



The concept of Deception and Its Applicability in India-China Framework



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“Be extremely subtle, even to the point of formlessness. Be extremely mysterious, even to the point of soundlessness. Thereby you can be the director of the opponent’s fate”.

—Sun Tzu¹

Introduction

The legacy of unresolved borders with our adversaries and the diminishing credibility of conventional deterrence has brought our nation at a defining juncture today. The magnitude of politico-diplomatic and military-strategic challenges posed collusively by our adversaries has led us to act in manners unprecedented. The inertia of self-restraint and credulity especially on the military front has been decisively jettisoned in light of situational realities and ground imperatives. The country and the military have re-evaluated their traditional thought process and instinctively embraced a transformative and futuristic trajectory in its policies, plans and practices.

Key Points

- The ‘Art of Deception’ comprising the wisdom of deceiving one’s adversaries and the naivety of getting deceived, still remains a credible battle winning factor.
- The ongoing India-China standoff in Eastern Ladakh serves as an apt instance for understanding modern day deception by an ‘assertive and aggressive’ China.
- Understanding the fundamental tenets and salient characteristics of Chinese deceptive behaviour is important towards handling and harnessing deception to one’s own advantage.
- Ingenuity and innovativeness will remain the litmus test for successful deception under all circumstances.
- Faced with deceptive situations, leaders on ground should adopt a balanced, level-headed and merit-based approach for decision making and discard impulsions.



Our period of existence as a nation is dotted with myriad military confrontations. Amidst dynamic battle spaces, evolving war fighting paradigms and combat experiences we have had so far, lies one ubiquitous factor which has clearly proven its role and impact in the military outcomes we have gained i.e. the wisdom of deceiving own adversaries towards operational gains and the naivety of getting deceived in setbacks.

Incidentally, the ongoing India-China Ladakh standoff serves as an apt instance for understanding modern day deception wherein an assertive and aggressive China has taken this 'new' battlefield skill of deception to a high horizon, whereby, a well calibrated use of war and non-war capabilities aimed at outwitting India and gaining distinct operational advantage, has remained central to China's deceptive endeavours in the aforementioned scenario.

Given the above context, this paper has been written with a twofold aim. *Firstly*, to understand the conceptual essence of battlefield deception in general. *Secondly*, to highlight the characteristic strands of Chinese deception philosophy and ideate certain situational imperatives towards handling and harnessing deception in the current and future Indo – Chinese engagements.

Deception: Conceptual Essence

"The essence of deception is that it lets the enemy convince himself that the misleading picture presented is valid".

—Michael I Handel ²

The US Army defines deception as "Those measures designed to mislead an enemy by manipulation, distortion or falsification of evidence to induce him to react in a manner prejudicial to his interests".³ To simplify, deception can be understood as "use of all means (direct or indirect, kinetic or non-kinetic and contact or non-contact) to favourably influence and channelise the adversary's mind and actions".

As we try to gauge the essence of concept, it would be prudent and logical to understand as to what makes the concept of deception relevant for a nation and its military.

- **Mislead the Adversary's Decision Making Ability.** The success of any military operation depends on the quality and correctness of decisions made. The overall operational aim of deception is to influence the enemy's decision making process so as to affect unfruitful committal of his resources, in turn facilitating own main effort.



