

CONVENTIONAL WARS: EMERGING PERSPECTIVE

“A nation has security when it does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war and is able to, if challenged, to maintain them by war”

Walter Lipman

INTRODUCTION

Contention, conflict, hostility and wars have always been there because of differences in ideologies, religious faiths and societal values or to acquire a greater share of resources or prestige and power. Before the Peace of Westphalia (1648), wars were waged by religious or social groups, clans and gangs. Thereafter, with the emergence of sovereign nation states with authority to control their territories, the conflicts became increasingly inter-state. In the last few decades, the enormous destructive power of strong conventional and nuclear capabilities has resulted in weaker states and non-state groups shifting to sub-conventional irregular means to achieve their political objectives. The nature of conflict has thus been constantly evolving.

The changing nature of conflict has added new complexities and challenges. Conventional conflict is increasingly intertwined with irregular forces using unconventional means and tactics; while irregular forces are becoming increasingly lethal with access to technology and equipment that previously only conventional state forces could afford.

The topic ‘**Conventional Wars: Future Perspective**’ is vast and all encompassing. The talk seeks to find answers to a series of pertinent questions concerning strategic and operational choices and dilemmas, with respect to structuring of forces.

PART 1 : NATURE OF CONFLICT

How is the nature of conflict changing?

Several scholars have variously grouped eras of warfare into various generations.

- **1st Generation (Pre WW 1):** Massed manpower with personal weapons; initially spears or bows and arrows and later rifles and machine guns.
- **2nd Generation (WW 1):** Employment of firepower, especially indirect fire from artillery and mortars. These wars were slow and resulted in heavy casualties trying to breakthrough strong defensive lines.
- **3rd Generation (WW 2):** Employment of armour, heavy artillery, aircraft and operational maneuver. This is what we understand today as conventional war, waged by nation states with conventional forces.

- **4th Generation (Post Cold War):** The rapid development of high tech weapon systems and their possession by powerful states meant that weaker States and Non State Groups could no more stand up to powerful States. This led to asymmetric conflict by smaller, irregular forces employing terrorism, insurgency, and guerilla warfare while exploiting technology, networks, cyber space, political maneuvers and media.

Prosecution of war has three important dimensions: the manoeuvre practiced, attrition caused and the moral impact of conflict. With generational shifts in the nature of conflict the focus has shifted from attrition to manoeuvre and now to the Moral dimension.

What are the emerging contours of conflict? Will conventional conflicts remain relevant?

Since 1945, the total number of armed conflicts worthy of being called “Conventional Wars” stand at just **20**. During the same period, the number of sub conventional wars (conflicts waged by or against, non state actors ranging from terrorism, insurgencies to clashes between armed militias) stood at well over a **100**. Some sub-conventional conflicts have been extremely violent leading to enormous casualties, even bordering on genocide. While the sub conventional conflicts are more frequent, the conventional conflicts are more dangerous.

Some recent conflicts, namely Lebanon War 2006, Russia – Georgia Campaign 2008, Sri Lankan Conflict 2009 and the ongoing Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan clearly indicate the changing nature of future conflict. Some of the lessons which emerge are:-

- There is a limit to the deterrence powers of states and proxies and thus space exists for inter state conventional conflict.
- Even irregular forces might have state like conventional capabilities and employ a mix of irregular and conventional tactics.
- The strength of irregular forces is the irregular means. Militarily, irregular warfare is rarely successful against conventional forces, perhaps the only exception was the Vietnam War.
- Any operation would have distinct phases of offense, defence and prolonged stabilisation. Conventional forces will have to continuously reassess objectives and priorities and adapt to irregular conflict.

If we look at the ‘**ends, ways and means**’ the following trends emerge:-

- **Ends.** The focus will be more on the achievement of political objectives rather than sole destruction of the enemy’s combat potential.

- **Ways.** Traditional kinetic means alone are not adequate to meet conflict objectives. Besides military effort, future campaigns will require a 'Complementary and Comprehensive Approach'. Such an approach includes an integrated whole involving diplomatic, economic, social and the informational domains / elements.
- **Means.** Military success will remain essential to achieve political objectives. Therefore, core military skills will need to be retained, while certain amount of re-orientation and creation of specialised military capabilities will be essential for the force to remain flexible, agile and versatile.

Due to the damaging potential of conventional wars, even those states which possess an effective conventional capability tend to shy away from conventional wars. Wars are preferred to be waged diplomatically, economically and by controlled armed actions like border skirmishes, face offs at seas, or through proxies in each other's territory or even far away regions of interest. When armed conflicts tend to become flagrant, escalation control measures are brought in. The likelihood of conventional conflicts may be declining, but the consequences of its occurrence are devastating.

