

Reconceptualising Land Warfighting Strategy

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Without the benefit of a formalized National Security Strategy, a maze of pronouncements and reflections dictate the ongoing broad war-fighting conceptology. Two or two and a half front (simultaneous) war under a nuclear overhang, the basis of current strategic and structural construct, is one such key element. Often short, intense, swift, limited wars are spoken of without exemplifying or paraphrasing it towards implementation or structural transition. The on-going thrust towards military modernisation and capability building (including for deterrence) relies on these constructs.

The mantra of ends, ways and means, is strategy. One can train for the mastery of operational and tactical skills, but the *imagination* needed for strategy cannot reliably be taught. All decisions for war are a leap in the dark, which has to mean that even honest judgements are likely to be wrong. It is hard to be expert on future wars, because the future is unforeseeable.¹ Since strategists are required to prescribe contingently for the use of force, in a future that at best can only be anticipated, it follows that their duties oblige them to operate on basis of assumptions

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than facts.² Herein comes in the overarching importance of assumptions in developing a strategy. In our context, these assumptions can emanate from political decision-making and will, to the perceived future course of relationship with adversarial neighbours.

Indian armed forces face decreasing defence budgets in real terms and the paramount necessity to modernise the forces, with competing inter-and intra-Service priorities.

This increasingly strains the coherence of the ends, ways, and means dictum. In its manifestations, translation of the political goals into military ends is contingent upon strategy and operational art. Here it is particularly germane to remember that military organisations (and strategists) almost always get the next war wrong. Hence, military leaders must be willing to challenge their most closely held assumptions if they are to adapt.³ Indeed, history does suggest that military organisations have been more committed to the ethos of the past than to prepare for the future.⁴ On the military side of the equation, most leaders will find themselves and their subordinates encumbered with their intellectual and historical baggage.⁵ The need for adaptation at the strategic level may represent easiest to recognise but the most difficult to accomplish.⁶ Tradition bound militaries are rarely able to affect speedy transformation.⁷ We have to avoid preparing and planning for the last war and in manner of adapting to change will have to push out parochialism and ego-centrism and the thought of major turbulence aside; howsoever, unpalatable it may be. And such a change mandates resisting to arriving at a consensual approach—which by itself counters effective transition by making excessive compromises, towards a modern force.

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Strategic Context

India lives in a far-from-benign strategic environment, which argues normally for a strong and effective military force capable of defending territorial integrity and sovereignty from possible threats from several sources.¹⁰ ‘India as the premier “rimland” power—will have to quickly build up and consolidate military strength and choose options wisely in order to play the key role of system balancer and stabiliser. ...there is no reason why India expected by the 2030s to become the third richest country...cannot muster the will and the gumption expansively to mark out its geostrategic perimeter and control the regional dynamic...’¹¹ Undeniably, despite the challenging environment, India will be a leading power in the foreseeable future. The context of change, hence, has to perform visionary and with far-reaching implications.

Indeed, China is spreading its wings and is sharpening its claws rapidly from restructuring, exercising, deadly long range nuclear missiles and expanding blue-water navy, to potent space and cyber warfare-capabilities. The proposed 46 billion dollar CPEC and One Belt One Road are of immense interest to us. China will have a modern military capable of high-intensity combat operations in near future. India can ill-afford to ignore China’s increasing economic and military might, its assiduous strategic encircling of India, hardening posture in the Sino-Indian border

talks, and close economic and military affiliations with Pakistan. China has nearly reached the pinnacle as a global power with global aspirations, and desires to re-obtain its primacy of previous times.

For Pakistan, a nation having taken birth without a clear identity, and with its inability to create and nurture one subsequently, maintaining integrity itself is an onerous task. Pakistan suffers from the crisis of identity, and an omnipresent threat of Balkanisation. Animosity with India (and Kashmir issue) lends Pakistan credence of identity, which is its bedrock to retaining itself as a nation-state. It also allows the Pakistan Army its continual position of eminence in the society, since Independence. The geo-strategic location of the nation, grave asymmetries in development among the provinces and the extraordinary role that Army has played, compounds the anxieties on the state of Pakistan presently and in the future. Pakistan, defines its security in tangible terms as military capability to thwart a military threat from India. The twin pillars of the India-centric security perception are building national military capability with the objective of challenging India's military might and providing for an effective defence, and searching for military-oriented alignments, which can assist primarily in dealing with New Delhi.¹² It is also obvious to any discerning analyst, that any comprehensive strategic transition to a more benign thinking in Pakistan is most unlikely. Any great socio-political change in Pakistan may not happen without attendant upheaval and instability, and hence is likely to remain elusive.

