
Adapting Quickly to Emerging Forms of Warfare in the Indian Context

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Abstract

The military-strategic community is awash with former practitioners, strategic thinkers, and policymakers whose job it is to look at future trends in warfare, influenced as they are by the seductive pull of the latest technological game-changer. In this cacophony of ideas and contestable claims, new means of waging war, for mostly the same old reasons, are discernible and can be grasped by strategic audiences who then look at the specific context in which some of these very ideas could fructify into doable strategic effort for a nation's overall wellbeing. This paper has tried to view the Indian strategic context without delving into too many specific recommendations for change in our policies, other than to crystallise them, or new structures in the military organisation as it exists. Instead, it tries to view this context through a wide-angle lens, searching for the pros and cons of change in the Sub-continental strategic-military future, and how our top leadership and military commanders could be better prepared, mentally as well as in material capabilities, for a war of the future.

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Introduction

Predicting the future is a perilous business, especially when it involves trying to crystal-gaze methods of warfare nations could use in order to secure national interests in a polarised and fractious 21st-century world. India is handling a decades-long proxy war with Pakistan¹ and, since May 2020, an intractable military standoff in Eastern Ladakh with China.² A military, keeping in check two ‘hand in glove’ inimical neighbours, who have not hesitated to use force for settling territorial disputes,³ and historical slights, can have a hard time peering beyond day-to-day operational challenges, and thus could be blindsided by disruption in the strategic paradigm. Such disruption may occur with the induction of better technology on the battlefield by an adversary, as also the emergence of new forms of conflict that confound traditional thinking and yet are able to achieve the same, or similar, strategic results that previous wars aimed for. It, therefore, becomes imperative that while the bulk of the Indian armed forces may ward off existing threats, there should be a cohort of civilian and military strategists along with uncommitted military forces who ideate, incubate and develop new weapons and novel techniques of warfare that could negate existing weaknesses in capabilities and give an edge over adversaries in the future. Such change is all the more necessary today when a wide array of new and ever-improving technologies, from machine learning, artificial intelligence, long-range precision strike (LRSP), hypersonic glide vehicles, cyber and space-based capabilities, et al., are touted as game changers for the future of warfare. India too needs to understand, develop and induct weapons and forces across emerging and new domains of warfare; forces that are innovative and adept at the exploitation of these new technological capabilities.

Getting it Right

However, before any identification of new warfare concepts and associated means for the execution of new doctrine, it is important to understand

certain truisms about future warfare. Sir Michael Howard has said—and I paraphrase,

“we’re never going to get the problem of future war precisely right. The key is to not be so far off the mark that you can’t adapt once the real demands of combat reveal themselves, and you need leaders who can adapt rapidly to unforeseen circumstances. They need to be able to retain the initiative as well as sustain the types of campaigns that require a broad range of capabilities.”

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The human dimension of war is immensely important for the Army as well; we need leaders who are morally, ethically, and psychologically prepared for combat and who understand why breakdowns in morals and ethics occur. In his book *The Face of Battle*, the military historian John Keegan has said that “it is towards the disintegration of human groups that battle is directed.” How sure then are we that a threat identified now will remain so in the future? Thus, will decision-makers and force planners be implementing policy based entirely on assumptions and guesswork when reworking outmoded structures or formulating new equipping guidelines force-wide, when these may make the military clumsy at handling actual threats which manifest in the near future. India, unfortunately, does not have the luxury of time or the financial leeway to make such policy errors when it comes to defence equipping. The necessity for change demands prudence and a need to stay within defined parameters (themselves difficult to identify) when it comes to implementing new doctrine and technology infusion into armed forces, which continue to hold on to archaic technology and traditional (though time-tested) structures.

Victory ultimately comes easier to nations that understand the strategic context of the conflict they are involved in, have the tenacity to stick through adversity, innovate with existing systems to get better results, adapt faster to changed circumstances and are able to draw on all strategic resources to stymie a much stronger adversary.

Doctrinal Confusion

There also exists some doctrinal confusion in the minds of senior military commanders who tend to view existing perspective plans for the modernisation of forces as being synonymous with an adaptation of new warfighting methods (though an element of better exploitation is ever present in upgraded and new platforms such as combat aircraft, frontline warships, missiles, tanks long-range artillery, etc.), and hence they are likely to misread or ignore the real challenges posed by new warfare techniques that an adversary

like China is actively developing and testing.⁴ However, to be fair to such military minds, history does point to the fact that it is not just new warfare methodologies that are the main arbiters of war. Victory ultimately comes easier to nations that understand the strategic context of the conflict they are involved in, have the tenacity to stick through adversity, innovate with existing systems to get better results, adapt faster to changed circumstances and are able to draw on all strategic resources to stymie a much stronger adversary. The US defeat in Vietnam and the ongoing war in Ukraine are good examples of such actions by committed nations battling seemingly unwinnable odds. Thus, in the Indian context as well, the need and the means for new and untested weapons systems and nascent doctrine needs to be framed against the requirement of what changes are we likely to witness in the Sub-continental strategic context over the near term.

