

India-China Defence Cooperation and Military Engagement

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Defence cooperation and military engagement between India and China are aspects of the complex mix of conflict and cooperation approach to bilateral relations between the two Asian giants. It is based on the presumption that there is a security dilemma between the two countries. However, it recognises the framework and postulates of what is called cooperative security. Through the liberal institutionalist's perspective, it argues that India-China defence cooperation and military engagement are not only possible but also desirable. For these two biggest developing nations of the world, peace and friendship between them are not only in their mutual interests, but also important for bringing peace, stability and prosperity to South Asia.

Military engagements between countries across the world are increasingly becoming an important aspect of the bilateral relations between them. It is not only symbolic of maturing of their relationship but also builds trust and confidence between the defence forces which may prove useful during any joint military operation such as

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fighting terrorism or natural disasters like flood and earthquake. Military engagement is possible when there is higher degree of friendship and cooperation at the political level between the two governments and their defence forces. If approaches to study of international politics and more particularly to study of bilateral relationship between two countries can be broadly categorised as realists and liberal institutionalist, then advocates of Confidence Building Measures (CBMS) like defence cooperation and military engagement can be put in the category of the latter nomenclature. Liberal institutionalists as distinguished from the realists point out that international cooperation is not only possible but

also highly desirable because it reduces transaction costs and makes interstate relations more predictable.¹

Both India and China have military engagements with a number of countries, besides between two of them. The rationale and raison d'être for defence

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cooperation and military engagement between the two countries can hardly be overemphasized given the fact that the two countries fought a war in 1962 and they share a common border of 3488 kilometres which remains undefined and disputed even after having thirteen rounds of fresh parleys. There exists, what is called, a persistent security dilemma between the two countries. Although, there had been no major conflict between the countries after 1962, there have been reports of border incursions from time to time, and tension have also built up across the border. In the post-1962 period, and after the restoration of the diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1976, the relationship between the two reached its nadir when the Sumdorong Chu incident took place in 1986. This incident brought the two countries almost to the brink of war, which in turn impelled the two sides to explore ways and means for defence cooperation and military engagement.

It is in this backdrop that it is significant to revisit the achievements between India and China in the field of defence cooperation and military engagement particularly at a time when these achievements built over the years as consequences of greater political engagement at various levels between the two countries and their leaders. It is regrettable, however, that the defence cooperation and military engagement between the two countries face challenges in the wake of the reports relating to the denial of visa to a senior Indian army officer on the grounds that he controls allegedly a disputed region of India. As a response, media reported Government's decision to keep the military exchanges between the two countries on hold till the visa issue is amicably settled through diplomatic channels. India's Defence Minister, A. K. Anthony, however, in a statesmanlike manner allayed the anxiety regarding the uncertainties about the military exchanges between the two countries.

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Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity, 1993

The consolidation of diplomatic relations between the two countries with the path breaking **visit of** the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to China in December 1988, established the Joint Working

Group (JWG), the groundwork for defence cooperation and military engagement. A milestone in the military relationship between the two countries was the visit of Sharad Pawar, the then Defence Minister to China in July 1992. It was the first ever visit by a Defence Minister of India to China. During the visit it was agreed to develop academic, military, scientific and technological exchanges between the two countries. It is also believed that during Mr. Pawar's visit, the Chinese military leadership emphasized the importance of forced reduction in the border region due to prohibitive cost. The visit fructified in the signing of the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the India-China Border area on 7th September 1993 during the visit of the then Prime Minister P.V. Narashima Rao . The Agreement² was indeed a breakthrough. In view of its importance, it is worthwhile to elucidate the salient features of the Agreement in greater detail.