The Indian Armed Forces have been and will remain to do so, committed extensively in internal security, in combating terrorism and insurgencies, and combating an intransigent Pakistan Army on the Line of Control and the International Border. This onerous commitment is a subject of separate analysis, and not pursued in initiating debate on war-fighting conceptology.

Transforming Indian Army War-Fighting Conceptology

India is on a steady and determined path of economic development and socio-economic development of the masses. This statement has given leads to many quintessential posers. With the strong growth trajectory, and a corresponding strength at global fora, will India in perpetuity remain

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threatened with loss of territory? Will India remain mired in territorial wars, be it limited, local, hybrid or all out? Should India's assured direction towards being a leading power make no difference except some incremental changes in warfare? Should the Indian Armed Forces continue the attrition-based, force-on-force strategies? How long will linearity, in execution of operation and military thought, retain its primacy? All this and more, including the nuclearised environment (over-hang as normally stated), demand and dictate revised conceptology of war-fighting.

The key notion that pervades all analyses of Indian military strategy and conceptology of future war-fighting is the fact that the nation has unresolved, unsettled and often tense borders, and unstable neighbourhood. Accordingly, in devising own military doctrine a hybrid *threats-cum-capability* model found its place in organisational thinking. Obviously, this rationale cites the various perpetual threats and challenges faced by India and those India will continue to face, from innumerable quarters. Assuredly, this philosophy caused retention of a threat-based model, and a capability facet was added so as to exhibit modernity in warfare thinking. The following merit attention:

- The focus of our war-fighting concepts, force structuring, and technological underpinnings is based on the threats and challenges envisaged. A threat-based model underlies a semblance of 'inwardness', a kind of 'fixated-ness'. In a two-front threat scenario, the rigidity is fully and independently cumulated for both, becomes astronomically expensive in all planning terms. Such a model underlies a sense of weakness, especially for a nation like ours on a strong growth trajectory. In the current and forthcoming era, the nation must exhibit the confidence to address any and all of the myriad threats that may emanate. Retaining the existing war fighting concepts and force structures, (or even making incremental changes) based on threat-challenges does not bring

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- This fixation of 'threat' comes at the expense of more flexible, imaginative, and adaptive planning. A new architecture for the Indian Military is necessary on capabilities that the Forces must acquire capabilities based on modern constructs of making *choices* about requirements and ways to achieve them, and in doing so addressing future war-fighting capabilities, force structuring, technological trade-offs, and related matters in an economic framework. Naturally, modern capabilities are not acquired over the proverbial shelf—these have to be built-in-blocks, in sure timelines. It is argued that capabilities-based model is as well-poised to address threats as they may manifest. Only additionally, the capabilities are not fixated towards a particular threat.

In the same context, is it correct to structuralise the armed forces for a *worst-case scenario*, for example a two-front or a two-and-a-half front threat? In identifying and assessing threats, the military must not rely on worst-case scenarios to guide planning and resource allocations. Worst-case scenarios (like a two-and-a-half front war) will focus on vulnerabilities, which are virtually unlimited, and would require extraordinary national resources to address. For example, '...with the current strength, the IAF will find it tough to take on both PLAAF and PAF. IAF requires at least 50 combat squadrons for a possible two-front war.'¹³ This, in fact, implies that without this kind of force structure, it may be difficult to address a two-front scenario, and understandably creation of such a force is not feasible, and is not on the horizon. There must be pragmatic analysis to deem that a conventional conflict with one is exploitable by the other adversary especially if one of the players is a global power! In the twenty-first century geo-politics, and the pedestal our nation is fast achieving, a multi-national conflict will have global ramifications. We must plan the escalation domination and capability matrix with deliberation, to preclude a multi-front scenario. Therefore, it is essential to carefully create a balance of

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capabilities that must provide for deterrence and simultaneous prepare and combat any threat—if manifested.

- While the nuclearisation of the sub-continent is reality, its influence on *conventional war-fighting* is largely obscured or deliberately understated under the adage of being political weapons, and that they are not for war-fighting. The spectre of nuclear deterrence looms large in analysis of 1998, 2002, 2008 or the on-going

proxy war. The stronger argument hence is that ‘...after India has full nuclear capability in place, it should also make it clear that in case of two-front war, it will have no choice but to exercise such an option.’¹⁴ No First Use (NFU) notwithstanding that would be correct signalling, and deter adventurism! In an eventuality, of opening second front on the West or threat thereof, nuclear signalling may be *Jus Ad Bellum*—a just cause to defend ourselves. Of NFU in doctrinal context, it has been surmised that, ‘...a doctrine serves the end of preparation and planning—but it does not, and cannot, override strategically or tactically sensible courses of action-reaction to be adopted in the battlefield.’¹⁵ Indeed, statecraft requires policies and capabilities that can shape adversaries behaviours in desired ways and at the same time build domestic public confidence and feelings of security.¹⁶ The nation has to have confidence that it possesses the capabilities, structures, mechanisms and the national will, to deter opening a second front, if the need so arises.

