



# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Quintessential Military Competition-Arms Race in the India-China-Pakistan Context



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### Introduction

The cover of the September 21, 2015 issue of the Time Magazine has a photograph of a phalanx of PLA soldiers dressed in spanking new pixelated camouflage uniforms. Marching in unison they look like a robotic army from the 2004 Hollywood movie, 'I Robot'. Inside is an article taking off from the massive military parade of 03 Sep 2015 analysing whether the world should worry as China flexes its muscle.<sup>1</sup> Named the '70th Anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War', the parade showcased to the world China's modern military might in the form of 500 pieces of military equipment, most of which have never been seen before.<sup>2</sup> President Xi Jinping in his speech stated that "we Chinese love peace" and used the word 'peace' 17 times in his speech.<sup>3</sup> However, the enduring image from the parade will be the military might moving in 'robotic' precision and not

### Key Points

1. The massive Chinese military parade of 03 Sep 2015 has all the catalysts of an arms race. An arms race occurs because of the action-reaction model is that states strengthen their armaments because of the threats the states perceive from other states which triggers the other state to build up even more.
2. The military by its very ethos will want the maximum strength and the latest in weapons and equipment because the military will always prepare for assured success in the worst case scenario.
3. The announced Chinese reduction of 300,000 soldiers is in fact a build up as the manpower will be diverted to the PLAAF and PLAN.
4. In the history of the Pakistan-India-China adversarial relationship the spikes in India's military growth have been mostly reactive.
5. To avoid a ruinous arms race India must make an objective analysis that how much of the PLA strength and of what type can be brought to bear against India.

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the chaotic flight of the 70,000 doves (of peace) released into the air later. That enduring image has all the catalysts of an arms race.

### Dynamics of an Arms Race

An arms race is likened to an 'action-reaction' model.<sup>4</sup> Barry Buzan, the International Relations expert states that the basic proposition of the action-reaction model is that states strengthen their armaments because of the threats the states perceive from other states.<sup>5</sup> An action by a potentially hostile state to increase its military strength will raise the level of threat seen by other states, who will react by increasing their own strength. Arms races are potentially ruinous. It is the arms race between USA and the USSR between 1945 and 1991 which led to the implosion of the USSR and the decline of USA.<sup>6</sup> The same dynamics had helped a third party, China. There will be always some third party which will benefit from an arms race between two competitors. Both Eastern and Western moral stories and scriptures, such as Aesop's Fables, the *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka* Tales have stories in which two disputants lose the object of their dispute to a third. We all have read about 'The Lion, the Bear and the Fox', 'The Two Cats and the Monkey' or 'The two Dogs and the Bone' in our childhood days yet mature nations neglect the moral lesson.

### Arming and its Relationship with Military Ethos and Political Direction

The military by its very ethos will want the maximum strength and the latest in weapons and equipment. The reason for this is simple "The function of an army is to fight...[to win]".<sup>7</sup> If no clear directions are given by the government then ignorance of the factual situation will fuel an arms race because the military will always prepare for assured success in the worst case scenario.

The eminent US General, Matthew .B. Ridgeway had this to say about the relationship between the military leadership and the government:

'[The Government says to the military] "...this is our national policy. This is what we wish to accomplish, or would like to do. What military means are required to support it?" The soldier studies the problem in detail. "Very well," he says to the statesman. "Here is what your policy will require in men and guns, in ships and planes."...If civilian authority finds the cost to be greater than the country can bear, then either the objectives themselves should be modified, or the responsibility for the risks involved should be forthrightly accepted. Under no circumstances, regardless of pressures from whatever source or motive, should the professional military man yield, or compromise his judgment for other than convincing military reasons. To do otherwise would destroy his usefulness'.<sup>8</sup>

Political goals should be based on vital national interests and military goals should be consistent with and support the political goals. If there is disconnect in the presence of an adversarial situation then there is bound to be an arms race. This will also be a race with haphazard spending and inadequate funding.

### Driver of Chinese Military Modernisation

The core value of China is its single party, the Communist Party of China (CPC). While other values of China have changed i.e it has transformed to a capitalist model of development, yet it remains a single party state and not a multiparty which is a *sine quo non* in democracy. Globalization has brought great prosperity to China. It has also brought aspirations of democracy to the people and responsibility to protect overseas interests upon its armed forces.

To counter the former, the primeval instinct of self preservation forces China to look at the champion of democracy, the USA, as an existential threat. The

threat is not a direct military threat. It is subversion of its people through two regional democracies. The first is Taiwan which is Communist China's alter ego. The second is Japan with which it also has abiding hatred and suspicion on account of two ruinous wars fought with Japan in 1894-1895 and 1937-1945. The ideological existential threat that China perceives from these two countries is protected as well as projected by the military shield of the United States.

