

# The Flaring Sino-Indian Security Dilemma: Is Conventional Deterrence Eroding?

Written by Erik Herejk Ribeiro

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/01/11/the-flaring-sino-indian-security-dilemma-is-conventional-deterrence-eroding/>

ERIK HEREJK RIBEIRO, JAN 11 2020

After more than a decade of standoffs at the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC), questions have been raised about the Sino-Indian military balance and the possibility of a repetition of the events that led to war in 1962. Especially after the Doklam plateau incident in 2017, where the countries' forces faced each other for several weeks, analysts have focused on the territorial balance of power as a crucial element of Sino-Indian competition and deterrence dynamics. The resounding question in the heads of policy-makers and experts is: Over the next decade, are China and India more or less likely to go to war than before? This article analyzes the effects of infrastructure building and military modernization for Chinese and Indian strategies at the disputed border. Using the offense-defense balance framework, our findings point towards an erosion of conventional deterrence at the Himalayas, where both sides have more capabilities and incentives to choose preemption and offensive action than any moment in the last five decades. These changes have also led to new military doctrines and strategies by China and India, which are now preparing for scenarios ranging from low-intensity conflict to a large-scale – although limited – conventional war.

### **The Sino-Indian security dilemma and the changing offense-defense balance**

The Sino-Indian War marked the beginning of a protracted rivalry, which became the underlying force driving bilateral relations between China and India. The security dilemma has been historically mitigated by the Himalayan high-altitude and mountainous terrain, combined with its distance from Chinese and Indian heartlands. When analyzing deterrence dynamics between China and India, the outbreak of a war in 1962 has been the exception, not the rule: it was an example of a well-conceived and prepared offensive human wave against an ill-equipped and poorly organized defender. After the Indian defeat, military dynamics along the disputed border were quickly stabilized with a reorganization of its force structure in the Northeast region.

However, as Yogesh Joshi and Anit Mukherjee have recently argued, the Sino-Indian security dilemma has increased dramatically in the early twenty-first century. According to them, China's high growth trajectory, the development of critical infrastructure in Tibet and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) rapid modernization have provoked shifts in India's military strategy towards deterrence by punishment. The Sino-Pakistani alliance, the Indo-US rapprochement and the competition for influence in Asia are three external factors that also contribute to increasing competition between the two most populous countries in the world. In this sense, both countries are preparing for an entirely different scenario of local war than envisioned by their leaders in the past. It is argued here that the underlying process driving the Sino-Indian security dilemma are the changes in the offense-defense balance, which ultimately result in shifts in military planning.

The Offense-Defense theory is at the heart of the security dilemma, positing that states gauge their calculations on the use of force based on the likelihood of success against a defender. The two key variables to analyze an offense-defense balance are: a) whether it is more feasible to hold or to take territory; b) whether one can differentiate the nature of each side's forces (defensive or offensive). Whenever the defender has the upper-hand, deterrence is considered strong because the costs of offense would be too high or too risky for a potential aggressor.

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As the advantage of offense increases, the security dilemma tends to become more pronounced and two possible outcomes are arms races and/or the outbreak of war. Moreover, offensive advantage makes states consider preventive or preemptive wars in order to outmaneuver the enemy before it takes initiative. On the other hand, as Glaser and Kaufman have argued, offense-defense balance is only one of three military variables that determine the cost-benefit calculus of states, standing alongside national power (relative resources) and military skill (strategy, doctrine, intelligence and force employment).

In the Sino-Indian case, infrastructure development and military modernization are progressively reducing the Himalayan natural barrier and blurring the offense-defense balance in two ways. First, Chinese and Indian military strategies and doctrines have become more offensive and reliant on large-scale and inter-theater movement. Thus, prior to the actual launch of major military operations, there is little or no distinction between local tactical mobilization and theater-wide mobilization. For example, one side could be mobilizing for deterrence, but the potential adversary would interpret that movement as a preparation for offensive action. Second, the deployment of ballistic missiles (conventional and potentially nuclear) in the theater of operations, along with the use of cyber, electronic and space warfare, has made it harder to distinguish between the use of offensive and defensive capabilities before and on the outset of a conflict.

Consequently, there is more strategic uncertainty with regard to the purpose and intent of Sino-Indian conventional military strategies and doctrines. While both countries are unlikely to cross the nuclear threshold, there is enough space for conventional escalation inside the boundaries of a limited war. The feasibility of a local war between China and India has increased military competition at the border, with both countries enhancing their levels of readiness. Since limited wars rely on strategic surprise and short windows of opportunity, the risks of misperception and intended or unintended escalation are also higher than before. In other words, the conventional deterrence dynamics between China and India are becoming more complex and could be on the course of erosion over the next decade and beyond.

