Leadership Challenges in the Information Age
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Introduction

Warfare is mutating. While conventional state-on-state conflict is not passé, future conflict will see increasing interventions by non-state actors, acting independently or supported by a state to achieve specific objectives. As we move into the information age, the future will bring forth fresh challenges in confronting a variety of military threats in an increasingly asymmetric world, with all its attending complexities. Leadership, as always will play a critical role in determining force effectiveness, but leaders will increasingly be confronted by challenges based on a changing environment. They would need to be trained and prepared accordingly.

The Environment

In their monumental work, 'War and Anti War', Alvin and Heidi Toffler posit a linkage with the stages of development of a society and the manner in which such societies conduct wars.1 As we move into the information age, greater emphasis will keep being placed on information as a weapon system and its impact on the environment of operations will have increasing relevance. Allied with this is the rapid pace at which technological advancements are taking place, enabling lethal engagement of targets at long ranges with precision, giving rise to the concept of network centric warfare (NCW). Applications of NCW in some form are visible in the conflicts presently taking place in Afghanistan and in the Levant. However, networks simply alter the character of warfare; they do not change its fundamental nature.2 Direct and indirect engagements will continue to exist but the network will enable collaborative engagements in which the sensor is not always identical to the shooter. Networks thus will remain additive and will not substitute for the fundamentals of warfare.

The additive advantage of networks however, is significant as combatants in conflict, both now and in the future, besides having greater battlefield awareness, will also possess the means to deliver precision guided munitions at designated targets. Survival of the agile will thus be a key feature of future conflict and will largely depend both on the quality of decision making as well as the speed at which decisions are taken. In his book, The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty first Century,3 Thomas PM Barnett observes that the future is not so much about dealing with the biggest threat in the environment but in dealing with the environment of threats. In this process, societies which are knowledge driven will have the edge as power shifts to knowledge based real time actors.

As we move towards self-synchronisation of forces, we may well be looking at a future in which decision making and action will take place at a far quicker pace than hitherto thought possible. Greater information availability comes with its own set of dilemmas in the form 'information overload'. Analysis capability too is not endless and will increasingly be put under severe strain. The desire to have maximum inputs for decision making is a tempting proposition but will have to be tempered with the necessity of giving a decision in time. As time pressures become more acute we may well end up with 'information decoherence'. We would also have to contend with the problem of 'attention fragmentation'.4 Military leaders, like leaders in all walks of life need uninterrupted time to synthesise information from many different sources, reflect on its implications, apply judgment, and arrive at good decisions. The capacity and capability of commanders to take appropriate decisions in a timely manner will hence be a key attribute for the leaders of tomorrow.

The Leadership Challenge

Technology, while continuing to have great significance, cannot by itself provide solutions to all strategic and operational challenges. Success will, more often than not, be a result of the interaction between humans and technology. Leadership at the higher level would need an understanding and development of a broader worldview on the changes taking place in the domestic and international environment. While using the tools of technology, the approach to war fighting would need to be constantly refined, expanded and improved. This evolution is a function of strategic leadership. Failure to evolve could well lead to our forces being well prepared for the previous war, but hopelessly incapable of fighting future conflict.

In the Armed Forces, while the tactical level leadership remains outstanding, the same cannot be said of the leadership at the operational and strategic levels, which remains tactical in its orientation and approach. The leadership challenge lies in creating an environment in which leaders with a strategic bent of mind will emerge. Skill sets required for strategic leadership would include facets like challenging the status quo, anticipating the challenges of a changing environment, interpreting multiple information flows, decisiveness and a focus on continuous learning.5 The information age demands leaders who can tolerate ambiguity, adapt to changing conditions and make decisions rapidly under stress. They should also have skills that are interpersonal, conceptual, technical, and tactical.

Culture, too, impacts on the evolution of leaders. By definition, culture is a 'repertoire of socially transmitted and intra-generationally generated ideas about how to live and make judgements, both in general terms and in regard to specific domains of life'.6 Social and political theorists have postulated that culture exerts a decisive influence on a people's economic and political development. As an example, socialist economies produce a cultural milieu in which anti-market, anti-profit schooling and insider privilege have planted and frozen anti-entrepreneurial attitudes. People thus fear the uncertainties of the market and yearn for the safe tedium of state employment. Or they yearn for equality in poverty, a common feature of peasant cultures around the world.7 For the Indian Armed Forces, the cultural milieu of the country will impact on the leadership traits of its officers. Here, let us examine the role of the family and of society.

