

Two Front War



Courtesy: ORF

In essence, the two-front threat justified a larger military with a more modern equipment profile and thus needed greater resource allocation from the government, even though the eventuality of a two-front war might never materialize.

The discussions on a two-front military threat for India started around 2006 and were formally articulated in the defence minister's operational directive in 2009. The Indian response was to prepare for a primary and a secondary front, and to prevent any loss of territory through deterrence and dissuasion. The response, however, was never resourced for a two-front collaborative threat. This way of dealing with a two-front war is thus based on a best-case scenario where everything goes to plan, so that New Delhi avoids a major loss of territory to China as it is able to sustain Pakistani pressure.

Definition

In simple terms, the two-front challenge refers to a simultaneous armed conflict between India and both China and Pakistan. Scholars like **Sushant Singh** in his article, "**The Challenge of A Two-Front War: India's China Pakistan Dilemma**", stated, "**China and Pakistan could follow either a collaborative or a collusive approach: the former involves one country openly aiding the other militarily, whereas the latter involves covert cooperation between the two.**" Covert cooperation means that if India is engaged in an armed conflict with Pakistan, China would provide moral, material, and logistics support to Pakistan. In case of a collaborative threat, either of the countries could activate a second front militarily in a coordinated manner. The two are not exclusive options, as the transition from the collusive threat to the collaborative threat could occur seamlessly.

Evolution of Two Front War

- India was cognizant of a two-front military threat during the 1965 and 1971 India-Pakistan wars.
- The recent discussion on such a military challenge started around 2006, when the China Study Group recommended construction of border infrastructure in response to massive infrastructure improvement on the Chinese side.
- The Manmohan Singh-led UPA government reversed a long-standing policy of keeping border infrastructure underdeveloped so as to prevent advancing Chinese troops from using it.
- Headed by then-Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, a task force made three field trips to the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and proposed a plan to build 73 India-China border roads with a length of 4643 km, mostly connecting to the areas where the border was contested by two countries.
- At the end of December 2009, then-Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor confirmed the directive when he stated during a seminar of the Army Training Command that the army must prepare for a two-front war.
- The prevalent institutional belief among the military leadership, captured by Kapoor's argument, was that placing a "**two-and-a-half-front war strategy**" as a top priority "**will henceforth provide an unambiguous political and military focus on strategic and operational initiatives to ensure readiness.**"
- Kapoor's successor, General V. K. Singh, referred to Pakistan and China as "two irritants" in October 2010, and indicated that the armed forces were planning and preparing for a contingency in which they might have to confront China and Pakistan simultaneously.
- After the border crisis in eastern Ladakh in the summer of 2020, the possibility of a two-front challenge became tangibly real, but India's military appeared

unequal to the task as it committed all its reserves and reoriented units meant for the Pakistan front in Ladakh. A one-time vexed theoretical proposition had transformed itself into a tough living challenge for the Indian military.

How India Plans To Tackle Such Issues Militarily? (MM Naravane & Others)

Even though the government directive mandates the armed forces to be prepared for a war which would expend ammunition and stores for 40 days of intense warfighting, the Indian military is banking on a shorter war with both adversaries. This is based on two factors. The first is the geopolitics of conflict between two nuclear-armed states like India and Pakistan. New Delhi envisages an international intervention in a short period of time in a military conflict with Pakistan, and hopes for early gains to hold good on the negotiating table before nuclear weapons come into play. The second is the practicality of its stocking ammunition and spares, which it hopes to build for 10 days of war against Pakistan and 30 days against China. The defence ministry believes that any stocking beyond 15 days is neither economically viable nor logistically feasible.

India has a series of plans as stated by the current Army Chief, General M M Naravane, that can be broken down on three ways:

- No territorial loss is politically acceptable on either front
- There will be a primary front and secondary front for the military
- There will be a major deployment on the primary front while the secondary front will only have a deterrent posture.

However, former Army Chief Gen. Deepak Kapoor had a separate view, **“the best we can do even with increased force levels is to defend resolutely against the Chinese and avoid any loss of territory while dealing with the Pakistani aggression.”**, which somewhere aligns with Gen NC Vij who has focussed more upon the idea of adopting a posture of deterrence against Pakistan and dissuasion against China. It means that India would have to coercively preclude an attack from Pakistan by threatening an effective military reprisal causing unacceptable losses. Against China, a posture of dissuasion means that New Delhi would be urging Beijing not to become a real military rival or fight a war. Dissuasion would not be achieved solely by threats of war and destruction from India but through the logic of geostrategic realities in a wider context.

