politics, hyper-nationalism or playing to the domestic galleries. The most important aspect to understand about credibility is that it is not a one-way action, but rather involves a reciprocal relationship between the two players in which perception and actions are crucial operational components. The deterrer, more importantly, the aggressor must believe beyond any doubt that deterrent threats will be carried out. ***Credibility does not only refer to the initial tactical response - but a deterrer must also be prepared to stay the course once the costs and pressures begin to mount at the operational and strategic level. A lesson we need to learn from the recent stand-off on our Northern Borders.*** Thus, a fundamental difference exists between the concepts of deterrence and defence: ***deterrence seeks to make conflict look bad to the enemy, while defence seeks to make conflict better for oneself by stalling the aggressor. This is the essence and something the Indian establishment would do well to differentiate and arm its deterrence capabilities.*** Credibility also has a close bonding to commitment. Commitment is political in nature and often put to test especially against a powerful adversary. ***When a challenge is directed against vital interests of the state, credibility is virtually assured. However, it is where commitment is questioned, that challenges are most likely to occur.*** A strong political will is required to commit forces and to convince a potential aggressor that the deterrer will carry out a threatened action irrespective of the cost, in the pursuit of preserving its national interest.

> **Communication**. It has three key strategic facets. Communication to the adversary of assured retribution where vital interests threaten, communication to the domestic audience of nations resolve to preserve national interests based on the ethos of "Nation Above All", and communication to the world community of the nation's maturity and commitment to global peace, yet firmness

to use of force should its national interests be compromised. It thus inherently involves a strategy of politico-diplomatic dissuasion, economic decoupling, and strategic messaging. **Communication should include “red lines” considered unacceptable, the response to any of the adversary’s unacceptable actions, and the demonstrated will to carry out the deterrent threat.** Thus, the ability to communicate to the potential aggressor that the costs and/or risks of a given course of aggressive action he might take outweigh its benefits, in clear and unambiguous terms, is vital. **Yet again the Indian national security establishment would do well to state it as firmly to the Northern adversary, as they do to the Western adversary.** While it may be desirable to restrict a potential aggressor’s access to sensitive military information, lack of showcasing abilities may reduce deterrence effectiveness. Thus, plausible communication must showcase military strength, its deploy ability, employability and capability.

Coercion. Much of China’s foreign policy and strategic behaviour, is built either directly or indirectly around the dual strategy of coercion and inducement. United States recent report on Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China stated: **“As China has grown in strength, so has the willingness and capacity of the Chinese Communist Party to employ intimidation and coercion in its attempts to subjugate perceived threats to its interests, towards the furtherance of its strategic objectives”.** Tactical actions and belligerence are thus aimed at strategic coercion, be it in the Indo Pacific or the Himalayas. **In the context of China’s recent aggressive stance on the Himalayas, the aim is not just tactical “salami-slicing” or incremental territorial expansion. The larger aim is stymieing the rise of India as a regional competitor, it’s global standing, and symbolic reprisal against its recent domestic and foreign policy initiatives, perceived as inimical to China’s national**

interests and vision. Keeping the LAC dispute live is thus perceived as leverage by China for its coercive strategy.

Compellence and Deterrence. Within the realm of strategic coercion, it is important to distinguish between deterrence and compellence, with particular reference to our northern borders. Deterrence and compellence couple demand for inaction and action, respectively, to a threat. Deterrence is easier than compellence, but this relationship is variable and mutually supporting. Whereas deterrence seeks to dissuade the target from doing something, compellence attempts to make the target change its behaviour—for example, to halt aggression, to withdraw from the disputed territory, and accept status quo as existed before the aggression. ***Thus creating counter friction points like occupying other disputed areas, and politico diplomatic cum economic pressure points, to compel the threat to a desired course of action must be part of the overall deterrence-compellence strategy on our Northern Front.*** This means making the expected value of continued aggression by China appear worse to its national interests, than the expected value of the status quo.

