From Denial to Punishment: The Security Dilemma and Changes in India's Military Strategy towards China

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that China's rise and its growing military power have intensified the Sino-Indian security dilemma. For a long time after the 1962 war, India's military posture along the India–China border was mostly defensive in nature and could be characterized as imposing "deterrence by denial." However, over the last decade, China's growth trajectory coupled with rapid modernization of its military called into question the efficacy of this approach. India now feels much more vulnerable to China's increasing military power both on the land frontier as well as in the maritime domain. The increasing intensity of this security dilemma has informed a consequent shift in India's military strategy vis-à-vis China to one of "deterrence by punishment." Theoretically, this article examines how changes in the severity of a security dilemma can lead to changes in military strategy. While doing so it explains India's current military strategy to deal with the challenge posed by China.

In 2011, the Government of India constituted a high-level task force to produce a thorough assessment of India's national security environment. Called the Naresh Chandra Committee, the task force delved into various elements of India's threat environment and security challenges including those posed by the rise of China. The report of this committee underlined that even when there are signs of improvement in the Sino-Indian relationship, it remains "clouded in mistrust." For New Delhi, this mistrust emanated out of China's "containment of India" in South Asia and its "growing assertiveness on the border." What was particularly threatening for the Task Force was the changing military balance in the Sino-Indian equation: "China's development of military infrastructure in Tibet and the Indian Ocean region coupled with the PLA's modernization changes its military capabilities meaningfully." The Task Force therefore recommended that India will have to be "prepared militarily to deal with an assertive China even as it seeks to build bridges of cooperation with it."[1]

The Task Force observations points to a classic security dilemma (SD) in Sino-Indian relations.[2] In international politics, SD refers to a situation where steps taken by one state to enhance its security results in counter-actions by another, leading to a net decrease in security for both. As Robert Jervis argues, "many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others" and therefore invite counter-measures by others.[3] Even if the territorial dispute is central to Sino-Indian relationship, the perception that China is a hostile expansionist power remains firmly entrenched in the Indian mindset.[4] In such a scenario, any action on the part of Beijing – whether or not expressly motivated by hostility towards India – which could upset the military status quo and provide it with a coercive capability severely threatens New Delhi. The last decade of China's rapid military modernization and its increasing capabilities both along the land border and in the maritime domain have created enormous military pressure on India.[5]

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Even when most observers of Sino-Indian relations argue that it suffers from a SD, the extant literature says hardly anything on how the change in the intensity of SD influences India's military strategy.[6] To simply state that SD creates military competition tells us very little about the content, or the specifics, of military strategy. For instance, for most of the post-1962 period, India followed a military strategy of "deterrence by denial" by holding the line along the Himalayan frontier with China. However, over the last decade, India's military strategy shows a major shift to "deterrence by punishment": Indian military now intends to take the battle into Chinese territory or target Chinese assets in the high-seas. If deterrence is "manipulation" of adversary's behavior by threatening "harm," "denial" and "punishment" are the two ways through which harm is inflicted.[7]

A deterrent strategy premised on denial "deters chiefly" by negatively affecting the adversary's "estimate of the probability of gaining his objective" by creating a "capacity to deny territorial gains to the enemy."[8] On the other hand, "deterrence by punishment" entails raising the costs for the adversary by taking the offensive to the enemy: to take the battle to its own territory, destroy resources dear to the enemy, or reduce its war-making potential. Denial works on manipulating the adversary's calculation of the likelihood of victory; punishment, on the other hand, manipulates the adversary's calculations of costs involved in perpetrating aggression. It is important to underline that an "absolutely sharp distinction" between denial and punishment is hard to make: strict denial would entail some punishment on enemy forces and punishment, in turn, would help in denying the enemy its preferred objective by reducing its war-making potential.[9] Three important distinctions are important however. First is the "dominant function" of the deterrent military action: to deny the enemy its objective or to raise costs for its actions.[10] Second is the theater of deterrent military action: on one's own territory or on the enemy's turf. Lastly, a pure denial strategy on the part of the defender may communicate to the adversary that hostilities will be limited to its preferred area of action. On the other, by expanding and escalating the conflict into new areas and avenues, a punishment strategy signals to the aggressor that it "cannot remain confident in its ability to control events" and hence, strengthens deterrence.[11]

This article asks the following questions. What explains the shift in India's military strategy? To what extent is a SD responsible for this change? Finally, what are the precise contours and debates surrounding India's current military strategy towards China? While answering these questions, this article makes two major arguments. First, even though the Sino-Indian relationship has suffered from conditions of security dilemma historically, the intensity of this dilemma has increased severely for New Delhi over the last decade. This is largely because of China's rapid military modernization combined with improved infrastructure facilitating forward deployment along the Sino-Indian border and in the Indian Ocean Region. "While analysing India's China strategy this article relies extensively on military journals, semi-official documents and other less widely circulated papers."

The article proceeds as follows. It begins with a conceptual discussion centering on the variables that influence a SD. This discussion explains how the SD changes over time depending upon a set of five factors. Variations in intensity of the SD may lead to variation in the level of competition. The second section explains how the changing severity of SD in India–China relations has created pressures for a shift from a defensive military strategy of "deterrence by denial" to a more punitive strategy of 'deterrence by punishment." The third section examines various elements of India's shifting military strategy on land, air, and sea. This not only captures the debates on competing at land or sea but also analyzes the doctrinal shift from "deterrence by denial" to that of "deterrence by punishment." We conclude with the broad implications of this article.

