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# A Perspective on Land Warfare Strategy

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## Introduction

If you were to look up “land strategy” in either Google or Wikipedia, you’d be disappointed. Land strategy does not have the impression in cyber space as one would expect in the belief that there is something called “land strategy”. The more familiar term instead is rightly “military strategy” or “land warfare strategy”. This is due to military power being taken as one entity in its exercise as per the dictates of strategy. As Giulio Douhet, the exponent of air power, bemoaning the parochialism of the military, once rightly said: “There are experts of land, sea and air warfare. But as yet there are no experts of warfare. And warfare is a single entity, having a common purpose.” Therefore, for this article to be titled “land warfare strategy” would appear an untenable contradiction. However, in the light of military history being replete with campaigns such as the Schlieffen Plan, Operation Barbarossa, Rommel’s conceptualisation of the “Longest Day”, MacArthur’s inspired landings at Inchon, Schwarzkopf “Hail Mary” manoeuvre and Petraeus’ “surge” in Iraq, it is apparent that “land strategy” has been central to war. Therefore, the aim in this article, intended as a beginner’s guide to strategy, is to discuss “land warfare strategy” defined as employment of land forces as part of the wider unfolding of military strategy.

## Situating Land Warfare Strategy

Strategy is the use or threat of force for political ends. The political ends being paramount, strategy derives from a political formulation of the national vision, aim and interests. The national security policy that defends and furthers these

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aims provides the overarching politico-military context for thinking on strategy. The term increasingly over the last century, has acquired wider connotations having to do with use of power instead of merely force and not necessarily in war but also in peace. At the next lower level, military strategy is the employment of the military instrument of national power in conjunction with other elements such as diplomacy, political and economic strength and, indeed, also cultural and soft power. Land warfare strategy, a component of military strategy, is use of land forces in war and increasingly also in peace. For India, land warfare strategy is of continuing consequence since it has a continental orientation, one that is thankfully increasingly being challenged by the maritime dimension.

Every discussion on strategy necessarily begins with the Bible on the military in the modern era, it being Clausewitz's work *On War*.<sup>1</sup> "War is an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds... a mere continuation of policy by other means". He conceptualised war as being about chance, passion, will, friction and fog. The idea of strategy is, therefore, to navigate through these conditions intrinsic to conflict by creating your own circumstance. The opponent, also being so engaged, makes strategy in the words of French strategist, Andre Beaufre, "the art of the dialectic of opposing wills". The widely accepted definition, also echoed in the *Indian Army Doctrine*,<sup>2</sup> uses the British war historian and theoretician, Liddell Hart's words: "The art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy." It follows naturally then that military strategy is to "secure policy objectives by the application or threat of force."<sup>3</sup> While application of military power naturally involves violence, both doyens of strategy, Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, agreeing across two millennia, observe that "supreme (strategic) excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting". Liddell Hart, a century after Clausewitz, concurs with Sun Tzu that the use of indirect methods to bring about a favourable situation makes better strategic sense. Thus, military strategy has evolved to mean "management and control of military force in international politics" (Alastair Buchan).

Two elements of the last century have impacted strategy with consequent implications for land warfare strategy. One is the widened concept of strategy that to the foremost Cold War strategist, Henry Kissinger, precludes compromising two incommensurables – "purely military" or "purely political" – in favour of a combination of military, political and economic factors. This is equivalent to the American rediscovery of Chanakya whose discourse on grand strategy, the *Arthashastra*, talks of "*Sam, Dam, Bhed, and Dand*" (Peace, Wealth, Divide, and Force).<sup>4</sup> The second has been the impact of the nuclear age on the Clausewitzian

concept that strategy is to enable imposing one's will on the enemy. In the words of the premier nuclear strategist, Bernard Brodie, "Clausewitz's classical definition must be modified, at least for any opponent who has a substantial nuclear capability behind him. Against such an opponent, one's terms must be modest enough to permit him to accept them, without his being pushed by desperation into rejecting both those terms and the limitations in war-fighting." This second aspect is of consequence for India in relation to the nuclearisation of South Asia in the late part of the last century.

The *Indian Army Doctrine* states that "military force contributes by the defeat of an opposing force." It defines "defeat" as "diminishing the effectiveness of the enemy to the extent that he is either unable to participate in combat or, at least, not being able to fulfill his intention." Land warfare strategy would, therefore, be the plan, employing land forces supplemented by the other two Services, to bring about a condition in which the enemy is unable to fulfill his intent through combat. The intention is the psychological paralysis of the enemy leadership by application of combat power for the purposes of preemption, destruction, dislocation and disruption.

