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MANAGING COMPREHENSIVE COMPETITION WITH CHINA: INSIGHTS FROM MULTI-DOMAIN BATTLE

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Indian military planning has always centred on countering threats from Pakistan and China. Traditionally, the threat from Pakistan has commanded the most attention and resources—and with good reason, given the four wars fought by India and Pakistan, and Pakistan’s territorial revisionism and perennial sub-conventional campaigns. Thus India has directed vast conventional forces and doctrinal changes at managing the security threats emanating from across its northwestern borders. But the strategic challenge from China, which has traditionally been experienced as a latent threat rather than active conflicts, has evolved rapidly in recent years. India has sought to respond to China’s growing power—with new infrastructure and force expansion on the border, for example—but this response may not be adequate. How has China’s military force modernisation changed the strategic challenges faced by India? And how should India plan to counter these evolving challenges?

In this chapter, I argue that China’s recent force modernisation, defence reforms and assertive security policies amount to fundamental changes to India’s strategic circumstances. The implications of these Chinese advances may ultimately be as significant as the realisation of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons capability. Just as the Pakistani bomb forced India to reconsider and adjust how it deterred and fought wars against its western neighbour, the recent and current changes in the Chinese military should force India to reconsider and adjust how it manages security competition with Beijing. The fundamental difference between the threats from Pakistan and China, however, is that while the Pakistani threat is largely localised to India’s continental periphery, forcing India to reinforce its territorial defence, the Chinese challenge is comprehensive, forcing India to reconsider its wider security policies. China is not only on India’s Himalayan borders. It is in the waters and ports of South Asia, and the wider Indian Ocean Region from the Horn of Africa to the Strait of Malacca. It is in the cyber circuits of

India and its neighbours and partners; it is in space above Asia; and it is insinuated in the defence policies and strategic infrastructure of Pakistan and other regional states. This is a uniquely comprehensive security competition which India has never faced before, and which requires an unprecedented re-evaluation of India's defence posture.

In such a re-evaluation, Indian military planners could draw lessons from a US doctrinal concept known as Multi-Domain Battle (MDB).¹ The concept calls for an evolved form of networked, joint warfare, in which forces support each other across domains. It is still in its infancy, and riddled with as-yet unanswered uncertainties. Most importantly, it was devised for problems and circumstances particular to the US, so it cannot be transplanted wholesale to India or any other country, especially given India's doctrinal and bureaucratic inertia. But the concept does provide a framework from which Indian planners could learn as they grapple with their own particular problems and circumstances. In the remainder of this chapter, I first outline the scope of the emerging security competition with China; second, I explain the concept of MDB, drawing out its three most relevant insights; and finally, I offer the first steps of an outline for how it may be applied in India's case.

A uniquely comprehensive security competition

In August 2017, India and China agreed to disengage their forces from a two-month-long stand-off at Doklam.² The troops

from each side had come face to face in a territory claimed by China and Bhutan, tensely maintaining their positions even while other units were placed on heightened alert, and other Indian and Chinese soldiers fell into scuffles elsewhere, on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The crisis was defused diplomatically, and China's attempts to extend a road into contested territory were thwarted, at least for the time being. India had succeeded in restoring the status quo ante, even though Chinese forces subsequently began a build-up on their side of the border.³ While much of the Indian strategic commentariat gloated at the apparent triumph, the crisis also notably hardened Indian attitudes against China.⁴ Inflammatory threats from Chinese officials and occasional outright racist needling from communist party mouthpieces revealed to Indian audiences that China viewed India as a security competitor. Beijing under President Xi Jinping would pursue its aggressive territorial expansion not only against smaller disputants in the South China Sea, but also against India on their common land boundary.

The Doklam crisis therefore only reinforced long-held Indian views that the threat from China was a territorial threat along India's northern land border. Since India's humiliating defeat to China in the 1962 war, Indian military planners consistently feared further Chinese attempts to attack across or revise the LAC. Soon after the war, these fears were realised during a bloody skirmish at Nathu-La Pass in 1967. Even in wars against Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, India was wary of potential Chinese

intervention in support of its Pakistani ally. Since then, Chinese forces have launched several incursions along the disputed LAC, including a prolonged stand-off at Sumdorong-Chu (1986-87), and more recently at Depsang (2013) and Chumar (2014). In that context, the Doklam crisis of 2017—even though it involved territory claimed by Bhutan and not India—was of a piece with Chinese probes and consolidation of its Himalayan land boundary.

