
Imperatives of Transformation: Changing Character of Conflict in the Emerging World Order

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The character of war in the 21st century has changed, and if we fail to keep pace with the speed of war, we will lose the ability to compete.

— General Joe Dunford, 19th Chairman of the
US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017¹

Introduction

It is extremely difficult to crystal-gaze and predict the future with certainty. In hindsight, one can say that the rapid changes in the geo-political, economic, social, cultural and technological domains have had a profound impact on the emerging geo-strategic environment. With a plethora of disruptive technologies, the unknown effects of emerging technologies, asymmetric threats and the revolution in autonomous systems and communications, the global environment has been in a state of continuous change and flux. Resultantly, the envisaged threats and challenges to national security, both traditional and non-traditional, have also undergone significant change. The complexities of which need to be analysed in order to formulate the future course of action. Factors such as external security threats, religious and ethnic extremism, population growth and unemployment, societal tensions, severe competition for natural resources, climate change and environmental degradation are likely to ensure that

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armed conflicts will persist, perhaps with greater intensity. To say so, in a large number of cases, trans-national neighbouring forces and non-state actors have been indulging in abetting insurgencies, terrorism, violence and organised crime, thus, perpetuating instability and conflicts.

The great powers such as the United States (US), China and Russia, continue to compete fiercely for gaining advantage in the political, economic, technological and strategic domains, causing a spillover effect on the stability and security of regions and countries at large. Therefore, the affected regional groups and countries must certainly review the threats and challenges to their national security.

Given this context, although it is difficult to predict the future, it becomes imperative to determine the future course of action for the Indian armed forces. Wherein, prudence lies in examining the envisaged threats and challenges. In doing so, the article seeks to examine the emerging strategic environment under three aspects: first, the emerging world order; second, the changing character of conflict which is closely associated with the nature of war/conflict; and, third, the internal, external and hybrid threats and challenges to national security in the Indian context. This three-fold assessment will then help provide possible answers to whether India needs to carry out some reforms in terms of modernisation or transformation of the armed forces and its security apparatus.

Balance of Power and Concept of Polarity

The concept of polarity is an important aspect of the emerging world order. It is a key determinant of the balance of power, which enables us to analyse the influence of a state at the global as well as regional level. In simple terms, polarity refers to the ways in which ‘power’ is distributed in the international system, that defines the balance of power as being unipolar, bipolar or multipolar in nature. Fundamentally, it refers to the influence of a nation over others because of its economic, military, political, cultural and diplomatic power. In the current environment, it

may be prudent to add factors such as technological advancement and culture of innovations that provide extra leverage and influence over other nations. To add, the geo-strategic location of a country and its natural resources are also argued to exert influence on others. On balance, it may perhaps be correct to say that the status of the Comprehensive National Power (CNP) of a country would be a major factor that provides extra leverage to influence other nation(s).²

In International Relations (IR), the concept of polarity remains highly debated. Kenneth Waltz, in his seminal work *Theory of International Politics* specifies that a “stable world precludes unipolarity” (Waltz, 1979).³ However, Waltz’s theory was proved wrong within 12 years when a unipolar world came into effect. Similarly, in assessing a bipolar world, a number of scholars agree that a bipolar world is likely to be more stable, wherein, the nation states tend to align themselves with a bigger power, for reasons like ideology, survival, appeasement and taking care of their national interests. Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State had posited that the economic integration of the world was already leading to a multipolar world.

Subsequently, according to reports published by the US intelligence in 2008, it was reiterated that the world is likely to head towards multipolarity in the next two decades. However, it is well established that the economy alone, though a vital component, does not have the power to influence other nations. Recently, Shiv Shankar Menon, former Foreign Secretary of India, suggested “strategic autonomy” as the way forward for India, and that we should adjust to the fast changing balance of power and correlation of forces around us.⁴ While considering our threats and capabilities, we must remember that India, as on date, is heavily dependent on energy (hydrocarbons), high technology and defence equipment from other countries. This makes it imperative for India to achieve self-reliance mainly in the latter two fields, to emerge as an undisputed regional power.

