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# Military Frontiers of the Global War on Terror: Some Lessons

Raj Shukla

Exchange between Col Harry Summers, Jr, of the US Army and a North Vietnamese colonel, in Hanoi on April 25, 1975.

*Oh come on, you know very well, you could never defeat us on the battlefield.*

— Summers

*That may be so , but it is also irrelevant.*

— North Vietnamese Colonel

*Hanoi's centre of gravity was never the battlefield.*

— Thomas E Ricks, in *Fiasco*

## Global War on Terror (GWOT)

The motivation for unleashing the GWOT was obviously 9/11. The military campaign to demolish the Al Qaeda and its Taliban sponsors in Afghanistan, thereafter, was perhaps justified. Widening the swathe of the military onslaught to Iraq, however, was clearly a mistake, especially now that it is abundantly clear that the conflict there had more to do with settling scores with an old foe than with any terror links with 9/11 or weapons of mass destruction (WMD). That Iraq today is a magnet for the Al Qaeda and other terror groups / regional proxies is the consequence of the invasion of Iraq and not its cause. In Lebanon, even if one were to concede a terrorism related rationale, the war's tardy prosecution, far from emasculating the Hezbollah profile, has only enhanced its stature. **GWOT, therefore, is not only conceptually flawed with weak moral**

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**underpinnings, but is also predicated on a rather hazy politico-strategic premise.** In so far as its military frontiers— Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon — are concerned, the seeds of the ongoing muddles lie in the neglect of the wisdom of that seminal exchange of April 1975, carried at the head of this article. In all the three conflicts, the world's most advanced and seemingly invincible militaries, sought (and even gained) victories on the conventional battlefield, but sadly that is not where the centre of gravity lay ; the victories, therefore, were never complete, and defeats now loom large on the horizon. Winning the battle for Baghdad did not win the war for Iraq, nor did the overthrow of the Taliban bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. What is mystifying, however, is that a nation and an army reborn out of the ashes of that transformational trigger called Vietnam, should so easily forget its simplest but most central lesson. Why and how ? Also the critical point: were these conflicts merely asymmetrical in the classical sense ? And has asymmetry in various shades not always been inherent to war-fighting ? Sample this. Armies do not, Gen Rupert Smith argues in his seminal classic, *The Utility Of Force*, prepare for the last war ; they frequently prepare for the wrong one— governments are inclined to fund the anticipated primary threat as opposed to the risk, adversaries play to the opponent's weakness rather than his strength, and armies often end up fighting the risk rather than the primary threat. Asymmetry, therefore, has always been intrinsic to war-fighting. What then were the definingly novel features of the recent conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon? In two of the three conflicts, major combat operations were a huge success ( in the third, the measure of victory was far from decisive) ; yet they failed to realise the stated politico-strategic objectives and have, therefore, been dubbed as failures. There is need, however, to make this careful distinction —the failures lie more in the realm of formulation and realisation of politico-strategic objectives and not so much in the military domain—if anything, the military campaigns in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom were resounding successes. Additionally, the comparisons with Vietnam are not entirely accurate— Vietnam was a sordid chronicle of the plummeting of politico-military performance to bizarre depths. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the problems lie principally in the handling of the post-hostility/stability phase of operations. It is wrong, therefore, to dub Iraq and Afghanistan as generic failures — as military conflicts, they are a combination of huge successes

and a single major failure: the inability to see and think through the inevitable consequences of post-hostility operations, despite numerous forebodings and persistent military counsel. The current imbroglio is a direct outcome of that fatal lapse. Asymmetric warfare, was, at certain points in the recent conflicts, leveraged to address the challenges of force asymmetry; its unleashing may also have been the critical tipping point in determining the outcome of the conflicts, but it would be a

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sweeping generalisation to conclude that the three conflicts were merely asymmetric wars of various hues—there are many valuable lessons that lie beyond the immediate pale of the catchphrase called asymmetry that are pertinent.

### AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

And so the men and the army that advanced across sand and rock were ready for their experience in their hands. **The army America deployed to the Persian Gulf might well have been the finest in all of history, equipped with the best weapons, trained in the most realistic fashion and led by men who'd learned the hard way why you have to do it right the first time**

—Tom Clancy *Into the Storm* (Pan Books, 2006).

