



A Consideration of Sino-Indian Conflict

Ali Ahmed

Ali Ahmed is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi.

October 24, 2011

Summary

There is considerable interest in a possible conflict with China. However, little discussion exists in the open domain on conflict possibilities. This Brief attempts to fill this gap by dilating upon conflict scenarios along the spectrum of conflict. It brings out the need for limitation to conflict and the necessity for a grand strategic approach towards China as against a military driven one.

Introduction

The Indian position on the power balance in Asia is that there exists enough space in Asia for both states and civilisations.¹ Consequently India's policy towards China is one of multifaceted engagement.² Yet, there is considerable concern among strategic analysts in India about the possibilities of conflict.³ Despite the focus on the 'China threat', there is surprisingly little in the open domain on the possible military manifestation of the threat. The popular narrative restricts itself to pointing out the head start China has had in infrastructure building in Tibet and the military uses to which this can be put. Its capability for sustaining forces is taken in one account as 34 divisions and half a million men in another.⁴ The factors leading to war that find mention are the boundary dispute, pressure tactics by China in 'balance of power' games, outward projection of internal political unrest in China and stand-off over markets and resources elsewhere.

This Brief sets out hypothetical conflict scenarios against the spectrum of conflict.⁵ It first outlines the contours of conflict,⁶ including that of the 'collusive' threat, and then discusses limitation. It ends by looking at the two buffer states Nepal and Bhutan in context. The conclusion is that coping with China will be a test equally of military jointness as of 'jointedness' of the Indian national security establishment.⁷

Conflict Scenarios

The spectrum of conflict is a conceptual aid to discuss conflict and subsumes along its continuum subconventional conflict; conventional war in its limited and total dimensions; and nuclear war in its limited and strategic dimensions. Placement along the spectrum would depend on the aims and intensity of conflict, troops and resources committed, etc.

Subconventional Level

In the subconventional level are proxy wars. The Chinese support for rebels in the North East up until the late sixties can be subsumed under this. It has been suggested that

¹ 'Asia has space for both India, China', *Indian Express*, 2 April 2010, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/asia-has-space-for-both-india-china/599066/>

² 'India-China Relations', MEA brief, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=50042452>

³ Bharat Verma, 'Unmasking China', *Indian Defence Review*, Vol. 24, Issue 3, Jul-Sep 2009, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/2009/08/unmasking-china.html>

⁴ Josy Joseph, 'High costs stall Army plans on the border', *Times of India*, 26 August 2011; GD Bakshi, 'The Age Of Differences...Wasn't It Born Before 1962?', *Outlook*, 3 October 2011.

⁵ *Indian Army Doctrine*, Shimla: HQ ARTRAC, p. 12.

⁶ The likelihood of conflict factor is not examined here. This is an academic exercise on dimensions of conflict, not to be taken as indicative that any such threat exists in the near or long term.

⁷ The term is attributable to the National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon. See his Cariappa Memorial lecture, 'The Role of Militaries in International Relations', <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2011/20111009/edit.htm#1>.

India must prosecute an asymmetric contest vis-à-vis China by: '(a) ...reach[ing] out to the restive, discontented and oppressed Tibetan population, particularly the youth, in Tibet; [and] (b) support[ing] the cause of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang Autonomous Region (XUAR) and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR).'⁸ Such playing of the proxy war 'card' can be done in peacetime and it can be enhanced in war to keep the communication zone of the adversary unsettled for operational gains. However, the factor of India's own multiple vulnerabilities in this sphere cannot be overlooked.⁹

While the foregoing are intelligence operations, military actions can also occur at the subconventional level. These include patrol clashes and border skirmishes.¹⁰ Reports of border 'transgressions'¹¹ suggest that patrol clashes can occur inadvertently or by design.¹² This was the pattern in the run up to the 1962 conflict as part of the 'forward policy' adopted of both states resulting in clashes at the grassroots level.¹³ Such occurrences could build up to a border skirmish or this could be engineered as a separate incident. The 1967 stand off at Nathu la and the Walong-Sumdorong Chu incidents of the late eighties are examples.