The Changing Nature of the Security Dilemma

Structural theorists of international politics explain SD as engendered by the existential conditions in which states interact: one of anarchy and uncertainty.[12] Anarchy posits that international politics is a space of self-help without recourse to any higher authority. Inter-state interaction also suffers from an "unresolvable uncertainty": states can never be sure of each other's intentions.[13] Given such

structural conditions, states maximize power and fight for relative gains. However, any relative gain in power by one state forces others to counter-act, and the competitive interaction produces a security dilemma. Yet, the severity of SD is not a constant; international politics has been an arena of "varying periods of war and peace, instability and stability, conflict and cooperation."[14] For one, a state's capabilities to threaten others may change over a period of time. Second, even perceptions of hostility wax and wane. Change in the intensity of a SD often explains why the same dyad may engage in intense competition at one point and cooperation at another. To understand the choices states have under conditions of SD therefore necessitates understanding what factors determine the intensity of SD in the first place. Extant literature points to five different variables: three material and two ideational.[15] These are: power (relative military capability), the offense–defense balance, offense–defense differentiation, a state's own motivations and its perceptions of other's motives.

Relative power – defined in terms of potential military capabilities – is a key variable in understanding SDs. Since latent power could be converted into military capabilities at a future date, significant changes in relative power therefore aggravate a SD.[16] In that sense, resources a state can divert to its military capabilities are always a source of concern for others. Military capabilities in themselves do not automatically translate into a potent coercive capability; they must be broken down into an ability to perform "relevant military missions."[17] Capacity to perform relevant military missions depends on the offense–defense balance and on offense–defense differentiation[18] The offense–defense balance is defined as being "inversely proportional to the minimum ratio of forces needed by the attacker in order to overcome an adversary defending a fixed position."[19] If offense–defense balance favors defense, a SD would be less severe, as defensive advantage help offset gaps in relative power. Offense–defense balance in turn depends on two variables: technology and geography.[20] For example, mobility-enhancing technological innovation helps the cause of offense; firepower-enhancing innovation, on the other, promotes defense.[21]

Offense–defense differentiation, on the other hand, is defined as "whether the forces that support offensive missions are different from those that support defensive missions."[22] High offense–defense differentiation can help states gauge an adversary's intentions in advance and, therefore, provides time for adequate preparation. States can also foresee clearly the value of cooperation in reducing such offensive weapons. High offense–defense differentiation helps reduce a SD and vice versa. Discerning accurately the momentum of technological change however is an extremely difficult challenge for decision makers. As Lieber argues, "leaders face enormous uncertainty when it comes to evaluating the offense–defense balance and predicting technological change."[23] Therefore, in circumstances where there exists "inherent unpredictability of technological change," competition for relative power "intensifies."[24] Under such conditions, balance of relative power, especially military power, between adversaries becomes the most important factor in determining the severity of SD.

If relative power, offense–defense balance, and offense–defense differentiation are the three material variables which define the severity of SD, a state's own motivations and its ability to understand the other's motivations constitute the two ideational variables.[25] A state's "fundamental interests and goals" constitute its motives.[26] If a state is primarily interested in its security – maintaining the territorial status quo and ability to deter attacks – it is called a security-seeking state. On the other hand, a state is a greedy state if it possesses non-security interests: its "desire to increase its wealth, territory or prestige or to spread its ideology when this expansion is unnecessary for state's security."[27] A state can have both kinds of motives: it can seek security in some domain and greed in another. Lastly, a SD is also influenced by what a state knows about others' motives. If a state perceives that it is facing a security-seeking state rather than a greedy state, it may be more willing to make compromises and concessions. On the other hand, if a state perceives others being motivated by greed, then cooperation is a risky strategy as it could be perceived as a weakness and may lead to more expansive demands.[28]

Depending on specific combinations and permutations of these five factors, the severity of a SD may change. Growing differences in power potential between hostile states would create intense SDs.

However, if one state seeks to maintain the status quo, a defense-dominated offense–defense balance would more than compensate for shifting power differentials and vice versa. Similarly, if the difference between offensive and defensive capabilities can be easily ascertained, a weaker state may be able to understand the intentions of the adversary and prepare in advance for the forthcoming conflict. Lastly, the intensity of SDs would also depend upon perceptions of hostility. If a state perceives itself as a security seeking state and the other as a greedy state whose greed increases as its power expands, its security dilemma would be intense especially because any compromise would be seen as weakness, in either "capability or resolve."[29] Under such conditions, the only resort for the security-seeking state would be to make the greedy state "realize that the defender cannot be bullied."[30] If perceptions shift in a different direction, cooperation may ensue.[31]

As this section has demonstrated, a SD is a complex condition situated in both material and ideational variables. Depending upon these variables, SDs both wax and wane. In the India-China dyad, change in these variables influences the intensity of India's SD vis-à-vis China. The next section elaborates on how the severity of the SD is intensifying for India given changes in material power and India's perceptions of Chinese intentions.

