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TO COERCIVE DETERRENCE
BY
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**ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
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Introduction

Professor Srikanth Kondapalli delivered a comprehensive lecture at Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS). The session explored the historical and tactical layers of the India-China border dispute, which remains one of Asia's longest and most complex territorial conflict. It involves two civilisational states currently caught in the modern-nation trap of defining precise longitudes and latitudes. Professor Kondapalli meticulously traced the transition from incremental "salami slicing" to a more aggressive "coercive deterrence" posture, highlighting the strategic asymmetries that complicate India's response. The following sections provide an in-depth elaboration of the key themes discussed during the lecture.

Historical Foundations and Strategic Asymmetry

The India-China dispute is fundamentally a clash between two ancient civilisations struggling to adapt to modern western notions of fixed borders. Historically, China's strategy is deeply influenced by its legacy as the "Middle Kingdom" and its traditional tributary state relations. While Beijing has demonstrated tactical flexibility with smaller neighbouring states often resolving disputes by conceding territory to ensure the survival of the state it remains remarkably rigid and inflexible with larger regional competitors like India and Vietnam. This rigidity is exacerbated by a vast and growing strategic asymmetry. China's GDP and defence budget significantly exceed India's (\$400B vs \$80B appx), providing former with a dominant position in negotiations and military posturing. This imbalance allows China to sustain long-term pressure along the approximately 3,500 km border, which has seen nearly four decades of unresolved talks and multiple rounds of negotiations since 1960 without a definitive settlement. The

speaker noted that historical memory of conflicts and the perception of "unequal treaties" continue to influence China's current uncompromising border posture. Furthermore, the involvement of third parties, such as the Quad (comprising Australia, Japan, the US, and India), adds another layer of geopolitical complexity, as China views these alignments as attempts to contain its rise.

The Tactic of Salami Slicing (*Cán Shí*)

A central theme of the lecture was "salami slicing" (*cán shí*), a term translated as "nibbling like a silkworm". This geopolitical strategy involves unilateral, incremental encroachments designed to alter ground realities gradually without triggering a full-scale conventional war. By establishing new patrol routes, constructing minor roads, and building temporary shelters that eventually become permanent structures, China creates "facts on the ground". These "grey zone" tactics shift the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in China's favour while complicating India's border management. These tactic leads to a volatile environment characterised by confusion, distrust, and largely reactive Indian responses. It was highlighted that such cartographic aggression and physical occupation serve to test India's resolve while avoiding the high costs of large-scale land grabs. Over time, this cumulative slicing erodes the effectiveness of established Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), which have failed to prevent recent conflicts.

Transition to Coercive Deterrence

The speaker explained that salami slicing is often a transitory phase leading to a state of coercive deterrence and entrenched militarisation. This stage is characterised by heavy military deployments, the buildup of sophisticated infrastructure, and the strategic use of nuclear capabilities to restrict Indian movements and assert dominance along the border. China's military infrastructure including high-speed railways, dual-use airfields, and fibre-optic networks enables rapid mobilisation and enhanced Rapid Reaction Forces. The PLA maintains a formidable presence, such as deploying roughly 70,000 troops opposite Galwan, supported by advanced assets like Type 15 tanks, PCL-181 truck howitzers, and J-20 stealth fighters. This posture is designed to constrain Indian actions along the LAC

and exploit India's two-front security dilemma involving Pakistan. Despite India's defensive deployments of about nearly 120,000 troops in the area, China maintains a conventional and nuclear deterrence posture that challenges India's strategic position. The Professor noted that while this mixed effectiveness has seen some success in restricting patrol points like Depsang PP10-14, it has also triggered a counter-push from India, which has accelerated its own infrastructure builds. The current state of entrenched militarisation suggests that the border has moved beyond simple territorial disputes into a broader military standoff.

Role of 'Xiaokang' Villages and Demographic Pressure

A relatively new and potent element of China's strategy is the construction of 628 *Xiaokang* (well-off) society villages along the Tibet border areas. These are comprehensive party-state units equipped with surveillance systems, telecommunications, and specific border defence duties, with at least one Communist Party cadre stationed in each. By settling civilian populations in disputed areas, Beijing exerts psychological and demographic pressure while reinforcing its territorial claims through permanent human occupation. These villages, such as those in the Tsari Chu and Metok Dzong areas, are dual-purpose establishments that integrate tourism with defence, often including PLA military outposts. The Professor highlighted that this civil-military integration aims to influence the demography of border regions, making it harder for India to assert its counter-claims. For instance, construction activity and road clearance have been observed at Longju in Arunachal Pradesh, directly altering the status quo. These villages serve as a long-term strategy for border domination, creating a "well-off society" that acts as a human buffer and intelligence network. Mr Kondapalli noted that such developments have long-term consequences for regional security, the economy, and the environment.

PLA Intentions and Regional Containment

Beyond the immediate border, the lecture addressed the broader strategic intentions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) towards India. China perceives India's global power

ambitions, regional dominance in South Asia, and aspirations to control the Indian Ocean as direct challenges to its own interests. To this end, Beijing employs "three warfares" (psychological, media, and legal) and seeks to confine India to the subcontinent by building strategic influence in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The speaker stressed that Indian strategic discourse may be missing critical insights into these intentions. The PLA annually assesses the military postures of 190 countries, including India, to inform its policy options. China's military intelligence has even coordinated with regional actors to influence political outcomes in South Asia to counter India's naval ambitions. This strategy of regional containment is designed to keep India preoccupied with its immediate borders, preventing it from projecting power further into the Indo-Pacific. He further suggested that India may not have fully understood or addressed these deeper PLA intentions in its strategic assessments, leading to gaps in long-term planning.

India's Strategic Response and Challenges

India's response to China's multifaceted strategy has historically been largely reactive, constrained by significant logistical disadvantages and concerns over escalation. However, over the last decade, India has initiated domestic balancing efforts and accelerated its own infrastructure development, including projects like the Sela Tunnel and the Arunachal Highway. Despite these strides, challenges remain in integrating border development with local communities; campaigns like "Vibrant Village" have seen limited success due to a lack of essential services such as education and healthcare in remote areas. The guest pointed out that the integration of development campaigns with local commerce and civil society remains insufficient, limiting their overall effectiveness in strengthening border resilience. Furthermore, sustaining the necessary economic growth is fundamental for India to allocate the massive resources required for border infrastructure and defence. While China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) faces global challenges and constraints, India has initiated its own free trade agreements and regional infrastructure projects to counterbalance its influence. The speaker emphasised that a comprehensive review of India's border strategy is necessary to counter salami slicing effectively, moving from a purely defensive posture to one of proactive deterrence.

The Way Forward and Conclusion

The session concluded with a call for renewed political will and comprehensive strategic planning to manage the complex dispute and prevent further escalation. While various models for settlement exist ranging from a Grand Political Bargain (Package Deal) to a Sector-by-Sector approach the rising tide of nationalism and domestic political sensitivities on both sides makes resolution exceptionally difficult.

Any lasting settlement would require a detailed "Boundary Protocol" treaty, involving joint technical commissions, GPS-coordinated ground surveys, and the installation of physical markers at mutually agreed coordinates. The speaker also suggested that India must send clear signals to China regarding escalation and territorial integrity while prioritising infrastructure and surveillance to match Chinese capabilities. Models such as the 100km demilitarised zone used in the Sino-Russian-Central Asian borders could provide precedents, but the de facto position currently remains a volatile status quo.

Ultimately, he emphasised that political decisions at the highest levels are crucial. Without a clear political mandate, technical and military efforts will remain reactive and insufficient to address the long-standing strategic challenges posed by China.