Chapter 6
21st Century Conflict:
A New Perspective

Athul M. A.
Max Protection Ltd., India

ABSTRACT

Warfare has evolved rapidly in the first few years of the 21st century. There are stark differences with conventional mode of warfare, which was the de facto mode for much of 20th century, and today's asymmetric warfare. In the conventional mode of warfare, if winning and losing a war could be defined by the traditional yard sticks of number of enemy dead, how much area of land occupied and number of prisoners taken, today these yardsticks no longer us get a clear picture of who is winning or losing it.

INTRODUCTION

The discussion on the future of warfare in the 21st century is a continuing debate as strategists continuously try to fathom the current trends and accurately predict the way humans are going to fight in the future. As such this is an attempt to give a brief summary of irregular/asymmetric warfare and factoring in the current trend of conflicts and try to establish where and how majority of future conflicts will be fought as well as the major influencers which will shape the conflicts of 21st century.

According to Carl Von Clausewitz, the author of 'Art of War', war is like a chameleon and it changes over time. The cause of the changes can be various, including technological, societal and political changes or innovations occurring at a given period.

Our concept of future conflict/war is coloured and held hostage by the understanding and experience of conflicts in the past era, when armed conflict was between nation states. We imagine conflict in the shadows of armed confrontation between two nation states .The generally character of armed conflict was that it was a symmetric confrontation between two opposing armies with each one trying to compel ones opponent to fulfil our will(Lindell, 2009), by means of arms and violence.

However, post-cold war era, the nature of conflict has changed. Today conflicts are asymmetric in nature, with conflicts increasingly becoming a non-state actor-State affair. One of the primary factor for the rise of these conflicts is that the political ideologies has been replaced by ethnic, religious and regional identities, paving way for more of a 'micro' nature of conflicts. If the nation state wars were intended to be short wars, with mobility and speed being the backbone of third generation warfare and victory clearly defined in terms of area occupied or surrender of enemy, With non-state entities becoming important players in a conflict present day conflicts are open ended, longer and is a reminder of old style campaigns, reminiscent of preindustrial age wars. There is no longer a face to face confrontation of uniformed bodies of men like that of a conventional war.

One of the primary catalyst for the rise of asymmetric conflicts in post-cold war scenario was the emergence of the United States of America as the sole military power with a vastly technologically superior military force. During the Gulf war of 1991, it was proven that no force could beat the Americans in a conventional head on battle. During Operation Desert Storm, US led coalition forces managed to reduce the Iraqi forces from a force of about 55 divisions and almost 500 aircrafts into a force of nearly 23 divisions and nearly 300 aircrafts in a span of four days. This emergence of US as the undisputed victor resulted in change of tactics of pursuing

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