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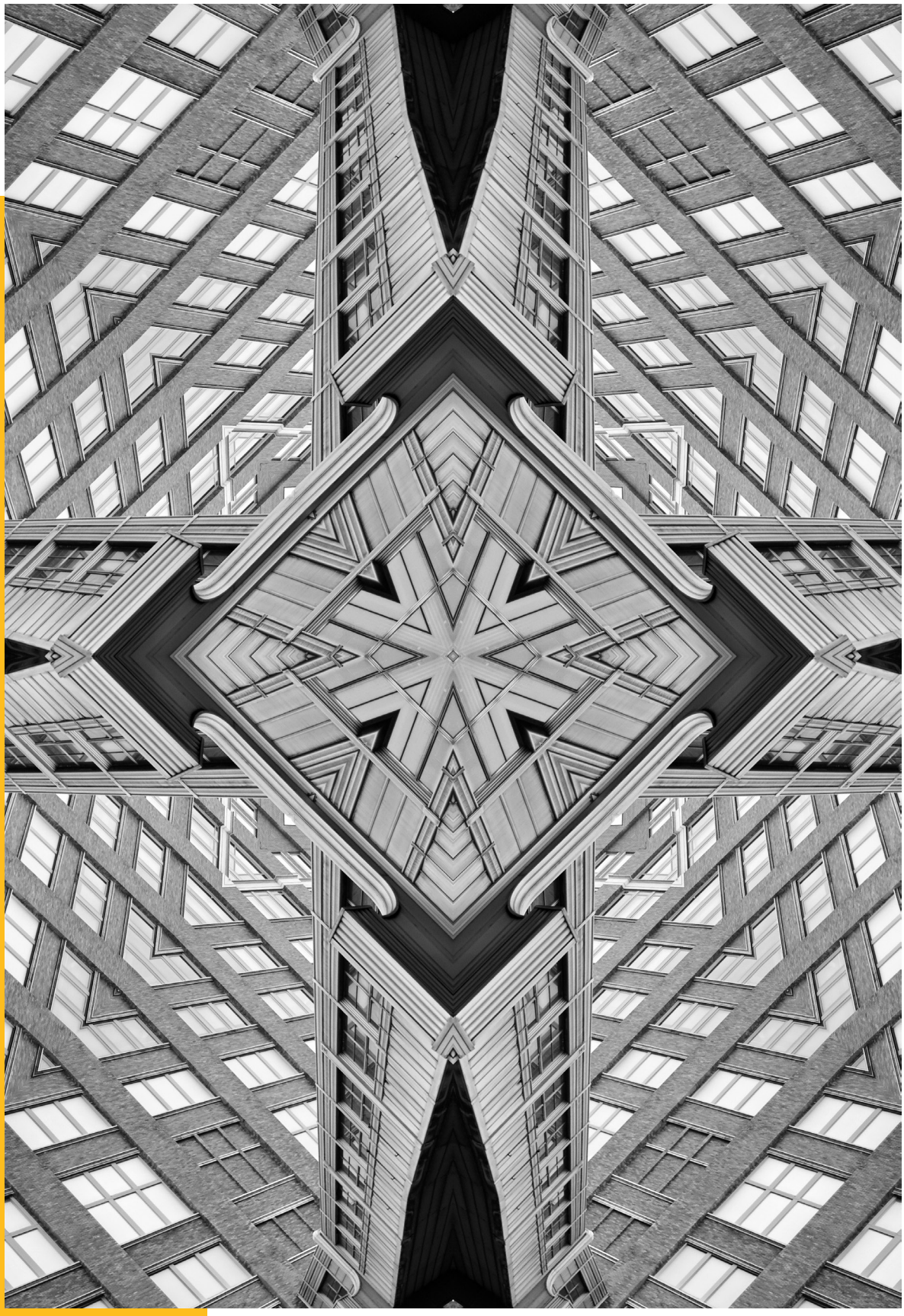

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Preparing for the Future: The Need for India to Develop Hybrid Warfare Capabilities

S.K. Gadeock

Abstract

Hybrid warfare is an emerging global challenge, with military and non-military elements. This has given rise to the need to develop national capabilities to combat amorphous adversaries by utilising intelligence, information, cyber, electronic, conventional, and unconventional warfare techniques. This paper discusses the nuances of hybrid warfare, explores the hybrid warfare capabilities of India's key adversaries (Pakistan and China), and makes the case for India to develop such abilities to respond to alternative wars.

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Introduction

There is no single universal definition of the terms 'hybrid warfare' or 'hybrid conflict'. Typically, hybrid refers to the juxtaposition of various methods and tools of warfare for optimal gain in a scenario of conflict. Hybridity is also examined from the broader perspective of how to apply national comprehensive power in the most effective manner to defeat an adversary, with or without engaging in combat.

The need for hybridity in conventional conflicts emerged in the aftermath of the September 2001 terror attacks in the US when conventional methods were found to be inadequate for the armed forces to undertake a war among people. The concept gained further prominence during the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War where Lebanon's (and the Hezbollah's) unconventional tactics against Israel—guerrilla warfare, innovative use of technologies, and an effective information campaign—were termed as 'hybrid warfare'.[1]

Col. John J. McCuen, a war veteran, and counterinsurgency and hybrid warfare expert, describes hybrid conflicts as "...full spectrum wars with both physical and conceptual dimensions: the former, a struggle against an armed enemy and the latter, a wider struggle for control and support of the combat zone's indigenous population, the support of the home fronts of the intervening nations, and the support of the international community...To secure and stabilize the indigenous population, the intervening forces must immediately rebuild or restore security, essential services, local government, self-defense forces and essential elements of the economy."[2]

Scholar Frank G. Hoffman, the first to have theorised the concept of hybrid warfare, has stated that it uses political warfare techniques and integrates different forms of warfare (including conventional, irregular, and cyber warfare), and includes other techniques (such as fake news and diplomacy).[3]

