

# Short Wars - Creating Tomorrow’s Reality

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## Introduction

Conventional wars have historically been resorted to with the intention of being kept short. Military history proves that as often as not, this is not how wars have turned out. The expectation that tomorrow’s wars will be short arises from the transition of South Asia into the Nuclear Age. However, if tomorrow’s wars are to be short, two aspects will need to be kept in mind. The first is regards the elements which keep conflict duration limited, and, secondly, are the factors that militate against this.

Most studies on Limited War suggest a deliberate limitation to politico-strategic aims, geographic spread, weapons and forces involved. Keeping conflict ‘limited’ is easier said on account of factors that stoke the conflict spiral. This article dwells on the drivers of conflict, through a look at military history and by analysing the current strategic reality in South Asia. The concluding recommendations are for working on the pre-requisites of a Short War during peace and in future conflict; these being, paradoxically, moderation of national passions, war aims and military means.

## The lessons of military history

The key impetus to conflict initiation has been the expectation of victory. Strategic sense decrees that victory be obtained at the earliest and at minimum cost and risk. Political masters considering war initiation in an inter-state setting have historically been persuaded of war as an option only in case of a short duration war. Other than the nuclear factor, factors that lend themselves to Short Wars have been present earlier. These include the role of international organisations; international opinion and pressures; tacit understanding between adversaries; sensitivity of leaderships to the underside of conflict, such as escalation and extension; and finite military capabilities at the outset of war. But these have not proven consistently effective in keeping wars short. Recourse to military history would help identify factors that bring about a reality contrary to expectation.

A review of military history reveals that most wars in the modern age dating to the Napoleonic Wars have been long. Napoleon spent the better part of two decades at war prior to meeting his Waterloo. The inspired manoeuvres of the revolutionary French armies led to his opponents joining in concert, thereby prolonging the war<sup>1</sup>. The American civil war is taken as the first war in which modern military systems, weapons and tactics made their rudimentary appearance. It was a long war with Lincoln preserving the Union through a time-consuming strategy of bringing the industrial might of the North to bear.

The relatively brief campaigns of the Bismarck-Moltke era were on account of Prussia having perfected the general staff system. Such momentary asymmetry can bring about quicker victory; however, German triumph led to French revanchism culminating in the Great War<sup>2</sup>. The First World War was embarked on by all sides with the expectation that, troops would be home for Christmas<sup>3</sup>. The static front owed to Moltke the Younger losing his nerve in carrying through the Schlieffen plan, evidence that the art in war can confound any science in it.

The limitations of operational brilliance in the industrial age are revealed once again in the next war. Blitzkrieg heralded joint-manship of a high order that won campaigns, but could not withstand the test of war in the industrial age. Industrial capacity in case of Albert Speer’s Germany was not of the order required to impose Hitler’s will<sup>4</sup>. Likewise in the East, Admiral Yamamoto, who struck at Pearl Harbor, is quoted as saying: “In the first six to twelve months of a war with the US and Great Britain, I will run wild and win victory upon victory. But then, if war continues after that, I have no expectation of success.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the Total War doctrine of ‘unconditional surrender’ ensured a prolonged contest eventuating in the nuclear age.

The nearly half-century long Cold War, curiously dubbed ‘the long peace’,<sup>6</sup> witnessed the Superpowers contending through proxies in the Third World, with individual conflicts lasting for decades. The three year long Korean War, energised ‘Limited War’ and escalation control theories.<sup>7</sup> The wars of colonial liberation were also long duration ones in Africa and South East Asia. The Vietnam War, sustained in the belief that incremental application of force would ensure its early conclusion, was a decade long. So was the Afghan war. In the post Cold War era, wars, both conventional and sub-conventional, have largely been of long duration, be they in central Africa, the Balkans and, indeed, counter intuitively, the Gulf. The Iran-Iraq War that consumed half a million lives lasted seven years, being fuelled by all the Great Powers interested in its extension for strategic and commercial reasons.

The two Iraq Wars are taken as Short Wars and seen as heralding wars of the future. However, this case is based on the interim between the two Gulf Wars being taken as a period of ‘peace’- an arguable proposition in face of a decade long blockade, sanctions, air space restrictions and episodic intervention using missiles and proxies leading up to an assessed toll of half-a-million.<sup>8</sup> Besides, the second Iraq War has self-evidently not quite ended. The latest Israeli month-long incursion into Lebanon against the Hezbollah was a short foray. That it cost the Army chief, General Dan Halutz, his job, indicates the limitations of Short Wars in gaining war aims.<sup>9</sup> The only gain has been avoidance of the earlier outcome of intervention under Begin and Sharon of 1982; but the jury is still out as to whether Israel is more secure today on account of this military self assertion.