- **Enhance Likelihood of Initial Success.** Being able to deceive the enemy decisively at the commencement of an operation offers the brightest chance to achieve initial success. Successful deception during 'Operation Overload' ensured that the German Armed Divisions remained at Pas de Calais during the initial phase of operation and were not available when the allies launched an attack on Normandy. Successful landing operations were thus made feasible.
- **Achieve 'More with Less'.** As we seek to deceive the adversary with regard to our own intended area of operations, resistance at the point of contact is likely to be normal/ lesser and hence there is a possibility of 'achieving more with less resources'. During 'Operation Desert Storm', having convinced Saddam Hussein of the coalition's intent to conduct main attack from southern direction (into Central Kuwait), the Allies swung west to attack Iraq and achieved their operational objective with lesser efforts. Thus, manoeuvre was chosen over attrition.
- **Force Multiplier Effect.** Deception achieved through 'cliff chop assaults' during the Kargil War⁴ (Ghatak platoons of Infantry Battalions reached the top of Tololing and Tiger Hill undetected) un-hinged the enemy's defences. Such manoeuvres, in conjunction with attacks through conventional approaches, led to the successful capture of these strategic points that eventually turned the tide of the war to India's advantage.
- **Time Critical Deterrence.** Wise use of deception may sometimes end up achieving dividends not envisaged through linear commitment of forces. General John Magruder's 'Quaker Cannons' (wooden logs painted as guns) during the 'Peninsular Campaign' in the American Civil War achieved the much needed deception against larger forces of General George McClellan wherein they managed to keep the larger forces at bay for one month by 'portraying' to the enemy that they have a larger force to attack. Magruder used this time to bring in actual reinforcements.
- **Targeting the Cognitive.** During war, deception by giving 'conflicting pieces' of information to the enemy increases uncertainty and ambiguity thereby thickening the overall fog of war. This 'helpless situation' causes mental isolation and psychological dislocation affecting the adversary's ability to take sane decisions. During the Arab-Israeli war, Israeli Military Intelligence launched 'Operation Fog of War' wherein they deliberately gave incorrect information with an intent to spread haplessness and confusion. This demoralised the top decision makers which in turn led to the eventual disintegration of the command structure.
- **Resource Optimisation.** Present and future adversarial challenges, being collusive in nature, entails simultaneous actions on multiple fronts. The recent situation in

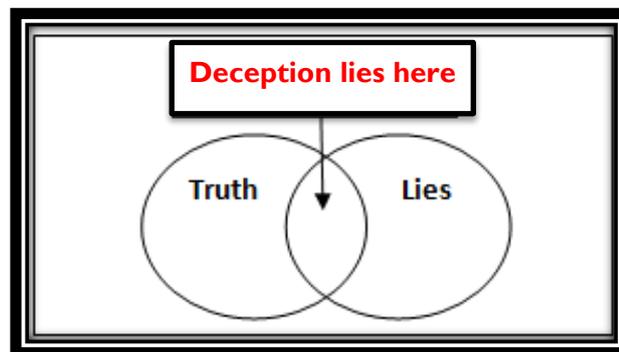
Eastern Ladakh is indicative of such scenarios wherein while on one hand, we were defending our Northern borders with China, and on the other, we were concomitantly poised and prepared to meet any challenge from the West.

Tenets of Deception

Having seen the necessity of deception and convinced of its credibility as a war winning tool, we should now try to study some of its vital tenets. A clear assimilation of these principles imparts a distinct advantage in planning and execution of the concept at various levels in combat.

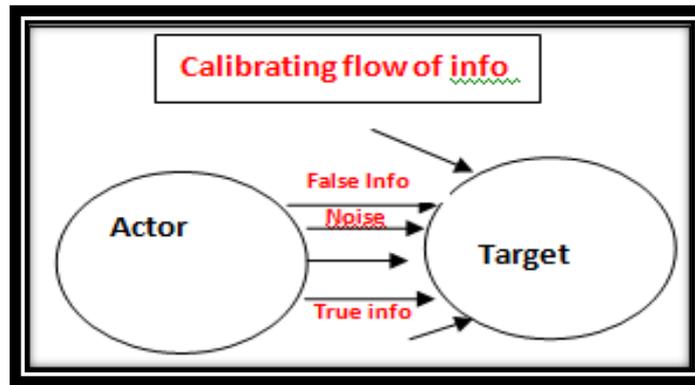
- **Credible Deception Comprises Well Calibrated Mix of Truth and Lies.** A deception which focusses only on radiating false information is unlikely to attract desired attention and action of the adversary. Truth and reality coupled with farce will impart immense credibility to the initiator's action and hence has far greater chances of success.