### Historical Context

The current morass in Iraq and Afghanistan, should not allow us to undermine the landmark military successes of the American Army of the recent past. Tom Clancy's description of the American Army in the build-up to Gulf War I says a great deal about the force—its rejuvenation and military fettle. To appreciate the scale of transformation, however, we must step back to Vietnam, which, in America's military history, clearly stands out as a forgettable nadir. The US armed forces in Vietnam seemed to symbolise all that could have possibly gone wrong with a military force. Operations Desert Storm ( Gulf War I ), Enduring Freedom ( Afghanistan ) and Iraqi Freedom ( Gulf War II ), in sharp contrast, saw the evolutionary emergence of a war machine that trounced its military adversaries with unprecedented sophistication and precision. The arduous climb, from the depths of Vietnam to the commanding heights of

Iraqi Freedom was indeed a remarkable journey. While the transformational contours are numerous—doctrinal, organisational and attitudinal—in its very basic sense, it is a story of how a group of officers—lieutenants and captains in Vietnam—Colin Powell, Fred Franks, Bill DePuy, Carl Vuono, Norman Schwarzkopf and Creighton Abrams, to name a few, those schooled in that war of grim tragedy ( Vietnam )—resolved to rethink and remake a NEW ARMY. The origins of the transformational journey lay in documents like the *Carlisle Survey*<sup>2</sup> that initiated the process of soul searching and military introspection. Its findings indicted the army and its senior leadership severely. Equally importantly, it was acted upon by the Generals—William Westmoreland, George Forsythe, Bernard Rogers, Creighton Abrams, Walter Kerwin, Bruce Palmer and Admiral Rickover—reformers who set about rethinking and remaking the doctrine, role, structure, leadership and ethical climate in the wake of the Vietnam debacle. The transformation was also significant for the manner in which it embraced information age technologies, the drive towards net-centricity, the search for jointmanship, the sagacious stewardship provided by the political class, the very robust nature of the relationship between the military leadership and their political masters, the enactment of a bold and prescient programme of modernisation et al—the entire paradigm of growth and change. There were other initiatives too, like the “ Future Laboratories,” a concept first conceived in TRADOC in the post-Vietnam years that laid the groundwork for some of the most awesome technological tools that would come to stun and pulverise American adversaries in later years. The Predator unmanned aerial vehicle(UAV), for example, which was used to monitor key targets in Afghanistan and to attack fleeing terrorists, began as an experimental programme in 1994. The technological accretions were gradual, with complex terrain matching systems gradually giving way to the global positioning system (GPS). While only 10 percent of the US military’s tactical aircraft were capable of precision strikes in Desert Storm, the number rose to 90 percent by 2003. Seventy-five of all ordnance dropped in Iraqi Freedom was precision guided. A special drive was launched to develop niche capabilities which proved to be valuable in later years: precision targeting, lighter and more deployable forces, information leveraging, effect-based operations, special forces operations, strategic airlift and sealift capabilities, etc. The battlefields of the intervening years, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Belgrade, proved valuable in updating concepts, doctrines, war-fighting strategies, targeting methodologies, etc. Consequently, the war machine that was called upon to deliver in Operations

Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom was as accomplished as could possibly be. But that was not all.

### **The Nature of the Challenge**

The post-Vietnam military successes in Kosovo, Iraq ( Gulf War I ) and elsewhere, successful though they were, were often derisively dismissed as over the horizon fights against terrorists with cruise missiles. Operation Enduring Freedom provided an opportunity to demolish the last of the critiques against the New American Army — that it could not put its boots on the ground. The Taliban and Al Qaeda would learn in due course how well the

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Americans fought. In collaboration with Rashid Dostum, American troops delivered the towns of Taloqan, Konduz and Herat, fighting small unit actions while surmounting terrible weather and mounting casualties. The capture of Mazar-e-Sharif on November 9, 2001, was the final stamp of approval on the worth of army that had used ground manoeuvre and air power to accomplish what the Soviets had failed to do with more than half a million men.<sup>3</sup> The American Army did extremely well in major combat operations — its failures came in the subsequent counter-insurgency operations, because the advice and forebodings of its senior generals were ridden roughshod by Rumsfeld and his cohorts; the principle of civilian control was used to ignore and subvert sound professional advice. It was not that the American Army ran into some asymmetric challenges that it did not foresee; it repeatedly raised concerns over the inadequacy of boots on the ground, the danger of losing focus and dividing assets and attention if two fronts were activated in simultaneity, the utter foolhardiness in creating a needless security vacuum by disbanding the Iraqi Army, but Rumsfeld's response was typical—destructive micromanagement<sup>4</sup> and ruthless bureaucratic manipulation to keep dissenting views and long-term issues ( the ones that looked beyond the Rumsfeldian obsessions of regime change and WMD ) at bay.