The Indian Context

The Indian Sub-Continent last witnessed a limited war in 1999, the Kargil War, which had a restricted geographic spread, and the committal of forces was a fraction of the actual active military strength of either side. There was full-fledged mobilisation of forces during Operation Parakram (December 2001) and we've seen partial deployments with the potential to ratchet up a level or two against China in the last decade. On the whole, however, other than the ongoing Low-Intensity Conflict (LIC) in Jammu and Kashmir that engages a percentage of the Indian Army and sharp faceoffs with China, the military domain has seen a level of relative calm. And yet as the world's premier military power, the United States, withdrew from Iraq and Afghanistan, the vacuum created in the Middle East and closer home has sought to be filled by revanchist powers such as China, Russia and even Pakistan. In the Gulf, the desire to dominate events in support of national aims has seen Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran engage in not-so-subtle power plays through proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, Libya and even Lebanon. In all these smaller military conflagrations what stands out is the use of non-standard means of force generation and exploitation of fast-improving technologies such as drones, long-range missiles, small fast attack craft that are difficult to detect and neutralise, the exploitation of the ever-expanding reach and influence of social media and the vast reliance on open source intelligence (OSINT) in conjunction with traditional means to develop a superior understanding of the adversary. Each and every one of these improvements in weapons' tech and means of conducting warfare, within the context of conventional war and outside of it, is available to all protagonists (state and nonstate) involved in orchestrating violence for political ends in the Indian context.

New Warfare Concepts

War remains an extension of politics by other means in this century as much as it did in the 19th century when Carl von Clausewitz

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made this significant observation.⁵ The only change that seems to have come about is that nation-states, and non-state actors, indulge in actions loosely clubbed under Grey Zone Warfare,⁶ i.e., that nebulous space between peace and declared war. It is within this space that Indian strategists and our armed forces ought to be spending their cognitive and financial resources, to try and grasp the nuances of such warfare and develop means of negating their effects while increasing their own abilities to execute such operations when required. This is not to say that the deterrent qualities and warfighting capabilities of conventional forces ought to be reduced or neglected. It is under the positive overhang of capable conventional forces that a nation can actually bring to bear unconventional warfare capabilities that give it superior results. This is never easy to develop, or even convince regular military mindsets to actively pursue in order to induct such systems and operators over a period of time. We have seen this slow progress occur in the development and fielding of strategic capabilities in Space, Cyber and Special Operations with the raising of such headquarters and units in a very nascent form since 2018⁷ or so. Our major potential adversary China is miles ahead in these very forms of warfare as it remains focused on matching, if not exceeding, US capacity in these futuristic warfare fields. Not to be overtaken by China, the US has in the meanwhile established the Irregular Warfare Centre (IWC) which seeks to “To Strategically ILLUMINATE current and future irregular threats, crises, and obstacles; and to ADDRESS current and future irregular threats to the US, allies, and partners by providing optionality.”⁸

Information Warfare

Another field of warfare, which is as old as a war but where the tools to execute given strategies have increased exponentially, is propaganda. The means of influencing human minds in the internet age have exploded to such an extent that such influence operations are waged relentlessly, 24x7, by all interested actors and nations with consummate ease. Social Media (SM) in all its digital forms is the preferred means to put out themes for targeting audiences already predisposed to given biases. These are subtly enhanced and misdirection together with misinformation is cleverly sought to be hammered home every minute to the target set so that “mind capture” and “thought alignment” occurs very rapidly and almost permanently. While countermeasures restricting access (China’s Great Firewall is an example) are inadequate ways of limiting the debilitating effects of such warfare, Indian armed forces have to significantly up their game in the field of information warfare and propaganda so as to target the minds of enemy audiences and get them to think about the futility of actual war. This form of warfare is today morphing and changing even as we go about our daily lives, and with the development of AI tools such as ChatGPT and other forms of algorithmic manipulation, a perfect storm of cyber, information and AI-induced hypnosis, leading to a total collapse of a nation’s mental and moral faculties seems plausible to bring about in the near future.

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Cognitive Flexibility

Armies are, in the main, conservative organisations that have proven time and again to be ready for the last war when faced with new threats. This happens because of a combination of factors, some of which have been alluded to in the opening few paragraphs. One of the key causes for

such an inability to be even somewhat correct with threat identification is cognitive inflexibility. Combined with a refusal to change in the face of mounting evidence that many of the existing security strategies being relied on are ill-suited for deterring or defeating emerging threats, it becomes a lethal hurdle. The need of the hour is to have mid and senior-level military leaders who are well-versed in futuristic forms of warfare and technological advances that have the potential to seriously impact the strategic domain (AI for example). This calls for a *de novo* look at how professional military education (PME) is structured and imparted across the breadth of officers' service careers across the three Services, and how it could foster better cognitive flexibility in key military leaders when the time arrives. This sounds lofty and a bit "in the air" and yet if we do not focus on improving the intellect and cognitive bandwidth of military leaders, there will be serious resistance to recognising and adopting plans that can face up to the expected challenges of the future.