Conventional Level

This is the key area of focus of the Indian military. The military takes its primary task of safeguarding territorial integrity seriously. The border and Line of Actual Control (LAC) is over 4000 km long. Much of this is disputed and China claims Tawang and even the whole of Arunachal Pradesh. The Army's 'Transformation' study reportedly proposes urgent and long term action necessary for preserving the status quo till a resolution is arrived at.¹⁴ Infrastructure improvement in the form of road building is underway.¹⁵ The Army's proposal for a mountain strike corps for the eastern sector, in addition to the two mountain divisions under raising there currently, stands approved. To supplement firepower resources that have been revealed as critical in mountains, a regiment of

⁸ Mandip Singh, 'Asymmetric Wars in the Indian Context', IDSA Comment, http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/AsymmetricWarsintheIndianContext_msingh_131011

⁹ The North East insurgencies are currently at a low ebb while the Maoist challenge is acute. China can exploit these in retaliation in case India plays the 'Tibet' card. Such cards are avoidable since they would impact both Indian friends (Tibetans) and Indian citizens.

¹⁰ Doctrine of Sub Conventional Operations, Shimla: HQ ARTRAC, p. 2.

¹¹ 'No increase in deployment of forces on China-India border: Army', *Economic Times*, 14 January 2011, http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2011-01-14/news/28429087_1_patrols-india-china-india-and-china

¹² 'India-China Territorial Dispute: Way Ahead', CLAWS Article 1933, 25 August 2011, http://www.claws.in/index.php?action=master&task=934&u_id=36

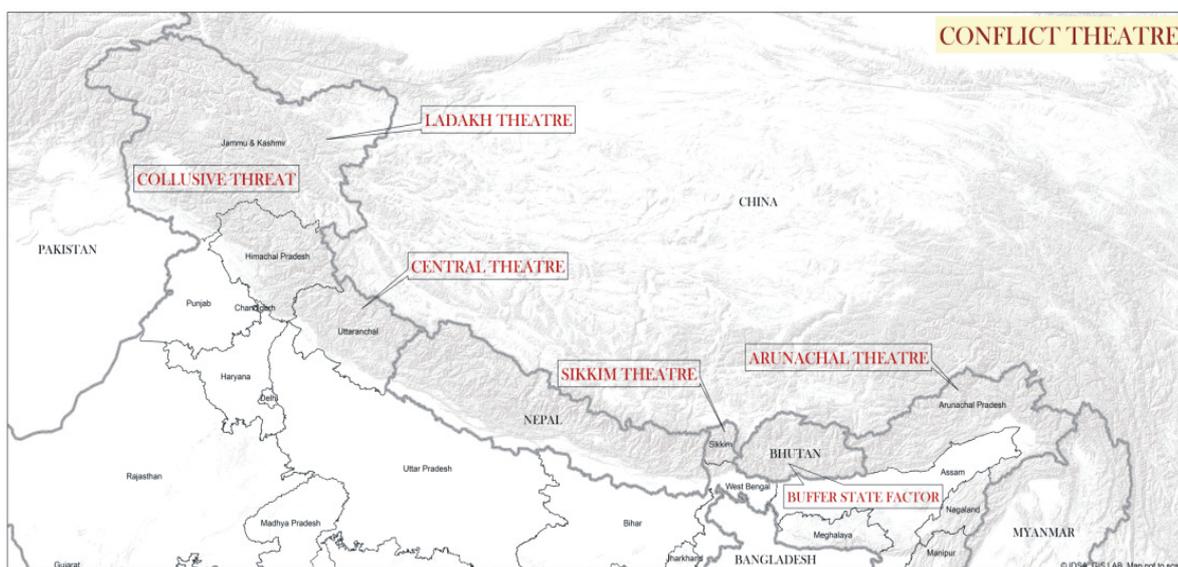
¹³ Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010, pp. 270-87.

¹⁴ This is a confidential study reportedly conducted under the current army chief during his former assignment as Eastern Army Commander.

¹⁵ The BRO has a budgetary allocation of Rs. 5,425 crore. See 'Progress of 61 roads to be built on Indo-China border reviewed', *Economic Times*, 13 September 2011.

