

India's Defence Preparedness to Face Chinese Challenges

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It will not be an exaggeration to say that China poses the major challenge to India's foreign policy and defence policy – which does not necessarily mean that a potential threat from China is imminent. Far from this, the Sino-Indian border of 3488 kms is by and large peaceful and tranquil, excepting occasional reports of border incursions. There are institutional mechanisms in place to meet any untoward incident on the border. Nevertheless, the security of the country, its territorial integrity and sovereignty warrant military preparedness to cope with any kind of eventualities. This is of critical importance particularly in the context of the persistent security dilemma between the two countries.¹

A country of India's size and international stature with its present level of economic growth, perhaps cannot afford to ignore its security needs, therefore, vigilance and defence preparedness are imperative. India has the resources to do so. As regards, India's perception of China, it is worthwhile to quote the observations made in Annual Report of the Ministry of Defence, 2009-10:

China is engaging in building its comprehensive national power encompassing economic and military development, which would enable her to play a dominant role in global affairs. India has a strategic and cooperative partnership with China, which has generally progressed well in 2009-10. There has been a convergence of views and actions on various issues in international fora. A regular mechanism for exchanges in the military sphere has been established through the ongoing confidence building measures between the Armed Forces of both countries and other military inter actions. India seeks to engage China to find commonalities which can give depth to the bilateral relationship and enable both to pursue the common goals of growth the development.

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However, turning to its military modernization, the Report cautiously mentioned that 'India also remains conscious and alert about the implications of China's military modernization on the regional and national security situations.'² The Annual Report for the year 2010-11, reiterated the earlier position when it said:

India's relations with China are of crucial importance. The effort has been to work on areas of mutual interest which would enable both countries to pursue common goals and development. India is conscious and watchful of the implications of China's evolving military profile in the immediate and extended neighbourhood. India's policy is to engage with China on the principles of mutual trust and sensitivity to each others concerns.³

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence in its fifteenth Report submitted in August 2010 also observed: "... the infrastructure being created on the border by our neighbouring countries particularly China, further poses challenges before the country."

Challenges from China

Notwithstanding the repeated assertions by both India and China that the two countries do not pose a threat to each other and that the border dispute between the two countries should be resolved peacefully through institutional and structural mechanisms and through dialogue, challenges from China can be discerned from three factors: (i) China's infrastructural development on the India-China border, (ii) China's strategic nexus with Pakistan, particularly with reference to infrastructural development in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) and (iii) China's increasing footprint in South Asia much to the chagrin of India. As far as China's infrastructural development on the India-China border is concerned, the infrastructural development by China in Tibet has a salience for India considering its proximity to India-China border in the Northeast. China has already built the high altitude railway line in Tibet, which has been operational for about five years. This railway line is being used as a supply line to enhance the mobilisation capabilities of China's air force in the region.

The railway line, which runs from Qinghai province to Lhasa, is at an altitude of 5000 metres. The line was made operational in July 2006, with a view to boosting economic development in Tibet, and enhancing the PLA's mobilisation capabilities. The railway has mainly been used to ferry tourists and business people from other provinces to Tibet. According to the *PLA Daily*, the PLA since the summer

of 2010, has begun transporting “combat readiness material through the railway. Given the high altitude, the PLAAF is also training transport security personnel to combat altitude sickness⁴.

Chinese army has also built ecological oxygen-enriched barracks in Tibet, to help hundreds of its officers overcome high altitude sickness. The first such was installed in the Naqu military sub-command of the PLA, the official Xinhua news agency reported in June last year⁵.

While these developments in Tibet are claimed to be benign, their strategic and security implications for India cannot be ruled out. A Pentagon report also mentioned that China has moved its new advanced longer range CSS-5 missiles close to the border with India and developed contingency plans to shift airborne forces at short notice to the region. According to the US defence department annual report: ‘to improve regional differences, the PLA has replaced older liquid-fuelled, nuclear capable CSS-3 intermediate range missiles with more advanced and survivable fuelled CSS-5 MRBMS’. The report further said: ‘China is currently engaged in massive road and rail infrastructures development along the Sino-Indian border primarily to facilitate economic development in western China’. The report added that despite increased political and economic relations over the years between China and India, tensions remain along their border, most notably over Arunachal Pradesh, which China asserts as part of Tibet and therefore of China, and over the Aksai Chin region at the western end of Tibetan Plateau⁶.