In 1985 there was a major reorientation of Chinese military strategy because of which the size of the PLA was drastically reduced from 4.238 million to 3.2 million.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently reductions have been 500,000 troops in 1997 and 200,000 in 2003.<sup>10</sup> The cut announced in 2015 is the fourth since the 1980's. As far as China is concerned the cuts do not herald a scaling down of its threat perceptions or military ambitions. In fact it is a scaling up. This is a result of two factors. The first is that the Gulf Wars had convinced China about the primacy of modern equipment to win wars. The second is the realignment of Chinese outlook from continental to global because of its greatly increased trade interests in the world. These mandate protecting the trade routes as well as overseas assets. The 2015 White Paper on military strategy clearly brings out this shift in priorities by stating that the special focus area of the PLA will be the Navy.<sup>11</sup> To that extent the latest announcement of troop cuts has been clearly enunciated to be the enabler of modernization and increase in the strength of the Air Force and the Navy.<sup>12</sup> The increase in strength of the PLAN<sup>13</sup> will make the Indian Navy uneasy and force it to increase its capability. Any military foresees the complete might of its adversary being directed towards it. A naval arms race is bound to ensue.

### **The India-China-Pakistan Arms Race Construct**

As brought out above, China is building up its military capability based upon the threat it perceives,

specifically from the USA. However, that capability adds to Indian apprehensions. India fears that the capability can be used against it. This leads it to build up its military capability to deter the Chinese. Indian military buildup threatens the Pakistanis as they appreciate that forces from India's Northern and Eastern borders can be employed against it. There can be no concrete assurance that China will prevent the shifting of such forces as in international relations there are no permanent enemies or friends. Build up of Pakistani capabilities forces India to enhance its capabilities to maintain an ability to impose punitive deterrence upon the Pakistanis. India also knows that countervailing pressure from China can prevent India from relocating forces from the Indo-China border. All its diplomacy aims to ensure that China remains out of any India-Pakistan war but this cannot be a given. Indian strategic planners therefore have to cater for a two front war; *ergo*, the race continues. In case the numbers are not increased then quality is improved through modernisation in a tit for tat reaction. This has been the norm in the India-China-Pakistan arms race construct since 1962. China is the catalyst though not the primeval threat to India.

### **Models of Military Buildup**

There are three models of the building of military capability. These are Threat, Capability and Budget Based. The Threat Based model is the most tangible as buildup is guided by the assessed threat. It can go wrong in case of faulty intelligence and incorrect assessment of the intentions of the state(s) perceived as 'hostile'. Capability Based is relevant when no clear military threats exist. The aim is to build up capability to defeat threats to national security that may arise. A great power like the USA may also have to build up military might to take on the security threats to allies or to maintain pre-eminence in the world. Budget based is not really a defined model. It occurs when a state needs to build up military

capability but does not have adequate financial resources or wants to focus on development. It is more relevant in a developing country where there are many other sectors of society (Health-care, education, infrastructure) which need government investment. In this case the government has to take a calculated risk to invest less in defence and more in other sectors. In case adversaries exist then the government has to invest in diplomacy as a hedge to threats. India did this in the 1950's by investing in the Non-Aligned Movement diplomacy. It was perceived to be a far less costly proposition than spending on military buildup. It also proved to be an ineffective hedge. Delving into the reasons for that is not the scope of this brief.

In the history of the Pakistan-India-China adversarial relationship the spikes in India's military growth have been mostly reactive. India's military buildup had been a result of the 1962 war with China. This led to independent India's first systematic rearmament.<sup>14</sup> The buildup in turn alarmed the Pakistanis that their opportunity to wrest Kashmir by force would be lost forever once the Indian buildup was complete. This led to the 1965 war. Indian armed forces had seen a decline in numbers from partition onwards. The post colonial Indian solidarity with China had brought forth the principle of *Panchsheel*- The five principles of peaceful coexistence. In the 1950's, convinced of the non likelihood of their ever being war on the Indian subcontinent the army was even used as troop labour to build new cantonments as the army set up new stations conforming to the new border. The dulling of our sword was obvious in the days to come.

The other periods of military buildup have been in the 1980's when a relative period of peace on the borders post the 1971 War and an economic upsurge, led India to aspire to a greater regional power status. Capability based planning led to major weapon purchases notably from the USSR. This gave India the capability and confidence to intervene overseas

in Sri Lanka and Maldives. Well aware that they could not match India in conventional military arms race Pakistan invested in two diverse strategies. It spurred its quest of going nuclear and it led to its unleashing proxy war in Punjab and J&K. Of course the nuclearisation became overt only in 1998.

