

# Changing Nature of Conflict in the 21st Century

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Armies do not prepare for the last war, they frequently prepare for the wrong one—if for no other reason than that governments will usually fund only the anticipated primary threat as opposed to risk, and the adversary will usually play to his opponent's weakness (the risk) rather than the strength (primary threat).

— Gen Sir Rupert Smith, author of the widely acclaimed book,  
*The Utility Of Force: The Art of War In The Modern World*

Everyone has a plan, till they get punched in the mouth.

— Mike Tyson

## **The Changing Nature of Conflict**

A few decades ago, it was relatively easy to talk about the nature of warfare, as it was intimately linked to statecraft, so one identified an adversary state and prepared oneself accordingly. In fact, one could even quantify threats and capabilities to arrive at a predictable outcome. In the 21st century, this is no longer so. Shades of grey have crept in; threats are not easy to quantify and, sometimes, even to identify. There is a merging, a fusion of various types of warfare; international rules do not apply to adversaries who are non-state actors; and deterrence, coercion and escalatory dynamics have been turned on their heads in a large number of cases.

Against such uncertainty, it is no longer easy to define the capabilities that a nation requires to meet its aspirations and obligations, and safeguard its vital national interests. To offer a perspective against such a background is, indeed, a daunting task. The character of warfare is determined more by political, social, economic and strategic imbalances than it is by changes that may occur on the military front alone. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the end of the Cold War. However, the cataclysmic airborne terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, transformed the definition of security, and, today, we live in an uncertain security scenario of “no war, no peace”.

There has been a paradigm shift in the very nature of conflict. Though territorial issues are important, other issues related to historical differences, ideological biases, economic disparity, energy security and water shortage are contributing factors for conflict. Modern-day conflicts are not merely confined to states, but have expanded to include sub-nationalities, terrorists, insurgents, religious fanatics and ethnic interests. The nature of conflict today encompasses sabotage, subversion, non-kinetic confrontation and traditional armed conflict in all its forms. Thus, the state’s response needs to be balanced, inclusive and one that incorporates political, economic, societal and military measures. Future threats will also encompass the war on drugs, radical groups, control of resources and religious extremism. The use of space and cyber space has added a new dimension to the scope of conflict. As the battlefields merge, the conflicts of the future would also be conducted with energy, trade, and aid employed as weapons. Therefore, the very concept of national security needs to be reexamined, and realigned to the new dimensions of the 21st century.

War is distinct from conflict. The latter is a vast canvas and includes all shades of discord, involving both states and non-state groups. There are various instruments to address conflict. Here, we will largely restrict ourselves to an exploration of one of those key instruments—military power—which, exercised by any entity, is the essential component of warfare, as war is specifically about employment of force to achieve a desired political end. Technology is the driver of changes and this is no less so in warfare. What is less certain and not easy to predict is how technology will develop and how it will be adapted to improve military capability. However, it would be safe to say that the future is unlikely to be a linear extension of present trends. Who could have predicted the impact of social networking—the way it has shifted the balance between oppressive state regimes and their disaffected populace.

**Conventional Conflict is intertwined with sub-conventional conflict with irregular forces using unconventional means and tactics.**

***Vulnerability of the Developed World***

In principle, war has become not only politically but also economically unattractive for the developed countries. The costs outweigh the returns. In “post-heroic” societies, wherein the concept of self-sacrifice is no longer an ideal, the highest value is the preservation of human life, and with it, the multiplication and intensification of individual sensations of well-being. Developed societies, therefore, remain vulnerable because of their advanced socio-economic state, and no degree of military superiority can eliminate this vulnerability.

Developed nations cannot adopt asymmetric warfare as they are based on the rule of law and political participation and will do their utmost to avoid body bags, which is possible only through superior military technology. The strategists of terror have recognised that “post-heroic” societies, with their lifestyle and self-assurance, are particularly vulnerable to attacks by individuals who value martyrdom. Terrorists are unlikely to achieve the power to destroy the developed nations, but will continue to cause anxiety, selective harm and, sometimes, immense psychological collateral damage.

***Demilitarisation of War***

A return to the forms of war which the nationalisation of warfare brought to an end during the 16th and 17th centuries and replaced by a disciplined military organisation, can already be observed. Civilian targets are now taking the place of military objectives, starting with towns and villages being overrun and despoiled by militias and warlords, and extending to the symbols of political and economic might that were targeted in the US by terrorists in 2001. Suicide bombers compensate for their military inferiority by giving up any chance of survival. A new perverse form of “heroism” has developed, which “post-heroic” societies are ill prepared to deal with from a military or psychological point of view.