In their book *Hybrid Warfare: The Changing Character of Conflict*, Vikrant Deshpande and Shibani Mehta deconstruct hybrid or grey zone conflicts[a] and threats,[4] and note that hybridity—concerning a combination of tools, both contact and non-contact[b]—has existed throughout the history of

a Grey zone conflicts are activities by state and non-state actors that combine non-military and quasi-military tools, and occur in the periods between peacetime (or cooperation) and war (or conflict). These conflicts fall below the threshold of armed conflict, and are aimed to impede, destabilise, weaken, or attack an adversary by considering the vulnerabilities of the target state.

b Contact warfare is where there is a physical contact between adversarial forces. Non-contact warfare uses command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) to achieve strategic objectives.

conflict, although the means and mechanisms of warfare have changed in accordance with existing sociopolitical conditions and developments in science and technology. Hybrid warfare—supplemented by grey zone, unrestricted, or non-linear warfare—is an attempt to decipher modern-day conflicts. The key difference between industrial-age conflicts and medieval ones is not the hybrid nature or non-linear approaches but the utilisation of information-era warfare tools due to their distinct sociopolitical context. The efforts to deconstruct hybrid or grey zone conflicts indicate the application of multiple forms of capabilities in a coordinated, coherent, and at times simultaneous manner to achieve the desired political objectives.[5] Further, the option of 'deniability'[c] and the limited scope of a nation to act against non-state actors increasingly enables more countries to use such forces to achieve their strategic aims and objectives.

According to strategic analyst Sean Monaghan, "Hybrid wars use multidomain warfighting approaches, including cyberattacks, disinformation and subversion, economic blackmail and sabotage, sponsorship of proxy forces, and creeping military expansionism to destabilise a society or a nation by influencing its decision-making process without resorting to traditional conflict."[6]

Hybrid warfare can, therefore, be defined as a focused, subthreshold-level[d] endeavour to establish strategic dominance based on geopolitical developments and the transforming character of warfare. In contemporary times, the usage of economic instruments, technologies, and critical infrastructure as weapons to achieve political and strategic objectives through stealth, grey-zone ambiguity, non-attributability, deniability, and careful risk escalation is interchangeably referred to as hybrid warfare, grey zone conflict, and/or political warfare.

c Deniability or plausible deniability refers to the ability to deny any involvement in illegal or unethical activities due to a lack of evidence to prove such an act. Furthermore, the lack of evidence also makes this kind of deniability plausible and credible.

d In the context of war, threshold refers to the levels or limits at which the war is being or will be fought.

Introduction

The international political environment is dynamic, although some security threats remain constant. For instance, the collusion between China and Pakistan[e] continues to pose a threat to India's security, stability, and peace. In this context, for India, maintaining the status quo on both borders requires a proactive stance, including offensive actions, to foil the revisionist tendencies[f] of its two prime adversaries. This paper aims to understand the nuances of hybrid warfare in the Indian context based on the capabilities of Pakistan and China.

> "Hybrid warfare can be defined as a focused, subthreshold-level endeavour to establish strategic dominance based on geopolitical developments and the transforming character of warfare."

e In the context of this paper, China-Pakistan collusion refers to the covert cooperation between the two nations against India. For instance, if India is engaged in an armed conflict with Pakistan, China will likely provide moral, material, and logistical support to the latter.

f Revisionism or revisionist states favour changes in the prevailing world order in terms of its rules and norms. It is also related to the changing patterns of the distribution of goods or benefits, the implicit structure or hierarchy, and the division of territory among sovereign entities. China is considered to be a revisionist power because it aims to change the global status quo by becoming a dominant player and replacing the US.

Understanding Hybrid Conflict: The Indian Context

Discussions on hybrid conflicts have existed in India since at least the era of Kautilya (the ancient Indian polymath also known as Chanakya). However, India's current military system is a colonial legacy and has developed from Europe's set-piece battlefields. A major challenge for the Indian armed forces is to adapt to the desired threshold of the complex and hybrid battlespace. Given the threats posed by its adversaries (chiefly, Pakistan and China), India has prioritised sub-conventional and conventional warfare,[g] albeit under the shadow of nuclear war. Still, future threats will not be simplistic and will give rise to complex and hybrid structures, necessitating a complete overhaul of force application and warfighting doctrines and strategies. To coherently define a specific objective and the desired end status of any war or conflict in compliance with the national and military aim—which will remain paramount and non-negotiable—it is necessary to establish an overall campaign 'grand strategy' with multiple sub-strategies. Countries require a strong political will, reinforced by a firm and decisive joint services capability (that goes beyond the land, air, and sea domains) to protect their core national interest. This mandates a strategic transition from the present focus on territorial integrity towards a more interest-based capability. As such, India must reorient existing political thought towards the development of a cohesive national mindset that does not rely solely on soft power and status quo options.

Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, a third-century treatise, and *Nitisara* by Kamandaki (a lesser-known military strategist) are essential readings on the Indian history of warfare. The key lesson in both is that a complex and hybrid mix of elements of national power is necessary to influence the battlefield before any actual force is used during conflict or thereafter. While Kautilya expounds on diplomacy, dissent, economic coercion, and the continuum of force before, during, and after conflict, Kamandaki adds deception, psychological warfare, and benign neglect to these tools of intimidation. When applied to the present context of the information age, these concepts will mean weaponising every modern, niche, and disruptive tool, technology, and ecosystem.

g Sub-conventional warfare is an all-encompassing term that refers to armed conflicts that are above the level of peaceful co-existence between nations but below the threshold of war. It includes militancy, insurgency, proxy war, and terrorism either as part of a movement or independently. Conventional warfare refers to the traditional means to wage war where the two sides face each other on the battlefield using weapons that are not biological, chemical, or nuclear in nature.

Understanding Hybrid Conflict: The Indian Context

India's current national policies, concepts of warfare, and force structures are not well aligned to the evolving nature of warfare. To successfully strategise its joint warfare doctrines and commensurately address the 'threat and capability' paradigm of war, a country and its military will need to adopt an integrated multipronged approach to achieve 'maximum gain', which can only emerge from professional military education[h] and the civil-military fusion.[i] As the adversaries' game plan could comprise a diverse range of threats—from low-cost and low-tech to high cost and niche technologies—it is incumbent that all ingredients of national power are coalesced into the nation's strategised joint operational plans. The political leadership must encourage politico-military diplomacy and astute statecraft policies that push the optimisation of soft power strategic communications to deter conflicts, while progressively developing and preserving a robust and credible military capability to safeguard the country's vital interests.

