

# Changing Face of Conflict: Need to Reshape Military Philosophy

Narender Kumar

*The peacetime soldier's principal task is to prepare effectively for the next war. In order to do so, he must anticipate what the next war will be like. This is a difficult task that gets continuously more difficult.*

— Lt Gen Franz Uhle-Wettler

A new narrative was written on 9/11 and the world was never the same again. The form of conflict which has emerged thereafter is amorphous, the adversary is faceless and national boundaries have become defused. The battle space is undefined and the time and location of the next engagement are unknown. The security forces are not issued any warning orders to respond to an aggression on a state, society or individual. The threat is undefined and unanticipated. If we look back in history, one thing which was common in the first three generations of warfare was that the battle lines were defined and the enemy distinguishable. The changing nature and character of warfare has rendered the territorial boundaries of nations insignificant and the emerging war which is ambiguous and irregular is now being fought within and beyond land borders, in the physical and psychological domains. On one side, it is asymmetric, and on the other, it is hybrid in nature, a combination of conventional and sub-conventional warfare. The targets are

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nations, institutions, individuals and even the psyche of the Diaspora. The means are kinetic and non-kinetic in character. Anne-Marie Slaughter, Professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University, says, “Conflicts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are going to look very different from those of the century before. The two wars launched by the United States—one justifiably in Afghanistan and the other unjustifiably in Iraq – are likely to be the last examples of 20<sup>th</sup> century-style warfare. Large-scale prolonged conflicts

involving the ground invasion of one country by another will be an exception rather than a practice.”<sup>1</sup> At an earlier time, a commander could be certain that a future war would resemble the past and present ones. This enabled him to analyse appropriate tactics from the past and present. Whosoever failed to adapt the experiences of the last war was sure to lose the next one.<sup>2</sup> But this scenario may no longer be relevant—21<sup>st</sup> century conflicts will require a new approach and philosophy.

The emerging security environment is radically different from what it was even a decade ago. The profound struggle of humanity will be for control of wealth and for ideologies and strategic autonomy in an environment which is increasingly globalised. The new security challenges are products, not of conventional inter-state rivalries, but of economic, demographic and societal tensions that are trans-national in nature. Incidents of conflict are on the rise due to a multiplicity of factors, ranging from weak and illegitimate state institutions, marginalisation of people, large scale population displacements and ineffective regional security arrangements.<sup>3</sup>

Ambiguous and irregular warfare is a reminder to the rest of the world to cast away the fatigued and tired ideology of matching strength with strength and division with division. A direct conflict between nations

will become history. Large conventional Armies will have to give way to Special Forces with precise capabilities. According to John Arquilla, “Many and Small” beats “Little and Large” and “swarming will be the new method of surging”.

### **Reshaping the Military Strategy for the Future**

Why is there a need to reexamine the future landscape of conflict? First, the era of large scale conventional inter-state wars is nearing an end, and, second, there is the rise of ambiguous, protracted and indecisive conflict in a complex environment.<sup>4</sup> Armed conflict will now be for stabilisation rather than regime change or defeating a rogue state. The focus will be on small wars since the internal conflict in itself could become intolerable to the global community because the national and international interests are entwined. Mr Obama, the President of the United States of America has already laid down the new roadmap for future strategies and force structuring of the US Army to deal with the emerging contours of conflict. It is interesting to note that the President had six rounds of deliberations with the Pentagon in 2011 before he unveiled the future strategy and force restructuring. The strategic imperatives he defined for the Pentagon are:

- The US Army needs to get rid of the “Cold War era syndrome.
- The US needs a smaller, more agile, leaner force, with precise capabilities to defend strategic and national interests globally.
- It needs to refocus and reinvest in intelligence operations and cyber warfare.
- A leaner capability is required to maintain military superiority for a full spectrum war on land, air, sea, space, and the cyber and psychological domains.

