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# Visualising the Context and Contours of India's Future Wars

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“Think, too, of the great part that is played by the unpredictable in war: think of it now, before you are actually committed to war. The longer a war lasts, the more things tend to depend on accidents. Neither you nor we can see into them: we have to abide their outcome in the dark. And when people are entering upon a war they do things the wrong way round. Action comes first, and it is only when they have already suffered that they begin to think.”

—Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*

## Introduction

There is a great deal of study and discussion about the character of future wars. Such a study is absolutely essential so that we are not caught in the trap of fighting the last war and finding ourselves on the losing side. However, it is also recognised that predicting future conflicts is not the easiest of tasks. Perhaps we can heed the words of Michael Howard, the eminent military historian, who said, that, “the purpose of

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future gazing in war is not to get it right but to avoid getting it terribly wrong”.

In assessing the future, we must analyse ongoing conflicts as these provide the best possible lessons in a live environment that cannot be replicated in wargames and exercises. However, we must also be mindful that wars occur in specific political, geographic, and strategic settings. What happens in one context may not be directly applicable in another. When the US was engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was predicted that the future of warfare would be insurgencies and countering terrorism. Wars between states were considered unlikely, with the greatest danger of such a war primarily in the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>1</sup> The traditional thinking in the Indian military leadership was that conventional wars would be “short and swift.”<sup>2</sup>

The Russia-Ukraine war in Europe has upended much of this thinking. Conventional wars between large, well-equipped militaries are no longer considered improbable. The US 2022 National Defense Strategy talks about developing “new operational concepts and enhanced future warfighting capabilities against potential PRC aggression.”<sup>3</sup> The war in Ukraine has also brought in observations about this being “the final war of 20th-century militaries,” with tanks, fighter jets, and warships “being pushed into obsolescence, giving way to new tools of conflict.”<sup>4</sup> Others argue that it is premature to declare that the era of large military platforms is over.

“Hybrid Warfare” is another term that is increasingly being used, although many strategists have argued that the combination of conventional and unconventional strategies is as old as war itself. However, the success of the Russian strategy in the invasion of Crimea in 2014 rekindled interest in the study of hybrid wars. Between insurgencies and all-out wars lies the “Grey Zone” conflict that seeks to achieve victory while remaining below the threshold of a conventional war. This is likely to be the preferred instrument of both strong and weak powers,

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as deterring such conflicts is infinitely more complicated.

Emerging technologies have always shaped warfare and driven innovation in tactics, influenced doctrines, and led to a change in warfighting strategies. Artificial Intelligence (AI), autonomous weapons, cyber resilience, unmanned systems, information dominance, hypersonics, and quantum computing have the potential to change the character of wars. However, technology alone is not a ‘silver bullet’ as evidenced by the US’s inability to achieve victories in its campaigns in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

In this uncertain milieu, what will India’s future wars look like? As stated earlier, wars occur in a specific geopolitical context, against specific adversaries, and with specific political objectives. Therefore, it would be appropriate to look at these aspects as these would determine how India will likely fight its wars.

### **Geopolitical Factors**

Geopolitical tensions are on the rise. In South Asia, India-China relations are at their lowest point in the last three decades, and India-Pakistan relations have never been worse since the 2008 Mumbai terror attack. On the Line of Control (LOC) between India and Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir, firing across the border by both armies was routine, but 2019 saw India using air power to strike terrorist camps in Pakistan. Pakistan Air Force responded the next day, hitting targets across the LOC and capturing an Indian pilot. Escalation was narrowly avoided as both countries claimed victory, but this crisis showed that restraints on the use of military force had loosened.<sup>5</sup>

In May 2020, the PLA moved large forces across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh, in some cases intruding into areas that India

considered on its side of the LAC. Clashes in June led to the death of 20 Indian soldiers, the first fatal casualties in an India-China clash since 1975. The situation has not yet been completely resolved three and a half years later. Meanwhile, both armies have moved in additional troops, strengthened defences, improved infrastructure, and view each other with suspicion. Even if the current crisis is defused, the breakdown of Confidence Building Measures and the lack of trust means tensions will persist along the LAC.

