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The India-China Border and Asymmetric Air Power

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Synopsis

While China can initiate a limited border war with India in future to leverage its superior air power, India can take advantage of better support facilities at bases along the border. However it needs to develop its minimum deterrent capability.

Commentary

The unresolved border issue between India and China prompts the security community in New Delhi to raise the prospect of China initiating a limited border war to teach India another military lesson - 1962 style. In hindsight, it has been argued that the outcome of the 1962 war could have been quite different had the Indian Air Force (IAF) been allowed to use its offensive arm to support the Indian Army against an adversary which had no matching air power capability at the time in Tibet.

While it is difficult to foresee when and how a future Sino-Indian border conflict will play out, it can be said with certainty that both countries would use air power to the best of their abilities to force a favourable outcome in the next conflict. Thus it is imperative to ask: can India effectively face the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) in Tibet?

Balance of Forces

Both the PLAAF and the IAF are undergoing metamorphic changes to emerge as state-of-the-art modern, strategic and networked air forces with 4th/5th generation aerial platforms. But the PLAAF is well ahead of the IAF in quantitative terms, especially when it comes to the respective strengths of their jet fighter fleets. Having deliberately discarded the "deadwood" of vintage aircraft from its inventory, the PLAAF currently fields around 1,700 jet fighters comprising a judicious mix of 3rd and 4th/4th + generation aircraft, and is working towards acquiring indigenously developed 5th generation stealth fighters by 2020.

On its part, the IAF, having endured a major downslide in its fighter squadrons' strength in the last decade, is now coming out of the pits, having stabilised at a lower figure of 34 squadrons (700 fighters). It has a robust modernisation/augmentation plan not only to regain its combat aircraft strength to the original 39 ½ squadrons but take it up to 42 squadrons by 2022. It may also get its own version of a 5th generation fighter (FGFA) – being developed through a joint Indo-Russian venture – at about the same time as the PLAAF.

However, due to great disparity between the defence budgets of the two countries, it is hardly likely that the IAF will ever be able to have more than half the number of fighters that the PLAAF could field. In addition, the

Chinese enjoy clear superiority as far as ground-based Air Defence (AD) weapons are concerned. The PLAAF is also ahead of the IAF in unmanned weapon systems.

Facing the PLAAF in Tibet

The big question is: to what extent can the PLAAF bring its superior fire power to bear against the Indian forces in Tibet? China has spent astronomical sums to improve infrastructure for its ground forces in Tibet. But for various reasons ranging from inadequate support facilities at its bases to penalties due to high-altitude factors, the PLAAF would find itself severely limited in carrying out large-scale air operations in Tibet.

In the coming years, even if China were to construct additional air bases and improve its infrastructure on the existing ones, it would still be constrained in deploying large-scale air resources in Tibet as it must safeguard its eastern flanks adjoining the East and South China Seas. Also, because of its limited in-flight refuelling capabilities, the PLAAF would find it difficult to dual task its combat aircraft fleets located outside the Tibetan Plateau. In other words, China would not be in a position to utilise the PLAAF's full potential against India in the event of a border war in Tibet.

The IAF, operating from a large number of bases conveniently located close to the entire Sino-Indian border, could pose a serious threat to the PLAAF in Tibet. China might want to use its vast arsenal of ballistic/cruise missiles for counter-air strikes (with conventional warheads only - as both countries are committed to "No First Use" of nuclear weapons) to offset its shortcomings in the use of combat aircraft.

But if the IAF improves upon its already existing facilities to ensure proper active/ passive air defence and rehabilitation capabilities, it could well weather the Chinese onslaught and be able to establish air superiority over Tibet's battle zones. It could then provide strong support to the army to ward off numerically superior Chinese ground forces. In this scenario, even a stalemate would be tantamount to a strategic victory for India.

Towards a More Credible Minimum Deterrence

The realisation of the PLAAF's vulnerability in Tibet could ultimately nudge China to shed its otherwise increasingly aggressive attitude and come to the negotiating table for a peaceful settlement of the Sino-Indian border dispute.

In the meantime, India needs to build sufficient military capability to create the minimum required deterrence both in conventional and nuclear terms. First, the IAF needs to build up its fighter fleets to a 50-squadron force level to adequately cater for a one-and-a-half to two-front war scenario. Second, while it has reasonably good numbers of airfields facing Tibet, it should substantially improve the existing ground infrastructure - especially in the East - to provide meaningful protective cover to aircraft and other weapon systems. Third, it must build on its existing radar surveillance capabilities in the East by deploying greater numbers of different types of radars, including aerostats.

The IAF would also have to augment its fleet of AWACS/AEW&C aircraft to adequately cover the Eastern sector, enabling it to effectively conduct its offensive/defensive air operations in and around Assam/Arunachal Pradesh as well. Last, but not least, it would also have to create all round anti-ballistic/cruise missile capabilities to counter China's formidable arsenal of these weapons.

The Indian government on its part will have to make available adequate financial resources for the IAF to create the required capabilities in a timely manner. India therefore must stay steadfastly on the path of economic reforms to ensure its economic growth story remains intact. This, coupled with a greater percentage of GDP (recommended 3%) being allotted for the defence budget in the foreseeable future, would enable the IAF to build up sufficiently for India to bring China to the negotiating table to solve the long-standing border dispute peacefully.

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