The Uncertain War
Decoding India's Two-Front War with China and Pakistan

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This article examines the two-front war challenge for India against China and Pakistan. It highlights difficulties nations have faced in managing simultaneous wars, emphasising the complexity such a situation imposes on national defence. The article explores collusion and collaboration between China and Pakistan and the resultant enhancement in military cooperation and interoperability, nuclear collusion, and infrastructure connectivity between the two countries. It also evaluates recent advancements in military modernisation by China and India's corresponding efforts in enhancing its defence capabilities and border infrastructure. The analysis suggests that while the threat of a two-front war is real, it remains a possibility rather than an inevitability. The article concludes that India must maintain high vigilance, continue strengthening its military posture, and simultaneously engage in proactive diplomacy. A calibrated strategy that balances robust defence preparedness with sustained diplomatic engagement offers the most effective means of safeguarding national security and regional stability.

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A two-front war for a nation is one where its armed forces are simultaneously engaged in combat on two geographically separated or overlapping fronts,

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resulting in splitting of attention, resources and personnel between the fronts. Historically, armed forces involved in fighting a two-front war have faced a grim prospect. The problems for the armies increase with the increase in number of fronts, as is evident from the examples in the following paragraph. Dispersal of resources and division of attention has brought many armies to the throes of defeat and countries to a collapse. There are numerous examples that illustrate the perils of a multi-front or even a two-front war. These examples serve as a reminder to the decision-makers and military leadership of the complexities of such a situation.

Napoleonic wars (1803–1815) are among the early examples which vividly illustrate the challenges of a multi-front situation. In his attempt to extend control over Europe, Napoleon often had to fight coalitions of European powers on multiple fronts. He fought Britain, Spain and Portugal in the west, while being engaged with Russia, Austria and Prussia in the east. His overstretched resources ultimately contributed to his downfall. During World War I, the Central Powers found it difficult to manage operations simultaneously on the Western and Eastern fronts leading to their eventual collapse. The Axis Powers, including Germany, strained their resources during World War II due to a multi-front situation contributing significantly towards their ultimate defeat.

As evident from the above, a multi-front war presents a unique set of difficulties and challenges to those adversely impacted by such a situation, due to severe strain on their resources and capabilities. Despite the problems associated with a multi-front war situation, countries are often unable to avoid the difficult situation because of ever-evolving geopolitical and military circumstances of the time.

Concept of a Two-Front War

A two-front war situation, as highlighted earlier, arises when the armed forces are involved in military operations, simultaneously, or almost simultaneously, in geographically separated fronts. The understanding of the terminology, 'two-front war', requires further deliberation because of the nuances of partnership between allies.

In the context of the India–Pakistan–China triangle, two terms merit attention—collusion and collaboration. Both these terms are frequently used to elucidate various scenarios of a joint Pakistan–China approach to undermine India's national interest and security and have been variously defined.[1]

A two-front war situation can arise when one country is at war with another country with the armed forces of both the countries operating in two geographically displaced fronts. In this case, only two adversarial countries are involved in military operations. The India–Pakistan War of 1971 is an example of such a situation. In the second case, one country could be at war with two or more countries with armed forces operating on two separate fronts. A variation to the above, described by Lieutenant General Rakesh Sharma (Retd) in his article[2] could be where the allies have deployed their forces across one single, extended front, but the armed forces of the two partner countries are operating separately. In all the discussed cases the operations could be conducted in all or any of the domains—land, maritime, aerospace and information. Such an approach could be described as a collaborative approach between the partner countries.

Another possible variation to the situations discussed above could involve two or more partner countries wherein only one of them is involved in the conduct of military operation and partner countries provide covert material, intelligence and diplomatic support during the war. In this condition, the situation becomes a two-front war technically only when the armed forces operate in separate geographies. This could be understood as a collusive approach.

For the purpose of this article, collusion and collaboration between Pakistan and China against India may be defined as follows:

> Collusion would involve covert cooperation or support to each other, including those considered illegal under various international regulations and charters to undermine India's sovereignty and national interests. While collaboration between Pakistan and China would involve overt actions including launching military operations in concert with each other to the detriment of India's security and sovereignty. In both the cases military operations would have to be conducted in geographically displaced two fronts.

