

INDIA'S MULTIPLE-FRONTS WAR SCENARIO: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

A majority of Indian scholars have been arguing for decades that India faces a joint military threat from China and Pakistan, a challenge so vast and complex that it would be difficult for India to manage it alone. The ensuing debate was impactful enough to garner sympathy for India from the US-led West. Eager to strengthen India as a bulwark to China, who moved forward to equip India with advanced military hardware and niche technologies. Seizing this opportunity, India embarked on a military modernisation programme which heightened Pakistan's security concerns. Reportedly, India has also adopted a new strategy named 'Pivot-to-North' (P2N) to confront Pakistan and China simultaneously. However, the idea of India engaging in a two-front war against Pakistan and China is unrealistic as it would put India at a military disadvantage, a situation it would avoid to the utmost. While the threat of a combined China-Pakistan military effort exists theoretically, practical constraints make it highly unlikely. Accordingly, any response structured in the P2N scenario would be flawed, as it misrepresents the actual threat dynamics in the region.

Keywords: Collaborative Threat, Cost-Benefit Analysis, Initiation of War, Military Modernisation, Multiple Front's War

Introduction

A large segment of the Indian strategic community has been arguing for many years that India faces a collaborative military threat from China and Pakistan combined, and that the threat is both colossal and complex and challenging to manage singlehandedly. The ensuing debate was so impactful that it generated a strong sense of empathy for India in the US-led West which, driven by its quest to prepare India as a regional bulwark against China, exhibited instant readiness to equip it with the state-of-the-art military hardware and niche technologies. Benefitting from this opportunity, India undertook a massive military modernisation drive alongside structural reforms and adopted a more assertive posture.¹

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This development has naturally exacerbated Pakistan's security dilemma and unnerved its strategic circles. India is also reported to have embraced a new strategy named 'Pivot-to-North' (P2N) as a rebalancing measure which avowedly would enable it to fight on multiple fronts against China and Pakistan successfully.² However, some experts contend that the scenario of India opting to fight concurrently on multiple fronts is unrealistic as it places India at a disadvantage militarily vis-à-vis Pakistan which India would avoid to the utmost. Since this scenario has long-term implications for Pakistan, probability must be evaluated.

This paper answers three inter-related questions: one, whether there is space for an all-out conventional war between nuclear-armed India, China, and Pakistan; two, whether China and Pakistan pose a collaborative military threat against India; and three, whether Pakistan faces the threat of Indian aggression under P2N environment and, hence, should construct its response strategy based on P2N scenario. It may be clarified that the term 'war' as used in this discourse means, as defined by Jack Levy, a "substantial armed conflict between the organised military forces of independent political units."³

Theoretical Framework

The dynamics of a war between India on one side and China and Pakistan combined on the other, as hypothesised by Indian scholars, including the likelihood of its occurrence, can be explained in the light of many theories like Liberalism, Realism, Constructivism, and Game Theory. All these theories possess sufficient capacity to analyse this subject and provide approximately accurate interpretations. However, their inherent limitation arising from their proclivity to interpret issues with peculiar biases tends to yield prejudiced and narrow perspectives. Therefore, this study takes significant guidance from the insights provided by Rational Choice Theory, which has the potential to explain the issue more objectively and comprehensively with its relatively wider theoretical lens.

Political economist Adam Smith originally developed Rational Choice Theory in the eighteenth century to explain social behavior in economics.⁴ The theory postulates that to choose a preference from multiple options in social interactions, an individual will perform a cost-benefit analysis and opt for one in which benefits outweigh the cost.⁵ It is based on the supposition that individuals often make decisions in social interactions by evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of the actions being taken. This propensity is equally evident in the state behaviour because states are rational actors.⁶ The theory also posits that non-material and normative considerations can also govern the decision to act on rational choice.

