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# CHINA'S HYBRID THREATS IN 'GRAY ZONE' AGAINST INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

The July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah is generally considered as the textbook example of hybrid warfare. Following that war, the term 'hybrid warfare', as currently used, was coined by U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Frank G. Hoffman in 2006. Gray Zone has entered in to the lexicon of Western security analysts and academics, post-2013. ***The Gray Zone encompasses the space between peace and war in which aggressors use hybrid threats to shape the battlefield and achieve strategic objectives short of all-out, declared conflict.*** On the heels of Russia's actions in Eastern Ukraine, China carried out a broad array of activities in East China Sea and South China Sea, as also on the land borders against India, which are now been categorized as Gray Zone activities. Chinese activities in the Gray Zone support PRC leadership's overarching domestic, economic, foreign policy, and security objectives to further its hegemonic ambitions. In fact, there is no model or set formula for Gray Zone activities - military and non-military activities can be launched together also. However, there will always be a dilemma to assess which PRC Gray Zone tactics are most problematic. Hence, we need to evolve our own solutions both for offence and defence in the Gray Zone. There will be a requirement of greater synergy between all security architecture components. To ensure a credible deterrence and responsive capability against emergent Gray Zone threats, there is a need to institutionalise the whole of nation approach to the national security matters.

## INTRODUCTION

Hybrid warfare or hybrid threats are not new. Hybrid threats have been used as the alternative solution for conventional military conflicts since many years. However, after the end of Cold War, it was the 2006 Israel – Lebanon War, where Hezbollah (backed by Iran) employed a host of different tactics against Israel, which included guerilla warfare, innovative use of technology and effective information campaigning. Following that war, the term ‘hybrid warfare’, as currently used, was first introduced by U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Frank G. Hoffman in 2006;<sup>1</sup> wherein he referred to it as “complex irregular warfare”.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, in 2007, Hoffman gave the first definition of hybrid warfare. According to him, *“Hybrid wars can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors. Hybrid Wars incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.”*<sup>3</sup>

The July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah is generally considered as the textbook example of hybrid warfare. The Hezbollah’s domination was so complete that the Winograd Commission, appointed by the Israeli government, concluded in its 2008 final report that IDF had failed to deter and defeat Hezbollah in South Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and undeclared war in Eastern Ukraine – as Russian covert operatives and military units played crucial roles in both – have brought this subject to the forefront of discussion amongst the security analysts and academia.

Of late, Gray Zone or Gray Zone conflicts have entered in to the lexicon of Western security analysts and academics. The analysts have tried to split the post-2013 conflicts in to Hybrid Warfare and Gray Zone conflicts. The senior officers of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) defined **Gray Zone conflicts** as a segment of the conflict continuum “characterized by intense political, economic, information, and military competition more fervent in nature than normal steady-state diplomacy yet short of conventional war.”<sup>5</sup> While the **hybrid threats** are defined as “the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, terrorist forces, criminal elements, or a combination of these forces and elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects.”<sup>6</sup> Further, Gray Zone conflicts are those in which nation states and non-state actors use hybrid threats/tactics, such as fusing political and information warfare with non-violent civil resistance, to achieve strategic objectives without violating international norms or crossing established thresholds and leading

to open war.<sup>7</sup> For example, Russia used hybrid tactics to achieve its strategic objectives in destabilizing Ukraine and annexing Crimea without crossing a threshold that would draw other global powers in to the conflict against the Russians.

***Thus, the Gray Zone encompasses the space between peace and war in which aggressors use hybrid threats to shape the battlefield and achieve strategic objectives short of all-out, declared conflict.*** It emerges that ***the Gray Zone is an operational environment and not a type of conflict or warfare***, in the same way that Urban, Mountain or Desert Warfare are considered. Though, the tactics, techniques, procedures, and strategy used in each of these operational environments may differ, these areas or terrains do not qualify for a separate type of warfare in the same vein as Irregular or Conventional warfare. Similarly, ***Gray Zone describes conflict in an ambiguous operating environment in the “space” between peace and war.***<sup>8</sup>

Having visualized the complexity of emerging warfare in the modern context, it is proposed to study the subject under the following heads:

- Hybrid Warfare and Gray Zone Conflicts – Are these different or connected?
- The Russian Concept – ‘Non-linear Warfare’.
- China’s Concept - ‘Unrestricted Warfare’.
- China’s Gray Zone Activities against India.
- India’s Response.

## **HYBRID WARFARE AND GRAY ZONE CONFLICTS ARE THESE DIFFERENT OR CONNECTED?**

Hybrid threats take place or are applied across the entire spectrum of conflict, whether it is Gray Zone or open warfare. Hybrid threats employed are common to both. However, the major difference between the two are the overt use of conventional weapons / formations / tactics and a lack of ambiguity in open warfare hybrid threats, whereas the Gray Zone hybrid threats are characterized by the use of special operations forces, irregular forces, and criminal networks employing a mix of conventional weapons and irregular tactics in a single space and time while striving for ambiguity and non-attribution.<sup>9</sup> A recent example is the Russians use of Gray Zone hybrid threats in Eastern Ukraine, while in Crimea it used much more overt hybrid threats to annex the region. While not considered entirely a limited conventional war, Russia's actions to secure Crimea were overt enough to differentiate them from Gray Zone hybrid threats, as Russia did not seek to hide its actions or to avoid violating international norms, such as annexing a part of another sovereign country that would entangle them in a broader conflict with Ukraine and upset the international community.<sup>10</sup>

In view of the aforesaid, following inferences can be drawn:

- Hybrid warfare does not exist as a separate form of warfare on par with irregular and conventional warfare. Hybrid threats or measures adopted are best described as tactics used throughout the modes of warfare to achieve the objective.
- While operating in the Gray Zone, states often use proxies or work in concert with proxies, in order to maintain ambiguity that contributes to the confusion of actions in the Gray Zone.
- Consequently, hybrid tactics and Gray Zone conflict are not independent of each other; they are inextricably linked and aggressors use hybrid tactics across the spectrum of conflict to achieve the desired ends.<sup>11</sup>

### **Peculiarities of “Warfare in Gray Zone”**

Gray Zone is unique in the sense that hybrid threats in it stay below the threshold of open conventional conflict between states, irrespective of whether there may be some shooting between states, state proxies and/or non-state actors. The main reason for this is that aggressors in the Gray Zone seek to take advantage of non-attribution to

shape the battlefield to achieve their strategic objectives with minimal cost in terms of responses by other nations.<sup>12</sup> The key characteristics of 'Warfare in Gray Zone' are:-

