

ANALYTICAL MAPPING OF TRENDS IN UNENDING CONFLICTS

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Abstract

The world is witnessing new forms of conflicts. These are occurring in otherwise stable regions like Armenia, Ukraine and Palestine, the latter seemed to be heading towards historic rapprochement between traditional rivals. Conflicts have acquired non-kinetic dimension like coercive stand-off in Ladakh on Line of Actual Control (LAC). They are proliferating to newer domains-cyber, information, cognitive, energy and economic. It appears that between Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC), world is moving towards clash of connectivity's and corridors. While it may be risky and pre-mature to draw lessons, yet trends need to be not only deciphered but analysed as these will drive the future Geo-strategic exchanges. The major emerging trends mapped are discussed in this analysis.

Keywords: Conflict-risk index, Geo-strategic theories, Non-kinetic dimension, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC), Cognitive Warfare

Analytical Mapping of Trends in Unending Conflicts

Every year, strategic experts and renowned think tanks, publish projected 'conflict-risk' index, with likely global conflict hot-spots for the year. These listings are invariably accompanied by maps and graphics. One such representative graphic is included. An analysis of these lists, reveals that they naturally draw inferences from the established and well-known geo-strategic

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theories like Halford Mackinder's 'Heartland theory', Nicholas Spykman's 'Rimland theory' and Alfred Mahan's 'Sea Power' theories. These are contextualized with contemporary geo-political realities. Analysis of these reveals that most projections conform to Greek analyst, Dimitri Kitsikis postulates. He had opined that besides Mackinder's - Eurasian heartland, the intermediate region of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) will also remain the crucible of conflicts. In effect, Kitsikis added geo-civilizational dimension to otherwise geo-political construct. MENA is the arena of competing civilizations, exemplifying Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations'.

The major ongoing conflicts include- Azerbaijan-Nagorno Karabakh (since 2020); Ukraine (since 2020) and Gaza (since Oct 2023). It will be pertinent to mention that all these conflicts have been festering for decades and time-lines indicated are only for the current round of hostilities. The world concurrently continues to be bedeviled with low order of brewing conflicts/insurgencies, unleashed by Houthis, Kurds, Islamic State in Syria/Levant (ISIS), Hezbollah, Hamas and other militants and even private militias like Wagner Army. This arc of instability currently extends from Mali-Sudan-Syria-Lebanon to Yemen. It may be little early to add Venezuelan-Guyana skirmishes to this mix, as situation seems to be getting defused, at least currently. In addition, more importantly, grey zone coercive posturing by China on Sino-Indian border since 2020 and aggressive deployment and aerial/maritime manoeuvres of Chinese in South China Sea targeting Taiwan need to be very carefully monitored.

Template for Analysis

It is indeed risky and somewhat pre-mature to draw lessons from unresolved wars and conflicts, yet some important trends and pointers need to be deciphered. In these unending, long, drawn-out conflicts, new paradigms of war fighting are emerging along with possible counter-measures. These may solidify into principles and defining postulates in future. The most obvious, case in point is pre-mature sounding of death-knell for tanks, consequent to disruptive top-attack effects, unleashed by Turkish, Bayraktar-TB2 drones and

Switchblade, Kamikaze, loitering munitions. Russian origin tanks in Armenia and Ukraine bore the brunt of reverses, which was magnified by the Western media. Notwithstanding, the hasty obituaries, Russian tanks duly fortified are back in Ukraine and modified Israeli Merkavas have been fielded in Gaza.

Emerging inferences in uncertain, dynamic flux of on-going conflicts need to be not only validated but also customized to the applicable local environment. In our context, in Ladakh, drones are likely to have very limited efficacy due to high altitude and environmental factors. Israel is leading attack into Gaza with fortified Merkava-4, yet India never uses tanks in urban warfare. In contrast, India prefers to secure populated areas with combined arms teams. India is not really in the conflict crucible of MENA, yet we have existing challenges of aggressive China and Pak fostered proxy-war. More importantly, our adversaries are increasingly, in collusion mode. The conflicts seem to be ever present though latent and lurking in the shadows. They get triggered by surprise and isolated events like Hamas raid in Gaza on 7th Oct, even when region was headed for impending re-rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. In a recent interaction, our two former Chiefs have flagged internal challenges as our main threats, hence, the need is to keep our guard up and be vigilant against both external threats and internal fault-lines. The subject is analysed in the context of relevance of mapped attributes in our environment.