The rational choice theory has been adopted to study behavior in other domains of human activities, including international relations and interstate wars. It offers a framework to explain how states behave during conflicts and the resolution of disputes. Central to this theory is the idea that actors, whether individuals or states, make decisions based on rational assessments to maximise their interests. When applied to international relations, this perspective suggests that states resort to armed conflicts only when they believe the benefits exceed the costs, such as loss of lives, economic strain and political risks.⁷ The theory enables analysts to examine why and under what conditions states opt for military action or deter other states against aggression.⁸

Likewise, scrutiny of perceived benefits and drawbacks for each party alongside appraisal of opposing military capabilities, alliances and diplomatic choices can be used to assess past wars and current crises. Through rational calculations researchers can predict the occurrence of armed conflicts and identify pathways and strategies to resolve disputes and deter conflicts. It also helps predict the outcomes and patterns of preferences, which promise the optimisation of contemplated choices without unduly indulging in the description of the choice processes.⁹ The choices are governed essentially by the criterion of feasibility which considers “financial, legal, social, physical or emotional restrictions” faced by the agent.¹⁰

To resolve the puzzle identified above, it is important to first address the fundamental question on which the entire debate rests: Is there a space for war between India, China, and Pakistan—all nuclear-armed countries?

Space for War

According to many scholars, the onset of the nuclear weapons era, the rise of capitalism and the spread of democracy is a “turning point” in history, which makes large-scale wars obsolete, prompting states to, *per force*, achieve national objectives through peaceful means or low-intensity conflicts.¹¹ The argument of nuclear weapons is powerful enough to justify the belief that large-scale wars between nuclear-armed belligerents are unlikely. The reason is the exceedingly high destructive potential of nuclear weapons, which is likely to increase the cost of war, outweighing its perceived benefits. Moreover, a war between India, China and Pakistan will likely have adverse ramifications for regional stability and global security. Therefore, war avoidance and conflict resolution through peaceful means should be preferred for regional adversaries. Consequently, the idea of ‘no space for war between nuclear-armed states’ sounds appealing.

According to a study, while the number of countries in the world increased in the last 200 years, interstate wars declined.¹² It substantiates the argument that war has become, at least, obsolescent. However, there is more to the reality than meets the eye.

At the outset, it is important to highlight that the adage of ‘no space for war’ is overly simplistic. It contradicts the fundamental reality that state behaviour reflects human nature, which is inherently “egotistic, manipulative and potentially violent.”¹³ The impact of human nature on state behaviour is overwhelming because humans are the most significant constituent of the state due to their crucial role in its formation, function and legitimacy.¹⁴ Hence, states naturally resort to armed conflicts to achieve their goals. That is why war has been an enduring phenomenon in international politics. Empirical evidence does not support the notion that war has become obsolete in the modern era. According to Christopher Coker, between 2001 and 2019 the world experienced 106 large- or small-scale wars involving over one hundred countries.¹⁵

Several factors can be cited to explain why wars occur hypothetically and will continue to occur. These factors include geopolitical/strategic aspirations, territorial disputes, quest for power and prestige, pursuit of security and survival, economic advantages, clash of identities and beliefs, historical grievances, failure of international institutions to resolve conflicts, and the absence or breakdown of economic interdependence.¹⁶ Alliance obligations are another factor which drives states to war. There is also ample evidence of wars being resorted to by political leaders to muster the support of the masses.¹⁷ Of all these factors, the most powerful ones are territorial disputes and geopolitical/strategic aspirations. States value territories and geopolitical power more than human and material losses. The long-term benefits in the context of national security and prestige are regarded as weightier than short-term detriments. According to Paul Diehl and Gary Goertz, territorial disputes have been “the primary source” of armed conflicts for the last five hundred years.¹⁸

There is another phenomenon that has historically triggered countless large-scale armed conflicts. As discussed earlier, the decision to go to war would depend on rational calculations based on political, strategic and economic benefits the war is expected to accrue. Nevertheless, the rational analysis sometimes overlooks the risk of miscalculation and misperception on the part of decision makers which can trigger armed confrontation. Similarly, wars can also occur owing to unintended consequences of defensive actions aimed at maintaining status quo rather than improving it.¹⁹

For example, World War I is cited as a classic manifestation of this phenomenon. Similarly, the recently concluded US-led Coalition Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are contemporary examples.