Land warfare strategy could be defensive or offensive depending on the strategic doctrine of a state. The strategic doctrine choices available to a state are defence, offence, deterrence and compellence. Land warfare strategy, taking a cue from the strategic choice, would then configure accordingly. For instance, India's strategic posture with respect to the China border is one of dissuasive defence, while that with respect to Pakistan is offensive deterrence. This would bring to fore the bias in land warfare strategy, defensive and offensive, respectively. Most armies prefer the latter for reasons of professional worth, and, even when in defence, prefer offensive-defence, for instance, the doctrine practised by the Pakistan Army. While both terms, offence and defence, deal with the same factors majorly, such as intelligence, security, air support, fire support, logistics and communication, the former is related to the capture or destruction of the enemy's centre of gravity and the latter to denying the enemy similar success in respect of own centre of gravity. Increasingly, objectives no longer being terrain-centric, the emphasis in land warfare strategy between the main components of land forces — armour, infantry and artillery — would shift as per the situation.

## **Land Warfare Strategy in India**

It has been opined by knowledgeable observers that India lacks a strategic culture. George Tanham, writing in the early Nineties,<sup>5</sup> maintained that India

had a defensive strategic orientation with passivity in military affairs, leading to a non-expansionist military tradition. Increasing interest, access and capabilities with respect to military technology, however, pointed to a more offensive future direction. To him, India was land oriented, with a protective mass army. Though it had not articulated its goals in a coherent manner, it was interested in recognition as a Great Power and, therefore, jealously preserved a long-term commitment to strategic autonomy in its decision-making and military capabilities. Tanham wrote at the time of the outbreak of the liberalisation era, and the situation has since changed and largely along the direction predicted. Growing power indices and increasing centrality to world politics have not only enhanced the significance of military power in the national scheme but also brought about a much needed balance among the three long standing components of military power and with the newer dimensions being space, cyber and information.

India's tryst with land warfare is due to its position as a continental power. This is reflective in a martial history replete with land warfare exploits, including the *Chakravyuha* of the Mahabharata times, Chhatrapati Shivaji's fortress strategy, the much denigrated "Panipat syndrome", the pacification campaigns in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), the lightning campaign, the limited war strategy for Kargil, glacial warfare in Siachen and, lately, the innovative Cold Start. This is understandable, given its history of the last thousand years in which the ruling regimes of the Indo-Gangetic plains were land focussed due to strategic and cultural reasons. The British continued the legacy in their indulgence in the Great Game from Shimla, while India's maritime interests were taken care of by the Admiralty in London. This landward orientation remained a distinguishing characteristic of Indian strategic culture well into the independent era. A disproportionately large army and a weak institutional interface led to it overshadowing the other two Services. Its major conflicts were with land powers, Pakistan and China. It was only in the successful 1971 War that land warfare strategy's sway over military strategy began to give way to a joint approach to war-fighting. This culminated in the Kargil War in which posturing by the three Services elsewhere, and application of air and land power to the politically restricted battlespace, brought in the dividend. The ascendance of air power, with increased capability and requisite doctrine, and the importance of the maritime dimension to growing national power have brought about a balance. Jointness enhancing institutional structures, further, and, rightly, degrade the autonomy of land warfare.

The primary influences on land warfare are: the nuclear backdrop; joint war-fighting doctrine articulated in 2006; a nascent proactive and offensive approach

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dictated by a national strategic doctrine of offensive deterrence; increasing resource base due to expanding budgets; heightened levels of strategic thinking brought on by its emerging power status, increased salience in the strategic situation in its immediate vicinity and its partnership with the US; “lessons learnt” from wars, resulting in transformation of the army underway; and, lastly, a more outward oriented strategic culture. The long standing factors continue in place, namely, disputed borders on the two fronts requiring manpower intensive protection, and continuing proxy war requiring extended deployment of a proportion of its land forces.

That a purely land warfare strategy may be a thing of the past is best evident from the debate between the two Services, the army and the air force, with respect to the air force’s role in land warfare. The army’s apprehensions are articulated by its former Vice Chief Vijay Oberoi, thus: “It fears that in the quest for waging an independent air war, the Air Force will neglect to provide adequate support to the Army, in terms of Offensive Air Support... The Army is of the view that in its quest for a more independent role for the Air Force, the IAF is selectively interpreting the lessons learnt from the recent wars and battles where air power was used....”<sup>6</sup>. Retired Air Marshal Vinod Patney, a votary of aerospace power, has countered: “Hard nosed practicality demanded that air power be given greater freedom of action and the overall strategy fashioned to permit this. Joint planning still remains the *sine qua non* for operational success but there has been a veritable sea change in the basic premises for planning and in the establishing of priorities.”<sup>7</sup> The air marshal continues to maintain that “a single Service operation is a valid operation of war and, at times, will be the option of choice”, in effect, making a case for a circumstance related independent air strategy.<sup>8</sup> It can be reckoned that this debate shall continue into the middle term and impact any future consideration of land warfare.