Figure 1: Credible Deception: Balanced Overlap of Truth and Lies



Source: Prepared by the Author

- **Knowing the Personality of Adversary Leader is a Pre-requisite for Successful Deception.** Different leaders will perceive and react differently—a brave personality will seek combat whereas a weak personality will avoid engagements. Intrinsicly, leaders are governed primarily by the sum of three frameworks vis. personal, cultural and genetic⁵. Each of these frameworks defines the ways in which an individual behaves and acts in a crisis situation.
- **Knowledge of the Enemy's Information Collection Methods and Means.** Detailed knowledge about the enemy's trusted source(s) of intelligence collection and selectively conditioning the desired information to ensure that only limited information reaches the enemy which is of no operational use to him.

Figure 2: Deception- Communication Framework

Source: Prepared by the Author

- **Analysing and Understanding Own Methods and Designs through the Adversary's Lens.** Nothing adds greater credibility and realism to one's own deception plans than visualising deceptive designs from the adversary's lenses. This helps us to plan things in a more effective manner.
- **Increasing and Decreasing the Fog of War.** In order to conceal own actual plan of action, the level of uncertainty is required to be increased by radiating indicators supporting divergent options at the same time. At the same time, whenever we want to convince the enemy about any particular course of action of ours, the fog of war is selectively reduced by giving out indicators supporting that particular course of action only.
- **Reinforcing the Adversary's Perception.** Whenever it is planned to adopt an unconventional option, one should create a deception of one's 'expected traditional course of action' so as to keep the adversary entangled in a different area on one hand and on the other, launch offensive in the intended area.
- **Changing the Adversary's Perception.** Whenever there lies an operational compulsion to follow the traditional course of action, deception can be achieved by executing actions that would change the adversary's existing perception and make the adversary believe that own interest lies elsewhere. This is however not an economically viable option, both in terms of efforts and resources.
- **Ingenuity and Innovativeness are Hallmarks of Deception.** In order to deceive the enemy more than once, it is important to break predictability and adopt a 'de-novo approach' every time. This can only manifest through an in-depth knowledge of the adversary's philosophy and institutional embrace of 'ingenuity and innovativeness'.
- **Deception Plan and Actual Plan Should Ideally Support Each Other.** In World War II, the Allies executed 'Operation Fortitude South' (a deception operation) in



order to prevent Germany's Fifteenth Army from becoming a hindrance to the Allied's action in Normandy. This operation ensured that the Fifteenth Army was kept stationed at Pas de Calais throughout.

- **Understanding 'What to Hide' is essential to Achieve own Economy of Effort.** Since the underlying aim of deception is to achieve victory with lesser efforts and resources, trying to hide everything may not be economical. In the case of Normandy, the Allies planned to land at Normandy, but however they forged a deception to project Pas de Calais as the landing location. No attempt was made to hide indicators that were same for both the plans like practice of beach landings, general build up, airborne training etc. which helped in achieving 'economy of effort'.
- **Synergy with Neighbouring and Higher Formations' Plans and Actions.** It must be ensured that one's own deception plans are coordinated with the plans and actions of higher and neighbouring formations. In World War II, during an attack on the German garrison at Brest, the 23 Headquarters' Special Troops undertook a sonic simulation of tank activity against a particular area, hence alerting the German Forces on this front. Later, due to lack of coordination when one of the tank thrusts belonging to other formation attacked through the same area, the alert German Forces positioned there annihilated the attacking force.
- **Careful Assessment of Deception Success to Avoid Getting Deceived.** While it is important to note the indicators of a successful deception, it is equally important to identify signs of its failure; this would avoid one's own troops falling prey to the adversary's counter deception plan.

Deception Philosophy of China

"Strategic communications, statements from China's topmost hierarchy and a tactical playback with planned release of video footages on global media, highlighting swift mobilisation of PLA to Aksai Chin by rail and air, deployment of an array of high altitude advanced weapons including Z-10 attack helicopters, and Karate fighters being deployed along the Line of Actual Control, is nothing but plain and simple subterfuge which the Chinese are experts in".