India's response to this perceived threat has been to expand its conventional ground and air defences near the border. Reversing decades of deliberate neglect after the 1962 war, India began a programme – albeit now grossly behind schedule – to upgrade and expand road infrastructure in border areas.⁵ It also reactivated Advanced Landing Grounds and stationed its most advanced Su-30MKI multi-role fighters at bases facing the Chinese border.⁶ Most significantly, it authorised the establishment of a new Mountain Strike Corps, designed to boost deterrence by threatening conventional retaliatory strikes into China, in 2013.⁷ These Indian military preparations—and the threat perceptions upon which they are based—are all therefore designed around a conventional, ground-centric confrontation, supported by air power as required to defend or take control of land on the border.

But while India prepares its conventional defences, China has been posturing for a more complex security competition. The People Liberation Army (PLA) is rapidly modernising its force structure and doctrine to fight more mechanised and “informatised” conflicts.⁸

It is developing a suite of indigenously-developed advanced weapons systems, some of which—such as anti-ship ballistic missiles, nuclear-powered submarines, and near-fifth generation fighter aircraft—would pose a serious threat even to the US military. Alongside this force structure, the PLA has been honing a military doctrine—which it calls “active defence” and US strategists have called “Anti-Access and Area Denial” (A2/AD)—designed to inhibit the US' ability to intervene militarily in a crisis or conflict involving China and a smaller regional state. Since the 1990s, the PLA has been developing its capability to fight what it calls “informatised” conflicts, wherein its forces would be enabled with better systems for command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR). Critically, it also seeks capabilities to disrupt those same data-networked systems in the enemy force. New capabilities in cyber and space—and, again, the disruption of those capabilities in the enemy—are central to this war-fighting doctrine.

More recently, in late 2015, China introduced a programme of organisational reforms in the PLA.⁹ These reforms were designed to streamline command, enhance mobility, and increase jointness among the services. Thus, the PLA rationalised its seven army-centric Military Regions into five joint Theatre Commands, responsible for planning and fighting wars and maintaining higher routine readiness. It reformed its higher command, the Central Military Commission (CMC), into a flatter and more joint structure, less

dominated by the army and more responsive to political and strategic direction. It established a new military service, the PLA Rocket Force, which coordinates all land-based nuclear and conventional missiles. And it established new joint structures, such as the Strategic Support Force to unite cyber, space and electronic warfare capabilities in direct support of operational commanders; and the Overseas Operations Office, to coordinate expeditionary operations far beyond its immediate region. It implemented this restructuring while simultaneously demobilising 300,000 mostly non-combat troops, to develop a leaner, more mechanised and technology-intensive force.

The PLA has not only become more powerful with these changes in force structure, doctrine, and organisation; it has also pursued increasingly aggressive defence policies.¹⁰ Most prominently, China has taken steps, beginning in about 2009, to press its territorial claims in the East and South China Seas, especially through the construction of artificial islands and the emplacement of military facilities on them. Closer to India, the PLA Navy began to extend its reach with routine operational deployments to the Indian Ocean. It sustained long-range anti-piracy operations in the Arabian Sea, and maintained such deployments despite the dissipation of the piracy threat.¹¹

China's activities also challenge Indian influence indirectly, through a growing presence in regional states. Chinese military and state-owned enterprises have built and

claimed varying levels of control over dual-use port facilities, in Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and soon in Kyauk Pyu in Burma.¹² Further, the PLA established its first-ever overseas military base in Djibouti.¹³ These infrastructure advances, many of which could be modified to serve military uses, are well integrated into other elements of Chinese national policy. Its Belt and Road Initiative seeks to develop economic and political influence across Asia, often through "predatory" means.¹⁴ Its investments, security cooperation activities, and arms sales—especially to Pakistan but also to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and other nations—also build influence over regional states' policies.¹⁵ Together, they amount to an ambitious plan to extend Chinese influence across the Indian Ocean littoral, developing military access and leverage in areas of vital national interest to India.