Whether the world moves to a unipolar or bipolar or to a multipolar order, the transition would certainly witness a certain amount of flux and instability. It does not refer only to geo-political volatility but also instability in the economy, investment and trade. Likewise, violent non-state actors and state-sponsored terrorism may become more active, leading to further volatility. As the 2019 World Economic Forum suggested, a new multipolar order, with the US and China at its centre, is the new reality, however, with this shift from a unipolar to a multipolar reality, the international system itself would be exposed to profound instability.⁵

Emerging New World Order

No truly global “World Order” has ever existed.

— Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, 2014⁶

To analyse the emerging world order, it becomes imperative to understand the changing dynamics in the regional and global environments—particularly the developments in West Asia and North Africa (WANA), North Korea, South Asia, China and Russia—as also the security threats and the flashpoints in different regions. Some of the recent events that bear testimony to an uncertain and complex global environment are; the US pullout from the multi-layered Iranian nuclear deal called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and reimposition of sanctions on Iran; the US sanctions on Russia; the US-China trade war and China’s efforts to offset the trade imbalance; the US pull-out from the Paris climate change agreement, and threats to move out of the World Trade Organisation (WTO); and the expected turmoil due to Brexit. West Asia has remained unstable due to the rivalry for regional dominance, intra-regional armed conflicts, civil wars, sectarian and ethnic conflicts, religious fundamentalism, criminal networks and drug trafficking—making the region highly volatile.

In addition, the world has also witnessed large fluctuations in oil prices, and the financial crises in Venezuela, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. Venezuela, with the largest proven oil reserves, has been affected by economic and political crises. Two important events relating to Saudi Arabia—the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the colossal humanitarian crisis in Yemen post the Saudi-led offensives—have affected the stability in the region. President Trump’s announcement to pull out US troops from Afghanistan and Syria, followed by another statement that he agreed “100 per cent” with maintaining a small troop presence in Syria, has added to the complexity of the situation. The US has made an all-out effort to bring the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table, to stabilise the situation and to pull out its troops.

However, amongst all this is China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), covering different sectors and regions, and its likely impact has caught the attention of all stakeholders—political leaders, economists, political scientists and the strategic communities at large. In response to the US “terrorism designation” of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, Iran’s Parliament overwhelmingly approved a Bill labelling the US forces in West Asia as terrorists.⁷ However, the positive trends in 2017-19 were the success against the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria (especially the March 22, 2019, victory against the IS in Baghouz, Syria), and the two rounds of talks—though unsuccessful—on the Korean peninsula peace process. These developments in the global scenario reflect the emerging unstable world.

Major Global Trends

It is a noted fact that the end of World Wars I and II had brought in innovative-cum-revolutionary power shifts at the global level. However, in the present time, given that the states are equipped with nuclear weapons, the world is less likely to witness any such major shifts—suggesting that the probability of total wars between the great powers in the future is rather

low. However, one cannot dismiss the power shifts that are happening at various levels, even without indulging in wars or conflicts.

Given the preeminence of the US in the global order, it has continued to be the sole superpower for the last three decades, primarily because it is leading the world in the economy, military power, science, technology and innovations. Besides its advantageous size, location and an abundance of natural resources, it also controls the seas, air space and outer space. These attributes qualify it to be the sole superpower for a few more years, however, with the rise of Asia and the resurgence of Russia, US supremacy is likely to face major challenges in the future.

With the shift of the economic centre of gravity from the West to the East, there has been a corresponding increase in the strategic significance of Asia, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Indo-Pacific region. With the rise of China and India, the Asian region has experienced rapid changes in the geo-political and geo-economic landscapes. At the same time, this region faces a large number of challenges like the presence of nuclear armed states, territorial disputes on land as well on the seas, insurgencies, terrorism, piracy, security of the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), illegal migrations, demographic inversion, displacement of people, drug trafficking, etc. All these challenges could well be sources of conflicts in the future.

Of all, the most defining trend of the 21st century has been the rise of China, characterised by its rapid economic growth, replacing Japan as the second largest world economy in 2010. According to Arvind Subramanian, China is likely to become the largest economy of the world by 2030. Adding to China's changing profile is the transformation—not just the modernisation—of its armed forces. China is not only upgrading its weapon platforms, but is also examining the whole gamut of transformation, and streamlining jointness, command and control structures.

