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# Generations of War and the Relevance of Armour

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**A**s per William S. Lind, director of the Centre for Cultural Conservatism at the Free Congress Foundation, USA, there are Four Generations of War. These Four Generations began with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, by which the state established a monopoly on war. Previously, many different entities had fought wars — families, tribes, religions, cities, business enterprises — using many different means, not just armies and navies (two of those means, bribery and assassination, are again in vogue). Now, state militaries find it difficult to imagine war in any way other than fighting state armed forces similar to themselves.

## Generations of War

### *The First Generation*

The First Generation of Modern War runs roughly from 1648 to 1860. This was war of line and column tactics, where battles were formal and the battlefield was orderly. The relevance of the First Generation springs from the fact that the battlefield of order created a military culture of order. Most of the things that distinguish “military” from “civilian” — uniforms, saluting, careful gradations or rank — were products of the First Generation and are intended to reinforce the culture of order.

**The Problem with the First Generation.** Around the middle of the 19th century, the battlefield of order began to break down. Mass armies, soldiers who actually wanted to fight (an 18th century’s soldier’s main objective was to desert), rifled muskets, then breech loaders and machine guns, made the old line and column tactics first obsolete, and then suicidal. The problem ever since

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has been a growing contradiction between the military culture and the increasing disorderliness of the battlefield. The culture of order that was once consistent with the environment in which it operated, thus, began to become more and more at odds with it.

### *Second Generation*

Second Generation Warfare was one answer to this contradiction. Developed by the French Army during and after World War I, it sought a solution in mass firepower, most of which was indirect artillery fire. The goal was attrition, and the doctrine was summed up by the French as, “The artillery conquers, the infantry occupies.” Centrally-controlled firepower was carefully synchronised, using detailed, specific plans and orders for the infantry, tanks and artillery, in a “conducted battle” where the commander was in effect the conductor of an orchestra.

Second Generation Warfare again restored or preserved the culture of order. The focus was inward on rules, processes and procedures. Obedience was more important than initiative (in fact, initiative was not wanted, because it endangered synchronisation), and discipline was top-down and imposed.

Second Generation Warfare is relevant to us today because the Indian Army learned Second Generation Warfare from the British and French during and after World War I, though it got engrained into our psyche much later. This generation essentially meant “putting steel on target.”

### *Third Generation*

Third Generation Warfare, like the second, was a product of World War II. It was developed by the German Army, and is commonly known as *Blitzkrieg* or manoeuvre warfare. Third Generation Warfare is based not on firepower and attrition but on speed, surprise, and mental as well as physical dislocation. Tactically, in the attack, a Third Generation military seeks to get into the enemy's rear and collapse him from the rear forward – instead of “close with and destroy,” the motto is “bypass and collapse.” In defence, it attempts to draw the enemy in, then cut him off. War ceases to be a shoving contest, where forces attempt to hold or advance a “line.” Third Generation Warfare is non-linear. Not only do tactics change in the Third Generation, so does the military culture. A Third Generation

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military focusses outward, on the situation, the enemy, and the result the situation requires, not inward, on the process and method.

#### ***Fourth Generation***

Characteristics such as decentralisation and initiative carry over from the Third to the Fourth Generation, but in other respects, the Fourth Generation marks the most radical change since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. In Fourth Generation War, the state loses its monopoly on war. All over the world, state militaries find themselves fighting non-state opponents such as Al Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and closer home the likes of Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) and Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT).

Fourth Generation Warfare is not merely something that is imported, but is homegrown, as happened to the USA on 9/11. At its core lies a universal crisis of legitimacy of the state, and that crisis means many countries will evolve Fourth Generation Warfare on their soil. Countries with a closed political system (regardless of which party wins, the Establishment remains in power and nothing really changes) and a poisonous ideology of “multi-culturalism,” are prime candidates for the homegrown variety of Fourth Generation Warfare — which is by far the most dangerous kind.

## **Employment of Armour**

#### ***Relevance of Tanks and Armour***

Given the generation of war into which the world is headed (where the enemy will increasingly be one of our own and the battlefield will be the areas quaintly referred to as cities), we are at a juncture where we need to reassess the efficacy and utility of the tank as a weapon system. The critics may point out that eventually the tanks will be passed up for more lightly armoured and faster armoured fighting vehicles (AFVs) and the light infantry and other highly mobile forces are going to be the death of it, as the enemy (in the Fourth Generation War) will mostly use small units and will fight based in urban areas where the ability of the tanks is greatly restricted. However, before writing off the tank, it is relevant to analyse its origin and the uses that this magnificent piece of equipment has been put through over the years.

#### ***Combined Arms Team Concept***

As early as 1927, J.F.C. Fuller insisted that the traditional arms be viewed and developed in accordance with their tactical function on the battlefield. He

listed these functions as: finding, holding, hitting, protecting, and smashing. Fuller did recognise that certain conditions, primarily terrain, could affect the function of an arm and, therefore, its employment. So arose the concept of the combined arms team, which consists of complementary arms and weapons, which contribute to victory by matching those arms with the tactical functions described by Fuller.

**Doctrine Prior to World War II.** In 1927, Fuller conceded that the older arms of light infantry and cavalry could best fulfill the above tactical functions in very difficult terrain. But, by 1932, he was more inclined to grant a greater role to the mechanised arms in “warfare in undeveloped

and semi-civilized countries.” Fuller had his eyes on the northwest frontier of India but commented not only on mountain warfare but also on bush fighting. He stressed the combined role of the airplane, motor vehicle, and scout tank, along with the need for a grid system or zones to facilitate command and control.