## **China and India flying over the Hump: Is conventional deterrence eroding?**

One of the forgotten, but most decisive operations of World War II in the Pacific Theater was the United States supplying of Chiang Kai-Shek's army in Chongqing (Central China) against the Imperial Japanese Army. From 1942 onwards, hundreds of Allied planes crossed the hitherto insurmountable Himalayan barrier, "flying over the Hump" to deliver up to 10.000 tons of cargo every month to mainland China.

More than 70 years later, China and India are preparing their armed forces to once again fly over the Hump, crossing the Himalayan passes in a contingency along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). After almost five decades of relative stability at the disputed border (with the exception of two skirmishes in 1967 and 1987), the LAC has become more active since 2008. This is an immediate outcome of Chinese and Indian new capabilities and intent to patrol and secure their positions at the LAC during all seasons. Beyond these merely defensive purposes, there is an alarming competition for tactical advantage and psychological pressure over the adversary. The veiled contest led to an increasing number of incursions and standoffs along the different perceptions of the LAC and to the 75-day standoff at the Doklam tri-junction with Bhutan in 2017.

The underlying offense-defense balance that heavily favored the defender until the early 2000s has been gradually shifting towards a more even balance. In the last two decades, the Chinese government took major steps to modernize the infrastructure of its hinterland, including civilian and military logistic hubs in the Tibet Autonomous Region and hyperbaric oxygen chambers for rapid acclimatization of troops to high-altitude terrain. In tandem with its doctrine of "local wars under informatized conditions", the People's Liberation Army (PLA) raised rapid reaction forces and air assault divisions which can be quickly deployed anywhere around the country's borders. The PLA Air Force is also increasing its peace-time deployment in Tibet and has progressively overcome the challenges of high-altitude operations. Especially after the Doklam incident, analysts have noticed the rapid modernization of Chinese airports in Tibet, most likely to assist military activities in the region.

Following incremental inputs from political, military and bureaucratic experts since 2004, India also decided to

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prepare for a scenario of local war against China. Particularly after the Naresh Chandra Committee Report (2011), the Indian government approved the construction of several critical infrastructure projects and authorized the armed forces to shift part of their land and air assets to Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. Arguably, the current scale and pace of infrastructure building in India's Northeast is unprecedented, enabling the positioning and movement of larger platforms such as heavy artillery and tanks.

India's force structure and military strategy are also following these developments. The raising of two new army divisions in 2009, of the Mountain Strike Corps since 2013 and the positioning of Sukhoi Su-30MKI squadrons in Northeast India are intended to provide a shift in military strategy from a defensive posture (deterrence by denial) towards deterrence by punishment vis-à-vis China. More recently, virtually all Indian Army and Air Force acquisitions have been aimed at reducing the Chinese operational advantage in Tibet, from the US-made Apache and Chinook helicopters and M777 artillery to the French Dassault Rafale fighter squadrons, armed with SCALP and Meteor missiles.

In the background of increasing militarization of the Himalayas, there are a few factors pointing towards the erosion of conventional deterrence. First, China and India not only are more capable of launching (counter) offensive operations over the LAC, but are also preparing their armed forces for this scenario.

Although the main strategic concept of the People's Republic of China is "Active Defense", Chinese strategic culture and operational art emphasize that the defensive phase is very limited in time and scope. China has a historical preference for taking the offensive and achieving strategic surprise, either by preemption or a robust counter-strike. As Larry Wortzel shows, a contingency with India has caught momentum in Chinese military writings. Two ideas stand out in a future border scenario. First, the concept of operational depth is central to the PLA Air Force and Rocket Forces, which aim to neutralize the opponent's force inside its own territory in order to weaken defenses and prepare for offensive land operations. Another development in Chinese strategic thought with regard to the mountainous terrain is that achieving information superiority and isolating the enemy by maneuver and combined forces (artillery, light armor, Special Forces, air assault, electronic warfare) is more advantageous than relying on a frontal attack.

Despite the severe conditions of mountain warfare, the Chinese military publications show increasing confidence, based on extensive training over the last decade, that it could apply the concepts of "local wars under informatized conditions" in Tibet. Over the last decade, the PLA has practiced large-scale theater mobility and air-land combined force projection in its exercises over Tibet, gradually integrating the electronic and cyber domains. Since nearly a third of Chinese territory is mountainous, there is a vast ground for rehearsing offensive operations and acclimatizing troops for long periods of time.