There have also been reports of China’s infrastructure development in the Demchok area of Southern Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir. According to local residents, China is building huge blue-roofed all-weather structures that can house up to 100-125 soldiers and their supplies during winter months⁷.

Infrastructural Development in India-China Border

It is against this background that India in recent years has been taking steps to strengthen its infrastructure in the Sino-Indian border. It is pertinent to mention that India’s efforts are purely defensive in nature.

Safeguarding the border is most critical component of defence preparedness. Compared to China’s infrastructural development on India-China border, the condition of the border roads on Indian side were far from satisfactory. Realising this, the parliamentary standing committee on defence expressed serious concerns over this. The Committee visited Leh and Ladakh in June last year⁸ and presented

its report in August 2010. The Committee felt that, 'it is most necessary to keep a watch on the construction activities going on our borders by different countries and maintain the data in this regard. Besides, there is an urgent need to ensure that our plans are in consonance with the impending security challenges'. As such the Committee strongly recommended formulating a sort of mechanism for this⁹. Over the last few years, however, roads on the India-China border have been improved so as to facilitate faster movement of men and material.

The bottlenecks relating to environment clearance have been removed and the Border Road Organisation (BRO) is working to execute and complete various projects, which have security and strategic implications. It may be mentioned in this connection that the Supreme Court of India in March last year allowed the Indian army to construct a strategic road near the international border, which will virtually overlook China. A special bench of the Supreme Court gave the nod for the construction of a strategic road near a T-point leading to Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim almost five years after permissions were sought. The Centrally Empowered Committee (CEC), appointed by the Supreme Court looked into the proposal on priority basis as it involved the construction of a new road between Flag Hill and Dakola passing through Panglakha wildlife sanctuary. According to the Indian army, the road is required for operational purposes to meet the strategic requirement of the nation¹⁰.

Another feat of engineering marvel by the Border Road Organisation will be the construction of the Rohtang Tunnel at the height of 12,300 feet on the Manali-Keylong highway, the foundation of which was laid in June last year. The tunnel will be key to the army's efforts to make the 475 km long highway motor able round the year for access to forward areas in Ladakh bordering China and Pakistan. Its strategic value was realised after the Kargil War, when the Pakistani army tried to cut off road access to the Ladakh and Siachin glacier. The project expected to cost Rs. 1500 crore is likely to be completed in 2015.¹¹

It may be mentioned that recently the director-general of the BRO, Lieutenant General S. Ravi Shankar, on the occasion of the 51st raising day of the BRO in May, 2011 said that, Sino-Indian border roads are being monitored at the highest level and 63 per cent of the projects in physical terms have been completed while one or two are yet to be started for different reasons. He further said that though there is no date set for completion of the roads along the Sino-Indian border, the majority of them would be finished in 2013.¹²

Also, in a major move to strengthen security at the India-China border in the Northeast, India has already raised two new infantry mountain divisions with 35,000 soldiers.

Military Modernisation

In another move, in May 2008, the Indian air force activated Daulat-Beg-Oldi (DBO), the highest airfield in the world, situated at an altitude of 16,200 feet. The DBO is

India-China Military Balance¹⁴

S.No.		India	China
1.	Active Military Personnel	1,325,000	2,285,000
2.	Active Military Reserve	1,747,000	800,000
3.	Army Total Land-Based Weapons	75,191	22,795
4.	Tanks	5,000	7470
5.	Armoured Personnel Carriers	3,000	5,000
6.	Towed Artillery	10,000	2,950
7.	Self-Propelled Guns	100	2,475
8.	Multiple Rocket Launch Systems	292	2,600
9.	Mortars	5,000	1,050
10.	Anti-Tank Guided Weapons	51,799	1,250
11.	Anti-Aircraft Weapons	15,508	750
12.	Logistical Vehicles	70,000	5,850
13	Air Force Total Air Craft	2,462	4,092
14	Helicopters	848	1,389
15	Serviceable Airports	352	502
16.	Navy Total Navy Ships	175	562
17	Merchant Marine Strength	324	2,010
18	Major Ports and Terminals	7	8
19	Aircraft Carriers	1	0
20	Destroyers	8	26
21	Submarines	15	55
22	Frigates	12	58
23	Patrol & Coastal Craft	31	937
24	Mine Warfare Craft	8	391
25	Amphibious Craft	20	544

