

Hybrid Warfare Division: An Urgent Operational Requirement for India

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Abstract

Hybrid and asymmetric warfare are an everyday war that developing countries are facing in a military and economic competitive environment. It is difficult to categorise hybrid war as military or quasi military challenge but it has elements of military and non-military domains. This article examines why Hybrid Warfare is a necessity for India and therefore development of hybrid warfare capabilities is imperative because, the state may be under attack but unaware of who is attacking, what is he attacking and how is he attacking. To react to such a threat, where lines of peace and war are blurred, India must build hybrid warfare capabilities for dynamic response to ambiguous and alternative wars. The threat may be kinetic, non-kinetic, political, cyber, transnational organised crime, global terrorism, asymmetric conflict, threat to resources, to diaspora and to key infrastructure. Hybrid war cannot be fought in silos; it requires integration of all elements of hybrid war for offensive and defensive operations. Therefore, India needs to develop asymmetric edge and build capabilities to fight ambiguous and amorphous adversaries by synergised application of intelligence, information, cyber, electronic, conventional and unconventional means. For this India requires a new organisation for Hybrid War, a Hybrid Warfare Division, the article brings out similar models in some countries which have gone in for it and thereafter gives a suggested organisation

and capability development framework for this division.

Introduction

Lieutenant General Ivan Jones of British Army said that, “The character of warfare continues to change as the boundaries between conventional and unconventional warfare become increasingly blurred”.¹ Hybrid and asymmetric warfare is an everyday war that developing countries are facing in a military and economic competitive environment. A recent RAND Corporation funded study states that while the term hybrid warfare has no consistent definition, it generally refers to “deniable and covert actions, supported by the threat or use of conventional and/or nuclear forces, to influence the domestic politics of target countries”.² Another definition says, hybrid warfare is broadly characterised by “a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures employed in a highly integrated design”.³ It is difficult to categorise hybrid war as military or quasi military challenge but it has elements of military and non-military domains. In fact, hybrid warfare is not a tactical or strategic challenge; it is a political issue.⁴ It threatens political stability of the state and creates fault-lines among the institutions of governance and the people that can be exploited by the adversaries. Therefore, it is not only important to defend physical frontiers but also cyber, cognitive and political frontiers.

Hybrid Warfare Capabilities: A Necessity for India

In the current milieu, development of hybrid warfare capabilities is imperative because, the state may be under attack but unaware of who is attacking, what is he attacking and how is he attacking. To react to such a threat, where lines of peace and war are blurred, India must build hybrid warfare capabilities for dynamic response to ambiguous and alternative wars. The threat may be kinetic, non-kinetic, political, cyber, transnational organised crime, global terrorism, asymmetric conflict, threat to resources, diaspora and key infrastructure. India’s core

interests are now spread across many continents and their security cannot be outsourced entirely to the host nations. There are state and non-state actors that are seen to be colluding with inimical forces to compromise and harm the interests of India globally, regionally and internally. The possibilities of certain states and non-state actors colluding to conduct operations against India are far higher today than it was a decade earlier. Direct involvement of military to protect national interests, and its diaspora, in a foreign country is neither plausible nor a good idea to pursue, thus hybrid warfare capability development assumes significance. Hybrid warfare capabilities are essential to create options to deal with unforeseen and adverse events that may threaten vital national interests within or beyond territorial boundaries of India. These capabilities may be required to create conditions to secure diaspora and even assist in release of hostages in a conflict or a situation like Syria and Iraq where Indian citizens were held hostage and later killed. Targeting of inimical forces to deter non-state actors is also one of the capabilities that India must possess. Moreover, it provides deniability and allows a state to maintain their presence in the target country covertly.

The conflict in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is slowly assuming the proportion of hybrid war; however, India's response has been by and large conventional in nature. Merging Pakistan Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (POJK) with India appears militarily impractical since operations in the mountains are prolonged and attrition is too high to sustain. The only possibility to liberate POJK and merge it with India is through hybrid warfare capabilities, to soften up the opposition and create conditions to employ conventional capabilities at a later stage if situation so warrants. The war for integration of POJK has to be fought from across the Line of Control (LOC) and Kashmir valley. There is a lesson for India from Russia's Crimea operation that is not outright conventional military operation but a typical hybrid or irregular war that ultimately led to securing Russian interests in the Black Sea.

Hybrid war cannot be fought in silos; it requires integration of all elements of hybrid war for offensive and defensive

operations. Therefore, India needs to develop an asymmetric edge and build capabilities to fight ambiguous and amorphous adversaries by synergised application of intelligence, information, cyber, electronic, conventional and unconventional means.