To sum this argument, the threats-cum-capability model, and planning for a simultaneous two-front war, is fraught with immense danger of seeking to create a potential force of immense magnitude, one that is unachievable in the ways-ends-means underpinning, in a developing nation. It also denotes conceptual shortfall. India as a leading global and regional player, and by innuendo Indian Military, must deem itself as *un-threaten-able* in relative power and standing as a nation in the global

comity. To begin with, in all our expositions, we must obviate the reference to conventional threat, by an adversary. India is a leading power, and must have capabilities and will to combat any external challenge

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Challenging Status Quo: ‘If It Isn’t Broken, Why Fix It’

With large economic investments, immense urbanisation, people-to-people movement, open skies policies, 80,000 odd ships annually transiting in proximity to Indian coast—all out long drawn conventional wars may indeed be passé. Future wars will be conducted with the aim of achieving a situation of political advantage, and not merely victory. In fact, victory has to be judged by political rather than purely military criteria.¹⁷ Traditional war-making concepts of capturing territory, destruction of military forces or strategic reserves, and attacking fortified defences are becoming less relevant in modern warfare. The goal of war has to be redefined as success rather than victory, where success is measured as much in avoiding excessive casualties, suffering and destruction as in furthering political goals underlying the military operations. Certain formulations merit attention. These are as follows:

- The experience of the 1990s (*2002 and 2008—comment added*) and its military confrontations have revealed that the international community will move heaven and earth to prevent a recurrence of conventional war in

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the region.¹⁸ It may be argued that nuclear environment has greatly diminished the space for military options. To prevent nuclear war, India, Pakistan and China would themselves be compelled to exercise restraint on the aims, objectives and duration of a war, mindful of even the remotest of likelihood of escalation to nuclear war. If, ‘...any large-scale wars beyond border skirmishes may not take place, given the sensitivity of the nuclear escalatory ladder...’,¹⁹ then the scenarios on which war-fighting rests, require serious revision.

- Very large-scale urbanisation and over-population on the western borders will cause untold collateral damage, in large-scale operations. Redrawing of recognised international borders by wars is difficult to construe. Linear defences, which have long been the forte of the western borders, are past. A *Blitzkrieg* of massed manoeuvre elements, deep thrusts, occupying, manoeuvring through or threatening lived in large urban centres (or even vast tracts of barren land), inevitably causing great collateral damage and immense hardships to civilian populace, will be unacceptable on either side of the borders, or internationally. In conventional operations on the western borders, front, depth and rear areas would get engaged multi-dimensionally, simultaneously with real time surveillance, integrated command, control, communications, intelligence and information (C4I2), and highly lethal precision weapon systems. It will become non-linear, possibly to the point of having no definable battlefields or fronts.²⁰ The following conceptual philosophy has indeed become too worn out:

Since World War II, attackers in mechanised warfare have tried to break through the enemy lines and then advance through the breach deep into enemy territory. To prevent such breakthroughs, defenders typically seek to build formidable front lines, so that any section that is attacked can hold out until local reserves arrive. If breakthroughs do occur, defenders use mobile reserves to counterattack the exposed flanks of the penetrating spearheads, in order to cut them off (or at least slow them down) while a new defensive line is established.²¹

- PLA's military modernisation, force restructuring, military exercises and development of infrastructure in Tibet, among other facets do cause anxieties. Conventional warfare on the northern borders, if fought, will entail unified tri-Service plans and execution, technological integration and redundancy of C4ISR elements, with fullest exploitation of weather and terrain, to thwart the force asymmetry. The modelling on the northern borders stands significantly upped, and in a force-on-force, there is credible strength. This is, of course, no ground for complacency.
- Is defend *every inch of territory*²² relevant when international borders cannot be redrawn by force? Will linear defences stretching the mountains, plains, and deserts; epitomising the 'Maginot Line' and the slogging attritional force-on-force warfare retain primacy even in next 25 years and beyond? Is it not time to reconstruct the combined arms, mechanised heavy forces, and blitzkrieg that has dominated the war fighting thought over the last three decades? The defensive strategy of the 1960s and 1970s, resting on the dictum of no loss of territory, gave rise to the linearity in defences or 'Maginot Line' which has served India well in the last 40 years. The 1980s and the 1990s brought in the massive strike corps, high intensity battle of attrition, and later nuclear deterrence. The proactive strategy, at the turn of the century, evinced the pivot and the strike formations, former with some offensive punch, yet largely mired in battling the proverbial 'not an inch', akin to a tram-line. The proactive strategy (or cold start as it was colloquially dubbed) was an aftermath. Interchangeably, however, on personalised basis came in incrementalism, seamless continuums, full spectrum, manoeuvrist approach, and decisive victory. In the journey, lapped up and jettisoned in quick regularity were many an acronym like the snipe, the swarm, the heavy degradation, and heavy breakthroughs.

