
Hybrid Warfare in the Sino-Indian Context

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Hybrid Warfare

In the first quarter of the 21st century, we have used terms like civil disobedience, counter-insurgency, guerrilla warfare, insurgency, insurrection, internal security, revolutionary warfare, small wars, subversion, terrorism, Fourth Generation Warfare (4 GW), grey zone, hybrid, sub-conventional and conventional conflicts. These are more often intra-state than inter-state.¹ However, a Sino-Indian conflict, in all probability, would be an inter-state conflict. With China, it could be conventional, sub-conventional, grey zone or hybrid. A grey zone conflict is best understood as activity that is coercive and aggressive in nature. It is deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of conventional military conflict and open inter-state war. Grey zone challenges are ambiguous and usually incrementally aggressive. Grey zone conflicts, exist short of a formal state of war.² These conflicts fall between war and peace. The International Security Advisory Board (ISAB) of the Department of State of the United States (US) carried out an exercise to list grey zone conflicts and found that they include the following:

- Cyber, information operations, efforts to undermine public/allied/local/regional resistance, information/propaganda in support of other hybrid instruments.

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- Covert operations under state control, espionage, infiltration and subversion.
- Special Operations Forces (SOF) and other state controlled armed units and unacknowledged military personnel.
- Support logistics, political and financial, for terrorist and insurgent movements.
- Enlistment of non-governmental actors, including organised criminal groups, terrorists. Further, this includes extremist political, religious, ethnic and sectarian organisations.
- Assistance to irregular military and paramilitary forces.
- Economic pressures that go beyond economic competition.
- Manipulation and discrediting of democratic institutions, including the electoral system and judiciary.
- Calculated ambiguity, use of covert/unacknowledged operations, deception and denial.
- Explicit or implicit use or threats of use of armed force, terrorism and abuse of the civil population, and escalation.³

On the other hand, the most lucid definition of hybrid warfare that this article agrees with is given by Frank Hoffman. In his seminal work, Hoffman clarifies that hybrid wars are polymorphous by their nature as are its antagonists. Further, it would be increasingly difficult to characterise states as comprising only traditional forces or non-state actors who may be termed as irregular. Operational challenges will present a complex array of alternative structures and strategies. It is in all likelihood that there would be hybrid challenges capable of launching hybrid wars. These wars can be waged by states or political groups and incorporate a range of different modes of war, including conventional, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts which would include violence, coercion and criminal disorder. They would target the strategic cultural weaknesses of the conventional thought process of waging a battle effectively. The

important characteristics are convergence and combinations which occur in several modes.⁴ Overall, Hoffman's study finds that conventional, irregular and terrorist types of warfare are not isolated challenges.

It is also important to understand what Margaret Bond says about the subject. According to her, "Hybrid war envisions employment of a comprehensive and highly nuanced variety of military activities, resources, programs and applications tailored to maximise a nonviolent, persuasive use of political and economic influence to reform hostile governments, movements or trends in politically, socially and economically unstable conditions, characteristic of failing and failed states. It also includes a full range of military intelligence capabilities, non-lethal weapons, armaments, support units available for instant employment if ever opposition elements of regular forces or irregular insurgents cross the hostility threshold and constitute a direct threat to, or threaten, these non-hostile activities".⁵ Bond's definition, though comprehensive is essentially at the level of the government. Like the grey zone, which is a sub-set of hybrid conflicts and describes an environment between war and peace. Having dealt with these aspects, it would be essential to understand the Chinese intent.

Chinese Intent

Henry Kissinger in his book, *On China*, mentions that China's strategy generally exhibits three characteristics: meticulous analysis of long-term trends, careful study of tactical options and detailed exploration of operational decisions.⁶ The Chinese style of dealing with strategic decisions is undertaken through analysis, careful preparation, attention to psychological and political factors as also quest for surprise with a conclusion arrived at rapidly.

It is noteworthy that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China is closely knit to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and is politically and militarily involved in all the activities of the country. The modernisation of the PLA and its rising global status could either make

it a more responsible international power or its assertive stance would harden further, leading to clashes with existing and emerging powers. In order to understand the path which China is likely to adopt, it is important to comprehend China's defence policy which stems from the modernisation of the PLA.