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- Focus is needed on strategies for back to the future.
- Conventionally, fighting a worst case war is to be avoided.
- This time, be more efficient, employ more technology with precise capabilities.
- Change the course, if required, in terms of force structuring or strategy.
- Maintain the capability to prevail upon two militarily capable aggressor nations.
- The military must fight one war at a time, but if forced, it must deny the objective to one and impose unacceptable costs of war

on the other aggressor.

An important facet of his new strategy is to build precise military capabilities to deal with small wars, and a hedging military strategy against conventional adversaries (China, Russia and rogue states).

**Will the Conventional Land Forces Become Irrelevant?** If the future wars are going to be fought in the political, economic, social and limited military domains, what is the justification for having large conventional Armies? A range of factors will make large-scale, state-on-state war rare or even obsolete. The costs and risks of a conventional war are going to be so huge that nations will avoid it. Even rogue nations such as Pakistan and North Korea which are otherwise aggressive, weak and irrational, will avoid risking a conventional war. In our context, the threat of a large war may have been reduced but the constant threat scenario does remain relevant since India is encircled by inimical state and non-state actors who are capable of threatening the sovereignty of this nation. Though a conventional Army is relevant as a dissuasive deterrent, there is a case for taking a fresh look at force restructuring in the backdrop

of the following emerging trends in war-fighting.

**Remote Control War:** It is not always necessary to put boots on the ground when other means are available. Why risk men and material in a hostile environment when the same objectives can be achieved by employing drones and weapon systems which can be controlled electronically? Afghanistan and the Iraq War have given an impetus to the remote control war. Pitfalls from such engagement are collateral damage if the intelligence is inaccurate or there is an error of judgement. This war can be fought by a laptop warrior sitting thousands of kilometres away, without fear of retaliation.

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**No Contact War:** Brig Arun Sahgal defines the no contact war “as a strategy aimed at political coercion through stage managed political, economic, and psychological effects”. The entire concept of “no contact war” is aimed at striking at key points to paralyse the enemy’s entire range of politico-military systems, and is aimed at immobilising its command structures. A possible dimension includes, “intimidation warfare”. This comprises military pressure or show of force i.e. actions short of war, including build-up and large-scale military exercises, computer network attacks, electronic attacks, psychological operations and provocative air and naval activity.

**War of Collusion:** In an Indian context, proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and expanding Left Wing Extremism (LWE) are the result of a war of collusion between two of our inimical neighbours, wherein the tools employed are state sponsored non-state actors and rogue government agencies (Inter-Services Intelligence–ISI). The war

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of collusion can be employed to subdue a nation by employing traditional and non-traditional means of war-waging. The nexus or collusion of Pakistan, China and non-state actors cannot be ruled out in the Indian context and has the potential to destabilise the region and create a situation of insecurity within the confines of national boundaries. The expansion of the 'Red Corridor' and the footprints of the *jibadi* upsurge across the country, from J&K to Manipur, are causes of concern.

**Soft Targets Will be in Focus:**

Soft targets will be in focus, because the hybrid threat will manifest in the rear areas or within the hinterland. An attack on such targets will attract considerable media glare and may be able to divert the attention and focus from the main threat for a brief period. Layered security and situational awareness make such attacks more difficult but then such a security umbrella has a cost in terms of the national exchequer, liberty or freedom of citizens and dilution of combat resources from the primary task to secondary ones.

