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# On Matters of Principles

V K Shrivastava

## Introduction

India's warring traditions can be traced back to the Vedic period of around 1500 BC. Both the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, particularly so the latter, have war as the central theme. A war was then referred to as *Dharma Yuddha* to signify its righteous origins and high ethics of engagement. In essence, it was viewed not as a contradiction but as an intrinsic part of the social order. Accordingly, the class system of the time had designated *Kshatriyas* to bear arms for the well-being of the society. The *Bhagwad Gita*, a scripture of spiritual enlightenment, deals at length with the eternal duties of a warrior. The aforesaid classics do not specify the principles of war of that era, but the discourses amongst the nobles and the notables in each of these invoke well-articulated maxims of war. Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, a comprehensive treatise on statecraft, written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, has many chapters dilating on the conduct of war. Similarly, the *Nitishastra* holds forth views on war as an element of the *Rajdharma* – the royal duties of a king. It is likely that some of the warring concepts of that time have been lost in the oral traditions of the yore. It has rightly been observed, "Our ancestors have been pioneers in so many things and to no less a degree in the art of war".<sup>1</sup> A departure is being made here for a quick scan of the developments in the world beyond India.

About the same time as Kautilya, the masters of war and their mentors in the far off Greco-Roman world were also dissecting the weighty matters of war. Nearer home, in neighbouring China, the *Analects of Confucius* had been compiled and Sun Tzu, a scholarly general, penned down *The Art of War*. It contained references to the principles of war. Medieval period writings of the Italian diplomat Niccolo Machiavelli resembled those of Kautilya. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century work of the

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Prussian General Carl Van Clausewitz, *On War*, is oft quoted. His concepts of “total war” were to influence the two World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is noteworthy that all the authors of the aforesaid masterly works, vastly separated in time and space, had reasoned and established the political relevance of war – an instrument of policy that may be pursued should all other expedients of diplomacy fail. To all of them, war was political violence.

Time to return to the point of departure with a quote from Nehru’s *The Discovery of India*. “Ancient India...was a world in itself, a culture and a civilisation that gave shape to all things”.<sup>2</sup> However, from the time of Alexander’s invasion, the art and the science of war in India have variously been influenced by the forays of the invading armies. The British were the last to arrive and ruled India for nearly two centuries. As has been commented, “Deeply embedded habits of thoughts... and British rule exert a powerful influence on the character and direction of the modern Indian state”.<sup>3</sup> The span of influence includes matters military. Indeed, the British must be credited for the present élan of the Indian armed forces.

The inherited professional ethos encompassing the principles of war has stood the Indian armed forces in good stead in the post-independence military ventures. However, the second half of the “Bloody Twentieth” century has witnessed vast changes in the nature of war and warring techniques. Therefore, in the light of our past experiences, moderated by the ongoing revolution in military affairs (RMA), and viewed in the context of the challenges ahead, our accepted principles of war deserve a critical examination and revalidation. To that end, this write up deals with the subject matter under the following five separate heads:

- A synoptic recapitulation of the current principles of war for ready reference and to set the stage.
- A brief resume of India’s military experiences to extract relevant inferences.
- A short review of the changing nature of war to attempt predictive assessments.
- Crystal gazing into the future to identify India’s military challenges in the years ahead.
- A summative analytical discussion to recommend a new set of principles of war.

As can be well appreciated, each of these topics demands a separate volume. Therefore, to retain brevity and focus, only such facets have been reflected upon inferences from which can sustain the summation. Also, by design, the discussions have been kept Indo-centric.

## Synoptic Reflections on the Current Principles of War

It has been observed, “Every science has principles and rules, only that of war none”.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, there have been concerted efforts to establish some. In the process, different military thinkers have referred to their formulations as “Ideas About Strategy”, “Fundamental Axioms”, “Rules of the Game” or simply as “Commonsense Propositions”.<sup>5</sup> The last century saw all modern armies adopt a set of principles to guide their endeavours in the trials of combat. Invariably, these have numbered around ten and, stylistic differences of expressions apart, have generally advocated similar precepts. The Indian armed forces also abide by a set of ten principles of war. Of these, eight were adopted in 1920 and the last two were added soon after World War II. For a quick recapitulation and ready reference, these are being listed below together with brief explanatory notes.

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### *Selection and Maintenance of Aim*

Listed first, this is arguably the single most important principle of war. Since, “war is merely the continuation of policy by other means”,<sup>6</sup> this principle enables a military commander to arrive at the military aim in furtherance of the political goals. In the fog of war, it prevents a commander from straying and dissipating his forces on seemingly lucrative objectives that do not realise the selected aim. Lastly, the principle helps in identifying terminal military moves for the desired conflict resolution.