—General MM Naravane PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM, ADC
Chief of the Army Staff ⁶

Understanding the cultural framework, organisational beliefs and the thought process of the adversary's decision makers not only helps in predicting its deception endeavours, but also



guides own counter plans to such designs. Before we assimilate certain characteristic features of contemporary Chinese deceptive behaviour, an objective analysis of the current India-China standoff in Eastern Ladakh through the lens of deception is required.

The Eastern Ladakh Experience

The ongoing standoff between India and China along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh aptly shows the aggressive and assertive behaviour of China in the regional and global context. Chinese attempts to change the status quo on ground resulted in mirror deployments on both sides at multiple places along the LAC. While 'teaching a lesson' has long been the salient Chinese way of dealing with smaller peripheral nations however, the year long struggle (Ladakh standoff) in one of the most rugged high altitude terrains of the world has thrown out meaningful strategic and operational lessons for the Chinese to say the least.

Notwithstanding the above, initially China did manage to 'trick' India with respect to the scale and time of presence of its forces in the region. The annual military exercises, generally comprising two or more Chinese motorised divisions from South Xinjiang Military District is a regular practice; however, in late April 2020, the PLA surreptitiously moved these forces and deployed them into Eastern Ladakh to the surprise of the Indian Army.

China's act of deceptive manoeuvre was not restricted only to the initial phase of the standoff, but was evident throughout the period involving 'distortion' (presenting varying facts regarding perception of LAC every time), 'denial' (denying real casualty figures of the PLA troops after the 15 June engagement) and 'diversion' of attention (time of engagement chosen— when the entire nation was under lockdown situation due to COVID). The measures undertaken by China highlighted their 'ingrained' preference for deception in warfare.

Characteristic Deception Strands. While generalising the adversary's behaviour may lead to a policy pitfall, however deductions supported by circumstantial evidence may serve as important planning parameters. Certain corollaries and prognostic assessments regarding the Chinese deceptive behaviour are highlighted below.

- ***Influence of National Strategic Culture.*** The Chinese strategic culture is immensely influenced by personalities of its ancient philosophers and the military treaties expounded by them like the Art of War, Seven Military Classics of Ancient China and 36 stratagems etc. In addition, there exists a penchant for the game of 'Wei Qi' which involves 'outwitting an opponent through positioning and expansion',



as also the predominant belief in the concept of 'Shi'. All these facets promotes the use of 'secrecy and stratagems' towards achieving deception and continues to guide, and to some extent dominate, its modern day strategic and operational behaviour.

- **Chinese Behaviour and Conduct Towards her Adversaries is Guided by the Perceived Image of Those Nations.** Chinese use of deception against its adversaries is guided primarily by the 'perception' it has about them. Nations that lack confidence, coherence and resolute will to hold on to their ground are likely to be pressurised and bullied by China, by employment of all kinds of deceptive means.
- **Pervasive Presence and Practice.** In addition to its prevalence in the military domain, deception is and will also remain a predominant tool for political and diplomatic manoeuvring.
- **Preference for Unconventional Approaches.** As per Sun Tzu, "while one may join the war through direct or conventional means, victory shall always be obtained through indirect means". Rightly so, the predominant use of the 'three non warfares i.e. non-contact, non-linear and non-symmetric warfare comprising active and overlapping exploitation of cyber, electronic and space domains, will remain potent 'unconventional weapons' towards achieving modern day deception.
- **Continuous Information Harvesting.** China plans its deception based on accurate information of the adversary, that has been collected before the engagement takes place. This information is not only confined to the military domain, but also involves larger canvas employing Chinese multinational giants, its academicians, tourists and even students present in target nation(s).⁷ The database thus available is used towards achieving holistic deception in times of need.
- **Mind over Matter.** Primacy of influencing the 'mind over physical domain' remains central to the Chinese way of achieving battlefield deception. Floating deceptive narratives specifically tailored for enemy's domestic audience, regional fraternity and the global environment through clever use of psychological, media and legal warfares gives China a decisive advantage over its adversaries.
- **Exploitation of Technology.** Use of niche technologies facilitates easy achievement of deception, as such actions are difficult to counter owing to their unexpected nature, lack of preparedness of the adversary and existing technological gap between the opponents. China's current focus towards leveraging autonomous and intelligent systems in an informationised environment will see active exploitation of technology towards achieving tactical and operational deception as against a mere 'force centric approach'.