**Outsourced War:** Estimates of the numbers of outsourced security personnel in Afghanistan vary from 130,000 to 160,000. Private military contracted personnel account for nearly two-thirds of all the Pentagon's personnel in Afghanistan, the highest ratio in any conflict in the history of the US.<sup>5</sup> This new strategy has pitfalls and military jurists are equally concerned that by ignoring the well-thought out doctrine on civilians' role in warfare, contractors now operate in a legal no man's land, beyond the established boundaries of the military or international law.<sup>6</sup> The Pentagon believes that this kind of strategy to fight a war is cost-effective and with the least amount of liability and accountability. It is

an alternative which has been found to fight a war in a troubled and inhospitable environment. The outsourced war-fighting model comprises “train, assist, enable and abandon”. This model is being tested in Africa, Iraq and Afghanistan by the United States of America and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The judgement is already out on such warriors but in a muted voice: it is being considered unethical, immoral and against the international law for employment of civilians in a war zone. The presence of a large number of trained armed cadres in our neighbourhood, who could be hired to outsource war against India or militarily weak and vulnerable regional states, is a threat to peace and stability in the region.

**Cyber Warfare/Digital Warfare:** This comprises use of electronics and computers to paralyse networks, communication systems, military and civilian facilities, and is intended to disrupt and deny these for military and non-military purposes by fighting with electrons rather than explosives.<sup>7</sup> Leon Panetta, former Defence Secretary of the United States of America has stated that a “Cyber Pearl Harbour” can disable the national power grid, commercial banking system and transportation system. The resultant loss will be even more than that caused by the actual Pearl Harbour attack during World War II. It is estimated that last year, the total loss caused by cyber crimes the world over amounted to approximately one trillion dollars. The biggest challenge is that more often than not, the retaliation or response to a cyber war is near impossible because such war can be caused even by an individual, and needs no Army. There is a thin line between crime and cyber war. It is emerging as more potent and dangerous than any other form of warfare. The keyboard and mouse are proving to be more dangerous than any kinetic weapon.

**Mind as a Weapon/ Perception of Just Cause:** It is an established fact that the “barrel of the gun cannot stop the will of a man”. Al Qaeda is one prominent organisation which manipulates the mind through ideology and uses the mind as a weapon system. It provides motivation

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and ideology rather than weapon systems. Those who perpetuated 9/11 were not given the weapon systems to cause huge collateral damage, but were motivated and convinced that their actions comprised a just war. Osama bin Laden was a super empowered individual, who manipulated the minds of the foot slogging soldiers, forcing them to close their minds to the aspects of right and wrong. The objective is important, the means are not. This kind of warfare where the mind is a weapon system has been in practice since time immemorial but its potency has increased recently and the boundaries of the conflict have become unrestricted. Such organisations and individuals are finding relevance in the trans-national arena. Such warfare poses a serious challenge to states as it is difficult to anticipate the time and location of the next engagement. The philosophy is that no target is far and no individual is above the cause.

**4<sup>th</sup> Generation / Asymmetric War:** Practitioners of 4<sup>th</sup> Generation warfare use a free society and freedom as a tool to operate in a secure environment; they can move freely within the society while actively working to subvert it. They use the democratic rights not only to penetrate society but also to defend themselves.<sup>8</sup> This kind of warfare is posing the greatest challenge to the conventional forces. These fighters are invisible, and it is cost-effective for those who perpetuate this kind of warfare. India is one of the most affected nations by this kind of war. The armed forces have controlled it to a great extent, but the ultimate resolution has to be within the political, social and economic spheres.

**Hybrid War:** Hybrid conflicts are full spectrum wars in the physical and conceptual dimensions: the former, a struggle against an armed enemy and the latter, a wider struggle for control and support of the combat zone. It is waged through the indigenous population, with the support of the intervening nations and the inimical international

community.<sup>9</sup> The world was shocked by the capability of the hybrid threat displayed by Hezbollah and Hamas in the recent conflicts in Lebanon and Gaza. Hezbollah and Hamas have a modicum of training, organisation, and advanced weapons, particularly if they are operating “among the people.”<sup>10</sup> It is a war between the “Big and Conventional” and the “Small or Irregular.” The enemies of today and tomorrow will employ combinations of conventional and sub-conventional capability.<sup>11</sup> This kind of warfare in the 21st century is being deemed a “revolution in warfare” and poses the greatest challenge to states and conventional forces. It will prove to be one of the most difficult to combat because it is a mixed war, with conventional war, insurgency and terrorism, fought from the hinterland and from the population centres. To deal with the hybrid threat, sophisticated conventional and Special Forces are imperative. The need is to train regular forces to combat the threat by adopting the strategy and tactics of irregular warfare. Land forces with precise information, high mobility and precision engagement are central to fighting this partially invisible enemy.