Collusion and Collaboration between Pakistan and China

Pakistan and China's deep strategic partnership is marked by extensive military, economic and diplomatic cooperation having a direct bearing on India's security. While the two countries present their partnership as a means to enhance regional stability and economic development, there are substantial pieces of evidence that suggest both covert and overt cooperation between them is directed to undermine India's sovereignty and security. The

partnership extends in the field of military, including nuclear technology, infrastructure, economic and diplomatic cooperation, often contravening international norms and regulations, thus posing a significant challenge to India's security.

Military Cooperation

The signing of the Border Agreement on 2 March 1963, marked the initiation of China and Pakistan's military cooperation. Shortly after the 1965 India–Pakistan War, China began providing military assistance to Pakistan. In July 1966, China and Pakistan signed their first military agreement worth US$ 120 million.[3] Since then, China has become Pakistan's most important defence partner and a leading supplier of strategic platforms and conventional weapons including high-end offensive systems. In 2003, Beijing and Islamabad signed a Joint Declaration on Direction of Bilateral Cooperation which enhanced defence cooperation. In the recent times, China has provided military assistance in terms of VT-4[4] and Al Khalid tanks, J-10 CE aircraft and PL-15 air-to-air missiles. China and Pakistan are also negotiating transfer of hypersonic missiles to counter India's S-400 air defence system.[5]

The two countries are also enhancing their defence capabilities through military exercises which are growing in complexities and interoperability. The inaugural 'Defence and Security talks' between China and Pakistan took place in March 2002 with a focus on regional security, military cooperation, joint training, defence industry collaboration and counter-terrorism. Since then, the two countries have been regularly conducting joint exercises. These exercises not only include combat training but also enable intelligence sharing.[6] The navies of the two countries have been regularly conducting Sea Guardian series of bilateral exercises, while the air forces have been participating in the Shaheen series of exercises.[7] In a sign of growing partnership, the militaries of the two countries conducted a joint exercise close to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Tibet, in the backdrop of the military standoff between India and China in eastern Ladakh. Although many details of the exercise are not available, it is reported that Chinese 3 Air Defence Division participated in the exercise.[8] In addition, China and Pakistan are increasingly deploying compatible communication systems and have synchronised their supply chains.[9]

Nuclear Cooperation

Pakistan's nuclear energy programme started in 1954 but the programme gained momentum following Pakistan's military defeat in the 1971 war

against India. In 1976, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto visited China and signed a nuclear agreement. Although the programme was announced as peaceful, it assisted Pakistan in developing nuclear weapons. In late 1976, after Canada terminated nuclear cooperation with Pakistan, China began aiding Pakistan in earnest. China has played a noteworthy role in helping Pakistan develop its nuclear energy technology, by assisting in the construction of nuclear power plants and assisted in research and technical support for uranium enrichment.[10] Additionally, China has also assisted in developing delivery systems such as nuclear-capable ballistic and cruise missiles.

It is pertinent to note Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme is India-specific.[11] A recent assessment of Pakistan's nuclear stockpile published in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* on 11 September 2023, titled, 'Pakistan Nuclear Weapons, 2023', assesses that the country has approximately 170 nuclear warheads.[12]

Strategic Infrastructure and Military Presence in PoJK

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was announced by President Xi Jinping in 2014. In November 2017, Islamabad and Beijing released a joint strategy to define the scope of CPEC as "starting from Kashgar in Xinjiang, China, and reaching Karachi and Gwadar, southern coastal cities in Pakistan, via the Khunjerab Pass and several other nodal areas {and} for cementing China-Pakistan economic relations, promoting friendly cooperation and establishing the shared destiny of the two countries". Even though Pakistani leaders have touted the economic benefits of the scheme, a *Special Report* published by USIP suggests the formation of CPEC is to pressurise "India and to secure a foothold on the Arabia Sea capable of enabling China's People's Liberation Army to project power throughout the Indian Ocean region".[13] Militarisation of CPEC has been a subject of discussion ever since the inception of the project. A report published by *The New York Times* deliberates on this subject. As per the report, the CPEC plan involves cooperation in building military jets and other lethal weapons. In pursuance of its policy, China has also provided Pakistan access to the BeiDou satellite navigation system.[14]

The CPEC passes through Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK), which is Indian territory under unauthorised occupation of Pakistan. The large-scale infrastructure development of the area with Chinese assistance is an attempt to legitimise Pakistan's unauthorised occupation. Many of the infrastructure projects in the area are dual-use, such as airstrips and logistic

bases, which may facilitate deployment of Chinese military assets to threaten India from a different front, enhancing the prospects of a two-front war.