located right at the base of the Karakoram Range in the northern Ladakh. Later in November 2008, the Indian air force operationalised the advanced landing ground (ALG) at Fukche. Both the ALG's have been refurbished to take AN-32 aircraft. In September, 2009 it was also reported that the Indian air force¹³ activated a third air strip close to the line of actual control (LAC) in the south eastern part of Ladakh, adjoining China. Though operational commanders are of the view that there is no alternative to building all-weather roads along the Sino-Indian border, the ALG would be helpful in evacuation, rotation of troops, and for delivering supplies.

In terms of military capability, India has made good progress vis-à-vis China since the 1962 war; however, there still exists a substantial gap in terms of capability between the two countries. The table below gives a comparative picture of military balance between the two countries. The table, however, can not be claimed to be accurate or authentic.

There are currently about 100 Su-30 MKI fighters with the Indian air force. They had placed an order for 50 Su-30 MKI aircraft with Russia in 1996 and for an additional 40 planes in 2007. India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) was also contracted to build 140 aircraft in India between 2003 and 2007 under a licenced production agreement. The 30 squadron of Su-30MKI has been deployed at the Tezpur air base. There was a report that India's fleet of Su-30 MKI fighter jets could be armed with Brahmos missiles by 2012. Established in 1998, Brahmos Aerospace, a joint Indian Russian venture, produces and markets Brahmo's Supersonic Missile.¹⁵ It is also reported that in order to meet Chinese challenges, the Defense Ministry has permitted the Airforce to move squadron of Sukhoi-30 MKI fighter jets from their Pune base to Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh from where they can strike deep into Tibet and even mainland China¹⁶.

Yet another major acquisition of the IAF is the hardy Hercules or C130J transport aircraft, from the US the first of which was acquired in February this year. The C 130J is several generations ahead of its earlier versions that airlifted several thousand troops from Ladakh down to the Northeast during the Sino-Indian war when the government realised that it was woefully short of transport aircraft that could carry troops and military equipment to difficult airstrips along the China border. In addition to the C 130J transport aircraft, the Indian Air Force is also getting ten C-17 Globemaster III strategic airlift aircraft with associated equipment from the United States at a cost of \$4.1 billion, the largest ever bilateral defence deal with the USA. The aircraft are to be delivered within four years. It is also reported that Globemaster manufacturer Boeing will establish a high altitude

engine test facility as well as a trisonic wind tunnel facility at DRDO for the testing and R&D of aero engines and aero dynamic bodies.¹⁷

The IAF is also bolstering its air defence in Ladakh along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) by installing a network of sophisticated radars. According to news reports, quoting authentic sources, different types of radars would be put in place along the 667 kms LAC with China. Air Marshal NAK Browne of the Western Air Command was quoted as saying: "The air force is keenly examining the option of a special type of radar which we call mountain radars, and also looking at the Low Level Light Weight Radars (LLLWR)". Browne said, the radars would be installed in four to five years to make the air defence system in the LAC robust.¹⁸

If the army and the air force are gearing up to face the challenges to the country's security and territorial integrity, the Indian navy is also not lagging behind in its modernisation and development. The most significance acquisition in this regard is the aircraft carrier *Admiral Gorchov*, rechristened *INS Vikramaditya* with the first batch of navy personnel having started training at St. Petersburg in Russia. The ship will have total crew of 1400. The *Gorchov* is likely to be inducted into the navy by next year or early 2013. The \$974 million deal to purchase the 45000 tonnes Kiev class carrier was signed with Russia in 2004. But, the delivery date of December 2008 could not be met after the shipyard demanded an additional \$1.5 billion for refitting the carrier and reportedly went slow on the work in 2007, before again hiking the price. The cost issue was finally resolved in 2010 with India agreeing to pay \$2.33 billion for the warship¹⁹.