- **Ambiguity.** In the Gray Zone, ambiguity is an essential aspect to keep conflict in the space between peace and war. Aggressors always intend to maintain ambiguity through the use of proxies, such as criminal networks or militias, special operations forces, intelligence operatives, or through the use of civilians to achieve objectives by using non-violent means. The aim of ambiguity is to maintain plausible deniability and thereby restrict the responses of international actors and institutions like the United States and the United Nations. In fact, Gerasimov Doctrine is also referred to as the Gerasimov Doctrine of Ambiguous Warfare, and was later transposed directly into Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine.<sup>13</sup> A recent example of an aggressor using ambiguity in the Gray-Zone was the Russia's employment of "unidentified troops" in Eastern Ukraine. First, small groups of disciplined armed men without recognizable insignia captured local government buildings, including Ukrainian police stations and security service headquarters in towns across the Donbas. Then unarmed civilians quickly moved in, erecting barricades and surrounding the seized buildings, staging sit-ins and demonstrations in support of the rebels inside. In this way they became human shields for the armed men.<sup>14</sup> Most likely, these "unidentified troops" were Russian soldiers without uniform but when they were present, the Ukrainians and rest of the world could not say with surety as to who was occupying the buildings prior to the arrival of civilians. The ambiguity played a key role in the Russians achieving their objectives in Eastern Ukraine without attracting significant negative actions from international community.
- **Exploit Weaknesses of the Adversary through Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic (DIME) Instruments of Power.** Aggressors use a whole-of-government approach to exploit their adversary's weaknesses through the use of DIME instruments of power. Autocratic regimes like Russia can apply these more effectively because their leadership can focus on a single objective. In large democracies like the United States, bureaucracy is unable to synchronize efforts and information flow across various branches and departments. Hence, it often allows the aggressor to achieve its objective while the adversary or its allies are still trying to fathom the situation, devise a policy response and allocate appropriate resources to respond to the aggression. In April-May 2014 in Eastern Ukraine, the Russians used their "unidentified troops" to seize government buildings in Donetsk, Lutansk and Kharkiv; had their separatist allies in Eastern Ukraine declare independence as "People's Republics"; and gathered uniformed

troops on the border of Eastern Ukraine in a threat to annex the separatist-controlled territory. This fusion of the instruments of national power allowed the Russians to destabilize Eastern Ukraine and ultimately led to a cease-fire and the retention of territory by Russian separatists backed up by Russian forces. During this time period, the United States and its allies were not sure (at least publicly) as to the exact nature of conflict in Ukraine. There was widespread suspicion that the Russians were operating in Ukraine but no tangible proof until pictures of suspected Spetsnaz soldiers and Russian military equipment were crowd-sourced and identified at multiple locations throughout Eastern Ukraine. Furthermore, the main concern of the US Congress at this point was the massing of Russian troops on the border and not the actions taken by Russians inside the Eastern Ukraine. This is the finest example of Gray Zone actions moving faster than the bureaucracy can react and difficulty in achieving common understanding of the true nature of the conflict amongst all parties involved.<sup>15</sup>

- **Attack in Five Domains – Land, Sea, Air, Cyber and Information/ Propaganda.** Based on the uniqueness of each situation, aggressors will determine in which domain or domains, they can achieve the greatest leverage in the Gray Zone. Examples of operations in each of these domains include: Using proxies and criminal networks on land; Using swarms of attack boats or fishermen at sea; Using reconnaissance drones or civilian aircraft in the air; Shutting down electrical grids or conducting denial of service attacks over networks; and finally, using information warfare and propaganda to influence the population. The goal of using all available domains is to fuse multiple tactics and techniques together in a single space and time to strain the opponent's resources and take advantage of where he is weak.<sup>16</sup>
- **Use of Criminal /Terrorist Organizations and Networks.** Aggressors will use criminal/terrorist networks to create ambiguity, shape public perception and move supplies around the battlefield. Criminal organisations, especially those involved in smuggling and supply of narcotics, have well-connected distribution networks. Similarly, terrorists are in league with smugglers for funding and running their organisation. For a price, Gray Zone aggressors can use these organisations and networks to supply their proxies, disrupt adversary's operations, disrupt adversary's police forces, and intimidate or coerce target population,<sup>17</sup> e.g., Russia used criminal networks during its annexation of Crimea and Sergey Valeryevich Aksyonov, the current Prime Minister of Crimea, who is supported by Russian President Vladimir Putin has extensive ties with organized criminal networks.<sup>18</sup>



- **Laws and Cultural Norms as a Weapon System.** In Gray Zone, aggressors try to use the international law and cultural norms to their advantage. Gray Zone actors conducting operations with speed and autonomy are able to exploit the bureaucratic processes inherent in these institutions and achieve objectives before these institutions are able to react or decide upon to take appropriate action, e.g., during Russia's actions in Eastern Ukraine, Vladimir Putin openly talked about using Ukrainian citizens to shield Russian troops. Then, they used the unwillingness to fire on unarmed citizens to stage occupations and demonstrations, as well as to seize Ukrainian Army garrisons.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, once Russian involvement in Ukraine became more overt and Russian actions began to shift to open warfare hybrid tactics, the Russians used legal systems and frameworks such as parliamentary approval of Crimea's annexation to justify their actions.<sup>20</sup>

## THE RUSSIAN CONCEPT - 'NON-LINEAR WARFARE'

On 26 February 2013, Chief of the Russian General Staff General Valery Gerasimov published his article, which is often cited in the West as 'Gerasimov Doctrine'.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Professor Mark Galeotti, Russian expert, published its translation in his blog with his own comments and claims to have coined the term 'Gerasimov Doctrine' to make his blog more attractive for people to read.<sup>22</sup> Gerasimov named the war of the future as ***"the war of a new generation"*** or the ***"Non-linear" warfare"***<sup>23</sup> and outlined its concepts as:

"The "rules of war" themselves have changed significantly. The role of non-military methods in achieving political and strategic goals, which in some cases significantly exceeded the strength of weapons in their effectiveness, has grown. The emphasis of the used methods of confrontation is shifting towards the widespread use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures – implemented with the use of the protest potential of the population. All this is complemented by covert military measures, including the implementation of information warfare and the actions of special operations forces. The open use of force is often disguised as peace keeping and crisis settlement only at some stage, mainly to achieve ultimate success in the conflict."<sup>24</sup>

Some analysts consider ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ as equivalent of the American Framework on the Adaptive Approach for the Use of Military Force (AAUMF), as the doctrine emphasizes the necessity of using military and non-military means against opponents.<sup>25</sup>

Gerasimov talked about something very different than the Western concept of hybrid war. One of the most interesting aspects of Gerasimov’s article is the graphic illustration of relationship on the use of non-military and military measures in war, which showed that war is now conducted by a roughly 4:1 ratio of non-military and military measures. These non-military measures include economic sanctions, disruption of diplomatic ties, and political and diplomatic pressure. The salient difference is that the West considers these non-military measures as way of avoiding war while Russia considers these measures for war fighting.<sup>26</sup>

In Gerasimov’s own words “Indeed, each war is a special case, requiring an understanding of its special logic, its uniqueness”.<sup>27</sup> He meant that there was no set model or formula for understanding the operational environment or the exercise of national power in every war scenario. Each instance of a problem would be looked upon as a unique situation that necessitated the marshaling of the state’s resources in whatever way is deemed fit.<sup>28</sup> True to the above philosophy, Russia employed different techniques in the Eastern Ukraine, Crimea and Baltics.

## **CHINA’S CONCEPT – ‘UNRESTRICTED WARFARE’**

China has been increasingly involved in unconventional operations to dilute United States’ hegemony. Though China avoids direct military engagement vis-à-vis the United States and its allies but its activities targeting weaker opponents are largely meant to undermine the strength and unity of alliance structures surrounding other powerful states. In spite of having its ambitions to develop a modernized conventional force on priority, China always prefers to use unconventional tactics that should remain between the thresholds of open war and peace.<sup>29</sup>

In 1999, two Chinese PLA officers, Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui brought out a book “Unrestricted Warfare” in which they advocated the concept of combining unconventional and covert tactics against the United States. They generally identified four alternatives to conventional warfare: One, Political action to promote favourable global change in policy and international norms; Two, Increasing economic pressure

on allies and opponents based on its burgeoning economy; Three, Engagement in cyber and network warfare; Four, Incorporation of non-state actors in to conflicts.<sup>30</sup> Over the past decade, China's actions have largely adhered to these principles.