As noted, ever since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012 wherein Chinese President Hu Jintao called for China to become a “maritime power”, Beijing has constantly reiterated

the same, as witnessed in the 2015 White Paper on “China’s Military Strategy” and by President Xi Jinping in April 2018. China is engaged in modernising its maritime power, with greater focus on constructing the third aircraft carrier and developing ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), the sea-based nuclear deterrent.⁸ This quest is further strengthened with Xi Jinping’s consolidation of power in the CPC, in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and in the Central Military Commission (CMC), with an infinite tenure. This also explains that with China’s growing ambitions of becoming a world power, it has become increasingly assertive in its actions, though not necessarily aggressive at the moment. However, there is a thin dividing line between being assertive and being aggressive.

Important issues that concern India are: first, the strategic encirclement of India, which has got a boost with China’s BRI; second, the territorial and boundary disputes; third, the transgressions that take place on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the tension that builds up between the two countries (the positive aspect post Wuhan Summit in 2018 is that there has been a certain decline in the transgressions on the LAC); and fourth, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In developing the CPEC through Pakistan Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (PoJK), China has increased its presence by positioning its security personnel in Gilgit and Baltistan, and, as more recently reported, in the Thar region of Sindh province. This demands an analysis of its impact on the region as a whole and on India in particular.

During the last two decades, China and Russia have been resisting the US-led international order. In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia,⁹ and in March 2014, Russia annexed Crimea in Eastern Ukraine.¹⁰ Similarly, China, over the years, has progressively continued to be more assertive in the South China Sea and East China Sea. To secure the SLOCs and for other strategic reasons, China has maintained the presence of at least six to eight ships in and around the Gulf of Aden (Indian Ocean) for over a decade. From 2013 onwards, China has had its submarines operating in the Indian

Ocean, ostensibly in an anti-piracy role. With such actions and development of ports and bases, China has made significant inroads into the Indian Ocean, Asia and Africa. In fact, in the past decade, both Russia and China have invested heavily in their armed forces, and have built effective Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2AD) capabilities.¹¹ In the future, more countries may start adopting such measures to deny access to certain sensitive regions.

At the global level, another characteristic trend that has emerged is that of ‘enhanced national interest’. It has been witnessed in expressions like ‘America First’, ‘Make in India’, and ‘Chinese Dream’, to name a few. Simultaneously, regional organisations are becoming far more predominant in their roles, functioning and effectiveness, in comparison to some of the international institutions. Most importantly, in the emerging world order, the economic security of a nation has become pivotal to the national interests and national security. Undisputedly, a strong economy is considered to be one of the most powerful weapons. Likewise, geo-economics is certainly driving the world over geo-politics, which is evident from the cooperation developing among the regional organisations. It is also a fact that economic sanctions, as a tool, have been used by countries to persuade/coerce a country to undertake, or desist from taking, a specific course of action, in order to achieve political and strategic objectives. Going by the current trends and greater focus on the economy, it appears that strategic rivalries will continue to revolve around the economy, investment, trade, innovation and technology.

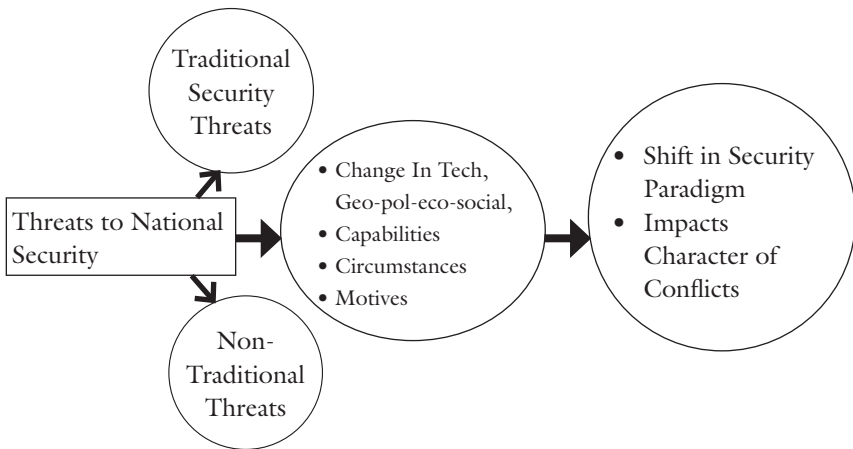
Changing Character of Conflict

Since the end of the Cold War (1991), we have witnessed changes in the nature and character of conflict the world over due to changes in the technological, economic and geo-political landscapes, and the capabilities and motives of nation states. The terms ‘nature of war’ and the ‘character of conflict’ have often been used interchangeably. The salient difference between the two needs to be understood. Carl von Clausewitz, the