Pending the arrival of *INS Vikramaditya*, the Indian navy inducted the MIG29K-a Russian made frontline maritime fighter plane in May last year.

It may be mentioned that while China is inducting its first aircraft carrier, India already has other aircraft carriers, besides *INS Vikramaditya*. India inducted its first aircraft carrier *INS Vikrant* with Sea Hawk jets way back in 1961. The second aircraft carrier is *INS Virat* with 11 Sea Harrier jump-jets. The first indigenous designed and built stealth frigate *Shivalik* was commissioned in April 2010. As regards China's acquisition of the aircraft carrier, it may be mentioned that India is way ahead of China in this regard. China's first aircraft carrier is likely to be integrated into PLA Navy only by the end of this year or early 2013. Even if this carrier becomes ocean worthy it will take China at least few years to master the complex art of operating fighters from a moving airfield on the high seas and then converting the entire package into a potent offensive weapon's platform²⁰. There is

however a strong plea among the strategic community in China acquiring aircraft carriers in tune with China's growing profile²¹.

As far as submarines are concerned, a feather in the cap of the India Navy was the launching of *INS Arihant* in July 2009, which is perceived as being crucial to India's nuclear deterrence doctrine.

While the three arms of the defence forces, are prepared for the defence of the country, several significant steps have been taken in the field of missile technology. The Indian defence establishment notched up a major success in May last year, when the army successfully test-fired the nuclear capable Agni-II missiles with a range of 2000 kms. The Agni-II Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) has already been inducted into the services. The missile is part of the Agni series which includes the Agni-I with a 700 kms range and Agni-III with a 3,500 kms range. Agni-I has already been inducted and Agni-III is in the process of induction.²²

It is also reported that the government has sanctioned Rs. 2,500 crores for Agni-V which will be a Canister launch missile system to ensure it has the requisite operational flexibility to be fired from any part of the country. Though slightly short of true ICBMS, which have a 5,500 km range, the Agni-V will come in special storage-cum-launch canisters, making it much easier to store²³

Strategic commentators are of the view that Agni-V will be capable of being swiftly moved closer to the border with China to substantially enhance its strike range into the country. Agni-V is likely to be test fired soon. Agni-V can hit the northern most part of China. It is believed that Agni-V will add muscle to India's deterrence capacity against China. According DRDO, director V.K. Saraswat; unlike China, which fired a missile to bring down a satellite in January 2007, India will not test a 'real' Anti-Satellite (AST) weapon. He, however, said The indigenously built Prithvi series of missiles are yet another weapon in the armoury of India's air defence capability. The single-stage liquid propelled missile is capable of striking targets at a maximum range of 350 kms. The nine-metre tall Prithvi-II has already been inducted into the air force. It can carry payloads ranging from 500 kg to 1,000 kg and has features to deceive anti-ballistic missiles. The missile can be launched from anywhere with its mobile launchers.²⁴ Although India has made commendable strides in nuclear capability, according to sources, 'China's missile and nuclear arsenal is leagues ahead of India, capable as it is of hitting any city in India.' India's entire focus is on building only credible minimum deterrence against China, not active offensive capabilities.

India's nuclear deterrence doctrine, it may be mentioned revolves around a clear 'no first use' policy. A robust and survivable second-strike capability is hugely dependent on having nuclear powered submarine, armed with submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), which can operate silently under water for several months at a time. With the operationalisation of its nuclear submarine, India's is poised to achieve what is termed the nuclear triad, which means the capability to fire nuclear-tipped missiles from land, air and sea²⁵.

Conclusion

As already stated, India's defence preparedness is purely defensive. India and China have very good political and diplomatic relations, and there are institutional and structural arrangements to deal with any untoward incident on the border and avoid any conflict. The resumption of defence exchanges between the two countries in June this year is symbolic of the keenness of the two countries to avoid any kind of tension. Trust and confidence between the military establishments of the two countries is essential for better relations; because after all, security is not just a question of defence preparedness, but also a matter of mutual trust and confidence. 

Notes:

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