Support for Cross-Border Terrorism

One of the objectives of the China–Pakistan alliance is to balance and contain India in South Asia. To that end, China has supported Pakistan's stand over Kashmir in international forums and supports Pakistan's policy of proxy war and use of terror groups to target India and Indian interests. Proxy actors provide China and Pakistan a low-cost option to keep India engaged in South Asian affairs and divert resources and attention which can otherwise be directed towards India's economic prosperity and/or towards countering China.[15] China has consistently worked to prevent Pakistani citizens and organisations from being designated as terrorists under the UNSC 1267 Committee.

China prevented listing of Jamat-ul-Dawa (JuD) as a terrorist group thrice before consenting to designate JuD as a terrorist organisation, after the Mumbai terrorist attack in 2008. In 2010, China prevented Masood Azhar of Jaish-i-Mohammed (JeM) from being designated as a terrorist under the UNSC 1267 committee rules. Thereafter, it prevented Masood Azhar from being designated as terrorist several times—in February and December of 2016, February, August and in November of 2017 and in March 2019, before he was finally designated as terrorist in May 2019. China placed a "technical hold" on India's request to designate Azam Cheema and Abdul Rehman Makki of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) as terrorists in 2010. Subsequently in 2015, China prevented Syed Salahuddin, Chief of Hizb-ul-Mujahedeen (HM) from being designated as a terrorist.[16]

China's support to Pakistan has shielded it from international condemnation and prevented Pakistan from getting diplomatically isolated. This has emboldened Pakistan to continue with its policy of proxy war, forcing India to dissipate its political, economic and military resources from being gainfully employed for economic prosperity and ensuring security.

Two-Front Challenge and Indian Army's Response

India has been cognizant of a two-front military threat since the 1965 and 1971 India–Pakistan wars. K. Subrahmanyam, then Director, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi, outlined in 1972 that the national security policy required: 'India to develop and keep at readiness adequate forces to deter China and Pakistan from launching an attack either

jointly or individually and in case deterrence fails to repel the aggression effectively.'[17] It was, however, General K. Sunderji, who in his vision document promulgated in 1986, outlined military strategy to counter threats from Pakistan and China.

Indian Army Perspective Plan 2000

Immediately after taking over as the 13th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), General K. Sunderji promulgated the *Indian Army Perspective Plan 2000*,[18] a vision paper with a projection of 15 years. The paper is notable for laying down military strategy to counter threats from Pakistan and China, a first and perhaps the only strategic document promulgated under the signature of the Chief. The strategy against China stipulated maintenance of "dissuasive deterrence", considering the qualitative and quantitative superiority enjoyed by the Chinese military and the terrain advantages in its favour. A policy of dissuasive deterrence entailed forward deployment of Indian Army formations on dominant ridges, close to the line of actual control (LAC). These formations until then were deployed in rear areas, leaving a large stretch of no man's land, patrolled by the ITBP and Assam Rifles, since 1980. The Indian side had underdeveloped communication infrastructure, unlike the Chinese side, where the development was ongoing to facilitate rapid mobilisation of their forces. In addition, the Indian strategy catered towards launching tactical level offensives. The vision paper also articulated policy of "offensive deterrence" against Pakistan which necessitated the Indian Army to plan and allocate resource capabilities to destroy Pakistan's military and seize large swathes of territory to impose political will.[19]

The government did not formally approve the vision document, but was largely supportive of the strategy against Pakistan, even as it was concerned about disturbing the status quo with China.[20] During his tenure as the Chief, General Sunderji was able to test his strategy both against Pakistan and China. Operation Brasstacks (November 1986 to January 1987) was a combined arms exercise planned to test the strategy of offensive deterrence against Pakistan. The exercise was subsequently converted to Operation Trident, a quasi-warlike situation, in the wake of heightened tensions due to mobilisation of Pakistan's armed forces. Near simultaneously, Indian Army was involved in containing the Chinese incursion in Sumdorong Chu valley in June 1986. Subsequently, General Sunderji refined the strategy of dissuasive deterrence and forward deployment by conducting 'Exercise Chequerboard', apart from the ongoing Operation Falcon in 1987. Prior to his retirement in April 1987, General Sunderji inducted a combat group of mechanised forces

in Eastern Ladakh and North Sikkim with a plan for induction of additional forces in future to strengthen the strategy of dissuasive deterrence.[21]