There has been hardly any research in India on the modernisation of the Chinese armed forces and its impact on India's security. The People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949 under the Chairmanship of Mao Ze Dong. It is one of the oldest civilisations, with a history filled with military activities for the last 4,500 years. China's traditions with regard to its military have emerged from its strategic concerns, war experience, civil-military relations and technological development. Chinese history is full of military conquests. It is pertinent to note that each imperial dynasty and modern government came to power through a military struggle. In the 20th century, the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party or KMT) came to power through revolutionary wars against the Qing dynasty which had ruled China from 1644 to 1912. Thereafter, the CCP defeated the KMT through the war for liberation in 1949. Accordingly, Chinese military history is essential for comprehending the Chinese civilisation, political institutions and foreign policy.⁷

The present Chinese government was formed in 1949.⁸ The PLA, which was formed under the CCP is an organ of the Party and, thus, obeys the diktat of the Party and also has its proportionate representation in various policy committees of the CCP. The PLA participated actively in both the Great Leap Forward, Mao Ze Dong's Cultural Revolution and in the modernisation programmes of Deng Xiao Ping. Further, it fought the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, the Sino-Indian War in 1962, the Ussuri river conflict with Russia in 1969, and the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979. However, since then, for about 39 years, China has not fought a major war, though the PLA has been involved in skirmishes in the South China Sea, intrusions in the

East China Sea and Tibet, as also in making preparations for a possible military offensive against Taiwan. China has also developed its own defence industry which enables it to indigenously produce state-of-the-art weaponry.

According to Lieutenant General JS Bajwa, “Though Chinese White Papers always state their attitude of being defensive and peaceful, its intentions appear to be deceptive”.⁹ China’s official media continues to publicise articles intended to caution India that China retains the option of initiating military hostilities. *Wen Wei Po*, a Hong Kong based daily, owned by the People’s Republic of China, with editorial staff from the CCP and controlled by the ruling Politburo Standing Committee, published an article in June 2013, captioned “Six Wars to be Fought by China in the Next 50 Years”. It was reposted on a Hong Kong website around the middle of September 2013. The details of the author’s background are yet to be ascertained and the contents have possibly been obtained from Chinese defence analysts. The article asserts that China can wipe out past humiliations and regain its dignity only after it attains national reunification. The article visualises the six wars that would have to be fought by China in the next 50 years to achieve its goal. The wars which are visualised are as under:

- For the unification of Taiwan, which is expected to be fought between 2020 to 2025.
- For the capture of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, possibly in the timeline 2025 to 2030.
- For the reconquest of southern Tibet (Arunachal) which would possibly be undertaken in the years 2035 to 2040.
- For the capture of Diaoyu Island and Ryukyu Island between 2040 and 2045.
- For the unification of Outer Mongolia around 2045 to 2050.
- To militarily recapture the territory lost to Russia between 2055 and 2060.

The anticipated six wars deal with reclamation of the Chinese national territories lost since Imperial China was defeated by the British in the Opium War of 1840-42. The first option that deals with Taiwan states that Taiwan must peacefully unite by 2020, failing which the country should be unified by war which should take place by 2025.¹⁰ This would be a test for the modernised PLA. The war would be difficult in case there is an intervention by the USA and Japan. The author feels that in such a case, the war would last for six months, or for three months.

It is forecast that there would be a slight pause for two years after the reunification of Taiwan. During this period, China is likely to send an ultimatum to the countries patrolling the islands in the South China Sea to withdraw, with a deadline of 2028.¹¹ The countries can preserve their investments followed by withdrawal. China anticipates that Vietnam and the Philippines will oppose the move, and both of them will fight, with possible assistance from the US. As per the author, if concrete results are not attained by negotiations, then the best option is for China to attack Vietnam. The reason is obvious as Vietnam is the most powerful country in the region. Victory over Vietnam will scare the rest. While the war with Vietnam goes on, the other claimants would adopt a wait and watch policy. China is expected to beat Vietnam, as per the author, and, thus, it would establish its suzerainty over the entire Spratly group of islands.

The third war would be for the reconquest of southern Tibet (Arunachal) in the years 2035 to 2040. The article emphatically states that Arunachal is the only point of conflict between India and China. It further notes the close relations between India, and the US, Europe and Russia. It assumes that during this period, India would militarily lag behind China. However, war with India would result in victory after sustaining losses.