Hybrid Warfare Division for Deep Operational Capabilities

Hybrid War is a non-standard, fluid and complex warfare where multiple domains are applied in a synergised and non-linear manner. Hybrid Warfare (HW) is a military strategy that blends conventional warfare, irregular warfare, cyber warfare and subversion, and blurs the formal distinction between war and peace.⁵ Such a complex warfare requires a compact military structure to develop ethos, dogma, discipline, secrecy and military routine to develop skills and a credo to execute this new form of “alternative war”. Confidentiality of such operations is paramount since it can create diplomatic, strategic and political complications for a nation. The entire operation can get compromised if security is breached. Thus, it is high time India creates hybrid warfare division to begin with, and later the scope can be enlarged to develop a hybrid war corps.

There are numerous models that have been adopted by various countries across the globe. China’s information and three warfare’s are the main pillars of unrestricted warfare controlled by Peoples Liberation Army’s (PLA) Strategic Support Force (SSF). SSF appears to be a unique organisation responsible for joint mission of supporting all services with its space, cyber, and electronic warfare capabilities.⁶ Though Russian military structure is ambiguous and unclear about command and control of hybrid war; however, it is under direct control of Russian Defence Ministry under political supervision of the President. Similarly, now United Kingdom is in the process of creating hybrid warfare division under the military for controlled response. It needs to be understood that hybrid war is a prolonged conflict that undermines institutions and could escalate into conventional war as well. The domains of hybrid war can spill over to kinetic and non-kinetic, traditional and non-traditional and contact and non-contact war. This is the reason why most countries have placed hybrid warfare capabilities

under military control with political supervision. Moreover, since it deals with external adversaries, it falls in the ambit of military engagement for offensive and defensive operations.

India lacks deep operations capabilities and Pakistan has taken the advantage of this void to continuously engage India in cross border terrorism. Had Pakistan been made to pay the cost of this irregular war, it would not have indulged in cross border terrorism against India. In the absence of hybrid warfare capabilities, India is targeting only the arrows and not the archer. The capability to target the archer will only come if India develops deep operations capabilities to engage with state, society and infrastructure simultaneously. Hybrid war requires fusion of civilian and military components of hybrid war under one structure for synergised application. The fragmented approach is primarily due to the fact that there is no formal structure of merging the civilian sphere with the military.⁷ Therefore, this void can be filled by a hybrid warfare division.

Government of India (GoI) has created the Defence Cyber Agency (DCA), the Defence Space Agency (DSA), and the Armed Forces Special Operations Division (AFSOD). The question is, will the AFSOD, DSA and DCA meet the challenge of fighting lethal hybrid war with the current structure? The answer is that wars are not fought in silos; wars are fought by integrating capabilities for a holistic response under single operational command authority. Democratic distribution may be a good idea to give equal representation to all stake holders but wars are fought and won by military ethos, discipline and hierarchical structures and not by agencies, departments or corporations. Ultimately, the real potential of these agencies can be optimally exploited when these agencies are integrated and employed in a synergised manner. The agencies can make policies; coordinate activities of respective constituents; but employment of holistic capabilities to fight a war requires a formal military structure.

The current structures created by the government may be a good beginning but certainly fall short to fight hybrid, grey zone and asymmetric wars. The structures must be so designed that they can plug and play during conventional or sub-

conventional conflicts. Moreover, engagement of military in the next decade appears to be more in hybrid domain than conventional domain. Can war be fought by agencies, especially hybrid war, where all elements are so intimately integrated at execution level, where conventional and unconventional means operate at the same level, and in the same battle space, with diverse objectives? At what level the three agencies come together to fight hybrid threat and who will be the task force commander to fight this everyday war remains unanswered because India is yet to develop doctrine, concept of operations and structure of hybrid war? Will the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) or Deputy CDS act as force commander and inter-agency coordinator for every-day operations, where the adversary is skilled to employ cyber, space and irregular forces through an integrated military command and control structure? Therefore, hybrid warfare division could possibly be a platform under which elements of these agencies can be employed in any future conflict. The mandate of fighting external adversaries, traditional and non-traditional, rests with the armed forces and it must be applied even to cyber, information and irregular warfare. Indian military must develop this capability before it becomes too late to catch up.