In the last few decades, the enormous destructive power of strong conventional and nuclear capabilities has resulted in weaker states and non-state groups adopting sub-conventional and irregular means to achieve their political objectives. Conventional conflict is increasingly intertwined with subconventional conflict, with irregular forces using unconventional means and tactics. The irregular forces are becoming increasingly lethal, with access to

technology and equipment that previously only conventional state forces could afford. The characteristics of future conflict can, thus, be summarised as under:

- The spectrum of conflict will range from conflicts between states to conflict with non-state actors and proxies.
- The boundaries between regular and irregular warfare are blurring. Even non-state actors are increasingly acquiring limited conventional capabilities that were earlier the exclusive preserve of nation-states.
- Conventional conflict could also be preceded and succeeded by a period of irregular conflict, which would include low intensity conflict and prolonged stabilisation operations.
- Technology has empowered the individual and today, a single terrorist/guerrilla can cause severe damage to adversaries through cyber, financial and kinetic attacks, which earlier only large organisations or states could do. The suicide bomber has added a very destructive dimension. Future conflicts will demand concurrent investment in sharpening softer skills like cultural awareness training, language skills, psychological operations and human intelligence.
- Non-contact/non-kinetic aspects of warfare are coming to the fore, specially between well-armed and nuclear capable adversaries. Cyber and space are the emerging frontiers, as is a combination of data mining and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to influence the human mind. Nuclear sabre-rattling by irresponsible states like North Korea and Pakistan is beginning to upset the nuclear deterrence which has prevailed so far.

### ***Hybrid Warfare***

Hybrid warfare is a military strategy that blends conventional warfare, irregular warfare and cyber warfare. This approach to conflicts is a potent, complex variation of warfare. Hybrid warfare can be used to describe the flexible and complex dynamics of the battle space, requiring a highly adaptable and resilient response. Hybrid threat actors seek to master unrestricted operational art in order to reconcile overmatch and protect or advance their interests. The hybrid threat concept represents the evolution of operational art and a potential paradigm shift as a doctrinal and organisational Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA).

Baptised in its modern form after the 1991 Gulf War, the hybrid threat construct is a sophisticated amalgam of unrestricted threat activities that have resisted codification. As an unrestricted collective methodology, the hybrid concept bypasses the cognitive boundaries of traditional threat characterisation and the application of organised collective violence.

## **Emerging Security Environment Around India**

In establishing the strategic context, exploring the nature of the security environment should be an obvious stop. When we survey the strategic environs around India, it becomes fairly obvious that there may be few others that are imbued with greater strategic-military adversity. Consider this: we face two neighbours which are also full-time military adversaries and in active strategic-military cahoots.

- That one of the two neighbours is also a superpower undergoing a military modernisation which is said to be the most massive in the history of mankind, only adds to the enormity of the challenge. To paraphrase the German Chancellor in the early 20th century, Bethmann Hollweg, from another context, “China grows and grows and weighs on us like a nightmare.”
- It is also more than obvious that in geostrategic terms, while Pakistan is the immediate irritant, China is the long-term threat; yet, the constant needling and frequent pokes from the western adversary do not allow India to turn its strategic gaze sufficiently to the north. In that sense, the two-front challenge is already an everyday reality, whether or not it manifests in all out conflict.
- What about the nature of the contest with China? Well, China is not an irrational power—it is unlikely to spoil its ascendant roll by resorting to an all-out war with India. This is very different, however, from deftly weaving force into its statecraft to aggressively pursue its interests and constrict India’s geostrategic space. When considering when and how China may use military force, it may be wise to heed the advice of Graham Allison, noted theorist and practitioner in the field of national security, who says, “It is not sufficient to ask what we would do in its (China’s) shoes. For Chinese leaders, military force is an instrument in an orchestra of engagement, one they may use preemptively to surprise an opponent who would not have done likewise.” It also bears consideration that while China will treat warfare as a last resort, should it conclude that the long-term trends are no longer moving in its favour and that it is losing bargaining power, it could initiate a military conflict to cut India to size.
- It is also fairly evident now, that China’s strategic orientation is steadily acquiring global overtones. The connectivity projects encapsulated in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (connecting Asia with Europe and the Pacific with the Indian Ocean), its expanding footprint in Africa, its numerous ideologically agnostic initiatives in pursuit of its search for oil in the Middle East,<sup>1</sup> the resolve to push the Americans out of the Western Pacific—all