Strengthening Military Deterrence Along Northern Borders

The start point of giving teeth to military deterrence is to have an unambiguous threat assessment, realistic strategic scenario painting cum wargaming and well-defined deterrence tools, translating into time-sensitive capability manifestation for the warfighter. As long as we have turbulent and disputed borders and regional rivalry, ***CHINA constitute the PRIMARY THREAT, to Indian national security, both for NOW and the FUTURE.*** Further, in Kautiliya's own words "Your neighbour is your natural enemy and the neighbour's neighbour is your friend". The Chinese seem to have imbibed it and apply it well for collusive strategies, making a two front binary pull a reality. Thus LAC

territorial dynamics and “salami slicing” by a belligerent China, could manifest into escalatory dynamics, as being witnessed and thus act as a tripwire for a conflict situation. Besides other friction points like competing energy resources, economic decoupling, evolving geostrategic partnerships and water, could add fuel to the fire. ***While the threat of a conventional war may be low, but limited war remains a possibility. Thus standoffs leading to confrontation and escalating into limited conflict remains a reality.*** This is the reality of TODAY and not the future. Thus, without sounding alarmist, pending it as a future scenario, would be at the cost of national security. While China should be engaged diplomatically and politically to minimize conflict situation, the window must be optimized for credible deterrence capability generation.

Thus, the immediate ***need is to dynamically reorient, reshape, restructure, rebalance forces and have a focused time-sensitive capability development towards Northern Borders, in keeping with the shift and focus of our primary threat. For too long the comfort zone of counter insurgency/counter-terrorism and associated “number game” has evolved orientations and leadership of the regular army, diverted from operational art nuances of conventional wars, however limited the conflict may so manifest.*** Even at the strategic level, while counter-terrorism success makes big news, the fact is the Northern borders rumblings have more serious ramifications for national security and remains the primary task of the defence forces. ***Further, Army must free itself from the nuances of policing borders which may blunt its cutting edge. Instead, existing border guarding forces like BSF and ITBP need to be empowered with greater capabilities, better accountability and more responsive command and control structure. The concept of “One Border One Force” often debated merits implementation.*** Thus reorientation and rebalancing towards the Northern borders are imperative, while positive control on the CI/CT front can be maintained

by RR and PMF/CAPF forces, which in any case is their primary task. Certain rebalancing from the western front for operational and strategic flexibility is also a desirability.

Simultaneously it must be restated that the utility of force is a factor of deployability, employability and capability. Thus restructuring and reshaping as subsets of force transformation, to generate lean, agile, versatile and technology-enabled combined arms modular force, remains an exigency. ***The need for rapid deployment forces modular forces of Brigade and battalion level force, on the lines of planned Integrated Battle Groups, both with offensive and defensive orientation would add teeth to the force capability. These should be suitably located as reserves in addition to the independent integral defence capability for each sector. Ironically, capabilities like a light tank which have been glaring at our face since over a decade got put under the carpet due to status quo mindsets and lack of foresight. There is a need to revisit the Mountain Strike Corps sanctioned earlier but financially not supported. Similarly, our joint force C5ISR capabilities have been spoken more than manifestation. We need to walk the talk NOW as a nation.*** An effective transformation strategy in our context must tackle the following six issues: the “bigger the better” syndrome, the absence of a strategic culture exemplified by the void of a national security strategy, the sustenance and capabilities voids, the imbalance and lack of reforms in the defence budget, bureaucratic decision-making apathy and risk averseness, and the need to optimise jointness. ***Thus, to be sustainable it must address all three critical components; transformed military culture transformed the defence planning process and transformed joint service capabilities.***

Military deterrence is a tool that needs focus on land, sea, air, space, subsurface, cognitive and cyber domain. ***India is an oceanic power blessed with gifted geography and a coastline dominating the most important SLOCs and thus must optimise the sea power for its security***

concerns. Over the past few years, India has drawn global attention on the regional influence in the Indian Ocean and its role as a net security provider. Thus, corporative mechanisms with the United States, Japan, Australia, Vietnam and others particularly in Indo Pacific and the Indian Ocean have also been upgraded. These besides providing strength to the shared security deterrence mechanism provide economic clout and strengthens diplomacy. India also needs to invest in the strategically placed ***Andaman and Nicobar Islands for oceanic deterrence. Similarly, while India enjoys the air component military advantage over China, it needs to further add teeth to its deterrence capability, both in quantity and quality. The dimensions of space and cyber while finding their feet in the military calculus, also needs a far greater boost, to match future asymmetrical threats from China.***