The Security Dilemma and India's China Strategy

India's SD vis-à-vis China is first situated in the difference between their latent power potential.[32] Given its territorial size, its larger economy and its greater military resources, it is obvious for Indian decision makers to remain wary of Chinese intentions (for relative difference in China and India's military expenditure, see Graph 1).[33] But differences in latent power do not necessarily translate into insecurity. The "major factor" driving Indian insecurity vis-à-vis China is the border dispute.[34] Even when both may have a status quo approach towards the border dispute, the uncertainty of Chinese intentions and the potential of Chinese military capabilities make India wary of Chinese power. If this is true across the Himalayan frontier, it is increasingly being felt in the maritime domain as well.[35] The current anxiety among Indian strategic thinkers, military strategists, and decision makers on China's economic growth is borne out of this potential to convert its latent power into military capabilities.[36] The impact of this power differential is explained by one senior military officer in an official Army publication in these words: "Not only has China established all round superiority over India, the gap – political, economic, and military – is continuously increasing. Such marked power differential encourages China's natural urge to make a grab for what she perceives to be hers."[37]

Differences in latent power however are just one cog in the complex wheel of SD. The two offense–defense variables, as discussed in the previous section, may help offset the advantages
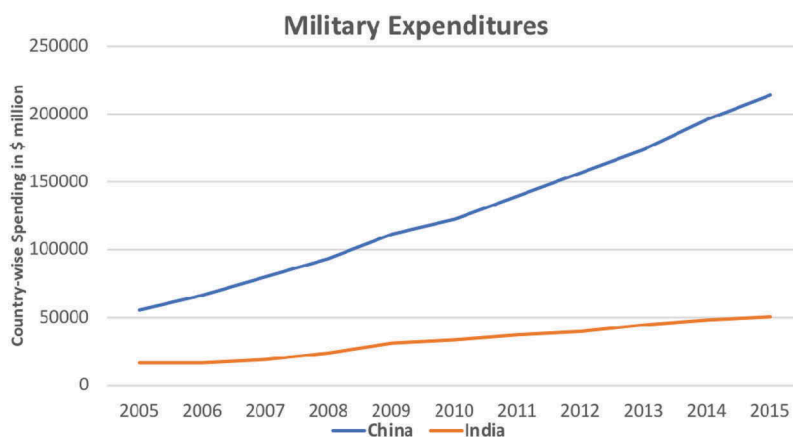
Graph 1. Military Expenditures of India and China in $ Million (Source: SPIRI Yearbooks).

accrued by the adversary's greater power potential. For most of the post-1962 period, these variables helped India counter the Chinese threat. For one, the offense–defense balance along the Indo-Chinese frontier was always dominated by defense because of the difficult terrain in the Himalayas and also China's modest defense modernization. Second, this defensive strategy was supported by India's limited aims vis-à-vis China: to maintain the status quo on the border. Therefore, Indian military strategy indicated a preference for "dissuasive defense"—which can be interpreted as another term for "deterrence by denial."[38] The post-1962 period saw an increase in India's mountain warfare capabilities with the addition of 10 mountain divisions along the India–China frontier. These forces remained dedicated to this operational theatre and were considered sufficient for holding the Chinese on the frontier.[39] India also brought MiG fighters from the Soviet Union which were dovetailed with radar acquisitions from the US providing an effective air defense against the Chinese.[40]

India's strategy along the Himalayan frontier was one of "deterrence by denial." The main approach was to ensure that a repeat of 1962 could be avoided by putting up a resolute defense against any aggression from the Chinese forces. Simply put, Indian military strategy hinged toward denying China any territorial gains along the Himalayan frontier by fighting a battle of attrition. The effectiveness of this denial strategy based on preponderance of Indian ground forces was conspicuous during the September 1967 border clashes between the two sides, where the PLA suffered heavy casualties. As the Indian Charge D' Affairs in Beijing reported to the Indian Foreign office, "the firmness shown by the Indian side in the skirmishes which occurred in the Sino-Sikkim border in September proved that those in charge of the cultural revolution had not lost all sense of proportion and respected force…. China (now) shows considerable respect for India's growing military strength."[41] Also, an inadvertent result of India's wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 and consequent military modernization of its defense forces, India's deterrent capability vis-à-vis China automatically increased. By the mid-1970s, India assessment of the China threat was reduced to Beijing's support for insurgencies in India's North East and the provision of military equipment to Pakistan.[42] If India's military modernization had created a deterrent, infirmities in China's military capability became evident during its war with Vietnam in 1979.[43]

By the mid-1980s, the force ratios on the Himalayan front were roughly similar, providing additional advantage to a defensive strategy.[44] Difficult logistics along the Chinese side of the Tibetan plateau also eased India's insecurity, as mounting a sustained aggressive campaign across the frontier was a difficult task. India, in comparison to the Chinese, had favorable "logistical interiors" along the Himalayan frontier.[45] As one Indian military commander suggests, "logistics and combat sustainability have (in the past) been a weak link in PLA's prosecution of operations."[46] Moreover, as K. Subrahmanyam pointed out, China's military doctrine during the Cold War was premised on Mao's concept of "people's war"—a "defensive concept and not one appropriate to exercise their power around and across the border."[47] If forces on land favored India's defensive strategy, India's air capability was qualitatively superior to what the Chinese could throw in the battle.[48]

As far as offense–defense distinguishability is concerned, during most of the Cold War, Chinese military capabilities lacked an aggressive capability—their biggest strength being in numbers. It was only in the late 1970s that the PLA undertook its first defense modernization under Deng Xiaoping. If for K. Subrahmanyam, "aggression takes place only when a nation is vulnerable and the aggressor concludes that use of force has a high benefit-to-cost ratio,"[49] India's military strategy of "deterrence by denial" concentrated on maintaining appropriate levels of forces along the border that could deter Chinese by denying them any easy victory along the frontier. Overall, as Raju Thomas argues, "the underlying Indian military posture (since 1962) has been to … maintain minimum border defense capabilities for a holding operation against China."[50] Both offense–defense variables supported such a strategy.