Prussian General wrote in his book, *On War*, that war is the continuation of politics by other means. Traditionally, war is an act of violence and destruction. The nature of war is considered to be enduring, destructive and interactive. Fundamentally, it is political in nature: wars are generally prosecuted at the national levels because of political aims and objectives. However, in today's environment, with disruptive technologies, network-centricity and hybrid warfare, non-contact wars, non-kinetic wars and economic wars are becoming predominant. Therefore, this particular definition of the nature of war is also undergoing a change.

The character of conflict, on the other hand, keeps evolving. It has evolved not only due to military factors, but based on the constant changes in technology, geo-political and geo-economic landscapes. The character of conflict has been evolving since the ancient times, from foot soldiers to elevated platforms in the form of horses and elephants. Kautilya, in his book *Arthashastra*, observes that during the Maurya period, the elephant was declared as a battle-winning offensive weapon owing to which, anyone who killed an elephant was awarded the death penalty. Later, in the medieval period, forts, castles, cannons and gunpowder remained at the centre-stage. During the 19th century, there were three important lessons that emerged from the Prussian War (1870), namely, quick mobilisation, quick and accurate artillery fire, and a focus on attack to bring the war to a decisive end in an early timeframe. However, the military historians were proved wrong four decades later during World War I, as trench warfare continued for more than four years.

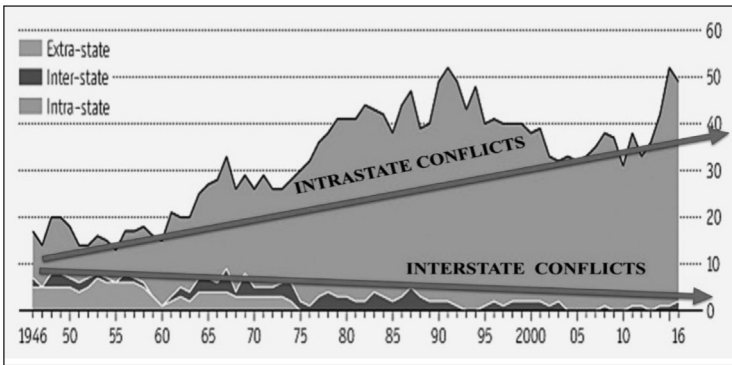
World War I was also called the New Industrial Age Warfare as it gave rise to the defence industry for manufacturing aircraft, tanks, guns, rockets and other weapon systems. The perception that heavy bombing of cities by aircraft would bring the enemy to submission was proved wrong during World War II. The war came to an end with nuclear weapons being used in 1945. The advent of nuclear weapons introduced the doctrines of deterrence, Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) and limited conflicts.

Chart 1: Changing Character of Conflict

Source: Prepared by the author.

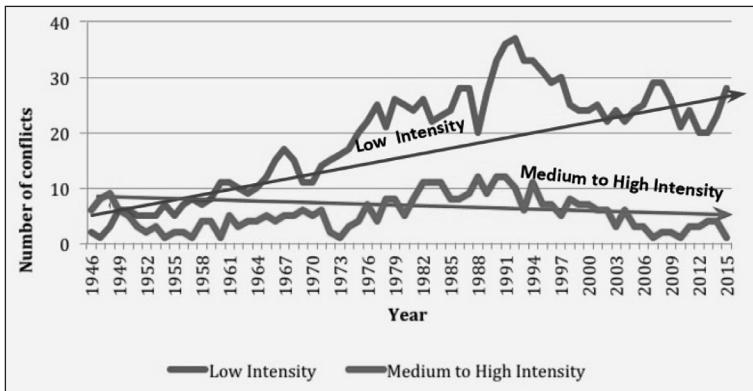
In the post-Cold War phase, non-traditional threats that impact human security have become predominant. Issues such as food security, water security, energy security, environmental security, cyber security, information security, economic security and others form a part of non-traditional security. When the traditional and non-traditional challenges are juxtaposed with changes in technology, and the political and economic landscape, it has a greater effect on the security paradigm and the character of conflict; as Carl von Clausewitz, in his seminal work, *On War*, suggests, capabilities, circumstances and motives too have an effect on the changing nature of conflict. In the current environment, hacking of the election process of another country or spreading of fake news with the aid of new technologies for political purposes or conducting influence operations by way of the internet and social media are examples of such non-contact warfare.