these moves and more, have obvious foreign policy, economic and strategic drivers, which are also being carefully undergirded by a potent military anvil. The scale of the military push and ambition is mind-boggling. Given the fact that Chinese defence spending is expected to exceed that of the USA by 2035, that by 2040 or so, some experts opine, the question will not be whether American ships should stay 12 nautical miles off the Chinese coast but whether Chinese ships should stay 12 nautical miles off the Californian coast.<sup>2</sup> Contrast these developments with India's strategic predicament wherein our foreign policy is entrapped in the Line of Control/Line of Actual Control (LoC/LAC) syndrome, pushing us into a perpetual defensive crouch. We have little option but to muster the will and find the resources to not only hold steadfast along the LoC/LAC but also acquire an outward orientation, failing which China's strategic squeeze will get only more strangulating. The time has come for the Indian military to acquire an outward orientation and an expeditionary profile—the sooner we shed our shibboleths in this regard, the better for us.

## **Establishing the Strategic Context: Revisiting Our Approach to War in Contemporary Conflict**

*Utilitarian leveraging of the instrument of force can occur only within a particular politico-strategic-military context.* Before we arrive at the contours of a possible military strategy, therefore, it may be useful to analyse the domain of hard power in terms of its linkages with the larger universe of politics, the changing character of war and the emerging geostrategic realities so as to try and determine to how force could be usefully leveraged within the prevalent strategic context. If we do reach the right answers, it will help in making sure that we prepare (as far as reasonably possible) for the 'right' and not the 'last or wrong' wars, as averred by Gen Rupert Smith. In doing so, it may be relevant to address stray sensibilities which, in recent times, have fuelled some diffidence about the very utility of force, the refrain in some quarters that 'war is no longer an option,' or that 'the days of all out war are behind us,' et al. Thinking the strategic context through and in depth is pertinent for two additional reasons: firstly, such an endeavour will ensure that the consequential military strategy is more grounded and resilient—else, it may not survive the first punch that Mike Tyson alludes to in the quote above; secondly, a military strategy framed in a sound strategic context is also important in order that in these days of scarce budgetary allocations, our capability building is suitably optimised. In establishing the strategic context,

we will do well, therefore, to be informed by a set of persuasions—the import of which is discussed in the paragraphs to follow.

Force has numerous stabilising uses, hard and soft, in equal measure: it helps keep the peace, it gives the practice of diplomacy a robust veneer, it deters, it is a useful tool for politico-military signalling, it is a critical component for the protection of geostrategic spaces, a means of protecting our interests across the globe, a conduit for the delivery of humanitarian aid and when employed sagaciously and resolutely, a decisive arbiter in conflict. When wrapped in imaginative statecraft, its utility as a metric in the resolute pursuit of national interest cannot be overemphasised. So, the real issue is not that ‘military force is failing or that it is no longer utilitarian’ but that we need to get much more cognisant of its deft leveraging, particularly in the non-kinetic/non-contact domains, and reconfigure its use in the obtaining politico-military context. If we do so thoughtfully, we shall discover that force has numerous enabling uses in day-to-day foreign policy contests and not merely as an instrument of last resort in an all-out conflict. The Indian strategic establishment, particularly the military, needs to develop and reinforce various military options within such a paradigm.

A few questions may help to illuminate the salience of the paradigm and consequential shortfalls in the Indian context. If cyber offensives [Computer Network Exploitation and Computer Network Attacks (CNE and CNA) to be more militarily precise] are the non-kinetic, digital equivalents of kinetic, strategic bombing of the adversary’s infrastructure, have our capacities evolved adequately in this regard? The Chinese Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy, it is widely acknowledged now, has successfully pushed American aircraft carriers beyond the second island chain. The dramatic growth of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and the construction of island fortresses/other military infrastructure in the South China Sea have effectively brought the Chinese threat closer to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands by 600-900 nautical miles.<sup>3</sup> Geostrategic spaces are being impacted/ altered not through kinetic use but by deft moves in the non-kinetic domain; military pressure points are being created and strategic objectives are being achieved without a shot being fired. Could we, in the Indian context, do much more and better? Unlike the kinetic, the non-kinetic domain operates 24 x 7 x 365—it envisages the leveraging and integration of all implements of statecraft: diplomatic, economic, military, psychological, media, legal—there is nothing ‘off the shelf’ in this high stakes competition.