The defence budget a key enabler and an indicator of the demonstrated will of the government to achieve the desired ends inevitably ends up as the prime villain. Given the pragmatic but limited nature of the defence budget, reducing revenue expenses and increasing capital availability poses the biggest hurdle. Besides the need for a budgetary rebalancing of revenue and capital heads, the sub-optimal allocation of resources particularly for modernization and sustenance are impinging upon the national security calculus. ***Ironically, the defence budget can never be enough, yet it must never be so insufficient too.*** The defence budget based on GDP's revised estimate for 2019-20; is at an all-time dip of 1.44% of GDP other than pensions (for FY 2020-21) and lower than the comparative figure before the 1962 conflict. ***The requirement is for incremental enhancement to meet the requirement of 2.5 to 3% of the GDP.*** Defence budgetary reforms must thus be pursued in right earnest, complementing the military transformation effort. ***A non-lapsable and dedicated modernization budget, despite its constitutional challenges, needs to fructify. An embargo must also be placed against fund transfer from the defence budget to other heads, which at times becomes a norm for populist budgeting. Besides, a special surge of***

budgetary allocation to address hollowness and infrastructure needs to be instituted. Failure to do so must be accompanied by accountability and responsibility of the decision-makers or tuning down the mandate laid down in the Raksha Mantri Operational Directive. ***In the meanwhile, the defence forces need a de-novo modernization outlook for fund optimisation, based on threat cum capability generation approach and priorities based on value, vulnerability and risk analysis.*** The risk of fighting the next war with the technologies, tools and mindsets of last war need caution. Besides, a nation must harness its defence industrial base to address its security concerns and focus on self-reliance in defence. ***Indeed, culturally we react only under crisis.*** Repeated knee jerk emergency procurements of the shelf from abroad, after every crisis, is a sign of myopic planning and unattended hollowness, which should not have existed and thus counterproductive. In particular investments in Defence R&D and evolving an integrated defence ecosystem is essential. Lastly but not the least is the human resource development, the greatest asset, particularly the higher military leadership at operational and strategic level needs remoulding of mindsets and professional orientation to the emerging threats on our Northern Borders.

Non-Military Dimensions of Deterrence

Definition of deterrence from the Dictionary of Modern Strategy and Tactics by Michael Keane is *"The prevention or inhibition of action brought about by fear of the consequences. Deterrence is a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction. It assumes and requires rational decision-makers. "A successful deterrence policy must thus be considered not only through the military lens, but also in political, economic, foreign policy, diplomacy and informational terms.* The prevention of crises of wars is not the only aim of deterrence. ***Thus, the Chinese three warfare***

strategy (media, psychological and legal warfare) to weaken its adversaries in regions constituting what it perceives to be its 'core interests', needs to be tackled by nonmilitary dimensions of deterrence as well. Besides, defending states must be able to resist the political and economic pressures of a belligerent adversary. If an armed conflict is avoided at the price of diplomatic, political or economic concessions to the demands of the potential adversary under the threat of war, then it cannot be claimed that deterrence has succeeded.

China's rise over the past two decades has sought to alter the landscape of global politics and strategic stability. **China's rise and assertive international posturing concerning territorial disputes both on land and at sea thus need to be deterred at two levels; global level and regional level.** At the global level, the focus must be encouraging China's integration into the rules-based global order, while deterring it from misadventures through an integrated security architecture. Such a collective security mechanism would also act as a deterrence, making the cost of Himalayan rumbling politically and economically untenable. **At the regional level, India can ill afford to lose its dwindling 'Strategic Space' in the neighbourhood. Chinese growing influence and investments in the immediate neighbourhood will in turn adversely impact the security calculus.** India needs to leverage Dragon's contradictions and fault lines to its advantage and show greater compassion to its neighbours and their aspirations. **India must thus endeavour to improve its geopolitical linkages like SAARC, ASEAN and QUAD etc, and harness deterrence based on multilateral and bilateral strategic mechanisms, both for economic development and security concerns.**