Over the last decade or so, however, these variables are shifting in a direction that worsens India's SD vis-à-vis China. For one, massive military expenditures sustained by the Chinese economy in the last 15 years have allowed the PLA a fair amount of defense modernization, accumulating capabilities which are generally associated with the Revolution in Military Affairs.[51] Consequent doctrinal

changes in Chinese military thinking, with its emphasis on "local wars under informationalisation," have been identified as threatening by many in India's military community.[52] As one analyst argues, Chinese logistical capabilities in Tibet have also increased drastically, making sustenance of military operations easier than before.[53] With the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway (QTR) in 2006, China ability to project power along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) increased three folds.[54] According to some estimates, the mobility provided by China's infrastructure development along the border may translate into a capability of deploying 10 to 12 divisions within a month.[55] This mobility quotient allowed China to operationalize its military doctrine of "revitalized war zone strategy," in which her enormous reserves could be forced into action at very short intervals.[56] This strategy, when combined with the doctrinal precept of "active defense" embodying preemptive military strikes with "superior concentration of firepower" in order to "destroy the opponent's retaliatory capability," has left, some argue, India's dissuasive posture on the border redundant.[57]

Along with PLA, the Chinese Air Force (PLAAF) and Navy (PLAN) have also undergone massive transformations—to the detriment of Indian security interests. The PLAAF's transition from a defensive force to an offensive one is evident to Indian analysts.[58] Currently, the PLAAF forces, which are pitted against the Indian Air Force (IAF), consist of two fighter divisions and one transport division under the Chengdu Military Region and two fighter divisions and one bomber division under the Lanzhao Military region; a total of 300 fighters and 72 bombers (the Chengdu and Lanzao Military Regions have since been amalgamated into the newly created Western Theatre Command).[59] Some have argued that the Indian Air Force will be able to match the Chinese Air Force in Tibet, but this may no longer be the case with the rapid modernization of the PLAAF and changes in its force structure.[60] For one, the PLAAF has made sustained effort to overcome the technological hurdles of flying at very high altitudes in Tibet.[61] Moreover, PLAAF's current modernization drive, as one analysis suggests, will provide more than "1,500 high end state-of-the-art aircrafts," including fifth-generation fighters, and may create an "operational paralysis" for the Indian Air Force.[62] In fact, after the Doklam crisis of 2017, the PLAAF activity in the TAR has increased significantly.[63] China's ballistic missile capabilities in Tibet also engender enormous risk for Indian military assets across the border.[64] China's intention to use ballistic missiles for conventional operations blurs the distinction between offensive and defensive use.[65] Similarly, China's growing naval capability has resulted in an impression that Beijing seeks to challenge India in the Indian Ocean.[66] All these developments, according to India's Ministry of Defense, have had an "adverse impact on India's security."[67]

Given these changes in offense–defense variables, fears of increasing Chinese propensity to fight short conventional wars are prevalent among Indian strategic community.[68] As a senior officer of the Indian Army argues, "infrastructure development along India-China borders, coupled with other strategic and operational parameters, will improve PLA soldiers' quality of life, morale and capability to wage war."[69] There is also recognition that as China modernizes, there is an increasing "asymmetry in the capability" between the PLA and the Indian Army to conduct operations along the LAC.[70] China's rapid military modernization therefore is viewed as shifting the offense–defense balance as well as the offense–defense distinguishability towards an undesirable and potentially threatening state, at least from an Indian point of view.

If material factors have intensified India's SD, so have the perceptual variables. In terms of motivation, India, by and large, remains convinced that it is a status quo power in the China–India dyad. Even when the narrative of "victimhood" is strong among Indian thinkers and strategists vis-à-vis China's actions in 1962 war, there is also widespread opinion that favors settling the border dispute by its only pragmatic solution: freezing the status quo.[71] Moreover, China's increasing influence in the subcontinent is perceived by India as a challenge to its primacy in the region, as India's security interests are intricately linked with a favorable balance of power both in South Asia and the northern Indian Ocean. Any outside force that would change this dynamic is seen as threatening India's national security. If New Delhi sees itself as a security-seeking state, it perceives China as a greedy one.[72] For one, China is a not a friendly

power; yet, it is also not considered as hostile as Pakistan.[73] There is also an appreciation among some quarters of the strategic community that China's actions are not always India-specific, as is the case with Pakistan.[74] Moreover, the last 40 years of peace along the India–China border and a series of confidence building measures agreed by the two sides have helped achieve some level of comfort.[75]

However, in recent times a sense of increasing hostility informs India's assessments of China.[76] This perception is informed by a number of factors. First, there is a feeling that even when China may agree to the status quo on the boundary issue, its constant postponement of a final solution reeks of hostile opportunism.[77] China's consistent support for Pakistan – for its nuclear, conventional, and sub-conventional strategy – is perceived as a strategy of using proxies to pin down India's military resources and to obstruct its growth in South Asia and beyond.[78] A dominant theme in Indian military thinking is of a "collusive and collaborative" threat from joint efforts of Pakistan and China, as popularly reflected in India's "two front dilemma."[79] Indeed, Beijing's support for Pakistan has increased manifold in recent years in terms of conventional arms, strategic programs, and economic aid—raising a high degree of concern in India.[80] Lastly, China's opposition to India's membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) is perceived as a strategy to resist its rise in the global order. Clearly, the strength of such perceptions defines India's security dilemma to a large extent – China is considered as a greedy power or, to use K. Subrahmanyam's words, an "anti-status quo state."[81]

As the two rising powers jostle for more space in South Asia and beyond, such perceptions are only going to embolden further. Already, Chinese economic activities in South Asia are leading to frictions with India most evident in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which, according to the Indian Ministry of Defense, "challenges India's sovereignty" as a part of it passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.[82] But China's growing influence in South Asia is also evident in its political, economic, and military activities in Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Maldives, leading to greater insecurity in the minds of Indian decision makers.[83] These trends will intensify with China's growing economic clout and military capabilities.[84] In sum, India perceives China as a greedy and hostile state that might become more aggressive and assertive over time.

