Utility of Military Force in Achieving India's Strategic Objectives

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Abstract

Present-day conflicts present a dichotomy in the utility of military force in achieving strategic objectives. Since the end of the Cold War, decades of irregular wars over the globe suggested that conventional wars were passe. However, in the past two years, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza have brought out that prolonged conventional wars are very much possible even under a nuclear overhang. This article carries out a brief analysis of India's strategic objectives and the theoretical framework of war. It brings out the uncertainties like future wars, and how preparing for a perfect fit is impossible given the availability of resources. In this milieu using military force requires fresh but realistic thinking. When talking of Military Force for achieving strategic objectives all three Services come into play and have to be considered. This article in its first half looks at the overall Military Force and thereafter goes into the specific Army sphere. Here it gives some key recommendations to ensure as to how can India effectively manage and apply ground forces to meet the current and future conventional and asymmetric threats.

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Introduction

In the intricate tapestry of international relations and national security, the role of military force as an instrument to achieve strategic objectives is both pivotal and complex. For a nation like India, with its rich history and unique geopolitical challenges, understanding this role is not just about comprehending past and present military engagements but also about envisioning the future trajectory of its strategic planning. This article delves into the multifaceted utility of military force in shaping and achieving India's strategic objectives, offering insights into the theoretical underpinnings, historical contexts, and practical applications of military power.

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Historically, India's strategic posture has been shaped by significant military engagements, from the post-independence wars to the more recent border skirmishes and counterinsurgency operations. These events have not only tested the mettle of the Indian Armed Forces but also influenced the nation's approach to security and strategy.

Moreover, the role of military force in strategy is not static; it evolves with changing geopolitical dynamics, technological advancements, and the shifting contours of global power. Today's strategic environment demands a nuanced understanding of not just traditional warfare but also of emerging domains like cyber and space. India's journey towards modernising its military capabilities, including the push for indigenisation and innovation in defence technology, reflects an adaptation to these changes.

India's Strategic Objectives: An Overview

Understanding India's strategic objectives is critical to comprehending the utility of its military force. These objectives are multifaceted, influenced by historical legacies, geographical imperatives, and contemporary global dynamics.

Territorial Integrity and National Sovereignty

- Securing the disputed border with Pakistan and China remains a primary strategic objective. The long-standing Kashmir issue and recent skirmishes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China underscore the need for a robust defence posture.
- With a vast coastline and strategic maritime routes, safeguarding India's maritime boundaries against piracy, terrorism, and strategic encroachments is crucial. The Indian Navy plays a significant role in protecting sea lanes vital for India's trade and energy security.
- Along with the Army and Navy, the Indian Air Force ensures the defence of national air space, air and space domain, contributing to the defence of national territory and defence of maritime areas.

Regional Stability and Power Projection

- India aims to maintain a position of influence in South Asia, managing relations with neighbours like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan. This involves a mix of diplomatic engagement and military readiness.
- Strengthening ties with Southeast Asian and East Asian nations as part of the 'Act East Policy'—both economically and strategically—to counterbalance China's influence in the region.

Global Positioning and International Relations

- Active participation in the United Nations and other international bodies to promote its strategic interests, including its long-standing

goal of becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

- Building strategic partnerships with key global players like the United States, Russia, and European countries, balancing relations with China, and engaging with emerging economies in Africa and Latin America.

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Economic Growth and Security

- India wishes to grow economically and technologically to power the resources needed for the betterment of its people and to build a comprehensive security apparatus.
- Ensuring the security of energy supplies, particularly oil and gas imports, which are essential for India's growing economy.

Combating Terrorism and Insurgency

- Addressing internal security challenges, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast states, where insurgencies and terrorism have been long-standing issues.
- A significant aspect of India's strategic objective is to prevent and respond to terrorism emanating from across its borders.

India's strategic objectives reflect its aspirations to safeguard national interests, maintain regional stability, and assert its role on the global stage. Achieving these objectives requires a coordinated and collaborative effort across various institutions, encompassing both government and non-government entities. Each institution plays a specific role, contributing its unique capabilities and expertise to the collective goal.