Other Options

1. To overcome its power deficit when confronted with a two-front challenge, New Delhi can look to forge partnerships with global powers. The only global power that can be of help in such a case is the United States, but India has valued its strategic sovereignty over becoming a treaty ally of the superpower.
2. But a similar last-minute SOS call to the U.S. is no substitute for a long-standing military and strategic relationship where cooperation, support, and technology transfer are routine activities. If India were to fully align with the U.S. in order to amplify its readiness, it might risk increasing the likelihood of conflict with China owing to Chinese threat perceptions. It still remains to be seen if New Delhi is willing to fully walk on the path of being an active security partner.
3. The only viable diplomatic solution then is for India to seek peace with either Pakistan or China. There has been no progress on Indian offers of boundary settlement with China, and Beijing remains a long-term strategic adversary, a fact acknowledged globally. Arguing that “the India-China relationship is today truly at a crossroads,” Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has noted that “far from mitigating differences, the events of 2020 have actually put our relationship under exceptional stress.”
4. The alternative for New Delhi is to seek peace with Islamabad. Pressure from the two-front military challenge, along with the changing geopolitical landscape with the Biden administration in place in the U.S., has led to some moves toward seeking peace with Pakistan. These have resulted in the reiteration of cease-fire on the LoC, but progress has been slow. The official Indian response, compared to Pakistani enthusiasm, has been tepid, and skeptical voices about the engagement are now being raised in Pakistan, too. In India, there are apprehensions that this may be a move made for tactical reasons to give respite from a Pakistan-supported and -backed armed militancy in Kashmir, besides creating time and space to address the complications of dealing with a belligerent China and the Biden administration’s strong response to Beijing.
5. Former National Security Advisor **Shiv Shankar Menon** says that the only way to prevent a two-front war is by being “**prepared to fight and win it.**” But the kind of military resources eventually required to prevail in the high-intensity two-front war that India is likely to face are simply not available. The peacetime costs that accrue to India in having to plan and prepare for a two-front war, which will push defence spending beyond 3 percent of GDP, are unaffordable.

6. Apart from this Happymon Jacob and Deependra Singh Hooda believes that the focussing on following parameters can allow India to consolidate their position:
 - a. The government's current engagement of the key powers in West Asia, including Iran, should be further strengthened in order to ensure energy security, increase maritime cooperation and enhance goodwill in the extended neighbourhood.
 - b. New Delhi must also ensure that its relationship with Moscow is not sacrificed in favour of India-United States relations given that Russia could play a key role in defusing the severity of a regional gang up against India.

Is It Feasible for Pakistan?

Scholars like Sushant Sareen have laid down several factors that compel Pakistan to participate in a military conflict with India:

- It is a virtual no-brainer that if a shooting match starts between India and China, the Chinese will direct the Pakistanis to jump into the fray.
- For their part, the Pakistanis who are already seething over the constitutional changes made in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, this will be seen as a golden opportunity to even the scores with India.
- The Pakistanis know that on their own there is no way they can launch a successful military operation to snatch Kashmir.
- Diplomatically and politically, their raving and ranting has got little traction.
- Their best hope is to catch India in a pincer – China on one side, they on the other – make some territorial gains in Kashmir.

Yet, Deependra Singh Hooda and Happymon Jacob believe, **“It is unlikely that Pakistan would initiate a large-scale conflict to capture significant chunks of territory as that would lead to a full-blown war between three nuclear armed states. In such a contingency, the damage to Pakistan’s economy and military far outweighs the advantages of capturing some pieces of ground. Pakistan would prefer the low-risk option of pursuing a hybrid conflict that remains below the threshold of war.”**

Why Can India Not Fight a Two-Front War?

Ravi Rikhiye in his book, **“Analysis of India’s Ability to Fight a 2-Front War”**, stated that it is not even feasible for India to go on for such ventures. It is because of the China-Pakistan alliance, we cannot fight even a one-front war: engaging in a war

with either adversary runs the risk of weakening the other front, leaving it open to exploitation. The solution, fortunately, is straightforward: build a 2-front war capability. The next problem is equally straightforward: the government of India is determined not to spend money on defense. Today spending is down to 1.56% of GDP, lower even than in 1962.

Conclusion

The distinct nature of threats posed by two dissimilar adversaries, China and Pakistan, means that India does not have any effective solutions to the possibility of a full-fledged war on two fronts simultaneously. Although all three defense services have been planning for such a contingency, their constrained budgets and sluggish acquisition programs have so far forced them to operate as if a future subcontinental conflict will likely involve major combat against only one adversary, with the other serving principally as a threatening distraction intended to tie down Indian combat forces from being committed exclusively to the primary front.

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