Mapping-Emerging Trends

The first defining trend is that application of kinetic force has limited effect and utility. It is certainly not able to get decisive end-state. Putin's so called special operations designed to capture Kyiv and effect regime change in the garb of de-Nazification, ensure neutrality or keeping away Western powers, planned to be achieved in two weeks has entered third year. This is even after annexation of Crimea and areas in Donbas region by Russia starting in 2014. Even the planned counter-offensives by both sides are stalemated with negligible progress. Similarly, Israeli Defence Force (IDF) operation in Gaza is already in third month and is likely to linger. Resource control, huge technical asymmetry and relentless operations are yet to get IDF, the desired

objectives and end state. Resolute stand adopted by India in Ladakh has certainly derailed PLA game-plan of forcing India into capitulation and scoring uncontested grey zone victory.

As a complementary inference, it will be pragmatic for nations to avoid belligerence and application of kinetic force. Even if forced into it, it will be prudent to stipulate realistic goals with clearly defined end-state. It is also axiomatic to build interim exit options, which may be required for conflict termination and face saving. Putin and Zelinsky seem to be both caught in never ending logjam and ego-trap, on this account. Even in Gaza, Hamas's objective of getting focus back on Palestine and Gaza seems to be more likely to be achieved rather than IDF aim of destroying Hamas. Even securing release of hostages from Hamas may need more time and even concessions.

The next major corollary is debunking of long held belief that wars are likely to be short, swift and decisive. In Indo-Pak context, 14 days' operational cycle was being used as template. Consequently, stocking and war reserves were planned for 21 days of combat. Long drawn-out conflicts with indeterminate objectives are more likely to be the norm and the new normal in future. In addition, conflicts are likely to degenerate into extended hybrid wars/insurgencies, especially in Palestine, where Hamas may get temporarily marginalized, albeit only till more dangerous variant of Hamas sprouts in its place. Wanton destruction of population centres is becoming the new normal with Aleppo, Grozny, Mariupol and Gaza razed to ground. It is invariably accompanied by humanitarian crisis with large scale civilian casualties and displacement of refugees.

Another major trend is, validation of seminal maxim that no defence line is impregnable, especially in the face of determined Fedayeens like Hamas. Famed Gaza Barrier has got added to compromised ones like- French Maginot and German Siegfried Lines (World War-II), Berlin Wall (Cold War) and Barlev Line (1973 war), just to list the important ones. While breaching of defence lines is inevitable, it is the immediate response that is the key imperative. IDF slipped-up badly on this account during audacious Hamas

raid. It has been repeatedly seen that information though available and in plenty, is not collated and analysed to convert it into operational and actionable intelligence. Hence, timely analysis of information and surveillance are most important. We need to certainly revamp our analytics of surveillance and intelligence structures/ mechanisms, as we have been repeatedly surprised in Kargil (1999) and again in Ladakh (2020).

For long conflicts, nations need to build resilience in logistics chain and spurt capabilities, to ramp-up inventories rapidly. We are witnessing Russia, famed for its depots and military-industrial complex is now scouting for spares and munitions. Countries like Pakistan have become suppliers to their own Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs)- Ukraine. At one time, we were planning, stocking only for 21-day conflict. It is time to adopt 'whole-of-nation' approach with civil-military fusion, enabling dual use technologies and applications. An apt example is fielding of Elon Musk's Commercial of the Shelf (COTS) satellite communication, Star links terminals by Ukrainians to circumvent Russian electronics warfare. Another interesting aspect is use of crowd funding to field low end drones like the Employment of ham operators in yesteryears. Fielding of such dual use devices is the obvious way forward. These conflicts have literally become trial and testing ground for armaments. Large manufacturers are exhausting munitions, nearing end of their shelf-life. In a no victor-no vanquished scenario, the only winner seems to be the military-industrial complex with bulging order books. We also need to boost our defence industry eco-system and infuse dual-use stakes.

The quest for the elusive silver-bullet or game changer weapon is never ending and unlikely to yield result. No single weapon like tanks or even current favourite drones can win battle on their own. It is seen that disruptive effects like drones give initial advantage but it is only temporary till mitigating defensive and counter-offensive measures are devised. Tanks are already getting retrofitted with cage like structures and fails as part of Tank Top-Attack Survival Kits. In addition, high end Active Protection Systems like Trophy and Shtora are being fitted and tanks fielded within Air Defence envelope and

umbrella. In essence, it will be synergistic application of combined all arms teams duly backed up by smart logistics.