- **Morality in Conduct.** Convinced by the philosophy of its strategic thinkers, China firmly believes that through 'strategic cleverness', they can secure a decisive victory at little or no cost. Many Western writers like Kurtis Hagen have written extensively on the subject reiterating that the concept of 'fair play' is absent in the Chinese classics.

Finally, the acquired conceptual knowledge and understanding of Chinese deception characteristics facilitates deducing certain situational imperatives towards effectively handling and harnessing deception in current India-China context.

Situational India-China Context

"China is increasingly becoming volatile in its quest for supremacy".

—General MM Naravane, PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM, ADC
Chief of the Army Staff ⁸

Dealing with China's short, medium and long term deceptive endeavours in the Indian context requires a comprehensive and coherent approach. Standalone, adhoc and segmented responses and reactions may not effectively match China's intent. Consequently, certain plausible 'Lines of Efforts' at the national and military level are highlighted below.

National Imperatives

- **Fine Understanding of the Chinese Strategic Culture.** In-depth knowledge of the ancient and contemporary Chinese culture, thought process and beliefs can be an efficient way of effectively reading and dealing with China's deceptive behaviour.
- **Changing China's Perception of India.** India- China relation in the current era is primarily characterised by misperceptions and distrust. While the overall economic, technological and military power balance between the two nations may be 'believed' to be tilting in China's favour, India with its determined, confident, convictive and mature handling of the Eastern Ladakh situation has set the stage for changing such 'flawed' Chinese perceptions of India. The paradigm should remain relevant irrespective of the political dispensation which would eventually convince China of her 'misconception' about subduing India through coercion and deception.
- **Deterrence against Deception.** Capability to effectively counter any deceptive manoeuvre by China especially in areas where she has an edge (like cyber, AI and autonomous platforms), with concurrent ability to forge own deception plans in same or other domains, would be the most effective deterrence against deception. The same can only be ensured through time bound capacity enhancement in these domains,



conducting counter response exercises and ensuring continuous product improvement based on ground feedback.

- **Neutralising China's Intelligence Collection Endeavours.** Intelligence collected through long term information harvesting mechanism employed by China can be weaponised and used at various levels— ranging from tactical battlefield to national level decision making. A credible start towards restricting Chinese eagerness to penetrate every sphere of our lives has already been made and needs to be pursued with the ruthlessness it deserves. Securing critical information infrastructure at the national level merits utmost priority. Incentivising security of information and networks of government departments may be one of the pragmatic ways of thwarting cyber breaches.
- **Synergising Own Intelligence Efforts.** Intelligence awareness across all domains and synergy of efforts is a prerequisite, for both countering as well as executing own deception plan. Intelligence failure or lack of coordination is directly proportional to the success of the adversary's deception plan. Apart from human and technical intelligence, encouraging the potential of current day 'satellite warriors' ⁹ may enhance the surveillance level along our frontiers.
- **Multi-Domain Preparedness.** As the recent conflicts in Caucasus and Middle East regions have demonstrated, modern engagements will spread into unconventional domains where 'hidden critical vulnerabilities' of any nation lies. An interplay of domains wherein the adversary shows simultaneous offensive indicators in two or more domains, may eventually result in successful deception in any one. Hence, readiness to counter such designs in multi-domain environment is the need of the hour. Cyber attack against the Maharashtra State Electricity Board during the peak of the Galwan crisis in 2020, with suspected Chinese links, is one such reminder. ¹⁰
- **Nurturing Matured Public Opinion.** Success of the adversary's deception also depends on how well the public perception of the targeted country has been influenced, during a conflict situation. In such situations, minor initial advantages gained by the adversary due to successful deception may result in undue pressure on the government and military hierarchy if the public opinion has been subverted. This may affect a balanced handling of the situation. Hence, gradually educating the people about the latent contours of China's cognitive deception may be prudent.

