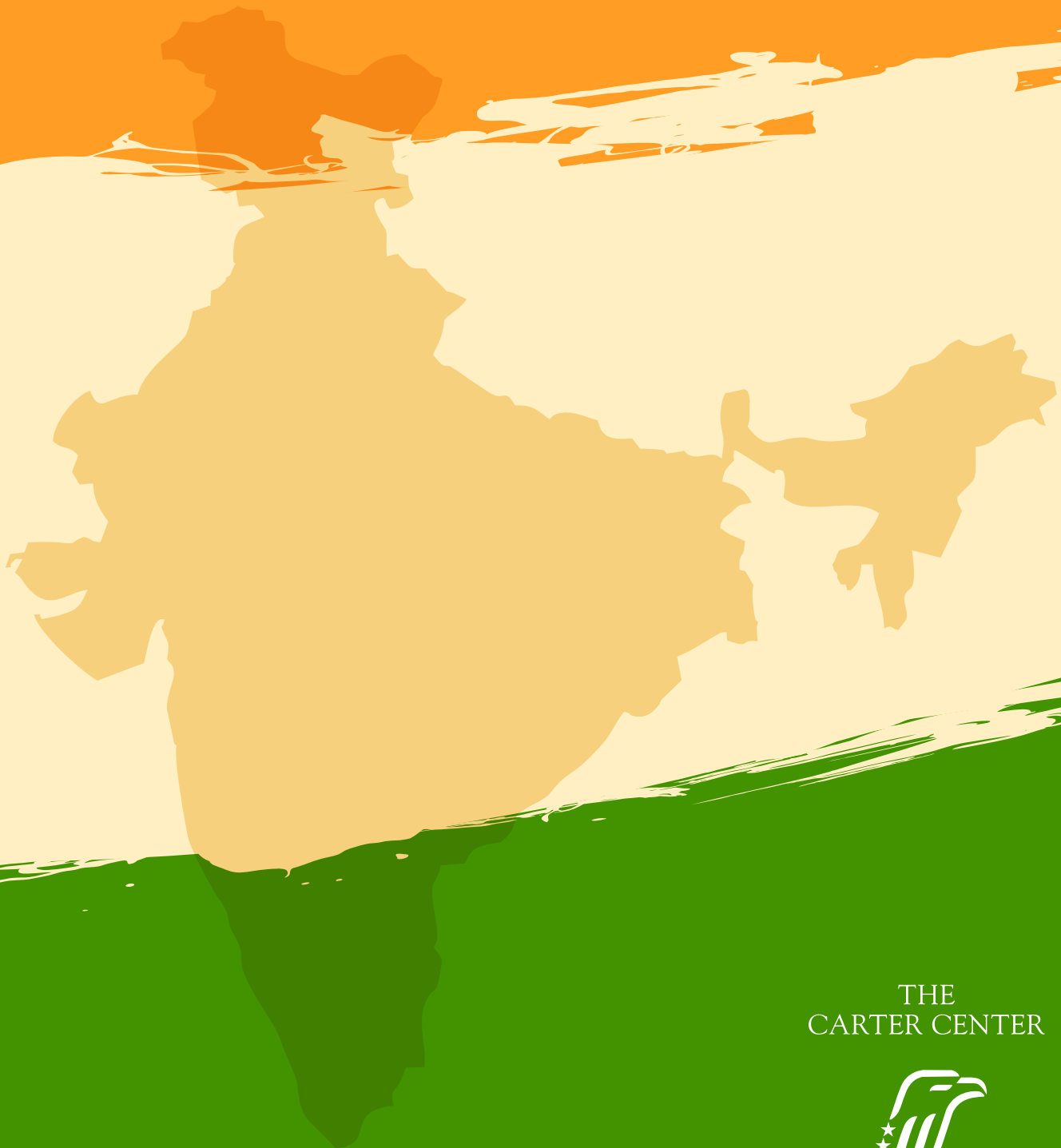


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COMMENTARY

Two-Front War: The Spectral Versus Actual Threat for India

By Yogesh Joshi
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Following the Galwan crisis between India and China in the summer of 2020, the specter of a two-front war has reached a fever pitch among India's strategic community. India is perhaps the only country in the world involved in serious territorial disputes with two nuclear-armed neighbors — China and Pakistan — who also have a close strategic relationship, if not an outright alliance.

The growing military collusion between China and Pakistan has created [speculation](#) that one of them will open a second front if New Delhi finds itself embroiled in a war with the other. Many argue that facing a coordinated military maneuver from a relatively weak but prickly and resolute power like Pakistan along with a highly capable China is beyond India's capability to withstand. Does this claim in fact hold? How might it obscure, among other things, risks facing India's democracy, which represent a graver vulnerability for India's security than a two-front war?

Options for India

India could seek to solve its two-front predicament by diplomatically settling disputes with either of its adversaries or by creating enough military power to deter both. Arguments among policymakers for either option, are, however, fallacious. First, irrespective of India's intentions, both Pakistan and China have [hardly shown](#) an inclination to pursue a peaceful settlement of border disputes. In diplomacy, as in strategy, the adversary always has a say. After the 1962 Sino-Indian war, under Western pressure, India offered the status quo on Kashmir as a solution to the conflict, a position it has maintained since. India's ambitions remain limited to protecting the status quo rather than retrieving what it lost in the war.

In the face of such intransigence, the other alternative is to create enough military deterrence with regard to both adversarial neighbors. Notwithstanding the need to reform India's national security policy, there is no denying that money is hard to come by for a vast state with major development needs. Historically, even great powers have struggled to fight two-front wars.