The US-China great power rivalry has also intensified and will increasingly play out in the Indo-Pacific. The US Indo-Pacific strategy clearly identifies China as the main adversary, stating, “The PRC’s coercion and aggression span the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific. From the economic coercion of Australia to the conflict along the Line of Actual Control with India to the growing pressure on Taiwan and bullying of neighbors in the East and South China Seas, our allies and partners in the region bear much of the cost of the PRC’s harmful behavior.” In this strategy, the US proposes to “steadily advance our Major Defense Partnership with India and support its role as a net security provider.”<sup>6</sup>

Many Chinese strategic scholars see the deepening of India-US ties as an attempt to contain the rise of China.<sup>7</sup> India professes ‘strategic autonomy’ and is unlikely to be drawn into a military alliance with the US, but suspicions in China about India’s future intentions will remain. China is dismissive of India’s aspirations to become a major power and could initiate a sharp border conflict as a warning to both India and the US.

### **India’s Military Adversaries**

India’s future wars will likely be with Pakistan and China, two adversaries with whom it has previously fought and with whom the likelihood of complete normalcy remains elusive. Pakistan has a professional, well-

trained military with adequate experience from its deployments along the LOC and in counterterrorism operations. While it cannot match India's conventional superiority, it feels it can hold its own in a limited conflict.

The Pakistan Army views its struggle with India in existential terms. In the words of C. Christine Fair, "For Pakistan's men on horseback, not winning, even repeatedly, is not the same thing as losing. But simply giving up and accepting the status quo and India's supremacy, is, by definition, defeat."<sup>8</sup> This simply means that Pakistan is unlikely to give up its calibrated strategy of using terror groups to stir up violence in Jammu and Kashmir.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is slowly transforming into a formidable military force. The PLA Navy (PLAN) is the largest in the world, with a battle force of approximately 355 platforms. It is estimated that the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) will become a majority fourth-generation force within the next several years. In addition, PLAAF has one of the world's largest forces of advanced surface-to-air missile systems. The *Director of National Intelligence Annual Threat Assessment 2021* assesses that "China presents a prolific and effective cyber-espionage threat, possesses substantial cyber-attack capabilities, and presents a growing influence threat."<sup>9</sup>

The PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) has seen an unprecedented expansion between 2017 and 2019, growing from 29 missile brigades to 40.<sup>10</sup> China has also reportedly tested a hypersonic glide vehicle that flew through low-orbit space and circled the globe before striking within two dozen miles of its target.<sup>11</sup> China's Military-Civil Fusion strategy has deepened the interaction between China's military and civil research and commercial sectors, enabling the rapid induction of technology into the PLA.

Despite these impressive achievements, the PLA will still face serious geographical constraints in a conflict with India. The Himalayan watershed, across which operations would be conducted, is a formidable

obstacle. Logistics, terrain, and a strong Indian Army deployment would limit quick success. In the maritime domain, India has a dominant position in the Northern Indian Ocean. For the PLAN to operate in the Indian Ocean, it will have to overcome its weaknesses in Maritime Domain Awareness, tactical air cover, communication infrastructure, and strategic anti-submarine warfare.<sup>12</sup>

### **Political Objectives**

Political objectives will ultimately determine the military objective and the amount of force required to achieve it. In visualising India's future wars, the starting point should therefore be to look at India's political objectives.

The most likely scenario for an India-Pakistan war is one in which India initiates a military conflict in retaliation for a major terror attack. The Indian government's objective would be to demonstrate its resolve and deter Pakistan from supporting terrorist activities. The limited force would be applied in the first instance, with a readiness to escalate if Pakistan responds militarily.

In an India-China war, which in most cases would be initiated by China, the Chinese leadership would not wish to engage in a war that would require a significant shift in forces from its primary focus on Taiwan and the South and East China Sea toward Tibet. A short, pedagogic war would be preferable. India's political objective would be to impose punishing costs that would limit China's military success and deter it from having expansive war aims.

