

Learning from the Ukraine War and Applying it in the India – China Context

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From the very beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, we called for an immediate cease-fire, insisting that dialogue is the only way to resolve the dispute. We believe that there will be no winning party in this war, everyone will suffer. [...] India is deeply concerned by the humanitarian impact of this conflict.”

Prime Minister Narendra Modi
May 2022, Berlin¹

Abstract

The Ukraine War has been in progress since Feb 2022 and its repercussions are being felt around the globe. Salient strategic and military lessons are there to be learned from this modern war. India too has been facing the threat of a conflict with China since mid-2020. China's belligerent behaviour and contentious build up towards our northern borders forebode a conflict. Strengthening our deterrence with speed is essential to prevent any conflict. The takeaways from the Ukraine War and their swift implementation will make our nation and the armed forces much more formidable.

Introduction

The Ukraine War has been in progress since Feb 2022 and has affected the globe in many ways. While Russia chose to carry out a 'special military operation' in Ukraine, the genesis of the war can be traced back almost three decades ago. The seeds of the conflict had been sowed by the West in the aftermath of the Cold War with the retention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), though the erstwhile Soviet Union stood dismantled in

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1991. As the NATO membership expanded, its military alliance has almost doubled, making Russia increasingly insecure, finally resulting in this conflict. The impact is ubiquitous with shortages created in energy, food and fertilisers, disruption of global trade and security links, apart from dire economic and political consequences for nations severely hit by the pandemic.

India too has been facing the threat of a conflict with China since mid-2020, when the PLA, in a sudden operation in Eastern Ladakh, violated laid down agreements and existing protocols that had maintained peace on our northern borders. As is the Chinese wont, they put the onus of their aggressive actions on India's building of roads and bridges close to the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Some analysts also attributed it to India changing *suo motu* the status quo in Ladakh to a Union Territory. As a result, India has had to deploy substantial forces there to rebuild deterrence, which had diminished. The Ukraine War is being closely studied by India, China, and a number of other nations to derive contemporary lessons which are applicable in various conflict scenarios.

The Ukraine War

In mid-2014, Russia annexed the predominantly Russian speaking Crimea from Ukraine, securing vital access to the strategically important Black Sea Region. Ukraine and the West protested vehemently but settled for condemnation instead of conflict. Negotiations led to the Minsk II Agreement in Feb 2015. However, relations kept worsening and led to further insecurity in the Russian leadership. "Since the beginning of 2021, a certain number of signals have been very negatively interpreted by Moscow, which saw confirmation that Washington was actively preparing a general show of force against Russia".² These were reinforced by the signing on 11 March 2021 by Volodymyr Zelensky of a decree stipulating that Kiev "reserves the right to make use of all means necessary to protect [...] its sovereignty and its territorial integrity"³ and in early April, "a change of policy by President Zelensky, who made joining NATO and the EU a priority".⁴

The amassing of Russian forces in the vicinity of Ukrainian borders for a series of exercises at the end of 2021 was seen as part of a continued hybrid war, which turned into conventional war as Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 Feb 2022. President Putin

indicated the purpose of his actions “We will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation”.⁵

The Russian Armed Forces initially attempted a bold operation to seize Kiev, which failed miserably. Other offensives were planned to target Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Donetsk oblasts linking up all the way to Kherson in the South. Their political aim appeared to be regime change, but the military operation suffered from inadequate intelligence of Ukrainian preparedness as the Russian Military overreached itself. Poor planning, training and dissipation of war effort forced the Russians to review their initial goals and consolidate forces towards the Donbas Region. They have now succeeded in Luhansk oblast while efforts are ongoing in Donetsk oblast.

The Strategic Lessons

There are a number of takeaways at the strategic level as under:

- First, nations irrespective of their power can develop a deep sense of insecurity, which might become acute if lack of strategic communication or misperceptions about an adversary’s intentions gain ground.
- Second, a series of military coercion manoeuvres spread over a long time connotes Hybrid War but a belligerent could use them as a prelude to initiate a conflict or a full-scale war as is taking place now. More importantly, conventional wars between nations can happen despite their deep economic links. Adverse financial and economic consequences are then inevitable.
- Third, political aims in a war have to be based on own military capabilities vis-à-vis the adversary’s (including those of its allies). Inaccurate assessments could lead to huge setbacks, forcing a hard reset of politico-military goals. “Wars are initiated based on a political aim, but the unpredictability of conflict often leads to the purpose not being immediately or wholly achieved. In these circumstances, what constitutes success for both sides can determine the future course of a war”.⁶

- Fourth, Russia has been greatly hampered by technological sanctions. “The United States has led our allies in banning the export of semiconductors to Russia. Since Moscow lacks its own advanced chip manufacturing capacity, without imports the Russian military cannot replenish its precision-guided munitions”.⁷
- India’s imports from Russia could now get delayed. Further, the Indian ‘defence industrial complex’ too will need to secure their hi-tech material supplies, having been tasked with domestic orders and desired defence exports.