Indian Army's Western Orientation

Through the 1960s till late 2000s, the Indian armed forces were largely focussed towards threats emanating from Pakistan and the northern borders did not receive the attention they deserved. In this context, understanding of the mechanisation of the Indian Army assumes importance. The Indian Army had begun the process of mechanisation in 1969 but the process received momentum in the 1980s, when the third strike corps was raised, some divisions were restructured to Reorganized Army Plains Infantry Divisions (RAPIDs) and the warfighting doctrine was revised. The capability development which happened in 1980s was adequate to not only 'defend' but 'defeat' Pakistan. In 1985, the CIA assessed that the Indian Army was "fully capable" of "defending the country from external aggression", and that the Indian Army's advantage would only grow over the following five years.[22]

Incidentally, the Indian Army's mechanisation happened when there was a diminishing interest in manoeuvre warfare across the world. During this period, the Indian Army was also deployed for manpower intensive operations such as Operation Bluestar, Operation Pawan in Sri Lanka and later to combat the Pakistan-sponsored proxy war in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). It was also the period when there were credible reports of Pakistan developing nuclear capability, diminishing Indian Army's conventional edge over Pakistan. It would take overt nuclearisation of India and Pakistan and two crises—the Kargil conflict, 1999 and Operation Parakram, 2001—to revise the Indian Army's doctrine. The official doctrine promulgated by ARTRAC in 1999, envisaged the army to strike sledgehammer blows against the enemy, to ensure a decisive victory.[23] By early 2000, there was a realisation of a need to change the doctrine to limited war under nuclear umbrella.[24]

Pakistan continued to remain the primary adversary of the Indian Army till 2020, when there was a military standoff between the Indian Army and the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) in Eastern Ladakh, leading to strategic rebalancing of forces.

Review of Indian Army Doctrine and Two Front Scenario

In early 2009, General Deepak Kapoor, the then Chief of the Army Staff, enunciated the concept of a two-front war. In the following month, in February 2009, the then Defence Minister, A.K. Antony issued an operational directive to the Chiefs of Staff, to prepare for a two-front war.[25] The political

directive lays down that, '(we) should be prepared to fight on both fronts simultaneously a war at 30 days (intense) and 60 days (normal) rates'.[26] The manifestation of the political directive was evident in the review of the Indian Army Doctrine 2004 which was brought out later in the year.

The Indian Army doctrine was first published in 2004 by Army Training Command (ARTRAC). The document was in three parts and stipulated a five-yearly review. In December 2009, as part of the five-yearly review, a closed-door seminar was organised by the army. The review focused on five major issues:[27]

- How to counter two-front scenarios involving China and Pakistan?
- Military and non-military aspects of asymmetric warfare.
- Out-of-area contingencies and measures to protect Indian interests from the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca.
- Measures to achieve operational synergy among the three Services.
- Enhance Indian Army's technological foundation.

Military Standoff 2020 and Strategic Re-orientation

India and China began normalising relations in 1976 and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited Beijing in 1988. Five agreements and protocols were signed between 1993 and 2013 by the governments of India and China, leading to relative calm and stability on the LAC. India was lulled into complacency and neglected the development of border infrastructure. During this period, China carried out massive infrastructure development in Tibet significantly enhancing its operational capabilities. India woke up to the Chinese challenge much later in 2006, sanctioning 73 roads on the northern borders. In 2010, two new divisions were raised to improve the defensive posture in the Eastern Sector and in 2013, a Mountain Strike Corps was sanctioned for the northern borders.

The ascendency of President Xi Jinping in 2013 was marked by an escalation in 'faceoffs' on the LAC and gradual weakening of border agreements. The period witnessed aggressive actions by the PLA and there were military standoffs in Depsang, Demchok, Chumar and Galwan in Eastern Ladakh and in Doklam on India–Bhutan–China trijunction. The PLA's behaviour has progressively weakened the framework of peace and tranquillity built by the two sides since 1993.[28]

The military standoff in Eastern Ladakh in the summer of 2020 led to strategic rebalancing of the Indian Army. This rebalancing has three key pillars—reorientation, relocation and reorbatting.[29] Some of the significant actions that have been taken include 17 Corps being made responsible for

operations in the Eastern Sector while 1 Corps being entrusted with the responsibility for operations in Ladakh. The headquarters of 18 Corps is being raised and the formation will be responsible for operations in the Central Sector.