While the political aim would be to achieve success without engaging in a costly all-out war, there is great unpredictability in the outcome. Factors like notions of victory and defeat, the stance of the leadership, nationalistic fervour, and public sentiment could lead to uncontrolled escalation. The Indian military must be prepared for this contingency.

## **Nuclear Overhang**

Any potential conflict in South Asia would be waged between nuclear-armed countries. The nuclear factor will play out differently in wars with Pakistan and China, but it will have one common impact—restraint on the use of military force.

An India-China conflict will mostly play out along the contested land border. This is mainly unpopulated, barren terrain that needs to be defended on the grounds of territorial sovereignty but has limited strategic value. As long as the war remains controlled and geographically confined, nuclear weapons will not come into play. However, the nuclear factor cannot be completely ignored if there is an all-out war, vital national interests are threatened, large population centres are targeted, key trade routes are blocked, etc.

India's conventional military superiority has led Pakistan to adopt a strategy of 'Full Spectrum Deterrence' that envisages the possession of "full spectrum of nuclear weapons in all three categories—strategic, operational and tactical, with full range coverage of the large Indian land mass and its outlying territories."<sup>13</sup> In an address at the Centre for International Strategic Studies in February 2020, Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai, Advisor, National Command Authority of Pakistan, stated that "Pakistan has ensured seamless integration between nuclear strategy and conventional military strategy, in order to achieve the desired outcomes in the realms of peacetime deterrence, pre-war deterrence, as also in intra-war deterrence."<sup>14</sup>

Many scholars in India dismiss Pakistan's nuclear threats as a mere bluff and believe that space exists below the nuclear threshold for a conventional conflict. However, the scale and scope of this conflict have to be considered. Even if the military is prepared to conduct large-scale combat operations against Pakistan, the Indian government would perhaps prefer to start with limited action, as has been witnessed in the past.

## **Role of Technology**

The PLA has made impressive gains in adopting military technology and is pursuing several advanced military capabilities with disruptive potentials, such as autonomous systems, hypersonic weapons, electromagnetic railguns, directed energy weapons, and counter-space capabilities.<sup>15</sup> At the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on October 16, Xi Jinping stated that China would adhere to the integrated development of the PLA through mechanisation, informatisation, and intelligentisation.

Intelligentisation refers to the adoption of AI, and papers published in China show that PLA is seeking to use AI in four main areas. These are the autonomy of unmanned weapons, including swarm drones; processing large amounts of information through machine learning; speeding up military decision-making; and using AI in cognitive warfare.<sup>16</sup>

Influencing human cognition requires detailed personal data that enables the targeting of prominent individuals or specific groups of people. The extensive penetration of Chinese technology companies in India has given them access to a vast amount of personal data that would be available to the Chinese government.<sup>17</sup> It would be realistic to assume that China would use this data to launch sophisticated information campaigns during future conflicts.

Non-kinetic elements of warfare like electronic warfare, information warfare, and cyber warfare have gained enormous importance due to technological advances. While non-kinetic warfare cannot win battles by itself, it can reduce the requirement of costly physical engagements as the primary measure of gaining victory. This would also tie in with the political objectives of winning with the least kinetic effort.

It must also be admitted here that the Indian military has been lagging in adopting military technology in the forces. Some steps have now been taken, but deeper reforms and doctrinal changes are required to hasten the pace of technology induction.

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### **Visualising India's Future Wars**

It is not always easy to predict the future, but from the analysis carried out in this paper, some trends can be discerned. The existing geopolitical tensions, while not pointing to an imminent war, are creating an environment where the use of military force cannot be ruled out. If a conflict does break out, its broad characteristics are defined below.