### **Military Acquiescence / Incompetence**

**Did the military protest enough ?** The military concerns bubbled under the surface but never rose to the level of serious confrontation, at least not visibly

so. There were lots of anxieties and private conversations, but they never converted into formal dissent. There were numerous protests and cautionary counsel by men like the Chief of Army Staff Gen Eric Shinneski and former Commander-in-Chief (CINC) Gen Tony Zinni, but there was only one resignation — Lt Gen Gregory Newbold, the director of operations on the Joint Staff.<sup>5</sup> The moot point is this — from Vietnam, till the phase of counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, there was little that the American Army did wrong — the odd glitch apart, the performance curve was constantly on the ascendant ; what hampered the success of operations in the counter-insurgency phase was the fact that no plan existed for the reconstruction /stability phases and the army's call for additional troops was not respected — with disastrous consequences. As far back as February 11, 2003, a week before the launch of Iraqi Freedom, Gen Tony Zinni, in a remarkably prescient deposition (pre-war counsel on post-war Iraq) before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,<sup>6</sup> had categorically stated that invading Iraq, defeating the Republican Guard and taking Baghdad by themselves would not constitute victory unless the complex web of political, economic, humanitarian, security, ethnic, religious and other factors that were critical to reconstruction were adequately addressed. Post-regime change, he said, Iraq would not self- order without a specific plan, and, horrendously, no such plan existed. But the protests were not wide enough and often lacked a deep seated conviction. Significantly, the role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) was a trifle dubious — they rubber stamped Rumsfeld's plan of a smaller, more agile force with the same timidity that the JCS of the Vietnam era had acquiesced in the dictates of McNamara.<sup>7</sup> The execution of the campaigns was smart but the plan for the war as a whole was not wise. **At the operational level, there were signs of brilliance** — clinical precision in execution of varying concepts: speed, jointness, knowledge and a polyglot of information-centric theories such as network-centric warfare, rapid decisive operations, shock and awe, et al. But there were glaring strategic deficiencies in that the wide generalship did not ask of their political masters critical questions as to how the desired politico-military end state was to be harmonised. And even if they did, they failed to press for adequate answers. Tommy Franks will forever have to live with the burden of being a pliant but efficient executioner and not a questioning, sagacious military professional. There were also **monumental tactical errors**—the vital lessons of waging counter-insurgency campaigns and asymmetry learnt in Vietnam (and captured so brilliantly in that exchange between Col Summers and the North

Vietnamese colonel in April 2005 ) were forgotten—the army’s capstone document FM-105 made no reference to counter-insurgency at all. In 1993, the US Army introduced the concept of Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTWA ) ; from 1997, the Pentagon veered around to the view that operations are a seamless connect between offence, defence, stability and support.<sup>8</sup> Yet the military’s heart was not in stability and support —the business of imposing curfews, directing civilians to return to work,

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controlling the local governments and populace, etc, because militarily it was not the real thing. It was only years later that a new manual on counter-insurgency, co-authored by Gen David Petraeus, would acknowledge that counter-insurgency was a great deal about “armed social work”—more about brain than brawn, more about patience than aggression.<sup>9</sup> In the meantime, the asymmetric warriors in Iraq and Afghanistan waited their turn—they let the Americans celebrate the outcome of their brilliance on the battlefield. No sooner had the celebrations waned and President Bush declared rather ceremoniously the completion of major combat operations aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln* on May 1, 2003 (implying also that what was left was merely a mop-up job), the insurgents took over, reminding the mighty Americans, like the Vietnamese colonel before them, of the irrelevance of those victories.

### **The Slide and Betrayal**

Saddam Hussein knew well that despite all his military bravado, he could not prevail upon the Americans conventionally. He, therefore ( even before the Iraqi invasion began ), set into motion a series of steps that would lay the foundation for the later day insurgency—geographic dispersal of arms caches through the country and pushing revolutionary Baathists with money into Syria . The real push for the slide into insurgency, however, came from the Americans themselves — a series of missteps in the occupation policy and military tactics that ensured that the anti-US forces, despite their narrow initial appeal, burgeoned steadily. Access to arms and ammunition was ensured by the lack of numbers amongst American troops and the decision to disband the Iraqi Army and police forces instead of working with them. In a land awash with weapons and explosives, caches and huge dumps were aplenty—the US forces simply

lacked the numbers to guard them ; had the Iraqi Army been in place, it may have been of help in locating and cordoning off the far-flung caches; <sup>10</sup>there would still have been some leakages but not free access to the insurgents as was the case later. The finances for the insurgency came from the Baathist cadres who shifted base to Syria consequent to the decision of de-Baathification (a disenfranchised, threatened leadership numbering anywhere between 30,000 to 50,000 would in later years provide the financial and leadership quotient for the insurgency) —there were reports, even before the invasion, of movement of trucks, cars and people in long convoys to Syria, but the Americans failed to act, partially because they lacked the numbers to secure the borders and partially because of their obsession with WMD; they kept looking for manuals, technical literature and WMD linked wherewithal, while failing to check the movement of finances, personnel and associated equipment, that would later give a boost to the insurgency. Insurgencies also need access to a steady recruiting base—such a base was provided by the thoughtless decision to disband the Iraqi Army and police forces; in one stroke, a body of approximately 800,000 able-bodied, humiliated and antagonised men were available as potential recruits. What made matters worse was the overwhelming sense of betrayal—over the years the American Army had highlighted to the Iraqi Army the benefits of cooperation, negotiations were afoot with senior Iraqi generals to enlist a huge body in the reconstruction effort — the sudden order to disband from Washington betrayed the trust of the Iraqi military and fuelled their anger further. These moves were also ill-conceived in the sense that they served to exacerbate the ethnic fault lines further—Sunni versus Shia versus Kurd. In such a divisive landscape, to disband a unifying institution like the Iraqi Army did smack of a certain juvenile arrogance.