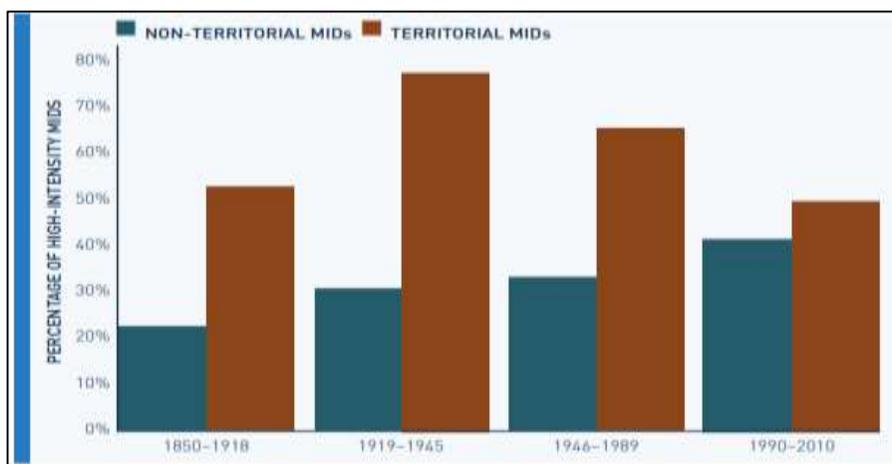
Suppose rational calculations suggest avoidance of escalation or reduction in the cost of war. In that case, adversaries may adopt hybrid warfare strategies featuring greater reliance on non-military power including covert means and proxies than conventional military power or they may curtail their aims/objectives. However, this implies a change in war's character and does not preclude war. Likewise, to minimise the risk of unintended escalation, the scale of the armed conflict may be restricted to low-level operations as envisaged in India's recently embraced Dynamic Response Strategy (DRS). However, it is noteworthy that compared to conventional military power, hybrid warfare strategies are less predictable and take much longer to produce desired outcomes. Therefore, conventional military power is relied upon universally for assured and quick outcomes.

To sum up, it is incorrect to assume that there is no possibility of war between nuclear-armed countries. In any case, the axiom of 'no space for war' in the context of the India-Pakistan dyad becomes meaningless when viewed in the backdrop of deep-rooted animosity of both belligerents and the persistent claims of the strategic community that war can be waged against Pakistan. According to Ashley Tellis, the most important lesson India learned from the Kargil Conflict of 1999 was the conclusion that nuclear weapons have not rendered armed conflict between India and Pakistan obsolete. Tellis asserts that the military crises created by India after the Kargil Conflict were aimed at exploring the space for armed conflict with Pakistan under a nuclear umbrella.²⁰ Its probability would hinge on whether the motivation to go to war is decisive for the side initiating it.

Motivations to Go to War

Historically, the key issue for its resolution has entailed using military power in territorial disputes. Therefore, while many other factors are no less potent in provoking war territorial disputes, as discussed earlier, they will continue to constitute the main factors for war among India, China, and Pakistan. According to a study, the number of "high-intensity territorial militarised interstate disputes (MIDs)" since 1850 has constantly been far more than "non-territorial MIDs" as reflected in Figure 1.

Figure -1: Comparison between Territorial and Non-Territorial Militarised Disputes



Source: Pushing the Boundaries: Territorial Conflict in Today's World." *HCSS Strategic Monitor*. Accessed August 23, 2024. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep12602.5.pdf>.²¹

Douglas Gibler avers that territorial disputes are “more difficult to resolve, more likely to repeat, more prone to fatalities, and more likely to cause wars than other types of issues.”²² However, it may be remembered that because India, China, and Pakistan are nuclear-armed countries, large-scale armed conflict among them is generally less likely except when due to miscalculation. The catalysts for war among the three countries are discussed in a dyadic framework, i.e., a China-India dyad and an India-Pakistan dyad.