In the first place, the Agreement affirmed the view that the India-China boundary question shall be resolved through peaceful and friendly consultations and that neither side shall use or threaten to use force against the other by any means. Yet another important high light of the Agreement was that it stipulated 'pending an ultimate solution of the boundary question between the two countries, the two sides shall strictly observe the LAC between the two sides and that no activities of either side shall overstep the line of actual control. In case of personnel of one side cross the line of LAC, upon being confirmed by the other side, they shall immediately pull back to their own side of the LAC. It further provided that when necessary, the two sides shall jointly check and determine the segments of the LAC when they have different views as to its alignment

Secondly, the agreement stipulated that each side will keep its military forces in the area along the LAC to a minimum level compatible with the friendly and good neighbourly relations between the two countries. It further iterated that the two sides agreed to reduce their military forces along LAC in conformity with the requirement of the principle of mutual and equal security to ceilings to be mutually agreed, and that the reduction of military forces shall be carried out by stages in mutually agreed geographical locations sector-wise within the areas along the LAC.

Thirdly, as regards military exercise, the Agreement mentioned that each side shall give the other prior notification of the military exercises of specified levels near the LAC permitted under the Agreement. Fourthly, in case of contingency or other problems arising in the areas of LAC, the two sides shall deal with them through meetings and friendly consultations between border personnel of the two countries. Fifthly, the two sides also agreed in the accord to take adequate measures to ensure that air intrusions across the line of actual control do not take place and that the two sides shall undertake mutual consultation in case intrusions occur.

As a follow up of this agreement, a senior level Chinese military delegation aimed at fostering CBMs between the defence forces of the two countries made a six day goodwill visit to India in December 1993.

CBM's in LAC, 1996

Three years later, the Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the LAC in India-China Border Area was followed by the Agreement Between the Government of Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Confidence Building Measures in the military field along the LAC in the India-China Border Areas on 29th November 1996 during the visit of Chinese President Ziyang Zemin to India. This Agreement while reiterating and reaffirming the intent and spirit of the 1993, state agreement, inter-alia, as Confidence Building Measures, envisaged the following:³

1. The major categories of armament to be reduced or limited include combat tanks, infantry combat vehicles, guns (including howitzers) with 75 mm or bigger calibre, mortars with 120mm or bigger calibre, surface-to-surface missiles, surface-to-air missiles and any other weapon system.
2. The two sides shall exchange data on the military forces and armaments to be reduced or limited and decide on ceilings on military forces and armaments to be kept by each side within agreed geographically zones along the line of actual control in the India-China border.

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In order to maintain peace and tranquillity along the line of actual control in the India-China border areas and to prevent any tension in the border areas due to misreading by either side of the other side's intentions, Article IV of the Agreement provided the following:

1. Both sides shall avoid holding large-scale military exercises involving more than one Division (approximately 15,000 troops) in close proximity of the line of actual control in the India-China border areas. However, if such exercises are to be conducted, the strategic direction of the main force involved shall not be towards the other side.
2. If either side conducts a major military exercise involving more than one Brigade Group (approximately 5000 troops) in close proximity of the line of actual control in the India-China border areas, it shall give the other side

prior notification with regard to type, level, planned duration and area of exercise as well as the number and type of units or formations participating in the exercise.

3. The date of completion of the exercise and de-induction of troops from the area of exercise shall be intimated to the other side within five days of completion or de -induction.
4. Each side shall be entitled to obtain timely clarification from the side undertaking the exercise in respect of date specified in Paragraph 2 of the present Article.

With a view to preventing air intrusions across the LAC in the India-China border areas and facilitating over flights and landings by military aircraft, Article V provides that

(1) Both sides shall take adequate measures to ensure that air intrusions across the line of actual control do not take place. However, if an intrusion does take place, it should cease as soon as detected and the incident shall be promptly investigated by the side operating the aircraft. The results of the investigation shall be immediately communicated, through diplomatic channels or at border personnel meetings, to the other side.

However, if an intrusion does take place, it should cease as soon as detected and the incident shall be promptly investigated by the side operating the aircraft.