## **CHINA'S GRAY ZONE ACTIVITIES AGAINST INDIA**

China has been assiduously employing innovative and imaginative Gray Zone tactics to further its ceaseless quest for a persistent strategic advantage over its neighbours. On the heels of Russia's actions in Eastern Ukraine, China carried out a broad array of activities in East China Sea and South China Sea, as also on the land borders against India, which are now been categorized as Gray Zone activities.

In general, Gray Zone activities involved purposefully pursuing political objectives through carefully designed operations; moving cautiously towards objectives rather than seeking decisive results quickly; acting to remain below key escalatory thresholds so as to avoid war; and using all instruments of national power, particularly non-military and non-kinetic tools.<sup>31</sup>

Given the nature of the Gray Zone, such actions do not just happen. They are implemented in a well-designed campaign plan approved and controlled by the highest levels of the Communist Party of China and the PLA. Gray Zone actions are not those of tactical commanders freelancing. Importantly, Gray Zone operations are designed to avoid military escalation. This requires the operations to be tightly controlled at the tactical level by senior leaders. Gray Zone activities are, in essence, carefully scripted brinkmanship.<sup>32</sup> This aspect is clearly evident by studying the pattern of Chinese actions on Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India, from the time Xi Jinping became the President of China in March 2013. A standoff took place between Indian and Chinese troops in Eastern Ladakh, in the Daulat Beg Oldi area in April 2013 as a Chinese military unit had apparently set up a camp fairly deep into what New Delhi considered was its side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The situation was diffused after diplomatic intervention at the highest level. Thereafter, just a week before Xi Jinping's three-day visit to India, a military standoff started at Chumar in Eastern Ladakh, with around 1,000 Chinese soldiers ranged against an equal number of Indian troops. Indian soldiers prevented PLA troops from building a road in the "disputed area" ahead of Chepzi towards Chumar on 10 September 2014. There had been a speculation in some circles that the PLA was acting independently of the leadership in Beijing. President Xi only supported this feeling when he appeared ignorant of the intrusion during his

private conversation with Prime Minister Modi. There is sufficient reason to discard this conjecture, though on his return from India Xi appeared to have given a dressing down to the PLA brass. Knowing fully well about the traits of Xi Jinping, he has the ability to listen to everyone without giving away his intentions or emotions and has not shied away from punishing the corrupt or rather disloyal officials as is evident from the most robust purge of senior party figures and military officers carried out by him. On the contrary, nine officers in the Lanzhou Military Region responsible for that portion of China-India border made the significant jump from senior colonel to the rank of major general on 12 January 2015.<sup>33</sup> That establishes that Chinese tactical activities and intrusions in the Indian side of LAC are part of their well-designed plan approved and controlled at the highest level. As the events would unfold later, the standoff at Doklam was not only continuations of such incidents and intrusions, which started after the arrival of Xi but were a part of greater Chinese design.

Somewhere in the **mid-April 2020**, when India was struggling to contain the COVID-19 pandemic by enforcing the country-wide lockdown, China launched its most skillful Gray Zone activities by creating multiple pressure points from Naku La in Sikkim to Lipulekh Pass in Uttarakhand and then to Eastern Ladakh through well-coordinated intrusions and building up of forces. Indian patrols had discovered the intrusions in early May. The Places affected in **Eastern Ladakh were Galwan Valley (to include Hot Springs, Patrol Point (PP) 14, PP 15 and Gogra Post), Pangong Tso Lake** (key strategic heights around the Lake, in the area stretching from Fingers 4 to 8) **and Depsang Plains**. There has been massive build up of Chinese forces on its side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), comprising more than 20,000 troops supported by armour, heavy artillery, variety of air defence missiles (including ground-to-air HQ 16 and HQ 9 missiles) and combat aircraft and helicopters.<sup>34</sup> India has also ensured a matching deployment on its own side of the LAC. The diplomatic and political interaction had succeeded in an agreement on restoration of status quo at Galwan and Hot Springs, but had left out Pangong Tso. As a follow up to that the two corps commanders in their meeting of 06 June agreed upon disengagement starting at Galwan. Following protocol, Indian troops were sent to monitor the vacation on 15 June. India was misled into believing that the Chinese would honour their commitment of 06 June 2020. It was approaching dusk when the PLA troops unleashed an unprecedented pre-meditated attack on unsuspecting Indian troops with iron rods, nail-studded clubs, spikes and stones. It resulted in the death of Colonel Santosh Babu, the Commanding Officer and 20 Indian soldiers, who despite being outnumbered inflicted heavy casualties on the Chinese before making the supreme sacrifice. Officially, PLA, as is their norm, initially did not give out any causality figures but several sources gave figures of around

43 Chinese dead. Later, China officially released the casualty figure as four, which was challenged by many newspapers to be nine times more than its official count.<sup>35</sup>

**Timing.** The Indian economy was facing a downward trend even before the commencement of the nationwide lockdown due to the pandemic. Further, the social turmoil caused due to Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019 and the proposed National Register of Citizens was indicating as if the Indian federal structure was weakening with the Central government losing hold over states. Even the Bangladesh was miffed with the CAA. India's traditional influence in its neighborhood was withering with Nepal raising boundary issues with India. China made deep inroads into Sri Lanka. More importantly, Balakot Strike was depicted as a victory over Pakistan and it even helped Prime Minister Modi win a re-election but it was a poor handling of media and Pakistan devised a better narrative thereby giving the opposition a chance to browbeat the government. However, the final decision might have been triggered by opening of the vital Darbuk-Shyok-Daulet Beg Oldie (DBO) Road that runs parallel to the LAC, providing key all weather access to the post at DBO. Another argument is that China's move was expedited not only by India's infrastructure upgrade but also by abrogation of Article 370 as applicable to J&K on 5 August 2019 and carving out two Union territories of J&K and Ladakh from the erstwhile state. While moving the resolution for the same in Lok Sabha on 6 August 2019, Union Home Minister Shri Amit Shah had asserted. "The boundaries of Jammu and Kashmir decided in our Constitution, and also in the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir, includes PoK and Aksai Chin," and Chinese had reacted very strongly to it. Confluence of all these factors might have stimulated China to make aggressive moves on LAC with India. Combined with this Xi's reputation has taken a beating due to mishandling of corona virus both domestically and globally as also the continuous decline of China's economy under his leadership; both these factors perhaps compelled Xi to play the Aggressive Nationalism card.

Military application or rather intimidation is only the overt manifestation of China's strategic intent and is only a physical portion of its overall Gray Zone activity. China's so-called 'Unrestricted Warfare' in the Gray Zone encompasses all aspects of its Comprehensive National Power (CNP), i.e., Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic. This is further supported by China's Three Warfare Doctrine. In fact, the concept of "Three Warfares" (san zhong zhanfa) was approved by the CCP Central Committee and the CMC in 2003 as a PLA information warfare concept aimed at preconditioning key areas of competition in its favour.<sup>36</sup> The three subsets are:

- a) **Psychological Warfare.** Seeking to undermine an enemy's ability to conduct combat operations through psychological operations aimed at deterring, shocking and demoralizing enemy military personnel and supporting civilian populations.
- b) **Media Warfare.** Aimed at influencing domestic and international public opinion to build support for China's military actions and dissuade an adversary from pursuing actions contrary to China's interests.
- c) **Legal Warfare.** Uses international and domestic law to claim the legal high ground or assert Chinese interests. It is intended to build international support and manage political repercussions of China's military actions.<sup>37</sup>

The new psychological warfare appears to aim for a high degree of precision in targeting critical nodes (*guanjie*) to achieve non-linear effects. Specifically, the enemy's motivation and willingness to wage war could be targeted, by eliminating opposing leadership, diminishing international support, undercutting military capabilities, affecting the economy, or sowing domestic political dissent.<sup>38</sup>