The Indian government must utilise inter-ministerial and inter-agency planning and incorporation processes by coordinating civil-military fusion with the appropriate civilian agencies, and engage the expertise of the private sector, including non-governmental organisations and academia. Such an augmentation will enhance the ability to address the non-military aspects of conflict. At the operational level, however, India must review and further refine its integrated joint warfighting principles to engage with the complex and hybridised character of warfare. The military must reassess its ideologies as they pertain to operational art and attempt to impeccably integrate new pillars of national power into the canvas of its strategic plans. Crucial to achieving this critical target is preparing the military's highest leaders with a thorough understanding of how strategising in the military profession is organised and conducted, and the ways in which it is related to strategy and policy. Under the agile leadership of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), India's joint and integrated military planning can become doctrinally more perspicuous, adaptive, synergised, and combat-responsive in the strategic context.

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h India's defence education institutions, such as the National Defence University (NDU), train military and civilian officials, technocrats, and politicians. All major global powers, including India's adversaries, have NDU-like structures.

i Civil-military fusion refers to developing a technologically advanced military that can counter all threats from the new emerging technologies in the military domain. In the case of India, the aim of civil-military fusion is to ensure the expression of the nation's comprehensive national power during war and peace.

Understanding Hybrid Conflict: The Indian Context

India's ability to grasp the new signposts of evolving non-contact, non-kinetic, and hybrid warfare precepts, in addition to recognising that warfare has now expanded beyond the conventional dimensions of land, sea, and air to that of space and information, is vital to achieve success in the emergent environment of hybrid conflicts. As India engages, either directly or indirectly, in such multispectral warfare, it will need professionals who can outperform the enemy even in conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (popularly referred to as a VUCA environment). The complexity of hybrid threats makes it imperative for future leaders to understand the implications, spin effects, and trade-offs between preparing for and carrying out counterinsurgency, partner-building, and stability operations, and enhancing cyber and information capabilities, while maintaining a conventional ascendency in combat. As a result, capability development is essential for India's armed forces, who can then decide what levels of knowledge and capability fusion are required to achieve effective operational readiness for a multifront scenario in a hybrid combat environment.

> "To successfully strategise its joint warfare doctrines and commensurately address the 'threat and capability' paradigm of war, a country and its military will need to adopt an integrated multipronged approach to achieve 'maximum gain', which can only emerge from professional military education and the civil-military fusion."

On the Western Front: Pakistan-Centric Threats

Pakistan continues to engage in antagonistic rhetoric against India even amid unprecedented domestic turmoil.[7] The Pakistan military is currently focused on maintaining a hybrid strategy against the Taliban on the country's Western front (Afghanistan) and India on its Eastern front. It is important to understand Pakistan's use of hybrid warfare against India in the context of its origins as an independent country; in the aftermath of Partition, the Pakistani Army, unlike the Indian Army, became politicised and emerged as a predominant power in the nation's ruling structure (which now includes the government, judiciary, and military).

To understand the threats posed by Pakistan, it is crucial to examine some of the geopolitical and strategic imperatives that define the India-Pakistan relationship. Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is important to Pakistan for geostrategic, socioeconomic, cultural, and demographic reasons. Pakistan has long suffered from the fear of a lack of 'strategic depth'.[j] At the time of Partition, Pakistan felt that this non-adequacy of depth would force it to surrender in the event of a bold military offensive by India. An additional concern was that sizeable Indian strike formations could threaten the epicentre of Pakistan's Punjab, a prosperous state. The proximity of J&K to Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and its large Pashtun population also posed a demographic and geopolitical challenge for the Pakistani authorities. Hydro-politics is another issue for Pakistan, which is the most canal-irrigated country globally and has the largest network of inundation systems. Waters of the Indus River and its tributaries, which flow from J&K to Pakistan, are crucial to the country's economy. As a riparian state, India has the option to openly control the waterways and use 'water as a weapon'.[8]

In the aftermath of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, Pakistan unified based on religious ideology and fundamentalism to prevent any potential further division within the country. The philosophy of Islamisation, initiated by former President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, went beyond the imposition of strict rules on adhering to Islamic practices to include transforming and building an Islamic army inspired by Quranic teachings. This has been a significant aspect of Pakistan's doctrinal strategy of covert warfare.

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j Strategic depth is related to military planning and operations, and mostly refers to the physical distance between enemy forces and crucial centers in a country that can be military frontlines, bases, or industrial and commercial hubs.

On the Western Front: Pakistan-Centric Threats

Pakistan began pursuing a strategy of asymmetric/proxy war against India as it entered an alliance with the US during the Cold War, resulting in a massive sale of arms and transfer of aid to Islamabad. Additionally, China has long provided Pakistan with major military, technical, and economic support, as well as nuclear material, including sensitive nuclear technology and equipment.

Pakistan has also exploited Sikh separatism in India's Punjab state to promote the idea of Khalistan, a sovereign Sikh state, as a means to annex J&K.[9] In the late 1980s, Pakistan's covert war in J&K began to concretise in the form of an insurgency in the Kashmir Valley. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency and the army have calibrated the insurgency in J&K to keep it below India's war threshold, thereby preventing covert operations from escalating into a full-fledged conflict. The aim of Pakistan's infiltration into India through terrorists with large amounts of counterfeit money and narcoterrorism is to create an imbalance in J&K and the country. India views Pakistan's hybrid warfare as a well-planned and organised strategy, focused on support from the local (Pakistani) population and infrastructure, and waged covertly via proxies.

Notably, Pakistan has conducted anti-terrorist campaigns, ostensibly to placate the US and continue receiving military aid and replacements for its diminishing hardware. At the same time, it has also continued using jihadi outfits, such as the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), as strategic assets to advance its interests in India and Afghanistan. Anticipating the forms and scope of Pakistan's potential plans for hybrid warfare to draw India into conflict will help New Delhi articulate more efficient responses.