Characteristics of Future Conflict

The characteristics of future conflict can thus be summarized as under:-

- The spectrum of conflict could range from conflicts between states to conflict with non-state actors and proxies.
- The boundaries between regular and irregular warfare are blurring. Even non state actors / groups are increasingly acquiring conventional capabilities that were earlier the exclusive preserve of Nation States. The idea of **Hybrid Warfare** is to fight in the seam; between conventional and counter insurgency operations.
- Conventional conflict could either be preceded, or succeeded by a period of irregular conflict, which would require low intensity conflicts and stabilisation operations will be an integral part of conventional wars.
- Technology has empowered the individual and today a single terrorist / guerrilla can cause severe damage to adversaries through cyber, financial and kinetic attacks which earlier only large organisations or States could do. Future Hybrid conflicts will demand concurrent investment in sharpening 'softer skills' like cultural awareness training, language skills, psychological operations and human intelligence.
- The constant fear of non state actors acquiring WMDs poses the greatest global threat due to the catastrophic consequences.

PART II: STRATEGIC CHOICES

What strategic choices do Nation States have with respect to structuring their Armed Forces?

- A state with clear and present threats from neighbouring states will have to focus on threat based conventional capabilities to deter adversaries. For contingency tasks, conventional forces can adapt to irregular/ unconventional conflicts. This is an easier option.
- States with secure borders have the luxury of anticipating future non conventional threats and prepare for irregular unconventional conflicts. Since conventional threats from States are unlikely, forces can adapt for such contingencies. However, capabilities take time to be created which may be possible only for a few countries with resources and even that may not be in the defined time.
- Therefore, while some nations can clearly identify the threats facing them and could have threat based force structures, others who face emerging threats which cannot be clearly identified would have to create capability based forces. Often it would have to a mix of the two.

PART III: ADAPTING TO CHANGE

How does changing nature of Conflict impact on the role of Air and Maritime Power?

Air Power will play a significant role in conventional conflict; however, to remain relevant and sustainable for hybrid threats of the future some reassessment and calibration on the use of air power will become necessary. The focus will be to 'minimise collateral damage' and the provision of intimate close air support to ground forces. Even today there is a great debate on the strategic choices to be adopted. There are no clear cut answers. Should the focus be on creating capabilities to address 'High End Operations' or should the focus shift to adapting capabilities to suit the 'Wars of Today'? Whatever the choice, capabilities for both strategic counter air operations and support to ground forces will be required. The shift in focus will be dictated by the need to adapt to meet the desired capability.

As far as the maritime domain is concerned, achieving 'Dominant Power' on the seas will remain important. Sea denial and sea control will remain essential elements to enforce deterrence on the potential adversary. Operational Manoeuvre from the Seas and Coercive Diplomacy will also form important components of capability development. In addition, security and stability of 'Global Commons' will require the development and fostering of 'collaborative capabilities'. Some of these could include:-

- Protection of economic interests and SLsOC (Energy Security).

- Anti Piracy Operations.
- Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Operations.

Nuc Dimension

Is there space for Conventional Conflict between nuclear power states?

The destructive potential of nuclear weapons and large number of nuclear weapons states have limited the scope of conventional conflict. The zones open for all out conventional conflict would be further reduced and limited to only small non-nuclear weapons power nations with smaller militaries. It is not to say that there will be no conventional conflict between nuclear states, but the scope of such conflict will be limited in space, type and quantum of forces used, objectives and targets, levels of casualties inflicted, collateral damage and the duration of wars. The scope of politico-military objectives of a conventional conflict would, therefore, have to be accordingly moderated. The Kargil Conflict 1999 amply highlighted that despite the nuclear dimension (including Pakistan's contrived nuclear irrationality) space for conventional conflict existed. It also highlighted the fact that escalatory dynamics could be controlled up to a point.

Deterrence and Escalatory Control

How will the dynamics of Deterrence, Coercion and Escalatory Control work against Non State Actors?

The dynamics of deterrence and escalatory control are more relevant against nation states. Against non-states actors these capabilities have little effect. On the contrary, the use of asymmetric means by non states actors seek to counter and make these very conventional terms irrelevant. However, several diplomatic, informational, military and social measures can be effectively used in a complementary and comprehensive approach to enforce restraint on the activities of non-states actors.

CONCLUSION

While there has been a strategic shift in the nature of warfare, the likelihood of conventional war cannot be wished away. The appearance of non state actors and proxies have added new and complex politico – military dynamics to conventional conflict. These changed characteristics will therefore increasingly challenge conventional armies to adapt and constantly remain ahead of potential adversaries. A dilemma would always remain; whether to orient for future State versus State conflicts or to adapt for Today's Wars.

Conventional forces to be able to face the multi-spectrum challenges that would emerge in the future would have to be organized, equipped and trained to be able to re-orientate from one form of conflict to another and often be able to fight various forms of wars with varying intensity levels all at the same time.