From the foregoing brief survey, certain lessons help identify the drivers of conflict. The first is that, aims that do not brook compromise, such as ‘unconditional surrender’, ending secession and regime change, presage a long haul. Keeping aims limited through a conflict is at best a difficult proposition. Second, from Napoleon through Guderian to Petraeus, the lesson is that operational level advantages cannot make up for strategic shortcomings. Thirdly, in the Age of Nationalism, political forces in society push for longer wars, thereby constraining autonomy of decision makers and impacting strategic rationality. Fourth, the form of the conflict embarked on could change, such as from conventional to sub-conventional. This would require viewing the conflict as one and its duration as a continuum. Periods of ‘phony war’, howsoever normalised in consciousness and discourse, also require being included as periods of conflict.

Next, there is no guarantee that external interests would converge to end conflict. International organisations, including the UN, are vulnerable to manipulation by the Great Powers; therefore any expectations of these would have to be suitably tempered. Lastly, the ‘stability-instability’ paradox is permissive of long duration LIC through which strategic aims other than the most desirable one of durable peace can be materialised.<sup>10</sup> By this yardstick, even a conventional war can also be chanced in the stability afforded by nuclear deterrence, as Pakistani planners persuaded themselves to believe in the run up to the Kargil intrusion.

## The sub-continental experience

An analysis of conflicts in South Asia does not unambiguously reveal an inherent propensity towards limitation from which it can be confidently extrapolated that wars of the future will be short. The Sino-Indian border war of 1962 was short, less due to the unilateral ceasefire by China than to India refraining from joining the contest in earnest. It need not have been so, especially as Western aid was requisitioned. The War was kept short by Pandit Nehru taking a considered political decision on not displacing India’s development trajectory, even if non-alignment suffered a momentary eclipse.

Earlier Indo-Pak wars have been taken as relatively gentlemanly affairs owing to shared legacy. Of the wars against Pakistan, the first was a long duration one lasting over a year. Marshal of the Air Force in hindsight reflects that the 1965 War ended prematurely as the full weight of air power could not be brought to bear.<sup>11</sup> It was restricted to the three weeks of intensive fighting. However, in case the Kutch incident of April, Operation Gibraltar of August, and subsequent violations of the ceasefire till the Tashkent Agreement of the subsequent January are included, then the conflict duration qualifies as long.

Likewise, the duration of the 1971 War need not be restricted to the two week ‘lightening campaign’. It should instead be dated to April that year when Sam Bahadur famously withstood political pressure for an early campaign. The Mukti Bahini period, migration of 10 million people, killings of hundreds of thousands within East Bengal and local border violations can be subsumed in the period of conflict.<sup>12</sup> Even the short campaign was fortuitous, in that, the view of Generals Jacob, Nagra, Sagat Singh and Inder Gill of going for Dacca prevailed in the last stages of run up to war, as against the original intent of salami slicing and time consuming capture of towns enroute’.<sup>13</sup>

The Kargil War, called a ‘short, sharp war’ by the Kargil Review Committee, is usually taken as forerunner of short duration wars of the future fought in the nuclear backdrop. According to the suspect Pakistani perspective,<sup>14</sup> a long campaign of attrition was preempted through US intervention. President Musharraf’s claims in his autobiography have been credibly disputed on this score by former Chief, General VP Malik.<sup>15</sup> However, a time-continuum can be discerned with Low Intensity Conflict across the Line of Control abutting either end of the mid-intensity Kargil Conflict. Conflating the two kinds of conflict into one would make the conflict a long duration one and part of the wider proxy war.

The lesson to be drawn is that India’s conflicts, like conflicts elsewhere, have an equal, if not greater chance, to be of long duration rather than short. Political heads took decisions to cease the conflict at a great personal and political cost on both sides of the border. The development of rival nationalisms and resulting politicisation of issues since, would impinge on future ease of settlement of issues. Secondly, these wars have not always yielded a meaningful result in terms of settlement of issues. A Short War in the future may also leave core issues unaddressed, begging the question of its utility. The ‘push’ for resolving issues militarily ‘once and for all’ may then make an appearance. Precautions require to be built into the preparation for and conduct of war to ensure a Short War.

## An analysis of the present

Understandably, none of India’s sub-conventional conflicts have been short duration ones: Operation Pawan, Operation Rakshak, Operation Rhino and the LIC in Siachen.<sup>16</sup> This trend is likely to persist into the future. To escape this strategic cul-de-sac, Short War thinking has arisen in which space in the conflict spectrum can be opened up for a conventional ‘Limited War’, with limitation being exercised in duration as against other parameters as extent of theater of engagement, weaponry used and targets engaged.

