

Book Review: By Editorial Board

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OPERATIONAL LESSONS OF THE WARS OF 21ST CENTURY

P K GAUTAM

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INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE
STUDIES & ANALYSES

The expectation of most U.S. senior commanders of the 1990s that RMA-based technologies would provide a silver bullet and disperse the fog of war and change its nature was never realised. "The experience of Afghanistan and Iraq has dissipated the fog of wilful ignorance about the fundamental nature of war, not to mention of historical experience."

War, as all other human activities, is the product of an evolving socioeconomic milieu that is continually driven by acquisitive demands and human ingenuity that push technological horizons, endowing communities with increasing power to achieve their individual and collective goals. This escalating power quotient creates ever-increasing capacities to wage war – through inventions that enhance destruction, acquisition and mobility of weapon platforms – thereby changing the character of waging war. The author's deduction that "the nature of war is unchanging while its character changes with time and technology" is well founded.

This evolution, from clubs to swords and spears to horsed cavalry and motorised weapon platforms onto the projection of munitions by gunpowder and means of delivering destruction over the seas and from the air, is spread over thousands of years. In the twentieth century, the evolution of weapons, induction of air power and exploitation of the electromagnetic spectrum brought about hitherto unknown magnitudes of death and destruction. More noticeably, the extension of war fighting beyond the battlefield aimed at destroying the means of war located in the non-military domain. Noticeably, the character of war fighting changed radically during the two world wars of that century.

The curtain was brought down on the Second World War by the employment of nuclear weapons, which brought about unprecedented and instantaneous destruction of a modern military force. Thereafter, the frequency and intensity of change in war fighting increased remarkably.

In the aftermath, the world was divided into rich and technologically advanced states and the others, lesser endowed, that were labelled "Third World states," products of ridding themselves of their colonial yokes. Yet another division was characterised by states that possessed nuclear

weapons and their allies and those that did not. The latter fell into the category of Third World states.

The presence of nuclear weapons made war between the nuclear weapon states (NWS) prohibitive, thereby restraining those states from initiating wars amongst themselves in the fear that a conventional war could escalate into a nuclear exchange. Conflict between them changed radically. Each competed in creating potent modern conventional war-fighting capabilities while containing each other through a psychological war of “deterrence” in preference to mutually assured destruction. Besides exceptional levels of destruction, the nuclear weapons environment brought about a radical change in the equation of resources and the time and space in which battles would be executed while complicating the definition, identification and promulgation of the military objective. While not changing the principles of war, it complicated the juxtaposition of each principle, further complicating the formulation of plans for war.

The only exception was the 1999 Indo-Pakistan Kargil conflict, where two established NWSs waged a conventional war against each other without crossing the nuclear rubicon.

Parallel to this, the Third World countries started the sovereign task of nation building. They either capitalised on great power rivalries by aligning with one side or the other for material and technological benefit or, while remaining non-aligned, developed their national human and natural resources to enhance national growth and coalesce the people into a sovereign state. Each developed national security policies and means to defend itself in the event of war.

It's in this resultant environment that military conflicts have taken place in the post-war period – wars between non-nuclear developing countries or conflicts initiated by the major powers to exercise control on recalcitrant non-nuclear weapon states that were perceived to work against the national interests of the former. In the former, the character of war followed the pattern of conventional war, as seen in the Second World War. In the latter, the targeted country was no match for the overwhelming technological military superiority of the major powers, as was demonstrated

during the 1991 Gulf War by the Western powers against Iraq – the latter's modern military machine notwithstanding.

This sparked yet another fundamental change in war fighting. Countries of the developing world, which perceived security threats to their sovereignty, were no longer ready to tamely acquiesce to the military domination of the major powers. They reviewed the French, U.S. and Indo-China wars and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, wherein ragtag forces imposed exorbitant political penalties and costs in manpower and materials on the prevailing super powers and forced them to withdraw without achieving the stated military or political objectives. Put in plain language, the United States suffered a military defeat in Vietnam, as did the Soviet Union in Afghanistan at the hands of guerrilla fighters and mujahideen, upsetting all theories and recognised concepts of war – a unique change in war fighting.

Saddam Hussein, whose military forces were comprehensively decimated in 1991, was the first to recognise the futility of waging war against an asymmetrically superior force and the need for a deliberate change in the character of war fighting – a change that would level the playing field, so to say. The study goes on to elucidate the following: “Guerrilla warfare has historically been the tactics of the weak. They also use asymmetric tactics. Here asymmetry has special connotations for the insurgents. These operations in the 21st century show the capacity of the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda fighters to employ tactics making full use of improvisation of (locally) available technology.” And – “Another variation of asymmetry is what the Chinese term as seeking out vulnerabilities inherent in enemy's superior strength and employing countermeasures or ‘sashoujian’ – assassins mace (low-cost quick fix substitutes to enhance military capability).”

There is substantial evidence to show that Saddam Hussein deliberately planned his operations and deployed appropriate forces to continue the conflict once the invading forces were stretched to their logistical and operational limit. President Bush's famous claim of “Mission Accomplished” in April 2003 proved to be an empty boast. The war continued for another decade in its asymmetrical guise, a change that the U.S. psyche failed to come to grips with.