Islamabad's illegitimate control over Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, and the ongoing political unrest and unstable security environment in the country have fomented conditions for terrorists to obtain access to nuclear equipment—admittedly one of Pakistan's inherent apprehensions—and launch a chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear attack in India, by either triggering an industrial accident or using chemical and biological agents (such as mustard gas, VX nerve gas, or anthrax).

In another scenario, Pakistan—through proxies such as the LeT, HM, and the crime syndicates based in some Arab countries—may attempt to destabilise the Indian economy by hijacking a large ship (possibly carrying liquefied natural gas) and setting off a massive explosion with collateral damage in the constricted areas of one of India's chief commercial ports.

Since its earlier attempts to alter the status of J&K failed, Pakistan shifted to proxy war and other forms of unequal warfare, but these efforts were thwarted by India's resolve to stay the course in the region. The emphasis on violence has subsequently changed to include intifada-style mass protests, the use of media, and infiltration into legal and judicial systems to put the Indian security forces on the defensive. The form of terrorist attacks in India over the last few years indicates a likelihood that various jihadi groups have shifted their attention from J&K-centric rural insurgence to a pan-Indian urban terrorism. It is also likely that Pakistan will look to use India's homegrown groups (such as the Indian Mujahideen and Students' Islamic Movement of India) through subversion strategies to carry out terrorist strikes in India. Additionally, given the geographic spread of the Naxal threat across India—and its potential to destabilise the country—Pakistan could look to extend support to such outfits.

Further, given that India has now fenced the entire stretch of the border with Pakistan and the Line of Control (LoC) and conducts constant surveillance of the surrounding waters, it is likely that the porous India-Nepal border will become the route of access for any future terrorist attack in India. There is also the potential for cyberattacks on India's financial, military, and other critical networks, as well as a greater influx of fake Indian currency notes and narcotics to generate greater turmoil.

India's Countermeasures

Pakistan is unlikely to change its confrontational stance towards India despite global opprobrium and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region now often being referred to as the 'epicenter of terrorism'.[10] As such, India must be prepared to safeguard its security interests by adopting a proactive hardline

approach using smart power,[k] and establishing a set of response options using all available tools (such as diplomatic, economic, informational, infrastructural, cultural, social, and politico-military). This will need to be supplemented by hard-hitting covert operations with designated special forces at appropriate pre-identified targets. The larger aim should be to prevent India from becoming a passive state that absorbs terror attacks without retaliation.

There are two possible approaches to achieve this goal. First, through effective measures aimed at generating a paradigm shift in India's strategy towards Pakistan and its asymmetric warfare manifestations, from reactive to proactive.[l] This would mean foreseeing crises scenarios and developing multiple strategies to overcome them, including incorporating high-end autonomous combat technologies and creating an immediate preemptive 'response options matrix'.[m] Second, in a potential situation where Pakistan is found to be responsible for a major terrorist strike in India, the best possible course of action will be to carry out military posturing of pre-planned strategic components and undertake swift retaliatory actions, including accurate multidimensional strikes, confirmed through post-damage assessment.

Pakistan's methods of hybrid warfare incorporate psychological and social combat. As such, it is imperative for India to practice a calibrated offensive-defence strategy using unconventional warfare methods, such as coercive tactics and guerrilla warfare through a combination of exhaustion, denial, and subversion, alongside conventional means of military actions. Furthermore, India's efforts are likely to endure by remaining just below the threshold of conventional war. Although a hybrid war can break out unexpectedly in peaceful circumstances, India has several alternatives to such warfare, which will require some degree of politico-military coordination. Another ongoing threat is that some (irregular) elements (such as non-state actors) could suddenly shift alliances to obtain their respective goals, such as destabilising the nation or harming its peace and

k Smart power can be understood as a combination of soft and hard power in an appropriate context (relative to the situation) and the measure and degree to which it can be applied.

l A proactive strategy is related to increasing the strategic offensive tactic or employing punitive deterrent tactics.

m Response option matrix refers to the crisis response plans in military parlance.

security. Therefore, alternative wars and non-linear conflicts require a very robust command-and-control structure and well-defined limits of operation to avoid an overexposure and any compromise of national interests.

For the most part, India's response to Pakistan's asymmetrical and hybrid war against it has been conventional. The deployment of conventional forces in hybrid conflicts demonstrates a lack of strategy, the inefficient use of resources, and the uninspired use of force. India must create a division dedicated to hybrid alternative war, with both offensive and defensive abilities. The various elements of the division should be able to operate covertly in areas where vital national interests are consistently threatened. The infantry division should have three brigades, two of which should be for offensive and defensive operations consisting of elements of cyber, electronic, information, space, communication, special forces, intelligence, surveillance, and psychological warfare, alongside geographically-specific air, naval, and logistical components. Further, the Ministry of External Affairs and Ministry of Home Affairs should realign the military structures to enable a special force-style structure to combat any hybrid threat. Operational research and support should fall under the purview of the third brigade. This brigade should develop effective psychological war themes, gather intelligence on culture, identify fault-lines in target areas, exploit cyber loopholes to launch attacks against adversaries, and serve as a hub for artificial intelligence (AI) and as the custodian of operational data. It should also oversee the impact assessment of operations, operational research, and the net assessment of future areas of operations. The entire structure should be confidential in nature and should be run under strict politico-military control. The structure should be agile, adaptive, and futuristic to conduct offensive and defensive hybrid war operations during both peacetime and conflict. The organisation should be adaptable enough to combine the civilian and military components for 'plug-and-fight'[n] functionality.

n Plug-and-fight is the military equivalence of plug-and-play, referring to the capability (often in terms of air defence systems) of large military systems, such as the Medium Extended Air Defence System, which automatically recognises and assembles various system elements, like sensors, weapons, and control nodes, into a single integrated supersystem or system-of-systems.