The professional ethos and ethics of the Indian military, naturally drive it towards delivery and excellence in the kinetic domain; activity in allied domains such as the non-contact, non-kinetic, informational, digital and diplomatic realms, has, for long been viewed as somewhat militarily infradig and ‘as stuff that real militaries don’t do.’ With the grammar of conflict changing rapidly, militaries need to do much more in these domains to build up such levels of capacity that the military opposition withers without conflict—in the mould of Sun Tzu’s classical dictum of ‘winning without fighting.’ In the ongoing contest with China, during the recent Dokala episode, our military agility and robustness helped in bringing about a military closure (albeit one that is temporary and will be tested again) to a developing diplomatic impasse [BRI, the Chinese stance on Masood Azhar, the blockage of India’s entry to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), etc., being the immediate drivers]. A good beginning by all means, but the Indian military will need to get far more proficient and savvy in this regard if it is to enhance its own institutional relevance and align the utility of force with the larger needs of Indian statecraft.

There are other posers which demand answers. In a hypothetical repeat of a Dokala-like scenario, how would we respond to a situation, wherein, in order to neutralise ‘our edge in the air’, our northern adversary saturates the ground Air Defence (AD) environment with S-400 systems? Do we have an escalatory option whereby we could ramp up our military response to the next level, in terms of surgical Suppression/Destruction of Enemy Air Defence (SEAD/DEAD) without getting close to all-out war? The availability of such escalatory options, the authors aver, would demonstrate military sophistication and poise; were we to suggest to the political class that we have run out of options (save the resort to all-out war), it would tantamount to a crude response—one that is not in accord with the attributes of a modern military. If faced with the prospect of 300 Chinese non-nuclear missiles deployed to target Indian facilities/military infrastructure along our northern borders, what will our response be in the domain of missilery? In the absence of a viable response option to meet the missile threat, will ground commanders be able to retain the verve to hold/escalate on the ground? Will they be constrained to pull back or at least get straitjacketed psychologically? Developing layered, intertwined military response options within a carefully thought through escalatory frame is something we need to attend to with despatch. The military mind needs to stop thinking of itself only in terms of ‘a last resort option,’ one that can only be ‘a decisive arbiter in all out conflict.’ The principal purpose of the military establishment is, of course, to win wars. It must



now also diligently apply itself to an even higher order skill—how to avert them without losing military face.

Modern conflict is more likely to manifest in the form of political/foreign policy contests interspersed with military episodes; a series of political events with military characteristics. Force is more likely to facilitate political settlements, rather than fashion outright military victory, even as political strategies without a military anvil are unlikely to succeed. So what we need today, more than ever, is for the strategic organs of the state to integrate—the political, foreign, defence, informational and military domains need to operate even more intimately together. Clausewitz recommended that the head of the armed forces should sit in the Cabinet, not so much to render military advice, but in order that the military understands how it must tune its campaign to the political goals. We need to adopt and adapt the modern equivalent for institutionalised and intimate politico-military interface in the Indian context—a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) whose institutional persona embodies a military ally with the trust of the political class—may just be the beginning that we desperately need. If we are to prosecute strategic conflict, particularly in the Responses Short of War (RSOW) domain, productively and successfully, we need to not only blur the distinctions between the military and civilian realms, but perhaps merge responsibilities. Cross-pollinating our strategic-military structures with talent from diverse domains—officers from the armed forces, civil servants, strategic affairs analysts, media experts, technologists, domain experts from the corporate world and futurologists—is now an inescapable necessity.

**Force Capability Dilemma to Meet Emerging Threats and Challenges:** It may also be pertinent to reflect on the perspicacious insights provided by one of the world's foremost thinkers on warfare, David Kilcullen, on why the recent land wars in Iraq and Afghanistan went awry.<sup>4</sup> He opines that the wars were inadequately managed and resourced—strategy without resources, therefore, is mere fantasy. We may, therefore, like to seriously consider whether our defence allocations (\$53.5 billion at 1.62 percent of the Gross Domestic Product—GDP)<sup>5</sup> is adequate to address the grave challenges/monumental adversities in our security environment. It is also for our collective consideration (particularly of bodies like the NITI Aayog) that while defence must certainly not unduly burden the economy, it can be nobody's case that capacity building in national security be premised only on economic considerations, in utter disregard of geopolitical/geostrategic realities. The metric of 'affordability' in defence budgeting must