While Beijing protested for years that it was pursuing a benign "peaceful development," its declaratory policy has also now ditched the garb of meekness. Official policies have quickly grown bolder. Until recently, for example, the notion of overseas basing was anathema in Chinese military strategy, but now has become accepted. Most recently, at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, Xi Jinping repeatedly declared that a well-prepared and globally active military would be central to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.¹⁶ China is not simply accumulating military power, but declaring an intent to pursue competitive strategies against potential rivals in the region. With particular reference to India, China has

not only stepped up military activity on India's maritime periphery, but also clearly signalled its intent to directly oppose Indian policy on a range of issues.¹⁷ It openly obstructed Indian membership of institutions such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group, blocked India's bid to sanction Pakistan-based terrorists, and threatened war over the Doklam border dispute. Frustrating Indian policy is now a part of China's broader bid for regional preeminence.

In sum, the security competition with China is unique and unprecedented in its complexity. India's historical threats had all been highly localised, emanating from highly predictable sources—either conventional border wars, infiltration by irregulars, or even complex but contained emergencies in East Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In contrast, the emerging strategic challenge from China spans locales and domains. It surrounds India geographically and involves all instruments of national power. And China's recent military reforms lend it not only greater capabilities, but the command arrangements to deploy them jointly. This is a novel and uniquely comprehensive challenge that requires novel Indian solutions.

Insights from Multi-Domain Battle

To meet its own military challenges, the US military has developed a new doctrinal concept known as Multi-Domain Battle (MDB).¹⁸ While still in development, the concept is designed to address an urgent US need to regain operational advantage against its near-peer competitors, China and

Russia. These competitors have developed technologies and doctrines that could effectively neutralise much of the US' recent superiority – especially by blocking US access to battlefields, disrupting its networked force, and using “grey zone” techniques to achieve objectives without crossing the threshold of conventional conflict. In response, MDB is designed to evolve the concept of joint war fighting, by more deeply integrating operations in the three traditional domains of battle—land, sea, and air—alongside the two other increasingly essential domains of cyber and space. It calls on forces to be able to operate independently—with their supporting C4ISR networks disrupted by the enemy—but then also to converge, across multiple domains, to create “windows of advantage” to manoeuvre and achieve effects against the enemy. It recognises that against near-peer adversaries, the US will not enjoy, for example, uncontested air superiority or undisturbed C4ISR networks, as it has in recent decades. Competing or deterring—or, ultimately, fighting—a powerful military such as the PLA requires a mutually-supporting combined arms approach across multiple domains, and an ability to exploit fleeting advantages.

MDB is, then, a particular US solution to particular US challenges, rather than a template that can be readily emulated by others. It is an evolution of earlier doctrines and concepts, such as AirLand Battle, rather than a revolutionary concept. Nevertheless, it offers three key insights that could be usefully applied to India's strategic challenges.

First, it offers an evolved understanding of jointness. MDB does not advocate simply the coordination of operations between services, or even the integration of services at the seams of domains, such as in amphibious operations or close air support. Rather, by focusing on the domains rather than the services, MDB calls for all services to operate wherever possible and necessary, in all domains. It assumes all domains may be contested, and friendly forces will therefore require supporting fires from other domains. And, as with the principle of combined arms, converging fires from multiple domains can impose invidious dilemmas on enemy commanders—where avoiding one threat makes the enemy vulnerable to another.¹⁹ The MDB concept, which originated in the US Army, pays particular attention to the support that land-based forces can provide in other domains, especially with the use of ground-based missiles against enemy air, maritime, or space targets. It also requires a new information architecture to integrate forces across domains so that they can share a common operating picture and common fire control systems. In the absence of such an architecture, for example, even the highly networked US military cannot readily use shore-based missiles to support naval forces.²⁰

Second, MDB suggests that military forces can and should more readily threaten the enemy's "deep", or rear, areas; while taking steps to protect their own deep areas from enemy cyber attacks, long-range strike, or other disruptions. Technological advancements and the changing character

of war have altered the battle space: it has now expanded, with wider area and more actors; it has converged, between military action and non-military action such as political and information warfare; and it has been compressed, with long-range weapons that can accurately attack distant targets. There is, in other words, less distinction between close and deep, or forward and rear, areas.²¹ This is especially true for regionally-active major powers like China and India, whose forces are not oriented linearly against each other as on a conventional battleground, but arrayed across a wide region such as the Indo-Pacific. In such a case, deep areas are still those which are more difficult to reach or politically more sensitive, but could still be threatened, especially through other domains. For example, for the India-China security competition in the Indian Ocean Region, the South China Sea may reasonably be considered to be China's deep area.