### **Inactivity and Highhandedness**

In the absence of a reconstruction plan, the months from July to October 2003 were plagued by an administrative paralysis that the insurgents would move in to fill. There were other fatal errors — fresh from the flush of a military victory, some managers of the Iraqi occupation were gripped by a desire for revenge and punishment that prevented a conciliatory approach so essential to the prevention of an insurgency from taking root. In the spring of 2003, a US intelligence officer, trying to make an assessment of the Iraqi public sentiment, got a handle on the Iraqi clergy—what they were saying and thinking, and took his report to the communications people at the CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority). They weren't interested. "It is tactical, take it



to the army,” they said. The army colonel he took the report to, focussed on certain anti-American comments and insisted that the offending cleric must be arrested. The intelligence officer while protesting that “one couldn’t survive as a cleric if one didn’t denounce the Americans,” urged intelligent differentiation between those who were merely vocal and those who specifically encouraged violence. The colonel was unmoved and went ahead with the arrest. The intelligence officer stopped his work on the clergy for fear of endangering his sources. Instances of excessive high-handedness like these dried up the flow of information and crippled the counter-insurgency effort.

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### **Strategic Ambivalence**

It is fashionable to dismiss strategy as a vague, intellectual exercise unconnected to the real world of tactics and execution. As evidenced by events in Iraq, nothing could be further from the truth. The problems of a lack of strategic acuity began with the exclusive focus on the plan of attack, rather than on the difficult but critical task of consolidation of that victory. A lacklustre CPA (manned by civilians on mere 90 day rotations) failed to provide even a semblance of administration. There was the initial illusion that the Americans would be welcomed as liberators and the remnants of Saddam supporters would be wiped out in a jiffy. Official America refused to acknowledge till very late that the situation in Iraq was one of war—the military response, therefore, was structured on the launch of mere presence patrols, rather than a viable counter-insurgency campaign. Till as late as June 2003, Rumsfeld wouldn’t call the situation in Iraq, a war. “There is no question but that in those regions where pockets of deadenders are trying to reconstitute, Gen Franks and his team are rooting them out,” he would claim. When his attention was drawn to the fact that 42 American soldiers had died, his response was typical smart-aleck justification, “There is going to be violence in a big city. If Washington were the size of Baghdad, there would be 215 murders in a month.” He missed the point entirely, because what was worrying was not the analogy of 215 murders, but the more precise equivalence that 215 policemen were dying in Washington every

month, trying to quell violence. When faced with situations of counter-insurgency, if one gets the strategy right but the tactics wrong, one can always make the necessary adjustments ; but if one gets the strategy wrong, no amount of fine tuning of tactics will help. For the first twenty months or so, the American occupation was stuck in the latter quagmire.

### **From Precipice To Catastrophe**

In the spring of 2003, US commanders had fought the war they wanted to fight — precise, quick and spectacular. By the autumn of that year, they slipped over the precipice into the lap of asymmetry, fighting a catastrophic war that their Iraqi enemies sought. Could the slip over the edge of the precipice have been avoided ? Yes, despite the initial strategic misjudgments, there was ample scope and time to administer correctives in order to prevent the slip over the precipice, but the wisdom and sagacity was simply not forthcoming. What aggravated matters was the arrogance of the kind exhibited by President Bush, who from the edge of the precipice, needlessly taunted the Iraqis, “ There are some who feel that the conditions are such that they can attack us there. My answer is, bring them on. We’ve got the necessary force to deal with the security situation.” A year later, with the American military adventure firmly in the grip of catastrophe, an Islamic Jihad Army communiqué would specifically inquire, “Have you another challenge, Mr President ?”

### **Martyrdom Operations<sup>11</sup>**

Even as the Americans struggle with ‘stability operations,’ the insurgents have created havoc with the epidemic of suicide bombings. The appeal of the suicide bomber is intellectual and theological even as the zealotry and resentment of the Muslim recruits makes the flow inexhaustible—it seems there are enough human bombs to keep Iraq burning for years. A 2004 survey poll found that 70 per cent of Jordanians and 74 per cent of Lebanese approved of suicide bombings. In about 541 attacks this year, more than 4,500 Iraqis have either been killed or injured. Apart from driving a wedge between American troops and the Iraqi people ( US posts have concentric circles of blast walls and other obstacles around their posts ), they have contributed to a feeling of despair and chaos amongst ordinary citizens. Late in July 2007, two suicide bombers killed more than 50 Iraqi revellers celebrating the semi-finals victory of the Iraqi soccer team in the Asia Cup. In sum, suicide bombing has proved to be an inhumane but clever tactic (Iraq’s response to the tomahawk) — with attrition ratios of 1: 50, it not only helps to attain disproportionate results but also pushes

the centre of gravity ( the Iraqi people) further away from the American Army .