The military's role in achieving strategic objectives is pivotal among the various institutions, requiring a balance between defence preparedness, diplomatic engagement, and economic development.

Utility of Military Force: A Theoretical Framework

The utility of military force in achieving strategic objectives has been a cornerstone of international relations and national security strategy. The debate about the utility of military force in the modern world is complex. In recent times, with militaries increasingly engaged in conflicts characterised by irregular warfare and complex socio-political dynamics, questions have been raised about the effectiveness of traditional military forces. On the other hand, the war in Ukraine has brought renewed attention to the relevance of conventional wars.

In his book "The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World," the author Rupert Smith argues that there is limited effectiveness of traditional military power in contemporary conflicts. Smith posits that the era of industrial warfare, characterised by state-on-state conflicts, has given way to "war amongst the people," where military engagements are often within states, involving non-state actors, and amidst civilian populations.[1] The utility of conventional military force in such scenarios is limited, as these conflicts demand more nuanced approaches, blending military, political, and humanitarian efforts.

In a similar vein, Mary Kaldor, in her book, "New and Old Wars," argues that in 'new wars', the lines between war, organised crime, and large-scale violations of human rights are blurred. These conflicts are rooted in identity politics and often financed through globalised networks, making traditional military responses less effective.[2]

In "The Limits of Power," Andrew Bacevich highlights the significant human and economic costs of military interventions, especially in protracted conflicts. He argues that reliance on military solutions often overlooks political, social, and economic dimensions, leading to unsustainable

outcomes.[3] Conversely, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine demonstrates the continuing relevance of conventional military force. The Ukrainian resistance, bolstered by military aid, has shown that conventional armed forces remain crucial in state defence against aggression. The conflict underscores the importance of a well-equipped and trained military in deterring aggression and defending sovereignty. Even if we assume that there is a reduction in the number of large-scale wars against nations, there are compelling justifications for retaining strong conventional forces grounded in strategic, political, and security considerations.

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In "Arms and Influence," Thomas Schelling argues that military force is a deterrent against potential aggressors.[4] The mere presence of a substantial military can dissuade adversaries from initiating conflict, thereby maintaining stability. In a world where threats are unpredictable, a credible military force acts as a powerful deterrent.

John J. Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, articulated in "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics," suggests that great powers are inherently cautious of each other due to the anarchic nature of the international system.[5] Maintaining substantial military capabilities is necessary for survival in a system where power dynamics can shift unexpectedly and potential threats can emerge rapidly.

Considering these arguments, it can be said that despite a decrease in traditional wars between nations, the continued maintenance of large military forces is justified by the need for deterrence and preparation for uncertain geopolitical shifts. However, military forces should be prepared

to play a multifaceted role that extends beyond the conventional battlefield, addressing non-traditional security threats, humanitarian interventions, disaster response, keeping pace with technological advancements in warfare, and contributing to national soft power.

Utility of Military Force in the Indian Context

The effectiveness and implications of using military power hinge on two fundamental principles: deterrence and compellence. Deterrence is about preventing an adversary from taking an undesirable action. It is based on the premise of a credible threat, where the cost of action for the adversary outweighs any potential gain. India's strategy against China is one of deterrence. India has primarily relied on its conventional military strength to deter China from military action through a robust deployment along the LAC, advantages of air operations over Tibet, and a dominant naval position in the Indian Ocean.

India's development of nuclear weapons can also be viewed through this lens. The overt nuclearisation in 1998, demonstrated by the Pokhran-II tests, was a strategic move to deter both regional adversaries and project power on a global scale. India's nuclear doctrine, which includes a no-first-use policy and a focus on a credible minimum deterrent, reflects a strategic posture aimed not at aggression but at ensuring territorial integrity and preventing external coercion.