### The Numbers Game and Arms Race

Numbers have traditionally been associated with military might. It is because of this deeply ingrained perception that threats are quantified in numbers of soldiers, tanks, guns, aircraft, warships and nuclear warheads. Post the Chinese parade on 03 Sep 2015 The Times of India carried a table comparing strengths of Indian and Chinese armed forces. Obviously the Indian armed forces in quantities appear significantly weaker. However an objective analysis should assess that how much of the PLA strength and of what type can be brought to bear against India. A non military person reading such tables of military balance would end up comparing India's 2874 tanks with 6540 Chinese tanks<sup>15</sup> without being aware that tanks have little relevance on the high altitude Sino-Indian border. The number of Indian tanks is more relevant to Pakistan which has 2531 tanks<sup>16</sup>. Similarly comparing the number of Chinese and Indian submarines is irrelevant because the major Chinese naval threats are in the Pacific and not the Indian ocean. Aircraft have a different dynamic as theoretically the bulk of the PLAAF aircraft can be used against India, but here again the distance of their airbases, the load carrying capacity of the warplanes in case operated from the nearer airbases in Tibet, will all need to be factored in to come to an objective threat analysis.

Such analyses *are* done by the armed forces but often public opinion affected by the media will fuel an arms race; this must be avoided. No country on its own can fight a two front war.

When having two hostile borders, astute statecraft should ensure that war is fought only on one front. Two front wars, such as those by Germany and Japan in World War II, and in recent times by USA in Iraq and Afghanistan impose great cost and enhance the likelihood of defeat. The only example of fighting a successful two front war is in the case of Israel in 1967 and 1973. In Israel's case the short interior lines of communication because of the small size of the country helps. In sub-continental India's case, which at the moment is practically the only country in the world having two unsettled borders with major military powers, adequate capability to hold one front defensively while being aggressive on the other, should exist. If we have not had to fight a real two front war against China and Pakistan so far, the deduction is that so far our statecraft has not failed.

### Recommendations

The following are the recommendations of this Issue Brief:

- Objective analysis can help in avoiding an arms race. We should not get thoughtlessly into an arms race. We should assess the threats realistically and synergise our national military strength and resources and build capabilities accordingly.
- Fighting a two front war is a situation which needs to be avoided. Arming for it is financially taxing and at the cost of development. Diplomacy should provide a hedge against an adverse two front situation. In *realpolitik*, alliances whether open and formal or implied and informal are essential. India has done that in the past<sup>17</sup> and must not shy away from doing it in the future.
- We should analyse what is the quantum of forces that China can practically bring to bear on us and not expect that the complete PLA will be unleashed upon India.
- We should not get into an arms race with China. Our aim should be have the ability to defend ourselves. Adequate arming to defend ourselves will *ipso facto* give us the capability to defeat Pakistan. Our nuclear deterrent should be strong and viable to impose dissuasive deterrence on China.
- While Air and to a lesser degree Naval forces can be quickly shifted from one front to the other, it is the ground forces which need to be in adequate strength to cater for both fronts because it takes time to shift them from one front to the other.

### Conclusion

Arms races are an affirmation of power. Used as a strategy they can win a war without fighting, by bankrupting the opponent. This is what the US 'Star Wars' did in hastening the demise of the USSR along with other factors. But that needs adequate financial commitment to the defence budget matched by Information Warfare and strategic *finesse* in walking a fine line.

George Orwell ruminating on marching in goose step had noted that it is "one of the most horrible sights in the world . . . It is simply an affirmation of naked power; contained in it, quite consciously and intentionally, is the vision of a boot crashing down on a face."<sup>18</sup> The robotic Chinese soldiers on the cover of the Time magazine referred to in the beginning of the brief are a deliberate symbolism of Chinese power. They symbolize a steadfast determination to sweep everything in their path. We need not be awed by this symbolism.

The Indian and Pakistani border guarding para military forces at the daily flag lowering ceremony at the Wagah Border have raised goose-stepping to new levels of aggression. Converted to a mix of exaggerated goose-stepping and 'eyeballing', the clashing of their boots (or sandals in the case

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of the Pakistani Rangers) enacts a pantomime everyday which highlights extreme nationalism, conflict and competition between nations. Such a spectacle can also be viewed as a harmless exercise to let off steam and give the multitudes of people

applauding their sides as much a thrill as in an India-Pakistan Cricket match. It is far better to do such exchanges where even the winner/loser relationship of a cricket match does not exist, than to perpetuate an arms race.

### Notes

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