### The Irregular Challenge

Quite similarly, Operation Enduring Freedom in Iraq, predicated on the skillful use of air power and special operation forces (SOF), was a masterpiece of military finesse and creativity—appropriately conventional, it extolled the instrument of attrition warfare to bomb the Taliban ( which presented an array of conventional targets ) out of power. In the next phase of war, however, the Taliban and the remnants of the Al Qaeda, altered the operational setting by resorting to unconventional warfare. It is here that the US armed forces made their most serious error—even as the operational setting turned increasingly unconventional, the US armed forces stuck to the conventional mode, refusing to make the necessary transition.<sup>12</sup> Even the most effective precision guided munitions can be of little use against an insignificantly indisposed and untargetable enemy. The pursuit of conventional, attrition efficiencies against an irregular, unconventional enemy leads to collateral damage, antagonises the population and swells the insurgents, ranks. Using SOF as “ elite shock troops “ to kick open doors too is not smart. To meet the irregular threat, you have to turn irregular too—adopt an indirect, local approach, get to the people, and win their trust. Stand-off targeting must give way to face-to-face contact and combat while eschewing the urge to kick open doors.

**Both in Afghanistan and Iraq, the civilian establishment failed to grasp the conceptual dynamics of asymmetric challenges.**

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### Spin and Hype

There are yet other instances of thought and act inexactitude that contributed to pushing things down the precipice — the bombast about the magical powers of air, special forces and other high-tech wizardry, for example, was steeped in erroneous historical precedents and manipulative spin to corner larger portions of the budgetary pie. The army’s problems were long in the making, the extended deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan have only exposed them for all to see: the consequences of decades of underfunding for boots on the ground. Much of the 600 billion dollar annual Pentagon budgets went into funding a different kind of war ; from 1999, to 2005, the army pocketed merely 16 percent of the capital acquisitions budget while the air force got 36 percent and the navy 33 percent. The army’s capacities were chiselled for peace-time tasks, MOOTWA missions and the

occasional and brief spasms of all out war, but not for the lengthy guerrilla campaigns that it is currently caught up in. “ This is not an army that was built to sustain a long war,” Gen John Abizaid told an audience at Harvard last year. The successes of the 100-hour air campaign in Desert Storm and the special forces operations in Enduring Freedom were quoted (out of context ) to insinuate that a hidebound army was thoughtlessly insisting on numbers. Air power and special forces, using unconventional tactics, it was implied, could achieve the same effect as whole divisions of conventional forces. The abiding reality of boots on the ground was given the critical go by. Afghanistan too tells a similar story. After the initial successes of Operation Enduring Freedom, military assessments urged the US Department of Defence (DoD) to expand its troops to secure the country from 4,500 to 25,000. The Pentagon turned down the proposal dubbing it as “overkill.” Today, a 31,000 strong NATO led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is insufficient to take care of a regrouped Taliban. Short of troops, the ISAF has been increasingly resorting to aerial strikes, leading to huge collateral damage. Assessments say average strike profiles (aerial strikes) are: for 38 insurgents killed, the civilian toll is closer to 90, leading to further alienation, in turn, helping the Taliban recruitment drive and, therefore, its combat prowess. Today, Karzai’s writ does not extend beyond Kabul. In Lebanon, yet again, military misjudgment aroused the unrealistic expectation of air power winning the war on its own. The less than desirable efficacy of overhyped precision capabilities, widespread collateral damage, lack of understanding and integration with ground forces led to a military reverse for one of the most combat hardened forces in the world. This only reinforces the view that neglecting the reality of ‘boots on the ground,’ far from enhancing, degrades combat prowess. Both in Afghanistan and Iraq, the civilian establishment failed to grasp the conceptual dynamics of asymmetric challenges—its power, magnitude, consequences and central moorings—the limitations of philosophies like stand-off targeting and air power and the overwhelming importance of numbers. Had the centrality of this reality sunk in, Cheney and Rumsfeld would have either given Shinseski his numbers or not taken the disastrous steps of opening two simultaneous fronts while concurrently pulling down the Iraqi Army, thus, exposing the American forces to the perilous consequences of force asymmetry.