Table 1 summarizes some of the main points relating to India's China strategy. It discusses the variables that shape India's security dilemma via-a-vis China and the manner in which it has

Table 1. Security Dilemma for India in India–China Dyad.

Variables shaping the Security Dilemma	Pre-2005	Post-2005
Relative Power Differential	India relatively weak but power differentials manageable.	Power differentials growing substantially.
Offense–Defense Balance	Technology and geography favors defense (low level of infrastructure development and military modernization in China)	Obstacles of technology and geography now surmounted by rapid military modernization and infrastructure development in Tibet.
Offense–Defense Differentiation	China's force postures lack aggressive content	More aggressive force structure including enhanced firepower and rapid reaction forces.
Indian Intentions (motives)	Maintain the status quo on the border (No loss of territory)	Maintain status quo and counter China's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean and South Asia.
Indian Perceptions of Chinese Motives	China as a greedy state which would like to pursue revisionism on the border (possibility of both limited incursions and a major offensive).	China would like to pursue revisionism on the border (possibility of both limited incursions and a major offensive) and with its growing capabilities is also attempting to contain India in the Indian Ocean.
Overall Policy Implication	Could maintain status quo using a strategy of "deterrence by denial"	Harder to maintain the status quo with a purely defensive strategy hence shift towards "deterrence by punishment."

changed around 2005 – leading to an intensification of India's security dilemma. Its overall outcome in terms of India's military strategy is a shift from deterrence "by denial" to deterrence "by punishment."

Towards Deterrence by Punishment

India's defense modernization in the 1970s and 1980s helped create a persuasive military deterrent against China. The momentum was, however, lost after the Cold War. Beginning in 1990s until the middle of the last decade, as one defense analyst argued, India's military capability declined with "very little modernization" in the armed forces.[85] An Indian Army study in 2009 suggested major weaknesses in India's conventional deterrent against China, which included unfavorable combat ratios, poor border infrastructure, and large gaps in intelligence capabilities.[86] This can be explained by three main factors. First, India was in financial distress at the end of Cold War, which meant that there were fewer resources for military modernization. Second, India was focused on the security challenges posed by Pakistan and internal security problems.[87] A good example of India's focus during this period is the Indian Army Doctrine of 2004, which restricted itself to the problem of limited wars under nuclear overhang, i.e., Pakistan.[88] Lastly, during this period, Sino-Indian relations appeared calm and progressing on a positive trajectory. In 1993, India and China had signed a Border Cooperation Agreement. Even when Sino-Indian relations suffered after India's nuclear tests in 1998, the trajectory of cooperation continued unabated. In 2003, Prime Minister Vajpayee visited Beijing and signed a comprehensive agreement claiming that India and China will not see each other as threats.

The post-Cold War bonhomie between India and China however started showing attrition from mid-2000s. From New Delhi's point of view, in the last decade or so, China increasingly began to behave in an unfriendly manner.[89] First, China started putting pressure on the border with systematic transgressions, resulting in major crisis situations. In 2007, in what was considered a "shock" by the Indian military, the PLA destroyed Indian bunkers on the LAC.[90] In 2013 the two militaries were involved in an eyeball to eyeball confrontation in Daulat Beg Oldi in the northern sector.[91] A year later in September 2014, during President Xi Jinping's visit to New Delhi, the PLA made a major transgression in Chumar that was foiled when India built up a huge concentration of forces in the area.[92] Second, China's resistance to the Indo–US nuclear deal and, as mentioned earlier, it opposition to India's entry into the NSG and UNSC was seen in New Delhi as deliberate attempts to thwart its rise in the international system.

The result of all these factors is an aggravating security dilemma for India. The deterioration in Sino-Indian relations has led the Indian military to shift "incrementally from a Pakistan-centric approach to focus more directly on China."[93] During this period Indian military journals are replete with the need for shifting India's military focus upon China.[94] Moreover, given the Sino-Pakistan nexus, the specter of a possible "two-front" scenario has been frequently articulated by senior Indian military officers.[95] Under these conditions, India's earlier strategy, with an "obsessive desire to maintain the sanctity of international borders (LAC)," did not "afford requisite deterrence."[96] Its military deterrence against China, it was felt, therefore required not only a dissuasive posture but one in which the threat of "quid pro quo" offensive action would be its "primary" element.[97] There are different elements of this strategy, but in broad terms, one could describe the strategy as having shifted from "deterrence by denial" to "deterrence by punishment." Unlike "deterrence by denial," which aims to deny the enemy any territorial gain, a strategy of "deterrence by punishment" deters by imposing higher costs upon the adversary by being more offensive in its approach.[98] Therefore, the "dominant function" – a term used by Glenn Snyder – of India's conventional deterrence strategy has undergone a significant change. First, India now intends to communicate its deterrent by not only denying any gains to the PLA in the Indian-held territory but imposing significant costs on China's war-making potential both on land and sea. Second, to impose such costs, India would not fight the

battle in its own territory alone – it will open up additional fronts on land, air, and the maritime domain. Lastly, the strategy of "deterrence by punishment" communicates India's intentions to escalate the conflict so as to signal China that once initiated, Beijing cannot be sure that it can fully control hostilities. Arguments suggesting deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to offset the increasing imbalance in conventional military power vis-à-vis China are only a manifestation, though extreme, of the same phenomena.[99] Though India's military strategy vis-à-vis China remains purely conventional with very little prospects of change in the near future, it is undergoing an offensive makeover.