Overemphasis on diplomacy and military readiness will not resolve India's predicament. New Delhi, instead, must leverage the Indo-U.S. strategic partnership and its nuclear capability. With this partnership in mind, the threat of a two-front war no longer seems as formidable.

Leveraging U.S.-India ties

Even without an explicit security arrangement, Beijing will have to calculate the risk of American involvement in case China actively interferes in Pakistan's favor during an Indo-Pak conflict. If no one in India can be certain of American assistance, no one in Beijing can count on U.S. nonintervention. Even at the height of the China threat during the Cold War, Beijing's adversarial relations with great powers was an [effective instrument](#) in India's deterrent strategy vis-à-vis China. This minimal risk of escalation will play into Beijing's calculations as a serious deterrent. Not without reason, New Delhi was more upset with prospects of a Sino-

U.S. détente during the initial Barack Obama years than with greater friction between the two under Donald Trump.

Pakistan's involvement in a Sino-Indian confrontation is even more doubtful given its precarious economy and dependence on Western institutions. American economic statecraft alone is sufficient for Pakistan's nonintervention. Since the 1999 Kargil war, the U.S. has increasingly leaned on Pakistan, to India's advantage. The Indo-U.S. relationship, therefore, is a critical element of India's strategy to counter the two-front threat. It not only assists India's internal balancing through more significant economic, military, and technological buildup, but it also creates enough uncertainties and risks for India's adversaries to deter the two-front threat.

Second, the two-front war scenario is farfetched because it ignores South Asia's nuclear reality. Even if the perceptual deterrent of potential U.S. involvement fails to restrain China and Pakistan from coordinating a military offensive against India, New Delhi by necessity will consider it a significant escalation, forcing India to cross the nuclear threshold. India's atomic posture with regards to Pakistan is [already moving](#) toward first use. Both Chinese and Pakistani leadership will have to contend with the possibility of nuclear escalation in case of a two-pronged attack against India. In case New Delhi believes a two-front war scenario is highly probable, it can simply revise its nuclear doctrine and categorically state that military coordination between Pakistan and China will incur a nuclear response.

Today's Government and the Two-Front War

The two-front war scenario is, therefore, manageable. India need not settle its disputes with either Pakistan or China under the threat of a coordinated military invasion. It needs to bolster its military readiness, but there are apparent resource limitations in building a solid conventional deterrent. New Delhi, therefore, needs to effectively leverage its strategic relationship with the U.S. and its nuclear arsenal to create enough anxieties in the minds of Chinese and Pakistani decision-makers.

Yet India has its own domestic anxieties. For example, many in India's strategic community hold the current government primarily responsible for the two-front predicament. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is accused of only worsening India's already difficult relations with Pakistan by abandoning the dialogue process, withdrawing the autonomy of Indian Kashmir, and frequently using force against Pakistan as punishment for its support of terrorism and insurgencies. Where China is concerned, the current government in India is seen as folding to Beijing's greyzone tactics and military pressure on the border.

While this reasoning holds true, there are aspects to India's complicated relationship with Pakistan for which Modi cannot be held fully responsible. Modi's resort to the use of force against Pakistan's continuous support for terrorism under the shadow of its nuclear arsenal has, for the first time, stymied the Pakistani strategy of bleeding India through a thousand cuts. the limited military action of the surgical strikes in 2016 and airstrikes against terrorist launchpads in Pakistani Kashmir in February 2019 has served one major purpose. It has forced Pakistan to calculate the consequences of supporting terrorism. Earlier, Islamabad could support terrorism believing that its nuclear arsenal would force India to practice restraint. New Delhi's actions under Modi have sent a firm signal that the age of India's self-restraint is over. Therefore, Islamabad would have to think twice about escalation before it supports major terrorist attacks in the Indian territory.

Vis-à-vis China, too, India's response during the Galwan crisis and afterward has been quite forceful. India has not been able to retrieve all the territory lost to the Chinese, but such is the nature of greyzone warfare until and unless India decides to escalate the conflict. The escalation costs appear high compared to the prospect of gains made by retrieving the lost territory.

Conclusion: Spectral vs. Actual

External threats notwithstanding, the genuine concern for India is internal: The growing domestic polarization and an increasing sense of insecurity among India's minorities are often cultivated by the BJP government for electoral gains. Therein, anti-Pakistan sentiment has been conflated with the scapegoating of Indian Muslims.

As the government in India increasingly veers toward greater internal polarization with its selective [targeting of minorities](#) for electoral gains, it creates a new front of internal domestic upheaval. Extremist forces such as al Qaeda, the Islamic State group (ISIS), and Islamist terrorists in Pakistan are already employing the narrative of minority persecution to garner support for operations inside India. Though India's minorities generally have not become radicalized, if and when the government targets them for electoral gains, it may initiate a dangerous trend. Aggravating the religious faultlines may appear to the BJP as a sound electoral strategy, but it does engender long-term domestic instability. Such domestic instability endangers India's growth, its national consensus, and also its foreign policy, as was evident during the blowback received from Islamic countries following a BJP spokeswoman's egregious [comments](#) on the Prophet.

The Indian state, therefore, needs to avoid internal polarization so as to focus on its economic rise and military preparedness. Inter-religious contestation harms India's image globally and also complicates its relationship with key external partners in the West and the Middle East. Domestic coherence is fundamental to India's external resilience. The Indian government should therefore pursue inclusive governance and clamp down on majoritarian radicalization against minorities.

Neither India's strategic relationship with the U.S. nor its nuclear arsenal will help confront the growing internal threat of religious polarization. Strengthening India's democracy is the only answer.

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