The pre-requisite for multi domain and cross domain operations is a structure where various components of hybrid warfare can plug and play. It is essential because each of the components is required to have adequate operational understanding, interoperability and established protocols for integrated operations. This can only be achieved when these elements train together under a single commander to execute operational plans. Creation of military structures to fight hybrid wars assume greater significance especially when 'Hybrid Warfare campaigns' tend to be long term, reflecting that states are living in a period of persistent competition, confrontation and sometimes conflict.⁸

Role of Hybrid Warfare Division

The hybrid warfare division should be operating "above and below the threshold of conventional conflict".⁹ The focus of hybrid warfare division should be on cyber, counter-

propaganda, intelligence gathering and electronic warfare to meet the needs in an arena where hostile states and transnational and local terror groups have been engaged in highly damaging asymmetric campaigns, often with the use of social media¹⁰ and radicalisation. In addition, hybrid warfare division should also act as vanguard for expeditionary forces for out of area contingency operations to protect diaspora, national interests beyond territorial boundaries, and disaster relief operations. Hybrid warfare division should be able to employ cyber, electronic warfare, information operations and unconventional warfare to secure vital national interests. It should also develop capabilities for hostage rescue, joint operations with foreign armed forces against state sponsored non-state actors in third country and to create safe havens till process of evacuation of Indian diaspora trapped in a conflict zone commences. This is also a platform where no-contact war, political war and information dominance operations can be executed to either weaken and demoralise an adversary to create controlled chaos¹¹ or create conditions for uprising against rogue state/agencies.

India's Options

Fighting a hybrid war requires research, information, communications, and integration of resources under a defined military authority. If such complex warfare lacks direction, control and focus, it can be chaotic and if not dealt professionally, it can become a major challenge to the national security. This form of combat requires some degree of politico-military coordination because such warfare can break out unexpectedly during ostensibly peaceful circumstances.¹² There is also a persistent danger of some elements (irregular) suddenly shifting alliances to obtain respective goals. Therefore, "Alternative Wars and Linear Conflicts" require a very robust command and control structures and well defined limit of operations to avoid over exposure and compromise of national interests. Thus, deniability and confidentiality is imperative to ensure effectiveness.

Pakistan has achieved greater degree of expertise and success in waging asymmetric/hybrid war against India and

Indian response to this 'Alternative War' has been, by and large, conventional in nature. Clausewitz had said, "Every age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions". Therefore, each form of warfare requires different set of strategy and structure. Employment of conventional forces to fight hybrid war is the absence of strategy, uneconomic and unimaginative use of force. In view of the foregoing, there is a need for India to create a Hybrid War or Alternative War Division.

To begin with, the division should possess both offensive and defensive capabilities. The elements of the division should be able to operate covertly in areas where vital national interests are consistently threatened. The division should have three brigades, two for offensive and defensive operations consisting of cyber, electronic, information, space, communication, Special Forces elements, psychological warfare cell, intelligence and surveillance elements along with air, naval and logistic components. The deployment of these assets would require expertise on terrain, culture, language and history, thus, 'one for all and all for one' will not succeed. Hence, these brigades should be region specific. The third brigade should be responsible for "operational research and support". The operational research and support brigade should be working out psychological war themes, intelligence collection on culture, fault-lines in target areas, cyber loop holes to generate attack on adversaries and be an Artificial Intelligence (AI) hub and the custodian of operational data. In addition, it should also be responsible for impact assessment of operations, operational research and net assessment of future areas of operations. The entire structure should be confidential in nature and should be tasked by politico-military authority. The structure should be agile and adaptive enough to undertake offensive and defensive hybrid war operations during peace and war. The organisation should be resilient enough to ensure plug and play by merging the civilian spheres with the military components.

Command and Control

There is no doubt that the entire operations must have politico-military oversight. However, operations would require clear distinction between the strategic and tactical levels of control. At the strategic level, actions would be largely formulation of strategy and plans. The agencies of space, cyber, Special Forces Division and Alternative War Cell at the CDS office should be responsible for formulation of policies, strategies and operational plans. The tactical level, i.e. running hybrid war and counter-hybrid war campaigns and operations on a daily basis, should be the task that needs to be delegated to the divisional commander. In fact, all the three newly created agencies (cyber, space and Special Forces Division) and hybrid warfare division should be placed under a three star military commander who could be designated as a Commander in Chief (C-in-C). This Force Headquarter could be designated as "Information and Dynamic Support Force". The C-in-C, in turn, should report to the CDS/Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that hybrid threat is here to stay, and it will become more lethal in the ensuing future. India is already delayed in building capabilities to fight and counter hybrid war. It is high time a formal structure in the form of Hybrid Warfare Division is put in place to counter hybrid and asymmetric threat from China and Pakistan. The urgency is to formalise strategy, doctrine, structure, training needs and human resource from the three Services and experts from the fields of space, cyber and intelligence agencies. Experts from strategic communications and counter-propaganda should also be part of this organisation, both at strategic and at tactical level. This vital war waging capability cannot be delayed or deferred further. It will have serious consequences if such a capability is not put in place by India in the immediate future.

Endnotes

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