The relationship between China and India has traditionally been marked by conflict, competition and cooperation. The primary source of their antagonism is their boundary dispute encompassing an area of approximately 90,000 sq km in Aksai Chin Region and Arunachal Pradesh which, according to Mohan Malik, presents a constant risk of military confrontation.²³ The most significant military confrontation between the two countries due to this territorial dispute was the 1962 War which established a precedent for subsequent border tensions that have continued to surface periodically. The last time militaries of the two countries came face to face was in June 2020 in Galwan Valley.²⁴

It may be noted that the potential for military confrontation between India and China goes beyond their territorial dispute. According to Andrew Scobell and Sumit Ganguly, disputes over non-territorial issues, such as competition for influence in neighboring states and maritime interests in the Indo-Pacific Region, heighten the risk of conflict escalation.²⁵

These disputes are significant for each nation's strategic positioning and access to critical resources, including energy and trade routes. Additionally, geopolitical and strategic ambitions, pursuit of regional dominance and quest for global prestige compel both countries to enhance their military capabilities and cultivate alliances, further complicating efforts to resolve tensions through diplomatic means alone.²⁶ Their relationships with other major powers such as the US and Russia influence their attitudes. The US, in particular, has strengthened its strategic partnership with India as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at containment of China.²⁷ The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a central element of China's strategy to enhance its regional influence and secure access to the Indian Ocean.²⁸ Likewise for India, asserting regional influence is paramount with risk of escalation.²⁹ Thus, while territorial disputes are pivotal, the broader regional and global aspirations influence their strategic calculations, potentially leading to a military confrontation.

Similarly, the likelihood of India engaging in a military confrontation with Pakistan over territorial disputes is a strong possibility with risk of nuclear conflagration. With a long history of an antagonistic relationship centered around the Kashmir dispute, both countries have fought three wars and many major and minor skirmishes since independence in 1947. Their enduring rivalry maintains a state of persistent tension in the region.³⁰ Regrettably, the resolution of Kashmir dispute seems a long way off owing to its complexity and high symbolic value for both India and Pakistan. While India claims the entire Kashmir including Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan views it as an "unfinished agenda of partition" of the Indian subcontinent and an existential necessity. Despite efforts at diplomatic resolution, tensions persist, creating the risk of military confrontation. The potential for future military confrontation arises from frequently occurring border skirmishes, terrorist incidents, and differing interpretations of territorial control.³¹ The conclusion of a study that "dyads that have recurring territorial MIDs (four or more) have an increased probability of having a war" is typically valid for the India-Pakistan dyad.³²

Another factor which can particularly provoke India to wage war against Pakistan is the internal dynamics and public opinion. The significance of this factor can be gauged from the fact that many mainstream political parties of India, including the Bharatiya Janata Party, use the Pakistan-card to rally public support in electoral politics and attribute India's national security vulnerabilities to Pakistan.³³ It is also a common knowledge that India and Pakistan are involved in proxy wars against each other in which retaliation to terrorist attacks could escalate to direct military engagement.

Likewise, India can undertake preemptive military action against Pakistan on the plea of a perceived imminent attack. It can also contemplate military action to achieve strategic objectives against Pakistan if it believes the international environment favours its military action. While there exists strategic stability between India and Pakistan, the risk of escalation from a conventional conflict to nuclear exchange remains a serious concern. India may also take limited military action believing that nuclear escalation can be deterred or controlled. Having discussed the factors that motivate war between the three countries, it is important to discuss which ones can initiate war.

Initiation of War

The option of initiating war rests with the state having the choice to initiate it, which is contingent upon whether the situation it confronts is a war of compulsion or choice. The war of compulsion, which is usually a defensive war and generally an option for the weaker side, has to be fought *per force* to avoid grave consequences or to ensure survival. Therefore, in a war of compulsion or defensive war, the question of initiation of war is irrelevant; it is relevant only to war of choice.