India clearly sees itself as the lesser force, trying to catch up with China's fast developing military power in Tibet. However, this sense of broader strategic and operational inferiority also boosts the case for a preemptive conventional strategy. As Iskander Rehman points out, India holds a clear numeric and equipment advantage near the LAC as a form of compensating for its poorer lines of communication. This is especially true for Ladakh and Sikkim, where the Indian Army is preparing for armored combat. When and if the Indian politico-military elites sense that China is mobilizing for war, one of the logical alternatives is to delay and hamper the PLA's arrival by launching limited offensive air-land operations, mounting a forward defense with the aim to divert and frustrate Chinese forces.

The Indian Air Force's doctrine has also shifted in the last couple decades from national air defense towards "strategic reach", including offensive operations deep inside enemy territory. In a contingency with China, Brigadier Arun Sahgal notes that "the capacity to interdict Chinese operational and logistic infrastructure in Tibet is the key to India's operational plans". This is the main rationale for stationing Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighters and BrahMos Block III missiles in Northeast India, providing the capability to strike targets deep inside Tibet. This is not particularly a call for offensive/aggressive action, but rather a preventive measure: the air force is aware of its responsibility to ensure air superiority and, simultaneously, deliver troops, supplies and ordnance up to and beyond the LAC. For this purpose, India has built several advanced landing grounds (ALGs) and has maintained several airfields close to the LAC. Also worth mentioning, these and other facilities (e.g. bunkers and aircraft shelters) would be vulnerable to sustained

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artillery fire if the Indian Army does not mount a forward defense beyond the currently controlled territories.

In the last couple of years, India has responded in kind to the PLA military exercises in Tibet. In 2018, the Indian Air Force held the Gagan Shakti, practicing full mobilization of airborne resources to cater for trans-theater mobility between the Pakistani and Chinese fronts. The Indian Army, in its turn, published the Land Warfare Doctrine (2018) and has conducted two major exercises in 2019 to test its new Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) in Ladakh (September) and Arunachal Pradesh (October), practicing air and land assaults in both regions.

Chinese and Indian military strategies now concede a greater role for strategic surprise and combined-arms offensive operations. While being essentially devised for deterrent purposes, both countries' military doctrines end putting a premium on preemption, particularly on the use of missile and air strikes to debilitate the adversary's key air defenses, logistic lines, radars and sensors. Especially for the PLA, new integrated theater commands along with cyber and electronic warfare capabilities could create an edge in terms of information superiority, while possibly increasing the *fog of war* for the adversary. Although India is dangerously lagging behind in organizational and technological terms, the weather and terrain difficulties of mountain warfare put in question whether new information and counter-information technologies will generate similar disruptive or revolutionary effects as shown in Operation Desert Storm.

The erosion of deterrence at the Sino-Indian LAC could even extrapolate beyond the conventional offense-defense balance. Larry Wortzel has argued that the deployment of PLA Second Artillery (now Strategic Rocket Forces) ballistic missiles in Tibet further blurs the distinction between defensive or offensive use of firepower in a future contingency. More worryingly, Wortzel identified in Chinese writings that the PLA also envisions space for "nuclear counter-deterrence" in high-altitude terrain. In practice, this concept could be interpreted as nuclear blackmail against an adversary like India, which has a smaller and less sophisticated arsenal.

## Final considerations

In sum, Sino-Indian conventional deterrence is not based anymore on the Himalayas as a geographical defensive barrier, where the predominant variable was the number and disposition of infantry and light artillery formations on each side. Improvements in air-land logistics, network-centric operations, mechanized assets and air power are changing the Himalayan equation towards escalation dominance, increasing the premium for preemptive offensive action and strategic surprise. This affirmative is especially valid for China, which strongly believes in its ability to generate major breakthroughs in technology and skill, thus achieving information superiority and more efficient operational coordination vis-à-vis India.

Sino-Indian conventional deterrence is now disputed on the grounds of who is more capable of moving faster and delivering firepower more precisely, achieving a degree of surprise that allows for changes or the maintenance of the territorial status quo. Even if the use of force is not exercised, it is possible that mobilization and maneuvering along the border would signal whether one of the sides has dominance or not.

Beyond the obvious impact on the economic and political stability in Asia, the Sino-Indian conventional balance is becoming a relevant indicator of polarity in the International System. In contrast to previous eras, the current relevance of this Sino-Indian conventional equation extrapolates bilateral relations and could impact the geopolitical and military calculus of other interested parties, from the United States and Japan to Russia and Pakistan. Thus, it is important not only to follow developments over the Himalayas, but to adjust assessments on the likelihood of armed conflict and the changing perceptions of escalation dynamics between China and India.

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