Fig 1: Types of Conflicts



Source: Prepared by the author with reference to *The Economist* (2018).¹²

Fig 2: Intra-State Conflicts 1946-2015



Source: Prepared by the author with reference to Pieter Van den Heede et al. (2018).¹³

Till 1945, the number of inter-state wars was far in excess of intra-state ones. A close look at the two graphs would suggest that post World War II, intra-state wars, also called small wars, accounted for a majority of internal armed conflicts. The Uppsala Conflict Data Programme has identified 280 conflicts between 1946 and 2016, a majority of which were intra-state conflicts. There was a spike in intra-state conflicts from the early 1980s, also referred to as the golden period of insurgencies. The graph of intra-state conflicts suggests that medium and high intensity conflicts have

shown a declining trend since 1994 (the year in which the genocide took place in Rwanda); whereas low intensity conflicts have maintained a slow declining trend, but have affected a large number of countries. Robin M Williams Jr, in his book *The Wars Within: People and States in Conflict*, suggests that more than 350 million people have been killed as a result of conventional battles and small wars. Matthew Symonds, editor of *The Economist* stated: “War is still a contest of wills but technology and geo-political competitions are changing its character”.¹⁴ To which, Gautam Sen, a specialist in the inter-disciplinary areas of strategic studies, international security and international relations, observes that the evolution of conflict is primarily related to two important facets: the aspirations of human beings to dominate over fellow human beings; and the crisis of identity, which has further given rise to the role of fundamentalism, terrorism and separatist movements.¹⁵ Hence, it is to suggest that the world will continue to witness conflicts in different forms and manifestations.

In this context, to analyse the changing character of conflict, it would be interesting to study the broad profile of a few important conflicts in the last three decades: Gulf War I (1991), Kosovo conflict (1998-2000), Kargil War (1999), Gulf War II (2003), Lebanon War (2006), Russia’s invasion of Georgia (2008), Sri Lanka–Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) conflict (2009), Russia–Ukraine conflict (2014), the battles of Mosul, Aleppo and Raqqa against the IS in West Asia (2016-18) and the conflict in the war-torn Afghanistan since 2001. Some of the prominent lessons of Gulf Wars I and II, as well as the Kosovo conflict, were the important roles played by air power (surgical use of air power), mechanised forces, special forces, airborne forces, Precision-Guided Munitions (PGMs), Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance (ISR), space-based technology and stealth technology. These wars confirmed major transformation in the character of warfare. In the Gulf Wars, the US-led coalition had a huge advantage over the Iraqi forces in terms of information and situational awareness.

One of the most important lessons was that ‘information and technology’ had become the key elements of warfare. In addition, these conflicts highlighted the importance of reducing the Observation, Orientation, Decision and Action (OODA) loop time, by placing emphasis on information, speed, range and precision. It led to timely decision-making. The objectives of high intensity conflicts have shifted from destruction and annihilation to disruption and destruction of the systems—cutting across the political, economic, trade, social, informational, psychological, and military domains. However, in the low intensity intra-state conflicts, protection of civilians has become a major area of concern, particularly in Africa.

The Chinese studied these conflicts with great care and took three important actions to improve the effectiveness of their armed forces, namely, mechanisation, informationisation (to win wars under conditions of informationisation) and the most recent one being theaterisation. China has restructured its seven Military Regions (MRs) into five Theaterised Commands (TCs) in 2015-16. In addition, it brought the People’s Armed Police Force (PAPF) and Chinese Coast Guard directly under the CMC in 2018. Theaterisation and centralisation of certain elements, the PLA/CMC ensure unity of command and unity of effort to face the challenges of future conflicts. On the other hand, in 2014, the Pentagon announced its “Third Offset Strategy” to regain its military edge by harnessing a range of technologies, including robotics, autonomous systems and big data, and to do so faster and more effectively than potential adversaries.¹⁶