With a view to analyse the depth of China's Gray Zone activities against India, it is essential to study the other fields activated by China in concert with its military intimidation on the land and sea, either directly or through its proxies so that a suitable response can be developed by India. These fields are Cyberspace, Informational / Psychological, Media, Legal, Diplomatic and Economic, which are being discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

## **Cyberspace**

Mumbai faced a massive power outage on 13 October 2020, which was said to be the worst power failure in decades though it lasted for two hours starting from 10 AM and the issue was resolved by noon. This had led to the cancellation of train services, work at the stock exchange and all the other offices and commercial establishments across Mumbai, Thane and Navi Mumbai areas. Some areas in suburban central Mumbai suffered outages for almost 10 to 12 hours till the power services resumed. In fact, during the ongoing stand-off between India and China at the Galwan valley, sources from Maharashtra Cyber reported that China-based hackers had started attacking the Indian cyberspace in the month of June. Thousands of cyber attacks had been witnessed in a period of four to five days in June 2020 on the Information, Banking and Infrastructure sectors in the country. Maharashtra Cyber Intelligence Cell reported

that there had been a minimum of 40300 probes or cyber attacks. These cyber-attacks or hacking attempts were traced to the Chengdu area of China and could be divided into three categories: Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks; Internet protocol hijacking attacks; and Phishing attacks.<sup>39</sup>

According to The New York Times report, malware was injected into the control systems that were responsible for electric supply across India. The malware tracing was done by **Recorded Future**, a cyber security company founded in 2009 with headquarters in Somerville, Massachusetts. The company claims that most of the malware was not activated, which may mean that a small proportion of malware caused the Mumbai power outage. The company had named the *Chinese state-sponsored group RedEcho*, likely to be blamed for the Mumbai power outage. Since early 2020, Recorded Future observed a large increase in suspected targeted intrusion activity against Indian organisations from Chinese state-sponsored groups and from mid-2020 onwards, a large swathe of India's power sector was tracked - 10 distinct Indian power sector organizations and two Indian seaports were identified as targets. The cyber security company said that it had sent its findings to Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (or CERT-In) within the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India. The government acknowledged the receipt twice, though there had been no confirmation of the fact that the code infected in the power grid may have any links with China-based hackers.<sup>40</sup>

Cyber attacks from China were attempts to give a sign to India that not to press too hard on military front. Such incidents are bound to increase in future given the factor of deniability, lack of attribution to a specific country and the low cost.

### **Informational/ Psychological**

India being a multi-regional, multi-lingual society and governed by a federal democratic polity, it has plenty of inherent fault-lines, which can be targeted by forces inimical to India without revealing their identity, to create fissures in the society and in the system of governance. Social Media, Internet, Electronic media and Print media (to some extent), leftist intelligentsia - the so-called urban naxals - professors and students, and the disgruntled members of the opposition parties are the tools available to China for furthering their overall strategic aim in the Gray Zone. There are number of instances which have occurred during this ongoing military stand-off.

- In October 2020, according to a report in Eurasian Times, China declared that separatist forces (though it did not name Kashmir or Khalistan but as per media

input they had approached China) had requested for China's support, for which it did not respond but 'If India supports secessionist forces in China and disregards China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, it should be aware of the consequences'.<sup>41</sup>

- China's Global Times while reporting that thousands of Indian farmers protesting the country's agricultural reforms stormed Red Fort in New Delhi during the Republic Day parade on 26 January 2021, commented that "Compared to China, what the Indian government lacks the most is to truly consider farmers' interests. The Indian government does not really serve the interests of farmers. Instead, it serves only interest groups and the landlords."<sup>42</sup>

**United Front work** (inspired by the Leninist theory of allying with minor enemies against the major ones)<sup>43</sup> has been a key element of Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) strategy to consolidate its hold on power, both domestically and internationally. The **United Front Work Department (UFWD)** is the primary organization responsible for United Front work within China and abroad and is a high-level party body that reports directly to the CCP's Central Committee. UFWD has regained its prominence since the rise of Xi Jinping, as Beijing has embraced a much more assertive approach to foreign policy.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, President Xi Jinping had served for many years in this organization. In a September 2014 speech celebrating the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) 65th birthday, President Xi referred to United Front Work as a '*magic weapon*' for the 'Chinese people's great rejuvenation', one to be used by the CCP to seize victory, construction, and reform.<sup>45</sup> Almost all Chinese embassies now include personnel working with the UFWD. A scrutiny of Chinese ambassadors posted in South Asia reveals that most of them had links with the UFWD. Clearly the task of China's ambassadors to South Asia is to push the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and aggressively undermine the Indian civilisational influence. This organisation is mandated with psychological operations with the task of influencing political, economic and intellectuals in other countries and the objective of systematic penetration into systems of targeted country.<sup>46</sup> The CCP regards United Front Work abroad as key element of soft power projection and soft power production. To advance its narrative, the CCP utilises its United Front Work to stifle criticism of the CCP, spread positive views of China, meeting local politicians and winning them over, and incentivize voters in foreign democracies to influence their domestic policies in ways that promote CCP interests.<sup>47</sup> The democratic governing systems and the concomitant freedoms are the perfect enablers for China's booming and devious influence operations. Deeply connected with intelligence, the UFWD runs influence operations in target countries to influence their politicians, intellectuals, media



and socio-economic institutions. Such “influence-operations” include fully-funded media conferences, academic conferences, paid trips of intellectuals and civil society members to China, and scholarships to students, especially in key developing countries in South Asia, poor ASEAN countries and Africa. Several eminent professors, media personalities, and public intellectuals availed paid trips to China for conferences and lectures.<sup>48</sup>

**Confucius Institutes** are CCP-sponsored education organisations that teach Chinese language and history at the primary, secondary, and university level around the world and promote the Chinese culture abroad in collaboration with foreign universities. However, in practice, the CCP is using them to reach campuses and spread Chinese influence amongst the students and the academia of the host nation. They advance Beijing’s preferred narrative and subvert important academic principles such as institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Significantly, Confucius Institutes are funded by the CCP Propaganda Department—formally affiliated with the UFWD—and are also overseen by personnel based in Chinese embassies and consulates.<sup>49</sup> Their activities have alarmed the host countries, and doubts are being expressed on the genuineness of these institutes, whether they are cultural ambassadors of China; or are being used to subvert the autonomy of teaching institutions and spy on its people.<sup>50</sup> The Confucius Institutes are overseen by Hanban (shorthand for the ruling body of the Office of Chinese Language Council International, a branch of the Ministry of Education) that is classified technically as a nonprofit agency, but it is dominated by Communist Chinese officialdom. The institutes are part of a broader propaganda initiative as the Chinese government is pumping an estimated \$10 billion annually into them.<sup>51</sup> Its governing council is headed by a Politburo member, and a number of its officials hold high ranks in various ministries. They reach out to students and professionals the world over including India, which in turn enables them to carry out influence operations and even espionage.<sup>52</sup> A number of Confucius Institutes have been established in South Asia for this purpose which includes Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The Hanban website lists three Confucius Institutes in India: University of Mumbai, Vellore Institute of Technology and Lovely Professional University<sup>53</sup> and the Chinese are pressing for opening more at Kolkata, Sullur and Coimbatore. Indian intelligence agencies have taken cognizance of worldwide reports of these institutes being used for intelligence gathering purposes, and are now keeping a watch on their activities.<sup>54</sup> The activities of Indian universities with tie-ups to Chinese institutions are likely to be drastically scaled down. The government is reviewing<sup>54</sup> memoranda of understanding signed between educational institutions including the Indian Institutes of Technology, Banaras Hindu University, Jawaharlal Nehru University and others with links to the

official Chinese language training office, Hanban, which runs Confucius Institutes across the world.<sup>55</sup>