In the context of a two-front war, there has been a major change with respect to certain formations earmarked as dual tasked formations (DTF). These formations have a primary role on one front, but can be deployed on the secondary front should the need arise. Earlier the Western front was considered the priority and the majority of the DTF were earmarked from the north to the west. Following the standoff in Eastern Ladakh, this has changed. As part of reorientation, 1 Corps has been dual tasked with primary role in the north, which was earlier responsible for the west.[30]

Reorientation of certain formations, raising of new formations and building of critical infrastructure will enhance the defensive capability and provide limited capability to launch offensive operations inside China.[31] As pointed out by two defence experts, the new Indian military strategy has shifted from 'deterrence by denial' to 'deterrence by punishment'.[32]

Assessment of India's Preparation for a Two-Front War

An assessment of India's preparedness to fight a two-front war against China and Pakistan involves a comparative evaluation of India–China–Pakistan's military modernisation and capability enhancement, including logistics, supply chain and defence industrial base. In addition, assessment of economic and civil preparedness and geopolitical and strategic partnership will also help in appreciating India's preparation to fight a two-front war against Pakistan and China.

In the recent years, China and Pakistan have undertaken significant military modernisation efforts enhancing their capabilities that have altered the regional balance of power.

PLA Reforms and Military Modernisation

The PLA has evolved from a manpower-intensive organisation to a high-tech, professional and agile force. This journey has been marked by strategic reorientation, force restructuring and technology induction measures. Since his inauguration in 2013, President Xi Jinping has launched the most extensive restructuring of China's national defence establishment in its recent history. The reforms aim to align China's military prowess with its regional and global interests. Some of the key initiatives include establishment of Joint Staff Department in the Central Military

Commission, reorganisation of military regions into theatre commands and creation of cyber space force, aerospace force and information support force. The PLA's modernisation and reforms have been backed by necessary budgetary allocation. China is the world's second-largest military spender and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimates that China's defence expenditure has increased from US$ 179.881 billion in 2013 to US$ 296 billion in 2023, marking 29 years of steady increase.[33] As a result, China has the world's largest navy by numbers, including advanced warships and submarines, along with the most advanced missile systems including hypersonic missiles.[34] China also has J-35 Stealth fighters in its inventory and J-36, a trijet is under trial.

Development of Chinese Border Infrastructure and Indian Response

When the People's Liberation Army troops marched into Tibet in 1950, it was sparsely populated and had limited infrastructure. By 1959, the road network had increased to 7,300 km, and by 2021 it was 118,800 km. China launched its 'Go West' campaign in 1999 to improve Tibet's and Xingjian's infrastructure and connectivity. Under the 10th and 11th Five-Year Plans, China invested US$ 4.2 billion and US$ 21 billion to undertake key infrastructure and development projects in Tibet. Under the current 14th Five-Year Plan, China aims to spend approximately US$ 30 billion on infrastructure projects in Tibet between 2021 and 2025.[35]

For a long time, India had followed the policy of keeping the border area underdeveloped to prevent Chinese troops from using it during hostilities. This policy was reversed in 2006 when the China Study Group recommended construction of border infrastructure in response to development on the Chinese side. A task force constituted under the former foreign secretary, Shyam Saran, proposed a plan to build 73 border roads totalling 4,643 km.[36] Since then, there has been an enhanced focus on development of border infrastructure. In its recent year-end review of 2024, the Indian Ministry of Defence (MoD) has informed that the perspective plan of the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has been finalised till 2028 and 470 roads of approximately 27,000 kms will be constructed. The perspective plan of other road-constructing agencies has been synchronised with the plans of the BRO. In addition, work is at hand for force preservation assets, development of aviation-related infrastructure, operational logistics infrastructure and anti-infiltration system.[37] The change in the Indian stance reflects a growing concern in the country's higher defence organisation, to the threats emanating from China, which until sometime ago, was disproportionately focused on the security of the western front against Pakistan.