Finally, while nations may plan for short and swift wars, once a war begins, its duration cannot be predicted. More so, when both sides here have hardened their stance, desire complete victory and are not prepared to negotiate. “Gen Mark Milley told Congress on Tuesday that he believed the Russia-Ukraine war would be a “very protracted” conflict”.⁸ Hence it will be necessary for any nation with threatened borders to build national resilience in peace which lasts through the conflict. This demands a ‘Whole of Nation’ approach where risks are identified, strategies made and necessary capabilities developed.

The Military Lessons

Drones have played a huge role in the Ukraine War gathering data for assisting operational level assessments to execute tactical kinetic engagements. “Ukraine has made extensive use of drones, from the Turkish-made Bayraktar TB-2 to hobbyist drones supporting civil resistance. [...] Russia appears to have stepped up its efforts, employing systems like the Orlan-10 and the KUB-BLA loitering munition. Drones have been used in a wide variety of roles from carrying out strikes to guiding artillery and recording video that feeds directly into information operations”.⁹ India has aptly developed a vibrant policy to encourage the nascent drone industry. The Armed Forces will need to be innovative in the use of drones, train properly and adapt their application to combat situations. With the proliferation of drones there is a need to take a *de novo* look at the concepts of air superiority and air space management.

The reliance of Russians on artillery is well documented. Once the operations were focussed on Donbas Region, they resorted to attritional warfare in which guns, missiles, and rockets took centre

stage. "Artillery is one of the most important components of Russian operations, and in terms of lethal capabilities it has become Russia's mission-critical force multiplier[...] Russian artillery is generally able to bring accurate artillery fire down on targets 3 to 5 minutes after UAV reconnaissance has identified them, but if a target is identified with EW direction finding, acoustic reconnaissance or counterbattery artillery radar, it will take Russian artillery approximately half an hour to bring inaccurate artillery fire to bear".¹⁰ We may have to reiterate the effective employment and synergy of firepower in our land doctrine.

The Russian cyber operations have often targeted Ukraine's critical infrastructure, independent of their kinetic attacks, but seem to have been blunted due to continuous hardening of cyber defence by US tech companies and military cyber warriors. "Once conflict begins, cyber becomes much less useful. Physical attacks are more disruptive than cyber-attacks".¹¹ Our armed forces, therefore, must secure the portion of cyberspace that they operate in during peace and war.

Information operations have become a key part of war outcomes. "Videos from the battlefield, leaked drone surveillance, and other forms of digital communications have made Russia's invasion of Ukraine the most internet-accessible war in history, turning Twitter, TikTok, and other internet platforms into primary sources of news on the war".¹² The use of internet by Ukraine, enabled in good measure by Space X Star Link terminals, by military and civilians alike has become a huge force-multiplier.

We seem to have reached an inflection point in the traditional domains of warfare wherein each country has to seriously reassess the type of weapon platforms that they need to develop henceforth. "At a conceptual level, the promise of the small-versus-the big, of the modern battlefield, has to be explored by India's military planners. The shifting character of war favouring small platforms over big ones can work in India's favour if we can first decide at the Joint Services doctrinal level, the theory of application of the concept for India's future battlefields".¹³ This aspect demands urgent examination by each of our three Services.

The man behind the machine continues to be the biggest factor in combat. "Another issue which has contributed to Russia's military woes is the low quality of its conscript force. Indeed, Ukraine

has even turned images of Russian POW conscripts being allowed to call their mothers into a weapon in its information warfare”.¹⁴ In our case, it is imperative that new recruits (*Agniveers*) are well and fully trained to ensure success in battle.

The India – China Context

While the Ukraine war has brought war to Europe again, the challenges faced in South Asia, particularly by India, have been frequent and much greater. Dr S Jaishankar, our External Affairs Minister, put it this way, “Ukraine is not a precedent for China; such events have been underway in Asia for the past decade. So, this is a wake-up call for Europe to start looking at Asia. This is a part of the world with unsettled boundaries, terrorism, and continuous challenges to the rules-based order. The rest of the world has to recognise that problems are not going to happen, but that they are happening”.¹⁵

Following the 2020 Eastern Ladakh incident, India and China have maintained considerable armed forces opposite each other, and the situation is volatile and prone to escalation. “India and China failed to make any breakthrough in resolving outstanding issues on the remaining friction points in eastern Ladakh at the 16th round of military talks but agreed to maintain dialogue to arrive at a mutually acceptable resolution at the earliest”.¹⁶ Disengagement has been achieved at Pangong Tso, Galwan and now PP 15, but it seems to be a long journey ahead for any resolution at Depsang and Demchok.

The imbroglio is summed up by Shri Shivshankar Menon, our former National Security Advisor. “Unlike past confrontations and face-offs, the framing of the (India – China 2020 border) crisis by China as a sovereignty dispute — rather than as a border dispute which would be solved by give and take — makes it harder to settle”.¹⁷ Moreover, the issue becomes acute considering that CPEC traverses close to the LAC.