The Offensive Makeover of the Indian Armed Forces

In recent times, the Indian military has shifted from a purely defensive strategy to more offensive deterrence vis-à-vis China, and accordingly, the three services have acquired offensive platforms and have changed their doctrine, deployment, and force structures.[100]

The Indian Army has the unenviable job of maintaining vigilance along difficult borders with two nuclear-armed neighbors with which India still has unresolved territorial disputes. Up until the mid-2000s, the Indian military's posture along the China border was largely defensive. However this has since undergone a change. There are three distinct elements of the Indian Army's new strategy of imposing "deterrence by punishment." First, and perhaps most important, is the raising of additional forces in the form of Mountain Strike Corps tasked for offensive operations along the China border. Internally, the Army has been cogitating over the need of Rapid Reaction Forces since the mid-2000s.[101] Officially, however, the idea of additional forces along the LAC was first mooted in 2008. This was related to a rethinking on the Indian Army's 2004 doctrine that had focused exclusively on Pakistan – the need now was to focus its attention on China and to move away from "massive conventional responses" to more "flexible" options.[102] This force accretion along the LAC, as an internal study by the Indian Army argued, was motivated by a perception that "China had now acquired the capability to launch an offensive almost without warning."[103] Under such a situation, the Army's "deterrence by denial" strategy would have resulted in major territorial losses on India's part given the time it required to mobilize its reserves.[104] As Sisir Gupta has argued, the raising of Mountain Strike Corps was the "first time the military and political leadership were thinking of a counter-offensive strategy and not just a defensive one."[105] Over the last four years, some progress has been made in raising elements of this additional force. While there has been some criticism of the pace of progress, the very fact that India envisages offensive operations into Tibet is significant.[106] This emphasis on punishment rather than simply area denial has been the "most important shift in (Indian) army" doctrine and thinking in decades.[107] The Mountain Strike Corps, argue military experts, will help India's conventional deterrence, as it will be "capable of initiating counter offensive action at points of enemy's maximum vulnerability."[108] Such a strategy will "pay greater dividends" than merely a defensive strategy focused upon "evicting (Chinese army) from captured areas."[109] Such augmentation in India's conventional deterrence also provides more bargaining power over border negotiations since India can project better its capability to "maintain the status quo" along the LAC.[110]

Secondly, there has been a concerted effort to enhance the logistical infrastructure—primarily road and rail along the border regions. For a long time, the Indian security establishment had kept infrastructure along the border region undeveloped as they did not want to facilitate "lanes of invasion" for Chinese aggression into India.[111] Over time, as China invested in infrastructure development in its side of the border, this attitude created a key defensive shortcoming for India. In 2004, however, the Manmohan Singh government took a decision to act upon a report submitted by Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran to develop strategic infrastructure along the LAC.[112] Since then the Indian state has worked on improving its border infrastructure—even as it is being criticized for the slow pace of work.[113] India's infrastructure development in border areas, as one military commentator argues, is a firm signal of Indian military's "combat worthiness."[114]

The third element of this strategy has been an effort by the Indian Army to acquire and deploy additional firepower along the China border. In the mountains where maneuver is difficult, an offensive strategy requires serious firepower.[115] In 2016, India signed a deal with the US to acquire 145 M-777 ultra-light Howitzers – an ideal weapon system to be used in the mountains.[116] Apart from that, the Indian Army has deployed the Brahmos cruise missile system and Smerch and Pinaka multi-barrel rocket launchers (MBRL) along the China border.[117] In a first, the Indian Army has also deployed armour in Ladakh and in the Northeast along the China border.[118] When considered together, all these measures indicate a significant shift in the operating paradigm of the Indian Army, reflecting a new, more offensive strategy.

On its part, the Indian Air Force has also shifted from a defensive to offensive posture vis-à-vis China. For long, the primary task of the IAF along the Sino-Indian border remained one of interception of Chinese air ingress. However, the IAF is slowly projecting itself as a strategic force able to strike deep inside Chinese territory creating what the IAF doctrine calls "strategic outcomes."[119] It has also put the premium on offensive action rather than a defensive strategy – as the recent IAF doctrine argues, "defensive action may prevent defeat, but wars can be won only by offensive action."[120] The shift to offensive air operations vis-à-vis China is evident from the force projection of the IAF along the LAC. Its recent modernization drive is also largely "China-centric."[121]