The tendency of conflict towards escalation, leading up to the ‘ideal’ state of Absolute War, has been conceptualised by Clausewitz in his discussion of the reciprocal actions between opponents.<sup>17</sup> This tendency is accentuated by nationalism, intrinsic to modern nation states, that yields ground to hyper nationalism in times of crisis. Historical memories also impact the creation of the ‘Other’, resulting in stereotyping and dehumanisation of the opponent. This tendency can be exploited by fringe political formations to tie down the government to less palatable options. These factors conspire to dispel rationality.

The expectation that external powers, valuing stability and fearful of the nuclear genie, would intervene early for conflict termination is also shaky. Pakistan has persistently defended its untenable position on Kashmir in defiance even of the US. India mobilised its troops in response to the Parliament attack irrespective of the effect on the US led GWOT. The impact of external pressure is limited to what states are willing to tolerate. International organisations also have their own limitations, hidden agendas and a case history of limited efficacy in sub-continental disputes.

Lastly, a look at the nuclear question on conflict duration is in order. General VP Malik has it that there exists a window in the conflict spectrum below the nuclear threshold for conventional operations.<sup>18</sup> This is elastic so long as the perceived ‘nuclear reaction threshold’ is not pushed. It is assessed that a threat to the threshold is more likely in a longer war in which comprehensive national power is brought to bear. However, the vulnerable state is also in a position to mobilise its national resources so as to preclude a lowering of the threshold. Against extant wisdom, it can be posited that a high intensity war, intended as a short one at the outset, poses the threat of stampeding the vulnerable side into premature nuclearisation to redress some or other emergent asymmetry. Therefore, the argument, based on the existence of a nuclear backdrop, is not entirely persuasive.

War termination would be dependent on like-mindedness of the adversary. In the Indo-Pakistani context, this may not be possible until Pakistan is able to pull off some gains either tangibly or psychologically. Its Army would require some face-saving action for holding onto power post-conflict within Pakistani political structure. This would likely result in Pakistan extending the war till its purposes - not amounting to ‘winning’ the war, but merely preserving itself from ‘losing’ abjectly - are achieved. Such a long war is in Pakistani interests for it will enable resort to external balancing and ‘extended depth’. Besides, it may ‘do an Iraq’ on an advancing India. In the event, India may end up with a partner unwilling to Tango.

India, on its part, would not like to be left strategically exposed lest a Short War not serve up its original aims. In trying to pull off a politically viable, strategically sustainable and militarily ‘decisive’ outcome, it may over-extend. Mission creep’ and ‘surge’ would then transpire, with uncertain outcome. Given the move of the discourse from Limited War<sup>19</sup> to Short War,<sup>20</sup> the premium on duration would necessitate a corresponding compensation through leveraging national and military power along other dimensions and levels in which India would be deemed to enjoy escalation dominance. This would compromise the resulting peace in leaving a bitter aftermath and an unrequited enemy.

## Concluding reflections

Short Wars are desirable as against long duration wars, in that they imply limited war aims; keep damage limited comparatively; do not deflect the national economy overly; do not providing enough time for passions to overtake rationality; and, resultantly, do not permit these to impinge unreasonably any future peace settlement. However, as seen here, the term Short War verges on an oxymoron. Therefore, measures need to be identified and implemented to bring about such an outcome. A few pointers to this end are recommended in conclusion.

At the political level, firstly, there requires to be a political consensus on the requirement, nature and aims of the war embarked on. In case this is not there, then self-interested political elements could whip up public passions forcing the leadership in unpredictable ways. Secondly, demonisation resorted to generally in peace needs to be tempered to the extent of permitting the adversary a locus standi on a vexed issue. This would enable easier assimilation by the polity and populace of the necessity for early war termination through compromise on mutually agreed terms.

On the military level, the first Principle of War, namely, ‘selection and maintenance of aim’ requires constant foregrounding. Second, the threat of escalation would require monitoring, particularly as the demonstration a capacity for ‘escalation dominance’, so as to influence enemy thinking towards conflict termination, may go awry. Thirdly, it must be borne in mind that operational brilliance may beget victory, but, paradoxically, victory is not usually a necessary and sufficient condition for subsequent peace. Lastly, the military would require conditioning to a half-fought war. Air power theory of ‘infrastructure busting’; land warfare concept of ‘decisive victory’; and the naval apprehension of ‘sitting out the war’ may require muting.

War is the least predictable social activity and the least controllable political act, and on outbreak is liable to truncate rational aims and pious intentions. Short Wars have to be brought about by creating the context and circumstance conducive to early war termination; best achieved, ironically, through war aims that belie the necessity of war. The purpose of military power in our context today is not to compel the enemy to one’s purpose; but to nudge the enemy to a mutually beneficial end.

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