China has a penchant for building a narrative about its belligerent behaviour. This is evident from Gen Wei Fenghe’s statement at the Shangri La Dialogue. “China adopts a military strategy of active defence. China’s military strategy adheres to the principles of defence, self-defence and post-strike response. It stresses that we will not attack unless attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked”.¹⁸ China is likely to keep the LAC

simmering for a long time, not only locking India's military power on its northern borders but also constraining development of maritime capabilities to counter an expanding PLA Navy presence in the IOR. We need to protect our territorial integrity and sovereignty by building a credible deterrence and steadily developing our military capabilities.

In the last decade, China has been testing the waters from time to time. Its recent air violations and provocations for over a month in Eastern Ladakh and movement of research and survey vessel Yuan Wang 5 to Hambantota, have affected Indian security interests adversely. Any increase in such acrimonious behaviour could ensue in the future and will have to be countered firmly.

Chinese scholars mostly view the Ukraine War in the context of the US as an adversary. "The Russia-Ukraine military conflict is another watershed event in the three decades since the end of the Cold War, in terms of the international security order, the major power dynamics and world economic development".¹⁹ The Chinese have surely drawn important lessons from the war. Their recent belligerence against Taiwan is part of hybrid warfare arising out of concerns about their 'One China' policy, perhaps encouraged by US ambiguity to get involved at this stage.

Doklam and Galwan incidents appear to have galvanised the Chinese to rapidly build up their military infrastructure on our northern borders. "Within its western regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, China is constructing and upgrading dozens of airports and heliports — a large majority of which are military or dual-use facilities. Additionally, China is supplementing its airpower expansion with new roads, rail, and other infrastructure that are upgrading the PLA's logistics capabilities and enabling more rapid movement of troops, weaponry, and equipment".²⁰ Further, a number of training exercises and live fire drills are happening to upgrade PLA combat skills opposite us. This portends military coercion in the future which could escalate into a full-fledged conflict.

All the while, it would be prudent to remain abreast of threats emerging out of Sino-Pak collusion, as envisaged by Sardar Patel over seven decades ago. "While our western and non-western threat to security is still as prominent as before, a new threat has developed from the north and north-east. Thus, for the first time,

after centuries, India's defence has to concentrate itself on two fronts simultaneously".²¹ This implies the need to use leverage with our strategic partners and ensure that Pakistan does not open another front in the event where China forces us into a conflict.

A Comprehensive View

The context in which the Ukraine War is being fought happens to be quite different from the situation obtaining in case of the India-China context. Yet, there is much to learn from this modern war to strengthen our deterrence and prevent any conflict on the northern borders. Some of the lessons learned, enumerated earlier, have already begun to be absorbed by the armed forces. In addition, certain other measures will help to build national security comprehensively.

The articulation of a National Security Strategy by a confident nation deserves the utmost attention, wherein a 'Whole of Nation' approach will end in success. It should address threats that include low intensity conflict, hybrid war and conventional war under a nuclear backdrop. Escalation dynamics will have to be thought through. This will galvanise all stakeholders, i.e., government and private sectors apart from civil society in contributing positively towards national security.

The country's resilience needs to be geared up meaningfully for the challenges ahead well in time. Peace-time efforts in strengthening our food, energy, material and technological stocks, and their supply chains then becomes crucial. It will greatly help the nation to absorb, adapt and respond to risks and setbacks that they would deal with in any conflict.

The armed forces are the primary instrument available to be employed in any war. Therefore, their combat edge has to be kept sharp. In our case, no stone should be left unturned in equipping and arming them within the timeframes that we envisage a conflict to take place. This also means enhancing defence budgets to look after our continental and maritime ambitions. *Atmanirbhar Bharat* is a good step in building defence self-reliance which can be sufficiently augmented if we technologically collaborate with friendly countries.

For the armed forces, jointmanship and integration is a sine qua non for victory in a conflict. The urgent appointment of the CDS, therefore, becomes vital. A joint doctrine, integrated capability development and an overarching tri-services training philosophy will then need serious deliberation. The new domains of cyber, space and electromagnetic spectrum need to be given greater impetus if we are to fight successfully in a multi-domain environment.

Conclusion

The Ukraine War has created an inflection point in global geopolitics. Most nations have to pick sides. India has clearly articulated its stance on the war which appears to be resonating well with most nations. A number of lessons are being learned at various levels of conflict and combat management. This conventional war was neither anticipated nor does it appear near any resolution soon. National security strategies of many nations are consequently being revised. China has been posing a grave threat to India over the last two years. Its belligerent behaviour and contentious build up towards our northern borders forebode a conflict. Building a credible deterrence against her is imperative. It thus becomes essential to invest in developing visible capabilities now rather than face an adverse situation arising due to their dearth. The takeaways from the Ukraine war and their swift implementation will go a long way in strengthening our nation and the armed forces, should we be pushed into any conflict.

Endnotes

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