### *Offensive Action*

To subdue an enemy, such losses must be inflicted on his men and material that he gives up his intentions to fight. Such efforts signify offensive action. Considered as the most exhaustive form of manoeuvre, the principle ensures that the aggressor continues to retain the initiative while keeping his adversary in a state of disarray. The underlying idea of the offensive action is “...not so much to seek battle as to seek a strategic situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce the decision, its continuation by a battle is sure to achieve this”.<sup>7</sup>

### *Concentration of Force*

History is full of instances when talented captains of war with smaller forces have defeated numerically superior opponents by clever application of this principle. Understandably, therefore, it has prominence as a qualitative principle. Simply stated, it implies not only the combat superiority at successive points of decision, but also the “concentration of strength against weakness”.<sup>8</sup>

### *Economy of Effort*

King Pyrrhus of Greece had suffered extremely heavy losses when he defeated the Romans in two decisive battles. He is supposed to have said, “Another such victory and I am lost”.<sup>9</sup> This principle stands guard against a “Pyrrhic Victory”. It does not profess idling of resources but implores a commander to marshal inter- and intra-Service resources for a victory at minimum cost. Economy of effort also tends to minimise the ravages of war and allows better openings for a negotiated settlement.

### *Flexibility*

Battles rarely unfold as conceived and wars repeatedly demonstrate the stark contrast between planning and execution. Hence, the principle of flexibility that demands a commander’s ability to foresee, the mobility of the force to react, and the organisational elasticity to absorb the unexpected. Thus, the principle enables a commander to retain the initiative despite the frictions of war and to exploit fleeting opportunities.

### *Cooperation*

The relevance of this principle of war has grown steadily in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the combined operations by multinational forces, engaged in a total war against a nuclear backdrop, have juxtaposed with the increasing preference for asymmetric wars. Therein, having strong links with the three preceding principles, this one is a “...unifying principle of war aimed at evolving a common endeavour.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Surprise*

The principle holds a brief at both strategic and tactical levels and asserts that the endeavour must be to take the enemy by surprise. It helps in establishing ascendancy and produces results far in excess of the means employed. Requiring a streak of originality, “The principle is highly attractive in theory, but in practice it is often held up by the friction of the whole machine”.<sup>11</sup>

### *Security*

In its broadest sense, the principle applies to the territorial integrity and the national assets. Strictly militarily, it refers to the security of all that constitutes the war effort – operational plans, men, material, command network, logistic bases, lines of communication *et al.* Also, the protection of the seaboard and the air space. The principle urges balanced allocation of forces so that the security of the war machinery allows unhindered prosecution of war.

### *Administration*

Present-day armies cannot be sustained by foraging expeditions. Modern armed forces employing a host of hi-tech weapons, and engaged in speedy manoeuvres in widely separated theatres, demand a highly responsive logistic support. The system must also respond to the spurts of unforeseen demands that the force commanders may make to deliver a *coup de grace*. Administrative shortfalls tend to degrade the fighting potentials of anxious troops.

### *Morale*

It is mental strength that drives the physical act of fighting, and ‘will to win’ is the moral factor of a war. Men’s belief in the cause of the war, confidence in their leaders, convictions of own force’s superiority, string of successes, and, of course, the attitude of their countrymen towards them, makes up for their morale. Field Marshal Slim has called it, “.....That intangible force...that makes them feel they are part of something greater than themselves”<sup>12</sup> and goes on to add that victory will go to those of higher morale.

Against this backdrop, India’s post-independence military ventures are being taken up for a critical scrutiny.

## **A Resume of India’s Military Experiences**

India’s military ventures started with the process of post-independence territorial consolidation and went on to include four indo-Pak conflicts and also a war with China. The aforesaid apart, for the past two decades, there has been an ongoing undeclared war on the Siachen Glacier, and a war by proxy in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Away from our troubled frontiers, we also had the none too happy experience of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka. Further, over the last fifty years, there has been an ever-increasing army involvement in the counter-insurgency (CI) operations in the northeastern states. Years of militancy in Punjab had added to such commitments. Besides, the Indian armed forces

have also participated in scores of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations across the globe. Our decisive intervention in the Maldives was one of its own kinds. All these signify defining moments of our national endeavours and, in the context of this write up, deserve selective reflections.