### **The Nature of War**

There is the other interesting issue raised by the likes of Gen Rupert Smith who argues that it was not the lack of understanding of the nuances of asymmetry that led to the defeats but a failure to understand a paradigm shift in the nature

of war itself. The prospect of wars as massive deciding events in international affairs no longer exists—military victories, even if they are outright and swift, do not automatically lead to attainment of corresponding politico-strategic objectives. At one time they did—the outcome of World War II (massive military victories in the field ) determined the nature of power arguments and structures in its aftermath ; a

**A military strategy without a clear and credible plan for conflict termination is often a dangerous prelude to creeping disaster.**

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huge Israeli victory in the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 led to the establishment of de facto Israeli supremacy in the Middle East ; a decisive Indian victory in the 1971 Bangladesh campaign led to the birth of a new nation-state—in sum decisive military victories led to corresponding politico-strategic gains. No longer. Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom were swift, outright military victories—their politico-strategic outcomes continue to be elusive. Baghdad 2003 is not Paris 1944. What prevents military victories from concretising into viable politico-strategic outcomes ? Is it the asymmetric challenge or is it the changing nature of war itself ? Perhaps the changing nature of the latter, and within the changing paradigm, the political context and the role of the military which need to be understood and adapted for force to be applied optimally and with utility. What we saw in Iraq , Afghanistan and even in Lebanon, was the growing dissonance of the politico-military construct, resulting in less than optimal application of force. That, more than the asymmetric strands, may be the greater cause for concern. THE BOTTOMLINE IS THIS: while combat, confrontation and conflict will undoubtedly continue all around the world, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and elsewhere, and while states will continue to have armed forces as symbols of power, wars, as we traditionally know them—massive deciding events in international affairs—may be a thing of the past. Rumsfeld, as boss of the American war machine was a partial success, because he understood the maxim only partially—he did realise that the days of using massive armoured forces in combat were over. Accordingly, he prescribed the use of lighter, more mobile forces with outstanding results in Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom. What Rumsfeld failed to appreciate was that the nature of war itself had changed — wars today tend to have for more limited results and uncertain consequences than their planners realise at the time they initiate and conduct them; there was, therefore, a need for greater and renewed politico-military synergy within whose framework the application of force had to be constantly reconfigured.

## LEBANON

### **The Invincibility Bubble**

Over the years, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) had come to see themselves as militarily invincible. The military and political elites had come to conclude that Israel was beyond the era of wars<sup>13</sup> — its military might was sufficient to deter war; asymmetric threats were the only challenges that it needed to brace itself against. So when it came to the Hezbollah—a non-state actor with military capacities that would be the envy of many nation / states, ‘asymmetric plus,’ one might say — the Israeli war machine’s performance was less than distinguished.

### **Battle Dynamics**

Israel seems to have got the battle dynamics horribly wrong. It sharply exaggerated what air power could do early in the war and sharply underestimated the Hezbollah’s ability to survive and fight a ground battle. The IDF first prosecuted a long, protracted and somewhat indecisive battle for the Hezbollah’s forward defences to deny them a line of sight into Israel. When that failed, it decided to drive towards the Litani river on August 11, 2006, to neutralise Hezbollah dispositions in depth, but by then it was too late to win a meaningful victory against a dispersed Hezbollah force. For reasons of terrain, the IDF had to advance along predictable lines of advance, allowing the Hezbollah to inflict severe losses.

### **The Failure of Deterrence and the Limits of Technology**

Israel’s conventional superiority and nuclear monopoly, together, ensured that no other state in the region could challenge it militarily. Since 1982, it was also evident that the Israelis, like their American mentors, had lost the stomach for a protracted ground war. In preparing to fight the war, it wanted to fight, the IDF invested heavily in technological capacities—air power, imagery, sensors, net-centricity, et al. Its opponents, however, determined to make it fight a war it did not want to fight, crafted a clever response predicated on the asymmetric surge of non-state prowess ( fuelled and sustained by Iran and Syria ) unleashing their might from the civilian precincts of a nation-state too weak to impose its writ (Lebanon): a series of Katyusha rocket attacks followed by the provocative kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers. Israel’s response was a military campaign with the avowed objective of teaching both the non-state actor and its host nation a lesson in order that similar endeavours in the future were deterred. With their ground forces not in the best of operational health, the Israelis

responded with what they were most adept at—air assaults on Hezbollah targets, carefully tucked into the predominantly civilian neighbourhoods of its host nation. The enormity of the collateral damage brought the air campaign to a swift halt, virtually forcing the IDF into a ground campaign for which it was ill prepared, with naturally horrendous consequences. Preparedness deficits failed to deter the initial Hezbollah offensive ; weaknesses in the ground campaign once again ensured that the IDF fell woefully short of its avowed campaign objectives of deterring future conjoint state and non-state responses.