The central role of family in Indian society establishes clear hierarchical relationships within the family and within society with close family ties often leading to nepotism. As the military is drawn from society, people joining the forces come with ingrained attitudes; many people thus do not view nepotism as a serious ethical aberration. Tendencies towards nepotism are transferred over time to the strong institutional bonding in the Army based on arm

and service affiliations, regimental loyalties, school ties et al. While many frown at such behaviour, the numbers who would desist from taking advantage of such bonding to further their self-interest dwindles to a mere handful. This leads to some seeking postings under a 'known' superior with the possibility of earning reports based on factors other than merit and to favourable considerations in selections for promotions. The cycle is self-perpetuating and leads over time to increasing number of mediocre officers occupying senior positions in the military hierarchy.

Culture affects in other ways too. Unlike the West where children are encouraged to think and act independently, the Indian family structure promotes deference to the head of the family for even mundane decisions. This translates into deference to superior authority whether in the family or at school and later in life as adult wherein even life choices are dictated by the desires and preferences of the elders. The custom of touching the feet of relatives and those in positions of authority is a direct outcome of such cultural constructs. Our schools also promote such a culture. Erroneous equation of such deference with respect and honour, results in a loss of individuality and leads to sycophancy, servility and obsequiousness.

The hierarchical decision making structure of the Armed Forces also tends towards attitudes of unilateralism and could preclude consultative mechanisms. In progressive cultures, authority tends towards dispersion and horizontality whereas in static cultures authority is concentrated in vertical silos.[8] This limits the narrative to individual views being the dominant input in the decision making process. Ingrained cultural attributes militate against effective decision-making and dilute leadership traits. The phenomenon of every decision being vetted at higher and higher levels of command is fallout of such cultural attributes. This leads at times to ridiculous situations where decisions, which should rightly be taken at the level of colonel, find their way to three star generals for approval. Play safe attitudes kill the leadership spirit, lead towards indecisiveness, promote mediocrity and sycophancy and hence need to be countered with an alternate narrative. There is thus a need to promote a counter culture within the military, if desired leadership attributes are to be developed.

The rise of Generation C will increasingly impact the environment and pose challenges to contemporary and future leadership. This is the generation which is connected, communicating, content-centric, computerised, community oriented, always clicking – hence the name. In India, this generation, born after 1990, for the most part comes from an urban or suburban background. It is from this base that the future leadership of India's Armed Forces will be drawn. This generation has grown up with the internet and mobile communications and is very familiar with technology. They will thus have an enormous impact on the way the Armed Forces function, as within a decade, they will form the core of its junior and middle level leadership.[9]

As we move towards greater digitisation in the forces, the increasing numbers of Generation C in leadership roles will start playing a more dominant role in military affairs. This will impact on the way information is transmitted and consumed. The linear set ups which are an essential ingredient of hierarchical systems will get more and more diffused as non linear information flows increase. Security issues arising from the same would need to be addressed. More importantly, we will increasingly witness a generation gap in the way this set of Generation C leaders function in relation to the rest. While the upper age limit of the digitally literate older generation will rise, they will remain far behind the junior and middle rung leadership dominated by Generation C in their digital behaviour and in terms of their ability to absorb, assimilate and employ technological tools.[10]

Strategy for Change

The start point for promoting an alternate culture to nurture leaders of substance must begin at the roots. Here, we need to look firstly at the selection system where the Services Selection Boards (SSB) will be the lead players and then at our training academies – the National Defence Academy, the Indian Military Academy and the Officers Training Academy. These are the nurseries which will produce our future officers and so the greatest care and circumspection must be exercised here.

The SSB procedures perhaps need a re-look. To claim that our selection system has stood the test of time and hence needs no change is denying the emergence of a changing aspirational India. Such review cannot be left to the Defence Institute of Psychological Research (DIPR), but must be led by the Services themselves with inputs from leaders in the field encompassing multiple disciplines. The next step will be to nurture the selected lot in the training academies. Here we come up with inherent contradictions. The prayer at the National Defence Academy which all cadets recite at the morning muster parade cannot remain a mere recitation of words but must be converted into an actionable plan. The words are stirring, emphasising duty and honour to the country and to the Services. Ethical conduct is emphasised through the words…"awaken our admiration for honest dealing and clean thinking and guide us to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong" and also… "endow us with the courage which is born of the love of what is noble and which knows no compromise or retreat when truth and right are in peril", but this cannot remain simply a morning prayer. There must be an actionable plan to convert the words into a way of life which becomes second nature to the cadets. The aim must be to turn them into men of character and substance who will not flinch when upholding a principle. Undoubtedly, the task is difficult for the cadets also have to be taught to obey orders without hesitation. How then are they to be taught to resist orders which are illegal and immoral? Who is to determine the same? These are the challenges to overcome; they would require a culture where openness is encouraged and space exists to oppose authority.