- (2) Subject to paragraphs 3 and 5 of this Article, combat aircraft (to include fighter, bomber, reconnaissance, military trainer, armed helicopter and other armed aircraft) shall not fly within ten kilometres of the line of actual control.
- (3) If either side is required to undertake flights of combat aircraft within ten kilometres from the line of actual control, it shall give the following information in advance to the other side, through diplomatic channels:
 - a) Type and number of combat aircraft;
 - b) Height of the proposed flight (in metres);
 - c) Proposed duration of flights (normally not to exceed ten days);
 - d) Proposed timing of flights; and
 - e) Area of operations, defined in latitude and longitude.

- (4) Unarmed transport aircraft, survey aircraft and helicopters shall be permitted to fly up to the line of actual control.
- (5) No military aircraft of either side shall fly across the line of actual control, except by prior permission. Military aircraft of either side may fly across the line of actual control or overfly the other side's airspace or land on the other side only after obtaining the latter's prior permission after providing the latter with detailed information on the flight in accordance with the international practice in this regard.

Notwithstanding the above stipulation, each side has the sovereign right to specify additional conditions, including at short notice, for flights or landings of military aircraft of the other side on its side of the line of actual control or through its airspace.

- (6) In order to ensure flight safety in emergency situations, the authorities designated by the two sides may contact each other by the quickest means of communications available.

Similarly, with a view to preventing dangerous military activities along the line of actual control in the India-China border areas, Article VI stipulates that:

- (1) Neither side shall open fire, cause bio-degradation, use hazardous chemicals, conduct blast operations or hunt with guns or explosive within two kilometres from the line of actual control. This prohibition shall not apply to routine firing activities in small arms firing ranges.
- (2) If there is a need to conduct blast operations within two kilometres of the line of actual control as part of developmental activities, the other side shall be informed through diplomatic channels or by convening a border personnel meeting, preferably five days in advance.

Neither side shall open fire, cause bio-degradation, use hazardous chemicals, conduct blast operations or hunt with guns or explosive within two kilometres from the line of actual control.

- (3) While conducting exercises with live ammunition in areas close to the line of actual control, precaution shall be taken to ensure that a bullet or a missile does not accidentally fall on the other side across the line of actual control and cause harm to the personnel or property of the other side.
- (4) If the border personnel of the two sides come in a face-to-face situation due to differences on the alignment of the line of actual control of any other

reason, they shall exercise self-restraint and take all necessary steps to avoid an escalation of the situation. Both sides shall also enter into immediate consultations through diplomatic and/or other available channels to review the situation and prevent any escalation of tension.

Article VII of the agreement envisages the following:

- a. To maintain and expand the regime of scheduled and flag meetings between their border representatives at designated places along the line of actual control;
- b. To maintain and expand telecommunication links between the border meeting points at designated places along the line of actual control; and
- c. To establish step-by-step medium and high-level contacts between the border authorities of the two sides.

Article VIII of the Agreement provides the following guidelines:

1. Should the personnel of one side cross the line of actual control and enter the other side because of unavoidable circumstances like natural disasters, the other side shall extend all possible assistance to them and inform their side, as soon as possible regarding the forced or inadvertent entry across the line of actual control. The modalities of return of the concerned personnel to their own side shall be settled through mutual consultations.
2. The two sides shall provide each other, at the earliest possible, with information pertaining to natural disasters and epidemic diseases in contiguous border areas which might affect the other side. The exchange of information shall take place either through diplomatic channels or at border personnel meetings.

Article X mentions following provisions:

1. Recognizing that the full implementation of some of the provisions of the present Agreement will depend on the two sides arriving at a common understanding of the alignment of the line of actual control in the India-China border areas, the two sides agree to speed up the process clarification and confirmation of the line of actual control. As an initial step in this process, they are clarifying the alignment of the line of actual control in those segments where they have different perceptions. They also agree to exchange maps indicating their respective perceptions of the entire alignment of the line of actual control as soon as possible.
2. Pending the completion of the process of clarification and confirmation of the line of actual control, the two sides shall work out modalities for implementing

confidence-building measures envisaged under his Agreement on an interim basis, without prejudice to their respective positions on the alignment of the line of actual control as well as on the boundary question.