While a politico-military oversight must be exercised throughout an operation, a clear distinction between the strategic and tactical levels of control is necessary. At the strategic level, the actions will mostly be to formulate plans. The space, cyber, special forces, and alternative war divisions at the CDS office should be responsible for the formulation of policies and strategies. Further, the Department of Military Affairs under the defence ministry can embed a special forces headquarters, with the liberty of choosing the required tool for attaining the desired result. Notably, when strategising for hybrid attacks, a pre-emptive scheme is key due to the criticality of time in such situations.

The divisional commander should be given tactical responsibility for the day-to-day coordination of hybrid and counter-hybrid war campaigns and operations. A three-star military commander can be designated as a commander-in-chief of the new force (that could be termed the 'Information and Dynamic Support Force'). The commander-in-chief should report to the CDS.[11] India currently has a skeletal structure in the form of the Armed Forces Special Forces Division, which needs to be reorganised given its limited capability and negligible mandate. There are several policy options for India to consider when developing its 'Information and Dynamic Support Force' to counter the hybrid threats emanating from its neighbourhood.

- **Joint Military Planning and Countermeasures**

Indian defence forces must analyse and co-opt each hybrid threat emerging from Pakistan into their planning parameters if they are to effectively respond with tenacity, lethality, and intensity to eradicate the risk. These conceptual foundations have the potential to influence or affect the counterstrategies, which can be further improved for the purposes of defence policy, strategy, and capability development.

Possible responses by the Indian military can range from swift covert operations by special forces, abrogation of the current ceasefire along the LoC, and multidimensional surgical/precision strikes with drones on identified terrorist camps, to a limited/all-out war in a nuclear backdrop. Given the threat of escalation, it is imperative to be operationally ready.

Modern means of mass communications and drone technologies have significantly increased the success of hybrid warfare. As such, drone technologies have the potential to become a specialised force rather than simply a force multiplier in the present environment. The complex and flexible nature of the warfare perpetrated by Pakistan calls for an adaptive, carefully considered professional response from the Indian defence forces. Given that India is a frequent casualty of Pakistan's hybrid machinations, it needs to take proactive offensive measures as part of integrated joint strategic initiatives by the various agencies. This should be undertaken in accordance with a well-formulated national hybrid warfare strategy, which should form an integral part of the national security strategy.

- **Politico-Military Diplomacy**

Politico-military diplomatic responses can include the suspension of confidence-building measures, cross-border rail and bus services, sporting events, cultural exchanges, Track-II channels, and one-on-one interactions between the two countries. Additionally, given the persistent risk of terrorist organisations obtaining nuclear weapons—a situation that will have implications for regional and global security—the global community should only provide Pakistan with military aid and economic assistance in exchange for the country cracking down on terrorist groups. Pakistan should also be prevented from using military aid and funds to augment its conventional military capability against India, and there should be an insistence on the need for appropriate benchmarks for accountability. India must intensify the campaign that states Pakistan will join the ranks of failed states unless stern measures are adopted by the international community.

As the largest troop contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, India must reiterate that 'terror havens' like Pakistan should not contribute troops to UN operations. Any such cutback will hurt the Pakistan economy, as there will be a shortfall in remuneration to Pakistani banks from savings made by the military peacekeeping forces. India can consider a strategic engagement through Track-II military diplomacy. Such a dialogue will present ample room for discussion, given that the military will be broadly represented on both sides. Additionally, India needs the space and time to focus its resources and consolidate its military modernisation to counter the

mounting pressure from China, but it cannot accomplish this goal while preparing for a potential crisis along the western borders. This is where a Track-II dialogue can be beneficial.

- **Socioeconomic measures**

In addition to staying Pakistan's status as a most favoured nation,[o] India can apply several other socioeconomic measures, including the suspension of trade and exerting pressure through the UN, the US, and other states to urge Pakistan to reduce its defence budget allocation with a corresponding increase for its social sector (particularly on education and health). Given that Pakistan is currently facing an economic crisis due to the structural flaws in its economy, its extreme reliance on external aid and assistance, natural disasters, inadequate agricultural yields, poor performance of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects, and depleted foreign exchange reserves, such international measures will add further pressure. Such economic isolation should complement the imposition of sanctions through the UN for violating UN Security Council resolutions.

The long-term destabilisation and strangulation of Pakistan's economy can be achieved by ensuring that the CPEC projects continue to suffer colossal losses from damage caused by terrorists (such as the Baluch Liberation Army) in the Waziristan region in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. A similar scenario can be set in motion in the Swat, Dir, and Chitral regions in the same province to delay projects and immobilise, demotivate, and frustrate investors and workers. The capture of Pakistan's export market must be carefully planned to further cripple its economy. Additionally, a climate of economic unease must be fostered to trigger an outflow of funds, thereby discouraging foreign direct investment. Pakistan must be engaged in an unaffordable arms race through threats and intimidation at its borders. Finally, India can also consider withdrawing from the Indus Water Treaty.[p]

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o Most favoured nation (MFN) status refers to the preferential trade terms of World Trade Organization member-countries with respect to tariffs and trade barriers to all other member countries as part of Article 1 of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Mutual MFN status, supported by trade facilitation, could help boost trade between two countries. India granted MFN status to Pakistan in 1996, but it withdrew this status in 2019 following the Pulwama terror attack.

p Negotiated by the World Bank and signed in 1960, the treaty governs the distribution of the waters of the Indus River and its tributaries between India and Pakistan.

- **Calibrated Information Warfare**

The current instability in Pakistan is a result of its continued neglect of the social sector, the country's rising trade deficit, declining foreign exchange reserves, and failure to repay loans from international institutions. This has created a situation rife for information warfare as part of the hybrid war. India has already significantly altered its land warfare doctrine to include hybrid warfare. India can now utilise various tactics—including non-contact areas of conflict such as cyber, space, and information—in a multifront scenario to counter its potential adversaries, giving it the option to destabilise its adversaries by exploiting their fault lines. Indeed, Pakistan alleges that India has long taken advantage of its socio-ethnic and religious fault lines and has stoked tensions, particularly in the Balochistan province, which has seen the highest incidents of sectarian violence.[12]

- **Strategic Communications Policy**

The Ministry of External Affairs must formalise a strategic communications policy by establishing a National Strategic Communications Advisory Committee or National Strategic Communications Authority. This entity should include individuals from India's top think tanks (government/parastatal/private-owned), defence analysts, strategists, academics, and veterans. India must plan analytical, authentic, and cerebral responses to any statements made against its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Such an organisation and a coherent strategic communications policy are integral to protecting India's pride and image from the machinations and deliberate false propaganda by another nation.