Military Imperatives

- **Accurate Knowledge of the Military Strategic Culture.** Knowing the military strategic culture of an organisation like PLA comprises an intimate analysis of its military treaties, understanding general pattern of its crisis decision making and



assessing contemporary institutional thought process reflected in its defence papers.¹¹ Such holistic knowledge will facilitate nuanced and intuitive perception of China's deceptive intents.

- **Balanced and Level Headed Leadership / Decision makers.** Personality based militaries provide exploitable vulnerabilities for the adversary forces. Hence, there exists an imperative of reducing personality play in operational conduct. Leaders in charge of the ground situation should adopt a balanced, level-headed and merit-based approach to operational decision making and discard impulsions. Such leaders are likely to see through deception with relative ease.
- **Cognitive Profiling of Adversary Leadership.** While modern decision making will increasingly leverage AI centric systems, human leadership element is still likely to retain a considerable hold over decision making process especially in India-China context. As a corollary, the personal and cultural biases of the adversary's leaders will be crucial towards reading intricate contours of enemy deception.
- **Dominating the Operational Information Framework.** Intelligence gathering assets of the PLA Strategic Support Force are engaged in continuous technical reconnaissance of our military networks and Electronic Warfare assets to achieve deception during crucial periods. Security of military networks needs to be ensured at all levels by isolation, cyber hardening, software encryption and above all using indigenous hardware. At the same time, imported Electronic Warfare equipment needs to strictly avoid using any Chinese component. Malwares embedded in such components may disrupt functioning of these equipment when most needed.
- **Think Irrationally- Act Rationally.** While 'irrational thinking' is important to understand the deceptive designs of a clever adversary, at the same time, own assessments and articulations need to be based on scientific analysis of the situation and mature operational insight. Solution may well lie in the overlap of mind, machine and intuition.
- **Hiding v/s Showing.** In the era of unprecedented battlefield transparency, it may be nearly impossible to hide everything from a technologically advanced adversary. Pragmatism lies in 'intently showing the unimportant' to the adversary with an aim to successfully 'hide the important'. Knowing the difference (what to show and what to hide) will certainly matter.
- **Human Eye v/s Artificial Eye.** A perceptible effort is visible on part of the Chinese to stretch own resources by facilitating 'minor' incidents across the entire frontage of the LAC. Such an approach by the adversary is conducive to executing deception by forcing resource dissipation. High resolution, deep penetration, state of the art



sensors (based on ground, air and space) backed by quick action forces may be an alternate for 'boots on ground' for low priority areas to release troops and resources for priority sectors.

- **Operational and Tactical Ingenuity and Innovativeness.** Material resources will always be important in any context. In order to achieve success in deceiving own adversaries, we will have to rely more on operational and tactical ingenuity than material requirements— a cognitively sharp military will be dreaded by even an advanced adversary.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the ancient legacy of the deception phenomenon, it still remains an enigma for the simple minded. As the competitions and conflicts between rising and the risen powers become more and more complicated and un-benign, the art of deception will be one of the most sought after skills for nations and their militaries. Even for nations which subscribe to the philosophy of peaceful rise, peace shall come only through optimum conflict preparedness across all domains; such preparedness entails that our conventional knowledge of the adversary be matched with the unconventional understanding of their mental and moral moorings. This can only result through a nuanced assimilation of the concept and practice of deception as relevant to our context. Finally, wisdom would invariably lie in leveraging deception towards fighting for our righteous aims in this competing world.

End Notes

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