Shortcomings in India's Defence Capabilities

Indian armed forces are deficient in some critical stores, equipment and weapons platforms to fight a two-front war against China and Pakistan. Additionally, limitations of infrastructure development along the LAC negatively impact India's warfighting capability. India's defence acquisition procedure is slow and complex leading to delays in induction of essential equipment and platforms, such as artillery systems and fighter aircraft. The Indian Air Force is constrained by limitations of fighter squadrons. The service is operating approximately 30 squadrons against the sanctioned strength of 42 squadrons. The Indian Navy has a significant shortfall of submarines between what is desirable and what is available. India's reserve of ammunition, particularly for armoured vehicles, artillery and air defence systems may not be adequate to fight a protracted war.

India's shortfall in warfighting capability is accentuated in relation to the rapid advancements made by China in the recent years in the field of missile systems, integrated air defence systems as well as in cyber warfare capability among other fields. Pakistan's policy of proxy war and cross-border terrorism add another layer of complexity to India's defence strategy.

Strategically, India has to contend with China's growing influence in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and South Asia. Even though in the recent years, India has attempted to improve ties with countries such as the United States, France, etc., and is actively participating in the deliberation of groupings such as the QUAD, the deterrence strategy against China and Pakistan is still work in progress.

India–China–Pakistan Conundrum

On 5 April 2005, Pakistan and China signed 'Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations' and 22 agreements to boost cooperation in defence, political, trade and economic areas. Article 4 of the treaty binds the two nations to desist from 'joining any alliance or bloc detrimental to the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of the other side'. The treaty and agreements have been interpreted as "clear and unambiguous, categorical assurance by China to defend Pakistan's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity".[38] However, the relationship requires a more nuanced analysis.

The traditional approach and narrative to understanding two-front war situations for India is rationalised by the common anti-India sentiment of the two countries. However, myriad complexities underscore the India–China–

Pakistan conundrum which belie traditional notions of Pakistan–China collusion and collaboration. In addition to several other factors, the interplay of geopolitics and national interests of the United States, Russia, India, China and Pakistan will be important determinants in the way the China–Pakistan collusion and collaboration will manifest.

Though both China and Pakistan have long-standing disputes with India, complexities of their national interests, emerging global order and an interplay of geopolitical factors defy the notion of seamless collusion and collaboration that could result in two-front war situations for India.

Rise of China and Shifting Balance of Power

The collapse of the Soviet Union witnessed the rise of the United Staes as the sole superpower and economic powerhouse. This has begun to change since the early 2000s, when China witnessed remarkable economic growth fuelled by a vast labour force and aggressive industrialisation and export policies. The rapid economic rise of China enabled it to invest in military modernisation, world-class infrastructure and research and development (R&D) in niche technologies, viz. artificial intelligence (AI), semiconductors, quantum physics and renewable energy, thus solidifying its position as a formidable geopolitical and economic power.

In the first two decades of this century, the United States was engaged in costly military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, draining its resources and international goodwill. The global financial crisis of 2008 highlighted the vulnerabilities of its financial system and the perception of decline as the sole superpower of the world grained traction. Even though the United States continues to remain an economic and military powerhouse, the foundation of its economic pre-eminence has been shaken and its position as an undisputable leader is being challenged by China. The 2008 financial crisis reshaped the global balance of power with China emerging as a formidable challenge to the hegemony of the United States.

There is a pragmatic acceptance by the United States and a recognition of the growing role of China in Asia in general and within South Asia in particular. The tacit acceptance of the growing role of China in Asia has been accompanied by counter-balancing efforts rather than outright acceptance. Even though the United States has not militarily responded to the growing Chinese military presence in the region, it has strengthened its QUAD partnership, signed the AUKUS Pact and has enhanced military engagement with India, among other measures. The United States seems to acknowledge China's growing influence in Asia. However, it is following a two-pronged

approach of engaging China economically and strengthening alliances and forming partnerships to maintain a balance of power in Asia.

Pakistan's Pragmatic Foreign Policy

Pakistan's relationship with China is rooted in its pragmatic security and economic calculus. Although Pakistan professes that China is its indispensable partner, especially in balancing India's influence, it also exercises a degree of independence in its foreign policy. In the early Cold War period, Pakistan was a close ally of the United States, joining Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in the 1950s to counter the Soviet influence. However, despite the alignment with the United States, Pakistan cultivated close ties with China and even facilitated normalisation of Sino-US relations in the 1970s.[39] Pakistan's military has maintained close military ties with both the United States and China. The United States had been an important source of military platforms and technologies. However, post the 1965 and 1971 wars, Pakistan developed close ties with China when the United States imposed arms embargo on Pakistan. China has remained an important supplier of military equipment and technologies, including nuclear technologies since the 1980s. The launch of China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015, despite the concerns of the United States, underscored Pakistan's deep economic reliance on China. Pakistan continues its balancing acts while being a key beneficiary of CPEC investments while still engaging with western financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Pakistan also maintains close relations with Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) securing financial support and fuel supplies, while balancing its relations with Iran. Recently, Pakistan has deepened its defence and economic ties with Turkey and Qatar, while balancing its relations with other countries in the Middle East and West Asia.