The first consideration involved in initiating a war of choice is the comparative power potential of opponents. As a rule, the weaker opponent is generally reluctant to initiate war for multiple reasons. 1) It is contrary to the dictates of rational analysis which may suggest avoidance of war. 2) The weaker opponent is concerned about legitimacy and moral ascendancy as justifying and gaining international support for offensive wars are enormous challenges.³⁴ Compared to the stronger opponent, it is in a weaker position to absorb and manage diplomatic isolation and condemnation reserved for aggressor states. Hence, while the weaker belligerent is seldom expected to initiate war, the stronger opponent will often initiate war depending on whether the decision to go to war is endorsed by cost-benefit analysis.

China has a potent and technologically sophisticated military force in the India-China dyad. The People's Liberation Army has achieved significant progress, fueled by considerable investments in modernising forces, including developing advanced missile systems, cyber warfare capabilities, and a formidable power projection capability.³⁵ It is also argued that China's military strategy increasingly focuses on the doctrine of Active Defence which emphasises offensive operations.³⁶ Therefore, China can leverage its superiority in a conflict scenario against India and possesses the capacity to initiate war.³⁷ Conversely, India maintains a potent military despite falling behind China in some technological regions and defence spending.³⁸

India's strategic geographic position and military capability are a strong deterrent against Chinese aggression.³⁹ Realistically speaking, the comparative superiority of China is not overwhelming enough to preclude aggression by India. Intriguingly, it is often argued by Indian scholars that India's military doctrine has traditionally been defensive, aimed at protecting its borders and maintaining internal security. This claim is not supported by empirical evidence. As a matter of fact, forced military occupation and gobbling up of states of Jammu and Kashmir (1947), Junagarh (1947), Manavadh (1947), Hyderabad (1948), Goa (1961), etc, by India, invasion against East Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh (1971) and its military interventions in Sri Lanka (1987) and Maldives (1988) point to the contrary.⁴⁰ As of today, India's military capability is more potent with an offensive character, and its behaviour is more aggressive. Therefore, in practical terms, with China having an edge over India, both countries can initiate war against each other.

In the India-Pakistan dyad, Pakistan, as a weaker player, faces significant strategic, military, and diplomatic constraints that discourage it from contemplating an invasion of more powerful India. Experts like Stephen Cohen underscore a considerable gap in conventional military capabilities of the two states, with India possessing larger and more technologically advanced armed forces.⁴¹ This disparity not only reduces Pakistan's chances of military success but also heightens the risk of overwhelming retaliation from India, potentially escalating any conflict to nuclear proportions. As a result, Pakistan is compelled to adopt a defensive posture, engaging in a war of compulsion rather than choice.

Additionally, scholars stress the international repercussions of Pakistan's aggression. Sumit Ganguly argues that Pakistan's aggression would likely trigger widespread international condemnation and possible sanctions, undermining its diplomatic standing and economic stability.⁴² Pakistan's strategic calculations are also complicated by its internal security challenges, including insurgencies and regional instability, which divert resources and attention from external security challenges.⁴³ Its precarious economic health also poses hurdles to the feasibility and sustainability of any military invasion against a stronger adversary. This implies that Pakistan can only fight a war of compulsion against India, i.e, a defensive war.

However, the combined military potential of China and Pakistan under P2N scenario can put India at a serious disadvantage. The P2N scenario entails diversifying some military resources initially meant to be used against Pakistan by India to the Chinese border, diminishing India's prospects of success. India's military capabilities, though substantial, are stretched thin across its vast borders with both countries, which would complicate the allocation of resources and workforce.⁴⁴

Additionally, India's budget constraint could impede India's ability to sustain a prolonged dual-front conflict.⁴⁵ India's option to engage in a concurrent military conflict against China and Pakistan has another constraint. Harsh Pant opines that the geopolitical implications of such a conflict would likely draw international players into the fray and cause diplomatic isolation for India.⁴⁶ These factors underscore why India would face formidable challenges in countering China and Pakistan militarily. Consequently, by Rational Choice Theory, India should avoid a situation of disadvantage to the utmost and not initiate war against Pakistan when it faces a live threat from China as well. Hence, for Pakistan PzN is an unrealistic scenario.

