

The Sino-Indian Border: The Indian Army and the Balance of Forces

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Summary

How is the Indian Army coping with the challenge thrown by China in the post-Galwan period? This brief argues that the Indian Army is trying to bridge the gap in the balance of forces, balance of logistics and balance of intelligence and surveillance capabilities. Yet, it also needs to augment its balance of resolve in confronting the Peoples Liberation Army along the Sino-Indian border.

The series of brawls which culminated in a clash in the [Galwan Valley](#) on 15 June 2020 was the bloodiest and most intense, if not the longest, confrontation in the last five decades along the world's longest unsettled border or the Line of Actual Control between India and China.

For India, the 2020 clashes and the continuing border crisis present the most formidable external security threat in the post-Cold War era. For one, the balance of power has shifted considerably in China's favour in the last two decades, economically and militarily. Second, this overall balance of power has also resulted in significant asymmetry in the balance of forces on the border. Yet, post-Galwan, there has been a concerted effort to bridge the gap in capabilities along India's land borders with China.

First and foremost, a shift has occurred at the level of balance of forces. Notwithstanding the technological changes in the character of war, the geography of the India-China border and the demands of strategy necessitate an overwhelming accretion of manpower and material at the China border. In the last four years, the Indian Army has significantly [upgraded both its manpower and firepower](#) on the China frontier. First of all, there has been a massive reorientation of the Indian Army towards the China border. As many as seven divisions of the Indian Army have been rededicated to the China border. These divisions have been reassigned from counterinsurgency operations in both Kashmir and the Northeast as well as two strike corporations based in central and northern India.

Similar adjustments have been made to firepower. A significant number of armoured and artillery units are now providing [firepower support](#) to the troops along the frontier. This includes the deployment of both T-72 and T-90 tanks, Bofors and M-777 towed guns as well as K-9 Vajra-T self-propelled howitzers. Such accretion in firepower is increasingly being bolstered by stand-off missile systems for precision strikes deep inside the enemy's territory such as the supersonic cruise missiles like the Brahmos and semi-ballistic missiles such as Pralay. Such redeployment of manpower and firepower will continue from the Indian Army to create a favourable balance of forces vis-à-vis China.

The 2020 crisis also was a significant lesson for the Indian Army in upgrading its [information and logistics capabilities](#) vis-à-vis movement and accretion of Peoples Liberation Army (PLA)

forces along the border and its capability to counter-mobilise its manpower and firepower. Given the length of the border as well as the terrain, constant intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) to gauge adversary intentions along with ready infrastructure to launch forces to forestall any aggressive moves is fundamental to the Indian Army's deterrence and defence requirements. On both these fronts, the Indian Army seems to have dedicated significant resources and focus in the last four years. Two dedicated drone squadrons, most probably medium-altitude long-range [Heron systems](#), have been deployed along the Ladakh as well as the North Eastern frontiers. To fulfill gaps in its ISR capabilities, New Delhi has relied upon strategic partners such as the United States (US). The [US-India partnership](#) has come more than handy in providing advanced warnings about Chinese troop concentrations and movements, which was evident in India pre-empting a Galwan-style salami slicing of Indian territory by the PLA in the northeastern theatre of Arunachal Pradesh in December 2022.

The balance of logistics between India and China along the frontier has also been a major source of concern for India. New Delhi, for decades, neglected the need to build the road infrastructure to feed India's defence deployments on the Himalayan frontier. However, in the last four years, the infrastructure development, particularly of roads, bridges and advanced landing grounds for the Indian Air Force has acquired significant speed. The Border Roads Organisation (BRO), the nodal agency responsible for infrastructure development along the border, has seen a three-fold increase in its budget. Several strategic roads, tunnels and bridges, including the Zozila Tunnel in Kashmir and the Sela Tunnel in Arunachal Pradesh, are either in an advanced stage of completion or have been opened to traffic. According to a [BRO official](#), since the crisis, "295 roads, bridges, tunnels and airfields have been constructed". At this pace, India will be able to out pass China's logistical support infrastructure in four to five years.

The Indian Army's capacity and capability to deter the Chinese and defend the Indian territory in case deterrence fails fundamentally depends not only on the balance of forces and balance of information and logistics but also on its balance of resolve. War is often a [negotiation between capacity and resolve](#). In terms of capacity, even when India is building its strengths, given the asymmetry of comprehensive national power between India and China, New Delhi will not be able to match China in bean count. However, deterrence does not result from an abstract balance of power but a very specific capability to both deny the enemy its desired goals and impose punitive costs in retaliation. The Indian Army's current force posture aims to precisely do that. Yet, where India lacks in capacity, it must resort to resolve. The Indian Army needs to constantly remind the PLA that it is highly motivated to both defend and punish any transgressions of the Indian territory. The political resolve of the government seems to be percolating down to the military where India has declined to negotiate with China without the establishment of status quo ante on the border.

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