## **Media**

Eight months after the Galwan clash, on 19 February 2021 China released new footage from the Galwan clash of June 15 and officially announced honours for five soldiers, four awarded posthumously (battalion commander Chen Hongjun and soldiers Chen Xiangrong, Xiao Siyuan and Wang Zhuoran). The PLA said the announcement was aimed at honouring the soldiers and “setting the record straight”, after it accused India of “distorting the truth” and “slandering the Chinese border troops”. The carefully crafted narrative was aimed at underlining the message that the Communist Party had defended China and to portray India as the aggressor — a message that was repeated in the official media. That narrative gave a 180 degree twist to the genesis of last year’s border crisis, which began with a mass mobilisation of PLA troops along the border following a military exercise that caught India by surprise. Not only the state media outlets had highlighted the announcement of honours for five soldiers but the messages were shared by some of the most popular Chinese celebrities on Chinese Social media as a result by the end of the day, Social media outlets were flooded with outpouring of sentiments by people.<sup>56</sup>

Thus local media has been CCP’s favourite tool to circulate its values and party propaganda, and to sway the public opinion in its favour. In order to ensure favourable press coverage in foreign media, starting 2016, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has conducted a 10 month course every year in which 100 foreign journalists from leading media houses in Asia and Africa were hosted. They were given royal treatment by housing them in plush apartments in Jianguomen Diplomatic Compound in Beijing, where a two-bedroom apartment costs 22,000 Yuan (Rs 2.4 lakh) and also given a monthly stipend of 5,000 Yuan (Rs 50,000). They were taken on free conducted tours twice-every-month to different Chinese provinces. The journalists were given pride of the place in important government functions and given access to Chinese government officials and ministries – a privilege usually denied to other foreign correspondents in China. They are briefed on the kind of reporting China wants from them and given choreographed questions to be asked from the government officials, whereas foreign correspondents in China aren’t allowed to pose unscripted questions at such events. They were also given language classes and at the end of the course, they were given degrees in international relations from a Chinese university. The participating journalists were accredited with specified Chinese press centers — and not with their own media outlets. During the complete stay, they were not allowed to undertake

individual reporting trips unaccompanied by government minders — as they were not independently accredited. From India, journalists from the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS), Jansatta, and The Indian Express participated in the course. Most of them published reports from their correspondents from Beijing, without mentioning that their reports were on a Chinese government-hosted fellowship.<sup>57</sup>

The **apps** are considered by CCP as perfect Comprehensive National Power tools - they siphoned metadata to develop China's AI weaponization; they allowed communications intercepts for blackmail, intelligence and corporate advantage as also they made their Chinese parent companies a lot of money, and more.<sup>58</sup> India's news aggregating app **Dailyhunt**, formerly Newshunt, which aggregates local language content, got \$25 million in its series D round of funding led by China's Byte Dance. ByteDance owns one of the largest personalised news apps Toutiao in China, along with running TopBuzz in the US and Brazil. Getting investment from ByteDance was significant for Dailyhunt, which claimed to have over 28 million monthly active users on its platform, providing regional language content through news, videos, audios and ebooks.<sup>59</sup> That speaks volumes of the ability and power which Bytedance will hold to influence the opinions and thoughts of such a huge consumer base of 28 million people. The Narendra Modi government's decision to ban the Chinese apps showed a deep understanding of the nature of role being played by these apps in advancing the Chinese Comprehensive National Power.

## Legal

China has been making skillful use of maps and old fabricated revenue documents to buttress its claims over territories along the LAC and border. It is also laying aggressive claims to territories on the basis of the historical ties that existed between the monasteries in Tawang and Lhasa so as to change the "facts on the ground". China claims some 90,000 sq km of Arunachal Pradesh as its territory. It calls the area "Zangnan" in the Chinese language and makes repeated references to "South Tibet". Chinese maps show Arunachal Pradesh as part of China, and sometimes parenthetically refer to it as "so-called Arunachal Pradesh". China has been making periodic efforts to underline its unilateral claim to Indian territory. On April 14, 2017, its Ministry of Civil Affairs had issued "official" Chinese names for six places in the state. Four and a half years later, on 29 December 2021, the Chinese renamed eight residential areas, four mountains, two rivers, and a mountain pass. They also provided the latitudes and longitudes of these places. As part of its strategy to assert claim over Indian territories, China routinely issues statements of outrage whenever an Indian dignitary visits Arunachal Pradesh — it did so when Vice President Venkaiah Naidu

went there to address the state Assembly in October 2021.<sup>60</sup> Further, China's national legislature – the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) – on October 23 adopted a new law for “the protection and exploitation of the land border areas”, which will come into effect from 1 January 2022. Though, China said that its new land border law would not impact the implementation of the existing border treaties and urged relevant countries to avoid making “wanton speculation” about a “normal domestic legislation” but a day after India raised concerns over the legislation. According to military analysts, the announcement of a law that makes China's borders “sacred and inviolable” at a time of prolonged ongoing discussions to resolve the standoff in Eastern Ladakh signals that Beijing is not likely to pull back from any other areas, thus making the border negotiations more difficult. It is also interpreted that the new law gives the responsibility of the border clearly to the PLA — “as opposed to India”, with a lack of clarity on who among the Ministries of Home and Defence is responsible for border management.<sup>61</sup>

China has also been building “well-off” border defence villages across the LAC in all sectors. President Xi Jinping visited a village in Tibet near the border with Arunachal Pradesh in July 2021. The dual civil and military use of these villages is a matter of concern for India as China will use settled civilian population to stake its claim to that area.

## **Diplomacy**

China uses diplomacy in a calibrated manner to its own advantage: firstly, during negotiations at foreign ministers' level agreeing to something but at 'military commanders' level talks' ensuring that while talks continue, no actual progress takes place. China's diplomatic talks vacillate between hard approach bordering breakdown of talks but showing willingness to negotiate. China follows the 'strategy of attrition' to wear down the other side during talks.<sup>62</sup> Despite having 15 rounds of Corps-Commander level talks, no significant outcome has been achieved in resolving the row, except for issuing a joint statement and waiting for the next round of talks. China tests the limits of the other side, which helps in devising their approach next time. In the Gray Zone tactics, China's diplomacy is not limited to its own-self but it exploits India's neighbours to put additional pressure. For instance, Nepal's raising of Limpiyadhura-Kalapani-Lipulekh dispute with India is reportedly at the behest of China.

## Economy

China's friendly or rather conciliatory overtures to India have been based on promoting its national interests. In 1979, President Deng Xiaoping set China on the path of economic modernization and thereafter, it was the economic interest due to which China came closer to India; intentionally keeping the border issue on backburner and trade became one of its top priorities. In 1990, bilateral trade between India and China was only USD 264 million but it reached USD 2.9 billion in 2000<sup>63</sup> and attained a peak of USD 89.6 billion during 2017-18, with trade deficit at a whopping (-) USD 62.9 billion.<sup>64</sup> China not only destroyed India's local industries by dumping its cheap products but made India so much dependent upon import of ingredients and components for its pharmaceutical, electronics and other items that India cannot easily get out of China's vice grip. Modi's government did succeed in bringing down this trade deficit to (-) USD 48.66 billion in 2019-20<sup>65</sup> by reducing the imports but the India-China bilateral trade touched a record high of over USD 125 billion - in 2021; India's trade deficit too mounted to over USD 69 billion, an all time high.<sup>66</sup> In terms of economic strength, China's GDP is now 5.46 times higher than that of India.