Politico-Strategic to the Operational

The idea of a nation with singularity of thinking in its security domain, from the politico-strategic (civilian) to the operational (military), is a seductive one. History however informs us that in the past when such alignment of thought occurred, nations have gone to war with little or no concern for the aftermath of their actions. The First World War, World War Two, and wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and Ukraine are among prominent examples of such alignment. However, it is pertinent to mention that there has to be clarity of thought, and a broad acknowledgement at the politico-strategic level (which in our case is that of the CCS and the NSA) as to what strategic threats a nation is likely to face. These should be spelt out in adequate detail through a National Security Strategy. It does not have to be a very voluminous document; just written with sufficient prescience to identify and broadly fix national security concerns that would have to be focused on in the coming decade

and beyond. The military hierarchy, headed by the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), could then draw out the national military strategy, or the strategic lines of effort, which joint forces require to be equipped and prepared for, drawing on their cognitive competence and a flair for assessment of required capabilities that future perspective plans can focus on. It will need frequent give and take at the level of the CDS's office and our higher-level defence organisation within the Ministry of Defence, and even the PM's Office. However, drawing upon the learned guidance of advisory bodies such as the NSCS and NSAB, as also strategic think tanks, this complete cycle of looking out a few years forward can become a prime mover for shaking conservative military organisations from their stupor. They would thus be better prepared to adapt and modify plans for a change in war-fighting strategies which are in sync with the real threat.

Grey Zone Implications

The past decade of Russian involvement in Ukraine has shown the success and pitfalls of adopting a doctrine of 'conflict below the threshold of full-scale war'. It worked in the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent slow-burn conflict that occurred in the Donbas Region.⁹ It was declared by many strategic thinkers¹⁰ that Russia had perfected the art of Grey Zone Operations and thus was a step ahead of the conventional might of NATO and the US in pursuing political aims through the scalpel-like use of force, nonstate actors and mercenaries. The subsequent build-up and launch of Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine in February 2022,¹¹ possibly under similar assumptions as earlier successes here, and its transformation into a bloody all-out war on Ukrainian territory, that shows no signs of letting up, is a warning to other nations seduced by the doctrine of Grey Zone Operations. It also has implications beyond new force structuring for strategic planners, as this war amply illustrates. It informs us that "war has a vocabulary and grammar of its own" and

thus all the crystal ball gazing and seductive pull of new forms of warfare could easily lead a nation's leaders and armed forces astray when it comes to dealing with war at the Clausewitzian level of "Politics, Chance and Passion."¹² The smart lesson here is to keep an eye out for new warfare trends and yet tinker with existing military means and a nation's warfare strategies only when serious deliberations, or actual faceoff/conflict, suggest that change is the only way forward.

Conclusion

In 1849, French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr wrote, "*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*" or "the more things change, the more they stay the same." This has been the theme running through this article. There is no denying the fact that armed forces, given their size, ethos, traditions and culture tend to resist change till external stimulus upsets their equilibrium. It is better to be forewarned of change than to confront its implications in the midst of conflict. The difficulty lies in a reasonable identification of future conflict trends and in focusing on change, within defined parameters, that should allow for an advantage in war. Twentieth century military history is replete with such examples, from the development of long-range radio communications, aerial warfare, undersea warfare, the Blitzkrieg doctrine, rocket technology, and the development of nuclear weapons, to the coming of age of the cyber warrior to name just a few. Globally, premier armed forces have adjusted to each one of these technological revolutions through a revolution in military affairs of their own. We stand on the cusp of multiple mini-revolutions in technology today. Change in how war is, or ought to be, waged, i.e., its character, is evident all around us. And yet we must acknowledge that the visceral nature of why it is waged, together with the calculus for going to war, hasn't really changed for centuries. Between these two inconsistent paradigms, nations have to keep abreast of the strategic context and induce required improvements and fresh ideas into the military mind. This has

to be done while ensuring that basic military structures are neither too rigid nor inflexible to adapt to newer threats and innovative battlefield technologies that would otherwise overcome or render obsolete one's own military strength. A large element of such flexibility lies in how the cognitive capabilities of present and future leaders, both strategic and operational, are nurtured and empowered. They are the ones who have to identify, fix and inculcate the requisite flexibility in doctrinal thought and adaptation of 'game-changing' technology that continues to grow, and at places, overwhelm human capacity. Today the blurring of lines between war and peace itself places stress on a nation's security establishment as it deals with a plethora of intertwined threats. Nations are constantly in competition with each other within the Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic paradigms. Such an ongoing scrabble to secure a country's medium to short-term interests is likely to make any rapid transition from relative peace to a sudden flare-up of fighting so much more difficult to identify and control. These are strategic conundrums that have no easy answers. Nations and their strategic thinkers have to be constantly in the geo-political arena, grasping at threads of change which could make a significant difference to existing competition and improve the chances of coming out ahead in the geo-strategic game.

Notes

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