Nations strive for technological asymmetry, yet determined adversary doesn't allow it to acquire debilitating character by closing the gap. Human element and operators (men/ women) behind machine(gun) remain very much relevant. This is especially relevant in high altitude, where environmental factors degrade equipment performance. The correct training and application of tactical concepts like dispersion, convoy discipline and intelligent use of ground would have drastically reduced Russian casualties in Ukraine. In this context, it is relevant to recall Indian crews exploiting their improvisation (jugaad) in antiquated Centurion tanks to defeat much superior and modern Pattons (M-48) in 1965 war. Another example is audacious employment of helicopters along with floatation of tanks in 1971 war to bounce formidable Meghna River and effect siege of Dacca from most unexpected direction. In essence, well trained and motivated human capital can offset technical asymmetry.

The most worrying aspect has been that nuclear installations are getting embroiled in skirmishes. In Ukrainian conflict, Zaporizhzhia, nuclear power-plant was damaged, wherein actions of Russian forces were questionable, not withstanding, it being nuclear power. More recently Israeli, Sdot Micha base, housing Jericho missiles was attacked by Hamas rockets, probably accidentally. It underscores the need to ring-fence such facilities as danger of radiation fall-out and proliferation is very real. Any attempt to reduce or surrender nuclear stock-pile is unlikely to find traction, in the light of Ukrainian experience. It had surrendered its stock-pile in 1994 in return for Russian nuclear umbrella and guarantees. In case it had retained its weapons, the same would have deterred Russians. It was predicted by John Mearsheimer that without nuclear weapons, Ukraine will be subjected to war. Consequently, quest for nuclear weapons and retaining them is likely to increase. Iran seems to be the next serious contender and on the verge of threshold, in this quest.

Security alliances like North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or less formalized ones like QUAD as a hedging strategy are unable to ensure requisite deterrence. Ukraine has got caught in such pincer as partners are most reluctant to put boots on ground even fatigue is developing on the issue of material support. In effect, such linkages have severe limitations and at best support can come in form of resources but operating crews need re-orientation. Fielding of such externally supplied armaments like American F-16 and German Leopard tanks have penalties in terms of training and complexities of integration in existing combat architecture, surveillance, communication and command grids. For, Ukraine, it is transition from Russian to Western mode. We are going to face similar challenges as we are reducing dependence on Russian equipment. In the power play, China has opted to remain in background in physical involvement even in United Nations force deployment. The only departure is China taking pro-Palestine stance in recent Gaza conflict at the cost of her traditional ties with Israel. It bears reiteration that performance of People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Sudan and Chinese drones in Syria has been sub-optimal. It is moot question if leading power like China can avoid responsibility and for how long? In our context and in larger context, nations have to build smart partnerships, integral capabilities and self-reliance (Atmanirbhar).

The basic paradigm of national interests being enduring and long term is undergoing a radical shift in polarized, binary flip-flops at the apex level of security management, especially in United States of America (USA). This is starkly evident in transition from President Obama's 'Pivot to Pacific' to President Trump's 'Fortress America' and Make America Great Again (MAGA). Now, we are witnessing President Biden's Quad and Build Back Better World (B3W). Concurrently, focus on NATO, dealing with Russia and China has drastically changed between Democratic and Republican dispensation. Even in China, transition from Deng's 'Hide your Shine-Bide your time' to Xi's Wolf-warrior, aggressive China surprised many like India. The lesson for us is to endeavour to forge bipartisan consensus on key security challenges and promulgate a clearly defined national security strategy.

Conflicts are characterized by relentless narrative wars on social media, electronic and print mediums, which were highlighted in Ukrainian conflict. Now in Israel, it is concurrent clash of two narratives- Terrorist Hamas vis a vis Genocide in Gaza. Cognitive warfare is going to only escalate and proliferate. It is important to be suitably prepared for it with policy, organization (like PLA's Strategic Support Force) and training. Competition and contests including conflicts are proliferating to emerging domains like cyber, space, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Robotics and autonomous weapons backed by quantum computing. It will be pragmatic if certain basic global norms and protocols are devised for these domains like Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) protocols. In our context, concerted effort in research and development (R&D) in AI, autonomous platforms and quantum computing as also upgrading organizations in cyber and space domain is recommended.