Third, MDB notes that, even in the absence of open war, states are engaging in increasingly intense security competition. Revisionist powers such as Russia and China have increasingly used "grey zone" military activities to coerce adversaries and impose *faits accomplis* to incrementally make strategic gains, without provoking a conventional war.²² China, for its part, has used its "three warfares" doctrine to gain territory and subdue potential foes.²³ In response, MDB suggests that deterrence is not created by a static correlation of forces – as it may have been in the Cold War – but through constant, dynamic activity. This security competition

involves multiple domains and multiple instruments of military and political power – including, for example, information operations, which take on added importance in non-war competition. In this persistent competition, as in war, where all domains are constantly contested, states can only hope to achieve fleeting “windows of domain superiority” – and only an agile multi-domain force can spot and exploit such opportunities.²⁴

These three insights suggest a blurring of traditional distinctions. The character of war is changing – with less distinction between ground-air-sea forces, less distinction between close and deep areas, and less distinction between peace and war. The nature of war remains unchanged – subject to chance, unpredictability, and extreme violence. And no military doctrinal concept can obviate the need for a sophisticated political strategy, addressing domestic support and the international environment. But MDB offers some insights into how the wars, and especially the non-war security competition, of the future will be fought. MDB has been introduced into published US Army doctrine,²⁵ although it remains a work in progress, still undergoing testing, evaluation, and refinement. Full implementation will require years, with new force postures and supporting systems. Nevertheless, some of its key insights may be useful for India as it struggles with the comprehensive challenge of China.

Applications for India

The Indian military has traditionally planned for a Chinese threat in a fixed locale and

domain, a principally ground threat at the India-China border; but the potential threat is rapidly evolving.

Consider the following scenario. A Chinese nuclear submarine is detected when it surfaces 25 km off the coast of Kolkata. Separately, a small group of men, bearing small arms and explosives, breach perimeter security at Tezpur and Chabua air bases in Assam. The Headquarters of the Army’s Eastern Command, in Kolkata, suffers a distributed denial of service attack, which cripples its computers and some communication circuits. These events could occur simultaneously, or they could occur in sequence, to ratchet up coercive pressure. The incidents are obviously known to the units involved—and probably to the respective operational commands of the Navy, the Air Force, and the Army, respectively—but not publicised, for operational security reasons. At which level of military organisation would the Indian military integrate a common threat and operations picture, in which these three events, occurring in the same region but in three different domains, are seen as part of a wider campaign? And, accordingly, how long would it take for other Indian units to coordinate defences and, if necessary, prepare a response?

In the absence of a joint operational-level command—such as the US Combatant Commands or the PLA Theater Commands—the Indian military’s situational awareness is fragmented, and its ability to command fast and coordinated responses is hobbled.

The Indian military's pathological aversion to jointness is well known.²⁶ The single-service approach to planning and doctrine has been tolerated because it imposed relatively little operational cost—India's past conflicts have been largely land wars in limited locales, where more effective jointness would have made little difference to the outcome.

Faced with the new comprehensive security competition with China, however, these old habits will become exceedingly costly. To strengthen deterrence and war-fighting capacity, the Indian military could apply insights from MDB, as I outlined above, in three mutually-reinforcing ways. First, by creating the structures and practices of combined arms across multiple domains. Second, by demonstrating an ability to threaten China's deep areas rather than responding directly in the same locale and domain. Third, by planning for and pursuing competitive strategies to deter and counter Chinese coercion and expand influence without direct hostilities.

