



China's Great War Machine in the Sino-Indian Context

by Lt. Gen. Gautam Banerjee PVSM, AVSM, YSM (Retd.)

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Abstract: The military and non-military demeanour adopted by the People's Republic of China since the mid-2000s has insinuated the threat of 'compromising with territorial sovereignty', whether through military coercion in the East and South China Sea, the Indo-Tibetan border escalations or the steady engulfment of the Indian Ocean Region. Lt. Gen. Banerjee provides a detailed account of these issues, using maps to illustrate China's territorial claims along the Sino-Indian borders, covering the eastern, central, and western sectors. While the internal workings and capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) remain largely shrouded in secrecy — often referred to as the 'Red Curtain' — Banerjee makes a commendable effort in this book to compile years of observation and expertise as a military practitioner to highlight the growing strength of the Chinese military. The book thoroughly discusses the possibility of another Sino-Indian war and explores the likelihood of events reminiscent of the 1962 conflict. It examines how China pursues its territorial ambitions and assesses India's military capabilities to respond to these challenges.

Keywords: *Strategic Infrastructure, Himalayan Terrain, Border De-escalation, Military Conflagration Hypothesis, Military Coercion*

In his compelling book, “*China's Great War Machine in the Sino-Indian Context*,” Lt. Gen. Gautam Banerjee (Retd.) offers a meticulous exploration of the intricate military and geopolitical landscape between China and India, shedding light on the historical tensions and contemporary challenges that define their relationship. The book theme is divided into three

subsections: the first two chapters discuss the hypothesis of war holocaust, the next two chapters discuss Chinese military modernisation and infrastructure, and the last two chapters discuss the likelihood of war in the context of the assessment provided in the preceding chapters.

Under abating unforeseen circumstances, nations are drawn into war to guard what they consider an existential ideal. Banerjee interestingly portrays the idea of war as inevitable from historical instances of ‘never’ the belligerent warmongers like Adolf Hitler, Nadir Shah, Genghis Khan and others. **A hypothesis of Military Conflagration**, an excursus possibility of the Sino-Indian War, is a distant dream, though not entirely unthinkable within the practitioner’s community of political analysis. Despite numerous preventive agreements for border de-escalation in the post-1962 war relations, the development between the two South Asian nations remained bivouac.

Ordinations of a ‘Himalayan’ terrain, the highest crest-line Himalayas serves as a natural barrier to both countries until the annexation of Tibet in the 1950s, the defunct natural barrier was disturbed. This chapter sheds light on the three sectors of the Sino-Indian border, *viz.* the Western Sector, Middle Sector and Eastern Sector, which came into direct proximity in the post-50s scenarios. Jammu & Kashmir-Tibet-Xinjiang 1,597 kilometres long borderline on the western sector, the international Indo-Tibetan border stretches across Ladakh to Himachal Pradesh, is 545 kilometres long central border. Lastly, the 1,325-kilometre-long eastern sector is divided into two segments, Bhutan to the West of which is the Sikkim-Tibet Border, while to the east is Arunachal Pradesh. The deficient strategic logistic infrastructure information poses daunting offensive operations and is more of a threat in the eastern Boundary – McMahon Line. The Indian side faces challenges in operating 2,200-3,200 kilometres away from their central China bases, crossing axes up to the India-Tibet border, and maintaining offensives from Tibetan bases. However, with adaptive tactics and air operations over the Tibetan plateau, the Indian military forces can grind such offensives to dust, despite the challenges faced by the PLA and Tibetan forces. China’s Tibet offering is a strategically smart move, keeping India busy, serving the purpose of robust infrastructural development and strengthening military capabilities is fulfilling the objectives. Relatively, India’s military build-up falls short in countering the adversary due to the long-delayed crest-line road connectivity construction.

Especially at the five river valleys that allow movement across north-south in Arunachal Pradesh – West Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Dibang and Lohit.¹

The next two chapters highlight the aspects of military modernisation, infrastructural development, and structure, with an emphasis on Outer China – Tibet's development vis-à-vis the developments in Inner China in relative analysis to India's deterrence capabilities. In

China's Robust Logistic Infrastructure, the underlying theme is based on a robust assemblage of transit and base edifices in neighbouring provinces of Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan, along land and air communication lines. Since the PRC cognizes that the development of Tibet cannot be neglected. An extensive road and rail network is laid out in the region, even at its best, though it costs three times its original value, given the geography of the area. A ubiquitous 'dual-use civil-military capability infrastructural development' programme is initiated in the region as an extension 'Western Development Campaign Policy' and the 'South Asia Land Route', one of the classic examples is of upgradation and extension of the Karakoram highway passing through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir to Gwadar port in the Makran coast, the Qinghai-Lhasa-Nepal highway and the highway connecting Kunming Yunnan with Kyaukpyu from Myanmar port.

