

## Book review: Face-Off! Analysis of India's Capability to Fight a Two-Front War

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# Book Review

*Face Off: Analysis of India's Capability to Fight a Two Front War*

Ravi Rikhye

KW Publishers, New Delhi (2021)

ISBN 978-93-89137-92-7, 616 pp., Rs 1,480



Kulbhushan Bhardwaj

With India facing a growing existential threat of a two-front war with its two hostile nuclear adversaries – China and Pakistan, there is an increasing interest in India's capability to confront both of them simultaneously. Therefore, this book comes at the right juncture, especially after the clashes against China in Galwan last year by the Indian Army (IA) and the Balakot strike against Pakistan by Indian Air Force (IAF) in 2019. Thus, the moot question of India's two-front war is no longer merely pedantic but in the realms of reality.

The book *Face Off: Analysis of India's Capability to Fight a Two Front War* by Ravi Rikhye, a distinguished author with 35 books to his credit and expertise in military matters, offers a detailed narration of India's capability to fight a two-front war. It is a well-researched book which presents cogent arguments on the subject of India's capability to fight a two-front war. The book has been divided into eighteen chapters with

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six chapters being devoted to the analyses of the three armies, navies and air forces in detail; one chapter detailing the background to the two-front war problem and one chapter devoted to India's 'Cold Start' doctrine. These chapters form the bulk of the book. Three chapters are devoted to the background of the whole problem and in the balance of the chapters, the author discusses the geo-political environment, infrastructural capabilities, nuclear arsenals, intelligence collection and analyses methodologies and the emerging India-US embrace and the Quadrilateral (Quad). Thus, adequate attention has been paid to the whole gamut of the issues involved.

In the introductory chapter, the author posits a simple question – Can India fight a two-front war against China and Pakistan? To which, his answer is that 'India cannot'. Rikhye further goes on to assert that because of the China-Pakistan alliance, India cannot fight even a single front war without running the risk of weakening the other front for exploitation. The author submits a solution to the predicament: build a two-front war capability. Thereafter, the whole book explores the various nuances and methodologies of executing and implementing this solution after due analyses.

The author has carried out an in-depth analysis of various factors involved in fighting a two-front war successfully, which is indeed commendable and highlights the pedagogic knowledge of the author. He has analysed in detail the force ratios of the three nations in a methodical manner. The author contends that for a proper two-front defensive capability, India immediately needs eight more divisions, and then some. However, to win decisive victories, he posits that the requirement is of 54 divisions. And to give the military the confidence it needs to recover Kashmir, and deploy sufficient force to deter the adversaries requires 72 divisions. Rikhye claims that in a classical scenario, 54 divisions – with 12 as uncommitted reserve – are the bare minimum forces required for decisive victories. And the figure goes up to 72 divisions – with 18 as

uncommitted reserve – to reclaim Kashmir. He has also given a People's Army model, where the border is held by semi-static fortress divisions composed largely of the Paramilitary, Territorial Army and militia with 39 divisions in 13 corps forming the strike force. His logical arguments make for a compelling reading. However, as he keeps the air force and the navy out of the gambit of force ratios, the numbers appear mere mathematical without any aggregation of the requisite effects when all the three services are applied in a synergistic manner. In the backdrop of the on-going the aterisation of the Indian Armed Forces, this sticks out like a sore thumb.

In this book, Ravi Rikhyehas also covered the famous Schlieffen Plan of 1914 of Germany to fight the two-front war against France and Russia in some detail, to build up the backdrop for a two-front war and his insights are indeed interesting. However, the author could have included some more background, maps and narrative to elucidate the problem of *mitteleuropa*, for ease of assimilation of the subject by those not having sufficient knowledge of the same and hence may miss out on some insights and linkages to India's two-front war impasse.

The economic analysis involving the GDP figures and infrastructural development and modernisation programmes has also been covered in detail at various places, supplementing the arguments being made. As per the author, India needs to spend 3-3.5 per cent of GDP for a strong defensive posture. To negotiate from strength, India needs to spend more than 4 per cent of the GDP; and to recover lost territories, the figure goes up to 6 per cent of the GDP. The author has also carried out a historical GDP and economic analysis of the three nations viz India, China and Pakistan. He infers that China and Pakistan out match India's GDP by almost six times which is a huge disparity and a cause for concern. Although the economic arguments have been covered at various places in the book, it would have been better if these facts and figures were compiled in one single chapter/appendix rather than being sprinkled all

across the book. This would have retained the coherence of narration and also provided for easy reference for the readers.

The order of battle (orbat) of the various armies, navies and air forces of the three nations has also been covered in the chapters. It is indeed commendable that the data has been compiled in detail. There are a few inaccuracies and some data needs to be updated, which the author duly acknowledges. Also, it is felt that to maintain the narrative style and coherence of the book, the orbat should have been included as an updated and accurate appendix rather than getting repeated in part or in full in a few chapters. This would have added to the comprehension and also led to easy referencing by the reader. The author has also given hypothetical situations and deployments of various divisions and corps in the book at a few places in pursuance of his arguments. This makes for interesting reading as it gives insights into the problems of fighting myriad battles along each front to secure overall victory.

It is pertinent to mention that the author has factored only the tangible force levels and carried out a mere quantitative analysis and arrived at the number of divisions required in various scenarios. The intangibles – leadership, strategy, operational art, morale, et al. could also have been covered, thereby giving the book a holistic flavour. The author has missed out on the fact that many battles and wars have been won by smaller armies based on the intangibles like proficient prosecution of operational art by the military leaders involved. Hence, mere quantified analysis – even though a good indicator of likely outcomes – may not be carved in stone. The author has also missed out on the power of technology and the ability to leverage it usefully during wars. Nonetheless, the overall analyses by the author is compelling in revealing the gross deficiencies in terms of numbers of divisions/brigades, squadrons, ships, missiles, nuclear warheads, etc. that is glaring even to a layman.

Some insights have been given by the author on cold start, firepower, attack helicopters, minefields, tank organisations, etc. while airing his

views on how to fight and win a two-front war. He has also covered aspects of intelligence collection, 'Quad' and offered his views on nuclear weapons policy and the silhouettes of the next war. However, these have not been carried through to their logical conclusions and have been discarded after a brief discussion.

The book has been written in a lucid and cogent manner. The author has given persuasive arguments to support his recommendations. However, the anecdotal references have at times provided some digression to the subject under discussion – making some parts out-of-context and irrelevant.

In the overall assessment, in this book the author deduces that fighting and winning a two-front war by India is a difficult proposition. While Rikhye offers some insights into the solutions for this impasse, however, he has failed to arrive at tangible policy recommendations for the decision-makers. Thus, the book leaves one with an unnerving feeling of an existential threat of a two-front war but sans any concrete plan to be implemented in a phased and time-bound manner to resolve the cul de sac. Nevertheless, on the whole, the book makes for a gripping read by positing some compelling arguments. The book will be essential reading for all uniformed personnel and an invaluable resource for both academics and practitioners. It will also be of good value to the students on the subject and the general public with interest in matters of defence.