**Employment of Armour in World War II.** Armour came into existence to fulfill a tactical role on the high intensity battlefield. Around the time of World War II and immediately after, this role was well understood and continued to drive the development of armour organisation, equipment, and tactical doctrine. In the Pacific during World War II, the US Army and Marines committed 20 tank battalions to fight campaigns in some of the world’s most rugged jungles. Even in the mountainous terrain of Italy, Greece, and Korea, armour formations achieved notable successes. The function of armour in these areas was different, however, from that of armour in less restrictive theatres. Indeed, in difficult terrain, armour was most often used as mobile assault artillery. The infantry served to find and fix, while armour and artillery hit. In combination, the arms would smash or destroy the enemy.

**Employment of Armour During Third Generation Wars.** On the high intensity battlefield, armoured cavalry was used to find, the artillery to hit, and the mechanised forces protected themselves with armour while they held and eventually smashed the enemy. In different conditions, such as rugged terrain, the infantry was used to find and smash, while the artillery and armour hit.

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#### *Fourth Generation Wars and Employment of Armour*

**Conditions Prevalent.** Unlike the enemy on the linear battlefields of World War II, the enemy during an insurgency is not only elusive but also normally possesses the initiative, making and breaking contact at will. Insurgents seek security for their bases by establishing them in remote areas, commonly in difficult terrain, where the employment of armour is limited. Additionally, the low intensity battlefield is non-linear and located either within one's own country or in close proximity. The battle is fought among the people in urban as well as rural areas; therefore, there is a desire to limit the violence. Obviously, the factors of terrain, enemy, and the nature of insurgency underscore the limitations of armour in limited war.

**Limitations of Armour During Insurgency.** Armour's ability to meaningfully contribute in the Fourth Generation War is constrained by several factors, primarily terrain and the nature of the insurgency. In addition to terrain, the nature of the insurgency also affects the function of armour. Difficult terrain inhibits the mobility of armour on the battlefield. The noise of armoured vehicles and their reduced mobility on the battlefield inhibits mechanised forces from finding the enemy. Destroying the enemy is much more difficult. Reduced battlefield mobility means that armour by itself is rarely able to fix and finish the enemy.

#### *Recommended Employment of Armour During Insurgency*

Armour's role in the combined arms team in the insurgency environment caused a reconsideration of tactics. In many ways, J.F.C. Fuller anticipated the role armour would play in what we now call low intensity warfare. Unlike high intensity warfare, armour's role at the lower end of the spectrum of war has not been so well understood. Both the United States and the former Soviet Union have gained experience with employing armour in such scenarios. In each case, the expectation of armour's role on the low intensity battlefield was different from the tactics finally hammered out in the field. Therefore, the theory of the function of armour must be examined in the light of experiences in this low intensity war.

**The American Experience.** The planners in the US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam originally saw no need for tanks for forces deploying to that country. When tanks first arrived in Vietnam in March of 1965, it was by accident. In fact, when informed that American tanks had been deployed, Ambassador to Vietnam Maxwell Taylor, was upset that such equipment "not appropriate for counter-insurgency operations" had been sent. Despite the apprehension of the planners,

once having proved its value, the number of armour units in Vietnam steadily increased. By the end of the war, 24 per cent of the combat manoeuvre battalions deployed to Vietnam were either, mechanised infantry, armour, or armoured cavalry.

**The Soviet Experience.** The Soviet experience with armour in insurgency began with the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Unlike the US, the Soviets over-rated the role of armour. In a number of articles prior to the invasion,

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which discussed mountain warfare, several military authors confidently asserted that tanks could operate jointly with motorised rifle and artillery units, and even sometimes independently. By 1982, after three years of fighting, articles discussing armour operations in mountainous terrain were, however, much more cautious. In the same year, the popular Press in the West was claiming that the Soviets had changed their tactics in Afghanistan.

Therefore, we have the American and the Soviet experience which both started from different ends of the spectrum, wherein, while the Americans were sceptical about using the tanks, the Soviets relied overly on tanks initially. In both wars, each army found that its pre-war tactical doctrine for armour needed some adjustment or change when applied to the present generation of war. In both these cases, mid-course correction was applied and the tank found a suitable slot to be employed in.

**Recommended Employment.** At the very least, during the Fourth Generation Wars armour can protect and hit. When properly organised and employed, it can also be used to find, fix, and in combination with other arms, destroy insurgent forces.

- (a) The aim in such a war, like in all kinds of war, should be to seize the initiative from the enemy (insurgent). The initiative and ability of the insurgent to break contact can only be taken away by forcing him to fight. This can be done through encirclement, traps, or incentive. If the insurgent can be provided sufficient incentive to fight, for his bases or through deception, enough firepower may be quickly massed to destroy him. Therefore, a key to success will be a combination of firepower and manoeuvre that must be used.
- (b) The chief value of mechanised forces here lies in their ability to react quickly, moving from zone to zone wherever needed. This ability should be exploited to the maximum.

- (c) The tremendous firepower which armour brings to the battle will be a key advantage in hitting the enemy and should be exploited to the fullest.
- (d) Armour can provide valuable protection from small arms and shrapnel through armour plating.

The bottom line as before, therefore, continues to be that without tanks, we don't have combined arms and, hence, a tank's importance, derived from its lethality, ability to adapt to open terrain as well as urban settings and survivability factor for the crew makes it by far the most potent weapon system in a non-linear battlefield, bordering on the horizons of the Third and Fourth Generations War. Even in present day Iraq, which though by no means is a barometer of the present day war, tanks led the way during the initial invasion and have been prominent weapons in nearly every major operation as well as important in the day-to-day missions.

The tank, therefore, will continue to be amongst the most decisive weapon systems and the efforts/discussions should be directed not at ascertaining "the relevance of the tank," but towards innovations and ideas required to transform the tank into an even more lethal monster capable of fighting in today's battlefield.