As events have shown, this change has materialised and it is to the credit of the Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses (IDSA) that it has focused on this critical issue of change in war fighting, particularly in our context and the context of similarly placed countries in and around the Korean Peninsula, central Asia, the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. The twenty-first century is characterised by asymmetrical warfare.

This monograph is “focused on the operational lessons of war and not on political or strategic ones . . .” After discerning the trends in warfare, it goes on to study the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Georgia to draw lessons that highlight the changes in war fighting.

The author analyses each of these conflicts and makes pertinent observations, some of which are analysed below.

There is a shift in the role of information from the tactical and operational levels to the strategic level – consequent to the introduction of electronic means to acquire, identify and collate information and synthesise it into intelligence in real time. “Informationalised warfare is marked by the struggle of stratagems, of policy, of morale, of thought, and of psychology.”

This thought, however, leaves questions as it addresses the concerns of the modern militaries without examining the inferior forces fielded by Afghanistan and Iraq. After all, these forces did not have access to the comparatively superlative means available to the United States and its allies but still held them at bay for over a decade. In both cases, denying the U.S. military any degree of success was the stated military objective. The author could consider a further examination to determine the changes in war fighting the guerrillas introduced that frustrated a modern military’s capacity to fulfil its mission. Those changes are relevant to war fighting today.

The author goes on to make a pertinent observation that while “the insurgency part of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq saw a great deal of faith in relearning the art and craft of counterinsurgency . . . the first three years of the Iraq war were disastrous because the US Army ignored the lessons of counterinsurgency from Malaya and Vietnam.” A modern military will come across the entire gamut of war-fighting scenarios, be they counter-insurgency, mid-intensity war or high-intensity war. Therefore, the army

must be equipped, trained and conditioned to wage war to meet each requirement. Under these circumstances, the system being followed in India is practical. Units prepare for conventional war against modern conventional forces with an alternate equipping policy for those to fight insurgencies and a six-week reorientation course before induction into operations. This caters for reorientation of psyche and training refresher to optimise force output.

The study points out “that the high point of wars is that all progressive militaries in their quest for modernisation cannot ignore battlefield support, interdiction, the importance of low collateral damage, helicopters and fixed-wing close air support in the conduct of conventional operations.” However, the author tempers this while taking this into account – “when the organisational and doctrinal foundation of the Indian military is deliberated - care must be taken not to blindly mimic proposals because “primary mission for counterinsurgency or counter-terrorism may take deep roots and the skills and capacity to wage a successful conventional war gets diminished.” A balance in potential and capacities is a must.

Therefore, in the Indian context, while it is important to emphasise insurgency/terrorism-driven conflict, we should not lose sight of the skills and capacities to wage a conventional war – especially when it comes to a hostile nuclear-armed Pakistan that fields modern conventional forces along the western borders and uses asymmetrical means to execute its proxy war in Jammu & Kashmir.

The author points out that “another fundamental difference is that unlike the US and its allies and NATO, the Indian military is not an occupying/colonial foreign force but it is only engaging misguided countrymen.” Furthermore, the counter-insurgency doctrine in India dictates “minimum use of force,” which precludes overkill and reduces collateral damage on the innocent civil populace. Failure to understand this basic principle in counter-insurgency operations alienated the population of the adversarial state and has cost the United States and its Western allies dearly during the consolidation phase of the war. Consequently, the operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya continue to fester and impose major economic and political penalties.

In addition to the laws of the country, it is imperative that the military abide by the international statutes of war fighting such as are laid

down by the Geneva Convention. This was given short shrift by the militaries of the United States and its allies and has been well elucidated in this study.

Changes in war fighting do not alter the basic principles of war. These cannot be ignored when adapting to new types of warfare. There is, however, a tendency to develop new concepts and methodologies some of which tend to go against these basic principles. This is well demonstrated in the Lebanon war, which proved to be disastrous for Israel due to the failure to understand the need for deploying adequate “boots on ground” and the inadequacy of the belief that air power alone can achieve a military mission.

Having analysed the five wars that have punctuated the first decade of the twenty-first century, the study sums up its findings in the chapter “Summary of Lessons” comprehensively. These need to be read and understood by researchers in the government and academia to point the direction for further research.

These lessons need to be related to the context in which the Indian armed forces would be required to operate in the country and beyond, be it on the northern or western borders or in the Indian Ocean.

In conclusion, emphasis needs to be laid on organisational aspects. Counter-insurgency operations require modified concepts, training, organisation and so on. On the other hand, the need to develop conventional capabilities that differ must not be lost sight of. There is a need to carefully reconcile the two to make sure that one does not negate the other and a meaningful potential is maintained. The Indian infrastructure in terms of the Rashtriya Rifles, the Assam Rifles and regular units for operating in the mountains, jungles, plains and desert with commensurate training establishments is already in place. The army needs to ensure that these continue to develop in keeping with the evolving changes that characterise warfare.

This monograph is a must-read for those charged with policy formulation in the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry for External Affairs and, most importantly, for those in the operational, intelligence, perspective planning and logistical wings of the armed forces.