Geo-strategy is yielding ground to geo-economics, hence there are conflicts in economic domain like energy supply with manifestation of sanctions. In addition, sabotage action on Nord-Stream pipeline disrupted energy supply to Europe from Russia. However, these have limited utility as was discerned in case of limited effect of sanctions on Russian energy supplies. Connectivity is another new frontier for power projection, which was flagged by Mike Pompeo, former US Secretary of State, when he dubbed Chinese connectivity corridors like Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as more geo-strategic than economy driven. American counter came through India Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC); however, it is currently under shadow due to conflict in Gaza. US establishment has claimed that Hamas raid was an attempt to disrupt IMEC initiative. Chinese Maritime Silk route including Kra Canal project are attempts to overcome Malacca dilemma and build energy security. India has to remain vigilant about these challenges and stay invested in relevant connectivity corridors like International North-South Transportation (INST), Chabahar, Kaladan besides IMEC to build redundancies.

Summarized Listing of Trends

It is important to reiterate the trends: -

- a) Application of kinetic force has limited utility in objectives and effects.
- b) Realistic and clearly defined objectives and end state along with exit options must be devised, when force application is unavoidable.
- c) New normal is long, festering conflicts with indeterminate outcomes often tapering-off into hybrid war/insurgencies.
- d) No defence line is impregnable, quick response and resilience is the key.
- e) Timely analysis of information and surveillance to convert into timely, actionable intelligence is most important.
- f) Resilience in logistics mandates 'whole of nation approach' and civil-military fusion with dual use technologies.
- g) There can be no silver bullet, synergistic application of combined arms, backed by smart logistics is mandated.
- h) Technological asymmetry is temporary and contested and human capital still has relevance specially in high altitude.
- i) Isolation of nuclear installations in battle space requires immediate attention.
- j) Quest to acquire nuclear weapons is likely to amplify.
- k) Security alliances have limited hedging value.
- l) There is a need to evolve national consensus on key security challenges and promulgate national security strategy.
- m) Narrative warfare and cognitive shaping are emerging trends. They require structures and organization.
- n) Conflicts are imminent in newer domains like cyber, space and autonomous warfare incorporating AI.
- o) Sanctions have limited utility yet they are growing manifestation of geo-economic contestation.
- p) Geo-economic contests are evident in energy and connectivity corridors.

Uncertain Future

Power play is acquiring non-kinetic dimension and grey zone character like coercive stand-off in Ladakh and Taiwan (South China Sea). Even in kinetic genre, conflicts are festering and instead of finding resolution are degenerating into insurgencies. Conflict is proliferating into newer domains like cyber, space, cognitive and autonomous platforms. Geo-economics is being leveraged through sanctions specially in energy security. It also appears that between Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC), world is moving literally towards ‘clash of corridors’.



Map Credit – Statista – <https://www.statista.com>

Alliances are unable to ensure deterrence, hence nations have to build integral capabilities and smart partnerships. The most worrying trend is that UN and other dispute resolving bodies have been rendered ineffective. The key challenge is not only to discern and map the emerging trends but stay ahead of disruptive trends.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study underscores the evolving nature of conflicts and the emerging trends that shape geopolitical dynamics. It emphasizes the limitations of kinetic force in achieving decisive outcomes and highlights the importance of realistic objectives and exit strategies when force becomes unavoidable. The paper also identifies the shift towards long, protracted conflicts with indeterminate outcomes, often escalating into hybrid warfare or insurgencies. Additionally, it emphasizes the vulnerability of defense lines and the necessity for quick responses and resilience in the face of determined adversaries. Timely analysis of information and surveillance is deemed crucial for converting data into actionable intelligence. The paper advocates for a holistic approach to logistics and defense, emphasizing civil-military fusion and the integration of dual-use technologies.

Furthermore, it acknowledges the temporary nature of technological asymmetry and underscores the enduring relevance of human capital, particularly in challenging environments like high altitudes. The potential risks associated with nuclear installations getting embroiled in conflicts are highlighted, urging for their isolation and protection. Moreover, the paper examines the limitations of security alliances in providing adequate deterrence and calls for a consensus on national security strategy to address key challenges effectively. It also stresses the importance of narrative warfare and cognitive shaping in contemporary conflicts, alongside the proliferation of hostilities into new domains like cyber, space, and autonomous warfare.

Lastly, the paper discusses the growing significance of geo-economic contests, particularly in energy security and connectivity corridors such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the India Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC).

It concludes by painting a picture of an uncertain future marked by non-kinetic power plays, grey zone conflicts, and the clash of geopolitical corridors. Overall, the conclusion underscores the need for nations to adapt to evolving geopolitical realities, leverage emerging technologies, and pursue strategic partnerships to navigate an increasingly complex global landscape.

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