Strictly militarily, the armed forces have been commendable in all these trials of combat and were generally well served by the guiding impulses of the principles of war. Military aims and the tri-Service efforts unfailingly promoted the national goals. Indian resolve and the speed of reaction often surprised the adversary. Offensive action, backed by concentration of force, was always in evidence. The principles of flexibility and cooperation were exploited to register a spectacular victory while liberating Bangladesh. Similarly, the dictum of the economy of effort in war, and application of minimum force in insurgency, was never lost sight of. Bloody wars, prolonged CI commitments, and permanent deployments along our disputed borders notwithstanding, the forces have remained in a high state of morale – undoubtedly, sustained by good administration.

These endeavours also reveal the nation's core ideas on war. "Independent government of India...took the stubborn view, that security came from peace rather than peace from security".<sup>13</sup> In essence, therefore, the Indian policy has been that of war prevention. In consonance, it has never initiated a war. Even so, when a war was thrust upon the nation, the political leadership responded with steely resolve while trying simultaneously to restrict the scope of the conflict. During the Kargil War, for example, the hostilities were confined to the areas of intrusions and neither was the Line of Control (LoC) allowed to be crossed nor the air space to be violated. Further, successive Indian governments have repeatedly opted for an early conflict termination. Was it not India that took the Kashmir issue to the United Nations (UN) in December 1947? Similarly, in CI situations, the government was usually quick to order the army back to the barracks at the slightest hint of reconciliation from the insurgents.

In the light of the foregoing, some analytical observations are being made:

- The Indian approach to wars enabled it to retain the moral high ground. The philosophy must be taken a note of since similar political assertions are likely to influence our future military undertakings.
- Political disregard for the armed forces' participation in the decision-making process was apparent in almost all our military ventures. As may be recalled, in 1951, Nehru is known to have told Gen Cariappa, "It is not the business of the commander-in chief to tell the prime minister who is going to attack us where. In fact, the Chinese will."<sup>14</sup> Such misplaced notions led to the debacle

of 1962. Similar politico-military disconnect resulted in the infirmities of political directions and the Sri Lankan misadventure. When such advice was sought and heeded as in 1971, the armed forces created history.

- In quest of peace, India always bargained for an early end of hostilities and in the promptitude, invariably failed to successfully stage the “end game” through politico-diplomatic initiatives. As a result, hard earned military gains were repeatedly squandered away – in the UN, in Tashkent and in Shimla. Not surprisingly, therefore, despite four wars, the J&K issue has remained unresolved. In CI, the insurgents in order to extricate and regroup themselves, routinely misused situations in similar inclinations of the government.
  - Our righteous intentions and actions were never capitalised on to mould the world opinion in our favour.
  - By never initiating a war, we surrendered the initiative to our adversaries. Our self-imposed restraints closed some of the offensive options. Weighed down by such disadvantages, the orchestration of tri-Service synergy within the short duration of the war became all the more difficult.
  - India’s defensive orientations have led to indifferent intelligence efforts and repeated fiascos. The consequences of the collective intelligence failures in Sri Lanka and in Kargil need no recounting. Our record on this count in dealing with insurgency and terrorism has been equally dismal.
- All these, regrettably, project India as a soft state.

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## **The Changing Nature of War**

In 1899, an international conference was held in the Hague to debate the future of war and peace. A century later, a similar conference was held yet again in St Petersburg. The intervening period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had witnessed such drastic changes in the nature of war and the warring techniques that the participants debated not the future, but the very concepts of war and peace. To further complicate the matter, the very first year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century opened its war account with the terror strikes of 9/11. The following paragraphs dwell on the

select few aspects of the ongoing changes that will help in honing the principles of war.

First, “Growing cross-border flows of trade, investments, finances, information technology, cultures, values, ideas, and people are drawing the far corners of the earth together, creating new opportunities and dangers.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the process of globalisation implies compulsions of inter-dependence. Resultantly, the politico-economic cost of waging a war is becoming increasingly prohibitive for nation-states.

Second, understandably, therefore, our long held ideas of total wars have made way for the limited ones. Also, wars have become less territorial in nature. More often than not, the doctrines of deterrence, and the arrangements of confidence building measures (CBMs), are relied upon to avoid conflict situations. Even so, the clashing interests of the great powers may trigger wars. Also, the rising aspirations of the people in the developing world now may lead to a variety of intra-state wars. Therefore, the infirmities of the dictatorial regimes, or the refugee exodus from the failed states, could also trigger inter-state wars.