- **War Escalatory Control Dynamics**

Despite India's conventional supremacy, Pakistan has continued to carry out its policy of 'bleeding India with a thousand cuts' with impunity due to India's guarded and no-risk stance. Still, any form of response by India to Pakistan for aiding a planned hybrid strike is likely to elicit a counter-reply from Islamabad, especially if New Delhi opts for a military response. Such a reaction could take the form of the withdrawal of Pakistani armed forces deployed along the Durand Line (to which the international community is particularly sensitive), and nuclear sabre-rattling. Therefore, a range of escalation control measures will need to be built into the response mechanism.

On the Northern and Northeastern Front: The China Factor

China is attempting to achieve unilateral superpower status by dislodging the US in the military, economic, digital, and infrastructure spheres through its expansionist, augmentation, and transformation policies. These are based on a strategised civil-military fusion ideology, focus on socioeconomic growth, reforms to increase agricultural productivity, transcendence of high-end scientific technology, and infusion of renewable energy, all to eventually enhance its comprehensive national power. Despite recent economic slowdown, setbacks to the banking sector and infrastructure and housing projects, and severe droughts, China's single-party regime has enabled the State to continue with its expansionist goals.

China's approach to hybrid conflict includes standoffs with India's Intelligence Bureau; transgressions, intrusions, rising assertiveness on the political and military fronts,[q,13] forays into the Indian Ocean region and threatening island territories; economic colonisation through debt traps; colluding with like-minded countries;[r] and a general attitude of 'coercive gradualism'.[s] China furthers its national objectives through the use of non-contact warfare, including cyber warfare, electronic warfare, integrated network electronic warfare, information operations, the 'three warfare strategy' (psychological, media, and legal warfare), political and diplomatic negotiations, economic warfare, and demographic warfare.

There are several geopolitical and geostrategic factors driving China's hybrid warfare activities against India. First, Beijing's expansionist efforts into Indian territory and actions in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region and in Taiwan have fostered disputes with New Delhi and with countries and non-state actors seeking to protect the Uyghurs.

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q In May 2007, China refused to issue a visa to an Indian Administrative Services officer hailing from Arunachal Pradesh citing that the individual was a "Chinese national" and thus did not require a visa. In the same year, there were over 150 transgressions across the Line of Actual Control (LAC), rising to 270 in 2008. Furthermore, in November 2009, Chinese soldiers crossed the LAC and stopped a road construction project in Demchok, Ladakh. In August 2011, Chinese soldiers reportedly used helicopters to land on the Indian side of the LAC and dismantle bunkers. Near similar instances of LAC violations were reported in 2012.

r Such as with Pakistan and North Korea.

s Coercive gradualism refers to the gradual pursuit of one nation's interests against those of another country. It is a form of aggression chosen by relatively powerful states. A state may have the capability and capacity to achieve its aims, but it might choose to do so in phased moves as opposed to a single coup de main.

On the Northern and Northeastern Front: The China Factor

Second, China's Southeast coastal territories[t]—which have over half of the country's economic, commercial, and industrial activities—were made particularly vulnerable by the historic maritime inertia induced by the defensive policies of the erstwhile Chinese emperors (due to which the West was able to gain a technological advantage in marine engineering). Additionally, China considers Taiwan as strategically important because of its location. Controlling Taiwan will allow China to dominate the major sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the South China Sea and increase its naval presence in those waters to compete with the US. India has been enhancing its engagement with Taiwan in political and economic terms, and, as such, Taipei has become a key partner for New Delhi.

Third, China is seeking alternatives to the Malacca Strait, via which 80 percent of its trade passes,[14] through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects to avoid an overdependence on this vital SLOC. At the same time, India has the option of using the Sunda Strait—situated between the Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Java, and which connects the Java Sea and the Indian Ocean to the waters of East Asia—as an alternative route for its maritime SLOCs in the event of a blockade of the Malacca Strait. Although the BRI was envisioned to offset the vulnerability of Chinese trade through the Malacca Strait, it has so far only incurred investments with little return. Studies on the economic viability of goods transportation have shown that even if all three alternatives—land, sea, and air—are available, water transport is still the most cost-effective and commercially viable.[15] As such, it is unlikely that SLOCs will ever be supplanted.

Fourth, China has 17 percent of the world's population but only 7 percent of arable land (due to significant industrialisation and urbanisation), leading to food shortages and increased dependence on Africa and Europe for its requirements of food and energy security. Additionally, the Chinese economy is slowing down, with projections of it remaining below 7 percent over the medium term.[16] Stagnation due to the initial advantages of low input costs (especially labour) that are no longer fruitful has forced China to look for ways and means to solve its mounting economic problems.

t Such as Shanghai, Ningbo, Wenzhou, Fuzhou, Xiamen, Taipei, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Zhanjiang, and Haikou.

India's Options

China sees India as an adversary to its ambition for regional hegemony and supremacy. India's geostrategic location and credibility as a strong military force also works against Chinese desires. China's belligerence has become more pronounced in light of its imperialist aspirations, and it has started modernising the PLA. Although India is cognisant of China's military buildup, its response is not cogent and commensurate enough to balance the power dynamics in the region. Until it can adequately leverage its military and economic capacities to match China, India must prepare interim focused strategies to counter the Chinese threat.

India can consider the following options to create hostile conditions in China and prevent it from implementing its expansionist plans.