**Irregular War—A Hedging Military Strategy:** In “irregular warfare,” the battlefield has no limits, because the tactics and strategies are not traditional. Subversion and the use of Special Forces for clandestine operations are the main techniques to destabilise the adversary “inside out.”<sup>12</sup> The world has acknowledged that it is far more economical and sustainable to operate against radicals and non-state actors in a clandestine manner than fighting with “boots on the ground”. Gen Gordon Sullivan, United States Army, wrote, “Warfare today has taken a new form and grown to new levels”.<sup>13</sup> This type of warfare is not new, but what is new is that it has recently reached a global level and the world has been found ill prepared. It comprises fighting irregular forces by regular forces in a conventional manner. Pakistan and China have adopted this strategy to erode the war-waging and military capability of India. In the backdrop of the above, the most potent strategy is to fight the invisible enemy with

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invisible soldiers. Therefore, there is a need to reshape the mindset and force structuring.

### **Intelligence-based Operations and Cyber Warfare**

The US is officially spending approximately 10 percent of its defence budget on intelligence and cyber warfare operations. Obama had requested an increase of 5.7 percent for the budget of special operations for the year 2011. He asked for \$6.3 billion, plus US \$3.5 billion extra for the contingency clandestine operations. For 2011, the total defence budget of the USA was \$ 872 billion, and \$75 billion was meant for the intelligence agencies.<sup>14</sup> Such huge sums of money available for intelligence operations are able to support and outsource large clandestine operations globally. It is a worry as well as a lesson for India to lay more focus on intelligence operations against rogue nations and non-state actors.

**Small but Radical Wars:** According to Robert M. Gates, US Secretary of Defence, “The categories of warfare are blurring and no longer fit into neat, tidy boxes. One can expect to see more tools and tactics of destruction from the simple and sophisticated means being employed simultaneously in hybrid and more complex forms of warfare.” There is a thin line between just wars and radical wars; use of the indirect method or hired mercenaries/ indoctrinated civilians has become a practice and is no longer an exception. This poses a serious challenge to the governments to deal with such wars since they are fought from within the homeland and the modules are “employ and abandon”. According to the *Washington Post*, the USA is carrying out special operations in 75 countries, with the assistance of 13,000 military troops and civilian experts in intelligence operations, psychological warfare, targeted killing, training missions, and other intelligence-based operations<sup>15</sup> against radicals and rogue nations.

**Synergised and Simultaneous War in All Six Domains:** Future conflicts will be fought in a synergised manner on the ground, sea, space, air, and the cyber and psychological domains. They need not be employed in a sequential manner, and there are no rules suggesting that all six domains will not be engaged simultaneously. Rather future wars will be won by those who retain the capability to control all six domains and prevent others from using them.

**Media Wars:** “Victory and defeat are determined by the media”—this moralistic simplification is not new in conflict coverage. Governments, militaries and non-state actors always seek to control information and shape public perceptions to their advantage most urgently during conflicts.<sup>16</sup> The role of the media gained prominence during the Iraq invasion by the US. The perception of people was manipulated and what suited the US-led Allies was fed to the people at large. The Fourth Estate is assuming much greater significance and is a powerful tool for waging war. The media also needs to be educated in our own context to be a tool of war-waging as was done by the Allies during World War II — BBC performed that task in a remarkable manner. Similarly, during the Cold War era, BBC, CNN and even Hollywood complemented each other against the Soviet Republic, and Moscow Radio and Warsaw Pact nations could not match up to the propaganda of NATO and the Western Allies. The Kargil War showed an efficient utilisation of the media to shape the opinion of the nation and the international community.