First, it has deployed its frontline Su-30 MKI deep penetration aircraft unlike the Mig-21 interceptors, which had limited operating ranges and are now being decommissioned. In 2009, Sukhois were deployed at the strategically important base of Tezpur in upper Assam, close to the Sino-Indian Border. With these frontline aircraft, IAF can reach almost all of Tibet. Their operational range has been significantly improved with the stationing of mid-air refueling aircraft. The significance of operations on the LAC is evident from the fact that the first squadron of India's newly purchased Rafale fighter aircraft will be earmarked for operations along the India–China border.[122] IAF is also currently in the middle of acquiring Apache attack helicopters.[123] These platforms are ideal for providing supporting firepower to the Indian Army in the mountainous terrain and to create "kill zones by directing this firepower along the pre-determined ingress routes in Sikkim and Arunachal."[124]

If the Indian Air Force has increased its lethal firepower along the Sino-Indian border, it has also doubled down to increasing India's strategic reach along the LAC. In 2008, India acquired the C-130J Hercules aircraft from the US and by 2009, the IAF had indicated its preference for C-17 Globe Masters. Currently, India has a fleet of 17 C-130 J's and 10 C-17's with plans for acquisition of more such aircraft.[125] It has also placed orders for Chinook heavy-lift helicopters. This strategic air lift capability is important especially for the support it provides to the Indian Army in allowing rapid deployment of troops across theatres. In addition, it has worked at revamping Advance Landing Grounds (ALG's) in Ladakh and in the Eastern theatre to support fighter, transport, and helicopter fleet operations. Serious upgradation of key IAF bases in both Eastern and Western sectors are part of its preparations to meet the China challenge. Finally, the post-1962 air defense systems are being revamped. India is contemplating the purchase of S-400 air defence systems from Russia. In 2009, a major deal for low-level flight radars was signed with France. Reportedly these assets have been deployed along the mountains on the Sino-Indian Border. The acquisition of Green Pine Radars and PHALCON AWACS has greatly boosted the IAF's reconnaissance ability vis-à-vis the PLAAF. To validate its operational plans for a "two-front war" the Indian Air Force, most recently, held a massive exercise, the biggest in over three decades, titled *Gaganshakti* involving more than 1,000 aircraft.[126]

The Navy is equally emphatic about its capability to inflict punishment in response to any Chinese misadventures along the LAC. By virtue of India's geography and the alignment of Sea Lanes of Communication, the Indian Navy has historically enjoyed tremendous advantages when operating in the Indian Ocean. During the Cold War the US deployment in Diego Garcia was a source of concern. With the transformation in US–India ties, however, this is not a cause for discomfort in Delhi; the increased activity of the Chinese Navy is.[127] The Navy, as is evident in the recent enunciations of its doctrinal concepts, not only seeks to secure India's maritime space but also to influence the course of operations on land.[128] As one study conducted by the Indian Military's

Joint Staff College concluded, "application of strategic pressure in the maritime theatre could be critical for India to gain advantage over China."[129] The dominant strategy for influencing the course of any military operations on the territorial frontier is by inflicting economic punishment on China primarily through interdiction of its Sea Line of Communications (SLOC).[130] By undertaking a number of measures, the Indian Navy now intends to be part of the larger military strategy of "deterrence by punishment" against China.

First, the Indian Navy has made a serious effort at acquiring new hardware and capabilities. It has taken on lease a nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) from Russia—the *INS Chakra*. The aircraft carrier *INS Vikramaditya* (ex-*Admiral Gorshkov*) joined in 2012, while an indigenous aircraft carrier is under construction. Also, on order are 7 stealth frigates, 6 diesel submarines, and 30 other warships. Apart from this, the Navy has purchased 12 Boeing P8i maritime patrol aircraft, 45 Mig 29K aircraft, and over 200 helicopters. After accounting for all the other acquisitions on order, the Indian Navy has a "committed expenditure in the region of US 30–40$ billion, in the next decade, on naval hardware of strategic significance."[131] The acquisition of all this hardware will enhance the operational capabilities of the Indian Navy. For punishing the Chinese in the Indian Ocean, the Indian Navy would require force structures for both sea control and sea denial, especially against the Chinese submarine force. The Navy's recent focus building a fleet of attack nuclear submarines for conventional operations clearly shows that it is adopting a force structure geared towards "deterrence by punishment."[132]

Second, the Indian Navy has also embarked on major new projects for naval infrastructure development. This includes the development of one of the largest sea bases in the Eastern hemisphere—*INS Kadamba* near Karwar along India's western coastline, the construction of a state-of-the-art very low frequency (VLF) transmitting station called *INS Kattabomman* in Tirunelveli (Tamil Nadu), launch of the GSAT-7 satellite, which is dedicated solely for the Indian Navy, and the establishment of the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) in Gurugram linking 51 substations to provide real time information awareness.

The third element of the Indian Navy strategy has been to enhance its ties with other countries in the region with shared apprehension of the Chinese Navy. While this is more a diplomatic measure, the Indian Navy has been at the forefront of forging security partnerships and conducting exercises with the Navies of US, Japan, Australia, Vietnam, Indonesia, France, Singapore, among many others. An aspect of this has been India's efforts to work on Maritime Domain Awareness by enhancing its links with the Indian Ocean island states like Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, etc. In recent years, with the Chinese submarine activity on the Indian Ocean rising steadily, Indian Navy has been particularly interested in augmenting its Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) capability. Recent editions of the Malabar series of exercises – involving the US, Japanese, and Indian Navy, have been primarily focused on ASW warfare.[133]

This assessment of developments, in terms of acquisitions, capabilities, and new constructions, within the three services reveals that the Indian military has now shifted significantly to deal with the threat posed by China. Yet, the debate on how India should calibrate its military strategy is being hotly debated in New Delhi. The most emphatic manifestation of this debate is evident in India's land-sea dilemma: should India focus more on a continental strategy with emphasis on the Army and the Air Force or should it shift towards a maritime strategy where the Indian Navy could more effectively coerce China?