Third, “Now, what makes us unique as a species is not that we use tools but that we attempt to remake the world, to mould the external environment to our needs”<sup>16</sup>. To do that, human beings use technology and one of the central themes for such pursuits has been violence. The phenomenal pace of these technological advancements in the Nineties has led to the RMA. “Armies are increasingly being thought of as information systems embedded in networks of relationships”.<sup>17</sup> Technologies are promoting doctrinal changes to steer wars to the next higher plane and into space and beyond. The race is already on in the fields of cybernetics, robotics, expert systems with artificial intelligence, directed energy weapons, space-based capabilities and more. In future wars, many ‘chips’ should be expected to die for their countries.

Fourth, those who cannot challenge their adversaries in high-tech armed conflicts, are increasingly resorting to asymmetric wars. Terrorism has swept aside the conventional notions of hostilities to usher in the non-state actors who are using globally networked tools of terror to wage wars sans borders. Their ‘cause’ evokes their religious beliefs to portray their struggle as a ‘clash of civilisations.’

Fifth, “The future military operations are likely to take place in an intense media glare, which will be both interactive and pervasive in its presence and influence”<sup>18</sup>. It will bring war into the public domain and raise issues of human

rights violations, co-lateral damage, environmental concerns and the like. Therefore, nation-states will have to be more humane while prosecuting wars to keep death and destruction within the global tolerances.

Lastly, the foregoing complexities of the setting will tend to make military success inconclusive and costly, with no clear-cut victor or vanquished. The very concept of victory will need to be redefined.

### **Military Challenges Ahead**

The world acknowledges India as a great power in the making. As the nation marches on, the armed forces will have to remain in step to sustain national aspirations and to honour the obligations of its rising status. With that as the backdrop, the following passages make some assertions regarding the military challenges ahead. By design, these have been kept few and brief.

India has disputed borders with both Pakistan and China. Therefore, the territorial content, and the rigid relevance of the borders, will figure prominently in India's futuristic threat perceptions. It will demand well-calibrated military responses to give CBMs and negotiated settlements a fair chance. .

Upheavals in neighbouring Afghanistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh and strife torn Sri Lanka are fuelling the existing social unrest in India. Resultantly, the armed forces, essentially the army, will have to quell the threats within.

India must also address the intricacies of the emerging security scenario in the Indian Ocean. Therein, the power play of diverse global interests would tend to bear upon India's strategic aspirations, economic growth, and energy security considerations. The Indian naval chief rightly intends to remodel his force "...from being just a 'salient service' to a potent maritime power acting as a 'stabilizing force' in the Indian Ocean Region"<sup>19</sup>.

America declared war on terrorism seven years ago. Yet the spread of terrorism continues unabated. Differing global perceptions have generated opportunities and complications alike – Pakistan has emerged as the most trusted American ally, for example. Be that as it may, with the epicentre of terrorism in the vicinity, India will have to exploit the leverages of the setting to combat terrorism within and without.

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Besides the rise in China's power and prestige in these parts, the war on terror has led to American military presence in the region. For a variety of reasons, it is likely to stay. Particularly so in oil rich Iraq. India will have to cope with these developments to ensure that her politico-military options in the extended neighbourhood are not curtailed.

"Intra-state violence, especially when linked to the presumed abuse of human rights, has come to be considered a legitimate concern of the international community".<sup>20</sup> Thus, armed intervention on humanitarian considerations is now an accepted norm. India will be expected to be a part of such global commitments.

Deriving from the preceding paragraphs, the essentials of the future military challenges can be summed up as follows:

- Remain relevant for the present set of external and internal threats while preparing for the emerging dynamics of war in the entire spectrum of conflict.
- In consonance with the national policy of war prevention, pursue the strategy of deterrence – both conventional and nuclear. Retain assertive control over the border flare-ups to seek conflict resolution within the nuclear threshold.
- Assign a far greater role to the naval and air forces. Duly restructured and equipped, they must project power to enhance India's strategic reach. A space force may have to be raised in the times to come.
- Ensure operational, organisational, and doctrinal adaptations for synergised prosecution of the fourth generation of war, as also for the coalition challenges of global dimensions.
- Prevail upon the government to create structures and procedures for participative orchestration of military power with the national aspirations. These have been long overdue.

"A liberal society cannot be defended by herbivores. We need carnivores to save us, but had better make sure that the meat eaters hunt only on our orders".<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, political control is necessary to keep the sword arm of the state mighty yet benign. However, for the ‘hunt’ to be successful, over-arching influences of sound principles of war are also necessary. The following text attempts to identify these.

### **Summative Discussion and Recommended Principles of War**

The principles of war denote collective wisdom and generate governing impulses for the prosecution of war. They are explicit enough to guide and yet resilient enough to accommodate the variables in the spectrum of conflict. The succeeding paragraphs subject the existing set of principles to an analytical scrutiny to accept, modify, or to reject some.