- **Supporting Minorities**

China faces internal security problems due to its various agitated minority groups, including the Han, Zhuang, Hui, and Manchu. Minorities frequently experience discrimination and exclusion, and struggle to access their basic rights, even under conditions of full and unquestioned citizenship. Denying them citizenship can increase their vulnerability and potentially result in mass expulsion. Any demand for self-determination by ethnic minorities is often perceived as an attempt to secede from the mainland and typically receives a negative response from the State. Supporting the rights of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region has the potential to create conditions of domestic instability, complicate Beijing's relations with its neighbours, and threaten its territorial integrity.[17]

- **Supporting Greater Autonomy for Tibet**

The campaign for greater autonomy for Tibet and its 5.2 million inhabitants continues amid China's subjugation of the region. India's advocacy for the Dalai Lama and outreach to Tibet's restive, discontented, and oppressed youth will certainly harm China. Its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council has allowed China to persist with its claim of Tibet being a domestic issue that does not need outside resolution. Still, using

social media, India can galvanise a massive global movement under the banner of 'revolution for Tibetan autonomy' with the help of the US and other friendly foreign nations to demonstrate solidarity for the oppressed Tibetan people.[18]

- **Aligning with ASEAN Countries**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region is of key economic and strategic importance to China. If India were to enter into a strategic partnership and free trade agreement with the US, it will counter China's attempts to establish regional hegemony through various BRI plans and mechanisms, including the China-Myanmar Pipeline Corridor. The ASEAN countries are wary of the Indo-Pacific alignment in the US's geopolitical outlook. While they remain suspicious of China's intentions and strategy in the South China Sea and its overall commitment to freedom of navigation and a rules-based order, they do not want to displease Beijing because they are unsure of how far the US will go to advance their shared interests in the region. The Quad (a strategic security dialogue between India, Australia, Japan, and the US) lacks confidence because of its long history of alterations and the sluggish growth of its security route. Perhaps this was one of the driving forces behind the creation of the AUKUS (a security pact between Australia, the UK, and the US), a sort of add-on arrangement meant to inspire greater confidence and convey the American message of relying on its many partnerships. In any case, it is apparent that ASEAN does not want the conflict between superpowers to bleed into its territory. While ASEAN retains its own interests, many of its member countries are hesitant in communicating their will. This power play prevents the ASEAN countries from developing relations with India since they may be seen as going against Chinese interests. Still, India must focus on growing its ties with the ASEAN region to capitalise on their joint economic opportunities and as a counter to China.[19]

- **Establishing Integrated Joint Cyber Warfare Capabilities**

The PLA and the Indian Army recognise the significance of network-centric combat.[u] The PLA has undergone significant reforms in organisation and commands and control, but the Indian Army has not. The Indian Army is yet to fully recognise the extent to which electronic warfare complements cyber warfare. The Indian Army has significant organic cyber and electronic warfare capabilities at all levels, and so more personnel should be trained in these areas. The territorial army can be a good incubator and manning agency for this purpose. India lacks a dedicated information warfare service that can be used in service-specific missions and military goals, while China has the Strategic Support Force. Indeed, India's information warfare capabilities are fragmented and lack a defined command structure, and its electronic warfare competencies have not acquired the same degree of miniaturisation as China. This necessitates the integration of cyber and electronic warfare assets under the control of a single operational commander. Additionally, the Indian armed forces have yet to develop anything remotely resembling the Chinese integrated network electronic warfare approach. At the same time, India has established the defence cyber and space agencies and the Armed Forces Special Operations Division. A probable reason for this is that there is insufficient communication between the Armed Forces and the National Technical Reconnaissance Organisation. If India were to establish integrated theatre commands, the inter-services theatre commander will need to be given autonomy to coordinate cyber and electronic warfare for greater network centricity of the tri-services down to the tactical level.

- **Converting Infantry Units to Special Forces**

A greater willingness and mandate to embrace risk, friction, and uncertainty is required to position Indian forces for longer missions, deeper into disputed territory, and against a significantly more powerful foe. On a wider level, effective covert action centres on a strong understanding of the strategic importance of special operations, rather than a focus on short-term tactical gains. The Indian Army's idea of how to operate in case of an occurrence along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is also not conventional

u Network-centric combat/warfare refers to a military doctrine that aims to convert an information advantage into a competitive advantage through the computer networking of dispersed forces.

or flexible. On the contrary, it places emphasis on quickly reclaiming the initiative of launching surgical strikes deep inside the adversary's territory and horizontal escalation across multiple sections of the border. It remains to be seen whether India's political establishment is willing to sign off on such plans. Even if India's current administration is determined to send a message that risk appreciation and use of force are indiscrete, much will depend on the specifics of the conflict and the exact nature of Chinese aggression.[20]

- **Steady Engagement with the US**

Ensuring a reliable US presence and long-term strategy for the region is another way to neutralise the China challenge. There are some expectations of the US's Biden administration engaging more closely with the South Asia countries on issues such as vaccines, emerging technologies, and climate—three areas where China has supported South Asia until now.[21] At the same time, connectivity and infrastructure projects are now a key area of cooperation between China and several South Asian countries because these are essential to the region's development. The G7's 'Build Back Better World' initiative[v] and the Blue Dot Network[w] have the potential to offer South Asia the same level of engagement as China.

Additionally, the Biden administration has released an Indo-Pacific strategy document[22] that focuses on countering China's growing economic and military strength, and empowering India to do so. The document discusses the potential for a major defence partnership with India and expresses support for its role as a net security provider in the region. It also states that the US will continue to work with India bilaterally and through groups to support New Delhi's rise and regional leadership,[23] and India must commit to doing so as well.

v The Build Back Better Initiative (B3W) was launched by the G7 countries to deliver high-quality, sustainable infrastructure through values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnerships.

w The US, Japan, and Australia launched the Blue Dot Network to promote the principles of sustainable infrastructure development globally. It is a means to certify infrastructure projects that fulfil international quality standards.

The US can also provide South Asian countries with technical advice on debt management. This does not have to mean formal debt relief as envisioned in programmes like the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative. Instead, the US can offer to support countries before and after they accept Chinese loans. It can assist countries like Sri Lanka and the Maldives in setting terms and conditions that will strengthen their negotiating position with Chinese actors, as well as by helping them manage and restructure their overall debt. The US Department of Treasury's Office of Technical Assistance helps the finance ministries and central banks of developing and transitioning countries to reinforce their ability to manage public finances effectively and safeguard their financial sectors, and it can extend such an engagement to countries in South Asia as well. Additionally, the US could use its influence on Western multilateral organisations to ease the transition and help these states in creating alternative channels for fiscal restraint and constancy.

