

India's Options in a Contested Environment: Constraints and Prospects

By Prakash Gopal

The past year has witnessed tumultuous and unforeseen changes in the global geopolitical landscape due to the pandemic. While India struggles to contain its devastating second wave, it is simultaneously confronted with a significant national security challenge from across the disputed Himalayan border with China. A skirmish along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that started in May 2020 escalated rapidly into a full-blown crisis, with clashes in Galwan on June 15, 2020, causing casualties on both sides. After multiple rounds of talks, the crisis remains unresolved and has starkly exposed India's lack of credible deterrence that could either deny or punish China's belligerence across the unsettled border.

Prakash Gopal, a PhD candidate at the University of Wollongong in Australia, explains that "There is a near-unanimous recognition that India must drastically overhaul its arsenal of military responses to successfully fend off the offensive might of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and preemptively deter aggression by ensuring that PLA provocations result in unacceptable losses."

In response to the border crisis, the Indian government promoted and contributed to the rapid coalescence of the quadrilateral security dialogue (Quad)—a loose coalition of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. Notable milestones in the Quad's accelerated development include the addition of Australia in the Malabar series of naval exercises and several high-level meetings of officials from the four countries, the highest-profile of which being the first leaders' summit in March 2021. The assumption that India's sudden moves to consolidate the Quad were driven primarily by Chinese actions along the LAC may be debated. Nevertheless, if that is the case, it follows that India views its renewed efforts in coalition-building as part of a solution to its China problem. Though the Quad may be useful in tackling security threats in the larger Indo-Pacific region, in the near term, it is unlikely to meaningfully contribute to bolstering India's ability to deter China along land borders or in the maritime domain.

Fortuitously for India, the terrain at the LAC tempers the military asymmetry between India and China. However, banking on this geographical windfall may not be strategically sound for the Indian army or India's defense leadership.

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The first step in this direction is for civilian and military leadership in India to accept that change in its diplomatic outlook—as welcome as it is—is not a substitute for military reform. The recent turn to multilateralism seems to be driven by the urge to 'do something', and more importantly, project the perception that something is being done in response to China. Military reform and modernization are hard work and entail a significant financial outlay, which will not be easy in the current environment. As important as it may be, participating in multilateral military exercises is cheaper and easier than a military capability overhaul. However, the fact remains that India must cover a fair amount of ground

before military-to-military engagements can meaningfully contribute to deterring China. At this point, these engagements cannot effectively substitute for India's military capabilities, or lack thereof.

There is little wrong in the way the Indian military fights, but there are serious shortcomings in what it fights for, and what it fights with. In other words, while India's military doctrine is tactically sound, it falters at the national and military-strategic levels. Much has been written about the lack of a strategic culture in India. This shortcoming is reflected unflatteringly in how the national leadership stumbles from one crisis to another without learning the right lessons along the way. In order to disrupt this cycle, India needs to evaluate its military capability development plan critically. In the post-pandemic environment, there is not likely to be enough money for any military force in the world to buy all the weapons and platforms they think they need. As in most democratic security establishments, India's military element proposes, and the civilian part of the establishment disposes. Poor civil-military relations prevent meaningful and constructive dialogues between the two silos, to the detriment of India's security preparedness. Undoubtedly, India needs some visionaries on both sides to bridge the divide, but the lack of acumen and inclination does not give cause for optimism.

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A key misconception that has gained traction in recent times is the belief that India's Indo-Pacific maritime capabilities, especially in the Indian Ocean, will even the keel of military asymmetry between India and China. While some may consider it controversial, it is accurate to say that the Indian Army is better positioned to repel the PLA at the LAC, than the Indian Navy is in the Indian Ocean. Until now, China has shown no overwhelming inclination to pose a maritime threat to India. The fact that more Chinese ships and submarines are spending greater amounts of time in the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) is neither surprising nor alarming. After all, the PLA is not building ships and submarines by the dozen to leave them idly floating in harbors, but to establish China's presence in the regional and global maritime commons. Should the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) choose to adopt an aggressive and escalatory attitude in the Indian Ocean, the Indian Navy's relatively shorter lines of communication may not adequately compensate for its deficiencies in capability. The Indian security establishment's conflation of a geographic advantage in the Indian Ocean with a military one is undoubtedly ill-advised.

There is also a direct relationship between India's war-waging capability and the possibility that one or more of its coalition partners will fire a shot at PLA forces in India's defense. While this scenario is highly unlikely, it may be argued that India's military capability is positively correlated with the likelihood of an ally coming to India's aid in conflict. The Indian military must be able to do the heavy lifting. Meeting this threshold allows for the possibility that assistance from allies in niche areas such as intelligence and targeting information could tip the balance in India's favor. However, believing the PLA can be punished or deterred through coalition-building, absent adequate augmentation of India's military capability, substitutes strategy for hope.

Prakash Gopal is a PhD candidate at the University of Wollongong in Australia. The author can be contacted at pgopal@uow.edu.au

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