**Jasmine Revolution and Social Media:** The Jasmine Revolution brought into focus the importance and power of the social media. During the run-up to the Tunisian revolution, 35 percent Tunisians were connected through the Internet and approximately 19 percent were connected through Facebook. A bloodless revolution was literally powered by the social media. This revolution has highlighted that manipulation of the social media by inimical forces and the government agencies could be a game changer during a war. The Chinese government is wary of

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the power of the social media; it is believed that if at all there is an uprising against single party governance in China; the social media will play a vital role in giving direction and impetus to the revolution. The exodus of the citizens of the Northeast from the rest of India, post Bodo-Muslim clashes in Assam is a grim reminder of the dangers of a media war against own people, if regulatory and intelligence agencies are unable to anticipate, and take corrective measures against, it.

**Economic War:** This is emerging as one of the most potent weapons. Conventional wars can be prevented purely by initiating an economic war. The tools of economic wars are cyber, information war, manipulation of forex, stock exchanges, fake currency to weaken the economy, proliferation of fake goods in international markets, economic blockade and adverse propaganda of racial bias and exploitation.

## **The Way Ahead**

Strategic wisdom lies in anticipation of, and preparation for, future wars. Those who disobey the trajectory of change are bound to bring disrepute and catastrophe to their nation. The changing face of conflict and rapidly developing strategies warrant transformation of the armed forces and evolution of strategies to deal with emerging military challenges. Napoleon had said, "Space I can recover, but the time I cannot". Rational thinking suggests that military capabilities should be built to deal with the military threats on the horizon, which are likely to emerge in the future, and which may even be invisible. The trend lines suggest that the armed forces should not remain focussed to deal with impending conventional threats but should structure themselves to deal with the full

spectrum war in all six domains. Transformation of organisational structures, training, equipping, evolution of doctrines and tactics comprises a time consuming and continuous process. But what is important is that the threats are dynamic and so should be the preparation to deal with them. A focus towards the future is essential and, hence, there is a need to cast aside the tired ideology of overreliance on large conventional forces. The next war is unlikely to be like the last war. Therefore, in this muddled and foggy environment, what should be the way ahead?

**The way ahead lies in investing in Special Forces with precise capabilities for wide ranging contingencies.**

**War of Division versus Division Will be History:** Pitching strength against strength is an outdated concept. Conflicts between states are unlikely until or unless a nation turns rogue or irrational. Therefore, the way ahead lies in investing in Special Forces with precise capabilities for wide ranging contingencies. Capabilities should be linked to the emerging threats and challenges.

**Agile and Lean Forces:** Agility in a force is induced by its readiness profile, mobility and quick transformation from one role to another without major logistic liability. Future engagements are likely to occur unanticipated and the response thereof has to be rapid and lethal. There will not be time to rehearse or carry out a detailed battle procedure. Therefore, agility and the ability to operate in an environment of information vacuum is the key to success.

**Capability for All Terrains:** India cannot afford a Special Force for each domain; therefore, all terrain forces are a must with the future in mind. Special Forces should be able to operate within, and beyond, the territorial boundaries of India, on the land, through the sea and through the air.

**Technologically Empowered Special Forces:** Special Forces should be lighter, more lethal, manoeuvrable, survivable, and more readily

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deployed and employed in an integrated manner. They must not only be capable of conducting dispersed operations, but also be able to force entry in anti-access or area-denial environments.<sup>17</sup> Special Forces should also have the capability to operate beyond Indian territory. This is imperative considering India's strategic interests and stakes in the Indian Ocean Region.

**Evolution of Strategy and Doctrine:**

The strategy and doctrine must be put in place before conceptualising the force restructuring. In fact, the first tool of deterrence is defining and declaring a strategy and doctrine. This is a weak area as far as our own military work ethos is concerned. Research and capability-based strategy and doctrine are required to be defined. This, in fact, lays down what we expect from the defence forces in a military engagement.