Accordingly, the best strategy that China might apply would be to initiate disintegration of the region. It will probably leave no stone unturned to instigate Assam and Sikkim to fight for independence. The

other option is to provide state-of-the-art weaponry to Pakistan which would enable the country to capture the Indian part of Kashmir by 2035 and thereby enable Pakistani control of the entire region. While the fight is on for Kashmir, China could launch an attack to conquer Arunachal. As per the author, India lacks the capability to successfully fight a two-front war. However, if this plan cannot be adopted, the other option is to launch a ground offensive to capture Arunachal (southern Tibet).¹²

It is pertinent to note that this article may not have emanated from the higher levels in China's military establishment, but it iterates an issue often emphasised by the Chinese media that the country will ultimately have to resort to the use of the PLA to settle border issues. Articles of similar nature have been appearing in the Chinese press ever since the *Review of Asia Policy* was undertaken in 2011. A publication of the official China mouthpiece, in November 2011, recommended that China adopt new approaches in dealing with its neighbours. It further stated that goodwill may not bring harmony and, sometimes, certain altercations with neighbours are appropriate and can result in the return of peace.⁸ It is, therefore, important to study the threat that China poses to India. In all probability, a full scale conventional war may not be fought but a hybrid threat to India does exist.

Hybrid Warfare in the Sino-Indian Context

The Chinese are adept at modernising their armed forces, learning from the Gulf Wars as also the hybrid war fought by Russia in 2014 in which it annexed Crimea. The Crimean operation was marked by its simultaneous use of the civil and military sectors. It was a combination of irregular, conventional and cyber warfare. It is to be noted that, historically, China has been adept at asymmetric warfare. Of late, China has begun to adopt hybrid warfare capabilities. China is demonstrating its hybrid capabilities particularly in the maritime domain in the South China Sea

and the Indian Ocean. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has developed enormously in the last 20 years, acquiring new warships, submarines, aircraft carriers and naval aircraft. With these resources, China has occupied a large portion of the Paracel and Spratly groups of islands as also developed ports to its advantage in the Indian Ocean. These include Djibouti, Gwadar, Hambantota, Kyakphu and possibly a new port, Sonadia, in Bangladesh.

Around 2014, China also heavily relied on its maritime militia, in Mandarin known as *haishangmingbing*. Like the Russians in Crimea were known as the little green men, the Chinese militia is called the little blue men.¹³ These little blue men operate when required in conventional operations with the PLAN and often disguise themselves as Chinese fishermen and attack other ships operating in the South China Sea in an unconventional role. The concurrent use of fishermen as civilians who turn themselves into active military personnel and vice versa in accordance with the operational environment they are faced with explains how the Chinese hybrid warfare operates. Once China stabilises the ports in the Indian Ocean, it would have these maritime hybrid warriors who would start operating and disturbing maritime traffic in the periphery of India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The next issue which directly impacts our land border is the Chinese strategy of salami slicing.¹⁴ This implies use of non-linear operations to gradually gain more pieces of land. This is applicable to building of artificial islands in the South China Sea, as also the disputed areas along the Sino-Indian border. This has been observed at Depsang, Chumar and Doklam where the Chinese creep in and try to grab territory. Wherever possible, China is also using cabbage tactics to encircle areas on land or in the sea which it claims, to block entry and exit to these areas, thereby leading to their eventual collapse. As India has hydro-carbon assets in the South China Sea, the Chinese activities have to be observed as the same could be applied in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Indian

armed forces have categorically mentioned salami slicing in their various discussions.

The Chinese are also using cyber warfare which is an important component of hybrid warfare. The Chinese have developed a new facet of hybrid warfare. They believe in using the civilian population to play an active role in cyber operations. The government has promoted the creation of cyber warrior units directly composed of university students and civilians.¹⁵ Further, as per reports emanating, Chinese telecom companies are closely controlled by the government. But the telecom companies do not agree and have taken legal recourse to prove that they are free from Chinese government controls. This has led Chinese telecom products being seen in India and their companies are in the run for the 5G contract.