Brahmos missiles is to be deployed in Arunachal.¹⁶ Strategic commentary variously has it that it needs two or three such corps.¹⁷ The Air Force has placed its latest strike assets, the Su 30s, in the North East and is expanding its infrastructure and capability in Ladakh.¹⁸

The lower end of the conflict at this level could be a Kargil-like situation. China's aim could be to 'teach India a lesson' so as to influence India's rise before its capacity building underway acquires traction. This could be a limited war confined to a specific section of the border or LAC, limited in duration and amenable to a negotiated termination. At a higher level could be a territorial grab by China, for example a bid to take Tawang. At the next rung could be a more ambitious bid southwards up to its claim line. Lateral or horizontal expansion of conflict from one theatre to another is the next step, with the conflict engulfing one or more of the four possible theatres: Ladakh, Central Sector, Sikkim and Arunachal. Alongside, it may impact the buffer states, Nepal and Bhutan (discussed later). A higher end war may spread outwards from the mountains to include air and missile action against the hinterland and the 'mainland' or strategic heartland. There is a possibility of the involvement of allies, in the least in a supportive role. The most extensive dimension of this could be the 'collusive' threat.¹⁹



¹⁶ P. Samanta, 'China flexing muscles, govt clears Brahmos for Arunachal', *Indian Express*, 17 October 2011, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/china-flexing-muscles-govt-clears-brahmos-for-arunachal/860799/>

¹⁷ Gurmeet Kanwal, 'Wars in the mountains: Capacity building needed for future conflict', CLAWS Article 1927, 14 August 2011, http://www.claws.in/index.php?action=master&task=928&u_id=7; GD Bakshi, 'The Age Of Differences...Wasn't It Born Before 1962?', *Outlook*, 3 October 2011.

¹⁸ 'IAF raises new squadron of SU-30 warplanes in NE', *Hindustan Times*, 1 March 2011.

¹⁹ VK Kapoor, 'Fighting a Two Front War', <http://www.spslandforces.net/story.asp?id=124>

*The Collusive Threat*²⁰

Such a threat has not transpired historically and has not developed so far. However, the 'threat' has been envisaged now due to juxtaposing of infrastructure developments in Tibet with taking over of transport corridor projects and infrastructure such as dams by the Chinese in Pakistan's Northern Areas.²¹ The manifestation of the threat in terms of scenarios could be either Pakistan- or China- led. Alternatively, it could be with either state taking advantage of an adverse situation for India brought on by the other state. Lastly is a grand strategic design between the two.

From this emerge five possibilities: China instigated, Pakistan instigated, Chinese hyena act, Pakistan's hyena act and lastly a planned twin strike. Since China can act on its own, it does not need Pakistani collusion. In fact it may find such collusion escalatory since it would place India in a worse position, from which India would only want to come out fighting. On the other hand, Pakistan can do with Chinese support. Yet, China would not want to be physically drawn in though it could use the transport corridors being developed in the Gilgit-Baltistan region to send in logistic support.

In a China-led case, a twin threat could be in case of Chinese designs to the east. These could be grandiose in terms of seizing limited territory such as Tawang or the whole of Arunachal, or to 'teach India a lesson'. This may entail tying India down in the western sector by having Pakistan make diversionary moves in Siachen or Kargil. This could result in 14 Corps based in Ladakh being forced to look both ways. The possibility of Chinese participation with movement through the Gilgit axis is possible, but the logistics and possibility of Indian air interdiction makes this unviable.

A Pakistan-led case is difficult to visualize since China would not like the 'tail to wag the dog'. China could nevertheless participate in such an adventure if it were to set India back and restrict India's strategic space to South Asia. Dual use formations that could tilt the balance in India's favour would then not be available, making for greater symmetry with Pakistan.

A 'hyena act' by Pakistan is easier to visualize than by China since China is more likely to be able to place India at a military disadvantage than Pakistan. In such a case, with India militarily distracted in an engagement with China, Pakistan could try and gain psychological ascendance, remove vulnerabilities through military action or recreate proxy war conditions.