Further, China leverages economy very cleverly to complement its Gray Zone activities. According to a Times of India report, Rajiv Gandhi Foundation (RGF), an NGO with Mrs. Sonia Gandhi as the Chairperson and Rahul Gandhi as its member, received a donation of USD 3 lakh from the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in 2005-06. BJP's Social Media Head Amit Malviya revealed that RGF commissioned several studies on how a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and China was essentially required. Studies argued that India needed the FTA much more than China and should pursue it as part of its efforts to improve bilateral relations. Reportedly, RGF convinced the then Congress government to pursue a FTA with China and the government should brook no delay in pursuing the matter. Curiously, India's trade deficit with China started to balloon thereafter. The overall trade deficit with China increased 33 times, i.e .. from \$1.1 Bn in 2003-04 to \$36.2 Bn in 2013-14, under the UPA government. <sup>67</sup>In fact, Congress MP Rahul Gandhi was in the eye of the storm when a photograph emerged in media that showed him signing an MoU with Chinese President Xi Jinping in the presence of Sonia Gandhi in 2008.<sup>68</sup> As the chain of events were correlated, it became evident that the Congress party showed a hurry to close the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) deal during the UPA regime, consequent to the receipt of donation by the RGF from China. Documents accessed by the Times Now showed that the negotiations for the RCEP began in 2010 and the UPA minister signed the deal in 2011, which was nearly five years ahead of the deadline.<sup>69</sup> In 2019, India withdrew from the RCEP, dealing a big blow to China's economic ambitions. The relationship

clearly indicates why the Congress MP was mounting scathing attacks on Prime Minister Modi for his handling of situation in Eastern Ladakh that too post-Galwan when the whole nation was supporting the government.

Taking advantage of economic distress caused by COVID 19 pandemic, China resorted to opportunistic takeovers of strategically important and other domestic companies in various countries when valuations were low. Chinese investments into India since 2014 had largely been a transactional trade relationship but now Chinese companies emerged as prominent players and investors, in areas ranging from infrastructure and energy to newer sectors of interest such as technology startups, banking and real estate. These investments are meant to lure them into the web of economic trap and thereby undermine the emerging local Indian industry and banking sector. The recent purchase of 1.01 percent of shares in the HDFC bank by China's People's Bank of China (PBoC) is a case in point. HDFC shares fell nearly 40 per cent in first week April 2020. China stepped in and thereafter immediately the stock rallied 14 per cent.<sup>70</sup> The Chinese bank also holds stock in several other listed companies, but are all below the radar since the stocks held are less than 1 percent. Among others, the bank holds 0.32 percent stake in Ambuja Cement, and 0.43 percent in Piramal Enterprises which has a major presence in Pharma Sector. PBoC's holding in HDFC was worth about Rs 3,100 crore, while in Piramal Industries around Rs 137 crore, and in Ambuja Cement about Rs 122 crore.<sup>71</sup>

Chinese nationals have been found to be involved in money laundering and hawala transactions in India. India's Income tax department conducted searches in 21 locations in Delhi, Ghaziabad, and Gurugram in August 2020. According to the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT), at the behest of Chinese individuals, more than 40 bank accounts were created in various dummy entities, entering in to credits of more than Rs. 1000 crores. A subsidiary of Chinese company and its related concerns took over Rs. 100 crores bogus advances from shell entities for opening businesses of retail showrooms in India. In addition, incriminating documents related to hawala transactions and money laundering with "active involvement of bank employees and Chartered accountants" also surfaced during these raids. Evidences of foreign hawala transactions involving Hong Kong and US dollars were also unearthed.<sup>72</sup> Hawala transactions are the most preferred route of funding for illegal activities such as arms smuggling, narcotics, terror attacks, and for creating social disorder and disharmony through dharnas, protest marches and rallies turning in to violent riots. Direct or indirect Chinese linkages to Shaheen Baag, Kisan Morcha and subsequent violent protests in the country need to be traced.

***The deliberate avoidance of firearms at Galwan was to keep the conflict below the threshold of a conventional war. This is an essential ingredient of Gray Zone conflict. The Chinese once again played smart by achieving the withdrawal of Indian troops from the Kailash ranges, a feature that was providing observation into the Chinese activities. On the other hand, they continue to hold on to their positions in Hot Springs, Gogra and Depsang plains. China's strategic aim is clear - to gradually gain and retain territory on its periphery without resorting to armed conflict.***

## **INDIA'S RESPONSE**

The challenge created by China against India by utilizing all elements of its CNP in the Gray Zone can only be countered effectively by adopting a whole of nation approach. China leverages its whole of society by virtue of being governed by a single party, its tremendous economic power, its technological prowess and the military might, all in a coordinated and synergistic effort to subdue its adversaries. In the same way, India's whole of nation approach should encompass not only all the departments and branches of the government but also the public and private sectors, intelligentsia, academia and society at large.

The Gray Zone encompasses the space between peace and war in which the aggressor achieves strategic objectives short of all-out, declared conflict. Therefore, India's response should also be developed in a manner that her national objectives are achieved without fighting or declaring a war - pay back the enemy in the same coin i.e., deterrence vs. deterrence. However, India has to be careful about China's salami slicing tactics adopted in the Gray Zone. It should be countered immediately by occupying a different piece of ground elsewhere, as it was done by occupying the Kailash ranges, a feature that was providing observation into the Chinese activities. However, the Chinese played smart by achieving withdrawal of Indian troops from that feature. On the other hand, they continue to hold on to their positions in Hot Springs, Gogra and Depsang plains. Dean Cheng wrote in 'The Daily Signal' about Mao Zedong's tactic of "fight fight, talk talk (*da da, tan tan*)" - "Mao would negotiate, not in order to "get to yes" and reach a compromise solution, but to buy time, colour his opponent's views, and influence third parties. The ultimate goal never changed, whatever the negotiating positions".<sup>73</sup> Having gained the dominating positions in the physical domain, military talks are progressed following Mao's dictum and China will not like to loose the tactically advantageous positions.

Strategic wisdom lies in preempting the adversary's actions in the Gray Zone by moving and occupying positions which will put him in a position of disadvantage, before he can do so. This can be achieved only if we have real-time operational intelligence. Agile and technologically superior Special Forces of all three services grouped under a joint command will provide a better response option to counter such Gray Zone threats on land and sea both. The Special Frontier Forces must be grouped under this command, because of their composition, motivation and familiarity with the LAC.

India's response is elaborated in succeeding paragraphs. It is not meant to be compartmentalised or segregated in different spheres but for the sake of laying down role and responsibilities, recommendations are being made under these heads: military, informational, economy and diplomacy.

## **Military**

Military sphere is the most visible, sensitive and overt manifestation of gray-zone activity, which if not handled properly may lead to a war. Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, the United States, had carried out an elaborate analysis of the strategic postures of China and India in the current scenario of Eastern Ladakh and it concluded by stating, ***"India is in a stronger conventional position vis-à-vis China"***.<sup>74</sup> India of 2022 is much different than what it was in 1962 both in terms of force capability as well as leadership. In terms of equipment, the PLA may be quantitatively superior but the Indian soldiers have proven their mettle, determination and bravery during Galwan for the whole world to see. It was not what the CCP expected.