Highlighted in the chapter **The Red War Machine in Tibet**, the modernisation, doctrine and structure of the People's Liberation Army set in 2015,², which assumingly aims to transform it

¹ The writer further explains the terrain – a difficult one in terms of geography. The McMahon borderline is 1080 kilometers long to the west end lies the Arunachal Pradesh and to the East end lies the India-Myanmar-Yuman trijunction. The Indian border belt, spanning 350 kilometers, rises from the Brahmaputra valley and descends over the southern Himalayan slopes. Out of 26 passes, fifteen have military significance and are situated at altitudes of 4,400 and 5,300 meters. Cross-border movement is possible only when snow cover becomes traversable during the five to six summer months. *For more refer Lt. Gen Gautam Banerjee's China's Great War Machine in the Sino-Indian Context*

² Kartik Bommakanti and Satyam Singh in their article shed light on China's Military modernisation development programme where they begin with historical development in 1980s under Deng Xiaoping with focus on 'local wars' to 'world class' military under Xi Jinping since 2013. The time he assumed charge of CPC as the general secretary, he has sanguine pushed for 'new era' with the following targets:

1. Accelerate mechanization, informatization, and intelligentsia by 2027.
2. Modernize military theories, organizational structure, personnel, and weapons and equipment by 2035.
3. Complete modernization of national defense and military by 2049.
4. Transform people's armed forces into world-class forces by mid-21st century.

China has made progress in building joint operational capabilities, combat readiness, and technology integration with the armed forces. Since 2020, the PLA has adopted more coercive actions in the Indo-Pacific region and border disputes with India. China's military expenditure has remained around 1.7% of GDP, with a gradual decrease in government expenditure. However, there is a lack of transparency in China's defense budgets and expenditure.

into a compact, joint, and combat-effective force capable of defeating formidable enemies in localised wars. The modernisation aims to maintain China's territorial integrity through a ground-based offensive-defensive strategy, deny inimical forces access to its maritime areas, and protect China's economic assets and communications in the Indian Ocean region. Given the adversary's capabilities, 'the red curtain' warfare under 'informationsed' conditions, traditionally preserves China from launching an incursion, escalation, and configuration with just a trick up their sleeve, whether launching an offensive campaign within thirty-odd days. The Chinese concept involves establishing a war zone command (WZC) with a structured structure, trained to handle integrated joint-services battles, under direct control of the GMC through PLA GHQ, permanently instituting this model at all BZCs. In a relative analytical sense, India in the past has displayed military capabilities, but only when the adversary has had the power to display.

An issue open to discussion, 'likelihood of Sino-Indian war', or 'counter-attacks by India for its self-defence' hypothetically raised in preceding chapters is unfolded by Lt. Gen. Banerjee, stating in the chapter **Objectives of Obligations of War**, India's political and diplomatic reactions to the PRC's arm-twisting may prompt a counter-attack on self-defence, though no military conflict is anticipated in this hypothesis. He further states that "the current military deployment in Tibet indicates that PRC does not consider any military threat to be emanating from in the near future." (Banerjee, 2017) In the modern cyber and space warfare concept, the 'Three Warfare' capabilities enhance China's asymmetric exclusive in psychological, media and legal warfare. An extension of the military and defence capabilities focusing on conjoined Chinese strategies. India's weariness of military strategy shows few signs of harnessing this asset. In cogent conjecture, while India's northern neighbour displays stronger combat, but not hopelessly skewed. The PRC's stronger combat power compared to India is not causing despair, but its military modernisation has changed the military balance in favour of India, as evidenced by recent border developments. India's border belt development aims to deter aggression by increasing forces in war, while adjusting to joint war doctrine, combined force structure, and integrated command and control.

In the last chapter, **Appraisal of Course of Conflict and Options**, is a further extension to the previous chapter, wherein analysing the likelihood of escalation in Sino Indian context is concluded as a scarce scenario. Though in a fraction of the possibility exists that India does not

shy away from using military capabilities at its disposal. The chapter argues that India has significant military power to counter China's offensives, but the latter can engage in larger conflicts and use non-conventional force multiplications. The PRC's recent activism should be considered. Indian general KS Thimaya, in 1962, emphasised the importance of using superior firepower and manoeuvrability to defeat China while harassing their communications. Implied in the post-1962, the visualisation of our General, this strategic approach aimed to impose asymmetry on a more powerful adversary, and India has taken deliberate measures to achieve this.

The theology of war is not in the preview of the subject analysis. In the entire book, Lt. Gen Banerjee's writing falls within the spectrum of hypothetical development of the Sino-Indian military escalation vis-à-vis India's military concerns and potential scenarios, although the scenarios may not be comprehensive or absolute. A meticulous examination of the PLA's advancements, infrastructure development in Tibet, and the strategic significance of these developments in the context of Sino-Indian relations. He emphasizes the importance of understanding China's military strategies to effectively counter potential threats and maintain regional stability. To conclude, the book is a critical source for defence analysts, policymakers, and anyone interested in the evolving dynamics of the two South Asian nations. Banerjee's comprehensive analysis and strategic recommendations significantly contribute to the discourse on regional security and military strategy.

Reference

Banerjee, L. G. (2017). *China's Great War Machine in the Sino-Indian Context*. New Delhi, India: Wisdom Tree.