In the scenario above, the aggressor was exploiting current seams between India's military services. Building structures and practices of a joint operational command would allow Indian forces to fuse a multi-domain picture of threats, and to deploy force with integrated supporting fires from multiple domains. This fusing of command would significantly improve India's deterrent against minor acts of aggression (or "grey zone" activity) below the level of open war, because it would eliminate unnecessary seams,

allowing India to quickly recognise and react to adversary action.

At the same time, India could also enhance deterrence by demonstrating its ability to contest China's deep areas, and impede China's access to India's deep areas. China's expanding military footprint across the Indo-Pacific creates vulnerabilities, a fact recognised by the Indian Navy's 2015 doctrine.²⁷ The PLA Navy's routine presence in the Indian Ocean has increased its reliance on free passage through the Strait of Malacca. India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands offer a well-situated lily pad to observe or potentially dominate the Malacca choke point.²⁸ A more fortified Andaman and Nicobar chain could be developed to lay an anti-access screen, or even to project Indian power eastward, towards China's deep areas inside its "first island chain". In fact, emplacing air defence and cruise-missile forces in the Andaman and Nicobar chain would be a textbook case of ground-based forces achieving effects in other—air and maritime—domains.

The PLA's extended lines of communication across the ocean, and its base in Djibouti, offer Indian forces other opportunities to contest and disrupt Chinese activity, as the Indian Navy develops greater sea denial capabilities. The MDB concept reveals how India can build coercive or counter-coercive leverage in one domain to deter or compel Chinese behaviour in another. Thus, India's aspirational sea denial capabilities in the Indian Ocean are not simply direct threats to the PLA Naval assets involved, but could also be a powerful deterrent against

other potential Chinese military action. For that deterrent to be effective, however, Indian forces must have multi-domain situational awareness and command authorities. Sea denial in the Indian Ocean would, for example, require fused space, air, and ground-based intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, besides land-based screening of choke points and a resilient cyber architecture to network the components together.

What tasks and reforms would India require to realise this vision of MDB-based operations? A full exposition lies outside the scope of this chapter, but it could include major changes to India's force structure, network technology, doctrine, and personnel training. Many of those changes are probably unrealistic, given bureaucratic inertia, but India can still reap some benefits from the MDB concept without such wholesale change. At a minimum, the MDB concept would require reorganisation of India's single-service command structures into joint structures, both at the highest level, with a Chief of Defence Staff, and equally importantly, at the operational command level. This way, the MDB concept joins a chorus of other sound reasons for this long overdue reorganisation.

Such a vision of an Indian adoption of MDB principles may seem fanciful; the services remain remarkably resistant to jointness. They have resolutely refused to accept the creation of a Chief of Defence Staff, despite repeated official recommendations and strident scholarly argument. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had made right-sounding statements,

but the military has not had any incentive to follow through. The recent decision to establish "joint" agencies—for space, cyber and special operations forces—offers little hope for progress.²⁹ Echoing the experience of the failing Andaman and Nicobar Command experiment in jointness,³⁰ the services will probably jealously retain much or most of their existing capabilities in these areas, thus denying the new agencies the resources or authorities to independently execute their mission. Nevertheless, the MDB concept may offer the most compelling reasons in decades to seriously consider joint operational commands. It remains unclear whether India could apply the MDB concept—through *jugaad* (frugal innovation), perhaps—in the absence of the necessary command structures.

Conclusion

Previous instances of major defence reforms occurred only after conflicts—the defeat against China in 1962 and the shock of the Kargil incursion in 1999. The evolving security competition with China may not create such a discontinuous shock event; indeed, Chinese strategy deliberately seeks to accrete gains without triggering a costly conflict. Nevertheless, the competition is underway and growing more complex, with Chinese gains in power and aggressiveness. India's existing structures are not adequate to provide the situational awareness and response options required in this competition. The doctrinal concept of MDB offers some insights on how India could strengthen its deterrence and relative power given its current force structure. It is far from a complete solution to

security competition, which would require a suite of military modernisation, non-military efforts, and partnerships with other states. Meanwhile, while those long-term efforts are in progress, the Indian military has urgent reasons to organise and posture in a way that allows its forces to operate across domains, and in China's deep areas. The costs of persisting with India's single-service, territorial-defence mindset will no longer be marginal. Indeed, in the new security competition, new joint organisations and doctrine may be decisive.

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