of necessity be buttressed by geostrategic needs; the pure economist's scalpel that is applied to budgetary allocations for defence, year after year, is a matter of intellectual and strategic concern. Given, the burgeoning economic differentials between India and China, it is quite apparent that we will not, for the foreseeable future, be able to match Chinese defence spending, rupee for yuan. We need to however, spend significantly more to at least sharpen our conventional and asymmetric capacities as also optimise by way of defence reform and structural overhaul—we are, unfortunately, not doing enough on this score. May be we cannot get stronger, but we can at least get smarter. We will also do well to realise that no amount of military skill or technology can substitute the lack of a stomach for a contest—if we lack the character or will to play the long game with foresight and thought, we will simply not be able to deal with a formidable adversary like China and a crafty one like Pakistan. Fixing the military time and again is not good enough unless you fix the politics too and develop civilian expertise and capacities to tackle the looming strategic uncertainties in order to secure a better peace. War and conflict, after all, are not spectator sports for the militaries to fight and for civilians to observe from the sidelines.

**India needs to strengthen its conventional and asymmetric capabilities and optimise through defence reforms and structural overhaul.**

### ***The Nuclear Dimension***

With the development of nuclear capability, and the remote yet attendant danger of its catastrophic use, there are differing perceptions on whether or not space remains for conventional conflict between nuclear powers. Since the 1998 nuclear tests, India and Pakistan have been through a limited war and a major military crisis, making clear that the nuclearisation of both countries has not made conventional war between them an obsolete concept. Acquisition of nuclear weapons by Pakistan has not altered the strategic balance in the subcontinent, though Pakistan has been able to pursue a sub-conventional proxy war under the assurance of its nuclear umbrella. Notwithstanding the nuclear deterrence in place, in our view, there is adequate strategic space for India to respond to a Pakistani misadventure, which might arise out of its miscalculated and misplaced perceptions. Nuclear capability may limit the objective, scope and intensity of the war, but despite views to the contrary, the nuclear threshold would not be as fragile and low as made out by many strategists and academicians.

## Summary

In sum, therefore, what could we do to move towards a favourable politico-strategic-military construct to facilitate the pursuance of our national security interests? A possible to-do list could be as under: it is high time Indian statecraft started firing on all cylinders and got far more imaginative—given the sheer enormity of the accumulated adversity around, especially the scale and pace of that posed by China, India simply cannot afford a languorous, incremental pace any longer.

- A realistic audit of our security environment will tell us that China's rise is not only inevitable but may also be in our interest. The trick will lie in keeping it peaceful by measuring up to both: the challenge and the opportunity. The challenge could be met through strategic thoughtfulness and a politico-military revamp, even as the opportunity needs to be milked through diplomatic engagement and economic interdependence. We may recall Hillary Clinton's famous quip when questioned as to why the USA does not get tough with China: "You don't go to war with your bankers", she said. Can we create similar linkages?
- Funding the development of asymmetric capacities is essential. While funding for the ultimate fight has to be the long-term perspective, funding asymmetric capacities to match the Chinese in the non-contact/non-kinetic domain is not a difficult proposition. The RSOW domain is not an expensive one—it calls for greater innovation, structural restructuring and agility—all of which could be done were there greater imagination in our statecraft.
- India's strategic-military mandarins will have to relearn the art of weaving force into statecraft as part of everyday foreign policy contests and not only as an instrument of all out conflict.
- In the prosecution of modern security challenges, if the instrument of force is to regain utility, India's politico-military construct and the pattern of civil-military relations must undergo concurrent change and reform. Were we to do some/all of this in the light of the changing grammar of conflict and the evolving nuances in our strategic construct, our security posture will emerge smarter, more focussed and effective, laying the ground work for our military strategies to unfold.

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Lt Gens **AK Singh** and **Raj Shukla** are prolific writers and the present article is an abridged version of the chapter from the book *Military Strategy for India in the 21st Century*.

## Notes

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2. Graham Allison, *Destined For War – Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap* (Harcourt: Houghton Mifflin), p. 160.
3. Vikram S Mehta, "The New Oil Game," *The Indian Express*, November 6, 2017.
4. David Kilcullen, *Blood Year – Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror* (London: Hurst and Company, 2016), pp. 229-232.
5. Laxman Behera, *IDSIA Issue Brief*, at [https://idsa.in/issuebrief/india-def-budget-2017-18\\_lkbehera\\_030217](https://idsa.in/issuebrief/india-def-budget-2017-18_lkbehera_030217). Accessed on November 6, 2017.