²⁰ Ali Ahmed, 'The Sino-Pak 'collusive' threat', CLAWS Article 1794, 31 March 2011, http://www.claws.in/index.php?action=master&task=795&u_id=77

²¹ Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 653: 'Chinese presence in POK', <http://www.idsa.in/resources/parliament/ChinesepresenceinPOK030811>

The last possibility of a concerted twin strike is the 'most threatening-least likely' one. In such a case, India may turn its attention and weight first towards Pakistan while it holds in the North. This serves as deterrent to Pakistani participation in such an enterprise. Since India would be greatly imposed upon, the possibility of going beyond the 'limited war' profile exists. India could legitimately rescind its NFU in such circumstance as a clear signal. This brings up the nuclear level.

Nuclear Level

Both India and China subscribe to a 'No First Use' (NFU) doctrine. Since this is a unilateral undertaking, it may be rescinded at any time. Therefore this level cannot be ruled out *ab initio*. Retracting from NFU itself would be a significant move to indicate that thresholds are being crossed in a conventional war. Nuclear exchanges can be either graduated or spasmodic. The former indicates that within this level there is also space for Limited Nuclear War.²² Theoretically, despite its implausibility, limitation in the nuclear domain can be restricted to specific targets or theatres; for instance, strikes on strategic lines of communications such as mountain passes or strategic bridges in the hinterland. The variegated capability available with both states in terms of types of weapons and delivery platforms and the nuclear weapon numbers make this possible. Counter value targeting would be a step up from such exchanges. In effect, a wider war may have all three levels of the spectrum in play: proxy war, conventional war and nuclear war. This brings to fore the imperative of limitation.

On Limitation

The pattern of Indian procurements, infrastructure building and force restructuring suggests preparedness for conflict scenarios across the board. In future, India could be subject to China's hegemonic attention. Since India would be better prepared by then, China may instead wish to set India back now by a preventive war. This means current day preparedness is as essential as preparation for the future. A reverse now will have as severe political costs, internally and externally, as it had back in 1962; for, as then, India is yet again contemplating a global role.

While India's is taken as a 'benign' rise, China's projection of 'peaceful rise' meets with scepticism.²³ China is better positioned for gaining super power status and may attempt to gain a position of dominance. This may place it at odds with India which wishes to preserve its autonomy and image. Short of this 'worst case' developing, perhaps a decade

²² Indian Army Doctrine, p. 12.

²³ Baladas Ghoshal, 'India and China: Towards a Competitive-Cooperative Relationship?', IPCS Issue Brief No. 153, August 2010.

or so from now, there are conflict scenarios that may spool out in the interim. The issue of 'saving face' and reputation for both sides will have an escalatory affect.

Against such a background, India's national aim, in light of its economic trajectory and national interest of strategic autonomy, is war avoidance. In case of conflict breaks out, limitation is desirable. At the upper ends of conflict, early conflict termination recommends itself, lest escalation result. Applying the Limited War concept makes sense in that it would not deflect India from its economic trajectory overly. Limitation would help ensure that the No First Use (NFU) doctrine, subscribed to by both states, holds. Localised conflicts are easier to terminate since 'saving face' is easier as resources committed are less and prestige is not staked inordinately. Limited War is a concept that has been aired in India since 2000, though this has found greater reflection in the India-Pakistan context.²⁴ Likewise, the Chinese concept of 'limited war in informationalised conditions' seemingly privileges limitation.

Limited War by definition is one limited along one of several dimensions. In the case in question, compartmentalising a conflict zone, easier brought about in the Himalayas, helps keep the conflict limited. There are potentially four conflict theatres: the Ladakh theatre, the central theatre, the Sikkim theatre and the last along the erstwhile McMahon Line. Restricting the conflict to one or more of these theatres would help localise it. For limitation in weapons used, saliencies exist in the employment of air power, as was done in 1962. Additional thresholds are the limit of employment of air power in terms of spread and type of targets; employment of weapons systems such as missiles; levels of employment of proxies in irregular war in the communication zones and hinterland and the opening up of the maritime front.