Compellence, on the other hand, involves forcing an adversary to take a specific action. It's more direct and often involves active military engagement. The Indian military's role in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War is an example of compellence. India's military intervention, which was pivotal in the creation of Bangladesh, was a strategic move that altered the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. This intervention illustrates how military force can be used to compel a change in the status quo, aligning with national strategic objectives. Recent cross-border actions by India in

2016 and 2019 can also be seen as forms of compellence to bring about a change in Pakistan's strategy of using terrorism as a tool against India. As long as Pakistan's behaviour does not undergo a change, India will continue to use sub-conventional tools to pressurise Pakistan.

Viewed in a historical context, Indian military forces must be prepared for a broad spectrum of military activities, from surgical operations to limited wars to full-scale conflicts. India has engaged in all these types of conflicts since independence and has the capability and experience to undertake such military operations.

Moreover, the counterinsurgency operations in Jammu and Kashmir and parts of Northeast India showcase a different dimension of the military's role in achieving strategic objectives. These operations are not about outright warfare but about maintaining sovereignty, ensuring internal security, and managing asymmetric threats. The Indian Army's role in these regions underscores the complexity of using military force, where the lines between combat and non-combat scenarios are often blurred.

In understanding the utility of military force, it's also essential to consider the evolving character of warfare. Cyber warfare, space capabilities, and unmanned systems are reshaping the strategic landscape. India's push towards modernisation and adaptation, including the establishment of the Defence Cyber Agency and the Defence Space Agency, reflects an understanding of these changing dynamics.

One can say that the utility of military force in achieving strategic objectives is multifaceted. It involves a mix of deterrence, compellence, and adapting to the changing character of warfare. Historical examples from India's military engagements provide tangible insights into how these concepts are applied in practice. As global dynamics evolve, so will the strategies that govern the use of military force, requiring continuous adaptation and reassessment.

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Indian Army: Adapting for Conventional and Asymmetric Threats

The effective application of military force is contingent upon a multitude of factors that span strategic planning, operational execution, technological capabilities, and broader political considerations. The utility of military force in this context is not merely a matter of deploying troops or showcasing military might; it's about how effectively this force is integrated into the broader framework of India's strategic vision. This is explained in the succeeding paragraphs.

Clear and Achievable Objectives and Civil-Military Synergy

Military force should be used with clear, well-defined, and achievable objectives. Ambiguity in goals can lead to mission creep, inefficiency, and prolonged conflicts. Military objectives must also align with broader political goals. The disconnect between political aims and military objectives can undermine the overall effectiveness of military action.

The current national security decision-making architecture has no military advisor to the National Security Council and the Cabinet Committee on Security. It is suggested that the role of the Chief of Defence Staff be revised to become the Principal Military Advisor to both these bodies, in addition to the Raksha Mantri.

For internal conflicts like Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast, where the army is actively involved, there is a need for a comprehensive politico-military strategy that will lead to a lasting resolution. There is little joint planning in the Ministries of Home Affairs and Defence, often resulting in the army saying that their job is limited to controlling

violence levels, while steps for final resolution are the responsibility of the political leadership. The political leadership certainly has the final say, but as mentioned earlier, military actions must align with political goals and cannot be conducted in isolation.

With the LAC heating up considerably since 2020, the management of the northern borders needs a review. The current arrangement of two forces—the army and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police—deployed along the LAC and reporting to two different ministries goes against the very principle of "One Border, One Force" espoused by the government. The Indian Army should be in complete control of the LAC.

Formulating an Indian Army Doctrine

Considering the variety of challenges facing the Indian Army, there is a need to prepare a fresh doctrine that provides a fundamental set of principles and strategies that guide the Army in its operations. The doctrine will establish a common intellectual framework that helps members of the army understand their roles and the nature of their operations. It will ensure consistency in approach and decision-making across different levels of command.

The doctrine will provide the basis for developing specific strategies and tactics. It will assist in planning how to employ forces effectively in various scenarios, considering potential adversaries and the nature of the battlefield. It will also shape the training regimes and preparedness, determining essential skills and knowledge and how soldiers should be trained to face current and future threats.