- **Build Modern Infrastructure and Sustainable Capacities**

Over time, building the capacities of India's neighbouring countries could enable more stakeholders in those nations to recognise the risks associated with China's opaque deals. These stakeholders will likely want their political administrations to only work with entities that share their commitment to international standards of sustainability and accountability. As a relatively new source of development aid, China depends heavily on project finance and direct investment. The China International Development Cooperation Agency or its proxies do not accept most of the Chinese development in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, and Bangladesh, which are instead accepted by the arms of various Chinese state-owned enterprises that have been established to only focus on a few specific regions.[24]

- **Boosting Military's Air and Naval Capabilities**

China's ongoing military build-up aims to overcome the PLA's own shortfalls, increase the PLA's combat capability for conflict along the LAC, and eliminate India's airpower advantage over Tibet. Building multidimensional deterrence against China with a very short-term perspective will be a serious

strategic flaw. India must develop a plan that reinforces its position as a credible deterrent. This should be supported by a strong military capability designed to carry out retaliatory strikes along the LAC. India must focus on its capabilities that seek to impose painful consequences in the event of a conflict. Since China does not have many forward bases in the region, and since the harsh climate of the Tibetan plateau makes soldier deployment and transportation extremely challenging, air superiority is required to ensure operational dominance in a high altitude. Moreover, India needs to develop its naval might in the Indian Ocean region. India must go beyond traditional means and develop the capability to execute costs beyond the immediate area of conflict through long-range missiles, cyber warfare, and space weapons.[25]

> “China sees India as an adversary to its ambition for regional hegemony and supremacy. But until it can adequately leverage its military and economic capacities to match China, India must prepare interim focused strategies to counter the Chinese threat.”

Conclusion

China is currently engaged in an intense tussle with the US in the economic and technology spheres. Although the US appears to dominate in the military space, China is making significant strides to bolster its military capabilities, including through a significant digital transformation. Additionally, by 2028, China is projected to account for 24 percent of the global GDP while the US will have a 14-percent share.[26] Still, China must confront significant issues—for instance, a slowing economy, a real estate crisis, and a demographic workforce deficit—to achieve its goals.

India can take advantage of this strategic window of opportunity provided by China's slowing progress to prepare for the challenges posed by it. The surest way to ensure this is to increase deterrence in the conventional and hybrid domains. At the same time, India must develop strategies to adjust to Chinese dominance and avoid being taken by surprise in a conflict or war.[27]

Proponents of hybrid war strategies will encourage the use of any form of warfare that can evade the military might and exploit the vulnerabilities of an adversary. An adaptive strategic approach that relies on a wide array of capabilities is the key to continued success in the hybrid spectrum of warfare. As such, India must review and formulate its national strategies for the neighbourhood to include joint warfighting concepts and integrated force structures, while developing enhanced inter-agency, multinational capabilities, and coordination; must formulate a framework for intelligence and ministerial tasking; must develop dynamic military diplomacy and strategic communications; evaluate its defence cooperation; increase its expeditionary power prognosis; maintain access to potential areas of conflict; increase adaptive planning and reconsider operational warfighting art; invest in professional military education programmes; and increase integrated multidimensional forces with a renewed capacity to wage irregular and autonomous warfare in an asymmetric and a digital battlefield milieu. There must be special emphasis on 'strategic space deterrence', which includes anti-satellite offensive operations and space combat platforms that optimise laser, particle beam, or kinetic energy weapons for the destruction of multidimensional targets. India should effectively synergise and combine these capabilities to prevail in hybrid conflicts. This will ensure the country's

Conclusion

ability to prevail in the major traditional wars that, in the long run, could directly overshadow and obstruct its progress towards realising the dream of becoming a developed global power.

India must develop a 'whole of government' approach to tackle hybrid warfare threats from its adversaries. For instance, a coordinated 'grand plan' encompassing all ministries, designed by the National Security Council Secretariat under the direction of the National Security Advisor and with the consent of the Cabinet Committee on Security, can be used to address such risks. At the same time, India must boost the military's capabilities (through a specialised force with appropriate skills training) to tackle hybrid threats. ISR capabilities, particularly in the space and ariel dimensions,[x] will need to be developed further. The armed forces must also prioritise information warfare capabilities (including psychological operations, and electronic and cyber warfare) at all levels. It must also prepare to induct new technologies into its warfighting capacities, including artificial intelligence, and hypersonic and quantum sciences, which must be backed by adequate government support and the military's willingness to accept indigenous products.

Developing such capabilities will require significant resources, but India's social and infrastructural priorities will take precedence. Still, there are ways to achieve these goals. Legacy systems derived from European World War-centric concepts and doctrines should be abandoned in favour of low-cost alternatives and niche technologies. Civil-military and inter-services fusion, realigning politico-military objectives with a 'whole of nation' approach, and even merging developmental and economic goals with security needs are some possibilities. But all this can only be achieved if the voids in operational readiness are recognised and accepted, with the goal of being prepared for war with effectiveness.

x For instance, remote sensing satellite series, electronic intelligence satellites, unmanned aerial vehicles, autonomous warfare systems, and long-range maritime patrol aircraft.

Conclusion

The 'low liability and high payoff' nature of hybrid warfare will ensure that it is a preferred method of conducting war. India may not subscribe to the ideology, but it must still be ready to face it or even pre-empt it. A 'whole of nation' approach—for coherent capability building and a coordinated national response mechanism—is one possibility. India should develop and instrumentalise a national approach of self-assessment and threat analysis. This will significantly improve the early warning systems of hybrid warfare, support resilience initiatives, and may even have a compounded deterrent effect. Indeed, the ability to tackle hybrid warfare does not lie in the operational or tactical sphere alone, but also in the strategic and political spaces.ORF

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