**Building Joint and Combined Arms Capabilities:** A theatrised approach is the right way to move ahead. Jointness, integrated and synergised efforts are required for a highly mobile, sophisticated and lethal environment. Most of the Armies in the world have adopted integration over jointness. Cyber war, information war, out of area contingencies and hybrid threats are some of the areas wherein the integration of resources is imperative and must be handled by a domain commander who could be nominated.

**Comprehensive National Security Strategy:** The strategy for the complete spectrum of conflict is required to be holistic and synergised in nature though the tools may be different and the task forces may be operating in different domains. A multi-layer security mechanism is needed to build a comprehensive security strategy against an ambiguous or undefined threat. For example, counter-

terrorism levers are intelligence, the military, law enforcement, diplomacy and financial sanctions to deal simultaneously against those operating from within the country or having cross-border linkages. The national security strategy will be effective if the following tools are provided to it:

**Conflict Prevention, Conflict Management and Conflict Termination Strategy:** The roadmap should always be prepared for conflict prevention, conflict management and conflict termination. What must not be forgotten is that prevention of conflict which includes efforts to pressure, cajole, arbitrate, mediate, and/or encourage dialogue and facilitate non-violent resolutions of crisis should not be ignored. Confidence-building measures, fact-finding missions, early warning networks, preventive deployment, and close interaction with the masses are all essential. In most cases, the situation has gone out of hand when preventive engagement, escalation prevention, prevention of relapse of escalation, preventive deployment and early warning are ignored. Negotiation and mediation are tools that have been used in conflicts around the world with varying outcomes<sup>18</sup> and cannot be put on hold for long. These are a part of strategy and cannot be glossed over. This is as important as the planning and preparation for war. In fact, in the given environment, more important than fighting a war are prevention, management and termination of conflict.

**Rapid Response Mechanism:** Success or failure will be dictated by the response mechanism. That does not mean only the security forces. A bigger role in this aspect is played by the intelligence agencies, which should forewarn, prepare the state security forces for the impending threat, guide them till the target and give inputs for a change in strategy or stance. Ultimately, what is significant is the preparation and response to an undefined threat. Therefore, a part of the security establishment should be in the readiness profile at all times. A rapid response also means the capability to reach, the capability to operate in an information

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vacuum and the capability to handle various contingencies, ranging from conventional to unconventional threats.

**National War Research Centre:** The National War Research Centre should be the central agency to give policy inputs with regard to the impending threat, response mechanism and timely course correction for dealing with a security problem. Ideally, it should operate under the National Security Adviser (NSA). In fact, it should be the hub of the NSA from where the new trajectory and ideas emerge to make the security set-up efficient and foolproof.

## **Conclusion**

The biggest enemy of military leaders is their inability to follow the unconventional approach. The next war will not be like the previous war and if the military refuses to change, the outcome of the war will certainly be negative. The fear of failure often forces a military leader to adopt a tried and tested strategy, with the least risk, but this is not likely to succeed in the wars of the future. In the backdrop of the above, the security forces must prepare for the wars they may have to fight and not for the wars they want to fight. Those who refuse to change with a changed environment rarely bring victory and often become victims of an ageing psychology and tired ideas.

By its nature, dramatic change in large military organisations involves a long-term process that could span decades or more. The gestation period of military preparation is long, thus, perspective planning is vital to look ahead and change with the emerging trendlines. Overreliance on conventional forces for full spectrum threats is suicidal and will force the nation to always punch below the capability. The political leadership needs to engage more with the process of policy decisions and cannot

afford to leave it to bureaucrats. The world over, the bureaucracy and the military have never been on the same page with regard to policy decisions and how a problem has to be handled. That is why the political leadership globally has always engaged directly with the military and not through the bureaucracy. The major reason for this is that the military matters are not procedures of government departments.

## Notes

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