The examples above reflect Pakistan's pragmatic approach—leveraging different alliances for economic and security benefits while maintaining strategic flexibility to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics.

China has Prioritised National Interests Over Pakistan's Immediate Expectations

China too values its close strategic partnership with Pakistan, but there have been instances where China's broader geopolitical and economic ambitions have taken precedence over Pakistan's interests, revealing areas of divergence. Two examples stand out in this regard. During the Kargil War in 1999,

Pakistan expected strong military and diplomatic support from China. However, China took a neutral stance, urging India and Pakistan to resolve the issue through dialogue rather than supporting Pakistan's military actions outrightly. During the period starting from the early 1990s, China had been improving trade relations with India. China's stance during the Kargil war is indicative of the fact that while it largely supports Pakistan's broader security interests, it is unwilling to compromise its strategic and economic interests and will not back Pakistan unconditionally in every conflict with India.

China maintains significant trade relations with India and it has been growing at a very fast pace in the recent years. The annual trade between the two countries has surpassed US$ 100 billion of late. Even during military standoff of 2020 in Eastern Ladakh, China wanted to pursue economic engagement with India.

In the recent years, Pakistan has been facing a grave economic situation and has been in a dire need of a bailout assistance. China has often encouraged Pakistan to seek assistance from the IMF rather than offering direct, large-scale bailouts. Despite public pronouncements of 'all-weather friendship', China has been cautious in extending economic relief to Pakistan without ensuring the protection of its investments.

These examples highlight the fact that while Pakistan is China's vital strategic partner, its broader regional ambitions and economic interests assume precedence, sometimes even at the cost of Pakistan's immediate expectations.

Manifestation of a Two-Front Threat

Historically, China has supported Pakistan in its wars and conflict situations with India through political, diplomatic and military means, even as it has stopped short of direct military involvement. This was also evident during the recently conducted Operation SINDOOR. Over time, China has become a major defence supplier to Pakistan and has been playing a critical role in the development of its nuclear programme. More recently, the CPEC has solidified their partnership, with China backing Pakistan in international forums, often to counter Indian initiatives.

Pakistan, on its part, has not directly intervened during India–China confrontations but has supported China diplomatically and rhetorically. During the 1962 China–India War, Pakistan took the opportunity to settle its border with China and build strategic ties. In more recent stand-offs, such as in Doklam in 2017 and in Eastern Ladakh in 2020, Pakistan backed

China's position through media and political statements, while also posturing along the India–Pakistan border to build pressure on India.

Overall, the China–Pakistan partnership is built on shared strategic interests and mutual rivalry with India. While China aids Pakistan in bolstering its position against India, Pakistan reciprocates by supporting China's regional assertions and helping sustain the two-front threat scenario that India strategically fears.

Emerging Dimensions of a Two-Front Threat

For India, a two-front war threat is a credible strategic concern rooted in the China–Pakistan partnership and evolving geopolitics. While a full-scale, military collaboration between China and Pakistan, in a war against India, has not occurred historically, several developments suggest that such a scenario, while unlikely, may manifest in hybrid forms and proxy operations with significant military and strategic consequences.

The China–Pakistan partnership is deep, spanning military, economic and geopolitical domains. China has helped Pakistan develop its conventional and nuclear capabilities, while their ongoing defence cooperation, including joint exercises and arms transfers, strengthens interoperability. China's increasing presence in Pakistan via CPEC places it physically closer to India's western front, creating strategic depth. For India, this means that any conflict on one front could be exploited by the other—if not through direct aggression, then through escalations, border skirmishes or proxy operations.