### **Excessive Civilian Cost**

“Half of Lebanon destroyed; is that a loss ?” said a beleaguered Israeli Prime Minister (PM) Ehud Olmert, in search of reasons to defend Israel’s rather insipid military performance. The destruction of Lebanon’s civilian infrastructure and the extensive loss of civilian life and property due to imprecision in the aerial targeting is indeed bewildering . The problem for Israel — as for the US and its allies in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan — is that good intentions, careful procedures and rules of engagement are not enough. A non-state actor, as part of battle strategy, uses human shields as a means of countering its conventional weakness as also as an ideological goal, seeking to push populations in the war on their side. The Hezbollah did more than use more advanced technology. It used Lebanon’s people and civilian areas as weapons of war. Hezbollah built its facilities in towns and populated areas, used civilian facilities and homes to store weapons and embedded its defences and weapons in built-up areas. It learned to move and operate in ways that mirrored normal civilian life. Civilians are the natural equivalent of armour in asymmetric warfare, and we must get used to the fact that opponents will steadily improve their ability to use them to hide, to deter attack, exploit the political impact of strikes, and exaggerate damage and killings. Modern armies must remember that they fight in the real world, not in accordance with the “rules of war” but against an enemy that fights in civilian areas, uses terror tactics, does not wear uniforms and engages in indirect combat. In a campaign spanning more than 7,000 air strikes and 2,500 naval bombardments, entire neighbourhoods were reduced to rubble even as 94

**The relationship between soldiers and statesmen (the political masters), in fact, lies at the heart of national security strategy. There is a vital and intimate connect between the nature of civil-military relations and the shape of a nation’s security construct.**

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roads, 80 bridges, 25 fuel stations and 900 commercial enterprises were blown to bits. In addition to the huge human toll — an estimated 1,813 fatalities ( to include about 600 children ), 4,054 injured and 970, 000 Lebanese displaced — two government hospitals in Bint Jbeil and Meis al Jebel were completely destroyed. Such a high civilian toll, even as the bulk of the Hezbollah military infrastructure remained intact, is reflective of a rather poor sense of politico-military proportion.

## **CRITICAL LESSONS**

### **Conflict Termination**

The critical need of linking military victories to lasting strategic gains is the underlying lesson of all the three conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon. The victory in the Gulf War of 1991, the defeat of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the conflict in Lebanon all point to the fact that a military strategy without a clear and credible plan for conflict termination is often a dangerous prelude to creeping disaster. As Sun Tzu observed many years ago, “Strategy without tactics may be the slowest route to victory; but tactics without strategy is the noise before certain defeat.”

### **Doctrinal Hype and Spin**

Over the years, a lot of hype and spin about air and aerospace capabilities has tended to dominate the doctrinal landscape. Territorial gains were passé we were told. Reams were written on how air power could win counter-insurgency campaigns on its own. There were the usual calls for the downsizing of the land forces while alluding to their increasing redundancy. The three conflicts have proved conclusively that such contentions were not only misplaced but also dishonest. Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon have established beyond any shadow of doubt that in conflicts, the many spin-offs of technological wizardry, net-centricity, effect-based operations and stand-off targeting notwithstanding, in the ultimate analysis, the only way to actually defeat the enemy is to clear affected areas, hold them, seal off possible exit and dispersal routes and conduct a long, wearisome security effort predicated on patrolling and area domination routines. Unwittingly, perhaps, the primacy of land warfare has been reiterated. We need to take cognisance of this reality.

### **Civilian Control of the Military**

The three conflicts also throw up some disturbing questions about the nature of civilian control over the military. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, civilian bosses like



Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz meddled with troop numbers, deployments and war strategies while overriding the military judgment of respected military professionals. In Lebanon, a prime minister, and defence minister with no military grounding whatsoever, and a military chief from the air force, lacking a perspective for ground warfare, allowed themselves to be pushed into a military campaign lacking in objective and purpose. It is becoming increasingly obvious, therefore, that military decision-making in modern conflict is a highly specialised domain, necessitating in the personas of the decision-makers some important virtues — intimate military knowledge, a distilled military judgment, acuity and an incisive feel about matters military. Civilian leaders/bureaucrats, lacking the necessary knowledge and expertise, tend to cover their shortcomings by getting back at the generals through petty manoeuvring and slimy moves. This is exactly what Rumsfeld resorted to — intimidation, ignoring awkward realities, egregious errors, demanding fealty as against loyalty, dismissiveness and arrogance, thereby, pushing the American Army into fundamentally flawed plans. There is a strong case for reviewing the nature of civilian control. The relationship between soldiers and statesmen (the political masters), in fact, lies at the heart of national security strategy. There is a vital and intimate connect between the nature of civil-military relations and the shape of a nation's security construct. The Huntington postulate of civilian control, which holds that the healthiest and most effective form of civilian control of the military is that which maximises professionalism by isolating soldiers from their political masters through a layered bureaucracy, is indeed antiquated. The nature of modern conflict and war-fighting is such that it does not permit the luxury of laborious interface between our generalship and the political class through a non-specialist bureaucracy. Modern conflict demands political leaders who investigate, interrogate and closely scrutinise the military counsel of their generals, through a process of robust, direct and respectful interface. Neither is distancing from military decisions the answer nor is the Rumsfeld “resort of scheming, screaming and bullying” the prudent way. A more sagacious choice for the office of secretary of defence may have made all the difference to the war in Iraq and the Bush presidency. It also brings back into focus the need to give a forgotten subject—Ministry of Defence (MoD) revamping and closer politico-military integration in India—renewed impetus. The entire paradigm of civilian control in India is juvenile, inefficient and needs to grow out of its present stasis.