Thus, it can be seen from various provisions of different agreements and accords signed between India and China that every conceivable aspect of military contingency has been thoughtfully anticipated and ways and means to deftly handle them without precipitating the matter have been envisaged. It was against this backdrop of signing of various agreements providing for CBMS that a slew of visits at various levels between the two countries were given further impetus. The most significant of the visit was that of the then Defence Minister, George Fernandes to China in April 2003. The visit of Mr. Fernandes took place after the gap of more than one decade and also helped ease the post Pokhran tension.

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Defence cooperation and military engagement between the two countries further received a boost during the visit of the then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to China in June 2003. It may be recalled that during the erstwhile short-lived Janata regime, Vajpayee had visited China in 1979. He, however, had to cut short his visit to China when war broke out between China and Vietnam as a mark of solidarity with the latter. The joint declaration between the two countries signed on 23 June 2003, *inter alia*, mentioned that "...they agreed on the need to broaden and deepen defence exchanges between the two countries, which will help enhance and deepen mutual understanding and trust between the two armed forces. They confirmed that the exchange of visits by their Defence Ministers and of military officials at various levels should be strengthened".⁴

Protocols on CBM's along the LAC, 2005

The upward swing of defence cooperation and military engagement between the two countries was given a further impetus during the visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in April 2005 in the protocol between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on modalities for the implementations of Confidence Building Measures in the military field along the LAC in the India-China border areas signed on 11 April 2005. This Protocol sought to further elucidate certain provisions of the 1996 confidence building accord while reiterating verbatim of some of the bilateral commitments in the accord. Some of the amplified provisions which merits attentions are as under:

Article III of the Protocol envisages the following provisions:⁵

- a. In the event of an alleged air intrusion of its controlled air space by the military aircraft of the other side, either side may seek a Flag Meeting within 48 hours of the alleged air intrusion in order to seek a clarification. The investigation shall be completed by the other side and its results communicated through a Flag Meeting within a period of four weeks.
- b. If a military aircraft of either side is required to fly across the Line of Actual Control or to overfly the airspace of the other side, prior permission shall be sought from the other side according to procedures and formats to be mutually agreed upon.
- c. If a military or civilian aircraft of either side is required to fly across the Line of Actual Control or to land on the other side of the Line of the LAC in an emergency situation, the two sides will ensure flight safety in such a situation by adhering to procedures to be mutually agreed upon.

If a military aircraft of either side is required to fly across the Line of Actual Control or to overfly the airspace of the other side, prior permission shall be sought

Article V provides the following:

- a. Both sides shall hold two additional border meetings each year at *Spanggur Gap* in the Western Sector, *Nathula Pass* in the Sikkim Sector and *Bum La* in the Eastern Sector respectively in celebration of the National Day or Army Day of either side. Specific arrangements shall be decided through consultation between the border forces of the two sides.
- b. Both sides are in principle to expand the mechanism of border meeting points to include *Kibithu-Damai* in the Eastern Sector and *Lipulekh Pass/Qiang La* in the Middle Sector. The precise locations of these border meetings points will be decided through mutual consultations.
- c. Both sides shall conduct exchanges between the relevant Military Regions of China and Army Commands of India. Specific arrangements shall be decided upon through mutual consultations between the relevant agencies under the Ministries of Defence of the two sides.
- d. Both sides shall strengthen exchanges between institutions of training of the two armed forces, and conduct exchanges between institutions of sports and culture of the two armed forces. Specific arrangements shall be decided upon through mutual consultations between the relevant agencies under the Ministries of Defence of the two sides.

Memorandum of Understanding, 2006

It was against this background of what may be called the heightened engagement between the two countries that the then Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee visited China on a five-day visit in May/June 2006 and held wide ranging talks with Chinese leaders including Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and his Chinese counterpart General Cao Gangchao.