Future Challenges

The main highlights of the conflicts of the later part of the 20th century and early part of the 21st century suggest an increase in lethality, mobility, battlefield transparency, improved Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, stealth technologies, cyber warfare, information warfare, militarisation of space, psychological warfare and other such technological changes. With advances in Artificial Intelligence

(AI) and robotics, we may see an increase in the security risks, by way of development and production of biological weapons. Therefore, adequate safeguards need to be put in place to prevent such futuristic developments. In addition to the development of new forms of weapon systems, a few countries have made significant efforts to improve their industries and have modernised their armed forces. The Prime Minister of Israel, in his address at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Policy Conference in Washington DC, on March 6, 2018, stated that Israel had revolutionised its industry by the confluence of three important technologies: artificial intelligence, big data and connectivity.¹⁷ With emphasis on innovations, it has a robust and vibrant industrial base, and comprises one of the leading defence industries in the world. While India has done fairly well in Information Technology (IT), nuclear energy, missile and space technology, it is not yet a global leader in any one of them—calling for immediate attention.

A. Hybrid and Grey Zone Conflicts

Two terms—hybrid warfare and grey zone conflicts—have been added to the glossary of terms of IR. Hybrid warfare, also known as ambiguous warfare, is a blend of regular and irregular warfare. In other words, hybrid warfare is a blend of the economy, military, information, psychology and cyber, with a view to achieve political objectives, and gain economic advantage. Warfare has graduated to the fifth generation in the form of hybrid warfare. It has been used in the recent conflicts in West Asia and Afghanistan. Although the Indian subcontinent continues to face sub-conventional war in the form of proxy war and cross-border terrorism, it has not experienced the full dimension of hybrid war so far.

Grey zone conflicts are conflicts that oscillate between war and peace and are generally waged by the great powers that do not want to cross the threshold of an outright war due to the nuclear threat,¹⁸ and yet aim to achieve their political and territorial objectives. In the grey zone,

the moves are carefully calibrated to ensure that the situation remains ambiguous and uncertain.¹⁹ Mark Galeotti has described the ‘grey zone’ concept as “guerrilla geopolitics”.²⁰ While looking at the future, grey zone conflicts between the great powers will remain relevant for both the domination of strategic space and heightened competition for fast diminishing natural resources.

To exemplify, two distinctive examples of grey zone conflicts are Russia’s intervention in Ukraine in 2014 , and China’s progressive, skillful increase in assertive actions in the South China Sea, by creating artificial islands to deploy Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs) and anti-ship missiles and establishing security posts on the reclaimed islands.²¹ Subsequently, China has continued to conduct major naval and air exercises in the South China Sea, suggesting to America that any intervention would be “more risky and more costly”.²² With the transformation of China’s PLA, improvement in its infrastructure and focus on technology for defence, the military capability gap between India and China is increasingly widening. To deal with which, India certainly needs to build asymmetric capabilities, particularly in the information, cyber, artificial intelligence, robotics, big data and media domains.

B. Urban Warfare

In WANA, the fight to reclaim Mosul in Iraq, with a population of 1.8 million, from the IS has been one of the most significant battles since World War II.²³ It took the Iraqi security forces, with the aid of the state-of-the-art technology of the US, more than nine months to regain Mosul. Near similar difficulties were experienced in the cases of Aleppo, Raqqa, and Sadr, though at different times. It is also evident that the role of irregular forces and violent non-state actors has continued to increase in conventional conflicts.

There has been a progressive increase in conflicts in urban environments. One of the potent threats of the future would be conflicts

as a result of hyper-urbanisation: it has been predicted that by 2040, two-third of the world's population would live in urban areas.²⁴ Although migration to urban areas is an economic activity, lately, insurgents and terrorists have been building their bases in the urban areas, inhabiting with civil population and thereby, seeking a number of advantages to combat the conventional forces. By and large, while urban areas are important centres of political and economic power, they are also becoming the hubs of the communication and transport systems of a region. History has a number of examples where uncontrolled migration to urban areas in a short duration led to simmering discontent and people's movements against the establishments/governments.