It is essential that the armed forces should be equipped with the modern state-of-the-art weapon systems and dependency on foreign countries for arms procurement is reduced. The process of importing defence equipment in our country is so long and complicated that by the time they reach the armed forces, many of them become outdated and their next generation versions are already on the line of production by the Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM). Therefore, the solution lies in going for indigenous manufacturing. As part of its 'Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan', India will soon start indigenous production of 108 military equipment, including complex defence systems. The development comes less than a year after the Centre approved the ban on import of the said number of equipment. It should be noted that the ban on imports of 49 out of the 108 military types of equipment came to effect in December 2021 and the procurement of the rest of 59 arms, missiles, and other hardware is scheduled to be stopped by the end of 2025. Domestic players and PSUs are being



encouraged to develop advanced defence gear and equipment including new generations of corvettes, radars, light and medium armoured vehicles, airborne early warning and control systems(AEW&C), medium-range surface-to-air missile systems (MRSAM), anti-tank guided missiles, tank engines and more.<sup>75</sup> Once a manufacturing base for defence equipment is established in the country, not only the country will be self-sufficient in terms of fighting a prolonged war that may be forced upon by its adversaries but it will also not be dependent upon foreign sources for war fighting material during crises. Further, with the OEMs being in the country itself, upgradation of equipment and research & development for their futuristic versions will not face any impediments.

The most important factor in winning a war is ‘the man behind the equipment.’ History is replete with examples where well-motivated and trained soldiers commanded by capable leaders are known to have defeated the mighty armies, better equipped and many times their size. The Indian Army thrives on its ethos of **‘Naam, Namak and Nishaan’** i.e., its soldiers fight and sacrifice their lives for the good name (Naam) of their village/town/country, loyalty to the mother earth whose salt (Namak) they have partaken and for the National Flag / Regimental Standard (Nishaan). These are the basic ethos that are imbibed in every regimental soldier and officer and this was the motivating spirit behind the officers and soldiers, who made the supreme sacrifice in every war<sup>76</sup> which India fought after 1947, whether it was 1947-1948 (J&K), 1962 (against Chinese aggression), 1965 (Indo-Pak war), 1971 (Liberation of Bangladesh), or capturing the dominating heights of Kargil, from the well-entrenched enemy in the most difficult high altitude terrain with treacherous weather conditions. On 15 June 2020 in the Galwan Valley, when Colonel Santosh Babu and his party were surreptitiously attacked by Chinese soldiers with nail-studded clubs, iron rods and stones, though outnumbered, they fought so valiantly that they inflicted more than double the casualties on the enemy before laying down their lives on the altar of the nation. It is because no Indian soldier wants to go back to his village with the name of his country/village being tarnished – only his dead body will go wrapped in the Tricolor.

Since there was no fresh recruitment in the Indian armed forces during last three years because of COVID 19, with a view to make up the shortfall, the government has ordered recruitment but introduced a new scheme called **Agnipath** to recruit volunteer/ contractual soldiers for four years and thereafter retain 25 percent based on merit. These new entrants will be called **Agniveers**. The envisaged advantages are a younger profile with the average age being brought down from 32 to 25 years, a more technology-savvy soldier and a pan-India merit-based recruitment system. There

were violent protests on the streets in various states, opposition leaders criticizing the government for this experiment and veterans also vehemently opposing the scheme by highlighting the pitfalls. The drawbacks of the scheme, underscored by the military veterans can be clubbed in to three major concerns: One, since the new scheme violates the basic ethos of regimental soldiering, it will degrade the combat effectiveness of the armed forces; Two, uncertainty of future for 75 percent of Agniveers (as there is no 100 percent job assurance for them, except for a lump-sum 'Seva-Nidhi' of Rs. 11.71 lakh), who will be relieved after four years and may become disgruntled elements of the society and moreover this factor itself may prevent them from giving their best to the service as compared to the regular soldiers; and three, at a certain point in future number of Agniveers will be more than the regular soldiers thereby upsetting the fighting efficiency of a unit.

First and foremost, the scheme has been approved and accepted by three service chiefs wholeheartedly and it is the responsibility of every Indian Armed Forces officer to make it succeed.

Second, strength of Indian Army (also, Indian Air Force and Indian Navy) lies in its young officers / leaders, who lead by setting personal examples and their men follow them. All infantry and armoured assaults were led by young officers in all the previous wars fought by India; therefore they had the maximum number of casualties, as also the maximum number of gallantry awards. As long as we train our officers as professional leaders and don't come out with a scheme which impedes their level of motivation, professionalism and esprit-de-corps, they will deliver commendable results. Various analyses have shown that performance of leader is dependent upon 'leader-group-situation', i.e., in an adverse situation, a good leader through his innovative and ingenious mind can lead his men to victory. It is expected that Indian armed forces officers will be able to motivate the Agniveers adequately to bring them at par with regular soldiers.

Third, it is being commented that basic military training of Agniveers for 24 weeks (36 weeks for recruits earlier) is not adequate. It is a well known and established practice that even after doing basic training at regimental centres, the recruits are not straight away allowed to handle sophisticated weapons/equipment or even given independent responsibility. In the initial one to two years, they are made to familiarize with the weapons/equipment, in terms of classes and maintenance. They are familiarized with the daily routine in a unit and given administrative tasks and guard duties etc. Based on the intellectual caliber and devotion of each soldier, he is given greater responsibilities and he moves ahead in the promotion to Non-commissioned officer

(NCO) and then Junior Commissioned officer (JCO). Thus, if one looks positively, two to three years may be adequate to decide as to who all to be retained as soldiers. However, a procedure has to be evolved for this selection process. Relying on the great traditions of Indian Armed Forces, it is believed that remainder will go back as physically tough and disciplined manpower, contributing for the well-being of society.

Fourth, considering the fighting efficiency of a unit in terms of mathematical numbers or ratio is futile. Napoleon won all his campaigns with numerically inferior force compared to his foes because he knew at which point and time he has to concentrate his force to off-balance the enemy. Thus, the real test of employment of soldiers in war will depend upon the quality of leadership.

The real test of an army lies in winning a war and it can only be achieved if the soldiers are motivated. The government has a great role to play in this regard. The soldier must be assured that the nation cares for him – if he dies, then his family is looked after and for the hardship which he has suffered during his stay in army, he is compensated by providing him a secure job through lateral absorption. This is the responsibility of the top brass of armed forces to convince the government for providing assured lateral absorption of Agniveers after four years.

Lastly, security of a country is dynamic as its facets keep changing based on multiple factors both internal as well as external. Therefore, mature democracies lay down policies / doctrines but keep enough scope for review with changing times and situation. Flexibility of plans is one of the war winning factors. Having launched the Agnipath scheme of recruitment, it should not be viewed as sacrosanct that hence onwards Indian Army would be designed on that pattern. It should be reviewed after three/four years, before the first batch of Agniveers are retired, to study its advantages and disadvantages, and relevance for future. If the government has taken a decision based on due deliberations with the armed forces, then in a later timeframe, they should be willing to accept their review also - whether to continue with this system, revert back to older one or have some other system. To give an example, even in case of the United States, whose structure of Theatre Commands, we intend to adopt, the Chairman of the JCS is directed to “periodically (and not less often than every two years): (1) review the missions, responsibilities, and force structure of each combatant command; and (2) recommend to the President, through the Secretary, any necessary changes.”<sup>77</sup>

## **Informational**

With the advent of Artificial Intelligence, Big Data Analytics and Machine Learning, the informational sphere has become very vast, encompassing information-cognitive, cyberspace, electromagnetic spectrum and space-based technologies.