It has been established that war signifies political violence and that parameters for its conduct are determined by the political approach to it. Even “military victories do not themselves determine the outcome of war; they only provide potential opportunities to the victors”.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, an advantageous conflict resolution is secured only through well-timed politico-diplomatic moves. The changing nature of war has made the relevance of political directions even more important. Yet the term “principles of war” in itself, or the principles themselves for that matter, fail to establish any politico-military connection. Therefore, the first principle of war, instead of being “Selection and Maintenance of Aim” should read as “Political Directions and Selection of Military Aim”. The first two words would remind the military commanders of the political primacy, and would also remind the political masters of the necessity of interactive decision-making – it has been lacking thus far.

“Offensive Action” as a principle of war tends to create images of combat forces executing operational manoeuvres on the battlefields to get the better of the enemy. However, aggression is also possible by other means such as electronic warfare, information dominance, psychological operations, media offensive and the like. Further, initiative is an essential element of aggressive designs and should be woven into the statement of the principle itself. Thus, the principle of “Offensive Action” must make way for the more expressive principle of “Initiative of Multi-Dimensional Offensive”. In the larger sense, it also alludes to the proactive stance of all other constituents of the national power.

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India's strategy of war prevention, and the policy of limiting the aim and scope of the war when forced into it, finds a mention earlier in the text. The necessity of well-calibrated military responses has also been established. There too, the Indian approach will have to be moderated by the dictates of the nuclear overhang and also by the compulsions of prosecuting a war on a human scale. In short "... we must be willing to wage such minimal wars, which consist in merely threatening the enemy, with negotiations held in reserve"<sup>23</sup>. The foregoing analysis calls for the inclusion of "Escalation Control" as the third principle of war. The underlying idea of the principle goes well with our cultural heritage and will also help in projecting India as a benign power on the rise. It should be noted that "Economy of Effort", an existing principle of war, falls within the ambit of the principle of "Escalation Control".

Versatile weapon systems, backed by accurate sensors, connected by seamless communications, and served by networked computers, can now digitally process the data, remain dispersed on land, sea and air, and yet deliver a stunning punch at great distances. Such capabilities bring together the essentials of four principles of war namely, Concentration of Force, Economy of Effort, Flexibility, and Cooperation. In fact, because of such technological advancements the concept of "mass" has lost much of its currency. Therefore, the aforesaid four principles can be clubbed together into two as principles of "Concentration of Combat Power" and "Force Integration". The two retain the essence of the earlier four and are well suited for the future.

The Indian experience of repeated intelligence failures has already been brought on record. Yet, its importance seems to have been lost on us. Is it not surprising that fifty years after the 'first round' of 1947-48, and some more declared and undeclared wars confirming hostile Pakistan designs, we were taken unawares in Kargil yet again? Commenting on the functioning of the intelligence agencies, the Kargil Review Committee found that "... at each level, the assessment tried to fit the available data into a familiar past pattern"<sup>24</sup>. Be that as it may, good intelligence is required to foresee threats, retain initiative, counter the insurgents, break into the global networks of terrorist organisations, and for precision targeting. Besides, the current principle of "Security" relies heavily on timely intelligence. Therefore, "Intelligence" is being included as a new principle of war.

In sum, the recommended new principles of war are as follows:

- Political Directions and Selection of Military Aim.
- Initiative of Multi-Dimensional Offensive.

- Escalation Control.
- Concentration of Combat Power.
- Force Integration.
- Surprise.
- Intelligence.
- Security.
- Morale.
- Administration.

It is difficult to establish the strict *inter se* importance of these principles. Even so, they have been listed generally in order of the degree of influence they exert. Further, it is also felt that intelligent interpretations of the core ideas of these ten principles should stand the Indian armed forces in good stead in their trials of combat. The requirement of additional principles, to suit specific contingencies in the spectrum of conflict, was not considered necessary.

In times to come, the ever increasing complexities of war-waging may make it necessary to have “Simplicity” as a principle of war.

## Conclusion

Being an instrument of the state policy, war has a future. However, whereas heroism must be applauded and conquests celebrated, wars must not be glorified. For, even in victory, there is death and destruction. In defeat, the very existence of a nation-state is at stake. A matter of such grave importance must be governed by enlightened impulses. The sally of thoughts in the preceding pages has debated and distilled a new set of principles of war, with promising predictive validity, to guide India's military ventures furthering national aspirations. It is time to step into the future, and for the existing principles of war to yield to the new ones with grace.

## Notes

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