Lastly, is the use of the nuclear plane for posturing and for 'tacit bargaining'. Rescinding the NFU when warranted can help send an unambiguous message of thresholds being reached. Lower order nuclear first use, such as against a geographic target such as a critical pass for operational gains and the strategic purpose of signalling would bring about a nuclear war. Consideration of keeping nuclear outbreak limited is in order, since neither state would prefer its 'mainland' being attacked. This means limitation to Limited Nuclear War also needs to be factored in for contingency planning purposes, howsoever far-fetched the enterprise otherwise appears.

Limitation can thus be both horizontal and vertical. Horizontally, it may mean opening of other fronts, including the maritime front. Vertically, it means stepping up the ladder, not necessarily in a graduated manner. It could mean introduction of air power, missile

²⁴ Swaran Singh, 'Indian Debate on Limited War', *Strategic Analysis*, XXIII (12), 2000: pp. 2179-83.

strikes with conventional warheads, use of tactical nuclear weapons, etc. In the upper end of the scale, both vertical and horizontal expansion are virtually assured, since both sides may want to capitalise on their advantages in other fronts or compensate for any advantage the other has on a particular front. This means that salencies and thresholds need to be identified.

An example could be when would India prefer to employ its maritime advantage in the Indian Ocean to pressurise China in case of outbreak of war in the Himalayas? This would perhaps be less useful for a short duration encounter such as a border skirmish, but would be consequential as an escalatory manoeuvre designed as war termination pressure in case of a wider war.

Likewise, at the nuclear level, for instance, a consideration could be at which hypothetical stage of an adverse situation would India rescind NFU and introduce nuclear weapons into the conflict? A scenario could be if and when a Chinese breakthrough is threatened onto the Siliguri corridor, in conjunction with an adverse situation developing on the Arunachal front. The aspect of in-conflict nuclear deterrence of strategic nuclear exchanges is catered for by India's second strike capability, likely to be increasingly sea-based by the turn of the decade.

Since it takes two to keep war limited by cooperating to prevent escalation, firstly, their communication through direct and indirect channels and tacitly by action manifest on the ground would help condition the other to follow suit. This means that diplomatic channels need to be kept open and governmental communication uncluttered by political rhetoric. Secondly, choice in fighting at a particular level may be with the initiator of a conflict, though escalation cannot be ruled out in all cases. To deny the enemy the advantage he seeks at his level of choice, there may be a need to respond in a more vigorous fashion. But getting the conflict to stabilise at that higher level of seeming advantage would require communication of sorts. In effect, game theory kicks in with defection and cooperation in evidence. Limited War in a sense is cooperation to mutually avoid the worse penalties of war, such as to prevent a conflict from going nuclear.

Impact on Nepal and Bhutan

What would be the implication of a conflict between the two Asian giants for the two buffer states, Nepal and Bhutan? Nepal will unlikely see military operations progressed through its territory in violation of its sovereignty due to it being geographically distant from the consequential theatres, Ladakh and Arunachal. Conversely, being close to Indian base areas India has a defensive advantage in case China were to open up a front through Nepal in an extensive war. For these reasons, China is unlikely to involve Nepali territory. The lack of infrastructure on the far side of Nepal for the progress of an Indian offensive would also make Nepal a less likely theatre of operations.

Myanmar has figured in conflicts earlier during World War II with the airlift 'over the hump' forming part of legend. Given its improving infrastructure links with Yunnan, a threat developing in this direction can figure either in the context of a localised war restricted to the tri-junction or a much wider Total War. The other link to conflict is in case of external support for insurgents in the North East. This last factor influences India's deepening relations with Myanmar.

In the case of Bhutan there is greater likelihood that it could emerge as a future site of contest, given its border dispute with China along the Chumbi valley. India has inherited military-strategic ties with Bhutan. These ties include the permanent presence of an Indian military training team in Bhutan and strategic stewardship of that state. Bhutan's strategic location may make it critical to war at the upper level of the spectrum. As can be seen in the map, its eastern and western flanks abut Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim respectively. In the hypothetical case of conflict in the eastern Himalayas, it is not implausible that Bhutan may get embroiled. China could offensively exploit its territory for outflanking Indian forces so as to pressurise India's vulnerability in the 21 km wide Siliguri corridor, aptly dubbed as 'Chicken's Neck'. Fearing such movement, Indian forces may stage forward defensively. Given the military advantages that would accrue to the force acting first in the mountains, pressures to pre-empt the other side will arise.