Punitive Deterrence and India's Land-Sea Dilemma

When in 2012, the Indian Army pressed ahead with its plans to induct mountain strike corps, there was some internal resistance towards this over-emphasis on a territorial strategy. The Indian National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) in particular contested this Army-centric answer to the Chinese military modernization across the LAC. The contention of the NSCS was that the funds of Rs 60,000 crores allocated for the mountain strike corps must also cater to the modernization of the Navy.[134] For the NSCS, given the difficult terrain in the Himalayas where maneuverability is an

uphill task, a strategy of "deterrence by punishment" necessitated taking the conflict into the high seas. Even when all the three defense services have shown an inclination for "deterrence by punishment" over "deterrence by denial," there exists a tension insofar the Indian defense establishment is divided over the focus areas – on land or at sea – for such an offensive deterrent strategy. This debate over a continental versus a maritime strategy is not new to Indian military thinkers. For long, given its security concerns, which mainly manifested themselves along India's territorial boundaries, India's military strategy was largely continental in nature.[135] The emphasis on the Army and the Air Force during the first five decades was synonymous with India's threat perceptions and its limited resources.[136]

The current dynamics are however different due to two reasons. First, given the size of China's military strength, not everyone is fully convinced of India's capability to inflict punishment on China across the land frontier, especially in mountainous terrain where China now enjoys rapid mobility and can, if necessary, bring to bear its numerical superiority.[137] Second, and the more important factor, is a belief that given China's rising economic profile and its vulnerability when it comes to the Indian Ocean SLOC's, it "faces a strategic dilemma right across the Indian Ocean that it will only be able to partially mitigate in the short to medium term."[138] The Indian Navy also appeared to have inculcated some of these precepts. As the 2015 Indian Naval doctrine argues: "the seas may provide access to vital or vulnerable areas of the adversary, which are otherwise not accessible by land. Accordingly, these areas would form part of the area of operations for naval forces from both sides, seeking 'use' for itself and 'denial of use' to the adversary."[139]

These assertions for a maritime strategy targeting Chinese SLOCs in the IOR, however, are highly contested. For one, analysts have pointed out that China is developing alternatives for its over-reliance on the Indian Ocean SLOCs.[140] The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor is a case in point. Second, it is hard to distinguish and concentrate upon Chinese shipping with other international commerce passing through the Indian Ocean. Lastly, a local confrontation along the mountains may not receive as much diplomatic attention but a blockade in the Indian Ocean will have a more likely chance of leading to an international intervention.[141] Beyond these operational issues, there are deeper conceptual problems with a maritime strategy that concentrates upon economic punishment on the high seas. Such a strategy requires both time and effort, which may not be available during a short and limited war with China. Moreover, blockades at sea are difficult to enforce as naval ships are increasingly vulnerable to asymmetric warfare with the introduction of carrier-killing missiles and other low cost, high impact technologies. In this age of military-technological revolution, such dominance of the seas may not be possible.[142] Lastly, the fundamental issue is whether India can afford to lose territory and avenge the humiliation through offensive naval actions.[143]

This debate on force structures is as much motivated by a churning in India's strategic thinking as it is by constant competition for resources among India's defense services. Indeed, inter-services rivalry and the lack of jointness has been, and continues to be, problematic in the Indian military.[144] In the end, the amount of resources India can direct towards its military modernization would be the ultimate arbiter. If India continues to grow and create additional finances for its defense modernization, it can cater to all the services. If not, then force structures and doctrines would be primarily geared towards meeting the most immediate threat.

Conclusion

There are three broad implications of this article. First, from a theoretical point of view, this article sheds light on the relationship between the security dilemma and military strategy and shows how changes in the former can affect the latter. As we have argued, variables that shape a security dilemma may shift in ways that can intensify or reduce the severity of the dilemma and thereby force change in military strategy. Whether this argument travels to other dyadic relationships under conditions of security dilemma requires further research. Second, from an empirical point of view, we argue that India's military strategy has shifted from "deterrence by denial" to "deterrence by

punishment." Accordingly, the Indian military has become more focused on offensive weapons and doctrines to deter a potential misadventure by the Chinese armed forces. India's "forward presence," which is a natural outcome of the "denial by punishment" strategy, was on display during the border standoff in the summer of 2017 at Doklam. The Indian military moved quickly to prevent Chinese road construction, thereby triggering a major diplomatic crisis. In the Ladakh sector, the two militaries engaged in stone pelting and physical violence and, even after the standoff was resolved, the Indian Army Chief warned of China's "salami slicing" tactics and the danger of a two-front war.[145] Finally, this article cautions against taking a mechanical approach to Sino-Indian relations. Just as the security dilemma has worsened (for India) in recent times, these can be undone by reassessment by New Delhi of China's motives or by real policy shifts undertaken by both countries. Currently, in light of incidents along the India–China border, there is a sense that China is a hostile state which can only be dealt by a competitive strategy. If however the dispute along the border is settled amicably, admittedly an unlikely scenario, or China appears to be more accommodative of India's concerns vis-à-vis CPEC, NSG, and other contentious issues, this has the potential to decrease the intensity of security dilemma and lead to an all-round development of ties. For the people of two of the world's largest countries, that is the best possible outcome.

Notes

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