In framing the military doctrine, the following aspects must be kept in view:

- The doctrine should align with India's broader national security objectives and foreign policy goals. It must support the overall strategic interests and values of the nation.

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• It should be based on a realistic assessment of current and potential future threats. This includes understanding the capabilities and strategies of potential adversaries.

• The doctrine must consider the impact of technological advancements on warfare. This includes cyber warfare, unmanned systems, artificial intelligence, and other emerging technologies.

• The doctrine should address both conventional warfare against state actors and asymmetric warfare, which includes counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations.

• With the increasing importance of joint and combined operations, the doctrine should facilitate integration and interoperability.

• The development of doctrine should involve a diverse range of perspectives, including military leaders, strategists, technologists, and academics, to ensure a comprehensive and forward-looking framework.

Force Structure and Technology

The issues of force structure and technology have to be seen together because there is often a debate on boots on the ground vs. technology. This debate reflects the evolving nature of military strategy and the complex requirements of modern conflicts. Boots on the ground and technology are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. Ground forces are crucial for holding territory along the disputed borders, interacting with local populations, and conducting operations where a physical presence is indispensable. However, technology enhances the capabilities of these forces and can often reduce the need for large deployments.

The relevance of either approach depends on the nature of the conflict. In conventional state-to-state warfare, technology plays a critical role in gaining superiority. In counterinsurgency operations, the presence of ground troops can be more effective in establishing control and building trust among local populations. The Indian Army faces both types of challenges.

While technology offers significant advantages, it is not infallible. Adversaries can develop countermeasures, and technologies can fail or be limited in specific environments. Ground forces provide a level of resilience and adaptability that technology alone cannot. The use of technology, especially autonomous weapons and drones, raises ethical questions. Being more discernible, humans offer more transparent lines of responsibility. Thus, a hybrid approach that effectively integrates technology with boots on the ground will be the most effective strategy. The Indian Army must study this with an open mind. The current force structures are largely a World War II legacy and need to be reorganised with greater technology adoption, leading to leaner units. The army no longer has the luxury to continue with current force levels where revenue costs prevent significant modernisation.

Internal Security Role

The Indian Army has continuously been deployed in an internal security role since independence. Today, it is combating insurgency and terrorism in the Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir. There has been a significant drawdown of the army from the Northeast, but large forces are still deployed in Jammu and Kashmir.

There were some reports in early 2023 that the Union government was considering a proposal to withdraw the Indian Army completely from the hinterland, with a presence only on the Line of Control (LoC).[6] The proposal seems to have been put on the back burner after an increase in violence in the Jammu region, but a long-term view needs to be taken.

There could be some reservations about drawing down the RR force, India's most experienced counterterrorism force for Jammu and Kashmir. However, some hard decisions need to be taken on how the Indian Army should be structured and equipped for its future challenges.

The army is facing manpower pressures, exacerbated by the enhanced deployment of troops along the LAC to handle the crisis that erupted in 2020 in Eastern Ladakh. Drawing down on internal security duties would allow the army to right-size its force structure. The army is already thinking along these lines, considering reducing the Rashtriya Rifles (RR) companies in a unit from six to four and disbanding some of the sector and force headquarters.

The first step should be a comprehensive and level-headed discussion between the Home and Defence ministries on the security situation in Jammu and Kashmir. If circumstances are favourable, the army could hand over internal security duties to the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in a phased manner. The start could be made in the Jammu region, where the CRPF takes over the complete responsibility for counterterrorism operations. A few RR units could be kept as a reserve for any contingency that may arise. After the stabilisation of the CRPF deployment in the Jammu region, the second phase could be the handover of the Kashmir hinterland to the CRPF, with the bulk of RR units being disbanded, except for a few that could act as reserves.