In India, according to the census conducted by the government, the urban population has increased by 74 per cent in 20 years between 1991 and 2011, from 217 million to 377 million. India is in the midst of a geographical transition, wherein the rural population is migrating to the urban areas to seek better job opportunities, security, quality of life—education, health care, houses, potable water, sanitation, infrastructure, etc. Considering the increase in India's urban population, the unemployment, and that the governance system may not be able to provide the essential services and facilities, we can expect conflicts that may manifest in the form of movements which would have an impact on 'human security' in more ways than one. Therefore, the Indian armed forces also need to review their urban fighting policies and doctrines, in both conventional and sub-conventional domains.

Conflicts in the Indian Context

According to the 2018 Global Peace Index (GPI), as published by the Institute of Economics and Peace, out of the nine regions of the world, South Asia ranks as the second least peaceful region of the world.²⁵ Out of the 163 countries evaluated in South Asia and neighbouring countries, the ranks are: Afghanistan 162nd (least peaceful), Pakistan 151st, India

136th, China 112nd, Bangladesh 93rd, Nepal 84th, Sri Lanka 67th and Bhutan 19th.²⁶ What is noteworthy is that India's ranking was rather low, despite reduction in the levels of violence in the northeast region and in areas affected by Left Wing Extremism (LWE), in 2017 and 2018. However, there has been an increase in violence in J&K since 2016. The GPI report also mentions that the cost of preventing and containing violence in India is very high. It is 9 per cent of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which, when seen in absolute terms, is very high.²⁷ This very factor makes it imperative to take mission oriented actions to resolve India's internal conflicts on priority and likewise divert the resources to improve health care, education, job opportunities, housing and provision of potable water , among many others.

In the Indian context, given the challenges of the intra-state conflicts, proxy war, state sponsored terrorism, unsettled borders with our adversaries, and obsession among all the stakeholders 'not to lose an inch of territory', land warfare is likely to dominate the battlefield in the foreseeable future, with support from other elements of national power. Cross-border terrorism from Pakistan will be one of the important factors that could result in a limited conflict, meshed with information (especially propaganda and psychological) warfare. Michael E O'Hanlon, Research Director for the Foreign Policy Programme at Brookings, reinforces the likely nature of conflicts in South Asia in his book, *The Future of Land Warfare*, wherein he writes: "On balance, it is hard to escape the conclusion that South Asia contains major potential for large scale operations by ground forces, whether in the context of interstate conflict, severe internal violence, or complex humanitarian catastrophe in which the effects of natural disasters are compounded by weak governance and political instability."²⁸

It is assumed that India, in another 10-15 years, will face an ultra-high technology adversary in the north, with hybrid warfare as the key feature, or a low to medium technology adversary in the west, with greater

focus on the sub-conventional threats, including proxy war, cross-border terrorism and information warfare, or a combination of both against a nuclear backdrop. Therefore, the spectrum of conflict will be seen between nation states (inter-state) and proxy-cum-internal armed conflicts. India is facing both. The major complement of the war or the conflict would be in land warfare, which will progressively increase the fighting in urban terrains. We should, therefore, be prepared to effectively fight both the emerging internal and external threats.

While looking at India's security environment in particular, it is important to understand the external, internal and hybrid threats. While traditionally, territorial integrity (no loss of territory) has been one of the prime concerns of every Indian, we have to be equally concerned to address the non-traditional and non-military threats to our country. Given the degree of difficulty of terrains along the borders and inadequate ISR capabilities, boots on the ground will continue to remain important for India. With the changes in technologies and character of conflict, it is operationally exigent to develop indigenous ISR capabilities and achieve a high level of battlefield transparency and network-centricity to reduce boots on the ground. Given India's boundary disputes, it should be fully prepared against the initiation of a conflict in the disputed mountainous areas, and a collusive threat from both the adversaries which could then spill over to other areas. In fact, India needs to look at the Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Information, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4I2SR) capabilities to enhance its operational preparedness, and develop indigenous capabilities to disrupt and destroy the networks of the adversaries, thus, targeting its 'will to fight' and to destroy its war-waging potential. The emphasis thereby needs to be on innovations and development of indigenous capabilities to seek significant advantages.

Given India's diversity on socio-economic-demographic counts, and the external support to insurgents/terrorists, it is likely to continue to face internal armed conflicts in the future as well. In addition, lack of social

cohesion and harmony, polarisation of people, non-inclusive growth, a huge youth population and large scale unemployment will always be sources of conflict in the future. Social and communal violence has shown an increase in the recent years. Therefore, India's internal security apparatus requires a comprehensive review of our strategy for the future.