A fully coordinated, conventional war involving the armed forces of China and Pakistan is not a possibility in short to medium term. A two-front threat is most likely to emerge asymmetrically. For instance, in a war or conflict situation between India and China, Pakistan could escalate security concerns for India along the Line of Control (LoC) by supporting cross-border infiltration to stretch Indian forces. Similarly, a military crisis on the western front could coincide with Chinese aggressive actions on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), like the recent stand-offs in Eastern Ladakh. The scenario may not involve conventional war on both fronts simultaneously but could take shape in the form of multiple concerns—intelligence sharing, technological support, cyberattacks, information warfare, gray-zone operations and localised conflicts—forcing India to divide resources and attention.

Recommendations

To counter a potential two-front threat from China and Pakistan, India must prioritise military modernisation and deterrence. Drawing lessons from

ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza, India must accelerate the creation of joint theatre commands, improve infrastructure along the borders and strengthen cyber, drone and space-based capabilities. Investing in artificial intelligence and multi-domain operations—particularly in cyber warfare and electronic warfare—will ensure that India remains agile and technologically prepared for modern wars and conflicts.

Equally important is India's approach to strategic partnerships and self-reliance. While enhancing defence partnerships with countries such as the United States, France, Israel and Russia, India should also enhance domestic defence industrial base under the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* initiative to reduce dependence on foreign countries. Strategic resilience must extend to military, economic and energy security, ensuring that India can sustain protracted wars without getting impacted by internal unrests or defence funding.

Lastly, India must prepare for hybrid and gray-zone warfare by strengthening counter-terrorist measures, disrupting disinformation campaigns and securing domestic unity—especially in sensitive regions like Kashmir and the Northeast. Effective civil–military coordination, public communication and proactive governance are vital to prevent internal unrest from being exploited during external confrontations. These measures together can help India manage and deter simultaneous threats from both its northern and western borders.

Conclusion

In the recently concluded India Today Conclave, the Chief of Army Staff, General Upendra Dwivedi emphasised the need for India to acknowledge the 'high degree of collusion' between Pakistan and China and informed that the 'the two-front war threat is a reality'.[40] Collusion and collaboration between China and Pakistan are exemplified by projects like CPEC and coordinated military exercises. Historically, India has followed a policy of deterrence by denial against China and deterrence by punishment against Pakistan. It has attempted to thwart the challenges of a two-front war by building military capability and undertaking diplomatic engagement at bilateral and multilateral levels.

The military stand-off in 2020 between the Indian Army and the PLA in Eastern Ladakh led to strategic rebalancing of the Indian Army marking a significant shift in India's defensive posture. The stand-off also led to accelerated infrastructure development along the LAC and speedy procurement of military stores and equipment. The stand-off in Eastern Ladakh and the ongoing wars in Gaza and Ukraine have led to a realisation

of the possibility of protracted wars and the need to develop a robust defence ecosystem in the country. The government's policy of 'Atmanirbharta' is an attempt to develop self-reliance in defence. Additionally, India's engagement with groupings such as the QUAD and with partner countries like the United States and France have provided India with strategic leverage to mitigate some of the challenges of a two-front war. Despite the progress there are deficiencies in modernisation and logistical readiness to fight a protracted two-front war.

It is critical to recognise that a two-front war is not a foregone conclusion. Diplomatic efforts, strategic deterrence and calibrated military responses play pivotal roles in shaping the regional security environment. China and Pakistan both have their respective national interests and strategic priorities which will determine the likelihood of a coordinated military engagement with India. Thus, while India must remain vigilant and continue strengthening its defence capabilities, it must also pursue diplomatic avenues to prevent escalation. The path forward lies in a balanced approach—fortifying military preparedness while leveraging diplomacy to deter and defuse potential conflicts.

Notes

1. During the 30th USI National Security Lecture, General V P Malik (Retd) had defined collusive and collaborative threats in the context of China and Pakistan—'Collusive threat' from China and Pakistan to India implies both countries acting in secret to achieve a 'fraudulent, illegal, or deceitful goal' or being engaged in secret or hidden avowed goals *vis-à-vis* India; and 'Collaborative threat' implies a joint threat by working together. Basically, that would cover overt as well as covert threats to India from the China–Pakistan nexus. See VP Malik, '30th National Security Lecture 2014, Comprehensive Response to a Collusive and Collaborative Threat', United Service Institution of India (USI), 2014, available at https://www.usiofindia.org/publication-journal/30th-national-security-lecture-2014-comprehensive-response-to-a-collusive-and-collaborative-threat-from-china-and-pakistan.html, accessed on 13 February 2025.
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