The high point of the visit was the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which is first ever of its kind between the two countries. The MOU envisages for the establishment of a mechanism to ensure frequent and regular exchanges between leaders and officials of the Defence Ministries and the armed forces of the two countries in addition to developing an annual calendar for holding regular joint military exercises and training programmes. In the past few years, the two countries had conducted joint naval manoeuvres, but the interaction between the ground forces has been limited to border meetings and mountaineering expeditions and there had been no interaction between the air forces of the countries. Prior to this the MOU signed between the two countries, thus, aimed at addressing these imperatives. The Defence Minister also visited the sensitive Lanzhou Military Area Command which controls the largest physical area of China's seven military regions. The region holding the nuclear research and missile testing facilities in the Chinese west comes under the Command of this area. Mr. Mukherjee's visit to the head quarters of the Lanzhou Military Command was a significant step in the process of building bilateral trust and confidence on part of China.⁶

In the past few years, the two countries had conducted joint naval manoeuvres, but the interaction between the ground forces has been limited to border meetings and mountaineering expeditions and there had been no interaction between the air forces of the countries.

These gains were further consolidated during the visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to India in November 2006. In the Joint Declaration signed between the two countries on 21st November, it was mentioned that 'the exchange of visits in the field of defence has resulted in the building of mutual trust and enhancement of mutual understanding between the defence establishments of the two countries. Both sides shall fully implement the provisions of the Memorandum of Understanding for exchanges and cooperation in the field of defence signed on 29 May 2006, which provides a sound foundation and institutional framework for further development of defence cooperation.'⁷

Certain concrete steps were taken as a follow-up of the CBM's. For example, Armed Forces of India and China held a warm meeting at a new border point in Arunachal Pradesh, on 18th November 2006, on the eve of President Hu Jintao's visit to India. The two sides met at Kibithu in Anjwa district of Arunachal Pradesh, and discussed modalities for the conduct of troops along the border. An official press release claimed, "The meeting and exchanges were characterised by great warmth and bonhomie. It marks another milestone in the growing relationship and military exchanges between the armed forces of the two countries." Border meetings between personnel of the armed forces of the two countries have traditionally been held at Chusul in Ladakh, Nathu La in Sikkim, and Bum La in Kamang district of Arunachal Pradesh.⁸

Hand-in-Hand 2008: The India-China Joint Military Exercise

Encouraged by the success of the first ever joint military exercise between China and India in Kunming in Yunnan in 2007, a week long China-India joint anti-terrorists training kicked off on 6 December 2008 in Belgaun in Karnataka with performance of the Chinese Tai Chai and Indian martial arts. *Qin Xiangyon*, in charge of the Chinese soldiers participating in the sessions, said during the opening ceremonies that the joint training was aimed at promoting the two army's mutual understanding and trust. He also said that it was a way for the armies to develop their friendship, and expand the fields for exchanges and cooperation. After the ceremony, Chinese and Indian soldiers displayed their weapons. Moreover, Chinese soldiers performed tai chi and anti-terror shooting skills, while their Indian counterparts put on display the country traditional martial arts. Commenting on the importance of the joint military exercise Quyang Wei, a professor at the University of National Defence said in an exclusive interview to Xinhua that 'China and India are the world's biggest developing countries. Peace and Friendship

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Highlighting the need for the joint training, the Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Huang Xueping said that such training 'was intended to enhance mutual understanding and trust and advance development of relations between Chinese and Indian armies.' Emphasising the importance of such exercises Lt. General Ma Xiaotians, Head of the Chinese Military Observer delegation and also the Deputy Chief of the PLA said that 'it showcased the resolution of the two sides to safeguard regional peace and stability and create a harmonious environment for development together.'⁹ Coming from the mouth of a very senior PLA functionary,

the statement should be taken very seriously. An editorial in *China Daily* hailed the joint training programme and said, 'China and India are looking after their fences, turning the Himalayas, the highest mountains on the earth, into a friendly border,'¹⁰

The joint military exercise was carried out according to the Memorandum of Understanding for Exchange and cooperation in the field of Defence signed in 2006 and listed in the annual exchange plan for 2008.