## **Budgetary Support**

There is the equally critical question of the funding of joint structures and information age capacities. There will always be the temptation to fund capital

acquisitions for jointness/latest technologies by slashing the revenue component of the defence budget. Such a path will be erroneous. The revenue component of the budget is largely utilised to fund the requirements of a manpower intensive commitment—if you cannot downsize, how can you reduce manpower and, therefore, the revenue component? In the face of continuous assessments that point towards capability enhancement by both our land adversaries, it is not possible to downsize / reduce manpower if relative combat edges are to be maintained. Demands to reduce the revenue component of the defence budget and use the resultant savings to fund joint / technological capacities, therefore, are unfair and uninformed. The requisite resources / funding for creating joint capacities must come not from indiscriminate slashing of the budget but from enhanced allocations. We must guard against making the same mistakes that the Americans made. The PM has referred to a 3 per cent allocation for defence if we grow at 8 per cent. Now that we are growing at 9.4 per cent (may be even 10 per cent in the near future), allocations for defence must proportionately increase. Our aspirations for joint exploitation of space, a longer legged maritime/ amphibious capability, enhanced strategic reach *et al* must be met from increased allocations. If we aspire to be a regional power of consequence, we must be willing to spend more.

### **Decisive Stability Operations**

An important lesson from the recent conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon is that the phase following the military operation *per se*, viz, stability operations, is really the most decisive phase.<sup>14</sup> The very phasing of operations in Iraq represented a conceptual skew: Phase III was described as Decisive Combat Operations while Phase IV was conceived as Post-Hostility Operations. As events unfolded, the converse proved to be true—a poorly executed Phase IV has rendered Phase III irrelevant. The Al Qaeda, once on the run (in the immediate aftermath of Enduring Freedom) has regenerated and reemerged in Pakistan's tribal safe havens — its network large, fluid and resilient. Headquartered in secure hiding places in Pakistan, its leadership drives the global terrorist franchise, with operatives in Iraq, Algeria and Afghanistan as also sleeper cells in Europe, flourishing. The message of recent Al Qaeda propaganda videos is clear —we are open for business again and are looking for recruits.<sup>15</sup> In Iraq, similarly, the initial stinginess with numbers has had horrendous consequences —surges are proving rather inadequate and despite spending a quarter million dollars every minute on the war,<sup>16</sup> it is simply not moving in any purposeful direction.

## **War Amongst the People**

As wars move increasingly to the people, entirely new facets emerge. There is the issue of protection—the places where you house the soldiers, the vehicles, the movement corridors and protection of soldiers. There is also the need to achieve control of the population. For both protection, and control, numbers are critical—strength in numbers is itself protection and control of the population is also about numbers. There is also the critical need to strengthen the tactical third dimension — digitising aerocombat wherein helicopters, UAVs and ground troops combine to improve the fighting efficiency of small units at the battalion / brigade level.

## **Ethical Climate**

In America's military circles there is much rancour about how their professional concerns in Afghanistan / Iraq were ridden roughshod by Rumsfeld and his associates. Such rancour, however, must be given a reality check : did the American armed forces meet their own standards outlined in the Carlisle Survey of the 1970s, post-Vietnam ? And if they didn't, they must take a large part of the blame. Interestingly, in the American armed forces, comprising 1,000 odd three / four stars, despite a great deal of mumbling and sub-surface rumblings, only two generals, Gregory Newbold and Eric Shinseki, expressed their "precise dissent". The others did eventually go along with the plans, reflective of a pliant ethical climate. So all this screaming, now, of how professional opinion knew all along that the plans were flawed is really not fair. The need for a strong ethical climate that encourages dissent and, more importantly, discriminates between "pliant, going along" and "principled, professional opposition" is often the difference between defeat and victory. Civilian leaderships the world over, more than their military counterparts, need to take note. Encouraging a timid military may make for good ego trips but is reflective of poor strategic sense.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis brings out the pitfalls that face operational endeavours in the absence of strategic clarity and military acuity. The lessons for an aspirational regional power like India, faced with similar challenges in its drive towards structuring, optimising and committing its military structures are instructive. If only we are willing to learn.

## Notes

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