In the South Asian context, an additional element, “posturing”, is in play. This involves location and movement of offensive forces in such a manner as to keep the enemy guessing as to their intent and eventual employment. This was particularly so in the era of “deep thrust” by strike corps. However, the doctrinal scene has been energised by the dissemination of the Cold Start doctrine.<sup>9</sup> It envisages multiple offensive thrusts across a broad front by divisional sized integrated battle groups of the pivot corps and strike corps resources located close to the border from a standing start: therefore, the term “Cold Start”. These offensives would comprise available air power assets also, and may have a maritime dimension, definitely involving posturing by the navy and possible

amphibious landings also. These offensives would not only open the window for strike corps to make further inroads but would also pressure Pakistan's military to throw in the towel along with the air force's strategic bombing campaign. Military coercion and attrition short of the nuclear threshold is to bring about a policy shift away from its support to proxy war, if not a regime change in Pakistan. Clearly, then, though land forces cannot any more "go it alone", land warfare strategy would continue to remain central to the outcome of conflict.

Much organisational innovation has gone into operationalising the changes, not only in the military but also in the civil-military relations domain. New formations headquarters have been created and new formations are being raised. The Strategic Forces Command has been formalised. Changes pending in the earlier round of reforms of the higher defence organisation in the early part of the decade include creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff and the greater integration between the Service Headquarters and the Ministry of Defence. Increasing jointness and better consideration of the military input and perspective would likely result from further evolution of the current structures.<sup>10</sup>

With respect to China, the dissuasive deterrent implying "hold and deny" is in keeping with the prevailing agreement on peace and tranquillity along the disputed border. The intent is to develop military capabilities in the interim such as by creating better infrastructure, including roads up to the border, raising new mountain strike divisions and commissioning a deterrent based on a 5,000 km range missile in the offing. This would position the army favourably in any future conflict brought on perhaps by the "clash of titans" over strategic space and political preeminence in a future Asia. These measures would lend teeth to the change to "active deterrence" recently adopted for this theatre.

The aftermath of Operation Enduring Freedom has witnessed Fourth Generation Warfare in which an asymmetric counter would require application of land forces guided by principles drawing on sub-conventional warfare doctrine. This too is a facet of land warfare, one the Indian Army in particular has much experience and expertise in and, therefore, not reflected on here in any detail. The major point is that India draws on its strength of a stoic and disciplined soldiery to establish a counter-insurgency grid for ensuring isolation of the insurgent 'fish' from the human 'sea'. Not having the same advantages of manpower, other armies have been known to substitute with technology and firepower, with attendant political costs.

## Conclusion

Land warfare is the *raison d'être* of the army. The relative balance between the lead arms is situation and terrain specific. Dispute on this score is good for *esprit de corps* but has to cease with the onset of conflict. The strategy that enables this balancing to optimum result in relation to the military objective is a successful land strategy. It has to be seen in relation to the tri-Service effort that is, in turn, part of the grand strategic orchestration of the instruments of national power. The Indian experience has been one of land forces' primacy. Increasingly, and rightfully, this is no longer tenable. Thus, land warfare strategy is likely to suffer an eclipse in favour of a joint military strategy in any future conflict. Then the armed forces would have entered the post-modern era.

## Notes

1. M Howard, and Peter Paret (eds), *Baron Carl von Clausewitz's On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).
2. Army Training Command, *Indian Army Doctrine* (Shimla: HQ ARTRAC, 2004).
3. The US Department of the Army, *Army Field Manual 100-5: Fighting Future Wars*, (Brassey's, 1994). Also see, *Army Field Manual 100-5: Operations*.
4. L Rangarajan (ed), *Kautilya: The Arthashastra*, (New Delhi: Penguin Classics, 1992).
5. G Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1992).
6. V Oberoi, "Air Power and Joint Operations: Doctrinal and Organisational Challenges", *USI Journal*, January 2003.
7. V Patney, "Air Power and Joint Operations: Doctrinal and Organisational Challenges", *USI Journal*, July 2003.
8. V. Patney, "Jointness in Armed Forces and Institution of Post of Chief of Defence Staff are Mutually Exclusive", *Journal of Defence Studies* (IDSA), Summer 2008, p. 35.
9. G Kanwal, "Strike Fast and Hard: Indian Army Doctrine Undergoes Change in Nuclear Era", *Tribune* (Chandigarh), 23 June 2006.
10. V Oberoi, "Need for Holistic Restructuring of Indian Military", *Journal of Defence Studies*, Summer 2008.