The last issue is the PLA's capability to instigate insurgency and rebellion in the northeastern region which has been discussed in the Chinese article on the six wars. The northeastern region has insurgent groups operating which could be supported by China.

Having observed the Chinese aspect of hybrid warfare, it would be important to examine what the drivers of a possible Sino-Indian conflict are. This would lead us to important observations as hybrid warfare encompasses conventional, sub-conventional, irregular and other forms of warfare.

Drivers of a Possible Sino-Indian Conflict

The drivers of conflict could be the following:

- **Tibet Issue:** Tibet remains a core issue between India and China. India would like China to begin a process of reconciliation and healing in Tibet in its own interest and for stable Sino-Indian relations. Beijing considers Arunachal as a part of Tibet and has been claiming the entire state. Further, China has been building dams on the Brahmaputra river and tampering with the flow at the Great Bend. Moreover, the

choice of the new Dalai Lama is causing consternation in the region. All these issues could exacerbate and result in them going out of control. Being sensitive issue, these could result in hostilities.¹⁶

- **India-US Strategic Partnership:** Signalling renewed depth in ties, India and the US, on January 25, 2015, decided to further elevate the long-standing strategic partnership by enhancing cooperation in a raft of crucial areas to include defence, trade and commerce, technology transfer, counter-terrorism and climate change.¹⁷ The joint declaration mentions freedom of navigation and freedom of flight which refers to the oceans and the skies. In his Republic Day message, the US President offered to raise the strategic partnership to a higher level. An article that appeared in the *Global Times* and *People's Daily* on January 25, 2015, cautioned India not to fall into the trap which was being laid to pit New Delhi against Beijing. It added that many Western media reports have pointed out that the US, regardless of historical complications, is putting greater efforts into soliciting India to act as a partner, even an ally, to support Washington's pivot to Asia strategy, which is mainly devised to counter China's rise. In a further elaboration, the *Daily* pointed to the West's ulterior motive to frame the Chinese dragon and the Indian elephant as natural rivals. The West is egging India to be fully prepared for the threat by rivals. These issues can cause provocation, which could throw things out of control. The Quad, which remains a diplomatic partnership among the US, Japan, Australia and India, could gradually transform into a military partnership, making issues more serious between China and India.
- **High Profile Posturing in the Indian Ocean Region:** Reports emanating from Beijing indicating that China is contemplating setting up military bases overseas to counter American influence, and exerting pressure on India, have been interpreted by some sections as a veiled reference to China's interest in securing a permanent military presence in Pakistan. Although it may not be politically feasible for

the Pakistan government to openly allow China to set up a military base, New Delhi fears that Islamabad may allow Beijing's use of its military facilities without any public announcement. It is possible to explain the construction of these ports and facilities by China on purely economic and commercial grounds, but regional and global powers like the US, Japan and India inevitably view the sum total of China's diplomatic and military efforts in the Indian Ocean as projecting power vis-à-vis competing rivals. Moreover, most of Chinese naval facilities in the Indian Ocean are of dual use nature and no serious strategy can discount their future military use. The notion that China aspires to dominate the Indian Ocean is a bit far-fetched. However, China wishes to play a greater role in the region, to protect and advance its interests, especially its commercial interests, as also to counter India. Countering India will be a difficult task, given the immense geographical advantages that India enjoys in the Indian Ocean. Even the task of protecting the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) remains challenging for the PLA Navy as of now. Currently, the steps that China is taking have caused concerns. In 2009, a sonar standoff is reported to have taken place between the Indian Navy and Chinese Navy while their ships were proceeding to the Gulf of Aden.⁵ In the year 2014, two incidents of Chinese submarines visiting Sri Lanka were viewed with concern by India. As both the Navies get stronger, such posturing might lead to an accidental conflagration which could result in confrontation. It is reported that Chinese nuclear submarines sporadically foray into the Indian Ocean.