Defence cooperation between India and China maintained a healthy momentum during the year 2009. The Chief of Naval Staff attended the International Fleet Review 2009 at Qingdao from 21-24 April 2009. Indian participation included guided missile destroyers INS Mumbai and INS Ranveer, the guided missile corvette INS Khanjar and the tanker INS Jyoti. Chinese "Shenzhen" Missile Destroyer made port call at the Kochi port from 8-11 August, 2009. The Deputy Chief of General Staff of China's visit was reciprocated by Indian Army Chief Gen. BC Joshi's visit to China in July 1994. Since then, regular exchanges have been taking place at various levels. Liberation Army of China visited India in December 2009. The Defence Secretary led a high level Indian delegation for the third Annual Defence Dialogue held in Beijing on 6 January 2010.¹¹

Although these military engagement and CBM's have somewhat helped in diffusing tension across the border, incidents regarding border incursions are reported from time to time. Every month, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) reports around a dozen unannounced Chinese military patrols in the disputed border area, and this number have not decreased over the last decade. Most of

In more recent times, India is worried about a significant increase in the number of stand-offs between Indian and Chinese border patrols and more aggressive posturing by Chinese soldiers along the border.

these incidents are inoffensive. Often border-guards do not even make direct contacts, but leave behind subtle traces of their presence, like piles of stones, cigarette packets, or cans. From time to time, Chinese military officials reportedly enter the Indian side of LAC in civilian clothes and vehicles. Almost on a weekly basis, small Chinese boats tour around Lake Pangong Tso in Ladakh.¹²

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more aggressive posturing by Chinese soldiers along the border. The latest standoff between the two sides along the LAC was sometime in early September 2010, when Chinese soldiers brought a bulldozer into a disputed area in the Ladakh region to construct a road. Even after the Indian side objected to it and asked the Chinese to take it back, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) unduly delayed the withdrawal of the machine and took it away only about four days later. The delay of the Chinese was unusual, but it fell into the trend they have noticed this summer of greater assertiveness by People's Liberation Army soldiers, reported a leading newspaper quoting senior officials. The 2010 summer has already recorded an almost 100 per cent increase in the number of stand-offs between the patrols of the two sides. These peaceful standoffs were reported from Depsang, Demchok and Pangong Tso areas of Ladakh region in recent times.¹³ Tension on account of border-intrusions arises because of non-demarcation of LAC, which needs to be addressed by both sides. It is essential, therefore, that the border talks between the two countries should take place.

Although the denial of visa by China to the senior Indian Army Officer has cast a shadow over the military engagement and defence dialogue between the two countries, there is a perception among a section of strategic community and in the media that both sides should work amicably out an exit route of the diplomatic impasse sooner than later for the larger interest and in particular to the tricky border issue in which the PLA seems to have an upper hand in China.¹⁴ At the writing of this article, it seems there are veiled signs of conciliation between the two countries. While newspaper reports suggest that Beijing might take a second look at the visa issue, the government of India has given the go ahead for an official visit by the Indian Coast Guard chief Vice-Admiral Anil Chopra to Shanghai in October. He will be the first high-ranking military official to visit China since Lt General Jaswal was denied permission to lead a military delegation to Beijing in July this year.¹⁵ It is also pertinent to mention that although not reported in the media, a group of senior journalists from China visited India in September this year. The journalists also had free and frank discussions with the scholars at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi. Military engagement which China had suspended with the United States earlier on the ground of supply of arms to Taiwan is going to be resumed, according to news reports. All these point out that military exchange between the two countries may be revived at some stage sooner than later.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that defence cooperation and military engagement between India and China is an aspect of the complex mix of conflict and cooperation approach to bilateral relations between the two Asian giants. It is based on the presumption that there is a security dilemma between the two countries. It recognizes the framework and postulates of what is called cooperative security.

China's acquiescence for military engagement and defence cooperation with India is another aspect of China's overall strategy of so-called peaceful and harmonious rise., which it initiated and pursues, arguably to project China as a soft-power, but really to consolidate its economic muscles and to use it as a leverage to enhance its influence, particularly at a time when there is greater degree of mutual economic inter-dependence between China and India.

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Notes:

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