There is then a need for a live conversation in our training establishments of ethics and values, where people hold each other responsible and accountable about whether they are really living the values – and this has to be internalised to become a part of Academy life. Creating this culture is the primary challenge. It means that cadets must have knowledge of alternatives, but still choose to stay within the bounds of ethical behaviour because it is important and inspires them. Making a strong commitment to bring such a culture to life is an essential part of ethical leadership. The 'authority trap' has to be avoided; this would require established and explicit ways for subordinates to 'push back' if a person thinks that something is ethically wrong and the values of the organisation are being eroded. The process of developing these mechanisms must be created in our training establishments. In due course of time, these will get transmitted to our units and establishments creating a unique army culture which could be emulated by the nation.[11]

Another criticality lies in the selection of directing staff to these establishments. They must be men of exceptional honour and commitment, and the selection process to select them the most rigorous. Each person so selected must be able to walk the talk, whether he is the Commandant or the divisional officer.

The proliferation and increasing sophistication of communication, interaction and collaborative technologies and tools could perhaps lead to redefining the way the armed forces operate. The capability of Generation C to use technology must be exploited to change many of the antiquated ways in which the Armed Forces currently function. If the senior leadership has the wisdom to exploit this talent, it could well lead to a revolution in the way the Armed Forces are currently administered. The entire logistic management could be overhauled leading to greater efficiency, real time availability of material, decrease in manpower requirements, reduced costs and more importantly a reduced logistic footprint in all types of conflict situations.

Systems would have to be reworked, especially financial rules and regulations as increase in transparency levels could potentially lead to massive cost reductions in items purchased for the force. Current procedures in which financial advisers from the Indian Revenue Service are dominant players but remain unaccountable for the decisions they endorse will have to give way to alternate models where decisions can be taken in compressed time frames with total transparency. On the operational front, Generation C is already wired for taking on the requirements of NCW and needs only a guiding hand to propel it in the right direction. We are indeed living in exciting times. The future holds great promise for the Indian Armed Forces – the current Generation C. But a great deal of maturity and understanding would be required to let Generation C fulfill the role which their upbringing and circumstance have fortuitously given.

Conclusion

Institutionally, we need to acknowledge that strategic information is now an essential element of combat analysis and combat power. Our training establishments need to rebalance from a competency based training approach towards an educative approach that involves cognitive learning.12 Within the Armed Forces, we need to develop and embrace an organisational culture of "lifelong learning" for leaders. Let us also keep in mind that leadership is all about decision-making. Sometimes, the choice is between ethical behaviour at the cost of personal advancement. What the leader chooses will be a product of his upbringing and conscience but the options lie in the 'black and white' domain. However, most choices will not be that simple. Difficulties arise when the options are between two courses, both having tremendous positive possibilities; or in having to choose one among a range of options, each having negative consequences.

Sam Manekshaw, in his address to officers at the Staff College, Wellington spoke of five fundamental attributes of leadership – professional competence, justice, courage, loyalty and decisiveness. It is the last named quality however, which finally defines a leader. The ability to take a decision and accept full responsibility for one's action will, in the ultimate analysis, define a person and what he stands for. Our ability to nurture such leaders, and place them in senior levels of command, remains the defining challenge of the day.

Endnotes

1 Alvin and Heidi Toffler, 'War and Anti War', Grand Central Publishing, May 1995.

2 Talk delivered by David A Fastabend on 'Military Transformation including Net Centric Warfare' at an International Seminar hosted by the Centre For Land Warfare Studies in Dec 2009 at New Delhi. The full address is available in a book published by CLAWS – Future Wars: Changing Nature of Conflict, Matrix Publishers, New Delhi, 2011: ISBN: 978-81-910142-5-9.

3 Thomas PM Barnett, The Pentagons New Map, G.P. Putnam's Sons, NY 10014.

4 Peter Drucker, The Effective Executive, Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1967, pp. 28-29.

5 Paul J. H. Schoemaker, Steve Krupp and Samantha Howland, "Strategic Leadership: The Essential Skills", Harvard Business Review, January, 2013.

6 Orlando Patterson, "Taking Culture Seriously: A Framework and an Afro-American Illustration", in Culture Matters – How values shape Human Lives, ed. Lawrence Harrison and Samuel P Huntington, New York, Basic 2000, pp 208.

7 David Landes, "Culture Makes Almost All The Difference", in Culture Matters, pp 2,3.

8 Lawrence E Harrison, "Promoting Progressive Cultural Change", in Culture Matters, pp 299, 300

9 Roman Friedrich, Michael Peterson and Alex Koster, "The Rise of Generation C" Strategy+Business Magazine, Issue 62, Spring 2011.

10 Ibid.

11 Extracted form the article by the author, ""Decision Making and the Leadership Conundrum", published in the CLAWS Journal, Summer 2013.

12 R Edward Freeman and Lisa Stewart, 'Developing Ethical Leadership', Business Roundtable Institute for Corporate Ethics, 2006.

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