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India's Multi-Domain Deterrence — Bridging the Gap with China

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India faces a widening military capability gap with China — can Multi-Domain Deterrence be achieved without a commensurate increase in defence budget and a fundamental restructuring of procurement timelines?"

THE CORE ARGUMENT

India's strategic community increasingly recognises that conventional platform-centric deterrence — more tanks, more jets, more ships — is insufficient against the modernised People's Liberation Army. What India needs is **Multi-Domain Deterrence (MDD)**: the integration of land, air, sea, cyber, space, and information domain capabilities into a networked "system-of-systems" architecture that denies any adversary a clean advantage in any single domain.

THE CHINA GAP: WHY MDD IS URGENT

PLA's Two-Decade Transformation

China's PLA has undergone a fundamental restructuring since 2015 under Xi Jinping's "Military Civil Fusion" doctrine:

- **Theatre Commands** replaced legacy military regions — enabling truly joint multi-domain operations
- **PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF)** was created to integrate cyber, space, electronic warfare, and information operations under a single command
- **AI and autonomous systems** are embedded across platforms — from drone swarms to AI-assisted targeting

- **Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD)** capabilities along India's northern border have expanded significantly

India, by contrast, still operates largely within individual service silos — Army, Navy, Air Force — with limited jointness and nascent theatre command structures.

The Two-Front Calculus

India faces a unique strategic reality: simultaneous threats from China and Pakistan — with documented coordination between the two. Over 90% of India's trade transits the Indian Ocean Region, making maritime security as critical as the continental northern border.

WHAT MULTI-DOMAIN DETERRENCE REQUIRES

1. Integrated C4ISR Architecture

C4ISR — Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance — must be seamlessly networked across domains. India's current fragmented C4ISR means data collected by one service often doesn't reach another in real-time.

2. Space and Cyber Capabilities

- India's military space programme (reconnaissance satellites, communication satellites) needs hardening against anti-satellite (ASAT) threats
- Cyber offensive and defensive capabilities must be institutionalised within a dedicated military cyber command — not scattered across intelligence agencies

3. Defence-Industrial Transformation

India's long procurement cycles (often 10–15 years from requirement to induction) are structurally incompatible with rapid capability development. The **Defence Acquisition Procedure 2020** and **iDEX** (Innovations for Defence Excellence) are steps forward but insufficient.

4. Private Sector Integration

The "Military Civil Fusion" model China uses — legally mandating tech companies to serve military needs — is not India's path. But India needs a voluntary equivalent: deeper R&D partnerships between DRDO, defence PSUs, and India's world-class private technology sector (Tata, L&T, ISRO spinoffs).

INDIA'S EXISTING STRENGTHS

DOMAIN	INDIA'S ASSETS
Nuclear	Credible minimum deterrence; SLBM capability (INS Arihant)
Space	50+ operational satellites; ASAT test (2019)
Cyber	CERT-In; National Cyber Security Policy; National Security Council Secretariat
Information	Growing influence in diaspora media and public diplomacy
Naval	IOR presence; carrier capability (INS Vikrant)

THE WAY FORWARD: THREE STRATEGIC OPTIONS

Option A — Technological Leapfrogging (Bold): Invest heavily in asymmetric capabilities — drone swarms, AI-enabled targeting, hypersonic missiles, directed energy weapons — skipping conventional parity and going directly to next-generation deterrence.

Option B — Incremental Integration (Conservative): Steadily build Theatre Commands, improve jointness, integrate existing platforms into a network-centric architecture — lower risk, longer timeline.

Option C — Pragmatic Middle Path: Combine Option A's priorities in critical domains (cyber, space, autonomous systems) with Option B's institutional reforms — most realistic for India's budget and procurement constraints.

UPSC MAINS RELEVANCE

GS3 — Security: India's defence modernisation strategy; Theatre Command reform; Aatmanirbhar Bharat in defence; DRDO vs private sector.

GS2 — IR: India-China strategic competition; India-US defence cooperation (QUAD, BECA, LEMOA); India's strategic autonomy in defence procurement.

Integrated deterrence across land, air, sea, cyber, space, information domains **PLA SSAF (Strategic Support Force):** Created 2015; integrates space, cyber, electronic warfare, information operations **India's Theatre Commands:** Still being established (Air Defence Command, Maritime Theatre Command proposed) **C4ISR:** Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance **iDEX:** Innovations for Defence Excellence; startup ecosystem for defence technology; 300+ challenges issued **ASAT test:** India's Mission Shakti (March 27, 2019) — demonstrated ASAT capability **INS Arihant:** India's first nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine; operationalised 2018 **Two-front threat:** Simultaneous China-Pakistan military pressure — India's core strategic planning scenario

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