Furthermore, as technology is one of the most important factors based on which the wars of the 21st century will be fought, this domain needs significant attention. Although these would be under the shadow of nuclear armed states, the enabling technologies that would have an impact on the character of conflict are: AI, big data analytics, connectivity, nano-technology, shock-hardened sensors, Internet of Things (IoT) and fibre laser technology. These technologies then would usher in militarisation of space, Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS), cyber warfare, robotics and AI-enabled systems, information warfare, autonomous unmanned systems, C4I2SR, and swarms of miniaturised drones. Given the technological advances, AI with big data analytics, and autonomous weapon systems, will revolutionise the nature of warfare faster than we can imagine. These factors further make it imperative for India to think ahead and factor these into its national security policies.

Way Ahead

The Chinese have a saying that 'Change is a Dragon.'

If you try to ignore him or control him, it will eat you but if you ride the dragon of change, you can survive, even prosper. I commit.... that we are going to ride the dragon.

— General Charles G Krulak, Commandant US Marines Corps

The above quote is attributed to General Krulak during the period when the US Marine Corps was debating doctrinal and organisational changes in the 1990s. After the formation of theaterised commands in

1986, the US Marine Corps was examining the feasibility of changes to build on the strategic need for amphibious assault and allied capabilities.²⁹

In conventional operations, the centre of gravity would perhaps be the paralysis of the enemy's networks, but in sub-conventional operations, psychological warfare would aim to influence the minds of the people. Ideally, in an insurgency, the rebels would aim to control the territory and mind space of the population. Hence, influence operations would always play a predominant role in a conflict situation. We will continue to have conflicts, but the character of conflict would be different. Therefore, besides resolution of territorial disputes, India, as an emerging power, must prepare itself to look at multiple challenges beyond the horizon: such as the presence of extra-regional and potentially hostile powers in its spheres of influence, development of military capabilities of its adversaries' space, cyber and information warfare domains, internal security and disaster relief operations. Though there is not much change in the principles and concepts of sub-conventional conflicts, the tactics, techniques, stakeholders and supporting technologies have changed. The basic question, therefore, is whether we are prepared to face the challenges of the future threats—external, internal and hybrid—on the Indian subcontinent.

Considering the scale and pace of changes in the future warfare, we need to analyse our response, both conceptually and from the capabilities point of view. It is evident that we have to look at the transformation of our current systems with due seriousness, and urgency. While military modernisation is an essential subset of transformation, it requires a change in the thought process, a review of our doctrines, strategy, war-fighting concepts, organisational and force structures, training concepts and logistics periodically, and, most importantly, preparedness of the strategic leadership to drive the change.

Having stated the operational necessity and the transformational requirements, India needs to broadly examine the likely challenges to transformation, both from within and outside the armed forces.

Transformation is a long-term, continuous process. It should be sustainable. Therefore, the Indian armed forces would require the support of the political leaders, bureaucratic set-up, industrial support especially from the defence industrial base, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and the armed forces themselves. In doing so, first, we need to address the fundamental issue of achieving ‘interoperability and integration’ within and among the three Services. Second, even if we are able to bridge the technological gap by introducing state-of-the-art technologies, absorption of technology is an equally important part which must be planned for in a deliberate manner. That is, military leaders have to not only keep themselves abreast with the latest changes in technologies, but also the geo-political-economic-strategic environment to drive the change.

Conclusion

In an overall assessment, it is a known fact that there is resistance to change and one needs to be conscious of that and fight that inherent resistance. The nature and character of conflicts will continue to change with significant shifts in the use of technology and the geo-political-economic-social environment, and likewise, changes in the capabilities, circumstances and motives of the countries. In this backdrop, India needs to assess its inadequacies in its operational preparedness against external, internal and hybrid threats—the call for the future. It still suffers from a dilemma on the issues of jointness, theaterisation and integration in its defence forces, and integration with the Ministry of Defence (MoD). It is time to find an answer to these challenges pertaining to interoperability and integration, management of borders, maritime and air space security, development of C4I2SR capabilities, battlefield transparency, and indigenisation of major components of the defence industry at the earliest. All these require transformation! Unless there is an understanding of the dynamics of change, and proactive actions taken, India will find itself unprepared to face the operational challenges of the 21st century.

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