There could be some reservations about drawing down the RR force, India's most experienced counterterrorism force for Jammu and Kashmir. However, some hard decisions need to be taken on how the Indian Army should be structured and equipped for its future challenges. The terrorist incident upsurge South of the Pir Panjal in 2023 should be seen as something which can justify delaying this drawing down,

but not as something which should postpone it indefinitely. To retain its counterterrorism expertise, the army must look at strengthening and expanding the capabilities of its Special Forces. Reducing internal security duties does not mean the army focuses purely on conventional warfighting. Future wars will be hybrid in nature, a multifaceted conflict that combines traditional military tactics with irregular

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methods, such as cyber-attacks, misinformation, and proxy forces. Army forces will have to be suitably structured to meet these threats.

Information Operations

Information operations (IO) are increasingly recognised as a critical element in future wars, given the growing importance of information and communication technologies in both civilian and military realms. The US Department of Defense defines the information environment as the "aggregate of social, cultural, linguistic, psychological, technical, and physical factors that affect how humans and automated systems derive meaning from, act upon, and are impacted by information, including the individuals, organisations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate or use information."

The military strategy for fighting in the information domain should be dynamic, adaptable, and forward-looking, recognising the rapidly evolving nature of technology and the information landscape. It should be an integral part of overall military planning, reflecting the increasing importance of the information domain in modern warfare.

To develop robust capabilities in information operations, the Indian Army must undertake the following measures:

- Formulate doctrines specific to information operations that outline strategic approaches, tactics, and rules of engagement. This must lead to strategies that integrate information operations with traditional kinetic military actions to enhance overall operational effectiveness.
- Identify and understand the target audiences, including adversary forces, local populations, and the international community. Craft clear and persuasive messages to influence the perceptions and behaviours of target audiences, supporting overall military objectives.
- Develop capabilities for conducting cyber-attacks to disrupt, degrade, or destroy adversary information systems and networks. Strengthen cybersecurity measures to protect military infrastructure from cyber threats.
- Build robust IT infrastructure that supports advanced data analytics, secure communication, and network operations. Indigenous solutions must replace foreign hardware and software in the infrastructure.
- Invest in technologies and methodologies for advanced intelligence gathering, including signals intelligence (SIGINT), human intelligence (HUMINT), geospatial intelligence (GEOINT), and open-source intelligence (OSINT).
- Consider creating specialised units for information operations, including cyber warfare, electronic warfare, and psychological operations. Foster cross-domain expertise in these units to integrate information operations with conventional military capabilities.

Conclusion

In synthesising the intricate relationship between military force and India's strategic objectives, it becomes evident that the country's approach to national security is as dynamic as it is deliberate. India's history, geographic realities, economic ambitions, and evolving global security milieu necessitate a military force that is robust, ready and reflective of the nation's strategic vision.

The historical tapestry of India's military engagements, from post-independence wars to present-day border conflicts and counterinsurgency operations, highlights a trajectory of growth and adaptation. The evolution of India's military doctrine, particularly in response to its nuclear policy and the challenges of conventional and asymmetric warfare, reveals an astute understanding of the strategic calculus required to navigate an increasingly complex global arena. It must now show similar adaptability to the emerging character of warfare.

In an era marked by complex security challenges, India's strategic objectives necessitate a military force that is versatile, technologically advanced, and strategically aligned with national goals. In achieving this aim, the development of a comprehensive Indian Army Doctrine responsive to both traditional and asymmetric threats is crucial. This doctrine must be grounded in the realities of modern warfare, including the pivotal role of information operations. Balancing 'boots on the ground' with cutting-edge technology, the Indian Army must be equipped to confront the spectrum of potential conflicts, from border skirmishes to cyber threats. As India positions itself on the global stage, its military prowess, underpinned by strategic foresight and innovative doctrine, will be instrumental in securing its sovereignty and regional stability.

Notes

1. Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (Penguin, 2006).
2. Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford University Press, 2012).
3. Andrew J Bacevich,*The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (American Empire Project, 2005).
4. Thomas C Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Yale University Press, 2020).
5. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2014).
6. Deeptiman Tiwary, "Government Considers Phased Withdrawal of Army From Valley Hinterland", *Indian Express*, February 21, 2023, at https://indianexpress.com/article/india/govt-considers-phased-withdrawal-of-army-from-valley-hinterland-8455146/