- **Water Issue:** The taming of the Brahmaputra by China could have major implications for India. China certainly wants to utilise the Tibetan water resources for its development. It is presumed that one day, China may divert waters from the Great Bend of the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra river), north of the McMahon Line, building another mammoth dam, much bigger than the Three Gorges Dam

which currently is the biggest dam in the world. China has viewed Engineer Guo Kai's 'Shuotian Canal Project' as a perfect model which would save China with Tibet's waters. In addition, this will be another gigantic power plant with an astonishing generating capacity of 20,000 to 40,000 Mega Watts (MW). This, if constructed, will be three times bigger than the hydroelectric plant at the Three Gorges Dam. This one plant can provide five times the energy requirement of Bangladesh. The taming of this river will require explosives of a very high magnitude. The impact would be profound and impact the people of northeast India and Bangladesh. Further, the area being seismically unstable, the construction of the dam would cause severe earthquakes. In addition, there is a proposal to build 28 dams on the Brahmaputra, which would sequester silt that normally gets washed to the flood plains of India and Bangladesh, renewing the fertility of their agricultural lands. All this is bound to exacerbate tensions and could lead to hostilities.

- **Collapse of Pakistan:** Pakistan is an unstable state with factionalism running against the dominant Punjabis by groups from Balochistan and the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). There are issues between the Sindhis, Punjabis and Baluchis which could cause friction, as also problems with the Shia population of Gilgit Baltistan. Further, the ethnic divide has been exacerbated by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan which has links with numerous terrorist groups operating in Pakistan. Some of the terror groups operate against Afghanistan, some against India, and some against the Government of Pakistan itself. The economy is in the doldrums and the politicians are destabilising the country. The Pakistani armed forces have some Islamic elements who are in league with these terror groups. All this could result in the collapse of the state and the Chinese would see an Indian hand in it which could lead to China attempting to teach a lesson to India.

- **Border Dispute:** The border dispute remains unresolved and there are sporadic standoffs between troops deployed on both sides. There have been altercations and it does not take long for a small incident to get blown up. The current stalemate is dangerous and could lead to hostilities between the two sides. The Indian Prime Minister visited China in May 2015. Despite friendly talks, he stated that the border issue is like a toothache which could easily conflagrate into hostilities.¹⁸ The issue was raised during the informal Wuhan Summit between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi on April 27-28, 2018. Both sides directed their militaries to earnestly implement various confidence-building measures in the border areas.¹⁹

What Lies Ahead and India's Response

Currently, China is straining every sinew to become a global power by 2049. It is modernising its armed forces, and despite all the hiccups, including an ongoing trade war with the United States, its economy is riding high. In all this, China is currently undertaking hybrid warfare with its maritime forces, salami slicing with its land forces, and cyber warfare with its special forces. It continues to be a friend of Pakistan that assists non-state terrorists operating in India. China is certainly interested in its claim over Arunachal and could possibly assist insurgent activity in the northeastern region. With all this, what is China likely to do militarily to disturb the prevailing situation? Visualisations of this is elucidated below. All these actions may be spread over a protracted period and could be sporadic, being suitably calibrated to suit the Chinese intentions:

- Destruction of Indian reconnaissance satellites by Anti-Satellite (ASAT) weapons.
- Transgressions at places of consequence.
- Interfering with the commercial Indian shipping in the Indian Ocean.
- Continuing to build bases in the Indian Ocean.

- Diverting the Brahmaputra at the Great Bend.
- If the need arises, capturing an area of significance with a shower of conventional ballistic missiles, overwhelming firepower of the artillery and swift attacks by the ground forces.
- Building the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and surreptitiously encouraging Pakistan to continue the proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) as also encouraging insurgency in the northeast.
- Launching sporadic cyber operations to disrupt the communications network, as well as launching social media campaigns to cause turbulence in India.

All these aspects need to be carefully analysed. Overall, India needs to take the following measures:

- Develop a national security strategy and a strategic response to China by intensification of strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, Vietnam, Australia and Russia.
- Build up our comprehensive national power.
- Joint operations in networked conditions, with improved surveillance.
- Build infrastructure along the border with speed and military precision.
- Modernise our armed forces to cater for the hybrid threats from China and Pakistan.
- Reorganise our Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) to focus only on cutting edge technologies.
- Provide the private sector a level playing field, especially in defence production.
- Develop pockets of excellence by focussing on hybrid warfare, cyber warfare and assassin's mace weapons.
- Create a diplomatic strategy to win war as also peace.

To conclude, one must realise that China respects strength. India must enhance both its soft power and hard power to build its comprehensive national power to undertake any misadventure.

Notes

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