In so far as Bhutan would incline towards India in any such conflict, an Indian position could have it that this is in India's interest. The 2007 treaty states that the two 'shall cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests'. It goes on to state that 'neither Government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security and interest of the other.'²⁵ Thus, even as Bhutan contests any Chinese ingress, it would be free to call upon India for assistance. This could enable India to respond militarily on request. Such military movement would help India defend its own territory better.

However, two problems arise. One is that a potential Indian-Bhutanese linkage may tempt China to be both offensive and pre-emptive. This could lead to a race between those 'rolling down' and those 'rushing up', reminiscent of the military action in Belgium at the start of the First World War and at the end of the 'phony war' in the Second World War. Second, an inadvertent expansion of the conflict could take place from what is originally intended as a localised theatre.

Therefore, in case Bhutanese territory does not figure in the military calculus of either state, it may be better for both. While there may be military compulsions, predicated on gaining a position of operational advantage or denying the same to the adversary, these

²⁵ 'Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty', text available at http://www.carnegieendowment.org/newsletters/SAP/pdf/march07/india_bhutan_treaty.pdf

need to be weighed against the strategic imperative of limitation to conflict between nuclear states. A measure to this end would be to respect Bhutan's neutrality. This would require Bhutan to emerge as the 'Switzerland of the Himalayas'.

Bhutan has been released from its 1949 treaty obligation of being 'guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations' by the exclusion of this clause from the new 2007 friendship treaty.²⁶ This reflects India's respect for the sovereign right of Bhutan to act by its own lights. Since an extension of war into Bhutan by inadvertence or design is not in India's or Bhutan's interest, respect for neutrality of Bhutan could be considered. This can be done by arriving at a tacit strategic understanding with China as part of the strategic dialogue.

Policy Choices

From among a menu ranging from compellence, deterrence and defence, India's strategic doctrinal choice is evident. Compellence is ruled out, as is defence. The former cannot be tried against a strong nuclear power and the latter has not worked adequately earlier in the fifties. The choice is restricted to deterrence, with its two variants: offensive deterrence and defensive deterrence. The former involves more expensive offensive capabilities and is predicated on deterrence by punishment. The latter is based on deterrence by denial.

Defensive deterrence makes grand strategic sense as articulated by the National Security Advisor:

Our goal must be defence, not offense, unless offense is necessary for deterrence or to protect... We must recognise that other countries too could have similar imperatives as ours and their own reasons for what they do. And why create self-fulfilling prophecies of conflict with powerful neighbours like China?²⁷

The military is also on board with this formulation. The former Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee, Admiral S. Mehta had stated, 'On the military front, our strategy to deal with China must include reducing the military gap...The traditional or 'attritionist' approach of matching 'Division for Division' must give way...'²⁸ These must be supplemented by 'harnessing modern technology for developing high situational awareness and creating a reliable stand-off deterrent.'²⁹ This will enable the fine

²⁶ 'Treaty Between India and Bhutan 1949', text available at <http://www.indianembassythimphu.bt/treaty.htm>

²⁷ Shivshankar Menon, 'Our ability to change India in a globalised world', *Tribune*, 14 August 2011.

²⁸ Admiral Sureesh Mehta, 'India's National Security Challenges - An Armed Forces Overview', Address At India Habitat Centre - 10 Aug 09, p. 3, http://maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/CNS_Lec_at_Habitat.pdf

²⁹ Ibid.

distinction between offensive and defensive deterrence. The strategic doctrine would require being ensconced in grand strategy involving diplomacy, trade ties, etc. accordingly, as, is indeed, already the case, albeit one under-appreciated.

Conclusion

The bad news is that conflict scenarios are not impossible to visualise, but the good news is that the higher one moves up in the spectrum the less likely the scenario. The sobering aspect is that the likelihood depends on the level of preparedness; but one not necessarily confined to military preparedness. The 'China threat' thesis requires being placed in perspective. The stridency attending it has the advantage of focusing attention on the challenge. Conflict potential cannot be ignored; but, coping cannot be solely a military, territory-centric enterprise.