In the growth trajectory of the nation, the strategic national priority will continue to remain prevention of war, which dictates adequate credible deterrent capabilities; and if deterrence fails, to undertake it to achieve the political goals and disengage with maximum advantage to our national

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interests at minimum costs, and in minimal time. Indeed, there must be credible deterrence at the conventional level against potential adversaries. The omnipotent poser is the prime necessity of holding large conventional formations for deterrence. Contextually, however, conventional deterrence is inextricably enmeshed with national will, war-fighting doctrines and capabilities, and nuclear weaponisation and its doctrines. The

challenge of military strategy will be to apply military power, to achieve the desired end-state, keeping the war below the perceived nuclear threshold.

The current thought is bound by the parameters that ‘...if it isn’t broken, why fix it’, or ‘...don’t change for changes sake’. Militaries world over inherently resist change. Hence, reconsideration of utilisation of military power and war-fighting doctrines is currently imperative. Indeed, the ‘Maginot Line’ should well be consigned to history, sooner the better. It has given rise to a singular deep-rooted defensive mindset that is absolutely avoidable. In redefining conventional war in a globalised environment on western and northern borders of India, the strategic pillar on which the Indian Armed Forces must stand is military power projection capability.

Operationally and structurally, the defensive (or pivot) and offensive (or strike) army formations must stand subsumed as ONE (much leaner) Conventional Force—an appropriate deterrent to any adversary. It is futile to orbit nearly an armoured division in defence and another in offense, in a singular theatre—this may be a luxury that would be ill-affordable.

In fact the wide variety of terrain configurations dictate force structures based on capabilities on sectoral profiles, than on broad-based brick-basis. Many duplications, and even triplications may prove redundant, in case configured on sectoral specificities, and many a void will be obtained ex-redundancies. In the plains and deserts, the immobility of infantry, its short range of influence and propensity to go to ground (and remain there *ad infinitum*), could leave it substantially out of battle. Hence,

the epitome of military thought should be offensive in nature, with the ability to dynamically manoeuvre to ground or aggress with equal fortitude and capabilities. In case considered imperative and inescapable, the PMF could take to be tasked to ground on eventuality—relieving army formations currently bee-lining towards holding role. In equal similarity, in the mountains and high altitudes too, a rethink is necessary, and feasible. This will allow for compositions based on capabilities profiled on exact requirements. This will also lead efficient right sizing of the forces, based on in-depth appreciation—leading to substantial reallocations, for modernisation and technological upgradation.

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Conclusion

‘...Transition of India is an expression of self-confidence. Its foreign policy dimension is to aspire to be a leading power... India engages the world with greater confidence and assurance.’²³ If we have aspirations, and deservedly so, we cannot avoid making seemingly awkward strategic choices. As a leading power, and if India is at the Global High Table²⁴, we must reappraise the current doctrinal framework. By discarding the over-stressed threat-based worst-case scenarios, the standing of the nation and the Armed Forces, will enhance credibly, and we will militarily too engage the world and the neighbours with greater confidence and assurance.

In sum, hence, clean drafting pads and a clutch of thought leaders—military and civilian alike, and a fresh contemplation of utilisation of military power optimally, and strategising twenty-first century war-fighting concepts is imperative, to then plan the capabilities that would abide by us till mid century. The war-fighting doctrinal transition must precede any force restructuring. In the interim, force structuring involving raisings

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of infantry units or acquisition of large numbers of artillery pieces, tanks and ICVs, planned on the basis of worst-case scenarios be reappraised. Such a *ways* transition will assuredly lead to serious well-analysed credible right-sizing, and internally generate substantial *means* to create a twenty-first century modern, forward-looking force, capable of achieving the *ends*. Such a military war-fighting philosophy will also denote that we have *arrived*, as a modern forward-looking force, with the twenty-first century credentials.

Notes

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