**Information-Cognitive dimension** of the Indian public including the armed forces personnel is highly vulnerable. Individual ministry or departmental level effort like creation of ADGPI in Army falls well short of expectation in this arena. A strong coordinated mechanism is required to be established at the national, ministerial and armed forces level, to dispel rumours and misinformation. Currently, private media channels are seen to counter fake news during their programmes. International media such as the BBC, Al Jazeera, Global Times, China and DGISPR, Pakistan are delivering anti-India fabricated news at will. For instance, Al Jazeera and BBC screened fake “videos on large-scale protests” in Srinagar on morning, 09 August 2019 and carried a report that over 10,000 people in the valley took part in the protest against India on Friday morning and another report that said the army had resorted to violence to counter peaceful protesters in western Srinagar. Video was first floated by Al Jazeera and then by BBC after three hours but it was telecast in all regional channels of BBC.<sup>78</sup> Though, the government of India contacted the International media and told that the news were ‘false and fabricated’ but the damage in terms of propaganda was already done and news media later acknowledging the government’s stance carried no meaning. Similarly, fake videos, old pictures and manipulated content flooded the internet in light of the nationwide protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and during ‘Kisan Andolan’.<sup>79</sup> These propagandist news have the potential to create major public law and order problems and turn into mass movements. There is a need to form a coherent intelligence picture by combining technical intelligence (TECHINT), human intelligence (HUMINT) and Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) under an integrated National Information Operations Infrastructure to ensure common action by all stake holders. The responsible media channels, in Hindi, English and regional languages, should negate fake/propagandist news and respond in a couple of hours.

**Cyber-attacks** targeting power transmission, aviation, railways and communication have emerged as favourite tools with both state and non-state actors. In fact, India has been the target of cyber intrusions that appeared to have originated within the PRC. Vulnerabilities in our infrastructure need to be identified regularly and loopholes plugged in, by creating adequate redundancies through defensive measures like creating firewalls and backups. This new kind of warfare demands not only to secure

the cyberspace but to dominate it by achieving **‘Cyber Superiority’**. The Indian government needs to have a coherent approach by co-opting Defence services, inland security, economic forums, civil aviation, railways, power sector, DRDO and IT organizations and evolve a comprehensive cyber strategy. Upgrading the Defence Cyber Agency to Defence Cyber Command should be done as soon as possible but for monitoring and dominating the cyberspace it requires whole of nation approach. Though India does not officially advocate Cyber-offensive but it should have the offensive cyber capabilities to make it known to the adversary that his infrastructure and national systems can also be targeted in equal measure. In other words, we should have indigenous capability to escalate cyber deterrence. Like China, India is also capable of creating millions of cyber warriors and that is indeed the need of the hour. This can be done in a very organised manner by establishing ‘cyber clubs’ in all universities/engineering colleges and ‘cyber wings’ of National Cadet Corps (NCC) to identify and create a pool of talented cyber warriors. Additional funds have to be allotted for developing innovative future technologies to protect own information networks and find ‘flaws’ in the networks of our adversaries which can be targeted at an appropriate time. The Defence services, public sector and DRDO have to provide funds to the researchers to identify ‘Zero-day vulnerabilities’ in computer systems of the world, for designing ‘computer worms’ with destructive capability like ‘Stuxnet’ and for developing ‘software bugs’ that can be exploited to have a ‘back door’ into computer operating systems of our adversaries.<sup>80</sup> There is a world market for ‘back door’ exploits which has been boosted by burgeoning demand from militaries eager to develop their cyber war fighting capabilities and ‘zero-days’ are being sold to the highest bidder. The world famous hacker conference known as ‘Defcon’ held annually at Las Vegas, is the place where ‘Zero-day’ exploits are advertised for selling ultimately to highest bidder. ‘Vupen’, a French security firm sells exploits to a variety of governments.<sup>81</sup> If there is a national requirement to launch a cyber operation against an adversary tomorrow, then that is not the time to start looking for exploits, one needs to have a complete catalogue of ‘Zero-day’ vulnerabilities to cover every possible configuration of computer networks which will be encountered. Therefore complete preparatory work has to be done during peace-time.

There is also an inescapable requirement to create redundancies for space based assets and their services. Further there is a need to develop an offensive capability to deter the adversary from undertaking any aggressive action against our space assets. Anti-satellite weapon (ASAT) capabilities need to be honed further.

## **Economic**

Ideally, aim of our economy should be to decouple from China but that may not be possible in today's globalised world. However, India should reduce its dependency on China for import of intermediaries being used in pharmaceuticals, fertilizers, electronics, communications, computers and so on. This can be achieved by finding alternative source of supplies from Taiwan, South Korea, Southeast Asia or Europe. These may be costlier initially but in the long run it will be beneficial once manufacturing supply-chains move away from China and India's Atmanirbhar Abhiyan takes a robust shape with an enhanced manufacturing sector. Semiconductor manufacturing is one field that needs special attention and requires both private and public investment. Further, there is a need to monitor Chinese economic activities during peacetime. Following are few recommendations to prevent them from indulging in any misadventure:-

- Keep a strict vigil on donation of foreign funds to political parties, particularly when there are mass protests, rallies, and bandhs in the country or during/before elections, especially through Hawala transactions.
- Monitor and regulate the activities of Chinese companies, joint ventures, especially multinational giants like Huawei. Keep a tag on their Indian connections and their funding of Indian set ups.
- Strictly regulate and restrict Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in India by China, to ensure that they do not influence national decision making, and/or indulging in influencing key sectors such as, pharmaceuticals, infrastructure, banking and finance, telecommunications, and start-ups.
- Maintain strict vigil over Confucius Institutes, cultural centres, and Chinese language schools run by them and their links with various Indian institutes and organizations.
- Update our legal system to plug loopholes, which can allow Chinese to circumvent our economic regulations.

## **Diplomacy**

The aspect that CCP fears most is not a single country applying its military might against China or acting against its other elements of CNP but banding together of countries to oppose China on multiple fronts or in diverse fields, for example the

formation of QUAD or even the proposed Supply Chain Resilience Initiative between India, Japan and Australia. Thus, the best way to counter China in Gray Zone is to keep China engaged on multiple fronts by forging strategic partnerships and de facto alliances with countries on its periphery. Military diplomacy also needs to be scaled up to project desirable military signals.

## CONCLUSION

Gray Zone as the futuristic operational environment is likely to be favoured by both states and non-state actors because of its low economic and human costs as compared to the conventional wars. The concept is unique in the sense that strategic objectives can be achieved without fighting a war. Chinese activities in the Gray Zone support PRC leadership's overarching domestic, economic, foreign policy, and security objectives in the Indo-Pacific, which Beijing views as China's priority region. Within the Indo-Pacific, China perceives QUAD as the most dangerous ganging up of nations to challenge her hegemonic ambitions. Therefore, China intends to drive a wedge between the United States and India, to make their strategic partnership fail bilaterally and also as part of the QUAD. Hence China adopted her favourite 'Salami Slicing' tactics or military coercion in the South China Sea as well as on the LAC against India. Combined with other Gray Zone activities, China's pursues the aim of altering the regional status quo in its favour with a desire to act below the threshold of a militarized response.

Over the past decade, China employed nearly 80 different Gray Zone tactics across all instruments of national power against Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, India, and the Philippines. Combining multiple geopolitical, economic, military, and cyber/Information Operation activities means that China no longer has to rely on significant escalation in any single domain and, if needed, can sequence actions to apply pressure in nonmilitary domains before resorting to use of military activity.<sup>82</sup> In fact, there is no model or set formula for Gray Zone activities - military and non-military activities can be launched together also. However, there will always be a dilemma to assess which PRC Gray Zone tactics are most problematic. Hence, we need to evolve our own solutions both for offence and defence in the Gray Zone. There will be a requirement of greater synergy between all security architecture components, which needs to be dovetailed in our Foreign Policy Objectives in real time to meet the Gray Zone threat. To ensure a credible deterrence and responsive capability against emergent Gray Zone threats, there is a need to institutionalise the whole of nation's approach to the national security matters.

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