Possibility of Collaboration between China and Pakistan

Another central question is whether Pakistan can collaborate with China in the latter's war with India. Historically, Pakistan and China have nurtured robust diplomatic, economic and military relations, often described as enduring friendship. Over the decades, China and Pakistan have forged a strong strategic partnership driven by mutual geopolitical interests. They have a shared interest in limiting India's influence. For China, India represents a regional rival and a potential competitor in the Indo-Pacific region, where the United States also aims to counterbalance Chinese influence through India. For Pakistan, the strategic alliance with China offers a strong ally against its primary adversary India.⁴⁷ CPEC, a key project under China's BRI, further cements this relationship by providing Pakistan with economic and infrastructural support while giving China a strategic presence in the Indian Ocean.⁴⁸ In short, China and Pakistan have maintained a history of comprehensive cooperation, including defence, encompassing arms trade and technology transfers, which acts as a counterbalance to India.

Nonetheless, the extent of Pakistan's involvement in a potential China-India conflict hinges on several factors. Firstly, there exists no explicit mutual defence pact obligating both Pakistan and China to collaborate in their conflict with India militarily. Secondly, Pakistan would need to assess the domestic repercussions of such involvement including economic impact. Direct engagement in a conflict with India would strain military resources and potentially expose vulnerabilities elsewhere. Thirdly, the country's international standing and relations with other global powers, notably the US and Russia, could be significantly affected. While aligned with China on numerous issues, Pakistan has traditionally balanced its relationships with other major powers to safeguard its interests and, hence, would need to carefully navigate diplomatic repercussions to avoid international condemnation and potential sanctions.⁴⁹

Fourthly, a conflict involving three nuclear-armed states poses severe risks to regional and global security. The collaborative conflict would entail substantial risks, given its potential for escalation into a broader regional conflict.⁵⁰ Lastly, historically Pakistan has never taken advantage of a military confrontation between China and India. For example, in the 1962 India-China War when India stood perilously exposed, Pakistan did not exploit the situation. As discussed above, the factors constraining Pakistan's liberty equally apply to China's liberty with reduced intensity. Swaim Prakash Singh opines that by collaborating with Pakistan in a war China "would accrue more damage than benefit to it."⁵¹ Therefore, the prospects of China-Pakistan military collaboration against India are rather slim.

Conclusions

The above discussion yields the following significant conclusions:

- War can occur in India, China, and Pakistan for multiple reasons, with the caveats outlined in the ensuing sub-paragraphs.
- In the India-China dyad, India may be compelled to fight primarily a defensive war initiated by China. However, India also possesses the capacity to initiate a war of its own choice against China, provided that, based on rational analysis, its national objective warrants it.
- In the India-Pakistan dyad, India possesses the potential to wage war against Pakistan based on cost-benefit analysis. However, India is not expected to initiate war against Pakistan if it is forced to fight from a disadvantage, implying that for India, it is not a multiple-fronts war scenario with China and Pakistan collaborating against it. Conversely, Pakistan is unlikely to initiate war against India and overwhelm it because of a lack of sufficient capacity.
- In the absence of a formal military alliance or framework, Pakistan is unlikely to collaborate with China and initiate a collective war against India. Neither is there a historical precedent whereby Pakistan took advantage of India's military vulnerability created by China.

Given the above discourse, it is safe to conclude that Pakistan's threat hypothesis formulated in India's P2N Scenario framework is unrealistic and likely misleading. Accordingly, a response based solely on the P2N scenario would be flawed.

Concluding Remarks

While Pakistan and China share strategic interests that could theoretically motivate their collaboration against India, the practicalities and risks of such an action are considerable.

Moreover, despite enduring geopolitical tensions and historical grievances between Pakistan and India, the practical considerations of military capability, international consequences, and internal stability present formidable barriers that discourage Pakistan from contemplating invasion of India or collaborating with China in the latter's military venture against India. Therefore, Pakistan will always fight India a war of compulsion, and not of choice. However, it does not face the threat of Indian aggression when India is engaged militarily against China.

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