On the economic deterrence front, **a powerful, vibrant and resilient economy is a potent deterrent.** India thus needs to remain focused on economic revival and resilience as an important tool of deterrence. Economic sanctions, isolation and decoupling, the world over are seen as tools of coercion, to change the behaviour of a state. Thus, **while a strong economy as China which has created global dependencies, it has its vulnerabilities of global decoupling. A collective global effort**

towards economic decoupling and reducing dependencies will act as a deterrent to its confrontational behaviour. A term sometimes referred to as economic warfare. **India has done well to ban the Chinese apps even if it is symbolic, yet a part of strong strategic messaging.** Much more need to be done to tame the Dragon.

However, the present context of COVID impacted economic downturn, also poses security vulnerabilities to India that can be and in the instant case was exploited by the Chinese. **Thus, the myth that blinds India's security policy thinking, that domestic economic development can largely be a substitute for security policy stands exposed.** Economic recovery is only possible if the most critical pillar of national security, in terms of a strong military is in place.

Additionally, **in the non-military front, cyberspace is another emerging arena to apply deterrence and demonstrate strong signalling.** Cyber operations are fundamentally different from other platforms of kinetic means of destruction, in that they can be leveraged by a wide range of national actors including organized teams with network engineering and cybersecurity capabilities. A recent example where a large swath of Indian network traffic was commandeered through intrusive cyber protocols to another country before being processed is a case in point. India has the largest pool of young talent educated in the tools and applications of cyber-operations; remember that defence and offence are two sides of the same capability coin in cyberspace with a broad spectrum of cyber capabilities; signalling can be right from a simple point penetration of a network to an infrastructure systemic attack. **The implications are clear- cyber deterrence must form part of the strategic arsenal of a country as gifted with raw cyber talent;** it requires mustering of technology leadership within the strategic community and operating in harmony within the overall deterrence paradigm. Because **India must secure its networks against all potential adversaries with all manifest capabilities, cyber deterrence must complement the military forms of deterrence.** India must have the capability and intent to signal that hostile acts in cyberspace would be followed up unreservedly through all other necessary means- diplomatic, military and economic, to defend the nation.

Lastly, ***deterrence is also a critical factor of the political dispensation of the nation and its leadership's disposition to take strong decisive actions.*** A powerful, decisive and nationalistic leadership with majority support thus can strengthen the deterrence architecture and impacts the cognitive domain of the adversary. However, when two such leaders clash, while both may exhibit credibility, yet the one with greater commitment, who does not succumb to pressures, succeeds.

Conclusion

China presents a multifaceted challenge to India "Today". Relations with China while being managed from competition to cooperation, have all the potential to flare up to a future confrontation leading to conflict. While dealing with China has always remained one of India's biggest foreign policy challenges, today the asymmetry in economic and military capabilities between the two Asian giants is not balanced. ***China respects only strength and India would do well to emerge as China's equal without falling into a complacency trap. The challenge is greater in the non-contact, non-kinetic, informational, cyber and digital allied domains.***

China has also developed an all-weather relationship with Pakistan, which it employs as a proxy against India. This collusive support remains a reality and challenge for any future conflict for India, be it a one or two front conflict. China not settling the boundary dispute and holding it as domicile's sword leaves no doubt that undercurrents of conflict remain. ***Managing the rise of China and deterring its unilateral aggression in the region thus remains a strategic challenge for India.*** Thus, countering the threat from China is based more robustly on conventional deterrence with unlikely nuclear posturing.

India's current strategic deterrence against China has not achieved its objective as highlighted recently in Eastern Ladakh. Thus, managing China both in peace and war requires collaborative military, economic,

informational, diplomatic and political levers to deter its revisionist designs. ***While China may continue to ignite sparks, India will need to do much more in these domains to build up such levels of deterrence capacity that the military opposition withers without conflict.*** China's periodic forays in peacetime by way of transgression will have to be denied any psychological gains with due resolute military deterrence and astute political decisiveness to preserve its core national interests.

China would do well to recognise the Indian resilience, while India will do well to keep its powder dry against the deceptive Dragon. The nation must realise that the threat is knocking on your door.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.

End Notes

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