### **Graduated Escalation**

- In a war with Pakistan or China, the initial use of military force is likely to be limited in line with the political objectives, as already discussed. If China initiates a conflict along the LAC, this force could still be considerable in number, employing a range of non-kinetic measures- electronic, cyber, and informational. However, it is likely to be geographically limited to the LAC due to the PLAN's current inability to operate effectively in the Indian Ocean. In the case of Pakistan, the conflict would probably start with a limited conventional strike by India in response to a major terror attack and Pakistan's counter-strike.
- India's response, in either case, would be a graduated escalation to deter or coerce the adversary from further action. The level of force and the means employed particularly the use of naval power would depend on the situation. At each level of escalation, a psychological impact is sought to be created to force the opponent to back down.
- An essential element of this strategy would be the ability to communicate our intent and demands to the adversary clearly. This helps in establishing the conditions for de-escalation and the cost of

further escalation. This communication strategy is primarily executed at the political/diplomatic level.

- There is always the danger of the escalation spinning out of control and leading to an uncontrolled, large-scale conflict. The military must be prepared for this contingency. However, from an overall perspective, the strategy adopted for a graduated escalation would be very different from the current thinking about a “cold start” or “proactive” doctrine that envisages the complete application of military power from the start of the conflict.
- The thought that wars are likely to be limited and controlled should not lull us into complacency, where we go slow on building a strong military capability. In any conflict, how the adversaries view India's military power will be essential in controlling escalation.

### **System Warfare**

- The PLA's theory of victory in modern warfare recognises the importance of system destruction warfare. Under this theory, warfare is no longer centred on the annihilation of enemy forces on the battlefield but on disrupting, paralysing, or destroying the operational capability of the enemy's operational systems.<sup>18</sup>
- In a war, the PLA would target command and control, reconnaissance, intelligence, firepower, and logistics networks, and degrade the flow of information. The aim is to create a psychological paralysis where decision-making and transmission of orders become difficult. The means used would be both kinetic and non-kinetic.
- The PLA's views on system warfare may still be developing and have not yet reached maturity, but it indicates their strategic thought process. The Indian military must also start studying this aspect and prepare for system warfare by both hardening its systems and developing offensive capabilities.

## **Information Warfare**

- An essential element of future wars will be an attempt to gain dominance in the information space. Electronic warfare and cyber-attacks will be employed to paralyse information networks. This would be combined with attacks on critical infrastructure that impact the financial, transportation, and power sectors.
- An important part of the information campaign will be the targeting of both specific individuals and the civil population at large. The availability of vast amounts of individual data, combined with advanced sensors and AI-enabled systems, has led to what is being called the ‘individualisation of war.’<sup>19</sup> New tech-enabled systems can now more easily target individual leaders, key functionaries, and even their family members, creating psychological pressure.
- Deception, fake news, disinformation, and deep fakes will be employed to spread panic and confusion among the public and undermine trust in the government. In turn, this could create pressure on the political and military leadership to make decisions meant to satiate public sentiment rather than to achieve long-term strategic goals.

## **Well-Defined Military Objectives**

- In any future conflict, it is essential to have clearly defined military objectives that will further the political objectives that have been laid down. These military objectives could be defined in terms of territory to be captured or defended, destruction of the adversary’s military capability, deterrent effects to be achieved, etc. Based on the progress of the battle or escalation levels, military objectives would need to be suitably modified.
- The military objectives will decide the strategy to be adopted. This strategy has to be a joint tri-service effort at land, sea, and air, which also incorporates other elements of military power—informational,

cyber, and space. This will require changing our current structures and processes in which individual services make operational plans with little inter-service coordination.

## Conclusion

In attempting to visualise the type of war India could be fighting in the future, it is essential to understand the geopolitical setting in which conflicts could break out, the capability of the adversaries and the likely political objectives for which the war will be waged. Keeping all aspects in view, it is likely that India's future war will be one of graduated escalation in which advanced technology and information dominance will play a key role.

This paper could be criticised on two grounds. One, is that it does not consider the possibility of an all-out war from the start of the conflict. Two, it has not fleshed out in greater detail how future warfighting would be conducted. These are matters that can be further deliberated by military planners based on political objectives, the context in which wars would be fought and the contours of such a war.

## Notes

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